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The Future Is Now, Part III

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Making Magic
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Welcome to the third week of *Future Sight*... What? There's only two weeks of previews for the small sets. The Prerelease was last weekend. The feature article on the front page is a [sortable spoiler](#). Everyone who wants to know what's in *Future Sight* knows. All right, give me a minute.

Welcome to the first week of the *Future Sight* postviews. When I [began this multi-column extravaganza](#) I thought it was only going to be two columns long, the exact length of the preview weeks. But somewhere during the first column I realized I finished before I had said everything I'd wanted. Much of that got pushed off to [the next week](#), which in turn pushed stuff off to this week. Which is why there's a "Part III" in the title. But after today, I'm done. Well, not counting the numerous times in the upcoming weeks that I talk some more about *Future Sight* design. When you get right down to it this column is really one long ongoing mega-story. This week is, by my count, Part CCLXXVII (Two Hundred Seventy Seven): When Mix Met Match. But before I jump into today's topic, a quick recap for those that are joining us mid-story. (This is a little convention used by Marvel Comics that I like where each issue starts catching up with what's going on—okay, the "Previously on" title I stole from television.)



Previously on "The Future Is Now"

Mark and the Future Sight design team (Mark, Devin Low, Mark Gottlieb, Matt Cavotta, Ryan Miller, and Zvi Mowshowitz) discover that designing the future is hard work. Luckily no one has any idea what the set's going to do to so they get to wing it. Half the set is "timeshifted," meaning that it appears in futuristic frames and hints as possible futures for the game. Because of this, the timeshifted part of the set is filled with a potpourri of one-shot ideas. But over half the set is non-timeshifted. This also needs to be designed.

The Distribution of Timeshifted Cards

Before I get to this week's column I want to first clear something up about *Future Sight* that seems to be confusing people.

Each of the three sets of the *Time Spiral* block have timeshifted cards. What the cards are, how they look and how they're distributed in the pack varies from set to set. In *Time Spiral*, for example, there was one timeshifted card in each pack. The card had a unique rarity (the lovely purple expansion symbol) that appeared in place of a common slot. This means a *Time Spiral* pack had 10 commons, 3 uncommons, 1 rare, and 1 purple-rarity "timeshifted" card.

In *Planar Chaos*, the timeshifted cards had normal rarities. Three common slots were given to timeshifted commons. One uncommon slot was given away for an uncommon or rare timeshifted card. Three out of four packs the slot would be a timeshifted uncommon, and one out of four it was a rare. This means a *Planar Chaos* booster had 8 commons, 2 uncommons, 1 rare, 3 timeshifted commons, and one uncommon or rare timeshifted card.

In *Future Sight*, there are no slots specifically set aside for timeshifted cards. Instead they are intermingled with cards of the same rarity. What this means is that some number of your 11 commons will be timeshifted commons. The same goes for your uncommon and rare slots. In a *Future Sight* booster you will get 11 commons, 3 uncommons, and 1 rare, any of which might be a timeshifted card.

Why didn't we have the timeshifted cards work the same across the block? Because we wanted the timeshifted cards to feel different in each set. For *Future Sight*, we liked the idea that the future is hard to predict, and thus we made the definition between the timeshifted and nontimeshifted distribution a little muddier. Hopefully, this will clear up the confusion surrounding the distribution of timeshifted cards in *Future Sight*.

And the Rest

Last week I talked about the design of the timeshifted cards. This week I'll talk about the other half of the set, the non-timeshifted half (once again, 99 of the 180 cards of the set are nontimeshifted – which, for the math impaired,

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means that there are 81 timeshifted cards). As I explained last week, here are the rules we set up for ourselves for the nontimeshifted cards.

#1 – We Could Not Use New Keyworded Mechanics – To create a sense of the future, we decided that we needed to save all the elements that felt like they were a peek into the unknown. As such, we chose to restrict all new keyworded mechanics to timeshifted cards. This didn't mean we couldn't do anything new. As you will shortly see, there's plenty of innovation on the nontimeshifted side. It did mean, though, that we couldn't create anything that needed to be keyworded.

#2 – We Had Access to Old Keywords (Within Limits) – Due to the nostalgia theme of the *Time Spiral* block, the designers had access to old mechanics. Anything used in *Time Spiral* or *Planar Chaos* was fair game. We were allowed to add other old keywords if we wished. As you will see, how many was an interesting question.

#3 – We Needed to Support the Themes of the Block – The future seemed like an odd place to close out the themes of the block. That meant that they were the domain of the nontimeshifted cards.

#4 – We Were On Dominaria – As with *Time Spiral* and *Planar Chaos*, the nontimeshifted cards are where the story takes place. The timeshifted cards in all three sets ignore the modern day setting, focusing on the theme of the timeshift. *Time Spiral* timeshifted cards were actually repeats from sets from all over the multiverse. *Planar Chaos* timeshifted cards were flavor reinterpretations from the same set they were replacing. *Future Sight* timeshifted cards are peeking at potential settings from the future.

With this in mind, we set out to figure out what role the nontimeshifted cards would play in the set.

The First Piece – The Continuation of *Time Spiral* Block Keywords

Each block pushes design into new territory. For *Ravnica* block, the guild model forced us to approach how we made use of block mechanics. Rather than introduce new keywords that we evolved over the three sets, we gave each set its own unique keywords. But the pendulum always swings back (this is a reference to my favorite **Magic** design metaphor: that **Magic** design is a pendulum over a sand pit that we keep pushing in new directions but that keeps coming back to the center) and I felt it was important that *Time Spiral* block return to our traditional handling of block keywords—that is, that they evolve over the course of the block.

Time Spiral and *Planar Chaos* had introduced four new keywords: flash, split second, suspend and vanishing. *Future Sight* was on the hook for finding some twists for some of these mechanics.

Flash – Because flash wasn't as much a new mechanic as an official naming of an old one, there wasn't a lot of room for innovation. Plus, the mechanic is more of a utility mechanic than a normal one. *Future Sight* would use flash, but not in any super innovative way.

Split Second – While the designers and developers liked what split second was capable of, we quickly learned two things about the mechanic. One, it had limited design space. The card had to do something that someone would want to interrupt but be unable to. Second, it was a mechanic that in large numbers was dangerous as it took away the interactivity of the game. A little "nyah, nyah, you can't stop me" is fun and adds new strategies. Too much, we believe, would have a negative overall effect on the game. This meant that we only had room for a little split second. We'd have to choose our use carefully.

Quick story: **Take Possession** was originally in *Time Spiral*. I had created it because stealing things seemed like a great match with split second as it would allow you to steal things you normally never could (such as creatures with sacrifice abilities). But *Time Spiral* had two split second stealing cards (the other being **Word of Seizing**), and so **Take Possession** was pushed off. It didn't fit *Planar Chaos*'s color shifting theme and thus didn't find a home in the second set. During *Future Sight* design I remembered that it had been pushed off, and I was determined to find a home for it. I stuck it in the file with a note that said "Now or never!"

Suspend – One of my writing teachers in college (for screenplay writing) taught me that every script has a single protagonist. Even when a movie has multiple main characters or even an entire group, my teacher stressed that only one of them is the true protagonist of the story from a structure standpoint. (Hint: That person usually appears in the first scene of the movie, often in a flashback.) I feel the same about block mechanics. Yes, we often use more than one, but when push comes to shove, one of them is really the key mechanic of the block. Flash and split second are nice, but *Time Spiral* block is suspend's movie.

What this meant was that the *Future Sight* design team had to come up with a new twist for suspend. Luckily, I had been holding onto an idea since *Time Spiral* design. (Yes, a lot of ideas for the small sets stem from work done on the large set.) In my column on vanishing (**Utter Chaos**) I explained that in the design for *Time Spiral* we included both suspend and fading. We quickly realized that we had to sync the two mechanics up, and thus vanishing was born. Later we realized that the two mechanics were a little confusing together (was a card with counters out of play and being suspended or in play in the act of vanishing?) and that we should probably introduce one in the first set and the other in the second set after people got the hang of the first one. As suspend was the new thing and revamping fading into a new mechanic fit the theme of *Planar Chaos*, we chose to push off vanishing.

When we did this we had to push off another idea I had, mixing suspend and vanishing. I realized that by mixing the two we would be able to create a flexible phasing-like effect. (Once more, we did consider brining phasing back as it fit thematically so well, but our disdain for how the mechanic technically worked, mixed with the



complication that came with it, made us nix it.) The key to making this mix work was to create an ability that allowed suspended cards to resuspend themselves. Imagine having a creature with suspend 2 and vanishing 2. You suspend it turn one. Turn three it comes into play. Turn five it goes away. Turn seven it returns. Lather. Rinse. Repeat. By changing the suspend and vanishing numbers, we could control how long the cards would both stay in play and how long they would sit out of play. It was a thing of beauty. One small problem: it didn't fit on the card.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks of design is templating. That is, many ideas that sound great in conversation don't really work when you have to write them down in sentences. Suspend is a good example of the difference between the concept and the templated text. If you play this spell for cheaper it costs you N turns. Very simple, very grokkable. But when you jump through the necessary hoops to actually keep track, you find yourself with six lines of reminder text (seven if it's a creature). Vanishing has four lines of reminder text. That's ten or eleven lines of text not counting the text that resuspends the card. It just didn't fit.

I was ready to throw the idea out when I realized that I actually had a cool idea that was salvageable. The text to make a suspend card resuspend itself wasn't too wordy—if, that is, we used it on instants or sorceries. "Remove CARDNAME from the game with N time counters on it." With this little baby, I could create spells that kept going off on a certain interval. This led to an uncommon cycle of sorceries, such as **Reality Strobe**, that each had a three-turn interval. If you paid full price you can have the first iteration that turn.

The other interesting twist with suspend was finding ways to mix it with other mechanics, but we'll get to that subset of cards in a bit.

Vanishing – During design we created an uncommon cycle of vanishing creatures that had powerful effects if they naturally faded away. This cycle was lost to numbers (the R&D way of saying that we had more other stuff we wanted in instead). **Lost Auramancers** is the one remaining card of that cycle.

Piece Two – Using the Past to Build the Future



Because all new mechanics were reserved for the timeshifted cards, the nontimeshifted cards had to scrounge around to see what else there was to work with. Since new was off limits, we turned to the old. *Time Spiral* block had a nostalgia theme and as such we had brought back a lot of popular old mechanics. Perhaps we could find a way to use the old mechanics in a new way.

Flash back to the early years of the **Magic** Invitational. One of the traditions of the Invitational back then was a format I dubbed Duplicate Sealed. (The format returned at the last Invitational—[check it out](#).) In it, all sixteen players played Sealed with an identical set of cards that I had put together. The idea was that it was a Sealed event where all the luck had been removed. Each player knew the environment they were building to because they had full information on what was available. Anyway, one day I came up with the idea of mixing a few new cards—ones that weren't real—in that year's Duplicate Sealed pool. So I went to Bill Rose (current VP of R&D, then Head of **Magic** Design & Development—we now split up the two responsibilities) to ask permission. Could I design a few original cards for the **Magic** Invitational, I asked. "Sure," replied Bill, "Just don't make anything we could print in a set."

This was a bit of a daunting challenge, as it seemed to make everything off limits, but I'm not one to give up easily. I started brainstorming cards that would be interesting but not printable. That's when I stumbled onto a subset of cards I called "mix & match." Mix & match cards are ones that used two different mechanics each from their own block. The reason mix & match cards were perfect is that while I knew we'd reprint individual mechanics, I didn't believe we'd ever reprint numerous ones in the same block. (Little did I know.) By mixing two mechanics, I could create something we wouldn't make because the interaction of the two mechanics would not happen, at least not in the near future.

As I started designing mix & match, I discovered something pretty cool: many past mechanics interacted in neat ways. I had stumbled onto a little gold mine of design space. Then, in *Unhinged* design, Mark Gottlieb turned in two cards, **Blast from the Past** and **Old Fogey**, that mixed many old mechanics on one card. Like my Invitational cards, these seemed to get good response.

So years later when *Time Spiral* became a reality, I let my fellow *Time Spiral* designers (Brian Tinsman (lead), Aaron Forsythe, and Devin Low) in on my secret design stash. We designed a number of mix & match cards for *Time Spiral* but something seemed wrong. Yes, they tapped into the past, but they felt too new. *Time Spiral* was about revisiting old mechanics, not finding new innovations with them. The set that seemed like the best home was *Future Sight*.

So I called a moratorium on mix & match cards in *Time Spiral* and *Planar Chaos* as I asked for them to be saved for *Future Sight*. This, by the way, is probably one of the most important parts of block design. By understanding what each set is doing, you can plan ahead and allow ideas to gravitate to the set that most wants and/or needs them.

When we began with mix & match, I said that any past mechanic was fair game. But as we played we realized that we were having keyword overload. So the team decided to try to limit what we allowed. We talked about a

number of restrictions, but the one we liked best was the idea of sticking to what was already available in Standard. This meant that any mechanic in *Time Spiral*, *Planar Chaos*, *Ravnica* block, or *Coldsnap* was fair game. This was over twenty mechanics, so it seemed like a fair restriction. Well, with a few caveats.



When we first started planning the block, we decided it would be cool to take some of the old mechanics that best hit certain themes and save them for the proper set. Flashback, for instance, we felt really had a past feel as you were replaying spells you had already played. This is why we put a common cycle of flashback cards in *Time Spiral*. Another obvious mechanic was scry. Scry means "to look into the future," and it was tied to a mechanic (look at the top of your deck and rearrange it or banish it to the bottom of the library) that also felt "future-y." So mix & match would restrict itself to mechanics in Standard, plus scry. But wait...

During *Time Spiral* and *Planar Chaos* design, we played around with cycling. It never quite fit, but we really felt like it was a classic mechanic worthy of seeing print in the nostalgia block. Then when we started in the early design of mix & match, we realized that it comboed well with just about everything. Finally, the idea of trading in the known here and now for a random something from a card to come also felt "future-y." So we also added cycling. Mix & match would have mechanics of Standard, scry and cycling to play with.

Once we knew what mechanics were available, I turned to *Future Sight* design team member Zvi Moshwowitz and asked him to take all the available keywords and examine how well they mixed together. Zvi spent a day and came back with a list. On it, he had five categories. Number five were combinations that had excellent synergy. Number four were combos that, while not quite as awesome, were still very solid. Number three were combos that technically worked together but weren't particularly exciting. Number two were combos that were somewhat anti-synergetic. Number one were what Mark Gottlieb lovingly refers to as nonbos—that is, mechanics that actively don't work together. In design, we put in every number five combo and many of the fours. (Note that a few didn't make it through development.)

I'm very happy with how mix & match worked out. They definitely fit the bill of using old things to create something new, and they did so in some surprisingly subtle ways.

Piece Three – Playing With Time

So much of the focus of the block has been put on nostalgia that I often feel the time theme gets a little overlooked. One of the ways we played into the past, present, and future designs was to find mechanics that tapped into the feel of that segment of time. For *Future Sight*, this meant that we wanted to find cards that mechanically felt like they were intermingling with the future, not of **Magic** at large but the future of the very game you're playing.

The first group of cards had an interesting origin. I guess the story begins in *Unhinged* design. One of the *Unglued* abilities that had really connected with people was denimwalk from the card Hurlon Wrangler (although let me publicly apologize for accidentally creating a card that encourages fellow players to take off their pants – for *Unhinged* we had a strict rule that we weren't going to repeat that mistake, and then we went and made Shoe Tree, a card that forced players to take off their shoes and put them on the table). I think that people liked the idea of us warping a keyword into a strange variant. I was determined to mine this design vein in *Unhinged*.

One of the ways I did this was to take existing keywords and see if I could tweak their name into something that sounded funny. One such exercise led to "super haste." Haste has been flavored as speed. What would happen if a creature was even faster than a haste creature? After thinking about it, I decided that a faster creature would be able to attack the turn before you played it. From there it was a top-down design exercise to figure out how to make that happen. I eventually stumbled upon the idea of attacking with the creature this turn but paying for it next turn. To make sure that you did, I added a "lose the game" clause.

During *The Great Designer Search*, the judges said numerous times that designers should avoid the term "you lose the game" like the plague. The rationale is that players don't like losing, and so cards that might make that happen are generally unpopular. The reason this didn't seem to apply as much here was how it was being used. Barring an unforeseen **Stone Rain**, players weren't going to accidentally lose the game. The "lose game" text was merely a way to guarantee that the players did the thing they promised to do.

Anyway, Rocket-Powered Turbo Slug was printed in *Unhinged*. During *Planar Chaos* design, one designer, Paul Sottosanti, came up with the idea of doing a cycle of cards inspired by the Slug. The team liked them, but many noted that they really had a future feel to them. You were playing cards that you paid for in the future. We suggested shipping the cards off to *Future Sight*. Paul agreed with our assessment and the cycle was moved.



Once in *Future Sight*, the cycle went through numerous changes. First we tried to use echo on the cards. (We turned them into enchantments with comes into play effects.) The idea was that the cards cost 0 but had an echo upkeep that you'd die if you didn't pay. The problem was twofold. First, if you somehow got rid of the card before

the upkeep rolled around you never had to pay. Second, the basic flavor, "get spell now, pay later" was a little less obvious and thus the cards were less cool overall.

Next, we tried versions that had negative conditions that weren't strictly lose the game. Instead each color had its own way to majorly hose you, most likely, but not automatically, causing you to lose (such as removing your library from the game). I didn't like this version because the cards felt more like wacky Johnny cards that you built your deck around rather than what they were meant to be—spells you had to pay for next turn. In the end, we ended up where we started, and I must say I really like how the Pacts turned out.

Which leads us to the one other time-related nontimeshifted cycle. The team liked the idea of creatures that you played but had to wait for their main value. These are the common cycle known as the Augurs. In the original versions, they blew up and did their thing during your first upkeep they were in play. Playtesting showed us that it was annoying when your augur blew up when the timing wasn't good. That's when we came up with the idea that you can choose what upkeep they blow up and do their thing. This way they still had the "you have to wait" feeling but that they were more flexible to use. During this pass we gave a number of them evasion/combat abilities to create tension on when you want to chose to sacrifice them for their effect.

As you look through the set, you'll notice a number of cards that have payoffs that come later in the game. These are all a part of this larger theme.

The Future Awaits

I hope these three columns have given you a glimpse of how many different things went into *Future Sight* design. This set has more design nuggets tucked away than the average set. I hope you all enjoy playing it as much as we did designing it. As always, I'm eager to hear your feedback on *Future Sight*, both positive and negative.

Join me next week when I timeshift into drive.

Until then, may you learn—

Oops, I almost forgot the preview card again. Don't worry I've got a doozy for you. What? Oh right. Well, I have a blank space below to reveal a card. I really ought to show you something. Oh, I got it. I'll show you a card that design made that didn't make it through development. In fact, this was one of my favorite cards in design.

What is it? It's the original version of a card from a high-profile *Future Sight* cycle. What happened to it? I'll tell you after you see the card. Ready? Click [here](#).



So what happened? The card was too good. It turns out that it's not so hard to deal with the card's handicap if the deck is built to deal with it. It saddened me that we lost the card, so I thought it might be fun to at least give all of you a chance to see it.

I hope that was an interesting "preview."

With that, it's time to go. Once again, join me next week when I timeshift into drive.

Until then, may you learn the value of paying Tuesday for a hamburger today.

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