

# The use of data in *Magic: the Gathering Arena* draft: complexity and critical immeasurability beyond ‘metric power’?

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This paper explores the increasing use of data from the 17lands.com tracker to inform the way that players of *Magic: the Gathering Arena* (Wizards of the Coast, 2018) navigate the limited draft format. There has been a burgeoning use of 17lands.com data in the last year as popular content creators, such as Limited Resources, have endorsed a metric-driven, albeit not uncritical, approach to card evaluations. The tracker compiles all player draft data into, among other possibilities, a ‘Card Performance’ table with columns such as ‘Average Taken At’ (ATA) – when a particular card tends to be taken by players in a draft. The availability of this data has led to a transformation in the manner in which many players now approach draft, particularly with respect to how they go about their card evaluations: which cards they will designate as high priority and which are ‘undraftable’. This has implications for ‘digital’ as well as ‘paper’ MTG since the data captures traces of people’s playing habitus, which then recursively goes on to shape subsequent preferences and habitus (cf. Airoldi 2022).

It is possible to see this MTG players’ habituation with regard to the incorporation of this data into their decision-making as constituting them as an ideal neoliberal subject, the entrepreneur: a person who, through the calculation of risks and uncertainties, can pursue personal success competitively (Becker, Ewald, and Harcourt 2012). Further, the rising number of players who sign up to 17lands arguably instantiates a form of ‘surveillance’ through ‘competition’ (Gane 2012) and a ‘hostility’ towards ‘ambiguity’ (Davies 2016).

I will argue, however, that insofar as players become critically aware of the limitations of such quantification, they may *exceed* such a neoliberal subjectivity. The competitive desire to win games is often one of the main drives for players to turn to metrics, yet it will *also* help some players keep in view the traps of utilizing metrics in a simplistic manner. Many players have tended to overtly focus on winrate metrics associated with each card, particularly the Winrate in Hand (GIH WR) metric. Yet as data analyst Sierkovitz (2021) of 17lands.com has emphasized, *context* is crucial: ‘Maybe a red card that has 57% WR (win rate) is actually worse than a 55% WR card, if you’re in Prismari, where the former card has a 54% win rate and the latter card has a 58% win rate’. Usually, players cannot simply pick the strongest card that is passed to them, but must keep in view a matrix of factors: the ‘synergy’ between their existing cards; the possibility of certain cards being passed to them in the future; the ‘curve’ of their deck; the balance of card types in their deck; the nature of the format; the decks that they will likely face; the colours and decks that other players at the table are drafting; the extent to which they would like to test a new strategy; their own playstyle and ability to pilot the deck that could be drafted; and many others.

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I will delve into three key instances identified by content creators where the data has been shown to be deceptive and where straightforward reliance on data leads to outcomes that reduce a player's likelihood of winning. In short, using data without both an adequate understanding of how it is derived and what it represents, together with an existing grounding in drafting, may lead to an inhibiting of players' contextual sensitivity and drafting nous. There are parallels here with Egliston's (2019, 13) account of *Dota 2* players who relied on imitating esports professionals and consequently actually 'deskilled' and 'short-circuited' their long-form competency. I argue that although competitiveness does drive players to embrace further methods and techniques of self-training and risk management, the nature of MTG draft means that an anxiety-fuelled turn to metrics will likely not lead to desired outcomes.

Overall, an identifiable outcome is that players are educated in a critical awareness of data yet are also habituated (Ravaisson 2008, Carlisle 2014) into regularly consulting it. The increasing use of data in MTG draft is thus not necessarily simply a case of the proliferation of 'metric power' (Beer 2016) into the domain of play. 'Metric power' concerns the use of metrics as a form of power, governance, and control in the way that they render reality thinkable and practicable. Here, gamic reality is indeed rendered in such a way by some players, yet this is often twinned with an awareness that naive data-driven optimization may increase the likelihood of defeat. The complexity of MTG draft (Churchill, Biderman, and Herrick 2019) and the irreducibility of contextual factors in a draft is therefore also a reminder for players to find the ruptures that occur when we locate things that are *hard* to measure (cf. Skeggs 2014), which is seemingly to hold in mind what critics of metric power have advocated (Beer 2016, 169-186). Although this does not amount to a refutation of metric power *per se*, I argue that what results is a landscape of player habituation in which faith in the validity of metrics contends with the need to develop an immeasurable aesthetic 'feel' for the game that transcends metrics.

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