

Everything you needed to know about *Mirage* in time for its *MagicOnline* debut.

Mirage – A New Era for Magic Online

John Liu

Monday, December 05, 2005

- 
- 



- [John Liu Archive](#)

Who Let The Flankers Out?

On December 5th the players of *Magic Online* will receive a nice present from Wizards of the Coast just in time for the holiday gift-giving season. For the first time, an out-of-print set will be released in its entirety on MTGO and the set brings with it a tremendous windfall for all digital card players. Now there will be some paper **Magic** players, especially the old-schoolers, who will say "Wait, there's nothing new about *Mirage*, it's all old cards we've already seen." While this is technically true, the release also brings a slew of new *Mirage*-related formats *exclusive* to MTGO. And, by setting *Mirageloose* in the current online environment, players not only get 300+ black-bordered cards (foils too!) never before seen on MTGO, they also get the unique opportunity to mix these cards with the current Extended card pool. That's quite a bit of cool and exclusive stuff just for MTGO'ers! The newly matured Classic format will very likely become the standard format for all casual and multi-player formats like 2HG (2 headed-giant), 3HG, FFA (free for all), Emperor 1/1/1 and everything else. Plus the 1-on-1 constructed format may very well become the Vintage of MTGO, except this time we all have a shot at the powerhouse cards. Thus the scope of the formats and the number of players affected by *Mirage's* release is quite significant. And hopefully after we re-reveal a few of the set's many intriguing cards, you the reader will get some interesting deck ideas of your own.

Teferi's Backyard: Gazing Into A Planeswalker's Past

Mirage was originally released in the Fall of 1996. *Mirage* is set in Jamuraa, a tropical land rich with exotic wildlife and inhabited by spirits of various natures. Jamuraa was controlled by famous planeswalker Teferi, the same from Urza's block, and this was where he conducted the majority of his temporal experiments. He successfully created a method that shifted objects out of the current time stream, which then returned shortly afterward. This method was called Phasing, an ability that also produced a number of random effects. His experiments attracted the attention of three other wizards, each with their own agendas



and spell color affiliations: Mangara – white, Jolrael – green and Kaervek – red and black, with Teferi being the blue representative, obviously. Their intrigues, alliances and conflicts form the background story of the *Mirage* block.

Back when *Mirage* was released, it was the 9th expansion ever and the second stand-alone expansion after *Ice Age*. It also marked the institution of the *Fifth Edition* rule set. Along with the “new” rules, the set also introduced several new mechanics including Flanking (a creature combat ability), Phasing and instant-speed enchantments. Eventually, Flanking was considered a fine mechanic for Limited play, which worked quite similarly to Bushido in the Kamigawa block. Phasing became somewhat ignored since it was a card penalty more than anything else. The innovative “instant-ments” card idea continues in current sets with variations of other insta-cast permanent cards sprinkled throughout later expansions.

As for **Magic Online**, *Mirage* will also re-introduce some old but popular mechanics for the first time. Banding, which has existed since Alpha, is an extremely useful creature-combat mechanic. Poison counters provide an alternative win condition likely to see play in casual formats. Also, *Mirage* will introduce many toned-down versions of Vintage powerhouses such as Final Fortune in place of Time Walk and Lion's Eye Diamond instead of Black Lotus. While some of these weaker versions have been virtually ignored by serious players, many others have seen extensive play such as Lightning Bolt's replacement in Incinerate.

Back In The Day

The Standard (then known as Type 2) environment during 1996 was quite bleak (black?). There were mainly two decks out there: Mono-black Necropotence and decks that were built to hose Necropotence. The latter included white/green Erhnam-geddon, Winter Orb and the infamous TurboStasis decks. If you thought the all-black Necro vs. Necro match-up was dull, wait until you played against Stasis! However, *Mirage* unleashed a new deck concept that completely replaced Necro as the king: Cadaverous Bloom. Although the deck did not become truly dominating until Visions came out, a few of **Magic's** brightest had already eyed Bloom as potentially broken.

I recall once when Mark Chalice and I were seated at the same table with a random young kid at the LA Pre-release of *Mirage*. (Mark was a founding member of the Pacific Coast Legends, **Magic's** first team of serious pro's, based in LA, and one of the finest constructed players in the history of **Magic**. PCL also included Scott Johns and Frank Gilson, both of whom now work for Wizards of the Coast.) Mark wanted the kid to show me an unusual card that the kid had main-boarded in his deck. You see, our local group of players from Irvine, CA headed into that pre-release with one main philosophy: prioritize cards in your main deck with highest emphasis on direct damage, then creature removal, large flyers and then 2/2 Flanking creatures. I remember that it was Truc Bui (a fine local player who also turned pro) who gave us that advice and I had stuck to Truc's instruction, which worked quite well for me. Thus it was quite surprising to see the kid sporting this gold-bordered enchantment that affected no creatures and basically did nothing by itself. Of course it was Cadaverous Bloom.

Mark had seen the kid cast the enchantment, drop a 10-point Drain Life on someone and thus come from behind to get a kill. Mark predicted that within a couple of months this card would be broken. As

he showed some of the other local pro's at the pre-release the same card many of them snickered because the card was a "bad card" due to the casting cost and non-board-affecting effect.

In the end, he was right and the rest has become **Magic** history. The Squandered/Bloom deck, which added Squandered Resources and Prosperity from *Visions*, became the next dominant deck after Necro.

Busting Packs!

Who doesn't love busting packs? Whether it's for Draft, League or simply adding cards to your collection, the only thing that's more fun than busting packs of totally new and unknown cards is busting packs you know to be full of useful and desirable cards! Since most players were not around for *Mirage* the first time around, opening these packs should be a completely new experience for them. But at the same time, *Mirage* is also loaded with tons of powerful commons and uncommons. Thus the potential for premium (foil) staples is greatly increased since there are so many common and uncommon possibilities.

For commons, *Mirage* debuts the first black-bordered regular versions of Memory Lapse, Disenchant, Dark Banishing and Fog (for you Emp players). Making their first appearance *ever* Online are Incinerate, Wall of Roots, Dark Ritual and Power Sink. The four latter cards should immediately become staple cards for their colors. For example, when you think about playing a black deck, the first card that comes to mind will be Dark Ritual for formats that allow it. That is how epic these commons are. Imagine busting a foil Dark Ritual out of a pack...and just in time too. Dark Ritual's best buddy is back in *Ninth Edition*: the Hypnotic Specter.

And that's just the commons. In the uncommon rarity slot, look for some seriously powerful cards that also should become staples in all of the various Classic-based formats. Look for powerhouses like Dissipate, Crystal Vein, and the three Tutors: Worldly, Enlightened and Mystical.

So not only will those online opening *Mirage* packs for the first time get that fun and exploratory experience for those new to a set, they will also see a plethora of cards inside that they and players will want right away. And speaking of pack busting...

Limited Play, Nostalgic Memories

I asked some old-school players about their recollections of the *Mirage* sealed experiences from back in the day and nearly all seem to remember it fondly, including myself. I also asked my old friend Scott Larabee what his *Mirage* memories were. (Scott once presided over the largest regular tournament of its day in the Los Angeles/Orange County area, located in Costa Mesa, and is now the DCI Program Manager at Wizards.) He basically told me exactly what I was feeling. It would be a great and unique experience to have a chance to play *Mirage* sealed and draft just like we did so many times in 1996 and relive those moments all over again.

So just what is the *Mirage* Limited environment like? Metaphorically speaking, if *Ninth Edition* Limited is akin to vanilla ice cream, then *Mirage* is the same with hot fudge and whipped cream on top. With

so many creatures sporting the Flanking ability and so few flyers, there are a lot of land battles on the ground and lots of alpha swings where a player attacks with all their creatures. Add in some banding, creature removal in each color except green (like Dark Banishing and Pacifism), direct damage, insta-enchants, some interesting combat tricks like Ray of Command, and five rare dragons, and you basically have a straightforward environment with lots of creature combat and quite a few neat tricks mixed in. It's simple enough for beginners and *Ninth Edition* fans to enjoy right away. But it's also interesting enough for expert drafters to enjoy as well. I can see the Draft 8-4 payout queue being popular since not only is it nearly as consistent as *Ninth*, but also with so many desirable yet Limited-playable uncommons like the Tutors, you won't have to pass all the money cards away.

Oh yeah, almost forgot. Always, always, always pick Savage Twister first...and Kaervek's Torch after that...c'mon, it's splash-able!

Mirage's Influence in Constructed

As with most sets' debuts, people hype up certain cards before they even come out when the spoiler comes out. By the time the first packs are broken, there are already double-digit cards that are completely untested in actual decks. Often those cards are discarded and the actual powerhouse cards reveal themselves when other cards can congeal around them to form solid deck concepts. *Mirage* was no different. When it came out, all the hype was on cards like Grinning Totem, Crimson Hellkite (settle down, Timmy), Phyrexian Dreadnought, and even Sewer Rats!

Side Note: As I previously stated, Necropotence was the dominant deck during Mirage's debut. At the first Pro Tour Los Angeles the pros naturally discussed the new Mirage set. Interestingly, they were completely divided on one little common card. Half the players hailed Sewer Rats saying "IT'S DA' BOMB!" while the other half ridiculed it as junk. Being held in LA, over half of the participants were from the West Coast and most of them favored this blighted shrew; the rest of the US and the world saw it as just another 1/1 rat. Back then the West Coast favored speed and aggression while the East Coast and Euros often favored control. In the end, people tried it immediately in their Necro decks but it never saw much serious play.

Maro made his debut in this set, named after Mark Rosewater himself. Also in this set were a couple of white rares that were popularly put into decks with varying success. Celestial Dawn was used as an attempt to make five-color decks with all the juiciest cards from each color, often killing with a giant plains-powered Drain Life. The strategy was casual at best since it relied so heavily on Dawn and Dawn itself did nothing to the board in play. On the other hand, Sacred Mesa was used with some success. Once people were able to get over sac-a-horse-every-turn as a reasonable and do-able upkeep payment, this card started showing up in Standard/Type 2 decks and it won games all on its own. Frenetic Efreet appeared in many decks as a hardy and effective flyer for control and aggro decks alike. That was likely the most tournament players have ever flipped coins aside from seeing who would be playing first.

While most casual players were chasing Grinning Totem, the Jester's Cap of the *Mirage* set, most of the pro players pointed to Hammer of Bogardan as the best rare in the set. It immediately saw play in mono-red, all-direct-damage decks, and spawned a new blue-red control archetype, Counter-Hammer. The card also did quite well in the red-white control decks popular at the time, backed up

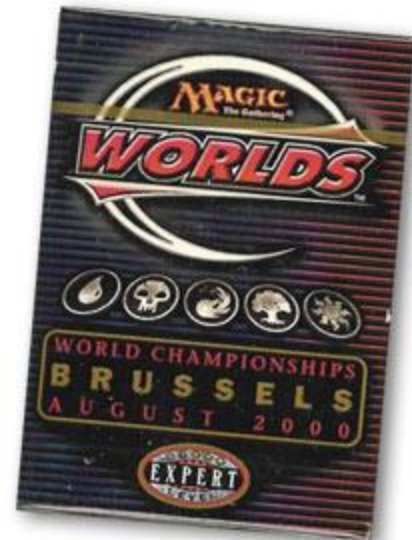
by Disenchants, Incinerates, Wrath of God, Wildfire Emissary and Hammer of Bogardan to control all possible permanent threats.

For the most part, only the three Tutors survived in the Extended environment. Stupor was also seen in a few decks as well since it, the Tutors and Crystal Vein were reprinted in *Sixth Edition*. (The *Sixth Edition* set was dubbed "Classic" but is not to be confused with the Classic formats.) They helped several combo decks in Standard become viable and serious tournament decks. One good example is the famous and beloved Replenish deck, piloted by Tom van de Logt to the quarterfinals of the 2000 World Championships.



In that deck, Mystical Tutor helped fetch Replenish and Wrath of God as sorceries. Counterspell, Frantic Search and even Enlightened Tutor could also be fetched as instants. Enlightened Tutor could fetch Opalescence, Parallax Tide, Parallax Wave or any other enchantment in the deck. The deck put out a bunch of enchantments that controlled the board and then Opalescence animated them all into big creatures with Replenish seriously abusing this idea by returning all the enchantments at once from the graveyard.

In that same World Champs of 2000, Nicolas Labarre took his bizarre "Chimera" deck to the quarterfinals as well. Enlightened Tutor drove this deck, fetching enchantments such as Fecundity, Saproling Cluster, Worship and even Confiscate. It also picked out artifacts like Ashnod's Altar, Whetstone or Snake Basket. Using Saproling Cluster, Fecundity and Ashnod's Altar to generate infinite mana, it could kill you in one turn by decking you with Whetstone, burning you with a massive Blaze or generating infinite snakes with Snake Basket. Both of these started as funny decks but eventually won their players some serious money at the World Champs. Both players had their decks commemorated and immortalized in the commemorative World Champ decks.



Speaking of World Champs, Jon Finkel won his Worlds title that year with his infamous Tinker deck. This deck was powered by extremely fast mana-generating artifacts, which were then abused by Voltaic Key. The deck turned out huge creatures or a game-locking Mishra's Helix with frightening speed. The deck was greatly helped by Crystal Vein, the 2 mana generating land. After 2000, the Tutors and Crystal Vein were always viewed as strong cards. In the

current MTGO Classic environment, these cards should once again be popular with the other cards in the pool.

Also in the mix were a couple of *Mirage's* oddballs that came back to become seriously dangerous cards in the Extended and Legacy environments. Phyrexian Dreadnought, once considered a joke card, became an extremely dangerous card when *Exodus* came out. Coupled with Pandemonium in play, it was a potent twelve damage for one mana and one card. It was errata'ed by the DCI to no longer be able to come into play without having the necessary creatures sacrificed. Spirit of the Night also got some run in early reanimator decks and featured strongly in the Survival of the Fittest/Recurring Nightmare decks of Worlds 1998.

Lion's Eye Diamond Also labeled a joke card, Lion's Eye Diamond began popping up in various decks. Once the *Odyssey* and *Onslaught* blocks came out, particularly the former, discarding your hand was no longer considered such a bad thing. In some decks it was potentially *better* than Black Lotus due to its "huge penalty" being turned into a huge bonus. And when *Mirrodin* block came out with all its effects of fetching and "regrowing" cheap artifacts, "the Diamond" got even more run. Between Madness, Flashback and the various ways *Mirrodin* has to manipulate artifacts, all of which exist in the **Magic Online** Classic format, this card is sure to be fun.

Ok, Enough History, What About Now?

...and now for the fun part. After combing through all the data and card lists for this article, I came across many *Mirage* cards that had never been widely used before but could see some serious play today when interacting with the current MTGO Extended card pool. This is what makes *Mirage's* release into the Online environment so intriguing; all of the new card combinations that can appear because of the unique occurrence of mixing *Mirage* with the Extended cards for the first time. It will generate many new deck concepts exclusive to MTGO. Here a few *Mirage* cards with potential decks, some of them casual and some of them serious. For brevity's sake, we'll skip the cards already mentioned.

Blinding Light – With the return of speed white-weenie, not only can this card be used against other creature decks, it can also be the decisive winner in the mirror match.

Bone Harvest – This card is great as an instant. Not only can you use it to return a creature your opponent worked so hard to get rid of, like Morphling, you can also use it to get useful utility creatures like Sakura-Tribe Elder and Viridian Shaman. Plus, you can use it to respond to graveyard eradicators like Nezumi Graverobber or even Haunting Echoes.

Burning Palm Efreeth – While a bit pricey with a four-mana converted cost, this card can rule the skies in multi-player team games such as Two-Headed Giant. It gets really bad if both you and your teammate have one.

Circle of Despair – Sporting a strong color combination in its casting cost, this card can be quite flexible in a deck simply as a way to sac creatures for only 1 mana. The B/W color makes it great not only for decks that sport Vindicate, but also can be quite interesting with the Kamigawa dragons Kokusho, the Evening Star and Yosei, the Morning Star.

Cursed Totem – The number of powerful creatures this card hoses is just enormous. Wild Mongrel turns into a bear. Nantuko Shade turns into just a 2/1. Psychatog turns into junk. Arcbound Ravager becomes a lowly myr. You get the idea.

Early Harvest – Ok, this card already exists in *Magic Online* and is even in print right now in *Ninth Edition*. But, this Emperor 1/1/1 staple is just now also gaining steam in 1-on-1 Constructed formats. The card was introduced in this set and MTGO players will get it black-bordered for the first time.

Floodgate – My personal favorite in this set. There are so many funny combinations you can do with it that it will make for a great casual card. But, there's also an outside chance of it being played in mono-blue decks sporting cards like Vedalken Shackles, Spire Golem or Meloku the Clouded Mirror. You can Boomerang this baby or find a way to sacrifice it with cards like Phyrexian Vault.

Forsaken Wastes – This goes right into any Gobbos or direct damage deck. This is also a great sideboard card against slow control decks.

Grinning Totem – Hyped and then discarded, this card still has many fun uses.

Phyrexian Vault – This is a very flexible and useful card in many creature decks, especially if you have some way to regrow the creature such as Oversold Cemetery or Genesis. Another strategy is to steal your opponent's creatures. Also, this card fits right in with the Kamigawa dragons again, especially if you don't run green for Greater Good.

Seeds of Innocence – You can bet on the fact Artifact Affinity will be an immediate deck choice in the new Classic format since there are no banned cards currently.

Shallow Grave – Reanimator now has a new reanimation option in the *Magic Online* pool. It's perfect especially if you have a way to sacrifice the creature right away after you attack with it.

Unfulfilled Desires – Speaking of Reanimator, this is another option to keep in mind, and one that also works with Threshold or Madness.

Classic Blunders...err, I Mean Decks

Here are some home-brewed deck ideas I made for the new, *Mirage*-infused Classic format. Each deck contains multiple *Mirage* cards performing pivotal roles. In every case possible, I've avoided using the most difficult-to-find cards in Extended including Pernicious Deed, Vindicate, Spiritmonger, Meddling Mage and Orim's Chant. This was for two purposes. First was to make the deck ideas as viable for as many players as possible since many can't afford four of each of these cards. Second is to make the point that with *Mirage*, many new and powerful deck concepts will emerge focused around other cards including *Mirage* singles and won't necessarily cost an arm and a leg. Obviously many of these are intended with casual players in mind (in case the 60+ card lists didn't tip you off), but hopefully even the hardest-core spikes may get inspired by some of these whacky creations as well.

The Invisible Woman

The Invisible Woman is the Serra Avatar that seems to come from nowhere; hopefully she's Angry too. She and the Darksteel Colossus are perfect for Polymorph but I chose the angel since she's simply more spectacular. Hitting for 20 in one turn doesn't suck either.

Bazaar of Trauma

Sell some serious brain damage with this deck. You can Traumatize yourself or your opponent depending on whether or not you have the Bazaar. If the market is closed, target yourself and swing with 'tog. If you do have Bazaar, then target your opponent and watch them draw junk from their deck while you use Wretch and 'tog to regulate your own graveyard. With Dark Ritual, you can cast either Bazaar or Traumatize quickly, get turn two Persecutes or get bigger Power Sinks.

Emperor Wingman: Dragons

This deck is designed for the flanker sitting to the left of the emperor in the popular MTGO Emperor 1/1/1 format. For those of you not familiar with the format, the 1/1/1 refers to player range: 1 adjacent player spell range, 1 adjacent player to attack (the flanker in front of you) and abilities of permanents affect up to 1 adjacent player; all ranges affect either side of the player. The left flank is the aggressive flank since that player's turn comes right after the emperor's, which means that player is the first to take advantage of all the emperor's powerful spells.

This is a new twist on a dragon deck I've seen before but now it has the Kamigawa dragons, Zirilan of the Claw to fetch dragons and Seedborn Muse to abuse Zirilan's ability. This deck can also be used for Tribal Wars by substituting Moment's Peace out for four more dragons and adding some City of Brass in place of Forests.

Emperor: Coat of Paws

Speaking of Emp 1/1/1, here's a new emperor deck concept. Instead of having multiple Kamahl's Summons and Weird Harvests clogging your deck, we substitute only one card, Waiting in the Weeds. Not only do "the Kitties" make for a one-card combo instead of the previously mentioned two, it only relies on your flankers/wingmen having Forests in their deck. Your flankers don't need to have great decks or expensive cards, just Forests and maybe Seedborn Muse. The Tutors let you fetch New Frontiers, Weeds or a greatly needed Howling Mine earlier too. And things get really abusive if you can fetch Coat of Arms and/or Mirari. Typically you go for Mirari first and Coat after. The deck still sports one Weird Harvest and three Wumpus anyway, which is also Tutor-able, just in case your wingmen have decks built around that combo.

Tap: I Win The Prize

Simply put, this deck attempts to get Isochron Scepter and Metamorphose together as quickly as possible, locking the game down. In the meantime the other instants either counter all of the opponent's spells or bounce them back into hand. Turn two and three scoops by your opponent are quite possible due to the Tutors making the combo more consistent and Chrome Mox makes it even faster.

The New Classic Bloom

Decks built around Bloom were among the most feared and copied back in 1997. Now that black has excellent card drawing and there are more lands with sacrifice-for-more-mana abilities, we no longer

need Squandered Resources nor Prosperity. The Tendrils, which absolutely loves Dark Ritual, adds back-up power in case we can't drain for enough with Consume Spirit, or in case you are playing against counters. Duress also hoses counters as well. Pre-turn three wins are quite possible with this deck.

Tribal Wars: Hoser Elves

Here's a Tribal Wars deck that can also work as a fun but serious Classic constructed deck. Hall of Gemstone will allow your elves to march unimpeded since your opponent's instants will almost all be useless. You can also Tutor for Fecundity, which hoses Wrath of God-like effects, as does Caller. Plus, Coat is just brutal in this deck. With it, you can win with a single Treetop Scout.

Hakim, The Dream

This is a fun deck for casual single play or even in Two-Headed Giant, especially if your partner has a control deck. Basically you try to stay alive long enough to get Hakim into play. From there, he takes over using the *Ravnica* enchants. With enough blue mana, you can do any of those effects twice per upkeep (gain life, 3 damage to any target, draw 2 cards, etc). Or you can simply get Pemmin's Aura on him and swing. Morphling adds a little beef and another target to enchant. Careful Study lets you draw through the deck and helps you get the enchantments into the graveyard. In a pinch, both Faith's Fetters and Pemmin's Aura can get rid of your opponent's creature threats.

Diamond Madness

This is simply a new twist on the old U/G Madness Tier 1 deck in Extended. This deck was plenty fast before but now with the Diamond, it can be downright blinding. Genesis, Call and Aether Burst work better in case you need to discard your hand. Now this isn't exactly a new deck concept but I included it as a simple example of how several of the new *Mirage* cards will make existing Tier 1 decks even better. Another example would be adding Mystical Tutor to the Upheaval version of Psychatog. Basically, the Psychatog deck is full of instants with a few key sorceries, which is perfect for Mystical Tutor.

Eternal Pegasus

This is a new twist on the old Wake and Mobilization G/W deck except we use Sacred Mesa in place of Mobo. Mesa only costs two mana to activate and pegasus tokens fly, so the sacrifice is no problem and should be easily paid with Wake out. Also, all the creatures in this deck work well with four Wrath of Gods in the deck.

Untap, Upkeep and Draw

Now it's your turn. I'm sure you readers out there will come up with many more deck ideas of your own and I look forward to seeing them play out Online. And who knows, with all the deck concepts I just listed, you might be playing me next ...once I'm done getting the *Mirage* cards for all these crazy decks!