

Mana denial, the do-nothing plan, and more Mental Magic: Basic Strategy

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Last week, I outlined the basic rules of how to play a game of Mental **Magic**. To recap: Mental**Magic** can be played with any old stack of **Magic** spells. Cards are either played face down as special "basic lands" that can tap for any color of mana or played "normally" as any legal spell with the same mana cost ([Wall of Blossoms](#) can be [Wall of Roots](#) or [Nomadic Elf](#), for instance, or of course [Wall of Blossoms](#) itself). For a more in-depth description of this format's fundamental rules, check out [last week's article](#).


This week, we will talk about the basic plans you make to win a game of Mental **Magic**. Mental**Magic**, because of its inherently adaptive nature, follows different strategic rules than you would typically associate with intuitive **Magic** play. One of the most significant differences involves a decision before the first spell is cast, before the first land is played, and even before the first card is drawn from the top of the library: Play or draw?



In competitive **Magic** circles, except in specific instances, most players will elect to play rather than draw. In Sealed Deck, where players are forced to run three (or sometimes four) colors, drawing will give a player that one more vital card to help establish a mana base. In Constructed, though, most players want to develop their own board positions, valuing the ability to play the first land and cast the first spell (or for blue players, have and leave open reactive mana) over the extra card that comes from drawing.

In Mental **Magic**, experienced players tend to want to draw. The main reason for this is actually quite simple. As the great Pat Chapin (quite possibly the finest Mental **Magic** player of all time) explained to me, "If you draw seven cards and I draw eight cards, and I trade every one of my cards one-for-one with every one of your cards, doesn't that leave me with an extra card?"

It certainly does.

And what if that last card is a  spell?

At this point we will step back and address a point that may have been lingering in the back of your mind since last week's article: Why is Type 1.5 the optimal format for Mental **Magic**?

I noted previously that Mental **Magic** veterans have played a number of formats, from Type 1 down, eventually settling on Extended. Over the years, though, Extended has been whittled down to a smaller and smaller card pool, making Mental **Magic** games in that format a good deal less interesting along the way. By broadening the format to Type 1.5, we got to bring back a number of old favorites, such as [Force Void](#), and we got to see the interactions between old and new mechanics. Quite accidentally, we also fixed the broken format.










Just the Facts

You would think that with the presence of such power cards as [Sinkhole](#) and [Hymn to Tourach](#) that Type 1.5 would be a much more broken format than Extended. The fact of the matter is Type 1.5 is a much friendlier environment in which to duel; the main reason is that [Fact or Fiction](#) is restricted in Type 1. Because it is on the Type 1 Restricted List, [Fact or Fiction](#) is banned in Type 1.5, making it unavailable in Mental**Magic** for our purposes.


[Fact or Fiction](#) is unreal in Mental **Magic**.

Imagine this:

With five mana in play, I cast [Fact or Fiction](#) during your end phase. Even if you have cards of the appropriate mana cost, you cannot respond successfully with [Disrupt](#), [Force Spike](#), [Force Void](#), or a cycled [Complicate](#). You will have to hard counter [Fact or Fiction](#), meaning you will have to have either a  card for [Pyroblast](#) or [Red Elemental Blast](#), a   for [Burnout](#), or a , , or  card for one of the traditional blue permission spells. If [Fact or Fiction](#) resolves, you are in deep trouble.

The piles will invariably be split three and two, and I will always take the pile with three cards, no matter what they are. Unlike in Extended, where you can force-divide a [Psychatog](#) player's lone [Upheaval](#) away with a one-and-four split, every card in Mental **Magic** is both an opportunity for personal creativity and a potential beatdown, so the only way to minimize the power of [Fact or Fiction](#) is to try to set up fairly equal piles, three and two. We will get into this later, but you will have to be very careful about which cards to put in the two pile . . . If they are , or a couple of other mana costs, they may be even more dangerous in the graveyard than they are in my hand. And that's just the beginning.


Let's assume that you were lucky enough to have an appropriate response card and I failed to resolve [Fact or Fiction](#). Your problems are over, at least in the short term, right? At least [Fact or Fiction](#) is out of the way, right? Sorry, friend.

Invariably, I will untap, draw a card, probably play a land, and then use that vicious [Fact or Fiction](#) that just went to the graveyard to play a [Deep Analysis](#) with flashback. Three life plus two mana is not much to pay for the same card advantage as [Ancestral Recall](#), especially if the original spell drew away one of my opponent's relevant cards already. If you fought the [Fact or Fiction](#), your mana is likely to be tapped, while I am fully untapped; if I want to fight for this spell, I am in good position. Even if you successfully stop both  power cards, I have used just one card to draw out two of your most efficient answer cards.

And if the original [Fact or Fiction](#) resolves? You are looking at one card (and six mana and 3 life) for five! This is a very bad place to be if you are not the mage who is tapping all the blue mana.





Fighting the [Fact or Fiction](#) and [Deep Analysis](#) combination never comes out well. Your goal shouldn't be to stop it totally, but to minimize how badly you are wrecked.


All that being said, you should be very glad for the Type 1.5 format choice. With [Fact or Fiction](#) banned, all you have to worry about is [Inspiration](#) and [Deep Analysis](#). While that also seems pretty strong, Inspiration is a lot easier to foil than [Fact or Fiction](#). For one thing, [Inspiration](#) has certain vulnerabilities that [Fact or Fiction](#) does not, such as being the legal target of a [Divert](#) or [Rebound](#). For another, it will always net at least one fewer card than [Fact or Fiction](#), and as I have tried to explain in today's article, every last card is a vital resource in Mental **Magic**.


So, in our initial example, the drawing player, after playing attrition one-for-one with his or her opponent's cards for several turns has one card left. It is , and the poor opponent is in a miserable position from which he or she can never recover. Basically, Mental **Magic** is a race to see who can claim the draw first, for his or her ability to win is inexorable. Well, not quite.

Though drawing is generally considered to be the superior starting position in Mental **Magic**, the person who goes first also has at his or her disposal several potential strategies to win that the drawing player simply cannot use. While these strategies are no more effective in the Mental **Magic** game than forcing one-for-one exchanges every game while drawing, they are battle-tested plans that have served me when I haven't been lucky enough to win the die roll.

1. Mana Denial



The mana-denial strategy works best if you have a  in your opening hand, but it is not necessary. It has great synergy with most of the common land destruction mana costs (, , , and so


on), and if you are lucky enough to have a  card in your opening hand, you can even start off with [Sinkhole](#).


Mana denial is a risky strategy because there are certain response cards your opponent can have that will thwart it with great panache, but I am convinced that it is the best way to go when playing first, especially if you open with .

Turn 1: Play land. Play  as [Birds of Paradise](#), [Fyndhorn Elves](#), or [Llanowar Elves](#).




Turn 2: Play the appropriate mana-denial spell based on your opening hand.




The absolute best card to have is . Even better than playing this card as [Stone Rain](#) on your opponent's only land is waiting for his or her upkeep and casting [Solfatara](#) or [Turf Wound](#). These spells accomplish much the same thing as [Stone Rain](#), but if they resolve, they automatically replace themselves (and their drawbacks are much less steep).  is particularly good because it can be recovered immediately as [Squee, Goblin Nabob](#) on your next turn, reloading your hand for another mana-denial attack.


 can be cast as [Rain of Tears](#), [Icequake](#), or another black land-destruction card and be brought back later as [Nether Spirit](#).

 is good for [Fallow Earth](#) and a [Call of the Herd](#) flashback.

The goal of the mana-denial strategy is to seize the early development of the game. It is not frequent that someone can use the mana-denial strategy to totally end his or her opponent's chances in the first four or five turns of the game. Your opponent will never, after all, hit a spell glut and fail to play lands. But playing this way will allow you to keep your opponent off balance, and eventually force through a powerful effect that erases the initial disadvantage of playing first or puts you ahead of your opponent, not just in mana development, but overall card count.

The defenses against the mana-denial strategy are few. They are even fewer if the opponent has a turn-one mana acceleration creature. By all means, if you are the defending player with a , , or  card in your opening hand, send a [Vendetta](#), [Shock](#), or [Swords to Plowshares](#) at that turn-one creature. In some sense, the opponent is playing into your strategy, as the drawing player, of aggressive one-for-one trades in the early game. While this will just delay the land destruction for a turn, rather than halting the plan altogether, it will give you at least another draw step to pick up an appropriate answer.

The mana-denial strategy can also be a double-edged sword. A land-destruction spell can be stopped cold by any number of  cards at two mana, the most devastating being [Teferi's Response](#). Part of the reason that the [Birds of Paradise](#)/[Fyndhorn Elves](#)/[Llanowar Elves](#) early play comes so highly recommended is that on turn two, the only real responses to the mana-denial plan cost , for [Disruptor](#) [Force Spike](#) . . . or [Divert](#). [Solfatara](#) and [Turf Wound](#) really shine here, because even if your opponent has one of those hated blue instants, you get an automatic reload via [Squee, Goblin Nabob](#) to try again. If your opponent does have a  response for, say, [Stone Rain](#), you are in a lot more trouble . . . you will be lucky if all the other person does is counter your threat and draw a card; you might just lose one of your lands.

Besides cheap blue spells, the ever-fantastic  flashes a pretty smile to defend against land destruction as well. Though useless against a turn-two mana-denial spell, [Skysroud Blessing](#) will counter any number of land-destruction techniques if you are able to get two mana in play.



Yes, he said these are the good cards.

I realize that the potential downsides to the mana-denial strategy seem harsh, but as they say: Risk leads to greatness. You can't just sit there going first, can you?

2. The Sit-There Strategy

Another path to success when playing first, especially with no appropriate mana-denial cards in your opening hand (or if you have a feeling your opponent has drawn the right spells to fight back), is to do nothing but play lands for four or five turns. This strategy works best if you have 3G in your opening hand because you will have to force a reaction during your opponent's end step. The spell you will try to break through with will generally be Inspiration, but the secret is you don't really care if it resolves. If you can get a one-for-one trade out of your opponent, you may appear behind, but remember, you can always cast a [Deep Analysis](#) from your graveyard the following turn. The main goal here is to get your opponent to respond by tapping enough mana for you to make your "big play" on your turn. I'm not sure what your big play will be (that, of course, will be dictated by your hand). I've seen everything from a [Mana Short](#) followed by [Probe](#) with kicker to crazy mana-floating turns with [Balancing Act](#). Your big play may be an attempt to equalize the cards, negating your disadvantage in going first, or if you have the right tools, it may be an elaborate turn that totally demolishes your opponent's board position.

I would not suggest tapping out on turn four for your big play, because that never works for me, but it seems that every time one of my opponents does so, he or she has the right cards to prove it a viable plan of action.

I hope this overview has been a helpful one in your quests for Mental **Magic** dominance. Next time, we will delve a bit deeper into the realms of Mental **Magic** strategy and dig into some reader email and message board questions.

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