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# Choosing a Channel

Mark Rosewater  
Making Magic  
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Wizards of the Coast is out of the office for the Memorial Day holiday, and will return with new articles beginning Tuesday, 5/31. In case you missed it, what follows is the article that ran in this slot last week. In the meantime, [this week's feature article](#) by Brian Tinsman is already up for your holiday reading pleasure. See you tomorrow!

Scott Johns, [magicthegathering.com](#) Content Manager

**T**wo weeks ago, I talked about the epic spells. [Last week](#) I talked about the Maros and the wisdom (aka hand size matters) theme. This week, I thought I'd handle another new *Saviors of Kamigawa* mechanic, channel. Where did it come from? How was it created? Who's responsible? And when I started writing this column I had the huge handicap of not knowing the answer to any of those questions.

## Reading the Designs

As I've mentioned many times, I talk a lot about the designs I do not out of an ego-based thrill (that's kind of a nice side perk) but out of the necessity of writing a weekly column. You see, most of my columns are written late night at my home after my family has all gone to sleep. If I don't know something I have limited resources to find out. That is why I was a bit panicky at 5:00pm this afternoon.

As I write this column it is Thursday, May 12th. I'm going to be out of the office next week (last week for you) running [the Magic Invitational](#) and thus I had to write my article for two weeks away (this week for all of you) before I left for Los Angeles. I wrote next week's column (which you might like to think of as last week's column – isn't this fun?) last night. Now, normally I have a week's respite between columns but traveling (which is something I've cut way back on – a side effect of having three kids) causes a little extra work before you leave (or sometimes when you return). Anyway, I had decided to write this week's article about the channel mechanic. I thought it was a neat mechanic. (If you haven't seen it, here's a quick peek)



And "Making Magic" is about design so it seemed like a good topic. The only problem as I've stated above is that I was not intimately involved with the early design. I did jump in at one point but it was once the mechanic was pretty far along. The short story is that I knew nothing about where the mechanic came from. The only piece of information I had was that the mechanic had been called purge in design. Other than that I had some logical guesses, but I didn't definitively know anything. That's okay, I said to myself when I came in this morning, I'll just have to ask Brian (Brian Tinsman that is, *Saviors* lead designer) about it. The next time that thought returned to my brain it was a little after 5:00pm. Now, I had to pick up my twins at 5:30pm, so I knew I had a little bit of work to do in a short amount of time. That's why I was panicky.

I rush over to Brian's desk to have the following conversation:

**From the SoK FAQ...**

- Channel cards have an activated ability that lets you discard them to get a temporary effect that's similar to the creature's normal ability.
- The ability after "channel" is an activated ability that you can play any time the channel card is in your hand and you have priority.

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**Me:** Tell me everything you know about the design of the channel mechanic.

**Brian:** Um, it was called purge in design.

**Me:** I knew that one. What else?

**Brian:** I'm not sure. I didn't design it.

**Me:** Who did?

**Brian:** I think Devin did.

**Me:** Let's go talk to Devin.

Brian and I go over to Devin's desk. Devin isn't there. That's when we remember that Devin isn't in the office. He's in Japan. The first half was a business trip and the second half was a vacation (Devin had never been to Japan before.) I look at my watch. 5:21.

**Me:** Who else was on the team?

**Brian:** You wrote the team bio in [this week's column](#). (Several weeks ago for all of you.)

**Me:** You don't know your team?

**Brian:** Of course I do. But so do you.

**Me:** Right. Brian Schneider.

Brian and I go to the other Brian's desk. While he was not as far away from his desk as Devin he was for all intents and purposes equally far away. I think he went to pick up his *Star Wars* ticket. (See, we make the **Star Wars Trading Card Game** so we get little perks like a company showing of "*Revenge of the Sith*" before the release date.) I look at my watch. 5:22. Okay, Brian's desk is pretty close to Devin's. In fact, we could see Brian's desk from Devin's desk so I don't know why we walked over. Maybe the same reason you push the lit elevator button when the elevator still hasn't come.

**Me:** The last team member was Brandon.

**Brian:** To Brandon! (Okay Brian never said that, but it sounds dramatic.)

So Brian and I venture off to the R&D library where the Creative Team resides. And there we find Brandon. My watch reads 5:25. (The library's also not that far away.)

**Me:** Brandon!

**Brandon:** Mark!

**Me:** We need your help.

**Brian:** Do you know who designed the channel mechanic? I think it was Devin.

**Brandon:** It wasn't Devin.

**Brian:** Then who was it?

**Brandon:** Me.

**Me:** Great! What can you tell me about its design?

**Brandon:** It was originally called purge.

**Me:** Other than that.

**Brandon:** (shrugging his shoulders) I dunno. (While most of the rest of this dialogue in this column is somewhat made up – although based somewhat on truth – this line is 100% exactly what he said.)

(Pause.)

**Me:** I need more than that.

**Brandon:** Okay, I can try looking something up.

**Me:** Good. (looking at my watch) You got three minutes.

In the end, Brandon promised to e-mail me something to my home. And he did. As did Brian (Tinsman) who also looked back at some of his old files. So why didn't I just start the column at this point? Because I hear time and again that many readers like the behind-the-scenes stories and this one seemed as entertaining as any other. I'm curious to hear feedback on whether you liked this first half. But don't worry, after the intermission there will be an actual look at the origin of the channel mechanic. By the way, I picked up the kids on time. (Head **Magic Designer** and conscientious dad.)

## Intermission

Now's a good time to take a break and go get a drink or maybe a snack. Don't worry, I'll flash the lights before the second half starts.

## Channel Surfing

I'll begin by playing a little game. What one card was the impetus for the Channel mechanic? (By the way, if you're ever playing this game for money and you don't know, always guess **Plague Rats**. It's the equivalence to answering Benjamin Franklin in *Trivial Pursuit*.) I'll give you five clues. See how few it takes for you to get the answer. (You can click below to see the card.)

**Clue #1:** The card is pre-*Mirage*.

**Clue #2:** The card is green.

**Clue #3:** The card is a creature.

**Clue #4:** The card had an ability that could be activated in the hand. (At least it does in the latest Oracle wording.)

**Clue #5:** The card rhymes with Smelvish Fear-It Ride.

[Click here](#) to see the card.





*Alliances* is filled with single cards that touch upon giant chasms of unexplored design space. **Elvish Spirit Guide** is one such card. It's a creature and a spell all in one. This was the concept that intrigued Brandon. What if there was a mechanic that allowed you to have cards that doubled as creatures and spells? Brandon's initial suggestion: (it's interesting to note that the guy formerly in charge of names failed to give his design card or his mechanic a name.)

Creature - Spirit

2/3

R: +1/+0 until end of turn.

Keyword 2R: (Discard this card and pay 2R) target creature gets +4/+0 until end of turn.

The team liked the idea and started exploring the mechanic. Here are the key lessons they learned:

**The two pieces had to be interconnected** – Having a **Grizzly Bears** that could also be a **Naturalize** just felt wrong. Aesthetically, the two halves of the card wanted to feel connected. So the team decided to make a rule that said that the channel ability had to grow organically from the card. After some experimentation, they found three variations they liked. I should quickly note that these aren't the only ways that could work. The *Saviors* design team was conscious to leave some open design space to allow R&D to bring the mechanic back at a later time.

**Variation #1** – The creature has a keyword ability that the spell can grant to all creatures. These became the Shinen (of Fear's Chill, Of Flight's Wings, Of Fury's Fire, of Life's Roar and of Stars' Light).

**Variation #2** – The creature has a mana-activated ability. For one more mana the spell does twice the effect. These became the Ghost-Lit creatures (Nourisher, Raider, Redeemer, Stalker and Warder).

**Variation #3** - This last variation is a combination of the first two. The creature has an activated ability that affects one creature that the spell can use to apply to all creatures (that fit the criteria). This became **Arashi, the Sky Asunder** and **Jiwari, the Earth Aflame**.

**The channel creatures wanted to be spirits** – This is true for two totally unrelated reasons, one mechanical and the other flavorful. The mechanical reason was to tie the cards into soulshift. By being spirits, the cards could be brought back when soulshift creatures were put into the graveyard. As all the channel effects work at the speed of an instant, you could even use the spell in response to the effect that's putting the soulshift creature into the graveyard. The flavorful reason has to do with explaining how a creature can also be part spell. The answer rests in the nature of Kamigawa spirits. The idea behind the channel cards is that these are creatures made of magical energy. A mage can summon them or "channel" their magical energies into a spell.

**Many of the creatures needed to be small** – Other than the two legends and one of the shinen, no creature with channel cost more than three. The reason for this was to increase the synergy with soulshift. The cheaper their cost, the easier they are to get back.

**The channel portion of the card didn't want to actually be a spell** - By making channel an activated ability rather than an alternate mana cost, the *Saviors* team allowed the channel cards to do several things. First, they became uncounterable. Second, they allowed players to play them at times spells weren't allowed (think epic spells). And third, they delved into a much unexplored design space.

## Turn the Channel

And that is how the channel mechanic came to be. I think when you play with it you'll find that the cards have a very interesting feel. The tension between the two effects is quite interesting.

Join me next week when...well, okay, Monday next week is Memorial Day so there won't be new articles from JMS or me that day (sometimes even we get days off). Regular updates will return the next day, and Monday will still have a new Feature Article – one where we play with fire.

Until then, may you channel your own energies into something fun.

Mark Rosewater

*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



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