



MAGICTHEGATHERING.COM

ARTICLES

- ▾ [Related links](#)
- ➔ [Read other articles](#)

TOURNAMENTS

MAGIC ONLINE

Article Search ▾ ➔

Duelist Flashback: "In Control" by Jim Lin

Magic Arcana
Monday, August 2, 2004

In honor of Ice Age Week, today's Magic Arcana reprints an article from *Duelist* #8: "In Control: Key Strategies for Ice Age" by Jim Lin, one of the original designers of the *Ice Age* set. It's always fascinating and educational to see what has changed in **Magic** strategy -- and what hasn't -- over the years. Enjoy.

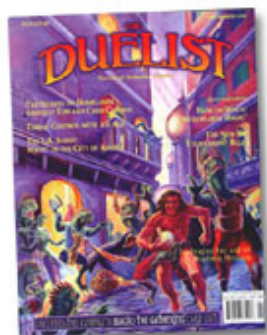


In Control: Key Strategies for Ice Age

by Jim Lin

I don't know what the weather is like where you are, but as I write this here in Seattle, it's beginning to get a bit chilly. That's good, because it puts me in the right mood to keep working on the next **Magic: The Gathering** expansion, which develops a lot of the themes introduced in *Ice Age*TM. In designing the expansion, we've done a little bit of thinking on *Ice Age*'s strengths and weaknesses, hoping that the expansion could serve to balance them out a bit. One broad category of cards that we've found *Ice Age* to be strong in is "deck control" cards.

By deck control, I mean several things. If you've been reading *The Duelist*, *The Pocket Players' Guide*, or any other source of strategy advice on **Magic**, the idea that you should play with the smallest deck possible has probably been pounded into your head. Despite our best efforts, some cards are much stronger than others, and if you play with fewer cards, you are more likely to draw the killer cards you need for victory.



Ice Age has a class of cards known as "cantrips." These spells let you get around minimum deck-size limits, effectively allowing you to use an even smaller deck. Most let you draw a card at the beginning of the next turn's upkeep, leaving your hand size essentially unchanged after you cast them. Some, such as **Brainstorm** and **Diabolic Vision**, are even better, allowing you to replace them immediately rather than making you wait until the next upkeep. Be careful about using too many cantrips, though, as they usually don't do too much on their own--you'll need some muscle in your deck to back them up. Also, if you're playing with lots of cantrips, stick with those that are very cheap (one or no mana to cast), and avoid those like **Force Void** that require a specific circumstance to cast. In general, try to use cantrips that are instants: you can cast some on your own turn, draw more during your opponent's turn, and then cast more on your opponent's turn. The cantrips that I have found most useful are: **Barbed Sextant** (great for mana management in multicolored decks); **Brainstorm** and **Diabolic Vision**

(which is helpful for managing the order in which you get your cards, and which gets you cards the turn you cast them); **Portent** (which again is good for managing card order, and which can be used on your opponent); and **Clairvoyance** (which is great for looking at your opponent's hand when you're playing, or playing against, a **Counterspell** deck).

Another aspect of deck control *Ice Age* is especially strong in is finding ways to use cards that aren't very useful at the moment. Ideally, you would want to design a deck in which all of the cards would be useful at all times, but that's just not possible. A good example of this can be found when you determine a deck's land ratio, one of the toughest things to balance in a deck. Almost every deck needs to get mana out in its first two or three turns, but when you adjust for this, you usually end up drawing too much land later on in the game. (This is one of the reasons **Land Tax** is such a good card: the main benefit of **Land Tax** is not that you're getting land in your hand, but that you're getting it out of your deck, increasing the ratio of useful, non-land cards.)

Fortunately, *Ice Age* gives you a lot of opportunities to use those "useless" cards. Excess land can be disposed of using **Zuran Orb** (sacrifice a land to gain two life), as yet the only *Ice Age* card restricted by the Duelists' Convocation. Gaining life out of those extra land is pretty good, but try **Zuran Orb** with **Channel**, **Jokulhaups**, **Armageddon**, or **Balance** for some real thrills. In sealed-deck environments, **Dwarven Armory** (sacrifice a land to put a +2/+2 counter on a creature) is also an amazing card for making use of land, although I think you'll find it a little too expensive for constructed-deck environments. **Krovikan Sorcerer** and **Mesmeric Trance** allow you to trade any useless card for a new card, and although **Mesmeric Trance**'s cumulative upkeep makes it difficult to maintain, you only have to trade in one card successfully to break even. Another excellent option is **Stormbind** (discard a card at random to deal 2 damage to target creature or player), especially if you have a deck in which you don't tend to hold cards in your hand for long unless they are useless.

Deck control in *Ice Age* doesn't have to stop with your own deck. For those control freaks out there, you can go ahead and control your opponent's deck, too. The two cards that have probably received the most attention in this area are **Jester's Mask** and **Jester's Cap**, but I don't actually think either is quite as good as some of the claims I've heard. **Jester's Cap** will definitely devastate decks that rely too heavily on one combination, but most good decks will not be hurt too much by the removal of a few cards. **Jester's Mask**, on the other hand, is usually used to give someone a hand of nothing but land. After having this done to me a few times, however, I don't think that it's as bad as it sounds. There are a number of ways in *Ice Age* to use extra land in your hand, and you're also getting a reasonable amount of land taken out of your deck, increasing the chance that you'll draw more useful, non-land cards later. The benefit of the Mask doesn't last for too many turns, and with a casting cost of 5, I don't think it does enough.



Ice Age does, however, offer some good options for controlling your opponent's deck. **Zur's Weiriding** requires a bit of finesse to use successfully, but when played correctly, it should be a game-winner. If you can get a situation where you will definitely win with the cards on the table, even if you lose 2 life a turn and your opponent has a useless or non-existent hand (**Clairvoyance** and **Portents** can help here), playing **Zur's Weiriding** will lock the game up for you by keeping your opponent from drawing any more cards. Probably the simplest lock to achieve is to drive your opponent down in cards and then play a Rack followed by **Zur's Weiriding**. Unless you are way behind, trading 3 damage for 2 life is pretty good.

If you like to play rainbow decks, **Elemental Augury** is another reasonable way to control both your deck and your opponent's deck. (And playing five colors with *Ice Age* shouldn't be too hard using the *Ice Age* "damage" lands like **Karplusan Forest**. I'd stay away from the "depletion" lands like **Lava Tubes**, though.) **Elemental Augury** allows you to rearrange your top three cards and your opponent's top three cards, speeding up your good cards and slowing down hers. Add **Millstones**, **Portents**, and **Ray of Erasures**, and you have a pretty good shot at keeping your opponent out of good cards altogether.

Well, I've got to get back to work on the next expansion, but I hope you've gotten some good deck and combination ideas. I'll just leave you with one tantalizing hint about the expansion:

What's this I hear about countering an opponent's spell before you've even taken a turn?

Jim Lin is a Wizards of the Coast R&D "old-timer," involved since the initial playtesting of **Magic: The Gathering**. Since he's one of the designers of *Ice Age*, we tried to make him feel guilty about having to tell readers to steer clear of some cards in the set--but it didn't work: "That's what's fun about **Magic**: figuring out which cards are good and which ones aren't so good."

Bigger is better - and possible

Before *Ice Age*, you almost never saw anything as big or expensive as a **Shivan Dragon** by the time you got around to summoning something that big, you were dead. With *Ice Age*, however, it isn't too hard to get out a **Shivan Dragon** or a **Scaled Wurm** on the second or third turn. The key cards you need to do this are **Tinder Walls** and **Orcish Lumberjacks**.



Ideally, you'll play a forest and a **Tinder Wall** on turn one and sacrifice the **Tinder Wall** to summon two **Orcish Lumberjacks**. Next turn, you play another forest, tap both your forests for mana, and sacrifice them both with your **Lumberjacks** for a total of 8 mana. Of course, this is a high risk strategy, as you now have no mana, and if the big and nasty thing you summon gets killed, you'll be in a lot of trouble. A good way to avoid this sort of trouble is to wait a little bit longer (you'll probably find that this combination won't get going before the fourth or fifth turn anyway), get a little more mana out, and cast **Jokulhaups** and then a **Shivan Dragon** in the same turn. This will leave your opponent with no mana, making it a lot more difficult for him to kill that Dragon. Of course, you'll be out of mana, too, so you really won't be able to take advantage of the Shivan's firebreathing, and flying isn't much of an advantage when your opponent has no blockers. For this combination, **Goblin Mutant** and **Orgg** might be more effective--both are cheaper and **Orgg** even has a higher power than the Shivan.

If you want the mana but don't like the idea of destroying all your land, you can stay in green and still get a good bit of fast mana. **Fyndhorn Elder** (or "Booster Elf" as the designers call it) will obviously help you get out some really large creatures, but don't overlook **Nature's Lore**. There are so many ways to kill small creatures like Elves and Elders (can you say "Pyroclasm"?) that I think you'll find that having extra lands in play may be a little more reliable. Plus, **Nature's Lore** has the added effect of thinning land out of your deck.

[Magic Arcana Archive](#)

Interact

Rant, rave and share



[Discuss "Duelist Flashback: "In Control" by Jim Lin"](#) on the message boards

Continue

Other recent articles



Today

[Spirited Away-kening](#) Revisiting multiplayer's best spirit
Anthony Alongi



Today

[IntoTheAether Invokes the Ultimus Principle](#)
Tribal and PDC revisited
Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar



Yesterday

[Forgotten Lore: 10 Mental Blocks of Magic](#)
Improving your play by challenging your assumptions and habits
Mark Rosewater



Yesterday

[That's the Spirit](#) Looking back on the design behind several of Magic's spirits.
Mark Rosewater

[Champions Sealed Deck Primer: Scott's](#)



Build Building the deck from last week's card pool.
Scott Wills

Yesterday

- [More recent articles](#)
- [Return to Magicthegathering.com](#)

[WHAT'S NEW](#) [CORPORATE INFO](#) [WHERE TO BUY](#) [INTERNATIONAL](#) [SUPPORT](#) [SITEMAP](#) [PRODUCTS](#)

© 1995-2004 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.
[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)