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# Looking Back to the Future

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Latest Developments  
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**O**nslaught Week puts me into an interesting position. It's a set that, unlike some of the other older sets that we've based theme weeks on, was released while this web site was up and functioning, so there are tons of articles in the archives from the Fall 2002 era that go into great depth about cards, mechanics, and issues of *Onslaught*.

I was not writing this column at the time the set released, Randy Buehler was. I wasn't even working in R&D; instead, I was coordinating and editing the articles themselves as a member of the web team. Since those days I've moved to R&D and climbed the ladder there and now have a different perspective on the things I read those few short years ago from Randy and the rest of our columnists about *Onslaught* and *Magic* in general. To that end, I want to share my musings on the topics written about back then filtered through the lens of what I as the R&D director, and we as a community, now know about *Onslaught*.

## "Metamorpho...Whoa" by Anthony Alongi

The backstory behind this article tickles me. In 2002, *Magic's* official web presence was split into two different sites—[magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com) and the now-defunct [Sideboard.com](http://Sideboard.com). The two sites were managed by two different groups of people on two different floors of the building and fell under two different budgets. Odd, I know. Normally we didn't "collide" when it came to content—they wanted to talk about tournament stuff, and we were more focused on a combination of insider information and casual play. But when it came time to preview cards for a new set, we both wanted part of the action.

Thomas Pannell was the fellow in charge of content for the Sideboard, and I got together with him every few months to divvy up the preview cards. Our methodology was simple—he'd pick the ones he thought would be good in tournaments, then I could have whatever was left over. How fair. The irony was that I was participating in R&D playtesting frequently, whereas Pannell was not, so I often ended up suggesting the cards he wanted to preview to him. That's what happened with *Exalted Angel*.

Me: "I'm sure you want to preview this Angel."  
Thomas: "That's not going to be good."  
Me: "I'm pretty sure it will be."  
Thomas: "There's no way."  
Me: "So can I have it?"  
Thomas: "Sure."

And that's how Anthony Alongi, casual mage extraordinaire, ended up previewing one of the most dominating Constructed creatures in recent memory. (Check the article out if you want to know how to combo it with cards like *Warpath* or *Souldrinker*.) I will admit that I got some amount of perverse pleasure in snookering the Sideboard out of their good preview cards.

For those that are wondering what happened to the Sideboard, you're looking at it! All the tournament coverage and high-level strategy is now part of [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com) and is now all managed by the same group of people that handle all the other articles and content.

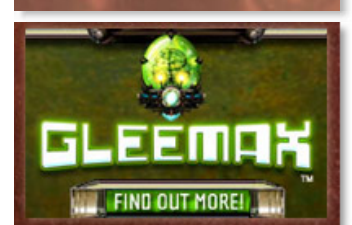
## "Paradigm Shift" by Ben Bleiweiss

Wow, did we think *Hystrodon* was going to be an awesome card.

## "Gotcha!" by Randy Buehler

Morph is an awesome mechanic—the moments Randy talks about are exactly why I enjoy it. I hindsight, though, I regret the fact that development didn't push the mechanic enough for Constructed play. The aforementioned *Exalted Angel* was the cream of a very small crop. The only other white morph worth playing was *Whipcorder*, and because it was cheaper and the same size when played face-up, it was rarely correct to run the morph "bluff" in the mana-stingy world of competitive play just to try and trick your opponent into thinking it might be an *Exalted Angel*. *Blistering Firecat* put in an admirable performance, but red didn't offer up many other morphy friends that fit well into a hyper-aggressive deck. *Hystrodon* never lived up to the hype and *Voidmage Prodigy*, which we'll talk about later, fell flat on its face. On top of the problems morph had in and of itself in a Constructed environment, incredibly powerful anti-creature cards like *Lightning Rift* murdered random 2/2s over and over again.

We took these lessons to heart with *Time Spiral*, and we hope it showed. We kept morph almost exclusively in one color—blue—to maximize the potential for multiple morph creatures to be good in the same deck. We



aggressively costed a couple key morphs ([Vesuvan Shapeshifter](#), [Fathom Seer](#)), gave others game-breaking flip effects ([Thelonite Hermit](#), [Brine Elemental](#)), and carefully chose a couple reprints to tie it all together ([Willbender](#), [Voidmage Prodigy](#)). The result was a handful of decks in both Standard and Block Constructed that let the morph mechanic do what it was meant to—create scenarios where the creature's identity was in doubt and leave the controller in a position to bluff. You know, all the stuff that happened all the time in *Onslaught* Limited but hardly ever in Constructed.

### "A Bear of a Combo" by Randy Buehler

This article is an interesting look at the development of the cycle of "[Words](#)" enchantments. The long and short of it is that they initially didn't require a payment of 1 to replace draws; they were free to use, and playtesting in the FFL proved them to be broken in that incarnation.

I'd like to think that the crew we have in place now wouldn't even need to get to the physical deckbuilding stage to find similar problems with cards, instead recognizing on sight the danger of free mass resource conversion and saving everyone a lot of time by just having them changed prior to being legal in the FFL.

### "The Titania Dilemma" by Randy Buehler

I love the card [Priest of Titania](#), but I have to agree with Randy that it is too powerful to reprint. We tossed about the idea of bringing it back in *Time Spiral*, but that obviously didn't happen, and I highly doubt we'll be seeing this powerful 1/1 again.

### "Crowd Favorites" by Randy Buehler

I'm always amused by the tales from the R&D crew that worked on *Onslaught* about how unsure everyone was that the tribal theme was going to be popular. In retrospect it seems so obvious when you think of all the decks cards like [Kobold Overlord](#), [Lord of Atlantis](#), and [Muscle Sliver](#) spawned in previous years. Well, with *Lorwyn* we're hoping that the theme is as popular as ever, as we're revisiting it. I'm not going to go as far as Randy and say "tribal was a hit across all audiences," as I know the "linear" nature of these sets is off-putting to those that self-identify as craftsman deckbuilders, but to me it is just about as perfect as a set theme can be—simple, fun, and a perfect match to the fantasy flavor of the game.

### "Goblins with Guns" by Randy Buehler

[Goblin Sharpshooter](#) is an awesomely designed card, no doubt about it, and it is also really fun to play with, at least for a few games. When I see the card now, however, I just lump it in with the mass of overpowered Goblins that came out of *Onslaught* Block and terrorized Block Constructed, Standard, and Extended, and continue to strike fear in the hearts of men in Legacy. At some point during that year, Goblins ceased being funny and cool and instead became annoying and mean in the eyes of many players. When people concede at the sight of a one-mana 1/1 in the Casual Room in **Magic Online**, you know that a deck has struck a nerve.

I'll say it now, Goblins are in *Lorwyn*. Handling them was difficult; at this point, whether you like the Goblin deck or not, you have expectations of what Goblins should be capable of, which leaves us between a rock and a hard place. If we matched those expectations, it would be bad for the health of the game and people would just start hating them again. If we don't match expectations, then the cards just feel disappointing. So we took a different tack. As we aren't yet into official preview weeks, I'm not going to get any more specific than that, but I'm confident that what we did will work out.

### "Birth of a Prodigy" by Randy Buehler

Randy on [Voidmage Prodigy](#): "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."

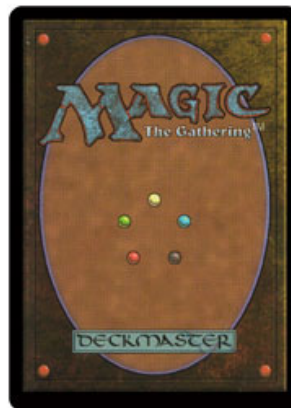
I've said it before—I'm done discussing how we thought Wizards were going to actually be a good tribe, but there you go. More proof.

[Voidmage Prodigy](#) was brought back to Standard in *Time Spiral* to see how he'd fare in an environment free from his nemeses [Lightning Rift](#) and [Slice and Dice](#) (in much the same way that [Shadowmage Infiltrator](#) was brought back free from [Psychatog](#)). The Prodigy has been seeing a tiny amount of competitive play, but that's probably more than he saw the first time around. Granted, there aren't as many reasons to build a Wizard deck these days, but it seems that the card just isn't as powerful in general as the *Onslaught* team had initially hoped.

### "Debating Humanity" by Randy Buehler

Ah, the subject of the "race-class" model, the "Human" type, and creature type revisions. A real hot-button topic. This article required an immediate follow-up from Randy ("[Human Nature](#)") in which he stated the following:

*I talked to Richard Garfield about this topic last Friday, by the way. He doesn't spend a lot of his time working on Magic these days (he's more interested in creating amazing new games and he trusts us to maintain this one), but he does come by with card and mechanic ideas fairly regularly and he*



still cares a lot about Magic. Anyway, Richard thinks we should make the switch. He acknowledged that there's some short-term pain because "Creature – Human Wizard" does look a little funny when you're used to "Creature – Wizard," but his take on the situation was that we'd all get used to it and five years from now we'd be glad that the flavor elements on the cards all made sense.

I think he's certainly right that we should make this decision by trying to look back on it from a vantage point five years into the future. So what do you see when you try that? We're not going to decide our course of action based just on your feedback, of course, but we do want to know what you think so we can consider that when we decide what we think is actually best for the long-term health of the game.

To summarize, here's the plan on the table: When we print new cards that are humans, they would normally get two creature types – Human plus whatever class is appropriate (Cleric, Wizard, Soldier, etc.) We would not mess with the creature types of old cards except possibly when we reprint them. We would do fewer humans than we do now and we would control the power-level of the Human tribe to make sure it doesn't get out of control. This would synch up the human race with the rest of the civilized races and add an air of coherence and aesthetic elegance to Magic's flavor.



Notes on that stuff: It has been five years since that article was written, and the change has been in place for about four. How does it feel now? Is "Human" a natural-feeling part of the game? The whole "we would not mess with creature types of old cards" line is no longer R&D's current line of thinking as of *Ninth Edition* (see my articles "[Classifying Samite Healer](#)" and "[Ninth Time's a Charm: Part 1](#)" for more), and we are continually toying with the idea of a grand, sweeping creature type revision (which isn't as drastic as it sounds; we've already started doing it with the *Mirage* block in conjunction with those sets' online releases). I don't think we've necessarily cut down on the number of Humans we've printed in recent years, and we certainly haven't done a good job of controlling the power level of the tribe, as Humans are the dominant choice in Standard Tribal Wars on **Magic Online**, even without tribe-specific helper cards available.

How does this apply to *Lorwyn*? With the race-class model firmly in place now, we aren't treating the two as interchangeable from a flavor standpoint (as *Onslaught* did—the races Goblin, Elf, and Beast meant the same thing as the classes Wizard, Soldier, and Cleric). *Lorwyn* deals with race only... and Human isn't one of the races. Using the setting conceived by the creative team, we managed to dodge the issue of making cards that referred to Humans. The word "Human" won't be on a single type line in the set, and I'm sure you'll agree with me that it's better that way. Once you immerse yourself in *Lorwyn* you'll see that humans just wouldn't fit.

#### "Old Uncle Fester" by Randy Buehler

This one made me laugh out loud, as certain arguments that Randy lays out as being proposed by the mysterious "some people in R&D" in the days of *Onslaught* design were proposed again by the exact same "some people in R&D" five years later during *Lorwyn* design.

Stay tuned to this website, as I'm sure "some people in R&D" will go over this point in a column a couple Mondays from now.

#### "Not As Good As We Thought" by Aaron Forsythe

Here's one I wrote two years after *Onslaught* had come out. While few of the cards I talk about are from *Onslaught* proper (the article covers the whole block), the article does end with the list of the ten cards R&D thought were going to be the best in Constructed from *Onslaught*.

That's it for my look back at the topics du jour from the days of *Onslaught*. It's cool to me that while looking back I am also looking forward... to *Lorwyn*, where we got to apply all the lessons learned from *Onslaught*—one of the most popular **Magic** sets of all time—to make an amazing set of our own.

## The R&D Pick for the Magic Invitational

In some ways I can't believe I'm typing this...

Congratulations to reigning Vintage Champion Stephen Menendian for being the R&D pick for the 2007 **Magic** Invitational. Stephen is an incredibly intelligent, passionate, and skilled gamer from a somewhat unrecognized corner of the community. Although he has never played on the Pro Tour, Stephen has amassed a following due to his insightful writing about the Vintage and Legacy formats. The DCI, recognizing his expertise, is always willing to entertain his recommendations on how to handle bannings and restrictions in those formats. (Randy Buehler played a similar "ambassador" role to the DCI with regards to formats like Standard and Extended before he was hired to work here.) With the [2007 Vintage Championship title](#) (from [GenCon](#)) as a feather in his cap and a reminder to everyone that his play skill is top-notch, we believe Stephen is the best the "Eternal" community has to offer.

The choice for us essentially boiled down to a three-way vote between Level 6 Shuhei Nakamura, PT Finalist and wunder-blogger Craig Jones, and Vintage star Menendian. I will confess that I did not cast a vote, preferring to sit back and watch and settle ties if necessary. It wasn't necessary. After going over the plusses and minuses of each candidate and his role in the game, Menendian was the clear choice for us. I was surprised to see just how many former Pro Tour players in the department, many of whom played in the Invitational themselves, felt Menendian was the correct choice.

Someone in the meeting used the analogy of the "Ultimate Fighting Championship," wherein world-class competitors boasting incredibly different skill sets meet head-to-head to determine an overall winner. With Vintage being one of the five formats to be played at this year's Invitational (more on the rest at a later date), Stephen will have a chance to prove himself and his community against the established best professional players in the world, which should make for some great viewing.



## Last Week's Poll

Do you agree with R&D's current direction regarding lands?		
Yes, things are in a good place now.	5980	55.4%
No, lands are currently too powerful; I'd like to see basic lands be more relevant more often.	2976	27.6%
No, I think you could make lands even better than you do now, possibly by making cards strictly better than basic lands.	1843	17.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10799</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

## This Week's Poll

Are you more or less interested in following the Magic Invitational now that people like Evan Erwin and Stephen Menendian are included along with the top pros?

- More  
 Less  
 The same

Submit my Vote

Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D, and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.



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