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Printer Friendly

Making Magic Monday, June 23, 2003

Instant Winners

Just add water



Mark Rosewater

Welcome to Instant Week! This week we'll talk about the fastest spells in **Magic** (well, ever since we got rid of **interrupts**). The spells too advanced for *Portal* (except for the **cheaty ones** we snuck in) and the mortal enemy of the **Ichneumon Druid** (if you don't need the Autocard to get that joke, you've been playing a *long* time). Instants – when it absolutely, positively has to be played now.



As "Making Magic" is a design column, I thought I'd use this week to explore what makes a spell an instant. More to the point, I'll explore the thin blue line separating instants from their slower brethren, the sorceries. When a designer sits there with a spell mechanic, what makes him choose to make it an instant rather than a sorcery? All will be explained in today's "instant" column.

The Fast and the Furious

To best understand the role of an instant, you need to look at its strengths and weaknesses mechanically. So without further ado, here are the major reasons to make a card an instant: (as always, these are in no particular order)

#1 – The card needs to be played at a time that only instants can be played

Let's begin with instant's greatest strength: it can be played at any time. Thus, the first reason a card is made an instant is that the card mechanic simply wouldn't work if the card is anything but an instant. This is actually a pretty wide swath of cards, so let me break it down into sub-groups:

- a) **The card has to be used on the opponent's turn (i.e. **Siren's Call**)** – Certain cards are designed to be used only during your opponent's turn. As the rules restrict spell usage at that time to instants, these cards by default have to be instants.
- b) **The card can only be played in combat (i.e. **Angelic Favor**)** – Now we get to phases on your own turn that are restricted to instant use. I've chosen to list the combat phase first because it's a popular phase to design cards around.
- c) **The card can only be used during your end of turn step (i.e. **Necrologia**)** – While the combat phase is used often, the end step is not. To the best of my knowledge, **Necrologia** is the only card to ever restrict use to this step.
- d) **The card can only be used during your upkeep step** – If you think the end step has it bad, check out the upkeep step. I believe it has zero spells whose use is

restricted to it. I've included it here as it potentially could someday be used, and if it is, will have to be used on an instant.

e) The card has to target a card on the stack (i.e. Counterspell)

– Sorceries can only be played during your main phase when you have priority and the stack is empty. The last part is important for this group of cards. If you want to target a spell on the stack, you need an instant as it's the only card type that can be played under those circumstances. The biggest group in this category would be counterspells. Sorcery counterspells just don't work (ignore the *Mystic Denial* behind the curtain).



Countermagic could not exist without the concept of instants.

#2 – The card needs to be reactive

The second strength of instants is that they make the game more interactive. For those of you that have ever played *Portal*, you'll see how different the game is without instants (and activated abilities) around. One of the most crucial lessons R&D has learned in the last five years is the importance of interactivity. The game is simply less fun if the players aren't interacting. That is why, for example, we've cut back on key components for speed combo decks to avoid games where both players sit and play solitaire.

This category is cards that, while they could be played when you can play sorceries, would lose most of their functionality. Like the last category, this category has a number of sub-groups:

a) Cards that you want to use to respond to spells or abilities on the stack (i.e. Healing Salve) – The poster child of this group is damage prevention. Sure, you could set up a damage prevention shield as a sorcery, but it kind of misses the point. You don't really want to use damage prevention until you know what's about to take damage. To do this, you have to be able to respond to the spell or ability (or attack) that's about to damage you. Thus, the spell needs to be an instant.

b) Cards that you want to have surprise value (i.e. Giant Growth) – In game design, there is something known as a “gotcha moment.” This happens when one player believes they have the upper hand only to discover that another player has a surprise they weren't expecting. Many game designers believe that “gotcha moments” are crucial to game design. This is why most games are designed with hidden information so that players have the ability to surprise one another. In *Magic*, the “gotcha moments” come from the instants. You opponent makes what he believes to be an intelligent block and you get to reveal your *Giant Growth* with a big smile. To allow the surprise, these cards have to be instants.

c) Cards that need to be “faster” (i.e. Shelter) – Another important aspect of instants is that they create an interesting timing structure. Instants essentially can be played to happen before another spell “goes off.” This is important when you have a spell that needs to resolve before the first spell resolves. Protection and regeneration are good examples of this group. In order for these spells to be “faster,” they need to be instants.



“Combat tricks” and other such instants add a level of

#3 – The card gets *intrigue to the game.* increased strategic play

This is the category that I believe is abused the most often. Certain spells are strategically enhanced by making them an instant, but, and this is important, not all spells are enhanced. One of the common mistakes of novice designers is to turn every spell into an instant. The thought behind it is that by making spells an instant you increase when and how they can be used.

The mistake made is that they neglect the value of strategic decisions. A good game needs to force the players to come to paths in the game where they have to think ahead and plot their course and then live with their decision. If every card can be played at any time, you never create these paths. That said, the game also suffers if players never have the ability to adapt on the fly. What's required is a delicate balance.

Strategically speaking, the cards that most want to be instants are cards that gain increased utility. That is, having the ability to be played at any time allows their caster additional options in how to use the card. As a general rule of thumb, these are cards, such as **Shock**, that want to get played at many different times. Cards that always get played at the end of the opponent's turn, such as card drawing, are better designed as sorceries. Note that I'm drawing a distinction between what makes a better design and what is more useful for players. One of the hard parts about design is that you need to create what the game needs and not always what the players want.

#4 – The card needs to fit into a cycle

I've talked in a previous column about the importance of aesthetics in Magic and its impact on the designing of cycles ("[Zen and the Art of Cycle Maintenance](#)"). In short, sometimes R&D breaks the rules to make cards fit into cycles. Occasionally, we will take a card that would normally be a sorcery and turn it into an instant to match the other four cards.

An example of this would be **Funeral Charm** (from *Visions*). One of the three abilities on the card is a discard ability. Normally discard is only done as a sorcery, but the four other charms in the cycle--as well as the two other abilities on the card--all wanted the card to be an instant. So we made an exception and made an instant discard spell.



#5 – The card wants to be a tweak

Certain effects get used all the time. As such, we are constantly finding tweaks for them. One of the knobs for us to play with is card speed. This means that every once in a while for the sake of diversity, we'll take a spell that is traditionally a sorcery and make a version that's an instant. A good example of this would be the cycle of instant/sorcery cards from *Invasion* (**Rout**, **Breaking Wave**, **Twilight's Call**, **Ghitu Fire**, **Saproling Symbiosis**). **Wrath of God** style cards, for example, are always sorceries, but for one set we thought it would be neat to create one that could be played when you can play an instant.

#6 – The card needs certain gameplay functionality

This is the catch-all category. From time to time a designer needs a card to be an instant to fill some other need. An example of this would be **Boil**. During *Tempest* design, we were trying to create color hosers. While a spell that destroyed all islands seemed good, we were concerned that blue could always just counter it. By making it an instant, it allowed us to put extra pressure on blue as it now had to worry whenever it tapped out, even at the end of the opponent's turn when it normally did most of its dirty work.

No Time Like The Present

Hopefully, this column will help you see some of the many decisions that a designer thinks about when choosing to make a card an instant. As you can see, it is not as simple as it would first


appear.

Join me next week when I talk about some of the mechanics that didn't make the cut for "You Make the Card #2".

Until then, may you appreciate the value of not always being able to do what you want when you want.

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