



Flavors of Seshiro, and an Overview of MTGO Trading

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Into the Aether
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Let's start things off with the results from last week's polls:

Question 1: Do you think they went far enough in fixing Elvish Champion?

Far enough	968	52.8%
Not enough	522	28.4%
Too far	345	18.8%
Total	1835	100.0%

Question 2: Do you think aggro strategies can compete now?

Yes	947	72.9%
No	352	27.1%
Total	1299	100.0%

Question 3: Do you think Ink-Eyes is playable now?

Yes	890	64.4%
No	491	35.6%
Total	1381	100.0%

Question 4: Once the changes take effect, which avatar do you think will be the best in the Vanguard metagame?

Akroma, Angel of Wrath	490	25.1%
Elvish Champion	246	12.6%
Birds of Paradise	171	8.7%
Seshiro the Anointed	122	6.2%
Platinum Angel	100	5.1%
Ink-Eyes, Servant of the Oni	91	4.7%
Phage the Untouchable	76	3.9%
Flametongue Kavu	65	3.3%
Eight-and-a-Half-Tails	61	3.1%
Prodigal Sorcerer	55	2.8%
Royal Assassin	53	2.7%
Higure, the Still Wind	49	2.5%
Raksha, Golden Cub	47	2.4%
Serra Angel	46	2.4%
Arcbound Overseer	41	2.1%
Viridian Zealot	36	1.8%
Etched Oracle	35	1.8%
Goblin Warchief	35	1.8%
Karona, False God	34	1.7%
Two-Headed Giant	31	1.6%
Grinning Demon	29	1.5%
Fallen Angel	21	1.1%
Bosh, Iron Golem	15	0.8%
Erhnam Djinn	7	0.4%



Overall, it looks like most of you think the changes were for the better. With Champion de-powered a bit and Seshiro's fangs blunted a tad, you all think Akroma is going to be leading the pack! I can't argue with that; the times I've squared off against Angel of Wrath have been tough fights indeed.

I asked Eric Engelhard (caliban17), who's done well in the Vanguard format (and who shares with us his Seshiro Elf combo deck below) to weigh in with his thoughts on the changes to some of the avatar's Vanguard abilities.

"I think the jury is still out on the Elf avatar - I'm not yet convinced one card will be enough to stop it from being the top avatar. I'm sure it'll no longer be putting up 70+% of all top 8s - but even if it still manages 40%, it'll be the big gorilla in the room. That level may be perfectly acceptable for this unique format. The life loss penalty makes Ponza much more attractive for beating Elf decks - but of course the Ponza decks all use the Elf themselves. Elf-based Belcher will likely be the hardest hit by this change with the loss of a card and less time to combo out. I think Affinity may look elsewhere - I bet Ravager still has Akroma's number stashed somewhere..."

"I think Goblin Warchief and Ink-Eyes were both very underpowered, and needed a boost. Combo decks now at least have to consider Ink-Eyes as a legitimate foil they may encounter. I think about 10 of the other avatars could also use a similar boost to make them somewhat more competitive with the top ones, or at least more fun in casual. Akroma and Prodigal's eight cards and life boost and useful abilities put Avatars like Bosh, Grinning Demon, Royal Assassin, and 8.5 Tails pretty far behind.

"I'm a little more worried about boosting Arcbound Overseer, as it did make a handful of top 8s (in CHK Vanguard) and is probably the 3rd most difficult Avatar to get. But I think it was still a reasonable change. It'll be competitive but I doubt it'll be dominating with the decks I've seen built with it so far - but there still could be a great Arcbound deck out there no one's found yet.

"The 'Vext' [Vanguard Extended] format's pretty wide open for new decks to emerge with the recent changes (and especially when *Saviors* hits)."

Since Eric designed a winning Seshiro Elf combo deck, I asked him if he thought that the changes made to Seshiro tones down the combo potential significantly?

"It does tone it down a bit - in the first Vext event since they restarted, I took Symbiosis (the Seshiro deck) to a top 4, and I paid careful attention to how many games along the way I ended up at 6 or less life. The changes would have affected the outcome of at least 2 of the games, and possibly more. Of course, Seshiro had so much life I could spend it rather freely with pain lands and *Forbidden Orchard* - the mana base may need to become less pain dependent, which will affect its ability to find all 3 colors, and possibly slow down the combo in that way. In a deck capable of routine turn 2 wins, life total is not of primary relevance. I wouldn't alter it much.

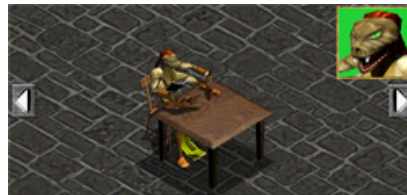
"The second-most popular Seshiro deck, Demon Infestation, will be a little harder hit. The deck uses *Zombie Infestation* and 2 *Blood Speakers* (along with the Seshiro Avatar, calling Demon) to create an infinite number of Zombie Demon tokens. Many of the versions use *Spoils of the Vault* and *Plunge Into Darkness* as fast tutors, and life loss can be a lot more important here.

"Honestly though, *Pithing Needle* is going to have a much greater impact on Seshiro combo than the life loss."

Thanks, Eric! It looks like *Pithing Needle* is going to be as sought after in the Aether as it already is in paper **Magic**.

Flavors of Seshiro

Last week, when going over the changes to some of the Vanguard avatars, [I was curious](#) about the Seshiro combo decks that Justin Ziran expressed some concern about. I received a lot of email from many of you that were much more knowledgeable of the topic than I was, and I thought I would share what I found out for those of you who might be in the same boat as I was.



Here are a few of the more powerful combos using the Vanguard avatar Seshiro the Anointed:

1. Name **elf**. Use *Wirewood Symbiote*, itself now an elf, to return itself to your hand while untapping a *Birds of Paradise* or *Llanowar Elves* (which can tap to provide you the green mana to recast the Symbiote). You can also use *Birchlore Rangers*, by tapping both the Symbiote and the Ranger to make the mana before the bounce. All the bouncing and replaying creates a huge storm count for something like *Brain Freeze* to win the game, though you can go a slightly slower route via the attack phase by making a huge number of insect tokens with *Wirewood Hivemasters*. *Glimpse of Nature* can also be used to draw your deck and find your win condition. Some of these decks can win on turns 2-4.
2. Name **demons**. Get two *Blood Speakers* in your hand or in your graveyard (often via *Buried Alive*), and a *Zombie Infestation* in play. Creating a zombie token that is now also a demon will have the *Blood Speakers* return to your hand, which you can then use to discard and make another zombie/demon token, and repeat until you have enough 2/2 token creatures to win during your attack phase. Some of these decks can win on turns 3-5, and tends to be a little more resistant to disruption (such as creature kill).
3. Name **clerics**. Get a *Rotlung Reanimator* and another creature in play, and some way to sacrifice that creature, preferably with some effect that controls the board (*Phyrexian Plaguelord*), disrupts your

opponent (**Sadistic Hypnotist**) or wins the game (**Fallen Angel**). This combo is a little slower, a little more "fair" than the previous ones.

Eric Engelhard was kind enough to share his version of the Seshiro elf combo. He warns that the deck is "fully powered" and very expensive to put together, but indicates a more budget-minded version can be made at the sacrifice of some consistency and speed.

Symbiosis by Eric Engelhard (caliban17)		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Brushland	4 Brain Freeze	2 Aura Shards
4 City of Brass	4 Chrome Mox	1 Auriok Champion
4 Forbidden Orchard	4 Eladamri's Call	1 Birchlore Rangers
6 Forest	4 Glimpse of Nature	2 Kami of Ancient Law
1 Yavimaya Coast	4 Living Wish	1 Kami of False Hope
19 lands	4 Orim's Chant	2 Krosan Reclamation
	24 other spells	1 True Believer
3 Birchlore Rangers		2 Viridian Shaman
4 Birds of Paradise		1 Wirewood Hivemaster
4 Llanowar Elves		1 Wirewood Symbiote
3 Wirewood Hivemaster		1 Xantid Swarm
3 Wirewood Symbiote		15 sideboard cards
17 creatures		

Tim Butler (tbutler55) also shared a Seshiro Zombie Infestation build he used to win one of the Vanguard qualifier tournaments.

Seshiro Infestation by Tim Butler (tbutler55)		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Bloodstained Mire	4 Buried Alive	4 Engineered Plague
3 Mountain	4 Cabal Therapy	2 Flaring Pain
4 Polluted Delta	3 Chrome Mox	4 Lava Dart
6 Swamp	4 Duress	1 Mountain
17 lands	4 Innocent Blood	4 Withered Wretch
	3 Lose Hope	15 sideboard cards
1 Anger	4 Night's Whisper	
4 Blood Speaker	4 Smother	
5 creatures	4 Spoils of the Vault	
	4 Zombie Infestation	
	38 other spells	

Now, both of these decks contain some rather expensive and hard-to-procure cards. For those interested in a more budget-minded deck, I received an email from Bryan Gerding who wanted to share his Seshiro combo deck that has ZERO rares in it! While it's not necessarily going to be as fast as some of these other Seshiro decks, it is very powerful, capable of some spectacular wins, and did I mention it has zero rares?

Seshiro Budget Combo (Beasts), by Bryan Gerding (HeirToPendragon)		
Main Deck 60 cards		
14 Forest	4 Birchlore Rangers	4 AEther Charge
4 Mountain	3 Bloodline Shaman	4 Genesis Chamber
4 Tranquil Thicket	4 Llanowar Elves	8 other spells
22 lands	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	
	3 Viridian Shaman	
	4 Wirewood Hivemaster	
	4 Wirewood Savage	
	4 Wirewood Symbiote	
	30 creatures	

Bryan was kind enough to tell us a little more about himself and his deck.

MTGO handle? HeirToPendragon

Real name? Bryan Gerding

Age? 19

Where do you live? Cincinnati, Ohio

How long have you been playing Magic? 3 some years

How long have you been playing MTGO? Played in Beta, just started up again about a month ago

Percentage-wise, would you consider yourself more of a casual or competitive Magic player? 75/25

What's your favorite online format(s)? Draft, Multiplayer

What do you think of the changes to some of the avatar's Vanguard abilities? I am going to miss Seshiro's extra 5 life, but it's necessary. I've seen sick decks on most avatar users and I think most of them can work around the changes

Do you think that the changes made to Elvish Champion tones down the combo potential significantly?

Oh yeah...but first turn Jitte is still possible and completely stupid

Do you think that the changes made to Seshiro tones down the combo potential significantly? Not much that players will notice

Tell us about how your Seshiro deck runs? Basically I always name beast. This makes [Wirewood Savage](#) draw a card for itself and each creature I play. Token generators like [Wirewood Hivemaster](#) and [Genesis Chamber](#) mean that for each elf/creature I play I draw two cards. One of the biggest win conditions is [Aether Charge](#). Once I get that out, each creature I play deals the opponent 4 damage, and if I have token generators I deal another 4 for each generator. Since all my creatures cost next to nothing I can usually kill the turn of or the turn after I play [Aether Charge](#). What's really fun is tapping a [Llanowar Elves](#), returning it with Symbiote, and playing it again to deal some damage/draw cards.

MTGO Trading: An Overview

I won't subject you to a "from the ground-up" treatise on trading, since my predecessor's predecessor Chad Ellis did a good job covering the basics already (see [Trading Online, by Chad Ellis, June 1 2004](#)). There's also a good beginner's guide available on the message boards ([MTGO Trading Guide for New Players](#), by BentFranklin), though keep in mind this is a player-compiled Guide, not an "official" guide from Wizards. It is, however, very thorough.

I highly recommend new traders check out these links to get up to speed on what to expect. What I'd like to do in today's column is to boil down some of this advice, and the loads of great information people sent in to me, into an overview of what's good (and sometimes what's not so good) about some of the areas available to wheel, deal, buy and sell. I just want to take time to especially thank everyone who took the time to send me his or her thoughts on trading online. A special thank you to Dave Parke (Phi_Delt125) for some specific tips mentioned in this column.

For those of you who are really *really* new to the game, make sure you switch to MTGO's Expert view or else you won't get to see some of these areas. You'll then be able to see the Trading area from the main page.



Message Board

One of the two "official" trading areas on [Magic Online](#), you get here by going to the Online Trading area off the main page and clicking on Message Board.



The message board is a virtual "bulletin board" where people can post the cards they're looking to sell or buy and the prices in tickets they are will to sell or buy them for. Obviously the message board is filled with posts so luckily we're given a Search button to help find the specific cards you're looking for.

Actually, the Message Board is one of the first places you should go prior to trading, especially for rares, since a quick scan through the Message Board can give you a pretty good idea of what the value range is. Check several messages, both buy (the low range) and sell (the higher range) to get a good idea of the card's value. Jot the prices down on a piece of paper prior to opening your binder and you'll be a much better position to avoid getting a bad deal. If the rare you're looking for isn't listed, there's a good possibility it's considered a "junk rare" which can go for 2-3 copies per ticket.

MTGO Veteran Guler thinks Message Board is the best place for a new player to get his or her feet wet with online trading before moving on to the more advanced areas. "There's a range of people selling the same thing here, allowing a player to look through the ads and find what they want for the cheapest price, rather than dealing with someone who is trying to convince you they have the cheapest price. On the Message Board, a player can just look at the ads and see what's what." It's also easier to process the information you need here. "With a new player, a lot of information can overwhelm them at once and be a complete turn off. On the Message Board, you don't have to instantly read lots of scrolling text in order to get the message, you can scroll through the ads at your own pace."

Market Place

The other "official" MTGO trading area is called the Trading Post, and you get to it from the same area.



This place feels like a Middle Eastern bazaar, with people virtually posting their wares for sale or posting the cards they're looking to buy and for how much. Transactions are in tickets (which you can purchase from the [Magic Online Store](#) for \$1 each or acquire in a variety of other means), so if you're looking to trade cards for cards, this is not the place for you. Many of the "people" here are actually automated "bots," which are unattended

accounts tied to dealers that auto trade with people. Some of them sell bulk commons or uncommons cheaply and are a great way to fill out your collection and decks. Most of the bots have a time limit for how long you can spend selecting your cards, so make sure you know what you're looking for before you jump in. You'd hate to spend time selecting a bunch of cards and then suddenly time out and have to start over.

Speaking of bots, one of the best ways to quickly check prices is to message Infobot. Type "/addbuddy infobot" and then double click on him from your MyBuddies list to open up a chat. This is what it looks like:



One thing to keep in mind in the Market Place is that there are a lot of dealers (and their bots) here who are naturally looking to buy low and sell high, so if you're looking for a great deal or a way to maximize the value of your cards, it's tough if not impossible to do that here. However, if you're looking to quickly unload some cards for tickets or trying to get that last card for your deck with a tournament starting in five minutes, you may want to check out Market Place.

Trading Venue: Auction (type "/join auction" where ever there's a chat box)

In his follow-up column introducing trading online ([Narrowing the Focus, by Chad Ellis, June 8 2004](#)), Chad drills down into how the auction room works. I would highly recommend reading Chad's overview to anyone prior to going into the auction room for the first time so you know what to expect. Pay particular attention to the roles of the people who run the auction as well as auction etiquette.



It's advisable that you open up the auction room and sit and watch things for a while before you do anything. Auction moves extremely quickly, with a lot of information flying by, so before jumping in you would do well to acclimate yourself with how things unfold. "Don't start bidding until you are confident in the auction rooms prices," says Guler. "Once you master auction and if you can think fast enough it is the cheapest way to get cards on MTGO."

Once you decide to sell some cards in Auction, message the lister using the following format: "[CARDNAME] -=minimum=-". For example, "EXALTED ANGEL -=10=-". The lister will add your card to a list that he and the auctioneer share. Stay in the auction room until your lot comes up. Sooner or later the auctioneer will announce your card and people might bid on it. If anyone bids at least the minimum and doesn't retract their bid (by typing "ret"), then the first one to bid the highest unretracted amount wins the bid. Make sure to honor your auction or your reputation will plummet and you'll be unable to utilize this valuable trading resource!

Can 'Bots hack your account?

If you are a customer who is looking to buy or sell cards from a 'bot, you are perfectly safe. There are rumors of 'Bots hacking people's accounts and stealing passwords when you trade with them, but in the MTGO environment this can't really happen. Any risk associated with the use of a 'bot would be solely on the part of the dealer running the bot.

To bid on a lot, type in a number for the amount you wish to bid. If someone bids at least the minimum, the auctioneer will state who the seller is after the auction is over. If you won the lot, open a trade with the seller and pay the bid amount. Again, make sure you honor your auction!

Trading Venue: Casual (type "/join casual" where ever there's a chat box)

This is one place to go in order to find people looking to trade cards for cards, the sort of "trading" most of us envision when we think of paper **Magic** trading. While you can certainly find plenty of fair traders here, there are also people looking to take advantage of newer players who don't know the value of their cards. Again, it is important to stress that you know the value of your cards before you start trading (this is true for paper **Magic** just as it is for **Magic Online**). It would be well worth your time to go to the Message Board and get an idea which of your rares are valuable and how much they are worth before you open your binder up to trade.



Make sure to only put up for trade the cards you're willing to part with. It may take you a bit of time at first, but by going through your collection and selecting cards as either tradable or untradable, you can control what others are able to see from your collection. Unless you are willing to part with a card, it is best to keep it untradable.

Use the collection search engines. Both the trade and collection tabs have the same search options to allow you to peruse card collections. When selecting a card from someone else's collection you have to be in the 'view' window rather than the 'list.' To help you find exactly what you're looking for, use the search on the left hand side.

Also, be polite! Even if you do a quick scan through a player's binder and don't find anything (maybe using the search function to do a quick check), don't just shut down the trade and move on. At least say something like "thanks, but I don't see anything I need right now." Politeness and fairness are the keys to setting up good relationships with folks you can trade with in the future.

Other Things to Consider

First, go here and read these important tips on protecting yourself from scams and crooks online: [Keeping Your Online Account Safe](#), [Magic Online Safety Tips](#). Seriously, give them both a read. I'll wait.

Review trades before you confirm. It is sad, yet true, that there are a number of people in the AEther ready to scam you. At the end of any trade, after you confirm the trade, a window comes up asking if you want to perform the trade. Take the extra time to ensure that you are only giving up what you've negotiated and getting what you expected. Players have been known to add additional cards at the last moment, or remove their own.

Be very careful with outside dealers since transactions outside of **Magic Online** are beyond the ability of Wizards of the Coast to protect you. Only deal with reputable PayPal or Ebay dealers. Your best bet is using the Ebay feedback rating to check out someone you don't know. A seller with any negative feedback is one to avoid.

Behind the Curtain – an interview with Justin Ziran

Not long ago you had your one-year anniversary as the *Magic Online* Brand Manager. Have you accomplished everything you hoped to in your first year?

Yes, Premier Events are back, we have improved system stability, we have managed to add new features such as Vanguard, address some of the annoying problems in marketplace and most importantly improved the quality of our card sets. There is still a bit of unfinished business that we'll get into more detail on later in the year.

When [introducing yourself to us last year](#), you stated that, from a business perspective, *Magic Online* had been very successful. Has that success continued? As a publicly traded company, I can not comment on specifics of the business but I can say that *Magic Online* is performing well and continues to meet expectations. The team is very proud of our accomplishments over the last year and we are looking forward to v3 next year.

I understand with *Saviors of Kamigawa* you've implemented different Beta test procedures. Why the new process?

The primary goal of ANY beta test is to deliver a high quality product. The tricky part of the process is to balance the quality goals with management overhead. If the beta test plan you create requires a disproportionate amount of management you really undermine the primary goal of creating a quality product. Long story short – We wanted to create a scalable beta test program that is easy to manage and produces a level of quality that our customers find acceptable.

What was the plan?

Part 1: Announce the beta sign-up, and gather applications. The application process includes providing information like (but not limited to); username, magic play experience, availability and a short **Magic** quiz

Part 2: Select beta candidates - Without getting into the details of selection criteria (since that would slant all future applications), I will give you a brief overview of what our selection goals are.

1. Find testers that are "good citizens" - we cross-reference all applicants against our Code of Conduct database
2. Find testers that are familiar with the *Magic Online* interface
3. Select testers with varying degrees of **Magic** knowledge - We want some novice players, intermediate level players and advance players.

Part 3: Identify quality testers that will form our core test group for subsequent beta - Toward the end of beta we will identify a "core" group of testers that will be invited to the next beta. What qualifies you as a good tester you ask? Well that depends; some things that come to mind are quality of bug reports, involvement, behavior, appropriateness of feedback, ability to follow directions and a good understanding of our objectives. In actuality, a good tester encompasses all of these traits and more.

Part 4: Rotation – We think it is important to bring a fresh perspective into every beta. Therefore, we will rotate those participants that were not selected as "core" testers out and recruit a new group of testers to take their place. There are a few cool things about this approach – 1: New testers bring a new set of skills and knowledge, 2: Theoretically, we can grow our core group of testers with each successive beta and 3: More chance for those interested to participate.

How did it work & how many people were selected?

Extremely well, we had over 10,000 applicants and selected 800 beta testers!

In the forums and in email there has been some concern about problems with League play and there have been requests that an option be added that lets you select whether you're playing for points or whether you're playing for tie-breakers. There's concern that outside of a limited window of time, there are mostly only "sharks" hanging around looking for tie-breaker games. I've got the sense there is a lot of frustration with this situation. Can you tell us whether those concerns are being addressed, with possible fixes to be implemented after V3.0 rolls out?

We are aware of the concerns and share in the frustration. Fixing the issues in v2 is unlikely but we are definitely committed to reviewing the entire league system for v3.

Last year, you gave us a peek into the future of *Magic Online*. What can you reveal to us that you see happening in the year to come?

Besides the releases of *Saviors of Kamigawa, 9th Edition* and *Ravnica*, we will be holding another World Championships qualifier as well as some special events for the extended rotation. In addition, we will be ramping up for the v3 beta at the end of the year.

Tips & Tricks

JStutz2003 writes in with a topical tip:

When searching for something on the Message Board, look at the first selling price you see, and then type the thing you are searching for with a lower price. Example: First search for Kokusho. You see "Selling Kokusho for 7" Search for "Kokusho6" or "Kokusho 6". You should put these numbers in the circle by hitting Ctrl+Q then the number. This saves you from looking through the whole list.

*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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