

# Organizing a slice of temporal chaos

## Piecing Together the Timeshifted Mosaic

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"Aaron, why don't you take a crack at a list of old cards to bring back?"



Those "famous last words" were spoken in an early *Time Spiral* design meeting by the set's lead designer, Brian Tinsman. I was thrilled. Most people in R&D really enjoy working on, playing with, and tweaking the new cards we make set after set, but few of them enjoy exploring new combinations of preexisting older cards as much as I do. I love, love, love working on Core Sets because it's fun trying to solve problems using preexisting pieces, and I also enjoy digging up obscure nuggets from the past that entertain and often baffle my coworkers and, later, the playing public: "[Horror of Horrors](#)? Is that even a real card? What does it do again?"

There's so much more to this game beyond the flashy tier-one constructed cards, the first-pick commons, and even the casual-favorite combo pieces—there are so many little gems that are passed over by the masses but invariably *someone's* favorite cards, were part of *someone's* very first booster pack they opened, and are vital to *someone's* hilarious story about how they beat their friend with some weird deck.

Those cards are the cards I love. [Fishliver Oil](#). Seriously, I could tell you the story. The guy was swirling his hand around on his creature card saying, "I'm rubbing it up wit' Oils." You had to be there.

Don't get me wrong; I also enjoy flat-out powerful cards as much as the next guy does. I was a tournament junkie for many years and winning was a priority, and I know that a large segment of our audience enjoys power as well. I brought back [Plow Under](#) in *Eighth Edition*, and [Hypnotic Specter](#) and [Kird Ape](#) in Ninth—those cards are nothing if not powerful.

What does this have to do with anything? Ah, yes. The Timeshifted cards. The goal the team had for the Timeshifted cards from the get-go was a simple one: Make people feel as if anything could happen.

## The First Pass

A key thing to remember about the first pass was that the intent of the Timeshifted cards in design was that they *weren't Standard legal*. A bit of backstory...

When designing *Time Spiral*, we (Tinsman, Mark Rosewater, Devin Low, and myself) knew we wanted the three sets in the block to have a "past, present, future" feel, and the first set, obviously, was going to be based on the past. We knew we wanted to bring back lots of old mechanics for certain, but we wanted other means of evoking feeling of the past. We made a list of things on a white board that could accomplish such goals, a list including:



- Old card frames
- Dinosaurs and cavemen
- Eight-card booster packs
- Sepia-toned art
- Old cards mysteriously appearing in boosters
- Bad old card templates
- Black-and-white cards
- "Baby" versions of popular characters, like Baby Kamahl
- See-through searchable booster wrapping
- [Alpha-style playtest cards](#)
- Commons with multiple versions of art

Many of these suggestions are either incredibly silly or just plain old bad ideas that we don't do anymore for very good reasons, but the two that stood out as real possibilities were using the old card face and having old cards "mysteriously" appear in booster backs. We decided to try and kill two birds with one stone.

We discussed the idea with people in the Brand department, and the idea came up that we should just get a bunch of actual old cards—preferably including at least one of everything from *Alpha* through *Scourge* (the last set with the old frame), throw them into the hoppers at the factory, and have one literally random old card show up in each booster. That particular idea had three strikes against it in my mind:

1. The logistics and cost of such an undertaking would hardly be worth it.

2. Across all time, most **Magic** cards we've made are pretty bad by modern standards, and I wouldn't want a disproportionate number of the "bonus" old cards to be disappointing chaff.
3. If there were even a single real [Black Lotus](#), [Ancestral Recall](#), [Mishra's Workshop](#), etc., in the mix, the possibility of opening those cards would overshadow every other thing we wanted to do with the set. The gimmick would grow out of control.

So we settled on hand-picking 121 old cards to be reprinted; the number is the largest we can accommodate with our printing technology and still maintain even distribution. Some goals were laid down:

1. Adhere to the [Reserved List](#).
2. Have a good cross-section of sets, mechanics, color, and rarity.
3. Cards must have workable current templates and/or reminder text that fits on a card. (We knew we wanted to update the text on the cards to match Oracle.)
4. Try to stick with stuff that we wouldn't normally reprint.
5. Other than that, anything goes.

Points 4 and 5 really drove the makeup of the original version of the Timeshifted set, and a lot of that philosophy remained through to the final version.

What reasons are there that things couldn't normally be reprinted?



- Power-level too high (ex: [Lightning Bolt](#))
- Set specific mechanic that is unlikely to come back any time soon ([Mystic Enforcer](#))
- Cards with flavor that is at odds with the current direction of the game ([Lord of Atlantis](#))
- Cards that break the current color pie philosophy ([Psionic Blast](#))
- Complexities that would prevent a card from being considered for a modern Core Set, such as counters ([Gemstone Mine](#)), tokens ([Sengir Autocrat](#)), legendary status ([Eron the Relentless](#)), or removing cards from the game ([Feldon's Cane](#))

Every card I used as examples above is in the current Timeshifted set save one—[Lightning Bolt](#). As I said before, the original intent of the Timeshifted cards was that they would not be Standard-legal, just fun little add-ins for Limited play and casual collectors, printed with their original expansion symbols. So power-level was not at all a concern when choosing the cards. Some cards from the original pass:

- [Lightning Bolt](#)
- [Goblin Grenade](#)
- [Armageddon](#)
- [Swords to Plowshares](#)
- [Channel](#)
- [Rancor](#)
- [Dark Ritual](#)

Boy, did those cards ever spice up Limited play. But that wasn't a huge concern because, as I said before, we just assumed we couldn't make them Standard legal, so why even try? After all, there was no way that development was going to allow us to effectively increase the size of Standard by 121 cards, was there?

Other considerations went into choosing the makeup of the rest of the Timeshifted set.

- I wanted at least two cards from every Expert-level expansion. As we started adding and subtracting stuff, however, that restriction was lowered to one card from each expansion, minimum. Oddly enough, it was Urza's block that took the biggest hit in that department, as each of the three sets contributes only one Timeshifted card—[Claws of Gix](#), [Avalanche Riders](#), and [Hunting Moa](#). Most of the cards in that block are overpowered, boring, on the [Reserved List](#), or can be reprinted in Core Sets at a later time.
- No Portal cards. They just don't feel like **Magic's** past that much.
- At least one card with every keyword mechanic that we were willing to support. That restriction was eventually dropped as well. Fading went away, for example, because *Time Spiral* at one point contained a mechanic similar to fading but not quite the same. Even when that mechanic was cut from the set, the fading card(s) never made it back to the Timeshifted set. *Ice Age* block mechanics, like cumulative upkeep, went away as *Coldsnap* came together. Cycling is also another obvious omission; [Choking Tethers](#) was in the set for a long time but was cut because it was unexciting. [Twisted Abomination](#) brings swampcycling to the table, which is close enough.



- I wanted every famous/popular cycle or subset of cards represented. This was a tough goal, and was probably unrealistic. Obviously some of that kind of stuff survived—the Timeshifted set contains a Spike, a Battlemage, a *Mirage* Apprentice, an *Invasion* split card, a *Torment* Nightmare, a *Visions* Charm, a *Legends* legendary land, a *Planeshift* Familiar, a poison creature, a "domain" spell, a *Judgment* Incarnation, and a *Scourge* Warchief, among other things. That's quite a bit of stuff! We had other such cards, including an Opal creature ([Opal Champion](#)), an *Urza's Destiny* Seer ([Jasmine Seer](#)), a gold *Invasion* "bear" ([Shivan Zombie](#)), an *Urza's Saga* "verse" enchantment ([Midsummer Revel](#)), a *Homelands* land ([Castle Sengir](#)), a Lcid ([Transmogrifying Lcid](#)), a Masques "flash" Aura ([Cho-Manno's Blessing](#)), a Monger ([Sailmonger](#)), a "gating" creature ([Marsh Crocodile](#)), and a Volver ([Rakavolver](#)), among other things. Most of those cards felt more like they were there to fill a quota and weren't particularly fun or cool.
- Every card should have a Song to Sing. In other words, every card would ideally elicit a reaction from every player that opens it or sees it across the table. Such reactions would possibly include the following: "I can't believe they reprinted that!" "I remember playing with that card." "Was this a real card?" "A blue regenerator? What the hell?" "What is this, a green counterspell?" "Holy crap, I always wanted one of these!" And my personal favorite, "WHAT? This card is TERRIBLE!" Originally we had [Snow-covered Island](#) in the set as the "booby prize," but when we realized *Coldsnap* would be actually reprinting that card, [Squire](#) got the call. More on him later.

## The Big Change

After development finally got a taste of playing with the Timeshifted cards in Limited, they endorsed the idea and the focus shifted from *if* we were doing them to *how* we were going to communicate to players that the extra card wasn't going to be legal in Standard, that it was just a neat little collectible.

Many options were tossed about, including putting "bursts" on the booster packs that said "contains one collectible old card," to having an insert in each booster display box that spells out very carefully that these cards aren't really part of the set.

In the end, though, no one could shake the feeling that no matter how we tried to sell it, players would be disappointed to open cards in packs that they couldn't effectively play with, regardless of how cool the cards were. Oddly enough, if the cards *were* cool, the desire to play them in Constructed formats would be that much greater. At that point, lead developer Brian Schneider did what I thought would never happen—he said to try to rework the set so that it could be Standard legal.

All the uber-powerful stuff had to go, and they were replaced with much tamer cards. What the cards were isn't particularly important, but suddenly the Timeshifted set felt like a huge let-down. Multiple people in R&D commented that the set felt incredibly lame without all the jaw-dropping cards—[Psionic Blast](#) was still there, but little else—so I resolved to find stuff to juice it up again.



Being Standard legal put another pressure on the Timeshifted set—it needed to support the themes present in the main set. The obviously supported themes include flanking ([Zhalfrin Commander](#), [Suq'Ata Lancer](#)), morph ([Willbender](#), [Voidmage Prodigy](#), etc.), madness ([Fiery Temper](#), enablers like [Undertaker](#)), echo ([Avalanche Riders](#), [Hunting Moa](#)), storm ([Dragonstorm](#)), Thallids and Saprolings ([Thallid](#), [Verdeloth the Ancient](#)), and Slivers ([Essence Sliver](#), [Spined Sliver](#)). Other cards support these main themes in more discreet ways, and there are other themes present in the set that are better left to player discovery right now. The biggest change in the Timeshifted cards with regards to these support cards regards morph; initially there was a cycle of five Timeshifted morph cards with the idea that every color would then have the possibility of at least two different morphs. But white was the problem child. [Exalted Angel](#) was too good to reprint, and we didn't like the power that [Whipcorder](#) brought to the table in combination with the Rebel searcher in the main set. We tried various other white morphs in that slot, but they all felt so lame, so we decided not to do one, and yanked the red [Skirk Commando](#) as well.

But the biggest question that arose when the set shifted to Standard legality was: How beholden are we to the modern color pie? I consulted with design-guru and long-time color-pie advocate Mark Rosewater, and his answer, while slightly surprising, was exactly what I wanted to hear: Not very much at all.



*Time Spiral* itself is full of pie-violators—[Fledgling Mawcor](#), [Granite Gargoyle](#), [Unyaro Bees](#) just to name a few—so of course we should be free to keep similar violators in the Timeshifted set, including previously taboo cards like [Bad Moon](#), [Psionic Blast](#), [Pirate Ship](#), and [Disenchant](#). The arguments for such violators were as follows:

- All these cards are already legal in older formats like Legacy, and they don't ruin anything there. The game still plays well and feels like **Magic**.
- In order to capture the feeling of "the past," we have to be willing to do things we wouldn't do normally. If every Timeshifted card fit neatly into the modern pie, it wouldn't feel quite so novel.
- Rules are meant to be broken. This set doesn't change the rules going forward—expect later blocks to resume the pie you all know and love. As much as we talk about how important maintaining order and balance is, the truth is that we make the game and have more-or-less free reign to do as we please.
- Bringing these cards and effects back make far more people happy than it makes angry. Happy customers are good for business.
- Playtesting is our friend—if any card tipped things too far in a bad direction, we cut it.

### **Adding the Spice Back In**

Once we were sure that having the cards be Standard legal was not going to cause any format to implode, we started slowly ramping up the "awesome" factor of the Timeshifted set again, trying to get it back as close as we could to the jaw-dropping feeling the first draft had.



One by one, high-level cards were added in, including the following: [Avatar of Woe](#), [Call of the Herd](#), [Shadowmage Infiltrator](#), [Enduring Renewal](#), [Pandemonium](#), [Lightning Angel](#), [Mystic Snake](#), and [Withered Wretch](#). (Other cards were tried as well and were cut. See my development column on Friday to hear more about the casualties.) And, with Akroma winning the "You Decide" vote, space was made for her and she quickly became the poster child for the entire set of cards.

## Powerful Symbolism

The Timeshifted set was now turning heads once again. It was having a nice impact on Standard as well, contributing cool old role-player cards to existing decks, and spawning a few new creations as well. The last thing to decide was what expansion symbols to put on the cards themselves.

I was firmly in the camp that wanted to use the symbol of the original set they were in, just as *Chronicles* did. I liked the history lesson that the symbols provided. But I'll admit, having now seen the cards, that I was wrong. Putting the *Time Spiral* symbol on them was absolutely correct—it ties them all together and doesn't take away from the "old card" feel as I was afraid it would. In fact, even though many of the Timeshifted cards have updated wording, updated creature types, edited flavor text, recropped art, more saturated color, more uniform layout, centered artist credits, collector numbers, and other miniscule but very real changes from when they first appeared, the effect we wanted—that you are getting an "old card" in your booster pack—still comes through loud and clear.

As for the color of the symbol... We talked about lots of different options. One was having the Timeshifted cards have the same rarity denotation as they did in their original sets. Mark Gottlieb was firmly against this plan, and I agreed with him. Rarity color code on a card has nothing to do with historical rarity—it has to do with all the card's rarity in the set it's in right now. In this set, [Thallid](#) is not a common, it's rarer than a rare. It has the same rarity as Akroma. Therefore, those two cards should have the same rarity symbol.

How about gold, then? They're all essentially rares after all. But that's not entirely true, either. They appear at a different frequency than the regular set's rares, and should be different. At the same time, I didn't like the idea of saying [Thallid](#) is now a rare, and you get two rares in every pack, as that isn't really true either. The best solution was a new color—purple won out as it was the most different than everything else we currently have. Now all the Timeshifted cards have their own rarity that conveys little other than what we want—there's something weird going on with these cards.

How then, you may ask, can we justify making common staples like [Disenchant](#), [Funeral Charm](#), and [Icatian Javelineers](#) rare when they are going to be Standard legal? Because they were printed as commons in the past. If you need four copies of any of those cards, they can probably be had for a pittance from any decent dealer or card shop.

## Specific Card Notes

That, my friends, is the story of the Timeshifted set. Is a collection of the best cards from **Magic's** past? Not really. Is it a well-organized cross-section of all the game has to offer? Hardly. Is it cards that everyone likes and longs to see return? Ha. What it is is a crazy roller-coaster ride through time, complete with ups and downs, bombs and stink-bombs, all-time favorites and obscure head-scratchers. Just what we wanted. As my friend Nick Eisel said to me at the Pittsburgh Prerelease, "Everyone wants to know how the Timeshifted cards were picked. They seem to think you just rolled some dice." I love it, only because we simply could never get away with being this intentionally disheveled anywhere else in the game. *One* split card? *Two* Slivers? *One* instant counterspell... and *it's* green?

There are the same number of cards of each of the five colors, there are more cards that used to be commons than there are cards that used to be uncommons, than there are cards that used to be rares. Other than that, structure is out the window. Like I said, anything can happen.

Here, now, are a few notes on specific cards:

### **Squire**

It's obvious that we know just how bad this card is, and that we chose to bring it back intentionally. Why? Because, to us at least, it is a hilarious non sequitur to the all-star cast that surrounds it. More seriously, it serves to remind us all that **Magic's** past isn't all Power 9 and other over-romanticized "good old days" stuff—there were some real stinkers back in the day as well. The card was obsolete the day it was printed, for crying out loud, because *Arabian Nights* had [Repentant Blacksmith](#). From a PR standpoint, [Squire](#) may be the third most talked-about card in the set, behind Akroma and Psiblast. To me, that means it's doing good work. People are talking about it, laughing about it, running promotions based around it. That's more than can be said for most cards.

### **Jasmine Boreal**

Speaking of vanilla creatures... I actually think vanilla legends are an important, if forgettable, part of the game's past. The *Legends* set was absolutely full of them, and they oozed flavor even though there was nary a word in their text boxes. On top of that, Devin Low and I are both madly in love with Jasmine, or at least with Richard Kane-Ferguson's rendition of her.



### **Serrated Arrows and Desert**

Part of bringing shadow back was making sure there were decent answers to it in Constructed. Once the Timeshifted set changed to being Standard-legal, we knew we had our answers. Both of these cards are great at dealing with otherwise hard-to-stop weenies and I expect both to see some constructed play.

### **Dauthi Slayer and Soltari Priest**

You may have noticed that their creature types changed to include "Dauthi" and "Soltari." We plan on doing a massive clean-up of every creature type in the game sometime during the next year or so—this is the type of changes you should expect then.

### **Lord of Atlantis**

Speaking of creature type changes—here's one that's quite relevant. Once we changed [Goblin King](#), [Elvish Champion](#), and [Lord of the Undead](#) in *Ninth Edition*, I kept hoping we'd have an opportunity to make the same change to [Lord of Atlantis](#). The Timeshifted set gave us such an opportunity, even though there are only a small handful of Merfolk available in Standard (a number that will grow as the year goes on).

### **Ghost Ship and Pirate Ship**

We wanted to make a creature in the main set that was a hybrid of these two cards—"Ghost Pirate Ship"—in the same way that [Triskelavus](#) is a merger of [Tetravus](#) and [Triskelion](#), and [Unyaro Bees](#) is a merger of [Unyaro Bee Sting](#) and [Killer Bees](#). But the creative team nixed it, seeing as Ship is no longer a creature type they're willing to support. So what did we do to thank them? Put them both in the Timeshifted set where their creature types became Spirit and Human Pirate respectively.

The creative team in general disliked the idea of the Timeshifted set, and really hated the fact that it was Standard legal because suddenly these cards with really, really bad art ([Psionic Blast](#)) and bad flavor (the Ships) would be at the forefront of the game again. We explained to them that all areas of the game (mechanics, color pie, and so on) were going to take a huge step backwards with the Timeshifted cards—it wasn't a phenomenon limited to creative—they decided they could live with it. I'm grateful they let us do our thing with minimal complaints. At least we didn't bring back Squirrels or Beebles!

### **Pandemonium**



[Pandemonium](#) is one of a few cards that could have come back in a Core Set. (Others include [Enduring Renewal](#) and [Claws of Gix](#).) But we didn't want every Timeshifted card to be something complicated or out of flavor, so we stuck a few cards like this in.

### **[Spitting Slug](#)**

Some cards are in the set merely because they were pet cards of designers or developers. [Spitting Slug](#) is a long-time favorite of developer Mike Turian—at one point he had a successful Extended deck that ran four of them.

I have my pet cards in there as well (as does my wife), but we're not telling. Hopefully, somewhere among these 121 oddballs from throughout time, is a pet card of yours. If not, I'm sure there will be soon.

And just think, there are still two sets to go in this crazy block.