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Coldsnap: A Fine Recovery

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Latest Developments
Friday, June 30, 2006



Before we get to the preview, some quick facts on *Coldsnap* with regard to Organized Play:

- Standard:** When *Coldsnap* becomes Standard-legal, its addition will not cause any previous blocks (i.e. *Kamigawa*) to rotate out. That means Standard will consist of all of *Kamigawa* block, all of *Ravnica* block, *Ninth Edition*, and *Coldsnap* up until the day *Time Spiral* becomes Standard-legal, at which point the *Kamigawa* block rotates out. Conversely, *Coldsnap* will rotate out of Standard with the *Time Spiral* block, when the first set of the "Rock / Paper / Scissors" block becomes Standard-legal in 2008. Considering that "Rock" will be released after both the *Time Spiral* block and the as-yet-unnamed "Peanut" block, *Coldsnap* will be a part of Standard for a long time—longer than any set in the modern block-model era.
- Block Constructed:** *Coldsnap* is considered to be a part of the *Ice Age* block (*Ice Age / Alliances / Coldsnap*). There will not be any premier-level events using that format for two reasons: the bulk of the tournament-caliber cards from the first two expansions are so far out of print as to be essentially inaccessible for most of the tournament audience, and the format is most likely degenerate. Local TO's and stores may feel brave enough to run such events on their own, however.
- Booster Draft:** Triple small-set draft (meaning something like *Guildpact-Guildpact-Guildpact* or *Exodus-Exodus-Exodus*) has never been a "real" format, but instead merely a prerelease curiosity... until *Coldsnap*. Because we had no plans to either reprint *Ice Age* and *Alliances* booster packs or make players track them down at exorbitant prices, we knew that *Coldsnap* would have to do what no other small set before it had to—stand on its own in draft. The design team submitted a few key suggestions about paths that could be taken to achieve this goal, but I must tip my hat to Randy Buehler and his development team for making it a reality. *Coldsnap* draft works so well, in fact, that OP is replacing most *Ravnica*-block booster drafts at high-level events (including Limited PTQ Top 8's and Limited Grand Prix Day 2's) with triple *Coldsnap*. I imagine some of you will shell out the dough for a few random *Ice Age / Alliances / Coldsnap* drafts, but don't be surprised if the results are underwhelming—not because the *Coldsnap* mechanics don't play nice with the earlier sets (they do, actually), but because those older sets are abysmal for Limited play by modern standards.
- Sealed Deck:** Because *Coldsnap* is a small expansion, we are not producing tournament packs for it. Sealed deck, then, will be played using five booster packs plus sufficient basic land as provided by the tournament organizer. Because of the awkward logistics of this arrangement, *Coldsnap* sealed deck will not be featured in large events outside of the initial prerelease/release salvo. As I touched on earlier, large sealed deck Qualifier and Grand Prix tournaments will still be run using *Ravnica*-block product once *Coldsnap* is released.



What about Snow-Covered Lands?

The five basic snow-covered lands that originally appeared in *Ice Age* are being reprinted in *Coldsnap* as common cards. Yes, that means that the same cards are in the first and third sets of a block, but the demands of having *Coldsnap* stand on its own in Limited and having snow-covered lands available in sufficient numbers for Constructed play trumped our desire to make the block feel "seamless" despite the decade-long gap between sets.

For Limited play, you won't be able to add snow-covered lands to your deck, but instead can play only with those in your card pool (in this way they are not unlike the artifact lands from *Mirrodin*). The set is constructed in such a way that these lands will have an impact on gameplay even in small numbers.

On to the new exciting stuff...



Updating an Old Favorite

When we were designing *Coldsnap*, the team made a very conscious effort to hit on every standout theme in *Ice Age* and *Alliances* to give the set the necessary “retro” feel. Snow-covered? Check. Cumulative upkeep? Check. Allied color theme? Check. Pitch cards? Check. Old characters springing to life? Check. Land that doesn't tap for mana? Yeah, we ended up with one of those, too, somehow.

But there was one mechanic from the days of yore that we were unwilling to touch... that of “graveyard order matters.”

Death Spark and its ilk are some of the most memorable cards from the *Ice Age* / *Alliances* era, and I'm sure that most of us that worked on the set had some memory of interesting play decisions that came from playing with cards that made the order of your graveyard relevant somehow. There was always this interesting cat-and-mouse subgame wherein one player was trying to “trap” the other player's *Death Spark* beneath a noncreature card, denying access to the recursion for the rest of the game.

But **Magic** has long since drifted away from making players care about the order of their graveyards. The last card to care about graveyard order appeared in the *Tempest* block, and is no longer legal even in Extended. Most modern players aren't even aware that the official rules of the game require players to maintain graveyard order—it just doesn't matter these days and hence is never enforced. There's no way we could in good conscience ask players to suddenly have to start caring about graveyard order in tournament play (theme decks are another story).

Sadly, the design team's love affair with the past failed to provide development with any new interesting keywords for the set, so they (Randy Buehler, Devin Low, Mike Turian, and Zvi Mowshowitz) tasked themselves to come up with keywords that were new, yet maintained some distinct connection to stuff going on in the block's previous sets.

Devin, long a *Death Spark* fan, pitched a mechanic based on *Death Spark*'s recursive ability, complete with graveyard order mattering. There were some moments during the testing of this mechanic when some people in the department were actually prepared to make graveyard order matter again based solely on how much they enjoyed playing the cards, but Mark Rosewater—normally not known for reigning in wacky ideas—was the most vocal of a group of people in R&D that absolutely abhorred the idea of making graveyard order matter. The story has a happy ending, however, as Mark and the development team were able to reach a compromise and salvage the “feel” of graveyard order mattering without having it actually matter.

I present to you the “recover” mechanic:





Garza's Assassin is a powerful card, which is why I'm pleased to preview it. Sadly, it isn't the best example of the typical execution of recover, which I'll try to explain. The Assassin is unique among recover cards for two reasons—he's the only creature (the rest are instants and sorceries), and he's the only one with an "alternate" recover cost (the others all require mana).

So the typical recover card plays in this way: You play it, it does its thing, and then it goes to the graveyard. Once there, it sits and waits for a creature to go to your graveyard from play, at which point the recover ability triggers. Once it triggers, you have to pay the recover cost right then and there to get it back into your hand, or it is removed from the game and you'll never get another chance to get it back.

That execution is really quite ingenious. It captures the feel of graveyard order mattering without requiring meticulous tracking, and it even allows for the cat-and-mouse games that *Death Spark* did—your opponent will most likely try to kill your creatures when you are unable to pay the recover cost, and you'll conversely be trying to get the card back as often as possible.

Now that you understand how the "typical" recover cards work, it's easy to see why Garza's Assassin is particularly nasty. Because there's no mana payment involved, you can never be "tapped out" with regard to the recover cost. As long as you have more than 1 life point at your disposal, the Assassin will be crawling out of your graveyard and into your hand repeatedly. Creatures go into your opponent's graveyard, and come out of yours... sounds like a great deal to me!

Last Week's Poll:

When you play older cards with your friends or casual playgroup, do you tend to use the printed card text, or refer to updated Oracle wordings?		
I use the updated wording most often.	5328	60.6%
I use the original wording most often.	2605	29.6%
I don't play with old cards/I don't play casually.	862	9.8%
Total	8795	100.0%

Interesting... Oracle is widely used, but not fully, not even among you, the Internet-savvy readers. This, my friends, is why errata is so distasteful in general.

This Week's Poll:

How many *Ravnica*-block dual lands do your own?

- 40+
- 20-39
- 13-19
- 9-12
- 5-8
- 1-4
- 0

Submit my Vote

*Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D, and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.*



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