

Rules Manager Mark Gottlieb walks you through the rules and changes that come with Magic's newest block.

Too Cool for Rules

Mark Gottlieb

Wednesday, September 20, 2006

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Every new set is accompanied by changes to the **Magic** Comprehensive Rules. And, for the most part, you shouldn't care. The rules are like the sewer system: It's really important to society and keeps everything running smoothly, but as long as it's doing its job behind the scenes, there's no reason for you to poke your head in there. (In this analogy, I'm the plumber.)

Time Spiral is a bit different. Besides the new keywords (which are reasonably complex), there are a couple of other things going on. One is the introduction of a pair of new rules. That's not too strange, but these are rules you might want to check out. The other is the fact that we're monkeying around with old keywords. (In this analogy, I'm the monkey.) We're changing how echo works, for Pete's sake! (In this analogy, I'm Pete.)

I know what you're thinking: "But Mark, I already read the [Time Spiral Rules Primer](#)! Why should I read this?" Egads! The rules primer is a highly informative document, but it's meant for judges, neurosurgeons, and aliens. It's full of Comp Rules excerpts, bullet points, and not much else. If you're interested in learning about the rules changes but want to read something in English that you might actually understand*, poke around through this instead.

Your monkey plumber pal,
Pete

Below is the list of things we'll be covering here. So, you can either read straight on through, or use the links to skip about.

New Rules:

- [Cards with No Mana Cost](#)
- [+1/+1 and -1/-1 Counters](#)

New Keyword Abilities:

- [Flash](#)
- [Split Second](#)
- [Suspend](#)

Old Keyword Abilities:

- [Echo](#)
- [Madness](#)
- [Morph](#)
- [Buyback](#)
- [Flashback](#)
- [Threshold](#)

* Disclaimer: Understanding a single word I say is not guaranteed.

Cards with No Mana Cost

Before *Time Spiral*, there were three reasons a card might get printed without a mana cost:

1. It was a horrible mistake! (See the Alpha [Cyclopean Tomb](#).)
2. It was a land, and they have their own rules about how to play them.
3. It was [Evermind](#).



[Evermind](#) was never intended to be played—the only thing you can do with it is splice it onto another spell. To enable that, the card was printed without a mana cost and a rule backed that up by saying that a card with no mana cost can't be played as a spell. Not only couldn't you play [Evermind](#) as normal, but you also couldn't play it via [Fist of Suns](#) or [Spelljack](#) or [Isochron Scepter](#) or whatever. *Time Spiral* contains six new nonland cards with no mana cost. Like [Evermind](#), none of them are intended to be played as normal. Instead, each one has suspend, and the only way to play one of them is to take the long way home and suspend it. You've seen two of these cards already: [Wheel of Fate](#) and [Lotus Bloom](#). (Obviously you can't just play a card like [Lotus Bloom](#) from your hand for free. That would be nuts!) Of course, after you've suspended the card and all the time counters have ticked away, you play the card . . . but the rules still say you can't play it! That's where I come in with my machete. See ya, you naysaying rules! Whack whack whack!

The new rule is actually similar to the old rule, but the subtle nuances make a world of difference. The new rule doesn't say the card can't be *played*—it says that a nonexistent mana cost can't be *paid*. If you try to play [Lotus Bloom](#) from your hand, the rules will smack you down when you get to the cost payment. "How can you pay {}?" the rules gasp. "I don't go in for your null set theory!" Increasing the cost doesn't help; the rules don't grasp the concept of {} + 1 any better than they grasp {}.

However, paying an alternate cost, or playing the spell without paying its cost, works because you sidestep the whole “paying { }” awkwardness. This lets a suspended Lotus Bloom work just fine: After the last time counter is removed, you play the spell without paying its mana cost. It also lets you play [Evermind](#) using [Fist of Suns](#) (since you pay * instead of the crazy { } noncost), or [Spelljack](#), or [Isochron Scepter](#). Have fun!

Note that the concept of { } is quite different than the concept of 0, which *is* a cost and *can* be paid. Also note that lands still don’t care about this rule because you don’t pay their costs.

+1/+1 and -1/-1 Counters

Introducing . . . a new rule! Starting with *Time Spiral*, +1/+1 counters and -1/-1 counters annihilate each other.

The old way: You have a [Hill Giant](#) with two +1/+1 counters on it, and I put a -1/-1 counter on it. Now it’s a 4/4 creature with three counters sitting on it.

The new way: You have a [Hill Giant](#) with two +1/+1 counters on it, and I put a -1/-1 counter on it. A +1/+1 and a -1/-1 counter are removed from it. Now it’s a 4/4 creature with one counter sitting on it.



Why the change? Simplification. This doesn’t affect the power or toughness of the affected creature, but it simplifies the bookkeeping. R&D has been gunshy for years about proliferation of counters. If too many different types of counters are floating around at once, then it gets confusing to keep track of the game state. (“OK, my [Hill Giant](#) has two pennies, a scrap of paper, and a button on it. The pennies are +1/+1 counters, the scrap of paper is a fate counter . . . what’s the button again?”) That’s why blocks will generally have only a single “main” type of counter: In *Time Spiral*, it’s time counters, and +1/+1 counters are hard to find. In *Ravnica* block, it was +1/+1 counters, and other types of counters with funny names were hard to find. *Mirrodin* block had both +1/+1 counters and charge counters, but they were pretty clearly delineated between creatures and non-creature artifacts. In all of this, -1/-1 counters get squeezed out. They’re so powerful that they’ve never been a block’s primary counter, so in all cases, they’re liable to be confused with the counters that do exist (especially +1/+1 counters, and doubly especially if they’re on the same creature at the same time). This rule alleviates that concern, and makes it more viable to print cards that use -1/-1 counters in the future. (And a couple might show up sooner than you’d expect.)

Some interactions will change as a result of this. For example, if you put [Shambling Swarm](#)'s -1/-1 counters on a fully-stocked [Triskelion](#), the Trike will now be permanently hobbled rather than just shrinking for the rest of the turn. There will be fewer counters for [Chisei, Heart of Oceans](#) to eat. If you use -1/-1 counters to annihilate all the +1/+1 counters on a creature, that creature will no longer be able to be affected by [Helium Squirter](#)'s (or any graft creature's) activated ability. This may seem at first glance like it makes the game less interactive, but in all cases, a new interaction stunts an old interaction. The amount of interactivity is preserved (and possibly increased because these new options exist); the interactions now just live in a different place.

This is a state-based effect, so the game removes these counters at the same time it checks to see if a creature has been dealt lethal damage, or an Aura is attached to nothing, etc. The effect will remove the maximum number of +1/+1 and -1/-1 counters that it can. It won't remove any other kind of counters, so if you're playing with older cards and wind up with a -1/-0 counter, a -0/-1 counter, and a +1/+1 counter all on the same permanent, for example, they'll all stay there.

Flash

Hmm. I don't really have a lot to say about flash. (Sorry you clicked this link or scrolled here!) That's because flash isn't new—[Ragged Veins](#) has flash. [King Cheetah](#) has flash. In fact, 41 cards (before *Time Spiral*) have flash; we just never called it that before. Like fear and vigilance, flash is a new keyword, but it's not a new ability.

Some older cards like [Armor of Thorns](#) or [Ghitu Fire](#) have variants on this ability, but we're limiting flash to be *exactly* this ability. So the Oracle wordings of those cards aren't changing.

A few other cards—including [Vedalken Orrery](#) and [Winding Canyons](#), for example—let players play non-instant spells at the time those players could play instants. We'll update those templates to use the word "flash," but these cards won't actually give anything flash. Doing so would make them interact differently with cards that let one player play cards another player owns (like [Grinning Totem](#) does), and there's no good reason to do that.

Split Second

Split second is kind of a modern-day take on interrupts. For those unfamiliar with interrupts, they were a card type many years ago, they were faster than instants, and that's really all the space I want to devote to them. When the stack was invented, all interrupts were given errata to become instants, and that's one of the best **Magic** revisions ever made.

Split second closes down the stack. While a spell with split second is on the stack, no player can play spells, and no player can play activated abilities (unless they produce mana). Players still get priority as normal; it's just that what they can do while they have it is severely curtailed. After the spell with split second resolves or otherwise leaves the stack, then everybody can do whatever they want again. Be free! Run wild in the streets!

So what *can* happen while a spell with split second is on the stack?

- Triggered abilities can trigger. If they do, they go on the stack on top of the spell with split second. Triggered abilities aren't played—they just happen—so they behave as normal.
- State-based effects are checked. Again, this is the game just being the game.
- Players can play mana abilities. Why? They don't use the stack.
- Players can turn face-down permanents they control face up. Why? That action doesn't use the stack.

- Players can pay the mana necessary to prevent [Nafs Asp](#)'s extra little bite from happening. Why? That action doesn't use the stack. I think you see where I'm going with this. . . .

There are a couple other actions created by one card or another that don't use the stack that you can still do (see [Lost in Thought](#)). However, I intentionally didn't list a couple of major actions that don't use the stack: playing a land and suspending a card. The former is impossible while a spell with split second is on the stack because lands can be played only at sorcery speed. The latter is impossible while a spell with split second is on the stack because if you can't play the spell that has suspend, you're also unable to suspend it.

Are spells with split second uncounterable? Well, mostly. You certainly can't play [Counterspell](#) (or [Remand](#), or [Rewind](#), or [Mana Leak](#), etc.) while one is on the stack. However, they're vulnerable to [Counterbalance](#), [Voidmage Apprentice](#), and a few other sneaky cards. Also, split second won't protect your non-split second cards. If you play [Wrath of God](#), then play a card with split second in response (thinking that this would lock the stack and your Wrath couldn't be countered), well, your opponent can simply wait until the split second spell resolves, then counter the Wrath when the stack is free again.

Suspend

The *Time Spiral* primer has all the rules and a bazillion bullet points about suspend. But how, in real English, does it work???

Suspend has three separate parts.




1. If you have a card with suspend in your hand and the timing is such that you could play it, you can pay its suspend cost and remove it from the game. This doesn't use the stack—no one can stop you, and no one can respond to this. The card is removed with the appropriate number of time counters on it.
Note that I said the timing must be right. All cards with suspend are sorceries, creatures, artifacts, or enchantments, so they're all "sorcery speed." Normally, you can only suspend them during your main phase when the stack is empty (at the time you could normally play a sorcery). The game doesn't care whether there are enough legal targets to play the card, or if you could actually generate enough mana to play it—it just cares about the timing. That said, some strange things can happen with timing. If [Rule of Law](#) is in play and you've already played a spell that turn, you can't play any more spells . . . so you can't suspend anything either. If you have Teferi in play, all your creature spells have flash . . . so you can suspend a creature card in your hand any time you could play an instant.
2. At the beginning of your upkeep, you remove a time counter from each suspended card you own. Each one triggers separately, and they're all mandatory.
3. When the last time counter is removed from a suspended card you own, you play it—immediately—without paying its mana cost. It doesn't matter who removed the last time counter, when, or how. (So yes, you'll often wind up playing creatures and sorceries during your upkeep this way because the ability says to.) Playing the card is mandatory; you do it even if you don't want to. Now is when the spell goes on the stack, now is when you choose targets, and now is when the spell can be countered.

If the spell is a creature spell, it gains haste until you lose control of it. After the spell resolves, the creature will come into play with haste. It will retain haste indefinitely, though this won't matter after the first turn. If another player ever gains control of it, or it leaves play, it loses haste.

If you can't play the spell because there are no legal targets, or because your opponent controls Teferi, or for any other reason, the card just stays in the removed-from-the-game zone forever. You never get another chance to play it. It has no time counters on it anymore, so neither of the triggered abilities that are part of suspend will ever trigger again. It's not even considered "suspended" any more.

Probably the craziest part of suspend is what happens if there's an additional cost. If the additional cost is a nonmana cost (like "discard a card"), you have to do it. (Remember, playing the spell is mandatory.) If you can't pay the additional cost, you can't play the spell. But wait—what if the additional cost is a mana cost? What if your opponent has [Grand Arbiter Augustin IV](#) in play? Well, if you have the mana in your mana pool, you have to pay it. But if you don't have the mana in your mana pool, you have options. Suspend forces you to play the spell and pay the costs . . . but it doesn't force you to *tap your lands for mana*. You can make mana, play the spell, and pay the cost, or you can decide not to make mana and then fail to play the spell. Up to you.

Echo

Echo has been changed, but in a completely unnoticeable way (for now, anyway). Old echo cards simply said "echo," and when the ability triggered, you paid the permanent's *mana cost* or you sacrificed it. New echo cards say "echo [cost]," and when the ability triggers, you pay the permanent's *echo cost* or you sacrifice it. All old echo cards will be getting errata to bring them up to speed . . . and in every existing case (including all *Time Spiral* cards), the echo cost and the mana cost are exactly the same. (So, for example, pre-errata [Acridian](#) is a  creature with echo, and post-errata [Acridian](#) is a  creature with echo .) Why make the change when nothing changes? Perhaps future sets will hold the answer. . . .

Madness

It's hard to explain what changed about the madness rules because no one understood the madness rules in the first place. Well, OK, some did, but those people were rightly deemed dangerous to society and shipped off to Monster Island. But I'm going to give it a shot anyway.

When you discard a card with madness, you can discard it and remove it from the game instead of discarding it and putting it into your graveyard. If you do, an ability will trigger. Under the old rules, after this triggered ability resolved, it would set up a tiny window of time in which you could play the madness spell for its madness cost. That window lasted from the time the trigger resolved until the time you passed priority. The intent was that the only thing you could do in that window was play the madness spell—doing anything else would pass priority, right? Well, no. If you played a land, that wouldn't use the stack, and you'd never give your opponent priority. Ditto for turning a face-down creature face up (though, to be fair, morph didn't exist at the time). Things were even stranger if, after the madness triggered ability resolved, *you* didn't have priority, which is exactly what happened if you discarded a card because your opponent played [Duress](#), for example. How could you pass priority if you didn't have it to begin with?

So let's try again. When you discard a card with madness, you can discard it and remove it from the game instead of discarding it and putting it into your graveyard. If you do, an ability will trigger. As *part of the resolution of that ability*, you can play the madness spell for its madness cost. There is no "tiny window of time" afterwards—do it now, or don't (and put the card into your graveyard).

Why isn't this how madness worked originally? The technology didn't exist at the time. Back then, the effect of a spell or ability couldn't include playing another spell. But that technology exists today (see [Isochron Scepter](#) and [Mindleech Mass](#)) and is getting increasingly common (suspend uses it).

What are the results of this change? Two of the craziest, rules-wonkiest loopholes ever exploited in tournaments have been eliminated. This trick will now no longer work:



Have three lands in play.

Play [Careful Study](#). Draw two cards. Discard [Arrogant Wurm](#) and another card.

Remove [Arrogant Wurm](#) from the game. Let its madness ability trigger and resolve.

Play a land.

Play [Arrogant Wurm](#) for 2.

Sorry. Play [Arrogant Wurm](#) when you discard it (and the madness trigger resolves) or don't—there's no interstitial playing of lands anymore. I expect some number of Spikes will be unhappy about this, but that's more than balanced by the number of people that will never have to do mental contortions when those Spikes explain to them why this ridiculousness works.

The other thing that's gone is the following interaction:

Player A plays [Duress](#) and has Player B discard [Circular Logic](#).

Player B removes [Circular Logic](#) from the game. Its madness ability triggers and resolves.

Player A has priority. If she plays a spell, Player B can then play [Circular Logic](#) from the removed-from-the-game zone for 1. If she passes priority, Player B can then also pass priority . . . and end the phase.

Again, now [Circular Logic](#) can be played when it's discarded (and the madness trigger resolves) or not, but there's no hanging out in limbo waiting to see what happens next. Madness is now immediate.

Also, the madness reminder text is changing. In *Torment*, the reminder text was "(You may play this card for its madness cost at the time you discard it.)" In *Time Spiral*, the reminder text is "(If you discard this card, you may play it for its madness cost instead of putting it into your graveyard.)" It's a bit longer, but it's more helpful.

Morph

Morph is still the same crazy ability you remember, with one minor exception. Under the old rules, when you played a creature face-down, it was a 2/2 creature with:

- No text
- No name
- No subtypes
- No expansion symbol
- No color
- Mana cost 0

Wait . . . huh? What's that last bit? Well, up until now, you weren't allowed to play spells with no mana cost. If a face-down creature spell had no mana cost (like it has no anything else except card type and power/toughness), then as soon as you put it on the stack it would be illegal to play.

That's changed with this update; how and why is detailed in the "Cards with No Mana Cost" section. Now it's possible to play something with no mana cost as a spell, as long as you don't have to *pay* the nonexistent mana cost. In morph's case, you don't: You pay 3 instead. Therefore (ignoring [Illusionary Mask](#)) a face-down spell on the stack, and a face-down permanent in play, is now a 2/2 creature with:

- No text
- No name
- No subtypes
- No expansion symbol
- No color
- No mana cost

Whew! That feels better. The converted mana cost of a face-down creature or spell is still 0. This change has an impact in interactions with cards that care about mana cost (like [Pendrell Flux](#), for example), but you'll probably never notice. In fact, many of you already thought that face-down cards had no mana cost, so if you're one of those people, I just explained all of that for nothing.

Buyback

Not much exciting going on here. Two things to report:

One, the reminder text is getting cleaned up from this:

(You may pay [cost] in addition to any other costs as you play this spell. If you do, put [the name of this card] into your hand instead of your graveyard as part of its resolution.)

To this:

(You may pay an additional [cost] as you play this spell. If you do, put this card into your hand as it resolves.)

And two, the rules have been tweaked to clarify what happens if a spell's controller isn't the one who chose whether or not to pay buyback (due to [Commandeer](#), for example). The rules used to say "if you do" (like the reminder text does), referring to whether you chose to play the spell with buyback. But it doesn't matter whether *you* paid the buyback—if the buyback has been paid, the spell is put into its owner's hand instead of into its owner's graveyard as it resolves. (The eagle-eyed will note that

the *Time Spiral* rules primer didn't quite update the wording correctly, but it's already been corrected for the upcoming Comp Rules update.)

Flashback

Like buyback, the rules for flashback have been tweaked to clarify what happens if a spell's controller isn't the one who played the spell with flashback (due to [Commandeer](#), for example). The rules used to say "if you do," referring to whether you played the spell with flashback. But it doesn't matter whether *you* played the spell this way—if it was played with flashback, the spell is removed from the game instead of being put anywhere else when it would leave the stack.

Threshold



Threshold appeared on 84 cards in the *Odyssey* block. It was a precursor to ability words, which are so simple that they don't actually have any rules meaning. However, it wound up being a bizarrely complex characteristic-setting ability. "Threshold — [text]" meant "As long as you have seven or more cards in your graveyard, [this object] has '[text]'" [Text] could be anything . . . and if you didn't have seven or more cards in your graveyard, the game pretended that [text] didn't even exist.

We've gotten lots of mail asking whether "threshold" would be an ability word like *hellbent* if it were introduced today (or even suggesting that we do that). The answer to the question is "yes," and the answer to the suggestion is "well, OK." This is the set for monkeying around with old keywords, after all. We're making threshold into an ability word, we're eliminating the "threshold" section from the rules, and all threshold cards will be getting errata. This is less invasive than you might think. For example, [Metamorphic Wurm](#)'s Oracle entry changes from this:

Threshold — Metamorphic Wurm gets +4/+4. (*You have threshold as long as seven or more cards are in your graveyard.*)

To this:

Threshold — Metamorphic Wurm gets +4/+4 as long as seven or more cards are in your graveyard.

Nomad Decoy changes from this:

* , ☹: Tap target creature.

Threshold — ** , ☹: Tap two target creatures. (*Play this ability only if seven or more cards are in your graveyard.*)

To this:

* , ☹: Tap target creature.

Threshold — **, ☹: Tap two target creatures. Play this ability only if seven or more cards are in your graveyard.

Shocking, huh? Most threshold cards would actually wind up with less text on them if they were printed this way. But it's not all that simple. A few cards come with (to continue the simian theme) monkey wrenches. Let's take [Centaur Chieftain](#) as an example. It was printed like this:

Haste

Threshold — When Centaur Chieftain comes into play, creatures you control get +1/+1 and gain trample until end of turn. (*You have threshold if seven or more cards are in your graveyard.*)

Whether you have threshold is checked only when the ability triggers. It doesn't care whether you have threshold when it resolves. That means the following wording (which is probably how we would print the card today if we were doing it from scratch) won't work here:

Haste

Threshold — When Centaur Chieftain comes into play, if seven or more cards are in your graveyard, creatures you control get +1/+1 and gain trample until end of turn.

That wording checks to see if you have threshold when the ability triggers *and* when it resolves. Even worse is this:

Haste

Threshold — When Centaur Chieftain comes into play, creatures you control get +1/+1 and gain trample until end of turn if seven or more cards are in your graveyard.

That wording checks to see if you have threshold only when it resolves—it doesn't even check when the ability triggers. So that leaves us with this option:

Haste

Threshold — As long as seven or more cards are in your graveyard, Centaur Chieftain has "When Centaur Chieftain comes into play, creatures you control get +1/+1 and gain trample until end of turn."

That's better. It's a bit bizarre, but it checks whether you have threshold only at the time the ability triggers. While threshold might be getting the most extreme overhaul of any keyword ability (I guess you could call being erased from the rulebook an "overhaul"), none of the cards that have it will really work any differently afterward.