

A look at *Legends* playtest cards Instantly Start Fighting

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- **Elaine Chase, Research & Development Archive**

In preparation for *Legends* Week, the WotC staff combed the secret vaults in search of long forgotten treasures. One of the most interesting things we dug up is the set's original playtest files. As you can probably guess, a lot of things have changed since the days of *Legends* development.

Just glancing at the file, you can see drastic differences in the way card information is presented. The most visible difference is the use of pictures. For *Alpha*, Richard Garfield put simple pictures on the cards to help add flavor to the card and enable the playtesters to easily identify which cards were which. After checking around with the old timers here in R&D, we're pretty sure that the only sets to use pictures for playtesting were *Alpha*, *Legends*, *Ice Age*, and *Mirage*.

The next difference that jumps out is the way mana costs were written. In current development, we write out the mana cost just as it appears on the card. For example, **Serra Angel**'s cost (3 generic and 2 white) is written as "3WW" (3   ). For *Legends*, the costs were written out with the converted mana cost first, and then what the colored mana symbols are. Under this format, Serra's cost would be written as "5WW." The exception is cards that require no generic mana, like **Black Knight**. Black Knight's cost of   would be written as "BB" under both the old system and the new one. Another cost presentation difference is how an activation cost is shown. In current files, all activation costs are included in the card text, just as they appear in the finished product. For the *Legends* files, you'll notice that some cards have two numbers in the casting cost area. The first number is the mana cost and the second is the activation cost (look at Holy Ankh of Ra for an example of this).

There is also a lot of information missing from these files. Looking at the cards, there is no indication of rarity, color (usually you can figure this out from the mana cost, but what about the Kobolds?), creature type, or the super important R&D card code. This last one is something the public never sees, but is crucial to the design and development process. The code is made up of four parts: commonality, color, number, and set. For instance, the R&D card code for **Nantuko Shade** is RB06_MTGTOR. This means it is the sixth rare black card in **Magic's Torment** set. If I wanted to look up a particular blue uncommon card in, say, *Onslaught*, I'd just go to my file of *Onslaught* cards, flip to the blue section, then to the uncommons, and skim those until I found the card I was looking for. The R&D card code helps us ensure we have the right number of cards for the set in each color and commonality, makes it easier to find things, and allows us to pull groups of cards to compare easily.

The final big difference is the card wordings themselves. Even today, card designers and developers aren't perfect when we initially write out a card's text. When the development team is finished, there is a whole other team made up of editors and rules experts who figure out the precise wordings. We

call this process templating. Due to both the vast amount of experience the current designers and developers have with the game and how much more developed card templates are as a whole, we do tend to get a lot closer to what the final wording ends up being.

Lets take a look at one of the cards and compare the playtest wording, the way the card was actually printed, and what the current Oracle text says:

Oracle text:

Gaseous Form



Enchant Creature

Prevent all combat damage that would be dealt to and dealt by enchanted creature.

After all that prep work, here's the fun part! Let's take a look at two sheets of the actual cards from the file:

Banshee

If you think this card looks familiar, you're right. **Howl from Beyond** in *Alpha* is the exact same card, only in black instead of blue. Since blue isn't very good at pumping up creatures' power, it makes sense that this card got killed.

Kobold

This card got split off into three different cards for the set: **Crimson Kobolds**, **Crookshank Kobolds**, and **Kobolds of Kher Keep**. Note that in the playtest file, you don't know what color this guy is!

Phoenix

This is supposed to mean that on your next turn after it is put into the graveyard from play, it comes back into play tapped. It cleaned up during the development process into **Firestorm Phoenix**.

Gaseous Form

I discussed this one earlier.

Cyclops

A 5/4 ground guy is pretty big for blue. But at 6 mana, though, I don't think anyone is missing him. **Water Elemental** costs 5 and never gets played.

Hell Storm

The "five lives" on this card obviously means "5 life." But we'll see the use of "lives" in a more interesting way further on....

Genesis

This one is my favorite. Not only is it kind of strange for white to be turning lands into creatures and making them "instantly start fighting (!)," but I wonder how those tapped lands join in the fray.

Giant Bat

Three mana for a 2/2 flier is a pretty good deal. Compared to **Dusk Imp**, he's a winner.

Giant Sand Flea

All I have to say about this card is thank God it didn't get made. I would have been pretty unhappy to open up a 5 mana 1/1 creature with such a marginal ability. **Mesa Pegasus** is looking pretty strong right now.

Lycanthrope

This is a pretty cool concept for a creature. We actually used something similar to in on a card from *Visions* called **Lichentrope** (big groan for the pun). The summon Lycanthrope card in *Legends* turned out to be **Lesser Werewolf**.

Sphinx

A 4/5 flier is really out of flavor for green. Besides, the cool ability that ended up on **Petra Sphinx** is much more flavorful for a Sphinx, even if it isn't really a white ability.

Shield Wall

Red isn't very good at increasing toughness, so this card was correctly moved into white during development. Interestingly enough, Richard's original versions of **Castle** and **Holy Armor** were also red. There must have been an important decision early on to switch defensive cards from red to white.

Lifeblood

This card got significantly better during development. Even though it lost the bonus for Swamps, you don't have to pay a mana for it to work and the casting cost dropped by 2. Lifeblood as it got printed used to be my favorite multiplayer card. Of course, that's when multiplayer rules had it triggering on all opponents, not just one!

Summon Soul

This card ended up getting moved to blue, although if I had to pick a color for it to be in today, I would have to say green since green is very good at generating mana from creatures.

Dimensional Cube

This card would probably be broken if it didn't cost 7 mana. By then, it will let you play your 11- or 12-cost monsters instead of your 7- or 8-cost ones. When *Legends* was released, the most expensive creature with at least 4 generic mana in the cost was the mighty **Akron Legionnaire** at **6*****. Somehow, I'd rather just have the eighth land than the Cube. **Planar Gate** may have descended from Dimensional Cube after several iterations.

Holy Ankh of Ra and Unholy Ankh of Set

Here's our more interesting use of the term "life." What these card mean is that you can spend 4 mana and tap to put a counter on a white or black creature. You could then remove this counter to regenerate that creature. I'm unclear on if these were meant to affect all white or black creatures or just one target, since one of them uses the singular "creature" and the other uses the plural "creatures." We may never know....

Staff of Rule




I'm not really sure what this card does. I think it means that all non-creature artifacts are just "off" when it comes to anything they would do to the controller of this card. Its unclear weather or not artifacts can affect the controller's creatures or lands (does **Gauntlet of Might** do anything?) and lets

not even get into the paradox of this thing turning itself off! The development team was probably correct in killing it.

Foundation Entice

When I first looked at this card, I thought it was a green card similar to a number of blue cards that have been made throughout the years, such as **Brainstorm** and **Sleight of Hand**. Then I realized it was an enchantment, which was really confusing, because there is no activation cost. Aaron came to the rescue and pointed out that it turned into **Sylvan Library**. I could tell that he was laughing at me for not realizing it sooner, but I claim to still have been befuddled by Staff of Rule.

Time Slip

This is one cute card. I'm not sure if the cost means the caster is supposed to pay an extra   for each extra turn they want, or if you are just supposed to just count up the lands they have that would provide  and then divide that by 2 to figure it out. Either way, it's doubtful that the opponent would live through all of the caster's extra turns to be able to make use of the extra turns they would have coming.

Life Matrix

This original functionality had you paying 2 extra mana when you played a creature to give it a counter you could then remove later to regenerate. This is a pretty hefty price, especially since the artifact alone costs 7 mana. For the final version, the base cost was trimmed down while the activation went up. Still not a great card, but much better than the way it started out.

Mirror Universe

Clearly the most powerful card in the entire set prior to the *6th Edition* rules change, you can see that the original version cost a bit more than the Mirror we know and love. Was it too powerful? There was a time when you could tap your lands during your untap *before* you untapped them and then tap them again to take two points of mana burn per land, bringing yourself down to one life, and then tap your **City of Brass** during your upkeep for the extra one point of damage necessary to bring you down to 0 life before you swapped life totals with your opponent. That trick was so powerful that it dominated the Type 1 environment for quite some time, and it was so rules tricky that it spawned many an argument. But under the current rules set, it doesn't work.

Spellbind

A card designed in the grand tradition of **Chaos Orb**. Unlike the Orb or **Falling Star** (the only other card to be physically flipped over the playing area) Spellbind can be activated multiple times (on different turns, notice that this enchantment taps!). **Chaos Orb** and **Falling Star** have been banned from tournament play for many, many years due to the physical constraints it placed on game play. When they were legal, there were all kinds of weird tournament rules to support them. For instance, if the Orb was in play, all cards in play couldn't be moved from their particular spot on the table and any new cards to come into play would have to stay where their caster put them. I spent many a game with my Moat pushed off as far away from the rest of my cards as possible, right on the edge of the table to make it more difficult to hit. Another popular strategy was to push your cards as close to your opponent's as possible so that if they tried to hit your cards with the Orb, they would likely hit their own as well. There have even been reports of players taping their cards to the wall behind them or using things like tokens or even record player covers to shield their cards from getting hit. And then there was the tech of how to actually flip the card in the first place. My husband, Kierin, got so good at it that he could make the Orb land on a dime. Due to the general annoyingness of playing in an Orb-infested environment, the varying size of table space given to players during tournaments, and how

undercosted the Orb was in the first place, both flipping cards were banned fairly early on. This one would have had the same fate, so it's probably just as well it didn't get made.

Odd Skew

This is one odd card indeed. Luckily, I sit next to Skaff Elias, one of the *Legends* development team members, and I was able to ask him how this was supposed to work. He claims that it should have looked at each "packet" of damage (that used to be a real rules term), and if that packet was an odd amount, it would be prevented. However, it is very likely that other team members thought that you added up how much damage you took all turn, and if that number was odd, you got to gain it all back as if it never happened. Talk about confusing! This card was actually mirrored in the file with Even Skew, which worked exactly the same (how ever that was), but prevented even damage instead of odd. These two cards definitely cross the threshold of how confusing a card can be, so they rightfully got axed.

Comments? Email editor@wizards.com.