

Advanced strategy with *Odysseyblock* faves

Mental Magic: Proactive Flashback

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This is Part 4 of the Mental **Magic** series. – [PART 1](#) – [PART 2](#) – [PART 3](#)

Once upon a time, Mental **Magic** games between experienced players were complicated fencing matches, in which each combatant manipulated his or her hand and bided time in order to set up a series of tiny gains in card advantage. Ponderous card advantage engines in the form of Jayemdae Tome or Treasure Trove would take control of the long game, while typical threats played out took the forms of Uktabi Orangutan or Monk Realist, fighting back while also putting a clock in play. If the opponent would do the favor of tapping out for a Disrupt or Force Void, it would be much appreciated.

Naked two-for-one spells were valued for their raw power. A player drawing a card with mana cost BB would have access to Hymn to Tourach, while 2B followed closely as Stupor or Bog Down. Though victory through these means was often more a result of drawing the correct mana costs than the dance of walking your opponent into cantrips or jockeying for control of the board with tempo-generating 187 effects, discard effects were no less brutal in their applications . . . at least against the uninitiated Mental Magician.

When antiscard strategies such as holding back Guerilla Tactics or Mangara's Blessing were discovered, players sought to gain the same kind of raw power card advantage by making each of their spells work harder than before. A R spell was not just a Shock aimed at an opposing Uktabi Orangutan; it was a Searing Touch with buyback first, sending his buddy the Monk Realist to the grave.

You could tell the subtle difference between a competent player and a true Mental **Magic** artist by his or her decision to go first or second. Every single card, even that eighth one granted by drawing first, was a precious commodity. Anoints and Bandages ruled creature combat as the best players would work cantrips, 187 comes-into-play effects, and buyback spells into as many situations as possible in order to claw ahead in the card advantage war.

And then came kicker.

With the advent of the *Invasion* block, Mental **Magic** was turned on its ear for, essentially, the first time in its history as a format. The rules had changed. The cards to be memorized had new neighbors. All of a sudden a 1B could be a three-for-one as Hypnotic Cloud and 2U soared to the sky as possibly the best mana cost since 3B for its potential virtues as Repulse, Exclude, and more than either, the

kicker-enhanced Probe. Joined by 2B, 2G, 2R, and especially 2W, 2U also rounds out the Battlemage cycle. Possibly the best of the kicker additions to Mental **Magic**, the *Planeshift* Battlemages play defense against the opponent's best permanents, draw extra cards, rip apart the other guy's hand, and like the Striped Bears and Gravediggers before them, simultaneously put offensive bodies in play.

But this article is not about kicker. It's about the mechanic that came next.

Last May in Milwaukee, I was sitting across from that Mental **Magic** savant, possibly the greatest player of them all, Patrick Chapin, when he declared "that it's all about flashback these days." Though I always considered myself an adept Mental Magician, Pat owned me in contest after contest. He could beat me with Savannah Lions beatdown, outplay me at my own game of overwhelming card advantage, destroy all my land, or take me to school. At this Grand Prix in Middle America, where Pat would go on to take second place behind his longtime cohort and mentor Eric Taylor (a.k.a. edt), he educated me in the most important mechanic since the *Ice Age* set gave us the first cantrips.

Way back in our second installment, I talked about how unreal a Fact or Fiction followed by Deep Analysis could be. At that first session with flashback, Pat showed me not just that trick with the new king of mana costs, 3U, but an additional twist on the classic playing-first strategy of mana denial: Fallow Earth followed by Call of the Herd.

Over time, I learned to adapt my overall playing strategy to exploit flashback. Though the tempo of a 187 creature will always be welcome on a developing board and it is difficult to make a play as satisfying as Disrupt or Burnout on the opponent's best spell, in the current Mental **Magic** environment, few things are as consistently dominating in this format than the flashback mechanic.

Why is flashback so good?

The main thing with flashback is that it represents the same kind of naked two-for-one as a discard spell like Hymn to Tourach, but for the most part, lacks the drawbacks. Flashback cards don't set off Dodecapod or Basking Rootwalla. It is a lot less lethal to have one answered by Divert than, say, a Probe while tapping out.

Moreover, flashback cards, even when they are broken up, generally require two separate responses from the opponent. While another two-for-one, such as a Nekrataal, can elicit a two-for-one right back, such as the wrong end of an Exclude, a flashback two-for-one will still have half its efficacy even if the opponent has an appropriate response.

Flashback threats can be cast over two different turns. They can lie in wait in the graveyard until the right moment appears, and then savage your opponent's best laid plans. They can play offense, play defense, play kill card, or keep you alive. They can serve as the desperation Moment's Peace you need while digging for that 2BB you've been looking for to end the game, the Ray of Revelation that snipes your opponent's Sylvan Library before he nets a single spell, or even the foil to the other guy's potential flashback cards, waiting in his rapidly developing discard pile.

So like I said, flashback is good. These are some of the proactive flashback tricks that come up in a typical game:

Deep Analysis

I know that I've gone over this one a couple of times already, but it bears repeating. Deep Analysis is potentially the most important card in the most important mechanic. When you cast Deep Analysis from the graveyard, you are setting up the same card advantage as an Ancestral Recall (+2 cards with no loss of cards in hand is essentially the same as +3 less the card used to play it). That in itself is the kind of activity that you want going on in Mental **Magic**, but combined with its extremely low mana requirement of 1U, Deep Analysis is absolutely lethal.

That Deep Analysis comes at 3U is pure gravy. You can play 3U on your own turn as the oft-forgotten Sift or at the end of your opponent's turn as Inspiration. Both of these cards generate card advantage in and of themselves, and show a perfect illustration of the "two answers required" advantage of flashback spells. Even if your opponent has an answer for an instant speed card advantage play at the end of his turn, the likelihood of him or her having one for a mana efficient flashback Ancestral Recall right afterward is low, especially in the mana tight turns of the early game.

Quick story: Jonathan Becker once trounced me when I had four lands in play, and both R and 2U in my hand. At the end of my turn, he played Fact or Fiction (this was before it was quite rightly banned in Type 1.5). Theorizing that he was just going to follow up with Deep Analysis anyway, I played Force Void, leaving mana open for Pyroblast, and drew a card at the beginning of his turn. My best-case scenario would be to break even . . . my 2U and R, less the extra card, for his 3U alone. Sure enough, Jon flashed back Deep Analysis, and sure enough, I made the scripted response of Pyroblast. My theory was that if I had led with Pyroblast, Jon would have had mana open on his turn to pay the 1 required for Force Void, so I should lead with the Force Void. Unfortunately for me, I was now tapped out, and Jon got me right back with Disrupt, and drew his two cards.

Probably the right play in this situation was to use the Pyroblast on the Fact or Fiction and let Jon have the Deep Analysis (I certainly couldn't let him simultaneously fill his graveyard and draw three cards with Fact or Fiction). As it was, I ended up being down three cards and minus two of my best defensive mana cost cards. This just goes to illustrate how powerful Deep Analysis can be in the early game after picking a fight at the end of the opponent's turn.

Call of the Herd

Call of the Herd is another one we have mentioned before. While best as a potential late-game threat after being set up by a devastating turn-three Fallow Earth, the merry elephants can play remainder to a Thornscape Battlemage, Uktabi Orangutan, or Pyknite.

Call of the Herd is great because it is a larger-sized body than you will typically see in Mental **Magic**, where many players rely on 187 weenies to deal most of their damage, and because even if the opponent trumps it with a cantrip like Repulse, the drawback is minimal as it was an extra card anyway.

Ray of Revelation

This card is a big reason why persistent enchantment-based card drawing, such as *Treasure Trove* or *Sylvan Library*, has so fallen out of favor in some Mental **Magic** groups. The best trump card from *Judgment* has quite a happy home in Mental **Magic** circles because it does so much for so little.

When you think about the fact that the opponent's nasty four mana game winner is being destroyed by your saucy one mana instant on his turn, you will probably get a warm and fuzzy feeling inside. When you consider the fact that he never saw this response coming because you simply cycled the *Disciple of Law* you were holding (or cast *Blessed Wine* if you were particularly greedy), *Ray of Revelation* gets even better. Though it doesn't come up very often, leading with *Aura Blast* against multiple enchantments (or in the case that your *Aura Blast* gets countered) is about as good as it gets for the *Ray of Revelation* setup.

Roar of the Wurm

The most popular flashback card in Constructed **Magic** games has only recently found its way into Mental **Magic**. Seven mana threats are dicey at best in a format in which your opponent can script whatever response he or she wants, often for as little mana as he or she wants. So in the past, if you had 6G in your hand, chances were that you played it face down as a land.

Then the *Legions* set was printed.

Much as you might not expect a hobbit orphan boy and his pet gardener to storm the gates of Mordor and plunge *The One Ring* into the fires of Mount Doom, a much maligned and inefficient Beast has done his part to plunge the gigantic *Roar of the Wurm* into the graveyard with increased consistency.

Just cycle your 6G card as *Hundroog* and you are halfway to *Roar of the Wurm* flashback. For the same cost as *Call of the Herd*, you get a threat that is twice as big and will end the game in a few short swings.

Coffin Purge

Coffin Purge's greatest advantage is its innocuous mana cost. In Mental **Magic** you are always spending early B spells as *Duress* or *Ostracize*, constantly using *Innocent Blood* or *Ghastly Demise* to stave off your opponent's creatures at a reasonable mana cost. And there it sits, your little B spell, at the bottom of your discard pile, covered with the remains of your dead creatures, stomped-on artifacts, and unsuccessful response spells. All of a sudden your opponent is about to take a big turn with *Corpse Dance* . . . and all he or she ends up with is a bunch of tapped mana.

Coffin Purge is deceptive in its effectiveness and almost always forgotten until it is too late. If you don't try hard, you might forget that it's waiting in your own graveyard.

Grizzly Fate

This card, like in the regular **Magic** game, is pure power. You cast it, and it wins the game for you. In Mental **Magic**, this is even more true, because played from the graveyard, Grizzly Fate is very often the remainder of a Stunted Growth or Plow Under (either one of which will generally set up a very favorable game position in and of itself when successfully cast).

Many players respect Grizzly Fate so much that they (as with Squee, Goblin Nabob) will blow an appropriately costed spell in their hands just to keep the opponent from casting it from the graveyard.

It should go without saying that you should only ever play this spell when you have seven or more cards in your graveyard.

Reckless Charge

If the early game is a fight for Deep Analysis, the end of the game is very often a race to the Reckless Charge. I am going to do an in-depth analysis of Mental **Magic** endgames in the near future, and Reckless Charge is going to be the R costed ruby in the middle of the endgame crown.

For now, just be aware that this is arguably the most important flashback card there is, not for getting ahead in a game, but in actually winning.

There are tons of other flashback spells available, and the ones mentioned in this article simply represent some of the most common that show up in a battle between two experienced Mental Magicians, as well as some convenient ways to get them into your graveyard while generating card advantage along the way. I leave you with my favorite flashback spell of all:

Alter Reality

The power of this card stems from its innocent face. It doesn't do *anything* does it? Nope, Alter Reality doesn't do anything except win the counter war that would have ended with Burnout; counterExecute, Perish, Soul Rend, and Slay; and generally leave your opponent tapped out in the middle of his own turn. One of the great joys in Mental **Magic** is walking your opponent into an unwinnable counter war in which you are going to fight that impending Red Elemental Blast with a card in the graveyard that he or she ostensibly already dealt with.

If there is a single card that I try to cast every game, it is this one.

Have fun flashing back spells and frustrating your fellow Planeswalkers!

Next time:

Mental **Magic** puts on its best Single Card Strategies costume when we examine the self-contained card advantage engine that is 3B!

If you like these articles on Mental **Magic**, feel free to contact me at ***michaelj at superhumaneffort dot com***. Two-time Masters champion Ben Rubin did, and now the gauntlet has been thrown down. Going to Grand Prix - Pittsburgh? You may just see the two of us clash in a bloodbath of Treasure Hunters and a Slaughter of Striped Bears. That being said, if you, like Ben, see me at a **Magic** tournament and fancy a game of Mental **Magic**, I may just be very interested.

-- michaelj