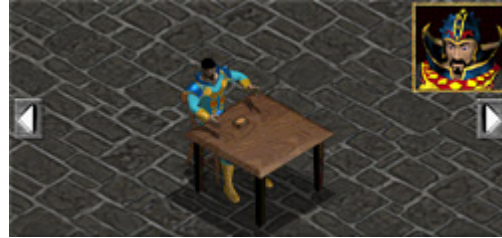


Auction of the Resident Genius Search

Mike Flores

Thursday, May 11, 2006

I originally wanted Birds of Paradise, but that Avatar had already been bogarted by former Single Card Strategies columnist Adrian Sullivan before I emailed Auction of the Geniuses Lord and Master Zvi Mowshowitz. Unlike many of the other deck designers, I actually tested the Vanguard format, and several Avatars, a great deal before submitting my deck; I went on to try Elvish Champion (a free Llanowar Elves is the next best thing to Birds of Paradise, right?) and Prodigal Sorcerer (which *seemed* broken), but like a naïve hayseed taking his first steps off the bus and onto the corner of 42nd and Broadway for the first time, I had no idea how the Vanguard format worked or what I was getting into.



If you've never played Vanguard – especially online Classic – you might assume that an attrition strategy like Prodigal Sorcerer might be encouraging, or a wee bit of mana acceleration via Llanowar Elves might be a solid way to go... However I got a crash course on the wrong ends of Seshiro the Anointed, Higure, the Still Wind, and my eventual Avatar, Hell's Caretaker, which caused me to greatly revise my position on the format.

Mark Gottlieb/Seshiro the Anointed (+0 hand/-1 life)

At the beginning of the game, choose a creature type. Creatures you control, creature spells you control on the stack, and creature cards you own that aren't in play or on the stack have the chosen type in addition to their other types.




Main Deck

60 cards

4 Bloodstained Mire	1 Angel of Despair	4 Spawning Pit
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	3 Bladewing the Risen	4 Talisman of Indulgence
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	4 Bladewing's Thrall	
2 Mirrodin's Core	1 Bloodfire Colossus	8 other spells
4 Mountain	1 Darksteel Colossus	
4 Shadowblood Ridge	4 Dragonspeaker Shaman	
4 Sulfurous Springs	1 Homura, Human Ascendant	
3 Swamp	1 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker	
2 Urborg Volcano	1 Kilnmouth Dragon	
	1 Kokusho, the Evening Star	
	1 Kuro, Pitlord	
	1 Nekrataal	
	1 Phyrexian Plaguelord	
	1 Siege-Gang Commander	
	1 Summoner's Egg	
	4 Zirilan of the Claw	

27 creatures

Mark Gottlieb's Seshiro deck is Dragon Tribal. Mark declares all his creatures to be Dragons and can take advantage of, say, big amplifiers. The version that impressed me – manhandled me to be more accurate – was *Elf Tribal*. That deck could play Wirewood Symbiote and Llanowar Elves and use the Elves to make , return the Symbiote to untap the Elves, rinse, and repeat 20+ times for essentially an infinite repetition. As soon as the second turn, the Elf Seshiro deck can run out a Brain Freeze for an immediate kill.

Higure was a classic example of a great deck that came out of terrible, terrible cards. Dan Paskins chose Goblin Warchief as his Avatar (obviously), but I think Dan would have really liked Higure had he tried it. The version I played against started on Raging Goblin (which is what made me think of Mr. Paskins). With Higure, lowly cheap haste creatures – including not just the mildly maligned Raging Goblin but such Constructed Unplayable paragons as Goblin Striker – are pretty good, and greatly synergistic. You see, this deck profits greatly from every hit for one, setting up almost geometric Ophidian card drawing from turn 1! Over the course of a couple of hits, cheap haste Goblin after cheap haste Goblin set up wild draws like Goblin Warchief (himself an efficiently-costed haste Goblin) and specialty non-haste bombs like Goblin Sharpshooter and Goblin Piledriver that work synergistically with the rest. Higure punishes slow draws and really buries the opponent under an avalanche of inexorable – normally marginal – dorks.

But the Avatar that really rewarded my strengths as a deck *tuner* and playtester was Hell's Caretaker.

Mike Flores/Hell's Caretaker (+0 hand/+4 life)



3, Sacrifice a creature: Return target creature from your graveyard to play.

Main Deck

60 cards

1 Ancient Den
 4 Brushland
 4 Forest
 1 Plains
 1 Selesnya Sanctuary
 4 Temple Garden
 1 Tree of Tales
 4 Windswept Heath

20 lands

4 Birds of Paradise
 3 Cathodion
 3 Eternal Witness
 4 Llanowar Elves
 3 Loxodon Hierarch

17 creatures

4 Aether Vial
 4 Enlightened Tutor
 4 Genesis Chamber
 1 Glare of Subdual
 4 Living Wish
 1 Pithing Needle
 1 Rule of Law
 4 Skullclamp

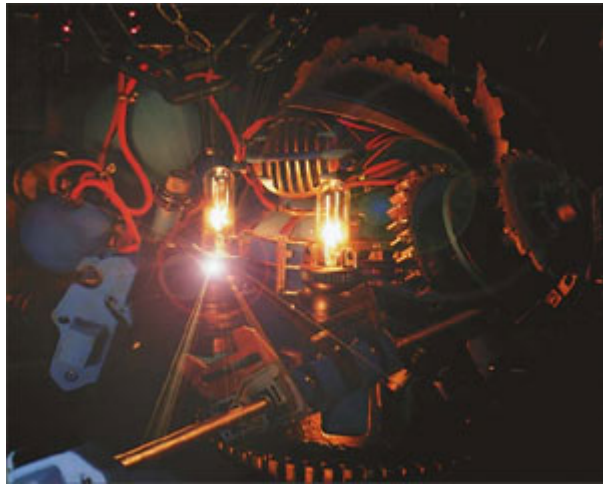
23 other spells

Sideboard

1 Arashi, the Sky Asunder
 1 Cathodion
 1 Eternal Witness
 1 Kami of Ancient Law
 1 Kami of False Hope
 1 Katakai, War's Wage
 1 Krosan Verge
 1 Loxodon Hierarch
 1 Mystic Enforcer
 1 Selesnya Guildmage
 1 Selesnya Sanctuary
 1 Silent Arbiter
 1 True Believer
 1 Viridian Shaman
 1 Viridian Zealot

15 sideboard cards

If you've never played against the archetype Hell's Caretaker Avatar deck on **Magic Online**, the combo goes like this: For three mana, Hell's Caretaker allows you to sacrifice a creature in play; in exchange, you can return a creature from your graveyard to play. Conveniently, Cathodion gives you three colorless mana whenever it goes to the graveyard, so you can repeat the Hell's Caretaker process as many times as you would like. As with Seshiro, this loop doesn't actually generate any *net* mana; therefore you need to be able to create some sort of advantage incidental to just swapping the positions of two of your creatures. My version runs Genesis Chamber so that every time a "new" Cathodion comes into play, I get a 1/1 creature.




The Hell's Caretaker ability is quite useful with even a single Cathodion. With just three mana, you can run two reanimations, which is very handy with Eternal Witness or other 187s, even when you are not creating an infinite loop.

On top of the Avatar functionality, mine is just set up as a powerful deck. I have the maximum number of each of **Magic's** iconic mana symmetry rulebreakers – Birds of Paradise and Llanowar Elves – as well as the much-banned *Darksteel* one-drops Aether Vial and Skullclamp. This just makes for a fundamentally strong beatdown baseline game plan a la Ravager Affinity circa 2004. I can't actually "go off" with Disciple of the Vault and Arcbound Ravager like, say, Frank Karsten's Bosh deck, but these cards really help my deck spread its hand across the table and set up for a quick Fundamental Turn.

The Details:

- Tutor Package:
 - 4 Enlightened Tutor – This card can fetch either combination element Cathodion or Genesis Chamber. It is also useful for finding singleton Silver Bullets like Glare of Subdual, Pithing Needle, or Rule of Law. Rule of Law is an important maindeck inclusion in my deck because I anticipated combo decks from certain fellow Geniuses, as evidenced by decks like Asahara's or Menendian's.
 - 4 Living Wish – This deck would actually rather play Eladamri's Call. My G/W framework comes from Eladamri's Call in the Alpha version, but we learned late that the Auction decks would not be allowed sideboards. By playing Living Wish rather than Eladamri's Call, I allowed my deck to "cheat" fifteen additional cards – fifteen additional *options* in the case of a Tutor deck – that most of the other decks would not be able to access. Living Wish allows my deck to break the Rule of Four on Cathodion (and other high quality drops like Eternal Witness), as well as to play powerful bullets like Kami of False Hope and Katakai, War's Wage. Katakai was hell on the Affinity decks in last season's Extended, and there are two Affinity-reminiscent decks in the Auction of the Geniuses format. Jamie Wakefield's deck, for instance, has literally zero capability of beating three-mana, a Living Wish, and a Genesis Chamber.
- 1 Glare of Subdual – Genesis Chamber, by nature, gives the *opponent* a ton of creatures as well. In many games, Hell's Caretaker will actually be *behind* in creatures in the early game! Surprisingly, you can set up an advantage and still have difficulty *actually hitting* with your infinite creatures – yes, even with essentially *infinite* creatures (look at Tsuyoshi's Avatar)! Glare of Subdual is the option I chose to break token advantage and bust through.
- Pithing Needle – Two words: "Auriok Salvagers" (see Asahara's deck). This card of course works against Jittes, Mirror Breakers, Tops, and other cards that you might name in actual Constructed battles.

I did all my testing *before* we got the lists of all the other Vanguard decks, so I don't actually know how my version of Hell's Caretaker stacks up against the other Geniuses' decks. However, based on studying the deck lists, here are my strongest impressions:

Akira Asahara/Loxodon Hierarchy (+0 hand/+12 life) 

Sacrifice a permanent: Regenerate target creature you control.

Main Deck
60 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 City of Brass 3 Flooded Strand 1 Godless Shrine 4 Polluted Delta 4 Underground River 4 Watery Grave <hr/> <p>20 lands</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Auriok Salvagers <hr/> <p>4 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Aether Spellbomb 4 Careful Study 4 Conjuror's Bauble 4 Dark Ritual 4 Lion's Eye Diamond 4 Plunge into Darkness 1 Pyrite Spellbomb 1 Sapphire Charm 4 Sensei's Divining Top 4 Shallow Grave 4 Vampiric Tutor 1 Vision Charm <hr/> <p>36 other spells</p>
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Asahara (Loxodon Hierarchy):

This is one of the decks I would be willing to bid for. Akira's deck is an infinite combination deck based on Lion's Eye Diamond, and one-mana "baubles" with Auriok Salvagers. Basically you can set up infinite mana with Lion's Eye and Salvagers (sacrifice for *******, use ****** to regrow the Diamond, replay it, sacrifice it again for *******, netting ***** each loop). Eventually the deck can play draw its deck with any of several cards (say Aether Spellbomb recursion) and kill with infinite Pyrite Spellbomb (somewhere along the way you can switch from ******* to **👁️👁️👁️** and lean on the essentially infinite Lion's Eye / Salvagers mana to give you the cushion you need to power up Pyrite).

Akira's Avatar allows him to protect the Salvagers, and also gives him a tremendous amount of life to buffer against a beatdown deck (a non-infinite one, anyway). In terms of its matchup with my deck, Akira's is another infinite combo deck, so it poses a definite danger. On the other hand, he doesn't seem to be able to break Pithing Needle or Rule of Law, so mise.



Comer (Flametongue Kavv):

I don't really understand what a single Boseiju, statistically, is doing in Alan's deck. Clearly his deck has the advantage in a creature matchup (say Wakefield's deck), but it doesn't really have the speed and efficiency I am looking for (no broken cards at all, only one Jitte, and many expensive cards with no explosive mana acceleration).

Cuneo (Serra Angel):

Andrew is one of my favorite deck designers, and his deck is ridiculously synergistic. He runs all kinds of cheap cards to gain extra life at a tiny cost (the most comical, if not the most absurd, is probably breaking even on Night's Whisper). Andrew has an actual sideboard via Burning Wish, so that is also a plus. I think that his deck is quite powerful in creature matchups due to Mutilate, Burning Wish (for Innocent Blood), and a ton of life gain... but it is pretty one-dimensional against combo (basically Cranial Extraction or no); the absence of Haunting Echoes may have been an oversight.

Andrew's deck also has a tremendous amount of velocity... Serra Angel forces his cards to work double duty, and he ignores the downsides of cards like Promise of Power that were held back historically only *due* to those drawbacks... but it is fundamentally fair. I think that my deck is ahead barring Cranial Extraction, and that even a successful Cranial for Cathodion is no guarantee of defeat.

All in all, Andrew's deck is a great one and has a chance fighting basically any Avatar with the right cards in hand, and is way ahead against several.

Fujita (Teysa, Orzhov Scion):

Not surprisingly, my predecessor as Resident Genius posted one of the most ingenious Action of the Geniuses decks. Tsuyoshi's deck has many of the same advantages of a Standard Ghost Husk, but mixes in the greediness that got my friend BDM the sometime nickname *GreedyM*. Brian loves Natural Affinity + Nantuko Husk to "Hatred" out of nowhere... and check the synergy with his Avatar's core mechanic!

Tsuyoshi's deck is probably the best or second best deck in the group *against* mine. I have a great deal of trouble going infinite against his deck because, not only does Tsuyoshi have a lot of creatures of his own for early game Genesis Chamber advantage (and he might just kill me before I get my game online), but Teysa gives *him* a creature with every Cathodion loop! In order to win, my deck would have to have two Genesis Chambers, a Glare of Subdual, or a Living Wish out... It's a tall order to set up *extra* combo kill against a deck as aggressive *and* disruptive as Fujita's!

Gottlieb (Seshiro the Anointed):

Mark's deck is powerful once it gets going but a bit slow. I don't think I would bid for this one.

Ishida (Frenetic Efreet):

Itaru is a true deck Genius, and his Frenetic Friggoid really steps up to how awesome he is as a designer. Krark's Thumb + his Frenetic Efreet Avatar is just busted. There will be many games where the opponent literally has no chance... because he never gets a turn!

I think Itaru's deck should have a superb chance against almost any Avatar, including mine; I am reluctant to bid for it mostly because Frenetic Efreet starts off with -1 card in hand, and when I failed to win a PTQ with Friggoid last winter, it was entirely due to two double+ mulligans in the Top 8... His deck has only 18 lands, and many of them don't produce any mana, so I think going to five cards or fewer will be extremely dangerous... No idea how the phasing element will play out, though.

Moldenhauer-Salazar (Maro):

The best part of this deck is Maro's natural +1 card in hand... I would go for this deck if I could ensure 8 or even 9 cards in hand; I also like that his Cunning Wish suite gives the deck more cards to play (which is ironic because Cunning Wish engines in normal Constructed events tend to give decks *fewer* options).

I don't think the "Erayo" element of the deck will actually do all that much because Jay's clock is slow. Note how Erayo has no interaction with an Avatar ability, and that countering, say, a Cathodion is actually *helpful* for Hell's Caretaker. Permission decks are generally weak against Aether Vials (of which there are several in this crop), so matchups are going to be another issue here.

Karsten (Bosh, Iron Golem):

Frank's deck is full on Ravager Affinity, with Aether Vial, Skullclamp, and all the rest of the banned cards, making it an iteration of the most dangerous aggressive deck ever built. I don't know how often Bosh's Avatar ability will actually make the difference because Frank's deck can *already* kill on the third turn, but probably it will play some sort of Shrapnel Blast (a card Frank argued against when we actually *had* Affinity decks to worry about)... but without actually having to waste the slot.


I think bidding for this deck will be hot and heavy, so I think I'll steer clear. It is unlikely to go at six or more cards in hand, which will balance the brokenness of what the Fanatic has offered to the Auction.

I think that my deck's acceleration will allow it to keep pace with Frank's, and that Kataki can potentially help quite a bit, but Bosh v. Kataki is an interesting dance, and, again, Frank's deck can win in three, so poor Hell's Caretaker might just get blown out, should we duel.

Kuroda (Etched Oracle):

Kuroda is my favorite **Magic** player I've never met, and I quite look up to the Pro Tour--Kobe and 2005 Finals Champ; in fact, *my* best deck of 2005 – Josh Ravitz's Top 8 deck – was even called *Kuroda-style Red*!

Masashiro's deck is a powerhouse – maybe the *most* purely powerful deck of all the Geniuses' offerings – due to his Avatar. His is a clear marriage of Avatar and deck list, powerful and synergistic without being a dirty combo deck... I am looking forward to seeing Hypnox hard-cast for perhaps the first time in the history of top level play!

The +1 card in hand is an attractive addition to Kuroda's already strong offering. He has a ton of mana acceleration to get to  and he has a sideboard! I think that Etched Oracle v. Hell's Caretaker could go either way... I'd be willing to bid for this deck, both for its strength and the obvious fatty fun factor.

Menendian (Eight-And-A-Half-Tails):

This might be the single strongest deck in the Auction. It is not the most powerful Avatar, nor does it have the most options, but Eight-And-A-Half-Tails *does* have a huge +2 starting hand size *and* a Tendrils kill reminiscent of Stephen's favorite format.



I predict Menendian's deck will, like Karsten's, be hotly contested in the Auction. Unlike every other Genius – up until this article – Stephen is the only one, to my knowledge, who has written an article about his build. Luckily, Menendian's combo deck is pretty single minded, and it doesn't seem to have a huge number of outs against Rule of Law or True Believer, so I think Hell's Caretaker has the advantage (but the strength of Steve's design and natural hand size means that the matchup can go either way).

Millar (Stalking Tiger):

Chris's deck reminds me of Ghost Dad. It has an enormous advantage in attrition matchups and a blazingly obvious card advantage engine, but begs the question... What is it drawing? This version of Stalking Tiger has a ton of synergy, but is short on broken cards.



WARNING: This card may be broken.

I think that Millar's deck can get the jump on basically any of the other decks if they miss a beat – creatures and card drawing being a classically powerful combo against any misstep – but that it is at a disadvantage against the most single-minded and broken decks.

Ruel (Arcbound Overseer):

Two Ravagers?

Oli's Avatar seems excessively powerful, but... Two Ravagers?

Paskins (Goblin Warchief):

Dan is a famous maker of offensive Red Decks; his Avatar comes stapled with what was once a banned card. This is a straightforward Goblins beatdown deck. I'd bid on it if the path were clear, but there are definitely some cards missing, and puzzlingly so. This is going to be a dark horse deck that may fly under the radar. With any kind of decent hand size, look for Dan's deck to go 3-0.

Pikula (Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni):

Chris's deck is awesome, mostly due to his Avatar. The whole "all the Invitational wizards" element is cute given the event, but the strength of this card is with Ink-Eyes. That Chris can set up Cabal Therapy and, um, *himself* strategically from the first turn is significant, as is the fact that he can answer anything via counters, hand destruction, and Recoil.

Chris's deck is fundamentally less broken than many of the others, but it can also punch holes in strategies like Menendian's and Asahara's pretty effortlessly; from my perspective, Ink-Eyes is a horrendous opponent. Whoever gets Chris's deck can just pay three life to demolish my combo. For example, if Ink-Eyes goes first, it can hit a Cathodion and then just pay three on turn 3 (before Hell's Caretaker hits three), putting the home team in a difficult spot. A combination of careful planning and setting up a



With Pikula and Jonny Magic, how can

mana advantage is required to beat the Pikula deck, which *you go wrong?* may be difficult in the face of Meddling Mage and Shadowmage Infiltrator... But on balance, the clock isn't particularly fast and the deck has a decided paucity of brokenness.

One of the deceptive advantages of Chris's deck is its ability to sit back on mana. Ink-Eyes the Avatar allows the Pikula deck options even when it doesn't have action cards. It can essentially "eat" a creature and come across with Jitte the next turn. Look for players to lose to Chris's "fair" offering, especially when they don't pay attention. The downside of this Avatar is -1 cards in hand (counterbalanced somewhat by the free Duress), but with only 13 mana producing lands... I worry.

Rizzo (Fallen Angel):

I think this deck will, like John's last major innovation, go underestimated to begin with. I don't think it is one of the more powerful decks, but the fact that he has Fecundity *and* reach out of nowhere is a powerful combination, especially if a player can get the deck with 8 cards in hand. I don't know that the Death Wish is ever actually going to come into play, but the deck *does* have options. I just question some of the numbers.

Sullivan (Birds of Paradise):

I was really looking forward to seeing what Adrian would do with potentially the most interesting Avatar. When I wanted Birds of Paradise, my angle was going to be the most broken beatdown creatures, burn cards, *and* support cards across the colors all on top of each other. Can you imagine Shadow Guildmage, Isamaru, Nantuko Shade, and Lightning Helix, combined with top shelf card drawing all on a Sligh curve? A couple of Dawn Elementals or even Etched Oracles on four? All the best drops clocking together with mana that never fails? Did I mention the Nantuko Shades?

Compared to the best of the other Geniuses' submissions, and the capabilities of the Avatar... Adrian's implementation is rather underwhelming.

It's definitely cool that Adrian hit on details like breaking the rules on Temple of the False God, but his deck doesn't *do* anything. Man land kill? Really? What's the deal with running so many *Odyssey* Block sacrifice/threshold lands with... no Life from the Loam? This deck is screaming for Life from the Loam, especially with Fact or Fiction, but it only has one, and the access is only as a bullet, not strategic.

It's possible people will see the *potential* on Adrian's Avatar (as well as the name of the player who gave us Annex Wildfire at States) rather than the interactions in-format context, so players may bid. However I just don't see this beating any of the many decks with Aether Vial *or* card advantage care of Avatar abilities. For example has it got *any* chance against Millar's deck? Ishida's? Hell's Caretaker?

Wakefield (Akroma, Angel of Wrath):

Jamie's deck has potential, but is wicked slow. I don't think Classic Vanguard is going to be very friendly towards a bunch of Grey Ogres, and Jamie has eight. You'll find no bigger fan of Nimble Mongoose than yours truly... But Jamie has literally no Threshold enablers, not even *Onslaught* lands. As I said before, his deck can't possibly beat three mana, a Genesis Chamber and a Living Wish (and the Chamber is necessary only to make it a *hard* creature lock), so barring horrible manascrew, I think Hell's Caretaker has a tremendous advantage.

That said, Jamie's deck is likely to go at eight cards, so it is a definite dark horse. A couple of Moxes and it could definitely surprise us.

As with many and most rules in **Magic**, the impressions of my deck and the other Geniuses' that I listed in this article are fast and loose rather than written in stone. The big X Factor in the Auction format is *the Auction format* itself; Randy [Buehler] theorizes that the Auction will normalize the decks to their natural positions on cards in hand and life total (assuming the bidders are on the ball). Any deck in this crop should be able to win against any other deck, given a strong enough cards in hand advantage, and this is exactly the format to level the haves versus the have-nots.

In case you hadn't gleaned it from the body of the article, I plan to bid pretty aggressively for my own Hell's Caretaker. The Invitational materials list the Avatar at +0 cards and +4 life... I actually did reasonably well testing at five cards, so the numbers that we are bound by in the Auction given Avatar tweaking is going to be a factor. Speaking in broad strokes, I'll go to five cards, but with only 20 lands, I don't think I'd go to four, for the same reasons I'm reluctant to go after Ishida's deck...

I'd say "wish me luck," but by the time you read this, Auction of the Geniuses will already be over, so... Show how hindsight is 20/20 in the forums I guess!

Next Week: Extremes in Metagaming for Regionals 2006!

