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BIRTH OF A PRODIGY

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The 2002 *Magic* Invitational starts today so I thought now would be a fine time to tell the story of last year's card. The story begins in Capetown, South Africa, where Kai Budde [Tinkered](#) out a [Jeweled Bird](#) to [win the deciding third game](#) of the deciding fifth match of a marathon finals against Dan Clegg.

Kai was fresh off his team's (first) win at the Team Pro Tour and the Invitational gave Kai one of the few meaningful titles that he had not yet won. It also signaled the beginning of the end of Jon Finkel's reign as "Best Player in the World." When I was asked around that time what Kai had to do to finally supplant Jon as the consensus best-player-who-ever-played I joked "win New Orleans" (which was the very next Pro Tour). He did. And then he won Player of the Year (for a third time -- no one else has won twice), and then he won German nationals, and then the World Team Championship, and then he repeated as Team PT champion, notching his 6th PT win (no one else had won two, except for Budde's teammate Dirk Baberowski, who now has three.) He now has more career earnings than Finkel, too, and the coronation is complete.



The point of this digression is that when most people tell the story, the Invitational is a big part of it. If you look at the list of Invitational winners, it includes pretty much all the greatest players in the history of the game: Olle Råde, Darwin Kastle, Mike Long, Chris Pikula, Jon Finkel, Kai Budde. Kai *deserved* the honor of getting to make his own card and it's symbolic of much more than just his ability to top-deck a [Tinker](#) when he needed it.

Interestingly, Kai won't be repeating as Invitational champion because school commitments prevent him from attending this year's event. That should make for a wide-open field as 16 of the best 17 players in the world vie for their own slice of *Magic* immortality.

Meanwhile, Kai's card just came out in *Onslaught*: [Voidmage Prodigy](#). The card Kai originally submitted was broken right in half:

Wisedrafter's Will

U

Enchantment

Opponents play with their hands face-up.

U, sacrifice Wisedrafter's Will: Draw a card.

UU, sacrifice Wisedrafter's Will: Counter target spell.



The idea of a "Seal of Counterspell" was actually kind of cool, but it needed to cost more than this. It also didn't need two other abilities randomly tacked onto it.

Any of you who were playing Limited back when [Wandering Eye](#) was around probably remember how annoying it could be when hands were face-up all the time and players would take forever to calculate what the right play was. The worst part about having all the information you could ever want is that you feel compelled to not just use it, but find some clever way to

really take advantage of it. Anyway, R&D now tries not to print many permanent effects that reveal other players' hands. A one-shot is ok, because the mystery sneaks back into the game one draw phase later, but permanent hand revealing effects are something we frown upon.

Meanwhile the ability to "cycle" Wisedrafter's Will for an extra card seemed like all it was doing was adding more power to an already too powerful card. The real essence of the card, we thought, was a standing counterspell, rattling its tail and telling the opponent not to mess with you.

Taking a step backwards, if you look at all the previous Invitational winners' cards, every single one of them is a creature. After he won, a bunch of players told Kai that it would be cooler if he made a creature. Getting to attack with yourself is pretty cool plus then he gets to *be* the card rather than just appear in the art. Over in R&D we

were already working on *Onslaught* and we knew the set was going to be all about the creatures. We're not opposed to the idea of some Invitational winner making a non-creature someday, but *Onslaught* seemed like the worst possible time for that because the set was all about the creatures. Our tribal theme almost demanded that we make Kai a Wizard.

One of the tricks we came up with during the development of *Onslaught* was that we could take effects that would normally only apply to the creature itself (like the regeneration ability of [Drudge Skeleton](#), the [Firebreathing](#) of random-dot-Goblin, or the sacrifice-to-gain-life ability of [Bottle Gnomes](#)) and expand the ability so it applied to any creature that shared a creature type with the relevant card. Thus we could give each color its normal assortment of cards and abilities, but at the same time we got to print a bunch of tribal cards that would make people card about creature types when they were playing with them. You can see this philosophy in evidence on [Ravenous Baloth](#), [Goblin Taskmaster](#), [Boneknitter](#), and others like them.

It occurred to me almost immediately that we could use the same strategy on Kai's card. We were already seriously considering turning it into a creature. Like I said before, there's no rule that Invitationalist cards must be creatures, but for *Onslaught* we really wanted it to be a creature. We thought about having a creature that sacrificed itself to counter a spell, but when I suggested having it sacrifice any Wizard (and be a Wizard), everyone immediately agreed that seemed perfect for the set.

We knew it needed some other ability in addition to just counterspelling, and Kai's original card gave us several to choose from, but we thought it would be better to use the other cool new mechanic of the set: morph. It isn't the most exciting morph card in the set since often you'd prefer to just play it face-up, but simply having a card that was good enough to play anyway that also randomly has morph means there's an extra element of mystery added to every other morph card we print. For example, if [Voidmage Prodigy](#) didn't have morph and your mono-blue opponent plays a face-down creature in a constructed tournament, you know it's probably a [Quicksilver Dragon](#). But in actuality it could be a "Budde" instead. In addition to merely being another good morph card and thus adding to the bluffing potential of the mechanic, Kai's card is also sometimes a nice surprise. It takes UUU, but sometimes you'll nail your opponent's crucial spell just when he wasn't expecting it.

For quite a while we actually tested a version of Kai's card that could "[Dismiss](#)" spells for 1UU (plus sacrificing a Wizard). That is, counter target spell and draw a card. In the end, that version was simply too good. Once you started countering stuff, you drew into more Wizards and your opponent could never slog through all of them. We then settled on simply countering spells for the iconic price of UU.

Of course, I still needed to talk to Kai about the changes to his card. That happened at Pro Tour - New Orleans (and then I updated him again at PT San Diego). By then he had warmed up to the idea of having his card be a creature, but he wanted to make sure it was a good one. His real wish, he explained, was to have one that was good enough to play in Extended, that way people would be playing with his card for more than just 2 years. I couldn't really tell him about the tribal theme of *Onslaught*, or about morph, but I could assure him that it was quite a good creature. He pushed for us to make it 2-power for 2-mana, that way it would actually attack aggressively enough to be relevant, and after playtesting we agreed with him.

All in all I'm really happy with the way the card's mechanics turned out. I think it's exactly the right creature to print in *Onslaught* and I think it's going to see plenty of play for plenty of years. Wizard decks including [Voidmage Prodigy](#) and [Patron Wizard](#) terrorized our Future Future League from time to time and [Voidmage Prodigy](#) is also quite playable on its own. I particularly like the way you can use Budde's card to sacrifice [Finkel](#) or [Pikula](#) or even [Råde](#).

As far as the art goes ... I'm not going to comment.



So who's going to get to make a card for "Bacon?" We'll find out this weekend, and this year it's a lot easier for you to watch the Invitational than it has ever been before. This year the event is being held on *Magic Online*. Click [here](#) to find out how to watch the

event itself and click [here](#) if you just want to read the usual coverage on the Sideboard.

Last Week's Poll:

What's your favorite Goblin card from Onslaught?

Goblin Sharpshooter

1209

34.0%

Skirk Fire Marshal

615

17.3%

Goblin Piledriver

412

11.6%

Festering Goblin

229

6.4%

Sparksmith

224

6.3%

Goblin Pyromancer

136

3.8%

Reckless One

130

3.7%

Brightstone Ritual

103

2.9%

Embermage Goblin

100

2.8%

Skirk Commando

92

2.6%

Cabal Slaver

86

2.4%

Goblin Sledder

79

2.2%

Goblin Machinist

55

1.5%

Airdrop Condor

52

1.5%

Goblin Burrows

29

0.8%

Total

3551

100.0%

I accidentally left [Skirk Prospector](#) (and a few others) off the list, and several people emailed me to tell me it was their favorite, but these results are fairly lopsided so I don't think that affected the final outcome.

Randy may be reached at latestdevelopments@wizards.com.

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