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Dead-Go

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Inevitably it happens: you build a great deck, be it for fun or for tournament play. It has nifty combos, your favorite creatures, and wacky spells. You sit down to play against a friend, prepared to wow him with your latest creation. He wins the die roll, and chooses to play. Your turn-two creature gets **Counterspelled**. Your turn three über-enchantment gets **Syncopated**. Your turn four artifact gets **Dismissed**. About 20 turns later, your opponent plays a **Morphling/Mahamoti Djinn/Stalking Stones**, and proceeds to bash your face in, his graveyard a veritable treasure trove of countermagic. Every spell you played was an exercise in futility.

You get frustrated.

You get aggravated.

Wasn't **Magic** supposed to be about playing cards? Then why did your opponent just keep on countering every last spell you cast?

Don't worry, I'm here to help.

Love 'em or hate 'em, they are the blue mages. What they don't counterspell, they bounce. What they don't bounce, they steal. If they can't counter, bounce, or steal, they draw cards until they find more business.

When people name the most powerful cards in the game, inevitably they must place that old standby that says "counter target spell" near the top of the list. Read that again; it doesn't just say "counter target spell." It says "whatever card you just played in the entire history of **Magic**, unless it was a land, just go ahead and place it in the graveyard cause I just said nuh-uh." Sure, there are exceptions, but you get my point.



So the question I posit here is as follows: How do you beat a well-built permission deck? You know, the kind of deck that features 16-30 counterspell-type cards (including favorites such as **Counterspell**, **Mana Drain**, **Disrupt**, **Force Spike**, **Syncopate**, **Power Sink**, **Dissipate**, **Dismiss**, **Forbid**, **Exclude**, **Force of Will**, and **Foil**, among others), a smattering of bounce (including and not limited to **Repulse**, **Aether Burst**, **Man-o'-War**, and **Capsize**), some card drawing (**Fact or Fiction**, **Stroke of Genius**, or good ol' **Jayemdae Tome**) and a couple of win conditions (see above!).

I'll even take that question one step further: How do you beat a well-built permission deck *and* still have your deck be viable against other types of decks? Sure, you can stack your deck with 4 **Pyroblasts**, 4 **Red Elemental Blasts**, 4 **Boils**, and a gaggle of non-counterable spells (such as **Urza's Rage** and **Blurred Mongoose**), but chances are you'll lose horribly to most non-blue decks. Let's examine the strengths and weaknesses a generic blue deck to see where an Achilles' heel might be.

Generic Blue Deck

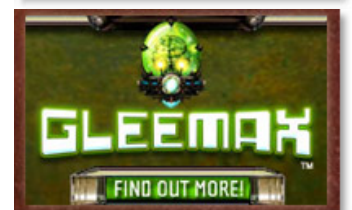
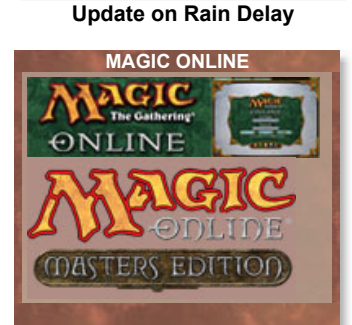
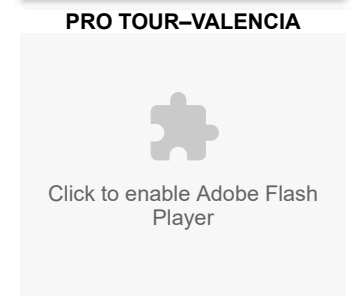
- 20 Counterspells (Ranging from 1-4 mana cost)
- 8 Bounce Spells (4 for creatures, 4 for permanents)
- 4 Card-Drawing Effects (either permanents or instants)
- 2 Creatures (actual creature spells, not lands)
- 4 "Man-Lands" (**Stalking Stones**, **Faerie Conclave**, **Mishra's Factory** -- they all fit the bill)
- 4 Colorless Lands (Utility lands, such as **Wasteland** or **Quicksand**)
- 18 Islands

Strengths:

- Counterspells are extraordinarily versatile. They can stop almost anything.
- Card-drawing effects mean card advantage. More cards drawn = more options.
- Endgame finishers (like **Morphling**) are hard to stop.
- Many cards are cantrips (see the second point).

Weaknesses:

- Needs a *lot* of lands to get going. Card drawing and kill cards are expensive.
- Cannot kill an opponent quickly.
- Has problems gaining control in the early game.
- Has some problems with permanents (limited, temporary removal).



So how can we beat the almighty **Counterspell**? Here are some suggestions.

DISRUPTION

Blue decks, in the early game, trade one-for-one card advantage. For each spell you cast, they cast one spell (a counter-magic spell) in order to stop you. If they can't counter early threats, they will quickly die to whatever you throw at them. One route to go would be to play spells which prevent your opponent from playing early-game counterspells. These are the spells favored by quick-kill combo decks to destroy the chances a blue mage has of winning the game, because they really mess up the beginning turns of a blue opponent.



Duress: One of the best anti-control cards ever printed. For one mana, you get to search your opponent's hand and knock out his best (non-creature non-land) card. Unless he happens to have a "free" counter (such as **Force of Will**), you can **Duress** him with impunity on turn one. Does he only have one **Counterspell**? Yank it out, and feel free to lay down creatures and other cards the first few turns, knowing that you've smashed his line of defense. **Duress** gives you, in essence, a pro-active **Counterspell** -- it counters a spell in their hand before it is ever cast! But instead of stopping your opponent in his tracks, you are clearing the way to allow yourself to play the game on your terms!

City of Solitude/Abeyance/Orim's Chant: I group these together because they basically do the same thing. They all keep your opponent from playing spells on your turn. This is key, because if he does not counter your **Abeyance**, for instance, you are free

to play anything you want, mana permitting. If he counters your **Abeyance**, you have just made him tap precious mana, plus he has one fewer counter in their hand to threaten you with. **Insist** and **Overmaster** also fall into this category.

Land Destruction: Blue needs lands to function, more so than most any other color. Let's say that you start to destroy his lands on turn three. By turn 7, imagine you have seven lands out to his three. This means that, at most, he can play two counter-magics (and most likely only one), allowing you to start playing threats. Does he tap out to counter your first spell, knowing you might play an even more dangerous one next? Does he counter your land destruction, leaving himself vulnerable to your business spells?

WEENIES

An early assault can end blue's game before it even gets started. Unloading a ton of undercosted weenies (creatures with a low casting cost and high power statistic) usually will overload a blue player faster than he can say "concede." **Sligh** (a quick red deck) and **Stompy** (a quick green deck) both thrive against blue control because they can have out 3-4 threats by turn two! Since the blue player will be able to counter, at most, one of these spells (barring **Force of Will** or **Foil**), they will quickly find themselves in hot water. How does an opponent deal with turn-one **Jackal Pup**, turn two **Mogg Fanatic/Cursed Scroll**, when almost all of his cards are geared towards dealing with spells and not permanents? And moreover, if he taps out to bounce your artifacts, enchantments, or creatures, you are free to unload your higher-costing cards on him (even if higher-costing might mean only three mana for **Ball Lightning** or two mana for **River Boa**).

RECURRING CARDS

Remember how I said above that blue usually responds to your threats on a one-for-one basis? Well, what happens when you can recur the same threat over and over and over? I point you all [here](#), as many of the recurring cards I mention in that article can single-handedly bring a blue mage to his knees. Control players just love extending the game as long as they can, since the longer the game goes, the more opportunities they have for card advantage. When a blue opponent starts drawing 2 to 3 cards per turn to your one, he can begin to lay down threats and still have mana to counter anything you might play. However, you can end that dream by having a **Hammer of Bogardan**. Sure, he can counter it -- but chances are it's not with a **Syncopate** or **Dissipate**. Well, that's ok, you can just bring it back next turn and throw it straight at his head. Did he counter it again? Well, now you're ahead by a card (they used two counterspells to stop the same Hammer twice). Do it a third time, or a fourth time. Is your opponent *still* alive? Wash, rinse and repeat, since you can Hammer down all day long! In fact, if you run them out of counters, you can even start playing those other cards in your hand that he can no longer stop.



Want to bring a tear to the blue mage's eye? Get your hands on some quick creatures and versatile anti-blue cards.

ANTI-BLUE CARDS

Earlier I said that if you play eight "red blasts" you'll lose to non-blue decks. Well, that doesn't hold true for all anti-blue cards. A good number of them are reasonable buys, which will be just that much more effective against a control deck. Consider some of the following:

Urza's Rage: Already a fan favorite, this direct damage spell will deal three damage whether your opponent likes it or not. And since many blue decks like settling down for a long game, you can make them pay by kicking it up for a full 10 damage.

Spellbane Centaur: Three mana for a three power creature definitely fits the mana curve. Throw in the bonus that the Centaur makes your creatures basically invulnerable to blue targeted effects (such as bounce, barring **Hibernation**), and you have a real winner to aid in your battle against blue.

Obliterate: The ultimate reset button, this handy little number takes out the entire world. Suddenly the blue mage finds himself back at square one, without the ability to counter multiple threats per turn. For extra fun, float mana after you **Obliterate**, and lay down a threat while your opponent has no permanents! Thrill as you lay down a post-**Obliterate** Mountain and summon forth your favorite **goblin**!

MASS-DISCARD SPELLS

Blue loves card advantage, and blue loves planning ahead. Mass discard spells take away both of those strengths, and gives the blue mage the same fits that land destruction presents: does he counter the **Stupor** and leave himself open to your next spell, or does he lose two cards? I put these in a separate category from disruption, since a lot of these spells (such as **Disrupting Scepter**, **Mind Rot**, and **Blazing Specter**) let your opponent chose what to discard. However, since you are making him lose cards, you are gaining card advantage. The fewer cards he has, the less he can do to stop your advances.

By no means would I consider this guide to be complete, but I understand the frustration people encounter when losing over and over to blue control decks. Just remember that the best ways to beat blue come from speed (to outrace their countermagic), disruption (to prevent their countermagic from ever being played), and out-card-advantaging them (making them discard two or more cards to one of your spells or using a recurring card to force multiple counters on a single spell of yours). Also keep in mind that blue control usually wins by drawing more cards than you, countering your threats on a one-for-one basis, and preparing for the long game. If you can employ strategies to get around blue's strengths (or exploit its weaknesses), you'll find you have a lot more success when your opponent brings a deck full of **Islands** to the table.

Next Week: Fire and Ice

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*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by **StarCityGames.com**, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their **Orgg** down comforter.*



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