

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Timeshifting Into Gear

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 Making Magic
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PRODUCTS

PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

I remember the moment very clearly. It was December and I was in Yokohama, Japan for the 2005 Magic World Championships. I had just finished gunslinging when fellow R&D member Henry Stern came up to me. "They have playtest cards," he said. By "they" I knew he meant the major rumor site.

"For Guildpact?"

"No, for Snap." (*Time Spiral's* codename.)

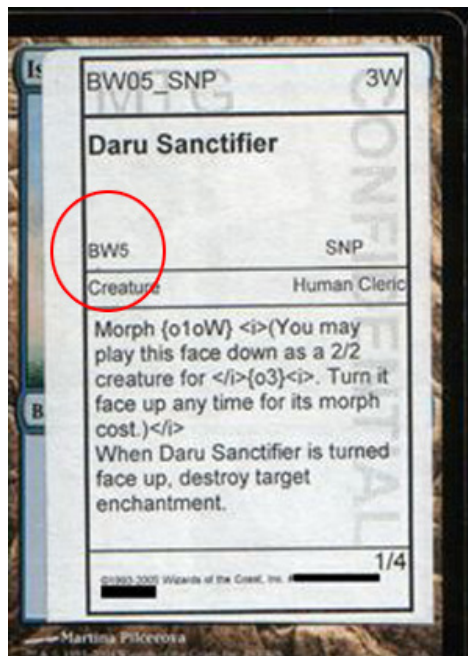
This was unprecedented. *Time Spiral* was ten months away from release. We'd had leaks before, but never this far in advance. We'd never had a leak about a future block before the current block had all been released. I ran to the computer and brought up the following image:

[Click here.](#)



I screamed a few obscenities. (A fine tradition when a rumor sites reveals something I really didn't want revealed.) "They have a timeshifted card!"

It was funny, of everything spoiled by those three playtest card, the thing that upset me most was one letter.



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RULES

Yes, the “B”. It was the first crack in the wall. You see, **Magic** cards have four rarities (good bar bet, as everyone thinks there’s three): common (C), uncommon (U), rare (R) and land (L). Thus in every card code, one of those four letters appears. For example, CR01 means the first red common. C is for common, R is for red and 01 means #1 in the file. The “B” stood for “bonus”, as we had not yet adopted the term “timeshifted” when the playtest cards in question had been printed.

Henry saw my concern. “It’s a ‘B’. They have no idea what ‘B’ stands for.”

“It doesn’t stand for common, uncommon or rare.” (Even I forget about the land rarity every once in a while.)

“They don’t even know if it’s real,” Henry reassured me.

“Not now. But they will. They’ll figure it out. They always do.”

* * *

Let me share with you something that I don’t think many people know. I adore rumor sites. I’m a huge fan. There’s probably isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t visit a rumor site. I think they can have a wonderful effect on the game. I think they’re amazing marketing tools. They do a wonderful job of community building and hype. In fact, any company that cannot appreciate what a blessing rumor sites are (thousands of people dedicating their time obsessing on the next thing you’re doing) is just looking a gift horse in the mouth.

But wait. Don’t I hate spoilers? Didn’t I write [a whole column on the topic](#)? I did. The problem is that many people missed my message. I don’t hate spoilers. I actually love spoilers. I think spoilers are wonderful marketing. What I don’t like are unofficial spoilers. I don’t like it when somebody breaks the law or a confidentiality agreement or a work policy or whatever rule that says they’re not supposed to give away our trade secrets and just spills them out with no thought of the consequences.

But isn’t that what a rumor site is all about? No, it isn’t. A rumor site is about people interested in upcoming product releases pooling information to see what they can figure out. And Wizards isn’t shy about giving out information. We actively encourage discussion among our fans to figure out what is going to happen. We do things like the Orb of Insight that allows the public access to certain facts just so we can see what all of you can figure out. We put out preview information out around the globe in many languages. On purpose. We want different parts of the world sharing the pieces of the information pie that they got. We sneak little hints into [magicthegathering.com](#) all the time. My column alone has more hints about upcoming sets than most companies reveal in total about an upcoming product.

I believe everyone is happiest when there are things to talk about. But as one of the people that agonizes over which facts to give out, it kills me when unofficial things ruin our carefully laid plans. But today’s column isn’t about that. You see, with only one or two tiny exceptions (and one big exception listed above), every single piece of information that came out for *Time Spiral* prior to the two weeks before the prerelease came from us (sometimes through second parties that we gave the information to with the intent that they would share it with the public).

You see, today’s story is an intriguing detective story. The rumor sites figured out timeshift long before the prerelease. And they did it with clues provided almost exclusively by us (once again, the lawsuit being the only exception – and one could argue that we were responsible for bringing the lawsuit into the spotlight and thus proving its veracity). How did it happen? And what did Wizards do about it? Stay tuned.

Oh yeah, since I didn’t say it up front. It’s Timeshifted Week!

* * *

When I became the Head Designer, I instituted the idea of block planning. This meant that the large set design team was responsible with figuring out not just what their set was doing, but what the rest of the sets in the block were also doing. As I explained during [my first preview column](#), *Time Spiral* block began centered around the temporal chaos of Dominaria. One of the first turning points in the design was the realization that suspend and hybrid weren’t playing nicely with one another. The two mechanics had no inherent synergy and each was fighting for space. The design team realized that one had to go.

Suspend was the “temporal” part of the equation while hybrid was the “chaos” half. We liked both, but what tipped the scales was the decision by the *Ravnica* development team to pull hybrid back into the set. The result was that suspend, the fresh mechanic, won out. The repercussions of this decision was that we started shifting more towards the “temporal”. The choice of this fork in the road in turn led to the past/present/future delineation. That structure led us down the path of figuring out how to make a set about the past. And that focus led to the timeshifted cards.

How? Let’s just say it all started with *Planeshift*.

* * *

While the lawsuit provided a crucial clue, it wasn’t the key piece of information that got the ball rolling. People had noticed the “B” and it created a few threads, but it wasn’t the foundation of the “conspiracy” that was to follow. No, that lovely nugget of information was provided by Wizards of the Coast. In our earliest solicitation for *Time Spiral*, we listed the product size as 422.

How did this happen? If we were planning a big reveal, how could we - in the very first piece of information to the public - give away the biggest clue to its existence? One of the hardest things about working on **Magic** is that the product constantly reinvents itself. Things that seem meaningless on an average set might be of utmost importance on another. For example, every once in a while a piece of art for a new set gets accidentally leaked through the artist. Not on purpose. An artist is redoing their website and a card image is lumped in the wrong folder. Just a mistake. And nine times out of ten, while unfortunate, it isn’t a really big deal. But that tenth time? Then it’s a problem. The art is for a creature type we’re bringing back (like say, a sliver) or it hints at some story point or world detail that we’re trying to keep secret. The point is that sometimes certain things don’t matter so much and sometimes they really, really matter.

This makes it very easy for us to slip up. Hundreds of people work on **Magic**, and for each person there is a set way that things work. Many of them don’t even have all of the relevant information to understand how some routine process is problematic for one particular set. And thus we come full circle to the set size. Never before have we needed to keep the

set size a secret. I know it seems like an obvious thing from the outside, but that's because you come to the set aware of how we've marketed it. To the public, no set is a routine set because we go to such great lengths to make every set feel unique. But inside to the guy who does the same job day in and day out for years on end, it's hard to see. If someone has been done the same way for every set since they started working for the company years ago, why would you assume that any one set wouldn't work the same way?

The other irony of the 422 announcement is that prior to it, we had already decided to group the pieces as two subsets. We had chosen to number them separately and treat them differently for redemption (on *Magic Online* we allow players to trade full virtual sets in for paper versions). So not only did 422 blow our secret, it also didn't follow how we wanted to represent the set. So we sent a retraction. We said that *Time Spiral* was not a 422 card set but a 301 card set. Which was technically true but yes, quite misleading. We really wanted to keep our secret and we honestly felt that the surprise we hoped to create would soften the fact that we were a bit sneaky about how we represented the set. The information was only with our distributors and besides, for all intents and purposes 422 was a random number as far as the public was concerned. How could it possibly cause us any trouble?

So how is *Planeshift* responsible for the timeshifted cards? Here's a little trivia quiz. What do **Ertai, the Corrupted**, **Tahngarth, Talruum Hero** and **Skyship Weatherlight** have in common? Okay, yes, they're all from *Planeshift*. Little more than that. All rare cards. Keep going. All legendary. Almost there. All of them have alternate art on their premium version. That's it.



To try and spice things up a little, we decided to take three cards (all Weatherlight Saga story cards) and make their premium versions a little more special. While we were brainstorming ideas for *Time Spiral*, for some reason I latched onto the *Planeshift* cards. They were this special, unexpected thing that we did to surprise the public. That got me thinking. Was there something similar we could do?

The answer was pretty obvious (to me at least). Wouldn't it be cool to every once in a while have an older card show up in an old frame with the original art? Because I was inspired by the *Planeshift* cards, I thought of the idea of adding a premium sheet. What if at the same rate as a premium card, you received a premium "throwback"?

It was an idea that struck a chord almost instantaneously. The idea of getting old random cards by surprise tickled me like few ideas ever had. But it was a rather crazy plan. And most of my crazy plans don't make it much out of the starting gate. (Some do obviously – the trick is to have a lot of crazy ideas.) This meant I had to sell it to the team.



About two seconds after the first memo landed in a mailbox with the number 422 on it, the information spread like wildfire through the rumor sites. We've never had an expert expansion that large before. This was big news. But wait. Just a few days later came the retraction. Did we say 422? Oops. We meant 301. Ignore the 422, we said. That was just a mistake.

This is the part where I have to say I love watching the rumor sites in action. They had only had the following three pieces of information: 1) the three playtest card images, 2) the initial 422 number, 3) the revised 301 number. That's it. That's all they had. And from this they hypothesized the timeshifted sheet. Really. How'd that happen? Let's follow the chain of logic.

As soon as the 301 number was announced, the rumor sites sprung to attention. A mistake, they asked. How does one mean to say 301 and end up with 422? How does that happen? Next someone did the basic math and subtracted 301 from 422. They ended up with 121. What significance was this? That's when another poster noted that 121-up was one of the available sizes for printing cards. 121 was exactly the number of cards that could fit on a single sheet. Interesting. But what would you do with an extra 121 cards?

Wait a minute, some one said. Remember the B rarity from the playtest cards? We don't know what it is, but we know it's a different rarity as it wasn't common, uncommon or rare (they always forget land). In addition, we know that the card with the B rarity on it was a repeat (**Daru Sanctifier**). The other two cards hinted at old mechanics coming back. This could mean a nostalgia set. Daru Sanctifier is not the kind of card that Wizards would normally repeat. What if, the 121 cards were all repeated cards, but ones that couldn't just fold into a core set? What if the 121 cards were a Chronicles

2? But why would it be confused with the 301 number? Maybe the two groups of cards are packaged together in a single booster – a *Time Spiral* booster.

You might think I'm joking, but the community over a few days came to the conclusion above. Not all of them, a small subset. But that group believed their logic was solid. *Time Spiral* had 121 repeated cards mixed in. They didn't know how or why, but they were sure it was going to happen. Now comes the most interesting part. Another section of the rumor site didn't believe them. A separate set of repeated cards packaged in the same booster. That's crazy! Some one dubbed it the "422 Conspiracy Theory".

So for a few weeks, I watched as the two groups battled it out. There wasn't any new information at first, so the arguments were more philosophical than anything else. The people who believed that the 121 cards was just a crazy pipe dream called themselves the 301ers. The "conspiracy folk" were the 422-ers. And for the first few weeks, the 422-ers were greatly outnumbered.

But that as we will shortly see was going to change.

I've never been one to shy away from crazy ideas, but time has taught me that pitching a crazy idea to others requires a more delicate hand. Mixing in a series of old cards into a set seemed like an awesome idea to me. Nonetheless, I had three other people to convince (Brian Tinsman – the lead designer, Aaron Forsythe and Devin Low).

I slowly built up the pitch. I started from "not so crazy" and gradually brought up the dial. When I was finished, Brian summed up the team's response: "That's great! We should definitely do that."

And like that, the design team was aboard. We were going to add some old cards to the premium sheet so that every other premium card would be an old one. It would happen a handful of times each box.

As Aaron's [feature article](#) points out (he talks about the evolution of the timeshifted cards – a definite read if this topic interests you at all), at this point all the timeshifted cards hadn't yet had the restriction of being Standard viable. As you will see, the timeshifted cards were only beginning their journey.

Little by little, the 422-ers were swaying people over to their side. Their idea was crazy but R&D had been known to do crazy things before. Plus the facts did make sense in their version. The 301-ers were having the problem that they couldn't identify how 301 would be mistaken for 422. Sensing that the 301 needed some ammo, we decided that we (being [magicthegathering.com](#)) would help them out.

But the website had a higher goal. I dubbed it the "Sixth Sense Effect". (Named after the movie with the surprise twist I won't reveal.) Like the movie, I wanted to mislead the public/viewer in a way that also laid down clues. When the big reveal happened, I wanted people to look back and go, how did I miss A, B and C?

While we did a whole bunch of subtle things, there were two blatant actions. First, on July 28th, we posted a *Time Spiral* card in "The Week That Was" (BDM's column).



We had been planning to do it slightly closer to the preview weeks, but we really wanted to get a card image out to the public. Why?

one mana of any color to your mana pool.

Martina Pilcerova

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The collector number. We knew that it was just the ammo the 301-ers needed. "The set is 301. It's printed on the card."

Everything worked like a charm. But we weren't done yet. The following week, I answered the following "Ask Wizards":

August 2, 2006



Q: I have a question about *Time Spiral*. Gemstone Cavern has its size listed at 301, but a normal large expansion is 306. Why is *Time Spiral* 301 and not 306 like *Ravnica*?

--Matt
Cheyenne, WY

A: From **Mark Rosewater**, **Magic** Head Designer:

Dear Matt,

The answer is a simple one. *Ravnica* had 110 commons, 88 uncommons and 88 rares. (That adds up to 306 if you include the 20 basic lands - remember four pictures of each one). *Time Spiral*, on the other hand, has 121 commons, 80 uncommons, and 80 rares. (Once again, if you add in 20 lands you get 301.) Why the change? A whole number of reasons, many having to do with production issues. The biggest effect of this change for the players is that the increase in commons will help create more variety in Limited play as well as make the uncommons and rares easier to collect.

This one wasn't as simple as showing the card. This answer had to lead the readers to 301 without ever actually saying the set was 301. (As one of the official spokesperson for **Magic**, I decided I wanted to go the extra level. I wanted to make sure my answer was true regardless of how you interpreted the 121 timeshifted cards.) Here's some interesting things to note about my answer (that you may or may not have realized):

- I chose the question (and yes, it was real) very carefully. Note that the question asks about the discrepancy between 301 and 306 rather than the discrepancy between 301 and 422.
- I never say the set size of *Time Spiral*. I give you numbers and tell you what they add up to.
- The other trick is that I list numbers for all the known rarities. If you're not looking for another rarity, the list seems complete.

The result of the Ask Wizards question was very interesting. The main effect was to further entrench people in whatever position they hold. The 301-ers took it as yet another definitive approach that 301 was the official and final word. The 422-ers pointed out that I was the one to write it and that meant something fishy must be going on (note to self: start doing a few "non-fishy" posts to better hide my fishy ones). In addition, they pointed out what I didn't say. The other side then countered with the fact that I must know about the 422 idea. Perhaps I worded my answer to not exclude it to help fan the flames.

The net result of **Gemstone Caverns** and my Ask Wizards question was that they pushed more people towards the 301 camp. And everything would have been fine if it weren't for those meddling... well us.

Normally when I come up with a wacky idea, it takes time for me to slowly warm up R&D. The timeshifted cards were the exact opposite. Everyone (well, almost everyone) latched onto them right away. So much so that I kept having managers above me (read: Randy Buehler and Bill Rose) suggesting we up the number. My response each time: "Sounds great."

When the dust settled, we ended up with one per pack, non premium with parallel premium versions. The reason I'm happy we ended there was that playtesting had shown that the timeshifted cards added a very fun aspect to the Limited games. By having them show up in every pack, we guaranteed that every game would feel the timeshifted card's touch.

Now that R&D was all on board, it was time for the next step for the timeshifted cards: convincing the rest of the company.

Soon after the Ask Wizards answer, the magazine ads started to run. Many of them featured Akroma. The 422 camp argued that this was proof that there were going to be reprints. The 301 camp said that Akroma represented the old guard and that the **Serra Avenger** was the new guard. The 301 camp also argued that the set might have a new version of Akroma.

Then came the Orb of Insight. We had purposefully not put the timeshifted cards in the Orb, as we knew doing so was the same as publishing the list of the 121 cards. Little did we realize that this would give the 422 more ammo. How? Remember how I said last paragraph that Akroma was all over the ads? Yeah, well she wasn't in the Orb. The 422 crowd said that this was positive proof. Obviously Akroma was in the set; she's in the ads. And if the 121 cards existed and were repeats, obviously they wouldn't put them in the Orb. Therefore, her absence proved the 422 theory. The 301 crowd didn't buy the argument. So they searched through the Orb trying to find other ways she could be referenced, but with no luck.

The biggest problem the 422-ers were having was that everything they were saying was built on circumstantial evidence. There was no smoking gun to prove their case. But have no fear, Wizards would soon provide that as well.

Many years ago, I took a column to tell [the story of the split cards](#). There was a point early on where less than a handful of people in the company that supported them. Timeshifted cards worked almost backwards. Everyone loved them from the moment they heard about them. A few were taken aback because the idea was so odd, but everyone quickly warmed up to the idea. Timeshifted cards were officially a go.



So what finally proved the 422's case? On the first night of our television spots (on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim), one included Akroma in her old frame complete with a spanking new purple expansion symbol. So how'd that happen?

One of my writing teachers hammered home that one of the distinct differences between reality and fiction is that reality is far less believable. Fiction has all sorts of rules that it abides by. Too many coincidences don't work well in fiction. Six unrelated things all happening one after another isn't believable as a story, yet it happens all the time in real life. Why do I bring this up? Because the Adult Swim ad is one such example of story that is only believable

because it actually happened.

To begin, let me explain that the timeshifted cards weren't always meant as a surprise. Although R&D had wished to keep it a secret, we knew that it was too potent a sales tool to not let the marketing and sales have access to it. We were resigned to the fact that it would be used to sell the set. But then Brand made an interesting decision. They decided not to use the timeshifted cards to market the set. Their thought was that they didn't want the focus of advertising to be about old cards, but rather new ones. They realized that talk of Psionic Blast and the like would draw focus from the message we wanted. Once I realized that Brand wasn't going to use the timeshifted cards for promotional purposes, I pointed out that R&D would love to keep the cards back as a secret. Brand also loved the idea and got on board.

Why is this important? Because before the decision was made to hold off on the timeshifted cards, the ad guys asked for a complete list of cards they could use for marketing. One of the cards on the list was Akroma. Akroma was already in the ads, so her inclusion on the list didn't strike anyone as odd. In addition, there are checks and balances built in to the system. After the ad guys are done with an ad, they run it by the **Magic** Brand Team. But the day that it was scheduled, the brand manager had a medical emergency. And her back-up had just started a few weeks earlier and wasn't up to date yet on all the product knowledge. The third brand person had been the one to put together the list, so everyone assumed he was aboard with the choice.

In order for this ad to make it to the air, six different things had to each go wrong. And all of them did. Not the greatest story, but the truth. And how did Wizards learn of this error? From the rumor site, of course. I will point out that the Akroma ad was scheduled to run a number of more times. The brand manager's story of what she went through to pull the ads is a crazy tale unto itself.

In the end, we poked around to see what kind of damage we had done. While the ad confirmed the timeshifted cards for the rumor sites, the information seemed to stay contained within the sites that cared. There still seemed to be a substantial number of people that didn't know so we chose to continue on with the plan.

Our last major gaffe came the day before the prerelease. The 5:00 PST Gatherer update included *Time Spiral*. How did that happen? A much simpler explanation. Every set ever released since [magicthegathering.com's](#) inception has been uploaded into Gatherer at the start of the first prerelease (held in New Zealand). This translates into Friday afternoon. The people responsible for updating Gatherer believed that nothing had changed, as they hadn't been given any instruction to delay its release. The people who wanted the change all believed that someone else had told the team responsible for making it happen. One R&D member even signed off on the schedule, not realizing that the dates had been changed on it since the last time he had looked at it.

Our execution was far from perfect. Nonetheless, I'm quite happy with how our little surprise turned out. My email makes it clear that tournaments varied greatly in what percentage came into the tournament aware of the timeshifted cards. Some tournaments it seemed almost impossible to find someone not in the know. In other letters, I'm hearing about tournaments where half the people started the tournament ignorant of what they were going to find in their packs. The one quirk I noticed at the Seattle prerelease was that each progressive flight seemed to have a greater number of people who didn't know. My theory was that the more die-hard players both came early and they were the ones more likely to read the rumor sites.

I asked for people who were surprised to write in and I got quite a bit of mail on the topic. Almost all of the people who were genuinely surprised found the experience very fun. I even had a few writers bemoan the fact that they didn't have the chance to experience the event without knowing about the timeshifted cards. I'll try to include a few of these letters in my next letter column.



Whew! That's all I got today. Hopefully, this has given you some insight into what the whole thing felt like from our side of the wall.

Join me next week when I take my first public peek into the testing for the Great Designer Search (quick aside – as of my writing this, we are down to 68 applicants).

Until then, may your coincidences not come in large chunks.

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.*



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