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Hits and Misses

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Latest Developments
Friday, June 22, 2007



R&D loves data from large tournaments, as it lets us go back and compare how we thought cards were going to perform against how they actually do perform in the real world. Regionals, with its [buckets and buckets of decklists](#), presents the perfect opportunity for us to do a little post-game analysis.

For the purpose of this article, I'm going to stick to talking about cards from the *Time Spiral* expansion. *Ravnica* block and *Coldsnap* are a little too "last year" to make for interesting fodder, and *Planar Chaos* and *Future Sight* still have room for exploration by players, so I'm not keen on talking about R&D's picks for power cards when there's a chance some of them may emerge over the next several months on their own without me giving them an official endorsement. But *Time Spiral* has been around long enough to be mostly "solved," and it is far enough in R&D's rear-view mirror that I don't mind talking about stuff we misevaluated.



Five *Time Spiral* Cards That Were Better Than We Thought

...and by "we" I mean the **Magic** developers that do Constructed "pointing" for each set—in this case it was Brian Schneider, Matt Place, Mike Turian, Devin Low, then-intern Zvi Mowshowitz, and myself. For the record, that's three Pro Tour winners, two men who at various points in time were considered among the best deckbuilders in the world, and three people that would at different times occupy the role of **Magic's** Head Developer. Yet we missed things and got a lot of stuff "wrong" when asked to predict the future. But I still think we're doing a good job—we craft environments with a lot of viable options and determine that the environment will, in fact, lead to a healthy metagame. Of course, often our twelve-person metagame ends up looking different than your entire-world one, but that's the nature of small closed systems. Our current development philosophy of "lots and lots of good cards" instead of "a handful of great ones" serves us incredibly well, as it makes sure there are myriad options available should something "get away from us," as you'll see happened in a moment.

The numbers I'm using to represent R&D's opinions on cards' viability were generated at the end of *Time Spiral* development, which puts them about eight months earlier in our Standard rotation (we hadn't played with *Planar Chaos* or *Future Sight* yet). But because we don't re-run our numbers on prior sets once a new set finishes, this is the latest *Time Spiral* analysis we have.

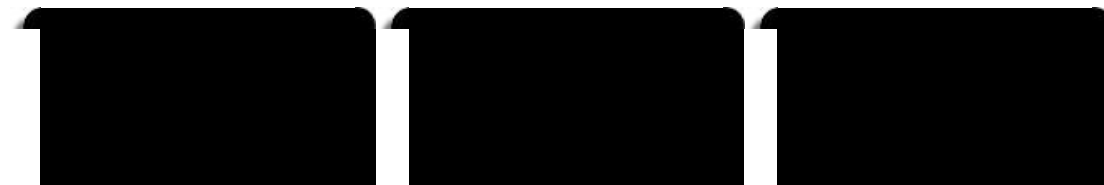
1) Rift Bolt

When a card like *Rift Bolt* ends up better than we imagined, that doesn't tend to cause many problems unless some critical mass of a certain type of card is now attainable. But in most cases *Rift Bolt* is replacing something like *Demonfire* or *Volcanic Hammer* in decklists as opposed to being added to them. We had *Fiery Temper* and *Sudden Shock* scoring higher than the Bolt, and would almost always opt for one of those two in our Gruul and Rakdos decks, but all that means really is that a different burn spell is the best one, not that three are being heavily played when we predicted only two would.

Cards we had scoring similar to *Rift Bolt*: *Premature Burial*, *Mishra, Artificer Prodigy*.



2-4) The Dragonstorm Trio (*Dragonstorm*, *Bogardan Hellkite*, *Lotus Bloom*)



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We had **Dragonstorm** decks internally, and they contained four copies of each of the above-named cards. They also contained four **Rite of Flame**, four **Seething Song**, and some number of additional Dragons. Some were mono-red, some were red-blue and had the expected amount of card filtering and drawing. So why didn't we think they were very good?

We never put in **Gigadrowse** or storage lands, and our **Dragonstorm** decks would fold to permission. **Gigadrowse** may seem so obvious now after nearly a year of action in Standard ("Duh, obviously you need **Gigadrowse** in a deck like this, how else can you beat counterspells?") but when the card first showed up and proved its power in the archetype, I'm sure many of you were as surprised as we were. It is player innovations like that that can turn a deck from one that R&D considers "cute but printable" to something we regret at this point in time. The deck is one of the best things going in Standard, no doubt about that, but as I mentioned earlier, we believe we've populated the environment with enough playable cards that players have what they need to fight against a top-tier combo deck like **Dragonstorm**, preventing it from running away with the format in an Affinity-like reign of terror.

Personally, I blame the storm mechanic. Nothing good ever came of that abomination.

Cards we had scoring similar to **Dragonstorm**: **Mystical Teachings**, **Opaline Sliver**
 Cards we had scoring similar to **Bogardan Hellkite**: **Funeral Charm**, **Wheel of Fate**
 Cards we had scoring similar to **Lotus Bloom**: **Psionic Blast**, **Dauthi Slayer**

Mystical Teachings was also quite underrated at the time; we discovered its power during the development of the block's later sets. We had **Lotus Bloom** as a good card, in the top 15 cards in the set, but it has shown itself to be top 5.

5) **Tendrils of Corruption**

It's unfair to call this one a total surprise to R&D, as we understood that the card would get better once **Urborg**, **Tomb of Yawgmoth** was in the environment, but it nonetheless vastly outperformed our prediction, for two reasons. One, we didn't understand the true power of **Mystical Teachings** (yes, we knew it got Teferi and then could get other creatures, but that didn't convince us) and two, by the time **Urborg** entered our environment, the FFL had fallen in love with **Greater Gargadon**, and **Tendrils'** life-gain aspect was severely hampered.

Cards we had scoring similar to **Tendrils of Corruption**: **Harmonic Sliver**, **Drifter // Dal**.

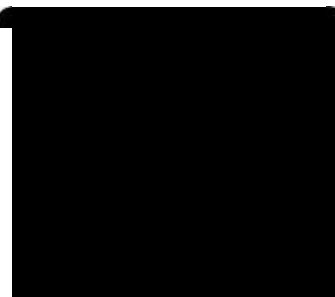


Five *Time Spiral* Cards That Showed Up Far Less Than We Thought

1) **Serra Avenger**

Many of us rated this the best Constructed card in the set. It was all over the FFL, we deemed it would be a staple of Constructed **Magic**, and we made it the full-frame Champs prize card. That's not quite how it has played out. One deck in all the Regionals Top 8s reported so far played **Serra Avenger**. That's the definition of a "fringe" card, not a top tier one. People have pointed out that **Plains** were a no-show at Regionals—that isn't by design. We believed we were giving white some excellent, excellent cards in this block.

Funnily enough, the Avenger has seen more play in Legacy—the format where 99% of all cards ever printed are legal—than it has in Standard.





2) Ancestral Vision

There were only eleven Ancestrals in all the Top 8ers' main decks. That's the same number as there were **Firemane Angels**, **Mystic Snakes**, or **Paladin en-Vecs**—fine Constructed cards all, but again, not close to tier one status.

I believe our high ranking of this card is due to our previous low ranking of the top card-drawer from the last block, **Compulsive Research**. We didn't give Research its due, and in a world without that particular card, Ancestral seems like a great deal. But with **Compulsive Research** in just about every blue-based deck, there's not a real need for anyone to play Ancestral. At least there were more Ancestrals than **Careful Considerations**.



3) Cancel

A count of twenty-four maindeck **Cancels** at Regionals puts it on par—in the current metagame—with each of the UrzaTron pieces and **Stone Rain**, all cards that were mighty within the past year. We pictured **Cancel** being played about as much as its slightly better predecessor, **Hinder**. But in this age of storm and efficient cheap creatures, a three-mana hard counter is not the answer control players need. I do expect **Cancel**—now confirmed to be returning in *Tenth Edition*—to be more useful in the future.



4) Magus of the Scroll

We thought the red Magus was the best one-drop we had given red in a long time, but **Scorched Rusalka** has proven itself to be the real victor in that race, with **Martyr of Ashes**, **Frenzied Goblin**, and—if you bend the rules a bit—**Greater Gargadon** showing up in higher numbers than Scroll Man.

What happens is that we tend to give the highest ratings to the cards with the most generic power. **Magus of the Scroll** is an efficient creature that gives aggro decks some good late game reach. That sounds powerful. But as real metagames take shape, cards need to fill much more specific roles than "generic power." The Rusalka and the Martyr are excellent against opponents' expected **Bridge from Below**, **Tendrils of Despair**, etc.—real cards that require real solutions.





5) Magus of the Disk

It certainly looks like an awesome creature, doesn't it? I suppose what happened here is that the Magus cycle was added to *Time Spiral* so late in development that we didn't get to run them through the normal number of months of playtesting, which may have shown us that the existence of both **Sudden Death** and **Char** in the metagame in high numbers due to the presence of **Loxodon Hierarch** and **Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir**, in addition to every non-toughness-based removal spell in the format, prevent the Magus from being a reliable board-sweeper. Or maybe he's a victim of other white cards also not being as good as we'd hoped.



Last Week's Poll:

Which part of magicthegathering.com do you read most regularly?		
Daily articles	3786	49.9%
Feature articles	1151	15.2%
Magic Arcana	1071	14.1%
Card of the Day	642	8.5%
Tournament coverage	513	6.8%
Ask Wizards	427	5.6%
Total	7590	100.0%

Interesting. Those of us that toil away on the daily columns appreciate the fact that so many of you tune in every day, and those of us that chronically forget to answer their "Ask Wizards" questions (*cough*) can feel justified that they have their priorities right.

This Week's Poll:

Where do you most often play Magic?

- At someone's house
- At a card/game/comic store
- At a tournament hall
- At school
- At work
- At a restaurant/bar/coffee shop
- Online
- Somewhere else

Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D; and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.



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