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Arcbound To Happen



Darksteel's new keyword

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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Welcome to Week 2 of our *Darksteel* preview. Last week I talked about indestructible artifacts. This week I'm going to introduce a card with one of *Darksteel's* new keywords (remember indestructible is not actually a keyword, [see last week's article](#) for more clarification). But unlike last week, I'm not going to show the card first. Why? Because as I was thinking about how to introduce the card, it dawned on me that it had an interesting evolution. So before I show you the card I'm going to walk you through its creation. If you're just dying to see the new card, just [click here](#), but I promise you it will be a cooler article if you hold off seeing the new card until after you hear how it came about (it's like knowing how a movie's going to end, but hey I won't start on that topic again – see "[The Leak That Was](#)" if you have no idea what I'm talking about).

What's Themata?

In science there is a term called a themata. The idea of a themata is that it's an unarticulated philosophy of life that comes about through an interweaving of themes that appear naturally throughout your life. The idea is that you have key moments that lead to an insight that adds to your themata. The most famous example comes from Albert Einstein. One day as a child, he got sick to cheer him up, his mother bought him a compass. Einstein was fascinated by how the compass always pointed north. Einstein later credited that moment with his earliest belief that there was order in the universe.

So what does a themata have to do with card design? Quite a bit I believe. See, it's my theory that the design of certain cards works very much like a themata. I believe that designers are very influenced by key moments either in playing the game, thinking about the game or even designing other cards. These moments collect up and sometime later on result in a card. Today's preview card (I'm not giving the name away yet as the title would give away information about the card) was created with such a method.

So here's how I'm going to do this. I'm going to share with you different key moments in my (**Magic**-related) life that I believe resulted in this card getting created. At first, the incidents might seem unrelated but you will see as time progresses they will slowly start merging together.

Incident #1

Working in a game store part time, I had heard about **Magic** through numerous customers that were looking to purchase the game. Finally, at a game convention I managed to find some Alpha cards for sale. I bought a starter deck (now called a tournament deck) and five booster packs. It came to about \$25 and that seemed to be a fair amount to pay for a game. I saw other people buying entire boxes. I thought they were crazy. (You see, I wouldn't buy entire boxes until Beta.)

Anyway, I opened my starter deck to see my cards. As I thumbed through them, I found myself drawn to the creatures. (I've since learned that this is a very common response for beginners.) I found myself excited as I saw each new creature. But then, I came to the ultimate creature. The one card in the entire deck that leapt out to me and said, "You will play my color."

The color was green. And the creature? Craw Wurm! All my other creatures were 1/1 and 2/2. This was a 6/4. A 6/4! I only needed to hit my opponent four times to win the game. What were the designers of the game thinking?

Incident #2

Before I moved to Seattle, I used to live in Los Angeles. And in Los Angeles in 1994, the place to play **Magic** was the Costa Mesa Women's Center. For those unaware of Los Angeles geography, Costa Mesa is about an hour south of L.A. It was quite a drive. And the Costa Mesa Women's Center was just a big empty room used by the women of Costa Mesa for random activities. But on Saturday night, it was **the** place to play.

Back in 1994, I had begun freelancing for Wizards (doing my "**Magic: the Puzzling**" column in *The Duelist*), but I was over a year away from joining R&D. Back then, I was known for building very quirky decks. I was (and still am) a Johnny at heart and I loved showing off my freaky, "win in ways no one expected" decks. But, Costa Mesa had a constructed tournament each week (this was when Type I didn't have a name as it was the only format) and my goofy decks never had a chance against actual tuned decks, so I decided I needed to build an actual deck with the goal of trying to effectively win each game.



But I was still a Johnny at heart so I wanted to win on my own terms. *Legends* had just come out and had warped the metagame towards anti-creature. With *Abysses* and *Nether Voids* running around wildly, no one was playing creatures. So, of course, I knew that I meant I had to play a creature deck. One of my friends one day claimed that blue and green couldn't be played together (ironically, back then they didn't have any synergy – *Tropical Island* was the lowest selling dual land for a long stretch). I now had my colors. All I needed was a way to make a viable blue and green creature deck.

As I started looking at the available cards I found my inspiration in *Giant Growth* and *Unstable Mutation*. Blue and green also were the only two colors to have 1/1 fliers for 1 mana. Throw in some Birds, Elves and a few *Concordant Crossroads* (This was the small window when you had to play enchant worlds) and my deck started taking shape. Except I had one big problem. Thanks to *The Abyss* and *Nether Void*, the majority of decks were packing black and destruction spells aren't the friend of a doubly *Giant Growthed*, *Unstable Flying Man*. So I was forced to look for an

answer that fit my deck. I finally found it in a little card called *Whirling Dervish*.

Back in the day, black had no good answer to protection from black. Once the *Dervish* hit the table, my opponent found himself on the clock. The metagame pushed me to start with the *Dervishes* in the main deck. I fine tuned the deck until I was ready to take it to the Costa Mesa. My friends had been joking with me about the deck ever since I showed it to them. And then the very first night I played it in a real tournament, I won. For the first time ever in Costa Mesa, I won the main event. With a deck that no one thought at first was any good. And the MVP? *Whirling Dervish*.

Incident #3

It was the winter of 1994 (the part at the end of the year) and I had showed up at a store at midnight to buy boxes of *Fallen Empires*. You see, the expansion went on sale on a certain date, so the earliest one could buy it was at 12:00 am. And being the **Magic** fan I was, I wasn't about to wait an extra eight hours until the store opened in the morning.

As I ripped open my packs, I stumbled across a green card called *Thallid*. It was one of those cards that I had to read twice to make sure I understood what it did. And then I had to stop and think about the card to understand what it meant in actual play. As I processed what the card

did, a smile came to my face. I imagined a deck full of **Thallids** growing over time until I overran my opponent. Before I left the store, I started writing down the early decklist for my **Thallid** deck.

Incident #4

It's the winter of 1996 and I'm a member of **Magic** R&D (back in the day, R&D members either worked on **Magic** or non-**Magic**). Back then, **Magic** R&D was myself, Bill Rose, Mike Elliott, and William Jockusch. We were led by then **Magic** Lead Designer Joel Mick. And the four of us were on every development team. Heck, the four of us were every development team.

We were getting ready to start up the *Visions* development team, so Bill handed out the file from the design team (he and Joel Mick had run the team along with a number of friends from Philadelphia). This was my first chance to see *Visions* (although to be fair, we had pushed off some stuff from *Mirage*, so all of it wasn't new). The item that stood out on my first pass was a series of artifact creatures. Each one could be sacrificed to add its power and toughness and ability to any of the other artifact creatures in the series. The creatures were called chimeras. And I thought they were really cool.



Incident #5

I was hired by Wizards of Coast R&D to be a developer. But in my heart I knew I wanted to be a designer. So, I managed to talk Joel Mick into letting me lead the design of an expansion. You all know it as *Tempest*. (After that, I got my wish of being a full fledged designer.)

During *Tempest* design, I decided that I wanted to create a mechanic that had a similar feel to the thallids from *Fallen Empires*. All I knew at first was that I wanted it to be green and use counters. I quickly realized that I wanted the counters to be +1/+1 counters. After all, **Unstable Mutation** and **Whirling Dervish** had taught me the fun of +1/+1 counters.

If I was going to use +1/+1 counters, I wanted to find a way to make them useful. At first I thought about 0/0 creatures with +1/+1 counters that could sacrifice counters for effects. But I wanted the creatures to interconnect like the thallids. There needed to be a reason to want to build an entire deck of the creatures. Then I realized that I could allow these creatures, then called amoebas, to move +1/+1 counters from one to another.

During design, I realized that the restriction of moving +1/+1 counters to only other amoebas was too restrictive. Why couldn't the creatures move the counters to any creature? My first attempt created two different activations, one to move the +1/+1 counter to any creature and a cheaper activation to move it specifically to another amoeba. Finally, after much playtesting, I realized the second activation wasn't necessary. Amoebas did have an advantage in that they move counters to another amoeba. This allowed the counter to move yet again. The naming team hated the name amoebas and changed them to spikes.

Incident #6

During the first meeting of the *Mirrodin* design team, I asked each team member to come back with a list of cool things that artifacts did in the past that they'd like to see us attempt again in *Mirrodin*. I came back with a very lengthy list. Included on my list were two relevant categories: artifacts that used counters and chimeras.

Incident #7

The design team latched onto the idea to using counters and we started exploring many different ways to make use of counters on artifacts. Once the theme started rolling along, I decided that I wanted to pull the theme over to the colored cards. This way, the theme would feel more inclusive of the entire set. I made a list of mechanics that used +1/+1 counters (as you can see, design requires the making of many lists). Included on the list were two of my favorites: Dervishes and Spikes.

Incident #8

The rest of the team also had fond memories of chimeras, but we all felt that the old versions were both a little clunky and were too low of a power level. If we were going to bring back chimeras, we needed to improve them. Each member was assigned with coming up with their own version. Not wanting to reinvent the wheel, I decided to try and recreate the chimeras as closely as possible. I liked the idea of one's death making another one bigger, but I felt that the sacrifice was unnecessary. Why not just have the effect trigger when the creature died? In addition, moving the abilities seemed clunky. It was just cleaner if the counters remained simple +1/+1 counters. I turned my version in and the team liked them, so we put them in the file.

Incident #9

The +1/+1 counter theme seemed to be very prevalent, so I felt bringing back the spikes was a great idea. I even created a few new spikes to shake things up. In addition, I created a cycle of dervishes. Both played well and had nice interaction with the +1/+1 counter theme.

Incident #10

During *Mirrodin* design, the team came to the conclusion that we had stuffed too many themes into the set (yes, it used to have more than it has now). One of the themes we decided to pull back on was the +1/+1 counter theme. (Although you will notice it was left in at a lower level.) So the team removed the Chimeras and the Spikes from the set.

Incident #11

The *Darksteel* design team had been created. It would be me, Tyler Bielman, Brian Schneider and Bill Rose (who would be leading the team). On the first day, Bill asked Tyler and myself (we were the only overlap between the *Darksteel* and *Mirrodin* design teams) if there were any cool artifact-related mechanics we moved off from *Mirrodin*. I said, "Yes, We have indestructible artifacts. We have a new twist on affinity. (see this column next week for more on this) We have some new tweaks with imprint. Oh, and we have the chimeras."

Incident #12

It was late in *Darksteel* design. Bill had added all the mechanics we suggested and then the *Darksteel* team came up with a few more. But I felt something was missing. I wanted some new theme for the set. Not something overt, just as subtle theme that would change the way players thought about certain cards. Then it hit me. Artifact creatures. By their nature, artifact creatures kind of have to suck. To keep the color wheel in check, we have to be careful not to let artifacts give abilities to colors that aren't supposed to have them (and yes, *Mirrodin*, by nature of being the artifact set does do this to some extent, but we wanted to rein it in). Blue, for example, isn't supposed to have efficient creatures (although it can have good, small utility-based creatures – that is creatures who excel at something other than attacking or blocking). This means that artifact creatures have to be very careful to avoid ending up in blue decks.



The end result is that *Mirrodin* had a lot of artifact creatures that were subpar. Some had interesting utility while others had very niche uses, but more often than not the artifact creatures in *Mirrodin* were nothing to write home about. That got me thinking. What if we could come up with a way to make the quality of being an artifact creature worth something. Wouldn't it be cool if

thought if we could encourage players to put artifact creatures in their deck solely because they were artifact creatures?

Incident #13

The chimeras were missing something. I was afraid that we were going to repeat the mistake of the original chimeras and make cool cards that never quite saw play. And then it hit me. We were making the same mistake I had made with the spikes. Just as spikes were more interesting if they could move the counters to any creature, the same holds true for the chimeras.

And then I remembered my desire to make artifact creatures matter. What if the chimeras' ability allowed them to put the counter on any artifact creature when they died. This way the cards would have more a more universal use and it would upgrade the value of artifact creatures. I pitched the idea to Tyler and he liked it, so I then pitched it to the rest of the design team. Everyone liked the idea and the cards were changed.

Incident #14

Darksteel was eventually handed from design to development. The development team really liked the chimeras and decided that they wanted more of them. So all the designers were asked to come up with new chimeras. When I sat down to brainstorm, I decided to think of ways that +1/+1 counters could be used on a creature. This way the creature would already have a natural use for the counters. I came up with a number of ideas (a number of which ended up in the set, but you'll have to wait for the rest of them). One obvious idea was to use the dervish mechanic. Here was a mechanic that naturally collected +1/+1 counters. If dervishes could appear in all five colors, why not in artifacts. Thus, Robo Dervish was born.

“I Love It When A Plan Comes Together”

And that in fourteen steps is how today's preview card came to be. Note that a few things like the terms “chimera” and “dervish” were given a new coat of paint by our creative team. So without any further ado, I present Arcbound Slith:



To answer a few quick questions, yes Modular is a new keyword and all Modular creatures come into play with N counters and then move all their counters to an artifact creature when they're put into the graveyard from play. There are a number of Modular creatures in the set many of which make interesting use of their +1/+1 counters beyond the Modular ability. All Modular creatures in

Darksteel are artifact creatures. As you will soon see, they're quite interesting to play with. (And the are **not** going to have the chimeras' low power problem.)

That's all I got for this week folks. Join me next week when I demonstrate how players might have an affinity for something other than artifacts.

Until then, may you find your own thematas equal as fun to create.

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

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