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Sometimes **Magic** R&D is like the BASF company. "We don't make the [insert random item here], we make it better." *Betrayers'* new twist on an old favorite cycle is one such example of our ability to improve on the past.

Back in the early '70's, Golden Age R&Ders like Skaff Elias and Jim Lin were putting together a hot little set called "*Alliances*" that contained a cycle of spells that would go on to become legendary--the "pitch spells." Said cards each cost five mana normally, but each could be played for no mana if a card of the same color was removed from the game (some also required a payment of one life). Okay, maybe only Force of Will--the premier card of that cycle--has ascended to legendary status, but its "freeness" has made it one of the most powerful cards in the game's history.



Pitch spells have been revisited in the days since (cards like *Misdirection* and *Cave-In* from *Mercadian Masques* leap to mind... if my name were Ben Bleiweiss, I'd compile a comprehensive list of all of them for your enjoyment). So when *Betrayers of Kamigawa* lead designer Mike Elliott wanted to make a new cycle of pitch spells, he reached into his bag of tricks and pulled out the letter "X".

## X Marks the Spot

Mike came up with a cycle of pitch spells that cared about the cost of the card you pitched to play them. Each was an X-spell that could be played for a normal mana cost, or played for no mana by pitching an appropriately colored card, in which case the "X" is set to the converted mana cost of the card pitched. The idea was amazingly elegant, and very little about the cards changed at all during development.

Which, in some ways, is scary.

Continuing R&D's long tradition of fair and balanced "play for free" spells, I present Shining Shoal:



Consider this your official serving of notice of this card's existence. Sometime during the next few months, an opponent *will* nail you with this card, and it *will* sting. In the words of **Magic** lead developer Brian Schneider:

Bs 4/29: [...]this card ruined some days[...]

The card as printed does precisely what Mike wanted the card to do in design--be a better Kor Chant (the original Kor Chant from *Exodus* could not redirect damage to or from players.). This card is what Reverse Damage has always dreamed of being. Those of you that have been following Mark Rosewater's "Color Pie" discussions over the past couple years know that we keep trying to find ways to push white's "don't mess with me or my boys" attitude, and this card does that in spades. Of course, the violent retribution this card issues may be hard to swallow for fans of white's softer side. Check out these early development comments:

MJ 3/25: White having manaless direct damage is SO out of flavor for white. :(

MP 3/26: I agree with MJ, this often feels like a XWW fireball.

RB 3/31: OMG, a white spell effect that's good enough for Constructed? Say it isn't so!

Mons's and Matt's concern over the card's feel were certainly justified, but if you read between the lines on Randy's rebuttal, you'll see something like, "It may feel jarring, but if this is the level to which we need to push white's protective theme to make it relevant, so be it."

Once everyone signed off that the flavor and feel of this card were okay for white, the power level of the card was still an issue. Creature combat becomes a risky proposition when this card is in the mix, and the decision to all-out attack your opponent when you are both at low life totals--even if he is tapped out--is no longer automatic. He could use the Shoal on your biggest attacker and snatch the game out from under you.

RB 4/5: Should this be creature only? Would it help the flavor if you couldn't hit players?

WW 4/6: I'm not sure it would help the flavor necessarily, but it feels like a fine tweak on power level, which I think this card needs.

HS 4/9 testing the tweak. Curious as to how good this card is now.

I'm sure you can guess what effect the change had on the card's playability. In its initial form, the card was good in most white decks, regardless of whether that deck contained creatures, and good against most other decks, again regardless of whether opposing decks played creatures. The tweaked "creature-only" version was still decent in creature-free decks, the opponent had to have creatures in order for the spell to have any worthwhile targets. I played with it for a while, and found myself pulling it from a lot of my decks, which made me a little sad. I enjoyed white having a card this nasty.



AF 4/12: I was getting used to the white one being the best in the cycle (which was weird in and of itself), and I feel a twinge of sadness now that it is worse.

ps 4/12: this change makes me sad as well.

Paul and I weren't the only two that liked the more powerful version better, and it was changed back. Developer Worth Wollpert calls the current version "the best white card since Land Tax," which is one heck of an endorsement. Is he right? He may be... we'll see over the next year or so.

## Fishy, Fishy, Fishy, Fish

"What's up with the fish in the art?" you ask? Brady Dommermuth and Jeremy Cranford, the creative minds behind the look and feel of Kamigawa, gave the card artists lots of freedom to depict the spirit world however they saw fit. To paraphrase some of Brady's instructions to the artists, "I don't care what it looks like, just make it weird." When Jim Murray's illustrations for the *Champions* cards Teller of Tales and Eerie Procession came back showing twisted floating fish, Jeremy and Brady loved them—those paintings captured exactly what the creative team was looking for.



The fish were such a hit here in R&D that Brady wanted to find somewhere else to incorporate them. The cycle of X-pitch spells presented an interesting opportunity. What if the fish weren't creatures, but rather the manifestation of a certain type of spell? While the more commonly known definition for the word "shoal" is "sandbar," it also means "a school of fish":

**shoal n. 1.** A large group; crowd **2.** A school of fish or other marine animals (from *The American Heritage Dictionary*)

That definition of shoal also can be used as a verb meaning "to come together in large numbers" or "throng," which is what the little spirit-fish are doing around the target of the spell. Each of the five Shoals show different spirit-fish manifesting themselves in accordance to the spells' colors. I find the black ones to be particularly creepy; if you catch a glimpse of them at the Prerelease I'm sure you'll agree!

## Go Play!

Speaking of Prereleases... the Betrayers Prerelease is this weekend! Everything you need to know is right here, so you have no excuse not to play! All the cool kids are doing it! And hey, just for showing up, you get a foil promo Ink-Eyes! Who could say no to that?!

### Next Week...

I'll reveal which of Paul Sottosanti's statements about *Betrayers* were true and which were false. And more!

### Last Week's Poll:

What was your favorite Magic release of 2004?		
Champions of Kamigawa	4427	55.5%
Darksteel	1541	19.3%
Unhinged	1188	14.9%
Fifth Dawn	815	10.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>7971</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

### This Week's Poll:

Which group of cards from *Betrayers of Kamigawa* has you most excited?

- Shoals
- Genju
- Patron Kami
- Ninja

