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Someday My Imprints Will Come

Customize your machines *Mirrodin* style



Mark Rosewater
Monday, September 1, 2003

Welcome to the first week of the *Mirrodin* previews! You have no idea how excited I am to say that. You see, designers don't get a chance to lead the design of a set all that often. And a large set? I've been here eight years and *Mirrodin* is only my third (*Tempest* and *Odyssey* being the other two). And this is not just any set. This is a set I feel extra proud about. It's got a cool theme (more on that in a second), fun mechanics, an amazing new environment, and just scores of really interesting cards. I'm bursting like a proud papa. And I have been... for a year.



That's right. My work on *Mirrodin* ended a year ago. At the start of every September, design hands over the large expansion to development. And remember, we started working on the design a year before that. *Mirrodin* has been part of my life for a long time and you guys are just now starting to get the first glimpses. So as you can see, I'm quite excited to finally get a chance to share *Mirrodin* with all of you. Well, at least a small piece of it. And you guys are in for a treat because I'm starting with one of my favorite cards in the set using my favorite mechanic.

Have I whet your appetite yet?

The Theme

Before I show you the card, I want to give you a rough idea what kind of set this card is appearing in. *Invasion* was the multi-color block. *Odyssey* was the graveyard block. *Onslaught* was the tribal race block. And the *Mirrodin* block? Officially for the first time, I'm happy to announce... *Mirrodin* is the artifact block. (Okay, you might have known that one if you've been paying attention.) And while we'll take you some places you'll expect, we'll also take you to a few places you won't. Today's card is an example of the latter (at least I assume few of you will have seen this card coming).

Without further ado, I present Soul Foundry...



The Mechanic

The imprint mechanic is a bit daunting at first glance, so let me walk you through it. An artifact with imprint (and all the cards with imprint are artifacts) has the ability to remove a card from the game (from *where* varies from card to card) and then use the removed card to help customize how the artifact works. The act of removing the card and syncing it up with the artifact is called imprinting. Let's take Soul Foundry as the example. You play Soul Foundry. When you do, you remove a card in your hand from the game, meaning you imprint it. This card is now used to determine what Soul Foundry can do. It tells you what creature the card creates when activated.

Once a card is imprinted and thus removed from the game, it's gone.* This is part of the cost of an imprint card. This isn't the **Nightmare mechanic** from *Torment*. You aren't temporarily using something. You are paying a cost you don't get back. But for that cost, you get the most customizable mechanic in **Magic's** history. What can Soul Foundry make copies of? Any creature you want. Literally, any creature. And it doesn't just copy color and size; it copies everything. Copies of **Exalted Angel** will fly and have the "Spirit Link" ability. Copies of **Nekrataal** will kill nonblack nonartifact creatures when they come into play.

It's important to understand that imprint cards vary in how they get their imprinted (read as "removed from the game") card. Some require a card from your hand. Some take cards from other zones. Some even take cards from play. A few take cards from your opponent. In addition, how each imprint card uses the removed card to customize itself varies from card to card. As you will see (when the set comes out, not now), imprint comes in a variety of flavors.

The History, Part I

So how did this mechanic come to be? I'm glad you asked because it's a good story. And it intimately involves Soul Foundry. Back in the day, though, the card was called "Clone Machine" and imprint wasn't yet a mechanic. It was the fall of 1997. *Tempest* had just been released, and R&D was hard at work on *Urza's Saga*.

During the design of the set I was brainstorming ideas for artifacts. I had really liked **Volrath's Laboratory** from *Stronghold*, so I was trying to come up with a new way to make a creature generator. The thing I liked most about **Volrath's Laboratory** was the customizability of it. You could make any kind of creature you wanted, but your choices were a bit limited. You could only choose color and creature type. I wanted more.

I toyed around with versions that allowed you to give greater input but I always ran into the problem of memory. Any decision that allowed a player to make anything more than a few simple choices became unwieldy (which is why *Onslaught's Riptide Replicator* makes you put counters on it to keep track of the size of the tokens). In addition, creating whatever creature you wanted was pretty powerful. I needed a way to balance the card. And then one day, creativity whacked me on the side of the head. What if I used a card as a marker or memory aide? That way, anytime I was unsure I could just check the card.

The solution worked perfectly. The card had a neat power and cool aesthetics. Clone Machine quickly became one of my favorite cards I designed. So why haven't any of you heard of it? Why didn't *Urza's Saga* have a Clone Machine? Well, it kinda did and it kinda didn't. You see, there are many pitfalls between a card being designed and it being printed. One such pitfall is known as the rules team. The rules team during *Urza's Saga* development was a completely different group of people from today's team. And the old team didn't like Clone Machine. It "caused problems." So it was changed to a mechanic that had a similar flavor (an artifact that can vary the types of creatures it creates). That card was called *Phyrexian Processor*.



Not a bad replacement. The card showed up in the finals of a World Championship (2000 Worlds in Brussels) in both decks. In fact, game one of Jon Finkel vs. Bob Maher might be one of the best games of **Magic** ever played. And the game hinged on Maher misplaying his *Phyrexian Processor*. So all, it seemed, worked out for the best.

The History, Part II

But here's the problem. I liked the card. I really, really, liked it. Rather than abandon it, I tucked it away to wait out the rules team. Flash forward to the fall of 2001. While working on the design for *Mirrodin*, I began looking at some old files for artifact ideas. A lot get created and lost along the way, so a good designer always takes a peek back at what he's done. When I got to my design files for *Urza's Saga*, I saw Clone Machine.

I dusted the little fellow off and put him into the design. There was a news rules team, so I figured the card deserved another shot. Maybe the rules team would kill it again, but I felt obliged to try. This was the artifact set after all. I damn well have some cool artifacts. And then I waited. I knew Paul (Barclay, the rules manager) was bound to peruse the file and make a comment. And I waited. And I waited. Finally, I went to Paul and asked if he was going to take a look at the file. He said he already had and, come to think of it, he did have a few issues he wanted to speak with me about. But none of them was Clone Machine. When I informed him that the card had previously been killed for rules issues, Paul replied, "They might have been afraid of it, but I'm not." (And as you'll see, some weirder stuff than imprint made its way into the set.)

Clone Machine had found a home. But what about imprint? When did one card become a mechanic?

The History, Part III

The next part of this story begins in *Scourge*. And not with me. While trying to design cards for the set, Brian Tinsman created a red enchantment called "Autospell." It too had a mechanic that removed a card from the game to customize itself. It took the card from a different place and it had a different effect than Clone Machine, but the core of the idea was very similar. When I saw the spell for the first time, I commented to Brian that it reminded me of Clone Machine.

The *Mirrodin* design team (more on them in an upcoming column) was playtesting Clone Machine while the *Scourge* development team was playtesting Autospell. Both spells were very popular.

Meanwhile, the *Mirrodin* team was looking for a mechanic unique to artifacts. To spur ideas, I asked each member of the team to return with at least one mechanic suggestion.

While racking my brain that night for ideas, I began thinking about what artifacts in *Mirrodin* (then just called "Bacon") stood out. I quickly thought of Clone Machine. And then my mind drifted to Autospell. Both were very cool spells that seemed to be filling a similar creative space. It soon dawned on me that the thing that the cards shared was the thing that made them both exciting cards. Maybe we could bottle that idea and turn it into a whole mechanic.

As I explored the idea of keywording the ability, I realized that it had to be the act of removing the card to customize the artifact. That was the common bond. This meant that imprint cards would vary a great deal. They would remove cards from different places and they would use them to customize themselves in different ways. But I thought the connector was strong enough to hold the cards together conceptually. The idea even lent itself to artifacts as the idea of customizing an item to personalize its use made perfect flavor sense on an artifact.

To capture the flavor I named the mechanic "imprint" as you were using it to imprint some aspect of the removed card to set what the artifact did. (As a side note, the *Mirrodin* team's design names for all four keyword mechanics – okay three new keyword mechanics and a new card subtype – made it all the way from design to print.) The rest of the team really liked the idea and imprint was born.

The one other impact of choosing to use imprint in *Mirrodin* was that Autospell had to be pulled from *Scourge*. It was replaced by the card *Grip of Chaos* (then called "Blindness"), which was in the file previously but removed for complexity reasons. This is the story Paul Barclay referenced in his [article](#) about *Grip of Chaos*. As it turns out, the artifact that Autospell became didn't end up in *Mirrodin* but was pushed off to later in the block.



The Future

What will all of you do with imprint? I honestly have very little idea. What I do know is that cards like Soul Foundry are going to be used in very different ways in very different decks. And this flavor doesn't end with imprint. *Mirrodin* is full of cards with all sorts of different applications (more on this "modular" design in a future column). Soul Foundry is merely your first taste of the delicious set to come.

Join me next week when I explain how a new card type was created (and despite rumors to the contrary, *Mirrodin* has more than one).

Until then, may you know the joy of making a Clone Machine uniquely your own.

Mark Rosewater

*: Barring a Wish, of course. You can [Living Wish](#) for the card imprinted on Soul Foundry, but then the Soul Foundry won't be able to make any new tokens as there would no longer be a card imprinted on it. ([back](#))

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