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Little Format That Could

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Into the Aether
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Vanguard! Putting those Avatars to Work for You

Could we have waited any longer to let you in on what Vanguard abilities your avatars are going to have? Well, sure we could have waited but considering Vanguard is rolling out April 28th, time's a-wasting! I'm going to be rolling some of them out each week from now until release day, so make sure to check back to see what you and your opponent's are going to be able to play with. And in the April 28th column I'll even be previewing a brand new avatar that hasn't been released yet!

We're going to kick this off with the five base avatars that come with *Magic Online*, and to whet your deck building appetite, I'm going to present a deck for each one that takes advantage of the Vanguard ability. For those of you who might not be familiar with Vanguard, it was a format available for Arena League play in real life **Magic** tournaments years ago. Each player chose an oversized Vanguard card that adjusted your starting life and hand size up or down, and gave the player some sort of ability that had varying effects on game play. In a way, they were like Enchant Players. The more powerful the effect, often the harder you'd be hit on your starting hand size and beginning life total. And it wouldn't surprise me if they were the inspiration for the "Auction" format at the **Magic** Invitational.

Well now Vanguard steps into *Magic Online*, making your **Magic** Avatars even cooler than they are now. We'll be sharing more details about how that all works in the weeks ahead, but for now let's let you take a peek at the Avatars everyone's going to have access to.



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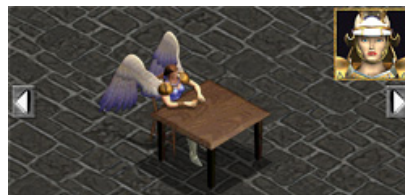
NOVELS

Dissension
Ravnica Cycle, Book III
by Cory Herndon

Vanguard Abilities			
Name	Hand	Life	Ability
Serra Angel	7	19	Whenever you play a spell, you gain 2 life.
Prodigal Sorcerer	8	22	At the beginning of your upkeep, look at the top card of your library. You may put that card into your graveyard.
Grinning Demon	6	18	Whenever a nontoken creature you control goes to a graveyard from play, target opponent discards a card.
Goblin Warchief	7	17	Attacking creatures you control get +1/+0.
Erhnam Djinn	6	23	Whenever you play a creature spell, put a 1/1 green Saproling creature token into play.

Serra Angel

Serra's ability seems pretty innocuous, and her hand/life adjustments reflect that by "auctioning" just one on your starting life to pick it up. Conventional wisdom decrees that gaining life is one of the weakest abilities in **Magic**, but clever players can certainly make it work when you don't have to waste any card slots on gaining life since every spell gets you two mana! What jumps to my mind is a Monoblack Control deck, with its selection of enticingly powerful yet painful cards like *Devour in Shadow* (which can destroy even black or artifact creatures) and *Promise of Power*. *Night's Whisper* gives you the life you pay right back. Play lots of smaller spells to keep your life totals high and refill your hand with the card drawing. I might try something like this with the Serra Angel Avatar in Vanguard:



Serra Necro (Online Standard) .txt

60 cards

1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Kokusho, the Evening Star	3 Chrome Mox
21 Swamp		3 Sensei's Divining Top
	4 creatures	2 Genju of the Fens
22 land		4 Talisman of Impulse

4	Night's Whisper
4	Wrench Mind
2	Devour in Shadow
4	Rend Flesh
4	Barter in Blood
1	Well of Lost Dreams
3	Promise of Power
34 other spells	

Prodigal Sorcerer

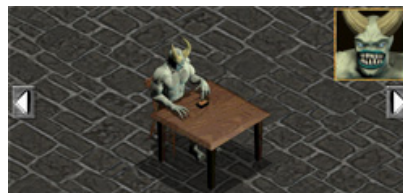
Uh-oh! They're *paying you* cards and life to take up Tim's banner, with a hand size of eight and 22 starting life. His ability must be pretty lame, right? (I mean, if you don't consider "draw an extra card at the beginning of the game" to be his ability.) Well, on the surface it seems pretty minor; being able to peek at your top card and mill it if you want to sounds low-key, but if the graveyard matters (hint hint), then the ability is pretty strong. Yes, I'm thinking some *Odyssey* block graveyard goodness is in order, but what to choose? That starting hand size and life total tugs me in the direction of Madness and playing a full boat of *Deep Analysis* and *Wild Mongrels*. But I think that might be shortchanging the Prodigal one, which promises you an incredibly fast Threshold and virtual card drawing in the form of Flashback. What about something like this, inspired by Mike Flores' U/G Threshold?



Tim's Odyssey (Online Extended)			txt
60 cards			
1 Polluted Delta	4 Nimble Mongoose	4 Mental Note	
3 Flooded Strand	4 Werebear	4 Careful Study	
4 Wooded Foothills	4 Wild Mongrel	3 Call of the Herd	
4 Yavimaya Coast	2 Wonder	4 Deep Analysis	
4 Forest	2 Genesis	2 Grizzly Fate	
7 Island		4 Roar of the Wurm	
23 land	16 creatures	21 other spells	

Grinning Demon

The first thing that leapt to mind here was Goblins. Plenty of self-sacrificers to keep your opponent off balance, fast swarm assault and if your opponent manages to sweep the board clean they're living off the topdeck too. But then I realized that was just the Spike in me talking, and Spike likely won't be playing much Vanguard. I decided to call upon my predecessor to see what he'd do with this Vanguard ability. Thus speaketh Dr. Jay:



Bennie,

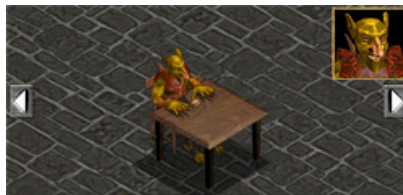
My first thought is *Lavaborn Muse*. My second thought is "self-sacrifice" creatures like *Sakura-Tribe Elder*, *Nantuko Husk*, *Arcbound Ravager*, etc... Monored Muse deck with Atogs, artifact creatures, and maybe *Geth's Grimoire* or *Skullcage* for style. -jms

Mmmm, *Lavaborn Muse*! I'd completely forgotten about that kid. Paired up with black for *Nezumi Shortfang* and plenty of sacrificial lambs and you got a potent stew only an amused Netherworlder could enjoy. Particularly nasty is the *Doomed Necromancer* chain you can get going once your opponent's hand is empty to prevent them from ever being able to play a non-instant card they draw. And *Geth's Grimoire* is just silly good with Grinning Demon's Vanguard ability

Lavamusement (Online Extended)			txt
60 cards			
4 Sulfurous Springs	4 Blood Pet	4 Cabal Therapy	
2 Bloodstained Mire	4 Frostling	4 Geth's Grimoire	
8 Mountain	4 Ravenous Rats		
10 Swamp	4 Nezumi Shortfang	8 other spells	
24 land	4 Nantuko Husk		
	4 Doomed Necromancer		
	4 Lavaborn Muse		
	28 creatures		

Goblin Warchief

For the relatively low low price of 3 starting life, you get to boost the power of your army, so obviously **Goblin Warchief** demands a horde of creatures to rally 'round his flag. You might be tempted to put a Goblin deck together but I'm thinking White Weenie here. White already has an impressive army of fast weenies, giving them all an extra point of power can turn them into a nightmare for your opponent. Your **Suntail Hawks** and **Lantern Kamis** are now flying **Savannah Lions**. How about this?



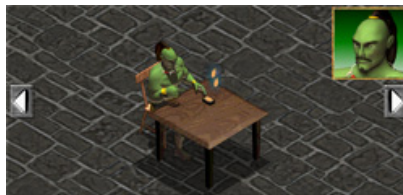
He Ain't Short, He's My Warchief (Online Standard)

60 cards

3 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Lantern Kami	4 AEther Vial
18 Plains	4 Suntail Hawk	3 Genju of the Fields
21 land	4 Savannah Lions	4 Umezawa's Jitte
	1 Isamaru, Hound of Konda	4 Raise the Alarm
	4 Leonin Skyhunter	3 Glorious Anthem
	4 Samurai of the Pale Curtain	18 other spells
	21 creatures	

Erhnam Djinn

To acquire Erhnie's Vanguard ability, you take a hit on hand size but get a few extra life points. In return, each of your creature spells gives you a Saproling tag-along. Can you imagine if we had **Gaea's Cradle** or **Recurring Nightmare** to work with here? But back to reality, to really take advantage of this Vanguard ability means keeping a steady stream of creature cards flowing. **Oversold Cemetery** springs to mind, but I think the first thing I'll try is an Elves deck using **Bloodline Shaman** and **Fecundity** to keep the creature cards rolling in, along with tons of Saproling chump blockers and free attackers. **Wirewood Symbiote** in particular gets kinda ridiculous. Something like this:



Sappy Elves (Online Extended)

60 cards

2 Wirewood Lodge	4 Wirewood Symbiote	4 Fecundity
4 Wooded Foothills	4 Llanowar Elves	4 other spells
14 Forest	4 Birchlore Rangers	
20 land	4 Bloodline Shaman	
	4 Wirewood Herald	
	4 Wirewood Hivemaster	
	3 Viridian Zealot	
	3 Seeker of Skybreak	
	1 Tribal Forcemage	
	4 Timberwatch Elf	
	1 Caller of the Claw	
	36 creatures	

Well, I hope you enjoyed the first wave of Vanguard previews. Check back next week when I start working my way backward from the most recently received Avatars!

Over the Rainbow

When Jay handed off this column to me, he cleared out his queue of a few emails, ideas, and thoughts he had but hadn't gotten around to getting around to. One email in particular jumped out at me:

Dear Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar,

Just wanted to go into more detail on a version of magic called rainbow stairwell. Since you have shown interest in both singleton and prismatic, I would think that this format might be of interest to you.

- Land
- 3 of each basic land.
- 2 Elfhame Palace
- 2 Shivan Oasis
- 2 Urborg Volcano
- 2 Coastal Tower
- 2 Salt Marsh

You then play with 1 card of each casting cost from 1 to 6 for each color. For example, green might look something like this:

- 1 Birds of Paradise
- 2 Sakura-Tribe Elder
- 3 Eternal Witness
- 4 Argothian Elder
- 5 All Sun's Dawn
- 6 Elvish Aberration

Those would then be your 6 cards for green. You would then do the same for white, blue, black, red and artifacts. Note, no gold cards can be used and you will pretty much see nobody playing split cards.

Once done, you should have a 61 card deck.

You could try to build on some themes, though it would be a bit more difficult with only one copy and equal parts of each color. Maybe tribal with slivers, humans or zuberbas.

Slivers would leave you with 2 utility spells per color and 3 slivers per color. Not a bad start.

Zuberbas are less appealing, but if more show up, then you have a start of a deck. But spirits and arcane spells on the other hand... Tempting.

I think you have the idea. I know the popularity of it was growing before I left for basic. It's great fun.

--Emmanuel Padilla (Mathrin)

This certainly looked like an interesting format! So I added it to the poll for my kick-off column... and the emails started rolling in. There's quite the vocal group of Rainbow Stairway fans out there, and while it didn't garner the majority of votes for the "casual" group of formats, it certainly intrigued me. Besides, taking the time to get together a 61 card deck sounded much easier to "jump in" and try than the more daunting casual formats (though don't worry—I'll be getting around to them soon!). See, I'm not a slave to the polls!

Anyway, a little history that I've managed to scrape together with some searching. Rainbow Stairwell was invented seven or eight years ago by somebody named Mike (who goes by Tom Veil in the forums) as an interesting Type 1 variant on E-league (an early online **Magic** community not affiliated with Wizards). Then Starcitygames.com's casual player extraordinaire Abe Sargent brought the format to a wider audience in December, 2003 after running across it himself and enjoying it. Almost immediately afterward a thread was started on Wizards board and thus was born the [original Rainbow Stairway thread](#), which illustrates the early wrangling for adapting it to **Magic Online**. For the most current information on the format, go the [Rainbow Stairwell Revival thread](#), particularly entry #3 which is maintained by Mana211 with the most current rules and variations, and you'll want to make note of what's not allowed: **Skullclamp**, Wishes, gold cards, split cards, and cards that mention nonbasic lands (like **Blood Moon**).

There seems to be some discussion and confusion about the lands you are allowed to use. In the email above (which I used as a guide to make my first RS deck), that mix of lands is indicative of the "RS Classic" build. There's also a "RS Singleton" format with a more flexible land base, which allows you 15 basic lands (3 of each), a 5-card "cycle" of non-basics (such as **Onslaught** sac lands, 7E painlands, artifact lands, etc.), and then other 4 non-basics (such as **City of Brass**, **Grand Coliseum**, etc.).

Anyway, so how do the rules translate into an actual deck? The email forwarded to me from Jay got me set on trying a Sliver deck in the format, so this is what I put together for my first foray:

RS_Slivers ("Classic") 		
61 cards		
2 Elfhame Palace	1 Birds of Paradise	1 Kodama's Reach
2 Shivan Oasis	1 Quick Sliver	1 Pyrotechnics
2 Urborg Volcano	1 Root Sliver	1 Lose Hope
2 Coastal Tower	1 Brood Sliver	1 Patriarch's Bidding
2 Salt Marsh	1 Elvish Aberration	1 Shared Triumph
3 Swamp	1 Grim Lavamancer	1 Ray of Distortion
3 Forest	1 Hunter Sliver	1 Wayfarer's Bauble
3 Mountain	1 Blade Sliver	1 Pentad Prism
3 Plains	1 Magma Sliver	1 Darksteel Ingot
3 Island	1 Chartooth Cougar	1 Soul Foundry
	1 Crypt Sliver	1 Coat of Arms
25 land	1 Spectral Sliver	
	1 Toxin Sliver	11 other spells
	1 Twisted Abomination	
	1 Imagecrafter	
	1 Mistform Sliver	
	1 Mistform Wall	
	1 Shifting Sliver	

1 Synapse Sliver
 1 Shoreline Ranger
 1 Plated Sliver
 1 Essence Sliver
 1 Ward Sliver
 1 Eternal Dragon
 1 Brass Herald

25 creatures

Going over the decklist initially, I thought it looked pretty good! But a few games with it and I quickly learned how bad it was. Not only were there too few actual Slivers (15 total), most of their abilities were fairly tame and sometimes worked at cross-purposes! At one point I had out **Toxin Sliver**, a **Hunter Sliver**... and a **Shifting Sliver**. So the Provoke ability was useless and I couldn't use the Hunter/Toxin combo to pick off my opponent's creatures. Another major problem was no real card drawing, no way to replenish your hand other than the awful **Brass Herald** (only 15 Slivers, remember?). Lastly, all my colored six drops were land cyclers, which seemed like a good idea initially, but other than the **Eternal Dragon**, none is a bomb you'd want to rip off the top of your deck late in a game. Whether it was early, middle, or late in the game, my cards were just subpar.

To top it off in my first match I was playing an illegal deck. Instead of **Shoreline Ranger** in my blue 6 mana slot, I accidentally had **Shoreline Raider** (at 3 mana). And my opponent did not happen to be playing **Kavu**. I fixed that problem for the next match but got smashed anyway. It was then I noticed my opponent was playing **Onslaught** saclands, which seemed infinitely better than my slow-as-molasses **Invasion** tapped lands. My opponent mentioned that there was some debate on the rules for land (I later learned he was running the RS Singleton land mix) and since I had decided to scrap the Slivers I went ahead and crafted a deck following the new land scheme. I was also fed up with getting stomped so I put together a decidedly "powered up" deck to regain a little self-esteem, but with enough fun cards for flair and smilies:



RS_Good Stuff ("RS Singleton")



60 cards

3 Forest	1 Birds of Paradise	1 Kodama's Reach
3 Plains	1 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Honden of Life's Web
3 Island	1 Anavolver	1 Disenchant
3 Swamp	1 Nemata, Grove Guardian	1 Dismantling Blow
3 Mountain	1 Weathered Wayfarer	1 Honden of Cleansing Fire
1 Polluted Delta	1 Blinding Angel	1 Curiosity
1 Windswept Heath	1 Exalted Angel	1 Ceta Sanctuary
1 Wooded Foothills	1 Jushi Apprentice	1 Deep Analysis
1 Flooded Strand	1 Tomorrow, Azami's Familiar	1 Honden of Seeing Winds
1 Bloodstained Mire	1 Phyrexian Plaguelord	1 Ghastly Demise
1 City of Brass	1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	1 Terror
1 Grand Coliseum	1 Hearth Kami	1 Rend Flesh
1 Mirrodin's Core	1 Flametongue Kavu	1 Agonizing Demise
1 Tendo Ice Bridge	1 Tephraderm	1 Firebolt
	1 Kamahl, Pit Fighter	1 Honden of Infinite Rage
	1 Solemn Simulacrum	1 Chromatic Sphere
	1 Duplicant	1 Umezawa's Jitte
		1 Darksteel Ingot
		1 Mind's Eye

24 land

17 creatures

19 other spells

I had much better success with this build, mainly due to actually packing some removal spells and threat creatures. My first match with this deck marked my first online activation of the Ninjutsu ability on MTGO, when Ink-Eyes came calling. Boy, is she a beating! The Hondens performed quite well too.

Overall, I think it's an incredibly fun format! Every time I venture into the Casual Play/Casual Decks area there are plenty of people looking for Rainbow Stairwell games. Check out the threads, brush up on the rules, make your RS and give it a try. I think you will really like it. As I continue to explore the format I'll be reporting back to you.

Tips & Tricks

Eric Pennock (AKA new_abolitionist on MTGO) wrote in to share this excellent tip:

Dear Bennie Smith,

It is possible for you to also save time in the game by setting "yields", as opposed to stops. These are set on recurring effects, such as the upkeep effect of Hondens or **Phyrexian Arena**, or one of the worst culprits, **Sensei's Divining Top**. You can right click on the effect as it is on the stack (to the left of the screen) but before you hit OK. When you right click, the uppermost option is to "Always Yield to ___effect/card." This cuts a TREMENDOUS amount of time, presuming there is nothing in your deck that you would use to respond to this effect being played. I hope you find this useful, and that you continue to enjoy your Online experience!

Thanks for sharing Eric! I have also found it a very useful time saver, and hopefully some of you who weren't aware of this trick will too!

*Bennie Smith has been playing **Magic** since Arabian Nights, and writing about it nearly as long. Several of his early musings appeared on the Magic Dojo, and from there he became a featured writer for Star City Games and a Contributing Editor for Scrye Magazine before he started writing for **magicthegathering.com**. While a casual gamer at heart, Bennie also thoroughly enjoys the competitive side of **Magic** and won the Virginia State Championship in 1999.*



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