Magic: The Graphening

Process Journal

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Table of contents

Week 1
A new direction

Original pitch

My original pitch for the project was a map. Users could search for their zip code and find the USDA Hardiness Zone where they lived, along with a list of plants that would thrive there. There were some additional features such as heat, rainfall and temperature extreme charts, but I was never too attached to the idea. When a week had gone by and I hadn't been able to re-project the map, let alone scrape the data I needed for the plant dataset, I decided it was time to write a second proposal.

Second pitch

The second idea was for an app that lets users compare and explore Magic: The Gathering (MTG) cards. I tend to shy away from exploratory interfaces, preferring a tight narrative that helps me understand why I should care. That being said, Magic cards have tons of dimensions: mana cost, power, toughness, color, rarity, set name, type, supertype, etc. I had hypotheses about patterns that I would find, based on my experience discovering Magic a few years ago, but I didn't know enough to start with the story.

User problem

The app I intend to build is very much a curio. That is, if you know nothing about MTG then you probably won't get very much out of it. Iif you're a diehard player then many of the graphs will just confirm mechanics and flavor that you already know. My audience are the players who are just starting to play the game or who played a few years back and want to see what had happened since. These are the kind of players who might be interested in seeing the most powerful cards in new sets or browsing the card art and flavor text from sets 10 years ago. But that behavior is hard to hook onto. It's like discovering an old friend on social media--you might go through their photos for a few minutes, but an app dedicated to reconnecting with that one friend every three months would be a hard sell. I hope that people "play around," remember why they loved MTG and share the link, but I don't think it's the kind of site that people will bookmark.

Competition

More to that point, there are a number of popular MTG-related sites that exist outside of the official Wizards of the Coast products. Here is a few tasks surrounding MTG that I identified when I was thinking about this app, along with the sites that aim to solve those tasks.

Learn about cards in a soon-to-be-released set
http://mythicspoiler.com/

Learn about Magic lore
http://archive.wizards.com/Magic/Multiverse/Planeswalkers.aspx?x=mtg/multiverse/Planeswalkers/tibalt

Learn about Magic tournaments/strategy
http://www.starcitygames.com/tags/Premium~Select/

Build a deck from scratch
http://tappedout.net/

Modify an existing deck archetype
http://magiccards.info/

Learn what cards have gone up in price recently
http://mtg.dawnglare.com/?p=viz

Learn about a card's price history
http://shop.tcgplayer.com/magic/dragons-of-tarkir/dragonlord-atarka

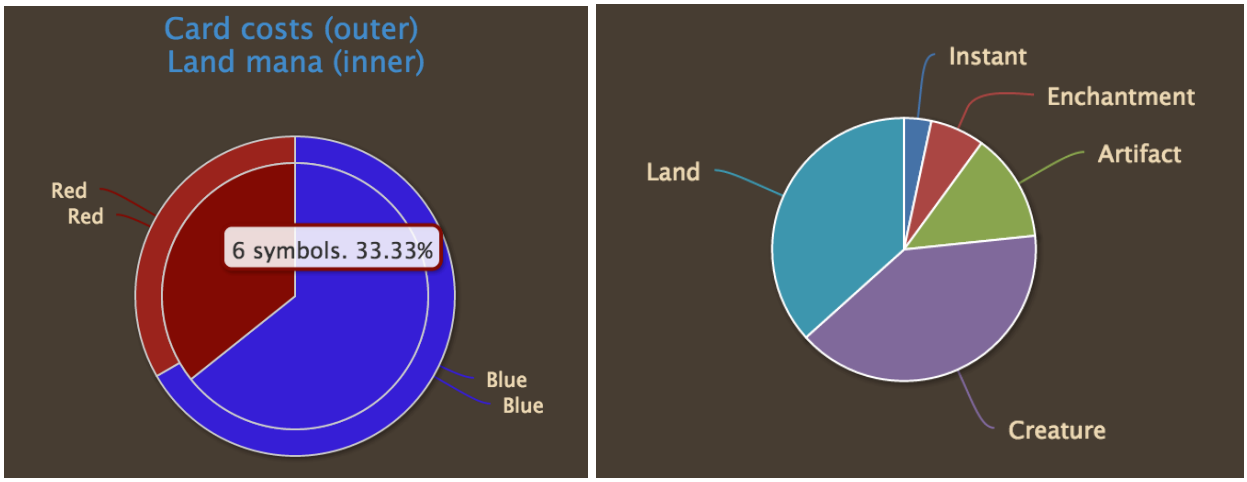
Learn prices of card collection
http://www.mtgcards.com/buylist/magic_singles-zendikar_block-zendikar/222
http://www.starcitygames.com/buylist/

Sell cards
http://www.mtgcards.com/buylist/magic_singles-zendikar_block-zendikar/222

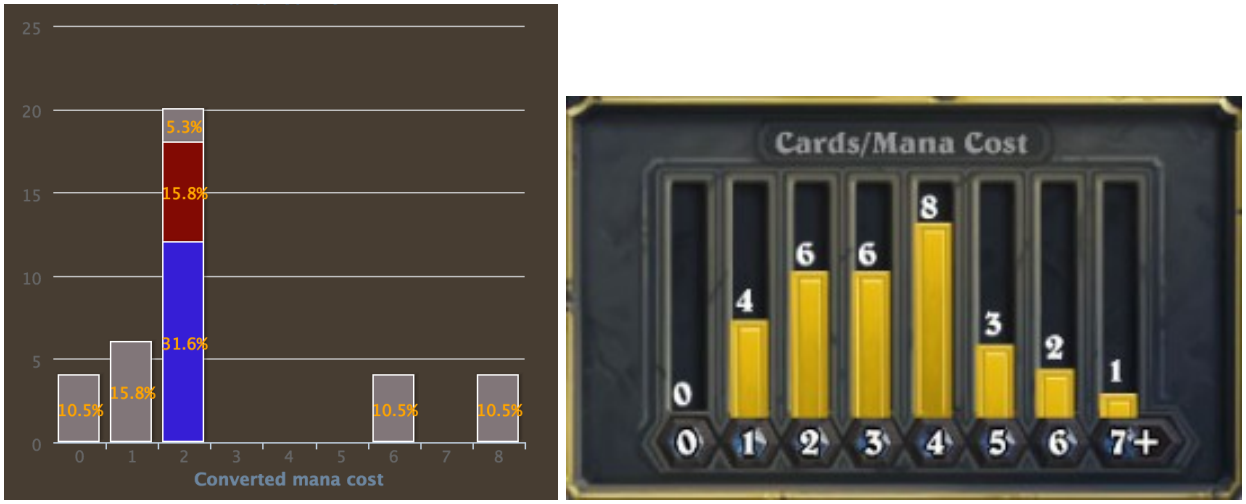
One of those tasks, pricing a card collection, is not fully served by its corresponding app (the UI is clunky and the task takes more time than it should). But my improved solution would require a whole lot of computer vision and not much data visualization, so I scrapped the idea.

Three of the tasks above use visualization to achieve their goals.

Tappedout.net lets users see the mana curve, color and type breakdown for a user's list of cards. TappedOut's focus is more on decks than sets. I suspect looking at decks is more interesting and useful, but a) deck info is hard to get (TappedOut has a large enough userbase to receive user submissions) and b) that task is already being solved. But the mana curve as a bar graph is an idea that's familiar to trading card game players, and the other two graphs reaffirm my assumption that color and type breakdowns will be interesting to users, even if a pie chart isn't the best way to convey that information.



Left: Composition by color on tappedout.net; right: composition by type



Left: Mana distribution ("curve") on tappedout.net; right: mana distribution chart in Hearthstone, a similar trading card game.

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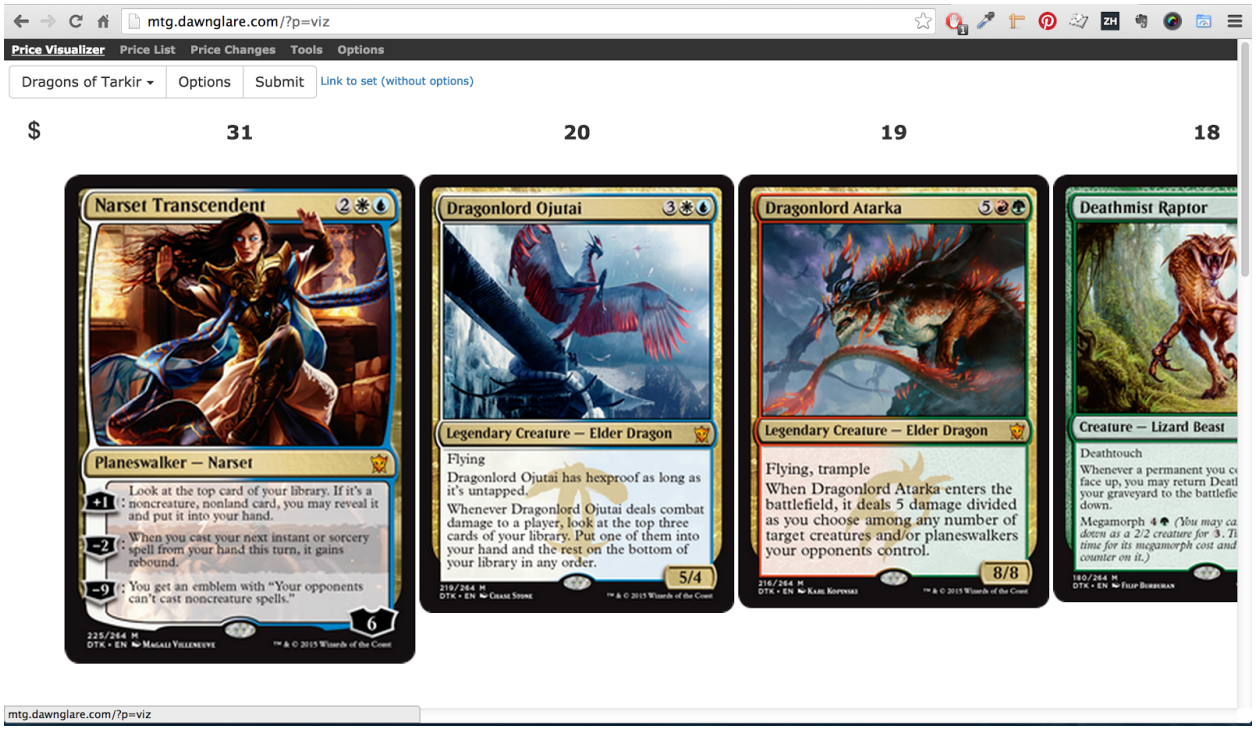
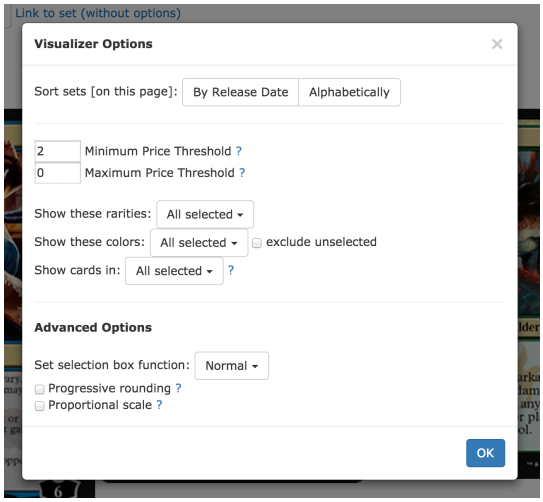
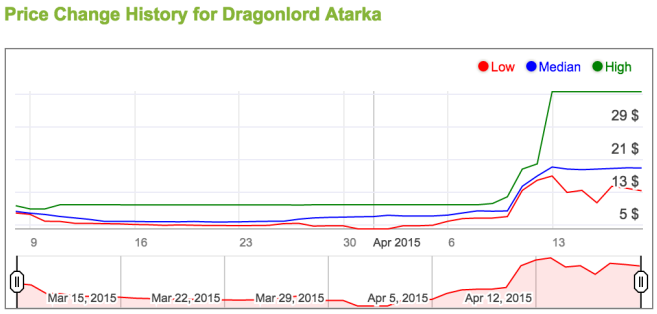
MTG Dawnglare is a revivification of an older site that used card images and sized them to encode price data. The default scale isn't linear, as there is a desire to keep text legible for all cards, even when the most expensive card is $50 and the cheapest is $2. I'm not sure if there's a name for this semi-encoding to support design. Metacritic.com does it too with their bar charts that never drop so low as to obscure the movie poster that's embedded in each bar. But I digress. Based on a reddit thread hailing its creation, I suspect the site is popular and the balance of data and legibility is successful. Despite its inaccuracy, I think the merging of the entity and the encoding is elegant and works. And if you are interested in seeing the pure encoding, you can do so via an (easy-to-miss) filter modal.



The price visualizer at mtg.dawnglare.com. Defaulting to a filter showing the most recent set is a smart idea editorially and performance-wise.





Left: Filter modal on mtg.dawnglare.com; right: price time series on shop.tcgplayer.com. Idea for the future: A stacked area chart or streamgraph showing the total value of all MTG cards over the past five years. Would be able to see if the demand in dollars matches other popularity growth indicators such as attendance at qualifying tournaments.

Price is easily the most interesting dimension when it comes to MTG. It's a proxy for value that rarity, mana cost, power or toughness alone--or even in concert--can't match.

Dawnglare partners with TCGPlayer for it's price data, and even then only has access to snapshots. I was unable to find an API that provided full price history for free. I've put in a request with TCGPlayer for a free API token, but I haven't heard back. And given the scatterplot that I'm using to visualize the other dimensions, I'd need to be able to request the most recent price for every card at once, which would be a lot of server requests using TCGPlayer's API. So the price dimension for this project is off-limits. If I feel good about this project post-launch and TCGPlayer gives me a token, it's likely I'll refactor and redesign to feature/default to displaying that data.

Also of note: There is one very dedicated designer who puts together an infographic for each release (http://www.visualizingmagic.com/), but I don't think we're direct competitors given the interactive, historical nature of my app. Still, his charts were good inspiration for what dimensions I could visualize.

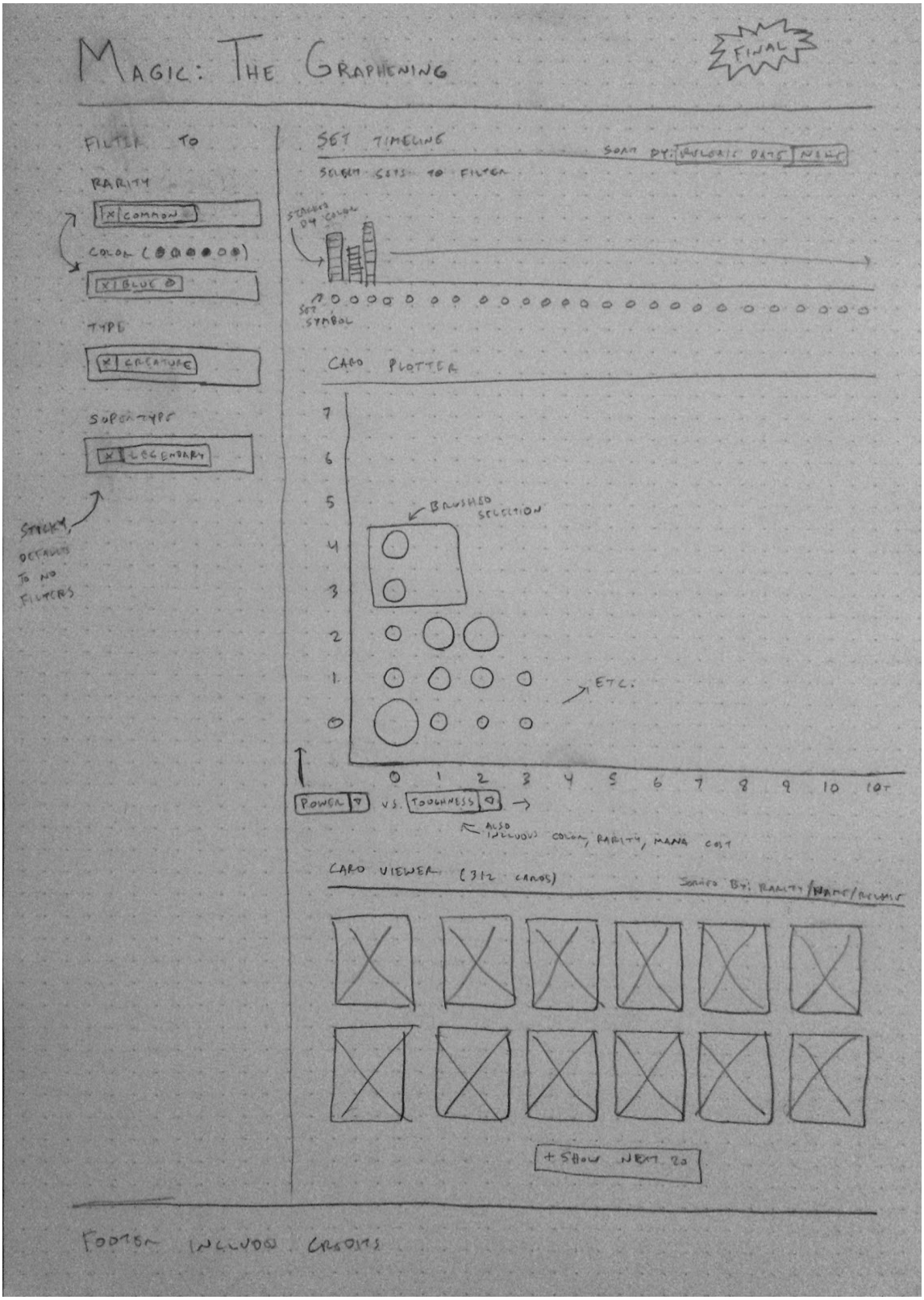
Data sources

As I mentioned above, price data is out of the question. I had better luck finding comprehensive data for the cards. A site called MTG JSON provides dumps of data by card and by set, while TK has an API for that data, along with a good documentation that lets developers append all sorts of query strings. I'm using the static data so I don't have to worry about rate limits, server errors, etc., but given the high degree of similarity between the two datasets I intend to eventually switch to the dynamic stream. I'll source images of the cards by calling the official Wizards of the Coast "Gatherer" site, cross referenced with the multiverse ID.

User story

So how will the app actually work? Here's what I imagine.

Tyler Palfrey is an 18-year-old who's planning to go to his first Friday Night Magic. He doesn't know what to expect, so he's browsing r/mtg, the subreddit for MTG. Near the top (actually, top link, 3k upvotes), is a link to "Everything You Need to Know About Dragons of Tarkir in Two Graphs." N.B. Dragons of Tarkir will be the newest MTG set when this app launches. *Wow, catchy title*, he thinks. *Only two graphs?* Tyler clicks and arrives at a page called Magic: The Graphening. *Another catchy title!* He sees three elements, alongside a sidebar of filters: a bar graph, a scatterplot and a grid of cards. The bar graph at the top shows the number of cards in every set of Magic. Seems like Dragons of Tarkir will have about 100 more cards than Fate Reforged, the last set. Below the bar chart is a scatterplot of the mana cost vs. color for all the cards in the set. He can see that green has a lot of high cost cards and white has a many one- or two-mana cards. Tyler sees there's a bubble in blue that has a mana cost of 9. He brushes over it and the card grid below filters down to one card, Clone Legion, a mythic rarity sorcery. "For each creature target player controls, put a token onto the battlefield that's a copy of that creature." *So you can double your own army or your enemy's--good for offense and defense,* Tyler thinks*. Maybe I'll play blue...*



My final sketch for the app, submitted (among others) in my revised proposal.

Week 2
Scaffolding the project

Front-end goals

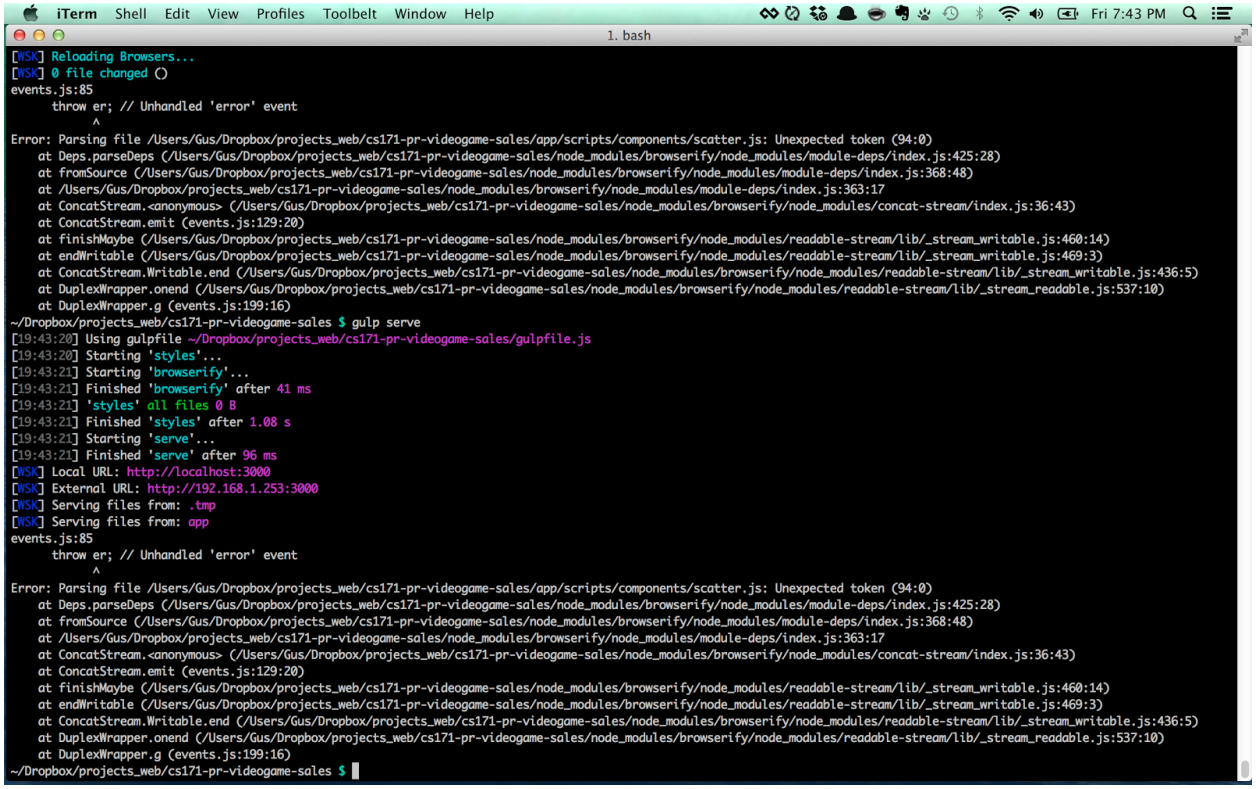
Like any frontend developer, I have a backlog of web technologies that I've been meaning to try or learn. At the top of my list was some sort of require system that would let me modularize my JS in a more elegant way than modifying object prototypes. I also wanted to use Flexbox for the page layout. I wanted the graphs to be adaptive, though I didn't commit to making the whole page responsive for the final deadline.

Research

Last year I used a boilerplate repo via Yeoman called gulp-starter-kit for a side project. I had a good experience, so I investigated using it again and found that the project had a spiritual fork in the Google Web Starter Kit (developers.google.com/web/starter-kit). Given that I was familiar with the gulp tasks in the original project, I decided to give the Google version a try. I liked what I saw upon startup, with clear tasks defined for dev builds and distribution, along with asset minification, concatenation, SASS support and live reloading.

Setup

Getting the above to work was painless, although I did have to rip out a lot of the boilerplate styling. As I added dummy html and scaffolded out the DOM, I tried out Google's grid system (not a fan, tossed it) and some other SASS defaults and mixins they were using (again, tossed a lot of it). The biggest challenge was getting Browserify (my require() solution of choice) not only to work, but work in concert with the existing gulp tasks. That took all of two days and was quite the headache, but at the end I was bundling all of my JS (with a sourcemap to make debugging easier), linting only the code that I wrote, keeping the namespace free of globals and separating my utility functions and objects to their own file. To make sure I could get this to work with D3, and that the data was as clean as I assumed, I built out a scatterplot comparing mana cost to power.



At this point a lot of my process was debugging gulp tasks and npm in the terminal, so I took a screenshot.

Challenges

The scatterplot came with unexpected challenges. First, there were obviously a lot of non-creature cards in the set that didn't have a power dimension. Also, there were a number of outliers that really messed with the range of axes--one card had a power of 99 and there were a few with negative power ratings. The most interesting part of the graph was being dwarfed by the outliers. I'm going to solve that by defaulting the axes from >0 to 10 and grouping any cards with dynamic values or values <10 in a final bin on each axis. As for the non-creatures, I want to visualize the composition of the remainder so the user can see how many of the rest are lands, instants, sorceries, etc.

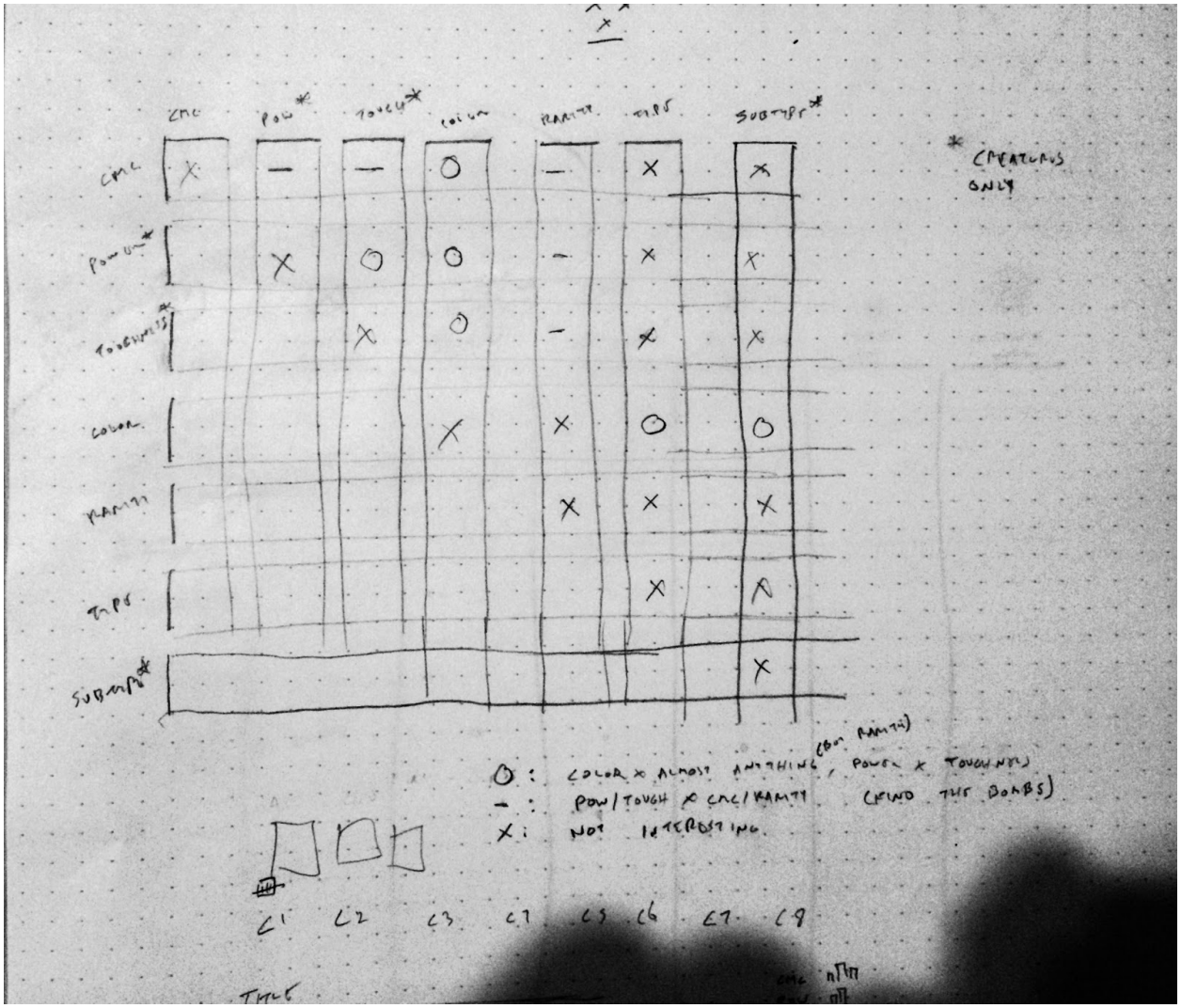
Writing the process book

As I started to write the process book, I got really hung up on the user story, which I probably should've included with original proposal (I find they keep the focus on the user in a way that a list of features doesn't). The default scatterplot I was considering at the time, power vs. toughness, just wasn't that surprising. Nor was the distribution of

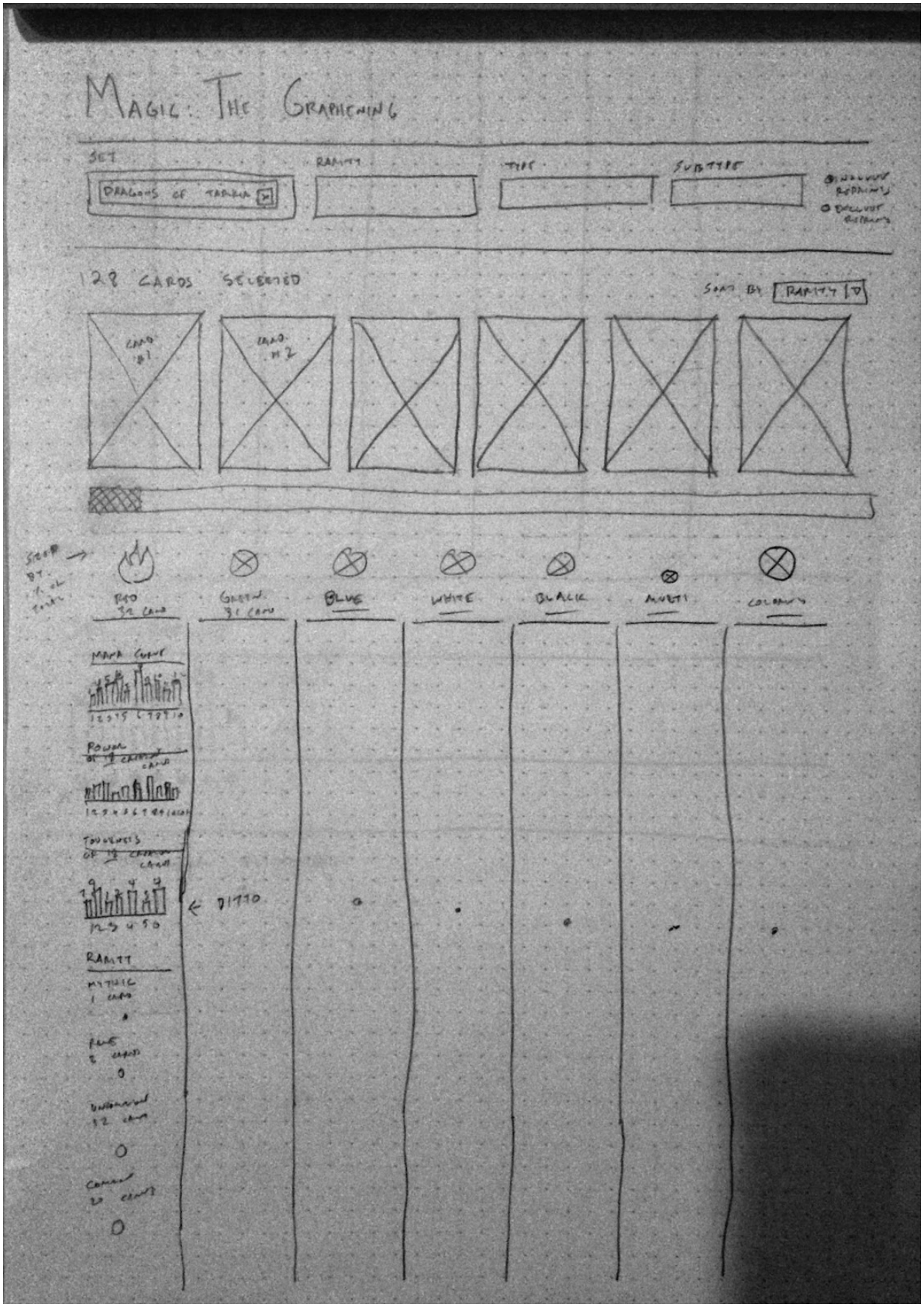
total cards by set. The ostensible goal of the first idea, to find the outliers, the power cards, wasn't nearly as compelling without the price dimension.

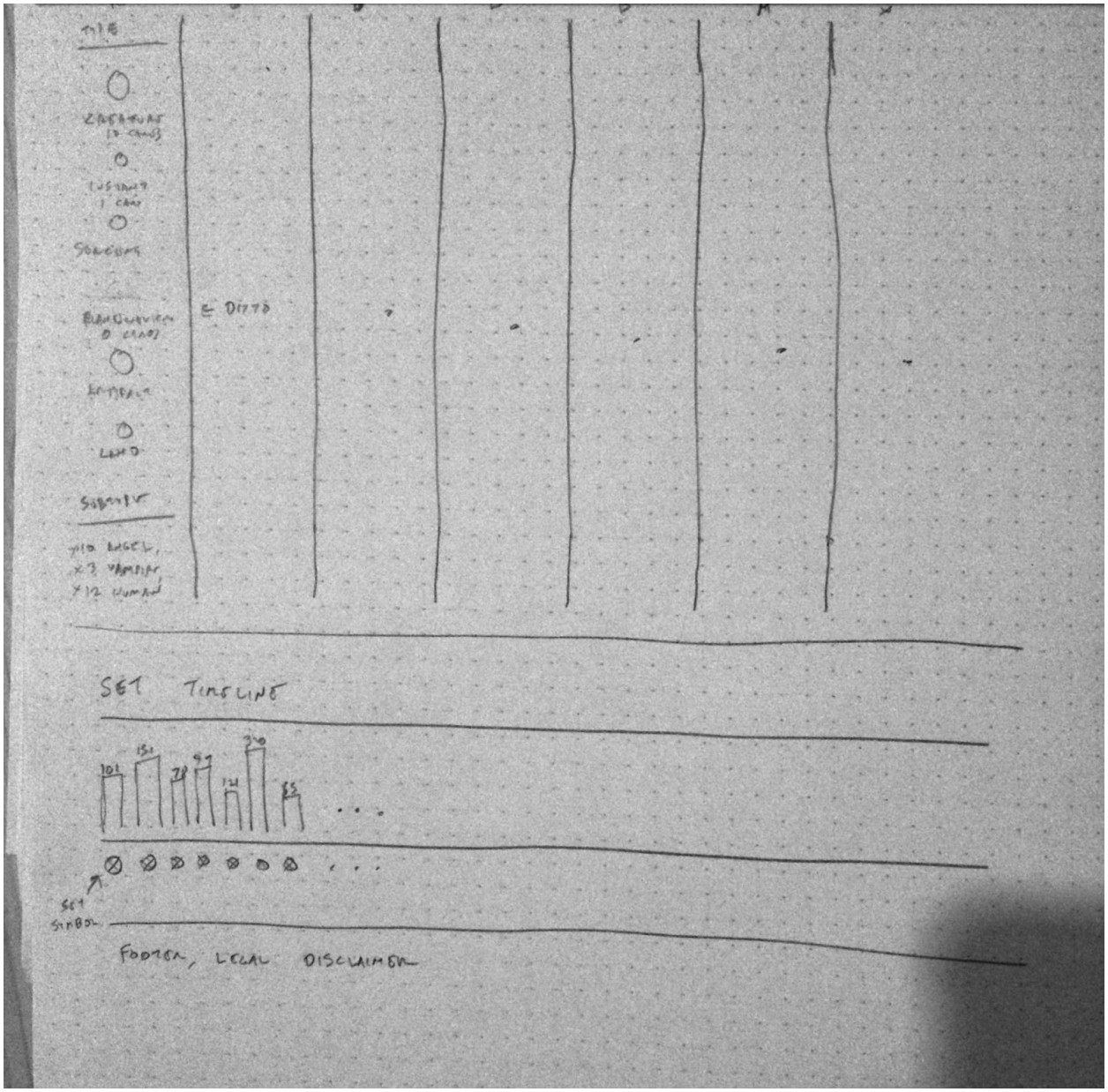
By limiting myself to one scatterplot, the dimension pairs that I thought might be interesting were hidden behind select menus. Why would someone "explore" a new app when the introduction was so uninspiring? My first thought was to add new graphs, to add interest and depth. Eventually I realized that I was just trying to bandage up a more fundamental flaw--my app was aimless, I didn't have a singular, overriding user goal that I could work toward. Without a target, there could be no hierarchy.

So I went back to the drawing board. Not entirely--it was too late to start from scratch. But I wanted to see if there was a way to take what I had learned from my initial exploration of the 7 primary dimensions and edit them down to a focused product. I kept thinking about MTG users tasks and after a bit longer realized that I might have the keys to help answer one of them: "Which color should I play?" Whenever a new set is released, everyone wants to know how the colors compare and which they might end up choosing. It's kind of like the sorting hat in Harry Potter. The metagame complicates this question eventually, as everyone gravitates toward two or three established decks that win at the top tournaments. But in the beginning, and always for the purist, the fun is in taking what the game designers provided and trying to figure it out for yourself. By taking a comparison across colors as my starting point, I could help answer a real question and honor the spirit of the game that initially drew me to it.



In order to hypothesize which dimension pairs were interesting, I created a pre-scatterplot matrix. Based on my experience playing MTG, I guessed that the most interesting comparisons would be between different colors. The two other graphs that I thought showed promise, power x toughness and mana cost x rarity, were just inferior solutions to finding the power cards or "bombs" (compared to using price as an indicator).


MAGIC: THE GRAPHENING
SET
DRAGONS OF TARKIR
RARITY
TYPE
SUBTYPE
128 CARDS SELECTED
SORT BY RARITY
CARD #1
CARD #2
STEP BY 1 OF THIS
RED 32 CARD
GREEN 32 CARD
BLUE
WHITE
BLACK
MULTI
COLORLESS
MANA CURVE
POWER
TOUGHNESS
RARITY
MYTHIC 1 CARD
RARE 2 CARD
UNCOMMON 32 CARD
COMMON 32 CARD



My revised sketch of the application. I put the emphasis on the card images, and made a point to keep the graphs simple and comparable across color columns. If the writing is too small, the multiples I'll be creating for each color are distributions for mana cost, power, toughness, rarity, type and subtype. When a user selects a filter, the multiples for that dimension will disappear, as they'll be redundant. The set timeline remains at the bottom, but it's icing on the cake and not essential to the functionality of the app.

Next steps

While the design of the app is different than it was before this weekend, I'm not very behind in terms of development. I have the app scaffolded, all the data (and knowledge

that it looks good visualized) and a real design goal. By the end of next week I should have all of the multiples built out and the cards coming in. That'll give me the last week to implement filters, brushing and possibly the timeline at the end.