

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Blast from the Past

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
Monday, September 4, 2006



PRODUCTS

PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Welcome to the first week of *Time Spiral* previews! You have no idea how long I've been dying to say that. One of the hardest parts about working so far ahead is the delay between doing something cool and showing it off. As you will see in my column today, I feel that *Time Spiral* is a very unique expansion (and block) with a theme that I'm sure is near and dear to the hearts of most players. And if that's not enough, I even have a fun preview card to show you. Sound good?

Building Upon the Past

As is tradition, let me start by introducing the design team:

Brian Tinsman – When I announced the Great Designer Search, I mentioned that over the last year, we've lost a number of our **Magic** designers. Brian is one such person. Shortly after *Time Spiral* was completed, he gave his notice. While I'll miss Brian and his unorthodox approach to design, I think he left on a high note. Brian was the lead designer for *Judgment*, *Scourge* and *Saviors of Kamigawa*. *Time Spiral* was his chance to lead something other than the last set in a block and he rose to the challenge. As you will see, *Time Spiral* tore off a larger chunk than the average big set and the team was definitely challenged during the duration of the design. The good news is that what we ended up with is something unlike any set you've ever seen. (And I mean that in a good way.) Let me just end this by publicly saying goodbye to Brian. You were wonderful to work with and I'll miss your joy and fire that you always had when working on **Magic**.



Final Wrap-up
[Top 8 Video Archives](#)

MAGIC ONLINE

Aaron Forsythe – This was Aaron's last chance to watch a big set being designed from somewhere other than the driver's seat. You see, Aaron is the lead designer of *Peanut*, next year's fall expansion. He had a chance to watch me lead a large set with *Ravnica* and *Time Spiral* was his chance to watch how another designer puts together a big set. Since this set was completed, Aaron has gone on to be promoted to Head Developer, the equivalent to my position on the other side of the cubicle. While I think the promotion will be great for **Magic**, it does mean that I'll be less able to lean on Aaron for design work. (That said, he is scheduled to be on *Butter* and *Rock* – of *Paper* and *Scissors* fame, the following year's block, so he's not exactly disappearing from design.) Aaron did his normal excellent work on *Time Spiral*. He is definitely a historian of the past, so a chance to jump into... (well, you'll see in a moment) this set's theme was quite enjoyable. As always, it was great having Aaron on the team.



MESSAGE BOARDS

Magic General Forum
magicthegathering.com Forum

Devin Low – With Brian leaving and Aaron reducing his time doing design, there has to be someone picking up the slack (you know, other than our future design intern). Devin is one of these people. He first worked with Brian on *Saviors of Kamigawa*. He was then on the design team for *Coldsnap*. Obviously, he worked on *Time Spiral*. He followed this up by being on the design team for *Future Sight*, he's part of my design team for Jelly, and, if all goes according to plan, will be leading his first set within the next year. Devin is one of the double dippers in R&D that works both on design and development (he was the lead developer on *Planar Chaos* and is currently the lead developer of *Peanut*). I can't speak for his development (you know, other than the fact that they just handed him the next year's large set to lead develop – around R&D there's nothing bigger than being given the keys to a large set), but he is definitely a designer on the rise.



RULES

Mark Rosewater – You might have noticed that I've been on a lot of design teams recently. Mostly this is because I have a hands-on approach to overseeing design. Being part of the team allows me to be around if the lead needs any help or guidance. It also allows me a chance to do work for every set and as I'm a design junky, this works out well for everyone.



There are not a lot of design teams in which I believe any member would be able to lead design for their own set. *Time Spiral* was one such team. This was good, because as you're about to see, it was a roller coaster of a design.

Time for Design

One of the most interesting things about a design like *Time Spiral* is how far it evolved over its lifespan. As with any story, I guess it's best for us to start at the beginning. Flashback to about two and a half years ago when I was assigned with the task of selecting the *Time Spiral* design team and figuring out the basics for the overall theme. You see, as Head Designer it's my job to give the lead designer of the set a general overview of what the block is about. Not the specifics, as we don't know them at that point, but a sense of the big picture. For example, when *Ravnica* started we knew "another multicolor block, not *Invasion*". I had a few inklings like the idea of having ally and enemy color pairs on equal footing, but basically it was up to the design team to flesh the idea out and figure out how exactly they were going to make it work.

So, here's what I had to work with. At this point in time, hybrid had been jettisoned from the *Ravnica* design. I knew that hybrid would overlap nicely with multicolor, so I had my eye on it for *Time Spiral*. Meanwhile, the *Saviors of Kamigawa* team was trying to come up with a way to do legendary spells (more details on this next week), and came up with the mechanic that you all know as suspend ([click here](#) if you have no idea what I'm talking about). And the Creative Team, while working on *Ravnica*, had come to the conclusion that they wanted an opportunity to reboot the creative.



What does that last part mean? Over the years, the **Magic** storyline had become very patchwork and convoluted. In addition, certain aspects of the creative had strayed over time, no longer serving the purpose they were originally created for. When hybrid came along and the team started trying to understand what hybrid mana meant creatively, they realized that the best answer to explain it might be the unraveling of magic itself. Perhaps things had gotten so bad that the very essence of the multiverse was threatening to collapse.

And if there was a disaster of epic proportions where else to center it than good old Dominaria? The story line was even set up for Dominaria to undergo a great crisis. Over the years, one cataclysm after another had pushed the plane to the point where something large and chaotic was destined to happen. Brady Dommermuth, the person in charge of world building on the Creative Team, admitted that Dominaria has essentially been moving towards a mighty upheaval for years. Each disaster that unfolded on Dominaria led to a larger disaster down the line. Brady assured me that Dominaria was primed for a temporal disaster. And the hybrid mana fit in perfectly.

As Brady explained how the very essence of time was breaking down, I started seeing the beginning of the set's theme – time. (Or more accurately, temporal chaos.) That is when I remembered suspend, the leftover mechanic from *Saviors of Kamigawa*. Basically, the mechanic allowed you to use time as a resource. What better place to use it than a world where time is malfunctioning? Hybrid, suspend, creative reboot, a theme of temporal chaos – we had the basic ingredients. As hybrid and suspend were the two biggest pieces, I chose two members from the design teams that created the two mechanics. Hybrid came from *Ravnica*, which brought Aaron and myself to the team. *Saviors*, which created suspend, had Brain and Devin. In both cases, enough work had been done on each mechanic that we started with a leg up on how to proceed.

We had our team. We had our theme. We had our mechanics. Everything was looking bright. So, of course, that's when the trouble began.

The Best Plans of Mice and Men

The team began by exploring the two major mechanics that had been brought to the design. Each proved interesting, but we learned a few important lessons. One, the two mechanics didn't really gel in any way. They both played into the larger temporal chaos theme, but they didn't have much synergy. This problem was soon solved when the *Ravnica* development team decided that the set was missing a little oomph. It needed something that worked in multicolor, but was new and innovative. In short, it needed hybrid. So it took it.

Quick aside – One of the interesting balances in R&D is trying to figure out how to prioritize needs of a particular set versus the larger needs of **Magic** as a whole. *Ravnica* needed hybrid, as did *Time Spiral*. Who wins? The answer is usually the set that design-wise needs it most, but there's a little caveat. The set closer to release sometimes doesn't have the luxury of time. What this means is that R&D has an understanding that if a set closer to release really needs to steal something, it can.

Once hybrid moved to the *Ravnica* block, the *Time Spiral* team discussed the idea of keeping it in *Time Spiral*. Perhaps, we thought, it would be neat to see a mechanic evolve over two years rather than one. (*Ravnica* had opted to just sprinkle in the mechanic, keeping it very simple and thus allowing plenty of space to evolve it.) Plus, it fit our temporal chaos theme so well. So we kept it, even though it was going to appear in the block before. It would later leave the set, but that is a story for another day.

Themes Like Old Times

Ever since I took over as Head Designer, one of my major pushes has been to focus on block planning. That is, I want the design teams to think about the block as a cohesive whole. This means during the early parts of the large set design, the team has to figure out what the block as a whole is going to be doing. We knew we had a theme of time, but how exactly could we evolve it over the block? Hmm. A theme of time, a block divided into three parts. How does one break time into three parts? Once we got to this point the answer was pretty obvious. *Time Spiral* block was going to break into the three parts of time – past, present and future.

This brought up all sorts of questions: How do you show the past when each expansion already borrows and repeats ideas from old sets? How do you show the present when every expansion is set in the present? How do you show the future when all sets have new, never before seen things? These are all good questions that will be answered before the block is over, but for today we'll just focus on the first question. In short, how do



you make a set evoke the past in a way that's different from everyday **Magic**?

The design team spent a great deal of time on this question. We tried to come up with every way we could that made a card evoke the past. And we discovered something interesting. No matter what avenue we started down, we always found ourselves making cards that referenced **Magic's** past, which led us to our second discovery. Nostalgia was fun. Really fun. Block theme fun.

Often in design you spend time trying out different things in a search to find something special. Most often you don't realize what that special thing is until you stumble upon it. This is what makes large block design so exhilarating and also so scary. You're looking for something where you don't know what it is until you find it. But if you're doing your job correctly and you have a little luck on your side, you stumble across the special element. You then nurture it and let it rise to the top. That's what happened here. The nostalgia theme quickly and definitively proved itself to be something special.

The most exciting discovery came as I started examining nostalgia as a block theme. We make new cards and mechanics every year, yet we repeat old things with far less frequency. In short, we were creating nostalgia faster than we were using it. We had stumbled upon an actual, honest-to-goodness resource. And not just any resource - a potentially very popular one.

This, of course, leads to another interesting series of questions. Nostalgia obviously blends seamlessly with the past. But how can you use nostalgia to evoke the present or the future? Very good questions, and ones we wrestled with during much of *Time Spiral* design. We luckily solved that problem. Unfortunately, that's not what this column is about but I promise, as we get closer to *Planar Chaos* and *Future Sight*, I will explore this issue in much greater detail.

Back to nostalgia as it deals with the past... Once I realized we had captured lightning in a bottle, I encouraged the team to embrace the nostalgia theme. This was no problem, as they were as excited about it as I was. The rest of R&D was a little more skeptical. They enjoyed nostalgia, but was it potent enough to bank an entire block on? Yes, I said, it was. Luckily for me, I built up a lot of good will during *Ravnica* Block (see, they were also a little skeptical at first with the guild model), so they just trusted me. An awesome feeling, by the way. Ironically, when we later handed off the design to development, they felt we hadn't pushed the nostalgia theme enough and pushed it even more. A lot more. (And note that we had already pushed it pretty hard ourselves.) But that's a story for Aaron.

Digging Through The Past

Once we were focused on harnessing the nostalgia of **Magic's** past, the team dug out all its reference material and dove in. We quickly realized that we weren't trying to connect to just anything from **Magic's** past - we wanted to connect with the best of **Magic's** past. To use a metaphor, we were the guys in charge of putting together the tracks for the Greatest Hits CD. We plumbed all the old sets trying to find the best of the best.

Here's the thing to remember. While we were using the tools of things that had been done, we needed to make new cards. The new set has to be about new things. How do we do that? For starters, we had the time theme to work with. As you'll see next week, it provided us with a number of new toys to play with. Two, we were able to take old ideas and put fresh new spins on them. Here are a few (but I promise not all) of the ways we did this.



Reusing old mechanics – Just having an old mechanic on a card is nostalgic. Having a different effect than one we've done before makes it new. But we quickly realized something important. Cards that tweak the past in ways we've never done them don't feel like the past. Changing an effect is fine. Sure, we didn't do Effect X with buyback in *Tempest* block, but we could have. So I drew a line. For *Time Spiral* (the set, mind you, not the block), I made the following decree: Any old mechanic we brought back could not innovate. The mechanic simply had to do what it did from where it came.

That said, we could do effects that were never done. We could update effects based on the modern color pie. We could make cards that put the mechanic on effects that you never would expect us to put that mechanic on (such as buyback on a Power 9 effect). There was a lot of room for making really cool cards. But innovation is not the past.

Revisiting old definitions – There is no stauncher supporter of the color pie in R&D than myself. But even I understand that **Magic** has a need to make exceptions. My rule is that we only do these things in a place where it serves the design. For example, usually only black and green interact with the graveyard, but when we do a set all about the graveyard, all five colors need to find a way to interact with it.

What does this have to do with *Time Spiral*? If you're going to the past, you have to dip your toe into the way things were. This means that in this set we are choosing to bleed the color pie in places where we've bled it before. There are cards in this set doing things that the modern day colors do not do. But if you want to evoke the

past, you have to be willing to let the past do its thing. This means that there are cards in this expansion that would never normally see print in a modern **Magic** set. Like I said in my [State of the Union column](#), there are cards in this block that will shock you. These are but some of them.

Reliving old designs – Another thing we tried hard to do was evoke ways we used to design. Cards have little riders that they might not, in modern day design, have. Certain flavors we've moved away from we've allowed a little visit. There's a certain feel that evokes different times in **Magic's** life. *Time Spiral* tries to recapture some of those moments.

Recapturing old iconics – One of the earliest exercises the design team did was have each of us to write up a list of the cards that intrinsically meant the most to us as players. What were the cards that we had fond memories of? We then tried to find ways to capture or reference or hint at as many of those cards as possible. It was no mistake that the first major preview card was a **Black Lotus** variant. *Time Spiral* is chock full of throwbacks. The set wants to evoke the past. This means it has to evoke individual cards that defined the game.

I can go on and on. *Time Spiral* is so chocked with goodies that I could write many, many columns about it. (And don't worry – I will.) But I've passed the 3,000 word mark, and it seems like it's about time to finally get to the preview card and call it a day. In future weeks, I'll explore the time theme. I'll go into greater detail of how we carved out different areas of nostalgia. And I'll give you a behind the scenes look at a crazy part of the design that I haven't even touched upon yet.

But that's the future and I'm supposed to be talking about the past. Today's preview card is supposed to demonstrate an entirely different aspect of using nostalgia to make new cards. Today's card is nostalgic to more than one card. Yes, the preview card is actually a throwback to Alpha **and** *Tempest*. But enough with my teasing, it's time to lay your eyes on the tip of the nostalgia iceberg.

[Click here to see today's card.](#)



Pretty cool, huh? Let me leave you with a few Orb stats for those that might not have had the time to check it out.

[Click here](#) to see the stats. **WARNING:** If you've been avoiding the Orb because you don't want to know too much about the set, I advise skipping over this (and please don't talk about it in the thread to this column – thanks).

buyback – 7
echo – 13
flanking - 21
flashback – 23
madness – 10
morph - 18
shadow – 28
spellshaper – 6
storm - 5
thallid - 14

And of course
sliver – 54
and
slivers - 26

Also, before I go a few updates on last week's teasers –

- an angel that costs two mana (yes, *that* angel, and no she's not some wimpy 2/2)

No, this does not have suspend. You get the angel the turn you play it.

- a female legend that players have been begging us to do for a *long* time

If she weren't a planeswalker, she would have been in *Coldsnap*. That's the great thing about messing with time; you can grab people from before they became too powerful to put on a card.

- a new hermit with a love of tokens and an old keyword (but not the same one)

It's one of the keywords in my Orb recap above

- a direct damage spell that can do 5 damage for a single red mana

Also not a suspend card. All five damage is done to the target you choose.

- a new Lotus (oh wait, you've already seen that one)

If you still haven't seen this, [go here](#).

- a Power Nine card with buyback

Fine, fine. A power 9 effect with buyback. No, we're not reprinting a broken card and just adding buyback.

- a card with the word "squirrel" in its rules text

Hint: the card isn't a creature. Also, not the hermit.

- a legend who uttered one of the most popular lines of flavor text of all time

Famous last words.

- and a cycle of artifact mana sources that turn into creatures from the Reserved List

I've seen some very educated guesses on this one, but I've yet to see anyone get all five correct in the same post.

And finally, a few juicy card names for you to chew on:

- Liege of the Pit
- Magus of the Candelabra
- Stuffy Doll
- Vesuvan Shapeshifter
- Wheel of Fate

I believe the art for the first four were all shown at Gencon, although the fourth one might have been shown in its sketch stage. The fifth one is on [the Time Spiral minisite](#). Check it out.

And finally, because I do so love teasing, here's one more little nugget:

Urza finally gets a factory.



Finally, an update on The Great Designer Search. We had over one thousand valid entries (1061 I believe), which is quite incredible when you take into account how hard we made the first step. This has broken the Wizards record for the most people applying for a single job (previously set by the Creative Writer job that Matt Cavotta got). Step two is in the works as we speak. I'll keep you updated as things move along.

Whew, that's all I got for today. I hope this column has whet your appetite for the awesomeness that is to come.

Join me next week when I find some time to talk about time.

Until then, may you know the warm fuzzies that are nostalgia.

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.*



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Mark Rosewater](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

