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Sunday Night FFA and Checking in with Rainbow Stairwell

Bennie Smith
Into the Aether
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When I first starting playing **Magic** back when Unlimited and *Arabian Nights* booster packs were on the shelves, my group of gamer buds and I played these huge, epic multiplayer games for hours on end. Over the years, my focus has changed more towards dueling in both the casual and competitive rounds, but multiplayer is still something I enjoy. When I got the gig to write Into The Aether, I was really looking forward to seeing how multiplayer **Magic** was going to play out on MTGO.

The Sunday Night FFA did not disappoint. I had a ball and thought I captured the fun well in this column, simply jam packed with good content. We kicked things off with an interview with one of the player organizers, and followed with my tournament report (where I did pretty well) and plenty of screenshots. The article was then rounded off with a deck from Alan Comer and some thoughts on *Saviors of Kamigawa* for Rainbow Stairwell.

Checking Out the Sunday Night FFA

For some time now, Gloinoi and a couple other organizers have been inviting me to come check out the Sunday Night FFA (Free For All) multiplayer tournament that's held each Sunday at 2pm Eastern Time.

Player-run events are one aspect of MTGO that I definitely wanted to provide some coverage on, and the FFA has been run for a while now and appeared to be very well-organized. Last Sunday I finally had the chance to make it, and let me tell you I had a great time. I sent some questions to Gloinoi to give us some more info on the FFA.

MTGO handle: Gloinoi
Clan: Full Frontal Noobity II (captain)
Real Name: Tom Rouse
Age: 16

Location: small town in England near Birmingham.

How long have you played Magic? Beginning of 2003 and so fairly certain it was just before the legions pre-release, as my friends who introduced me to the game attended it but beyond that no definite date.

How long have you played MTGO? Since the release of *8th Edition*, got started with the *8th Edition* starter set, but have only actively played since October 2004, around when the FFA tournament started.

What percentage would you say you were, casual/competitive? Started as a very casual player and I still am at heart, with an unhealthy love for green fatties. Since joining the clan however I have started playing more competitively mostly through drafts and the *Saviors* Release League (biggest competitive achievement being the 26th place I achieved there). Recently we've branched out into competitive standard, with 3 or 4 clan members working on decks for the format. I'm currently working on Mono Black but building it slowly on a budget so not ready for tournaments yet. Percentage wise probably 60/40 in favor of casual currently, but I guess the tournament counts as competitive so make that 50/50.

What's your favorite MTGO format(s)? Toss up between sealed, prismatic and any of the multi player formats with the exception of emperor. Sarsem has got me hooked on any format where I can play a 5 color deck so I also like to dabble in Rainbow Stairwell. Which probably means my favorite format is pauper prismatic, which for those who don't know is prismatic but using only commons, which is a challenge but produces very rewarding matches...

How did the Sunday Night FFA Tournaments start? The FFA was originally started by Hygglo, but after the birth of his second child he handed the reins over to CutToTheChase. Just like all things it started small and every week Cut added the attendees to his buddy list and gave them a friendly reminder PM each week to ensure we had an attendance. The decks were good and in general pretty competitive although much more casual then they are today. It got busier and Cut got me to start making the tables and helping out by answering questions (Cut's typing is appalling), the tournament started to grow when Cut brought in a sponsor., MTGOtraders was well known to us and has over the weeks offered us everything from foil IPA Cards to *Odyssey* block boosters and even Vanguard Avatars for special weeks. With the introduction of the prize people started taking it more seriously, combo's became more focused and the number of players attending shot up There is a limit of 36 players per week and we average between 24 and 30 on most weeks. So considering the small start we're ecstatic with how it's developed.

Describe what it is, how it's run, and how to participate for folks who might not have heard of it before (including how to find out about the format, etc): The event is aimed at bringing a more competitive side to the multi player games we all enjoy, specifically the FFA format. It's run every Sunday at 6.45 PM GMT and is easy to participate in. Simply type */join chaos* in any window and then when registration is announced type aye to participate. I then assign people a table based off the numbers we have. The event is run in 2 rounds with a first elimination round, where the winner of each table passes through to the final. Each table is made according to the rules of the tournament: Buddy only to ensure only the registered people join, attack any and timed to 150 minutes. For more information look for the weekly post by CutToTheChase on the *Magic Online* section of the Wizards message boards, where the format prize and details are announced, or on <http://www.fullfrontalnoobity.com/ffa.html>

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by Cory Herndon

Are Vanguard avatars allowed or only when specified? Normally the format is regular online extended so no vanguard allowed, but every 4 weeks we change to a special format as voted for by the players. The last tournament was a good example where we used the Singleton format.

I understand you give out a prize and post the winning decklist? Thanks to our very kind sponsors at MTGOtraders we are able to give a prize to the winner of the weekly event, with the only stipulation being that they send us their decklist for publication. Previously a report was written, but it did not serve any real purpose and so we moved on to the current decklist system. The prize varies between the 5 and 10 ticket range and is almost always an IPA rare. Each winning decklist is posted on our clan website.

Any tips you can pass along to anybody new to FFA who wants to give it a shot? Have a look at the previous winning deck lists available on the clan site. As you will see Mono Black is usually the deck to beat, so keep that in mind when choosing a deck. We see a full spectrum of decks from casual 3-4 card combos to finely tuned dragon storm Kokusho decks. However due to the dual rounds system, any one trick ponies will quickly find themselves hated on in the final, so resiliency and a backup plan is key if you intend to win. Most importantly have fun, it's a competitive event but everyone has fun and very rarely do we have any problems or disputes. For an idea of the environment check out the lists but also the old reports particularly from 12 or 13 onwards where the competition starts to heat up.


If you're new to the multi player environment in general then build a casual deck, jump into some pickup games and see what works and doesn't work in the format. Then build your most competitive FFA deck and come join us.

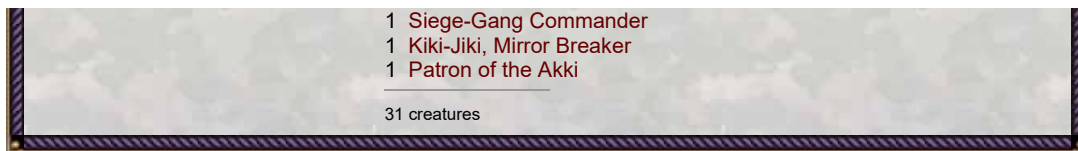
What do you think of the *Mirage* announcement for MTGO? It's awesome! Having just discovered **Magic** recently, any chance to experience the older cards has to be a plus and I'm sure it will allow the development of interesting new FFA decks!

Prepping for the FFA

Once I confirmed that I'd have the time available to play in the FFA, the next step was to figure out what to play. My #1 consideration was that the event was timed. As regular readers will remember, the clock and me aren't the best of friends yet, and it's doubly so in multiplayer, where I tend to want to be deliberate and think things through. With 3 or more other players around the board, hastiness can get you killed quickly. Now, in paper **Magic** multi, I tend to like to play a slow game of controlling the board through permanents. This tends to involve a lot of long turns where I advance my board position without directly confronting other players very often. For a timed FFA though, I thought this might be a bad approach for someone as deliberate as me. Spending a lot of time without actually impacting other players directly seemed like a recipe for timing out. So I decided to try something different and play something more aggressive, with a basic game plan of unleashing my aggressive plan on whomever was looking like he or she was trying to gain the upper hand on the board (or going for the win). I thought that approach might work instead of just randomly lashing out at people and having everyone team up and take down the aggro player. I didn't expect to win the FFA, but I was also hoping to not get eliminated first. Like so many **Magic Online** fans, mostly I was looking forward to having a lot of fun and seeing what happened in the process.

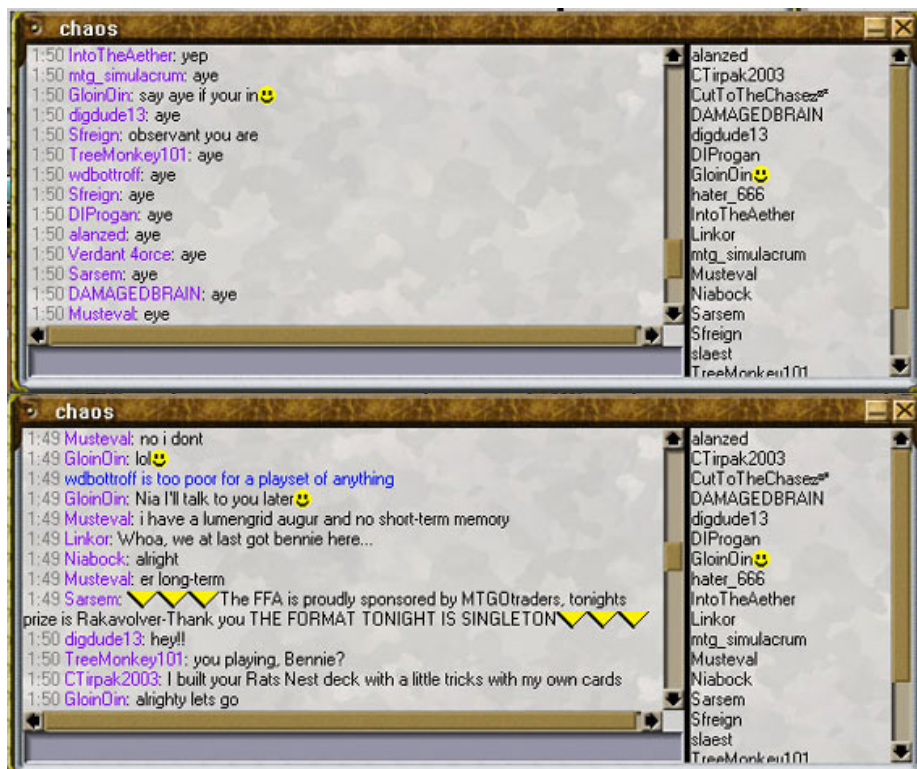
My next question was: what variety of aggro deck should I play? Impacting the decision was the fact that, for this week's FFA, the format was Singleton in addition to being Online Extended. I decided on Goblins. Even in Singleton, I figured goblins had enough synergy, power, and resilience to accomplish my goals. This is what I cooked up:

Singleton ITA Goblins 		
60 cards		
1 Goblin Burrows	1 Mogg Sentry	1 Umezawa's Jitte
1 Blinkmoth Nexus	1 Raging Goblin	1 Sword of Fire and Ice
1 Deserted Temple	1 Goblin Grappler	1 Sword of Light and Shadow
1 Keldon Necropolis	1 Goblin Sledger	1 Loxodon Warhammer
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	1 Goblin Taskmaster	1 Coat of Arms
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	1 Skirk Prospector	
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	1 Warbreak Trumpeter	5 other spells
17 Mountain	1 Goblin Lookout	
24 land	1 Goblin Piledriver	
	1 Skirk Drill Sergeant	
	1 Sparksmith	
	1 Goblin Archaeologist	
	1 Goblin Raider	
	1 Ishi-Ishi, Akki Crackshot	
	1 Flamewave Invoker	
	1 Gempalm Incinerator	
	1 Goblin Matron	
	1 Goblin Sharpshooter	
	1 Akki Drillmaster	
	1 Spikeshot Goblin	
	1 Goblin Warchief	
	1 Goblin King	
	1 Goblin Ringleader	
	1 Reckless One	
	1 Clickslither	
	1 Airdrop Condor	
	1 Goblin Assassin	
	1 Skirk Fire Marshal	



The curve was decent, and there are plenty of muscle cards to let me play from a position of strength, along with several “flavor” cards that could make games fun. As you’ll see, one particular fun, flavorful card ended up being quite muscular in the flow of one game. Sadly, none of the artifacts I included (all of which I thought had the potential to be amazing) showed up!

Sunday rolls around, I jump online and type `/join chaos` to see how this thing works. The room is abuzz with chatter and excitement, and I’m impressed at how GloinOin and the others keep things on track.



We end up having 24 players. The organizers break it up to six tables of 4 players each and I end up in table #4. Linkor is playing a monoblue deck that seems to have a strong *Kamigawa* flare, but also includes some power blue cards from other sets. CTirpak2003 is playing monoblack with lots of artifacts (including apparently all the 2 mana lifegain artifacts like *Angel's Feather* and *Dragon's Claw*). Musteval is playing an anti-black monowhite deck, which is definitely considered a “metagame” deck for the FFA since monoblack apparently does consistently well. Musteval and CTirpak2003 naturally develop quickly into adversaries!

Even though I start out a little slow for Goblins, my turn 2 *Ishi-Ishi*, *Akki Crackshot* makes Linkor rather unhappy, since he’s got some blue spirits to play. My *Sparksmith* looks pretty good, but I sensed that CTirpak2003’s *Festering Goblin* might want to take him down prematurely, so I played *Akki Drillmaster* first, and then dropped the *Sparksmith* with the option of gaining haste instantly if I needed to. I end up using the *Sparksmith* to kill off Linkor’s early blocking *Minamo Scrollkeeper* so I can get a few smacks in. Meanwhile, Musteval has played a *Stern Judge* to carve out swaths of CT’s life total. Linkor points out that FFA is not “attack left”, but unfortunately for him I don’t see any point in getting between Musteval and CT’s antagonism (despite CT threatening to kill me if I don’t *Sparksmith* the Judge). If they can mortally wound each other, then all’s the better for me, right?

Things get very interesting when I draw *Goblin Assassin*. I already have Kiki-Jiki in play, and I think about how crazy copying the Assassin could be. Since everyone else is playing few creatures, I could see coin flips clearing away everyone else’s creatures, leaving me with a dominating board position.



It works like a charm, though Linkor's Quicksilver Elemental survives and I have to kill it with Sparksmith to prevent him from copying Kiki-Jiki's ability. I lose a couple Goblins, but everyone else loses all their creatures and is forced to rebuild. Linkor plays a couple more creatures, including a Thieving Magpie. CT comes back quickly with a Gravedigger, retrieving his Festering Goblin (Goblin!) and replays it. I go ahead and copy the Assassin and start another round of coin flips, leaving Linkor with just his Magpie and sadly CT makes all his flips!

Linkor decides to go nuts. He equips Viridian Longbow on his Magpie. Then he plays Freed from the Real and has one blue mana untapped. As it stands he can draw two cards from pinging with the Magpie. If he untaps he'll be able to draw a ton more cards. During my turn, I can copy Assassin or play a Goblin or flip the Warbreak Trumpeter and likely force him to sacrifice the Magpie with only the two activations available, but to be honest I felt a little bad about leaning in against him from the beginning. I decide to let him have his fun and see what he does with it.



He starts off pinging Musteval and drawing cards, which is fine with me. I click on OK a few times, then notice in the log that he's pinged Kiki-Jiki. My Mirror Breaker!! I guess that serves me right for giving him the opportunity. I flip over the Trumpeter and let the Assassin go nuts, with the Magpie getting sacrificed. By the way, for those who haven't seen how "coin flip" cards resolve, here's a screenshot. The coins actually all flip in the air simultaneously, it looks pretty cool.



DAMAGEDBRAIN is playing... Mind's Desire. Ooooh boy. Some pre-game chatter warns me of this, but I was a bit concerned about being manipulated to attack someone needlessly. If I started into 'BRAIN and he was just playing a slow five-color deck and I killed him, I'd feel like a goon. I decide that my board's natural enemies are the monoblack decks and mostly focus on them. This turns out to be a mistake since digdude13 had a **Mind Sludge** he could have cast one turn on 'BRAIN but instead cast **Beacon of Unrest** to get back his Kagemaro to protect against an attack from me. That turn 'BRAIN went off, having drawn **Mind's Desire** and just needing to cast a few mana ramping spells to up his storm count and go off. Yes, folks—even in singleton, Desire is still very very dangerous. Turn 7 it's over. 'BRAIN ends up at 95 life.



If you're curious, they have a great archive of all the past winning decklists at the hilariously named www.fullfrontalnoobity.com (just click on the "Weekly FFA" graphic). Here's the cool decklist that 'BRAIN used to win the event.

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
10 Forest	1 Lay of the Land	1 Sensei's Divining Top
6 Island	1 Rampant Growth	1 Boomerang
1 Plains	1 Early Harvest	1 Dark Banishing
1 Swamp	1 Fact or Fiction	1 Mana Leak
1 Flooded Strand	1 Fertile Ground	1 Reclaim
1 Polluted Delta	1 Harrow	1 Reprisal
1 Windswept Heath	1 Merchant Scroll	1 Moment's Peace
	1 Opportunity	1 AETHER Burst
21 land	1 Restock	1 Funeral Pyre

1 Sunscape Familiar	1 Revive	1 Krosan Reclamation
1 Nightscape Familiar	1 Sleight of Hand	1 Ray of Revelation
1 Diligent Farmhand	1 Vernal Bloom	1 Chain of Vapor
1 Krosan Tusker	1 Concentrate	1 Brain Freeze
1 Eternal Witness	1 Deep Analysis	1 Hunting Pack
1 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Far Wanderings	1 Echoing Truth
6 creatures	1 Nostalgic Dreams	15 sideboard cards
	1 Cunning Wish	
	1 Mirari's Wake	
	1 Explosive Vegetation	
	1 Future Sight	
	1 Trade Secrets	
	1 Mind's Desire	
	1 Tendrils of Agony	
	1 Journey of Discovery	
	1 All Suns' Dawn	
	1 Rude Awakening	
	1 Serum Visions	
	1 Wayfarer's Bauble	
	1 Ghostly Prison	
	1 Gifts Ungiven	
	1 Heartbeat of Spring	
	1 Kodama's Reach	
	1 Peer Through Depths	
33 other spells		

Behind the Curtain: Decks that Wizards Plays – Alan Comer

Alan Comer contacted us and wanted to share one of his recent deck concoctions. I'm hoping that this might inspire other Wizards employees to share their decks on Into The Aether periodically (hint hint)! Let us know if you'd like to see more of this sort of thing.

Take it away Alan!

This deck is pre-*Saviors*, and a lot of fun to play, which is good, because you wouldn't want to take this to a serious tourney or anything like that. I started with 4 *Sakura-Tribe Elder* & 4 *Wayfarer's Baubles*. When I finally added the 1 *Rampant Growth*, it was amazing how much better that felt.


Although I built it as a Cowardice deck, it is really a "Find answers" deck. I usually only go get the cowardice if I am not under a lot of pressure, or it happens to answer the current problems I have. However, once you have *Cowardice*, there are some really fun things you can do, like mind twist every turn with the *Myojin of Night's Reach*.

The deck is really weak against Tooth and Nail. If *Sundering Titan* hits the board, it is all over. I have never been able to solve this problem.

The sideboard is pretty weak, and I haven't spent much time on it. Currently, *Auriok Champion*, which looks really bad in the sideboard, is actually quite amazing. The key here is that nobody expects it, so the red players were not killing my plains, which allowed me to get one on the board. Since that plan requires people not knowing what is going on ahead of time, it seems weak now that I'm sharing the deck with the world! Another funny one is *Boil*, with no mountains to power it. Especially since against blue I tend to remove the Gifts. I tried *Nezumi Shortfang*, but wasn't that pleased with him either.



At Worlds '01, having a blast as always.]

Comer Cowardice 		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
9 Forest	1 Rampant Growth	4 Boil
2 Island	1 Cowardice	1 Sacred Ground
3 Plains	1 Icy Manipulator	1 Wrath of God
2 Swamp	3 Wrath of God	1 Aven Cloudchaser
4 Mirrodin's Core	1 Zombify	1 Viridian Shaman
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	1 All Suns' Dawn	4 Auriok Champion
	4 Wayfarer's Bauble	3 Cranial Extraction
	1 Cranial Extraction	
21 land	4 Gifts Ungiven	15 sideboard cards
2 Triskelion	17 other spells	
4 Solemn Simulacrum		

2	Viridian Shaman
4	Etched Oracle
4	Eternal Witness
1	Myojin of Cleansing Fire
1	Myojin of Night's Reach
4	Sakura-Tribe Elder
22 creatures	

Thoughts on Rainbow Stairwell

Since this is Rainbow Week, it seemed a good idea to touch base on the [Little Format That Could](#). Since I first covered this player-created format, *Saviors of Kamigawa* has come out and I thought it might be a nice idea to go over new sets in regards to cards that might make a splash in RS (which could also be somewhat applicable to Prismatic and Singleton). The overview would include "the good stuff" but also make note of budget selections. I got some feedback from some fans of the format that I'll share with you, but first let me slip a poll to you all to see if you'd be interested in making this a regular feature for Into The Aether.

When a new set is released on MTGO, would you like to see a quick overview of potential highlights for Rainbow Stairwell?

Yes
 No
 Don't care

I got a lot of great ideas and thoughts from people regarding the format, but Russel Lunt sent me quite a download of ideas I'd like to share with fans of the format. Feel free to share your thoughts on his "review" of *Saviors* in the forums! russel_lunt has been playing **Magic** since *Ice Age* and started playing MTGO in 2003 when he moved to China and was unable to find paper **Magic** players. He's relatively new to RS but has jumped into the format enthusiastically since he started playing it.

Regarding *Saviors* and RS, I feel that the 'cards in hand' cards will have an impact on the format, particularly for newer players. RS is typically a slow format so one often has many cards in hand, so cards using effects generated by this could form a 'new' strategy. With RS being a 5 color format however, the cheaper cards with double dedicated mana costs (e.g. **Descendant of Kiyomaro**) may not make the cut as you'll often have issues casting them. For most established players, the **Descendant** also competes with **Dismantling Blow** in that slot, and non-creatures removal is vital in the format. That being said, **Kagemaro** puts his hand up as a strong contender at 3. I play my deck often and I currently use **Throat-Slitter**, which is okay but probably sub-optimal. Of course, **Kagemaro** is roughly 6ix online, so that's hardly a budget pick, is it? **Thoughts of Ruin** and **Secretkeeper** are also very interesting. Of course, you'll have a dilemma like **Presence of the Wise** vs. **Wrath of God** in many of the slots.



Scroll of Origins is something else that has caught my eye. The most common 2 mana artifacts I see played are **Journeyer's Kite**, **Sun Droplet** and **Jitte**, but again if you have additional ways of getting more cards this artifact can generate huge card advantage over the course of the longer game.

The cheap Channel men are interesting; if only **Arashi** didn't compete with **All Sun's Dawn**! But the fact that he does warrant a closer look indicates the card has merit. There is a significant amount of graveyard recursion in RS, not just **Witness** and the **Dawn**, but also **Genesis** and even **Oversold Cemetery**. Combining creatures like **Ghost-Lit Warder** and **Ghost-Lit Redeemer** into these decks may prove interesting.

The **Onna** cycle is also worth consideration, but they are rather expensive for their effect and thus compete for space with generally more powerful cards (e.g. **Yuki-Onna** vs. **Grab the Reins**).

The cards that flip into enchantments I believe will be generally useless in the format, though perhaps this is being unfair to **Homura**, **Human Ascendant**. He looks pretty good at 6 mana in red, with a powerful effect once flipped. At worst he trades for two of your opponent's cards, which is never a bad thing.

The **Kirin** are interesting, but I think not useful enough since you cannot stack your deck nicely with the other spirits or arcanes of the correct cost, and you can't guarantee drawing the **Kirin** itself since you only play 1, so you'll just be making a weak and unreliable deck.

The 'Stampeding Wildebeests' of the set will not see play due to a lack of like-colored creatures. This is a pity because they are generally very good men. **Oni of Wild Places** might be solid though -

red doesn't really have good top end creatures.

The epics that you can play ([Neverending Torment](#) and [Undying Flames](#)) will also be looked at. With so many ways of keeping the opponent creatureless, either of these spells could result in a quick win, though the Flames will be rather unreliable since the deck contains such an array of casting costs. But the Torment could be a major player.

The Shinen are very nice indeed, with good Channel effects as well. I expect most of these to get played, particularly by newer players.

I am certain people will try to play the Hands, though I personally feel it is unwise due to mana constraints - a creature costing ♠♠ will not hit play on turn 2 with any regularity. [Promise of Bunrei](#) does look interesting though and may find its way into a few decks.

Finally the lands - Miren and Mikokoro both have interesting abilities for the format, but the fact they only tap for colorless mana will count against them more often than not I suspect.

What of [Pithing Needle](#)? I think people are starting to see past the hype generated by this card, but RS is quite a varied format, sporting many cards not commonly seen by the average player and it might just be a useful catch-all for "things I didn't expect". Of course, once more it's not a budget card even though you only need 1. [Wayfarer's Bauble](#), a common inclusion, is not strictly superior to it, I feel. I like [Murmurs from Beyond](#) at 3 in blue. RS needs its card draw spells and this is one of the better ones, even if you'll likely never see the discarded card again due to the Singleton nature of the deck.

Of course there are also [Thirst for Knowledge](#) and [Probe](#) at that casting cost, but for newer players I think this is an excellent card. [Raving Oni-Slave](#) might make a splash here, if beatdown turns out to be good (with [Shinen of Fury's Fire](#)). I think this is a card to watch for the future in the format, as [Magic Online](#) gradually gains access to better, cheap beatdown men. I also like [Sakura-Tribe Scout](#), just not more than [Birds of Paradise](#).

I like [Pain's Reward](#). I really do. I'm trying to find ways to abuse it in every format I play (RS, standard, standard and extended vanguard, prismatic). Since my chief deck for RS is lifegain based, I think it fits in quite well (though I'm not happy about taking out my [Rend Flesh](#)). I also wonder a bit about [Choice of Damnations](#), but I get the feeling this is a card that only really helps you "win more".



Thanks for sharing, Russel! Anyone else out there have advice or opinions on the format? Hit the message boards!

Clarification & Correction for 7/7/2005 Into The Aether

Regarding my mistaken conclusion about copied abilities with the Sakashima avatar, the reason my copy of [Tangle Asp](#) didn't destroy the creature I blocked was because I didn't copy [Tangle Asp](#) until after blocks were declared. [Tangle Asp](#)'s "destroy" ability triggers when blocks are declared, so copying the creature after that point meant that I wouldn't get the benefit. Clearly, I should have copied the Asp first, and then declared it as a blocker.

Also, I indicated that Jamie Wakefield had been to two Pro Tours. He's actually been to five PTs: New York '96 (21st place), Dallas '96, Los Angeles '98, New York '99, and Chicago '99.

*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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