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Talking Tech

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

The letter O! ne of the common themes I talked about when discussing *Coldsnap*, whether it be in this column or in one of the many interviews I did, was the idea that designing an *Ice Age* expansion was a challenge because design technology had changed so much in the last eleven years. This, of course, begs numerous questions. What exactly has changed in those eleven years? How is design now different from design then? Which of these changes has the biggest impact on how **Magic** is designed? All good stuff. So good, in fact, that I've decided to dedicate today's column to the issue.

Here's how it's going to work. For each section, I'll begin with an example from *Ice Age* to show how things were. Then I'll talk about how things are done today. Before I begin, I want to stress that this article is not meant as a slight to the designers of *Ice Age* and *Alliances*. They were cutting edge **Magic** designers. The evolution that has occurred in the last eleven years is a direct result of all the designers who built upon their work. Yes, modern cars put the Model T to shame, but you have to respect the Model T for its day. In 1995, *Ice Age* was amazing **Magic** design. My comments today are only to show how much we've grown not to belittle where we came from.

One final note, many things have changed over the years. I have chosen today to just dwell on some (and note I say some) of the major changes.

Change #1 – Simplicity, Simplicity, Simplicity

(A quick aside – for those out there tempted to write in and ask why I didn't just write "simplicity" – I mean, that is simpler, right? – are unaware that I'm making a literary allusion. The quotation is from the book "Walden Pond" by Henry David Thoreau. English teachers everywhere rejoice.)

Let's start with a card from *Ice Age*.



Before I say anything else, please take a moment to read it.

Read it? Good. Do you know what it does? Let me explain. Are you familiar with the card *Sleight of Mind* which appeared in *Ice Age* as well as Alpha. The card lets you permanently (meaning the effect does not end at the end of turn) change a "color" word (white, blue, black, red or green) in rules text from one color to another color word. You tap *Balduvian Shaman* to do that. Well, except that it can't just target anything. It can only target enchantments. White enchantments. White enchantments you control. Actually, white enchantments you control

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that don't have cumulative upkeep (why will be clear in a moment). Once you've done that, the white enchantment you control without cumulative upkeep will have its text permanently changed. Oh yes, and will gain cumulative upkeep. Such a simple ability and it only took eight lines of text. Did I mention it was common?

To be fair, this card goes down in history as being the most complicated common ever printed. But it does illustrate my point. Eleven years ago, it was possible to consider this for common. Today, you'd get laughed out of the development meeting. One of the biggest discoveries of the last eleven years was the importance of stratifying complexity. We still do cards with eight plus lines of text that you have to read twice. But we do them sparingly, and we almost always do them at rare.

The role of common is to serve as the backbone of the set, especially in Limited. Commons are the cards players see en masse. This means that they have a responsibility to convey the meaning of the set in the simplest and most direct way possible. This doesn't mean that commons can't be interesting. They just have to find the intersection between interesting and simple. Hybrid cards, for example, demonstrate this intersection. But notice that we went out of our way to make all the common hybrid cards just have a single hybrid mana. We allowed uncommon and rare to show multiples, but tried to keep commons - most likely the first hybrids players would see - in the simplest form.

Another common worry of simplifying the commons is that we're lessening the overall strategy of the game. Not true. Design has chosen to put the complexity in common not in the individual cards but in the overall synergy. The idea behind this is that the novice player isn't able to absorb all the complexities of synergy and thus the overall game is simpler for them. Then, as they advance, they begin to see the extra layers that they need to pay attention to and the strategy starts getting harder. Neat how that works.

One final note, players who do things like count lines of text will properly notice that **Magic** has gotten wordier over time, including at common. Much of this has to do with our strategy over the years of more clearly spelling out everything on the card. You know, so you don't have to carry around a novel-length stack of papers. Much of the extra text is clarification and reminder text. A card with just the word "phasing" might seem simpler, but when you realize what it would have to say under modern template philosophy you'll see that many of the cards from the past cheat in their simplicity. It's also important to note that R&D cares a great deal about the grok-ability (that is the ability to just "get it" when you see it) of cards. Wordy cards that make instant sense when processed are truly simpler than cards that, while having fewer words, don't naturally make sense.

Change #2 – Keep An Eye On Limited

I know that some players are eager to play *Coldsnap* in Limited with *Ice Age* and *Alliances*. To all of you, I have one word of caution – beware. *Ice Age* and *Alliances* were created at a time when Limited was a lesser focus of design and development. Anyone coming into the experience with modern Limited sensibilities is in for a bit of a shock. (By the way, I believe the best way to play *Coldsnap* in Limited is to Booster Draft it by itself - My column from two weeks ago, "[Feeling a Draft](#)" explains why. It really is quite fun. If you're at all a fan of draft, I strongly recommend giving it a try.)

As an example, let's take a look at flying in *Ice Age*. Limited, by its nature, tends to be about creatures. This means that Limited games tend to push towards creature stalemate. To solve this problem, design and development have to make sure that a set has enough evasion, which is defined as a way to get damage through in a creature stalemate. The most common form of evasion is flying. *Ravnica*, as an example, has thirteen common creatures with flying (Conclave Equenaut, Courier Hawk, Drake Familiar, Drift of Phantasms, Roofstalker Wight, Screeching Griffin, Skyknight Legionnaire, Snapping Drake, Stinkweed Imp, Surveilling Sprite, Tattered Drake, and technically Transluminant makes a twelfth). Of these, eight have a power of 2 or greater.

Now let's take a look at *Ice Age*. How many common fliers does it have? Five (Goblin Ski Patrol, Illusionary Forces, Illusionary Wall, Kjeldoran Skyknight, Phantasmal Mount). Note that I'm counting a creature that doesn't naturally have flying but can grant itself flying at the cost of killing itself as one of the five. Another one of the five is a wall that can't attack. That leaves two 1/1 fliers (although, yes, Phantasmal Mount can make creatures with a toughness less than 3 fly) and a creature with cumulative upkeep. As someone who has played a significant amount of *Ice Age* Limited in his day, let me say that this is quite the beating. In no other format do you draft the 1/1 flier so highly.



Over the years, it has become more and more apparent that Limited play is a fundamental part of the game. Because of this, design and development are obligated to put all the necessary pieces into the set to make sure that Limited plays smoothly. This involves having a high enough concentration of creatures (*Ravnica* is almost one half creatures, where *Ice Age* is closer to one third creatures), having significant evasion, having enough removal, having power through synergy to allow players to craft better decks in Limited, and a myriad of other issues.

Making sets Limited-friendly is so imbedded into our how we make cards that it has completely reshaped how sets are designed and developed. Commons and uncommons have taken on new roles. "Pointing" has become a science. We actively think about how each mechanic will work in sealed and in draft. In eleven years, Limited has moved from an interesting add-on to a fundamental part of a set's infrastructure.

Change #3 – Better Rarity Appreciation

Take a look at these two cards:



The first is an enchant creature that grants banding while the second is a cantrip that provides banding until end of turn. One of these cards is common while the other is rare. Which is which? Unless you already know, you can't tell. (*Cooperation* is the common by the way.) This is a problem. It stems from a frequent early design mistake. The role of each rarity was not well defined. There was a loose idea of where things went but a quick look through *Ice Age* demonstrates that there was much room for improvement in this delineation.

Over the years, design and development have grown to have a much better appreciation for what the role of each rarity is. For example, let's take a look at how Limited affects rarities. Common cards define a Limited environment (as well as a casual Constructed one). This means that the designers have to be able to define their set solely through the commons. The uncommons and rares will be seen, but not in the number needed to guarantee that key components get noticed. Uncommons then serve as a home for cards designed for Limited, but ones that need to be more restricted (often this is where powerful Limited-oriented effects go).

In overall look and feel, commons are the cards that carry the brunt of setting tone. If you want the world to have a certain ambience, it is the commons that are responsible for getting this message across. Rares, on the other hand, need to add the elements that spice the set up, but would send false messages in large numbers. A dragon, for instance, adds nuance to a world, but many, many dragons would give the world a very different feel.

The end result is that today's design has a much better handle on what effect putting a card in each rarity will have. As a result, cards are easier and better identified as to where they properly belong.

Change #4 – Diversity of Card Creation

The Limited issue leads to another related issue. When *Ice Age* was created, who were the designers designing cards for? If you asked them at the time, I'm sure they would have said something like "for the players". Because back then, the playerbase was thought of as a single entity. Since then, we have spent a lot of time and energy understanding who exactly the players are.

I often talk about Timmy, Johnny and Spike (see "[Timmy, Johnny, and Spike Revisited](#)") if you don't know what I'm talking about). These are psychographic profiles R&D uses to understand the different type of players. It helps us understand why different players play and design cards that offers them the thing they seek. In addition, we also focus on the different ways to play, be it Limited (sealed or draft), Constructed (in the many formats we support), or casual (this involves other ways to play including multi-player play). Each group (and you get a bunch as you begin mixing and matching) gets support. That is, in every set, we think about that group and try to make sure that we give them something that will make them happy.



If you look at early sets you will see a lot more "misses" than in modern design. What I mean by this is that there are more cards in the olden days that didn't really have a target audience. Nowadays we are much more conscious of who we are designing for. In addition, we do a much better job of letting the players know what the other types of players are. This way when you run into a card that isn't for you, you better understand who the card is for. This overall approach leads to stronger sets, because it both ensures that everybody gets something they can hold near and dear to their hearts and that players are more forgiving of the cards that don't excite them.

Change #5 – Look at the Big Picture

So what's *Ice Age* about? A Nordic inspired flavor. But what is it mechanically about? Cantrips, cumulative upkeep, snow-covered lands, ally color helping, taxing. In short, no one thing. The set doesn't have a lot of internal synergy. (I should stress that is not the same thing as no internal synergy.) Why? Because sets we're just put together differently back then. Things were newer. Just showing things that hadn't been done yet was enough.

Even back when I started designing (*Tempest*, for those out there that don't track everything I say in a meticulous journal), set design was basically "get two good keyword mechanics and go". What we found with time was that there is a finite number of things that haven't been done before. **Magic** didn't have the luxury of just tapping into a completely unexplored vein each year. But we were able to focus the set in a different place each year. What's the difference? Quite a bit. In the former, you're dependent on finding untapped areas of design. In the latter, you're looking for new ways to combine what you already know. Yes, the second still requires some innovation, but not the complete overhaul that the first style of design represents.

Let's take *Ravnica* as an example. Much of what we did in *Ravnica* wasn't new. We've done multi-color cards before. We've done off-color activations before. We've done cards that promote two-color play before. What *Ravnica* did that was really different was to hit the problem from a different vantage point and use many of these resources in a way that made them add up to something different than *Invasion*.

You'll notice as **Magic** design evolves we keep expanding how much we coordinate. Since *Ice Age*, we've begun synergizing mechanics within sets, then between sets, and now we think about how things interact between blocks. With each year, we are getting a better grasp on how the game interconnects and we are taking steps to build that synergy into our design process.

Eleven Down, Many More To Go

Today's column is far from a comprehensive list, but I hope it gave you a better insight into the many different evolutions that **Magic** design has gone through. If certain aspects of this column interest you, let me know and perhaps I can go into greater detail on that aspect in the future.

Join me next week when I get a little something extra on my investment.

Until then, may you take a moment to think about how things used to be and why they've changed in the way they have.

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*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.*



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