

Designing *Ice Age* The Dawn of *Magic's Ice Age*

Skaff Elias

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This is the story of **Magic's** first expansion - *Ice Age*. Don't buy into the common misconception that *Arabian Nights* was **Magic's** first expansion merely because of its debut date! *Ice Age* was old before *Arabian Nights* was even conceived.

Foundation

The playtest group surrounding **Magic's** initial test at the University of Pennsylvania in 1991 was, to the clear betterment of the game, very opinionated. Math and physics graduate students, who were by training and temperament overly familiar with arguments being provably winnable, didn't always have the skills and inclination required for compromise. Initially, rather than an "expansion" *Ice Age* was to a certain extent the way its design group thought the game itself should be.



While the idea of expansions in the abstract could not have escaped anyone playtesting the game, the specifics of how an expansion would look were very much up in the air. One thing up in the air was the very basics of the creation process - whether expansions should be produced by individuals, small teams, or enormous teams. *Ice Age* began when three of us - Dave Pettet, Jim Lin, and myself thought we could design a more interesting group of cards to play with than the basic set and began work on such a set. Very quickly, Richard asked people formally for expansions (probably at the request of WotC central), and assigned Chris Page to our team. The three of us at first weren't happy with anyone being "assigned" to us, even though we all liked Chris - he was one of the most likable of all the playtesters. As it turned out in some ways he was the least dispensable person in the group simply because he thought completely differently than the rest of us. Please understand that "us" is used here in a very general sense, meaning roughly "mammals" or "vertebrates." If Jim or Dave or I thought of a card idea, we'd be hard pressed to say the other two couldn't have come up with it. I never heard anyone say that about Chris' stuff.

So we began building a better basic set, unaware that events would pass that idea by rapidly. We wanted a set where flying was special, not just an extra word tacked on to every played creature. We wanted a set where the idea that a color was short on creatures meant something. We wanted a set where the "allied" colors were played more often with each other than enemy colors were. We wanted strategy in simple creature combat as well as flashy enchantments that gave you cards for life. We wanted games to last longer (when we started the design of the set, the **Magic** environment was too fast due to unlimited card restrictions) and have more turnabouts.

Ice Age achieved these things in two ways - new cards and a different mix of cards from the basic set. As has been written before, the intention was to play *Ice Age* as a "stand alone" set where environmental changes for all practical purposes changed the cards themselves. Is [Disenchant](#) a good card? Is [Terror](#)? What about [Juggernaut](#) or even [Counterspell](#)? These questions are impossible to answer without knowing the environment. We wanted to change the cards without changing a word on them.

This plan went apleigh with the inevitable thud of a falling brick. **Magic** simply grew too fast, and was being played too much for those initial plans to make sense. Players couldn't wait for a whole new set to be created - they wanted new cards fast. They wanted them so fast that to force some people to re-buy [Disenchants](#) and goblins and land at the same pace they wanted new cards would cause a riot. Also, the subtle variations of card mix were a bit lost on the people who traded [Specters](#) away to make sure they had four [Wall of Wood](#) in their deck. So Richard was asked to crank out expansions and make more cards. Being the taskmaster he is, he leaned hard on his elves back in the workshop in Philly, "stole" a bunch of *Ice Age* cards to make Alpha, and got us and others working on what are today seen as "regular" expansions. A bunch of *Ice Age* cards made it off the sinking ship and into Alpha, but the rest of the set and its central strategic theme, delayed by at least a year, was being swamped under the tidal wave of speculators and gamers new to the hobby. I will say that while I don't recall anyone ever losing hope that *Ice Age* would come out, if I knew then what I know now then I would have bet against it. Feedback inside Wizards of the Coast on *Ice Age* was negative due to all the old reprinted cards, and it kept getting delayed as a concept, not just a cardset. Projects like that have a poor track record at any company; in retrospect *Ice Age* and standalones in general were lucky to have survived.

Restoration

It is a testament to the organization at Wizards of the Coast, sprung from the management philosophy of Peter Adkison and to a lesser extent Richard Garfield, that it was able to arrive at correct decisions it didn't believe in, by putting faith in the people it needed to at the right times. *Ice Age* had been delayed for over a year - 5 expansions completed after it were released before it! Internally, many people outside of R&D kept worrying (rightly) about how the reprints would be received. We had to redesign the entire set, then redesign it again. We kept having to put in more new cards, but also were asked to add surface structure to the set to make it seem more "Ice Agey." I was told on one occasion that the set didn't feel enough like an *Ice Age* should feel. While I'm still not sure exactly how a set achieves that tingly "Ice-Age" feeling, I know that [Snow-covered lands](#) evidently make it feel that way, because once we added them the critic was satisfied.

Through all the complaints, R&D maintained that standalones were not just a requirement for extending the life of the game, but provided an opportunity for enormous fun on the part of the player. Management listened to us, and *Ice Age* was finally on the schedule irrevocably. Today we talk about standalone expansions and their effective periodic overhaul of the environment as a cornerstone of **Magic**. The legacy of *Ice Age* could have been merely an interesting story about where [Orcish Artillery](#) came from.



The delays changed *Ice Age* in many ways. Certainly in some ways they made the set worse. A lot of complexity was added at the last minute to give things the *Ice Age* "feel" without being well thought through. A lot of text was put on cards to make the allied color crossover clear. I believe the set was made worse by not allowing as many reprints as we would have liked. I can remember negotiating percentages, then the four of us going back and adding text to another 10 cards to make them fit the theme better, then going back again and forcing another 5, etc. This was mildly annoying, but also fun, as it allowed more opportunities for us to create cards, which designers can seldom pass up.

However, the good side of the delay is that the set as a whole became much, much better than the original version. We simply had more time to devote to creating cards. We also knew a lot more than when we had started more than two years before. You can sit and create cards all day long that you find interesting as a designer, but it's impossible to know what cards will be found interesting in the real world without interacting with it. If *Ice Age* had come out in early 1994, [Necropotence](#) may have cost two life per card, or been ☠ to cast. [Jester's Cap](#) wouldn't have been in the set. [Cantrips](#) might have been so miscosted that no one would ever have taken notice of them. The delay was critical because it allowed *Ice Age* to give standalones a solid launch - with a cardset able to (partially) stand the test of time and a customer base finally able to appreciate it.

Configuration

Making cards for *Ice Age* was one of the most fun experiences of my career. They were made at essentially three different times - the first early group meant as improvements to the basic set, the second group designed back in Philadelphia by a group of game designers who just received their first commission, and the third set designed in Seattle immediately before the product's release. The feeling in the beginning was intense - we weren't making an expansion, per se. Remember, we were redesigning all of **Magic!** We felt, I believe, a responsibility for balance completely unlike that for a mere expansion. In spite of this tone, we had a great time with the cards. With a microscope and a retrospective view, you can see a design philosophy at work - we played a lot with the costs of cards, for example in cantrips, cumulative upkeep, life sacrifice, etc. This continued into *Alliances* with cards like [Balduvian Horde](#). Some of the early sets like *Arabian Nights* or *The Dark*, for example, had a theme that cards fit into. Conversely, *Ice Age* began with the cards themselves, and high level design goals like creature color balance.

General goals are boring, while individual cards are exciting.

So when asked what card from *Ice Age* I like the best, I'm tempted to say [Necropotence](#) because it embodies the principles of design we strove for. It changes the players' most basic calculations: what are cards and life worth? Calculations done consistently correctly only by the best players - how many times have you played against a "Necro" player who chose to draw only enough cards to fill their hand, never glancing at life totals? The icing on the cake for [Necropotence](#) is its flavor - pure perfection for black. It may be equaled but won't be surpassed in this department. To top it all off its power is at the very limit of acceptable (some surmise it didn't hit the limit, but defined it), and while its power level had its critics, it had its supporters also. Rarely has a card had EVERY player having an opinion on its power, as occurred back then, without there being a clearly favored position.

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OK, so we got really lucky on [Necropotence](#). But aside from that one, I like [Jester's Cap](#). Of course it fulfilled a design goal we had - hurting decks reliant on restricted cards. More importantly, though, it was one of those cards that got players to scream, "you can't do that!" Not the first in that department by any means - the land in *Arabian Nights* and [Ornithopter](#) from *Antiquities* beat it to market by miles, just to name two, but it is a great feeling for a design team to ever accomplish that to the degree the Cap does, especially as late as *Ice Age* came out.



So in a cardset built on specific gameplay goals, what do stodgy physicist and mathematician designers have the most fun doing? Naming cards of course. I can remember trying to "norsify" the set and poring over books of real Nordic names and mythology. It's interesting to find something like [Fylgia](#) and put it in the set, but not half as fun as pulling [Lhurgoyf](#) out from between your cheeks. Especially after the flavor text was created - I think we could crack each other up in the halls for weeks just by smiling and saying "Ach!" to each other. [Lhurgoyf](#) sounded vaguely Norse to our Anglo-Saxon ears, and the icing on the cake was when I went to Oslo for a game convention and was talking with players about the names. One guy who I can only assume was the Cliff Clavinsson of Norway claimed the name had come from an old Norse story and explained its origin to me and his friends, unaware I was on the design team. He did complain it was spelled terribly. Here's one last naming tale for the road. Design and development were definitely less professional as a group back then, and we used a lot of our friends' names on cards. Staying far away from an exhaustive list, I can say that [Adarkar Wastes](#) and [Adarkar Unicorn](#) were named after my friend Aditya Adarkar. He claimed to be somewhat upset, but I'm guessing he was secretly flattered when he googled his name one day a few years ago and found out for the first time he was a celebrity of sorts. He mentioned his status to some young **Magic** player he met to find a point of commonality, saying "did you know the a-DAR-kar unicorn was named after me?" The kid smirked in disbelief and told him he was lying - he didn't even know how to pronounce "ADD-a-kar."

Redemption

You can look at *Ice Age* today and as even an amateur archeological developer see what was "original" and what was grafted at the end. The set doesn't have the polish it should, and simply has too many words on cards. The casting costs are skewed high because the resources weren't available at the

time for the amount of proper playtesting required to cost them more aggressively. And yet the set is arguably full of gems and ideas usable well into the future. On a card-by-card basis its inconsistency was a sign of its times, while many of its design elements were a step ahead of them. All of that with a set designed to a fair extent before **Magic** was even released to the public.

Yet its main legacy is often taken completely for granted - the cycle of standalones that followed it. Consciously or not, players have a deeper understanding and appreciation for the game experience provided by the cards as a mixture, not just as individuals. The launch of this expansion forged by designers and annealed by marketing concerns was a giant step for the game as a whole. Importantly its innovations lay not merely with its cards but largely with its position in the **Magic** business as a whole, from the idea of reprinting a "limited" expansion if need be to having future cardsets purposely interlock with old ones in a cycle. It was a big idea, in some ways as much about the business of the game as the game itself. Remember that while excitedly busting open your next pre-release deck.