

Personal confessions of a Magicflavor text writer. The Italicized World of *Time Spiral*

Doug Beyer

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It's about four o'clock in the morning, Pacific time. The lights of a container barge inch across a black Puget Sound outside my window. There's a sentence I can't get out of my head. It's a piece of flavor text for a *Time Spiral* card.

"Go back to sleep, you dummy," I tell myself. "You'll remember it in the morning."

But I won't. You never remember those dream-induced gems of genius the next day. That's why I'm awake – I can't let myself fall back to sleep without getting it down. So I snap on the light, wait for my eyeballs to adjust, and grab the pad of paper on the bedside table. That's exactly what I put it there for.

She brought the message to a devastated land thirsty even for information centuries out-of-date.

Oh my god, that's brilliant. I click off the light and roll over, grinning. One more piece of flavor done for *Time Spiral*. It's going to be a good set.

I wake up a few hours later. The Sound is busy with traffic now, two fishing trollers outpacing an Alaska-bound cruise ship. I check the idea pad. It looks like some madman scrawled something about "thirsty lands" and "out-of-date information" on it with his foot.

Okay, brilliant it's not. At least I was able to get back to sleep.

Writing names and flavor text for **Magic** cards is obsessive work. It's the kind of work you don't leave at the office, or leave anywhere you would normally sit down and write. It comes along with you throughout your day and wakes you up at night. It's mental peanut butter – delicious but sticky.

I'm working on the flavor text for "Icatian Rouser," a white spellshaper creature with flavor similar to [Icatian Town](#). The sketch depicts a woman in garb that doesn't fit the style guide – she's a victim of the rifts.



[Icatian Rouser]

2W

Creature - Human Spellshaper

1W, T, discard a card: Put two 1/1 white Citizen creature tokens into play.

1/1

Her Icatian town was thriving back in her time. She's freaked out. This isn't the town she remembers – it's rubble now. And she's holding a scroll, a message. That scroll becomes mental peanut butter for me. What does it say? I can't get it out of my head.

What I know about the card from the art description and from **Magic's** history swirls around in my noggin for days, mixing freely with pure conjecture. I figure she was about to deliver her news way back in her time of *Fallen Empires* – and it was important, which makes her even more distressed about winding up here in modern Dominaria. She's a rouser, a town crier – so her most important duty would be to warn the town of an attack and deliver details from the front lines to a military official. Her scroll is news of not just an attack, but of all-out war in Icatia.

But suddenly, due to a buckling of the timeline, she finds herself in the ruins of her former home. My writer sadism kicks in. See, the more I care about a character, the more I want something horrible to befall them for the sake of drama – and the drama is getting delicious now. It's worse than her not being able to deliver her message – it's that her failure to deliver it *destroyed her home*. Painful. I'm grinning.

But I still don't have piece of flavor text that sums up all of that. I return to my writer's cave every couple of nights or so throughout this round of writing—bedroom door shut (no interference from girlfriend or cats), lights off (no distracting visual stimuli), earphones playing instrumental music (no words competing with my verbal centers). It's basically a sensory deprivation chamber, and for the same purpose—to let my brain wander wherever it wants to go.

Back to the messenger torn away from her Icatia. This time-transported woman and her useless message – is this a **Magic** card or a stage tragedy? My final realization is that her message isn't useless at all. Her failure to deliver the news may have caused the destruction of her village, but she may yet have a chance to redeem herself. She can still deliver the message – to strangers a thousand years younger than her, but still to good effect. She can still raise the alarm (okay, that card makes Soldier tokens, but whatever) to prepare her new countrymen for the harsh world they now face. *A thousand years removed from her home, her news of war lost its context, but not its relevance.*



Her name becomes Icatian Crier thanks to another writer. I can submit the piece into the Namebase database and move on. Finally that mental peanut butter dissolves away.

Set Setup

The first set of a block has a lot of creative work to do. Using only names, art, and sometimes flavor text, it has to build a world. It must introduce players to a whole new environment, get them comfortable with the themes of the set, and provide a window to the setting behind the mechanics, all in the space of 300-some cards.

This is true even when the set returns to a preexisting plane, like *Time Spiral*. **Magic** always changes, so there's always work to do to show off what's new about the setting this time around. The Dominaria of *Time Spiral* is brand-new, creatively speaking—full of references to beloved people and places, but cast in the deep shadows of an unfamiliar time.

When I opened the emails from Matt Cavotta about the set's themes, I knew this would be tough. Dominaria had a 10,000-year timeline packed with history. And with the harsh, post-apocalyptic filter over the plane, I would have to be careful about my emotional investment.

A writer could get burnt out writing too many pieces about the painful irony of a dead world. But I had a job to do.

So, I thought, how does one go about portraying this new Dominaria? Brady Dommermuth and Matt Cavotta have talked a lot on magicthegathering.com about the role of story on cards. The gist is this: cards aren't movie trailers or novel chapters – they just aren't very good at showing off a sequence of events over time. Yet that's exactly what I needed to portray. Most first sets get away with showing off tidbits of the new plane being visited, but this was different. This was Dominaria!

Cards are excellent at one thing, however, and that is highlighting themes. Cards can have flavor themes just as much as mechanical themes. The more cards you see that focus on a given theme (as you peruse those cards in Gatherer, build decks with them, crack them open and play sealed with them, whatever), the stronger that theme comes across. You hit a theme often enough, and you can communicate the structure of that world even without the help of that deep-voiced movie trailer guy.

Time for Mechanics

The broad theme of *Time Spiral*, mechanically and creatively, of course, is time – not the predictable beat of a Swiss clock or the Greek-letter elegance of an Einsteinian thought experiment, but time gone awry. Time exposed to magic. Time as the gasping canary in the noxious coal mine of post-apocalypse Dominaria.

The *Time Spiral* creative text writers were:

Matt "Pope of Flavortown" Cavotta
Elye "Eternity Snare" Alexander
Garrett "Crookclaw" Baumgartner
Doug "Gnarr" Beyer
John "Timebug" Carter
Christa "Mage of Zhalfir" Knott-Dufresne
Adam "Hypergenesis" Lee
Jay "Blazing Blade" Moldenhauer-Salazar
Rei "Swarmyard" Nakazawa
Alex "Flickering" Smith
Jake "Pitkeeper" Theis



I started writing *Time Spiral* flavor text by looking at the time-based mechanics. With only the broad strokes of the set in place, it can be hard to get a sense of how the set will play. However, with mechanics like suspend and split second, it was clear how the set would have the feel of distorted time just from playing the cards. Suspend streeeeetches a spell out over hours or days, like a martial arts move in extreme slow motion. Split second jump-cuts a spell from announcement to resolution, like that creepy ghost-girl in *The Ring*.

(She's over there crawling slowly out of the TV with her creepy wet hair, how will Naomi Watts ever escape – OH HOLY CRAP SHE JUMPED FORWARD LIKE TEN FEET NO FAIR AAAAHH! Hey, ask anybody who had their active [Jaya Ballard, Task Mage](#) killed by [Sudden Death](#)—that *is* how it feels.) So I wanted this feeling of warped time, both slow and lightning-quick, to come across in the flavor text.

The Slow Blade Penetrates the Shield

Unfortunately, for suspend cards at least, there wasn't much room. The reminder text for suspend *isenormous*. Check out [Durkwood Baloth](#):



How is a flavor guy to get a word in edgewise?

Luckily a few suspend rares forgo (forwent?) that Ph.D. dissertation of reminder text, as they often do in expert-level sets. This allows R&D to make cards with additional rules text on top of the new keyword to throw a twist on the mechanic, but it can also leave room for flavor. Yay for me – there was a chance to wax italicized on this very flavorful time mechanic after all.

I scanned Namebase for suspend, and this card came up.

[Sea Kraken]
6UUU

CARDNAME is unblockable.

Suspend 9–2U

Whenever an opponent plays a spell, if CARDNAME is suspended, remove a time counter from it.

6/6

Art Description:

Color: Blue

Location: stormy beach

Action: Show a large "Time Delay" kraken that is moving from one green/blue time dimension into the current dimension. The "current dimension" should be in local color.

Focus: the kraken Mood: Emotionless and destructive Notes: see jpeg for kraken ref.

Wow. It was the old-school [Tidal Kraken](#), famous 6/6 unblockable ass-kicker of his day, in his new suspend form – a great candidate to describe some slow-warpin' time. Two flavor concepts were in play here. One was the clear homage to the older [Tidal Kraken](#) card, which meant the flavor text could try to explain the circumstances of how such a kraken came to be transported to modern-day Dominaria. The other was the suspend mechanic, a special way to cast spells, so the flavor text could comment on how enterprising Dominarian mages used time rifts to summon creatures from across gulfs of time.

This thing was 6/6. How big do these time rifts get? Dragging a zombie or a hawk across time is one thing, but this was a *kraken*. And no one could say how long a turn of a game of **Magic** takes in flavor terms, but 9 turns is a long time. Summoning this guy would be like giving birth. To a whale.

The rift remained open, sluicing ancient seawater for days, closing only after the last great tentacle squirmed its way through.

Go Speed Flavor, Go

Split second's reminder text, on the other hand, is mercifully short, so you'll see a lot more pieces of flavor text describing it. Lucky thing, because I think it's the more ambitiously abstract mechanic of the two, in flavor terms. It's not just a spell cast while leaning on the gas pedal; it's a missing block of time between a cause and its effect. It's thinking you had everything planned out, then you blink and you realize everything's gone to hell somehow without even a second gone by.



I loved thinking about this in flavor terms. When you cast a split second spell, it's as if you had the power to stop time, like Piper Halliwell, Professor Xavier, or Hiro Nakamura. You can rearrange things however you like, resume time again, and chuckle at the confused looks of people affected. You could deal 2 to target creature, file your nails, fix your hair, unsummon something, whistle, draw a comedic mustache on your opponent's face, then hit play on the big DVD player in the sky and laugh and laugh.

Hence I cranked out this baby:

An eyeblink later, all that remained of the tree-beast was the breeze of its momentum. ([Wipe Away](#))

Nothing amazing, but I liked the idea of everything but the treefolk still moving forward as it had the moment before. The wind of its momentum still blows by. A few leaves roll lazily in the air like in cartoons. Everything's just like it was, except no tree-man.

That's the only piece of mine that got selected for a split second card, but I had other pieces accepted on the subject of time-gone-haywire. And for such a subject, who better to quote than a certain mage from Zhalfir?

"Keep your pace steady through the haze, lest you step on the heels of your future self or trip up the self a moment behind you." –Teferi ([Paradox Haze](#))

Even in his current state ([Time Spiral novel](#), people, keep up), Teferi is the authority on weird time phenomena.

To a treefolk's sense of time, ages pass as hours. They stood as witnesses to the apocalypse, the years of which they saw as one cacophonous, ultra-destructive moment. ([Scarwood Treefolk](#))

The coming of Karona, the apocalypse and the Phyrexian invasion, the war between Urza and Mishra – I had fun imagining all of these as rings in a treefolk's trunk, barely blips on their millennial lifespan.

Some timelines fray, branch and intermingle forever. Others end abruptly. ([Return to Dust](#))

"Time as fabric" and "lives as threads" are not new ideas. However I liked the idea of taking a planeswalker's-eye view of all of history, with all its lifelines woven together, and seeing certain threads cut short, maybe even burnt at the ends. What's up with that thread? Why does it stop there? Oh, that's that legendary sword that was destroyed near the flagstones of Trokair, when a mage decided it was time for it to return to dust. Turned the tide of a whole battle. Note how many other threads come to an end nearby...

Timeshift into Overdrive

Perhaps the most fun part of writing for *Time Spiral* was its nostalgic twists on old-school **Magic** cards and characters. It's a new card, in a new strategic environment, but with flavor that connects to your Magical roots.



(I'm sure that in another dozen or so years, we'll be reminiscing about old-school *Time Spiral* cards. Wow, this new mechanic is a twist on those old "suspend" cards! You'll feel old and yet somehow young again. Nostalgia is funny.)

These retro-allusion cards aren't actually "timeshifted cards" – that word describes the special reprints bearing the purple expansion symbol – but the flavor of many of them is actually of being shifted in time. Mishra is a perfect example:

A sojourn through time gave dark inspiration to one gifted young mind. ([Mishra, Artificer Prodigy](#))

Note that the art depicts Mishra as a young man. This is Mishra just before his prime, flung through time to modern-day Dominaria to raise a little artifact-involving hell. He hasn't heard the siren call of Phyrexia yet, but he's definitely open to suggestion. The flavor text almost implies that his moral downfall is due to this time-trip, but being time-rifted doesn't actually change history. It's more like we're seeing a temporal mirage of Mishra, doing things here in the post-apocalypse world for a few weeks, then disappearing – and meanwhile the original Mishra goes on about his business just like history says. However, maybe there's a chance, just a glimmer of possibility, that past-Mishra tuned in

to some wavelength of future-Mishra and saw the ruination he saw, and the bleakness inspired a decision or two...

The hymn's melody has persisted since Tourach's time, but the words change to invoke the phobias of each listener. ([Haunting Hymn](#))

I loved me some [Hymn to Tourach](#) brokenness back in the day, not just because of said brokenness, but because of the flavor. There's this villain Tourach, follower of the Ebon Praetor and leader of the Order of the Ebon Hand, and how do his minions worship him? By singing a hymn that drives mages mad. Now that is a powerful hymn. I loved the idea of that haunting tune still sticking in people's heads – mental peanut butter, if you will – for thousands of years, but changing over the generations to fit the fears of the time.

Speaking of changing over the generations, oh how the mighty have fallen:

Its secrets once wrought the greatest artifice known to magekind. Now crabs loot the rubble to decorate their shells. ([Academy Ruins](#))

Yes, these are the ruins of the [Tolarian Academy](#). Yes, it was destroyed. It can't generate unreasonable amounts of blue mana anymore, so I played up the contrast in the flavor text, to make blue mages even sadder than they might have been. Hey, repeated apocalypses are hard on a plane! You can't expect everything to stay the same. Ancient artifacts, for example, are now dudes:

Studying the journals of the necromage Nevinyrral leaves disciples gripped with the urge to exercise his draconian judgment. ([Magus of the Disk](#))

No, that is not the disk itself around his neck. It's a symbol of Nevinyrral's mighty Disk, worn by scholars of that ruthless necromancer. It was a fun challenge connecting a white creature to a very black villain – this scholarly white 2/4 is tempted, ever so slightly, to exact some judgment (a thoroughly white concept) with his subject's tyrannical fervor (blackety black black).

Devil's in the Details



Of course, there are plenty of cards in *Time Spiral* that have nothing to do with the bucking bronco of time. It's just like any other set – it's full of characters living out their lives, facing daily struggles. It has fantastic locations where magical things happen. There was plenty of detail to flesh out – how new spells do what they do, where slivers get their power, how you use mystical artifacts, what it's like to stand in Dominaria's toxic wasteland. When you scan a piece of flavor text for a *Time Spiral* card, you should feel a pinprick of gust-grit from the Salt Plains – plenty of work to do.

"Crispy and Scarback! Load another volcano-ball!" –Stumphobbler Thuj, Orcish captain ([Orcish Cannonade](#))

Um, and of course, you should hear the belchings of Stumphobbler Thuj. Matt Cavotta actually came up with his name – I love the title Stumphobbler.

Few dare to trespass where scavengers nest in hollowed-out ribcages and chittering crawlers peer from empty eyesockets. ([Swarmyard](#))

This flavor text has a lot of Easter egg references in it. You get no points for noticing [Chittering Rats](#)—that's the easy one. Funny part is, I didn't intend at first for it to reference critters of all the appropriate creature types—I started out just by describing the art!

Ground into the footprints of the ravaging herd were clumps of salt from Benalia, moss from Llanowar, dust from Hurloon, and ash from as far as Urborg. ([Tromp the Domains](#))

I only had a couple lines so I couldn't list a blue location, but it would have been weird even if I had room. It would've been hard to explain why there was "water from the [Yavimaya Coast](#)" or whatever ground into the herd's footprints. I think it would have just become mud with the Hurloon dust...

The Flavor Writer's Buzzy Brain

I love writing flavor text. It takes over my brain in a wonderful, Futurama brain slug kind of way. I'm kind of a social robot for six to eight weeks, but what a ride it is from the inside.

I'd be an awful Buddhist. I have "the buzzy brain" that my master would scold me for. To mix metaphors horribly, I have a bunch of bees stuck in peanut butter up there. I'm not serene or clear-minded. I'm a flavor text writer!

Doug's *Time Spiral* Name and Flavor Text Credits

- [Academy Ruins](#): *Its secrets once wrought the greatest artifice known to magekind. Now crabs loot the rubble to decorate their shells.*
- [Aspect of Mongoose](#): *A mix of speed and camouflage helps the mongoose – and its emulators – evade danger.*
- [Call to the Netherworld](#): *It is a ritual normally performed only by horrors and pitspawn, as lesser mages have only one sanity to crack in the casting.*
- [Cancel](#): *Fendros gasped as he watched the spell drip from the ends of his fingers. He moved his foot, afraid to disturb the spot where it lay slain.*
- [Castle Raptors](#) (name)
[D'Avenant Healer](#): *"One arrow keenly fired might prevent more battlefield wounds than I could treat."*
- [Deep-Sea Kraken](#): *The rift remained open, sluicing ancient seawater for days, closing only after the last great tentacle squirmed its way through.*
- [Detainment Spell](#): *Bind the mind rather than the wrist, and you stop the intent to harm before it starts.*
- [Dreadship Reef](#) (name)
- [Flagstones of Trokair](#): *Dust-spiked winds erode the stones, but the ground they stand on still holds power.*
- [Haunting Hymn](#): *The hymn's melody has persisted since Tourach's time, but the words change to invoke the phobias of each listener.*
- [Havenwood Wurm](#) (name)
- [Havenwood Wurm](#): *Time rifts bring tunneling beasts of old into the hard, dry earth of the present. Most die there, trapped, though the mightiest burst through the surface.*
- [Herd Gnarr](#) (name)
- [Icatian Crier](#): *A thousand years removed from her home, her news of war lost its context, but not its relevance.*
- [Magus of the Disk](#): *Studying the journals of the necromage Nevinyrral leaves disciples gripped with the urge to exercise his draconian judgment.*
- [Mishra, Artificer Prodigy](#): *A sojourn through time gave dark inspiration to one gifted young mind.*
- [Opal Guardian](#): *It was a moment in time, cast in stone – a moment whose time had come again.*
- [Orcish Cannonade](#): *"Crispy and Scarback! Load another volcano-ball!" --Stumphobbler Thuj, Orcish captain*
- [Paradox Haze](#) (name)
- [Paradox Haze](#): *"Keep your pace steady through the haze, lest you step on the heels of your future self or trip up the self a moment behind you." –Teferi*
- [Pit Keeper](#): *"The undead are not awakened, they are evicted when there is no room left in the pit for more bodies."*
- [Prismatic Lens](#): *It bends not light but mana, aligning chaotic leylines into the sharp angles necessary for the mystic's purposes.*
- [Psionic Sliver](#): *Some slivers have evolved the ability to concentrate their neural activity into one pulse, causing a disruptive but usually suicidal blast of psionic energy.*

- [Return to Dust](#): *Some timelines fray, branch and intermingle forever. Others end abruptly.*
- [Scarwood Treefolk](#): *To a treefolk's sense of time, ages pass as hours. They stood as witnesses to the apocalypse, the years of which they saw as one cacophonous, ultra-destructive moment.*
- [Spinneret Sliver](#) (name)
- [Sprite Noble](#) (name)
- [Sprout](#): *Centuries of temporal strife stripped Dominaria of its natural defenses. But nature fights back with armies constructed of little more than grime and sunlight.*
- [Squall Line](#): *The constant shifting of Dominaria's shredded timeline plays havoc with its atmosphere, combining savage electrical storms from ages past.*
- [Stonebrow, Krosan Hero](#): *Moments after a fickle rift dropped Stonebrow in the waste of his beloved Krosa, he took up his axe in rageblind vengeance.*
- [Tromp the Domains](#): *Ground into the footprints of the ravaging herd were clumps of salt from Benalia, moss from Llanowar, dust from Hurloon and ash from as far as Urborg.*
- [Swarmyard](#): *Few dare to trespass where scavengers nest in hollowed-out ribcages and chittering crawlers peer from empty eyesockets.*
- [Walk the Aeons](#): *Teferi drew a deep breath as he prepared the first of a series of nudges.*
- [Wipe Away](#): *An eyeblink later, all that remained of the tree-beast was the breeze of its momentum.*