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The Mana Question(s)

Noah Weil
 Limited Information
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Everyone has it happen now and then, but for some reason, games with mana problems just *stick* with you. Since starting this column, mana queries have been the number one off-topic issue on peoples' E-Mails and board postings. Personally, I think mana issues affect games less than people realize. I believe the little things like not sneaking in points of damage, or not hunting for card advantage, or any of the tiny edges one can acquire; those affect win/loss records far more frequently. These kinds of issues are harder to identify though, especially when foregoing an attack on turn 3 ends up costing you the game 20 turns later. Besides, at least you get to play a game of **Magic**, poorly executed or not. Poor mana situations remove you from the equation entirely, and nobody wants to feel ripped off. I certainly understand this impulse; while play mistakes really bug me, mana screw is certainly no walk in the park.

The mana equation is interesting, because the choices one makes are a little more subtle than just drafting a bomb. In a first pick, first pack scenario, your choice will be a 1:15. In the mana game, you have literally infinite permutations of land possibilities. That's a lot of opportunity for error, which is why so many people utilize a system, something I'll address in a bit. The nice thing about mana (or the worst, depending on your perspective), is that a player can still make severe mana mistakes with their deck and end up alright. Conversely, a player can create the perfect mana base and still have mana issues all day. It's the nature of the beast. Don't let the possibility of your actions not mattering turn you off to the idea of perfecting mana crafting skills. Like many things in this game, your edge will be small but significant against those that don't put in the time. How many games of not getting mana screwed do you need to win a tournament? How many games of mana screw can you afford before your chances become nil? Even a few percentage points in one direction or another can mean all the difference. Statistics tend to even out, and luck is a fickle fiend indeed.

The Tenant of Limited

If I had to reduce Limited down to one quandary, it would be that of Power versus Consistency. Over and over again, from the cards one drafts to in-game decisions, things come down to risk/reward analysis. Some plays and some games carry few decision making processes, but these are rarer than you might think. At any stage where both players have equitable skill, the wins are going to go to the player who can better manage risk. Trying to play it "safe" is a grand way to do nothing, but depraved indifference won't get you far either.

Mana structure exemplifies this process perfectly. Never want to be mana light? Play 39 lands and a **Greater Mossdog**. Oh, I know that **Firemane Angel** looks pretty powerful, but six mana? **Two Colors**? No thank you sir! Stick with all mana and you'll never have to mulligan those one-landers again. Bonus: Their **Caustic Rains** look soooo stupid.

Obviously, the above path is a poor way to go, but it's really a common sentiment, taken to extremes. Playing just a hair too many lands in a deck will give you the same effect: They're drawing business and you're drawing blanks. Consistent yes, but a consistent loser.

You can take the flip side. Find the most expensive card you drafted (perhaps a **Cytospawn Shambler**), and put in exactly seven lands. One of each basic, maybe an extra Forest, and that **Duskmantle**, **House of Shadow** (just in case). Wow, what a powerful deck! If there's a threat you've drafted, it's at your fingertips. If you need an impossibly narrow answer, well, if it's been drafted it's there somewhere. The silly opponent is drawing lands when they need to draw threats, but you won't ever stop laying down creatures and spells.

The above plan is also remarkably stupid, but it is again taking a correct path of logic to its extreme. The 7 land deck and 14 land deck will lose in the same way: They're looking for lands while the opponent gets to play all their best cards. It's hard to win when you're busy deciding what to discard.

The answer to this dilemma is to strike a balance between the two extremes, but perfect equity is probably impossible. Usually, one must make a decision on whether to err towards power and consistency. What's the better way to go? It's an interesting question, but that's for later. The first step is to get as close to a balance as possible. My procedure is pretty simple really: I ask a question and try to figure out the answer. I find most of my mana equations come down to some simple questions. Get all of them correct and you'll be in a fine place for your Limited games.



How Much Mana Do I Want?

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The first and perhaps easiest of the questions is determining your quantity, your denominator. The baseline mana source question is 17 basics in a 40 card deck, but boy are there exceptions to that rule. The reason 17 lands is the generally accepted number is because 17 lands gives you two things, both of which are good. It allows you the quantity you need to draw enough lands in a likely manner. The goal of mana is to get to 6 or 7 lands in play and then stop. 17 lands makes this more likely than 13 or 20. The other reason is a qualitative one. In this case, that means giving you enough lands so that you can get both of your colors online in a reasonable manner. 9/8 or 10/7 is a standard proportion in your basic draft environment. Some of the core sets allow you to draft a mono-colored deck. Often those decks have 15-16 lands, because your multi-color needs are already taken care of. In *Ravnica* block, this is (of course) impossible. Other reasons to alter this amount include a particularly low mana curve, a particularly high mana curve, or a stronger need to reach certain stages in mana development. Onslaught block was famous for this, as a played *needed* to get to 3 lands to play their morph creatures. Missing the third land drop was often a death knell, so players would play 18 lands often, just to increase their chances of getting to the sweet spot.

Taking all of this into account, how many lands should this deck have, and what should they be? The answer and final decklist are below


Mirage/Mirage/Visions 		
Main Deck		Sideboard
25 cards		
2 Bad River	1 Dark Banishing	1 Benevolent Unicorn
2 lands	1 Ether Well	2 Betrayal
	1 Funeral Charm	2 Boomerang
	1 Parapet	1 Builder's Bane
1 Azimaet Drake	1 Power Sink	1 Civic Guildmage
1 Cadaverous Knight	1 Remedy	1 Death Watch
1 Cloud Elemental	1 Sun Clasp	1 Disenchant
1 Crystal Golem	1 Thirst	1 Divine Offering
2 Ekundu Griffin	1 Tidal Wave	1 Freewind Falcon
1 Femeref Healer	1 Undo	1 Hope Charm
1 Femeref Knight	10 other spells	1 Karoo
1 Femeref Scouts		1 Mtenda Herder
1 Knight of Valor		1 Mystic Veil
1 Kukemssa Serpent		1 Sapphire Charm
1 Merfolk Seer		1 Shadowbane
1 Sea Scryer		1 Shaper Guildmage
13 creatures		1 Vanishing
		1 Vigilant Martyr
		20 sideboard cards

Looking at our color requirements and mana curve, how many and what kind of lands should this *Mirage/Mirage/Visions* deck run? [Click here to see.](#)

What Type of Mana Do I Want?

Now on this particular question, people seem to love shortcuts, or “systems”.

I don't have a system, and I don't like them. Mana is tough enough to warrant the desire for shortcuts, but things are not that simple. Gilbert Royle recently E-Mailed me, kindly sharing his particular system. Basically, it goes something like:

1. Add up all the color requirements in a casting cost (Keening Banshee is  for example)
2. Do this for all your colors to have the total amount of colored symbols on all your cards' casting costs.
3. Pick the amount of mana total you want in a deck (17 lands for example), and divide the symbols by the total. Assuming you brought your calculator, do some math and determine how many lands per color you need for your requirements.
4. Most importantly, have fun!

This isn't a bad system as far as they go, and it will get you to a decent starting place for gleaning mana requirements. But I believe this system, like all algorithms of this stripe, are too flawed for consistent application. The reason things are not so simplistic is because in addition to merely determining your color needs, you must all determine *when* you want them. Some colors are more beneficial early, you see. So let's revise the question to



What Type of Mana Do I Want and When Do I Want It?

Now your needs are becoming more clear. Obviously, the more lands you play of a particular color, the more likely you are to draw them. Incidentally, this is why splashing for mana fixers is so bad: you want enough lands to cast your fixers early in the game when it matters, but you certainly don't want to dedicate too many land slots to your most minor color.

Temporal needs are pretty simple. In the starting portion of the game, you want cards that are most effective early, like two-drops, or cards that get you to the later game like removal and mana acceleration. Later on, you want the difficult to cast creatures and the niche cards. If you're splashing a narrow card like *Incite Hysteria*, it's really a spell you won't need until the later portion of the game, so you can skimp on the red sources.

In practice, this means your goal is not to just get sufficient mana, and not just to get it in the distributions you need, but also to play it in the *order* your deck needs. I have yet to find a system that answers this dilemma to my satisfaction, but luckily practice practice practice still gives good results. Here's one from Daniel Minutello, who has an incredibly strong deck, which is not to say it doesn't have some tough mana.

Daniel Minutello		
Main Deck		Sideboard
41 cards		
4 Forest	1 Compulsive Research	1 Clutch of the Undercity
4 Island	1 Electrolyze	1 Dimir Aqueduct
3 Izzet Boilerworks	1 Flight of Fancy	2 Dryad Sophisticate
6 Plains	1 Invoke the Firemind	1 Leap of Flame
1 Simic Growth Chamber	1 Peel from Reality	1 Muddle the Mixture
18 lands	1 Train of Thought	1 Nightguard Patrol
	1 Withstand	1 Ocular Halo
	7 other spells	1 Simic Growth Chamber
2 Azorius Guildmage		1 Terraformer
1 Benevolent Ancestor		10 sideboard cards
2 Coiling Oracle		
1 Court Hussar		
1 Minister of Impediments		
2 Ogre Savant		
1 Selesnya Guildmage		
1 Siege Wurm		
1 Simic Ragworm		
2 Soulsworn Jury		
1 Steamcore Weird		
1 Vedalken Dismissal		
16 creatures		

Triple Guildmage and tons of card advantage is pretty impressive. The above is how the deck was submitted, with the relevant sideboard cards in the side. From Daniel:

"I thought you might find it interesting, because I chose to omit a few offensive cards as I was trying to make a more controlling build. Also I think the mana may have ended up a little wrong. The decision I made at the time was that Red was my splash and I could afford to wait until I drew a Karoo to play them. I also reasoned that I really needed to draw a Forest in the early game for my green cards to mean anything. Finally, I chose to play a higher land count because I figured that my deck would win through card drawing and control... as it turns out I never missed a land drop and my hand was always full of tricks"

I like Daniel's reasoning here, but I think he took it a bit too far. The deck is glutted with card advantage spells. That's fine until there are so many you just end up drawing all CA spells and not enough action. That's in addition to the fact this deck is incredibly mana hungry, with the Guildmages and **Soulsworn Jury** preferring open mana. Looking at this build, it's safe to say White is the most important color. White has the three 2/2s for two and the three walls, all of which let you stem off a speedy start. The Green cards are relatively unimportant; **Siege Wurm** is pretty late and **Coiling Oracle** is effective enough at any stage. The interesting thing about the Oracle is its synergy with bounce lands in general and **Simic Growth Chamber** in particular. You don't need to glut the deck with Islands and Forests when one Growth Chamber gets you where you need to be. That in turn allows more Plains in the deck, which is what we want anyway. Daniel submitted the deck with 3 **Izzet Boilerworks**, 1 **Simic Growth Chamber**, 4 Islands, 6 Plains, and 4 Forests. I disagree with these proportions. [How about you?](#)

The kind of process above seems... extreme, but it is a necessity. Knowing the likelihood of how your deck progresses is great knowledge to have. Again, this requires practice and experience with the environment. Finally, we're back to the original question:

Do I Prefer More Powerful Mana or More Consistent Mana?

Like everything else, the answer is "it depends". This question in particular requires a very keen understanding of your play environment and your deck's strengths. Consider:

- The more powerful your deck is, the less you have to get fancy with mana bases. When each of your cards outclasses theirs, you can afford to draw an extra land here and there. Your bombs will pick up the slack.
- Are you the best player in your draft? Then you don't need to draw extra spells, a normal proportion will do. When the only way you can lose is through mana troubles, reduce the possibility.
- Are you amongst strong players? Then you need to take some risks. I play with a bunch of very talented people, so I personally push the envelope on my mana bases. My play group is strong enough that mana troubles in either direction are swiftly punished, so one must take some chances to have any chance at all.
- Is your deck underpowered? Time to ratchet up the power level. That usually means playing less lands, or more colors, or both. If your deck can't win when both players get a normal draw, you'll have to set the stage for an abnormally good draw.
- How big are the stakes of the event you're playing? In the Top 8 of a PTQ, winning carries a lot of reward. For three rounds, you may need to flex statistics a bit, just because the prize is so large.
- Are you playing a large (7-9) round event with a single deck? Then consistency needs some attention. Every percentage point gambled in the mana department is magnified each game you play. Accepting the possibility you need to get lucky to win is acceptable for short events; adding double or triple the amount of rounds is asking a bit too much. Being more consistent in a big tournament also magnifies their mistakes. Each round makes their bad builds more likely to bite them. That's nice for a big tournament. Nothing is more annoying than not being able to take advantage of their mana screw, because you're having one yourself.

Yep, mana is a tough nut to crack. For the final practice deck today, here's an RRG deck from a recent 8-4 draft. Good players and strong cards make this one a pretty difficult build. There are a couple of ways to go here; I'll give the version I went with next week.

RRG Draft		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
26 cards		
1 Boros Garrison	1 Bathe in Light	1 Benediction of Moons
1 Orzhov Basilica	1 Boros Fury-Shield	1 Boros Recruit
	1 Boros Signet	1 Conclave's Blessing
2 lands	1 Dimir Signet	1 Courier Hawk
	1 Douse in Gloom	1 Cry of Contrition
1 Absolver Thrull	1 Hypervolt Grasp	1 Cyclopean Snare
1 Agrus Kos, Wojek Veteran	1 Last Gasp	1 Dimir Infiltrator
1 Conclave Equenaut	1 Peel from Reality	1 Dromad Purebred
1 Izzet Chronarch	1 Terrarion	1 Fencer's Magemark
1 Molten Sentry	9 other spells	1 Grayscaled Gharial
1 Moroi		1 Instill Furor
1 Mourning Thrull		1 Mnemonic Nexus
1 Orzhov Euthanist		1 Necromantic Thirst
1 Petrahydrox		1 Poisonbelly Ogre
1 Skeletal Vampire		1 Sabertooth Alley Cat
1 Skyknight Legionnaire		1 Stoneshaker Shaman
1 Sparkmage Apprentice		1 Suppression Field
1 Vedalken Dismissal		1 Thunderheads
2 Veteran Armorer		1 Withstand
15 creatures		19 sideboard cards

Thanks for reading and a big thank you to everyone who sent in their decks to examine. See you next time.

-Noah Weil



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