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Rules, Interrupted

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Did you start playing **Magic** after the introduction of *Classic* (Sixth Edition) in 1999? Was *Urza's Destiny* your first small expansion or *Mercadian Masques* your first large expansion? If so, you're in for a treat: a look back at a card type called "interrupt." Veteran players will recognize this card type, which used to be assigned to spells that produced mana (such as *Dark Ritual*), spells that targeted other spells (such as *Counterspell* and *Fork*), and even some that could target permanents (such as the two *Elemental Blasts*). These days, spells such as these are classified as instants, but then they were something else entirely.



The first **Magic** set contained many interrupts; these are just the blue ones.

So what's the difference between an instant and an interrupt? Think of interrupts as just that: spells that interrupt the entire game. While both card types could be played at just about any time, interrupts happened "faster-than-instantly" (in the words of the *Fourth Edition* rulebook). No one could play anything but an interrupt in response to an interrupt.

Why did interrupts go away? The answer lies in the history of the **Magic** timing rules.

In the beginning, there was the batch. You played a spell, a flurry of "fast effects" were played in response, and then everything (well, everything except interrupts) resolved using the "last in, first out rule," with no chance of playing more spells in the middle.

Rules changes circa *Mirage* and *Fifth Edition* clarified (complicated?) the timing rules by spelling out in meticulous detail how just about everything worked, including series, batches, damage-prevention steps, and mana sources.

The "Sixth Edition" rules, currently in use, introduced the concept of the stack and the idea that everything in the game happens at the same speed. Rather than special "interrupt windows," where the counterspells duked it out, the interrupts were slowed down to instant speed.

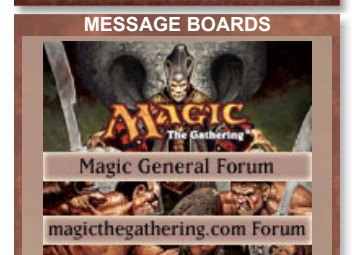
Here's an example using current **Magic** rules. Aaron and I are engaged in a mighty duel with the big draft box (more on this in a future column). I play *Giant Growth* targeting my unblocked *Argothian Swine*, and Aaron adds *Forbid* to the stack, pitching two cards to buy it back. In response, I add *Might of Oaks* to the stack. With no further effects, everything resolves, last in, first out. *Might of Oaks* makes my Swine 10/10. Aaron's *Forbid* counters my *Giant Growth*. Aaron takes 10 damage and I win the game.

Now, let's rewind that a bit. Under pre - Sixth Edition rules, this would have worked a little differently. Let's go back to when I attempted to play *Giant Growth* on porky. Aaron plays *Forbid*, an *interrupt*, pitching two cards to buy it back. At this point, the game stops while the *Forbid* does its thing! Only interrupts can be played, and I am not allowed to play an instant until *Forbid* has resolved. In this scenario, I must allow *Forbid* to counter my *Giant Growth*. By the time I get to play *Might of Oaks*, the *Forbid* has already returned to Aaron's hand, allowing him to play it on the *Might*. He doesn't get to do that under the current rules because I can play the *Might* while the *Forbid* is helplessly pinned on the stack.

Got it? A lot of spells were weakened (and others strengthened) by changing all interrupts to instants. In the wake of this change, let's take a look at some of the big winners and losers.



Update on Rain Delay





Power Sink

No spell lost more of its oomph than poor **Power Sink**. Back in the day, it combined the powers of **Counterspell** and **Mana Short**. Remember, you couldn't respond to an interrupt except with another interrupt. Because of this, when an opponent used **Power Sink** on one of your spells, all your lands got tapped and your mana pool was emptied. Then play resumed.

So let's say two guys--I'll name them Jay and Anthony--are playing a Type 1 game today. Both players have ten lands on the board: Jay is playing monoblue and Anthony is playing monored. Jay is at a precarious 3 life, although he has been attacking with a **Mahamoti Djinn**, which has reduced his opponent to a mere 5 life. Neither player has cards in hand, but Anthony draws his card for the turn--and it's a **Wheel of Fortune!** He merrily plays the sorcery, drawing four **Lightning Bolts** and three **Sonic Seizures**. Jay unfortunately has drawn six islands and a **Power Sink**. Anthony gleefully throws a Bolt at Jay, who attempts to counter it by Sinking it for nine. In response, Anthony adds three more **Lightning Bolts** and a **Sonic Seizure** to the stack, reducing Jay's life total so low that he's taking damage the next game as well.

Today's *Magic Arcana* looks at how the old rules worked from a schematic standpoint, interrupts included.

Now, let's take the same scenario, except now **Power Sink** is an interrupt and the old rules apply. Anthony plays his first Bolt, and Jay responds by Sinking it for nine. The game stops while the Sink resolves, tapping Anthony's remaining lands, emptying his mana pool,

and leaving him sitting there completely tapped out, with six burn spells in hand. Jay then sends the Moti over for the win.

Thank goodness things have changed! Strategically, having counterspells act as instants rather than interrupts makes for a much more interesting game, because people can always respond to their opponents' spells with more fast effects of their own. Have you ever gotten a player of a blue-white deck down to 2, and then played a **Shock** to the head for the win--except it's not the win, because he or she has an **Absorb**? No problem. Just respond with a second **Shock** and you win, because your opponent hits 0 life before the **Absorb** resolves.

Now imagine this same scenario under pre - Sixth Edition rules, with **Absorb** as an interrupt. You play the first **Shock**. Your opponent then plays **Absorb**, stopping the game entirely while the counter resolves. Your opponent gains 3 life and counters your first **Shock** before you're even allowed to play the second one--only now your opponent has 5 life, and that second **Shock** isn't nearly as glorious.

Interdict

If **Power Sink** got it pretty badly, **Interdict** runs a close second in the hosed department. It's not so much that its first ability doesn't work (it still stops an activated ability), but its second ability (can't play the ability again that turn) is effectively negated because the target's ability can now be played in response. Yes, because **Interdict** was an interrupt in a former life, it used to be able to stop the game, hit the "off" switch on an activated ability, and then restart the game with the power down. But that was then. Now, the controller of that ability can respond by activating the source of that ability to his or her heart's content.

Let's say you're playing black-blue control and plan to keep creatures off the board with buyback spells like **Capsize** and **Slaughter**. Your opponent, Melissa, throws a wrench into the works by playing a **Frenetic Efreet**, a creature that can fizzle any spell played on it using its "coin-flip" ability, regardless of the ability's outcome. With **Interdict** in hand under the old rules, you could calmly play **Slaughter** with buyback on the Efreet, wait for Melissa to stop laughing and activate its ability, and then--BAM!--**Interdict** it. The **Interdict** would suppress the coin-flip, freeze the action, and prevent Melissa from activating the Efreet's ability again for the rest of the turn. You'd draw a card, **Slaughter** would resolve and return to your hand, and the Efreet would die.

With **Interdict** as an instant, that little trick doesn't work. **Frenetic Efreet** can now be activated in response to **Interdict**, and will be either phased out or in its controller's graveyard by the time **Slaughter** tries to resolve.



Avoid Fate and Ring of Immortals

On the other hand, two nearly useless cards received a major boost by the change from interrupts to instants. Previously able to stop your creatures from being targeted by enchantments and interrupts (and the interrupts that could target permanents were few and far between), **Avoid Fate** and **Ring of Immortals** became able to affect instants instead of interrupts, giving them much more versatility as to which effects they could prevent.

Red and Blue Elemental Blast

The timing issues presented by **Red Elemental Blast** and **Blue Elemental Blast** (and later, **Hydroblast** and **Pyroblast**) were particularly troublesome. Interrupts made sense when they targeted spells, but what happened when they began targeting permanents? Remember, removing the source of a fast effect does not remove the fast effect itself, but what about stopping the fast effect in response to it being played?

Under the current rules, Mark taps his **Prodigal Sorcerer** in an attempt to deal 1 damage to Randy. In response, Randy plays **Red Elemental Blast**, targeting the **Prodigal Sorcerer**. This destroys the Sorcerer, but not before its "ping" effect goes onto the stack. That 1 damage is still dealt to Randy. Now, under the earliest **Magic** rules, Mark would announce the tapping of his Sorcerer, but Randy could say, "Hold on a minute! I want to interrupt your effect." This would stop the game, target the Sorcerer with Randy's **Red Elemental Blast**, and prevent the damage from ever being dealt. This created huge amounts of confusion over timing: The active player was supposed to have priority each turn, but interrupts being used this way seemed to contradict the rule. This problem, however, was corrected before interrupts were done away with entirely. The ruling said that if you targeted a permanent with an interrupt, the interrupt was played "as an instant."

Mana Sources

Dark Ritual and other mana-producing effects, such as **Birds of Paradise**, fell under the category of interrupts. This allowed them to be played at a speed that made responding impossible. This again made for some interesting timing issues, in which an interrupt-speed mana source couldn't be stopped by any means other than another interrupt.

Let's say Skaff has a **Looming Shade**, and his opponent Jeff is at 3 life, with a **Shock** in hand. As an interrupt, Skaff plays **Dark Ritual** using his last untapped land. Because **Dark Ritual** is faster than **Shock**, which is an instant, Jeff can't respond to the spell by destroying the Shade. This adds three black mana to Skaff's mana pool, allowing him to pump the Shade and send it across for the win.

During the *Mirage - Fifth Edition* era, **Dark Ritual** and other mana-producing effects actually got their own card type: mana source. Mana sources were even faster than interrupts, and couldn't be stopped. This led to mass confusion at the players meeting for Pro Tour - Atlanta (which also doubled as the *Mirage* Prerelease tournament), because players kept asking if a **Nether Void** could now counter a **Dark Ritual** if the extra three mana were not paid (it couldn't). Sixth Edition rules did away with the extraneous mana source card type, instead putting it under the banner of instant.

Some players have cried that **Magic** has been dumbed down over the years, and use the removal of the interrupt card type as one of their rallying cries. On the contrary, this is definitely an example of "less-is-more," because changing countermagic and mana-producing spells has added much more of a move-countermove element to games, and put all fast effects on a common ground for gaining priority. I'd much rather see a game in which I can deal 12 damage to my opponent in response to a **Power Sink** than have the entire game paused just because **Power Sink** given special priority for no good reason.

Old Interrupts That Are Now Played As Instants

Card Name	First Printing	Card Name	First Printing
Blue Elemental Blast	Alpha	Burnt Offering	<i>Ice Age</i>
Chaoslace	Alpha	Force Void	<i>Ice Age</i>
Counterspell	Alpha	Songs of the Damned	<i>Ice Age</i>
Dark Ritual	Alpha	Spoils of Evil	<i>Ice Age</i>
Deathlace	Alpha	Memory Lapse	<i>Homelands</i>
Fork	Alpha	Arcane Denial	<i>Alliances</i>
Lifelace	Alpha	Burnout	<i>Alliances</i>
Magical Hack	Alpha	Force of Will	<i>Alliances</i>
Power Sink	Alpha	Dissipate	<i>Mirage</i>
Purelace	Alpha	Illumination	<i>Mirage</i>
Red Elemental Blast	Alpha	Meddle	<i>Mirage</i>
Sacrifice	Alpha	Withering Boon	<i>Mirage</i>
Sleight of Mind	Alpha	Desertion	<i>Visions</i>
Spell Blast	Alpha	Abjure	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Thoughtlace	Alpha	Disrupt	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Artifact Blast	<i>Antiquities</i>	Dismiss	<i>Tempest</i>
Force Spike	<i>Legends</i>	Ertai's Meddling	<i>Tempest</i>
Remove Soul	<i>Legends</i>	Interdict	<i>Tempest</i>
Avoid Fate	<i>Legends</i>	Mana Leak	<i>Stronghold</i>
Flash Counter	<i>Legends</i>	Rebound	<i>Stronghold</i>
Mana Drain	<i>Legends</i>	Forbid	<i>Exodus</i>
Reset	<i>Legends</i>	Annul	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Rust	<i>Legends</i>	Rewind	<i>Urza's Saga</i>

Deflection	Ice Age	Intervene	Urza's Legacy
Hydroblast	Ice Age	Miscalculation	Urza's Legacy
Pyroblast	Ice Age	Denied! (by default)	Unglued

Old Mana Sources That Are Now Played As Instants

Card Name	First Printing	Card Name	First Printing
Dark Ritual	Mirage	Culling the Weak	Exodus

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



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