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OF SPIDERS AND SNAKES

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ANTHONY CONTINUES NINJA WEEK, AND REPORTS ON *MAGIC ONLINE*

For those of you into *Magic Online* but not ninjas, feel free to skip to the second part of this article.

For the first half of this article, we'll be discussing the ninja of *Betrayers* and how they stack up in multiplayer formats.

Surprise! It's A Spider

For a more full discussion of what I mean by "spider" cards, see [my archives](#), particularly the [Hall of Fame articles from last autumn](#). In brief, spider cards are useful in multiplayer because they bait opponents to gain you some sort of unexpected advantage.

I normally think of card advantage when I think of good multiplayer "spider" cards (e.g., [Spinal Embrace](#)). But ninjas have forced me to broaden what spiders can do, for two reasons:

- their combat damage, and
- what they return to your hand.

We'll take both into consideration as we discuss ninja cards. Certainly, strategies that work with one may easily work with another; I just like the chance to space out the discussion for readers one card at a time.

The "spider" rating is on a scale from 0 to 8 with 2 being average, for reasons that are completely arbitrary but allow easier digestion for those of you familiar with the Hall. *A low spider rating doesn't mean I don't like the card!* It just means that it's less spider-y. It may rule in other respects.



Skullsnatcher. *Spider rating: 2*

Probably the least impressive ninja in any format, the [Skullsnatcher](#) still has its role in certain decks. What I might look for is the opportunity to flip a [Nezumi Graverobber](#) a bit earlier than an opponent with three (creature) cards in graveyard may expect. And of course, the [Skullsnatcher](#) can prevent a [Patriarch's Bidding](#) or [Exhume](#) later in the turn from turning into a disaster.

Where [Skullsnatcher](#) can help even more is in its cheap ninjutsu cost. For a mere $\black{1}$, you can save any attacking creature you like. This may come in handy with some strategies, particularly breakneck aggression.

Walker of Secret Ways. *Spider rating: 2*

The peeking at opponent's hand is barely worth mention here. Information is nice, of course. But if you go to the trouble of whipping creatures in and out of your hand at instant speed, you might expect something more spectacular.

The Walker is nicer as a "safety valve" for your ninjas in mid-attack. If it doesn't look like they're going to hit (e.g., [Wing Shards](#)), you can slip one or more back to your hand. Note at this point the ninjas are less like spiders, and more like rattlesnakes (my terminology for "don't mess with me" cards). Attacking you without keeping plenty of defenders back will become very scary for many people, if they know you could replay a ninja from the safety of your hand.

Ninja of the Deep Hours. *Spider rating: 3*

Here's where folks who don't understand what I'm trying to do today will flip out. [Ninja of the Deep Hours](#) is an excellent card. It's fantastic in limited, and it's going to

get some consideration in constructed tournament decks. But spidery? Not so much. Very few opponents will slap their foreheads when they let an attacker through, only to see a 2-power creature hit them so you can draw a card. They'll think it's clever, yes. But they won't feel much pain.

You can change that, if you like. Consider [Words of War](#) (or the others in that family of "Words" enchantments).



Throat Slitter. *Spider rating: 4*

Killing a creature is always good, right? A "4" generally means the spider element is pretty obvious in the card, and you just have to work a bit to make it shine. The question is, how will you ensure that at least one attacker can slip through the defenses and give the [Throat Slitter](#) a chance to deal combat damage?

Will it be [Basalt Golem](#)?

Will it be [Snorting Gahr](#)?

Will it be [Konda, Lord of Eiganjo](#)?

Here's what I like: snakes. (Don't roll your eyes. I haven't even *started* with the snakes, my friend.) The *Kamigawa* block snakes have that lovely disincentive for creatures to engage them. In addition, it's easy to make lots of them with [Orochi Hatchery](#) or [Orochi Eggwatcher](#); and green is a color that can threaten pump. So you attack with increased chances of outnumbering and/or intimidating blockers. One gets through and presto, you can kill that pesky Wellwisher that never does anything but tap for stupid amounts of life.

If you go down this path, bear in mind that [Zombie Boa](#) is a snake, too!

Okiba-Gang Shinobi. *Spider rating: 4*

Multiplayer discard decks are getting more and more interesting. Remember [Mindslicer](#)? Who wants to block that, am I right? I mean, if you're a defender and you've got a [Hill Giant](#) that could get in the way, you won't block if you're holding two

really good cards. You'll just let that 4 damage through, right? Right?

Mistblade Shinobi. *Spider rating: 4*

What's clever about the Mistblade Shinobi is the chance to blend your bounce strategy with whatever you're bouncing back to your hand as your ninjas come out. The obvious (and dull) example is Auriok Champion; but you can be more creative than that! And yes, Intruder Alarm is fairly pedantic at this point, too. (Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker kinda ruined that card for me.)

How about Blasting Station, or Mana Echoes? What about Unstable Shapeshifter? What about Ravenous Rats or Man-o'-War? Why not Fog Elemental? Keep digging – the possibilities for easy, quick combos are very high with this card!



Figure, the Still Wind. *Spider rating: 5*

It's really hard for me to separate the "spider" part of this card from some other elements I really love about good multiplayer cards, particularly "cockroach" (persistent, replicable effects). As you continue to hit opponents, you continue to build up your army of ninjas, gaining more ability to threaten (back to "rattlesnakes"! a nasty surprise if someone refuses to block.

After you build up enough ninjas in your hand, you can create quite a bit of confusion. Who's to say which ninja will come out on a given attack? Are there ninjas you already had in hand, that nobody has guessed at yet?

Figure's the complete deal, the ninja that makes us hope there'll be more ninjas in *Saviors of Kamigawa* this Spring.

Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni. *Spider rating: 6*

A rating of 6 out of 8 is stellar. Ink-Eyes is a nightmare for your opponents. She comes out cheaper than many 5/4's; she hits hard; she pulls a dead creature out effortlessly for your use...and she can attack again ruthlessly the next turn, presenting a problem

for the defender as she regenerates. She contributes to her own continued success, since the more creatures you revive, the better your chances are of getting one through a given defense and spurring another ninjutsu opportunity!

Ink-Eyes is one of my favorite cards in the set. She's going to be a beating in group play, especially if you play her in rat decks based on the fear ability. When are you *not* going to be able to get her through?

In closing this half of the article, I'd like to point to [Shuriken](#) as a fun multiplayer card, in that it mirrors a "jinxed" sort of mechanic that everyone can share in. If that's the way you like to play, [Shuriken](#) is fine even in a non-ninja deck. Heck, even in a deck with a bunch of 3-toughness creatures, you'll often find yourself ahead of the curve!

My apologies in advance for the sudden shift in topic – I normally don't do two unrelated topics in an article; but the experiment below couldn't wait and I enjoyed it enough to want to write about it. Think of it as a bonus article, if you find the transition painful.

Into The Aether With Intotheaether

If you need to know why I'm writing part of this article about ***Magic Online***, see [Jay's article today](#). Here's the "Untargetable Cowards" deck I started with. It's based in part on the deck of a member in our play group, George Maverick. George normally doesn't come up with anything interesting (and he's used to zingers), but in this case, I thought there was an idea here that Jay could wrestle with. He seemed to enjoy it, which made me happy.

UNTARGETABLE COWARDS



DECKLIST

STATS

SAMPLE HAND

SORT BY:

Creature (24)

3 Solemn Simulacrum
4 Blurred Mongoose
3 Gigapede
4 Humble Budoka

4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
4 Troll Ascetic
2 Kodama of the North Tree

Sorcery (1)

1 Restock

Instant (7)

2 Condescend

2 Naturalize

3 Syncopate

Enchantment (4)

4 Cowardice

Land (24)

1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge

1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers

4 Yavimaya Coast

14 Forest

4 Island

60 Cards

It doesn't play too badly – but you'll note it doesn't remove the creatures themselves. Because so much of the deck is untargetable, it doesn't make too much sense to play an easy-targeting card like, say, [Narcissism](#) – because it'll be dead too often. On the other hand, it's a pain to wait on either [Cowardice](#) or the means for Jay to use it. I thought I would enjoy this deck, but I grew to loathe it. It hated me, and it wound itself in a coil of despair around my throat. I had to get out, out I tell you!

While Jay wasn't around, I toyed with a blue-black Dragon-Bidding deck:

DRAGON'S BIDDING**DECKLIST****STATS****SAMPLE HAND**SORT BY: **Creature (12)**

3 Clone

3 Iname, Death Aspect

2 Keiga, the Tide Star

4 Kokusho, the Evening Star

Sorcery (16)

4 Buried Alive

4 Lobotomy

4 Patriarch's Bidding

4 Zombify

Instant (8)

4 Condescend

4 Syncopate

Land (24)

2 Barren Moor

2 Lonely Sandbar

10 Island

10 Swamp

60 Cards

As you can imagine, it can do pretty stupid things. Turn 3 or 4 [Buried Alive](#) (and get all the dragons in the graveyard), turn 5 bidding and let the legendary rule take care of life totals and creatures on the board.

Probably the first non-Wizards employee to come up with this trick was Dave Hanson. He worked a blue-white-black deck with all the relevant dragons back while we were playtesting *Champions* for the Wizards development team. Back then, the white dragon tapped all permanents all opponents controlled...it was truly sick. They fixed that in a hurry.

There are two problems with the deck as I have it: first, it's not that fun after you do it two or three times. And second, [Haunting Echoes](#) just wrecks you like you wouldn't believe – and everywhere I went, people were playing with [Haunting Echoes](#)! It was unreal coincidence – because in the very same rooms, I haven't seen the card played since I gave up this deck.

So it was back to [Cowardice](#) for my games with Jay. But as he points out in his own article, after a few matches I had had about enough of [Cowardice](#) (or the lack thereof, or the desperate inutility of it when no targeted abilities were present). I wasn't having fun with the deck (though chatting back and forth with Jay and other players was a blast), and we weren't even winning that much. To top it all off, a bunch of Jay's fans were watching and I wasn't giving him a good article.

Then I asked myself: what makes a good article? Surprise does.

So I surprised Jay and just told him to whip something together in five minutes, giving him only the sketchiest of themes. ("I want to do damage with snakes...clear the way!") I knew we'd do much better this way. Why? Because Jay and I do this all the time when we write articles. We make up, oh, maybe over a hundred decks every year, not counting limited formats. And we do it fast to include in articles and to get back quickly to online (or real) games. So why not play to our strengths?

Five minutes later, the decks were done. We didn't tinker with either of them until after the experiment was over – whatever we did, that's what we were going to live with.

Jay did brilliantly, coming up with the shaman idea and literally blazing a path for me each and every game. More details on that below.

Here's the final version of the snake deck:

YAY E-SNAKES!



DECKLIST

STATS

SAMPLE HAND

SORT BY: Overview ▼

Creature (24)

1 Jugan, the Rising Star
 4 Matsu-Tribe Decoy
 3 Sachi, Daughter of Seshiro
 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
 3 Seshiro the Anointed
 3 Mistform Shrieker
 2 Mistform Ultimus
 4 Mystic Snake

Sorcery (2)

1 Biorhythm
 1 Restock

Instant (2)

2 Naturalize

Artifact (4)

2 Coat of Arms
 2 Orochi Hatchery

Enchantment (4)

4 Opposition

Land (24)

1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
 1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers
 4 Yavimaya Coast
 11 Forest
 7 Island

60 Cards

Jugan is sort of an honorary snake, given the artwork. [Biorhythm](#) was sort of a throwaway card; but it's already had two big games. The [Coat of Arms](#) were originally [Kusari-Gama](#); and the [Mistform Ultimus](#) was originally another Shrieker and Jugan.

How did the deck do? Well, while we were together, it was like having the New England Patriots playing **Magic**. (Go Pats!) I was the cagey offense, and Jay was the stifling defense. We won because the snakes got huge from [Coat of Arms](#). We won because shamans were sometimes more plentiful than snakes! We won because the snakes held back and tied down defenses and lands with [Opposition](#). We won because [Jugan, the Rising Star](#) sprayed +1/+1 counters all over. We won because Jay's [Kumano, Master Yamabushi](#) went haywire on a ton of 1/1 spirit tokens and opponents' life totals. And we even won a game because of [Kusari-Gama](#), which wasn't enough to save it from permanent demotion after several other games of lackluster performance.

My experience "solo" with the deck – that is, paired up with random teammates – is also very satisfying. While I'll occasionally run into a decided lack of synergy (a [Burning Sands](#) – [Tainted Aether](#) – mass kill combo deck comes to mind), we'll still

manage to pull off wins well more than half the time, which is really all you can ask of a multiplayer deck on a randomly assigned team.

While we're talking about my new *Magic Online* addiction, I've also been having fun drafting. I'm sticking to the 4-3-2-2 (lesser prize) queues for a while, until I can master the interface and remind myself what's good in *Champions*. Sometimes, you end up with a pretty forgiving table. Mono-black decks like this shouldn't happen:

WHOPASSESTHIS.DEQ



DECKLIST

STATS

SAMPLE HAND

SORT BY: Overview ▾

Creature (16)

- 1 Bloodthirsty Ogre
- 1 Cruel Deceiver
- 2 Cursed Ronin
- 3 Gibbering Kami
- 1 Kami of Lunacy
- 1 Kami of the Waning Moon
- 1 Nezumi Cutthroat
- 2 Scuttling Death
- 1 Thief of Hope
- 2 Villainous Ogre
- 1 Wicked Akuba

Sorcery (5)

- 1 Dance of Shadows
- 1 Devouring Greed
- 1 Swallowing Plague
- 2 Waking Nightmare

Instant (3)

- 1 Hideous Laughter
- 1 Pull Under
- 1 Rend Flesh

Land (16)

- 16 Swamp

40 Cards

Sometimes, stupid decks happen. After a bit more success in 4-3-2-2 land, I'll jump to 8-4 land, which I did accidentally once and got the tar knocked out of me by a bunch of folks whose ratings suggest some 20th century nostalgia.

You'll find me in either the sanctioned tournament drafting room or casual multiplayer room, later at night Central Standard Time, about 2-3 times a week. If you see my handle (SeriousFun), feel free to chat and say hello!

Thanks to rotten Jay for getting me hooked on this. Oh, he'll get his...

Anthony cannot provide deck help. He is busy breaking online protocol and screaming "YAY SNAKES!" on the game chat boards.

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