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Needing a Little Time

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Making Magic

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Howdy everyone. Welcome to the second week of *Time Spiral* previews. Before this column is out, I will explain a different aspect of *Time Spiral's* design, I'll show off yet another cool legend, (hint: his name has appeared in the title of a restricted card) and I'll even spend some time explaining the big new mechanic of the set. All for the cost of nothing but your time. Although as you will see, time is an actual cost. (That said, don't worry – I'll make it worth your while.)

Last week, I talked about the nostalgia theme of *Time Spiral*. Nostalgia, by its very nature, is centered on bringing back the past. But **Magic** designs want to innovate and do new and different things. How does one innovate in a world of nostalgia? For starters, you can innovate with the nostalgia, and as the previews have demonstrated, we have. But the set cannot live on nostalgia alone. No matter how much you play with things from the past, they are still things from the past. **Magic**, at its core, is about exploration. Every set has to have something new. *Time Spiral* is no exception. So, how does *Time Spiral*, the set about the past dipped in nostalgia, do this? That, with the help of a new preview card, is the topic of today's column.

It's About Time

The first thing you need to do is ground the nostalgia theme in something tangible. Nostalgia for the sake of nostalgia leads you down a dark path. Nostalgia used as a tool to accomplish a larger goal creates interesting opportunities. Case in point: *Time Spiral* didn't start with a nostalgia theme. It evolved there. Why? Because at its core, *Time Spiral* block isn't about nostalgia; it's about time. Yes, nostalgia flavors the entire block. It gives it a lot of substance, but it isn't the backbone of the design.

To understand where we went and how the choices were made, let me take you back to the very beginning of *Time Spiral*. Before the design team was selected. Back when the block was just an inkling in my mind – something that I knew I'd have to start worrying about. At the time, I understood where *Ravnica* block was going. I used the guild model as a means to tweak the multicolor theme. The guild model then led me to my first block design. I've now dubbed it the "jigsaw method". Why should players care about all three sets? Because the block is really one large idea that was chopped up into three pieces. Each section had elements that were unique to it and were a piece of the total puzzle. You want to see the whole picture, you have to complete the whole puzzle.

At the time, I didn't know what *Time Spiral's* block was going to be; I just knew it wasn't going to be the same structure. That's when I stumbled onto the idea of using a motif as a connector. What if the block as a whole was about something, but that each set played into a different part of that thing? Each expansion would have its own unique viewpoint. The sets would be connected yet not similar. Each set would have its own subtheme, yet there would be a through line that connected all three expansions. The idea was great. The only problem was I needed "the thing".

That's when the event I talked about last week (you know, where all these different ideas started flowing together) happened. At the heart of everything was one simple idea, a "thing" if you will. And that thing was: time. Let me tell you, there are few themes that excite me more than time. I'm an avid science fiction fan. My favorite science fiction subgenre? Time travel. I love, love time travel. I've watched so many movies (and read so many books), a lot I probably shouldn't have, just because I'm a sucker for time travel stories. Something about being able to point out how the climax to *Timecop* can't actually work under the movie's established rules of time travel or knowing to yell at the screen every time I watch *Back to the Future III* ("The gas is in the car in the cave!") brings such joy.

I was very optimistic about time when I started playing with the concept. What I soon found was that it was even more flexible than I had imagined. For starters, as I explained last week, it worked perfectly as a structure to build the block around. Past, present, and future was just the type of hook I wanted. Each fit with the other two yet was distinctive by itself. Trust me when I say that this block will be one where each expansion is remembered unto itself. Twenty years from now, you might not know which of the three *Ravnica* sets Izzet was in, but you'll know which *Time Spiral* expansion a certain concept came from.

The cool part was that time also worked at the other end of the spectrum: the mechanics. Time, you see, is already an important part of the game. Yet it's not something we've messed around all that much with in design. Virgin design space; just what the nostalgia theme needed.

Boldly Going...

Another important part of doing nostalgia right is not relying too much on the nostalgia to provide the "new and different". I often talk about how **Magic** is, at its heart, a game about discovery. Every set needs to allow the players to explore and experiment. The biggest problem with old things is that the world has already wrapped their brains around them. Yes, buyback might have been hard to strategically grasp when it first came out, but

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once the **Magic** playing community digested it, it became an understood aspect of the game. (This, by the way, is one of the major reasons we felt comfortable bringing so many mechanics back.)

What this means is that nostalgia has to be paired with something new to give it balance. For *Time Spiral*, that something new is the mechanical ramifications of the time theme. This theme is big enough that I'm not even going to have space to talk about all of it today. I'm going to use the rest of today's column to focus on the major mechanic and use next week's column to round out the many different ways time is being used.

So what is the biggest new thing in *Time Spiral*? It's a mechanic called suspend. What you ask is suspend? If only I had some example to show you. If only I was given access to one of the *Time Spiral* cards that I was allowed to reveal to you, even though the set hasn't yet been released. If only such a "preview" card existed and was a legend whose name appeared on a once-restricted card. If only.

[Click here to see such a card.](#) (And yes, I know [we already previewed](#) Lotus Bloom)



Yes, it's Ith, man of mazes and wands. (He's from *The Dark* back story, if you have no idea what I'm talking about.) The important part (for this column anyway) is the last line on the card. Yes, the "Suspend 4 — *♦" part. What makes things even more confusing is the fact that the reminder text had to be dropped from this card to make space for the other abilities. So, I guess I can start with the basics on suspend, the reminder text. For creatures:

(Rather than play this card from your hand, you may pay [some mana cost] and remove it from the game with [some number] time counters on it. At the beginning of your upkeep, remove a time counter. When you remove the last, play it without paying its mana cost. It has haste.)

And non-creatures:

(Rather than play this card from your hand, you may pay [some mana cost] and remove it from the game with [some number] time counters on it. At the beginning of your upkeep, remove a time

counter. When you remove the last, play it without paying its mana cost.)

To keep you from hurting yourself, they're identical except the creature reminder text has the added line "It has haste." (I'll explain this part in a bit.) So what exactly is going on here? I'll give the brief, oversimplified, in actual English explanation and then include the technical version at the end of the column. (You can [click here](#) to just see it now if you have to.)

A card with suspend gives you the following ability: As a special action - which means this can only be done when you have priority but doesn't use the stack - you may remove a card with suspend from the game. Because the special action doesn't use the stack, it cannot be responded to. This means it cannot be countered or manipulated in any way. Also note that targets aren't chosen yet. You then pay the suspend cost and add the appropriate number of time counters. At the beginning of each of your upkeeps, you'll remove a time counter. When the last counter comes off, you must play it, although you do not pay the mana cost. It is at this time that targets for the spell are chosen and that the opponent has a chance to respond to it. This is the point where you are allowed to counter it or manipulate it in some way. If the spell was a creature, it gains haste when played, meaning it can attack the turn it comes into play. (Once again, I will explain why in a bit.)

Suspend is odd in that it is both very simple and very complex at the same time. The basic idea, trade in mana for time, is very grokable, but some of the intricacies can get a little wonky. Definitely read the section at the end if you want a better technical understanding of the mechanic.

Birth of a Notion



Normally, I start with the story behind the mechanic before I show off what the mechanic is. For suspend, I felt it was better to start the other way around. Why? Because the story is a lot harder to follow if you don't understand what the mechanic is.

As I said last week, this story begins in *Saviors of Kamigawa* design. The design team was lead by Brian Tinsman and included Devin Low, Brian Schneider and Brandon Bozzi. Trying to finish up the *Kamigawa* block, the team became obsessed with the idea of doing legendary spells. The block had already made the legendary supertype applicable to all other card types. Why stop at just the permanents?

The problem was what does a legendary instant or sorcery mean? The team tried several approaches. They started with the idea that once a legendary spell was on the stack, no other one may be added to the stack. That turned out to be clunky, confusing and seldom relevant. Next the team tried making legendary spells that could only be played once a game. If a copy of the card was in your graveyard, you couldn't play it. The team felt the restriction was too easy to build around.

Eventually the team stumbled upon the ideas of spells so big that there was a time component to playing them. This would allow the legendary spells to be big and sexy, yet not cost an arm and a leg. The team liked the idea, but as they played with it, they discovered they had something bigger than just a five-card cycle. (The epic spells would go on to fill this role in the set, although they never became legendary.) So they brought it to me. You see, as the Head Designer I'm the repository for all good but unused ideas.

I liked it, but didn't quite know what to do with it, so I filed it away in the back of my head. Cut to a year later. While trying to piece together what *Time Spiral* block was going to be about, I throw suspend (then called delay) into the mix. Surprisingly, the ideas gelled into something that resembled an actual good idea.

Time For a Change

While the crux of the idea behind suspend has stayed the same since day one, the execution has done everything but. For example, when we added suspend into the design, the ability wasn't optional. Cards with suspend could *only* be played using suspend (and yes, Lotus Bloom is part of a six-card rare cycle that still does this). It was the development team that decided to make suspend an optional ability. They did this for two reasons. One, it made suspend seem less like a negative (something you were forced to do) and more like a positive (something you could choose to do if you wanted to). Second, the suspend cards were proving to be horrible in mid to late game. Sure, they were great when you could drop them turn 1 or 2, but draw one when the game is almost over and it's the same as drawing a blank card.

Next, the original version of suspend had you play the spell up front. If it was suspended, it was then removed from the game before the spell resolved. This meant that you picked targets and checked to see if the spell was countered when it was played. While the countering part was a little more intuitive, the picking targets turns ahead of time proved to be very lame. For example, if you used a suspend direct damage spell on a creature, the



opponent almost always found a way to get rid of the creature, usually for some benefit, before the damage ever happened.

Third, the design had a lot more cheap suspend, including a bunch of suspend 1 cards. Eventually, we came to the conclusion that suspend was just more interesting if it required a true investment. A creature with suspend 1, we realized, was almost the same as having a creature come into play tapped. Over time, the suspend cards were pushed towards larger numbers.

Finally, the original design had a lot more suspend cards than the current file does. The reason for this is that development realized that having a few suspend cards was interesting. Having half of your game sitting around waiting to come into play was not. As such, the development team kept what they thought were the most interesting suspend cards and cut the rest.

There's a whole lot more story about how the cards changed, but since much of it happened in development, I'll leave the story for Aaron. Just the story of how the ability got templated should take up a column or two.

The Nick of Time

I'd like to end the column by focusing in on the thing that most drew me in as a designer to suspend. And wouldn't you know it, it ties right back into my theme of innovation. **Magic** has a number of resources. These resources are so fundamental to the game that we've spent years exploring them. In fact, I think one of the common themes in how we design is trying to find new ways to look at resources. This is why the idea of time is so exciting. It's a resource that we've barely touched.

This means three very cool things. First, it's something brand spanking new. Players walk into the set with no preconceived notions about it. It costs five less mana if you are willing to wait four extra turns for it. Is that good? When is it good? What can you do to maximize how you're using it? Players will have to actually figure it out. They will have to come face to face with the unknown. Which is exactly what a set about nostalgia wants to balance it out.



Second, it's organic. Designers always love to find ways to make use of things that already exist. This is why, for instance, a tribal theme is so cool to design. Every creature already has a creature type. The design doesn't have to add clutter because the necessary information is already on the card. Time is similar as it is already a fundamental part of the game. Turns, steps, phases all exist in every game. This makes the ideas surrounding time manipulation very clean (if even a little wordy).

Third, being virgin territory allows design a lot more latitude in how we can design it. And it allows us to tap into simple concepts as they haven't been handled yet. Suspend, in particular, is relatively simple in concept. The player trades time for mana. How much more straight-forward could it be?

The net result of all this is that suspend is both a mechanic that design was eager to create and one that the players should have a fun time exploring.

A Haste Is A Terrible Thing To Mind

Finally, before I let you go today, I owe you an explanation of why all suspend creatures gain haste. The answer is surprisingly simple. In the beginning, creatures with suspend just came into play like any other creature when it resolved. This meant they had summoning sickness and couldn't attack the turn they came into play. All the designers understood this rule, yet all of us found ourselves attacking with the creatures.

Before each game we swore that this time we'd remember that the creatures couldn't attack, but each time they came into play, we attacked with them. So we took a step back and examined the issue. Why were we attacking? We came to the conclusion that psychologically, after waiting for several turns for your creature, when it finally came into play you just wanted to use it.

Long ago I learned the following rule. If everyone playtesting keeps doing something wrong, change the thing such that what they're doing isn't wrong. You can't fight instinct and intuition. If people want to do something a certain way, they will. Not changing things to accommodate this is just being stubborn. I even have a little parable about this (once again from *A Whack on the Side of the Head*). At a college, there was a man whose job it was to put walking paths into any new grass in the courtyard. He'd been doing it for thirty years. How did he do it? Whenever there was a new piece of grass, he wouldn't put any paths in for the first few weeks. Instead, he would just let students walk where they wanted. Soon the grass would get worn into a pattern set by the students' natural paths. It was these paths that he would then turn into walkways. Design is the same way. You have to respect the players' natural impulses.

That is why all creatures with suspend gain haste.

More Time Next Week

I'm not done talking about the time theme yet, but I am out of time. Join me next week when I explore the many other ways *Time Spiral* plays around with time.

Until then, may time be on your side.

Mark Rosewater

Oh yeah, I promised you the technical rules for suspend. Here you go:

New Keyword Ability: Suspend

Suspend is an ability that essentially lets you spend time instead of mana to play spells. The suspend cost and number of time counters will vary from card to card, but the ability looks like this on cards:

Suspend 4--{1}{R} (Rather than play this card from your hand, you may pay {1}{R} and remove it from the game with four time counters on it. At the beginning of your upkeep, remove a time counter. When you remove the last, play it without paying its mana cost. It has haste.)

The official rules for the suspend ability are as follows:

502.59. Suspend

502.59a Suspend is a keyword that represents three abilities. The first is a static ability that functions while the card with suspend is in a player's hand. The second and third are triggered abilities that function in the removed-from-the-game zone. "Suspend N--[cost]" means "If you could play this card from your hand, you may pay [cost] and remove it from the game with N time counters on it. This action doesn't use the stack," and "At the beginning of your upkeep, if this card is suspended, remove a time counter from it," and "When the last time counter is removed from this card, if it's removed from the game, play it without paying its mana cost if able. If you can't, it remains removed from the game. If you play it this way and it's a creature, it gains haste until you lose control of it."

502.59b A card is "suspended" if it's in the removed-from-the-game zone, has suspend, and has a time counter on it.

502.59c Playing a spell as an effect of its suspend ability follows the rules for paying alternative costs in rules 409.1b and 409.1f-h.

* The phrase "if you could play this card from your hand" checks only for timing restrictions and permissions. This includes both what's inherent in the card's type (for example, if the card with suspend is a creature, it must be your main phase and the stack must be empty) and what's imposed by other abilities, such as flash or Meddling Mage's ability. Whether you could actually follow all steps in playing the card is irrelevant. If the card is impossible to play due to a lack of legal targets or an unpayable mana cost, for example, it may still be removed from the game with suspend.

* Removing a card from the game with its suspend ability is not playing that card. This action doesn't use the stack and can't be responded to.

* If a spell with suspend has targets, the targets are chosen when the spell is played, not when it's removed from the game.

* If the first triggered ability of suspend is countered, no time counter is removed. The ability will trigger again during its owner's next upkeep.

* When the last time counter is removed from a suspended card, the second triggered ability of suspend will trigger. It doesn't matter why the time counter was removed or whose effect removed it. (The `_Time Spiral_` reminder text is misleading on this point.)

* If the second triggered ability of suspend is countered, the card can't be played. It remains in the removed-from-the-game zone without any time counters on it for the rest of the game, and it's no longer considered suspended.

* If the second triggered ability of suspend resolves, the card's owner must play the spell if possible, even if that player doesn't want to. Normal timing considerations for the spell are ignored (for example, if the suspended card is a creature and this ability resolves during your upkeep, you're able to play the card), but other play restrictions are not ignored.

* If the second triggered ability of suspend resolves and the suspended card can't be played due to a lack of legal targets or a play restriction, for example, it remains in the removed-from-the-game zone without any time counters on it for the rest of the game, and it's no longer considered suspended.

* As the second triggered ability of suspend resolves, if playing the suspended card involves an additional cost, the card's owner must pay that cost if able. If he or she can't, the card remains removed from the game. If the additional cost includes mana, the situation is more complex. If the player has enough mana in his or her mana pool to pay the cost, that player must do so. If the player can't

possibly pay the cost, the card remains removed from the game. However, if the player has the means to produce enough mana to pay the cost, then he or she has a choice: The player may play the spell, produce mana, and pay the cost. Or the player may choose to play no mana abilities, thus making the card impossible to play because the additional mana can't be paid.

* A creature played via suspend comes into play with haste. It still has haste after the first turn it's in play as long as the same player controls it. As soon as another player takes control of it, it loses haste.

*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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