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Drafting 999 with Wizards of the Coast

Bennie Smith
Into the Aether
Thursday, October 6, 2005



Getting Owned By R&D

Have you had a chance yet to jump into an unsanctioned draft with Wizards of the Coast employees? I was online the other night and I got a message from Scott Larabee:

smlarabee: Hey, wanna draft?
IntoTheAether: Sure!

Heck yeah! Writing this column, I get to interface with the guys that make **Magic** a little more than the average cat, but at my core I'm a geeky **Magic** fanboy just like everyone else. I still feel green pangs of envy crop up when I think of Jay Moldenhaur-Salazar's trip to Wizards HQ and hanging out with Mark Rosewater and the R&D gang.

So I meander over to their waiting draft table and see two other gents with the Wizards logo flag flying next to their name: Jake_Theis, who I've heard of before (he's on the Brand Management team for **Magic**), and D_Monin (Didier Monin), who I haven't but who apparently works on keeping the ratings database going. Yikes, I bet that's a monster job!



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NOVELS

Dissension
Ravnica Cycle, Book III
by Cory Herndon



Now, I have to admit that this is my first 999 draft and I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm just here to have fun and hang with the WoTC guys. Unfortunately for me, the WoTC guys can both have fun *and* draft like fiends.

My first pack is uninspiring so I take **Shock**. I get passed some more quality red and end up mono-red, trying for an aggressive early assault backed up by two **Lava Axes** as finishers along with **Thundermare**, which I'm counting as **Lava Axe** #3. This is what I build:

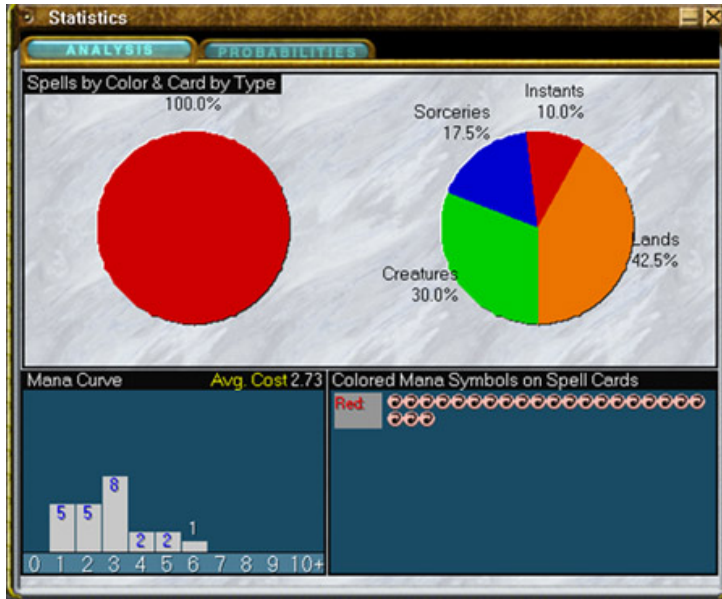
Don't Try This At Home .txt

R&D 999 Draft, by Bennie Smith

Main Deck 40 cards	Sideboard
17 Mountain	1 Volcanic Hammer 2 Lava Axe 2 Panic Attack
1 Forest 2 Island	1 Lord of the Undead

17 land	2 Shock	1 Scathe Zombies
1 Anaba Shaman	2 Stone Rain	2 Balduvian Barbarians
1 Goblin Balloon Brigade	2 Seething Song	1 Coercion
2 Goblin Chariot	11 other spells	1 Dream Prowler
1 Hill Giant		1 Firebreathing
1 Raging Goblin		2 Lightning Elemental
1 Thundermare		1 Natural Spring
1 Goblin Mountaineer		1 Ravenous Rats
2 Goblin Pike		2 Serpent Warrior
2 Goblin Brigand		1 Spineless Thug
		1 Annex
12 creatures		2 Goblin Sky Raider
		1 Sea's Claim
		1 Mending Hands
		22 sideboard cards

I think at the time that the build is okay, with a reasonable curve and some removal/creature control.



I should do alright, right? Queue the ominous foreshadowing music!

My first round opponent is WotC guy D_Monin, who's apparently with anti-red.dec, chock full of white high-toughness guys. Game 1, I get an early assault going and have some hope, but I run out of gas as he drops fat-back after fat-back. Two Lava Axes to the dome isn't enough to finish the game before I'm toast. Game 2?



Yep, that's a turn 2 CoP: Bennie. Soon he's got **Honor Guard** and **Bottle Gnomes** down.

1:13 IntoTheAether: I must have missed the "never draft mono-red" memo

1:13 D_Monin: lol

Soon, a fearsome **Razortooth Rats** with **Unholy Strength** turns sideways five times, taking me down in 4-life chunks.

Okay, so my inaugural 999 draft didn't go so hot. I shoot my draft deck over to PT Player, Worlds Competitor, and all around Good Man, Ken Krouner to see if he can learn me a little something about what went wrong with my deck.

So Sayeth Ken Krouner:

"Red, while having powerful cards, is the weakest colors in the set. The problem is the creatures are all fragile and weak with the exception of **Anaba Shaman**. I don't mind drafting red, but I only like it as a support color. As you can see, your creature base is extremely weak. You only have 2 creatures of any substance, **Hill Giant** and **Thundermare**. Every other creature is easily outclassed and only **Anaba Shaman** is versatile.

"In 999 you want to make sure your spells and creatures are the best they can be because there are so few opportunities for card advantage. Your Red deck has almost no ways to achieve card advantage.

"I think what White is by far the best color. There are more playables in that color than any other and they are all high quality for their relative power level. I try to draft white with black as it gives you powerful removal spells but doesn't limit you on the creature side like red does. *[lol, obviously D_Monin concurs with KK's assessment—Bennie]*

"Green is also a great color as there is plenty of mana acceleration, powerful large creatures while also having the best early game. Of course the trade-off is you get few tricks and no removal.

"Blue is incredibly powerful because it gives you card drawing and extremely high class creatures for their cost.

"In short, while I think Red is definitely playable, I'd try to look elsewhere if you can, and certainly avoid it as your only color."

Thanks for the advice, Ken! I'm sure there are draft veterans out there clapping their foreheads at my deck, but I'm also sure there are far more readers of this column that still need to work on their draft game the way I do.

Tribal Wars Open

If you're a Tribal Wars fan, hopefully you had the chance to play in the Premier Event on Saturday, October 1st (6 tix, 4x prizes). I unfortunately had other obligations and couldn't attend. After playing several weeks in the Natural Selection player-run campaign, I was very curious what tribes would rise to the top of this tournament. Natural Selection prohibits the Elf, Goblin, and Zombie tribe since each of those tribes was "pushed" in *Onslaught* block to be competitive in Standard tournament events. The Goblin tribe has even rampaged across the Extended and Vintage landscape. I was curious whether these tribes would dominate the landscape or whether some other tribes would make a showing.

I went and reviewed the tournament results (which, btw, I think is pretty amazing we can do that). I was a little surprised that Elves and Zombies made no appearances in the Top 8, but it was pretty obvious that the metagame was defined by Goblins. Three Goblin decks made Top 8 with one eventually crowned Tribal champion. I was a little surprised at the three Beasts decks, but after thinking about it some it made sense: Beasts are a pretty solid foil to Goblins, being able to churn out quick large bodies and sometimes being able to cash them out for life boosts if you get a **Ravenous Baloth** in play. The Knight (White Weenie) deck representing in the Top 8 also was a natural goblin foil, with maindeck **Silver Knights** and Paladins en-Vec. His deck also featured the "I-win" combination against certain decks of **Isochron Scepter** and **Orim's Chant**, along with the raw power of **Umezawa's Jitte**.

One deck that freaked me out in the Top 4 was **Tooth and Nail** featuring the creature-killing-combo **Mephidross Vampire** and **Triskelion**. It freaked me out because it took observing a couple of games before I figured out what tribe it was—the Shaman tribe! **Sakura Tribe-Elder**, Kiki-Jiki, **Troll Ascetics** and others provided fine tribal support for the **Tooth and Nail** archetype. Congratulations to Patariba for winning it all!

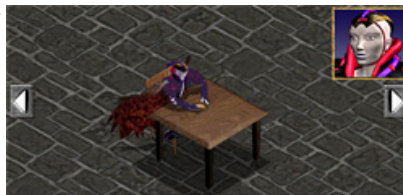
Tribal Wars 4x PE Saturday, Oct 1

121 participants

1. Patariba - Vial Goblins
2. LuckyScrub - WW/u Knights
4. mirakurufait - Shaman/Tooth and Nail
4. Thommo - Beasts
8. _LondoMolari - Beasts
8. wakester - Goblins
8. sMann - Goblins
8. KaZamM - Beasts

Deck of the Week - Vanguard

Taking a break from the constant testing and tweaking of my Bringer deck for the Natural Selection campaign, I decided to have fun with my Sakashima Vanguard deck again and in the process ran across a cool Beacon Blaster deck that used the Fallen Angel avatar's Vanguard ability to bring some serious pain out of nowhere. I asked Lord fAtbOy to share the deck with us because it struck me as being relatively easy to put together as compared to some of the other high-dollar Vanguard decks running around.



MTGO handle? Lord fAtbOy

Real name? Oliver Neil Organo

Age? 25

Where do you live? Olongapo City, Philippines

How long have you been playing Magic? I've been playing since 1998, when *Tempest* just came out.

How long have you been playing MTGO? I started when 7th was released, had a long off-period, then came back during the time when *Fifth Dawn* came out.

Percentage-wise, how would you consider yourself more of a casual or competitive Magic player? For paper **Magic** I am 100% competitive, but online I'm more of a casual gamer, maybe around 40/60 casual/competitive.

What's your favorite online format(s)? Vanguard!!!

What is your favorite color? Red

What is your quest? My quest for now is to complete my collection of Vanguard avatars, and build a deck around each and every one of them. I also dream of the time when I would visit the Hall of Champions and see my name right there =).

Do you play Vanguard a lot? What is/are your favorite avatar(s)? I play Vanguard most of the time. I like the "wacky" avatars (the ones who have game-warping effects, and the ones you have to build an entire deck around to be effective, such as Karona, Caretaker and Sakashima) but the Fallen Angel is my personal favorite.

Do you think there is a defined metagame for Vanguard? One thing I like about Vanguard is that it brings out the creativity in Johnnies. Before 9th came out, I'm not quite sure what the metagame is, since aggro, combo, and control all make an appearance in one form or another, although tournament-caliber decks in both Standard and Extended win most of the time. In Standard, there have been White Weenie builds with Erhnam Djinn or Akroma avatars, and Angry Ire and Blue Tron with Prodigal Sorcerer avatars. Extended had Ravager Affinity builds with Akroma and various combo/control builds with Prodigal Sorcerer. But post-9th, I'll have to say yes, there is a metagame, defined by Hell's Caretaker combo decks. It's a lot like paper **Magic's** "Combo Winter."

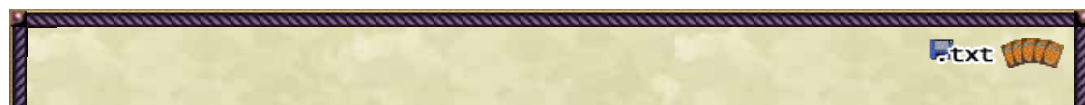
Have you ever played in the Premier Events for Vanguard? Not yet, but I'd love to try it out.

What do you think of the current Vanguard metagame? Is there anything you think needs to be done to "fix" it? Do people just need to step up and figure out how to beat the "best" deck(s)? Right now, I think combo Hell's Caretaker is the deck to beat. In conjunction with Yosei, the deck is nearly unstoppable. It's even more powerful than the Rec/Sur deck that ran rampant in paper Standard way back in 1998. Given its power, I think it needs to be tweaked. **Recurring Nightmare** was powerful enough as a vulnerable enchantment with sorcery-speed activation, so changing it to be uncounterable, unremovable, and usable at instant-speed just shifts it from being powerful to just plain bah-roken. Maindecking **Scrabbling Claws** and **Nezumi Graverobbers** to beat Caretaker is annoying and consumes much-needed deck space, plus, they're mostly dead against other decks.

Share with the readers some thoughts you have on your deck, overall game plan you had when building it, cool combos and synergies, etc. The first time I set eyes on the Fallen Angel avatar, I knew it was love at first sight. Her life drain ability was the one who got me thinking "in the right deck, this could be abused". A dozen combo possibilities flooded my mind, from Plaguelord to Rotlung to **Spawning Pit** to **Beacon of Creation** to Zuber and **Devouring Greed**. I knew I had to build a deck that abused her ability. I found the interaction between the avatar and various sacrifice effects to be devastating, with **Spawning Pit** at the heart of the design. Now all I needed is something that can generate a whole lot of tokens. I thought of **Beacon of Creation**, and the deck was born. The deck functions like Beacon Blaster, but it relies more on the Fallen Angel Avatar for the win. Combat-wise, the deck is poor, but it can inflict massive amounts of direct damage after resolving a **Beacon of Creation** or **Endless Swarm** with **Blasting Station** and **Spawning Pit** in play. The starting -5 life is a heavy penalty, but an early Pit with early-game chump-blockers works wonders against aggro decks and lets you hold on until you can fire off a medium-sized **Beacon of Creation**.

My game plan is simple: ramp up mana until I get enough mana sources (8 being the ideal number), plop down a **Blasting Station** or **Spawning Pit**, then fire off the token generators. From there, you can either stack the Station's abilities and deal 2 damage to the dome while netting you 1 life per creature, or go the **Spawning Pit** way, sacrificing tokens again and again to achieve the game-ending effects of the avatar.

About **Endless Swarm**: the effect is huge, it's overcosted, and I know that being unable to cast anything else for the entire game bites, but I built this deck for casual gaming, so it made my deck over **Orochi Hatchery**, which easily gets destroyed by artifact hate. Thanks to the avatar's ability, they also function as disposable bile urchins when destroyed or sacrificed. Also, the sheer fun of seeing an aggro player struggling to survive an assault from a horde of 1/1's that keep on multiplying every time you start your turn is just so entertaining. Perhaps the weirdest card in the deck has to be **Rude Awakening**. I once used **Death Pit Offering** in these slots to go the beatdown route, but Rude has its advantages as a surprise finisher. Plus, with **Spawning Pit**, it allows you to get in extra damage by either sacrificing your lands, or floating more mana for a really big Pit drain-loop, or even both with entwine.



Lord fAtbOy

Avatar - Fallen Angel
60 cards

20 Forest

2 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea

22 land

4 Eternal Witness

4 Llanowar Elves

4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

4 Viridian Zealot

16 creatures

4 Beacon of Creation

3 Blasting Station

2 Endless Swarm

4 Kodama's Reach

2 Rude Awakening

3 Sensei's Divining Top

4 Spawning Pit

22 other spells

We Interrupt This Column...

Crack online reporter Fox Murdoch has been in the trenches of *9th Edition*, living and breathing and trying desperately to avoid getting kicked, burned, scratched or ripped in half by its denizens. His mission? To see how the natives react to some of the changes they have endured being scooped up from their homes and deposited in a new land. It's like *Nip/Tuck* meets *Celebrity Fear Factor* with a heavy dose of Geraldo Riviera in the Terrordome.

"Thanks, Bennie! A welcome to you all, this is Fox Murdoch reporting from the painlands of *9th Edition*. Today I'll be taking you through the many new faces we see since the new Core set came out, and boy the changes we've seen! First off, let's catch up with an old favorite of mine from the color white.

"I tracked down the old man around 12 midday when lunch just been called. Before him sat a bowl of noodles, a look of concentration on his face.

"Mr. Monk. We understand you went from being simply a monk in *8th Edition* to also being human and a cleric in the one day. How does this make you feel?"

"Old," the **Venerable Monk** replied, "but wiser for it. It is finally good to no longer be the butt-end of all those 'less than human' jokes those moronic samurai keep laughing at. Especially that meanie Fumiko."

"Looking across the room is a table full of Samurai, mostly red and all sniggering. Suddenly, a metal kite flew wobbly into the room and crashed behind the hot plates. I rushed over to see what had happened.

It was the perennial favorite **Ornithopter**, and it was still running okay. I suppose that extra toughness helps sometimes. "I'm glad you are okay," I said. "We wouldn't want the only candidate for 'Thopter of the Month' to be grievously injured!"



The flapping metal wing noise suggested pain and annoyance rather than laughter. Sheesh, I guess artifact creature - THOPTERS can't take a joke! Observing some goblins coming out to see what the fuss was about, I thought it best I get to my interviews.

"HEY!!" screamed a multitude of voices in perfect harmony.

It was hard to focus on the caller, his body constantly shifting and shaping into anything and everything. I had to close my eyes before responding.

"Yes, **Mistform Ultimus**?"

"I'd be in the running for that too, you know."

"Oh. The Thopter contest? Yeah great, right. I hope the second place prize is nice."

"I'm a mighty pirate," he added, the misty opalescence of his skin shimmering out of view and becoming that of a swarthy ne'er do well. Jack Sparrow, he was not.

"I'm also a dragon... and a spirit... and an avatar..."

At this point I was beginning to get the same feeling most people had when talking to **Mistform Ultimus**. This was simply going to be all about him, him, and him.

"I'm also a demon, so if you've got Ogres and you're in Kamigawa for the weekend-"

"Then you still wouldn't be playable?" I cut in, somewhat sorry to be so blunt.

"Well...no I suppose not," Mistform conceded, "but the point remains-

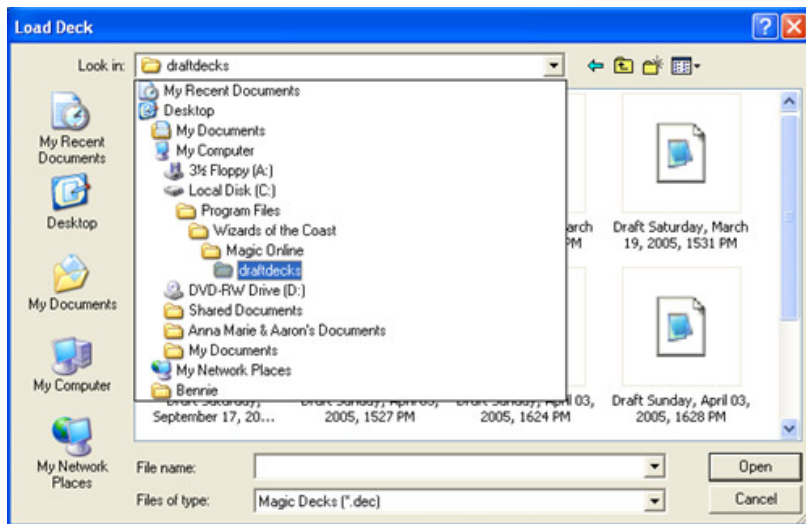
"And then you're also the only moonfolk without the moonfolk ability? Or the only Bringer who doesn't bring it? Or an Angel that doesn't fly?"

"I get errata almost every set," he added hopefully.

"I know you do, and that's really, really cool. But right now I'm trying to check out *9th Edition* and we've run out of time. Sorry folks! Check back with us next week for continuing coverage of *9th Edition* Changes: the Aftermath! I'm Fox Murdoch, signing off."

Tips & Tricks

Many of you probably already know about this, but for those that don't, draft decks are saved on your hard drive and can be retrieved and reviewed later. Go to your Deck Editor screen, click on the Load button, go to the Program Files/ Wizards of the Coast/ Magic Online/ draftdecks folder and there are your drafts named by the date and time you played.



There's also a folder for your sealed decks.

So What, So What, So Whatcha Want?

Okay, I'm taking feedback from you all as to what you might like me to cover in the coming weeks. Is there an aspect of *Magic Online* that hasn't gotten the love you think it deserves? Something I've missed completely? Something I need to dig into more? Hit me in the forums or drop me an email. I'm going to compile the suggestions and put it to a vote next week to help guide Into The Aether as we head into 2005's home stretch.

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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