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# The Future Is Now, Part I

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Making Magic  
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

18 Months Ago

**Me:** Randy, you wanted to see me?

**Randy:** Mark, come in. Close the door and have a seat. I wanted to have a quick chat about the block design for "Snap," "Crackle," and "Pop."

**Me:** Okay. What do we need to talk about?

**Randy:** So you want to go with a past, present, future theme.

**Me:** The overall theme is temporal chaos. It's going to have a time motif and play around with time as a resource. Then there'll be a nostalgia theme that runs through the block.

**Randy:** Which is going to be represented over the three sets with past, present and future.

**Me:** Um, right.

**Randy:** I know you explained your vision to **Magic** R&D. They seem rather pumped about the idea of a set dedicated to the past. They love the concept of the timesthifted sheet. Everyone seems thumbs up about "Snap." "Crackle," on the other hand, is not quite as well understood and as such hasn't created the excitement that "Snap" has. I don't think people quite get the present theme.

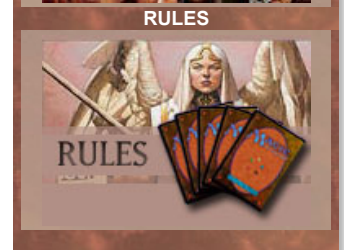
**Me:** It's an alternate reality present theme. Kind of like *Back to the Future, Part II* when Marty and "Doc" Brown return to Hill Valley from the future to discover that it's fundamentally changed because Biff...

**Randy:** Mark, I don't need to hear about any more time travel movies. Bill's the lead on the set and he says he gets what you're talking about, so I'm okay with proceeding with "Crackle." Which leaves "Pop" – the future set.

**Me:** End with a bang!

**Randy:** No one has any idea what you mean when you say you're doing a set based on the future. Even Bill told me he hasn't a clue. In all of **Magic** R&D, you seem to be the only person who "gets it." But you are the Head Designer and you are the lead designer of the set and you do have an impressive track record, so I guess I'll saying go for it. I hope you know what you're doing.

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## Present Day

Welcome to the first week of *Future Sight* previews! I'm quite excited to show you what is in my opinion one of the most innovative sets I've ever been involved in the design of, with only *Unglued* and *Unhinged* giving it real competition. (Hmm, maybe that's why R&D keeps joking that I've snuck through a third *Un*-set.) In addition, this set has been one of the more challenging sets I've ever designed and so I'm excited to walk you all through how *Future Sight* came to be and, more importantly, what we came up with. (If the title didn't give you sufficient warning, be aware that this is a multi-part column.) And yes, before the column is through I'll have a preview card for you. One from the FUTURE! (dramatic music)



In writing, they teach you that you want to start your story with your protagonist in a position where he has a clear-cut goal but is facing what seem to be insurmountable odds. And as luck would have it, *Future Sight* has such a beginning. There I was all set to lead the design of a set that no one understood, well except me. And here's the problem. I'm an intuitive, holistic thinker. (For more on how I think, check out last week's column of creativity, [Connect the Dots](#) if you haven't had a chance yet.) My ideas start very internal. My disparate concepts start slowly globbing together until I get a sense of what I want. But even when I "figure it out" it can take a while before I'm able to process why I instinctively want to do certain things. This makes it relatively hard to explain to others what I'm up to.

To help you get a sense of where I was, I want to run through all the different aspects of what I, at the time, felt was necessary. The reason I'm able to verbalize this now is that I've had eighteen months to talk through many of my ideas and thoughts on the set. What follows is an explanation of all the factors that were floating around in my head.

## Telling Time

Here's what was going on. I was very happy with how the *Ravnica* block turned out. I felt that I had done a good job of showing what block design could do. But now I was faced with the dreaded phenomenon known as the "sophomore slump." Following up a success is very daunting because you want to keep the elements that worked the first time around without feeling that you're just repeating yourself. To me, this meant that I needed to approach the block design from a different vantage point.

To do this, I wanted to make two fundamental shifts from *Ravnica* block. First, *Ravnica* block used what I call the "cake method"; that is, it made one big thing and then divided it into three parts. The pull of each set was that it had a portion of "the cake" that no other set had. You want red-green cards? Get *Guildpact*. Blue-green? Get *Dissension*. I wanted to approach *Time Spiral* block with a different type of block design. This time around I was trying what I call a "motif method"; that is, a block where the three sets are connected by an overriding theme. Each of the sets of *Time Spiral* block have a very distinctive identity yet the three are clearly linked by the connection of time. In this block design, the interest in the second and third sets is that they are doing something different from the first set. In addition, the year builds towards an exciting climax—after all, who wouldn't want to glimpse the future? (More on this in a second.)



In addition to shaking up the structure of the block planning, I wanted to vary the mood. *Ravnica* block is a very cerebral block. By making clear definitions between all the combinations of colors we created a block that explored the minutiae of what each of the colors meant both in isolation and in conjunction with one another. It was cool, but it was very "heady." To shake things up (and as I've explained umpteen times, **Magic's** lifeblood is its ability to constantly evolve and change) I wanted to find a set that created a different feel. When we stumbled upon time, and in turn nostalgia, I realized that we had a set that could be very visceral. What I mean by this is that the set would define itself not by how it made the players think but rather by how it made them feel.

*Time Spiral* was the warm, fuzzy, "fond look back at the past" set. *Planar Chaos* was the disorienting alternate reality present that made you see how things might have been. Which left *Future Sight* as the exhilarating set that gives you peeks of where **Magic** is headed.

## Looking Back

The glue that held everything together was nostalgia. To understand this next part I have to actually leave the game of **Magic** and take you behind the scenes of another game, a pet project of mine named "Mood Swings." Back in 1998 I had the crazy idea of trying to create a trading card game that didn't follow many of the conventions of a traditional trading card game. What I ended up with was a game that I simply adored. The problem was that it didn't fit neatly into any box of what Wizards did. For nine years I've been trying to find a home for it, and one day I hope to.

] During that time, I've constantly fiddled with it. What does this have to do with *Future Sight*? Well, in my mind everything connects, and the lessons learned in one place are applied to other places. (Really, if you haven't read [last week's column](#) on creative thought, I urge you to take a peek.) Anyway, during "Mood Swings" design I learned the potency of nostalgia. My cards are all named after emotions and moods and I started putting pop culture images on them to help convey the emotion. So when *Time Spiral* block starting dipping its toe into the nostalgia well I quickly realized that we had the backbone we needed for the block.

Which brings me to another point of confusion. I keep saying the theme of this block is nostalgia. During design people kept bringing up to me the point that only the past can have nostalgia, for what is nostalgia if not a fondness for the past? I realized as I thought more about it that what I meant by nostalgia is a slightly different definition than what you might find on something like dictionary.com (by the way, for those that care, here it is: "A wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one's life, to one's home or homeland, or to one's family and friends; a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time.")

By nostalgia, I mean that the set would play into the emotions and memories players had about mechanics, cards, sets, blocks, environments and other creative elements of the past. The three sets of *Time Spiral* block would have a resonance to any of the audience that comes into the block with knowledge of the game's past. This would be the nostalgia block because the set would use the players' nostalgia as a key component of the design. Normally, the game brings all the components to the table. For this block, we'd be asking the players to provide something. (This does bring up the interesting point that we did take a number of steps to make sure that this block was accessible to the newcomer who had no knowledge of **Magic's** past.)



How does one bring nostalgia to the "alternate reality" present or the future? To explain how, I used the example of a Coke can. (No really, you want insight into the making of **Magic** – I'll fill you in on the nitty-gritty details.) For the past, imagine a Coke can from the 70s. Or perhaps a Coke bottle from the 20s. The can of the past might bring back old memories or just remind the person where Coke came from. For the alternate reality, imagine a green Coke can. It looks just like a modern day Coke can except instead of being red, it's green. Why is this image nostalgic? Because without the knowledge of what a Coke can is supposed to look like, the green coloring means nothing. It is only a shock if it contrasts with what the viewer expects. For the future, imagine a Coke can

of the future. It has enough elements that you recognize it as a Coke can, yet certain things about it are unfamiliar. This is a common trick in science fiction films set in the near future to help ground the audience. The important point here was that I knew nostalgia was crucial to making *Future Sight* work.

## The Best Is Yet to Come

The final important piece was that I knew that *Future Sight* was going to represent something much bigger than a single set. In the same way that *Time Spiral* became the poster child for all that has come before, I knew *Future Sight* was going to be the set representing all that would come after. What this meant was that *Future Sight* didn't just have the weight of being a good set on it, it had the weight of representing where the future of the game is headed. While this is, on one hand, quite daunting, it also allows us freedom to do some things that we have never done before, not just in a card-by-card sense but also in the way the set would play into the larger game.

What do I mean? Well, *Future Sight* is going to give all of you glimpses into **Magic's** future. Glimpses? Yes, *Future Sight* is not a peek into a single future but instead glimpses into a myriad of possible futures. Some of these futures are going to come to pass, while some of what you see in this set you'll never see again. Which means that for the first time ever, **Magic** goes meta. Every time we've ever hinted at the future in the past it was an immediate future. It was always locked within the context of a single block. This time, the scope is as grand as possible. We're not showing you more of a single world. We're peeking into many worlds. And not only do you get to peek behind the curtain, we get to peek at you peeking behind the curtain.



Normally when the audience reacts to a card, its biggest impact is that it can affect whether and how soon to repeat certain themes or cards. But in *Future Sight*, if the audience likes something, they have the ability to actually influence the future. If the players, for example, take a shining to one particular mechanic, the odds of that mechanic being from a "near future" go way up.

**Magicthegathering.com** has done things like "You Make the Card" and "Selecting Nth Edition" that have allowed players to intermingle with design and development but never before have we done so in the actual cards (okay, maybe the *Un*-sets count if you stretch it, but this is definitely the first time for black-bordered cards).

## All Together Now

It's eighteen months ago and I have all this stuff rattling around my head: shaking up block design, creating a visceral feel, using nostalgia, creating a meta-experience within a card set. And I knew what I wanted. I had a vision, a goal if you will, a clear cut one. All that stood before me were the insurmountable odds. You know, like the fact that only I understood what I wanted and I hadn't figured out how to verbalize it yet. Oh yeah, did I mention that due to a scheduling snafu I had a month's less time than normal for a small set design. The most difficult set I ever had to design and I started behind, muddled, and with my back to a wall. That, my faithful readers, is how you start a good story.

Join me next week when our protagonist begins his uphill climb.

Until then, may you... what? I didn't show the preview card yet? Are you sure? I wrote 2500 words. Surely it must be in there somewhere. No?

Well, we can't have a preview article without a preview card. Click [here](#).



There you go. So, I'll see you next week when I... what? You have questions? Well, I guess I could spend a few minutes answering them.

*What's with the frame?* Oh, that's the "timeshifted" frame. Yes, *Future Sight* has timeshifted cards. But these cards come from the FUTURE (dramatic music).

*Is this what the frames are going to look like in the future? Are they changing again? Should you start putting together the angry letters?* No, no, and heavens no. We felt that each incarnation of the timeshifted cards should have a distinctive look. Because *Future Sight's* timeshifted cards are from the FUTURE (dramatic music) we wanted them to have a futuristic look, so we made a futuristic frame. But have no fear, we have no plans to change the frames.

*Are all the timeshifted frames the same?* Yes. I mean no. More yes than no. The vast majority of the futuristic frames are identical in that each timeshifted red frame looks the same. That said, there might be a surprise or two.

*What is that claw symbol in the upper left hand corner?* It means something, but I'm not going to ruin the fun.

*How many timeshifted cards are there?* There are 81 out of a set of 180 cards. Yes, that's the highest percentage of timeshifted cards yet.

*How many per pack?* Let's see. *Time Spiral* had one. *Planar Chaos* had four. Which means that *Future Sight* has, let's see, somewhere between five and ten. No, literally, somewhere between five and ten. As the future is very uncertain, we decided that the timeshifted cards should be as well.

*Is the purple rarity symbol back?* No, that's a thing of the past. (rim shot) But seriously, the timeshifted cards in *Future Sight* are all common, uncommon or rare (with appropriately colored expansion symbols).

*So what in the world is transfigure?* It's a mechanical evolution of *Ravnica's* transmute, except this mechanic turns a creature in play into another creature from your library rather than turning a card in hand into another card from your library. Curious how else the mechanic is used? You might be in for a little wait. You see, *Fleshwrither* is the only card with transfigure in *Future Sight*.

*We used a new keyword mechanic on just one card? Do we do that?* No, of course not. Transfigure will have plenty of cards when the mechanic is introduced in the FUTURE (dramatic music). But the *Future Sight* card is just a timeshifted card from that future set. Kind of like how the *Time Spiral* timeshifted sheet had just one card with threshold.

*So instead of having a large number of cards with a few new mechanics, we have a large number of mechanics each only on a few new cards?* Sure looks like it. Let me leave you with this statistic. As of *Planar Chaos*, there are sixty keyword mechanics (including ability words). *Future Sight* has fifty. A lot of these, by the way, are old ones coming back, including a heaping helping that haven't shown up in *Time Spiral* block yet, but a number of the mechanics – a number larger than any set ever in the history of the game – are brand spankin' new. (Okay, some, like transfigure, are new riffs on old mechanics, but you get the gist.)

Some people have expressed worry that *Time Spiral* block hasn't had as much innovation as some previous blocks. It does. We've just saved a large chunk of it for *Future Sight*. I would like to ask any players with sensitivity to brain cramps to take extra care opening booster packs.

That's all the time I got today.

Join me next week when I explain how we got from A to B (to C, around F, over N, and smacked Z on the head).

Until then, may you start polishing your crystal ball.

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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