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Constructed Tempo Powerhouses

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First off, please please please go read [Scott Johns's article on tempo](#). It's fantastic, and it's coming from someone that absolutely knows what he's talking about. I have had my creature **Time Ebb** by Scott more than once so that his pair of **Zodiac Monkeys** can hit me for four more damage. Scott's article is required reading because I borrow many of his terms.

Scott talks mainly about Limited, and while that stuff is all very interesting, I'm not going to continue focusing on it. Limited tempo happens naturally in whatever the card set is—R&D doesn't have to devote too much time to making sure the pieces are there. All you need are two-power two-mana guys, cheap tricks, and expensive powerful cards to tempt you to the dark side.

I want to talk about Constructed tempo for a bit, specifically cards that are on the fence regarding whether or not reprinting them is considered "in bounds" by the current development team.

Whereas combat tricks and removal play key tempo roles in Limited, bounce, countermagic, and land destruction are great tempo tools in Constructed.

Land destruction is the interesting one of the group, as it neither nets you a beat or sets your opponent back a beat, but what it does do is prevent your opponent from hitting his later beats. Land destruction is at its best when the opponent hasn't played anything in the early turns.

Bounce can be used as it is in Limited, putting opposing threats back in the hand so your guys can hit for more damage. But it can also be used as pseudo-land destruction in the early turns so that opponents can't make plays until they are too far behind developmentally.

Countermagic, as a tempo piece, is at its best when protecting creatures. Imagine a White Weenie deck that splashes blue for **Mana Leaks** and **Remands** and you'll get a good picture of how counterspells work with tempo.

In development, we keep Constructed tempo in mind quite a bit. Below are a bunch of powerful Constructed cards that have led to debates here in R&D:

Historical Tempo Powerhouses We May or May Not Reprint Again:

Remand and Memory Lapse

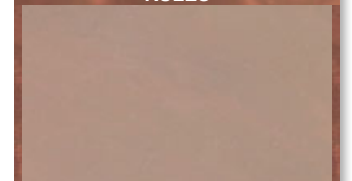
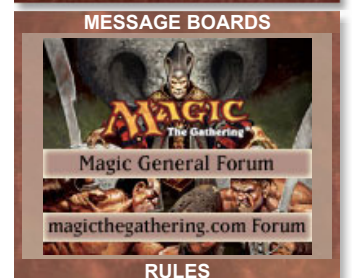
These two cards are similar. Both counter spells—sort of—and maintain card parity with the opponent. One gets you a new card, while the other prevents your opponent from getting a new card. There are differences between the cards—some may even say profound ones, as **Remand** has been off-called "the most important card in Standard"—but for the sake of this discussion they are essentially the same.

Both cards have two functions: keeping yourself from falling behind in beats, or making sure you keep whatever beat advantage you currently have. The fact that they do both is what makes them so amazing. Both cards are great in control decks, as they can keep the board clear until your bigger and better spells can come online, and they let you keep expensive opposing threats at bay for only two mana, freeing up your other mana for stuff like card drawing.

That said, because they are cheap and splashable, they may be even better in aggressive decks. There is nothing more demoralizing than having your **Wrath of God Remanded** while you are being attacked by a pair of **Ninja of the Deep Hours**. **Memory Lapse**, when at its best, plays a lot like **Time Walk**. Here's a powerful deck from *Ice Age/Mirage*-era Standard that used two-mana creatures, **Memory Lapse**, and **Winter Orb** to tie opponents in knots—getting ahead in tempo and never letting go:



Final Wrap-up
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Forgotten Orb		
Ice Age/Mirage Standard		
Main Deck 61 cards		
4 Underground River	3 Black Knight	3 Winter Orb
3 Undiscovered Paradise	4 Fallen Askari	4 Memory Lapse
3 City of Brass	4 Skulking Ghost	2 Arcane Denial
3 Quicksand	3 Man-o'-War	1 Contagion
8 Swamp	3 Nekkartaal	1 Dystopia
2 Island	3 Erg Raiders	11 other spells
23 lands	3 Knight of Stromgald	
	2 Phyrexian War Beast	
	1 Shadow Guildmage	
	27 creatures	

Without **Winter Orb** around to **Complicate** things, **Remand** is clearly the more powerful of the two cards, and we'll be happy to give it a rest once it rotates out. If we feel blue needs another two-mana counter to go with **Mana Leak** in the near future, **Memory Lapse** would likely get the nod.

Force Spike and Daze

While it is imaginable that **Force Spike** could perform the second role of **Remand** and **Lapse**—keeping you ahead in tempo—that isn't the card's best use. **Force Spike**'s role is almost always to keep you from falling behind in the early game. Going first, **Force Spike** lets you keep Lions, Hounds, Elves, and Birds off the table, and it handle two-mana spells like **Wild Mongrel** and **Watchwolf** when going second.

The card becomes dead in the late game, but that's a good problem to have; it means you managed to survive into the late game. Then the best use of the card is to pitch it to **Force of Will**, **Forbid**, or **Psychatog**.

Daze, although it looks similar, plays quite differently, as it lets you be very proactive with your mana. It makes sure you keep the tempo advantage as opposed to not lose it. **Daze** is currently seeing play in the Legacy format as part of the threshold beatdown decks.



Summersberger, Helmut		
UGW Threshold		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
3 Volcanic Island	2 Fire/Ice	3 Tormod's Crypt
4 Flooded Strand	3 Lightning Bolt	2 Divert
4 Polluted Delta	4 Serum Visions	4 Chill
3 Tundra	2 Pithing Needle	3 Wasteland
4 Tropical Island	4 Brainstorm	2 Red Elemental Blast
18 lands	4 Daze	1 Naturalize
	4 Mental Note	15 sideboard cards
4 Meddling Mage	3 Counterspell	
4 Werebear	4 Force of Will	
4 Nimble Mongoose	30 other spells	
12 creatures		

Counterspell decks are supposed to have holes in their armor, and quick creatures should be a weakness. Therefore we probably won't be printing **Force Spike** any time soon. If counterspell players want answers to early beatdown, they should have to consider more narrow cards, like **Unsummon**, **Steel Wall**, and **Spell Snare**; **Force Spike** is too universally applicable.

Similarly, free countermagic in tempo-based decks is something we're not fond of. Decks that continually play out threats should be vulnerable to defensive measures—efficient creatures and free counterspells combined almost feel like cheating. Even really cheap counterspells (like a madnesed **Circular Logic**) combined with efficient beatdown (like **Wild Mongrel**) is far too difficult for most decks to fight against fairly. So I'd consider **Daze** to be currently off limits.

Avalanche Riders and Plow Under

Two of my all-time favorites... as a player. As a developer, I have to look at the cards slightly differently.

As I said above, the main use of land destruction is to make sure you get ahead in tempo in the future by making your opponent miss beats. **Stone Rain** is not a great play when your opponent has two **Savannah Lions** in play, because you're behind and not doing anything to change that. **Avalanche Riders** is a different story. It puts you ahead if things are even, it can bring things close to even if you're behind, and it sets your opponent back developmentally in all instances.

Plow Under is, to me, the quintessential "I'm ahead and I'm staying there" card. It certainly isn't very good if you are losing on the board... but if you are winning on the board, your opponent may just concede when you cast this. Not only are the expensive cards he's holding not going to be played for a long time, but his chances of drawing a relevant cheap card go up in smoke as well.

I don't think either card is unfair in its own right, but combine them with any other bit of mana disruption and you can put games out of reach very quickly. Both cards have been extremely relevant to Standard each time they've

been printed, and the kinds of pressure they put on formats is something we want to enable very, very infrequently. R&D would have to think long and hard about the consequences of bringing either of these cards back again before reprinting them.

Man-o'-War

[Noah Weil quoted me](#) pertaining to **Man-o'-War** in his article this week, and that opinion is the one generally shared by my coworkers. I'm a little more on the fence when it comes to this card; I personally love **Man-o'-War** and bring him up every time we're putting a Core Set together.

Yes, he is a fantastic tempo card. He's great at keeping you ahead in a creature war, he can snatch initiative from your opponent if you're a little behind, and he is a fine card to topdeck if you're flat-out losing (unlike other tempo all-stars like **Force Spike** and **Plow Under**). But he's just plain *fun*... and I've heard many people comment that he's one of their favorite *Visions* cards now that that set has been released Online.

If we keep the environment clear of most of those kinds of cards, the jellyfish may indeed return some day.

So I'll keep exploring the possibility of getting this card reprinted. Heck, it worked for **Hypnotic Specter** once we determined that **Dark Ritual** was the real power behind the throne and that the scars associated with the random discard of **Hymn to Tourach** had healed. I think **Man-o'-War** has similarly always been the toady for more super-powered villains like **Winter Orb**, **Tradewind Rider**, free countermagic, **Recurring Nightmare**, and **Propaganda**. If we keep the environment clear of most of those kinds of cards, the jellyfish may indeed return some day. Of course, there is the whole "Creature – Jellyfish" problem that our creative team isn't exactly in love with...

Shining Shoal

Assuming you are playing in an environment where you reasonably expect your creatures to be damaged, **Shining Shoal** is a ridiculously powerful zero mana, you get an effect that is part combat trick, part counterspell, and part burn in a color that already lays claim to a lot of the best aggressive creatures. And you get to keep casting stuff like nothing happened.

These effects are great to do once in a while, as they change the way the game is played and force players to think about the ramifications of their actions at times when normally the right decision would be clear. Like most "free" spells, we usually want them to show up, do their thing, then go away. This isn't the kind of effect we want people to have to sweat out in Standard year after year.

Since **Shining Shoal** is Arcane, we pretty obviously won't be reprinting it in a Core Set. This class of card as a whole, however, is something that we'll return to every so often.

Over-the-Top Bombs That Won't Come Back:

Lightning Bolt

The fact that **Lightning Bolt** does three damage to a player for a single mana is only a small part of what makes the card "too good"; after all, we printed **Lava Spike**. No, the real issue with the Bolt is that it is a fantastic tempo card *in addition* to being a way to win the game. Bolt kills somewhere in the range of 57 of the 88 creatures that debuted with it in Alpha, and almost all of them cost more mana—often significantly more—than it does. That's too much for a one-mana card.

Swords to Plowshares

Lightning Bolt may deal with 57/88 of Alpha's creatures, but **Swords** takes care of 87/88. For. One. Mana. There has never been a better deal for efficient creature removal than this.

Rishadan Port

Like **Plow Under** and **Avalanche Riders**, this card is one that keeps you ahead in tempo once you grasp the initiative. The problem is that the card costs 0 mana to play and is colorless in addition to tapping for mana when necessary, meaning any deck that wanted it—tempo or otherwise—could throw in the card relatively painlessly.

Any deck with Ports that got off the ground quickly could stay ahead very easily.

Force of Will



Force of Will does everything **Force Spike** does, everything **Daze** does, and tons more. It has been called the glue that holds Vintage—the most power-laden format in the game—together. Many players probably don't think of FoW as a tempo card, but it does a fine job of that. Check out Nicholas Labarre's Merfolk deck from Pro Tour—Rome. Besides **Force of Will**, it backs up its weenie horde with other cards from today's discussion, like **Force Spike** and **Man-o'-War**. He took this deck to a second place finish at that event, which was defined by the most degenerate Extended deck ever played—**Tolarian Academy**.

Fish		
Nicolas Labarre; Pro Tour-Rome 1998 Top 8		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
18 Island	4 Force of Will	2 Phyrexian Furnace
4 Wasteland	4 Counterspell	2 Bottle Gnomes
	2 Force Spike	2 Force Spike
22 lands	3 Nevinyrral's Disk	2 Disrupt
	2 Curiosity	4 Hydroblast
	15 other spells	2 Serrated Arrows
4 Lord of Atlantis		1 Nevinyrral's Disk
4 Merfolk Raiders		15 sideboard cards
4 Manta Riders		
4 Suq'Ata Firewalker		
4 Man-o'-War		
3 Waterspout Djinn		
23 creatures		

Two Week's Ago's Poll:

How happy were you with the Azorius guild?		
Pretty happy	3560	31.3%
Neutral	2248	19.8%
Very happy	2174	19.1%
Overjoyed	1197	10.5%
Mildly unhappy	1174	10.3%
Outraged	538	4.7%
Very unhappy	481	4.2%
Total	11372	100.0%

One in five of you is actually unhappy, but on the flipside three out of five of you are happy with the Azorius. We can live with that.

Last Week's Poll:

What Ravnica block guild do you feel best matched its mechanics with its flavor?		
Golgari	2647	19.4%
Simic	2402	17.6%
Rakdos	2239	16.4%
Gruul	1135	8.3%
Orzhov	1061	7.8%
Selesnya	1059	7.8%
Izzet	1045	7.7%
Dimir	763	5.6%
Azorius	726	5.3%
Boros	543	4.0%
Total	13620	100.0%

Golgari wins, with Simic in second. I think radiance bummed people out, which I suppose is understandable.

This Week's Poll:

Do you watch the following Discovery Channel shows?



Yes
 No

Monster Garage
 Yes
 No

American Chopper
 Yes
 No

I Shouldn't Be Alive
 Yes
 No

Extreme Engineering
 Yes
 No

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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