



Ninjaffinatog

Ben Bleiweiss
Building on a Budget
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Ninjaffinatog. The deck that strikes fear into the hearts of players everywhere. This week's evolution comes straight from an argument about a relatively unplayed *Mirrodin* common—and from that argument came the most mashed-up, confused, rareless undefeated deck ever seen on Building on a Budget!

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I was sorting through a bunch of *Mirrodin* foil cards for my day job when I came across *Hunger of the Nim*. *Hunger of the Nim* is essentially a one-shot *Cranial Plating*, at sorcery speed. So I asked off-time Pro Tour player Chris Wolterec "How come nobody plays this card? I always see people losing to a top-decked *Cranial Plating* when they are [playing against Affinity](#), so why not play this instead of something like *Shrapnel Blast*? You're probably going to hit for more than 5 damage!"

"Well," Chris responded, "it's a sorcery and *Shrapnel Blast* can hit creatures. Plus, you need evasion guys if you're going to use *Hunger*. What about *Ornithopter*?"

"And if you play *Ornithopter*, you get to play Ninjas!"

"Sure—and don't forget *Brass Gnat* too! You're also going to want *Blinkmoth Nexus* in this deck."

So here started the early beginnings of Ninjaffinatog—originally an attempt to work *Hunger of the Nim* into a budget version of Affinity. But readers, believe me, the deck moved far past these early roots!

Affinity is already a good choice for many budget players - outside of *Arcbound Ravager*, *Blinkmoth Nexus*, and *Glimmervoid*, the core of the Affinity deck (artifact lands, *Shrapnel Blast*, *Myr Enforcer*, *Thoughtcast*, *Frogmite*, *Cranial Plating*) are mostly commons with a touch of uncommons. When I did my first price checking on the rares for this deck, I found that there was no way I could have Nexus on a budget:

- Arcbound Ravager*: 20 tickets average
- Blinkmoth Nexus*: 7 tickets average
- Glimmervoid*: 2 tickets average

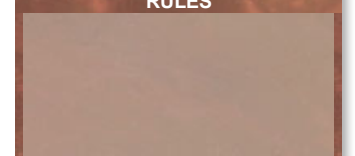
All right, *Glimmervoid* was a budgetable rare if I wanted to go that route (remember, all decks used in Building on a Budget stick to a strict 30-ticket maximum limit!), but a playset of Nexus would completely kill my budget for the rest of the deck.

I pulled up a handy-dandy spoiler generator, and started looking up all of the black, blue, and artifact cards available in the Extended card pool. I wouldn't be able to use *Blinkmoth Nexus*, but I wanted to see which cards were available to power out a deck that hybridized Ninjas and Affinity. After much searching, here were the lists I came up with!

The Affinity Components

- Arcbound Stinger*
- Arcbound Worker*
- Broodstar*
- Frogmite*
- Myr Enforcer*
- Myr Servitor*
- Somber Hoverguard*

These are the standard creatures that you'll usually find in an Affinity deck, give or take *Arcbound Stinger*, but I included it since it's an early flying creature, and we want evasion creatures of some sort (flying, fear, shadow, strictly unblockable) to allow for early Ninja action! This lead me to another list (ticket costs are listed in parenthesis, if notable beyond bulk):



The Evasion Creatures

Aven Envoy
Brass Gnat
Cloud Sprite
Dauthi Slayer (.5)
Dimir Infiltrator
Flying Men
Looter *il-Kor*
Moroi
Nightshade Stinger
Oona's Prowler (3)
Ornithopter
Nether Traitor (.5)
Nezumi Cutthroat
Nightscape Familiar
Phyrexian Battleflies
Sage Owl
Shriekmaw (1)
Spellstutter Sprite
Spiketail Hatchling
Stinkweed Imp
Stormscape Familiar
Vampire Bats
Will-o'-the-Wisp (.5)
Wonder (.5)
Wormfang Drake

Some of these creatures were less than ideal, but I wrote down even the most remote possibilities just in case there were weird interactions that clicked. Why did I restrict this deck to black and blue? Because those are the colors of Ninjas, and also most of the important affinity-based artifact spells and cards (right down to the banned *Disciple of the Vault*). Black and blue also tend to have a lot of early evasion creatures, as evidenced by the above list. While *Moroi* wasn't likely to be a good choice (who wants to drop a turn-four 4/4 flyer as a way to enable dropping a 1/1 or 2/2 creature to the board?), I had my early eye on *Brass Gnat* (as suggested by Chris—both as an affinity enabler and as a Ninja enabler), *Flying Men* (early beatdown), *Sage Owl* (which works well when being returned to the hand with a Ninja) and *Dimir Infiltrator* (unblockable, plus it can transmute for *Cranial Plating*, one of the most powerful pieces of Equipment ever printed... in the right deck). These were, of course, in addition to the omnipotent *Ornithopter*, everyone's favorite "free" 0/2 flyer.

Speaking of *Cranial Plating*:

The Creature Enhancers

Bonesplitter
Cranial Plating
Curiosity
Grafted Wargear
Hunger of the Nim
Lightning Greaves
Loxodon Warhammer (2.5)
Shuriken

All of these were in consideration for the deck, more so *Cranial Plating* and *Hunger of the Nim* than the others. *Lightning Greaves* was an interesting possibility, but I've often won (or seen people lose) games because someone had only one creature in play with a Greaves on it, and they couldn't target their own creature with other pieces of equipment.

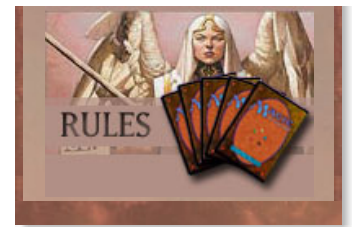
Since this deck was going to be straight black-blue, I needed to figure out how to fix its mana. Unlike traditional affinity decks (which usually run 16-20 artifact lands plus *Glimmervoid*), I'd probably need fewer artifact lands and more black and blue producing mana sources.

The Artifact Color Fixers

Chromatic Sphere
Chromatic Star
Dimir Signet
Paradise Mantle
Pentad Prism
Phyrexian Totem
Springleaf Drum
Talisman of Dominance

The Lands

Dreadship Reef (.2)
Dromar's Cavern (.25)
Glimmervoid (2)
Salt Marsh (.2)



I especially gravitated towards **Springleaf Drum** and **Paradise Mantle**—both give me extra use out of early non-affinity creatures (**Ornithopter**, **Flying Men**, **Brass Gnat**), and the traditional affinity fixers (**Chromatic Star** and **Sphere**) weren't as important with only two colors in the deck.



Springleaf Drum and **Paradise Mantle** are two cards which deserve some look side-by-side. One is free to play (the Mantle) and the other is free to activate (**Springleaf Drum**). Both require you to tap a creature to activate, but one can't be used on summoning-sick creatures (the Mantle, since it gives the creature a tap ability), while the other can be (the Drum, since tapping the creature is part of the cost, and not an ability on the creature itself). In the end, this is the most important distinction: if I want, I can attack with an **Ornithopter**, Ninja it back to my hand, replay it, and then activate **Springleaf Drum** using the same (replayed) **Ornithopter**. With **Paradise Mantle**, I'm either tapping for mana or attacking; I can't do both on the same turn.

Hey wait, did I forget about:

The Ninjas

Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni (4)
Mistblade Shinobi
Ninja of the Deep Hours
Okina-Gang Shinobi
Skullsnatcher
Throat Slitter

I didn't include Ninja-specific hijinks like **Walker of Secret Ways** or **Higure**—this was going to be a beatdown deck one way or another, and I wanted the more efficient creatures available. **Ninja of the Deep Hours** (a two-mana **Ophidian**) was especially the guy I was looking for.

Card Drawing

Fabricate (.33)
Night's Whisper (1)
Phyrexian Arena (1.5)
Ponder
Skeletal Scrying (.33)
Standstill (2)
Thirst For Knowledge (.5)
Thoughtcast

Ninja of the Deep Hours wasn't the only card-drawing spell that I was considering—there were plenty of other options for refilling my hand available. **Thoughtcast** is the traditional affinity card-drawing card, but other options were contenders as well, especially the artifact-loving **Thirst for Knowledge**.

I also wrote down black and blue cards that played to the strengths of the colors—countermagic, creature kill, and discard—just in case I wanted to run a more utility-based effect for the last few slots of the deck.

Countermagic and Creature Kill

Delay (.5)
Force Spike
Mana Leak
Remand (.75)
Smother (.5)
Spell Snare (.75)
Spite/Malice
Sudden Death

Discard

Cabal Therapy (3.5)
Duress (.33)

Lobotomy (2.5)
 Persecute (.5)
 Shimian Specter (2)

Last, but not least, I had some general utility cards that would either buoy my artifact count in play, or play well with early artifact effects. For instance, **Trinket Mage** can not only fetch up **Ornithopter**, but it can also tutor up the right color of artifact land.

Utility

Aether Spellbomb
 Conjurer's Bauble
 Erayo, Soratami Ascendant (5.5)
 Mishra's Bauble
 Trinket Mage
 Welding Jar

Plenty of great options, right? Well, when I started to puzzle out which cards I'd like to put together to mesh Affinity and Ninjas, I had a nagging feeling in the back of my head... Why just stop at putting two popular themes together? I had seen one other black-blue contender from the past that might work as the be-all, end-all for throwing a ton of eggs against the wall and seeing how many omelets you make at once:

Psychatog

Psychatog (2.5)

So important that he gets his own heading (at least I'm assuming **Psychatog** is a he; for all I know **Psychatog** is genderless. I don't ask those sorts of questions of mythological beasts that can bite my head off). I'm already playing black and blue—I already have some card-drawing elements available for the deck. I want to be able to give my creatures evasion (and making a creature too big to block counts—often people won't block an early 'Tog out of fear of trading a card in hand for a creature of theirs on board, allowing me to easily Ninja creatures out). In fact, the decision to include **Psychatog** led me to reexamine some of my earlier choices.

If I was going to want to get extra cards into my graveyard, plus give all of my creatures evasion, why not pair **Looter il-Kor** with **Psychatog** and **Wonder**? The Looter is a perfectly good evasive attacker that works well with trading late-game artifact lands for more useful spells, plus it works well for Ninja action, and fills the graveyard for **Psychatog**. **Wonder** allows all of my guys to attack in the air, plus it can be fed to **Psychatog**.



In the end, here's the first version of the deck I ended up with:

Ninjafinnatog, Version 1		
Main Deck 60 cards		
4 Ancient Den	2 Brass Gnat	4 Cranial Plating
4 Darksteel Citadel	4 Frogmite	4 Springleaf Drum
4 Dreadship Reef	4 Looter il-Kor	4 Thoughtcast
4 Seat of the Synod	1 Mistblade Shinobi	
4 Vault of Whispers	3 Myr Enforcer	12 other spells
20 lands	4 Ninja of the Deep Hours	
	4 Ornithopter	
	3 Psychatog	
	1 Throat Slitter	
	2 Wonder	
	28 creatures	

What really struck me about the deck was just how amazingly synergistic three seemingly disparate elements (Ninjas, Affinity and **Psychatog**) turned out to be:

Ornithopter and **Brass Gnat** work to boost artifact count for affinity, get out an early Ninja creature, or boost early mana production with **Springleaf Drum**.

Cranial Plating works well with the affinity mechanic (since both want lots of artifacts in play) and serves for a quick kill on any number of the evasion creatures in the deck.

Frogmite and **Myr Enforcer** are traditional affinity creatures, and work both as beatdown, and to fuel the artifact count for **Cranial Plating**.

Ninja of the Deep Hours, **Throat Slitter** and **Mistblade Shinobi** are the ninjas of the deck. **Ninja of the Deep Hours** is pretty much the best ninja currently in print, as it is a card-drawing machine that comes down as early as turn two (and often will, since I can often drop **Brass Gnat**, **Ornithopter** or **Frogmite** on turn one).

Wonder, as mentioned earlier, allows me to give all of my guys flying, or to fuel **Psychatog**.

Psychatog is a guy who can push through for my ninjas, work off of cards discarded to *Looter il-Kor*, and benefits from extra cards drawn by *Thoughtcast*.

Springleaf Drum fuels affinity, gives me something to do with early creatures (nothing like an opening draw of artifact land, *Ornithopter*, *Springleaf Drum*, tap the *Ornithopter* and *Drum* to play *Frogmite*), and helps fix the mana in a deck without many strictly Bback or blue mana sources.

I decided to start my mana base with sixteen artifact lands (*Seat of the Synod*, *Vault of Whispers* and *Darksteel Citadel* were shoo-ins. *Ancient Den* is interchangeable with any other artifact land—I just needed four more, and these were slightly cheaper than the more-played *Great Furnace* or *Tree of Tales*), and four *Dreadship Reef*. I choose the Reef because I've often seen games decided by moving around *Cranial Plating* using the sometimes-forgotten ability to pay $\{B\}$ to attach *Cranial Plating* to a different creature. I wanted to be able to build up a lot of Black mana to move around a *Plating* (or multiple *Platings*) a few times to get around blockers and creature-killing effects.

Notice something else about the deck? After putting most of the cards together, I came to realize that my deck was just about rare-free! I debated putting in *Glimmervoid*, but in the end I decided that I was going to see how the deck worked first without any rare cards whatsoever. In fact, the total breakdown of the deck was:

46 commons (100% of them were one-tenth of a ticket or less)
14 uncommons (2.5 each for *Psychatog*, .5 each for *Wonder*, .2 for *Dreadship Reef*, .25 for *Ornithopter*, .1 for *Throat Slitter*)
Total cost of Ninjafinnatog: A whopping 15 tickets, at most.

Eager to see if this mish-mash of a deck would do well, I electronically shuffled up and made my way to play some games online!

Game 1: Petermanna (Milling Deck)

I mulligan from a one-land hand to a five-land hand. He drops first-turn and second-turn *Howling Mines*, and follows them by using *Innocent Blood* to kill my first two creatures. I get down *Frogmite*, *Brass Gnat* and *Looter il-Kor*, with *Cranial Plating* on the *Frogmite*. He drops *Ghostly Prison* and double *Mesmeric Orb*, but I can survive being milled for nearly a dozen cards a turn in exchange for swinging in twice for 10.

Record: 1-0

Game 2: The_CommonMan (Four-Color "comes into play" creatures)

He drops *Niko-Onna* and *Viridian Shaman*, plus a lot of mana fixing and a *Sword of Fire and Ice*. I get second-turn and third-turn *Ninja of Deep Hours*—and then throw them both away with *Wonder* because I don't have an *Island* in play. Oops! Well, I eventually get *Psychatog*, throw down *Looter il-Kor*, and have *Ornithopters* left to block his last *Sworded* creature (he can't attack without dying to the "Tog"). I then draw *Cranial Plating* off of *Thoughtcast*, and win the game.

Record: 2-0

Well, that'll teach me to read the card! After years of playing with *Wonder* in blue decks, I had totally forgotten that you need to control an *Island* to give all your creatures flying (once *Wonder* is in your graveyard, of course). I had a choice of either killing *Wonder*, or getting some *Islands* into the deck. I decided to go with the *Island* route—I really liked having *Wonder* in the deck, and (based on the first two games) I could use a little blue-mana loving early in the game for *Ninjas* and *Thoughtcast*.



Ninjafinnatog, Version 2		
Main Deck		
60 cards		
2 <i>Ancient Den</i>	2 <i>Brass Gnat</i>	4 <i>Cranial Plating</i>
4 <i>Darksteel Citadel</i>	4 <i>Frogmite</i>	4 <i>Springleaf Drum</i>
2 <i>Dreadship Reef</i>	4 <i>Looter il-Kor</i>	4 <i>Thoughtcast</i>
4 <i>Island</i>	1 <i>Mistblade Shinobi</i>	12 other spells
4 <i>Seat of the Synod</i>	3 <i>Myr Enforcer</i>	
4 <i>Vault of Whispers</i>	4 <i>Ninja of the Deep Hours</i>	
20 lands	4 <i>Ornithopter</i>	
	3 <i>Psychatog</i>	
	1 <i>Throat Slitter</i>	
	2 <i>Wonder</i>	
	28 creatures	

Out: 2 *Dreadship Reef*, 2 *Ancient Den*

In: 4 *Island*

Game 3: bigjimm77 (Black-Blue control)

I get a ridiculous draw:

Turn 1: **Ornithopter**, **Vault of Whispers**.

Turn 2: **Island**, **Ninja of the Deep Hours**, replay **Ornithopter**.

Turn 3: **Vault of Whispers**, play another **Ninja**, replay **Ornithopter**, **Springleaf Drum**, **Frogmite**, **Thoughtcast**.

Turn 4: He hits me with discard, making me drop **Wonder**. That's that, folks!

Record: 3-0

Game 4: i11winner (Soldiers)

I get down early guys with double **Cranial Plating**, and knock him down to 6. He drops **Major Teroh** and DOUBLE **Intrepid Hero**, plus a **Loyal Sentry**! This leads us to a stand-off, where I can't make my guys big enough to attack, and he can't swing into me for fear of death. He drops a couple more flying creatures and follows them with **Noble Purpose**. I get down **Dreadship Reef**, and build up four counters. This allows me to swing with four guys (**Psychatog**, **Frogmite**, **Brass Gnat** and **Ninja of the Deep Hours**) and keep my guys alive by moving **Cranial Plating** around depending on which creature he targets with each **Intrepid Hero**. Since any contact I have at this point is lethal, I end up getting his **Intrepid Heros** and **Loyal Sentry** off the board, along with a **Gustcloak Savior**.

On later turns, he continues to drop Soldiers such as **Aven Brigadier** and **Daru Warchief**. We trade creatures one-for-one, with him getting up to 30-something life, and me getting a third **Cranial Plating** on the board. Finally, after a long game of trading, I land a **Looter il-Kor** onto the board with triple-playing, doing nearly forty damage in one swing.

Record: 4-0

Game 5: crisis909 (White-Geen "comes-into-play" creatures)

I get down a second-turn **Looter il-Kor**, and he drops **Saffi Eriksdotter** and **Civic Wayfinder**. I turn **Looter il-kor** into **Mistblade Shinobi**, returning **Saffi** to his hand (and replaying the **Looter** after combat). He drops **Masked Admirers**, and I drop **Cranial Plating** and **Springleaf Drum**, use my **Shinobi** to pay for the equip cost, and swing for 6 with my **Looter**. He attacks with both of his guys and follows with **Saffi** and **Eternal Witness**. I draw another **Cranial Plating**, and swing in for the win.

Record: 5-0

Game 6: ijourneyman (Black-Red Control)

He advertises his deck as being more competitive. I get a first-turn **Springleaf Drum**, a second-turn **Frogmite**, a third-turn **Cranial Plating**, and have to deal with him playing **Burning Wish** for **Granulate**. I drop **Myr Enforcer**, knock him down to 6, and drop a second **Cranial Plating** after his **Granulate** to win.

Record: 6-0



Game 7: mico_wr (Niz-Mizzet / Curiosity)

mico_wr comments that this deck is based off of my old [Izzet Pinball deck](#) from back in 2006—it's good to see someone enjoying one of my more favorite decks I've done for this column! Unfortunately, mico_wr gets stalled on two mana (despite **Remanding** two straight spells), which allows me to maximize use of **Ornithopter** and **Springleaf Drum**. I am able to ninja out creatures, cast **Thoughtcast** after the attack, and squeeze out maximum use of all my mana each turn. This leaves me with **Ninja of the Deep Hours**, **Looter il-Kor** and **Myr Enforcer** on the board, with a **Remanded Psychatog** in hand when mico_wr is forced to concede.

Record: 7-0

Game 8: Angel of Ruin (Black-White Control)

I get down a first-turn **Ornithopter** and **Springleaf Drum**, and follow them with **Thoughtcast** into another **Drum**. My third turn, I get **Ninja of Deep Hours** and **Cranial Plating**, but lose one to a trade with **Shrieking Grottesque** and lose the other to **Mortify**. I still am able to drop out **Frogmite**, **Myr Enforcer** and **Psychatog** the following turn (thanks to **Springleaf Drum** providing the black mana!), and he is only able to answer with **Hypnotic Specter**, allowing me to finish him off in one swing.

Record: 8-0

Game 9: mmcb6102 (Thallids)

He drops **Thallid** on turn one and turn two. I have first-turn **Brass Gnats** and follow them with **Ninja of the Deep Hours**. He builds up an army with **Fists of Ironwood**, and then convokes up **Deathspore Thallid**—but accidentally targets it with itself, allowing me to hit him for 12. This pretty much spells game over, although, in my defense, he was going to target my **Brass Gnat** with his first activation, and I had a **Ninja of Deep Hours** to swap it for (he did this after blocks).

Record: 9-0

Game 10: Rukh Toe Ken (Mono-Blue Control)

I get a first-turn **Gnat**, but I don't have blue until the third turn, thanks to only drawing a **Dreadship Reef**. This is still fast enough, as I can drop **Ninjas** in consecutive turns, drawing a concession.

Record: 10-0

Game 11: Sprngpilot (Demons)

He uses Demons with changelings, which is kind of cool! I drop a first-turn **Ornithopter** with double **Springleaf Drum**, and he kills it with **Cruel Edict**. I then drop a third-turn **Psychatog**, use it to bring out **Mistblade Shinobi** (returning his **Skeletal Changeling** to hand), and drop down **Myr Enforcer** and 'Tog on the same turn. He gets double **Raving Oni-Slave**, but after I drop **Cranial Plating**, he concedes.

Record: 11-0

Game 12: Darkstalker_77 (Artifacts)

He drops a first-turn **Vault of Whispers** and double **Paradise Mantle**. He doesn't get another land until I have **Looter il-Kor**, **Cranial Plating**, **Ninja of the Deep Hours** and **Ornithopter** on the board, and this allows me to blow past his late-dropped **Myr Retriever** plus **Cranial Plating** of his own.

Record: 12-0

Man, did I have fun playing Ninjaffinatog—even the name is fun to say! The deck was powerful, explosive, cheap to build (look ma, no rares!), and most importantly, an absolute blast to play! It's not as strictly powerful as a dedicated Affinity or **Psychatog** deck, but the threat diversity (not just all artifacts!) is wonderful, and oftentimes my opponents seemed confused (**Ornithopter** followed by **Ninja of the Deep Hours** followed by **Psychatog**, **Ornithopter** and **Frogmite**? What is going on here?) because the deck takes the best cards from several other decks, and throws them into one big pie.

Ninjaffinatog—the Extended deck of choice for when you want to play every deck at once, but can't make up your mind.

Ninjaffinatog has been a presentation of Building on a Budget, courtesy of Wizards of the Coast and Ben Bleiweiss. Playing Ninjaffinatog may cause your head to explode with budgety goodness. Play at your own risk.

Ben

*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by StarCityGames.com, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.*



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