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# Checking Out the Opens

Bennie Smith  
Into the Aether  
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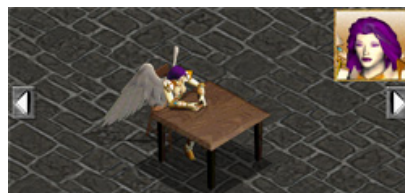
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hello everyone, I hope the holidays were good to you and yours, and that everyone has fully recovered from any New Year's celebratory activity! 2005 was a great year for **Magic** and the signs are there for 2006 to be even better. For **Magic Online**, the much anticipated Version 3.0 is on the way and you can rest assured we will share with you details about that right here in this column as they are made available. The **Magic** Invitational should be hitting sometime soon. Then we get to see the rest of the *Ravnica* guilds in *Guildpact* and *Dissension*, *Cold Snap* hits sometime over the summer, and a new block begins this fall with "Snap." And, with the success of *Mirage's* debut in the aether, speculation on *Visions* joining the mtgo lineup is reaching a fever pitch. Who knows what other goodies Wizards will unveil in next 365-odd days? I'm certainly looking forward to finding out!

I spent some time Christmas break thinking of ways to improve this column. The **Magic Online** community has always been very helpful in making suggestions, and Scott Johns and I will be working on addressing many of those in the coming weeks and months. One thing I thought deserved more attention was coverage of the constructed [Open events](#) that are held several times a month. My vision is doing a snapshot of the players and decks of the Top 8 (best-guessed based on watching game reviews) and any of the winner's thoughts he or she may want to share. I'd also like to invite other Top 8 players to post their decklists and comments in the forums. Got a great performance you'd like to share with the community? Shoot my email a decklist and a paragraph or two on how it went and you could have your name in the bright lights!

## 4x Standard with Vanguard 12-31-05

One tournament I was particularly interested in going over was the Standard [Vanguard](#) tournament. The last one I checked out was dominated by Hell's Caretaker, and with the changes implemented to that avatar since then, I was curious how that would affect the metagame. In [the poll I put up right before the holiday break](#), a sizable percentage felt Akroma, Angel of Wrath was poised to become the deck to beat. It turns out that an Akroma deck *did* win the event, but I wouldn't necessarily call it a dedicated Akroma Vanguard deck. As you'll see from the comments by the winner below, he started with a solid deck and then chose an Avatar to enhance its performance, as opposed to starting with the Avatar and building a deck around it.



The big winner in the new metagame appears to be... the default avatars in general, and "Tim" (AKA Prodigal Sorcerer) in particular! Check it out:

- 1st place: FelixLeong2 (Akroma, Angel of Wrath) BUG Aggro Control
- 2nd place: Kangoo (Prodigal Sorcerer) 4-Color Greater Good
- 4th place: Oelgart (Erhnam Djinn) Aggro Scion Elves
- 4th place: Slider37 (Prodigal Sorcerer) U/B Control
- 8th place: cartman st (Higure, the Still Wind) White Weenie w/Red
- 8th place: Melvy.JP (Serra Angel) U/B/W Control (Glimpse, [Howling Mine](#))
- 8th place: mtg simulacrum (Prodigal Sorcerer) G/W/B Greater Good
- 8th place: nandas (Elvish Champion) G/w [Glare of Subdual](#)

What I find encouraging here is that R&D appears to have successfully leveled the power level to the point where the default avatars are competitive, no small accomplishment given how completely wild this format can be. That's good news to players who may not have had a chance to play in many release events and might not have a huge selection of Vanguard avatars to choose from. Prodigal Sorcerer is particularly well suited for improving consistency in control decks, keeping answers—and mana—flowing as needed. It's also a solid boost for combo decks looking for the right pieces of their puzzle.

Melvy.JP had some clever action working with his Serra Angel deck. Using [Howling Mine](#) to fuel cheap spells to gain lots of life from Serra, he set up a great little life-gaining engine once he found two [Sensei's Divining Tops](#). He'd tap one to draw a card and put the Top back on his library, then tap the other to draw the first Top and play it to gain 2 life, and repeat for as much mana as he had lying around that he wanted to sink into gaining life. I'd be curious to hear from Melvy.JP whether that nice combo was an integral part of designing his Serra deck, or whether it was a nice side benefit to choosing that avatar for a pre-existing deck idea.

Early in the tournament there was some buzz on a [Loxodon Hierarchy](#) deck would animate a [Kuro](#), [Pitlord](#) with [Goryo's Vengeance](#), pay life to sweep the board, smack the opponent for 9, and then use the sacrifice ability of the avatar to sacrifice Kuro and put a regeneration shield on some random permanent so Kuro could go back to the graveyard for future reanimation. I didn't get to see his deck in action, but I'd assume the idea works great for the Kamigawa Dragons as well.

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One of the top 8 players, mtg simulacrum, also provided some entertainment with copious grousing about the lone **Frenetic Efreet** player, how bad that avatar is, how lucky the player got, etc. Particularly amusing was how parallel it ran to the very vocal outrage by many tournament players to the actual card **Frenetic Efreet** back when *Mirage* first came out. Bad beats tales of a lone Frenetic and his coin defying the odds and dodging numerous **Swords to Plowshares** and **Lightning Bolts** were staples in the strategy newsgroups. This was even before we had the phrase "damage on the stack" that likely makes Frenetic even more difficult to play against today.

At any rate, for those of you who may have shied away from Vanguard in 2005 because of the degeneracy that kept cropping up, I think it's safe to say "Come back, jump in—the water's fine!"

### Akroma BUG (1st Place, Standard with Vanguard) by FelixLeong2

Avatar - Akroma, Angel of Wrath f.d.ec

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 Forest</li> <li>4 Llanowar Wastes</li> <li>4 Yavimaya Coast</li> <li>4 Overgrown Tomb</li> <li>4 Watery Grave</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>20 land</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 Birds of Paradise</li> <li>4 Elves of Deep Shadow</li> <li>4 Hypnotic Specter</li> <li>2 Llanowar Elves</li> <li>4 Dark Confidant</li> <li>4 Dimir Cutpurse</li> <li>2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni</li> </ul> <p>24 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 Mana Leak</li> <li>4 Putrefy</li> <li>4 Remand</li> <li>4 Umezawa's Jitte</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>16 other spells</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 Nekkoraal</li> <li>4 Naturalize</li> <li>4 Convolvite</li> <li>3 Iwamori of the Open Fist</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>15 sideboard cards</p>

**Name:** Leong Baojie Felix  
**Nick:** Felixleong & Felixleong2  
**Age:** 22

**Country:** Singapore  
**Online clan:** Diplomats

**Magic** resume includes 9th at PT Los Angeles 2005, 5th (team) Worlds 2005  
 Has been playing magic since Revised, and MTGO since *Mirrodin*.

**Favorite formats Online:** 90% of the time I am playing constructed events, and I like Standard, Extended and most of all IPA Sealed!!

"I worked with my clan mates in diplomats for this event. We first came up with a Vanguard **Battle of Wits** deck using the Birds of Paradise avatar and containing all the good removal spells like **Lightning Helix**, **Putrefy**, **Pyroclasm**, and mana accelerators like **Sakura Tribe-Elder**, **Rampant Growth**, **Kodama's Reach**, **Farseek**, and being able to **Gifts Ungiven** for **Reclaim**, **Recollect**, **Battle** and something else. It was like **Gifts** and **Enduring Ideal** rolled into a **Battle of Wits** deck.

"But I felt that when playing a big deck like BOW it's easy to get unlucky and lose to random decks. I was running BUG in the 8 man standard tournaments and it's quite consistent, so I thought of running it for this event. We looked at all the Vanguard avatars and decided that Akroma, Angel of Wrath worked best; the extra card improves the deck's consistency since a turn 1 Birds or Elf is really important. The extra 7 life also helps to offset the pain from the lands.

"The things I've found the Standard BUG deck fears are early **Pyroclasm** and other removal like **Last Gasp**, **Putrefy**, **Shock**, etc. on the turn 2 Cutpurses and Specters. Akroma can help by randomly giving my creatures the Protection



from Black and Red needed to sneak past their removal spells. A turn 2 Specter with Haste and Protection is really solid, and with **Mana Leaks** and **Remands** backing it up it's an easy win.

"The metagame didn't turn out as I expected. Some tough matches I faced were White Weenie with the Higure avatar, and another tough match-up was Elves with **Erhnam Djinn**. I didn't expect so many aggressive decks; I thought there would be more combos like 5-color Myojin deck with **Etched Oracle**, or more control decks.

"I would like to thank my clan mates the diplomats for helping me for this event! To read more about us, stop by [our homepage](#)."

## 4x MTGO Classic 12-24-05


Classic was another format I was curious about. What would Extended look like when you toss back in all the banned cards, then added the promo cards and *Mirage*? Extended's banned cards are banned for a reason, so it's a pretty good bet you start with the banned list and go from there. **Aether Vial** and Goblins are two great tastes that go nuclear together, so it's easy to see how two of the Top 8 sported those elements. The incredible **Skullclamp** made an appearance in mtg simulacrum's Elf and Nail deck. MaDCaTxEs' winning deck decided to go with **Entomb** to fuel a Reanimation strategy.

1st Place: MaDCaTxEs, Reanimator  
2nd Place: Octopus Disco, Vial Goblins  
4th Place: bobthedog, B/W **Dark Confidant**  
4th Place: FelixLeong2, Vial Goblins  
8th Place: Meikel, **Vernal Bloom** Green  
8th Place: PITStop, **Tooth and Nail**  
8th Place: mtg simulacrum, Elf and Nail  
8th Place: filipe, unknown (dropped right after top 8 pairings)

Watching the replays from bobthedog's games, his deck reminded me an awful lot of Chris Pikula's Legacy deck from Grand Prix Philadelphia, minus the **Sinkholes** and Hymns, of course. The "big green" decks that filled out the 8th place finishes were a pleasant surprise, though I also found it interesting that adding **Dark Ritual** and **Lion's Eye Diamond** to the format didn't push a Storm combo deck into the top 8.

The winner, Goncalo Pinto (MaDCaTxEs) was kind enough to send us his decklist and some quick thoughts on it.

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
1 <b>Island</b>	4 <b>Buried Alive</b>	2 <b>Duress</b>
2 <b>Swamp</b>	4 <b>Dark Ritual</b>	4 <b>Engineered Plague</b>
1 <b>Underground River</b>	2 <b>Duress</b>	1 <b>Petradon</b>
4 <b>Bloodstained Mire</b>	4 <b>Life/Death</b>	4 <b>Kataki, War's Wage</b>
4 <b>Flooded Strand</b>	4 <b>Careful Study</b>	3 <b>Pithing Needle</b>
4 <b>Watery Grave</b>	4 <b>Entomb</b>	1 <b>Sacred Foundry</b>
16 land	2 <b>Zombify</b>	15 sideboard cards
1 <b>Verdant Force</b>	4 <b>Cabal Therapy</b>	
1 <b>Petradon</b>	4 <b>Stitch Together</b>	
1 <b>Phantom Nishoba</b>	4 <b>Chrome Mox</b>	
1 <b>Wonder</b>	36 other spells	
1 <b>Symbiotic Wurm</b>		
1 <b>Visara the Dreadful</b>		
1 <b>Akroma, Angel of Wrath</b>		
1 <b>Platinum Angel</b>		
8 creatures		

"I decided to play this deck because I always loved to play Reanimator, and I was playing it in extended so I already had lots of cards for it. 

"Here are some thoughts on the match-ups I faced:

**Affinity**: I guess it's a 50/50 match-up but multiple copies of Kataki in the sideboard help a lot (note that I don't play **Polluted Delta** to have 8 fetch lands that get Blue White and Black).

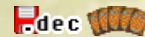
**Tooth and Nail**: A good match-up, just have to reanimate **Petradon**

**Goblins**: Reanimate Akroma in the first few turns is usually enough... later could be too late. **Engineered Plagues** in the sideboard make the match-up very good.

**Boros**: I thought this match-up was good for me, but then I realized that it must be the hardest match-up!"

He also told me online that he'd made a few changes to the deck since then and sent along his revised build:

## Reanimator with Mods (MTGO Classic) by MaDCaTxEs



Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
1 Island	3 Buried Alive	1 Duress
2 Swamp	4 Dark Ritual	4 Engineered Plague
1 Underground River	1 Duress	2 Coffin Purge
4 Bloodstained Mire	4 Life/Death	1 Petradon
4 Flooded Strand	4 Mystical Tutor	2 Echoing Truth
4 Watery Grave	4 Careful Study	4 Katakai, War's Wage
16 land	1 Coffin Purge	1 Sacred Foundry
1 Verdant Force	4 Entomb	15 sideboard cards
1 Petradon	2 Zombify	
1 Phantom Nishoba	3 Cabal Therapy	
1 Wonder	3 Stitch Together	
1 Akroma, Angel of Wrath	4 Chrome Mox	
1 Duplicant	37 other spells	
1 Platinum Angel		
7 creatures		

By trimming a few counts from the sorceries he's now able to add a **Mystical Tutor** engine. Here's a rundown of the changes:

**Maindeck:** -1 Buried Alive, -1 Duress, -1 Cabal Therapy, -1 Stitch Together, -1 Symbiotic Wurm, -1 Visara the Dreadful, +4 Mystical Tutor, +1 Coffin Purge, +1 Duplicant

**Sideboard:** -1 Duress, -3 Pitihg Needle, +2 Echoing Truth, +2 Coffin Purge

He's also apparently concerned about graveyard strategies with addition of **Coffin Purges** in the main deck and sideboard, despite being the only graveyard strategy in the Top 8. I didn't have a chance to ask him about that prior to publication, but perhaps he'll comment in the forums.

When it comes to *Mirage* cards floating around outside of **Dark Ritual** and **Goblin Tinkerer**, I also saw an old favorite make an appearance in the **Tooth and Nail** deck: **Wall of Roots!** With **Stampeding Wildebeests** effectively reprinted in **Stampeding Serow**, perhaps we could see a revival of **Stupid Green Deck** in Classic? **Wall of Blossoms** is back—sorta—with **Carven Caryatid**, and there's also the crazy synergy with **Eternal Witness**. **Aether Vial** could give deck a nice boost, too, perhaps playing some of the role of **Eladamri's Vineyard**.

Speaking of *Mirage*, I thought as a public service to fans of Tribal I'd list all the creature types that got a population boost from *Mirage*. Obviously, the Human tribe went nuts, but there are also some nice gems here. The Cobras did indeed turn Snake, giving Seshiro and the gang an alternative win condition with Poison counters. **Kamigawa's Spirit** themes got a bumper crop of spirits to mess around with; I imagine a few players might be horrified to see three Zuberu sacrificed to **Lifespinner** and **Spirit of the Night** jumping into play all hasty. The Wizard tribe also got a lot of new toys, not least of which include the awesome Guildmages. I also can't help but wonder what **Ichorid**-inspired madness might be "dredged" up with **Tombstone Stairwell** for Zombie decks. Oh yes, I'm definitely plotting *that* one!



One last thought—*rutabagas!* Could **Dwarven Miner** finally bring a critical mass of playable Dwarves to enable a **Dwarven Bloodboiler** deck? Might it be time to fetch the pestrider, Paka?

Have a great week, and here's that creature type list for your referencing pleasure.

### Tribal: *Mirage* Creature Types

- **Archer** (**Femeref Archers**, **Jolrael's Centaur**)
- **Artificer** (**Goblin Tinkerer**)
- **Assassin** (**Abyssal Hunter**)
- **Atog** (**Foratog** - also in 8th)
- **Avatar** (**Ethereal Champion**)
- **Basilisk** (**Rock Basilisk**)
- **Berserker** (**Talruum Minotaur**)
- **Bird** (**Bay Falcon**, **Crimson Roc**, **Windreaper Falcon**)
- **Brushwagg** (**Brushwagg**)
- **Cat** (**Mtenda Lion**, **Purraj of Urborg**, **Stalking Tiger**, **Uktabi Wildcats** - also in 7th, **Urborg Panther**; **Waiting in the Weeds**)
- **Centaur** (**Jolrael's Centaur**)
- **Cleric** (**Asmira**, **Holy Avenger**, **Auspicious Ancestor**, **Femeref Healer**, **Vigilant Martyr**)

- **Crocodile** (Sandbar Crocodile)
- **Demon** (Spirit of the Night)
- **Djinn** (Benthic Djinn, Emberwilde Caliph, Emberwilde Djinn, Nettletooth Djinn, Vaporous Djinn)
- **Dragon** (Canopy Dragon, Catacomb Dragon, Crimson Hellkite, Mist Dragon, Pearl Dragon, Teeka's Dragon, Volcanic Dragon; Hivis of the Scale, Rashida Scalebane, Zirilan of the Claw)
- **Drake** (Azimaet Drake, Cerulean Wyvern, Hazerider Drake, Teferi's Drake)
- **Dreadnought** (Phyrexian Dreadnought)
- **Druid** (Quirion Elves - also in *Invasion*, Village Elder)
- **Dryad** (Unseen Walker - also in 6th)
- **Dwarf** (Dwarven Miner, Dwarven Nomad)
- **Efreet** (Burning Palm Efreet, Frenetic Efreet, Harmattan Efreet, Wildfire Emissary)
- **Elemental** (Flame Elemental, Maro - also in 7th – 9th, Subterranean Spirit, Wave Elemental)
- **Elephant** (Iron Tusk Elephant, Noble Elephant, Wild Elephant)
- **Elf** (Quirion Elves - also in *Invasion*)
- **Faerie** (Uktabi Faerie)
- **Fungus** (Mindbender Spores)
- **Gargoyle** (Harbor Guardian, Leering Gargoyle)
- **Giant** (Ekundu Cyclops)
- **Gnome** (Ersatz Gnomes)
- **Goblin** (Goblin Elite Infantry - also in 7th, Goblin Soothsayer, Goblin Tinkerer; Goblin Scouts)
- **Golem** (Basalt Golem, Crystal Golem, Igneous Golem, Lead Golem, Patagia Golem, Sand Golem)
- **Griffin** (Ekundu Griffin, Mtenda Griffin, Teremko Griffin, Unyaro Griffin, Zuberi, Golden Feather)
- **Human** (Abyssal Hunter, Armorer Guildmage, Asmira, Holy Avenger, Auspicious Ancestor, Blighted Shaman, Burning Shield Askari, Civic Guildmage, Daring Apprentice - also in 7th – 9th, Dream Fighter, Femeref Archers - also in 7th, Femeref Healer, Femeref Knight, Femeref Scouts, Granger Guildmage, Hakim, Loreweaver, Jungle Patrol, Kukemssa Pirates, Mtenda Herder, Rashida Scalebane, Reckless Embermage - also in 7th, Searing Spear Askari, Shadow Guildmage, Shaper Guildmage, Shauku's Minion, Sidar Jabari, Suq'Ata Firewalker, Telim'Tor, Vigilant Martyr, Village Elder, Zhalfirin Commander, Zhalfirin Knight)
- **Hyena** (Gibbering Hyenas)
- **Imp** (Teferi's Imp)
- **Insect** (Giant Mantis, Locust Swarm, Carrion)
- **Knight** (Burning Shield Askari, Cadaverous Knight, Femeref Knight, Searing Spear Askari, Sidar Jabari, Telim'Tor, Zhalfirin Commander, Zhalfirin Knight)
- **Manticore** (Sawback Manticore)
- **Merfolk** (Coral Fighters, Merfolk Raiders, Merfolk Seer, Sea Scryer)
- **Minion** (Shauku's Minion)
- **Minotaur** (Talruum Minotaur)
- **Mongoose** (Karoo Meerkat)
- **Nightstalker** (Breathstealer, Feral Shadow, Urborg Panther)
- **Pirate** (Kukemssa Pirates)
- **Rat** (Sewer Rats)
- **Rhino** (Crash of Rhinos)
- **Scout** (Femeref Scouts, Mtenda Herder)
- **Serpent** (Kukemssa Serpent, Taniwha)
- **Shade** (Fetid Horror, Mire Shade)
- **Shaman** (Blighted Shaman, Goblin Soothsayer, Hivis of the Scale, Zirilan of the Claw)
- **Skeleton** (Restless Dead)
- **Snake** (Crypt Cobra, Sabertooth Cobra)
- **Soldier** (Coral Fighters, Dream Fighter, Jungle Patrol, Merfolk Raiders, Rashida Scalebane)
- **Specter** (Dread Specter, Tainted Specter)
- **Spirit** (Discordant Spirit, Harbinger of Night, Haunting Apparition, Horrible Hordes, Melesse Spirit, Radiant Essence, Raging Spirit, Skulking Ghost, Spectral Guardian, Spirit of the Night, Subterranean Spirit, Afterlife)
- **Troll** (Jungle Troll)
- **Unicorn** (Benevolent Unicorn, Zebra Unicorn)
- **Vampire** (Ravenous Vampire, Shauku, Endbringer)
- **Viashino** (Hivis of the Scale, Viashino Warrior, Zirilan of the Claw)
- **Wall** (Blistering Barrier, Floodgate, Mindbender Spores, Sunweb - also in 7th and 8th, Wall of Corpses, Wall of Resistance, Wall of Roots; Jungle Patrol, Tidal Wave)
- **Warrior** (Goblin Elite Infantry, Purraj of Urborg, Viashino Warrior)
- **Wizard** (Armorer Guildmage, Civic Guildmage, Daring Apprentice - also in 7th – 9th, Granger Guildmage, Hakim, Loreweaver, Merfolk Seer, Reckless Embermage - also in 7th, Sea Scryer, Shadow Guildmage, Shaper Guildmage, Suq'Ata Firewalker)
- **Wraith** (Dirtwater Wraith)
- **Wurm** (Barbed-Back Wurm, Jungle Wurm, Warping Wurm)
- **Zombie** (Cadaverous Knight, Gravebane Zombie, Zombie Mob; Tombstone Stairwell)

*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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