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Wait For It...

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 Latest Developments
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Suspend. Such a simple idea, such a beating to implement. I can remember few mechanics that sounded so simple at first glance yet took many people many, many hours to actually make work.

Before each new set comes out, we make one common from that set available at some **Magic** retail locations to be given away or won as prizes as a nice preview of things to come. For *Time Spiral*, we chose **Errant Ephemeron**, as he was what we considered the "poster child" for Suspend. Even when the mechanic was first put into the design file, **Errant Ephemeron** was there as the simplest possible application.

I'm going to follow its evolution through design and development, and mirrored therein are all the changes and tweaks made to the suspend mechanic. Changes from iteration to iteration are in bold.

2/18/2005

Tardy Elemental

U

Creature - Elemental

4/4

Flying

Delay 5



Here's the first appearance of our ephemeral friend, known then as Tardy Elemental (he arrived late to the party).

Suspend, or "delay" as it was first known, came from the *Saviors of Kamigawa* design team, and wasn't completely fleshed out within the rules. Hence, it was written on the card simply as "Delay 5" with no attempt to explain how it worked. The gist of the mechanic was this: If it would come into play (or resolve, in the case of spells), instead you removed it from the game with X time counters on it, removed one during each upkeep, and when the last was removed, the creature came into play (or the spell resolved).

So you had to counter the delay spell as it was being played, meaning up front, and if you didn't, countermagic was no longer useful. This also meant that if the creature tried to come into play from anywhere (such as from *Zombify*), it would delay itself for five turns.

There was a weird problem that when the card ran out of counters and came into play, it would immediately remove itself again thanks to the delay ability, which didn't care how it was trying to come into play. We figured that we could solve that problem later.

4/12/2005

Tardy Elemental

U

Creature - Elemental

4/4

Flying, **haste**

Delay 5



The more we played with delay creatures in design, the more we realized that if the creature was in play with no counters on it, we felt like it should be able to attack. After all, it had been hanging out on the table for several turns with counters on it, and now that the counters were gone, it should be ready to go. No matter how much we tried to convince ourselves to pay attention and *stop attacking with delay guys the turn they came into play*, all of us on the design team - to a man - would repeatedly attack with freshly undelayed guys.

We couldn't fight the urge and felt that in general players wouldn't be able to, either. Our solution was to give the delay creatures haste. Blue creatures with haste bothered some people, but we had no other answer at the time.

9/9/2005

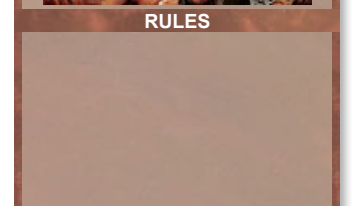
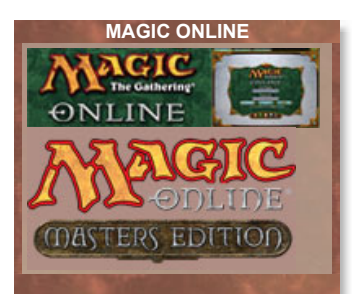
Tardy Elemental

U

Creature - Elemental





4/4




Flying



Delay 5
Buyout 4U

When delay came to development, we played and played and played the cards, and we quickly noticed that delay spells were fantastic in the early turns, but were absolutely miserable as mid- to late-game topdecks.




We tried to solve this problem by adding a *second* ability called "buyout." Buyout, in essence, let you play a "kicker" that eliminated the delay ability from the card. So now the Elemental could be delayed five turns for , or played as a 4/4 straight away for   .

The fact that all creatures with delay also had haste really posed a problem here because the hardcast    Elemental also would have haste. To solve this, we shoehorned haste into the theoretical delay rules so that delayed creatures came in with haste, but didn't have it if they were just played.

9/27/2005
Gathering Storm
U
Creature - Elemental
4/4
Flying
Delay 5 (If this would come into play, set it aside with 5 time counters. At the beginning of your upkeep, remove a counter. When it has none, it comes into play with haste.)
Buyout 4U (You may pay an additional 4U as you play this card. If you do, it loses Delay.)

We curved out all the delay and buyout costs, leaving buyout off of key cards that we wanted to be played via delay only (like *Ancestral Vision*). Tardy Elemental was given a much more reasonable playtest name and reminder text was added, all in preparation to send the card file to external playtesters.

9/28/2005
Gathering Storm
U
Creature - Elemental
4/4
Flying
Delay 5 (If this would come into play, set it aside with 5 time counters. At the beginning of your upkeep, remove a counter. When it has none, it comes into play with haste.)
Buyout UUUU (You may pay an additional UUUU as you play this card. If you do, it loses Delay.)




As we continued testing the cards, we started fiddling around with making the buyout costs different so that some of the cards would be better in constructed and create more interesting tension in limited, so we tried    on the Elemental. That didn't last long.

At this point, the rules conundrum that delayed cards could never actually come into play because they would keep removing themselves came to a head. The ability had to be worded differently. We tried tweaking the wording such that the cards would only be delayed if they were *played*, but that meant that they could come into play via other "cheaty" means, like *Chord of Calling*, *Proclamation of Rebirth*, and *Aether Vial* because their CMC's were so low. Imagine playing *Proclamation for an Errant Ephemeron* and two *Greater Gargadons*! One mana creatures indeed!

10/5/2005
Gathering Storm
5U
Creature - Elemental
4/4
Flying
U: Delay 5 (If this would come into play, set it aside with 5 time counters. At the beginning of your upkeep, remove a counter. When it has none, it comes into play with haste.)

The best solution was to frontload the high cost onto the actual mana cost of the card, and then have delay be an extra ability on each card.

We were a little sad about this change, even though we recognized that it was much more functional, because we were no longer going to print really sexy-looking cards like one-mana 4/4 flyer or one-mana 9/7. The all had to have "fair" mana costs now. This meant we had to go back over all the delay cards and recost them.

Of course, we kept mana costs off of a cycle at rare, feeling that putting some lame, large cost like    on *Ancestral Vision* would be way worse than not letting it be played at all. Not worse from a functionality standpoint, but worse from a "this reminds me of *Ancestral Recall*" standpoint. On top of that, having no mana cost made for a neat gimmick if nothing else.

10/7/2005
[Sleet-Eye Ephemeron]
5U



Creature - Illusion

4/4

Flying

U: Delay 5 (U, Remove this card in your hand from the game with five time counters on it: Play this ability only as a sorcery. Remove a counter at the beginning of each of your upkeeps. When the last is removed, play this card without paying its mana cost. It has haste.)

At this point the card concept was done, and it finally became the Ephemeron we all know and love. Something approximating working reminder text that could go on both creatures and noncreatures was put into the file by editing.

10/13/2005

[Sleet-Eye Ephemeron]

5U

Creature - Illusion

4/4

Flying

2U: Delay 3 (2U, Remove this card in your hand from the game with three time counters on it: Play this ability only as a sorcery. Remove a counter at the beginning of each of your upkeeps. When the last is removed, play this card without paying its mana cost. It has haste.)

Figuring out the correct mana time and cost for the delay abilities was tricky, and we fluctuated quite a bit on them during development. The change to 2U delay 3 meant that the Ephemeron would no longer be attacking on turn five, but turn six instead.

12/19/2006

[Sleet-Eye Ephemeron]

6U

Creature - Illusion

4/4

Flying

1U: Delay 4 (1U, Remove this card in your hand from the game with four time counters on it: Play this ability only as a sorcery. Remove a counter at the beginning of each of your upkeeps. When the last is removed, play this card without paying its mana cost. It has haste.)

A later shift made the delay cost lower, but kept the ideal turn of arrival as six. In addition, to make the card less attractive to play normally (and therefore more attractive to suspend) the cost went up to 6U.

2/21/2006

Errant Ephemeron

6U

Creature - Illusion

4/4

Flying

Delay by 4 - 1U (Rather than play this card from your hand, pay 1U and remove it from the game with four time counters on it.)

Countdown to play (At the beginning of your upkeep, remove a time counter from this. When you remove the last, play it for free. It has haste.)

Al, the real name appears. Sadly, some unwanted stuff has also appeared in the form of "countdown to play." Suddenly, every card with delay now had a second ability—the former put on the counters, and the latter removed them.

Why was such a change made? We were experimenting in other sets with having time counters be used in other ways, each of which would countdown to another effect. But the cost for *Time Spiral* of having this very extraneous-looking ability that junks up all the cards. There was a time when we were very serious about printing the mechanic spilt in two parts like this, but I'm glad that time was very short.

3/8/2006

Errant Ephemeron

6U

Creature - Illusion

4/4

Flying

Suspend 4 - 1U (Rather than play this card from your hand, you may pay 1U and remove it from the game with four time counters on it. At the beginning of your upkeep, remove a time counter from this. When you remove the last, play it for free. It has haste.)

Here's the final version! A big change came in templating: suspend (no longer "delay") stopped being an activated ability (that *Voidmage Husher* and *Trickbind* could stop) and became a "special action" that can't be responded to. This kind of snuck up on most developers, but we knew when we made the mechanic that a keyword with two parameters would be tricky to template and weren't too disappointed that this was the best answer.

The road was long and difficult, but I'm thrilled that it worked out as well as it did and that (most of) the relevant rules for the mechanic actually fit on a card. And the cards do look cool, even though they don't have the miniscule mana costs the designers hoped for. Hey, you get a 4/4 flyer that can attack on turn six for only two mana!

In the near future, I plan to do another "Twenty Questions" column about *Time Spiral* development, so if there's stuff you want to know, fire away!

Last Week's Poll

How do you usually purchase theme decks?		
I don't usually get them	6860	59.3%
One at a time	3449	29.8%
Two at a time	690	6.0%
By getting all of them from a set at once	573	5.0%
Total	11572	100.0%



We were curious as to how many players "cherry pick" the "good" decks versus how many just like having and playing all of them.

This Week's Poll

Do you think suspend will be a force in Standard?

Not at all
 One or two cards, maybe
 There will be some interesting rogue decks
 The mechanic will be a player

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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