

A Little Bit of This, A Little Bit of That Search

Mike Flores

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Every block has its own take on the **Magic** classics. You will consistently see a twist on Lightning Bolt, whether it's a Lightning Bolt that only hits non-Red creatures at sorcery speed, a Lightning Bolt that costs twice as much mana but consistency kills River Boas, or a Lightning Bolt that only does two damage. Similarly, every block has got some kind of green combat trick at instant speed for two or less mana; each of these cards skirts constructed playability, with some versions making the cut and others *so close* if they miss. The interesting part about the green cards is that it is often hard to say even within the same block which card is superior. For example, do you want to play the one that gives trample or the one with the team-up potential?

Every block has a new way for basic Swamps to tap to kill creatures – though usually not their own spawn, mind you -- and every block has some kind of damage prevention. And as far back as I can remember, anyway, every block has had a take on cheap card selection.

The first disempowered Ancestral Recall, back in *Ice Age*, was a pretty clear attempt to "fix" a good, but overpowered card. Ancestral Recall was quite exciting but more than a decade of **Magic** development has taught us that three cards is more in the four mana sorcery ballpark than one mana instant zone. Brainstorm was *exactly* Ancestral Recall... except you didn't get to keep two of the cards you drew. Back in the first real block, Brainstorm paled in comparison to the original. I remember when *Ice Age* appeared, discussing the merits of Karplusan Forest or Adarkar Wastes with Worth Wollpert. "Trust me," Worth said. "They're not the real dual lands... but they're not that bad." Worth was right then, and as with *Ice Age's* pain lands, Brainstorm turned out to be more than okay itself.

A year or two after *Ice Age*, **Magic** players in California and Pittsburgh discovered the technique of shaving mana and instead playing low mana cantrips to smooth their draws, to ensure land drops even without actually playing those lands, and to give themselves more robust long games. In the springtime of 1997 or so, the cards in competition for top cantrips were the aforementioned Brainstorm, and Impulse from *Visions*.

The cards were both very good, certainly similar, but ultimately did uniquely different things. Brainstorm was almost absurdly powerful in conjunction with Thawing Glaciers and gave superior selection options because it allowed players to return cards they didn't want (for example expensive end game threats in the early game) to their libraries; Brainstorm could be poor, though, when players didn't have any way to shuffle their decks otherwise. Impulse was less powerful and more expensive than Brainstorm, but it was much better at purely digging through one's deck. Impulse was the kind of card that combination players loved. It went a card deeper than Brainstorm – or basically anything else – and got the garbage out of the way. It put the Cadaverous Bloom right in a combo player's hand, and did so immediately. Impulse was great in control decks, too, because of its ability to find Force of Will or another relevant permission spell at a moment's notice, driving past the cards that were ineffective in the short term and never looking back.

Both cards, both strong, were the best low mana cantrip tools of their shared era, which was probably the high point of this sort of card in Standard. Brainstorm was reprinted in *Mercadian Masques*, Accumulated Knowledge eventually proved itself a fine successor to Impulse (better, even, in some decks), but for the most part, players since the Golden Age of Cantrips have had to content themselves with half-Impulses like Opt, essentially vanilla options like Obsessive Search or Reach Through Mists, or sorcery speed selection like Sleight of Hand or Serum Visions. There's nothing wrong with any of these cards, of course... But old timers just don't consider them *the same*.

With Telling Time, though, Blue might just have another successor worthy of Brainstorm and Impulse. [Click here to see it.](#)

This new card isn't Brainstorm or Impulse, and it probably isn't quite as good *at specifically what Brainstorm or Impulse were about* as either. However Telling Time combines elements that are reminiscent of *both* cards, and combines those elements effectively. Like Brainstorm and Impulse both, Telling Time nets a player exactly zero cards: you invest one card and you get one back. You break even, but have looked at more cards and have better control over the development of your mana and game. Like Brainstorm, Telling Time lets you look at the top three cards of your library. Like Impulse, it costs 1U. Like Brainstorm, Telling Time lets you put one card on top of your deck, and like Impulse, Telling Time lets you put one on the bottom.

Now specifically as a digging card, Telling Time isn't as good as Impulse because you only get to look at three cards rather than four and you only get to put one card on the bottom of your deck rather than three. It is in a strict sense inferior because Telling Time puts one card back on top of your deck... But at the same time, one of the annoying things about Impulse was that if you saw two cards you liked, you could keep only one. If there was another card you liked, Impulse made you put it on the bottom of your deck anyway! Telling Time does not.

On the other hand, Brainstorm has shown us that it is sometimes nice to know the top card of your library. More than just keeping a card that you might like, Telling Time can work in conjunction with a creature card like Dark Confidant -- Bob Maher's new Invitational card, also making its first appearance in *Ravnica* -- Telling Time's "Brainstorm" aspect can put a land on top so that you don't lose any life for drawing extra cards.

As Brainstorm proxy, Telling Time is more expensive... but also conditionally better than "just" a Brainstorm. One of the things that I always found annoying about that strong card was that

sometimes I would simply learn that there was no land on top of my deck and that there wasn't going to be any land in my hand for the next two turns. While it is nice to sometimes keep a card (which was impossible with *Impulse*), not being forced to keep *two* cards is a nice compromise.

Now what about the mechanics of *Telling Time* itself? What does this card represent that differentiates it from the classics?

First of all, looking at *three* cards is kind of a magic number in 60 card **Magic**. Most decks play greater than 1/3 lands, so looking at the top three cards of one's deck will generally let a player ensure his next land drop. In the case of *Telling Time* at the end of the opponent's turn, you can set up your next land drop *and* set up the most relevant action spell for the next turn. While *Impulse* was great at finding a land or finding a counter, it could not simultaneously do both things.

Similarly, most blue control decks don't play a whole lot of finishers. With *Telling Time*, a blue mage can put his *Meloku* on the bottom of his library if he wants to wait, rather than forcing him to draw it before he has enough land to protect or even play that amazing but mana-intensive *Legendary Moonfolk*. Against hand destruction, this is a powerful way to protect your killer cards. There is nothing more disheartening than waiting to have counter backup for your endgame threat... only to lose it to a *Ghost-Lit Stalker* before you have the mana for *Meloku* + *Hinder*.

At the end of the day, I think that *Telling Time* will see significant, if not universal, adoption. It isn't going to be an automatic inclusion in every Blue deck, but *Telling Time* definitely has a role to play. It will make the *Wrath of God* show up a couple of cards early and might just find the *Counterspell* when all hope seems lost. If there is a viable combo deck that includes Blue in Standard, *Telling Time* is likely to make the cut as well.

But hey, only Time will Tell.

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