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# Preserving the Coolness of Legends

Aaron Forsythe  
Latest Developments  
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Wizards of the Coast is out of the office for the Thanksgiving holiday, and will return with new articles beginning Monday, November 27. In case you missed it, what follows is the article that ran in this slot last week. Have a great weekend, for our American audience happy Thanksgiving vacation, and we'll see all of you Monday!

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One of the important mechanical themes to the *Kamigawa* block was legendary permanents, especially creatures - what are more commonly known as "legends." One of the catchphrases we threw around for that block's premier set - *Champions of Kamigawa* - was that it had "More Legends than *Legends*" (the old set). Not only was every rare creature - in the entire block - legendary, but there were a handful of uncommon legends (such as the *Brothers Yamazaki*), creatures that turned into legends (flip cards like *Nezumi Graverobber*), legendary artifacts (*Umezawa's Jitte*), legendary enchantments (the *Honden* cycle), legendary lands (*Minamo, School at Water's Edge*), and cards that worked specifically with legends (*Time of Need*). We certainly ran with the theme.



One problem with a theme like this is that it is based entirely around a *drawback*. Yes, the "legendary" supertype brings with it all sorts of flavor goodness, but it remains a drawback. No more than one of any legendary permanent can be in play at once.

What does such a drawback do to the value of a card? There was a time long ago when legendary cards were actually *restricted by the DCI* for flavor reasons, which meant owning more than one copy was hardly necessary for any player. Today, even with that rule stricken from the record, many players aren't compelled to own anywhere close to four copies of a particular legend. Many casual players will still only include one copy of a legend in their decks (as they constantly imagine the worst-case scenario of *drawing two copies!*), and competitive players will often determine that the correct number of a legend to run is less than four for the very reason that casual players run only one. Even late in *Kamigawa's* Standard life cycle, I saw decklists with one or two copies of *Isamaru, Hound of Konda*, the decks' controllers gripped by The Fear of potential dead draws. (I do believe four copies was correct most of the time, as the 2/2 tended to die a lot.) Powerhouse cards like *Meloku the Clouded Mirror* and *Kodama of the North Tree* rarely - if ever - appeared four times in a decklist; that almost certainly wouldn't be the case if they *weren't* legendary.

Of course, the cards probably wouldn't have been as powerful were they not legends, but we do make incredibly powerful non-legendary creatures like *Loxodon Hierarch* and *Simic Sky Swallower*. A quick glance at the ever-changing secondary market value of some of the aforementioned cards shows that the *Kodama* never approached the value of the *Hierarch* or the *SSS*, and *Meloku* crested above the *Ravnica* creatures only at the height of his Standard popularity before quickly crashing. *Isamaru* has climbed steadily ever since high-level Extended decklists started using four copies, but it took a long, long time for the card to achieve its full value potential.

As designers and developers, we employ a number of tricks to help make legends into potential four-of cards, the most notable of which are the "death triggers" on the *Kamigawa* Dragons like *Kokusho the Evening Star*. When you play the second copy, you drain each other player for ten life, and suddenly having four of a legend in your deck sounds like a good idea. We also made a few legends with sacrifice abilities, such as *Kagemaro, First to Suffer*. Since you can sac one and the play another, having multiples should be too much of a burden. But there's only so much of that we can do-most legends simply have to stand on their own.

So if legends have drawbacks and thusly aren't usually played as much as their non-legendary counterparts, why do players like them so much? Because they're special. This is a fantasy game we play, after all, and the heroes and villains are just as important as the monsters and the setting. Ideally you aren't getting a legend in every single pack, but instead only once in a while. Perhaps you'll have seen the legend's name in the titles and flavor text of other cards in the set, and can't wait to see what the guy is all about. *Legends* should have the most over-the-top abilities of all the creatures in the game.

I feel that the *Kamigawa* block, with its endless sea of flowery soubriquets, did some real damage to the "specialness" of legends. Suddenly they were commonplace. No individual creature could realistically stand out in that all-star lineup of over-the-top one-upmanship. It simply became, "Oh. *He Who Hungers*. Another legend. Great."

In the two blocks since - *Ravnica* and now *Time Spiral* - we've tried to rebuild the equity that legends used to have. Each one has a place or tells a story, from *Tolsimir*, the dashing wolf-riding Selesnyan warrior, to *Ib Halfheart*, moronic Goblin "strategist." Even if the cards aren't the most powerful or valuable ones in the set, they all feel "magical" somehow. *Niv-Mizzet. The Ghost Council. Teferi*. Awesome cards all.

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I was heavily involved in making the legends in both blocks, and have been pleased by the player responses to the cards as a whole. I think we're making legends the right way these days.

On to *Time Spiral* specifically. For legendary creature in the main set, we wanted to bring to life as many of the old, important characters as we could get away with (the process actually began in *Coldsnap* with [Lovisa Coldeyes](#), [Zur the Enchanter](#), [Arcum Dagsson](#), [King Darien](#), and [Marit Lage](#)). It always bugged me that **Magic** would feature certain characters in flavor text, others in novels, and yet others on cards as legends. I distinctly remember opening *Ice Age* packs...I'd keep reading about how awesome Lim-Dul and Freyalise were, yet my legend cards were Marton Stromgald and the freakin' **Skeleton Ship!** What in the heck?



Other TCGs based on intellectual properties don't keep their most popular characters out of the game. I've played with Darth Vader cards, Snake Eyes cards, Gandalf cards. **Magic** seemed weird to me in that regard, as awesome characters like Jaya Ballard, Yawgmoth, and Mishra were constantly and repeatedly kept out of my hands. Now that I work here, I tried to rectify that a little bit in *Time Spiral* (and *Coldsnap*).

As I and the other *Time Spiral* designers started the long discussion with the Creative team about how many and which characters we could make cards out of, certain rules were laid down. Essentially we didn't want to make cards for characters that were dead and whose deaths were key plot points in **Magic** continuity, like Ashnod. Similarly, we were not to do characters that were planeswalkers, as they couldn't be properly represented on cards with their god-like powers. We made huge lists, Creative crossed some stuff out, we picked our favorites and got to work.

There were many arguments, but the biggest revolved around our ability or inability to make a card for Jaya Ballard, the popular pyromancer that had ascended to the ranks of the planeswalkers. Most of the design team argued that she was potentially the most popular of all characters that had never been on a card (with the possible exception of Urza), and that she was sure to be a hit. Creative held firm that she was a planeswalker, and therefore off limits. Plus, I believe there was a bit of trepidation on their end that we wouldn't be able to deliver a card good enough to meet the lofty expectations of Jaya's legion of fans. Eventually we tried the time-travel angle, a solution the Creative team found incredibly cheesy but hard to counter. This was *Time Spiral*, after all, and the whole set was based around stuff from the past popping into the present decimated Dominaria. Why couldn't a pre-planeswalker Jaya be among the time refugees? Eventually we won, and Jaya made in into the set alongside other characters that were supposed to be dead ([Saffi Eriksdotter](#), [Endrek Sahr](#)), trapped (Mangara), or otherwise ineligible.

The risk turned out to be worth it, as Jaya has been a big hit, coming in as the number one most popular card in the set according to our market research data. I'm glad you fans weren't let down!

As most of this week's columns have done, I'll now quickly run through all the legendary creatures in *Time Spiral* from a design and development perspective.

### Akroma, Angel of Wrath

She came into the set on the back of huge fan support, winning the legendary [You Decide! bracket](#). I'll be curious to see how popular she is two years from now once everyone is sick of facing her down in Standard play. Our market research notes show that Akroma is the most loved "timeshifted" reprint, but is also among the most hated; some segment of the audience is put off by her absurd power level.

### Dralnu, Lich Lord

Chris Millar has been having fun with this guy [over in his column](#). Dralnu originally had a static ability that just gave all the instants and sorceries in your graveyard flashback, but that was absurd in many decks. To balance him, we added the tap activation, then upped his toughness from one to three so that cards like [Feebleness](#) and [Deathspore Thallid](#) didn't wipe him out.

### Endrek Sahr, Master Breeder

I talked about this guy extensively in my column during [Wizard Week](#). Click to read!

### Eron the Relentless

This guy has a cool name, what can I say? Actually, *Homelands* had some of the most flavorful legends of any set (check out the awesome promotional video [here](#)), but the big dogs [Baron Sengir](#) and [Autumn Willow](#) are both on the [Reserve List](#). [Ihsan's Shade](#) is probably the next most famous of that crew, but we didn't think he'd stand out as anything remarkable in this day and age. That left us with Eron, whose out-of-the-pie regeneration ability made him a great candidate for time-shifting.

### Ib Halfheart, Goblin Tactician


Ib was a favorite character of my brother; he'd often call himself Ib Halfheart when playing red decks back home at the kitchen table. Ib used to cost  $2\text{ }2\text{ }2$ , but his super-long name forced us to change it to  $3\text{ }2$ . We couldn't change the name now, could we?

### Ith, High Arcanist



Again, see my [Wizard column](#). Also see my "Not Their Time" column, which explains that **Maze of Ith** was once in the timeshifted set!

### Jasmine Boreal

It seems that The Ferrett has [decided to challenge](#) the decision to include the lovely Jasmine as the token "vanilla legend" as opposed to the awesome **Jedit Ojanen**. Why? At least Jasmine is playable in Limited! Jedit is a  5/5-about as bad as a 5/5 can get. I have no idea why that knucklehead had a novel and multiple comic books based on him. Plus, I was hoping that Jasmine would get the creature type Ninja - check out that shuriken!

For some real laughs about vanilla legends, check out [this](#), one of my favorite **Magic** Arcana of all time. I used to work alongside *Legends* designer Steve Conard in Online Media when I was still editing [magicthegathering.com](#). Steve readily admitted that most of the *Legends* legends were ported in from his **Dungeons & Dragons** campaigns, and that the cards rarely did justice to the characters. I think you'll agree when you see what a vanilla six-mana 5/5 (**The Lady of the Mountain**) was capable of in the *other* game.



### Jaya Ballard, Task Mage

I came up with the design for this card, and I'm tickled pink that it actually *worked*, meaning it lived up to all the anticipation borne from years of waiting for her card. There's no way this would have worked out had we ever done Spellshapers capable of different effects before. Matt Cavotta, a member of the creative team that was so against doing this card in the first place, took it upon himself to do the illustration, and he hit it out of the park. This card is a [home run](#) all around.

### Jolrael, Empress of Beasts

With Spellshapers coming back in the main set, we felt the need to bring back one of *Prophecy's* legendary Spellshapers as well. **Mageta the Lion** was off limits as we didn't want another Wrath effect in the environment, so we went with the next most high-profile member of the cycle. The fact that she is a long-standing **Magic** character who was kickin' it with Teferi and Mangara back in the *Mirage* days, and showed up in the original *Legends Spirit Link* art somehow even though the *Mirage* story and world hadn't been created yet, and is immortalized in a statue here at Wizards headquarters, is just gravy.

### Kaervek the Merciless

Not much to say about this guy. We tried out a bunch of abilities for him, but none of them seemed to fit well. I think part of the problem was the lack of source material on him, which made it difficult to do anything top-down. This card is somewhat splashy, but probably among the weaker efforts of our legends.

### Lim-Dul the Necromancer

Another Wizard, another link to [that article](#).

### Mangara of Corondor

[Ditto](#).

### Merieke Ri Berit

There are a certain number of cards in the timeshifted set that really old players have some sort of fond memory for but that have drifted completely out of the public eye. Newer players will see such cards and be puzzled, wondering if the card is in fact even real, let alone what set it came from. Merieke is such a card. At the time of her release, she was considered pretty nifty but quickly faded away. Now she gets another chance.

### Mishra, Artificer Prodigy

Mishra was one of the last cards designed by veteran Mike Elliott before he left the company. An awesome card indeed. Note that he is "young Mishra," as older Mishra would have been far too powerful to be on a card.

### Mistform Ultimus

Everyone loves this guy, and he ruins a lot of trivia questions. A winner in my book.



## Nicol Bolas

It was disheartening to see how badly Nicol Bolas was trounced in the [You Decide! bracket](#). The only thing I could surmise was that most of our players have no experience with cards this old, and therefore can't put him in any kind of context. So he's both a great nostalgic throwback for older players and a window to the past for newer players.

## Norin the Wary

Mark Rosewater went into detail on this card [on Monday](#). I think he's pretty cool - a great "bad card." I'll call out Randy Buehler as the developer that decided that Mark's design version "wasn't bad enough." Randy was the mastermind behind the current version. The low number of bad cards in the set in general should help make cutesy guys like this more palatable.

## Saffi Eriksdotter

Another of Mark's babies. See [his column](#) for the lowdown. I love the card - she's an efficient beater, a combo piece, and an answer to mass removal.

## Scion of the Ur-Dragon

This crazy guy was 5/5 for a long time, but with those stats there was very little incentive to ever turn him into anything else. A neat instance of a card getting more interesting because it got worse. Other than that, I don't think this card changed a lick from the design file.

## Sol'kanar the Swamp King

Another old-school *Legends* legend that gets no respect these days. This guy used to be king of the crop back in the mid-90s and was worth double-digit dollars. How times have changed. His creature type becoming Demon threw me for a loop initially, but in many ways he's even more cool now. Perhaps he and [Rakdos the Defiler](#) need to hook up.

## Stonebrow, Krosan Hero

We decided early on that we didn't want to do any characters that appeared solely in novels - we wanted all the source material to be from cards. So we avoided characters like Jodah from the *Ice Age* books. But when it came time to finalize a choice for a red-green legend to finish our cycle, there were no good candidates. So Stonebrow stepped out of the *Odyssey* novel and into the set.

His ability is a cool one, and it works especially well with cards like [Gruul War Plow](#) and [Overrun](#). For a while, *Time Spiral* contained a slew of "keyword lords" that granted bonuses to other creatures that shared their keyword. That theme didn't work out in general, but bits of it survived on Stonebrow and [Sprite Noble](#).

## Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir

[A Wizard!](#) Some players feel that Teferi would have made a great green card, and they're right. But we needed an awesome blue creature to be the master of time, and the design fit so well that it stuck in that color.

## Thelon of Havenwood

There was some consternation on the development team over Thelon's first ability; there were claims that he didn't do what Thallid players would want out of a lord. Thallids were supposed to use their counters to make Saprolings, not hoard them all for size bonuses. I felt that the ability was great as it shifted the way Thallid decks played as long as he was in play. Plus, with [Verdant Embrace](#), [Verdeloth](#), and [Thelonite Hermit](#) in the set, there were ample ways to up your Saproling count. Why not try something different?

## Tivadar of Thorn

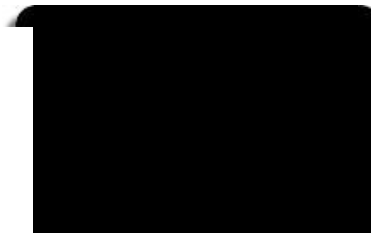
I talked about Tivadar in [last week's article](#). There's been some fuss regarding his non-Knightness, and many complainers had pointed to [Coldsnap's Haakon](#), [Stromgald Scourge](#) as an example of a Knight that isn't on a horse. To them I say this: He's only a Knight because his mechanic ties him so tightly to that type. If we could go back and paint a Zombie Horse under him, we would. He's a bad example.

## Verdeloth the Ancient

I'm not exactly sure which moons aligned to get this guy reprinted, but somebody along the way must have really liked him.

## Vhati il-Dal

I do know what stars aligned for this guy - [Spiritmonger](#) was cut from the timeshifted set. Besides [Pernicious Deed](#), which was never considered,



Vhati is the only other black and green rare card we could have reprinted. I remember having fun with the card and reading that casual players like Abe Sargent enjoyed him as well, but Randy Buehler was unconvinced that the card had any coolness at all. So he created the [play-in game](#) in the You Decide! bracket, pitting Vhati against his nemesis **Commander Greven il-Vec**. "Fine," I said, "Vhati gets to be reprinted if he beats Greven in a fight." And beat him he did, plus he followed it up with respectable numbers against the almighty **Sliver Queen**! So in many ways you fans voted Vhati in.



## Last Week's Poll:

| How old were you when you first started playing Magic? |              |               |
|--|--------------|---------------|
| <10  | 1683         | 11.7%         |
| 10   | 912          | 6.3%          |
| 11   | 1128         | 7.8%          |
| 12   | 1692         | 11.7%         |
| 13   | 1650         | 11.4%         |
| 14   | 1444         | 10.0%         |
| 15   | 1126         | 7.8%          |
| 16   | 1010         | 7.0%          |
| 17   | 668          | 4.6%          |
| 18   | 581          | 4.0%          |
| 19   | 418          | 2.9%          |
| 20   | 356          | 2.5%          |
| 21   | 242          | 1.7%          |
| 22   | 250          | 1.7%          |
| 23   | 177          | 1.2%          |
| 24   | 162          | 1.1%          |
| 25   | 144          | 1.0%          |
| 26-30  | 377          | 2.6%          |
| 31-35  | 214          | 1.5%          |
| 36-40  | 90           | 0.6%          |
| >40  | 112          | 0.8%          |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>14436</b> | <b>100.0%</b> |

Very interesting. I was 22 when I started playing, which I know to be abnormal, but it would have been nigh impossible for me to start at any age much younger than that - the game wouldn't have existed yet!

## This Week's Poll:

**Which of the following movie franchises is your favorite?**

- Star Wars
- The Lord of the Rings
- Harry Potter
- Star Trek
- James Bond
- X-Men

*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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