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Bacon Bits



Mirrodin design anecdotes

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic Monday, September 22, 2003

One of the advantages of working on a set for over a year is that you collect a lot of stories. Some stories are long, involved stories such as the creation of Soul Foundry ("[Someday My Imprints Will Come](#)") or Mindslaver ("[A Mind Is A Wonderful Thing To Waste](#)"). Other stories are not quite so grandiose. Today's column is filled with the latter. It's a collection of little stories that I believe will give you some insight into *Mirrodin* and the design process. [Mirrodin](#), by the way, was called "Bacon" in design (for those of you scratching you head about this column's title).

Counter Example

Very early in *Mirrodin* design, I created the following card:

Malfunction

Instant
Counter target artifact.

It was simple, elegant, and very relevant to the *Mirrodin* environment. There was just one problem. It was strictly worse than the *Urza's Saga* card *Annul*. For the same cost, *Annul* could counter any artifact *or* enchantment. Whenever any member of R&D saw the card, they'd ask, "Why don't you just repeat *Annul*?"

But I felt that we didn't need to. Malfunction had proven to be very strong in our early limited playtesting and we believed it would be relevant in any Standard environment that included *Mirrodin*. Repeating *Annul* instead of Malfunction would just randomly hose enchantments. The design team spent a great deal of time talking about this card.



As a quick aside, one of the more interesting parts of R&D is how often we get to discuss design (and development) philosophy. Should we print a weaker version of a card we're happy with if the newer version is relevant in the new environment? In the end, the design team decided yes. When the file was officially handed over to development it contained Malfunction.

So, I'm sure you're all asking, what happened in development? Well, *Onslaught* block happened. More specifically, *Astral Slide* and *Lightning Rift* quickly became cards that players were tired of facing. And the development team starting getting a bit more concerned about enchantments. Maybe randomly hosing enchantments wasn't such a bad idea. And thus, Malfunction became *Annul*.

Make a Dervish

One of the best parts about being a **Magic** designer (and there are lots of good parts) is the ability to bring back a card you've always enjoyed, either as a repeat or as a new series of cards influenced by the original. Sometimes the idea is fleshed out as a whole cycle. In *Mirrodin*, that card was **Whirling Dervish**. Back in the day, I had a pet green/blue weenie deck. **Whirling Dervish** was an excellent sideboard card as certain decks (especially black ones) just couldn't deal with a turn-two Dervish. The important point is that I had a very positive association with the card. This will matter next paragraph.

Early in design, *Mirrodin* had a strong +1/+1 counter theme (while this lessened over time, you can still see elements of it). The team was trying to find ways to bring the +1/+1 counter theme to colored cards, especially creatures. So I began looking at old colored creatures that used +1/+1 counters. When I stumbled upon **Whirling Dervish**, I knew I had my answer.

Now the trick with creating a cycle is to find interesting twists in each of the colors. I made the green dervish first as the choice was obvious. One of the themes of this set is that green creatures had protection from artifacts, so I repeated **Whirling Dervish** except I changed "protection from black" to "protection from artifacts." (I called the card "Twirling Dervish.") As you can see, these stories are filled with twists and turns that keep things from being the way I planned them. ("So I made the card and development didn't touch it" doesn't make for good reading.) So what happened?

Another quick aside. In film school, I was taught the difference between surprise and suspense. An example by Alfred Hitchcock uses a scene in which two people are talking when a bomb under the table explodes. If we watch two men talk about an innocuous topic (Hitchcock suggests football) for five minutes and just see the bomb go off, it's surprise. We are shocked or possibly scared for a few seconds. But we were probably bored for five minutes. Suspense requires the filmmaker to show you the bomb under the table, at which point the innocuous five-minute conversation takes on a whole new meaning. Will the conversation lead one of them to look under the table? Will it end quickly enough that they'll leave? Showing the audience the bomb makes for much better entertainment. So when I give away a change to come, just remember I'm simply showing you the bomb.

Back to the dervish design. Red came next as haste seemed like a perfect fit. For black, I had the idea of simply making it start at a bigger size (3/3 as opposed to 1/1). Then for white, I did something radical. I made it the flying dervish. You see, when we make cycles, we always give blue the flying ability. What if just once we didn't give blue flying? What if we gave flying to white (the number two color at flying)?

While this idea was a bit revolutionary and cool, it did have one small problem. What ability should I give to blue? In the end, I chose to make it a 5/5 "serpent." That is, it could only attack if the opponent controlled an Island. To recap, here is how the first dervishes—what would eventually come to be known as the Slith—looked:

- White – 1/1, flying
- Blue – 5/5, could only attack if opponent controls an Island
- Black – 3/3
- Red – 1/1, haste
- Green – 1/1, protection from artifacts

The design team was happy with all the dervishes except the blue one. So every other week or so, we'd try a new version. The problem we kept running into was that most of blue's creature abilities are about evasion. But we didn't want to give the blue dervish evasion. If we did, we would have just given it flying.

Meanwhile, a number of people (including some people not on the design team) questioned whether we wanted dervishes that started at larger than 1/1. This forced us to examine abilities for the black dervish. Mike Elliott had been pushing for regeneration as it had good synergy with the dervish ability. In addition, the design team thought it would be cool to stretch out the cycle across the entire block. We kept the white and red dervish in the file and removed the other three (to be included in "Lettuce" and "Tomato" – aka *Darksteel* and *Fifth Dawn*).

And then the file was handed over to development. Early on, the development team thought the cycle worked better all in the same set so they brought back the blue, black and green versions. Next, they changed the blue dervish (multiple times just as the design team had) ending up with a mechanic that the design team had tried many months before. The one other change was that the green dervish had his ability changed from protection from artifacts to trample. The thought process was that trample would mesh well with the dervish ability.

All the changes were fine to me except one. How could they change the green dervish? The entire design was inspired by the **Whirling Dervish**. I really wanted the green dervish to make the homage. When I mentioned the fact to Randy, he hadn't realized the connection.

(Randy started playing around *Homelands* and wasn't as intimately familiar with the Dervish as I was.) Randy took my issue to the team and the team decided to change it back. The file actually went to editing

(design hands off to development; development hands off to editing) with protection from artifacts.



Usually, if a card makes it to editing, all is good. Only minimal changes (such as tweaking numbers) happen past the handoff. I was convinced I'd gotten my Dervish homage into the set. But further playtesting showed that protection from artifacts was stronger than we originally realized. There was too much in the set and it was throwing off limited pointing. One of the green creatures with protection from artifacts needed to lose the ability.

There were three cards in green common with protection from artifacts: Slith Predator (the dervish), Tel-Jilad Archers and Tel-Jilad Chosen. In the end, changing Slith Predator seemed the easiest fix. The development team had playtested the trample version so they knew it worked well. So, at the last possible moment, the green dervish lost its protection. To quote Alfred Hitchcock: "Boom!"

Bring 'Em Back

Sometimes we use old cards to create new ones and sometimes we just bring the old ones back. Part of the design process is finding interesting repeats that fit the theme of the set. With *Mirrodin*, this was easy. **Magic's** history is filled with cool artifacts. The reasons why we brought different artifacts back seemed interesting enough to examine. Here are the reasons behind some of the repeats:

Triskelion – When I was first assigned the job of leading *Mirrodin*, I started thinking about what cool artifacts we could repeat. Two artifacts instantly leapt to mind. Both of these artifacts were cool cards that I had played with extensively in the past that I believed were able to repeat (both for not being on the reserved list and being within a power level that R&D would allow). One was **Triskelion**. One of my favorite decks of all time was a **Hell's Caretaker** deck that killed the opponent by constantly recycling **Triskelion**. I knew I was on to something when everyone who reviewed the file said, "Hey, **Triskelion's** back. Cool!"

The other card? You'll have to wait until later in the block, but I promise you it will bring a smile to many people's faces.

Icy Manipulator – This is the other high profile repeat in *Mirrodin*. To make sure it was relevant we made sure to include a number of artifacts that turn off when tapped.

Brown Ouphe – One of my favorite types of repeats is playing with player's expectations. In *Ice Age*, **Brown Ouphe** (pronounced "oof") sucked. Many of you might not have been playing back in 1995 but I was and I'll tell you that the Brown Ouphe stunk up the place. Nonetheless, I've always liked him. So, I was overjoyed I realized that I could bring him back in *Mirrodin*. When half the cards are artifacts, the Ouphe gets a little better.

Atog – This is another sentimental favorite that seemed perfect to bring back. A long time fan of the **Atog** (I've had my hand in the design of just about every atog beyond the original), I knew I wanted to bring the little guy back as soon as I got assigned to *Mirrodin*. Like the Ouphe, **Atog's** stock rises in *Mirrodin*. One thing that surprises me is how much this guy is getting dissed in players' *Mirrodin* set reviews (yes, I do read many of these). I think a number of you are missing the fact that half of the set is artifacts. We even moved **Atog** from common to uncommon because he was too strong in limited. If you're playing red in *Mirrodin* limited, you're crazy not to play him. To quote myself: "In a world made of metal, the Atog is king."

Dross Prowler – This card is a repeat but with a new name and creature type. This card first appeared in *Weatherlight* as **Razortooth Rats**. Back then, this card was a beating. But while Ouphe and Atog improve, fear does not. When half the creatures are artifacts and everyone has some, fear is actually quite bad. I think it's important to repeat a card or two whose stock has dropped. This demonstrates how card value has a lot to do with environment. Why the name and creature type change? Because the Core Set needs more simple Zombies. We learned this during *Eighth Edition* development. We had a Zombie Lord (**Lord of the Undead**) and not enough simple Zombies to go around. So, not only could we get an interesting repeat but we could fill a hole for *Ninth Edition*.



Ornithopter – How could we print an artifact block and not print **Ornithopter**?

Yotian Soldier – I originally didn't put this card in the set because I thought the card was simply too good for an artifact creature. After Randy assured me it wasn't, I literally walked to my desk from the conversation and added it to the set.

Bottle Gnomes – **Tempest** was my first set as a designer (and a lead designer). I knew I had to include something from it in *Mirrodin*. Note that this is the only small artifact creature in the set to remain a Gnome. Gnomes were originally going to be the key artifact race in the block, but the creative team decided they didn't like Gnomes and came up with the Myr (which have really grown on me). As we wanted to keep the name **Bottle Gnomes**, this card had to remain a Gnome.

Dragon Blood – As I mentioned above, the earlier version of *Mirrodin* had a stronger +1/+1 theme. This artifact was brought in during that time, and even when we lowered the number of +1/+1 counters, we decided to keep it.

The design team did include some repeats that got cut either during design or development. Here are a few cards that almost saw a second life in *Mirrodin*:

Xenic Poltergeist – At first glance this card seemed perfect, but there were two strikes against it. First, the "this transformation lasts until your next upkeep" text was a bit clunky. And second, animating artifacts is not really supposed to be a black ability. In the end, the design team decided that this card just didn't make the cut.

Titania's Song – Speaking of animating artifacts, we have the king of artifact animation. What would an artifact set be without Titania's Song? This card also had some clunky wording, so the design team tweaked the card as a new green enchantment. During development, it was decided that this ability wasn't green, so the card was moved in its entirety to blue (now called March of the Machines).

Arcane Laboratory – Artifact sets tend to lend themselves to combo decks. That means that you need to stick anti-combo cards in as a safeguard. But with the color reconfiguration, this "rules changing" card had to be moved to white (now called Rule of Law).

Junk Diver – This is an *Urza's Destiny* artifact I tried to get into the set, as *Destiny* was another set I was lead designer on. In the end, the development team decided to revamp the card slightly, turning it into Myr Retriever.

Argothian Pixies – My weenie green/blue deck made good use of this card. But *Antiquities* templating is ancient by today's standards. *Mirrodin* remade the card into the card it was always supposed to be, a 2/1 green creature with protection from artifacts. The creature type was also changed from Faerie (we've since moved them to blue) to Elf.

Goblin Welder – This is another fun card that has relevance to artifacts. But after much discussion, we decided the card was a little too good. The red spell Trash for Treasure (called "Weld" in design) is a nod to the Welder.

Artifacts Of The Environment

That's all the stories I have for today. I hope as always that they've allowed you to get a better glimpse into what goes into designing a set like *Mirrodin*. I had a blast designing it. I hope you have as much fun playing it.

Join me next week when I dissect the artifact creature.

Until then, may you know the joy of **Dragon Blooding** a **Triskelion**.

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