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It Happened One Nights

A designer look at Arabia



Mark Rosewater

Welcome to *Arabian Nights* week! This week is dedicated to the **Magic** game's very first expansion, designed by none other than the game's creator, Richard Garfield. I thought it would be neat to examine *Arabian Nights* with a designer's eye in order to see the elements that it added to the **Magic** world. I think many of you will be pleasantly surprised at how much ingenuity was packed into this 92-card set.

Once upon a Time

But before I jump into the design, I'd like to set the stage for what the **Magic** world was like before the *Arabian Nights* set premiered. Richard talks about **Magic** from Wizards of the Coast's side in today's other article, so I'm going to approach what the *Arabian Nights* release was like from a player's perspective.

It was December 1993. Earlier that summer, **Magic** was released. And all hell had broken loose. Alpha came and went in a blink. Beta repeated that feat even faster. **Magic** had a fervid, but small, following. Why small? Several reasons. First, Peter Adkison, former CEO and one of the founders of Wizards of the Coast, originally marketed **Magic** by driving up and down the Pacific Coast, stopping to demo it at every game shop along the way. As a result, most of the game's early sales were to West Coast distributors--meaning that when **Magic** first premiered, it was mostly a West Coast phenomenon.



Second, early **Magic** printings simply weren't that large. There weren't a lot of players because there weren't a lot of cards. And remember, a new player couldn't just walk into a store and buy **Magic**. Back then, if you wanted to play you had to wait for a shipment to come in, and purchase it that day. When Beta debuted, for example, I purchased two boxes of starters and two boxes of boosters because I wanted to have extra cards to sell to my friends, whom I was hoping to get into the game.

But back to December. I'm visiting my friend David in San Francisco. We stopped by a coffee house, where David had heard **Magic** was played. While I was talking to a few players, another one walked in and said, "It's here."

I was surprised to hear this because my game store back in Los Angeles had informed me that *Arabian Nights* wasn't shipping until January. But I wasn't about to pass up the opportunity for an early look, so my friend and I went to the game store. I bought only a few packs, as I had prepaid for two boxes back home. (This incidentally meant that I bought two times as much product as was allotted to the state of Wyoming.)

The players I knew were excited about the new set, but also a little hesitant. Most of us had just begun to explore Alpha and Beta. Every player I met would show me new cards. Back then, Wizards guarded the content of the sets very closely, and players could learn about cards only by

physically seeing them (the Internet was not in common use yet). A new expansion seemed too soon. Also, the new cards had a completely different theme: Alpha and Beta were traditional fantasy; *Arabian Nights* was, well, *1001 Arabian Nights*.

Still, seeing new cards was cool. Some struck my fancy right away. I loved--loved--**Diamond Valley**. Others just didn't seem playable. 🐼🐼🐼 for a 5/5 creature that damaged you every turn. What kind of idiot would play that? (See **Juzam Djinn**.) But more than anything else, *Arabian Nights* let me know that the roller coaster that was **Magic** was about to start down its first big hill.

Innovate Is Enough

During college, I had the fortune to major in broadcast and film (a.k.a. television and movies). This meant I got to take classes for which I watched television and films. One class I took was on early films. The first class, we watched a film called *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). The heart of the film is a sequence in which a bunch of cowboys rob a train. The film cuts back and forth between them robbing the train, and the station where we know the train is heading. The film seemed very amateurish and not particularly interesting. After the film was over, our teacher asked us, "Okay, why did I just make you watch this?"

No one in the class knew. Then the teacher explained. "You know the part where the film cut back and forth between the train and the station? The part where the audience gets to see two different scenes that take place concurrently, which is communicated by cutting back and forth between them? Well, this film invented that technique."

Innovation is hard to spot because by the time you care to look back, the thing you're looking for is so commonplace that you forget that someone had to come up with it. *Arabian Nights* is a lot like *The Great Train Robbery*. Richard wasn't satisfied with inventing the trading card game genre with Alpha. He wanted to take the game to the next level. My column today will discuss the innovations that *Arabian Nights* added to **Magic**. This is not an exhaustive list but rather a few highlights. To indicate how much impact I feel each innovation had on future design, I'm grading each with from one to three stars, with three being the most impactful.

Stealing (**)

Alpha introduced the idea of stealing permanents (**Control Magic** and **Steal Artifact**). *Arabian Nights* added a few new twists to this idea. **Old Man of the Sea** was a permanent that could tap to take control of a permanent as long as it remained tapped. This particular mechanic spawned numerous copies (**Willow Satyr**, **Rubinia Soulsinger**, **Preacher**, **Seasinger**, **Merieke Ri Berit**, **Rootwater Matriarch**, **Coffin Queen**, and **Helm of Possession**, to name just a few).

Aladdin moved stealing into red, allowed the stealing of multiple items with one card, and introduced the concept of unmarked control; that is, cards that allow a player to steal another player's permanent without an in-play reminder that you do not own the permanent. It's interesting to point out that red had an early relationship with stealing, so R&D's recent decision to move temporary stealing (a la **Ray of Command**) to red actually has some historical precedence (in fact, the earliest version of **Ray of Command** was a red *Legends* card called **Disharmony**).

Finally, **Ghazban Ogre** introduced the concept of cards that changed their own ownership. It began to blur the line between your cards and your opponent's cards.

Abilities Activated by the Opponent (*)

If **Ghazban Ogre** blurred the line, **Iff-Biff Efreet** started erasing it. One **Magic** cornerstone is that no rule is sacred. Just when a player begins to assume that something is safe, the designers pull the rug out from under him or her. Before *Arabian Nights*, what was mine was mine and what was yours was yours. Sure I could steal it, but if I controlled it, only I could use it. **Iff-Biff Efreet** changed all that.

Lands That Did More (***)

Beta had fifteen types of lands--the five basic lands and the ten dual lands. All fifteen simply tapped for mana. In *Arabian Nights*, Richard saw greater potential for lands. What if (gasp!) lands could do things other than tap for mana? They could draw cards, deal damage, or even regenerate Elephants. Lands could have the same functionality as artifacts or enchantments.

Many years later, R&D chose to pull in the reins and say that lands are defined by their mana production. This didn't mean that lands couldn't do other things. (Obviously, a look at recent sets show they still do.) It just meant that all lands should have the ability to produce mana, as that's what makes them lands (in **Magic** terms) in the first place.



Coin Flips (***)

Alpha came with plenty of randomness. Players started every game by shuffling their decks. But in *Arabian Nights*, Richard raised the bar. What if certain cards were unto themselves random? When you play **Bottle of Suleiman**, for example, maybe you get a 5/5 flying Djinn and maybe you don't. Other cards like **Mijae Djinn** and **Ydwen Efreeth** showed different ways this randomness could be applied.

Coin flips have their lovers and their haters. Recognizing that randomness is more for casual play than for tournament play, R&D has made a conscious decision to pull back the power level of coin flip cards. The importance of cards like **Bottle of Suleiman** is that it showed the appeal of cards with a random effect. Many newer cards, such as like **Grindstone**, **Tainted Pact**, and **Scalpelexis**, owe their existences to Richard's fondness for coin flips.

Cumulative Upkeep and Cantrips (***)

There are two questions that R&D loves to argue about. What was the first card with cumulative upkeep? And what was the first cantrip card? There are three answers to the first question. The first is **Stasis** from Alpha. Its lockdown effect combined with an upkeep cost to create an effect very similar to cumulative upkeep. The second is one of the cards from *Ice Age* that actually had the words "cumulative upkeep" on it, such as **Maddening Wind**. And third is **Cyclone**, which is the first card that spells out an upkeep that grows linearly.

The second question is a little more problematic. Obviously, Alpha had cards that allowed you to draw cards, but none used this card drawing as an added second ability. **Jeweled Bird**, in *Arabian Nights*, was the first card to have the words "draw a card" in addition to another ability.

What makes this an odd category is that *Ice Age* was in design at the same time as *Arabian Nights*, meaning that ideas flowed freely between the creators. Did **Cyclone** influence cumulative upkeep or was it the other way around? No one is sure. Richard does believe, though, that **Jeweled Bird** existed before the idea of cantrips. Cantrips were inspired by, of all things, **Ornithopter**. If a card could cost nothing but a card, could a card cost nothing but its mana (meaning not the cost of a card)?

Spirit Link (**)

It's interesting that this base white ability was not only introduced in *Arabian Nights* but also introduced on a black creature, **El-Hajjaj**. The move to white happened in *Legends* six months later.

-1/-1 Counters (**)

Alpha introduced two different types of creature-enhancing counters: +1/+1 (**Rock Hydra**, **Sengir Vampire** and **Fungusaur**) and +1/+0 (**Clockwork Beast**). In *Arabian Nights*, **Unstable Mutation** introduced a third type: -1/-1 counters. These counters saw a significant amount of play until R&D decided that having +1/+1 counters and -1/-1 counters coexist both caused confusion and overlapped in utility; so the lesser-used -1/-1 counters were eventually eliminated.

"As CARDNAME Comes into Play" Choices (***)

Alpha taught us that instants and sorceries (and, okay, interrupts) could require input to affect what they did. For example, when playing a spell, you could pick targets or modes (an example of a mode choice would be whether you want to counter a red spell or destroy a red permanent with **Blue Elemental Blast**). *Arabian Nights* took this idea one step further. With **Jihad**, Richard introduced the idea that permanents could require choices when played that would affect how the permanent would function. Now written as "As CARDNAME comes into play," this innovation has affected the design of scores of cards.

Removed from Game as Limbo (***)

With cards like **Disintegrate** and **Swords to Plowshares**, Alpha introduced the idea of "remove from game." *Arabian Nights* furthered this idea by explaining that cards removed from the game could be brought back. The most blatant example was, of course, **Ring of Ma'ruf**, which not only got cards removed from this game but also could get cards that didn't even start in the game. The Ring was a radical idea that obviously was picked up by the *Judgment* designers to make the Wishes.

The more influential card, though, was **Oubliette**. **Oubliette** introduced the concept that remove from game could be used as a "limbo." That is, remove from game had a utility greater than a "really gone" graveyard. It was either a place to put things that you wanted to remove for some length of time or a means to use the card as a marker. From phasing to **Flicker** to **Spelljack**, the ramifications of this discovery have ricocheted throughout **Magic**.

Remove from Combat (***)

Up until **Ebony Horse** in *Arabian Nights*, the words "remove from combat" did not exist in **Magic**. Regeneration did exist in Alpha, but back then regenerating a creature didn't remove it from combat. **Ebony Horse** threw a new wrinkle in what could be done during the combat step. This obviously had an impact on regeneration as well as influenced a slew of combat-altering cards.



These four cards introduced concepts that would be used again and again in later expansions.

Expansion Hosers (*)


City in a Bottle was the first card to make an expansion symbol have game relevance. Of course, as *Arabian Nights* was the first set to have an expansion symbol, this wasn't as revolutionary as it might seem. **Golgothian Sylex** (from *Antiquities*) and **Apocalypse Chime** (from *Homelands*) would follow in its footsteps.

Under the Influence

As you can see, *Arabian Nights* has had a huge impact on **Magic** design. I hope that my short tour through the set (and my list is far from complete) has illustrated how the innovations of one set can permeate the evolution of **Magic**. And if you ever have a chance to see *The Great Train Robbery*, give it a break. Your favorite film wouldn't be the same without it.

Next week, join me as I explore the wacky world of set code names. Until then, may you know the joy of playing a card with a scimitar for an expansion symbol.

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
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