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PayPal, Scott Larabee, and much more

Bennie Smith
 Into the Aether
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Interview with Scott Larabee

Even if you're not sure what he does, Scott Larabee is a name that is bound to sound familiar. He shows up in various Into The Aether and other columns quite frequently. Since his [Magic Dossier](#) is a bit out of date, I thought it would be nice to reintroduce everyone to Scott and find out all of what he does for this game we love. If we're lucky, and don't rough him up too much, maybe we can squeeze some information out of him about MTGO 3.0!

ITA: I was checking out your "Magic Dossier" and was wondering if there were any updates you'd add now that 3 years have gone by since then?
 SL: Well...I am 38 -- as of December 27 :)

Also, I have been working for Wizards in a different position since November 2003. I am no longer the North American Territory manager. I am now the DCI Program Manager. In July 2004 I also took on the position of *Magic Online* Tournament Coordinator.



ITA: Is *Fallen Angel* still your favorite even after the release of *Mirrodin* block, *Kamigawa* block, and *Ravnica*?

SL: It is, though I have enjoyed the *Mirrodin*, *Kamigawa*, and *Ravnica* blocks completely. *Fallen Angel* is still my favorite. Of the last 3 blocks, my favorite card is *Sakashima*, the *Impostor*.

ITA: Are there any more games you currently enjoy playing?

SL: I mostly play *Magic* when out on the Pro Tour. We play a format called "Elder Dragon Highlander", which Level 5 judge Sheldon Menery and a bunch of us play. You can read about the format [here](#). As for the rest of my gaming, I generally play board games. Advanced Civilization is my favorite, but with a game play length of 12+ hours I only get to play it once or twice a year. I enjoy Scrabble quite a bit as well as many of the "German" style board games that have come out over the last 5 years: Puerto Rico, Ticket to Ride, Saint Petersburg, Manila, Shadows Over Camelot, **Vegas Showdown**, and many others. We have a regular group of WotC employees that plays board games every Wednesday night.



ITA: BDM mentioned you originally were a Los Angeles-based tournament organizer of the fabled Costa Mesa Women's Club before hiring on at WotC. Costa Mesa Women's Club???

SL: I really was :) Shortly after I first started playing *Magic* in 1994, some local guys in the Orange County, CA area started a weekly *Magic* Tournament at the Women's Club in Costa Mesa, California. The "Women's Club" was basically this big, empty building owned by a women's auxiliary group. They never used the building on Saturdays, so they rented it to us. Anyway, the group that ran the tournaments also opened a *Magic* club/game store around the same time. A chance for me to become a partner in the business opened up. I ran the weekly tournaments there, as well as all the Pro Tour Qualifiers, Prereleases, and other events, until I came to work for Wizards of the Coast in 1998. The "Women's Club" tournaments were the mainstay of *Magic* Tournament play in Los Angeles in the early days of *Magic*. Notable players who were regulars were Henry Stern, Mark Rosewater, Scott Johns, Alan Comer, Frank Gilson, Mark Chalice, Mario Robaina, Truc Bui, Brian Hacker, John "Daddy" Yoo, and many other Pro Tour players. It was a great time for *Magic* and gave me the training I needed in order to turn a hobby into a career. Organizing the Pro Tour Qualifiers and other Premier Events started my relationship with Wizards, which led to my eventual hiring.

ITA: I've noticed you have a couple titles. What does it mean to be "MTG:O Tournament Coordinator"?

SL: Basically, I am the Tournament Organizer for *Magic Online*. I decide what tournaments are run, what times they are run, and what formats they will be. I also decide how release events and other Premier events will be run. Basically, if it is a tournament, queue, or league on *Magic Online*, it's mine :)

ITA: What about "DCI Program Manager"?

SL: I am the manager of all the high level programs that involve Wizards games at what we call a "championship" or "professional" level. This includes *Magic* World Championships, Pro Tour, Nationals, Grand Prix, and Pro Tour Qualifiers. I am also the *Magic* Pro Tour Manager. In this role I supervise the Pro Tour tournament, making sure that all aspects of the Pro Tournament itself run smoothly. As a crossover between the paper and Online worlds, I am the Program Manager for the *Magic* Invitational.

ITA: What about "Lord of the Underworld and All Shadowy Things?"

SL: No, you have me confused with Justin Ziran :)

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ITA: Is there any other role you have within Wizards that players might not be aware of?

SL: I am the Organized Play Program Manager for the [Avalon Hill](#) Board game line. I organize whatever board game events we run at conventions throughout the year. I am also on the play test team for Avalon Hill board games.

ITA: The "skins" style of payout for Pro Tour Philadelphia seemed to be very popular with many of the players. Now that the 2006 PT schedule has been announced, are there any plans yet for doing that again next year?

SL: Not in 2006. When we begin planning for 2007, we will be looking at the skins format and other ideas that we have had and may sprinkle some of these ideas into the pro tour schedule.

ITA: The MTGO Worlds qualifier is a nice "crossover" event between the online and paper worlds of Magic. Are there any plans for further crossovers?

SL: No plans at this time, but you never know...

ITA: How do you decide what Premier Events to schedule in a given month? I notice that it changes from month to month.

SL: I keep track of what people are playing and make adjustments as necessary. I also read the boards and take feedback from players online as to what they would like to see. I often get questions like "Why don't you run a 2x Standard at 2:00PM on Tuesdays?" Individual requests are, obviously, almost impossible to fulfill. I basically try to get certain formats running when they are likely to get the highest attendance.

ITA: Were you involved in choosing Braingeyser as the 2005 Holidays Promo card? How was that card chosen?

SL: With darts :)

Not really. As we didn't want to choose the best or the worst, we chose a card that had a mid-range power from among the new promo cards. Also, there is no "plan" for when we will release which card, but it is amusing to watch people on the boards try to guess a release pattern. :)

ITA: I noticed in an old "Ask Wizards" piece you were talking about the Prerelease promo cards for paper Magic. Are you still involved in choosing those? What goes into deciding which card will be given out?

SL: I am not involved in that process anymore as I am no longer involved in planning the paper prereleases. R&D chooses the prerelease cards during the design and development process.



ITA: When I'm on MTGO I notice you're quite often also on. Do you play a lot or are you mostly monitoring the goings-on?

SL: Actually, I am usually AFK :) I am on from time to time during the day, monitoring events and getting feedback from players on tournaments, prizes, etc. I love to get feedback from people. Most of the suggestions I get from people I have heard many times before, but occasionally some really great, original ideas come in. Some of them have even been incorporated into version 3.0

ITA: What's your favorite MTGO format?

SL: Tribal Wars. I actually didn't think much of the format until I scheduled the first 4x Open in that format back in the Fall. I started playing around with a Cleric/Zombie deck and actually enjoyed the format quite a bit.

ITA: What's your favorite Vanguard avatar?

SL: Stalking Tiger. Isn't it everyone's favorite? :)

ITA: How have the Mirage Release Events and Drafts been going? Has the player base jumped on it?

SL: As much as expected. I had lower expectations than a regular release, such as *Ravnica*. We realize that old sets, while cool, will not appeal to a number of players on *Magic Online*. But I do think that having the older sets available will be interesting for many players to try out and play from time to time. Personally, it has been quite fun for me to play *Mirage* and relive a bit of what *Magic* was like in the past.

ITA: Did you go to Worlds? Any good Magic stories you can relay? Do you have any good "only in Japan" moments?

SL: I was at Worlds acting as the Tournament Manager. My favorite story from Worlds was Pierre Canali. He left the tournament site on Friday to go sightseeing in Tokyo. Before he left, he still did not know if he had won the Rookie of the Year title, as a player in the Top 8 could still pass him in points. He said he would be back in time for the awards ceremony on Sunday. The look on his face when he returned and found out that he had won is something I will always remember.

As for "only in Japan" moments, they all involve Sake and Karaoke. Further details are best left unuttered.



ITA: We are all dying to know anything about the much-anticipated release of MTGO 3.0! What can you share with us about it now?

SL: I am so excited about 3.0! Since I came on board the *Magic Online* team, there have been many things about the *Magic Online* tournament system that I have been looking forward to improving. Things like prize payouts, special events, etc.

I have been able to fix a few things under the 2.5 architecture but the real goodies will be here with 3.0! I have been involved with 3.0 since the beginning and have been able to make some very significant improvements to

the way that Organized Play runs on **Magic Online**. In a previous article, Justin Ziran mentioned that there would be 2 versions of Magic Online 3.0 - 3.0A and 3.0B. 3.0A would replicate existing functionality with a new code base, while 3.0B would introduce new things to **Magic Online**. As it turns out, we have been able to add some new functionality starting with version 3.0A.

For example, I hate the way leagues run on **Magic Online**. In June 2005, I started meeting with various folks around the company about ways to improve how leagues operate. I also talked to a lot of players that actually play in leagues about ways to improve them. I think that what we came up with will better serve the needs of the players that play in leagues and be a more enjoyable experience. While I cannot go into the details of the changes yet, I think that **Magic Online** players will ultimately be pleased with the results.

Various folks involved in the 3.0 project will be talking about the various changes as we get closer to launch. Be patient, everyone! The result will be worth the wait.

Justin Ziran on PayPal for MTGO

Before we break for the holidays, Justin Ziran wanted to give us some more information on the PayPal program for purchasing product in the **Magic Online** store that some of you may have noticed has rolled out. Take it away, Justin!



Justin_Ziran: I am extremely excited to announce we will be conducting a series of tests for Paypal in the **Magic Online** store. As you know, you can only use Visa, Master Card and American Express in the store right now but, if all goes well during testing, you'll soon have the option to use your PayPal account to make purchases too.

Our goal is to make purchasing **Magic Online** product more accessible & convenient. You'll notice that the store has undergone some minor cosmetic changes in an effort to streamline the purchasing process. The layout is more intuitive and easier for new customers to understand.

There are a few things you'll need to remember when using PayPal...

No split payment option: If you are using PayPal to purchase your **Magic Online** product, you will not have the ability to split payment between PayPal and any other payment option. Technically speaking, it turns out that splitting payments is pretty complicated to pull off.

No support for non-store PayPal transaction: Any agreements to purchase product beyond the service provided by our **Magic Online** store is NOT supported by Wizards of the Coast in any way. Our trade system is set up for digital object for digital object trades and there is no support built in for digital object for PayPal (or any other payment option for that matter) trades and we strongly recommend you **do not** engage in these sorts of transactions.

On security...

Credit Cards, Coupons, PayPal and all other forms of "internet payments" present some unique challenges for online retailers. As an online retailer of digital goods, we're prepared to handle any issues related to the payment options offered in the **Magic Online** store. In addition, we have developed a very close working relationship with PayPal in an effort to address the PayPal-specific challenges as they relate to digital objects.

Accounts Security: As with any password-protected account, YOU need to be vigilant in protecting your private information.

Email phishing is the most prevalent method used to gather information on password-protected accounts. Phishing emails look pretty official, going as far as duplicating a company's website. So use extra caution when dealing with emails or websites that request personal information. It doesn't hurt to update your virus/spy ware programs regularly.

We've pulled together a few tips to help you avoid falling victim to these scams. Follow the link and scroll down to the end of the article.

<http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/daily/bs25>

Test Schedule...

Over the next 5 weeks we will be running a series of tests designed to gauge our readiness to roll the PayPal feature out on a 24/7 basis.

Testing will be broken down into several phases ranging from very short tests (20-30 minutes) to longer more comprehensive tests running 3-8 hours.

During test periods you will be able to use your Paypal account to purchase product just as you would a credit card. When PayPal is active you'll have the ability to select it as a payment option in the **Magic Online** store. When testing is over, we will remove the PayPal option from the store (see picture).



We will post in-game announcements when Paypal is active in the **Magic Online** store and also send another message when that test period is complete. As I said earlier, the initial test will be short and we'll expand the duration as we validate features.

Other details

The Knowledge Base system will have an FAQ with common answers to the most frequent questions. You can find that information [here](#). Enter "PayPal" in the search text field.

And finally

Please take the time to participate in the testing process by reporting any issues you have while shopping. Keep in mind that PayPal transactions take a few minutes longer to process which means product delivery can take a few minutes longer as well. If you don't receive product within 25 minutes of your transaction, please contact us here (URL - http://wizards.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/wizards.cfg/php/enduser/acct_login.php?p_sid=&p_lva=&p_sp=&p_li=&next_page=ask.php)

See you online,

Justin Ziran
Username: Justin_Ziran

Things to Keep In Mind When Drafting *Mirage*

Perhaps you've got some time on your hands, a break from school or work. Perhaps you've got some Santa cash burning a hole in your back pocket.

It's been calling you, shimmering on the horizon. It's not an illusion... it's a *Mirage* draft queue with seven players waiting...

If you've hesitated to try drafting *Mirage* because the cards are old, unfamiliar, and maybe seem a little wacky, you're not the only one. I asked PT player and limited specialist Ken Krouner to share a few things that may be useful to keep in mind when jumping into *Mirage* draft.

Ken Krouner: I'm an old school player. I played back when *Antiquities* were still \$1.15 a pack. I know my *Mirage*! At least I thought I did. As it turns out I wasn't very good at all when *Mirage* was released and a lot of things I thought I knew I really don't know.

However, I have been learning as I go and here are some easy tips I picked up.

Tip number 1: If you didn't open a true bomb, take the best Red card.

Red is by far the best color in this set. It has 2 of the best commons by far, some of the best rares, and potent uncommons. The beauty of forcing Red in this format is that no matter how bad your deck is you can still open a **Kaervek's Torch**. It sounds weak and simplistic, but it is the best way to go. **Talruum Minotaur**, the Flanking knights, **Spitting Earth**, **Chaos Charm**, **Ekundu Cyclops**, and **Raging Spirit** are all playable- to good- cards, and **Incinerate** and **Kaervek's Torch** are fantastic and all are in the common slots.

Tip number 2: Avoid Blue.

Yes, Blue has the best fliers and the 2nd best common (**Ray of Command**) but the fact of the matter is Phasing sucks in limited. It's one of the worst drawbacks to ever be keyworded. When you look at the power and toughness of the creatures it looks like a sweet deal, but let's look at the best Phasing creature (besides **Taniwha**). **Breezekeeper** is a 4/4 flier for 4. So let's think about that. How does it compare to its non-phasing brother the **Air Elemental**? For 1 less Blue mana you have to wait an additional turn to attack or block with it the first time, you may only attack or block every other turn. If you want to put it in card advantage terms you are getting half a card and spending 1. Phasing creatures will tempt you, but please, let them go.

Tip number 3: Fill in that curve.

This set is bogged down with 3 and 4 drops. If you aren't careful and just take the "best card" every time you will wind up with a glut in those 2 spots in your curve, and a dearth in the rest. Sometimes if you get access to a quality card that may be a bit weaker than the 4-drop in the pack, don't be afraid to fill in the curve. None of the common creatures are really that exciting except for the Green and Black Guildmages and they aren't in the 3- or 4-drop spots anyway.

Tip number 4: Play first.

Often the games come down to tempo. You want to get your Flanking knights out first and get them attacking. Even in sealed deck you will often want to play first.

Tip number 5: Draft *Mirage*.

We have been given an opportunity here to do something I have wanted to do for years. Old sets are what got me to start playing **Magic**, and I miss them terribly. Even if *Mirage* isn't your favorite set, you should really endeavor to support it since the release of other old sets is likely contingent on the success of *Mirage*.



Most important of all is, of course, to have fun. I may have been a diehard Pro in my heyday, but I love **Magic** because I love the game. If you don't love the game, then any other reason you play will become stale quickly.

Thanks, Ken! I also dug around on the 'net to see if I could find some *Mirage*-era limited strategy and found a few things. Keep in mind that limited strategy has come a very long way since 1997, but you may find something helpful in these dusty archives!

- [Best M1V1/WL Draft Cards? analysis of Mirage, long, and all that](#) by Lee Hendricks
- [Re: sealed deck strategy...](#) by Ryan Roe
- [Dave Price on X-spells re: Mirage sealed](#)
- [The art of Mirage Sealed Deck](#) (strategy thread) by jasfriese, others
- [MIRAGE ONLY: How to beat the heat?](#) (thread) by The Nightfly, others
- [Sealed Deck Guidelines](#) (thread) by Dante

Prismatic with Shane Stoots

Recently Doug Beyer wrote a fine article on Prismatic, [Prismatic in the Ravnica Era](#). I remember reading with great curiosity, wondering what Doug—who I knew was an absolute Prismatic Fanatic—was going to say about Transmute. A good friend of mine, Shane Stoots (well known in the Vintage strategy community), is also a big fan of MTGO Prismatic and had been constantly telling me how sick Transmute was, how it was enabling super-fast combos in Prismatic.

What did Doug think?

"The transmute mechanic adds thirteen library-searchers to the format. Is the mechanic itself too strong for Prismatic? After some serious study (which means, building a bunch of Prismatic decks and playing them—yeah, life is hard), I'm not sure it's too powerful—and I'm pretty sure it's fun."

Hm. Not exactly *Houston, We Have A Problem*. So I went back to Shane and asked if he could share with us his Prismatic deck and what Transmute does to turbo charge it. He's toned down his fears of Transmute a bit recently, but is still wrecking people with relatively early Storm combo.



Shane Stoots: The plan of attack is to tutor for and play **Future Sight** and a **Heartbeat/Wake** ASAP. If you have a Top in play already you have a built-in draw engine/storm machine immediately. The deck is in many ways the Prismatic version of the Sensei/Sensei Vintage deck created by guys out of Hadley. There are some suboptimal cards included. I would prefer to have 4 each of the **Onslaught** fetch lands, and 4 each of the **Ravnica** duals lands. Also I would love to have 4 **Fact or Fiction**, 4 **Mystical**, and 4 **Enlightened Tutors** in the deck to increase consistency.

I am a huge fan of Transmute in prismatic, particularly in dedicated combo. Being able to fetch the combo piece you need is a huge benefit, particularly in a format bereft of quality tutors. I don't think Transmute should be banned (I once did), but I definitely could see **Mystical** and **Enlightened Tutors** getting the axe.

After a little more playing with the Transmute cards I've discovered that 5 Drop and the 1 Drop transmuters are the best. The one drops fetches Top, and the five-drop fetches you **Future Sight**, **Wake**, and **All Suns' Dawn**.

Here is my current decklist:

Prismatic Storm Combo by Shane Stoots		
250 cards		
12 Forest	2 Loxodon Hierarch	3 Mirari's Wake
13 Island	3 Sunscape Familiar	3 Lightning Helix
8 Mountain	4 Anarchist	4 Putrefy
8 Plains	3 Dimir House Guard	2 Disenchant
10 Swamp	4 Elves of Deep Shadow	4 Ray of Revelation
2 Salt Marsh	4 Eternal Witness	3 Faith's Fetters
4 Krosan Verge	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	4 Fireball
4 Barren Moor	4 Solemn Simulacrum	4 Tribal Flames
4 Flooded Strand		4 Firebolt
4 Forgotten Cave	28 creatures	4 Magma Jet
4 Lonely Sandbar		4 Duress
4 Polluted Delta		3 Ghastly Demise
4 Secluded Steppe		4 Tendrils of Agony
4 Tranquil Thicket		4 Night's Whisper
4 Windswept Heath		3 Brainspoil
4 Mirrodin's Core		2 Shred Memory
		4 Sleight of Hand

93 land	4 Worldly Counsel
	3 Concentrate
	4 Deep Analysis
	3 Future Sight
	4 Long-Term Plans
	3 Mind's Desire
	3 Thirst for Knowledge
	4 Serum Visions
	4 Telling Time
	4 Counsel of the Soratami
	4 Dizzy Spell
	4 Rampant Growth
	4 Harrow
	2 Naturalize
	4 All Suns' Dawn
	4 Farseek
	3 Heartbeat of Spring
	2 Fellwar Stone
	3 Gilded Lotus
	4 Sensei's Divining Top
	129 other spells

Bennie asked me to share my **Magic** background, so... I started playing MTG around Revised, and then took a break until *Stronghold/Exodus* (when I graduated from college). I started out drafting and playing a lot of Standard/Extended until the local store-- Richmond Comix-- started holding monthly Vintage tournaments. I played in most of those, won a few, and then began playing Vintage almost exclusively. Along the way I designed an early artifact aggro deck called The Funker, which was somewhat modeled after the Kai Budde *Tinker/Wildfire* deck of yester year. My biggest claim to fame was piloting Vengeur Masque (designed by Carl Devos) to the finals of the 2003 Vintage Championships at GenCon. As a member of Team Shortbus I had a hand in designing several metagame defining decks such as 7/10 and 5/3. In the last year I have retired for the most part from Vintage competition with the birth of my son Jackson. In my down time I've started playing much more Prismatic on MTGO, focusing mostly on Storm based combo.

Vanguard Poll Results

As a big fan of [Vanguard](#), I was extremely pleased to see the response to last week's polls—obviously there are lots of other fans out there too!

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?		
Akroma, Angel of Wrath	269	16.7%
Frenetic Efreet	147	9.1%
None, they all seem comparable	114	7.1%
Birds of Paradise	85	5.3%
Platinum Angel	66	4.1%
Prodigal Sorcerer	66	4.1%
Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	64	4.0%
Stalking Tiger	58	3.6%
Hell's Caretaker	55	3.4%
Royal Assassin	54	3.4%
Sisters of Stone Death	53	3.3%
Loxodon Hierarch	50	3.1%
Serra Angel	47	2.9%
Sakashima the Impostor	35	2.2%
Flametongue Kavu	35	2.2%
Phage the Untouchable	32	2.0%
Elvish Champion	31	1.9%
Eight-and-a-Half-Tails	30	1.9%
Raksha Golden Cub	27	1.7%
Oni of Wild Places	27	1.7%
Fallen Angel	26	1.6%
Two-Headed Giant of Foriys	26	1.6%
Viridian Zealot	24	1.5%
Goblin Warchief	22	1.4%
Karona, False God	22	1.4%
Higure, the Still Wind	22	1.4%

Erhnam Djinn	21	1.3%
Maro	21	1.3%
Bosh, Iron Golem	18	1.1%
Seshiro the Anointed	18	1.1%
Grinning Demon	16	1.0%
Arcbound Overseer	14	0.9%
Etched Oracle	13	0.8%
Total	1608	100.0%

Which avatar is your favorite for playing in Vanguard?


None, I don't play Vanguard	479	32.0%
Akroma, Angel of Wrath	162	10.8%
Birds of Paradise	89	5.9%
Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	49	3.3%
Prodigal Sorcerer	42	2.8%
Hell's Caretaker	41	2.7%
Frenetic Efreet	37	2.5%
Royal Assassin	35	2.3%
Sisters of Stone Death	35	2.3%
Seshiro the Anointed	34	2.3%
Sakashima the Impostor	34	2.3%
Serra Angel	33	2.2%
Flametongue Kavu	30	2.0%
Loxodon Hierarch	30	2.0%
Oni of Wild Places	29	1.9%
Higure, the Still Wind	27	1.8%
Raksha Golden Cub	26	1.7%
Phage the Untouchable	26	1.7%
Platinum Angel	25	1.7%
Goblin Warchief	24	1.6%
Two-Headed Giant of Foriys	24	1.6%
Eight-and-a-Half-Tails	22	1.5%
Erhnam Djinn	22	1.5%
Karona, False God	19	1.3%
Maro	18	1.2%
Elvish Champion	18	1.2%
Stalking Tiger	17	1.1%
Fallen Angel	17	1.1%
Arcbound Overseer	15	1.0%
Grinning Demon	12	0.8%
Viridian Zealot	12	0.8%
Bosh, Iron Golem	9	0.6%
Etched Oracle	7	0.5%
Total	1499	100.0%

With Hell's Caretaker taken down quite effectively, it seems the venerable Akroma has won the hearts *and* minds of the Vanguard community. There's no arguing that she's not quite the powerhouse, boosting both hand-size and starting life (an eye-popping 7!), and randomly making creatures even better than they already are. Akroma's popularity makes relying on black or red creature removal risky at best in the Vanguard environment, so plan accordingly.

On the power poll, it was interesting to see Frenetic Efreet in second place. The ability is potent but the drawback quite significant, and I think my White Weenie deck did a pretty good job working between those two tensions. Are others also playing White Weenie or are there other, more twisted and sick Frenetic creations out there? I certainly look forward to checking that out.

On the favorites poll, it's nice to see a fairly even distribution of favorite avatars once you get past Akroma and Birds of Paradise (where the Vanguard Spikes hang out, of course!). I feel bad for the avatars at the very bottom of the heap though, so I may have to make a few decks to give them some love over the holidays!

Tips and Tricks

Reid wrote: "I have a question about something I saw online. The other day there was a 2hg game where the life of each player was set to '99' and the starting hand was '10'. Obviously these players know about some way to set up games outside the standard program." 

RachelR replied: "When you start a game, if you click on the options button at the lower left corner of the new game window, and then select "Allow starting handicaps" players can have different life totals and hand sizes. If the option is selected, at the beginning of the game each player can set his/her starting life total. The life total can be anything from 1-99, and the hand size can range from 1-10."

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

I hope everyone has a great holiday season and a happy and safe New Year! 2005 has been good to me, and I've really enjoyed my time here at magicthegathering.com, working closely with some fine folks at Wizards, and especially meeting lots of great players online! I'm certainly looking forward to seeing what **Magic** brings in 2006, see you then!

*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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