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That Old Familiar Spell

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Magic's first "standalone" expansion set was *Ice Age* way back in 1995, though that distinction should have belonged to *Legends* (the first issue of *The Duelist* even advertised *Legends* as a standalone set). Either way, as the first standalone, *Ice Age*, was designed to be playable even if you didn't own any other **Magic** cards. (Note that the term "standalone" isn't used anymore, just "large expansion." *Onslaught*, for example, is a large expansion.) This was the first set outside of the main print run (Alpha/Beta/Unlimited/Revised) to contain all five basic lands (*Arabian Nights* reprinted only mountain). Wizards ran into one problem that came up both during *Legends* and *Ice Age* development: reprints.

The problem was this: each color had a share of effects that defined them. From earlier sets, there were staple cards that really gave the flavor of what each of the five magics did. Red blew up land, white prevented damage, blue countered spells, green enhanced creatures, and black accelerated mana. Should Wizards make variants on these types of spells that already existed, or pick out some spells that were so well designed that simply reprinting them would form the skeleton for the standalone set?

As history shows, Wizards opted for the latter. For years, large sets came and went with the same cards being reprinted as staples of their colors over and over again. As time went on, this trend changed into reprinting cards which fit a set's theme but didn't necessarily fit the **Disenchant/Stone Rain** mainstay mold. So what exactly made a staple card to begin with, and does such a beast even exist in modern day **Magic**?



In this article, I'm going to take a look at all of the reprints in expansion sets, and explore why they were brought into their respective blocks. Base sets and *Portal* both shall be removed from such examination, since they deserve articles of their own. Especially *Portal*, since I don't believe many players realize just how many cards graduated from beginner **Magic** to the more advanced sets. Also, only exact reprints count. While **Llanowar Elves** and **Fyndhorn Elves** are functionally identical, they are differently named cards, allowing a player to use four of each in a deck.

ICE AGE

- Artifacts: **Icy Manipulator** (ABU)
- Black: **Dark Ritual** (ABU), **Fear** (ABU), **Howl from Beyond** (ABU)
- Blue: **Counterspell** (ABU), **Power Sink** (ABU), **Sleight of Mind** (ABU)
- Green: **Giant Growth** (ABU), **Hurricane** (ABU), **Lure** (ABU), **Regeneration** (ABU), **Wild Growth** (ABU)
- Red: **Shatter** (ABU), **Stone Rain** (ABU)
- White: The five **Circles of Protection** (ABU), **Death Ward** (ABU) **Disenchant** (ABU), **Swords to Plowshares** (ABU)

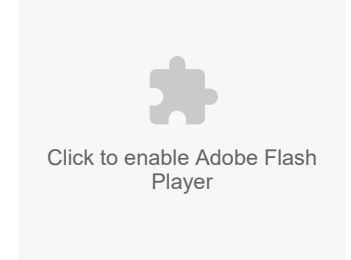
Ice Age gave the earliest indication of staple cards in **Magic**, since it premiered non-base set reprints. Most players should recognize every card on the above list, all of which were taken from the base set. Of these cards, all but five have survived into modern day, the exceptions being **Icy Manipulator**, **Dark Ritual**, **Power Sink**, **Sleight of Mind** and **Swords to Plowshares**. Even those cards have been re-imagined several times over the years, so you have to admire how accurate the *Ice Age* development team was when it decided which cards would represent staples in each color.

You'll also notice that each of the above cards (excepting **Power Sink** and **Sleight of Mind**) were very simple from a rules perspective. It was this simplicity that led to the reprinting of staple cards to begin with. How do you improve upon a card like **Stone Rain**? If you make it cost less, it's too good. If you make it cost more, it's not good enough. 2 to destroy a land is just the right cost for this particular spell.

Or was it? Several other staples were retooled to give them an edge over their original counterparts. **Unsummon** became **Word of Undoing**. **Terror** gained the ability to kill artifact creatures and became **Dark Banishing**. Green and Black traded **Ice Storm** and **Sinkhole** for **Thermokarst** and **Icequake**. Why should those two colors capitalize on the block mechanic (snow-covered lands) while red should not?



PRO TOUR-VALENCIA



Update on Rain Delay





MIRAGE

Black: Dark Banishing (IA), Dark Ritual (ABU), Drain Life (ABU)
 Blue: Boomerang (LG), Memory Lapse (HL), Power Sink (ABU), Ray of Command (IA)
 Green: Fog (ABU), Regeneration (ABU), Sandstorm (AN)
 Red: Firebreathing (ABU), Flare (IA), Incinerate (IA), Stone Rain (ABU)
 White: Disenchant (ABU), Divine Offering (LG), Healing Salve (ABU)

Mirage gave a lot more interesting signs of things to come in **Magic**. While all of the effects were still simple, the staples represented much different abilities than they had in *Ice Age*. Look no further than black, which traded **Fear** and **Howl** from *Beyond* for **Dark Banishing** and **Drain Life**. These pairs could not have come from two more different extremes: two creature enhancers traded for two creature removers.

Each of the other colors underwent a much more subtle metamorphosis in staples. Blue gained bounce and steal with the **Ray** and **Boomerang**, green added the uncharacteristic direct damage of **Sandstorm**, while white traded **Circles of Protection** for **Prismatic Circle** and **Healing Salve**.

Consider that many of these cards had made their second or third main-set appearance by this point. How many times do you need to see **Stone Rain** before you start wondering if R&D has "run out of ideas?" However, look at the abilities introduced in *Ice Age* and *Mirage*:

- Snow-covered lands
- Cumulative upkeep
- Flanking
- Phasing
- Cantrips

Of these five mechanics, only one really lent itself to spells: cantrips. Staples tend to be spells and not creatures, so if your abilities are based around being permanents in play, it's difficult to redesign staple cards. Can you make a phasing **Disenchant**, or a flanking **Stone Rain**? It would be years until we saw cantrip versions of most of the staples in this set (**Flare** excluded of course), and none of them were exactly barn-burning winners.

Let's say Wizards decided at this point to use one the one spell-friendly block mechanic (cantrips) and turned some of the above spells into cantrips. What would they look like?

- **Incinerate** becomes **Ember Shot**.
- **Dark Banishing** becomes **Annihilate**.
- **Stone Rain** becomes **Implode**.

I know that I'd rather be playing with **Incinerate**, **Dark Banishing** and **Stone Rain** than **Ember Shot**, **Annihilate** and **Implode**.

What happens then when R&D designs block mechanics that are a lot more spell-friendly?

TEMPEST

Black: Coercion (VI), Dark Banishing (IA), Dark Ritual (ABU), Enfeeblement (MI)
 Blue: Counterspell (ABU), Gaseous Form (LG), Power Sink (ABU), Spell Blast (ABU)
 Green: Rampant Growth (MI), Tranquility (ABU)
 Red: Giant Strength (LG), Shatter (ABU), Stone Rain (ABU)
 White: The five **Circles of Protection** (ABU), **Disenchant** (ABU), **Pacifism** (MI)



Buyback really gave Wizards the freedom they needed to let loose and retool staples into more block friendly cards. The trend moved from reprinting staple cards to reintroducing staple effects on new cards. Blue bounces permanents, but instead of printing **Boomerang** we got the awesome buyback spell **Capsize**. **Flare** morphed into **Searing Touch**, while other staples effects dotted the expansions using buyback. Even though *Tempest* reprinted **Stone Rain**, **Flowstone Flood** played around with the red "destroy land" effect. **Constant Mists** completely outshone the card upon which it was based, making most players take the **Fog** effect seriously for the first time ever.

The motivation behind reprinting staples still remained the same as it had for the third straight block: reprint cards which encapsulated a simple mechanic for a color. All of this was soon to change.

URZA'S SAGA

Artifact: **Pit Trap** (IA)
 Black: **Dark Ritual** (ABU), **Pestilence** (ABU)
 Blue: **Enchantment Alteration** (LG), **Power Sink** (ABU)
 Green: None
 Red: None
 White: **Disenchant** (ABU), **Healing Salve** (ABU), **Pacifism** (MI), **Presence of the Master** (LG)

of the Master (LG)

Urza's Saga featured such staples as **Dark Ritual**, **Disenchant**, and **Presence of the Master**.

Presence of the Master?

Isn't that the card from *Legends* that has a picture of **Albert Einstein** on it? The one that would be right around last place on most people's staples list?



When people think back to Urza's Block, they remember cycling, and **Rancor**, and horribly broken **Tolarian Academy** decks. What you might not have realized is that this set marked a major change in the way Wizards thought about their reprint policy. Instead of making **Stone Rain** the quintessential land destruction spell, R&D started pushing for the staples to become effects instead of cards. There would always be a red land destruction spell, but it wouldn't have to be **Stone Rain**. In this case it was **Lay Waste**.

Instead, reprints became an outlet to rotate in cards which fit in with the theme of the block. Urza's block relied heavily on enchantments, from sleeping creature enchantments (**Opal Titan**, for one) to the **Embraces**. **Enchantment Alteration** and **Presence of the Master** served as foils for these types of cards, and were given a chance to shine when in previous incarnations they were lost in the shuffle.

MERCADIAN MASQUES

Black: **Dark Ritual** (ABU), **Rain of Tears** (TE)
 Blue: **Brainstorm** (IA), **Counterspell** (ABU), **Energy Flux** (AQ), **False Demise** (AL), **Timid Drake** (WL)
 Green: **Deadly Insect** (AL), **Desert Twister** (AN), **Giant Caterpillar** (VI), **Lure** (ABU), **Tranquility** (ABU)
 Red: **Stone Rain** (ABU), **Tremor** (VI), **Word of Blasting** (IA)
 White: **Afterlife** (MI), **Disenchant** (ABU), **Righteous Aura** (VI)

Masques first became available after the release of *Sixth Edition*. By this time, Wizards had decided to make the basic sets a little less complex, as to make them more accessible to newer players. As a result, several abilities got the boot, including protection and untargetability. Thus was born a third type of reprint for the stand alone sets: cards that wouldn't fit into the base set but would be good for the Standard constructed card pool.



So now there were three different camps of cards out there. The first were still staples, such as **Dark Ritual** and the always reprinted **Disenchant**. Next came cards which were recycled to fit into block mechanics, such as **Word of Blasting** for the *Masques* Walls. Lastly, cards which were too complex for the base set but were good for type two decks returned, such as **Deadly Insect**.

Also, **Deadly Insect** and **Giant Caterpillar** were the first creatures to be reprinted in an expansion set in **Magic** history.

INVASION

Black: **Cursed Flesh** (EX), **Ravenous Rats** (UD), **Reckless Spite** (TE), **Soul Burn** (IA)
 Blue: **Disrupt** (WL), **Phantasmal Terrain** (ABU), **Shimmering Wings** (TE)
 Green: **Fertile Ground** (US), **Harrow** (TE), **Quirion Elves** (MI), **Tranquility** (ABU)
 Red: **Crown of Flames** (TE), **Maniacal Rage** (EX), **Stun** (TE)
 White: **Blinding Light** (MI), **Holy Day** (LG), **Shackles** (EX)
 Gold: **Lobotomy** (TE), **Simoon** (VI)

Invasion marked a three firsts for reprints. It was the first stand alone to finally do away with **Disenchant** (opting for **Capshen Unicorn** and

Dismantling Blow instead), the first to reprint a gold card, and the first to reprint cards that weren't part of a cycle and incorporate them into a cycle (**Shimmering Wings**, **Crown of Flames** and **Shackles** to go with the newly printed **Mourning** and **Whip Silk**). Meanwhile, most of green's repertoire consisted of the best mana fixers from its past to coincide with the domain mechanic and five colored nature of the set. This was a much narrower focus than in the past, where the staple reprints were usually spread out among many different abilities.

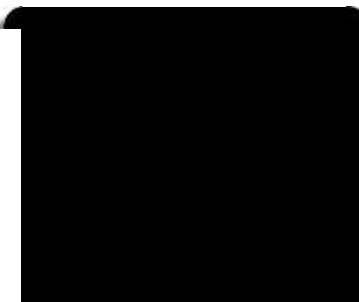
ODYSSEY

Artifact: **Patchwork Gnomes** (TE)
 Black: **Buried Alive** (WL), **Gravedigger** (TE)
 Blue: **Scrivener** (EX)
 Green: **Cartographer** (EX), **Overrun** (TE)
 Red: **Anarchist** (EX)
 White: **Gallantry** (TE)

Odyssey marked the first stand alone set in which not a single card from the original set saw print. It also marked a departure from using reprints to get staple cards back—only **Overrun** and **Gravedigger** even remotely fit this category. While the idea of staple cards had been slowly eclipsed by block-mechanic friendly reprints, they were just given the old heave-ho in this set. There was no **Disenchant**, or **Stone Rain**, or **Tranquility**. Instead, there were a cycle of graveyard recurring creatures, a threshold enabling artifact creature, a threshold enabling graveyard filler, a white creature defensive cantrip, and the world's best team **Giant Growth**.

TORMENT

Black: **Sengir Vampire** (ABU)



JUDGMENT

Green: **Erhnam Djinn** (AN)
White: **Guided Strike** (WL)

Although *Odyssey* didn't reprint any Alpha cards, good old **Sengir Vampire** made his long awaited return to **Magic** in the second set of the block. Just as *Torment* was dedicated to black and featured the return of one of the most beloved black creatures of all time, *Judgment* returned **Erhnam Djinn** and **Guided Strike** to modern **Magic**. They also marked the first time that cards were reprinted outside of the large set of a block.

ONSLAUGHT

Black: **Swat** (UL), **Syphon Soul** (LG)
Blue: **Clone** (ABU), **Meddle** (MI)
Green: **Elven Riders** (LG), **Taunting Elf** (UD)
Red: **Lay Waste** (US), **Shock** (ST)
White: **Disciple of Grace** (US), **Pacifism** (MI)

Onslaught nearly heralded the complete death knell of staple cards. **Swat**, **Lay Waste** and **Disciple of Grace** all reuse the cycling mechanic. **Taunting Elf** and **Elven Riders** fit the Tribal mechanic, **Clone** continues the trend of classic creatures being reprinted that began in *Torment* with **Sengir**, **Shock** acts as a foil to 2/2 morphing creatures, and **Syphon Soul** acts as a compliment to the newly printed **Syphon Mind**. This leaves only **Pacifism** and **Meddle** as the staple cards reprinted simply for their status as staples, and arguments can be made against **Meddle**.

In addition, the longest running staple changed colors! **Disenchant** moved from white to green, reborn as **Naturalize**. Surely this is a sign that R&D has done a complete 180-degree turn on their idea of staple cards and reprints. While reprints were originally seen as staple cards which each color could not live without, they are now seen as cards from the past that would enhance the themes of a specific set. In short, they have the exact *OPPOSITE* reason for existence now then when they were first printed!

And that, my friends, is what I love about this game of **Magic**. We've gone from **Disenchant** to **Naturalize**, and from **Fear** being a staple card in *Ice Age* to fear being a keyworded mechanic in *Onslaught*! The change came gradually, but when you have all the cards down in front of you, you can truly appreciate the evolution of reprints in **Magic**.

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*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by StarCityGames.com, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.*



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