

Let's blow up land! Deconstructing Ponza

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Kill their creatures and destroy their lands!... probably one of the oldest strategies in **Magic**. If you have been playing **Magic** as long as I have, then you remember the first powerful cards you had four copies of were [Stone Rain](#) and [Lightning Bolt](#). Everyone tried to trade for four [Sinkholes](#) and if they were successful added them -- and [Terror](#) -- to the decks. Unfortunately, back in those prehistoric days we were playing 90+ cards and our decks were likely to also feature [Serra Angel](#), [Force of Nature](#), and [Counterspell](#). Land destruction was good.

As **Magic** evolved, so did the recipe for land destruction decks. In addition to slimming down to a low-fat sixty cards, the decks shared many ingredients.

Land destruction, removal, and a big monster: the perfect recipe

Key in the dish is, of course, land destruction. [Stone Rain](#), [Sinkhole](#), [Strip Mine](#), [Icequake](#), [Pillage](#)... just click over to the [Ben Bleiweiss article](#) for the full smorgasbord of possibilities.

Spot removal is as essential to the mix as salt and pepper. From [Lightning Bolt](#) to [Firebolt](#) there has never been a shortage of heat to spice up this dish.

Not hot enough for you? There is usually a punishing mass removal spell that will leave your opponent scrambling to catch up with their depleted lands. [Earthquake](#) has long been a favorite card in this role as has [Nevinyrral's Disk](#). Sometimes this spell destroys lands as well as in the case of [Wildfire](#) and [Jokulhaups](#).

The cherry on top is usually a big monster. [Shivan Dragon](#), [Juzam Djinn](#), [Orgg](#), [Masticore](#), even [Covetous Dragon](#) have all finished off what [Stone Rain](#) began.

Even the land chips in when it can. [Strip Mine](#), [Wasteland](#), and [Rishadan Port](#) have all depleted many an opponent's resources. [Mishra's Factory](#), [Stalking Stones](#), and [Ghitu Encampment](#) have all depleted many an opponent's life totals. For mana, land is usually not enough, especially when you are playing symmetrical land destruction spells such as [Wildfire](#). [Moxes](#), [Diamonds](#), [Cameos](#), [Mind Stone](#), and that old favorite [Dark Ritual](#) have all provided land destruction decks with the burst they need to start destroying lands early and often.

As you can see, there is a dizzying array of options to choose from. Perhaps if we stopped to analyze a specific deck we could determine what made it tick and maybe try to recreate it using today's Standard card pool.



 Ponza



Main Deck

4
[Rishadan Port](#)
3 [Dust Bowl](#)
4 [Ghitu Encampment](#)
14 [Mountain](#)

4 [Avalanche Riders](#)
3 [Masticore](#)

3 [Earthquake](#)
3 [Fire Diamond](#)
3 [Hammer of Bogardan](#)
4 [Pillage](#)
4 [Seal of Fire](#)
2 [Shock](#)
4 [Stone Rain](#)
2 [Tectonic Break](#)

3 [Cave-In](#)

Sideboard


4 [Boil](#)
4 [Cursed Totem](#)
1 [Earthquake](#)
2 [Tectonic Break](#)
4 [Thran Foundry](#)




Chris ran roughshod over the weenie creature environment at Nationals only to run up against the "Shadowmage Infiltrator" himself in the finals -- Jon Finkel. Finkel was playing a [Vampiric Tutor](#)-based black control deck that had maindeck answers for just about everything, plus "Jonny Magic" was in the middle of a hot streak that culminated with him becoming World Champion.

Let's look at the cards that took Benafel's deck to the finals.

Creatures


Four of the creatures in this deck are really land destruction spells. [Avalanche Riders](#) was the first Invitational card and it made its presence known immediately. A 2/2 for , the Riders destroy target land when they come into play. If that isn't enough, they also have haste. On the downside, they do have echo, but most everyone who has played with this card agrees that the upside (as in "destroy a land and go 'upside' your head for 2") is well worth it.


It's a creature! It's land destruction! It's Darwin Kastle!

arguably the best artifact creature ever printed. [Masticore](#) is a 4/4 for . If that isn't enough to make him good he also has "2: Masticore deals 1 damage to target creature." You want more? Greedy, greedy. Masticore's other ability is "2: Regenerate Masticore". Red mages everywhere can also appreciate that the Masticore deals colorless damage, cleverly attacking through the inevitable [CoP: Red](#) after sideboarding.





The other creature in this deck also has a serious drawback, but anyone that has seen a [Masticore](#) turn a losing game around will agree that discarding a card during your upkeep is a small price to pay for what is

Land Destruction









We have already talked about [Stone Rain](#). It is a pretty straightforward card -- destroy target land for . Early on you set your opponent back by keeping him from the mana needed to start casting spells. Later in the game the card requires more aim; you will try to keep your opponent out of a color or save it for lands with special abilities.

[Pillage](#) is more versatile and as such has a tougher casting cost at . In exchange for the higher color-specific cost we get the option of destroying either a land or an artifact without the possibility of regeneration (that is quite a virtual mouthful, I miss being able to simply say "bury"). [Pillage](#) is


the [Masticore](#)'s bane and provides a nice insurance policy against other nasty artifacts. (Enchantments, on the other hand...)

[Tectonic Break](#) is my favorite name for a land destruction card. The Break is what I referred to as a symmetrical land destruction card earlier. At    , the Break demands that both players sacrifice X lands. Now symmetry is in the eye of the beholder. If it has been Raining Stones as Avalanche Riders Pillage your opponent's lands, there is no way this card will feel even-handed. If you also have artifact mana to power it up it will often leave your opponent without any mana to throw obstacles in the path of your [Masticore](#).



See Spot Removal




[Hammer of Bogardan](#) is a long way from [Lightning Bolt](#). It does 3 damage to a creature or player but is a sorcery where Bolt was an instant, and costs    where the Bolt cost . What makes this card good? Sometimes they come back. During your upkeep you can pay     and return [Hammer of Bogardan](#) to your hand. While your opponent is floundering without sufficient lands it is fun to taunt them by spending 5 of your "extra" mana during your upkeep to regrow three damage.

[Shock](#) has the same casting cost and card type as [Lightning Bolt](#) but only deals 2 damage to target creature or player. One has to make due with the cards at hand and [Shock](#) is perfect on the first couple of turns for making crispy [Elves](#) and [Birds](#).


[Seal of Fire](#) also deals 2 to target creature or player but is an enchantment and cost . The advantage this card has is that it sits on the table and not in your hand make it invulnerable to discard spells. The downside is that your opponent can dictate when you use it with a [Disenchant](#) and sometimes play around it.

Mass Murderers

Whether it is clearing the board of weenies or simply burning out your opponent when you are at a higher life total, [Earthquake](#) has long been a staple of the land destruction deck. Another symmetrical spell at  , [Earthquake](#) deals X damage to each player and all creatures without flying. Once again, symmetry is going to provide cold comfort to your opponent when this card clears the board of an army of elves, goblins, or zombies leaving a gaping hole for your larger monster to drive through.


[Cave-In](#) may cost    but a savvy player usually takes the option of removing a red card in his hand from their game to do 2 damage to all players and creatures. [Cave-In](#) is cast in such a manner so often that paying the mana cost is considered the "alternate casting cost" by magicians in the know. You may be asking yourself, "If an [Earthquake](#) doesn't kill flying creatures, how does a [Cave-In](#)?" The answer to that question is... I don't know, just shut up and be happy you can take down those [Birds of Paradise](#) along with the [Elves](#)!


Just the Artifacts

Three [Fire Diamonds](#) provided Chris's deck with the acceleration he needed to ramp up to a turn-three [Masticore](#), or just have more mana available after a [Tectonic Break](#). There is a Diamond in each color; they cost  and provide one mana of the appropriate color -- in this case red. On the downside, they come into play tapped which may be why Chris chose to only play three, not wanting to clog his hand up with artifact mana that would come online next turn. Other versions of this deck have used more artifact mana when they featured cards like [Wildfire](#) and [Covetous Dragon](#).



This Land Is My Land

What can I say about [Mountain](#) that hasn't already been said? Always remember that [Arabian Nights Mountains](#) can be destroyed by [City in a Bottle](#). Chris played 14 Mountains and as far as I know, none of them were destroyed by [City in a Bottle](#).

[Rishadan Port](#) is so powerful that it was banned in a Block Constructed environment. In addition to providing colorless mana, it allows you to pay 1 and tap your Port to tap target land. The Port was so ubiquitous that its name became a verb; tapping your opponent's land is called "Porting" to this day, even if you don't use a Port to do it. Whether you were using it to retard your opponent's mana development or -- my favorite -- to keep a blue mage from having the dreaded 



 untapped, [Rishadan Port](#) is capable of dominating the board. When you combine it with land destruction spells it becomes downright sick.

[Dust Bowl](#) is [Wasteland](#) on steroids. An excellent source of colorless mana, you could also pay 3, tap and sacrifice a land to destroy target non-basic land. Even the mono-colored decks were running [Rishadan Ports](#) when this deck was viable, and the [Dust Bowl](#) was rarely a dead card.

[Ghitu Encampment](#) comes into play tapped but when it untaps you had better watch out. Sure, it provides red mana, but the [Ghitu Encampment](#) also gives us so much more. For   the Encampment becomes a 2/1 creature with first strike. Lying dormant until the aftershocks of an [Earthquake](#) have diminished, there is often nothing to stand in the way of this little beater.

Benafel's "Ponza" deck was built to punish weenie creatures decks that come out of the gate fast with mass removal in the form of [Earthquake](#) and [Cave-In](#). Slower, more control oriented decks will never get the time they need to develop their mana base thanks to land destruction spells. The non-basic lands in the deck also help the match up against control by attacking their mana or providing attacking creatures that can't be countered.

By Today's Standards

The non-basic lands are a large part of this deck's success and none of them are available to us in the current Standard environment. Fortunately for us, [Wildfire](#) was reprinted in *Seventh Edition*. [Wildfire](#) has often been the centerpiece of red land destruction decks. It does great things for its   casting cost. Each player sacrifices four lands and all creatures take four damage. Lets see if we can't build a [Wildfire](#) deck using today's cards.



The Magni-Fire



Main Deck

Sideboard

 [Barbarian Ring](#) 2
 3 [Mossfire Valley](#)
3 [Sulfurous Springs](#)
16 [Mountain](#)

4 [Magnivore](#)



[Wildfire](#) 4
4 [Firebolt](#)
4 [Volcanic Hammer](#)
4 [Assault/Battery](#)
4 [Stone Rain](#)
4 [Pillage](#)
2 [Devastating Dreams](#)
4 [Fire Diamond](#)
1 [Bloodstone Cameo](#)
1 [Troll-Horn Cameo](#)

[Overmaster](#) 4
4 [Hull Breach](#)
4 [Pyroclasm](#)
3 [Void](#)





What Does That Do?



This is probably my favorite question to get asked when playing **Magic**. I guarantee that more than one player will turn your Magnivore around to read it. The next question is usually, "That thing has haste?" Followed by, "He's how big?" For 2   the Magnivore is a hasty Lhurgoyf. His power and toughness are determined by the number of sorceries in all graveyards. You have twenty-six in your deck so he's often quite big without your opponent's help. Combined with your mass removal spells -- which conveniently are sorceries -- the Magnivore often gobbles up huge chunks of your opponent's life the turn he comes into play.


Magnivore and high-quality sorceries: two great tastes that taste great together.


Teach Those New Dogs Old Tricks

Stone Rain and Pillage fill the same roles as in the earlier deck. You can be a little more capricious with your Pillage in the current Standard environment because there are fewer artifacts to worry about and none as powerful as the Masticore. If anyone in your playgroup uses Patchwork Gnomes they will be in for a nasty surprise if they try to regenerate from a Pillage. Don't forget that each time you destroy a land you are also making your Magnivores bigger.

Removal, Spot Removal


All sorceries all the time! Once the Magnivore is in play you can use these cards to remove their blockers and make your 'Goyf bigger. Firebolt is slightly worse than Shock at 2  for 2 damage at sorcery speed -- the first time you use it. What makes it better is its flashback ability which allows you to play it out of your graveyard for 4 . When you do this it is removed from the game -- one of the few times playing a sorcery will make your monster smaller.

Assault/Battery is another sorcery speed Shock. Well, the Assault half of this split card is anyway. The other half allows you to put a 3/3 green elephant token creature into play for 3 . The deck has access to green mana for the sideboard but sometimes you need a 3/3 creature while conveniently putting another sorcery in your graveyard.









If Firebolt is a weaker Shock, then Volcanic Hammer is a weaker Incinerate. For 1  you can deal 3 damage to target creature or player at sorcery speed. This is powerful enough to remove most creatures and takes a sizable chunk out of your opponent's life when aimed at their head.

Kill 'Em All

[Wildfire](#) is a reset button. It will almost always kill every creature on the board and take out four lands on each side of the table. If you have been using your [Stone Rains](#) and [Pillages](#), this will often be more than enough to kill everything your opponent has in play. If you are accelerating your mana with Diamonds and Cameos then you will be able to destroy all of their lands while maintaining an artifact mana base on your side. If there are four or more sorceries in all graveyards when you cast [Wildfire](#) your [Magnivore](#) will survive -- and grow to a 5/5 (thank you, state-based effects) -- while your opponent's creatures will not. They will also be in a poor position as far as mana is concerned to deal with him on the subsequent turns.

I'm trying [Devastating Dreams](#) out in the final removal spot. I considered [Pyroclasm](#) and [Overmaster](#) but I think the Dreams works nicely with the [Magnivore](#) and the land destruction theme. In addition to paying , you discard X cards at random from your hand and each player sacrifices X lands and all creatures take X damage. An early Dreams for one or two is often devastating against the green/red mage playing with [Birds of Paradise](#) and [Llanowar Elves](#). Again, this card clears the way for [Magnivore](#) and the discard can make him bigger if you throw away sorceries.

The Artifacts (and Sideboard)

We have already discussed [Fire Diamond](#) and its purpose hasn't changed. What has changed is our reliance on it. We are counting on the Diamond to leave us with a mana advantage after a [Wildfire](#) or a [Devastating Dreams](#). In fact, we are relying on it so much that we are adding one more Diamond and two [Cameos](#) from *Invasion*. The [Bloodstone Cameo](#) provides either  or  for . We have no use for the  game one but we also have no good answer to a [Psychatog](#) game one either. The  mana will let us cast [Void](#) after sideboarding which should deal with the 'Tog rather nicely as well as other pesky creatures like [Spiritmonger](#) (make sure you kill all their black mana though since they can still regenerate from a [Void](#)). The [Troll-Horn Cameo](#) also costs  and provides  or , which lets us make Battery tokens if need be and allows us to [Hull Breach](#) those nasty, nasty [Sacred Grounds](#) we hate so much.

The Land

The land available to us is just not as good as it was when Chris Benafel built his Nationals deck. [Mountains](#) -- once again -- need little explanation. Because I have added more artifact mana I have cut back on the number of lands from 25 to 24. I would be hesitant to cut back further than this since we will often be sacrificing lands to [Wildfire](#) and [Devastating Dreams](#). The [Mossfire Valleys](#) and [Sulfurous Springs](#) are in the deck for the same reason as the Cameos. I want to be able to cast Battery game one and [Void](#) and [Hull Breach](#) games two and three. I didn't want to have all the lands be pain lands or open up with a hand full of [Mossfire Valleys](#) and [Shadowblood Ridges](#) so I mixed them up. I chose the [Mossfire Valleys](#) because you are more likely to use green mana game one and you don't have to take damage to do so. This deck will get to threshold very quickly and your [Barbarian Rings](#) will come online almost every game. If you are playing with a group that plays with a lot of [Mystic Crusaders](#) and [Crimson Acolytes](#) you might want to consider more Rings maindeck or in the sideboard since the damage they do is colorless and those two cards will really hurt our deck if they come into play.

This deck is a lot of fun to play and the [Magnivore](#) is a huge truck that comes barreling out of nowhere. Will it be successful in your playgroup? Why don't you build it and let me know?
Brian David-Marshall