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# Return of the Vanguard Cards

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*Into the Aether*  
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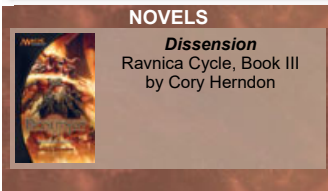
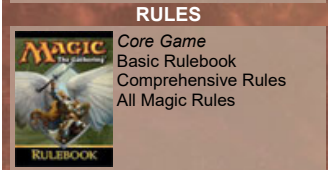


## Vanguard! Avatars from the Recent Past

This week we'll continue unveiling the Vanguard abilities, and start working our way back from avatars made available recently. We've got a lot of ground to cover, so let's get right to it!

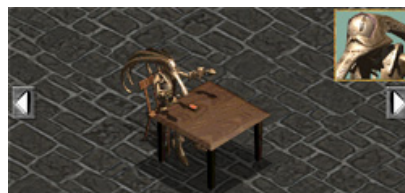


Vanguard Abilities			
Name	Hand	Life	Ability
Etched Oracle	8	16	You may pay  rather than play the mana cost for spells that you play.
Seshiro the Anointed	7	25	At the beginning of the game, choose a creature type. Creatures you control, creature spells you control on the stack, and creature cards you own that aren't in play or on the stack have the chosen type in addition to their other types.
Eight-and-a-Half Tails	9	17	: Target permanent you control gains protection from a random color it doesn't already have protection from until end of turn.
Fallen Angel	7	15	Whenever a creature you control goes to a graveyard from play, target opponent loses 1 life and you gain 1 life.
Higure, the Still Wind	6	23	Whenever a nontoken creature you control deals combat damage to an opponent, take a random creature from your library, reveal it, and put it into your hand.
Ink-Eyes, Servant of the Oni	6	13	At the beginning of the game, look at target opponent's hand and choose a nonland card from it. That player discards that card. , pay X life: Put target creature card with converted mana cost X in an opponent's graveyard into play under your control.



## Etched Oracle

So you get a free **Fist of Suns**, huh? Set up all five colors of mana and you can play any spell you want! This is obviously Timmy's dreamboat Vanguard ability, but I can also see Spike's dedicated combo contingent liking the ability and the extra hand size. There's a nice balance here though, since it's going to take some time to set up your mana, your starting life of 16 means that once you hit that point, you better win the game in short order. I think dropping Myojin, **Darksteel Colossus** or tossing off **Searing Wind** on turns 3 or 4 might qualify, don't you?



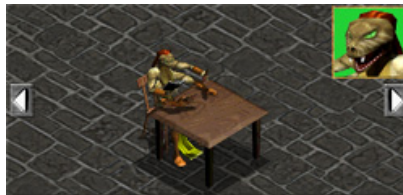
### Oracle of the Gods (Online Standard)

60 cards

3 City of Brass 2 Swamp 2 Island 2 Plains 2 Mountain 12 Forest <hr/> 23 land	4 Birds of Paradise 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder 4 Myojin of Cleansing Fire 2 Myojin of Night's Reach 4 Myojin of Seeing Winds 4 Darksteel Colossus <hr/> 22 creatures	3 Sensei's Divining Top 4 Pentad Prism 4 Kodama's Reach 4 Searing Wind <hr/> 15 other spells
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## Seshiro the Anointed

Leave it to the Snakes to start up a Conspiracy! Tribal fans will love this twist, which basically allows you to dramatically expand a Tribe's membership and lets you pad your starting life a bit too. To get maximum value out of Seshiro, you need to figure out a tribe that not only cares about whether a particular creature type is in play, but also that cares about that particular creature type in other zones (your hand, on the stack, in your deck, in your graveyard). Another subtle use for Seshiro is when you've got a complex tribe you want to solidify, and *Kamigawa Snakes* are the perfect example: if you choose "soldiers" with Seshiro for your Snake deck then even the shamen can benefit from Sosuke's warrior boost.



So I was going to do a Snake deck, but then I thought about trying something different. Zombies maybe? Dare I try out a Sliver deck? "Why are you tiptoeing around the elephant in the room?" I finally asked myself. Seshiro demands you at least try out a Goblin deck, right? MTGO Extended Goblins are already a very strong tribe, but there are some fringe characters that aren't technically goblins that you've always wanted to try. *Número Uno* is *Goblin King*, who under Seshiro's guidance will actually boost himself in addition to your army. *Cabal Slaver* has always been tempting as a devastating way to strip an opponent's hand if you have a bunch of goblins out too, so now the cleric can get in on the action too. Then of course there's *Patron of the Akki*, the legendary spirit who now can also benefit from the *Goblin Warchief's* mana discount and, most importantly, haste. Oh, and how about *Flametongue Goblin Kavus*? All of these can be fetched out with *Goblin Matron* and drawn from the deck with *Goblin Ringleader*.

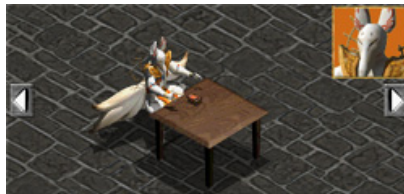
### Anointed Goblins (Online Extended)

60 cards

4 Sulfurous Springs	4 Skirk Prospector	0 other spells
4 Bloodstained Mire	4 Goblin Sledger	
2 Swamp	4 Sparksmith	
14 Mountain	4 Goblin Piledriver	
24 land	4 Goblin Warchief	
	4 Goblin Matron	
	1 Goblin Sharpshooter	
	1 Goblin King	
	1 Cabal Slaver	
	2 Goblin Ringleader	
	4 Flametongue Kavus	
	1 Siege-Gang Commander	
	1 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker	
	1 Patron of the Akki	
	36 creatures	

## Eight-and-a-Half Tails

I have to admit to being a little baffled as to what to do with 8.5's Vanguard ability. It looked like it was going to take a lot of mana lying about to activate the protection ability enough to ensure protecting key permanents. Then I looked over Paul's developer's notes (see below) and realized what was really going on here: hand size! I remember playing against Gerrard's Wisdom Control [Squee Vanguard decks](#) back in the old days and they were incredibly difficult decks to beat. But making another Gerrard's Wisdom deck didn't appeal to me so much. What if we instead utilize that big hand to try and pull off a fast combo deck? Just think, you can effectively get two free mulligans with a starting hand size of nine.



Ben Snyder posted this interesting deck amongst his test gauntlet for Standard in [an article over at Star City](#), which turns [Aaron Forsythe's fears](#) to reality by featuring a possible turn 1 kill. Impossible? With *Blazing Shoal* anything is possible! Even with a seven-card hand it can happen; with a 9-card hand and a free mulligan or two, the odds look better. Even if you're not killing on turn 1, this deck can take an opponent down just as easy turn 3 or 4.

### Lickity Split by Ben Snyder (Online Standard)

60 cards

12 Mountain	4 Raging Goblin	4 Blazing Shoal
4 City of Brass	4 Spark Elemental	4 Eerie Procession

4 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Slith Firewalker	4 Uearthly Blizzard
20 land	4 Myojin of Infinite Rage	4 Through the Breach
	4 Bringer of the Red Dawn	4 Chrome Mox
	20 creatures	20 other spells

## Fallen Angel

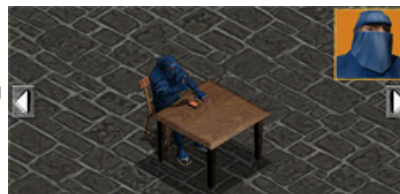
Where's **Tombstone Stairwell** when you need it? (Longtime friends or readers might recall my fondness for **Tombstone Stairwell**) **Fallen Angel's** ability reminds me of a new card from **Kamigawa** block, **Thief of Hope**. Just think, with a Thief out and spirits coming into play and dying you could chain a serious life transfer! Then there's **Devouring Greed**... mmmmm! I think I've really gotten into the *spirit* of this avatar! Okay, somebody stop me...



<b>Smells Like Angelic Spirit (Champions Block Constructed)</b>			txt
60 cards			
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Kami of False Hope	1 Oni Possession	
10 Plains	4 Bile Urchin	1 Indomitable Will	
10 Swamp	4 Silent-Chant Zubera	4 Cage of Hands	
24 land	4 Ashen-Skin Zubera	4 Devouring Greed	
	4 Tallowisp	10 other spells	
	4 Thief of Hope		
	2 Shirei, Shizo's Caretaker		
	26 creatures		

## Higure, the Still Wind

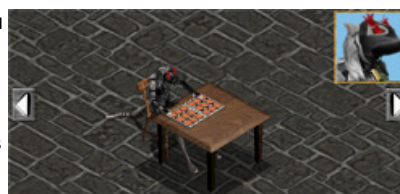
You take a hit on your starting hand size, but provided you can get creatures in to deal damage to your opponent, you should be able to keep the cards flowing. The trick is how to make sure your creatures hit fast and often. Higure's ability takes away a lot of the overextending drawback of playing a creature swarm strategy, and works nicely for thinning your deck of creatures and shuffling it (which comes in handy with **Sensei's Divining Top**). Yes, it's another white weenie deck (last week's **Goblin Warchief** deck also featured the archetype), but don't blame me—Wizards is obviously trying to push White Weenie decks back into the fore, apparently even in Vanguard!



<b>They Call Me The Breeze (Online Standard)</b>			txt
60 cards			
3 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Lantern Kami	2 Sensei's Divining Top	
19 Plains	4 Suntail Hawk	4 AEther Vial	
22 land	4 Savannah Lions	3 Steelshaper's Gift	
	1 Isamaru, Hound of Konda	3 Sword of Fire and Ice	
	4 Leonin Skyhunter	1 Sword of Light and Shadow	
	4 Eight-and-a-Half-Tails	2 Umezawa's Jitte	
	2 Skyhunter Skirmisher	15 other spells	
	23 creatures		

## Ink-Eyes, Servant of the Oni

Let me just say that Ink-Eyes might be the riskiest Vanguard ability you can take. Do you have nerves of steel? Do you have the *sand* to ride with the mama rat ninja? With a starting life total of just 13 and an ability that requires life to activate (in addition to mana), Ink-Eyes is a serious gamble. That other ability is a *killer* with an early **Cabal Therapy**, isn't it? What about a Cleric deck that can recoup the life loss in several ways (including an infinite life combo with **Lightning Greaves**, **Daru Spiritualist**, and **Starlit Sanctum**) and can use Ink-Eyes' ability to gradually win the war of attrition?



The Eyes Have It (Online Extended)		
60 cards		
3 Starlit Sanctum	4 Weathered Wayfarer	4 AEther Vial
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Dark Supplicant	4 Cabal Therapy
3 Mirrodin's Core	4 Daru Spiritualist	4 Lightning Greaves
6 Swamp	4 Auriok Champion	
7 Plains	4 Eight-and-a-Half-Tails	12 other spells
23 land	4 Rotlung Reanimator	
	1 Scion of Darkness	
	25 creatures	

## Erhnam Djinn (from last week, bonus 2nd deck idea!)

I received an email that made me ashamed of the relatively straightforward Elf deck I put together [last week](#) for Erhnam Djinn (six cards, 23 life, "Whenever you play a creature spell, put a 1/1 green Saproling creature token into play."):

Dear Bennie Smith,

Regarding your article "Little Format That Could": Just thought I'd share that Erhnam's vanguard ability plays really well with [Viashino Sandstalker](#). Every time you get a chance to cast him, you get a 1/1 chump blocker to block when the sandstalker is hiding in your hand. Throw in [Confusion in the Ranks](#) and you've got yourself some creature swapping good times.

--philosophile42

[Confusion in the Ranks](#)? That card is definitely one of my favorite fun cards, so I just had to come back and make a new deck!

Confused Ernie (Online Extended)		
60 cards		
4 Darksteel Citadel	4 Ravenous Rats	4 Shock
2 Great Furnace	4 Viashino Sandstalker	4 Magma Jet
2 Vault of Whispers	4 Phyrexian Rager	2 Volcanic Hammer
4 Sulfurous Springs	4 Flametongue Kavu	4 Confusion in the Ranks
4 Swamp	3 Gravedigger	3 Starstorm
8 Mountain	19 creatures	17 other spells
24 land		

Make sure to click on [Confusion in the Ranks](#) and read up on the Rulings, since it does some pretty crazy things! You can steal critters, enchantments, artifacts and even lands with this build. Note that since the Erhnam ability goes off when you "play a creature spell," not when "a creature comes into play," that means things happen in this order:

1. You play a vanilla creature
2. Erhnam triggers
3. Saproling Token enters play
4. Confusion in the Ranks forces you to swap the token with an opponent's creature
5. The vanilla creature enters play
6. Confusion in the Ranks forces you to swap the vanilla creature with an opponent's creature (which, at this point, could be the token from step three, if you wanted to end up not doing any trading).

## Behind the Curtain: Notes from MTGO's Developers

[Paul Sottosanti](#), Devin Low, and [John Carter](#) were the team that developed Vanguard for MTGO, and Paul was kind enough to offer some of their perspectives on how it all came together:

"Here were the goals of Vanguard, as seen in my head when we started the whole process:

- **"Fun.** Above all else we wanted to create a fun and crazy format.
- **"Inspire new decks.** Many of the avatars should inspire new deckbuilding ideas just by looking at them.
- **"Make my guys cool, not anyone else's.** We deliberately avoided abilities like All creatures get +1/+1. Vanguard should be about your avatar helping you, and not about trying to abuse symmetrical effects.
- **"Lasts throughout the game.** One-shot effects just don't change the game as much as we wanted. Each of you getting an effect one turn followed by many turns of normal Magic wasn't what we wanted from the format.
- **"Take advantage of the computer.** Look into the possibility of doing effects we can't normally do.

- **"Make something for everyone.** No matter what you like or dislike, there should be at least one avatar that appeals to you personally.

"With **Etched Oracle**, there were two distinct paths that opened up: sacrificing creatures to draw cards, or playing off of the five-color aspect of the Sunburst mechanic. We looked at various options that included card drawing, but in the end, they were powerful but not all that interesting, and tended to play a lot like **Skullclamp**. We chose the current ability because it leads to some crazy decks. Even though we've already printed this ability on **Fist of Suns**, the inherent problem with those decks is that, when you don't draw your Fist (or worse, your opponent **Oxidizes** it), you lose miserably because you can't cast anything in your deck. Having this ability on an avatar makes these decks viable and a lot more fun.

"**Seshiro the Anointed** was another that got an ability chosen because it opened so many deck-building possibilities. Who hasn't wanted to sacrifice some Elves to **Ravenous Baloth**? (Poor Elves!) Or give them haste with **Goblin Warchief**? Or protect them with **Daru Spiritualist**, **Master Apothecary**, and **Rotlung Reanimator**?

"Also, I don't know about you, but I find adding on creature types to be a lot of fun. I don't know anyone who hasn't chuckled the first time they saw **Mephidross Vampire** in play on **Magic Online**. Elf Vampires, Angel Vampires, and Rat Vampires, all staring across the battlefield at one another. Imagining a Rat Vampire brings a smile to my face, and with Seshiro you can feel free to create whatever madness will bring one to yours.

"One of the problems with the original Vanguard was that Squee, despite having the worst ability of the bunch ("Your opponent plays with their hand face up."), was arguably the best Vanguard card simply because you started with a ten card hand. We didn't want to make the same mistake again, so we agreed to be a little more conservative with the hand sizes. Despite that, **Eight-and-a-Half Tails** started development with nine cards and managed to make it through intact.

"The ability stemmed from a desire to take advantage of the computer's ability to create random effects. Anyone who played the old Microprose Shandalar game has fond memories of the Astral set and creatures like the Aswan Jaguar. With randomness, we were able to make a flavorful ability that's balanced despite the avatar's nine cards."

"We wanted **Fallen Angel** to have an effect that rewards the player for sacrificing creatures. We played around with effects that made your other creatures bigger, of course, but we settled on this one because as long as you put creatures in your deck, it's almost always useful. Wrath of God? Take 5 and I'll gain 5, thanks.

"Then, instead of requiring a sacrifice, we made it trigger upon going to the graveyard, which opened up some possibilities for deckbuilders. This is definitely one of the more combo-enabling avatars.

"The most interesting tidbit about **Higure, the Still Wind** is the presence of the "reveal" clause. It's always frustrated me that cards which require a player to search their library for a certain card type have the reveal text on them, but it's necessary so that players can't easily cheat. Whenever we can leave it off, we do, because there's a lot of adrenaline associated with knowing that your opponent just got what he thinks is the best card in his deck against you. You have no idea what it is, and you're trying frantically to figure it out in time so that you can minimize the damage.

"When Higure's ability was selected, I was delighted to be able to leave off the "reveal" clause, since the computer is handling the searching, no one can cheat. Makes sense, right?

"Well, yes and no. What I just said is entirely true, but it turned out that the avatar was actually much less fun without the clause there. Why? The fact that the choice was random meant you had no information to try and guess anything, and you just felt detached from the whole process. When we changed it back to revealing, it created all sorts of "How lucky!" moments when an opponent tutored for something particularly strong. And those moments are what randomness is great at providing.

"The idea of **Distressing** your opponent before the game even started was appealing to me from the beginning. It was new, it was different, and it was a perfect avatar for those people who hate playing against certain cards. Whatever card you don't like in your opponent's hand, get rid of it, and there's nothing they can do about it.

"The only problem with that ability was the fact that, as soon as the game started, you were back to playing normal Magic. No good. I was about ready to give up on the idea, but then the Betrayers avatars were announced internally and I realized that **Ink-Eyes, Servant of the Oni** was actually a perfect fit.

"When the **Distress** ability is combined with the option of bringing back creatures from an opponent's graveyard, you've got two powerful effects and a bundle of synergy. This led to her losing four life in development, falling from 17 to 13, but try her out a few times and I'm sure you'll agree that she's still quite powerful."

Thanks Paul, for that peek behind the curtain! I'm hoping we can get some more peeks on Vanguard development so check back next week.

## Followup on Rainbow Stairwell: My Illegal Decklist and the Land Controversy

Sharp-eyed Rainbow Stairwell fans noted right away that I \*still\* had an illegal decklist [from last week](#), using **Eternal Dragon** as my white six-mana spell when the casting cost is clearly seven. I blame the fact that I've never really played this awesome card too much back when he was Standard legal, combined with the fact that the **Champions** dragons all cost six mana. In other words, yeah I screwed up. I'm looking for an alternative that's not the awful plainscycler that really does cost six mana, but I'm not partial to **Akroma's Vengeance** either. I'll come up with something by the time I get back online with my Rainbow deck!

Evidently there are still plenty of strong opinions on the land base for Rainbow Stairwell; I received tons of email and forum posts from people on all sides of the issue. While I am not going to take any sides, I do think it might be helpful to take a poll of fans of Rainbow Stairwell. Getting a handle on which land base most people use might help codify a common standard, which I think is crucial towards growing participation in this fun format. Let me know what land base you play and I'll report the results next week.

#### When you Play Rainbow Stairwell, Which Land Base Do You Use?

- 2 of each Invasion dual land + 3 of each basic land (3/2 or "RS Classic")
- 1 non-basic five card cycle + 4 non-basics of your choice + 3 of each basic land (4/2 or "RS Singleton")
- 4 non-basic lands of your choice + 4 of each basic land (another version of "RS Singleton")
- Other land configuration (please post yours in the forums)

## Tips & Tricks

Fox Murdoch writes in with this handy tip:

Another great tip for MTGO players, which I find quite a lot of players don't know about, is that you can hold CTRL to maintain priority after a spell. This saves time when someone's Master Yamabushi is burning you away, so you don't have to click OK in-between every activation, and is how cards like **Goblin Cannon** are meant to be used.

It's also great when you have a Timestop in hand, and your opponent has just poured all their mana into putting several things onto the stack all at once.

*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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