

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Chaos Theory

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
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Welcome to the first *Planar Chaos* Preview Week! The set is mere weeks away from release, so it's time to start spilling the goods and give all of you a glimpse of what *Planar Chaos* has to offer. As normal, I will show off a preview card in my column today (and there's one in [today's feature](#) as well), but I'm going to set it up first. I think you'll find the preview more interesting if you have some understanding of what the set is about (not that the card won't stand up on its own).

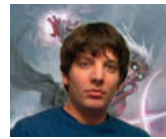
Creating Chaos

I'll begin today the way I always start my previews by introducing you to the *Planar Chaos* design team.

Bill Rose (lead designer) – Of all of the people in R&D, I've worked the longest with Bill. He started two weeks before I did back in October of 1995. Back then, there was a small number of R&D members dedicated to **Magic**, and we worked on every set together. Bill has led numerous design teams including *Mirage*, *Visions*, *Invasion*, and *Torment*. (For the trivia buffs out there, Bill has led more design teams than everyone but myself and Mike Elliott.) He was also the Head **Magic** Designer before me. In short, Bill has clocked a lot of hours working on **Magic**, and it's always a treat working with him on design. As you will see in a bit, *Planar Chaos* got off the ground only because Bill got what I was talking about when I was explaining this set's focus to R&D. Oh yeah, he's also the Vice President of R&D and my boss's boss.



Paul Sottosanti – While I spend all my time talking about **Magic**, Wizards R&D is also responsible for designing a lot of other games. Paul is one of our designers that jumps around our many different games. He's done such an excellent job that I planned to do what I always do when I see good design talent. I try to convince them to work on **Magic**. (Okay, it's not the hardest of tasks.) Paul was eager for the opportunity. And he did so well that I gave him a chance to be the lead designer for a small set codenamed "Butter" (hint: it comes after "Peanut"), coming out in early 2008.



Matt Place – I've also known Matt for quite a while. He and I had become friends on the Pro Tour, and when he expressed interest in applying for an intern position, I both encouraged him and spoke highly of him to the other R&D folk. Matt has turned out to be an excellent developer. So what's he doing on a design team? Two things. One, we like to give the developers a chance to see how design works to give them a better understanding of what happens to the set before it gets to them. And two, many developers have proven to have some potential as designers. My favorite part of having Matt on the design team is that he asks the most insightful questions. On numerous occasions he's made me rethink parts of the design merely by his desire to better understand it. Matt also has a very open mind, which was a blessing on what turned out to be one of the weirdest designs ever.



Mark Rosewater – Many people ask me why we felt we needed to hire a design intern. Then they ask me why I'm on so many design teams. I'd give you a nice thorough answer, but I just don't have the time. Another important reason I was on this design team was that coming into it, I had a vision that everyone (save Bill) didn't really understand. I'll get to that in a moment.



That was our team. It was a solid, strong design team, which was good because we were about to start a roller coaster of a design.

Present And Accounted For

When last we left *Time Spiral* block design, we came up with the past-present-future block plan. *Time Spiral* was the past. Everyone seemed to understand what we were up to with it. You see, the past is concrete and known. Everyone understands what you mean when you say you're going to mine the past. The present and the future? Not so much.

The future is a story for another set of columns (oh, about mid-spring). Today is about the present. (That last line sounded like something out a self-help book.) In my column today, I'm going to explain how we came up with the idea behind *Planar Chaos* and then talk about a few of the ways we chose to execute our vision. Note that I won't be covering everything, as I have a few more weeks of columns left to write.

When I first pitched the idea of past-present-future, I got the following response:

Me: Don't you see? Three sets. Three states of time: past, present, future. It's perfect.

Them: It doesn't make any sense.

Me: What do you mean? We'll harness nostalgia.

Them: Sure, for the past. Nostalgia works great. For the past! You can't have nostalgia for the future.

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Me: Actually...

Them: Whatever. I don't know how you design the future, but at least I can imagine something. But the present? How can you make the present? Let me rephrase the question. How can you *not* make the present? Every expansion is set in the present. How do you make a set that feels like the present when that's how everything feels?

Me: It'll be a challenge.

Them: Why are you smiling?

Me: I like challenges.

The present was in fact the big sticking point in the block plan. No one thought we could make a set that made any sense as the present set. Luckily, I'm very stubborn. So I turned to one of my favorite genres for inspiration: science fiction. And not just any part but my favorite subgenre of science fiction – time travel. How is the present represented in time travel? Once I asked the right question, I got my answer.

In time travel, the present changes as people muck around in the past and future. Remember *Back to the Future, Part II*? The interesting present setting was the alternate reality one (you know, where Biff turns the town into a low-grade Vegas). In time travel, the way to make the present dynamic is to make use of alternate reality. That was our answer. Only one problem: No one got it.



You see, I was all excited. I'm jumping up and down screaming, "alternate reality, alternate reality!" I knew we'd found our answer. Everyone else in R&D just looked at me weird. One of my ongoing issues is that I'm an intuitive thinker. I reach solutions instinctually. That is, ideas come to me and I just know they're correct. The problem is that the rest of R&D are speculative thinkers. (I'm using Myers-Briggs terminology for anyone who cares and/or knows what I'm talking about – it's a personality test based on Jungian psychological theory.) This means that the rest of R&D likes their solutions carefully spelled out. Often when you get an intuitive breakthrough you don't have the ability to easily explain it. So there I was, convinced that we'd found our answer, but everyone else treated me like I was speaking some crazy alien language.

And Now For Something Completely Different

Before I continue, let me explain what was going through my mind. (Having months to think about it, I've figured out how to explain what was swimming in my head.) The goal was to make a block that played into the players' familiarity with the past thirteen years of **Magic**. Time was a cool motif for the block, because it allowed us to approach the goal from different vantage points. *Time Spiral*, for instance, was about a fond nostalgic look back. Remember what things we've done? *Future Sight* will be a look forward. See where the things you know and love are going? The revelation that I had (from good old time travel) was the idea of taking a look at where we've been through the lens of what might have been.

The reason alternative reality works as a storytelling device is because writers get to approach a known situation and then deviate. People know about key events of history. Alternate reality takes some piece of that and changes it. What if Abraham Lincoln hadn't been assassinated? What if the Nazis had won World War II? What if a pivotal moment in world history happened a little differently? The alternate reality works because it plays off existing knowledge. *Planar Chaos* could make use of that technique. Players know how **Magic** is done. What if things had been done differently?

Planar Chaos is a set built on what ifs.

Planar Chaos is a set built on what ifs. It examines choices that were made and then tries different choices. Now, I know a lot of players think this is just us randomly messing with the status quo. Don't get me wrong, we are messing with the status quo; it just isn't random. In each case, we went back and examined why decisions were made and then looked at other logical options. To understand what I mean, let me digress in this digression to talk about the color pie. (Don't worry, I'll get back to my main story.)

Hmm... Pie

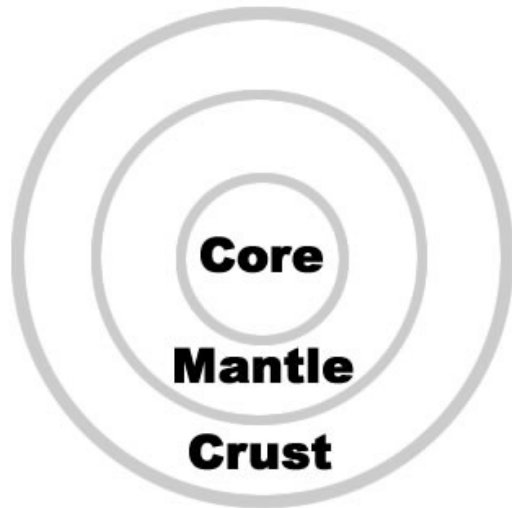
Here's how I think the world sees the color pie:



Here's how I see the color pie:



To make this easier to talk about, let me add a few labels (and take one away).



Yes, to me the color pie has three layers, what I call the core, the mantle and the crust. Let's examine them one at a time.

The Core – This is what most people think of when we talk about the color pie. This is the here and now. These are the choices currently being used to design and develop cards. Black discard, blue counterspelling, red direct damage, that kind of thing. The core is what is currently being executed in the game. Note that what is in the core slowly shifts over time.

The Mantle – These are the abilities that are adjacent to the core – not things that we do on a regular basis, but things we do when we need to stretch a theme. These are color decisions that feel a little weird, but when you

take a step back you can see why they fit.

The Crust – This is the outer layer. The crust holds ideas that fit the colors philosophically but represent choices that haven't been made. This layer is the most disorienting because it is the least tied to what has been done. This layer cares nothing about execution. The crust is about what could (or maybe one day might) be. It is about what is possible given the philosophies of the colors.

The reason I bring this up is that I know I will hear (and to some extent have already heard) "You're messing with the color pie." We are, but not quite in the way people think. We are being very faithful to the color pie. (*Time Spiral*, in contrast, in honoring what had been done, was much more dismissive of the color pie.) We are messing *within* the color pie. Every choice we make has a firm grounding in the philosophical underpinnings of the colors.

Planar Chaos is not us disrespecting the color pie. It is us examining it to a level never before seen in the game. No set has ever been more about the color pie than *Planar Chaos*. What is going to be disorienting (and I hope in a fun way) is the exploration of the mantle and the crust. Yes, many of these cards are going to seem odd at first because they are not following traditional core color pie. But if you take a step back (and don't worry, once the set is out, I will be exploring why we chose to put certain mechanics in certain colors), you'll see a lot more method to our madness. We're not exploring what shouldn't be done. We're exploring what could have been done but wasn't.

Reality Twist

Now that I've explained how I see the color pie, let me get back to my discovery of alternate reality as a theme. I've always been fascinated by the mantle and the crust. During the years that we were working extensively on the color pie, I came to meetings with some "out there" ideas about how we could restructure the color pie. My logic was based on the fact that the colors philosophically could support more mechanics than had been traditionally assigned to them. The point is that I knew going into *Planar Chaos* that we would be dipping our toe (or our whole body depending how you see the set) in very interesting waters, both for the lovers and the haters of the color pie.

For the lovers, we would be studying the color pie in greater depth than we ever had. We would be creating all sorts of very interesting discussions about what the colors really mean. For the color pie haters, we'd be doing something they've always asked for – put mechanics in colors that haven't had them. Since the haters generally don't care for the nuances of the color pie, we felt they wouldn't see the larger pattern we were weaving. (So sssh.)



The final reason I loved the alternative reality theme was it let us continue to make a block that valued knowledge of what had been. Like *Time Spiral*, *Planar Chaos* has a much greater depth if you know what's being referenced. The sense of nostalgia radiates through the set, just from a different vantage point.

Getting It

So there I was, quite pumped on the idea of an alternate reality present. And I was kind of alone. The rest of the *Time Spiral* team (Brian Tinsman, Aaron Forysthe and Devin Low) kind of got what I was getting at, but they didn't fully get it. Randy, the Director of **Magic** and the one who had to okay the block, didn't get it, either. Randy's worry was this: He knew I got it. But I wasn't lead designing the set (I was saving myself for *Future Sight* as it was by far the most complicated design of the three), and he felt the set couldn't be designed if the lead designer didn't get it.

So I went to Bill, who I had put on the team as the team lead. I explained what I was thinking. He listened and he was getting a good chunk of what I was saying, but I could see it hadn't totally clicked. Then I said three words: "white **Memory Lapse**."

You see, years earlier I had been fighting to move **Memory Lapse** out of blue. I felt it was overshadowed in a color that could just counter things. **Memory Lapse** wasn't really stopping the spell as much as delaying it. And delaying things, that's white's domain. If viewed as a means to temporarily hold off an attack (in spell form), it made a lot of sense in white. While I didn't win the argument, Bill had heard it and he agreed with me that philosophically, white should be able to have **Memory Lapse**.

All of a sudden, Bill got it. "We do white **Memory Lapse**," he said. "A set of white **Memory Lapses**."

"Exactly!" I shouted back.

Bill went to Randy and said he got it. With both me and Bill on board, Randy gave his thumbs up even though he didn't get what we were up to (the sign of a great manager, by the way). Before you get all excited about the white **Memory Lapse**, let me fill you in on an important point – it didn't make it through development. Yes, design made it and turned it over, but it turns out that giving a proactive tempo card to a weenie color was bad news, so development unfortunately had to kill it. But we did many other cool things and some of those weren't killed. (One card in particular is coming up.)



Before we get to the preview card, let's start with another *Planar Chaos* card. (I'm well aware that the people who just skipped ahead think they're about to see the preview card.) It's the surprise preview we did on January 1. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, you, lucky reader, get two previews today. Here's was our first preview card.

Click [here](#).



Yes, we printed a black *Wrath of God*. I wanted to show this to you for two reasons. One, I'm about to explain how the "timeshifted" cards work in this set, and two, I have a funny story about *Damnation*. Let's start with number one. There are 45 timeshifted cards in *Planar Chaos*, nine in each color. Unlike *Time Spiral*, these timeshifted cards appear in normal rarities – that is, a common timeshifted card is of a rarity very close to a common nontimeshifted card.

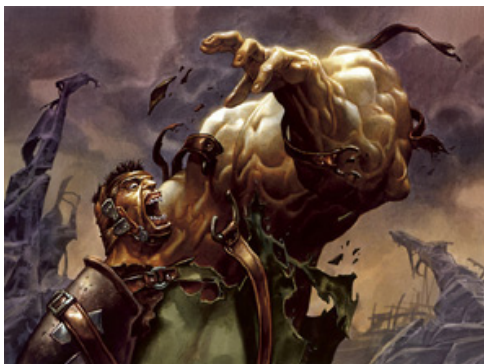
We're also giving them out in packs a little differently than we did in *Time Spiral*. In *Time Spiral*, each pack had one rare, three uncommons, ten commons and a "purple rarity" timeshifted card. In *Planar Chaos*, you get the following in each booster: one rare, two uncommons, eight commons, one uncommon or rare timeshifted card, and three common timeshifted cards. Yes, this means that you get four timeshifted cards per pack. And yes, you can still get two rares (and unlike *Time Spiral* you can actually get two gold-symboled rare cards). The uncommon timeshifted cards, by the way, show up in a 3:1 ratio with the rare timeshifted cards. For those bad at math, this means that in four packs, you should (on average) get three uncommon and one rare timeshifted cards.

As you can see with *Damnation*, the timeshifted cards have a different frame. It's a little hard to tell online, but the cards are designed to have an alternate reality feel. The card frames look like modern card frames but with a few twists. The easiest thing to notice (but, oddly, the hardest to notice in a vacuum – no really, try showing a lone *Planar Chaos* timeshifted card to your friend and see if he can point it out) is the white writing in the title and card type line. The texture and text box are also different but you'll probably have to wait until you get one in your hand to really appreciate it.

Why four instead of one? Because there is a fundamental difference between *Time Spiral* timeshifted cards and *Planar Chaos* timeshifted cards. The *Time Spiral* ones are merely repeats. Many players already own them. The *Planar Chaos* timeshifted cards are new cards that have never been printed in their current form. As such, we felt it was important not to make them too hard to collect.

This, of course, leads to the final question: How are the timeshifted cards different from the nontimeshifted cards? The answer is a simple one. All the cards in the set have the alternate reality feel. The timeshifted cards are all existing cards from the past with only one change (with one caveat I'll explain in a second): they're color-shifted. These cards are known, iconic cards printed in a different color. As I explained above, in each case, the new color represents a choice we could have made with this card. The changes are not willy-nilly and are not uniform (we didn't just rotate every color one to the left in the color wheel, for instance). For each card, we examined where key cards from the past could have deviated. This also means that none of the nontimeshifted cards are just color-shifted.

The one mechanical change we did allow ourselves on the timeshifted cards was that if the card mentioned a color or basic land type, we allowed ourselves to correct it. If a creature has protection from an enemy, we kept the protection from an enemy. If a card could affect its own basic land type, we kept the card affecting its own basic land type. Also (and I guess this is partly mechanical), we allowed cards to change creature type for flavor purposes.



Before I move on to today's preview card (no really, I am going to get there), I want to point out one last cool feature of the timeshifted cards. For each of the timeshifted cards, we went back and changed the card as if it were changed in its original incarnation. What this means is that if a card was from *The Dark* (hint, hint), the timeshifted card was conceived in the new color as if it were from that set. This is why, for example, you'll see a lot of throwback flavor text in the timeshifted cards.

Plugging the Damnation

Time for number two, an interesting story about the design and development of Damnation. While "white *Memory Lapse*" might have been the first timeshifted card I mentioned to Bill, "black *Wrath of God*" was the second. From very early on, I knew Damnation was going to be our poster child. It was simple, it had visceral impact, and it actually made some sense. Black is the creature killing color after all. It has *Mutilate* and *Plague Wind* and *Pox* and a number of "kill lots of creatures" type spells.



There was one small problem. The card had to make it through development. I mean, it is a black *Wrath of God* after all. Because it was a timeshifted card, the development didn't have any tools to fix it. The card had to do what it did and cost 2 black mana. If it didn't, it wasn't timeshifted.

My dilemma was this: I knew the card was the poster child of the set, and I knew that whether it was too good or not was completely out of my hands. While I occasionally dabble in development, I don't mess with power-level discussions. I'm good at what I do, and gauging card power or understanding whether something disrupts an environment are not among my skills. Pretty much I just listen to the people that focus on this type of stuff.

But I really wanted it in. So, every once in a while I would go to Devin Low, the lead developer of *Planar Chaos* and stress how valuable the card would be as a promotional card for the set. "All we have to do is show the card," I said time and time again, "and we'll sell the set. We won't have to waste the ad guys' time. Just have a blank white sheet with Damnation in the middle. By itself, it will sell the set."

At first things looked bad. At the time Zvi Mowhsowitz was a development intern, and he deemed it unprintable. Every time I'd talk with Bill, he'd ask, "How's black *Wrath of God* doing?" My response was always a shake of my head: "Not good enough."

But then something happened. Head Developer Brian Schneider (then, Aaron fills this position now) said he felt it would be okay, and then little by little all the developers came around. I remember the day R&D was looking at the proofs (this is a point where the cards are locked in because the guys who lay out the card sheets are busy actually getting the set ready to print) when I saw Damnation in its final form for the first time. I started doing a little jig: "It's in! It's in!"

I probably wasn't the happiest person who saw Damnation previewed on January 1, but I'm sure I was in the top one percent.

Um, Don't You Have A Preview Card?

Oh yeah, that. I guess I should show it off before the article ends. Why so much talk today about timeshifted cards? Because my preview for you is another timeshifted card. A very cool one. Without further ado, here's today's preview card.

Click [here](#).



So, were you expecting that? In a future column, I'll walk through how the different colors were shifted mechanically. For today let me just say that as far as *Planar Chaos* is concerned, haste is a green ability. (And trample's red, but green gets to dabble in it.)

While I have a lot more to say, I've run out of space to say it in this column. Join me next week when I'll explore another important aspect of *Planar Chaos* design and show you a preview card from that portion of the set.

Until then, may you know the joy of being pleasantly disoriented.

Mark Rosewater

*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



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