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Trying Out Vanguard

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Into the Aether
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When I first took over Into The Aether, I was a bit overwhelmed by the possibilities. The *Magic Online* community is vast, with lots of different formats to explore. I was intrigued by Vanguard, since I had played in several *Magic* leagues years back when Vanguard was released for Arena League for paper *Magic*, so one of the things I decided to do was explore the various Avatars and design decks around each of their Vanguard abilities.

I had an absolute ball playing a wide variety of creative Vanguard decks and sharing the experience with the readers, and have made Vanguard deckbuilding a regular feature for Release Event coverage to highlight the new prize and participation Avatars. I know not everyone is interested in Vanguard, but I feel it's truly one of the most fun and distinguishing features of playing MTGO.

Vanguard: Game on!

I have to admit after spending several weeks speculating on building decks around each of the various Vanguard avatars, I was just as eager as you likely were to jump in and actually play some Vanguard *Magic*! So over the course of a few days I popped onto *Magic Online* and queued up various decks that I'd proposed here to see just how my theoretical creations performed in the harsh light of virtual reality.

As I strolled through the various decklists, I decided my inaugural run would be Goodstuff Green backed by the power of Akroma! Good green creatures with random Akroma abilities tacked on sounded like fun.

I had a brief moment of panic when I couldn't seem to get my deck legal for Vanguard. I'd click on the Statistics button and the Format tab, and find a big NO staring at me. Were Wizards' contract writers forbidden from playing Vanguard? Then I actually read the *Why Not?* part of the Format tab and noted it said "Less than 61 cards, Deck must have exactly one Vanguard card." Aha! I see that sometimes it pays to read instructions.

Akroma's Green Critters of Wrath

Avatar - Akroma, Angel of Wrath
60 cards

22 Forest	4 Birds of Paradise	2 Sword of Fire and Ice
22 land	3 Solemn Simulacrum	4 Beacon of Creation
	4 Troll Ascetic	3 Sensei's Divining Top
	3 Viridian Zealot	4 Umezawa's Jitte
	4 Eternal Witness	
	3 Kodama of the North Tree	13 other spells
	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	
	25 creatures	



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NOVELS

Dissension
Ravnica Cycle, Book III
by Cory Herndon

I set up a game and waited for an opponent to show, and when he did I noticed his avatar window had four avatars in it. *What the heck?* I wondered. "Do you have four Vanguard avatars in your deck?" I asked. "Actually, I think I have eight," he replied.

EIGHT VANGUARD AVATARS?! I wasn't even sure how to respond to that. For one thing I wasn't even mentally prepared for such a possibility; from the beginning of my being familiar with Vanguard—on back to the real-life version—it was always just one Vanguard ability per deck per match. For another, packing eight Avatars I was fairly sure he had some ridiculous array of abilities that would destroy a Vanguard singleton like me.

"Sorry," I said. "No thanks, looking for single avatar games," and conceded the game.

My first real opponent was TheOriginalGasFaceEtc (with quite the original moniker) playing monoblack. I get off to a quick start with turn 1 Birds, turn 2 *Sword of Fire and Ice*, and turn 3 equip and swing.

It's important to note that Vanguard can be played in several different formats. If you select "Open" as your Vanguard format then you're playing under the Open Format rules, which is basically no rules, which means you can have as many avatars as you want. For the other Vanguard formats (Extended, Standard, and *Kamigawa* Block Constructed) you can only use one Vanguard avatar, plus a deck composed of cards appropriate to that format.



As The Original G.F.E. soon pointed out, that sort of opener wins Premier Events and will certainly win casual Vanguard games. He was nice about it, but I still felt a little bad. Perhaps this build was a little too competitive for pickup games? Still, it was fun playing **Beacon of Creation** and seeing what array of random abilities the computer granted my insect tokens.

Poking around my deck lists I decided to try out my Fallen Angel avatar deck, which was a *Kamigawa* Block Spirit concoction. Featuring the **Tallowisp** creature enchantment engine (including one **Oni Possession** just for flair) and tons of Spirits, the plan was to go off with a massive **Devouring Greed** that would feed the Avatar ability in a fine spectacle of life-draining glory!

Smells Like Angelic Spirit txt

Avatar - Fallen Angel
60 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Tendo Ice Bridge 10 Plains 10 Swamp <hr/> <p>24 land</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Ashen-Skin Zubera 4 Bile Urchin 4 Kami of False Hope 2 Shirei, Shizo's Caretaker 4 Silent-Chant Zubera 4 Tallowisp 4 Thief of Hope <hr/> <p>26 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Cage of Hands 4 Devouring Greed 1 Indomitable Will 1 Oni Possession <hr/> <p>10 other spells</p>
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Unfortunately, my opponent sakhmet had other plans, brought together by Tim, the Prodigal Library Digging Mule Avatar.



I was off to a slow start by being mildly color screwed, and by the time I got going he'd lit me up several times with a spliced **Glacial Ray**, hitting himself with **Dampen Thoughts** to fuel a lethal **Ire of Kaminari** around turn 6 or so. Ouch!

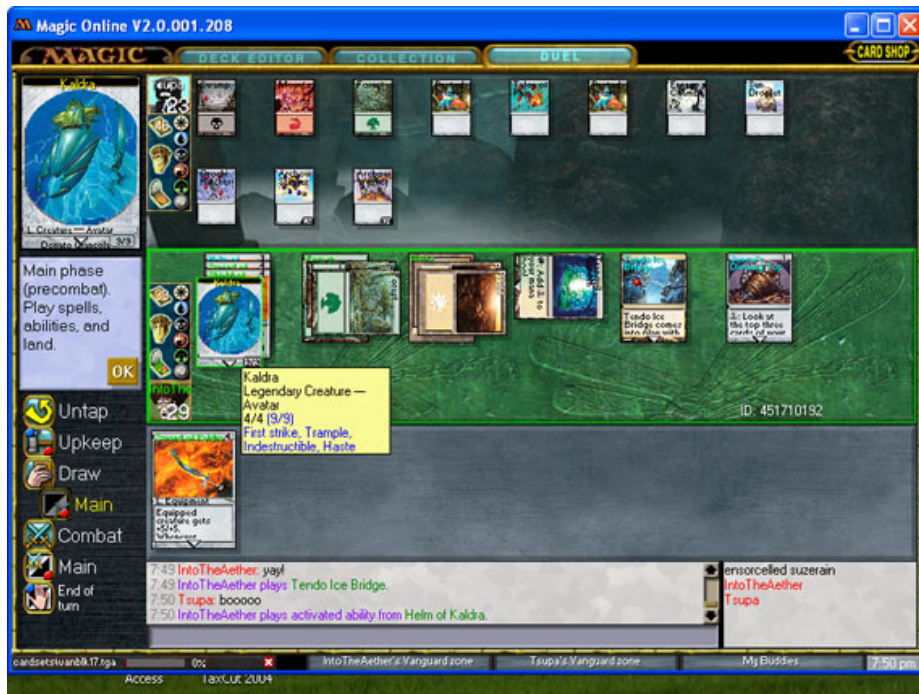
With the spirits being less than inspiring, I decided to try out another deck. The Phage Vanguard deck with the Kaldra pieces called to me. Phage's ability coupled with **Pulse of the Fields** was just ridiculous and should give me plenty of time to assemble the pieces and start whaling on my opponent with the incarnation of Kaldra, a 9/9 first striking, trampling, indestructible Legend with haste that removes creatures from the game whenever they take combat damage from him. One swipe of his legendary Sword and all opponents would go POOF!

Untouchable Kaldra

Avatar - Phage the Untouchable
60 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 Tranquil Garden 3 Tendo Ice Bridge 7 Plains 11 Forest <hr/> <p>23 land</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Birds of Paradise 4 Bottle Gnomes 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder <hr/> <p>12 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Sword of Kaldra 4 Pulse of the Fields 4 Shield of Kaldra 3 Helm of Kaldra 4 Steelshaper's Gift 3 Sensei's Divining Top 4 Terashi's Grasp <hr/> <p>25 other spells</p>
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My opponent Tsupa was playing the Arcbound Overseer Vanguard ability and had the tokens cranking out! One interesting thing was that Tsupa just didn't attack me; I suppose his plan was just to assemble a large enough army to alpha strike me to take me down even if all his creatures died. When I built the deck I added all sorts of life gain to it because I assumed that I'd have to constantly spend life to kill off attacks after attacks, but if you're playing this Vanguard avatar you might not need as much life gain as you think. Which is good, since cutting back on the life gain opens up more slots for much needed utility.



Anyway, things go according to plan; I've got a relatively high life total and eventually assemble my Kaldra trifecta. With an activation the Kaldra token appears and gets equipped. Having never actually seen the Kaldra token card before, I have to say he looks pretty cool! Even though my opponent has out **Sun Droplet**, there's no way he's going to be able to keep up with the indestructible pounding I was about to unleash!

So I won, right?

Um, well... no.



Tsupa's **Orochi Hatchery** eventually accumulated so many charge counters from his Vanguard ability and **Energy Chamber** that he created a horde of snake tokens that could chump block enough damage from Kaldra so that the **Sun Droplet** would easily offset the remaining damage. I couldn't punch through! And though it would take a dreadfully long time, eventually Tsupa would overwhelm me with snakes and Arcbound dudes. I saw the writing on the wall and sadly conceded because in the original decklist I had no **Terashi's Grasps**, as I was running **Nourishes** instead. The swap was easy since it would give me life gain too while making sure I had at least some chance at breaking up a show stopper like the new **Snake Basket**. With the changes made I jumped into another game, this time with the humble **smartest_kid_on_earth**.

My opening hand had all three Kaldra pieces, three lands and a **Bottle Gnomes** for good measure. I didn't even need to search for any of my combo, and that led me briefly to consider maybe diversifying my equipment toolbox to cover some other needs. It was an all too brief consideration however, since after my fourth turn **Shield of Kaldra** play I was dead.



My opponent led with **Cloudpost** and eventually accumulated a few more with the help of **Sylvan Scrying** and **Reap and Sow**. The **Fertile Ground** on one of the 'posts' had me question my initial assessment of **Tooth and Nail**, and when he dropped a **Dawn's Reflection** on the 'post' I assumed I'd be taking some sort of fire to the head. And me with a lower starting life total!

Smartest K.O.E. did indeed have direct damage in mind, but the way he got there was quite unique. Once that single land produced more mana than it takes to cast **Petals of Insight** Spliced with **Psychic Puppetry**, he'd keep getting the **Petals** back and untap the overly enchanted **Cloudpost**, netting at least one mana each time. **Petals** can be cast indefinitely, so he could just keep going, accumulate some large volume of mana before finally letting the **Petals** find the **Blaze** or other X burn spell to kill with. Quite clever! If I'm going to get smoked by a combo deck it's nice to die to one I hadn't seen before.

Okay, so next I decided to try out the one deck I was leery about running, the Platinum Angel Vanguard deck featuring **Zur's Weirding** for the lock. See, ever since **Ice Age**, I've tried to build **Zur's Weirding** decks periodically and all experiments have failed miserably. It's a card that seems so potent and yet it never seems to work right. And Wizards keeps tormenting me by reprinting it - it's treacherous siren's call relentlessly echoing up from the bottom of the alphabet. But if ever there were a format where **Zur's Weirding** might shine, it would have to be Vanguard, right?

Zur Can't Lose		
Avatar - Platinum Angel		
60 cards		
3 Glimmervoid	4 Leonin Elder	1 Chromatic Sphere
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Myr Retriever	4 Spirit Link
4 Cloudcrest Lake	4 Steel Wall	3 Zur's Weirding
6 Island	3 Auriok Salvagers	1 Pyrite Spellbomb
6 Plains	4 Myr Servitor	2 Sunbeam Spellbomb
23 land	19 creatures	1 Aether Spellbomb
		3 Artificer's Intuition
		3 Sensei's Divining Top
		18 other spells

The deck actually starts off pretty well until I do my best to screw it up by letting my third **Myr Servitor** die with two more in the graveyard, and worse yet, since that was my last artifact in play my two **Glimmervoids** implode too. My opponent MinisterAkhna is kind enough to get mana flooded however and gives me a chance to recover. Sorry dude.



With lands, artifacts, creatures and enchantments in play, I can't lose but I do need to go about figuring out how to win. Losing the **Glimmervoids** means I have to run **Chromatic Spheres** to fire off **Pyrite Spellbomb**, recurring both with **Auriok Salvagers**. With Salvagers in place and **Sunbeam Spellbomb** in the graveyard, it's safe to slap down **Zur's Weirding** to prevent my opponent from drawing any mass creature kill while I go about killing him. Slowly. Oh, ever so slowly. No, slower than that. A friend pops by briefly and when I chat with him later, I apologize for the display. "Like watching paint dry?" I ask and he doesn't disagree.

About this time I'm starting to have an itch for playing in one of the Vanguard premier events. I poke around the tournament results to see if there are any "top tier" Vanguard decks or whether everybody is driving original recipes. At the top of the heap looks to be Red Deck Wins running **Elvish Champion Vanguard** for even more speed (as if **Chrome Mox**, **Slith Firewalker** wasn't enough on turn 1). I start to mentally go through the decks I have built... would any of them do particularly well against this aggressive monster?

One of my decks catches my attention. **Ink-Eyes** is risky; with a starting hand size of -1 and a starting life of -7, it can't afford a misstep or RDW will, well... do what it does so well. Win. However, the initial free **Coercion** effect, followed up with **Cabal Therapy** can potentially devastate an opponent before he even gets going. Winning the die roll would help too.

The Eyes Have It

Avatar - Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
75 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Tendo Ice Bridge 3 Mirrodin's Core 3 Starlit Sanctum 6 Swamp 9 Plains <hr/> <p>24 land</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Rotlung Reanimator 4 Weathered Wayfarer 4 Dark Supplicant 4 Daru Spiritualist 1 Scion of Darkness 4 Auriok Champion 4 Eight-and-a-Half-Tails 4 Crimson Acolyte 1 Devoted Caretaker 4 Headhunter 2 Nova Cleric 2 True Believer <hr/> <p>37 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Cabal Therapy 4 Lightning Greaves 4 AEther Vial 2 Disenchant <hr/> <p>14 other spells</p>
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I decide to give it a whirl in the casual room first to try and get a feel for how it plays. Unfortunately for me, my opponent **Numair_Salamin** is playing a wacky combo deck that kills me with **Worldgorger Dragon** on turn 5.



My deck doesn't even run a **Terror**. How embarrassing. So while the Dragon jumps in and out of Wormfang space I get nailed by **Granite Shard** each time. Props to Numair_Salamin, I never saw it coming! I thought **Worldgorger Dragons** only menaced Type 1 airspace.

Alright, enough fooling around! I decide to just jump into the Premier tournament and give it a whirl. Wife and kids are at the in-laws for Mother's Day. I'm at home slaving away for you playing **Magic Online** so I can write about it. Yes, it's a rough gig but somebody's got to do it!

Round 1 – Alexeus with Akroma's Goblins

Starting life of 13, mize well get paired up with Goblins, right? I use my **Coercion** ability to strip out his Piledriver, but he rips another one so, even though I drew fairly well, I just get run over in game 1. Game 2 starts out looking pretty good!



I nail his **Goblin Matron** with **Coercion**, follow up with a **Therapy for Goblin Piledrivers**. **Crimson Acolyte** in the grip. I can't lose, right? Queue the "he's doomed" theme from your favorite slasher movie. My good opener is soon negated by his ripping **Siege-Gang Commander** off the top when he has the mana to play it, bringing a horde of Akroma-enhanced goblins with him, two of which gained flying just to add insult to injury! Staring down a SGC is no fun at 10 life.



Round 2 – Duelist_Devourer with G/W Serra Vanguard

Even the most aggressive of starts finds it hard to punch through Serra's ability. D_D is playing **Well of Lost Dreams** and that big green creature that gains +1/+1 tokens when life is gained. We end up going 1-1 somehow and go on to game three, where the clock is not my friend. As it begins to look more and more hopeless about whether I'm going to have the time to kill my opponent (slowly, ever so slowly) I start to worry about my deck choice. Perhaps I have too much going on in this deck for effective clock management at my current MTGO skill level? Fighting the clock has never been that big of an issue in real life, but it's proven to be a killer in 8-man drafts I've played online and now it raises its wicked, punctual head here as I lose to time (not to say my opponent wasn't going to win anyway, but the buzzer didn't give us the chance to find out).



Round 3 – Chevalier69b with Seshiro Beasts

This is the first time I felt that my deck really came together like I envisioned it would. I **Coercion** his **Wirewood Savage**, play a turn 1 **Aether Vial**. Turn 2 **Lightning Greaves**; turn 3 pay 3 life to reanimate the Savage. Interestingly, since the Savage is a Beast while in my opponent's graveyard, his draw card ability triggers when he comes into play, even though the elf loses his Beastliness on my side of the table. Draws from the Savage feed into my **Supplicant/Scion of Darkness** combo and that wins the game in short order.

Game 2 doesn't go quite as well and we get into a bit of a stalemate. My opponent's **Totem Speakers** have netted him a comfortable life total when I draw into the last piece of my "infinite life" cleric combo. Unfortunately, I have to manually work through the loop, so even with both of us Auto Yielding to the Greaves and the Spiritualist effects, it takes a really long time and I eventually stop at sixty-some life, not at all out of range from my opponent's deck (which is also running **Aether Charge**, the card that slammed me in my last multiplayer game). I should be a

1,000,000,000 life, completely out of reach but again, time is not on my side as I ponder how to bust through the stalemate.



Sadly, I eventually conclude I have to concede and hope to get a good disruption hand that feeds into the Scion combo for a quick win. That's tough to bank on with 6 starting cards off the play. I do get the disruption, hitting his early play with the **Coercion** effect, and then playing **Cabal Therapy** on turn 1, trying to nail the **Aether Charges** in his hand. One problem though.

Apparently there's a glitch in the system so that **Aether Charge** isn't in the list of cards you can pick from. Chevalier69b tells me there's a glitch that causes that but my mind is blown by the revelation. A card as powerful and well played as **Cabal Therapy**, a card that's been around since *Torment*, has a glitch?! As the clock ticks away to 2 seconds I'm completely discouraged, both by my poor time-management skills and the glitch in the system.



I end up dropping from the tournament, and while I'm disappointed in both the B/W cleric "not nearly so infinite" life combo part of the deck, and with the Therapy glitch, I'm not at all disappointed with Ink-Eyes. It takes some guts to play with him, but I think that initial **Coercion** effect, coupled with Therapy and maybe **Ostracize** and/or **Meddling Mage** could be quite competitive with the right deck behind it. Rest assured you haven't seen the last of IntoTheAether and his Ink-Eyes Vanguard decks!

As an important follow-up note, I later find out that **Aether Charge** most certainly *is* on the list of cards that can be selected by spells like **Cabal Therapy**. My mistake was looking under "A" alphabetically. Because **Aether Charge**

actually starts with the "Æ" ligature character, it (and the other special character card names) appears at the *bottom* of the list! My bad for just assuming my opponent was right when claiming the problem was a bug!

Behind the Curtain: Notes from MTGO's Developers

Paul Sottosanti, part of the team that developed Vanguard for MTGO, has been keeping an eye on how Vanguard has been playing out after its release. He's noted the power of the Elvish Champion Vanguard ability to fuel combo decks and wanted me to pass along to you some deck ideas for how to combat the Elvish menace.

Hey Bennie,

I have some decks that I've been working on that seem good in the Elvish Champion heavy metagame; if you want to include them in your column as inspiration to those who want to win without playing Champion, feel free. :) These exact decks might be a bit expensive to build, but the main idea is that there are two ways to attack the Champion--kill the token as quickly as possible with **Firebolt** or **Fire/Ice**, or disrupt their combo with hand destruction like **Cabal Therapy** or **Cranial Extraction**. If you can slow them down even a little bit, your avatar will start doing great things for you, while theirs is essentially already spent. **Ivory Mask** is also wonderful in a metagame where many of the combos win through **Goblin Charbelcher**, **Brain Freeze**, or **Blasting Station**.

- Paul

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
2 Caves of Koilos	4 Cabal Therapy	1 Circle of Protection: Red
4 Forest	4 Death Grasp	1 Sacred Ground
3 Mirrodin's Core	3 Gerrard's Verdict	4 Cranial Extraction
5 Plains	1 Honden of Cleansing Fire	3 Ivory Mask
2 Swamp	1 Honden of Night's Reach	4 Naturalize
4 Windswept Heath	1 Ivory Mask	2 Wrath of God
3 Llanowar Wastes	3 Kodama's Reach	
23 land	1 Overgrown Estate	15 sideboard cards
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	4 Pernicious Deed	
4 creatures	4 Renewed Faith	
	1 Sacred Ground	
	4 Sterling Grove	
	2 Wrath of God	
	33 other spells	

A free **Distress** at the beginning of the game will either slow down your opponent or take away his win condition. You can then use **Cabal Therapy** and **Gerrard's Verdict** to press your advantage while searching out whatever silver bullet will win you the game. Against creature decks, recur cards from their graveyard to make favorable trades while keeping your life total high with **Death Grasp** and **Renewed Faith**. If they start to overwhelm you, **Wrath** will often reset the board and let you back into the game.

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
2 Barbarian Ring	4 Absorb	4 Cabal Therapy
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Counterspell	3 Cranial Extraction
4 Darksteel Citadel	3 Decree of Justice	4 Flametongue Kavu
1 Gods' Eye, Gate to the Reikai	4 Duress	3 Oxidize
1 Keldon Necropolis	4 Fact or Fiction	1 Wrath of God
4 Nantuko Monastery	3 Fire/Ice	
4 Stalking Stones	4 Firebolt	15 sideboard cards
4 Temple of the False God	3 Vindicate	
24 land	3 Wrath of God	
4 Eternal Witness	32 other spells	
4 creatures		

Combo decks have a hard time fighting through your countermagic, while control decks will have problems handling your twelve manlands. The great thing about this deck is it's so flexible; if you find the countermagic to be too slow, you can replace the **Absorbs** with **Mana Leaks** or **Force Spikes**. If you need more discard, you can easily add the **Cabal Therapies** to the maindeck. Also,

your opponents will never know what to expect, so they have no choice but to play into your countermagic.

Platinum Angel		txt
Avatar - Platinum Angel		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Darksteel Citadel	1 Aura Shards	4 Ivory Mask
6 Forest	4 Darksteel Ingot	3 Naturalize
5 Plains	3 Genju of the Cedars	4 Oxidize
4 Tree of Tales	3 Genju of the Fields	4 Sacred Ground
4 Windswept Heath	4 Living Terrain	
23 land	3 Renewed Faith	15 sideboard cards
4 Birds of Paradise	4 Sterling Grove	
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	22 other spells	
3 Sylvan Safekeeper		
4 Troll Ascetic		
15 creatures		

Platinum Angel's "can't lose" ability can come online as early as turn two and almost always is online by turn four at the latest. I could see adding a better win condition to the deck, but I haven't found anything I'm happy with yet, so for now you'll mostly have to chip away with Genjus and possibly just deck them. *Pristine Angel*, or something equally unkillable, seems like a possibility.

Oh, and one final thing: rumor has it Wizards may be implementing a new beta selection process that would give a wider range of people access to beta testing. Stay tuned!

Tips & Tricks

Fox Murdoch writes:

Another great tip for MTGO players, which I find quite a lot of players don't know about, is that you can hold **<CTRL>** to maintain priority after a spell. This saves time when you're being burned away by someone's *Master Yamabushi*, so you don't have to click OK in between every activation, and is how cards like *Goblin Cannon* are meant to be used.

It's also great when you have a *Time Stop* in hand, and your opponent has just poured all their mana into putting several things onto the stack all at once.

Also, while Tips & Tricks is still looking for any and all tips and advice, in particular I'm looking for your tips on **time management** for tournament play (as if that wasn't painfully obvious from my Vanguard tournament report). The Auto Yield tip has been great, but in my case (and likely others) it has not been enough and running out of time has still been problematic. I know online game play will tighten up the more I play it, but if there are any other tips and tricks to help please share by dropping me an email!

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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