

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



The Themes of *Time Spiral*

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Latest Developments
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"So, I hear they're releasing a set full of all the old mechanics just thrown together. I wonder how that's going to play. Probably like crap, like a bunch of somebody's old cards all shuffled together."
—people, upon hearing of *Time Spiral*'s theme

Oh, people, how little credit you give us sometimes. We knew from the very earliest days of design that, while we wanted the initial vibe of the set, even down to the level of when players were thumbing through cards from booster packs, to be "temporal chaos world" where anything can and did happen, there needed to be some underlying structure to guide gameplay. Themes were woven in. Keywords were pigeon-holed in specific colors. Helper cards were created to empower certain strategies. And when the salty, apocalyptic dust settled, it all worked out.



Of course, development had to do a lot of culling of themes from design that weren't working out, then add in new themes, take some of those out, add new ones again, and then add Slivers on top of everything else just to make sure everyone would be happy. I'll go over the major through-lines and what it took to get there...

...quickly, though. I've spent too many of this week's writing chops on the [Great Designer Search](#) article, and I just don't have much typing left in me at this point.

White

When we were first divvying up the keywords, white was given flanking. Not the worst mechanic it could have been given, but far from the most interesting. Yes, flanking creatures sort of work well together (in that the pressure they put on the defender is multiplied), and a deck full of flankers will play a certain way that feels a little different from a creature deck that doesn't feature that ability, but how many interesting cards can you make that either have or deal with flanking?

Cavalry Master? Check. Now what?

During a brief redesign phase, a "flickering" theme was put into white, building off of **Momentary Blink**. Cards like **Blinking Drifter** and others like it were added, along with a bunch of creatures that triggered whenever something came into play. The latter cards still live in green – **Herd Gnarr** and **Primal Forcemage** – but most of the flickering stuff in white didn't survive. Oh, how I enjoyed Father of Runes...

- Father of Runes
- * Creature – Human Cleric
- 1/1
- ☞: Remove target creature you control from the game, then return it to play.

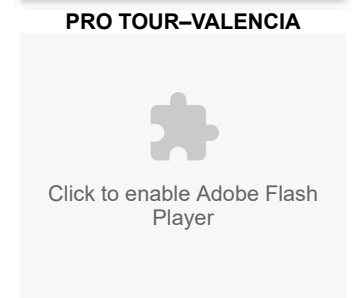
Yeah, that guy was fun with **Avalanche Riders**.

With flickering gone, white was at a loss for an angle that could be pursued in drafts and casual constructed. With a few tweaks to cards like **Ivory Giant**, **Cloudchaser Kestrel**, and **Gaze of Justice**, we cobbled together a small "white matters" theme that rewards decks that are almost all white. The flavor was okay – white creatures are very xenophobic in post-apocalyptic Dominaria – but overall I think white is the weakest color when it comes to interesting subthemes to pursue in the set.

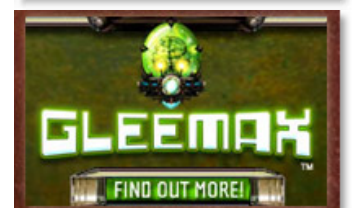


Flanking remains its most numerous keyword, with the "white matters" theme providing a bit of a diversion.

Blue

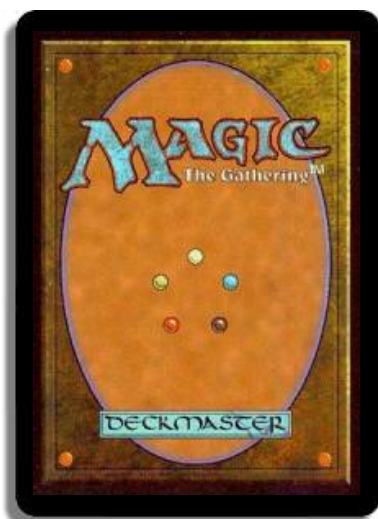
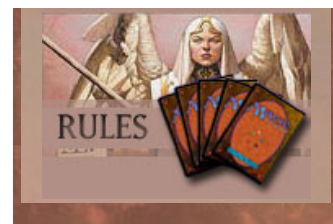


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The set began with buyback as blue's main theme, which makes sense as the mechanic on its surface feels very "blue." Blue remained the biggest buyback color in the set all through the process, ending with three buyback spells to each other color's one, so the theme wasn't a total loss. But when it came time to play, no one was having success or fun with attempts at buyback decks.

The problem with the mechanic – at least as far as basing some kind of theme on it – is that multiple cards with the keyword don't really play well together. They all want all of your mana at any given time. Having many different ones in your hand may give you more options, but they don't combine in any kind of cool way. Additionally, if someone did manage to make a decent buyback deck in Limited, it usually bored opponents to death by repeating the same action turn after turn after turn.



When buyback was moved to the back burner, an attempt was made to make blue the color that cared about "time" the most. *Clockspinning* is a good example of the kind of effect that came out of that movement (ironic that it is a buyback card), and at various points in the set's lifecycle there were five or six cards in blue that messed with time counters, suspended cards, parts of turns, and other time-related bits. Sadly, most of those cards were incredibly complicated and parasitic (like *Jhoira's Timebug*), and felt a little too forced. We kept a few gems, like the 'Spinning and *Paradox Haze*, but had to look elsewhere for blue's primary identity.

The answer actually came from the design of the next set, *Planar Chaos*. That team had been working on a morph theme for their blue cards, augmented by a cycle of morph rares in every color. There were no morphs at all in the *Time Spiral* main set at that point; the mechanic was relegated to a few cameos in the Timeshifted set. *Time Spiral's* lead developer, Brian Schneider, recognized a good idea when he saw it and copied *Planar Chaos's* morph execution, changing all the individual cards to have a more nostalgic feel.

While it was the right thing to do for *Time Spiral*, it really set *Planar Chaos* back. However, I'm happy to report that *Planar Chaos* recovered nicely and is an awesome set despite giving up one of its themes.

Black

The design team designated shadow as the keyword for black in *Time Spiral*, and that decision had some bad ramifications. The notorious "non-interactivity" problem that shadow can have is exacerbated by concentrating all the shadow cards in the same color, making games involving that color very lopsided one way or the other.

We really wanted to bring shadow back – mostly because we had vowed we wouldn't – and it took several big adjustments to the set before we settled on the "lightly in three colors" strategy that you are all familiar with now.

Without a keyword to latch on to, black headed into weird waters during development – a "swamp matters" theme began emerging. Suddenly the set was full of Shades, Nightmares (flying horses, not *Faceless Butchers*), swampwalkers, *Evil Presence*, and other things that wanted the world to be as black as possible. We came to our senses on this one eventually, axing most of it in favor of madness cards, but some of the swampiness lingers on: most notably *Tendrils of Corruption*, *Viscid Lemures*, and *Cyclopean Giant*.

Madness was in the set on cards of various colors early on, but we eventually decided to pull all of it into black as a means to give the color an identity. Madness always felt like a very black ability, but the black madness cards in *Torment* were the worst of the lot. So we tried to do black madness some justice while at the same time avoiding the power-level pit-traps that allowed *Basking Rootwalla* and *Circular Logic* to see print the first time around.

Once the madness cards were in place, we set to work on the enablers. The spellshaper cycle had been in the set all along, giving us some good starting points. From there we added cards like *Lightning Axe*, *Trespasser il-Vec*, *Mindlash Sliver*, *Conflagrate*, and *Looter il-Kor* in an attempt to give madness decks a few different angles and color combinations to try out.

I think madness in *Torment* was poorly executed, creating an oppressive play environment. We tried capturing all the fun the mechanic should have had the first time by being slightly less aggressive with both the madness cards themselves and the enablers. I think it worked out well.



Red

Red brought the storm mechanic to the party initially. The fact that it is still there now might lead you to believe we were happy with it all along, but that's not true.

Initially storm wasn't working out all that well, so red stole echo from green, leaving green in the lurch. More on that later. We did our best to make echo work as a theme, even going so far as making a card that reduced all echo costs to zero (*Thick-Skinned Goblin*, whose secondary ability, by the way, allows him to survive the dreaded touch of the *Subterranean Shambler...* and *Crater Hellion*, which was slated to be a Timeshifted card for quite

some time.) But echo, much like buyback, doesn't lend itself to a deck just by throwing a bunch of cards with the keyword together. In fact, that strategy is actively bad. So red still needed something cool to "do."

During the redesign phase, Mark Rosewater and Devin Low came up with the idea of "One Big Turn" for red, wherein it would try to exploit the natural synergies of suspend and storm for some awesome fireworks. With minimal additional enabling (*Coal Stoker* leaps to mind), the One Big Turn theme worked out quite well for red, both in Limited, where *Empty the Warrens* can do some amazing things, and in Constructed, where *Dragonstorm* threatens to rain Hellkites down on the room.

Red is interesting in that it is the most greedy of all the colors, having two decent-sized themes and exclusivity on two keywords – echo and storm – in the normal set. Even in the "timeshifted" set, only *Hunting Moa* gives a taste of either mechanic to any other color.

Green

During design, green dabbled in several mechanics, including echo, provoke, and rampage, none of which had much star-power.

Echo was stolen by red at some point, and provoke slowly drifted out of the set as we tried to show *some* restraint in the number of keywords we were willing to jam into a single set.

That left rampage and, believe it or not, we actually tried basing a decent-sized theme in green on that outmoded mechanic. I don't really remember how we were going to try to make it work, but I'm sure it involved a bunch of "Lure" effects. (Maybe provoke lasted a little longer than I thought.) Check this monster out:

Craw Titan
 3 5/5
 Creature – Giant
 5/5
 Rampage 1
 2: CARDNAME gains provoke until end of turn.

That was my attempt at something approximating a cool rare guy with rampage. I had serious doubts that we could get anything going based on a mechanic that was so unimportant that we tossed it aside in favor of the "Cave Tiger" ability, so I went home and started flipping through *Magic Encyclopedias* and old decks.

I came across my brother's old "Salad Shooter" deck, a hodge-podge of *Fallen Empires* Fungus with a nifty little *Thorn Thallid/Fungal Bloom/Arboria* combo built in. "This," I said, pocketing the deck to take to work with me later, "is a nostalgic theme I could get behind."

Others in the department had mused previously about when the right time to bring Thallids back would be, and to me, *Time Spiral* was about as perfect an opportunity as we'd ever get. So in went all the various Fungi, Saproling generators like *Sprout* and *Verdant Embrace*, and the Thallids' fearless leader, *Thelon of Havenwood*.

Since the set has come out, some designers and developers have lamented that Thallids weren't the best choice for green's theme in retrospect, because the bookkeeping they force players to do starts to become overwhelming when combined with the bookkeeping our new hallmark mechanic – suspend – brings with it as well. Upkeep phases may have never been so fidgety.

But I'll stand by my choice of the little green guys, as I think players will tolerate a slew of coins, beads, and dice in their games if the outcome is fun enough... and with Thallids, I think it is.

All Colors

Our three "new" keywords – suspend, split second, and flash – are well represented across all five colors. There was a time when split second was absent from some colors in an attempt to give the mechanic some definition, but in the end we decided to spread all the new stuff around and let colors be defined by what they do with older mechanics.





Flashback is another mechanic that is spread out in the set. The initial design vision was that flashback – the mechanic that most showed off the concept of "past" in **Magic**—was going to be a big part of the set, and other mechanics that felt like "present" and "future" (in game terms at least) would be similarly applied to the other sets in the block. This all worked out very well as flashback, like echo and buyback, doesn't need to be present in large doses to be interesting.

That leaves Slivers, the biggest "mechanic" in the set. As development dragged on, we had most of our pieces in place, but there was some concern that there was still something "big" missing from the set. I went away for a few days, and when I returned, Brian and the rest of the team had populated the set with everyone's favorite tribe, the hive-minded Slivers. At first I was a little wary of the idea, feeling that *Legions* wasn't all that long ago, but when I started making cards – applying lots of old, nostalgic ideas and card references to the Sliver framework – I started enjoying the little fellas.

And I think they ended up in a cool spot: they're everywhere, but not. You probably get one in most packs you open, yet you never feel forced to draft or play with them. And if you do finally decide to try them out, there are so many crazy combinations of effects available that no two Sliver

decks should feel quite the same.

There you have it... a look at the order behind the chaos – the themes that hold the wacky world of *Time Spiral* together.

Last Week's Poll

Do you think suspend will be a force in Standard?		
One or two cards, maybe	4217	44.8%
There will be some interesting rogue decks	3410	36.3%
The mechanic will be a player	1181	12.6%
Not at all	598	6.4%
Total	9406	100.0%

Don't forget... [Champs is this weekend](#) for most of you! Head out and play the new Standard, and see if your prediction was correct! (And get cool promo cards while you're at it.)

This Week's Poll

Which *Time Spiral* theme has been the most enjoyable for you?

- Flanking (white)
- "White Matters" (white)
- Morph (blue)
- Madness (black)
- "One Big Turn" (red)
- Echo (red)
- Thallids (green)
- Slivers (all five colors)

*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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