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Making Magic Monday, September 9, 2002

Wait, There's Morph

The design of the morph mechanic



Mark Rosewater

Welcome to the first week of the *Onslaught* previews! In particular, welcome to Morph Week! Before, I begin, I feel obligated to mention what I consider one of the most fun preview features here at MagicTheGathering.com, the [Orb of Insight](#). Type in a word and the Orb will tell you how many times that word appears on *Onslaught* cards. The Orb does not count flavor text but it does count the title, card type line, rules text, and artist info. If you haven't checked it out, I recommend you do. Although, read my column first.

This week I'll be talking about the design of one of the more innovative mechanics we've done in a long time. If you're unfamiliar with what morph is or how it works, feel free to take a look at [Snapping Thragg](#), today's preview card. If you'd like a more in depth explanation, take a gander at Rules Manager [Paul Barclay's article](#) from last Friday.



Mask Wizards

Morph's origin starts ten years ago when Richard Garfield was designing Alpha. You have to remember back then that Magic was not the game it has become today. When Richard was designing it, he had no idea that it would become the defining game it has since metamorphed into. Back then it was just a cool, new, innovative card game. As such, Richard didn't worry about rules ramifications or tournament issues. This allowed him to make some pretty freaky cards: [Chaos Orb](#), [Word of Command](#), [Illusionary Mask](#). The latter was Richard exploring a theme that he has revisited over the years, bluffing. (As I've explained in this column before, Richard's love of bluffing lead him to create *Tempest's Cursed Scroll*.)

What if, he thought, players did not have all the information about creatures in play. Usually, the defender has the advantage as he gets to find out what creatures are attacking before he declares blockers. [Illusionary Mask](#) changed that. Now the attacking player knew more than the defending player. Things got shook up a bit.

Magic Rules

Flash forward seven or so years. **Magic** has matured and now we have to care about things like rules ramifications and tournament issues. So what happens to those wacky cards Richard threw into Alpha to add some extra fun? It falls into the lap of the Rules Team. The Rules Team is the group of people responsible for making sure the rules work. When rules issues arise, they get passed along to the Rules Team to come up with an official answer. In addition, the Rules Team has the responsibility of making sure all the cards that have ever been printed actually work. So, a little over a year ago, they were presented with [Illusionary Mask](#) (and [Camouflage](#)).

At the time, the Rules Team consisted of six members: Paul Barclay, Elaine Chase, Brady Dommermuth, Jeff Donais, Mike Donais and Collin Jackson. Paul Barclay, as the Rules Manager, oversees the Rules Team. Elaine Chase and Mike Donais both work in R&D. Jeff Donais is the manager of the DCI. And Collin Jackson is a level four judge with an insane ability to remember and comprehend rules.

Now **Illusionary Mask** presented all sorts of issues. The biggest problem was the existence of unknown information. For example, lets say a player puts a **Scathe Zombies** (a 2/2 black creature) face down with **Illusionary Mask**. Now the opponent, unaware that it's a **Scathe Zombies**, attempts to **Terror** it. Except a **Terror** cannot target a non-black creature. But they don't know that until they **Terror** it. In the olden days, players would have to say things like this:

"I **Terror** your creature."

"No, you don't."

"Why?"

"You can't."

"Why can't I?"

"Because you can't. The creature has some quality that keeps you from **Terroring** it."

"Is it black? Does it have untargetability? Is it an artifact creature? Why can't I **Terror** it?"

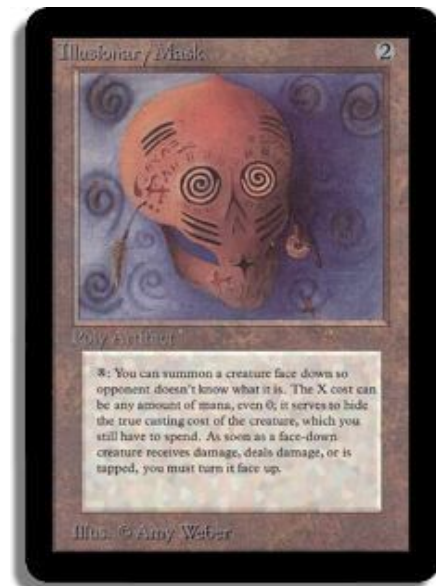
"That information isn't public yet."

The Rules Team solved this problem with an interesting idea. What if a face down creature had defined qualities? That way while it was upside down, you would know whether or not you could **Terror** it. And then there was some way (probably by paying mana) that you could turn the face down creature face up and have it turn into the creature it actually was.



Design of the Times

If this were a movie, we'd now cut away to a design meeting. While the Rules Team was busy solving the **Illusionary Mask** puzzle, the *Onslaught* design team (comprised of Mike Elliott and Mike Donais) were solving a problem of their own. During design, the designers try out new mechanics. A mechanic can look good on paper but until you play with it you just don't know how good it is. R&D has created numerous mechanics that while interesting theoretically prove to not be fun in actual play.



Mike and Mike had a problem. One of the mechanics they had chosen was proving unpopular in playtest. It needed to be replaced. For the scene in question, Mike Elliott had actually pulled me into a meeting room to pick my brain for new ideas. Now, here's where things get interesting. At Wizards, we have two meeting rooms that share a wall. Mike and I were in one room while the Rules Team was in the other.

One of the ongoing discussions in R&D is who has the loudest voice. The standing champion for a long time was a man named Shawn Carnes who was nicknamed Captain Volume. (Shawn incidentally had a pet phrase "Bad Touch" that was anagrammed to create the card **Chub Toad** in *Ice Age*.) Since Shawn's departure, there seems to be two candidates for the honor. Robert Gutschera, the current head of the 8th Edition design team, and myself. I'm not sure who's louder, but I am told that people who want to find me usually can if they just listen carefully.

The reason this is important is that the Rules Team heard me talking to Mike. By then they had figured out that the fix for **Illusionary Mask** had potential to be its own mechanic. All excited, Jeff Donais ran next door to fill Mike and I in on their discovery. At the time, the Rules Team was pitching the idea that all face down creatures would be vanilla (meaning having no abilities) 1/1 colorless creatures. Also, they had come up with the idea of a morph cost that would convert the creature into its natural state. (At the time, by the way, morph was called stealth.) Mike wasn't sure. 1/1 creatures seemed too fragile and the entire mechanic appeared ripe for cheating issues. All in all, Mike didn't think it was the answer to our problem. I, on the other hand, disagreed.

This Is Only a Playtest

A while back I learned an important lesson here in R&D. Talk is cheap. I could waste hours talking about why I liked something (and I have a long history of doing just that), but nothing could prove my point like just making the cards and getting people to play. So, I designed some morph cards and made up stickers.

The first change I made was that I turned the face down creatures into 2/2 creatures. I agreed with Mike that 1/1 was just too fragile. We wanted players to be encouraged to attack with these creatures and an army of 1/1s was too easily shut down. Three mana made sense for a 2/2 as I knew from experience that a **Gray Ogre** was weak but not useless in limited. In addition, I tried to design a number of different morph creatures that took advantage of the surprise value of morph. In addition, I varied their size to play up the unknown quantity of blocking a morph creature. Some morph creatures you wanted to block and others you didn't. When I was done, I had two two-color decks each with six morph creatures (three of each color). I chose six because I was trying to create the level I expected morph creatures to appear in limited play.

I then took these two decks and started playing them with all of R&D. Morph was fun and it instantly became obvious playing with the cards. Even Mike realized this when he played with the decks. (I would like to point out that one of R&D's best qualities is its ability to realize that it had misjudged something.) He still had some issues of concern (some of which Randy will discuss on Friday), but we felt the mechanic was cool and fun enough that development could solve these other issues.

What A Long Strange Trip It's Been

So, how did morph get created? Because R&D tweaked a Rules Team solution to a wacky card created by Richard Garfield in Alpha. I want to point out that the real innovation of the mechanic comes from the Rules Team. The idea that face down creatures have their own defined qualities is quite "out of the box" thinking. It seems obvious once you hear it but it requires a creative leap to get there in the first place. As such, I like to think of morph as the first mechanic designed by the Rules Team. I joke that I'll keep on making wacky cards to give them more opportunities to create mechanics in the future.


That's all for the design side. Check in this Friday with Randy to hear about how morph morphed through development.

And next week, join me when I talk about how cycling cycled its way back into **Magic**.

Until then, may the face down creature be a 1/1 and not a 9/9.

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