

[Products](#)
[Gameplay](#)
[Rules](#)
[Help](#)
[Learn to Play](#)
[Fun Stuff](#)

Daily Articles

Making Magic Monday, August 19, 2002

Free Play

The design of APC cards



Mark Rosewater

Welcome to Alternate Play Cost Week! For those unfamiliar with the term Alternate Playing Cost (or APC), it refers to cards that can be played for no mana if you pay an alternate cost. Famous examples of APC cards would be **Force of Will** (from *Alliances*), **Fireblast** (from *Visions*) and **Gush** (from *Mercadian Masques*). This week we'll be examining how the APC cards came to be and what impact they've had on **Magic**.



As this is a design column, I thought I'd spend my time this week talking about some of the rules to designing APC cards. They are not as simple as they might initially appear to be. To do this, let's start by taking a quick peak back at where APC cards came from.

Tapped Out

After my *Arabian Nights* column ("It Happened One *Nights*"), I received a letter from Chris Page (one of the "East Coast Playtesters" that designed *Antiquities*, *Fallen Empires*, *Ice Age*, and *Alliances*). Chris had written to me to fill in some of the gaps in my story. While corresponding with him, I realized that Chris had copies of some old correspondence (during the playtest of Alpha) that he was kind enough to share with me. In it, are many different letters between Richard Garfield and numerous playtesters (Chris, Skaff Elias, Jim Lin, etc.) In one letter is a little blurb that I believe is the kernel of the APC spells.

Richard writes:

*Cantrips) I may have brought these up before but the more I consider them the more I like them. Cantrips are spells that no one plays with now and other weak spells. The casting cost is merely a color land in play, they DON'T cost mana. Hence they can surprise your opponent when they think you can't cast anything. When played you immediately replace them from the deck, so that the typical "well, this armor *could* have been a giant" is done away with, they could affect your card flow if you are having land trouble, but otherwise it almost can't hurt playing with them. A 'part' cantrip might actually be used.*

It's interesting to note that "cantrips" would go on to be only part of what Richard described, and the other part became APC spells.

Magic is a game about breaking the rules. One of the keys to creating new concepts is to find some aspect of the game that seems very established and then create a mechanic that plays against conventional wisdom. Richard and the playtesters early on stumbled upon the fact that a player who was tapped out revealed his vulnerability. If a player had no mana, then he was

Mon, Feb 10

A Day in the Life
A "Choose Your Own Adventure"
by Mark Rosewater

Sat, Feb 8

Saturday School #14
What about Phage with Humility?
by Rune Horvik

Fri, Feb 7

The Past and Future of White
Old favorites and new directions
by Randy Buehler

Thu, Feb 6

An Interesting Gate
Resurrecting Birds and Clerics
by Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar

Wed, Feb 5

Deconstructing White Weenie
Remaking an old favorite with new cards
by Brian David-Marshall

Tue, Feb 4

Sugar and Spice...?
White need not be so nice
by Anthony Alongi

Search

incapable of messing with his opponent. The earliest alternate playing cost spells were an attempt to buck this convention.

Flash to several years later (fall of 1995). On my very first day as an R&D member, I was tossed into an *Alliances* development team meeting. Unlike teams of modern day that number four or five, the *Alliances* development team consisted of every R&D member (and a few that weren't) that wasn't one of the designers. About fourteen people in all. By the time I had arrived, *Alliances* was in full swing. I remember looking through the file for the first time. I knew right away what the set's hit was going to be: the pitch cards. More specifically, *Force of Will* (then known as "Stop Spell"). The designers of *Alliances* (Skaff Elias, Jim Lin, Chris Page, Dave Pettey) had taken Richard's inkling of a "free" spell and worked out the kinks.

Da Rules

This is where the topic gets interesting. What exactly did the *Alliances* design team figure out? What were the kinks?

First, is the most basic problem of APC cards. **Magic**, through color diversity, has been carefully balanced. Players are pulled in different directions to get the effects they want. If players are allowed to splash any effect in any deck then the whole color wheel would come tumbling down. The glue holding everything together is mana. If you want to play a **Counterspell**, you need blue mana. APC cards, though, circumvent the use of mana. *Force of Will*, for example, lets you counter a spell without blue mana. This meant that the *Alliances* designers had to find a different way to insure that a red mage couldn't splash a counterspell.



Second, the designers wanted the pitch cards to work in the early turns of the game. In fact, one of the goals of *Force of Will* was to create a counterspell that could stop a threat even before a player had taken a turn. "Swamp, Mox, Mox, Lotus, Dark Ritual – Mind Twist you for seven." "Uh, no."

Third, the designers had to come up with effects that were beneficial when tapped out, yet not fundamentally broken when used aggressively. And, of course, fourth, they wanted to do all this as elegantly as possible. The fact that they accomplished all these tasks

is a sign of their strength as designers.

Since we all know the outcome, I thought I would walk through some of the thought processes they must have had. Be aware that I was not involved in this process so I am speculating what areas I assumed they would have covered. The second goal is the most restrictive so I believe that is where they would have started. If you want to have an alternate cost before you've played a card, what resources are available to you? Two obvious ones jump to mind, the resources you start the game with: life total and cards in hand. There are some other possibilities (giving up future draws/turns, granting resources to the opponent, etc.) but these two are clearly the most elegant.

The life total's biggest stumbling block is that it doesn't allow any simple way to address the color issue. Cards in hand, though, have an elegant solution. Cards are colored. If I'm playing a red deck, I don't have access to blue cards. Thus pitch cards could be alternately played by discarding a card of the appropriate color. Ironically, during development, the *Alliances* development team ended up using both cards and life as an alternate cost as the just card version of *Force of Will* proved too strong.

Once the team knew how the pitch cards would be played, they had to come up with attractive effects that weren't degenerate. Since the team wanted the cards to be reactionary (so you could surprise your opponent when you're tapped out), the cards had to be instants. But what kind of instants?

Let's take *Pyrokinesis* as an example. Red's major theme has always been direct damage. Direct damage is often at instant speed. It makes perfect sense that the first place to look for a red pitch card would be a direct damage spell. Traditionally, red direct damage spells are versatile enough to hit both creatures and players. But hitting players causes problems. Imagine that *Pyrokinesis* dealt 4 damage to target creature or player. A deck of nothing but *Pyrokinesis* could deal 12

damage to the opponent's head before either player drew. It would deal 4 more damage after the first card is drawn, and it would win the game by turn three. Pitch cards were made to add an element of surprise, not speed up the game. (Although as we will see, this goal was not always accomplished.)

As such, the *Alliances* designers carefully picked cards that would be reactive as opposed to proactive. *Pyrokinesis* and *Contagion* kill creatures. *Force of Will* and *Scars of the Veteran* stop spells and damage respectively. *Bounty of the Hunt*, the most aggressive of the cards, is as much a means of saving your creatures as it is of speeding up your attack, and even then is at a slow enough rate to avoid easy third turn kills.

Better Late Than Never

If the *Alliances* designers showed the early advantage of APC cards, the *Mirage/Visions* design team (Bill Rose, Joel Mick, Charlie Catino, Don Felice, Elliot Segal, and Howard Kahlenberg) explored the opposite end of the spectrum. As the game progresses, the player accumulates more and more resources in play. What if there were APC cards that used those resources? According to Bill Rose, co-lead design of *Mirage/Visions*, *Fireblast* was originally designed to be a card that made use of unneeded lands in play. (Yeah, it didn't quite end up being used that way, but designers often find mechanics shifted in use by players.)

By exploring the other side of the coin, the *Mirage* designers opened up a whole new area of alternate costs. Players could sacrifice or bounce colored permanents of the appropriate type. They could sacrifice or bounce corresponding basic lands. They could remove colored cards in other zones such as the graveyard. In addition, these resources allowed some more aggressive effects as a player did not have access to these resources until later in the game.

Behind the Masques

The next big innovation came during the design of *Mercadian Masques*. The design team (Mike Elliott, Bill Rose and myself) planning to revisit pitch spells, decided to take a more in depth look at APC cards. Having learned a lot from the APC cards of the past, the design team played around with numerous new twists: APC cards as color hosers, APC cards that required you to grant the opponent a resource, pitch cards that pitched basic lands instead of colored cards, etc.

The most interesting part of *Masques* design for me was learning how rich the design area of APC cards actually are. Yes, it's fraught with dangers, and yes, R&D has a history of undervaluing how good they are. But, I believe it's a staple area of card design that we will visit again and again.

Hopefully, my short jaunt through the mechanic will give you some insight into how many complex decisions go into making a card as elegant as *Force of Will*.




These three cards show different tweaks on the APC mechanic used in the Masques block."

Join me next week when I show off the baby pictures of some famous **Magic** cards.

Until then, may you have a devilish smile on your face whenever you're tapped out.

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

Discuss this article on the [message boards](#). 

MagicTheGathering.com Recent Content

- Sketches: Bloodstoke Howler *Mon, Feb 10*
- A Day in the Life *Mon, Feb 10*
- Saturday School #14 *Sat, Feb 8*
- The Top 50 White Cards *Fri, Feb 7*
- The Past and Future of White *Fri, Feb 7*
- Arcana: Jamuraan Lion *Fri, Feb 7*
- Arcana: White mana symbol *Thu, Feb 6*

Full Archive



[WHAT'S NEW](#) [CORPORATE INFO](#) [WHERE TO BUY](#) [INTERNATIONAL](#) [SUPPORT](#) [SITEMAP](#) [PRODUCT LIBRARY](#)

© 1995-2003 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.
[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)