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A Word Is Worth A Thousand Headaches

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Magic is a game of words. The art is gravy and the numbers always mean the same thing. It's in the words that we find the sweet, sweet juice that makes the game fun and, time and time again, fresh and new. This puts a lot of weight and responsibility in the hands of the gangs of random letters we call words. Until I started working at Wizards as a creative writer I never had a real appreciation for the intricate web of words that holds this game together. It was a rude awakening for me, since part of my job was overseeing the selection of card names (*Lightning Bolt*, *Lightning Rift*, *Rift Bolt*), and keywords (*Flash*, *Flashback*, *Buyback*). Just these few examples can give you an idea how difficult it can be to run with words without stepping on anyone's toes.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. I agree—just about every time. These days, it seems, a word can be worth a thousand headaches. *Time Spiral* has changed the role of words in both card names and keywords, often resulting in maximum cranium pain-ium.

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In a standard **Magic** set, words have responsibility to game functionality and to the rest of the cards in the block, with a little attention to the next one or two contiguous card sets. For example, in *Guildpact* we paid mind to the words used on *Kamigawa* block cards as well as the other cards in *Ravnica*. Words on high-profile cards are avoided more concertedly than words on random chaff that makes no splash. Continuing with that example, *Guildpact* cards were pretty easy to put words on because *Ravnica*, an eastern European-inspired city-world, had very little in common with a setting inspired by feudal Japanese spirit mythology. It was even easier because all of the guilds in *Ravnica* block had their own distinct flavor. There was very little risk in having the words *Scab*, *Clan*, or *Mauler* step on the toes of *Kabuto* or *Moth*, or *Stratozeppelin*, for that matter. Part of the reason **Magic** "walks" from one plane to another, like from *Mirrodin* to *Kamigawa* to *Ravnica*, is so the game has a fresh new crop of concepts, imagery, and—thank Gaea—words.

Never before have I been so sure that this idea of plane-hopping is the right way to go. You see, *Time Spiral* did not play nice like *Guildpact* did. It did not play in its own little *Time Spiral* sandbox, with an occasional visit from a Ravnican neighbor. No, *Time Spiral* had to squat on the words from every **Magic** set since the dawn of time! You see, *Time Spiral* IS all **Magic** sets. In having its driving theme be nostalgia, all of its words were connected to all the prior cards that used those same words. *Time Spiral* cannot even play in a sandbox by itself without getting

problems. We could not just use the word "Shock" or "Shocker" or "shocking," not unless it was on a card that does 2 damage-paying homage to **Shock**. Unless, of course, it's on a **red insect card** that makes you discard cards and draw cards—a nostalgic reference to **Shocker**. Similarly, we could not roll out the word "bolt" on anything that did not make a nod to **the bolt**, **Lightning Bolt**. But it's not that easy. Take a look at **Rift Bolt**. It's a Suspend **Lightning Bolt**. Seems pretty simple—it does 3 damage, so it's a bolt. It has Suspend, using the time rifts, so it is **Rift Bolt**. Yay, we're done. That was easy. Actually, it was not easy at all—not easy because this is *Time Spiral* block, and words are not our own.



Rift Bolt started out as **Lightning Strike**, paying homage to "the bolt" via "Lightning." But that got nixed when **Lightning Axe** took that word (We needed something Red to spice up an axe to make it reminiscent of **Lava Axe**. Lightning was the clear winner.) So we looked at the art and saw the "Bolt" coming from a storm cloud. Perfect—"Storm Bolt." Winner. That wasn't so bad. Doh! Development has added the Storm keyword to the set. We can't use the word "Storm" on a card without Storm in a nostalgia set. Words have to mean what we remember them to mean. What's another word that's like a storm? A tempest! Doh! Scrap the storm angle and move on...to **Jagged Bolt**. Not bad, the art definitely supports this. But lo! That name is nearly identical to **Jagged Lightning**! This card does not have multiple targets like **Jagged Lightning** did, so this name surely cannot stick. What to do, what to do?

Flash Bolt was on the table, but also ended up getting hacked late in the game because **Flashback** was put in the set, and we did not want it to be confused with **Flashback**, or the popular **Flashback** card, **Firebolt** (which happens to break the mind-wrenching nostalgia rule of "bolts" do 3!) Then, weeks later, the keyword that was then called "Surprise" was named "Flash." Of course, **Rift Bolt** could not be **Flash Bolt** because it does not have Flash. (See what I mean, *Time Spiral* steps on its own toes too!) I can hear you thinking it. You're thinking, "What about **Rift Bolt**, you doofus." Well, Smartypants, it just so happens that, for a time, the Timeshifted Cards were called **Rift Cards**—and **Rift Bolt** is in the main set. Of course, the whole "Rift Cards" thing did not last because there were other cards already in the regular set that used the word Rift. That was not the end for "Rift," though. Obviously, it ended up on **Rift Bolt**—but it also was, for a short time, the keyword for Suspend! Aaahhhhh! Stop the madness! Wait, I can't use that word either! My head hurts!

The scary thing about *Time Spiral* is that this **Rift Bolt** was not the only card to play a game of musical words. As you've already seen, keywords and other game terms joined in the fun as well. Since it is Suspend week, and we've already seen a little bit of how Suspend hopped from one word to another, let's take a look at how the keyword "Suspend" came to be.

Way, way back in the very primordial moments of *Time Spiral*, the block's main mechanic was born, and it was called "Delay." At that time, all Delay cards had to be removed from game with time counters. It was not an option—you could not hard cast them if you wanted to. In essence, you had to delay what you were doing. It did not take long for play-testers to find that this was no fun. The mechanic was feeling like a drawback rather than an alternate cost. The keyword itself had a negative vibe; Delay. It just seemed bad—the whole thing. The first attempt at addressing this situation was left to me. I was charged with finding a single word that somehow spun the mechanic in a positive way. I enlisted the help of the usual suspects, Brady Dommermuth, Brandon Bozzi, and Mark Rosewater for help in this difficult challenge.



The perfect word, we decided, would really hit on the Time theme, and feel like a "way" to play a spell rather than a description of the mechanic. What I mean by this is that our perfect keyword would somehow say that we're casting a spell with time, not mana. Our list was short.

Chronomancy
Chronoform
Chronocast
Chroncast
Timesink
Timewarp

None of these seemed good enough. Chronomancy is nice, but too long. Suspend reminder text crams the text box something fierce. The right word would also have to be pretty short. This ended up nixing Chronocast and Chronoform as well. Timewarp did not work because this is *Time Spiral* block, and *Time Warp* has blue toes we did not want to step on. Timesink stunk because it seemed just as negative as Delay.

Lucky for us, the designers alleviated some of the negativity when they made "Delaying" the spell optional. This at least made it less important that we candy-coat the keyword. It was playing like an alternate cost now (because it was) and so we were left to find a good, time-themed word that...did...what?

At some point in this process, we settled on the visual cue for Suspend, the bluish veil through which the spell emerges. We explored a bunch of words that addressed what was happening *in-world* instead of *in-game*.

Rift
Displaced
Overlay
Emerge
Unveil
Threshold

Overlay has some serious flavor baggage that we were not ready to carry. This mechanic was not describing the same thing as when planes, like Rath onto *Dominaria*, are overlaid onto others. Displaced was just lame. Do I even need to explain why Threshold was not an option? Yes, it was already a keyword, but it was thrown out there because we were rattling off words that describe something coming through a...er...threshold to another time. It, in an interesting and tuxedoed way, led to Unveil. Unveil was, and in my mind still is, pretty darn cool. It's short, sounds like something cool is being revealed, and refers to the blue "veil" that is shown on all the suspend art. But it, like Emerge and Rift, addressed only the creative, and did not offer any clues as to what the mechanic does. We've used more flavor-bent words like these in the past (Bushido, Shadow), but everyone seemed to feel like Suspend needed a little more help. As I said earlier, we did take Rift for a ride for a week or so, but its life in italics was short.

Flux
Impending
Timer
Clock
Countdown

There was a time, probably right after Rift hit the trash heap, when the pendulum swung the opposite way and the keywords bandied about were dryly explaining the mechanic, regardless of flavor. Timer, Clock, and Countdown were such words. I did not like any of them, but peeps seemed to like Countdown, at least for a while. At some point in mid-process, editing began digging into the set. Once they settled on a template for the mechanic, it became clear that there were even more parameters this poor word had to fit. The keyword would have to work in noun, verb, and adjective form. The keyword itself functions as a noun, "Card X has Suspend." Cards that refer to cards with this keyword call them "Suspended," an adjective. When in play, the keyword will be deployed in verb form, "I Suspend Spell Y." Countdown actually spent some time in the file as the final keyword. Sometimes, if you're lucky, the rules can be your friend. In this case, Countdown did not work as a verb or an adjective.

Timebend
Timespan
Timeburn
Timecast
Timeshift
Timeshifted

Yup, you saw that right. Timeshift was in the hopper for the Suspend keyword too. In fact, its existence ended up killing the rest of these keyword contenders. Once we settled on Timeshifted as the word for the "purple" cards, "Time_____" was no longer an option. We wanted to make sure people could talk about Timeshifted cards without having them mistaken for Timecast/Timespan (Suspend) cards.

After what seemed like months of word-induced headaches in search of Suspend, it hit me. Mind you, this is weeks and weeks after final words were due, weeks and weeks and words later. During the long period of testing out words in the set file and on play-test cards, all of these words were put out there for consumption and debate. They all had proponents and opponents. They all ended up getting the axe for some reason or another. All until it hit me. Suspend!

I shot an email out to all the necessary folks that the final keyword for Delay would be Suspend. (I did this at least 3 or 4 other times with Rift, Timeshift, Countdown, and, I think, Uncle.) But this time, nobody poked any holes. It was short enough. It felt "Timey" enough. It did not feel like a negative or a drawback. It suggested a mechanic in which something was held up temporarily. It helped describe the visual cue in the art. And, most importantly, the



word "Suspend" did not appear on any other **Magic** cards since the dawn of time! (OK, it appeared on one **flavor text**, but you know what I mean.) It ran the gauntlet, ladies and gentlemen. And what a knock-down, drawn-out, bloody gauntlet it was.

Another game of musical words. One thing I will say about *Time Spiral* is that it's really great to be done with it. From a distance, after all the headaches have subsided, it is nice to look back and see how all the hard work paid off. This goes for all facets of the game too. Words (though I do believe them to be the biggest pain in the neck), were not the only things to have to bow down to Lord Nostalgia. Story, setting, mechanics, art, concepts, flavor text, you name it-they all had to make sacrifices to a demanding despot. I tip my cap to every battle-worn soul who worked on this set to bring you this non-stop **Magic-o-Rama**. But as I said before, now that the sacrifices have all been made, *Time Spiral* is all about giving. Lord Nostalgia giveth to the people. They bow their heads...and play.

Starting Monday, participate in the [UnCon](#) Vorthos Art Contest! Watch the [UnCon Events Schedule](#) for details, and read up on the fictional "Vorthos" card in my articles [Parlez Vous Vorthos](#) and [Parlez Vous Part Deux](#).

Matt Cavotta has always been a fantasy goober. At various points in his gooberhood, he has used his nerdy knowledge to become a professional goober. He went from scribbling pictures of his own D&D characters to illustrating books and cards for his two favorite games; D&D and Magic. Then he channeled his inner 7th level Illusionist/3rd level Bard and landed himself a job at Wizards as a writer. He continues to cast his illusion spells each morning, lest they find out he's just another goober.



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