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Full-ffej Invitational

Bennie Smith
Into the Aether
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As I checked in on the [Magic Invitational coverage](#) day by day, I grew more and more excited for Jeff Cunningham. Not only was he my #1 choice for Scrye magazine's Writer's Pick, but I thought his card design was by far the coolest of the bunch! Of course, I'm letting my bias for cool green utility creatures show, but what's wrong with that?



No offense to eventual champ Antoine Ruel, but I was a little disappointed when Cunningham lost in the finals. Since I'm sure Antoine will be getting plenty of attention in the wake of his victory (perhaps even in this week's BDM column), I thought I'd check in with Jeff and get his thoughts on the **Magic Invitational** and **Magic Online**.

ITA: How did it feel to get selected to the Invitational?

Jeff: After all the mudslinging in the forums it was somewhat bittersweet. Nevertheless, it was a very good feeling. It still hasn't quite sunk in.

ITA: I really liked your [card idea](#). How did you come up with it? Were you trying to accomplish anything in particular with the design? **Jeff:** *Survival of the Fittest* is probably my all-time favorite card (*me too—Bennie*). It just allows for so much creativity in deck design. I thought I could allow for the same creativity, but in different ways - sacrificing rather than discard requires an entirely different approach, and a creature plays much differently than an enchantment. In short, I wanted to "fix" *Survival*, not by neutering it, but by taking another approach.

Other ideas I had were

```
U Seagull 0/1 Flying
T: add 1.
When this dies draw a card.
```

(This would be to **Birds of Paradise** what **Jackal Pup** is to **Savannah Lions**.)

and

```
G Enchantment
G: Discard a creature CMC 2 or less: search for a creature CMC 2 or less
+ put it in hand.
///
BB1 Sorcery
Living Death all CMC 2 or less.
```

(Kind of like a Polly Pocket of a *Survival/Living Death* deck.)

ITA: I know it must have been disappointing to not win it all, but going 12 – 3 against some of the best players in the world (plus Flores) is still impressive. How did you prepare yourself for the event?

Jeff: I think Terry Soh, Gabriel Nassif and I were the only ones that used our stocked Invitational **Magic Online** accounts beforehand. I played a bunch of block with those two (trying Tooth, Goblins, MBC, and Gifts along the way). For the auction, I mostly just discussed the decks with other players, studied the lists, and organized them by preference. I always do MMVs for fun on **Magic Online** so I felt I knew that format like the back of my hand.

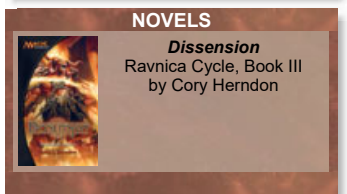
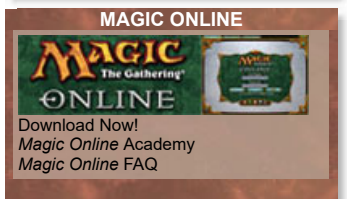
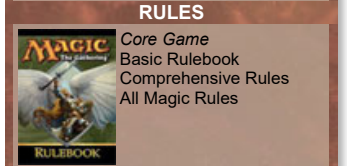
ITA: For the [Auction of the Geniuses](#), did you come in with a certain strategy or deck you were gunning for? Did you playtest any of the decks beforehand? **Jeff:** I wanted to play all of the decks at least once beforehand just to get a feel, but I didn't have a chance. Wish I had, as I would've fought Antoine harder for Ink-Eyes.

As I mentioned earlier, I had studied the lists and organized them by how powerful I thought they were. (Alan Comer's and Jamie Wakefield's decks were last!)

ITA: On the [Invitational coverage](#), after losing the bidding on Rizzo's Fallen Angel deck, it was mentioned you got to ask Dave Williams for advice on the format. What did Dave tell you? **Jeff:** Dave didn't really have anything to tell me that I didn't already know. He just kept saying that Menendian's deck was "dirty."

ITA: What did you like about Fujita's Teysa deck? What's your overall impression of **Vanguard**?

Jeff: If Husk hits your opponent, he's dead. Tough to argue with that, as it



often happens by turn 3. The avatar seems pretty resilient on its own, and also happens to just trump a bunch of other avatars (unfortunately Ink-Eyes is not one of them). Vanguard's a lot of fun. It seems like a sort of unexplored Type 1.

ITA: For [Duplicate Sealed](#), how did you go about sorting 120 cards and choosing which ones to play in the MTGO deckbuilding viewer?

Jeff: [Aaron Forsythe put together a very challenging Duplicate format](#) and if anyone hasn't tried a build, I would recommend they do so.

I overheard Mark Rosewater saying that while Duplicate is a great format, it is just not feasible to do anywhere but the Invitational. I agree very much with this sentiment.

When I realized the cards were mostly cantrips, and mostly expensive, I decided to focus my deck on tempo (*hey look, I got a Tempo Week tie-in! – Bennie*). If everyone has unlimited cards, then you just want to get them out of your hand faster than your opponent. Blue, with its bounce and cheap counters, was then the obvious choice. Red had Adamaro and good burn.

ITA: How about for [Decadent Sealed](#) - 360 cards to sort through! How did you do it?

Jeff: That was difficult. I cleared out all junk first. After that, I was down to about 140 cards. I then surveyed the colors (and combinations of colors) for overall power, mana curve, and synergy. R/G had the best stuff and I went with it, despite those not being the two best colors in the abstract (i.e., Black/Red, Black/Blue, or Blue/Red).

ITA: You and [Wild Mongrel](#) go together like peanut butter and chocolate, so it was no surprise to see you play Madness for [Block Party](#). Looking back on what everyone played, sentimental value aside, would you have played something different?

Jeff: I went 3-1 with U/G, losing only to Ruel in the Swiss due to terrible luck in games 2 and 3, so I don't really see any reason to change the deck in hindsight.

At the time, though, I felt pretty nervous about playing U/G against a potential field of Slide, MBC, and Goblins, but felt that I knew how to play it better than anything else. Good lesson, I guess.

ITA: For the [Mirage-Visions draft](#), how did you decide that the conventional "go blue rule" wasn't something you wanted to do?

Jeff: I've played a ton of *Mirage-Visions*. Red and Green are far and away the best two colors. Red has cheap burn, and top commons, and green has cheap creatures and tricks. Blue is good in *Visions* but absolutely sucks in *Mirage*. Anything with Phasing is terrible.

So, given my success on *Magic Online* with MMV, my approach at the Invitational was pretty straightforward and worked out as I had planned.

ITA: Tell us what you thought of the new *Magic Online III* interface!

Jeff: Honestly, I'm not sure yet... The fewer bells and whistles I'm looking at while trying to play a game, the better. In terms of aesthetics, I feel like the current *Magic Online* has it almost nailed. That said, I haven't played any real matches on the new one.

ITA: For the final match, how do you feel your and Ruel's Vanguard decks matched up?

Jeff: He was way ahead. I got a great deal on my avatar, but he got an even better one on his. I also had 12 one-drop mana producers that he could *Coercion* from my hand (with Ink-Eyes) and then reanimate on turn 1. I also just basically loses to a Jitte. So, yeah, it was really tough.

The battle was basically fought in the Duplicate sealed (I had a great match up against him in Block), and I got mana screwed Games 1 and 3 there.

ITA: Do you play *Magic Online* much? What are your favorite MTGO formats for competitive play? Casual play?

Jeff: I play *Magic Online* a ton. 8-4s are challenging. I like 4x Sealeds. MMV's a really fun, relaxing, format. I don't casual play really. I guess *Magic Online* tournaments *are* my casual play. My favorite Limited format of all time is probably OnsOnsLeg, or OdyOdyOdy.

ITA: Where did [Kenji find those girls](#)?!

Jeff: He's Kenji. They found him.

If you haven't had a chance to read the Invitational coverage, make sure to check it out! There were certainly plenty of tidbits of particular interest to *Magic Online* players, and here are a few of them:

A tip for those who want to tighten up their game play on MTGO: "A round later, Karsten would be seen keeping a notepad window open with a list of the cards his opponent had played so far in the match. It's one of those things you know you should be doing, but you just can't motivate yourself to do it. Come on, admit it. You need to tighten up!"

For some glimpses of MTGO III, you can look [here](#) and [here](#)



A lot of decks just lose when this card resolves.

[Justin Ziran's inside look](#) at MTGO III gave us some intriguing information, including: "Currently a free beta is scheduled for the week before the official V3 release. While that date isn't set in stone, no doubt **Magic** players will be excited for a whole week of free play."

A particular challenge to the **Magic** Invitationalists was sorting through the large card pool for Decadent Sealed: "Decadent Sealed is, well, decadent... If a computer can't keep all these cards in its head at once, what chance does an ordinary man have? Clearly good searching tools are required, and the players are finding out that, at the Invitational, one skill they didn't know they needed was how to use their interface in powerful but less known ways to sort out the good from the bad and the ugly." Jeff Cunningham let us know how he went about sorting through it. How would you do it?

Finally, there are the Replays available in the **Magic** Invitational area on *Magic Online*. If you haven't browsed through the matches and watched some of your favorite pros, you're missing out! "With the Invitational coming to a close, we thought a guide to the best matches of the weekend would be in order. With hundreds of games to watch via replay in *Magic Online*, who better to provide a guide [than the players themselves!](#)"

One last thought: even if you are not interested in playing *Magic Online*, I'd still recommend [downloading](#) and installing it on your computer. Not only is it fun to watch the **Magic** Invitational replays, but you can also learn a lot by checking out the Premier Events area and watching replays from PE's featuring the format you're interested in. Many players, including pros, test their decks online and you can often get faster metagame information by watching what happens on *Magic Online* than you can by waiting for tournament reports and decklists to appear on **Magic** websites.

Tribal Wars 4x Open

Saturday, May 13th, 81 players

The addition of *Mirage* and *Visions* online has clearly benefited a few already strong creature types in the Tribal Wars format. Goblins are already incredibly good at dealing damage fast, so it's natural that some versions would adopt **Fireblast** to increase the clock even more. *Visions'* **Goblin Recruiter** also injects the combo-kill possibility of **Goblin Charbelcher**, stacking your deck with enough goblins to make sure one activation of Charbelcher is lethal. For the Human tribe's **Auriok Salvagers** combo deck, **Dark Ritual** and **Lion's Eye Diamond** increases the deck's speed, and **Vampiric Tutor** dramatically increases the deck's consistency.

Here were the final standings:

1st Place: TackleMeElmo, Goblins with Charbelcher
2nd Place: johan80, Goblins
4th Place: Bird of Paradise, Goblins
4th Place: Fabian, Humans/Salvagers
8th Place: Rungee, Humans/Salvagers
8th Place: Zom, Wizards/No-Stick
8th Place: mmmr, Goblins
8th Place: Mowbli Cat, Humans/Salvagers

I checked in with some of the Top 8 players to see what they thought of their deck and the format as it stands.

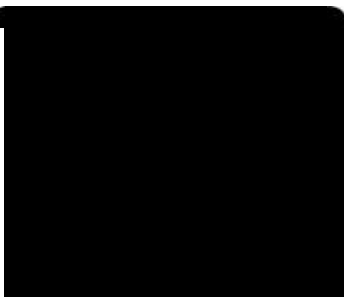
Belching Goblins, by TackleMeElmo (1st place, Tribal Wars) 

60 cards

4 Bloodstained Mire	1 Goblin King	4 Goblin Charbelcher
4 Crystal Vein	4 Goblin Matron	4 Seething Song
8 Mountain	4 Goblin Piledriver	4 Aether Vial
4 Wooded Foothills	4 Goblin Recruiter	
	4 Goblin Ringleader	12 other spells
20 land	1 Goblin Sharpshooter	
	1 Goblin Tinkerer	
	4 Goblin Warchief	
	1 Siege-Gang Commander	
	4 Skirk Prospector	
	28 creatures	

TackleMeElmo:

"My name is Aaron Cheng, I'm 18 and I live in California. This was my first time playing Tribal Online and I had a blast. Originally, I planned on playing **Tooth and Nail** with Shamans. Testing almost everyday, I realized that TNN just didn't have the answers to certain decks. The nuts draw for TNN is a turn 4 Tooth, and that almost didn't seem fast enough for the current format. I found that many "serious" Tribal players owned cards like **Vampiric Tutors**, **Orim's Chant**, and the like, going off or locking the game as early as turn 2 or 3. TNN just couldn't deal with that. On Thursday, I kind of gave up on TNN as I realized that I would play on Saturday and probably scrub out, but have fun just the



same. But an answer came to me on Friday, when my friend asked me what I was playing, and came up with a brilliant solution. 'Why don't you just borrow my goblin deck and change some things around?' Yeah... why not?

"Originally the goblin deck had 4 **Goblin Sledder** instead of the individual "tutor" **Goblin Matron** targets. The last minute change ended up being a huge success. The ability to search for a Sharpshooter to wipe out their board, a **Goblin King** to sweep in for unblockable damage, or a Tinkerer to destroy any annoying "sticks", was amazing. The deck had a sense of "tech" in it with the ability not only to smash face, but also could pull off the **Goblin Charbelcher** and **Goblin Recruiter** combo more consistently with 4 each.

"The field that I played against was quite dominated by Humans and Wizards, with either the Salvagers/**Lion's Eye Diamond** combo or **Isochron Scepter**/Chant lock. I did play against a TNN deck, and there were other Goblin decks, but in my opinion, the serious players were Goblins, Wizards, or Humans. I heard and saw a couple of Elves and Clerics floating around, but none of them did very well.

"One major problem with the Salvagers deck is that the player must be quick while executing the combo. In one of my games, my opponent got the combo on turn 3 and attempted to 'go-off'. It ended up taking him over 26 minutes to finally kill me, while I let him play just pressing F6. I won this match due to time.

"Special thanks to feuerspieler and gngeek for loaning me the cards and greyknight7 for helping me figure out what was the right play in certain situations."



Goblins, by johan80 (2nd place, Tribal Wars)

60 cards

4 Bloodstained Mire	3 Gempalm Incinerator	3 Chrome Mox
12 Mountain	1 Goblin King	2 Pithing Needle
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	3 Goblin Matron	4 Aether Vial
4 Wooded Foothills	4 Goblin Piledriver	
	3 Goblin Ringleader	9 other spells
21 land	2 Goblin Sharpshooter	
	4 Goblin Warchief	
	1 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker	
	2 Siege-Gang Commander	
	4 Skirk Prospector	
	3 Sparksmith	
	30 creatures	

Human Salvagers, by Fabian (4th place, Tribal Wars)

60 cards

3 Caves of Koilos	4 Auriok Salvagers	4 Chromatic Sphere
4 Flooded Strand	4 Dark Confidant	3 Chrome Mox
1 Godless Shrine	4 Disciple of the Vault	4 Dark Ritual
1 Island	4 Thought Courier	4 Lion's Eye Diamond
4 Polluted Delta	4 Trinket Mage	1 Pyrite Spellbomb
1 Swamp		1 Rushing River
3 Underground River	20 creatures	4 Vampiric Tutor
2 Watery Grave		
19 land		21 other spells

Fabian:

"I had little to no experience with Tribal Wars prior to this tournament. I had seen Brusher win a tournament with a Salvager deck some time ago, and so I built this one for the tourney. I had no idea it was considered so strong and that so many would play it (though I don't think there were many in the Top 8). I played 2 or 3 practice games before the tournament and that was it, the decklist is still the same as the very first version I built.

"I feel my build is much stronger than the others I've seen. I've seen lots of people play 4 or 5 colours, and play stuff like **Eladamri's Call**, **Worldly Tutor** or **Enlightened Tutor**, maybe because they

don't have Vampirics? I don't know, but I don't think adding colours is worth it; it slows the deck down a lot (no **Dark Rituals**) which makes it almost as slow as Goblins, and makes the mana base even worse with no apparent gains.

"The format in general seems very unbalanced. It seems that apart from Salvagers and Goblins, the only deck able to compete is Scepter Chant (Wizards). Without specific hate, I'm fairly certain Salvager has a great match-up against every deck, but it's an easy deck to metagame against (**Pithing Needle**, **Fireblast** and more). I'm more worried about Goblins, with Salvager out of the picture, that deck pretty much crushes everything and there's no easy way to shut it down (hate-wise nor banning-wise, it's pretty resilient in that way). So it's a tricky situation."

Do you think something needs to be done to "fix" Tribal Wars? Or is there a silver bullet that can take aim and clean up in a Goblins/Salvagers-dominated metagame? Let us know in the forums!

Wizards No-Stick, by Zom (8th place, Tribal Wars)

60 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Adarkar Wastes 4 Flooded Strand 2 Godless Shrine 4 Island 1 Plains 1 Sacred Foundry 1 Seat of the Synod 1 Steam Vents 1 Temple Garden 3 Watery Grave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Azami, Lady of Scrolls 4 Dark Confidant 2 Meddling Mage 1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror 4 Shadowmage Infiltrator 2 Stormscape Apprentice 2 Thornscape Battlemage 4 Trinket Mage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Boomerang 4 Chrome Mox 2 Fire/Ice 4 Isochron Scepter 2 Lightning Helix 2 Orim's Chant 1 Pithing Needle 1 Sensei's Divining Top 4 Vampiric Tutor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 19 land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 20 creatures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 21 other spells

Pauper Deck Challenge – Euro Champs

If the decklists above give you tix **Nightmares**, don't forget there are low cost alternatives out there such as the Pauper Deck Challenge format (PDC). For those who might be unfamiliar with PDC, I wrote about it here ([Spotlight on PDC](#), and there are further links to dig into there). These are all-commons decks and they are actually quite fun and competitive, in addition to being affordable. SpikeBoyM gave me a heads-up that the PDC Euro Champs was recently held, and here are the Top 2 decks to show you just how good some of these decks can be:

Grrr, by nickpzo (1st place, Euro PDC Season 2 Championship)

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7 Forest 3 Forgotten Cave 2 Gruul Turf 7 Mountain 3 Tranquil Thicket 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Barbed Lightning 4 Firebolt 4 Incinerate 1 Kaervek's Torch 1 Vulshok Morningstar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 22 land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 14 other spells
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Basking Rootwalla 3 Granger Guildmage 2 Nantuko Vigilante 4 Phantom Tiger 3 River Boa 4 Werebear 4 Wild Mongrel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Golgari Brownscale 2 Jolrael's Centaur 2 Lava Dart 2 Nantuko Vigilante 2 Stone Rain 2 Tin Street Hooligan 1 Vulshok Morningstar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 24 creatures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15 sideboard cards

You Killed My Fish! By Evu (2nd place, Euro PDC Season 2 Championship)

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 13 Island 5 Mountain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Prohibit 4 Repulse
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Gigadrowse 4 Goblin Tinkerer 	

2 Izzet Boilerworks	4 Exclude	4 Jilt
4 Cloudpost	4 Barbed Lightning	1 Lay Waste
24 land	4 Condescend	3 Yamabushi's Storm
3 Dream Fighter	4 Power Sink	15 sideboard cards
3 Shimmering Glasskite	3 Kaervek's Torch	
3 Izzet Chronarch	27 other spells	
9 creatures		

You can read more about PDC in the [Player Run Events](#) section of the Wizards.Community forums.

Regional Championships Are Upon Us!

Seems like I was just popping *Dissension* booster packs for the very first time not too long ago... and now Regionals is here, featuring *Dissension*-legal Standard! I haven't missed a Regionals Championship going on six years now, and I don't intend to start now. If you're going to attend the Mid-Atlantic Regionals, track me down and say hi, and no matter where you end up going, best of luck to all of you and I hope you have a good time! What am I playing? Sadly, as of this writing, I have no idea. I've narrowed it down to a few decks, but I'm still undecided but whatever it is, it will include a healthy dose of the new set. Send me your good luck vibrations; I'm sure I'll need it!

*Bennie Smith has been playing **Magic** since Arabian Nights, and writing about it nearly as long. Several of his early musings appeared on the Magic Dojo, and from there he became a featured writer for Star City Games and a Contributing Editor for Scrye Magazine before he started writing for **magicthegathering.com**. While a casual gamer at heart, Bennie also thoroughly enjoys the competitive side of **Magic** and won the Virginia State Championship in 1999.*



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