

Memories of Snow-covered Swamp Search

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We interrupt your regularly scheduled column for a walk down the icy path down of Kjeld's memory lane.

Once upon a time, specifically when *Ice Age* was released, there was no Swimming with Sharks. In fact, there were no **Magic: the Gathering** content websites at all! There were, however, still **Magic** tournaments, where players were perhaps even more cutthroat and competitive than the sharks are today. Because message boards were then used only by a tiny minority of extremely savvy Internet users who had primarily university-provided email accounts, the discourse between players also drove far fewer ideas. So instead of a column like the one BDM brought you up until this week, players relied primarily on print books and magazines to get an idea of what other players were bringing to the table.

There is definitely a lesson here.

When *Ice Age* came out, there were two cards in particular that were poorly reviewed by a well-respected **Magic** content magazine. Let's start with this one:



That magazine said that they couldn't see a reason for anyone to play Elkin Bottle. Almost in protest, the then-reigning US National Champion (and first legend of the Pro Tour), Mark Justice, took this deck to the first Pro Tour:

Mark Justice



Main Deck

60 cards

2 City of Brass

1 Balance

Sideboard

2 Anarchy

1 Detonate

4 Dwarven Ruins	1 Black Vise	2 Eron the Relentless
1 Havenwood Battleground	1 Detonate	2 Fountain of Youth
4 Karplusan Forest	1 Earthquake	3 Pyroblast
4 Mishra's Factory	1 Elkin Bottle	3 Serrated Arrows
3 Mountain	1 Feldon's Cane	2 Shatter
3 Plains	3 Fellwar Stone	
<hr/>	3 Fireball	15 sideboard cards
21 lands	4 Howling Mine	
<hr/>	4 Icy Manipulator	
0 creatures	2 Incinerate	
	1 Ivory Tower	
	1 Jester's Cap	
	4 Lightning Bolt	
	2 Shatter	
	2 Stormbind	
	3 Swords to Plowshares	
	3 Winter Orb	
	1 Zuran Orb	
	<hr/>	
	39 other spells	


Elkin Bottle is a bit out of place in this deck. Justice's is a Howling Mine deck that would arguably have too many cards a lot of the time and a Winter Orb deck that would rarely have spare mana for Elkin Bottle activation. Personally, I think that Mark could have done better with a fourth Fellwar Stone or Winter Orb. But Mark played the Bottle in protest. He did a great job and made Top 8 of one of the most legendary tournaments of all time, even hamstrung by a misplaced Elkin Bottle.

The more famous low card ranking belongs to a much more famous three mana cost card drawing engine (that, like Elkin Bottle, does not actually "draw" extra cards):



Now Necropotence is almost surely the most important, powerful, format altering, paradigm changing, card to have come out of *Ice Age*. Necropotence dominated most formats in which it was legal, and continued to innovate half a decade after *Ice Age* itself was released. Necropotence is most famous for the so-called "classic Necro" deck of Nevyinyrral's Disk, Necropotence itself, disruption,

and black creatures, but has contributed to templated multicolored decks of similar concept, been shoved into beatdown decks, and, perhaps most importantly, restructured how combination decks were built. Arguably as famous as classic Necro itself is Trix, a combination deck that ruled the Extended format as long as it was legal.

Trix		
Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Gemstone Mine	2 Brainstorm	3 Annul
3 Island	1 Contagion	2 Contagion
6 Swamp	4 Dark Ritual	1 Hoodwink
4 Underground River	4 Demonic Consultation	3 Hydroblast
4 Underground Sea	4 Donate	4 Phyrexian Negator
<hr/>	4 Duress	2 Unmask
21 lands	4 Force of Will	<hr/>
<hr/>	1 Hoodwink	15 sideboard cards
0 creatures	4 Illusions of Grandeur	
	4 Mana Vault	
	4 Necropotence	
	3 Vampiric Tutor	
	<hr/>	
	39 other spells	

At first it might be difficult to see how a deck like this can be so good, or even see what the deck does. The plan itself centers around the Illusions of Grandeur + Donate combination (gain 20, chuck the Illusions at your opponent, watch him die when he fails to pay the aggressive cumulative upkeep). Necropotence is in the deck mostly as a facilitator. Use Vampiric Tutor or Demonic Consultation to find Necropotence and fill your hand. You will probably find a number of cover cards like Duress and Force of Will; the volume of cards you draw may give you an Illusions of Grandeur. The Illusions itself will give you 20 more life to abuse your Necropotence, and all together, the Mana Vaults, Dark Rituals, and lands will help you cast the zillions of cards you've drawn consistently.

While not as amusing as Elkin Bottle or as influential as Necropotence, the most hated card to come out of *Ice Age* was quite possibly this one:



By the time I started playing competitive **Magic** tournaments, Zuran Orb was already restricted, meaning that a player could run only one copy between his deck and sideboard. The problems with this card were many. First of all, as a colorless card with zero cost, it could go into any deck. Just as we don't want to give black enchantment removal, we don't want red gaining life cheaply. But Zuran Orb was also supremely annoying to play AGAINST. I remember many games where my opponent would top his only Zuran Orb and drag a game out of a board that I thought locked just one turn before.

But maybe worse than either of these sins, Zuran Orb combined too strongly with existing power cards. Its synergy with Necropotence should be pretty obvious, but the Orb was also really good with Land Tax and Thawing Glaciers (the latter became a problem in *Ice Age/Alliances* block as well as Standard). More dreaded than any of these was the Zuran Orb + Balance combination. Devastating to a greater extent than Disciple of the Vault and Arcbound Ravager, more controlling than Astral Slide and Lightning Rift, more drawn out than Psychatog and Upheaval, Balance and Zuran Orb could beat a player from any position... It was especially devious to spring this combination when the opponent had you pinned and way behind. There has been no better way before or since to destroy the opponent's board, erase his advantage, kill all his creatures, and reset your life.

Even the beatdown sharks would have Zuran Orb available, at least in their sideboards, and every single one worth his fin would be ready to complain when the opponent drew his Zuran Orb.

But *Ice Age* as a set was more than exceptionally powerful cards. I think that deck design started to mature during this era. Players started really thinking for themselves with decisions like moving forward with Necropotence and Elkin Bottle when the experts naysayed them. Strategies started to mature as new partners to existing cards were printed (like Thermokarst and Icequake to Stone Rain).

At the same time, correct power levels really started to hit their stride with this set. In the beginning, I think that players resented Adarkar Wastes replacing Tundra... but today we would love to have cards like Incinerate when Volcanic Hammer has become the measuring stick for cheap burn. In 1995, Incinerate didn't hold a candle to the original Lightning Bolt.

More than any of the above, though, was the graduation of this shark. I won my first PTQ on my third attempt. The format was *Ice Age/Alliances* block. Back then, PTQs had two slots to give rather than today's general one. I had the honor of sharing the victory with Erik Lauer, the man who

would eventually become one of the absolute most influential and important deck designers in all of **Magic**. Latest Developments writers past and present Randy Buehler and Aaron Forsythe owe a great deal of their **Magic** success to Erik's skills and the community he helped to build in Pittsburgh.



"The Mad Genius" - Erik Lauer

Now years before Swimming with Sharks was even a twinkle in BDM's eye, he was the top tournament organizer in the world. Starting with New York **Magic**, BDM co-owned a company that would give away the Type I Power Nine cards or a large cash prize of up to \$1000. They generally had two groups, a Type I and a Type II, with the top four from each playing Limited for the big prizes. All of these things were unusual and innovative a decade ago... big prizes, Limited anything, tournaments at all... and when the Pro Tour appeared BDM's Gray Matter Productions added PTQ winners to their format such that there would be two PTQ players and three each of Type I and Type II finalists competing.

At the end of maybe the longest tournament day I had ever played, I was facing off against Erik. He had opened the day by winning a side Juzam Djinn tournament, fought through the PTQ with me, and taken the top prize from the cash portion. After that had been resolved, we two played for the PTQ title and a couple of DCI points. Erik and I both played Necropotence and the rest of the Top 8 didn't... go figure we were facing off with the PT slots.

We agreed to a one game match for bragging rights and a pack of Italian *The Dark*.

Now I was already hurting for mana because in those days, there was no Paris mulligan. Erik made matters worse with an Icequake.

"Take one."

"Huh?"

"Take one. You have Snow-covered Swamps."

I used Snow-covered Swamps to power up Withering Wisps to beat Deadly Insects and other low toughness creatures. This match was the first time all day they had proven a liability.

Erik then summoned a pair of unplayable 2/3 Zombies for 3. These were not the sorts of Zombies you and I would be proud to play, like Carnophage and Sarcomancy, but instead Lim-Dul's Cohort and Legions of Lim-Dul. Erik tore through my first couple of guys with Contagion, but despite mana screw, mana denial, and creature removal, I eventually got a Lim-Dul's High Guard in play to defend.

"Attack."

"Okay. Block that guy."

"You can't."

"What?"

"He has Snow-covered Swampwalk."

"What are you playing? Anti-my deck?"

"Heh."

"Fine," I said. "Block that guy instead."

"Okay."

"Regenerate."

"You can't."

"Huh?"

"Creatures blocking or blocked by Lim-Dul's Cohort can't regenerate."

"What!?!"

At that point, I took my lumps like a man -- okay, a Planeswalker -- scooped up my cards, congratulated my opponent, and collected my invitation to my first Pro Tour.

"That happened in the Top 8 of a PTQ?" -Scott Johns, our editor
"No. The top TWO."

This remains my fondest memory of *Ice Age*.

Next week Swimming with Sharks returns with a PTQ Top 8 and the inside track to bashing your way through *Mirrodin* Block Constructed.

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