

Zvi's experience at this year's Invitational

The Future is Bright

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This was my third Invitational. My first Invitational mattered a lot to me, and I went all out. I worked on all the constructed formats, worked out a deal with Neutral Ground to get the cards I'd need to play Vintage. I had a great new build for Standard of an Accelerated Blue deck, a Keeper deck in Vintage I'd done a lot of work on and a Block deck I had a lot of faith in with Awakening. This was the All-Star game and no one was going to take me out and call it a tie after eleven innings! I was making my own **Magic** card. When I came back the next year, I managed to crash and burn, finishing dead last to invoke "The Curse". Most Invitationalists go to the event to have a good time but they all share at least one goal that goes all the way back to the very first Invitational: Please don't let me finish last.

The Curse is well known to participants in the Invitational and around the Pro Tour circuit. Like all curses it began life as an odd coincidence and then grew sufficiently improbable enough to get its name, first "The Invitational Curse" and now simply "The Curse". The first person to invoke it was Steven O'Mahoney Schwartz. After finishing last at the Invitational, he went on to win a draft Pro Tour on the Queen Mary and everyone noted that he had gone from last place to first. The next year Gary Wise finished last and went on to win the Team Pro Tour as part of Potato Nation and a legend was born. When I was the last place finisher for the next Invitational and went on to win in Tokyo that legend was solidified. The next last place finisher would go on to get a second place but miss his chance to win outright, and Pikula's failure last year is blamed on his being so careless as to not attend any Pro Tours.

I suspect that The Curse might be more than just a coincidence. If you can get to the Invitational, it means you are a great **Magic** player. You've made a name for yourself. When that player finishes last, it gets them fired up. I told myself that I was better than that! It was time to show everyone else that I did indeed know how to serve the beatdown and draft the booster, and later that same year I took the top prize at Tokyo. When I made the top eight in Chicago, it was jokingly suggested that I not win - why waste the curse when I could cash in this top eight and then win another Tour later? No one wants to finish last, but once you already have you might as well make the most of it.



This one was a lot more important to me than my second time because I've had to give up two previous invitations. Two years ago I was set to go to South Africa when I fell violently ill. I had trouble getting out of bed for two weeks, and somehow the idea of going to South Africa seemed not to be a good idea. I'd kept track of every Pro Tour point in the race to qualify and now I couldn't go. The good news was that I got to send Scott Johns in my place. Scott had been my number one testing partner on multiple teams for years by then, and since then has gone on to be the Editor of this site. Last year was another heartbreaker. The tournament was held at Wizards of the Coast, which to me is actually a far more exotic and exciting place to go than previous locations like Australia, Malaysia and South Africa. Alas, real life got in the way.

I'd just gotten myself a job as a high school teacher and couldn't take the time off to go. Or at least that's what I thought before I started teaching. Thrust into the classroom with almost no preparation by a system that doesn't know how to prepare its teachers, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown two weeks later. I am thankful for the lesson both about the job and about myself, and left having done what I hope was minimal damage to our nation's youth. Mike Pustilnik is now attempting to transition from **Magic**: the Gathering to become a High School teacher and I wish him all the best. He's a good man in for one hell of a challenge. By the time I realized I would indeed be able to go, my replacement had already accepted so I missed again. When I was voted in this year - and thank you for that, by the way - I wanted to make the most of it. I would finally get my third chance, and I'd even get some payoff for all those *Seventh Edition* booster drafts I did on **MagicOnline**.

I left for the airport just after six on Sunday morning carrying a backpack, a suitcase and after stopping by the office multiple cases of product. As a developer for a rival product the **Magic** Invitational is a rather strange event. I'm here to promote **Magic**, but I also want to get the word out about Cyberpunk and that led to checked baggage full of what we in the business refer to as shwag. It's good to get shwag, but it's even better to give shwag. When you're promoting, every day is Christmas. Only those paying manufacturer's cost know the true joy of giving. My flight is on United, the airline of Wizards of the Coast. I probably should be allied with United at this point since I've moved to a United hub, but for now I'm still with Continental but I finally decided to be slightly less lazy this time and signed up for a new frequent flier program at the airport. Don't ever pass up a chance to pick up miles - I feel like an idiot for all the ones I missed early in my career.

I arrived at Los Angeles on schedule around eleven in the morning. This is odd you see because that meant that I had a full twenty-one hours before anyone was scheduled to do anything official. If you add to that the fact that I was not scheduled to take part in the daylong event on Monday, it means that I had a full thirty hours before I had to start getting ready to go to the first official event. It gave me a chance to walk around the area and see the pseudo-famous Sunset Boulevard. I am told it is both historic and dynamic, famous for many historical things that I know nothing about and that have to do with music and movies rather than anything of redeeming social value.

Hollywood in particular is a strange place. Like every other place I've been, at its core it is the same as every other city. People live here, they eat, they go to work, they go out to have a good time. Same old story, same franchise chains and roads and houses and hotel rooms and convention centers. The tourist attractions switch around like tweaks on popular **Magic** cards, and one museum or cathedral passes into another as you pass from Lay Waste to Stone Rain to Molten Rain to Pillage. It all depends on how you look at it. From the viewpoint of the cynical traveler that I had grown to

become it was all the same, but if you stop and look at the details and appreciate them you can find that same limitless variety. It is not about the broad strokes. It is about the details. It's about the gorgeous view of a Hollywood hill as I look out this window, or even better it's about the gorgeous view as the populace walks by.



Actors come here to make their name as do others of similar ilk, and those who follow them follow. At the end of this chain of events lies a place where all the men are strong, all the women are good looking and all the talent is above average and only working their day jobs temporarily. Interspersed with this common wonder is the uncommon wonder, the specter of celebrity. Those of us who never have to drive share the same thought: I'm starting to like this town. I have now been in this area twice recently and I think I might just be ready for it. After walking around, finishing reading Neil Stevenson's *Diamond Age* (it's a great book but I didn't like the ending) and watching *Men In Black II* (which is an awful movie but kept me laughing the whole time) Justin Gary arrived and the two of us went to an old friend's house to have dinner and watch the finale of *Survivor*. I think a true **Magic** player should love *Survivor* and I think that learning any game, even something that radically different from ours, can help make you a better **Magic** player. After that we headed back because Justin needed to be up bright and early the next morning.

Justin got up the next morning because he was required to. I got up the next morning because that's what I do. I get up in the morning. I'm probably the only game developer in history who designs more than half his cards between eight and ten in the morning. When I tested decks for the Pro Tour with the Dutch and the Germans I wasn't just looking for the best teammates. I was looking for someone who would be awake. At eight fifteen I was downstairs together with those who had been summoned there, just so I could hang out and chat before heading out to a diner for breakfast.

What we had all been summoned for was something called Media Training. From the wrong angle, this sounds evil. All right, from any angle it sounds evil. Wizards puts the top players in a room and teaches them exactly what to say when in front of a camera, tape recorder or microphone to help infect a new generation with the **Magic** bug. Welcome to the spin zone. Instead of being ourselves, we would learn to represent exactly that which the big evil heartless Hasbro feels we should be representing. That is exactly what I thought it was at first as well, a place where we would be instructed to spout out the same canned answers, lying and evading questions like a member of the Bush administration. I wanted in just to see how the process worked. This was partly because I wanted to be able to apply it in other contexts, partly because I wanted to help build my name by being one of the game's spokespersons but mostly it was because I hate this kind of media manipulation and I wanted to know how it was done. Remember your Sun Tzu.

I got my chance to find out what it was because of a changed flight. Not knowing about the training, or at least that's his story and he's sticking to it, Nicolai Herzog was not getting in until two in the afternoon and would not be able to participate. Since finding another **Magic** player would involve finding another **Magic** player who was awake at eight in the morning, and if I'm excluded that is virtually an oxymoron, I was able to take his place. What I found was a very pleasant surprise, both in its usefulness and its alignment. It turns out that the right way to handle an interview with the press

is *not* to supply canned answers. The proper approach is to learn to think on your feet and be yourself while thinking strategically. If you try to spout out canned answers you'll come off as stiff and you don't have to be a member of the press to tell when people aren't acting like themselves.

By the end of the day most of us were a lot less nervous around a microphone, knew how to handle the most common questions and interview scenarios and had learned a lot about how to compose ourselves in these types of situations. We catch on fast. One thing I love about **Magic** is I get to keep learning new things all the time, and this was a whole new format. We were out to break it. This group had three potential stars in it. Bob Maher and Justin Gary are old hands at these skills, even though they use them in other contexts, and Maher had done a lot of interviews for **Magic** in the past. They were naturals, and so was Osyp. For composure under fire you can't beat Joe Black.



Osyp, a couple days later at PT SD

Pack Draft and the Auction of the People

That wrapped up around four in the afternoon, leaving three hours before dinner began. For some reason, Justin and I cannot leave well enough alone in these situations and decided to try and figure out a strategy for the night's events. We test for everything, and while we hadn't tested prior to the event any more than anyone else we were on site and that was different. Jordan Berkowitz was interested as well, so he joined us as we looked over the options for the pack draft and the auction draft. The auction's stakes seemed higher, but in the end the pack draft turned out to reward skill more than anyone anticipated.

We talked about the auction first, because it seemed more important and easier to self-destruct in than the pack draft. We looked over [all the decks](#) and studied them. Justin had done something that few others had done and shuffled up the decks, so we had some real information on how some decks ran. In particular he informed us that the Myr deck, which at first glance looks like a good deck, is actually a horrible deck and to be avoided.

One by one we analyzed the decks, then went back and looked at them again. All agreed that the Flying deck was the strongest, but also that it was likely to be so heavily bid on that it would not be worth buying. The Zombie deck looked good but was overrated, unless a lot of players were bidding down to very low life totals. Legacy was far stronger than it looked; some of the seemingly lousy decks were just fine or even quite good. The most important thing was that there were not enough viable decks to go around. At the bottom were about five decks that were to be avoided at almost any cost. If past auctions were any indication, even at seven cards and twenty life they would be hard pressed to win any games.

"The key was to avoid the panic point where players start paying way too much for decks..." I could go into detail about what we thought about all seventeen decks and what ended up happening, but I think that would best be saved for another day. The decks we wanted most were Fun With Tokens, Swing When You're Winning and theoretically Flying. There was also a solid chunk of decks like the

Blue/Black Grave Pact deck, the Library deck and Legacy that seemed solid. As long as you got out with a reasonable deck at a reasonable price, you were fine. The key was to avoid the panic point where players start paying way too much for decks in the middle of the power curve to avoid the total disaster that awaits them at the end of the auction. Another interesting phenomenon is that almost everyone instinctively leads with a deck they feel is among the strongest of those remaining rather than trying to trap others into taking other decks and taking them out of the auction having overpaid for mediocrity. I tried that by naming the Zombie deck, which we thought was overrated, but it turned out not to be.

The pack draft was a far more abstract concept. No matter what you did, you would effectively be opening a Sealed Deck since three boosters offer the same number of cards as a starter deck if you don't count the basic lands. Five boosters therefore equals a Sealed Deck. There were six packs of everything but *Seventh* and *Eighth Edition* and seven packs each of the two basic sets. I thought about what the best approach to such a format would be, and hit upon what I still believe is its core quickly. You're opening a Sealed Deck, so you have three goals. Goal one is to get as high a power level as possible, since some packs are stronger than others. Goal two is to pick packs that concentrate their power in the same colors so you have a chance to play as many of your best cards as you can and still have a reasonable mana base. Goal three is to choose packs whose cards have the greatest synergy. Many cards are at their best within their own block and are far less effective in combination with (or playing against) cards from other blocks.

I made a chart of the packs and how strong I felt they were when I was back in Denver. The most obvious strategy is to grab as much of *Torment* and *Scourge* as possible. These two packs are very strong in black, so if you can get five packs between these two sets then you should be set up to have an amazing deck with black as your main color and splash another color depending on what bombs you open. That's a strong play, but it's also an obvious play. I expected too many players to try this approach but I wanted to be on the lookout for it. If there was an opening, I was prepared to take it.

Plan number two was what I developed as my primary plan, Green/Blue. Since *Invasion*, red and black have had a lot of sets in which they are weak in limited and white has been getting the short end of the stick for most of the last decade. There are a lot of packs which are strong in both Blue and Green. Going chronologically, you can get good mileage out of *Invasion*, *Apocalypse*, *Odyssey*, *Judgment* and *Legions* plus either basic set. They are the two strongest colors in *Apocalypse*, especially when playing both and splashing a third. They are the best in *Invasion*, dominant in *Odyssey* where they have half of all the goodies between them and solid in *Judgment* and *Legions*. They are very strong in *Seventh* and solid in *Eighth*. You can also round it out with *Mirrodin* or *Darksteel*, since you can always play artifacts. That gives you a lot of options and most of them are synergetic since the goal of a Blue/Green deck of this type is to assemble a lot of good stuff and cover all your bases while doing one very well. Herzog's Pack Draft deck is a good example of what I was trying for, except without the high end I would hope for.

If you want red you can go for *Planeshift* but I think your real goal is *Onslaught*, which is an amazing set for red and green and where blue is all but dead. The problem is that there aren't enough good packs. You can still take *Seventh* and *Eighth*, which are well-rounded sets with strong high ends but very poor low ends, but after that options are limited. It's not like life was back in the age of *Tempest* or *Mirage*. The final option was White, but with only *Judgment* giving it enough power to

make it worthwhile that was only a wild card option. Green/Blue decks wanted it too, so this plan seemed unlikely to work.

The key was focus. Cards work well within their own blocks. If you took *Odyssey*, you wanted a lot of it and some *Judgment* then to back it up with the few sets that work best in that complex. Even sets in the right colors aren't always going to be good fits as Dirk discovered trying to build his deck on Tuesday morning. If you went for *Mirrodin* and *Darksteel*, you needed to stay that course and the same held true with most other sets. When Bob Maher went for packs he thought he could get at least three of and got triple *Invasion* he was making a strong play and it paid off.



We went out to dinner and I sat in the middle of the table, alternating between the two conversations over time. The meal took almost three hours and the food could have been better – I don't think we would go back there if we got a chance to do the event over again, but it wasn't too bad. Good times and good company are more important than good food and you can't get too angry about that when Wizards is picking up the tab. I had Osyp next to me, and that is both good company and especially good times. Osyp's crusade that night was to get as many people as he could to ride the bull after the drafts.

That's not a euphemism. There was a bull riding tournament that night with a mechanical bull and he was working every angle. By the time we sat down I was ready to do it, not because I thought I would enjoy the event itself but because I would be better for the experience and it would be a wonderful story no matter what happened. There wouldn't even be the need to make anything up. I think the motivation to have good stories to tell should be encouraged.

The auction began at an hour far later than I like to start my **Magic** events. Many **Magic** players like to start drafting well into the evening, but that is not the way I work. There are pitfalls to being the only **Magic** player in the world whose internal clock refuses to budge from Real World Time. The first deck up was the Myr deck, and it went to Finkel for six cards and a low but sane life total. The question was whether that was a sign that our anticipation of the bidding was too conservative or if people just really liked that deck. During preparations, Jordan decided it would be infinitely bad to bid six cards for almost any deck.

Jordan is a man of one very large number and lots of big effects. Infinities are everywhere, both the infinitely good and the infinitely bad. He'll tell you your deck is amazing, he'll tell you your deck is terrible. He might even say he has no idea, but one thing is certain. Once you enter his world, what you're holding is anything but average. It's an exciting place to be, but sometimes I wish Ron Foster (from Wizards Japan) was there to translate more than just Japanese.

Justin and I were planning on being more aggressive, but also figured the bidding would die down. The Flying deck went second for six cards and just ten life, a point at which a five card bid would probably have been a better option. I named the Zombie deck because I expected it to be vastly overbid. The deck is not that strong if everyone starts with seven cards and a lot of life, but what we

did not realize was that this auction was going to be much more competitive and aggressive than we thought it was going to be. We did adjust for that, but not fast enough. Carlos Romao took this deck for six cards and a reasonable life total. That would prove to be an excellent deal.

The Legacy deck came up soon after that as Justin wanted to try and get it. Legacy was a solid deck, but it doesn't take advantage of low life totals and with the average starting at fifteen or so and six cards this deck went down a lot in value and we didn't pick up on that in time. I got out of his way to let him get it rather than because I realized it wouldn't have been a good buy and he got it at what we thought was a good deal but it turned out not to be. I then got into a bidding war over the Token deck, which I lost to Jens when I thought long and hard about bidding five cards and decided not to do it. After that, I bid down to thirteen life to get the Blue/Black deck, a solid creation with a good mana base, good men and remarkable synergies.

The pack draft did not go as I thought it would. I figure most players would pursue similar strategies to the ones we had worked out, even if they had to improvise them, but that turned out not to be the case. With a chance to implement our game plans, our preparation paid off. I got a chance to get a lot of focus and power and I grabbed it. After being in position five for the Auction I was in 12th for the pack draft, which was done as one giant snake. By the time it got to Justin in tenth, no one had



touched *Judgment* or *Odyssey*. *Torment* and *Scourge* were flying off the shelves and *Planeshift* was going to be gone soon, but that just meant that players were after black and red when they shouldn't have been. At least that many of them shouldn't have been going after them at the same time. The Japanese both went after *Mirrodin* block, which I considered a solid plan due to synergy, familiarity and the low color requirements.

When it was my turn, I couldn't pass up the chance. If no one wanted *Judgment*, I could get one pack now and a second pack on the way back. No one but Justin wanted *Odyssey*, which had a lot of natural synergy with *Judgment*, and there was enough for us each to take our own pack and not get in each other's way. I took the first *Judgment* pack and the second on the way back. This is the shoe step of any Rochester style draft. I was the only one pursuing a strategy that could only support one (or at most two) people but was one of the strongest of the format if I could get it alone. The other strategies that were as strong were being broken up as there were fights over *Apocalypse*, *Torment* and *Scourge*. No one was going after *Seventh* or *Eighth Edition* at all, which also made things easier. Those are the easy going packs and without them the fighting becomes that much more intense.

I took the third pack of *Judgment*, then I got the fourth pack. For a little while I had illusions that I might make it a clean sweep and get five packs of the stuff, but Jordan took the fifth away and while I was a little upset on the spot I quickly realized that there was no way I could get the fifth pack. The decision there came down to *Legions* or *Eighth Edition* as that was all that was left. Since *Judgment* is a creature set and has few spells, I decided to try and pick up spells from *Eighth Edition* rather than

head into *Legions* without tribal abilities. I had four JUD and one 8ED, which I considered the best pack combination in the whole draft. We went to sleep right away and I got up at six thirty with the sun, went out to a diner and came back to start day one.

E3 wasn't its true self on the first day as everyone else was still setting up but you could already tell what it was going to be like. Part of that was the others setting up, including the Playboy Mansion exhibit next door, but also because we were warned explicitly about what would happen: It was going to be loud. Very loud. Arrangements being made for ear plugs loud. That was the theory, but for now it was quiet. We didn't have any spectators yet, so we were just having a private tournament in a giant hall that looked a lot like GenCon SoCal did when I came a day early to set up. Since the event was being played on **Magic Online**, the first thing I noticed was naturally the computers as we all sat down to build our Pack Draft decks.



The first thing I noticed about the computers was the keyboards. At the time, I was used to using desktop computers almost exclusively, and had mixed experience with those of laptops. Since then I've gotten used to my laptop, which I'm typing this on now with no trouble at all. These keyboards were something else, about midway between what I'm using now and our Organized Play director's cell phone with a slide-out mini pad for typing text messages. If you were watching the coverage, many times you saw me curse the keyboards in filter-

friendly language. My typing started out as error ridden and finished off our time there as merely not up to my usual standards and slower so I could proofread.

Pack Draft - Deck Construction

Deck construction for the pack draft took a while to get started because we had to work out some technical problems before we could start, and in my deck construction procedure I experienced a technical difficulty of my own but I'll get to that later. I was playing with four *Judgment* packs, so I knew I would have to play white or green as my primary color. The deck I wanted most out of these packs was the White/Blue one, but White/Green was a close second and splashing red or black was a definite possibility for cards like Arcane Teachings and Treacherous Vampire.

When I saw my cards, the first thing that leapt out was that my blue had received the shaft. I had no good reasons to play it, so that meant I was most likely going to use a Green/White base. That base seemed strong, and I splashed a Swelter and an Arcane Teachings out of red. The resulting deck seemed strong, but I had never played Sealed across different blocks so it was hard to judge. I knew that this would have been a very good Sealed or draft deck in *Odyssey* Block. Meanwhile, reports are streaming in from other players and it is clear that many players who had tried to mix cards that don't mix well had ended up with poor decks.

Pack Draft - Play

If you want to watch any of the Invitational games, you can check them out on **Magic Online** in replays, which is one of the real pluses to holding the Invitational this way. Those of you who are familiar with my writing know I could write endlessly about my fifteen matches or those of my competitors, and at some point in the future I might do that but here I've decided to let the games mostly speak for themselves. The pack draft had a few scary moments and I never got to kill multiple creatures with Swelter despite casting it several times but there was no point in these games that I feel the need to note here.

The most interesting thing that happened in these three rounds came during the third one when I looked at my sideboard and glanced over at the gold card section. There it was staring *Oops!* me in the face: Mirari's Wake! And here I was playing Green/White with (among other things) a freaking Planar Portal thanks to *Eighth Edition*. Wow did I feel silly. My strategy was even better than I thought it was, I was just a moron. Well, ok, already got the memo, moving on. I didn't draw the Wake the rest of the match once I boarded it in, but I was still able to pull the sweep with my *Judgment* deck.

A bunch of players online noted the similarities between taking *Judgment* packs in the pack draft and the strategy I used at Pro Tour: Nice known as the White Gambit: I let it be known that I would draft white every draft, which was the weakest color, on the theory that no one would be silly enough to fight me for it knowing I was going to force it even if it wasn't there. And by "let it be known", I'm not kidding around. I wore a white T-shirt with a picture of Teroh's Faithful and a big circle around the casting cost with "Hint hint..." scrawled in. I still think that it was a very strong strategy for that tournament, or for future formats where it is appropriate, but my execution was lacking. In my first draft the strategy worked for me but could have gone better if I'd taken it to the next level, and in the second draft my failure to find that next level ended my tournament. What I should have done was announced white, forced blue and then drafted white later on in due course, but a further discussion would be beyond the scope of this report. I will note that if it proves appropriate, I am eager to try it again...

Auction of the People

The deck I drafted was a solid creation. I fought for it because there were not many worthwhile decks left and this one was both solid and had the potential for some sick things to happen in the right situation. You can win a long game *and* you can get some quick beatdown. Here's the list:

Steelhorn And Blackblood (Anthony Szczudlo)

Simon Watson

There are a lot of very cool things this deck can do with no obvious clunkers. I think the price was fair but I certainly liked my chances. I played against Finkel and the Myr, which was closer than I believe it normally should be but Justin's intel came though and the Myr deck although cool failed to accomplish much. In the next round I faced Carlos and paid dearly for not recognizing how the auction would go. He played out some Zombies and ran me over in ten minutes tops. That left only Bob Maher undefeated, and I faced him in round six. If he won he would take a commanding lead, and if I won I would tie him for the lead, and having beaten him (which is the first tie-breaker at the Invitational) would be in an excellent position going into the second day.

The first two games were blowouts. In one of them I dominated and he never had a chance, and in the other my deck did not function and he rolled over me. It came down to game three. He played an AEther Rift and I had Grave Pact up so I figured I would be fine. All I had to do was keep playing creatures. He kept playing out guys every turn with the Rift, and I rapidly ran out of life to pay to it, but I was having difficulty finding men. I had Spawning Pit too now, so the long game was mine whether he was paying mana or not. As I was stabilizing and then attacking he played Natural Emergence for three more men. It came down to the last draw. If I drew Essence Drain, Death Pulse or any creature except Quicksilver Elemental the game was mine. If I drew anything else, he would kill me. I drew the Elemental, looked down at only one Island and symbolically picked up my cards to end day one.



We thought about drafting then but ultimately decided not to and returned to the hotel. At this point you may notice that I have not said anything about our group's attempts to ride the bull. That's because it didn't happen - Osyp decided it was getting late and he'd rather sleep than take embarrassing pictures that would last a lifetime. Seems like a poor choice to me. This time Justin and I decided to go out, and Nicolai tagged along after we met while waiting for Jordan who didn't come down. We went back to the place with the bull first, although I don't think any of us had any intention of trying it out, but they were closed. That turned out to be good news, because as a way of apologizing we were each given a free drink each at another bar. After we finished those drinks we decided to leave rather than stay for an overpriced dinner when we met another group of five or so Invitationalists downstairs on the way out.

Nicolai suddenly decided that where he wanted to leave before now he wanted to stay, but I asked Justin if he wanted to go somewhere else - this group was too big and I still didn't think this was the place I wanted to go. Justin agreed, and of course in standard logical order Carlos and Osyp went with us and we went back a nice little Irish pub that Justin had been to the night before after much debate, where we ate, drank and talked for a while. After that those who have this sort of game attempted to get into a club of some kind, which resulted in various shenanigans - the two slickest among us (hint: not me) managed to get into one private function but came out afterwards, and after several failures the group decided to call it a night. It was late enough anyway as far as I was concerned.

On day two we had to quickly submit both the card we had designed and our constructed decks. For *Mirrodin* Block there are only two decks worth playing if you don't count variants, Affinity and Red. I don't know red and don't know the mirror, and besides I'm known for the good old AEther Vials and wanted to show them off to the fans. Affinity it was, so I put the four Oxidize into the maindeck and was ready to go. That one was easy.

The more difficult task was Online Extended. Justin had me wanting to run the Red Army and Burning Wish for Pulverize but Online Extended is one block too late for that. I thought about running Affinity, but that wouldn't have been much of a show for the fans. In an attempt to handle both and do something I didn't think others would do, I went with Deed-Psychatog. I built it as quickly as you can build a complicated control deck on the fly. I tried to make it the best it could be but I didn't have enough time to get it right.

Zvi Mowshowitz

MI04 Online Extended Deck

If you look at my decklist I made a few mistakes. The biggest one was that I forgot about Troll Ascetic and therefore needed to have access to three or four Chainer's Edict to deal with that. The other problem was that I didn't have enough artifact removal in the sideboard. I had five, but given the way things panned out I could have used several more. I turned out to be far too concerned with certain control battles rather than the more likely outcomes.

My card was something I had given a lot of thought to. I wrote an article about the development of this and my other Invitational cards for Brainburst if you have a premium membership. The short version is that I was looking for solutions for the coin flip problem. In limited you would rather go first but it is close enough that the coin flip is no big deal. In constructed I strongly disagree with anyone who says that the card you give up is fair compensation. Going first in today's Standard is vitally important in most match-ups. I came up with the idea of a land that could be played on the opponents' turn if you were going second. If you drew it, which you would do a little under half the time with four copies, you would now effectively be taking the first turn and still have the extra card. If you had such a card, would you rather go first or second?

To balance the card I knew I wanted it to be bad when you went first but very good if you went second. The cleanest way to simulate the game asking if a player went first was to count the lands in play. If you have more land in play, you went first. If you have less, you went second. If the numbers are equal, wait for the next land. Basing things on land count also creates decisions, and I love it when players are forced to make decisions, especially decisions they're not used to making. Therefore I decided that would be the condition that let you play the card. If you have less land in play than your opponent, you can play the land on their turn. If not, you'll have to play it on yours. This also prevented you from taking advantage of this in multiples, which could easily become abusive if I wasn't careful. I later adjusted the wording to make it function better in multiplayer games.

This land, which at this point I was calling Hall of Justice and was producing white mana, needed a good drawback. Right now it was just a Plains with a side benefit. Coming into play tapped was obviously not a strong enough drawback. Since you could play this land when you fell behind on land I hit upon returning it to hand when you used it thinking that would be a good interaction. You couldn't use it to get ahead, but you could also catch up if you fall behind. That would hopefully promote good **Magic**. The obvious problem now facing the card was someone tapping it and then playing it again right away. Since the card still seemed too strong, I added that it came into play tapped on the opponent's turn. If it was your turn, everyone knows when you can play a land - on the opponent's turn it's not so clear to most players. The card became blue, as I felt blue needed the most help, and I changed the name to the very appropriate Undiscovered Island. When the rules team noted this problem, I fired back that this card comes into play tapped so who cares if players misunderstand? They won't be able to use it. At the Invitational I changed it to just come into play tapped as I felt that this would be more balanced and it was certainly cleaner.

Undiscovered Island

Land

If you control fewer lands than an opponent, you may play Undiscovered Island during that player's turn as though it were your turn.

Undiscovered Island comes into play tapped.

T, Return Undiscovered Island to its owner's hand: Add U to your mana pool.

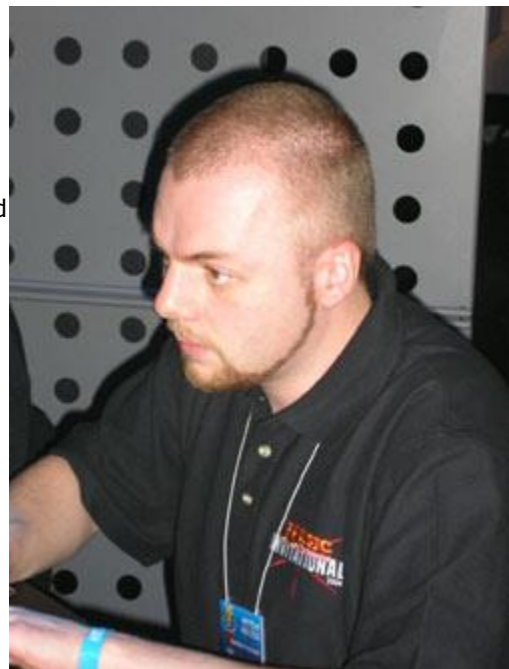
If there was any doubt, this is how you design a Spike card. There is a reason why Spike is losing, and things Spike isn't making decisions about, so he looks for a way to make those decisions and get into situations where he has a chance to use his skill. As you all know, I did not win so I won't be getting my face on this card - if I come back next year I will be submitting an all new design - but that doesn't mean the card cannot get made. Maybe the powers that be will like it. You never know. Maybe they'll even make all five some day.

Eighth Edition Rochester

It's too bad that they didn't record the draft itself because this was by far the most amusing **Magic** action of the tournament. It was also instructive in the art of Rochester Draft in general if not *Eighth Edition* in particular. Before the draft the players reviewed what they knew about the format. Most if not all of us knew that green was the strongest color. My experience comes from doing far, far too many *Seventh Edition* drafts.

I figured this set would reward similar decks, with the biggest change being that a chunk of blue's strength was taken away and given to black. I wanted Blue/Green, the color combination I have the most experience with from *Seventh*, but I was prepared to draft any two colors except white. White is not undraftable, especially in Rochester where you can see if it is open, but I figured that there would be players who would be willing to draft it at least enough. This was similar to my strategy in the pack draft where I figured I would avoid black. The important thing is not the best colors, it's the most underappreciated ones. I quickly realized that green was itching for a fight when the Spider went first in pack one.

I am told in the coverage that Herzog's pick of Slay was a misclick, that he didn't make his pick in time and this was the card he got because of that, but to me it seemed reasonable and pushed home the idea that green was being overvalued. Either way my pick was clear as Aven Fisher was by far the best pick left in the pack. I settled back and waited for pack two, which had both Blaze and Lava Hounds. Finkel of course took Blaze, and given how strong Lava Hounds seemed like it would be in this type of environment I snapped it up. I would have to share the color with Finkel, but so far it looked like I would be able to avoid fighting with either Dirk on my left or Nicolai on my right. The next pack had Wall of Air, which is very strong and kept me on target and then I opened Two-Headed Dragon. After that all I did was stick to my colors. Everyone around me was being nice so I saw no reason not to return the favor. At a table with eight Pros who are even allowed to talk you would think that everyone would get along.



You would be most wrong. The first shot was fired by Justin Gary, who went after Jens by taking green cards in seat eight in front of him. That would seem like a sign for those around them to avoid the color given they didn't have any green cards but never underestimate the will of an inflexible game plan. Gary Wise came roaring in from seat seven, thinking that of course since he was in front of both of them taking green cards for himself would not be a problem. Fire away! Jens tried to get away, but he was caught in the crossfire that comes from players who all want the same thing. Justin fought back and soon the two of them were paying at least as much attention to taking away each other's cards as they did to drafting a deck of their own.



Meanwhile there was another war going on between Finkel and Herzog. Finkel is the most brutally honest man you'll ever meet, and he has a theory of Rochester Draft different from that of most Pros. He believes in taking cards away from other players and he repeatedly wrecked Herzog, ending up with several quality cards in his sideboard. Nicolai got a chance to retaliate by taking away a Wrath of God I passed up, but he decided not to. I wonder if the aura of Finkel being Finkel is what lets him hate cards so often. Either way his is the report I want to read most if he writes one. Look up his past ones in the archive, they're a revelation.

Aaron Forsythe [covered my draft](#) and predicted an easy 3-0. I had what I felt was easily the best deck at the table, and the only one that came close was in the hands of a player I had faced on day one. It was closer than I expected, with the biggest scare coming against Gary Wise when he assembled a steady stream of counters for my key spells, but I pulled all the matches out. There's nothing like sweeping the limited formats to make you wish you'd spent more time thinking about the constructed ones. All three of us at the top of the standings had swept the *Eighth Edition* draft, so it looked like it was going to be a tough tournament to make the finals in.

Mirrodin Block Constructed

I've already noted what I think of *Mirrodin* Block Constructed before *Fifth Dawn*. If nothing else it is most certainly played out. First up was Osyp running a red deck. In game one I got a strong Affinity draw and killed him on turn four. In game two he went after my Vault of Whispers on turn two, ignoring my AEther Vial. Doesn't he know that Vial is just better than a land as long as you have at least one? Wasn't it far more likely I had land in my hand than, say... the other three Vials? What the hell! His explanation was that he wanted to be mana efficient and get his Talisman into play, but either way I was rather frustrated to have three Vials stuck in my hand. For those who think this proves that Vial is bad, I would answer that I would not have been any better off if they had been additional spells. In fact, I would have been far worse off, and my deck does not contain less land than the standard non-Vial build.

It came down to me not finding a Disciple for the longest time and then him drawing a Dragon on one of his last two draws with no other outs. Game three he dropped a Furnace Dragon on schedule and I

had no answer. The match against Dirk was similar. I killed him turn four in game one, he drew Dragon on the last turn one game and had one standard Dragon overrun in another. After that experience, I still would rather be the red deck but I don't think the gap is that large. My last match was against Kibler's Affinity deck which I won via standard procedures.

Online Extended

With one round of block still to go my four remaining opponents were Jorstedt, Kibler, Berkowitz and good old Kai Budde who was fighting like mad to avoid last place. Both Kibler and Berkowitz were playing a deck that without Chainer's Edict I did not think I had a good shot at beating in Extended. It was possible, but I was very much hoping to face one of them in Block where I could face either Kibler's Affinity, which I did face, or even better the green deck of Jordan.



That took us into the last three rounds where I first faced Kai Budde who was running Mind's Desire, another deck I hadn't considered. When I cast Cunning Wish, there was no Stifle in my sideboard to get. Game one my draw was slow and he had no trouble going off. In game two I dropped a third turn Psychatog and a fourth turn Deep Analysis since he had only played one additional mana source so far and the Analysis would put him close to being in range of my Psychatog. Knowing what was

coming he cast a Mind's Desire for four, turned over three irrelevant cards... and then the second Desire. From there it was commentary and to have any chance at all to come back I would have to beat both Berkowitz and Jorstedt. I thought it was over.

I faced Jordan first, but the giant hammer I was expecting never fell. My deck worked the way it was designed to work. In game one he got a Troll Ascetic down and had me on the defensive but then he miscounted and left me with a Psychatog kill in sight, 1 life to zero with no cards in hand or graveyard. I saw it and grabbed it. In game two he doesn't do anything early, I stabilize and start drawing cards. When I find a Tog he scoops.

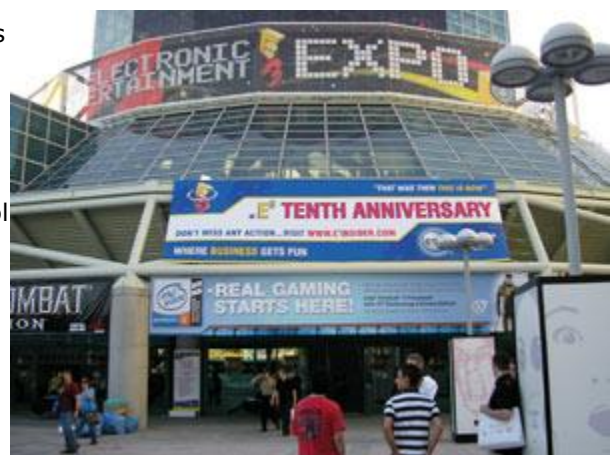
This creates a very strange situation. Four players are still in contention. Bob Maher is guaranteed a slot in the finals while the three of us fight it out for the other slot. Currently I'm one match behind Jorstedt and I'm even with Romao. The first tiebreaker is how you did against those you're in the tie with. If I'm in a tie with just Romao, I lose. If I'm in a tie with Jorstedt that depends on the results of the last round which also means that if I lose to Jorstedt I can't make the finals. So assuming I beat him in the last round, I'll be at least tied with him.

But, if the *three* of us are tied we go to the second tiebreaker, which yields unknown results so while I want Romao to lose I'm in the strange position of wanting Jorstedt to win so that if I beat him we'll be tied. I rather enjoyed that when I realized it. Romao played Maher in the final round and lost, taking him out of the picture, so the right to play in the finals would be decided in the last round between me and Jorstedt. If I win then we're in a tie and I break it because I won head to head. If he wins then he's in second place by a full two wins.

Alas, our little finals was rather anticlimactic. I think the deck I built should be strong against Affinity, especially his version of Affinity (Bob's would have been far harder for me with Cabal Therapy instead of Artifact Mutation) but my draws hiccupped and his came out of the gate roaring. Even if the match-up is good there is no question that his best draws are almost always going to beat me and just like that he was going on to the finals.

A Tour of E3: Style over Substance (The First Rule)

Perhaps I am getting too old, but I don't think that is the primary problem. When **Magic: the Gathering** was invented by Richard Garfield the computer gaming industry was creating a steady stream of amazing, addictive games that kept getting better. I remember spending years on games like Star Control II, Civilization II and Master of Orion. The last game to suck me in like that was Diablo II. I've intentionally stayed away from the MMORPGs, which I call morgues for the same reason I avoid them. If you get into one, you're dead to the world. Back then I subscribed to Computer Gaming World and every issue would have something new for me to get



excited about. I wish I'd been able to go to E3 back then and get as excited as I know I would have been.

I believe that the computer gaming and video gaming industries have fallen into a dark age. We started with Pong, and it was good. We progressed to Ms. Pac-Man, to Super Mario Bros. and on to Civilization. The Nintendo became the Super Nintendo, the Master System became the Genesis and life was good. Then I became a professional **Magic** player, and I started to have less time for games but when I looked around I couldn't find games that I wanted to play like I wanted to play them back then. The morgues I respect, but aside from the first generation C&C and Warcraft II real time strategy is not my cup of tea and even those have nothing on turn-based masterpieces. First person shooters are fun to watch for a few minutes, but the only first person perspective game I've ever enjoyed was Ultima Underworld. Even those games that were in genres I should like I didn't care for, and the few new games I did like were far from the state of the art.

What I think happened was that designers and developers of games lost sight of the substance of their games and the elegance that early games had, instead making their games sparkle. Sparkle is a term that I learned during media training that represents something that is evocative enough to grab someone's attention during an interview. The first example came from Justin Gary, who described the joy of new **Magic** cards as playing a game of chess in which every four months they create new pieces for you to play with. That's a striking image: It has sparkle. It's a certain attitude, and in my opinion a little bit of it goes a long way.

New games are obsessed with how they look and being state of the art, cutting edge creations. The **Magic** booth may have seemed primitive compared to some of the rest of the show, but we were laughing, drafting and having a grand old time. The giant cards we put up didn't look like much compared to the other games, but they were great for those of us who know what they represent. **Magic Online** succeeds in part because it doesn't try to match that sparkle, those graphics and sounds that are the basis of entire games. We couldn't match them if we wanted to, so why try? Functionality is the important thing.

Diablo II is great example of functionality of graphics. This game looks fantastic and you walk around admiring the grand scenery and animations. You get a kick out of how it looks but notice something about that. Every pixel counts. This is the first principle of the future computer gaming Dogma movement. Every pixel must count. When you see something on the ground, its exact features tell you what it is. No space is wasted, and you the graphics of hitting something are also functional. You use the graphics to play the game and tell exactly where you are rather than the other way around. Now compare that to all those three dimensional games where you never know exactly where are or which way you're facing.

Sid Meier said it best, and his steady stream of instant classics was so good that his last name is in the Word spelling databanks. This comes from an old article in Computer Gaming World. He says that one of the keys to making computer games work is to let players have all the fun. You control what happens, you see the gears turning. You don't feel like a helpless spectator who doesn't make any choices. Most games that succeed let the player have the fun; most games that fail do so because the computer had all the fun. That's great for the computer but not so good for you. **Magic** often works the same way. When you make decisions, create things and change the outcome you're having all the

fun - and that's fun! When you feel like you're just a spectator, the game system itself (or your opponent) is having all the fun, and that's no fun at all.

As a result, when we toured E3 in all its glory everything that stood out to me was low tech. There was us at the Wizards booth. There was a great chair downstairs that had built-in controls. There was an exhibit on gaming history. There was even a room for Karaoke Revolution, which is a good idea with some serious design flaws. There was also an amazing little purple ball I'll get to in a minute, but what was most striking were the failures. Everywhere you looked were oversized booths with proportionally oversized booth babes, as if that was somehow going to get everyone to stop and pay attention. Well, all right, it seems to be pretty effective but I don't get it - you can see that stuff anytime but this is E3 man! I must admit that the Playboy bunny that came by to interview O'syp and Justin was rather impressive both in looks and deeds but the best is always impressive - and the game was terrible. Just remarkably awful.

Now for that little purple ball. You can play the Internet version at www.20q.net, but it is somehow much more impressive when confined to a little purple ball. All it is is a program that plays twenty questions and does it very well with just the right amount of computer-generated attitude. That's right, good old "animal, vegetable or mineral" twenty questions. You think of something, it tries to guess it. One by one objects fell to it as it mocked us with lines like "I will ask a few more questions before I win." By the end of the bus ride to San Diego, which included a stop at an In & Out for a monster order beyond measure, I was trying to sleep but the others had become completely obsessed by the little ball. By the end people were going hoarse from all the yelling and laughing.



I think the future is bright. I'm working at my dream job making my own game. **Magic** continues to have new and interesting cards as far as the eye can see. Computer gaming is reaching the point where those who make them are going to soon reach the point where graphics look photorealistic, after which they will have no choice but to return to making actual games like Europa Universals II rather than what they're doing now. My first expansion locks at the end of next week. Life is good.

Before I conclude I want to make one last note. Players at the Invitational used to be required to write tournament reports, but due to a lot of players just turning in reports they'd thrown together because they had to and the availability of the matches on **Magic Online** that procedure has been abandoned. That doesn't mean that they shouldn't be written. The whole point of the Invitational should be about the readers and fans, and writing about it is a great way to give back for the experience. I call upon the other fifteen competitors from the Invitational: Do as I have done.