

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



The Final Vanguard Preview

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 Into the Aether
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Zeal for the Zealot!

Let's start things off with a little flashback from [last column](#):

Vanguard Abilities			
Name	Hand	Life	Ability
Viridian Zealot	7	22	②, Sacrifice a creature: Destroy target artifact or enchantment. Search your library for a card with the same name as the creature you sacrificed, reveal it, and put it into your hand. Then shuffle your library.

First off, let me say I got a great response from you all on the deck challenge for coming up with a Vanguard deck for the Viridian Zealot avatar from last week. I can safely say that even if only a fraction of you actually have the Viridian Zealot avatar, there's going to be some wild Vanguard games to be had! It was tough coming up with a "best deck" from the bunch, but this one in particular made me smile. Not only does it have the near-ubiquitous poster child of Vanguard—Myr Servitor—but also it's got both *Mycosynth Golem* and *Lattice*!

Mycosynthesis

60 cards

4 Darksteel Citadel	4 Ornithopter	4 Krark-Clan Ironworks
20 Island	4 Myr Servitor	4 Mycosynth Lattice
24 land	4 Myr Retriever	
	4 Frogmite	8 other spells
	4 Myr Landshaper	
	4 Neurok Transmuter	
	4 Mycosynth Golem	
	28 creatures	

Bill Bailey sent this deck in and had this to say: "The object is to turn whatever you can and/or everything into artifacts with either the transmuter, the landshaper, or the Lattice, then take advantage of the fact that KCI gives you 2 mana for sacking artifacts. The *Mycosynth Golems* and the *Myr Retrievers* are especially good at the killing. If you have even one golem in play with a KCI (and the Lattice of course ^_^) all you need is one Myr to start waylaying your opponents entire board." Thanks, Bill!!

Okay, now on to the final bunch of Avatars -- and incidentally, a complete archive of all the Avatars and their abilities is [available here](#)...

Vanguard Abilities			
Name	Hand	Life	Ability
Phage the Untouchable	7	15	Pay 1 life: Until end of turn, whenever a creature deals combat damage to you, destroy that creature. Pay 1 life: Until end of turn, whenever target creature deals combat damage to a creature, destroy that creature.
Karona, False God	6	28	At the beginning of your upkeep, exchange control of a random permanent you control and a random permanent target opponent controls.

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Two-Headed Giant	8	16	Each creature you control may block 2 creatures each combat. Each creature you control can't be blocked except by 2 or more creatures.
Elvish Champion	8	21	You start the game with a 1/1 green Elf token that has 'C': Add C to your mana pool.'
Royal Assassin	5	17	At the beginning of your upkeep, you draw a card and you lose 1 life.
Akroma, Angel of Wrath	8	27	When a creature comes into play under your control, it gains two of the following abilities at random: flying, first strike, trample, haste, protection from black, protection from red, or vigilance.

Phage the Untouchable

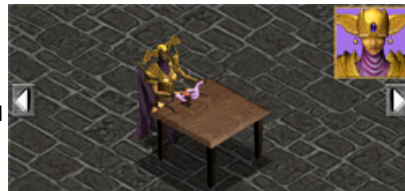
The amazing thing about the Phage abilities is that they do not cost mana to activate; for a simple life payment you get to call in an awesome board-controlling ability. Since you start with a relatively low life you'll need to pack plenty of life gaining spells to make up the difference. Okay, so you're gaining a bunch of life, killing stuff, buying plenty of time... what now? Well, since you have the time, why not go for something wacky and fun you've never had the luxury of doing because your opponent was always bothering you by attacking early and often. What springs to *my* twisted mind is summoning up Kaldra from his various equipment, the first of which has to be the Shield in order to make all the pieces indestructible.



Untouchable Kaldra		
60 cards		
3 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Birds of Paradise	3 Sensei's Divining Top
2 Tranquil Garden	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	4 Steelshaper's Gift
7 Plains	4 Bottle Gnomes	4 Nourish
11 Forest		4 Pulse of the Fields
	12 creatures	3 Helm of Kaldra
23 land		4 Shield of Kaldra
		3 Sword of Kaldra
		25 other spells

Karona, False God

Sadly, I didn't get nearly the response to the "mystery" avatar (which most of you guessed as Karona) as I did to the Viridian Zealot. I think Karona is perhaps one of the most challenging of all the Vanguard abilities and I suspect it'll keep plenty of Johnnies up late at night trying to figure out cool ways to break it off. Fabio B. (who also showed up in Mark Gottlieb's column [yesterday!](#)) had the gumption to send in his neat idea:



"Dear Bennie Smith,

"The main concept behind this deck is the use of **Filth** in a monoblack beatdown deck. By running only swamps, it ensures that your opponent will at some point be randomly traded a swamp. On the other hand, **Filth** is safely tucked away in your graveyard, making all creatures you control unblockable, even if your opponent gave them to you. I decided to go with a rat tribe theme for three reasons:

"Ninjutsu and **Ravenous Rats**: These cards get to working as soon as you play them, before they even have a chance to be lost to your opponent. Once your creatures are unblockable, Ninjutsu just gets better.

"**Marrow Gnawer** - In the late game he will give you many many rat tokens. This serves two purposes. 1) Killing your opponent. 2) Protecting your good permanents from random trades.

"**Swarm of Rats** - Very likely to be good on your side with unblockability and many rats, but if traded away are a small threat."

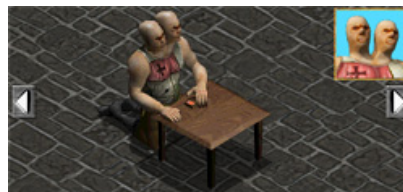
Random, Filthy Rats!		
60 cards		

24 Swamp	4 Filth	2 Entomb
24 land	4 Ravenous Rats	4 Night's Whisper
	4 Swarm of Rats	4 Aphetto Dredging
	2 Okiba-Gang Shinobi	4 Corrupt
	2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	14 other spells
	2 Marrow-Gnawer	
	2 Nezumi Cutthroat	
	2 Throat Slitter	
	22 creatures	

It occurs to me that many of *Odyssey's* themes would work nicely with Karona, especially the Incarnations and threshold creatures.

Two-Headed Giant

Being able to get into twice as many creature fights led me to think about creatures that do bad things to creatures when they get into fights. Which of course led me to snakes. The *Kamigawa* block snake ability of tapping down creatures they fight with seemed perfect. Earlier snakes like *Tangle Asp* and *Voracious Cobra* are even more deadly; *Voracious Cobra* in particular can take out *two* creatures and destroy them with first strike before they take any damage. And of course, any snake deck needs Seshiro leading the way. I also thought it would be handy to get "combo" with this Avatar's ability and play *Familiar Ground*, making all of your creatures unblockable. This is particularly potent with Seshiro in play and can get downright nasty with Shisato. When going on offense like this, *Sosuke's Summons* token creatures become super chump blockers, really holding back counteroffensives.



Two-Headed Snakessss			txt
60 cards			
14 Forest	4 Voracious Cobra	4 Familiar Ground	
6 Mountain	4 Tangle Asp	4 Shock	
4 Karplusan Forest	4 Matsu-Tribe Sniper	4 Sosuke's Summons	
24 land	4 Orochi Ranger	2 Time of Need	
	4 Seshiro the Anointed	14 other spells	
	1 Shisato, Whispering Hunter		
	1 Sosuke, Son of Seshiro		
	22 creatures		

Elvish Champion

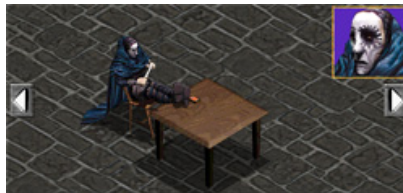
Combo lovers will be thrilled to be able to get a huge jump-start on their mana, but I just couldn't bring myself to go there. This was the *Elvish Champion*, starting the game with a free *Llanowar Elves* to turbo charge the swarm! With a hand size of eight I imagine this deck can just explode a ton of elves into play in the early turns.



Turbo Elves			txt
60 cards			
4 Wirewood Lodge	4 Taunting Elf	0 other spells	
16 Forest	4 Llanowar Elves		
20 land	3 Wirewood Symbiote		
	4 Bloodline Shaman		
	4 Wirewood Hivemaster		
	4 Wirewood Herald		
	3 Tribal Forcemage		
	4 Viridian Zealot		
	3 Gempalm Strider		
	1 Caller of the Claw		
	2 Viridian Shaman		
	4 Timberwatch Elf		
	40 creatures		

Royal Assassin

Interestingly, this reminded me a little bit of the old Vanguard Gerrard, for which I had a nice, fast goblin deck that took advantage of the extra draw power each turn. I decided to update that and make this a front-loaded Goblin deck that is designed to just spit out tons of fast, cheap Goblins and just win before the life loss kills you. Suicidal? Oh yes! **CHARGE!!!**



Royal Goblin Mob

60 cards

2 Goblin Burrows	4 Skirk Prospector	4 AEther Vial
16 Mountain	4 Goblin Sledder	4 other spells
18 land	4 Goblin Grappler	
	4 Akki Avalanchers	
	4 Goblin Piledriver	
	4 Akki Raider	
	3 Goblin Brigand	
	3 Goblin Raider	
	4 Gempalm Incinerator	
	4 Goblin Sharpshooter	
	38 creatures	

Akroma, Angel of Wrath

Green's already got some of the best creatures in the game, so why not make them that much better? A first-striking, protection from red **Sakura-Tribe Elder** can certainly put a crimp in your opponent's **Sliith Firewalker** plans. A trampling, regenerating, cannot be targeted by your opponent **Troll Ascetic** with Vigilance equipped with an **Umezawa's Jitte** has got to be scary. What about a flying, hasted **Kodama of the North Tree**? What's really going to be fun is casting **Beacon of Creation** for six or seven insects, each with two random abilities!



Green Critters of Wrath

60 cards

22 Forest	4 Birds of Paradise	3 Sensei's Divining Top
22 land	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	4 Umezawa's Jitte
	3 Viridian Zealot	2 Sword of Fire and Ice
	4 Troll Ascetic	4 Beacon of Creation
	4 Eternal Witness	13 other spells
	3 Solemn Simulacrum	
	3 Kodama of the North Tree	
	25 creatures	

And now... A New Avatar Unveiled!

Some of you may have seen Wizards of the Coast employees and contract workers using the Birds of Paradise avatar. Now it's going to be available to all of you! The [full details are here](#), but the short version is this: Wizards will be holding Vanguard Release events May 5-11, 2005. *All participants will receive a Birds of Paradise Avatar* (yeah, that's the really awesome news)! Formats for the Release events will be Standard, Extended, and CHK Block Constructed (all with Vanguard). There will be a Vanguard Release event Championship, prizes to be announced soon.



So what does the Birds ability do? It's not hard to guess!

Vanguard Abilities

Name	Hand	Life	Ability
Birds of Paradise	7	17	Lands you control have 'C': Add one mana of any color to your mana pool.'

So you start the game with three hits from a **City of Brass** and then you never have to worry about getting color screwed again! There are so many options here, putting together color-intensive cards that were never meant to be played together, it's hard to know where to begin. I know the Kiki-Jiki/Opposition/Mystic Snake deck I played in Extended would have *loved* to eliminate the color requirements. For my first Birds deck though, I decided to just pick good stuff on up the mana curve regardless of color, taking advantage of Sunburst (especially **Etched Oracle**) and the Bringers' alternative casting cost.

Gather 'Round the Goodstuff



60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Frostling	4 Engineered Explosives
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Auriok Champion	4 Magma Jet
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	4 Troll Ascetic	8 other spells
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	4 Eternal Witness	
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Etched Oracle	
1 Eiganjo Castle	4 Bringer of the Blue Dawn	
3 Plains	4 Kokusho, the Evening Star	
3 Island	28 creatures	
3 Swamp		
3 Forest		
3 Mountain		
24 land		

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 finishes up revealing how it all shook out:

"Before I get into the descriptions for this final week, I'd like to call out the people who helped with Vanguard in one way or another.

"First and foremost is **Magic Online** programmer [Rachel Reynolds](#). The idea of Online Vanguard had been floating around for years, but only when Rachel committed to coding it did the process actually begin. She came to R&D and asked for abilities, which led to the formation of the team of Devin, John, and I and the eventual creation and costing of all the avatars.

"Not only was Rachel responsible for getting this whole process rolling, but she also coded each of the abilities, put up with R&D's frequent requests for changes, and hosted a test server so that we could all playtest to our heart's content. In fact, she finished the coding early enough that we were able to do all of our testing online. She's also behind all of the client work that displays your avatar during gameplay and the ability to add an avatar to your deck so that you can play Vanguard in the first place.

"Thanks also go out to all the playtesters who helped out the Vanguard team at one point or another: Mons Johnson, Nate Heiss, Mike Turian, Mark Gottlieb, Michael "Elf" Feuell, and Steve Warner!

"Now for this week's avatars:

"For a long time **Phage** just had the **No Mercy** ability, but late in the playtesting process we realized that not a single person had built a Phage deck. **No Mercy** is powerful, but it's just not exciting, and it doesn't inspire any deckbuilding. Nate suggested that Phage should be able to impart her "untouchable" nature onto your creatures as well, and thus the current avatar was born.

"Ah, wacky **Karona**, always bouncing back and forth between everyone at the table. Her fickle nature is mirrored in her avatar ability, which tends to create mass chaos rather quickly. Her hand size is a little lacking, but not because we thought the ability was overly powerful; we just didn't want any chance of it being one of the best avatars. (Feel free to take that as a challenge and prove me wrong!) It's an ability that's tons of fun to play against once in awhile, but to the more serious players, it has the potential to get a little old.

"It should come as no surprise that Mark Gottlieb enjoyed Karona the most during playtesting.

"My initial suggestion for **Two-Headed Giant** was a 14 card hand size, 40 life, and the ability (well, drawback) 'Your opponent takes two turns for every turn you take.' It didn't work out. I then offered up the opposite, something like: 3 card hand size, 10 life, 'You take two turns for each turn your opponents take.' No luck there either.

"We ended up with an ability that's a little less splashy but surprisingly potent. Creature combat is hardly fair when one player has a bunch of Two-Headed Dragons.

"Who needs **Mox Emerald** when you can start with **Llanowar Elves**? We broke one of our rules with **Elvish Champion** (your avatar must be useful throughout the entire game) but the ability was so perfect that we simply didn't care. Just make sure to win quickly, because the longer the game goes, the more your opponent's avatar can take the game away from you.

"Not to steal any of Bennie's deckbuilding thunder, but anyone who's played against me online knows that I love decks based around **Goblin Charbelcher** and **Timesifter**. I've got a Prismatic version, a Singleton version, and yes, even a Tribal version. Well, Vanguard's going to be the next format I build the deck for, and Elvish Champion is going right in the avatar slot. I wonder how few lands I can get away with this time...the current guess is four.

"This one's for you, Spike. **Royal Assassin's** five-card hand size is a bit rough, but it's hard to complain when you're drawing two cards a turn. I'll admit I had a lot of fun with this one in playtesting. The Shoals from **Betrayers of Kamigawa**, **Wrath of God**, **Gerrard's Wisdom**, **Exalted Angels**...it was quite the deck. I died to my avatar a few times, and I got run over a few times, but the games where I managed to stabilize went, well, quite perfectly.

"It's safe to say that **Akroma** was the fan favorite amongst the playtesters. The original ability had the creature only gaining one of the abilities, but guess what? It's even more fun with two. During Vanguard testing, it was common to hear shouts like, "Come on, flying/haste!" or "One time for pro red/pro black!" echoing around the room. And what a feeling it is when you hit the exact two you were asking for.

"Ever faced a **Fangren Firstborn** with haste and first strike? I have...and yeah, I lost that game.

"Is there any ability more perfect for **Birds of Paradise** than this one? I doubt it. There was little discussion, although the Birds did lose some life during playtesting. Mike Turian had built a Birds control deck that was crushing dreams all over the place, even to the point of topdecking **Innocent Blood** to deal with Nate's turn 3 **Hypnox**. The current totals seem a little more fair."

Planning Ahead

Over the next few weeks I'm going to start trying out the various multiplayer options available in Magic Online, starting with just regular "multiplayer" before trying out Emperor and 2-Headed Giant. Any advice or suggestions from the veteran multiplayers amongst you would be appreciated, either [in the forums](#) or [email me](#)!

*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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