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Look Ma, No Mana

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Ahoy there, matey! Once again you've joined our cast here at MagicTheGathering.com. This week I'm looking at the history of cards with an alternate play cost. These are the spells which can be played by ways and means other than the mana cost printed in their upper right hand corner. So without further ado, let's cast off to see which spells are out there!

NETHER SHADOW

Our beginning point on this voyage isn't a card with an alternate play cost at all—there's no way for **Nether Shadow** to be played from your hand to the table on its own aside from adding two black mana to your mana pool and putting him gingerly onto the table. It's the ability of this undead spirit to come back into play under certain conditions—for no mana—which looks similar to APC's (alternate play cards). Surely the mechanic on this card inspired the set of five cards to follow a few brief sets down the road in *Alliances*.



I'LL TAKE ONE

Alliances was the first **Magic** expansion set to be designed expressly as a part of a block. It used the mechanics from *Ice Age* such as snow-covered lands and cumulative upkeep. While **Storm Elemental** and **Splintering Wind** are all but forgotten by modern-day players, the new mechanic that debuted in *Alliances* revolutionized the game. The concept was ingeniously simple: instead of paying the mana costs of this cycle of five and six mana cost cards, a player could remove a card of a similar color from the game, possibly lose a life, and play the card for free (as far as mana was concerned).

These initial five were a huge success. **Scars of the Veteran**, **Bounty of the Hunt**, **Pyrokinesis**, **Contagion**, and **Force of Will** all saw considerable play, with the last becoming a staple in nearly every format in which it appeared. Suddenly each color could perform while tapped out of mana: white could save itself/its creatures, green could give size bonuses, red and black could kill creatures, and blue could play **Counterspell** from a particularly vulnerable board position. It was, and still is, this last card which has proved the most troublesome over the years. We'll explore why a little later in the article, but just keep in mind for now that while all of these five were good, **Force of Will** might have been a little TOO good.

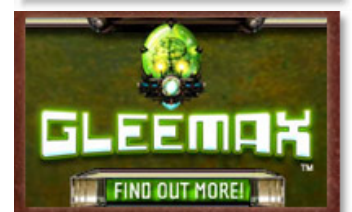
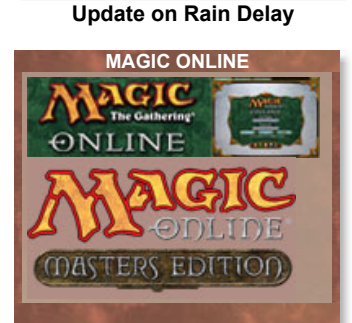
HERE AND THERE

These cards showed up sporadically over the course of the next few blocks. *Visions* produced **Fireblast**, which immediately became a fixture in fast red decks. *Weatherlight* gave black mages **Spinning Darkness**, the first alternate play card which used the graveyard as a resource. Then came *Stronghold*.

Dream Halls isn't an alternate play card in and of itself, but it turns every spell in your hand into a neo-*Alliances* pitch card. The mechanic finally blew wide open over the course of the next year, with combo decks feature **Mana Vault**, **Dream Halls** and card drawing engines dominating the post *Tolarian Academy/Memory Jar* tournament scene. **Dream Halls** decks became all the rage, and drew the banning of the namesake card of the deck. This came just in time for the mass-reintroduction of this mechanic in the *Masques* Block.

EVERYBODY JUST WANTS TO BE FREE

Mercadian Masques used alternate play cost as one of the block mechanics, and explored it more fully than it had been in the past. Each color had a standard alternate cost, along with two cycles of hoser cards and a pitch-card cycle similar to the *Alliances* cycle. Black sacrificed creatures (**Dark Triumph**, **Delraich**, **Mind Swords**) or paid life (**Rouse**, **Snuff Out**). Green gave life to the opponent (**Invigorate**, **Reverent Silence**, **Skyshroud Cutter**) or revealed its hand (**Land Grant**). Red sacrificed lands (**Crash**, **Downhill Charge**, **Mogg Alarm**, **Pulverize**, **Thunderclap**). White tapped its own creatures (**Angelic Favor**, **Lashknife**, **Orim's Cure**, **Ramosian Rally**, **Sivvi's Valor**). Blue returned lands to its hand (**Daze**, **Ensnare**, **Gush**, **Thwart**, **Tidal Bore**).



The two color hose cycles (one in *Masques* and one in *Nemesis*) finally introduced cards which could be played for free... under the right circumstances. The Legate cycle from *Masques* were creatures which were free if you controlled the correct land and your opponent controlled an opposing one. A similar cycle hosed the opposite way along the color wheel, except this time with spells.

A final cycle of APC cards came in *Prophecy*, the last set of the *Masques* block. This time around, each color could pitch a land appropriate to the card's color (or in blue's case with *Foil*, a island plus another card) in order to avoid paying mana for a spell.

LOTS OF PEOPLE GOTTS THE BLUES

Unfortunately, alternate play cost cards went a long way towards making blue a bit overpowered. Since blue's main strategy is reactive, part of the inherent weakness of the color is that when blue taps out, it's powerless to stop whatever the opponent throws out on the table. *Force of Will* changed the way blue was played—previously a board of tapped Islands meant you could go for it. Now it meant that your game breaking play might be stopped at the cost of a card in hand and a single life.

As if *Force of Will* didn't change the dynamic of the entire color enough, *Masques* block added FOUR more "free" counterspells to blue's repertoire. *Thwart*, *Misdirection*, *Daze*, and *Foil* all worked in the same way as *Force of Will*, but with two (*Daze/Thwart*) coming at the cost of tempo instead of life and a card. Of these, *Misdirection* (the closest to *Force of Will* in regular mana cost and alternate play cost) proved the most troublesome for non-blue players. Red began getting "uncounterable" spells such as *Urza's Rage*, and *Misdirection* provided blue a way to deal with these spells, even when tapped out. Gush gave blue a "free" card-drawing card, which worked very well when combined with *Foil*, or in decks which could play multiple lands a turn with *Exploration*. In fact, part of the problem with blue was that returning lands to your hand (blue's alternate cost for the block) could often be exploited to an advantage!



For a very long time, *Force of Will* stood on the brink of being banned in the Extended format. Some argued that it was the only card keeping combo decks in check, since you could counter a person's attempt at "going off" on turn two or three. Other players claimed it was an enabler for broken blue decks, since the color wasn't meant to be able to counter while tapped out, much less counter a spell on the opponent's turn one when the player with the *Force of Will* hadn't even had a turn yet!

PLAYED OUT

Even with the problems with blue, the alternate play cost mechanic has proven to be one of the better ones, as a vast majority of the cards were playable in one constructed format or another (Extended, Type 2, or Block), and were very popular with the players. *Judgment* saw some alternate flashback costs (such as *Battle Screech* and *Prismatic Strands*), showing that R&D still has at least the spirit of APC cards in mind. I wouldn't be at all surprised to see these types of cards making another appearance in the not horribly distant **Magic** future.

As a sidenote, I suppose it is possible to call *Basking Rootwala* an APC card, since there is a way to get it into play that does not involve mana. Imagine if it had the text "If you control a *Wild Mongrel*, you may play *Basking Rootwala* without paying its mana cost." Almost the same thing. But here are the traditional APC cards:

Expansion	Alternate Playing Cost Cards				
	White	Blue	Black	Red	Green
<i>Alliances</i>	Scars of the Veteran	Force of Will	Contagion	Pyrokinesis	Bounty of the Hunt
<i>Visions</i>				Fireblast	
<i>Weatherlight</i>			Spinning Darkness		
<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Cho-Arrim Legate, Orim's Cure, Ramosian Rally, Reverent Mantra	Gush, Misdirection, Saprazzan Legate, Thwart, Tidal Bore	Deepwood Legate, Delraich, Rouse, Snuff Out, Unmask	Cave-In, Crash, Kyren Legate, Pulverize, Thunderclap	Invigorate, Land Grant, Rushwood Legate, Vine Dryad
<i>Nemesis</i>	Angelic Favor, Lashknife, Sivvi's Ruse, Sivvi's Valor	Daze, Ensnare, Submerge	Dark Triumph, Massacre, Mind Swords	Downhill Charge, Mogg Alarm, Mogg Salvage	Refreshing Rain, Reverent Silence, Skyshroud Cutter
<i>Prophecy</i>	Abolish	Foil	Outbreak	Flameshot	Snag

Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by *StarCityGames.com*, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.



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