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# On the Vanguard of *Mirage*

Bennie Smith  
Into the Aether  
Thursday, December 8, 2005



I was originally going to be doing an interview with Aaron Alberg this week, but there have been some changes of plans so we'll instead be bringing you a different interview next week. There will be more on that once we get to it, but I'm guessing you'll be happy to know that the planned topic is new info on MTGO 3.0.

Also, I'd like to extend my congrats to *Magic Online* Worlds Qualifier winner Adam Klein, who placed a respectable 128th out of 286 participants and earned 3 PT points, performing better than over half of the pros in attendance. Not just your garden-variety pros, either—the best of the best that the World has to offer. Three days of top-level *Magic* and a free trip to Japan hopefully added up to a lot of fun for Adam.



## Stalking Tiger, Phasing Efreet

One of the things that always excites me about release events is the opportunity to play with two new *Vanguard* avatars. A wise man once said, a Vanguard game is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you're gonna get. Designing decks around Vanguard avatars are intriguing puzzles because you start with a blank slate: you're not tied to a particular color, so you're limited only by your imagination and the available card pool. When writing up overviews for set release, I like to come up with deck ideas for each avatar in order to get the creative juices flowing. Then, once the set releases and I have the avatars available, it's fun to run 'em to see whether the deck idea works or whether it crashes and burns. Monday I got to try out the decks I suggested last week, and I decided to give the participation avatar, Stalking Tiger, a whirl first.



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**Stalking NiceDraft.dec (Vanguard Standard) by Bennie Smith** .txt

Avatar – Stalking Tiger  
60 cards

2 Svogthos, the Restless Tomb	4 Birds of Paradise	4 Sensei's Divining Top
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	2 Llanowar Elves	4 Darkblast
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	4 Nezumi Graverobber	3 Life from the Loam
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	2 Golgari Thug	3 Moldervine Cloak
4 Overgrown Tomb	4 Stinkweed Imp	1 Nightmare Void
4 Llanowar Wastes	2 Greater Mossgod	15 other spells
5 Swamp	1 Nullmage Shepherd	
6 Forest	1 Grave-Shell Scarab	
	1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	

24 land 21 creatures

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**NOVELS**

*Dissension*  
Ravnica Cycle, Book III  
by Cory Herndon

After a couple games, I noticed something right off the bat: Stalking Tiger is an absolute mana hog. *Sensei's Divining Top*, normally a pretty good way to soak up extra mana lying around, got ignored. Apparently a Top is a high maintenance card and doesn't like getting ignored, because I kept drawing it, in multiples, before I got into the Dredge sweet spot and could just cash them in for Dredge cards. Plus, with the recent handicapping of Hell's Caretaker, I didn't run across a single deck where the Graverobbers played a big role other than fighting another Dredge deck.

Time to pop the hood and monkey around with the engine a little bit. Here's the version I'm ready to battle with next.

**Stalking NiceDraft.dec (Vanguard Standard) by Bennie Smith** .txt

Avatar - Stalking Tiger  
60 cards

1 Miren, the Moaning Well	4 Birds of Paradise	4 Darkblast
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	2 Llanowar Elves	3 Life from the Loam
4 Overgrown Tomb	4 Elvish Skysweeper	3 Moldervine Cloak
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	2 Golgari Thug	1 Nightmare Void
2 Svogthos, the Restless Tomb	2 Nezumi Graverobber	11 other spells
	4 Stinkweed Imp	

6 Forest	3 Viridian Shaman
4 Llanowar Wastes	1 Nullmage Shepherd
4 Swamp	2 Greater Mossdog
	1 Grave-Shell Scarab
23 land	1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
	26 creatures

The Skysweepers were a sudden flash of inspiration after getting annihilated by an Akroma vanguard deck with **Concerted Effort**, where every creature had flying and protection from black pretty early in the game. I didn't play another Akroma deck with this new configuration but if nothing else they're cheap creatures to cantrip off of.

I got in a game with shivan\_hellkite who's with the Phage avatar, and having **Darkblast** in my opening hand proved quite handy in mowing down his early mana critters, nuking two **Elves of Deep Shadow** and a **Llanowar Elves**.



Unfortunately, having to give up my draw each time to get back **Darkblast** I quickly run out of mana, stalling at three. My opponent plays **Persecute** and knocks the **Cloak** out of my hand, so I play my **Stinkweed Imp** and **Dredge** back the **Cloak**. The **Imp** falls to a **Putrefy**. I **Dredge** back the **Imp**, play it, then **Dredge** back the **Cloak** and play it on the **Imp**. This time, the **Imp** dies to **Last Gasp** in response.

By now, my graveyard is chock full of cards, but unfortunately there is no sign of **Life from the Loam** yet. I do have a **Thug** in the graveyard, so I **Dredge** that back (still no **Loam**), play it, and decide to draw off the top of my deck with the **Tiger** ability this time—and snag a fourth land finally!



Finally I get a fourth mana on turn 9, to my opponent's seven mana. Not good, but luckily my opponent has drawn mostly creature kill and Persecutes so I'm not under any pressure yet. The next turn he plays a Bob and I'm forced to Dredge back **Darkblast** to take him down before things get ugly—again, no **Life from the Loam**!



My opponent then drops a **Golgari Rotworm**, something huge that my puny **Darkblasts** can't handle, but with still nary a **Life from the Loam** in sight and my Thug playing **Moat** I decide to try and draw normally into some land. My opponent decides to not let me stall for time and drops a **Graverobber** of his own.



Thankfully, he only has enough mana to eat two of the three **Darkblasts** in the graveyard, so the last 'Blast rides to the rescue during my draw step, flipping over—finally!—a **Life from the Loam!** The Svogthos endgame is now in sight, but complicated slightly by my opponent's Phage avatar, so I will need to dredge up some additional hits to chip away at his life total, and things go according to plan. The first Svogthos is killed by Phage, but I get him low enough on life that he can't use the ability again and the second Svogthos rides in after **Darkblast** takes out the **Ravenous Rats** chump blocker he plays.



Ach, Hans—run! It's a 16/16 plant zombie!!

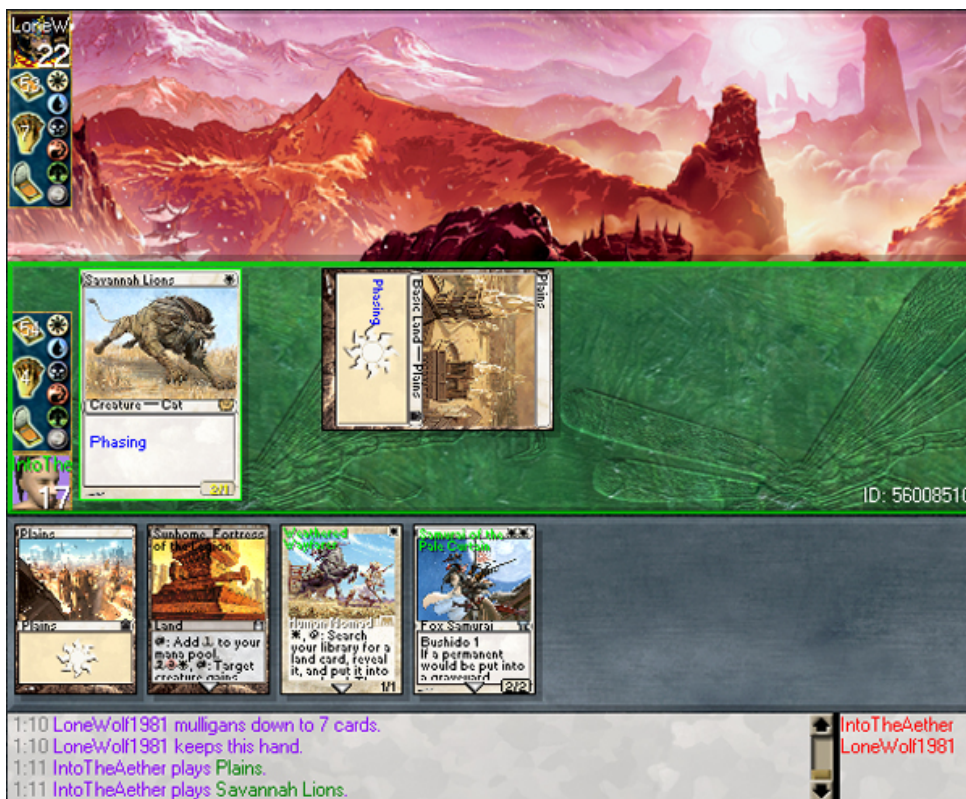
I play a few more times and the deck performs reasonably well; I definitely like the Stalking Tiger avatar!

Next up, Frenetic Efreel! I have to admit I'm a little nervous about how this one will play out. A white weenie deck where the white weenies only get to attack every other turn sounds like it could be... mediocre. The proof's in the pudding though, so I shunt aside my doubts and give the deck a whirl.

My opening hand has a **Sacred Foundry**, a Sunhome, and some weenies. A keeper. As I play things out though, I start to notice: all I'm drawing is forests as lands. Did I splash green into the deck? I take a peek and realize an error: instead of 16 plains, somehow I put 16 forests. I guess I'm just a green mage at heart, even my subconscious conspires to slip forests into my decks. I then take this corrected version into battle:

Frenetic WW (Vanguard Standard) By Bennie Smith		
Avatar - Frenetic Efreet		
60 cards		
3 Eiganjo Castle	4 Savannah Lions	4 Umezawa's Jitte
2 Quicksand	4 Isamaru, Hound of Konda	4 Gift of Estates
1 Sunhome, Fortress of the Legion	3 Lantern Kami	4 Shining Shoal
1 Sacred Foundry	2 Suntail Hawk	12 other spells
16 Plains	4 Weathered Wayfarer	
23 land	4 Eight-and-a-Half-Tails	
	4 Samurai of the Pale Curtain	
	25 creatures	

It takes a few games, but I finally start to see the rhythm of how the deck should operate. For instance, here's my opening hand after my draw.



Frenetic White Weenie (for me anyway) seems to break this way: in one phase area you have your aggressive suite. This is where your creatures go on the assault, it's where you will drop your Jittes, develop your mana and set up your Sunhome. In the other phase area is your "garden" – you keep your land count lower than your opponent (if possible), and that's where your **Weathered Wayfarers** hang out and where you cast your **Gift of Estates**. You may occasionally need to drop a defender here or a **Quicksand** so as to not leave yourself too vulnerable.

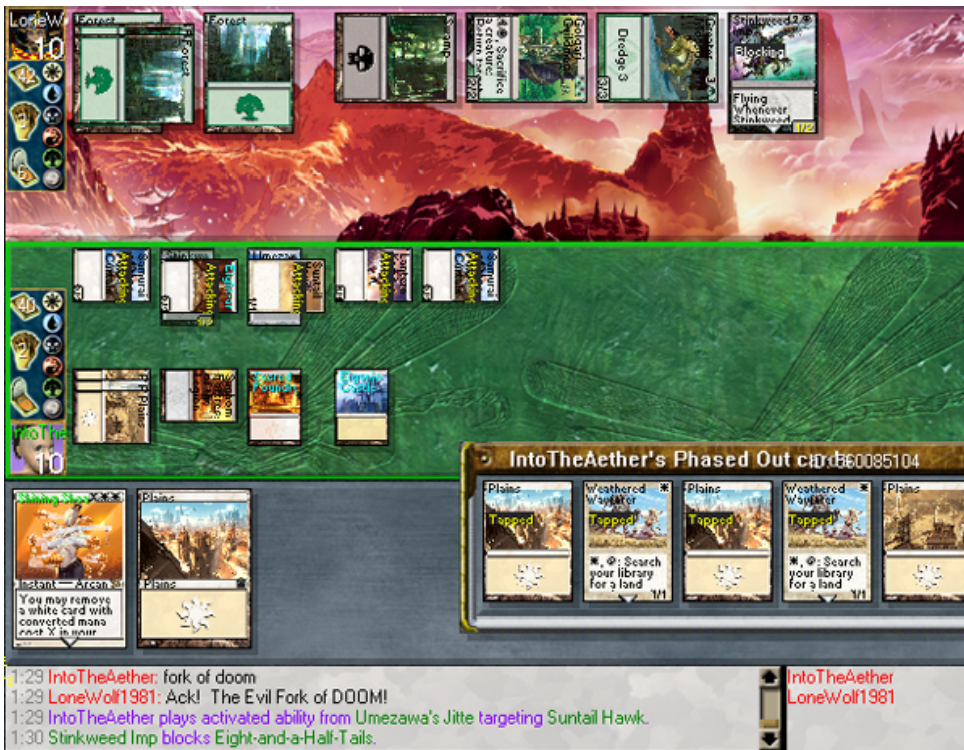
Anyway, with that opening hand, The Plan seemed to be a no-brainer. Unfortunately, I went first and kept winning the Frenetic coin-flip, taking 5 turns in a row before I lost a flip and let my opponent, LoneWolf1981 go.



So, there's a flaw in The Plan—if you go first and win too many flips, your garden doesn't grow. Of course, the good news is that your aggro phase will run amok which is not a bad trade-off. I wonder if this deck might prefer to be on the draw as opposed to on the play? It seems counter-intuitive but my experience in this and other games suggests that perhaps drawing that extra card and allowing your opponent to get land out there first might be beneficial, with their advantage of going first off-set by your own extra turns.



So my opponent gets a few turns, laying out two lands and allowing me to get my Wayfarer going. It turns out my opponent is playing Prodigal Sorcerer with Dredge, which seems like a pretty nice idea. Unfortunately for him, I take 10 turns to his 4, and those 6 extra cards reveal the Evil Fork of Doom that quickly seals the game as it so often does.

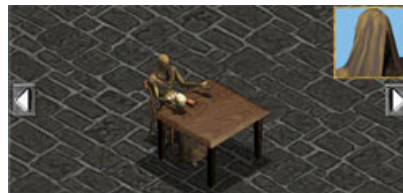


I'd like to give props to all my opponents who played against this deck, since sitting there watching your opponent take extra turns with great frequency is likely not too high on the fun meter. I suppose taking those extra turns and utilizing them for attacking helps.

After playing the Frenetic Efreet avatar, I have to say I'm impressed by its power, especially if the coin seems to like you. I definitely want to give it a whirl in Extended where *Krark's Thumb* is available!

## Vanguard Caretaking

Last week, Aaron Forsythe explained in [Cards are for Playing, not Banning!](#) the need to drastically change the starting life and cards in hand for Hell's Caretaker, from +4 Life/+0 Cards to -2 Life/-2 Cards, a pretty heavy hit. In case you missed it, here's what he said:



"As for Vanguard, let's have a moment of silence for the Hell's Caretaker avatar. A drastic change, to be sure, but the Hooded One was about as dominant as an avatar can be in Standard Vanguard. We came to the decision to really weaken it only after discussing the possibility of leaving it alone and instead banning cards that work well with it from Standard Vanguard (or Vanguard across all formats)—cards like Yosei and Kokusho. We opted for altering the avatar this time mainly because that action is in line with our current policy, but we'll be revisiting the idea of bannings again soon (which would allow us to "restore" avatars like Hell's Caretaker to something akin to their original statistics). What do you think? Post in the forums or drop me a line—is altering avatars a better way of balancing Vanguard than banning individual cards?"

I was checking out some of the replies in the forums, and there was some concern expressed about taking the time to collect/buy the necessary cards to build a deck – in this case, Hell's Caretaker – only to have the deck "banned out of existence." It's the age-old complaint that rises up any time R&D is forced to decide on banning/restricting cards, but I think it's clear they don't make the decision lightly. *Magic Online* fulfills a lot of needs for the *Magic* Community, and much of it is as a reflection of what's going on in the world of paper *Magic*. The Vanguard avatars are uniquely *Magic Online* however, and represent a fun, offbeat alternative to the regular ways we all play *Magic*. I'm glad that R&D pays attention to Vanguard and is willing to step in and make changes when necessary. They did it with Elvish Champion early this year. Hell's Caretaker utterly dominated the recent Standard Vanguard Premier Event and proved the need for a fix. With *Mirage*, we now have 32 Vanguard avatars, and the more of them that are viable the better.

Speaking of the 32 avatars, I haven't done any polls in a while so let me hear from you Vanguard fans, which avatar do you think is the best now... and also, which avatar is your favorite?

**With the changes to Hell's Caretaker, which of these avatars do you feel is best poised to step into the power vacuum as Avatar To Beat?**

- None, they all seem comparable
- Akroma, Angel of Wrath
- Arcbound Overseer
- Birds of Paradise
- Bosh, Iron Golem

- Eight-and-a-Half-Tails
- Elvish Champion
- Erhnam Djinn
- Etched Oracle
- Fallen Angel
- Flametongue Kavu
- Frenetic Efreet
- Goblin Warchief
- Grinning Demon
- Hell's Caretaker
- Higure, the Still Wind
- Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
- Karona, False God
- Loxodon Hierarch
- Maro
- Oni of Wild Places
- Phage the Untouchable
- Platinum Angel
- Prodigal Sorcerer
- Raksha Golden Cub
- Royal Assassin
- Sakashima the Impostor
- Serra Angel
- Seshiro the Anointed
- Sisters of Stone Death
- Stalking Tiger
- Two-Headed Giant of Foriys
- Viridian Zealot

Submit my Vote

#### Which avatar is your favorite for playing in Vanguard?

- None, I don't play Vanguard
- Akroma, Angel of Wrath
- Arcbound Overseer
- Birds of Paradise
- Bosh, Iron Golem
- Eight-and-a-Half-Tails
- Elvish Champion
- Erhnam Djinn
- Etched Oracle
- Fallen Angel
- Flametongue Kavu
- Frenetic Efreet
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- Stalking Tiger

- Two-Headed Giant of Foriys
- Viridian Zealot

Submit my Vote

Aaron [also talked about Enduring Ideal](#) getting the boot in the online Prismatic format, and discussed some concern about the tutoring power that *Ravnica's* Transmute ability brings. If you're a fan of Prismatic make sure to go to the forum thread for his article and get your opinion heard!

## Mirage and MTGO Constructed Format Changes

Last week, I gave a quick overview of the changes being made in Constructed formats for *Magic Online* with *Mirage*. In the coming weeks, I'd like to dig deeper into these formats and look specifically at the impact of *Mirage*. John Liu's article, [Mirage – A New Era for Magic Online](#) does a great job of introducing us to the exciting vintage set and the possibilities it offers to MTGO players. I'd like to hear what you think about which *Mirage* cards will have a big impact in Classic (and Classic w/ Vanguard), Prismatic, Singleton, Tribal Wars, Freeform and *Mirage* Block Constructed. What do you think of John's deck ideas? Got some ideas of your own that you'd like to share? Drop your thoughts in the forums or send me an email.

## Tips and Tricks

I received an interesting note from MagicTheGatherin on a tip that might be helpful to you if you're having problems with getting Convoke to play correctly:

"Today while in a game with JMS a player could not use Convoke because he didn't know how. It might have been different if he had unclicked the "You can only announce a spell or activated ability if you have the mana in your mana pool to pay for it" box in the game settings. I suggest putting a little suggestion at the end of your next column for doing this, as it is generally a better way to play for numerous reasons, one of which is that it prevents hasty mistakes."



Thanks, MTG!

And, lastly, a reminder that the four-week *Mirage* leagues will kick off as soon as the release event league conclude. Don't miss it!

*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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