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The State of Limited

Aaron Forsythe
 Latest Developments
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With the qualifier season for Pro Tour – Kobe in full swing, including several Grand Prix tournaments, many of you are probably trying to figure out *Time Spiral* Sealed Deck play. What works, what colors are good, how many lands should one play... All sound questions that many, many Internet pundits, including our own [Noah Weil](#), will help you answer over the coming weeks.

As we pieced the format together a year ago, R&D had a series of questions we needed to ask ourselves as well, including two important ones that may end up affecting how we put sets together for limited play far into the future. We had a good grasp on how the plethora of mechanics would work with one another and how the “timeshifted” cards would interact with the rest of the cards, but the key issues for *Time Spiral* – and perhaps for all of limited going forward – were: How much non-green mana fixing should be available; and how “deep” should the format be?

If you’ve played the format, you know how we chose to answer those questions in *Time Spiral*. Below are two sealed decks that I built for various events. Both were very good, and both illustrate how our answers played out.

Aaron Forsythe – Employee Prerelease Sealed Deck

4-0 match record

Main Deck
 40 cards

6 Forest 6 Swamp 2 Mountain 1 Plains 1 Fungal Reaches 16 lands	2 Castle Raptors 2 Corpulent Corpse 1 Ashcoat Bear 1 Avatar of Woe 1 Greenseeker 1 Greater Gargadon 1 Gemhide Sliver 1 Wormwood Dryad 1 Thornscape Battlemage 1 Nantuko Shaman 1 Wall of Roots 13 creatures	1 Feebleness 1 Griffin Guide 1 Dark Withering 1 Prismatic Lens 1 Phyrexian Totem 1 Sudden Shock 1 Search for Tomorrow 1 Chromatic Star 1 Dread Return 1 Mindstab 1 Conflagrate 11 other spells
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Aaron Forsythe – Pittsburgh Prerelease Sealed Deck

40-12 game record

Main Deck
 40 cards

9 Island 6 Swamp 1 Dreadship Reef 1 Urza’s Factory 1 Arena 18 lands	1 Riftwing Cloudskate 1 Looter il-Kor 1 Skulking Knight 2 Brine Elemental 1 Coral Trickster 1 Urborg Syphon-Mage 1 Slipstream Serpent 1 Triskelavus 1 Clockwork Hydra 1 Mana Skimmer 2 Crookclaw Transmuter 1 Sindbad 14 creatures	1 Mindstab 1 Dark Withering 1 Funeral Charm 1 Stupor 1 Feebleness 1 Snapback 1 Ophidian Eye 1 Chronatog Totem 8 other spells
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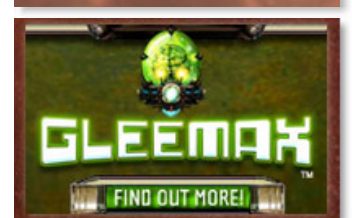
Let’s look at the first deck – to some of you, it might seem pretty bad at first blush. Four colors?! There wasn’t sufficient power in any two or three colors, so I had to branch out and make the good stuff work. I had powerful rares and timeshifted cards – *Avatar of Woe*, *Thornscape Battlemage*, *Greater Gargadon* – and wanted them in the deck, but any way I cut it I was short on cards. So I dipped into white for some good evasion and set out from there to make the mana work.



PRO TOUR–VALENCIA

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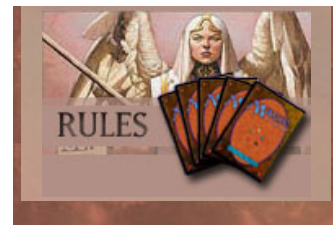
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I had the three good green common color fixers – *Gemhide Sliver*, *Greenseeker*, and *Search for Tomorrow* – but the deck succeeded because of the two common artifacts: *Chromatic Star* and *Prismatic Lens*.



Those two cards might not seem revolutionary at all, but it was kind of a big deal getting them to exist. Look at common artifacts historically: *Tempest* had five, including a pair of mana-makers, and then common artifacts *disappeared* totally for many years until *Mirrodin* block came along with its scores of artifacts across all rarities. After *Mirrodin* wrapped up, *Kamigawa* block went back to no common artifacts. That's 20 straight non-*Mirrodin* sets in a row without common artifacts anywhere to be seen. Why were we not making them? Let's look back at an old Ask Wizards question from March 2003:

March 12, 2003

Q: "I was looking through all of my artifacts and realized that Wizards hasn't printed any artifacts as commons since *Tempest* and *Fifth Edition*. Why is that? Some artifacts that used to be commons, like *Grapeshot* *Catapult*, are now uncommons. What is the reasoning behind this?"

--Chris Gregory, Natchitoches, Louisiana

A: From **Mark Rosewater**, R&D senior designer:

"The reason that artifacts aren't common ties into the belief of R&D that in the world of **Magic**, artifacts shouldn't be all that, well, common. Artifacts are supposed to be something special and rare. The average wizard isn't supposed to be tripping over artifacts. When a wizard gets one, it's supposed to be a big deal. To reflect that in the game, R&D made a decision (back during the end of the *Tempest* block as you surmised) to keep artifacts out of common. Will you ever see common artifacts again? Possibly; rules are meant to be broken."

Lo and behold, *Mirrodin* came out that fall and the rules were, once again, broken! Well, sometimes rules are broken because doing so is meant to be a big splashy event, and sometimes they're broken because they were probably bad rules to begin with.

Artifacts at common aren't actually all that disruptive, no one actually trips on them, and if they aren't much of a "big deal" to the wizard that finds them, well, we're okay with that. In general, the purpose of common artifacts in *Ravnica* and *Time Spiral* is to make gameplay better, and that alone is more important than a dusty old rule. The *Ravnica* development team came to the conclusion that mana in that set wasn't going to work well outside of the green guilds and came up with the idea for the Signets and *Terrarion* as commons, and gameplay got a lot better after that. Once it was time to start working on *Time Spiral* limited development, we figured it couldn't hurt to try some more common artifacts, seeing as (a) they worked so well in *Ravnica* and (b) we at least have "nostalgia" as an excuse for doing them. So we made room for the Lens (which, at two mana, is strictly better than *Mana Prism* from *Mirage*) and the Star (which is nearly identical to *Chromatic Sphere*, but fixes a rules issue that the latter has), plus three creatures: the theme-filling *Jhoira's Timebug* and *Venser's Sliver* and the oddball throwback *Brass Gnat*.



Additionally, development added a third "colorless" mana fixer at common, the fantastic *Terramorphic Expanse*. Budget players rejoice – a common fetch land!

With those cards at common alongside green's normal slew of fixing and accelerating, plus a couple interesting uncommon cycles in the *Totems* and *storage lands*, players should have the ability to make mana bases that range from slickly consistent to downright weird and everything in between. And in drafts, mana can be prioritized or ignored at each player's discretion.

Now go back and take a look at the second deck I listed above. It contains cards of only two colors, and while not all the cards are ultra-powerful, none of them are noticeably bad either. And I had to cut two or three cards when I was building. Why is such a two-color deck possible? This set is deep.

In some older blocks, the drop-off from cards that a decent drafter might consider playable to those that were not was steep and noticeable. Cards like **Chimney Imp**, **Takeo's Cavalry**, and **Elvish Pathcutter** were always on the bench, and always surrounded by the same bad friends. There are lots and lots of reasons why we make some cards better than others, but the relevant one to this discussion is that we feel that each level of difference down the "bad card" scale separates one level of player from another. Even neophyte drafters know not to play **Break Open**, but not all of them will properly eschew **Mistform Mask**. Further up the ladder, some players know when not to play **Nosy Goblin**, and it goes on from there. (Of course, once you reach the highest level of play, you toss all biases aside and look for the good in every card. One of my favorite Pro Tour stories involves Masashi Oiso wrecking Gadiel Szeifer with a sideboarded **Dryad's Caress**.) Of course, if R&D draws the line in the wrong spot, players sometimes end up with just enough playable cards to build a deck – and I personally feel that is a terrible number for the game to end up at.

We upped the number of playable commons in *Ravnica* block a little bit in an attempt to alleviate the problem that sealed decks in that format would tend to pull players in too many different directions. If players had enough good cards in just three colors, we reasoned, many of them wouldn't feel the need to play four or five. Even more depth was added to *Coldsnap*, this time because we reasoned that a set that small couldn't give up the usual number of "slots" to bad cards and still have diverse gameplay in draft. We liked the way things played out so well in those sets that we increased the depth again in *Time Spiral*. Now most sealed deck pools can support two-color builds, and most draft piles will contain at least 23 generally "playable" cards.

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I have heard some "pros" lamenting the deep pool, claiming they'd rather have it be shallow and win some percentage of their games because their less-savvy opponents couldn't cobble together something resembling a deck. To hell with that attitude – that's lazy gamesmanship and a very narrow perspective.

First, look at the situation from the viewpoint of your "bad" opponent. He's bound to lose regardless; why not make his experience a little better and let him preserve some of his dignity by letting him have a playable 40? Getting blown out is never fun.



And from the perspective of the pro – the deeper pool actually gives you more chances to out-think your opponents. In the "shallow" environment, you can out-draft and out-play the guy across from you. But what happens in a world where everyone gets 27-30 playable cards? Suddenly you can out-draft and out-play people just the same as before, but now you can also *out-build* them by choosing the exact correct configuration of cards, and later *out-sideboard* them mid-match. Personally, I love picking up my sideboard after game one and seeing a bunch of tiny tweaks at my disposal as opposed to a **Shatter** variant and 20 pieces of unusable junk. I won one match at the employee prerelease by siding in a **Gorgon Recluse** for an **Ashcoat Bear** after losing game one to the combined talents of **Firewake Sliver**, **Sedge Sliver**, **Spined Sliver**, **Might Sliver**, and **Fury Sliver**. The 2/4 – which I couldn't really madness out – held the ground for a bit in the next game, eventually trading with one of the larger Slivers, while my fliers and landwalkers won it.

Even in sealed deck play, the deep pool rewards smarter, better players who are willing to think things through. You can go for consistency over power by cutting out splash colors for worse – but still playable – cards in your main colors, you can go for synergy over raw power by playing the right mix of cards with a similar theme, or you can simply opt for power over everything else thanks to all the common mana fixing I discussed in the top half of the article.

Even the cards that tend to sit on the bench usually have some kind of use, and knowing when to play them can separate the men from the boys. **Gaze of Justice** may seem unusable, but in the right deck it can be devastating. Same thing goes for **Empty the Warrens**. When is **Pentarch Ward** correct? **Plunder**? **Sage of Epityr**? **Sprout**, for crying out loud? Those choices are yours.

And, of course, the last great bonus of a deep card pool is that the set simply has more good cards in it, which makes everyone happy. If I never see another **Horizon Seed** again as long as I live...

The way we develop sets for limited play has changed slightly over the past couple of years. I hope you enjoy what we've done – I'd love to hear your experiences from this round of qualifiers, so drop me a line. Assuming things are as well-received as we hope, the future of limited play even beyond this block should be one marked with depth and ample mana fixing.

In closing, here are a few tips that I'm passing on from my recent experiences with *Time Spiral* cards in limited:



- I've seen several set reviewers puzzle over **Cloudchaser Kestrel's** ability to turn permanents white. The best uses I've heard to date are allowing **Terror** effects to hit opposing black creatures, or as a combo with **Pentarch Paladin** set to "white" (a combo you can enjoy in the Hope's Crusaders theme deck). No, it's much simpler than that. In *Time Spiral*, white loves white. Lots of cards work better if all of your creatures are white, including **Gaze of Justice**, **Ivory Giant**, and **Celestial Crusader**. On top of that, it can give you options when it comes time to block an **Amrou Seekers**.
- **Firemaw Kavu** is being lauded as one of the set's real limited bombs, and rightfully so. But did you know it's *even better than that*? If you are at a precarious life total and facing down an **Errant Ephemeron**, play the Kavu and have it do 2 damage to *itself*, and then 4 to the Ephemeron upon dying. Not the most ideal use of the card, but extra options are always nice.
- **Temporal Isolation** is the latest **Pacifism** variant, and it is quite good. There are, however, a few neat tricks you can use against it. You could play a **Dream Stalker** and return your Isolated guy to your hand. You could play a **Faceless Devourer**, removing your Isolated guy from the game. Should the Devourer leave play, your original creature will come back as good as new. My favorite anti-Isolation trick, however, is to attack with the Isolated creature, taking advantage of the fact that it has shadow, and then remove the creature from play via bounce or a sacrifice effect once damage is on the stack. With the creature not in play, the Isolation isn't in play to prevent the combat damage. Take that!
- **Aether Web** is the green **Condemn**. Try it.

Last Week's Polls:

Which of today's cards would you have liked to have seen reprinted in the Timeshifted set?		
Meddling Mage	3966	20.2%
Spiritmonger	2746	14.0%
Armadillo Cloak	2740	13.9%
Maze of Ith	1490	7.6%
Serendib Efreet	1199	6.1%
Crystalline Sliver	1162	5.9%
Anger	960	4.9%
Takklemaggot	958	4.9%
Concordant Crossroads	806	4.1%
Urza's Rage	792	4.0%
Capsize	729	3.7%
Contagion	708	3.6%
Crookshank Kobolds	697	3.5%
Whipcorder	500	2.5%
Granger Guildmage	198	1.0%
Total	19651	100.0%

I had a feeling that the Mage would win... which was why I saved it for #1!

How interested would you be in purchasing a <i>Transformers</i> collectible game made by Wizards of the Coast?		
1 (not at all)	7223	62.1%
5 (extremely)	1593	13.7%
2 (slightly interested)	1237	10.6%
3 (moderately interested)	1037	8.9%
4 (very interested)	545	4.7%
Total	11635	100.0%

This Week's Poll:

How do you usually purchase theme decks?

One at a time.
 Two at a time.
 By getting all of them from a set at once.
 I don't usually get them.

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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