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# Cantrip Down Memory Lane

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Welcome to Cantrip Week! This week I'll be taking a look at the life and times of the little mechanic that could. Yes, today is all about a mechanic that really knows how to draw... fans. (Yes, be warned that there are more jokes like that coming. And if you didn't know that, welcome to "Making Magic".) Cantrips have had a few more twists and turns behind the scenes than many of you might realize. So Cantrip, come on down – This is your life!



## Catch Me If You Cantrip

When a designer designs a mechanic, he knows that it has one of four fates:

**#1 – It's a One-Timer** – This is what happens to the not-so-popular mechanics. You get one shining moment before you're trapped in the back of a glossary alongside terms that haven't seen print since tapped blockers didn't deal damage. (That's pre-Sixth Edition rules for those readers that might not been playing last millennium.) A fine example of this category would be bands with others (you might want to check out this pre-"House of Cards" Mark Gottlieb article – ["Absurd or Ridiculous? You Decide"](#) - if you don't realize how crazy this mechanic was.)

**#2 – Slow Rotation** – These mechanics are ones that we like enough to bring back but not on any accelerated schedule. This is where the vast majority of mechanics fall. An example would be something like cycling that came back once (so far).

**#3 – Heavy Rotation** – These are mechanics that have proven popular enough with the fans that they return on an accelerated schedule. The best example of this would be the "pitch" mechanic from *Alliances* (i.e. *Force of Will* and company). *Coldsnap* is the third/fourth return of the mechanic, depending how you count it. (The others being *Mercadian Masques*, *Prophecy*, and *Betrayers of Kamigawa*.)

**#4 – Full Time Status** – This is the holy grail for mechanics. To become so popular and useful that it becomes engrained in the status quo. Cantrip is one such mechanic. Cantrips are so basic to R&D that they are free reign for any set that needs them. But this wasn't always the case. No, there was a time when cantrips were "too special" for every day use.

## Have a Nice Cantrip (See You Next Fall)

So what is a cantrip? I mean the actual word. It has some sleight variance from source to source but basically it is a very minor magical effect. I've heard it described as a magic trick but with real magic. It's flashy and fun but with little magical substance. So how did the "draw a card" rider get this nickname? It got it from the *Ice Age* designers (Skaff Elias, Jim Lin, Dave Petty and Chris Page). Note that the term itself has never appeared on cards. The idea behind the original cantrips was that they represented effects so minor that they were worth less than a mana. The only way to make them worth enough to spend mana on was to take away the other cost, the cost of the card. So why the "beginning of next turn" silliness? I'm getting there.

The delayed aspect of the original cantrips stemmed from the team's fascination with one card – *Urza's Bauble*. They loved the idea of a card that basically did nothing but replace itself. The problem was that if the text was simply "draw a card", *Urza's Bauble* was broken. It basically would say that the deck limit is 56 cards. So *Urza's Bauble* stayed as the delayed text. (A quick aside – when the *Coldsnap* developers decided to have the set use the old delayed text, they specifically made *Mishra's Bauble*, another card that could only be printed with the old version.) That decision would later be overturned on appeal, as we'll see.



## Cantrip Over Your Own Words

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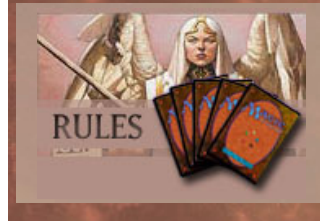
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RULES



Last we left poor little cantrip, it had just premiered in *Ice Age*. The designers latched on quickly that cantrips were valuable. *Homelands*, the very next set, had four (**Headstone**, **Jinx**, **Prophecy** and **Renewal**) all done with the same wait-until-next-turn text. *Alliances* continued the trend. As did *Mirage*. As did *Visions*. Then something happened. That something was Sixth Edition.

For those unfamiliar with Sixth Edition, that is when the axe came down. During **Magic's** early years, many parts of the game, the rules in particular, were handled very catch as catch can. Each decision was made in the vacuum of that decision alone. As such, many aspects of the game, once again the rules in particular, became very patchwork. To understand the rules, you had to memorize every card on an individual basis. Joel Mick and Bill Rose (basically the Head Designer before me and the one before him) decided enough was enough. If **Magic** was going to survive long term, it had to have things set up to allow the players to be able to figure out how things were supposed to work. Rather than have numerous case-by-case decisions, they wanted the game to have one unified set of rules that answered all the questions (okay, the vast majority of the questions – **Magic** does have its deep and dark rules black holes – ssh).

While they were busy rewriting **Magic**, Bill and Joel took a look at every nook and cranny of the game. They had their eye on things that existed yet were unnecessary. One day they got their eye on cantrips. Why was the delay necessary? Yes, a few cards like **Urza's Bauble** would be lost, and the costing would have to be tweaked, but the trade-off would be for much greater simplicity. Starting with *Weatherlight*, cantrips simply read "Draw a card." They also decided to keep the old cantrips (now dubbed the slowtrips) as they had been written since a number of the cards couldn't be changed without being recosted and, of course, **Urza's Bauble** would become broken.

Thus began a new era. A new "too special" era? Yeah, yeah, I'm getting there.

## Trash Cantrip

The next set was *Tempest*. I was the lead designer of *Tempest* and I liked cantrips. So *Tempest* had a number of them. As did *Stronghold*. And then, the next big wrinkle in the life of cantrips – Bill Rose became Head Designer. Bill also liked cantrips. A little too much for cantrip's sake. You see, Bill had a philosophy that the good things in **Magic** were better if they were withheld for periods of time and then brought back with much flair. During Bill's reign, you'll notice he did this with such things as multicolor cards and artifacts. As far as Bill was concerned, cantrips fell in this camp. They were a cool thing that would be better savored if we didn't use them so often.



This is why *Exodus* didn't have any cantrips. It had some card drawing, but "Effect. Draw a card." was missing. This trend carried into *Urza's Saga* block. By Bill's decree, the block had no cantrips. In its place came two mechanics. The first was cycling. Like cantrips, this mechanic helped smooth out decks (especially in Limited) through card drawing. The other mechanic inspired by cantrip's absence? The "free mechanic". Yes, the broken thing on cards like **Cloud of Faeries** and **Palinchron**.

I know I've told this story before but I have this rep in R&D (and well, outside of R&D as well) as telling the same stories over and over again. Why stop that lovely tradition in my column (and long time readers know I haven't). While trying to find a replacement for cantrips I explored with the idea of cards that did the opposite: they cost a card but no mana, but being free caused all sorts of issues. That's when I hit upon the idea that the mechanic required you to pay for the spell and then gave you the mana back. If you could pay for it *then* it was free. I next realized that the mechanic wasn't limited to just cheap cards and from there basically, all hell broke loose.

Next was *Mercadian Masques* Block. Bill's ban held strong and the block had zero cantrips. (Quick trivia: How many spells in *Nemesis* had the word "draw" in its text? One; **Accumulated Knowledge** – if you're only going to have one, might as well make it good.) During all this time I slowly gathered up the support of all the other designers and developers. Cantrips seemed too useful, and kind of bland, to be a splashy heavy rotation mechanic. Little by little I got all the others on board in the belief that cantrips belonged as a basic tool in the toolbox of every set. And so is that what caused Bill to change his mind? No. Bill didn't change his mind. As far as Bill felt they belonged in Group #3 (Heavy Rotation) that is where they stayed. Ah, it's good to be Head Designer.

## Yes, I Cantrip

Next came *Invasion*. By this point I had realized that Bill was pretty steadfast in his opinion on cantrips. So I tried a different approach. Wasn't it time for cantrips to rotate back in? The public hadn't seen them in the last seven sets. *Invasion* was the perfect opportunity to bring them back. Bill agreed. As I said, Bill really liked cantrips and he had high hopes for *Invasion*. Thus, *Invasion*, *Planeshift* and *Apocalypse* all had cantrips. According to the plan, *Odyssey* block would then stop using them. I, of course, had other plans.

*Odyssey* block was the graveyard block. A key component of it was the mechanic threshold, which encouraged you to throw away card advantage for improved board position. Cantrips fit perfectly into this world because it allowed players to burn spells without card disadvantage. Knowing this, I went to Bill and made the argument that although *Invasion* block used cantrips, *Odyssey* block needed them. Bill was reluctant, but he saw the value that they offered the set. In the end, he gave his okay. Thus, cantrips showed up in *Odyssey*, *Torment*, and *Judgment*.

Two whole years of cantrips. That was enough to make Bill realize the value of cantrips? No. As *Onslaught* demonstrates, the block after *Odyssey* was back to its "no cantrip" norm. (Yes, *Onslaught* did have **Wheel and Deal**, so one did manage to sneak in.) This included *Legions* and *Prophecy*. In Bill's defense, *Onslaught* brought

cycling back, which fulfilled much of cantrip's purpose (smoothing decks and allowing small effects to have enough value).

Meanwhile, the *Eighth Edition* team was busy sneaking a few cantrips of their own in. *Slay* and *Execute* were so hands down the best "black hates green" and "black hates white" cards available that Bill allowed them into the set. Also, *Merchant of Secrets* was treated more as a creature with a comes into play effect than a cantrip. This meant the fate of cantrips was going to be left up to the next large set, one I was lead designing. A little set known as *Mirrodin*.



## Tin Cantrip

The reason I was successful in *Odyssey* was that my argument was true. The set really needed cantrips. The same could not be said about *Mirrodin*. The set was over half artifacts meaning it was spell light. There wasn't even really room for cantrips. And so, Bill's decree held true for the *Mirrodin* block. *Champions of Kamigawa* has a single cantrip, *Squelch*. *Betrayers of Kamigawa* had none. But then something interesting happened.

*Saviors of Kamigawa* had three cantrips (*Curtain of Light*, *Dosan's Oldest Chant* and *Rending Vines*). *Ravnica* had seven (*Carven Caryatid*, *Festival of the Guildpact*, *Quickchange*, *Remand*, *Reroute*, *Shadow of Doubt* and *Smash* – and yes, I guess you could count *Ribbons of Night*). *Guildpact* had nine (*Conjurer's Ban*, *Cremate*, *Electrolyze*, *Quicken*, *Repeal*, *Runeboggle*, *To Arms!*, *Wildsize*, and *Withstand*). *Dissension* had five (*Carom*, *Determined*, *Flash Foliage*, *Psychotic Fury*, and *Shielding Plax*). *Coldsnap* had five (*Balduvian Rage*, *Mishra's Bauble*, *Mystic Melting*, *Swift Maneuver*, and *Thermal Flux*), though they were slowtrips in honor of being part of the *Ice Age* block.

So what happened? What got Bill to finally change his mind? Nothing. He didn't. He just stopped being the Head Designer. See, I took over the reins in the middle of *Betrayers of Kamigawa*. *Saviors* was the first set under my watch. And the very first thing I did in the very first meeting I had with all the designers once I took over my new position was to change the official policy on cantrips. Like I said, it's good to be Head Designer.

And that, my faithful readers, is the plight of our friend the cantrip. I hope you enjoyed my little peek behind the scenes. Perhaps it gave you another idea of the kinds of issue we face day in and day out. Now surely I have my personal pet peeves. Things that I've decreed during my reign shall be different than they have been. There are, but I'll save those for another column.

Also, one last note. While I definitely have fun with Bill in this article, please don't take away the impression that Bill did anything but a stellar job during his time as Head Designer. While he and I disagreed on cantrips, we agreed on most everything else. Much of the improvement of design during the last nine years has been the direct result of Bill's hard work. **Magic** was lucky to have him (and still have him as he's now the VP of R&D).

As always if you enjoyed today's column (or if you disliked it) drop me a note and let me know. While I can't reply to every letter, I do read them all.

Join me next week when I take you behind the scenes in a whole new way.

Until then, may you cantrip down the light fantastic.

Mark Rosewater

P.S. – Oh yeah, one last thing – Draw a card.

*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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