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The Timeshifts They Are a Changing

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Making Magic
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Welcome to Timeshifted Week, Part Deux! Yes, we had a Timeshifted Week before, but that was about *Time Spiral* "timeshifted" cards. You know, the blasts from the past with the purple expansion symbol. This week is all about *Planar Chaos* timeshifted cards. You know, the "almost but not quite" blasts from the past with the black, silver and gold expansion symbols. By the way, and you didn't hear it from me, word on the street is that there might be a third Timeshifted Week shortly after our *Future Sight* previews. Of course that week will be about the crazy... I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's focus on the present. The alternate present, that is.

By the way, for those of you looking for part II of "The Great Mix-Up" (Part I was [last week](#)), you're going to need to wait until next week. I did say that in last week's column, but I know I'll get mail if I don't repeat it here. Ah, who am I kidding? I'll still get mail. If a few of you wouldn't mind sending me some "I Know Part II Isn't Until Next Week Because You Clearly Spelled That Out Last Week" mail to offset the "How Could You Write Part I and not do Part II" mail that would be nice. (A parenthetical aside to my paragraphical aside - yeah, I just made up that word, whee! - most of my email is quite nice and pleasant, so please don't let things like the threads lead you to believe that I just get hundreds of letters berating me. Okay, I do get hundreds of letters berating me, but they are a tiny minority of the thousands of letters that don't start with "Dear Ruiner of All Things Good In **Magic**....")

Back to the theme of the week, the timeshifted cards from *Planar Chaos*. This week you'll hear them discussed from many different angles. For my take on the topic I thought I'd explore how we chose to do color-shifted cards as our timeshifted cards. A sort of a *Behind The Timeshifted Cards*, if you will. As you will see, the story has a few turns you might not have expected.

Timeshift After Timeshift

Our story begins in the middle of *Time Spiral* design. You see, as the Head Designer I came up with this crazy concept called "block design" (For the lengthy explanation, check out my column "[State of Design 2005](#)"), wherein we design all the sets of a block in conjunction with one another. We actually plan out ahead of time where the block is going. This meant that during *Time Spiral* I had to spend some time thinking about *Planar Chaos* and *Future Sight* (then codenamed "Crackle" and "Pop" to *Time Spiral's* "Snap").

Yeah, yeah, yeah, past, present, future, yada, yada, yada. You've heard this story before. (Another aside: I seem to have this compulsion to tell the same stories over and over again - oh wait, you read my column, so you already know that.) Yes, but you haven't heard the one important point. When I planned out past, present and future, the timeshifted cards were not a given. Yes, they were in *Time Spiral*, but I wasn't sure whether or not they were just a *Time Spiral* thing. Cards from the past in a set about the past seemed like a perfect fit. So we designed *Time Spiral* with them.

But there wasn't an obvious direction for the present, and the ideas I had about the future were a little out there, so I decided that I would recommend the design teams include them if and only if they felt they had a good idea for them. This meant that when *Planar Chaos* design started I told Bill (Rose, *Planar Chaos*' lead designer) that while having timeshifted cards was something I wanted the team to explore, it wasn't a mandatory requirement of the design. Thus, the early *Planar Chaos* design files didn't have timeshifted cards.

So what am I saying? There were no color-shifted cards in the early *Planar Chaos* design files? That's not what I said. I said there were no timeshifted cards. There were plenty of color-shifted cards in the earliest files. In fact, the very first *Planar Chaos* design playtest had nothing but color-shifted cards. (Say what? Patience, I'm getting there.) You see, in the beginning all of *Planar Chaos* was color-shifted.

Does Anyone Really Know What Timeshift It Is?

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As I explained in my first preview article ("[Chaos Theory](#)"), I managed to convince Bill what the set was about through the use of color-shifted cards. This meant that we began the design by plumbing what color-shifted cards had to offer us. Our first few meetings were spent figuring out just what spells made sense (you know in a "what if" / "what we might have done" kind of way) in other colors. This led us to making our first set of commons, all of which were color-shifted.

Understand that it was never the intent of the team to have the entire set be color-shifted. We just wanted to start by seeing what kind of effect we could make solely with color-shifted cards. A number of R&D folk were worried that color-shifted cards wouldn't feel right. The first playtest was to show how we could use this simple resource to create a very different feel. And it worked. Randy (Buehler), who was one of the biggest skeptics about color-shifting, admitted after the first playtest that he was impressed how much the cards felt different yet still made sense. More importantly, he liked how the cards "felt right." He then said, "The whole set's not going to just be like this though, right?"

Once we created enough color-shifted cards, we began to flesh out the rest of the set. The "what if" theme made a lot of different executions possible, so the design team (Bill, Paul Sottosanti, Matt Place and myself) spent a lot of time exploring different design veins. Check out Paul's feature article about *Planar Chaos* design, "[The Color Purple](#)," in which he talks about a lot of the crazier things the team tried. And trust me, in this design, "crazier" goes a lot further than most sets.

What this meant, though, was that the early part of the design was spent examining some big picture "what if" possibilities and the concept of what the timeshifted cards might be was put on the back burner.



Timeshift Keeps Slipping Into The Future

While this was going on, I was busy putting together my design team for *Future Sight*. For reasons I can't explain but which all of you can have fun guessing in the thread, I decided to choose myself for the design lead. The team ended up being me, Devin Low, Mark Gottlieb, Matt Cavotta, Zvi Mowshowitz, and Ryan Miller (yes, quite an interesting team, bios to come during my first *Future Sight* preview). The more I thought about *Future Sight*, the more I realized that it really wanted timeshifted cards. What does this have to do with *Planar Chaos*? The Rule of Three, my friends.

What is the Rule of Three? Why, there are many Rules of Three. Comedy has one; writing has one; mathematics has one; aviation has one; statistics has one; social science has one; even the Wiccans and C++ programming have one (that's two distinct ones - although if anyone knows of a single Rule of Three for both the Wiccans *and* C++ programming, let me know). **Magic** design, it turns out, also has a Rule of Three. And a Rule of Five. Not so oddly enough, the two are connected.

I'll begin with the Rule of Five. The Rule of Five says, if four cards in a cycle do something, the fifth must as well. If the white, blue, black and red cards all cost 1C (C is R&D speak for a colored mana) then the green one must cost 1G. If you want to cost it at 2G then one of the other four cards has to change away from 1C. Why is this a rule? Because having a cycle *almost* do something feels wrong. (Yes, we have broken the Rule of Five on occasion, but the vast majority of the time it's been a mistake.) Part of good design is not doing things that just feel wrong to the consumer. Why? Because there is no difference in the audience's mind between a perceived mistake and an actual one. In communication, perception is truth.



As a lover of both asides and the aesthetics of game design, I feel obliged to take a paragraph on this point. A game cannot outthink its audience. There is no absolute truth in gaming; reality is what the audience perceives it to be. If no one "gets it," then it essentially isn't there. For example, I can make a card that works within the rules, but if no one will instinctively play it correctly then I can't make it. It doesn't matter that it works in some absolute sense. If it doesn't work for the players then it doesn't work. You, as a game designer, are not bigger than your audience. You serve their needs, not force them to serve yours. The former creates great game experiences. The latter creates a thing that shouldn't really be labeled a "game" as much as a "frustration experience." And that is why the Rule of Five (and Three) is so important.

Okay, Rule of Five. What about the Rule of Three? The Rule of Three is the same thing but applied to expansions. If two expansions do something then the third one should as well. For instance, if there is a cycle in two of the expansions, there will be expectations that a third version will appear in the final one (so yes, that means *Future Sight* does have a Magus cycle). Just one expansion can have something unique to itself, but including it in the second begets the third. There is one corollary to The Rule of Three: Something may be introduced in the second expansion and be carried on to the third. This works because the audience accepts that new elements will be introduced as the set evolves and they're okay with the new element finishing out the block.

The Rule of Three comes into play in our story because I was coming to the conclusion that *Future Sight* wanted timeshifted cards. If *Time Spiral* had them and *Future Sight* had them then... you got it, Rule of Three applies. *Planar Chaos* was going to need timeshifted cards.

Timeshift in a Bottle

So I came back to the *Planar Chaos* design team and said that I felt we needed to find a reason and execution for timeshifted cards. Everyone agreed. (They weren't crazy enough to challenge the Rule of Three.) We all put on our thinking caps and thought real hard. And that's when... we came up with nothing. Bupkis. We didn't have any ideas. What new alternate reality thing could we do? We were stumped.

Salvation came from a designer, just not one on the *Planar Chaos* team. Who saved the day? **Magic** Rules Manager and my arch-nemesis, Mark Gottlieb. (As I stated above, Mark was soon to be on the *Future Sight* design team. Keep your friends close and your arch-nemeses closer.) While we were busy looking at all the pretty trees, Mark managed to check out the forest. You know it's a good idea when you're first response is, "Of course, how didn't I/we come up with that?"

What was Mark's brilliant idea? Make the color-shifted cards the timeshifted cards. This seems dirt-obvious now, but it's amazing how sometimes when you're wrapped up in something it's hard to see the obvious. The color-shifted cards were the perfect fit for two reasons. One, they created such an easily delineated line. It was crystal clear which cards were timeshifted and which ones weren't. Second, it allowed the timeshifted cards to have some of the nostalgia we were trying to imbue the set with. Because the color-shifted cards come from known sources, they have a similar feel to the *Time Spiral* timeshifted cards.



Once Mark made this observation things fell quickly into line. (For a glimpse into some of the color-shifted ideas that didn't make it all the way to print, check out Aaron Forsythe's "[Latest Developments](#)" column from last Friday.) In fact, the vast majority of the timeshifted cards were designed before we even knew what the timeshifted cards were going to be.

For the Longest Timeshift

While my story is pretty much over, there was one last piece that I thought was a cool story. I didn't think anyone else was going to tell it, so I decided to tell it here. This story is about how we got the *Planar Chaos* timeshifted frames. Originally, the plan was to just put the timeshifted cards in old frames just like the *Time Spiral* ones. The problem with this idea was two-fold.

First, *Planar Chaos* was about the alternate present. Putting the cards in old frames made it feel more about the "alternate past" (and yes the alternate present versus alternate past was a debate that raged through most of the set's design and development). Second, repeating the same frames didn't give *Planar Chaos* something that felt new. And while we wanted the timeshifted cards in each set to feel connected, we wanted each one to have their own identity. This led us to the decision to have "alternate reality" present frames. This, of course, begged the question, what in the world does such a thing look like?

Somehow I became the point person for design and developments' concerns. This meant that I was one of the people who looked at every version of the cards (and there were many) and gave notes. Here, in a very condensed dialogue format, is what happened in those several months. (Please note that I was giving advice more than telling the graphics people what to do - for the sake of comedy I don't represent that fact all that well below.)



Jeremy (Cranford - Magic's Art Director at the time and the person who was turning R&D-speak into graphics-speak): What do you mean by "alternate reality" present?

Me: Like the *Eighth Edition* frames but slightly tweaked.

Jeremy: Okay, we've changed the saturation.

Me: Too subtle.

Jeremy: All right, we've tweaked the texturing.

Me: Too subtle.

Jeremy: How about this? We fiddled with the text boxes.

Me: Still too subtle but less so.

Jeremy: More saturation change.

Me: Keep going.

Jeremy: More texture in the text boxes.

Me: On the right track.

Jeremy: Completely changed the text boxes.

Me: Getting warmer.

Jeremy: New card frames for each color.

Me: We're moving in the right direction.

Jeremy: Darker name, card type, and power/toughness boxes.

Me: Good.

Jeremy: We inverted the text from black to white in the same boxes.

Me: I like it.

Jeremy: Even more saturation of color.

Me: I love it. Print it!

It took many tweaks, but in the end the graphics guys (and gals) hit the ball out of the park. What we ended up with was a card design "what if" that says, "What if the shift to Eighth Edition frames had stayed somewhat closer to the pre-Eighth Edition frames?" This is where the darker saturations and inverted text came from. I, for one, am quite happy with how the card frames turned out.

Timeshift Is on My Side

Two Timeshift Weeks down and one to go. I hope this one was as interesting as the last. Join me next week when I tackle part II of "The Great Mix-Up" and explain some more of why certain colors got certain mechanics.

Until then, may you discover your own forests.

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*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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