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EDGE CASES: DECKBUILDING AS GAMEPLAY IN *ON THE EDGE*

Cameron Kunzelman, Lucy Roach, & Kathryn Volz

Abstract

Within the design and study of games, it is common to view deckbuilding as an additional, contextual practice that sets up games but is not gameplay itself. This article argues for the inclusion of deckbuilding as a form of gameplay. Through the close play of the trading card game *On The Edge*, one of the many games released shortly after massive hit *Magic: The Gathering*, the authors recognized that their aesthetic and affective engagements with the game happened most often during the deckbuilding process rather than in the mechanical operations of the rules in an explicit game of *On The Edge*. By paying close attention to the experiential components of gameplay and reading carefully through both the game design and game studies literature surrounding card games, we argue that deckbuilding is a productive edge case through which we can produce a more expansive vision of where gameplay happens and how it is facilitated.

Keywords

card games, trading card games, *Over the Edge*, deckbuilding, aesthetics, mechanics, close playing, gameplay, paratexts, edge cases

The dominant deck building games of our moment, like *Magic: The Gathering* and the *Pokémon Trading Card Game*, ask players to open card packs, align themselves with themes and mechanics, and then assemble playable decks from those cards. With many of these most popular games, the deck building component turns into a mass exercise of the general intellect: local communities of players, regional competitions, professional leagues, internet writing, and social media discussion mediate a player's relationship to their own deck. These various metagames,¹ existing at the crossing of the personal and the social, create a condition in which games are constantly in flux across their time as ongoing commercial and competitive concerns.

¹ See Boluk and LeMieux's work on metagames, including card games, for a more extensive analysis of how these operations work. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

What is under-discussed in card game analysis is the work of deck building itself within these networks of relation. In this article, we pursue the analysis of deck building to highlight the functions of deck building for players. We hold that deck building is not merely an out-of-game operation that creates the conditions that allow a game to happen, but instead a key site of gameplay that deserves to be analyzed as such. We pursue this argument in two ways. The first is through the method of close playing,² which two of the authors engaged in over the course of months while researching the 1990s trading card game (TCG) *On The Edge*. We follow that analysis with a criticism of the clean split that often appears in the scholarly literature between the work of deck building and gameplay, which assumes and asserts that the play of a game is different than the deck building process that provides the ground of play. It is through the close playing of a minor, “dead” deck building game that these tensions between deck building and gameplay emerged for us, and we follow these threads to find a productive tension: to fully understand the affective and strategic play of TCGs, deck building must be brought closer to the forefront of the discussion.

Building the Analysis of Deck Building

This project was initiated by Cameron Kunzelman, Lucy Roach, and Kathryn Volz. It began as an experiment in naive media archaeology, a method characterized by a focus on the historical context and technological relations of media objects.³ Our goal was to simulate the conditions of reception for a complicated card game released during the 1990s in the wake of *Magic: The Gathering*.

Kunzelman obtained a large number of unopened starter decks and booster packs of *On The Edge*, and he tasked Roach and Volz with playing the game for a few hours each week and documenting their experience. What felt fun? What frustrations did they have? What snags were they caught on, and what made them intrigued by the game? The point of the exercise was not to prove a point or to test a hypothesis, but instead it was to begin from gameplay and discover what feelings an “also-ran” game of the TCG boom would have felt like to players who attempted to learn it in isolation from communities and resources. More importantly, neither Roach nor Volz were experienced TCG players—they did not have a substantial base of rules or genre expectations to work from in order to read between the lines, or assumptions, of the game rules as written.

The game itself is structured as a traditional TCG, with players assembling a deck composed of a variety of card types, the vital ones being Resource, Character, and Conditions. You use the Resource card to call the Character cards, which give you Influence points each round. The win condition of the game is reached when



Figure 1: Students play *On the Edge*. Photo by authors. Used with permission.

² See Edmond Y. Chang and Timothy J. Welsh, *Video Games, Literature, and Close Playing: A Practical Guide* (Routledge, 2025) and Edmond Y. Chang, “Close Playing,” *JCMS* 10, no. 4 (Fall 2025), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jcms/18261332.0064.905/--close-playing?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

³ Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, (University of California Press, 2011), 3.

one of the players reaches twenty-four Influence points first. The way that players interact with this system of deckbuilding was what the two researchers set out to discover and highlight.

To sum up that experience, Roach and Volz wrote the following reflection and summary of their experience:

Over the course of three months, we met for multiple hours a week in order to learn how to play the card game. Having never played a trading card game, we were essentially starting from scratch. We began by opening and playing with the starter pack with only the small, included rule book to guide us. Learning how to play the game solely from the small, in-pack rule book was very challenging. The wording felt unclear, which required us to read and re-read the same sentences to attempt to understand the rules. A major issue was the fact that it doesn't provide instructions on how to actually start the game. Though an experienced trading card game player may know how to draw and call cards into the game, without any prior experience in how games like *On the Edge* work, we had trouble being able to even begin a round. We took the process of playing the game step by step, from sorting the deck to practice runs, noting thoughts, errors, and questions we encountered. Importantly, we worked to understand not only what the cards meant but also how to play them.

While initially playing with only the starter pack, we faced challenges with being able to determine how to play correctly using just the in-pack rulebook. After spending over an hour on the initial read of the booklet, we still faced issues understanding exactly how the cards functioned and how we should use the cards in order to win. Apart from a one-page diagram providing basic identification of what the various components of cards were called, the little information included about card types was introduced after the explanation of game mechanics. Due to this, it was difficult to decipher what card was meant to be used to achieve any specific goal. In addition, it appeared that the booklet was written with the assumption that players would have previous knowledge about how to play the cards and in what order, particularly in the initial round. There was not any explicit direction on how players call their first cards to begin the first round. This proved to be the first challenge for accessibility and playability.

Over the next few months, Roach and Volz continually updated Kunzelman, and the broader research lab they operate in, about their progress. They were given more cards, expansion packs, and (eventually) a more complete rule book for the game.⁴ They both agreed that the game was frustrating to learn and play.

Their reflection continued:

It took us over a week to get a handle on even the basic rules, especially as TCG novices, and even longer to understand the nuances of the game. We attempted a real game after the first week but completely failed. Because we had never played a TCG before and didn't understand the structure of the game, we just grabbed a random grouping of cards to use as our deck. The game was quite literally impossible to play. The classifications of the Resource cards did not match up with the classifications of the Character cards, meaning we couldn't call a single card into play. The game was over before it started.

Because of this, the second week was spent heavily engaged in deck building. We spent hours laying out every single card we had and sorting them into relevant groups. There are

⁴ Peter Hentges et al., *Surviving on the Edge*, Atlas Games, 1995.

over twenty card classifications, and more are added with each expansion pack. By laying out and sorting the cards we were able to improve our deck building skills, and we could see which attributes tended to overlap and work best together in a deck for the most effective gameplay.

Once we understood how the game worked better and spent more time on deck building, we were able to actually play a few rounds. But we often found ourselves getting stuck in one of two loops. The first being that we would both be pulling cards, just waiting for a Resource card to appear so that we could call a Character into battle. The instruction booklet contained no information on how to build a deck or what the card type ratio should be, so we were going off of nothing. After much deliberation and trying several different deck ratios, we finally got the ratio right with about 25% of the deck needing to be composed of Resource cards and 50% of the Character cards needing a Human attribute in order to keep the game moving. Once we got a handle on this, the issue was mostly resolved and rarely cropped up again.⁵

The second loop we found ourselves getting stuck in was an issue with whoever started gameplay. The first player would have a slight upper hand in calling a Character card first, which allowed them to consistently have a card on deck to attack the other player's first character. This would repeat the entirety of the game until the player with the upper hand reached twenty-four points, signaling the end of the game. The player that went second would never even have a chance to get more than one or two cards on the table while the first player would end with at least six. This didn't happen every single game, but about two thirds of the time or more, whoever began play first would have the upper hand and win, demolishing their opponent in the process. Somehow, the first move would create an over-powered player that would prevent the opposing player from really even playing the game. The issue persisted for five months across different deck variations and different expansion packs.

A vital part of understanding our draw to deck building and the interest that came with it was the fact that the game mechanics of *On the Edge* felt bad. The card interactions and mechanics seemed hastily thrown together, barely made sense, didn't really work with each other, and made fun gameplay basically impossible. When almost every round consists of one player absolutely destroying the other, there is no tension, there is no fun, for either player. We noted that attacking feels pointless once the other person's defense is too good or vice versa. It was not just the person losing that was bored, but the winning attacker was too. The mechanics of the game were frustratingly bad, difficult to understand, and just boring to us.

While the total experience of the game was clearly negative, the players' impression of the game became more positive as they developed more skills with the game and a closer connection to the broader imagery and storytelling of the *Edge* universe. In meetings it was quite apparent that they were developing an attachment to the game in terms of its aesthetics and the cards themselves.⁶ Kunzelman noticed that they would repeatedly mention specific cards and the deck building strategies that they were using in order to play those cards. Very rarely did traditional metagame

⁵ It is notable that this is almost certainly not the correct ratio of resources to units, but that the "local culture" of the players found it satisfactory to generate a worthwhile play experience tells us something about how deckbuilding and games culture are interrelated.

⁶ The approach of analysis here is similar to the modes of engagement advocated for by Tracy Fullerton and Matthew Farber in their *The Well-Read Game: On Playing Thoughtfully* (The MIT Press, 2025).

language appear in those discussions—language relating to strategy or competitiveness, for example. Instead, it was about increasing the frequency and efficacy of cards they enjoyed looking at and thinking about.

While competitive *Magic* players have described deck building as a kind of puzzle, Roach and Volz discussed it more in terms of how certain cards would evoke specific feelings and interests for them.⁷ The card “Promising Student” was particularly interesting for them because they found it relatable. The card depicts a young woman with a lab coat holding a book, and Lucy and Katie repeatedly said that the card was “funny” in the sense that they self-recognized the card as being a quasi-representation of their own position: young women working in a research lab. They worked to make sure that the Promising Student appeared in their decks, despite the fact that it did not have good gameplay stats and did not contribute uniquely to the win condition. This essay partially emerges from those conversations: deck building was a process of trying to fit in suboptimal, yet affectively engaging, cards for these students. Where did gameplay start? Where did it end?



Figure 2: A selection of cards from *On the Edge*. Photo by authors. Used with permission.

⁷ For an analysis of a similar situation, see Rachel Guldin and Brandon Harris, “‘Who Wouldn’t Want to Summon Dragons and Trolls?’ Constructing Communities at Friday Night Magic,” *In Beyond the Deck, Critical Essays on Magic: The Gathering and Its Influence*, ed. Shelley Jones, Studies in Gaming, n.d. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2023), 158.

Learning on the Edge

Much of the engaging aesthetic material emerged from how the card game embedded itself in the setting of the pre-existing role-playing game (RPG), *Over the Edge*. The setting for both the RPG and the card game is a fictional island called Al Amarja located somewhere in the Mediterranean. The game centers around "The Edge," which is the major city in Al Amarja. In the first edition of the RPG setting, Jonathan Tweet, the primary game designer, writes that the game takes place in "(apparently) the real world", signaling a heightened version of our real condition that is influenced by surreal media like *Naked Lunch*, *Twin Peaks*, and *Repo Man*. The relationships on the island, and the transient surreality of the game, evoked the Interzone texts of William S. Burroughs. At the same time, the "Deep Overview" background section on the history of the setting contains extensive fantastical information: prehistoric creatures, mad scientists, and pharaohs coexist with the real-world history of European and colonization—the Reconquista and even Mussolini appear in the narrative backstory of the fictional island.⁸

The *Over the Edge* RPG rule books prioritize player agency, or the ability for a player to pick up where Tweet left off, in regards to worldbuilding. Tweet reaffirmed this in the interview we conducted with him. In the first edition of the RPG, the player is provided with a framework to understand the basics of the island but are still largely being tasked with creating their own narrative input. The book's overview equips players with information on various aspects of the island such as geography, politics, and even what kind of drugs can be bought and sold on the island. Though the overview includes several categories it spans just four pages and one page including a map. The in-book section "Deep Overview" is for only the game moderator to read and reference. In the third edition of the game, released in 2019, Tweet describes Al Amarja as "a crossroads of mind-controlling conspiracies, twisted dimensions, inhuman depravity, questionable science, unholy commerce, and cutting-edge art. At your gaming table, it's a locus for whatever dangerous urban weirdness the gamemaster or players can dream up."⁹

In each iteration of *Over the Edge*, Tweet repeatedly emphasizes that he hopes players will make the world their own, often describing rules as things to explicitly be broken. An encapsulation of his philosophy surrounding the role of the player is "Role playing games are a special kind of art where the consumer is also the artist."¹⁰ Tweet also explicitly states that the goal of the game is immersive, "enjoyable role playing."¹¹ To create this immersion, Tweet emphasizes the role that the player must occupy within gameplay. This includes doing the labor of both character development and worldbuilding. In the introduction of the RPG, Tweet describes Al Amarja as a space in which players are both tangentially familiar and are simultaneously free from the burden of too much pre-determined worldbuilding. To accomplish this environment of creation, Tweet consciously chose to not bog characters down by specific lists of skills or lengthy backgrounds with the intention of the players being able to do their own worldbuilding work, based in both imagination and their ability to link Al Amarja with similar settings from the real world. In comparison to a card game, which largely relies on the execution of game mechanics, Tweet did not have the goal of an RPG where numeric or mechanical expression was the key site of enjoyment. Player imagination was a priority. For Tweet, it is essential to positioning the player as a creator within the game. Drawing from his initial interest

⁸ Jonathan Tweet, *Over The Edge*, First edition, (Atlas Games, 1992), 44.

⁹ Jonathan Tweet, *Over The Edge*, Third edition, With Chris Lites (Atlas Games / Trident, 2019), 9.

¹⁰ Tweet, *Over The Edge*, Third edition, 10.

¹¹ Jonathan Tweet (primary game designer of *On the Edge*) in discussion with Roach and Volz, January 2025.

in games as a player, Tweet spoke of the draw of games like *Dungeons and Dragons* that are made up of “designing your own rules.”¹²

With such an interest in player agency and worldbuilding at the center of Tweet’s work, he admits that the work of moving between the RPG and card game format was not easy. The RPG *Over the Edge* was commercially successful, and its most recent 2019 release was Kickstarted for \$134,333, which demonstrates a strong popularity even today.¹³ The RPG *Over the Edge*’s original release in 1992 was soon followed by the debut of *Magic: The Gathering*, and Tweet was approached by a publisher who suggested they could “make oodles of money from trading card games”¹⁴ based on the Al Amarja setting. Tweet was invested in Al Amarja and the space it offered players to occupy a world in which they are distantly familiar yet able to project and construct their own reality within the setting.

Paul Booth defines paratexts as an object that is adjacent to a text that is both part of the product, “and yet substantially different from the content.”¹⁵ For us, this notion plays out in the relationship between *On the Edge* and *Over the Edge*. *On the Edge* functioning as the paratext to *Over the Edge*. Booth is specifically referring to board game paratexts, but the focus is on games “based on media products but using new game mechanics to complement the original text.”¹⁶ Because *On the Edge* is an adapted trading card version of the original RPG, *Over the Edge*, we can see the way this relationship mirrors the one described by Booth. What is interesting to Booth is the way that the original game and the paratextual games are comprised of “sufficiently different enough ingredients to make distinct games”¹⁷ despite being created out of the same source material. This rings true for creator Jonathan Tweet. When asked about his games, he displays a much greater affinity for the RPG than for the trading card game, despite both games being set in the same place with the same characters. Clearly there is a distinct divide between the two and an understanding that despite being created out of the same source material, the two games are *not* the same.

Within paratextual games, Booth also points out the vitality of a player. Because “no paratextual board game is complete without a player.”¹⁸ While this is true for the paratext of *On the Edge*, it also remains true for *Over the Edge*. In fact, in our interview with Jonathan Tweet, he expressed a distaste for the *lack* of player agency in the trading card game as opposed to the RPG. For him, agency in character and movement were much more vital to an enjoyable game experience than all of the rules that constrain a TCG experience. Alternatively, Booth suggests the agency of the player in “moments of authorship”¹⁹ is required for paratextual games. For *On the Edge*, that agency shows up in deck building and strategy.

From Sourcebooks to Card Decks

Card games generally do not have mechanics that speak to customizability. You build your deck, and there are competitive or rules-based constraints on what they can look like, but there is very little mechanical expression of how or why one might customize a deck. Following *Magic*, most competitive card games have a set of generic constraints: there is a comprehensive rule document

¹² Tweet, January 2025.

¹³ Atlas Games, “Over the Edge: A Roleplaying Game of Weird Urban Danger,” Kickstarter, October 25, 2024.

¹⁴ Tweet, January 2025.

¹⁵ Paul Booth, *Game Play*, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) 5.

¹⁶ Booth, *Game Play*, 10.

¹⁷ Booth, *Game Play*, 10.

¹⁸ Booth, *Game Play*, 10.

¹⁹ Booth, *Game Play*, 9.

that governs the play space of the game, and the text and images on the cards denote the specific ways that cards intersect with that comprehensive document. Stats, rules text, and card types are ways to signal how individual cards interact with the game state through the game rules and their mechanics. Assembling a series of cards that use these different characteristics to accomplish a goal in concert with one another is what we colloquially call deck building.

Deck building is therefore the way that customization and personalization enters into card games. The process through which players select cards that they own to field against opponents in decks that are built around synergies, strategies, or their own unique desires. The work of deck building can be deeply personal, especially in more casual games and formats where the goal is self-expression or fun rather than competitive dominance of your opponent. The Commander format of *Magic: The Gathering*, in which players create decks of 100 unique cards to compete in four-person pods, is generally more casual and friendly and, by virtue of this stance, it draws in more forms of customizability. This can be seen in the form of “pet cards,” which Dave Kosin for *CoolStuffInc* defined as “cards that individual players choose to include in their decks even though they're not considered to be ‘as good’ as others. Essentially, they're the cards you play to stick it to the man, or...you know, whatever.”²⁰ One's personality and feelings can be expressed in the form of card inclusion, even if that card is suboptimal for mechanical play. As Brian Cain summarized about deck building on the popular Commander site *EDHREC*, “If you want to build a commander simply because you like it, that is absolutely valid and you don't need any more reasons for making that deck. Commander is the format of fun and self-expression, so you do whatever floats your boat!”²¹

We can see that deck building is seen as a pathway to a custom experience of a game—that the game itself becomes more expressive of a player's desires and interests through the choice of what cards, and therefore interactions, they place into the game. The RPG of *Over the Edge* schematized its gameplay in terms of customizability, and the third edition of the game's rulebook even goes so far as to present that player with multiple sections on the ethics and practicality of ignoring the game's rules in order to create more situations and gameplay that are best tailored to the game's players. It is undeniable that the choice to ignore or focus on specific rules in an RPG would be called a form of gameplay—it would literally impact the rules that appeared in the interactions of the game. However, the decisions that Volz and Roach made



Figure 3: Some of the key resource cards from the game. Photo by authors. Used with permission.

²⁰ Dave Kosin, “No Sweat, My Pet Cards,” *CoolStuffInc.*, Accessed May 8, 2025. <https://www.coolstuffinc.com/a/davekosin-10232020-no-sweat-my-pet-cards>.

²¹ Brian Cain, “How to Choose Your Commander,” *EDHREC*, November 26, 2024. <https://edhrec.com/articles/how-to-choose-your-commander>.

around the cards they included, and how they engaged with the game, primarily aesthetically through card choice that had no strategic significance to play, would traditionally not be understood as a form of gameplay. We will turn to an analysis of this strange divide in game studies before returning to deck building as a mode of gameplay.

Building Decks as Gameplay

Deck building typically exists in the world of trading card games as something left to the experts. Patrick Chapin, who is known by the moniker of “The Innovator” in *Magic* circles and the author of multiple *Magic: The Gathering* guidebooks, asserts in *Next Level Magic* that the goal of deck building is to achieve “wins.”²² The way for new players to reach that goal is by taking “an existing deck archetype and rebuilding it using cards that are legal in the format you are playing,”²³ specifically copying decks produced by “better deckbuilders.”²⁴ He refers to this as templating. In our own experience with playing *On the Edge*, we were unable to heed this suggestion due to the nature of the project. We were playing without any research or resources on what a successful deck might look like. This led to a steep learning curve, but it also gave us a more in-depth understanding of the cards and their uses. We seem to have gotten a lot more first-hand experience with deck building than is typical for a novice in trading card games.

Broadly, game studies does not define deck building as part of gameplay in a trading card game. It seems inherently accepted that collectible card games are made up of two parts, “strategic deck building and game play.”²⁵ However, one of the issues with arguing about the parameters of gameplay (and what crosses its boundary) is that neither gameplay nor deck building really have a stable and universally agreed upon definition. Yet, somehow, everyone seems to agree that deck building is not part of gameplay.

This is slightly ironic given that this understanding of deck building, self-expression, and play was one of the early discoveries that *Magic* designer Richard Garfield reflected on shortly after the release of the original card game. In his 1993 reflection on the game’s early development, Garfield notes that deck styles became associated with particular playtesters. There are several points in his reflective essay where he likens early *Magic* with role-playing games, suggesting that hypercompetitive decks were treated “much like roleplayers treat their most successful characters: they were relegated to the background, to be occasionally dusted off for a new encounter.”²⁶ Later in the same essay he evokes roleplaying again, writing that “each player’s deck is like a character. It has a personality and quirks.”²⁷ He continues later on: “As in roleplaying, largely the players determine the object of the game in the unstructured mode of play. The object of the duel is usually to win, but the means to that end can vary tremendously. Most players find that the duel itself quickly becomes a fairly minor part of the game compared to trading and assembling decks.”²⁸ What is notable here is that in the origins of *Magic*, deck building was not only understood as gameplay but also that its thrills and interests could sometimes overtake the more banal dueling that is competitive *Magic*. To begin from this position, where deck building is undeniably a part of a

²² Patrick Chapin, *Next Level Magic: A Guide to Mastering Magic: The Gathering* (RIW Hobbies, 2018) 28.

²³ Chapin, *Next Level Magic*, 28.

²⁴ Chapin, *Next Level Magic*, 27.

²⁵ Selen Turkay, Sonam Adinolf, and Devayani Tirthali, “Collectible Card Games as Learning Tools,” *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences* 46 (2012): 3701–5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.130>.

²⁶ Richard Garfield, “The Design Evolution of *Magic: The Gathering*,” in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (MIT Press, 2006) 545.

²⁷ Garfield, “The Design Evolution of *Magic: The Gathering*,” 550.

²⁸ Garfield, “The Design Evolution of *Magic: The Gathering*,” 550.

gameplay experience, and then move into a place where it is clearly not understood as such is an interesting maneuver. Part of the reason for this, we believe, is schematic and terminological. Deck building has been written out of gameplay.

There are few definitions of deck building. When reviewing literature produced by game designers on the topic, the act of deck building is assumed to be inherently understood by the players. In rulebooks or game manuals, there are often instructions and guides on how to build the best or more effective deck, but not really any definitions. For example, the *On the Edge* rulebook describes deck building as “whichever cards you decide to use, selected from those you’ve bought or traded for,”²⁹ and *Magic* refers to deck building as how “you build [the deck] yourself using whichever *Magic* cards you want.”³⁰ The game design definitions tend to focus more on the mechanical aspect of the deck building, which must be done before the “actual” game begins.

In our experience playing the game and detailed in other player’s experiences, deck building is one of the most engaging parts of the process. These experiences suggest to us that the definitions that designers and rule books provide fall short of the actual human engagement with the game and what the game itself *is*. Rather than mere preamble, deck building is a core site of expression and engagement for many players, sitting alongside more traditional parts of a game as *play*.

Academic literature on the subject has an even less solid definition. There are even fewer explicit definitions of deck building from game critics. Like game designers, they assume an implicit understanding of what deck building is and how it works. When critics refer to deck building, they often contradict each other on both the function of deck building and on a definition of the word. It is referred to as a “game system,”³¹ a “metagame,”³² “an act of creation,”³³ and even a way to “create stories or narratives”³⁴ through play. Just as deck building cannot be relegated to just a mechanic, deck building cannot be narrowed down into any of these terms either. Despite the fact that the terms above are hard to reconcile with each other, what we can see in the creation and use of these terms is a desire to classify deck building as something that is not gameplay. What all of these terms and definitions have in common is that deck building is never referred to as gameplay and is always parsed as a distinct addendum to the gameplay process. There is an intentionality and a willfulness in the refusal to allow deck building to become part of gameplay. For example, the term “metagame”³⁵ even acknowledges the fact that deck building has a game aspect to it. One would assume that gameplay happens within a metagame. Though the authors of this case study concede that deck building is an “important activit[y] associated with the experience, yet [it is] perceived by players as peripheral to the game itself”³⁶ and therefore cannot be considered gameplay. Yet, our experience of playing *On the Edge* argues otherwise. So, we turn from insufficient definitions of deck

²⁹ “On the Edge: Rules of Play,” Atlas Games, 1994.

³⁰ “*Magic: The Gathering*, Basic Rulebook,” Accessed April 3, 2025, https://media.wizards.com/images/magic/resources/rules/EN_MTGM14_PrintedRulebook_LR.pdf.

³¹ Joshua Bycer, *Game Design Deep Dive: Horror* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), Accessed April 3, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.

³² P. García-Sánchez, A. Tonda, A. M. Mora, G. Squillero, & J. J. Merelo, “Automated Playtesting in Collectible Card Games using Evolutionary Algorithms: A Case Study in *Hearthstone*,” *Knowledge-Based Systems* (2018): 133–146, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.knosys.2018.04.030>.

³³ Autumn M. Dodge, “Examining Literacy Practices in Game Magic: The Gathering,” *American Journal of Play* 10, no. 2 (Winter, 2018): 168–192, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/examining-literacy-practices-game-magic-gathering/docview/2052765014/se-2>.

³⁴ Paul A. Crutcher, “Magic: The Gathering,” *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 2017), <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/magic-gathering/docview/1983157324/se-2>.

³⁵ García-Sánchez et al., “Automated playtesting,” 133–146.

³⁶ García-Sánchez et al., “Automated playtesting,” 133–146.

building to definitions of gameplay in hopes of finding a definition that is capacious enough to include the act of deck building.

Once again, we run into the problem of a lack of universal definition. This time it's not for a lack of trying, but rather that the concept of gameplay is abstract and difficult to pin down. Many definitions are unable to expand beyond a reference to "the player's interaction and experience while playing a game"³⁷ or the fact that "gameplay is empirically seen as a central element"³⁸ to games. There seems to be an awareness within the community that this term is lacking a definition, and it's not for lack of attempts, but rather from the community's inability to agree on both a definition and a function. In other words: we have adopted an ideology of card game design that has hindered our ability to accurately describe and analyze the games we are playing.

Where Does Gameplay Begin?

Definitions of gameplay are fraught. Beginning again with definitions that stem from game designers, we tend to get a more physical or applicable definition of what gameplay is. Josh Bycer refers to gameplay as "the primary game system that a player will be making use of the most when playing a game."³⁹ Similarly, Paavilainen refers to gameplay as "the dynamic interaction of game mechanics,"⁴⁰ this being the way in which "aspects like goals, challenge, progress, and rewards"⁴¹ interact to make the game interesting and enjoyable for the player. The focus falls more on how gameplay functions for the player in the final product. This definition, of course, does not include deck building. As we've established that deck building is both mechanical and affective in nature, a mechanically based definition of gameplay does not include deck building. Furthermore, understanding gameplay as nothing but mechanistic feels reductive to the more complex investments that players have with their games.

Game academics focus more on gameplay as how the player interacts with the game than vice versa. Jonathan Frome makes this distinction by defining gameplay as "a mental framework or attitude rather than a type of situation."⁴² This most game scholars are able to agree on. Based on this distinction, there seem to be two different suggestions for understanding this framework. Djauoti, Alvarez, Jessel, Methel, and Molinier suggest that gameplay is composed of "game bricks"⁴³ and "play bricks."⁴⁴ Play bricks refer to inputs in a game; choosing to select, move, or shoot something. Game bricks are elements that refer to the goals of the game; choosing to destroy, avoid, or create something. Gameplay is the balance created by players in their use of game bricks and play bricks. The second framework for understanding gameplay in this way is proposed by Lasse Larsen and Bo Walther in their first paper, "The Ontology of Gameplay: Toward a New Theory." They

³⁷ Nathália Macedo, "Gameplay: The Essence That Defines a Successful Game," Accessed April 3, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/gameplay-essence-defines-successful-game-nath%C3%A1lia-macedo>.

³⁸ Damien Djauoti et al., "A Gameplay Definition through Videogame Classification," *International Journal of Computer Games Technology* (2008), <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/gameplay-definition-through-videogame/docview/863557302/se-2>.

³⁹ Bycer, *Game Design Deep Dive*, Accessed April 3, 2025.

⁴⁰ Janne Paavilainen, "Defining Playability of Games: Functionality, Usability, and Gameplay," in *Proceedings of the 23rd International Conference on Academic Mindtrek ACM*, (2020), 55–64, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3377290.3377309>.

⁴¹ Paavilainen, "Defining Playability of Games," <https://doi.org/10.1145/3377290.3377309>.

⁴² Jonathan Frome, "Interactive Works and Gameplay Emotions," *Games and Culture*, 14, no. 7-8 (2019): 856-874, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019847907>.

⁴³ Djauoti et al., "A Gameplay Definition," <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/gameplay-definition-through-videogame/docview/863557302/se-2>.

⁴⁴ Djauoti et al., "A Gameplay Definition," <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/gameplay-definition-through-videogame/docview/863557302/se-2>.

propose that gameplay “arises from the tension between being-here and ‘being there.’”⁴⁵ Being-here is the aspect of the game that refers to play bricks, the desire to survive in the moment. Being-there is the future aspect of the game, similar to the game bricks, the desire to win. Gameplay for Larsen and Walther is the oscillation between the being-here and the being-there, something that becomes entirely indistinguishable during the game.

We find Larsen and Walther’s work particularly fruitful for thinking about analog games and the labor of deck building in relation to more legible forms of gameplay. Larsen and Walther’s paper “Gameplay 2.0: Toward a New Theory” develops their complication of gameplay. They expand their definition to include micro-tensions. The authors define them as being at “the core of playing and gaming since [micro-tensions] envelop us in the presence together with dreams about future states, thus encompassing the here-ness and there-ness that we discussed earlier.”⁴⁶ Micro-tensions exist on three different planes: temporal, spatial, and emotional. The friction of the player’s competing impulses in these micro-tensions, or the balancing of here-ness and there-ness on all three levels, is what creates gameplay.

Larsen and Walther open us up to a theorization that considers deck building as part of gameplay. Deck building has aspects of being-here and being-there – it drives the player to consider potential states of a future game in the current moment. It also creates micro-tensions on both the temporal and emotional planes. If “gameplay, therefore, is a composite of being present, on the one hand, and basically living in the future,”⁴⁷ deck building fulfills that definition. Deck building draws on present affective engagement that is simultaneous with the futuristic desire to create the best deck to win the impending game.⁴⁸ Deck building *is* gameplay under Larsen and Walther’s definition. Despite the literature that assumes deck building is not gameplay, our experience in playing *On the Edge* has told a different story. There are no definitions of deck building that directly exclude it from being gameplay in a strict sense. Instead, there is merely an implication that something that takes play prior to a rule that begins a game must always *not* be gameplay. However, some of these recent scholarly definitions of gameplay disprove this as their definitions are so capacious as to include deck building. This, in tandem with our own



Figure 4: The card backs and a page from the rule book for *On the Edge*. Photo by authors. Used with permission.

⁴⁵ Lasse Juel Larsen and Bo Kampmann Walther, “The Ontology of Gameplay: Toward a New Theory,” *Games and Culture* 15, no. 6 (2020): 609–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019825929>.

⁴⁶ Lasse Juel Larsen and Bo Kampmann Walther, “Gameplay 2.0: Toward a New Theory,” *Games and Culture* 21, no. 5 (2024): 1025–1045, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120241295926>.

⁴⁷ Larsen and Walther, “Gameplay 2.0,” <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120241295926>.

⁴⁸ This is also key to Kunzelman’s claims about speculation within games. See Cameron Kunzelman, *The World is Born from Zero* (De Gruyter, 2022).

personal experience with gameplay, carves out a home for deck building among the definitions of gameplay.

Deck Building as Transforming Play

The clean line between the deckbuilding process and the beginning of gameplay in trading card games is mostly an illusion. It is a distinction in ideality, but a close analysis of existing definitions of gameplay and the descriptive process of deckbuilding suggests that they are closer than previously assumed.

We end this piece with a claim for transformation. Over the course of this essay, we have worked to trouble the distinction between the work of deck building and the act of playing the game, arguing for the inclusion of an underthought category into a more robust category of interaction. In the end, we think this is a move to expand the capacity of game studies itself, making the methods available to us more attentive to the ways that gameplay extends across actions rather than fencing them in.

We are not alone in re-evaluating the parameters around gameplay. Theresa Jean Tanenbaum and Karen Tanenbaum have argued that the contribution of transformative play, or the "process of empathic identification with a new point-of-view or lived experience,"⁴⁹ should be more seriously considered in scholarship on persuasive games. As they identify, transformation is more capacious than the more traditionally analyzed elements such as player agency and immersion. Transformation appears in more than just the ludic element of gameplay, "it creates experiential rhetorics by allowing us to project ourselves into a set of contexts and circumstances."⁵⁰ Though the game system can present limitations, it can also provide conditions for players to both identify with characters and engage with a setting that exists outside of their reality. In other words, if gameplay is recognized as distributed across experiences that are inside and outside the game, we have a more substantial capacity to recognize when games are having effects on their players. Bo Ruberg similarly redirects this argument of transformation from being rooted in empathy to one rooted in alternatives such as "caring, compassion, sorrow, loss, and queer entanglement"⁵¹ instead. Tanenbaum, Tanenbaum, and Ruberg are in agreement when it comes to the valuing of non-traditional feelings and experiences in games. The idea of transformative play and the considering of one's own emotions (beyond the accepted hegemonic emotions) and experiences within a game "is a radical notion."⁵² If players are willing to engage in transformative play, it opens up a new form of play and new experiences to the players. Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum also identify the interaction between mechanics, game art, and transformative play. They say "the game's interfaces, visual rhetorics, and motivational structures serve as mediating artifacts, guiding and supporting the player's participation within their imagined world and establishing the conventions that the player must obey."⁵³ In *On the Edge*, the game mechanics are not the sole vehicle to player engagement, deck building is also key because it is where aesthetic exploration and player expression live.

While good game mechanics can and ideally should be a part of engaging games, it is not the only way players can engage in transformative play. Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum's assertion regarding the player's ability to identify with and engage in the importance of the world neglects to account for

⁴⁹ Theresa Jean Tanenbaum and Karen Tanenbaum, "Empathy and Identity in Digital Games: Towards a New Theory of Transformative Play," *International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games* (2015).

⁵⁰ Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum, "Empathy and Identity in Digital Games."

⁵¹ Bo Ruberg, "Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of 'Empathy' in Video Games," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13, no. 1 (March 2020): 69.

⁵² Bo Ruberg, "Empathy and Its Alternatives," 67.

⁵³ Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum, "Empathy and Identity in Digital Games."

the affective engagement that occurs beyond and even outside of mechanics or game rules in the form of deck building. For Roach and Volz, investment in the game did not follow the prescribed path of a player learning about the mechanics of the game, following rules, and the end product of a satisfying game experience. Instead, deck building, including visual aesthetic elements, was the site in which they drew the most meaning and personal investment in the game, and thus did the identifying with characters that Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum posit as being essential to transformative play. If we as scholars are willing to recognize when gameplay is happening, we might have a better sense of where transformation is occurring. As yet, we do not know how deck building figures into these persuasive processes because we have formally cut them off from analysis.

Deck building was thus the site of transformative play. In this reasoning, deck building *must* be considered part of gameplay. Furthermore, by actually allowing deck building to exist as gameplay, transformative play becomes more capacious and has greater opportunities to manifest. Deck building is a fundamental aspect to the playing of a TCG, the game itself cannot happen without deck building. Therefore, if players are not engaging in the act of deck building, they are not playing the game to its fullest extent and they are not reaching Tannenbaum and Tannenbaum's ideal of transformative play as a participatory space. In this, we argue that not only is deck building actually part of gameplay, but that it should be considered as such within the discipline. Understanding deck building is absolutely fundamental to gameplay and the lack of literature on the subject only highlights a significant gap in the field of game studies.



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