

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



The Scrying Game

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This week we'll be exploring the mechanic that's making a comeback in *Future Sight*. Okay, one of the mechanics making a comeback in *Future Sight*. A mechanic that's showing up in numbers larger than one to three. But one that wasn't in *Time Spiral* or *Planar Chaos*. The one that isn't cycling. Yes, welcome to Scry Week!

I was excited to hear that it was Scry Week, as scry is a mechanic that originated in one of the sets that I was lead designer for and thus I have an insight into how the mechanic was created and integrated into the set. What? I already wrote that column during *Fifth Dawn* previews. It was called [Scry Me a River](#).

No problem. I could use my column today to explore why we bring back old mechanics like scry. Over the years I've had the opportunity to bring back numerous mechanics and I think I have a good understanding of why returning to an old mechanic is valuable for a new set. Really? I already wrote that one too, when cycling returned in *Onslaught*. It was called [Cycling Cycling](#).

I guess I could talk about how R&D's view of mechanics has changed over time as we shifted from thinking of them as a disposable resource to a reusable one. Oh, [Keyword to the Wise](#) already covered that.

Man, writing theme weeks gets harder over time.

How about I write how scry got put into *Future Sight* and what we did to tweak the mechanic to try some new things with it? Has that been written yet? No? Good. I'll do that then.



Big Girls Don't Scry

I guess I'll begin by explaining how scry ended up in *Future Sight*. It didn't even happen in *Future Sight* design. No, scry got assigned to *Future Sight* during *Time Spiral* design. How? Well, once we committed ourselves to wedding the past/present/future structure to nostalgia as our block design, we decided it would be a good idea to write down every mechanic we might bring back and then look and see if any of them felt like they belonged specifically in the past, alternate reality present, or future.

The reason we did this is simple. If the block was about nostalgia then an important part of it was bringing things back. Block design, though, has taught us that we should carefully spread the goodies across the block. This meant that all the returning keyword mechanics shouldn't come back in the same set. The smart thing to do was to carefully divvy them up knowing that *Time Spiral* the, first, largest, and "most about the past" set, would get the lion's share. And remember, anything introduced in the first set of a block is allowed to carry through the entire block.

We began by looking for mechanics that felt like they were about the past. The winner was flashback. Not only did the name mean "looking back at the past," it had a mechanic that referenced cards that had already been played. This is why there is a common cycle of flashback cards in *Time Spiral*. We felt the mechanic did an excellent job of feeling like it was about the past.

Next came alternate reality present. After much thinking, we chose morph, as it was the mechanic that was most about having two different states. So what happened? Morph showed up in *Time Spiral*. Yes, it did, but that happened in development. *Time Spiral* design specifically left morph out, and it was a major part of early *Planar Chaos* design. But during development of *Time Spiral*, the lead developer (Brian Schneider) felt that *Time Spiral* was missing something and morph turned out to be one of the things he needed to fill that void.

Finally, we were looking for a mechanic about the future. Scry was the obvious choice. Like flashback, scry was a perfect fit in both flavor and mechanics. The word means "to look into the future," and the mechanic was about influencing what you were about to draw, i.e., influencing the future. Once or twice the development teams from *Time Spiral* and *Planar Chaos* glanced at scry, but each time I was able to fend them off. *Future Sight*, after all, was the one set I was in charge of. I wasn't about to let anyone take my returning mechanic.

Scry Uncle

Thanks to block planning, the *Future Sight* design team started the design knowing scry was going to be used. The big question was what new thing were we going to do with it. See, the *Time Spiral* design team, because the

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set was about the past, decided that we shouldn't innovate on the mechanics we brought back. The *Planar Chaos* design team wanted to focus on color switching and thus also shied away from using old mechanics in new ways (well, other than using them in colors they hadn't been used in before). *Future Sight*, on the other hand, was all about innovation. What does the future of **Magic** hold if not lots of innovation? This meant we had free reign to do what we wanted with scry.

In fact, we had more than free reign. We felt obligated to innovate with scry. So what could we do? We began by going after the obvious choice. Yes, we made cards that scryed for numbers other than 2. Gasp! Scandalous! But that was just the beginning. To talk about what we did (and a little about what we didn't), I thought it best to go through the cards in *Future Sight* that have scry and talk about how each card was made and what thought process went into its design.

Cryptic Anelid

Here's how this card appeared when it was first turned in during early card design (by Mark Gottlieb, in case you were wondering):

```
Twiddlywink  
3U  
Instant  
Scry 1, scry 2, scry 3.
```

During design, I changed the card to this: (which explains the name; I always try to keep the name given by the card's designer so when I have to change a card's type I usually adapt the name to fit)

```
Twiddlywinker  
3U  
Creature - Human Wizard  
1/4  
When CARDNAME comes into play, Scry 1, scry 2,  
scry 3.
```

The card went through the rest of design and all of development and only two things changed about the card. First, it was changed from a Human Wizard to a Beast. Note that except for tribal mechanics/sets (such as Slivers or *Onslaught*) or for specific cards such as *Masked Gorgon* design has nothing to do with setting creature types, so this change isn't even a mechanical one. What was the second change? Don't try looking too hard; it's nothing you'd be able to see.

The second change is that this card was originally designed as a timeshifted future card. The thought behind it was that the scry combo felt weird and unusual. During development it was decided that the advancements of the mechanics of the block as well as most of the advancements of the old mechanics brought back for this set would sit on the non-timeshifted side.

The interesting thing about this design was that it approached scry from a very different vantage point. In *Fifth Dawn*, scry was used similarly to cantrips. That is, it was a little add-on effect that helped smooth out your draws. When the *Future Sight* designers approached the mechanic we looked at it not just as an add-on but as an effect unto itself. More on this in a bit.

Foresee

And by a bit, I meant right now. **Foresee** does a very good job of explaining the shift that design took when thinking about scry. Rather than see it as simply a rider, the designers tried to find effects that worked with scry. **Foresee** is a great example. In the *Fifth Dawn* model of scry, **Foresee** would have read as such:

```
Foresee  
3U  
Sorcery  
Draw two cards.  
Scry 4
```

Because scry was always a rider it came last. But that would suck with the above card. You would draw two cards and then after you're done, you'd then look at the top four cards of your library and rearrange as such. By putting the scry effect first, it now interacts with the effect of the spell. You get to fiddle with the top four cards knowing that afterwards you will draw the top two cards.

The original design for this card was identical to the printed card with one exception. I costed it at 4. It's interesting to note how often these days development lowers my costs. Back in the day I had the rep of designing cards that were far over the power curve. Development was always taking an axe to my cards. Looking back at the file, I saw this note:

```
MR (3/24/06): DESIGN NOTE #1: The designer goob likes this card. I'd be willing to look at other effects that play nicely with Scry.
```

The note tells me that this spell was one of the things that had me push the team to find more interesting interactions between scry and the effect. Next week I'll be talking a bit more about designing for the different psychographics (aka Timmy, Johnny and Spike) and evaluation models (Melvin and Vorthos). A sneak peak—this card is designed for Spike and Melvin. (Why? Well, you'll just have to come back next week, won't you?)



Judge Unworthy

I've talked a bit in the past about the importance of cycles (see my column [Zen and the Art of Cycle Maintenance](#) for the meatiest column on the topic). When talking about cycles I have briefly mentioned the idea of tight and loose cycles. A tight cycle is one that brings attention to itself. Usually the cards have some strong mechanical tie and often a strong creative tie. The Wishes from *Judgment*, the legendary dragons from *Invasion*, and the three Magus cycles from *Time Spiral*, *Planar Chaos* and *Future Sight* are examples of tight cycles. A loose cycle is one that has some connection but not one that is necessarily noticed consciously by the players. Loose cycles exist to help build a set's structure and create aesthetics that make a set resonate as a cohesive whole.

Why do I bring this up? Because Judge Worthy is part of a cycle. Just as we did when we added flashback to *Time Spiral*, we decided that scry, as a flavor-defining nostalgia mechanic, should have a cycle at common. Each color got one common card that played with the idea of combining relevant effects with scry. Actually it gets more intertwined than that. Each card in the cycle has an effect that cares about what the top card of the library is. This allows you to use the scry to help maximize the effect by choosing what card you want on top.



Here, by the way, is how the card came out of design:

Tactical Strike

2W

Instant

Scry 3

Reveal the top card of your library to all players. Remove target attacking creature with a power of X from the game where X is the revealed card's converted mana cost.

The card was rightfully changed from an **Exile** variant to a rangestrike spell (R&D's codename for the "deal N to target attacking or blocking creature" effect) for two reasons. First, it was cleaner and easier to process. Second, it was as printed too fiddly. The design version required you to line up the card's converted mana cost with the creature's power. The printed card just needs you to find a converted mana cost that equals or exceeds the toughness of the attacking (or blocking) creature.

Something else you'll notice if you look at the five common cards is that the blue card of the cycle (Forsee) doesn't specifically use the top card to set its effect. It just cares because it's going to draw the card. Why didn't we make the cycle exact? Because we are a little more forgiving with loose cycles as they exist more for structure than to be ogled. And we thought **Foresee** was a really cool card—cool enough that we let the cycle slide a little. I talk a lot about all the hard and fast rules. What I don't talk as much about is learning when to relax things to make sure that you don't keep some small good thing from happening.

The other discrepancy is that there are six common scry cards. Blue got a second one (**Unblinking Bleb**). Why? Well, we justified it by the idea that blue is the most scry-friendly color. In addition, it was one of our mix and match cards (scry and morph in this case). I'll cover this more when we get down to the Bleb.

Llanowar Empath

Remember how I said above that I used to make the design cards too powerful? Well, while I do it less, I'm still able to overpower a card like the good old days. Case in point: here's the version of this card design handed off:

Animal Handler

2G

Creature - Elf Handler

2/2

As CARDNAME comes into play, Scry 4 and reveal the top card of your library. If it is a creature card put it in your hand.

Yes, a mana cheaper and two extra cards on the scry. For those that like this kind of thing, here is the original design of the card:

Animal Handler

2G

Creature - Elf Handler

2/2

Scry 4

2G, T: Reveal the top card of your library. If it is a creature put it into your hand.



The original design was playing with the idea that the scry could help set up the ability for some number of turns but then it would just turn into a normal card. The design team decided that the card felt better if the effect happened immediately, as then it made the scry feel more relevant.

The final note is to point out a little design quirk of mine. Whenever I can't figure out the class of a creature with both a race and a class, I just make up a class that works. Who handles animals? It turns out, shamans do.

Mesmeric Sliver

Wait a minute. What's a card that doesn't have scry doing here? Well, it sort of does. You see fateseal was called "evil scry" in design. In fact, it was designed as a scry variant. Instead of scrying yourself, you scry your opponent. Thus, evil scry.

During mechanic naming, the design team tried hard to convince the powers that be that the name should reference the fact that this mechanic is scry the opponent. Unfortunately no words that included scry passed the "this is good enough to print" test.

The last note on this card is that the design team didn't create it. During development it was decided that the set needed a few more cycles on the timeshifted side (and note that development is famous for breaking up cycles, not making them). Brian Schneider, the head developer during *Future Sight* (not to be confused with the set's lead developer, which was Mike Turian) came up with the idea of having a cycle of slivers that each granted a new keyword to its fellow slivers. The blue sliver went through numerous versions but in the end got fateseal, as none of the other blue keywords worked well on a sliver.



Mystic Speculation

This card was turned in early in design (again by Mark Gottlieb) and wasn't touched throughout all of design and development. Okay, the playtest name—Shenanigans—was changed. As a designer I'm still awed at the design of this card. It's a mix and match card that has no other text. It's just two keywords. And yet, it actually does something. If you don't have any appreciation for this card, my guess is you're just not a Melvin.

I'm not even sure what to say about this card. It does play up the fact that scry has shifted from a rider to an effect. *Future Sight* gave me much greater respect for scry. Some mechanics I feel might come back. Scry is a no-brainer. You will see scry again. And my designer sense says it still has some room for some new innovation.



New Benalia

This card is also part of a cycle, although this one's a bit tighter so I'm guessing most of you might have noticed this one. Here's how the card was turned over from design:

Future Plains

Land

CARDNAME comes into play tapped.

When CARDNAME comes into play, scry 2.

T: Add W to your mana pool.

We were pretty close. The interesting story about this card has little to do with the scry. While trying to concept *Future Sight*, the creative team came across the idea of showing Dominaria recovering from the apocalypse. How better to hint at the future than to show you the desolated landscapes recovering? The idea was to take a picture of each basic land from *Time Spiral* and then show that land healing and starting to prosper once again. To do this, though, the set needed to have a cycle of lands that were affiliated with each color.

Jeremy Jarvis, *Magic's* art director (*Future Sight* was the first set that he was fully in charge of the art), came to me and asked if I could include a land cycle for this art. I said sure and Jeremy commissioned the illustrations. Luckily I already had an idea for a land cycle. I thought it would be neat to find five keyword mechanics that had never appeared on lands and put them on. I think this started from the idea of making a morph land. Ironically, the morph land would be pulled out during development to be a separate land, not part of the cycle.

Here's the cycle as it was turned over from design:

⚡: Scry 2

🌀: Morph 1U

♁: Transmute 1BB



♣: Hellbent – T: Add RR to your mana pool
♣: Dredge 3

Blue's entry was doing double duty. It was also part of a vertical morph cycle in blue (**Lumithread Field**, **Zoetic Cavern**, **Whetwheel**) which all stayed in the file. The development team felt that the two cycles didn't need to be connected and moved things around to add in a land with graft.

But this really has little to do with scry, so let's move on to the next card.

Putrid Cyclops

You'll notice a trend that most of the scry cards that saw print started in some similar form in design. Not so this card. In fact, design's submission for the black card of the cycle is radically different from card that later got put into the slot. Here's what design turned over:

Scry Baby

4B
Creature – Zombie
3/2
When CARDNAME comes into play, scry 5.
Whenever a card would be put on the bottom of your library, you may choose to put it into your graveyard instead.

This version was trying to be a reanimation enabler. Before it was Scry Baby, it was:

Digger of Graves

4B
Creature – Zombie
3/2
Scry 3
When CARDNAME comes into play, put target card in your graveyard or from the bottom of your library into your hand.

This version was trying to connect a **Raise Dead** effect to scry. Awkwardly done, I agree. Before Digger of Graves, it was:

Ambulance Chaser

2B
Creature – Zombie Advisor
2/1
When CARDNAME comes into play, Scry 3.
When CARDNAME comes into play, put the top card of your library into your graveyard. If it is a creature, you may put it into your hand.

This card was me trying to sneakily recreate what we did in green. As we were already doing it in green and this card just read very clunkily, we mercifully changed it. What's clear was that the design team never quite found what it wanted. Most of the design seemed focused in making the scry matter in a black way. The solution was found during hole-filling in development.

Riddle of Lightning

This card is another that made it from its earliest design incarnation to print. The playtest name was one of my favorites from the set—Future Shock.

I'm not sure, but I'd bet this was the first scry card designed that played off the converted mana cost of the top card of the library. Why do I believe this? Because the card was obviously inspired by the *Onslaught* card **Erratic Explosion**. Which brings up another interesting bit o' trivia. **Erratic Explosion** was the first card designed by *Future Sight* design member Mark Gottlieb. The playtest name for **Erratic Explosion**, since we seem to be on the topic, was Gottlieb's Bolt.



Spin into Myth

This was the one and only fateseal card handed over from design. Named Bad Mojo, it was identical to the printed card except design costed it at 5. Oh, and of course we called it "evil scry." I still regret that the connection to scry isn't made anywhere on this or the **Mesmeric Sliver**.

Unblinking Bleb

Scry shows up on two mix and match cards. This card and **Mystic Speculation**. Unlike **Mystic Speculation**, this card didn't start trying to be a mix and match card. **Unblinking Bleb** – this is your life!

In early design, I put the card **Soothsaying** from *Mercadian Masques* in the file as it felt a perfect fit for the future feel. The problem was that repeating cards in a set about the future felt a little weird. So I turned the card into a creature. The original version was a 1/1 with the text of **Soothsaying**. I called the card Soothsayer. But this led to another problem. The Magus cycle in *Future Sight* were creature incarnations of famous enchantments. This card was technically a magus. We thought about making it the blue magus, but **Soothsaying** just wasn't iconic enough.



To distance it from a magus, I made three major changes to the card: (this, by the way, is the version turned over in the design handoff)

Soothsayer

3U

Creature — Human Wizard

2/3

Morph U

X: Look at the top X cards of your library and put them back in any order.

I took off the "3 ♦ ♦ ♦: Shuffle your library" text off; I made the creature more expensive and bigger; and I added morph with a cheap morph cost.

The problem with this version was that the activation was just too similar to scry. So development fixed this by turning the card into a card that had a scry trigger when your cards were unmorphed. (Yeah, yeah "unmorphed" isn't really a term; I just like it better than "turned face up." Sue me.)

Very roundabout, but that's how we got from **Soothsaying** to the Bleb.

It's Judy's Turn To Scry

As I'm out of *Future Sight* scry cards, I guess I'll end my column for today. I hope you liked my peek into scry design.

Join me next week when I talk about design yet again, this time... hey, weren't you paying attention when I explained this up above? Yes, next week is a follow-up to last week as well as a follow-up to all the letters I get about how exactly we design for Timmy, Johnny and Spike. If any of this sounds interesting, tune in next week.

Until then, may you find future potential hidden in the past.

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