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Ice Guys Finish First



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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Welcome to *Ice Age* Week! This week we'll be exploring the ins and outs of **Magic's** sixth



expansion. (Kind of scary when you realize there's been thirty-two of them – and that's just the tournament-legal ones!) The [feature article this week](#) from Skaff Elias talks about *Ice Age's* design, so I decided to approach the topic from a different vantage point. I'm going to use my column today to give my opinions, as a current **Magic** designer, of the set in a historical context. In short, what has time taught us about *Ice Age's* design?

And to add a little flavor, I've decided to make use of a Letterman favorite, the Top 10 List. Although be aware that mine isn't trying to be funny. So without further ado (because my column has a higher “ado” content than most online columns about **Magic**), here's my list:

The Top 10 Best Designed Cards In *Ice Age* (According to Me)

Number 10... Zur's Weirding

I've been a fan of this card for a long time. One of my favorite parts about the card is that it's a very sneaky Johnny card. It has a sense of power without a lot of direction. What I mean by that is that most strong Johnny cards push you down an obvious path. Not **Zur's Weirding**.

Zur's Weirding has an indescribable quality to it that makes players react to it in very odd ways. I don't know what exactly it is about the card, but it creates situations like no other **Magic** card. The best example of this is a story I always tell about a **Zur's Weirding** deck I used for gunslinging. “Gunslinging” (if you've never heard the word) means playing **Magic** against the public for fun (typically at events), usually giving away a free booster pack if you lose. Back in the day I used to freelance for Wizards. From time to time I'd get sent to conventions. And as a pseudo-**Magic** celebrity (back then I was “the guy who wrote the puzzles”), I was often asked to gunsling against the public.



One summer, I had a **Zur's Weirding** deck that I gunslang (is that a word?) with at all the events I attended. Whenever I set up a lock (where you have permanents in play that allow you to gain 2 life a turn, meaning your opponent can never draw again; the total lock means you've checked their hands for answers) with the deck, my opponent would never concede. They couldn't win, but all of them seemed magically unable to concede. The conversation went something like this:

Me: Okay, I got the lock. Concede?

Them: No.

Me: You do understand that you can't win. I know what's in your hand.

Them: Let me just see my next card.

Me: That's the point. You don't get your next card. Or the card after that. Or the card after that.

Them: We'll see.

Me: I can gain two life a turn. No, you won't see.

Them: I got a few answers.

Me: But you're not going to draw them.

Them: Let's just play a few more turns.

Me: Fine.

They reveal the top card of their library.

Me: I pay 2 life. You don't get it. Gain 2 life.

I reveal the top card of my library.

Them: Hmm, should I let you have this?

Me: Does it matter? You only have seven life. That's three cards. I have over twenty cards left. Seventy five percent of which can kill you.

Them: I'll pay 2 life.

They reveal the top card of their library.

Me: I pay 2 life. Gain 2 life. Do you see what's going on? Your life total is going down. Mine isn't. You're not drawing cards. In a few turns, I will be. You. Cannot. Win. You can't win. Winning? Not an option. Jimmy the Greek bets on this game? He bets his life savings on me. Because he can't lose. Because I can't lose. Would you like to concede?

Them: Not yet.

I reveal the top card of my library.

Them: I pay 2 life.

Me: Okay, you're at three life. Next turn, you'll be at one life. Then you will have to let me draw cards. But I'm gaining 2 life a turn. That means I can deny you drawing cards until bell bottoms come back into style... yet again... for some reason. Do you see what I'm saying?

Them: I still have one more draw.

Me: Looking at a card before I make you get rid of it isn't really a draw. It's just the illusion of a draw. You have no draws. That's why I called it a "lock". That means I've put the lock on the game. You have no options left which would allow you to win.

Them: I still have three life.

Me: And I can tango. What does that have to do with the price of tea in China? Which word is throwing you. You? Can't? Perhaps it's win?

They reveal the top card of their library.

Me: I pay 2 life. Gain 2 life.

I reveal the top card of my library.

Them: (after thinking for a minute) Okay, you can have it.

Me: You just let me have a creature that I can play, attack with for several turns, and win.

Them: We'll see.

To this day, I don't know why this phenomenon occurred. My hypothesis is that **Zur's Weirding** feels so much like a soft lock that players always feel like there's some way out of it. Anyway, the point is that this card has a magical quality to it that I find entrancing. I can't put my finger on it and as a designer that only further entices me.

Zur's Weirding has a nice mix of design elements. It's straight-forward yet has a lot of subtlety to its execution. It encourages you to build a deck around it, but doesn't dictate strongly what that deck has to be. And it's somehow always underestimated when it's played. Every time I see it reprinted in a base set, it brings a smile to my face. (And speaking of base sets, **Zur's Weirding** is the card featured in [this week's sketch vote](#) for [Selecting Ninth Edition](#). Go vote!)

And maybe, one day, someone will actually concede.

Number 9... Pyroclasm

Every once in a while when I'm designing, I stumble onto an idea so simple and functional that I assume it's already been done. And most of the time it has been. But every once in a while, it hasn't. And man, is that a happy day. There are over seven thousand unique **Magic** cards. The idea that somehow this clever little vein of design space hasn't been tapped is a euphoric one.

This is how I assume the *Ice Age* designers must have felt when they created **Pyroclasm**. The card is so perfect and so simple. It's wonderfully in flavor yet it gave red a tool it desperately needed. Yes, yes, red had **Earthquake**, but man did fliers cause red a headache. And red was supposed to be number two at anti-flying. And **Earthquake** costs three mana to destroy two toughness creatures. And it hurt you to do it.

Red needed **Pyroclasm**. And in *Ice Age*, it got it.



Number 8... Jester's Cap

There is a famous quote by pro player Dave Price. Asked why he liked to play aggressive, quick kill decks, he replied, "There are often wrong answers. There are never wrong threats."

He was referring to the fact that in **Magic** there are offensive cards and defensive cards. Offensive cards almost always do what they were

designed to do. Defensive cards though can often lie dead in your hand as the threat they exist to combat doesn't show up.

Making playable defensive cards has forced the designers to make the "answers" a little more flexible. If one answer can deal with multiple threats it's less likely to end up a dead card. Enter **Jester's Cap**. Here's an answer that can handle almost any threat.

In addition, **Jester's Cap** does a second thing that the designers really like. It's a card that gets stronger in the hands of better players. A beginner probably doesn't know what will cripple their opponent. A Pro knows exactly the impact of each card he takes.

Finally, the card was very innovative. At the time shockingly so. It and **Jester's Mask** allowed players to do something that had never been done before – look through the opponent's deck. It may seem tame now, but in the day it was actually quite controversial.

And so I tip my hat to the Cap.

Number 7... Pox

One of the signs that a card was well designed is to follow the cult following around it. And for some reason, I think the cult favorite from *Ice Age* is **Pox**. I've spent a lot of time studying the card to figure out what makes it tick and here's the best I've come up with so far.

First, the card is very powerful. Players love power. Second, it shares the quality that I like about **Zur's Weirding** in that it cries to have a deck built around it but doesn't tell you exactly what to do with it. Third, it oozes black. And let's face it, for cool flavor, no one touches black. Fourth, and this is strictly my current hypothesis, it has a "gotcha" feel.

Huh? What's a "gotcha" feel? One of the principles of game design is that players enjoy putting it to one another. They like doing something that advances their cause at the expense of another player. The kind of thing that makes a player cry "gotcha!"

I think **Pox** embodies a lot of the "gotcha" moment. Your gain comes at their loss. Combine them all together and the card creates a very distinctive emotional response. Odd that a card themed around illness can make so many feel so good.

Number 6... Orcish Lumberjack

This card performs the hat trick of card design – it's flavorful, it's useful and it's fun. To be printed a card has



to has to shine in at least one of those three qualities. To be a star, it has to shine in at least two. Three is a moment of the stars aligning for a designer. We just thank the designing gods that they occasionally happen.

This card's only problem is a power level one (and hey, that's a development issue). Back in the day, the card had a bit of a flavor issue as fast mana used to be black's domain. But when R&D reshuffled the color pie to try and align the mechanics with the philosophies, red got fast mana. Hmm, maybe the *Ice Age* designers really were ahead of their time.

The only reason it's at six on my list is that it didn't have the influence on later design that I feel many of the upcoming cards did. That said, I love this guy. Now if only I could convince the development guys that it isn't too good to reprint.

Number 5... Brainstorm

It's interesting that the more experience I get as a designer, the more I appreciate the simple cards. **Brainstorm** is one such card. **Brainstorm** is never the star of the deck, yet it helps push the percentage a few points in its controller's favor. It's a subtle card that rewards a skilled player (see, we really do like that). Cards like **Brainstorm** are very hard to design so when I see one that works, I'm always impressed.

So it's simple and elegant. So was **Pyroclasm**. How'd **Brainstorm** make it up to number five? Because it did all that... and costs one mana. As a non-creature card no less. Since most of you probably don't design **Magic** cards and this may not mean anything to you, let me use a Hollywood metaphor. Hollywood has a large number of attractive actresses (one of my favorite perks of living in LA, by the way). It also has a great deal of funny actresses. But a looker that can do comedy? Few and far between. When a casting director finds a new one, they cling on like the hook side of Velcro to the loop side.

What does this have to do with one-drops in **Magic**? I consider well-balanced, interesting one-drops to be the Jennifer Aniston of **Magic** design. Now, I'm sure a bunch of you are saying, hey, there's plenty of good one-drop spells. Not the kind I'm talking about. See, I'm not counting one-drops that R&D over-juiced. The cards where we put a little more than one mana's worth of power in the card. **Birds of Paradise**, **Llanowar Elves**, **Duress**, etc., are all nice cards, but every time R&D prints one we have to watch the cards like a hawk.

The category of one-drops I'm talking about are cards that see play but that R&D doesn't have to feel dirty about. These are cards that honestly have a mana's worth of power. Cards we can always reprint because they aren't raising the overall power level of the game. The poster child of this kind of card is **Giant Growth**. And **Brainstorm**.

In addition, **Brainstorm** really put cheap deck manipulation on the map. A lot of cards and even mechanics (scry, cough, cough) owe their existence to the influence that **Brainstorm** has had on the game.

And all that for one mana.

Number 4... Jokulhaups

This spell does an excellent job of summing up red. In the end, red is willing to blow up the world, but even then it just can't quite get rid of everything. I talked in my red column ("[Seeing Red](#)") about how red is very short-sighted. It constantly gives up long-term advantage for short-term gain. This means that quite often a red mage finds himself in the mid-game without any resources left. What's a red mage to do?



Luckily, *Ice Age* came up with a very elegant, and in-flavor, solution – just blow up everything and start all over! (It's what we in R&D refer to as a “reset” button.) *Jokulhaups* wasn't the first reset button (Alpha, after all, had cards like *Balance* and *Nevinyrral's Disk*), but I think it's become the definitive one.

As far as the spell leaving enchantments behind? A touch of genius. It both helps educate the player about red's weakness and allows the Johnnies of the world a chance to turn that weakness into a strength.

This one card added an entire new depth to red. Again with flavor, efficiency, and fun. (Well, fun for red.)

Number 3... Demonic Consultation

At the 1995 US National Championship, a man named Derek Rank played this card in his deck and made Top 8. At the time, most players thought he was insane. And I include myself in that camp. The card seemed so high risk that the majority of tournament players shunned it. I think back then the card was put into the same



camp as a coin flipping card. What we failed to understand is that coin flipping cards would be played if they allowed you to win and came up heads ninety seven percent of the time.

The reason I rated this card so highly is fourfold. First, I love cards that seem bad but turn out to be good, so how could I not love the card that historically created the widest gulf? From “crazy to play it” to restricted in Type II!

Second, the card opened up a very interesting area of design space, an area I call “push your luck” cards. These are cards that allow a player to get more risky as things get more and more dire. (Or vary in their power enough that the user is uncertain what effect the card will produce during any one use.) The ability has cemented in black and is also used in red and artifacts quite a bit.

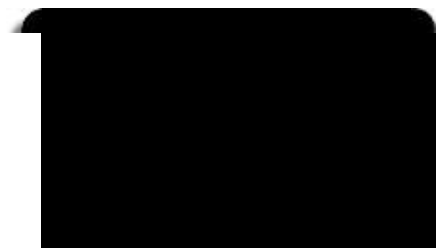
Third, the card really knocked home the value of tutoring. Will players risk their entire game to tutor? Yes. It doesn't get much more telling than that.

Finally, the card taught the designers the importance of the thrill. That is, players like it when the game creates a moment that pushes the adrenaline.

By the way, this doesn't fall into the *Brainstorm* category of one drops.

Number 2... The “Pain” Lands (*Adarkar Wastes*, *Brushland*, *Karplussan Forest*, *Sulfurous Springs*, *Underground River*)

R&D makes a lot of non-basic lands. Especially dual-colored lands. And nothing (with the sole exception of Richard Garfield's original dual lands) has ever been as well designed as the *Ice Age* pain lands. *Invasion's* tap lands (*Coastal Tower*, *Elfhame Palace*, *Salt Marsh*, *Shivan Oasis*, *Urborg Volcano*) come close in elegance, but hit slightly lower on the power level.



That said, would I change anything about them? Yes, I would. I would change the second ability from "T: Add C or D to your mana pool. CARDNAME deals 1 damage to you" to "Pay 1 life, T: Add C or D to your mana pool." While mechanically they are slightly different (You can prevent the damage from the current versions), I like the shorter, snappier template. In addition, I prefer costs that aren't so easy to work around.

But that's just me being very picky. The pain lands are about as classic as card design comes. Of course, even that only gets you to number 2.

And the Number 1 Top Designed Card From *Ice Age* (In My Opinion)... *Necropotence*

This card



The infamous skull



makes my Top 10 List for The Best Cards Designed Of All Time (hmm, I should do that article some day). But it was so crazy overpowered, you say. Fine, it might not make the Top 10 Best Developed Cards Of All Time. But *Necropotence* is a genius of design. Why? For starters, it's a card with such a cleanliness of concept mixed with an incredible depth of strategy. This isn't the first card to trade life for cards - I believe *Greed* (from *Legends*) has that honor - but it was the first to turn this powerful idea into a card that could shape the game of **Magic**.

It's an injustice to merely say *Necropotence* has an "incredible depth of strategy." The enchantment does something that few **Magic** cards can. Its use seems to complicate upon repeated use. Most cards, as a counter example, become more and more rote over time. The more you play with the card, the easier it is to play. *Necropotence* seems to work almost in reverse. The better player you become, the harder it is to use, because *Necropotence* has so much raw power that the experienced player has to be very careful in how to maximize extracting it. And those decisions are dependent upon so many other factors in the game. I've seen top pro players who have played countless *Necropotence* decks still struggle game after game trying to deduce the exact right amount of cards to draw at the end of each turn.

But some of you out there might say that the card is wordy. Shouldn't points be taken off for the card's slight inelegance? No, because those little subtleties are crucial to the card. Believe me, I've learned from first-hand experience. In *Urza's Destiny*, I thought I'd fix the "little inelegance". Why wait for the end of turn? Let's just let the players draw the cards immediately. That would be less wordy, right? Big mistake!

That delay is crucial for a number of reasons. First, it adds a more complex set of play decisions. When you get the cards right away, the answer is to simply draw until you get the card you want or are unable to draw more. With *Necropotence*, you have only one chance to gauge how many cards you need. You must face the future and the unknown. You must understand the game state to properly deduce how much you need and how much you can afford (or often have to) to risk.

Second, having to wait until the end of the turn shifts how the card is used. *Necropotence* is a card drawer. *Yawgmoth's Bargain* can also be more of a convoluted tutor. Third, the delay creates drama, a quality that I have respected more and more as I've advanced as a designer. Every time a *Necropotence* is used it becomes an event.

There was a lot of criticism when R&D chose to put *Necropotence* into *Fifth Edition*. How could R&D let a card so powerful get reprinted? I think the answer lies in the respect R&D has for the

design of the card. There are few cards that have not just single decks, but multiple archetypes named after them. The answer to "I'm playing a Necro deck" is usually "which one?"

Necropotence is heads and shoulders in my mind the best designed card in *Ice Age*. It wasn't even a hard decision. There's no way for me even to do it justice in the short space provided. Suffice it to say that **Necropotence** has had a bigger influence on the game of **Magic** (at numerous levels – from design all the way to tournament play) than almost any other card you could name. The card just turned nine years old and I still don't feel like the strategy of using it has been mastered. And finally, to borrow a phrase from my college days in Boston, it's wicked awesome. It's flavorful. It's powerful. And boy is it fun.

Have an Ice Day

I hope today's column has given you a little insight into both *Ice Age* and design.

Join me next week when I... I guess there's no point about getting cute, we all know it's the second part of [my Pro Tour column](#). See you next week.

Until then, may you find the future by studying the past.

Mark Rosewater

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