

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Of Ice and Men

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
Monday, July 3, 2006



PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Welcome to Week Two of the *Coldsnap* Previews. I have another exciting preview card for you (there are some perks to being one of the "insider" columns), but as with last week's card, I'm not going to show it to you just yet. I'm going to make you work for it. Well, work for it or just scroll down and look at it. But don't do that. Give me a chance to set up the card before you take a peek.

So when last we left this column, I explained how snow mana came to be. This week, I'm going to talk about how we got *Ice Age* and *Alliances* into *Coldsnap*. No, not the actual sets. (That would make for a mighty large expansion.) Rather I'm talking about the spirit of *Ice Age* and *Alliances*. *Coldsnap* could not be the "lost set" if it didn't harken back to the first two sets of the *Ice Age* block.

Ice Guys (Don't Always Finish Last)

Whenever I preview a new set, I always make a point to introduce the design team. But as *Coldsnap* is a throwback to *Ice Age* and *Alliances*, it dawned on me that it would be only proper to introduce you to the design team of those two sets (it's the same team for both). Without further ado, I present...

The East Coast Playtesters

Very few **Magic** design teams have a nickname, but these four individuals were no ordinary design team. For starters, this team was responsible for designing four **Magic** expansions: *Antiquities* (along with Joel Mick), *Fallen Empires*, *Ice Age* and *Alliances*. In addition, this group was part of a larger group of people who were the original playtesters for **Magic** (now you see where their name comes from). They were all living in Philadelphia and befriended Richard through different gaming avenues. *Ice Age*, interestingly enough, was originally designed to be the next evolution of **Magic**. Richard's original vision had the base game changing every year or so. **Magic: The Gathering** was the first such set. **Magic: Ice Age** was planned to be the second. But as we all know, things didn't quite take that path. So who are these four team members?

Skaff Elias – Those of you that participated in my choose-your-own-adventure column ("[A Day in the Life](#)") have probably already met Skaff. (Yes, the scary man.) Skaff spent many years as an Executive Vice President at Wizards. During that time he managed to do a few things like be Brand Manager of **Magic**, oversee Organized Play, and, oh yeah, create the Pro Tour. It's hard to do Skaff justice in just a few paragraphs (that's why I'm using more than one). He is *quite* the character.



When I first started working at Wizards, Skaff had a habit of spending nights (and occasional days) sleeping under his desk in a sleeping bag. And this was *during* the time he was Brand Manager of **Magic**. Skaff has made it a habit as he's traveled around the world to play basketball in every city he visits. (I've seen first hand how hard it is in some cities to find a basketball court.) For many years, Skaff offered up \$10,000 to the person who introduced him to his future wife. (He's now happily married with two kids – see "Topical Blend #1: [To Err Is Human](#)" wasn't a fluke.) But for all his idiosyncrasies, Skaff is one of the most insightful and passionate people to ever work on **Magic**. When Skaff had an opinion, the rest of R&D listened (although they had to be careful not to get trapped into an all-night discussion on the topic – yeah, I got caught a few times, thus my choose-you-own-adventure moment).

While Skaff took a little getting used to (which is true for much of R&D), he was a blast to work with. (I use past tense only because he no longer works at Wizards.) He always approached problems from a vantage point that few others would ever think of. I believe it was this quality that made him such a good designer. He would come at designs from all sorts of angles and as such, came up with very inventive cards. (I don't know this for a fact, but I'm pretty sure that *Necropotence* is Skaff's baby.) Richard was the first innovator of the game. The East Coast Playtesters definitely took design to the next level. (We've been stealing ideas from *Alliances* for years – *Guildpact*, for example, borrowed replicate from it.) Skaff was an integral part of making this happen.

Jim Lin – As with Skaff, I had the honor of spending many years working with Jim at Wizards. When I first started in R&D, he oversaw all of R&D's non-**Magic** projects. Over the years, he climbed up in the organization along the way becoming the VP of R&D (the job Bill Rose now holds). Let me start this by saying that I like Jim. He's a

Final Wrap-up

[Top 8 Video Archives](#)

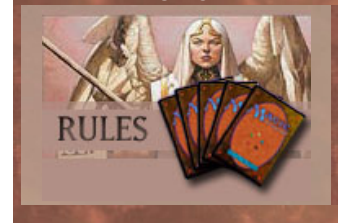
MAGIC ONLINE



MESSAGE BOARDS



RULES



good guy. I didn't work on too many projects directly with him, but the few I did were quite memorable. I should also state that I am a very stubborn man. I married a lovely yet stubborn woman. We have three equally lovely and equally stubborn children. That said, Jim is the most stubborn man I've ever met.

Jim is the pit bull of **Magic** designers. When Jim gets an idea in his head, I pity the man who gets in his way. (Above I talked about how Skaff would argue a point all night long – do you know who he most often argued with until the wee hours of the morning? Jim!) But Jim has vision and a keen eye. He has an uncanny ability to narrow in on the thing that needs tweaking. If you want thorough feedback on a design, Jim's your man. The only real mystery is how Skaff and Jim worked so long with one another without one of them killing the other.

Dave Petty – Of the four team members, three of them have worked in Wizards R&D. Dave is the third. Unfortunately, I don't have any good stories about Dave. Why? Because Dave left the month before I started working at Wizards. (Bill got his desk because he started two weeks before I did.) Most of what I know about Dave is second and third hand. I do know that he was very quiet, had the ability to get a bit temperamental, and had very creative insights. In short, he fit right in.

The only other story I know about Dave isn't really about his design days, but rather his playtesting ones. During **Magic's** beta playtest, it was Dave that first built a land destruction deck. Dave's deck, I'm told, caused Richard to reevaluate the power of a number of cards in Alpha.

Chris Page – And finally, we have the one member of the team who chose not to drive across country at the drop of a hat and work for Wizards. Instead, Chris made the crazy choice of actually finishing his degree. (As sarcasm never reads well in print, let me point out that I have a lot of respect for Chris seeing through his education.) Most of the stories I know about Chris, well, come from Chris. You see, Chris still keeps his toe in **Magic**. How do I know? Because whenever I talk about *Ice Age* or any other project that Chris worked on, he always e-mails me with extra info. (I'm curious to see the letter this column generates.)

For instance, last week he mailed me to let me know how the snow-covered lands came to be. According to Chris, he created them as a chance to make an extra set of lands that didn't have any special rules. To keep them from having the "dual land problem" (a.k.a. being better than basic lands) and not having the development resources at the time, the team chose to balance the lands by making an equal number of things that helped and hurt snow-covered land. The team considered it a failure and purposely didn't put any snow-covered land references in *Alliances* (the few that exist were put in by development). He is interested to see what the *Coldsnap* team did with it.

My favorite stories about Chris involve Chris proving that something in one of their sets was broken through playtesting. (I believe Chris did the most playtesting of the group.) Ever wonder why *Icatian Javelineers* has a tap in its activation cost? Because Chris made a degenerate deck made up of almost all Javelineers. (Think about it, it's better than *Mogg Fanatic*.) Ever wonder why the *Ice Age* Talsimans suck? Because Chris proved that the earlier version could be used in a nutty yet powerful combo deck and the team had to "fix" them late in the process.

You might have gotten the sense from the previous three bios that the East Coast Playtesters had an eccentric edge. Chris is no exception. Chris is equally passionate in his beliefs that often didn't line up with the other members of the team. Which brings us back to the thing that I'd admire most in the East Coast Playtesters: each member had a very unique approach in how they thought about the game. While this caused some conflict, it also allowed the team to come up with ideas far ahead of their time. I know when I started playing that I was excited to buy any set that they worked on because I knew I was always in for a treat.



Ice Told Tales

The East Coast Playtesters made something very special in *Ice Age* and *Alliances*. The *Coldsnap* design team had a simple goal: Live up to the sets that came before while adding our own twists. To accomplish this we had a number of different tricks. Today's column examines what some of those tricks were.

Mechanics

The first obvious place to look for inspiration was the mechanics. As I explained in [last week's](#) column, on the first day, we started by looking at what *Ice Age* and *Alliances* had done mechanically. We began with the global picture. What were the keywords? What other terminology was added? What unnamed but large swath of cards were there? What did the set revolve around? Unlike blocks of today, the set didn't have one major mechanical focus. Instead it had a strong setting that the design team wrapped various mechanics around.

Let's walk through the major mechanical pieces:

Snow-covered lands – As I explained last week, we chose this mechanic as the thing to innovate on, mostly because it had the most untapped potential. As you will see, we took this design space and ran with it.

Cumulative upkeep – Other sets have explored cumulative upkeep. *Weatherlight* in particular really looked into how cumulative upkeep ticked. It had cards that had weird cumulative upkeep costs or used the cumulative upkeep cost in a way that blended with the card in unusual ways. In essence, the bar had been raised. But we were doing an *Ice Age* expansion. How could we not do cumulative upkeep? This meant that if we wanted to fiddle with cumulative upkeep we needed to do it in a way that exceeded what had been done before. To borrow a *Spinal Tap* expression: we needed to go to 11.

So we did. *Coldsnap* stretches cumulative upkeep costs like nobody's business. I guarantee that you will see at least one or two cumulative upkeep costs that you would never have thought of as being a cost. And then in development, Randy (Buehler, he was the lead developer of the set) pushed the designers to go even further. So we did. I think any cumulative upkeep fans out there are in for a treat. (A weird treat, but a treat nonetheless.)



Cantrips – What would an *Ice Age* expansion be without cantrips? The real question was whether to have them work like old time cantrips (a.k.a. slowtrips, which have you draw the beginning of the next turn's upkeep) as they did in *Ice Age* or modern day cantrips (get the card right away). After much debate, we felt like we were obliged to stay true to the world we were in. Yes, *Coldsnap* will probably be the last set ever with old-fashioned slowtrips.

Pitch Cards – We mustn't forget some of the fun *Alliances* brought to the party, the most significant of which were the pitch cards (a.k.a. the **Force of Will** cycle). Each block has one standout innovative mechanic (be it split cards, morph or hybrid mana). Pitch cards were it for this block. The idea that you could play spells for free might seem tame now, but it was actually quite controversial at the time. (There's a famous incident where another section of the company wrote a letter to the president of Wizards denouncing the upcoming *Alliances* set primarily because of their belief that the pitch cards were bad for **Magic**. Obviously, R&D managed to convince the president otherwise.)

Coldsnap couldn't avoid expanding upon such an iconic part of the block. The only problem was that, like cumulative upkeep, we've revisited the pitch card mechanic. Multiple times. This led me to suggest my twist on the mechanic. What if, I said, we made bigger effects and had the players have to pitch two cards. I called them super pitch cards. The idea was pitched (pun, as always, intended) within the first hour of the first meeting and we never discussed how to tweak pitch cards again. To get a hint of what you can expect, you may want to check out the webcast from the finals of Pro Tour--Charleston where [Randy leaked the very first super pitch card](#).

Ally Color Cooperation – This is one of those themes that was very strong in the block (especially in *Ice Age*), yet is not often remembered. The *Coldsnap* design team started out keeping the theme at a decent level. But as development began figuring out how draft was going to play, they realized that to keep diversity of play up in draft made up of three packs of a small set, the theme had to get dialed way down. (Expect more on *Coldsnap* draft design next column.)

Taxing Theme – The Ally Color Theme is barely remembered, yet it's the Rockettes compared to the Taxing Theme. (I swear it's there if you look.) In fact, I had forgotten about it until I looked through the sets when I was refreshing myself for design. The *Coldsnap* team felt any theme this forgettable need best stay forgotten.

Once we finished looking at the larger mechanics, we focused in on the next level down:

Card By Card

Ice Age and *Alliances* had a lot of memorable cards. While some of them fit into larger mechanical boxes, a number of them were just cool one-ofs. The *Coldsnap* design team also took time to examine them one by one to find inspiration for new cards. I don't want to give too much away, as I want to leave the opportunity for all of you to find these gems for yourselves. That said, I can give a few hints.

A Certain *Alliances* Instant - There's a great story about this card became an entire mechanic in *Coldsnap*. But as Aaron already told the story last Friday, I'll [send you there](#) if you don't already know what I'm talking about.

A Certain *Ice Age* Creature – This creature is the only one of its creature type. Which seemed so wrong, given what the creature did. Everyone wanted more of them, so we made more in *Coldsnap*.

A Certain *Ice Age* Enchantment – This card was an iconic part of *Ice Age* (heck, of all of **Magic**). How could we go back to the world of *Ice Age* and not make a card that hints at the awesome power of the earlier card?

There are many more, but I will leave those for the prerelease.

Once we finished combing the rules text, the next logical move was down to the italicized text.

Flavor Text (and Names and Art)

Part of keeping the feeling of a “lost set” was matching the mechanics of the earlier sets. Equally important though was tapping into the flavor of the earlier sets. Names, places, people – all of these things have to be present to make the third set feel like an extension of the first two. This means several things. For starters, words like Kjeldoran, Krovikan and Balduvian show up in titles. And the legends all have names that you recognize. Which brings us to today's preview card.

It is a legend named Arcum Dagsson. Perhaps the name rings a bell. He appears on twenty-four *Ice Age* and *Alliances* cards in flavor text. He has a Sleigh and a Weathervane and a Whistle. We decided that it was time for him finally to get a card. I had the lovely task of the top-down design.

For those that haven't heard me talk about this before, a top-down design is one where the mechanics are created to fit the flavor of the card. In this case, I was designing a card that had to match a specific character with a specific back story. I started by asking the creative team for the back story. This is what they sent me:

Arcum Dagsson (n.) Person. Once the leader of the Soldevi Machinists, residing in the city of Soldev. Was a very strong proponent for unearthing artifact creatures and using them to make life better, especially artifacts unearthed from the time of the Brothers' War. Arcum's experiments and archaeological surveys eventually led him and the Soldevi Machinists to discovering a number of ancient machines. Those who spoke against him warned of meddling with the technology that had caused the *Ice Age*, but Arcum's enthusiasm drove his group on to new discoveries. A couple of machines that Arcum's people unearthed from deep beneath Soldev eventually awoke, went about awakening all of the other hundreds of machines secreted in the yet-undiscovered caves, then went on a rampage through Soldev to escape into the light. (All due to a number of Soldevi Adnates reawakening the Phyrexian machines with their ritual sacrifices and other dark offerings.) The episode destroyed much of the city of Soldev and most of Arcum's followers and notably Arcum's credibility amongst his people. An accomplished artificer, Arcum made a variety of useful devices over the course of his lifetime (though none in comparison to the Brothers Urza and Mishra), but was constantly hounded by Sorine Relicbane, a strong opponent of his work and the dangers it revealed. Two years after Soldev was wrecked by rampaging artifacts, Arcum died of a failed heart. Between the fall of Soldev and the heart attack (when *Coldsnap* takes place), Arcum dedicated his life to making up for the destruction he caused. He was instrumental in stopping the ice Phyrexians from taking over Kjeldor.



This back story presented an interesting challenge. Arcum was an artificer and thus had to interact with artifacts, but at this point in his life he had a disdain for artifact creatures. In addition, when designing a character with some history, you want to make something memorable. So what did I come up with? That sounds like a great time to show off today's preview card.

[Click here to see Arcum in all his glory.](#)



I was very happy with how the card turned out. It's both flavorful and a very interesting card. I hope you all have as much fun playing with Arcum as I had designing him.

Ice Cooker

That's all for today. Any feedback is, as always, welcome.

Join me next week when I take a look at a bug that became a feature.

Until then, may you have fun diving into the frozen world of *Ice Age* (hint: there's [a prerelease this weekend](#)).

Mark Rosewater

*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Mark Rosewater](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

