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# Flip Service



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic  
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Welcome to Week Two of the *Betrayers of Kamigawa* previews. If you've cracked my secret column-naming code, you've deduced that this week I'm going to be talking about the flip cards in *Betrayers*. To do that I'm going to have to take you to a place that I seldom go in my column – into the mind of *Betrayers* lead designer Mike Elliott.



I should quickly add the caveat that this column is me taking my best guess at how Mike's design worked. One of the major reasons that I focus on my own designs (perhaps you've noticed) is that I mostly understand my own fevered creative processes. But every designer works differently, so whenever I focus on another designer, I have to use my basic designer instincts to make a logical guess how they would have designed the card(s) in question. (I do also talk to the designer, but I find that most designers have trouble verbalizing how their own processes work.) In short, this column is my best guess at what happened.

This column does contain a preview card, by the way. But I've buried it deep in the column as I feel it will be cooler with some set-up. You're free to scroll down to it, but I want to warn you that it will be cooler if you wait until it shows up in the column.

## See You On The Flip Side

So Mike sits down to start *Betrayers of Kamigawa* design. The very first thing he does is look at *Champions of Kamigawa*. What does he have to work with? What mechanics does *Champions* have that Mike can build upon? In addition, what did *Champions* do that the audience is going to expect Mike to follow up on? A quick search through the file will quickly bring you to the flip creatures. The flip cards are a new type of card introduced in *Champions*. They are unique. They are sexy. And as such they've proven pretty popular. In short, it's a mechanic that Mike has to deal with.

And he can't just do more. No, the audience will expect something new. A twist, a tweak. Something that *Champions of Kamigawa* didn't do. Why? Because it is something that the designers have engrained into the block system. Block mechanics grow and evolve over the course of the block. Players don't just want the second and third sets in the block to simply be "more of the same". No, they want "more of the different".

One of the reasons it's so hard to write about another designer's process is that each designer creates differently. But I'm assuming that Mike starts where I often start when looking to expand on a block mechanic – the staples. That is, you always begin by looking at what tricks have worked before. (Note that there are a slew of unused tricks, but I'm not about to spill those.)

- **Alternate Costs**

This is the granddaddy of block mechanic evolution. You start by introducing a mechanic with a cost. In the first set you only use mana activations (generic mana if you can get away with it). And then in the second and third set, you start finding other costs. Buyback,



flashback, entwineback... each of these mechanics followed this pattern. Unfortunately, the flip cards don't have mana activations, so this category isn't going to work.

- **Get More Complex**

This is probably the number two most used trick. When R&D introduces a new mechanic, we tend to present the simplest version first. This allows later expansions to start introducing more complex uses of the mechanic. Imprint, for instance, started out in *Mirrodin* by only having cards that were imprinted when they were first played. *Darksteel* then introduced imprint cards that had their imprinting happen at other times (usually as an activated ability). The flip cards started pretty complex, so there wasn't tons of room for advancement. In addition, the limited space for rules text greatly hampered design space.

- **Add a Second Trick**

For this block mechanic evolution, you take the new mechanic and connect it to some time-tested regular **Magic** mechanic. The most common add-on is "comes into play" triggers. Echo, for instance, used this trick. By adding comes into play triggers in *Urza's Legacy*, the echo creatures gained a sorcery quality that made it okay to often not pay the echo cost. Once again, the limited flip card space for rules text rears its ugly head.

- **Make Cards That Care About It**

Sometimes the advancement is not changing the mechanic but changing the world around the mechanic. Take cycling as an example. When we brought cycling back in *Onslaught*, we created a number of cards that triggered off of cards being cycled. This fundamentally changed how many decks utilized cycling. I'm sure Mike thought about cards that triggered off of other cards being flipped, but it didn't really solve the problem. Part of why players liked the *Champions* flip cards was the layout. Having *Betrayers* flip cards that don't involve the layout seems doomed to failure.

- **Follow the Flow of the Block**

Sometimes block mechanic evolution is as easy as letting the mechanics do what the sets are doing. The best example of this would be the split cards. Once the designers realized that *Apocalypse* was going to be the enemy color set, enemy split cards became an obvious choice. Unfortunately for Mike the *Kamigawa* block didn't have any easy answers for the flip cards.

- **Shift Zones**

If something works in one zone, try it in another. Cycling tried this trick. In *Urza's Destiny*, we made cards with "Cycling from Play" such as *Yavimaya Elder*. (The fatal flaw to this plan, by the way, is that we didn't label it and thus only about one percent of our audience ever caught the evolution). Flip creatures don't really work well in any other zone.

- **Combine the Mechanics**

One interesting way to spruce up mechanics is to let them start commingling. As we'll see, this idea wasn't dismissed so quickly as the others.

- **Find New Ways to Make Use of It**

Part of evolving a mechanic is finding different ways to use it. Phasing, for example, started as a handicap for creatures. But as design worked with the mechanic they found all sorts of other ways to make use of it. This was another tweak that Mike filed away.



## Let's Flip For It

After examining all these options, Mike gravitated towards the last one. Is there a new way to make use of the flip cards? The answer rested in finding a way to change the key part of the cards – the flip condition. In *Champions*, the cards flipped by accomplishing some task. What if the *Betrayers* flip cards just had a different kind of flip trigger? This led Mike to start thinking about other types of triggers. In the end, the one he kept coming back to was time. What if these cards just changed when enough time elapsed? This led to the earliest versions of the flip cards. These cards got a counter each turn and flipped over when they had three counters. These counters were then a resource to be used by the flipped version of the card.

***What if the Betrayers flip cards just had a different kind of flip trigger?***

These cards had two problems. One, the time versions weren't very interactive. The player had no real ability to affect the flip. And two, it didn't have any synergy with anything else in the set. That's when Mike thought back to the "Combine the Mechanics" strategy. Was there a way to tie the mechanic closer to the set while also giving the player some ability to affect the change? The answer was yes, the arcane/spirit triggers. So Mike changed the cards such that they gained a counter every turn and whenever an arcane or spirit spell was played. This way, you could just let them evolve normally, or you could help speed along the change.

Playtest showed Mike (and Randy, the other member of the design team) that the arcane/spirit triggers were enough. They gave the player the sense of elapsed time that Mike wanted but more organically fit into the set. To sync this new version up to match a similar time frame, the counters (now called ki counters) were dropped from three to two.

And thus we ended up with the cycle (yes, there's one of each color) of *Betrayers* flip cards. Because it would be mean to walk you this far through the mechanic's design and not show you a finished version, I present [Cunning Bandit](#).



## Flip Flip Hurray

And that is how the *Betrayers* flip cards came to be. I hope you enjoyed the journey.

Join me next week when I peek my head back into the world that is R&D.

Until then, may you find ways to evolve things in your own life.

Mark Rosewater



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