

The long, slow creation of Magic's first block A Three-Year *Mirage*

Bill Rose, head of Research & Development

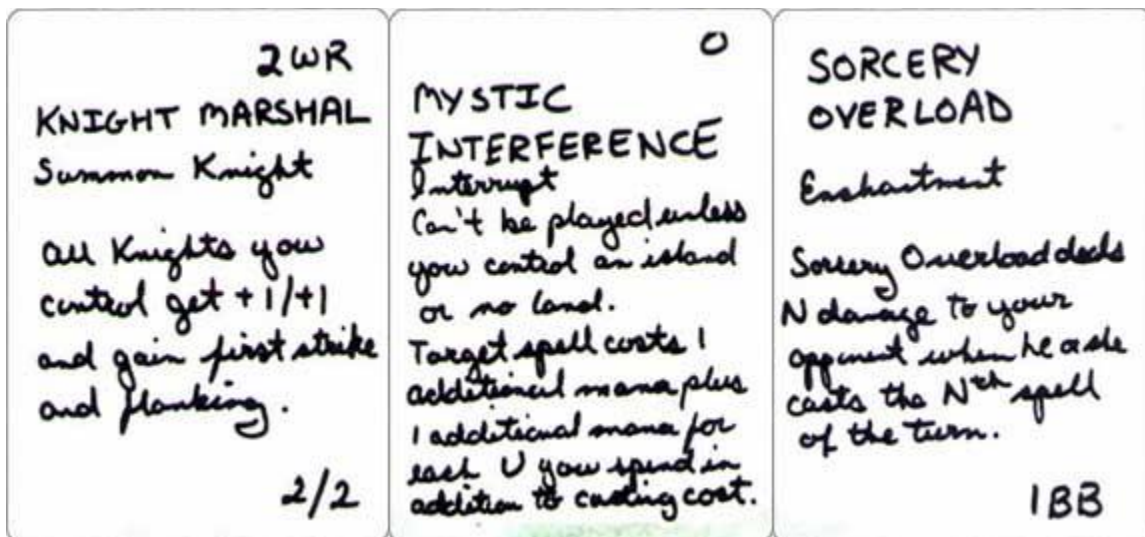
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- [Bill Rose, head of Research & Development Archive](#)

To talk about the *Mirage* set we need to go back to **Magic's** beginning. In 1991, Richard Garfield had a large group of gamers at the University of Pennsylvania playtesting his new game concept – **Magic: The Gathering**. Richard would print cards every couple months and give each playtester about 60 cards. We traded, played some cross between Constructed and Sealed Deck, suggested changes to Richard, and designed our own **Magic** cards. Richard would listen to our suggestions, watch us play, then make changes to his card set and give us new decks to play with. This continued for over a year, then Alpha playtesting stopped and **Magic's** first set was sent to the printer. The ending of the Alpha playtest didn't end the playtesters' addiction to **Magic**, but there were no more new **Magic** cards. One group of playtesters – Charlie Catino, Joel Mick, Howard Kahlenberg, Don Felice, Elliott Segal, and your author – continued to play by printing our own card set, which was a combination of Alpha and our own ideas. We called the set "the Menagerie," which would later be named *Mirage*.

In 1993, ideas about what **Magic** would become seem inconceivable now. It was believed most people wouldn't see all the rare cards. That's the way Alpha playtesting worked. If you didn't play games against a particular playtester, you wouldn't see his rare cards. You would only hear stories about great power or weirdness. It was also believed Alpha would eventually be retired and completely replaced by other sets. The first replacement set was to be *Ice Age* and the second, *Mirage*.



Some early *Mirage* playtest cards.

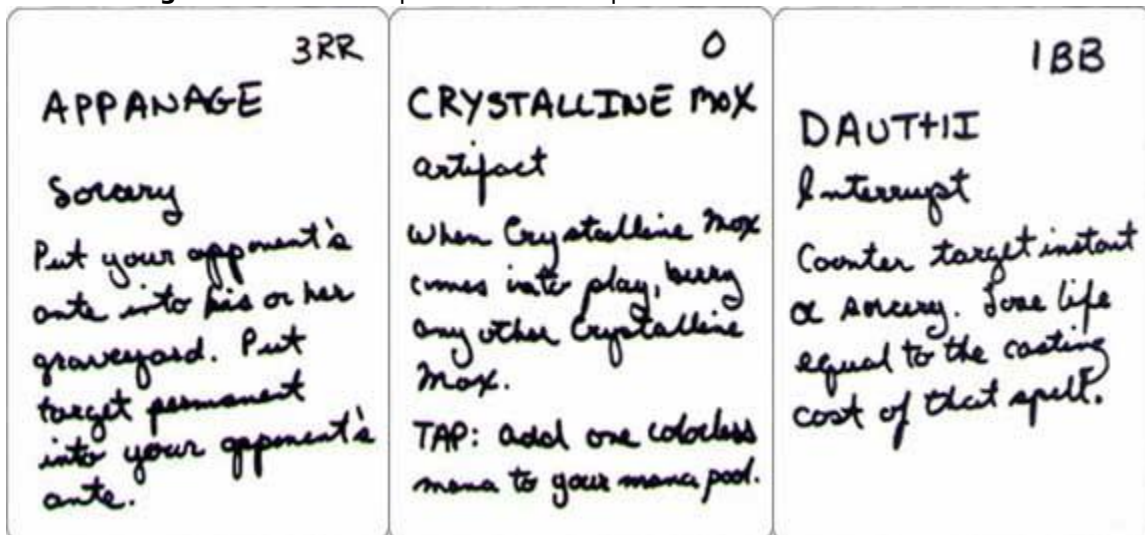
The Long Road

Mirage wasn't "designed" as much as it evolved. *Mirage* started as primarily a copy of Alpha with changes the *Mirage* designers wanted to see made to Alpha cards plus some new card ideas of our own. *Mirage* started as what the designers thought Alpha should have been. Back before Alpha was released I knew [Ancestral Recall](#) was too strong, and so *Mirage* would have a correctly costed [Ancestral Recall](#). (I also thought the [Circles of Protection](#) were too strong and [Balance](#) was just fine, but I prefer not to remember that part.)

Over time, *Mirage* continued to evolve and gained its own identity, although I'm not sure when the exact turning point was. Today's sets are designed in a couple months. *Mirage* was designed at a more leisurely pace – three years, from Winter 1992 through Fall 1995. *Mirage* was in design longer than any other set in **Magic's** history.

From the beginning, *Mirage* was built with Limited as the primary play pattern. We drafted often and many changes were made to improve Sealed Deck. *Mirage* went through a number of design experiments. The one I remember most is the 3/3 experiment. We made "Hill Giants" available at common in all colors. Everyone had an army of big men. That experiment only lasted a week.

As *Mirage* grew from Alpha, we added flanking and phasing as the two primary new mechanics. We also incorporated ideas that circled among the Alpha playtesters – [multi-colored cards](#), [cantrips](#), and [cumulative upkeep](#). Twists were added to core cards to make *Mirage* different from Alpha. By this stage in *Mirage* design, it was clear Alpha wasn't going away. We had to start thinking of *Mirage* as an expansion to **Magic** rather than a replacement for all previous sets.



More early *Mirage* playtest cards.

The Mechanics

Flanking was *Mirage's* first major departure from Alpha. The design team had a goal to make three-mana 2/2 creatures playable. The consensus among the original playtesters was that 2/2 creatures for

three mana are among the worst cards in **Magic**. We had [Pearled Unicorn](#), [Scathe Zombies](#), and [Grey Ogre](#) copies in an early version of *Mirage* and were not inspired by their presence. With the addition of flanking, *Mirage's* 2/2 creatures instantly went from bad to good. As an homage to all the original bad 2/2 creatures, *Mirage* had a three-mana 2/2 artifact creature with no abilities called "[Horrible Hordes](#)." (At one point, we also had a 2/2 artifact creature with no abilities for *four* mana called "Really Horrible Hordes.") In the end, the development team couldn't stomach making the designer's version of [Horrible Hordes](#), so they added "rampage 1."

My Favorites from *Mirage*

Before writing this article, I looked through my *Mirage* card collection. It was fun seeing old favorites again. My all-time favorite *Mirage* card must be [Polymorph](#), as I love the gamble. [Celestial Dawn](#) is another favorite. At heart, I'm basically a Timmy. I play more colors than I should because I love to play the good stuff. [Celestial Dawn](#) was designed to let you play all colors without color screw. I also enjoy the "[Feral Shadow](#), [Breathstealer](#), and [Urborg Panther](#) become [Spirit of the Night](#)" combo. I love the flavor of [Infernal Contract](#). One of the *Mirage* developers first thought [Infernal Contract](#) was the most broken card in *Mirage*. Now whenever I design a set, I try to put in a ☠☠☠ spell that costs half your life. I'm proud of [Kaervek's Torch](#). I like keeping blue's countering under control. And [Unyaro Bee Sting](#) also caught my attention when I looked through *Mirage*. When I designed it, I didn't think much of the card. Little did I know [Unyaro Bee Sting](#) would be the subject of numerous heated debates in R&D. For the record, I still think [Unyaro Bee Sting](#) is a fine card for green to have.

Phasing was *Mirage's* second new named mechanic. Phasing didn't turn out as well as I had originally envisioned. Give me a time machine and I'd buy Microsoft stock cheap and eliminate phasing.

– Bill Rose

The concept of phasing worked when playing with Alpha cards... well, worked as well as [Word of Command](#) did. In the early days of **Magic**, designers relied on players playing the cards with intuition, which led to abominations like phasing and *Fifth Edition* rules. *Mirage's* expansion set – *Visions* – made creatures with comes-into-play abilities popular and exposed the fatal flaw in phasing. In retrospect, I still like the *intent* of phasing. Would you rather have a 3/3 creature every turn or a 5/5 every other turn? It's an interesting choice.

Putting it All Together

In October 1995, *Mirage* left design and was sent to Wizards of the Coast for development. I left Philadelphia and went to Wizards with *Mirage*. *Mirage* was a first in many ways. It was a first for me as a designer. The *Mirage* block was the first real **Magic** block. (I don't count the retrofitted *Ice Age* – *Homelands* – *Alliances* block, which was never intended to be a block.) *Mirage* was also the first set to have its creative direction headed by someone other than the designers.

For all the early sets, designers named cards and wrote flavor text. One rule we were told was no anagrams, which means no names that are just mixed-up versions of other words. The editors hated anagrams. So what did we do? We anagrammed "anagram" when creating the story's main character, [Mangara](#). Other such silliness followed. One of the designers loved the football player William "The Refrigerator" Perry and suggested we each take a nickname after a household appliance. He was immediately dubbed "Mr. Toilet," after which none of the other designers took a nickname. Then we anagrammed Mr. Toilet to get [Telim'Tor](#). In the end, almost all the cards were renamed, and for the better. We've had professional namers every since.

As for the overall look and feel of the set... **Mirage** was not designed with an African theme in mind. The set was designed to play **Magic** and the set's flavor wasn't given much thought during design. I always assumed *Mirage* would be classic fantasy like Alpha was. At the time I arrived at Wizards, a new director was appointed to **Magic** – Sue Ann Harkey. Sue Ann asked me if I had any plans for *Mirage's* setting. I told Sue Ann to create whatever setting she wanted. Sue Ann chose an African jungle setting, and she did a great job. *Mirage* stands apart of the rest of **Magic** with its own look and feel. I've always loved that.



As I designer I've been involved in every set beginning with *Mirage* – 26 sets total, including *Unglued* and yet to be published sets. Current **Magic** designs are superior to early creations like *Mirage*. But *Mirage* remains one of my favorite sets.