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Shifting Shapes

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Today's preview card is a fun one. The road to its creation was long and arduous, and I'm thrilled that it made it to print and is waiting in warehouses for all of you to open. Feast your eyes...



That right there is a cool card. It is, at worst, a Clone for five mana. But it gets better. At the beginning of your upkeep, you can turn it face down, only to turn it face up again for 1 and have it become a copy of another (or the same) creature of your choice. If any of you remember a certain 3 creature from Alpha that let you switch what it was during your upkeep, raise your hands. That's right, good ol' *Vesuvan Doppelganger*, one of the earliest fan favorite cards. And look, we even got Quinton Hoover—the artist that did the original—to do this update almost 14 years later.

The Shapeshifter is part of a loose five-card cycle of rare morph creatures that are take-offs on popular rare creatures from **Magic's** past. Some hints for you Orb of Insight junkies:

- Three of the five homages are to Alpha cards.
- Four of the original creatures are on the Reserved List.
- The combined base power and toughness of the five creatures is 10/14.

It's a fun cycle, to be sure.

Vesuvan Shapeshifter does all sorts of neat tricks. First of all, he does everything **Clone** does as far as copying creatures with comes-into-play abilities. If there is a *Loxodon Hierarch* in play, you can play the Shapeshifter as a copy of it and gain four life. Cool. Unfortunately, if you play the Shapeshifter face down then unmorph it for 1 into a Hierarch, you won't gain the four life, as the Shapeshifter isn't coming into play. It is simply turning from a 2/2 morph guy into a 4/4 Elephant.

But the shenanigans begin when you couple the Shapeshifter with another morph creature with a "turns-face-up" trigger, such as *Skinthinner* or *Echo Tracer* from *Legions* (or the handful of such creatures in *Time Spiral*).



Suddenly you can generate powerful effects over and over again during your upkeep for only 1 by flipping the Shapeshifter face down each turn and turning it face up as a copy of the creature with the triggered ability.

There's even a new rule dedicated to such high jinks:

504.8. If a face-down permanent would have an "As [this permanent] is turned face up..." ability after it's turned face up, that ability is applied while that permanent is being turned face up, not afterward.

A great card to be sure... but making it wasn't easy. History should have warned us that would be true...

The Shapeshifters' Tale

Richard Garfield's "Alpha" edition of **Magic**—the first set of cards ever released for the game—contained three blue cards that could become copies of other permanents: **Clone**, **Vesuvan Doppelganger**, and **Copy Artifact**. These cards were very popular and very fun, but had some non-intuitive rules problems associated with them. As tournaments became a big part of **Magic** in the coming years, the rules were cleaned up and clarified to remove as much ambiguity as possible, and the R&D of those early years felt that copy cards couldn't be made to work under the existing rules. The three blue cards were yanked from the Core Set after the Revised (third) Edition, and it was years before any new "copy" cards were introduced.

In the meantime, a card called **Dance of Many** was put into a set called *The Dark*. Dance tried copying in a new way—instead of having one card change into another, it simply put a token copy of a creature into play. The rules for copying using tokens were much simpler and easier to understand.

Fast-forward to the *Tempest* block. Not only did those sets have a token-style copier (Echo Chamber), but also a slew of Shapeshifters that attempted actual copying a la Vesuvan Doppelganger. The cards were fun, but rules problems persisted. Ambiguous situations arose, and errata had to be issued. By today's standards, the Oracle templates on some of the *Tempest* block Shapeshifters are abominations:

As long as Volrath's Shapeshifter is in play and the top card of your graveyard is a creature card, Volrath's Shapeshifter has the full text of that card, and has "2: Discard a card." (*Volrath's Shapeshifter has that card's name, mana cost, color, types, abilities, power and toughness.*)
2: Discard a card.

The R&D department of the time must have considered those cards to be failures, as another moratorium on copy effects that caused one card to change into another was put in place, and it lasted for many years. *Urza's Saga's* powerhouse **Morphling** was born of this ban on cloning—it was an attempt to make a **Clone**-like card that didn't involve actual copying.

Copying using tokens sprung up from time to time in the next few years, including **Dual Nature** in *Prophecy* and **Parallel Evolution** in *Torment*. But it wasn't until Rules Manager Paul Barclay "fixed" the game's copy rules prior to the release of *Onslaught* that another true copy card could exist—and it was fitting that the card was the original Alpha **Clone**, back again as a reprint.

Revised Edition **Clone** wording (1994):

Upon summoning, Clone acquires all characteristics, including color, of any one creature in play on either side; any creature enchantments on original creature are not copied. Clone retains these characteristics even after original creature is destroyed. Clone cannot be summoned if there are no creatures in play.

Onslaught **Clone** wording (2002):

As Clone comes into play, you may choose a creature in play. If you do, Clone comes into play as a copy of that creature.

With the copy rules in a "good place," R&D started introducing new copy cards in to the game, including *Mirrodin's* **Sculpting Steel**, *Kamigawa's* **Sakashima the Impostor**, and *Ravnica's* **Copy Enchantment**. But none of these newer cards had the ability to change from one thing to another while in play like the original Doppelganger did. That area of the rules was still fraught with problems.

It was fitting, then, that the card that forced that area of the rules to be cleaned up was designed by the man destined to become the current rules manager. The card was *Ravnica's* **Dimir Doppelganger**, designed by Mark Gottlieb. It took many hours and many revisions, but in 2005, twelve years after the game's debut, **Magic** finally had a Doppelganger supported by rules that actually worked.





Once Gottlieb opened that particular Pandora's Box, R&D started making more cards that caused one thing to change into another in play, including **Mizzium Transreliquat** and **Cytoshape**. Each new such card required more and more tweaking to the rules, but each worked, and the game is a more fun experience because of them.

Not willing to leave the issue alone, we decided to mix "shapeshifting" with another troublesome mechanic that causes a creature to change characteristics—morph—for *Time Spiral*. Originally, we were all convinced the card would work, no problem, as the copy rules were quite robust by that point. But somewhere during the editing and templating process for the set, it was pointed out to Gottlieb that a morph card cannot have an ability that works "as it turns face up" because face-down creatures have no text until they are turned fully face up, at which point it is too late for that ability to matter.

Deflated, we spent weeks trying to revamp the card to maintain the functionality of being able to copy "turn face up" morph triggers while still being a Doppelganger.

I came up with the following template, which I thought was a good

solution:

At the beginning of your upkeep, if Vesuvan Shapeshifter is face up, you may choose another creature in play. If you do, Vesuvan Shapeshifter becomes a copy of that creature except it gains this ability and morph {1U}, then it's turned face down. *(While it's face down, it's a 2/2 colorless creature. Turn it face up any time for its morph cost.)*

Can anyone understand that? The card was a hair's breadth from actually being printed with that wording until developer Matt Place objected—claiming the card to be extremely confusing and the whole Doppelganger vibe ruined—and implored us to find better solutions.

Again, Gottlieb spent many hours trying to solve the problem, eventually coming to the conclusion that the only way to do so was to write a new rule that would make a previously impossible action possible. And the above-quoted Rule 504.8 was born.

I imagine in the future we'll continue to push the boundaries of shapeshifting and the rules that accommodate it, but for now, Vesuvan Shapeshifter stands at the pinnacle, on the shoulders of many rules managers, editors, designers, and developers. I imagine the view must be great up there.

Last Week's Poll:

Do you read...		
Neither	5162	36.8%
Both	5003	35.6%
Graphic novels	2294	16.3%
Comic books	1575	11.2%
Total	14034	100.0%

This Week's Poll:

Do you plan on attending a *Time Spiral* prerelease event?

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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