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Seeds of *Dissension*

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Making Magic
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Welcome to the first week of *Dissension* Previews! During the next two weeks, you'll get a number of peeks into the chapter after the penultimate chapter of the *Ravnica* block (a.k.a. the last one). There was some talk when we were doing *Coldsnap* whether we could search Richard's file cabinet for a fourth set for the *Ravnica* block, but most of us felt that the whole "guild model" thing kind of limited us to just doing ten guilds. What this means is that *Dissension* is it, the end of the line for the *Ravnica* block. But as any good writer will tell you, you've got to save your best stuff for the third act. And we did.

So what does *Dissension* have in store for all of you? Lots of goodies my friends, lots of goodies. Before I get to some of those goodies - including an awesome card preview (wait for it, wait for it) - I need to start off with something I do for every first design preview article. I need to introduce you to the *Dissension* design team - also known affectionately as **magicthegathering.com does design**. (It'll make sense in a moment.) Here's the team:

Aaron Forsythe (Lead Designer): If you don't know Aaron's name, you simply don't read my column with any frequency. And you definitely don't read *his* at all (Friday's "[Latest Developments](#)" - check it out). Aaron began as editor of **magicthegathering.com** before he became an up-and-coming R&D guy before he became an up-and-coming design guy before he became a somewhat-up-and-yet-still-coming design guy before he became a go-to design guy before he became lead designer of his own set. That set was of course *Dissension*.



I'm not sure what I can say about Aaron that I haven't said before. I know Aaron was eager to lead his first design team and, as you'll see, I think he did a wonderful job. Many might think that the third set in a block as structured as *Ravnica* might be an easy job. I mean, after all, most of the structure was set into place long before the *Dissension* team met for the first time. (It is important to remember that Aaron was the only designer who was on all three *Ravnica* design teams.) While structure clearly helps in certain areas, it also created unique challenges in others. (More on this to come.)

The point I'm trying to make was that this is Aaron's baby. He took the task very seriously and definitely proved that he is ready to move on to bigger and better things. His good work on *Dissension* led him to becoming the Lead Designer of *Peanut* (it's a codename I swear - hint, *Butter* comes next), the fall expansion for 2007.

Mark Rosewater: Mark is the opposite of an up-and-comer. What's that make him, a down-and-goer? I'm not sure how the hack keeps getting put onto design teams. Oh that's right, he picks the design teams. Isn't that lovely? But then he's never been one to shun favoritism. I'd better be quiet. I don't want to get on Mark's bad side. The last designer to do that mysteriously disappeared. What? Hey, Mark. I'm just typing my column. I didn't mean any disrespect. No, put down the... aah! I'm not sure why I felt to type "aah!" when you hit me. It just felt right. Why? I don't know; the same reason I'm still typing I guess. Remember the pen is mightier than the sword. Put down that pen! It's just an expression. It's just... ow. Not only did that hurt, but now I have ink all over my shirt. And blood. Man, this multiple personality disorder is a pain. Excuse me a second. Hi, this is Mark. Just ignore these last two paragraphs. I'm just goofing with myself. No problems here. Why wouldn't I want myself on the design team? I'm Head Designer. I've been doing this for over ten years. I'm sure I had something to add to the team. Or at least I'll take credit for a large portion of it. But enough about me.



Mark Gottlieb: Perhaps the whole "**magicthegathering.com does design**" moniker is starting to make sense. Yes, at the time of this design, the team had three current **magicthegathering.com** columnists on it. What does this mean? Well, there will be no fear of you not hearing about it. Multiple times. From multiple sources. Week in and week out. But it's a good thing. You'll see.



Back to Gottlieb. Now many would ask why I would put my arch-nemesis on a design team with me. I'd like to say something like - to keep my friends close and my enemies closer - but the truth is Aaron asked for Gottlieb to be on the team. All I did was not say no. So how was it working side by side with my arch-nemesis? I'd tell you, but that's exactly what he wants, isn't it? Okay, it was actually pretty good. Don't let Gottlieb know I said this, but he's quite capable of doing good design. (For the record, I don't think you'll ever see him admit that I do good rules management.) Mark was instrumental in creating numerous keywords in this set and kept pace design-wise with Aaron and myself.

Brandon Bozzi: Now we tried to fill out our team with a fourth columnist but it turns out none of them is foolish enough to work with Aaron, Mark and myself on a team. Luckily we had some internal candidates that don't know any better. Like Brandon. By day, he works on the **Magic** Creative Team doing, well, creative things. But a few years back he expressed an interest in working on some design teams and kept doing good work. As a result, about once a year we put him on a design team. I'd like to take credit for putting Brandon on the team, but once again it was Aaron's doing. (Okay, okay, the truth comes out - a kind of let my lead designers have some say on their team - well, other than I make them use me). Aaron feels strongly that it's important to have a Creative Team Member on design teams. (By the way, look for Matt Cavotta on *Pop* and Brady Dommermuth on *Peanut*). Brandon held his own in the design team and with this mix, that's saying quite a bit. (Even if I'm saying it in a single sentence - well two if you count this one.)



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Guild Me Up Buttercup

Often times the first few weeks of a design are spent figuring the essence of what the set is going to be about. Not so much for *Dissension*. Day one we knew the job ahead of us – design cards for the last three guilds. They each needed a keyword mechanic, a basic strategy, some neat multicolor interactions and a few staples (you know a Signet, a Dual Land, etc.) In addition, we were given one more goal. We wanted the third set to have a little something extra; a little surprise to end the block with a bang. That, however, is a story for next week. (Hint – check out [this arcana](#) if you just can't wait a whole week – next week I'll explain how it happened.) Which leads us back to the guilds.

Off the Rakdos

Let's start with Black/Red as it was the easiest of the three guilds to define. (Okay, Azorius – White/Blue – wasn't all that tough either. Simic – Blue/Green – was the problem child, but I'll get there.) We knew that we wanted each expansion to have an aggressive deck and Black/Red fit the bill for *Dissension*. But the block already had three other guilds with Red. How would Rakdos be different?



The answer rested in understanding how to design a guild. When you start putting a guild together, you have to examine the two colors being merged. With three other guilds sharing each color, it was important for the designers to figure out how the aspects of each color got distributed among its four guilds. What this means is that in any one guild, not every aspect of that color shows up. For example, Dimir played up Black's secrecy and desire to keep information hidden; Golgari played up Black's obsession with death; and Orzhov played into Black desire to keep everything under its thumb. So which part of Black was Rakdos going to tap into? The answer is the self-destructive part.

You see, Black is down with making sacrifices. Black does what it needs to get what it wants. But most of the time this is tempered by Black's long term desires for power. Now imagine that what drove Black instead was a need to meet its basic emotional needs. What if Black was encouraged to sacrifice stuff *now* for things it wanted *now*? Mix in Red's reckless hedonism with Black's wanton destructiveness and you end up with a very interesting guild.

But what did this mean mechanically? It meant that the Rakdos were going to focus on pressing its early advantage. But thanks to its Black influence, these short-term sacrifices had potential long-range ramifications. Unlike mono-Red that just runs out of steam, Rakdos were going to set up things that would allow it the potential of powerful mid- and late-game cards. The key was everything would be built on risk.

Now, I'm not giving away the keyword mechanics today, so I can't give you the specifics on the Rakdos ability (other than to let you know its called hellbent), but I can say that it very much forces you to play with a Rakdos sensibility. It will force you to make sacrifices you never do at the hope of a power boost down the road. It is by far the most adrenaline pumping strategy of the ten guilds. It's inconsistent, but when it works, watch out.

Azorius Against the World

Next we approached Azorius (a.k.a. White/Blue). In many ways, Azorius is the anti-Rakdos. Everything I described above is the antithesis of the Azorius. White/Blue is the least risky of the ten guilds. The Azorius plan out everything. They make no sudden moves. They think long before they ever act. They are the embodiment of passive play.



The trick to designing the Azorius is that we didn't want to make them so inactive that they didn't do anything. Yet we wanted the guild to stay true to its White/Blue origins. In the end, we decided that the Azorius were going to play a control game, yet were going to be given the resources to end the game quickly once control had been established.

The Azorius keyword mechanic, named forecast, plays exactly into this strategy. In the early game, it can be played to slowly and methodically gain advantage inch by inch, and in the late game, it can simply be used to win. As I'll explain in future weeks, this mechanic was a delicate one, but it definitely helped us get the feel we wanted for the Azorius players - sit back and monitor the game, stepping in where you see fit to make sure that things go your way.

During design there were many people who were concerned that Azorius might not be fun to play. It is the guild that least "does something". My reply was that the Azorius does what White/Blue does. The White/Blue archetype has been a staple since **Magic's** early beginnings. People play it because some people like that style of play. If you don't like sitting around and gaining advantage inch by inch, then perhaps White/Blue is the wrong color combination for you. But the people that like White/Blue had expectations that the Azorius had to meet, and I feel we did an excellent job of capturing that feel. Just remember if you're the impatient type, try Rakdos.

Simic City

I saved the Simic for last for several reasons. First, it was by far the hardest guild to design. Second, it's my personal favorite of the three. And third, it is the home of today's awesome preview card (notice how I keep using the word "awesome"). Why was the Simic so hard? Because the combination of its two colors is less obvious than most other guilds.



As I'll explain in greater detail when we get to Simic week, the Simic strive to "improve upon nature". That's what happens when you merge nurture with nature. But Blue and Green tend to have very different strategies in Limited - the key was to figure out the right intersection. We started by assuming that the Simic guild would be about creatures. The reason for this is that the Simic are all about creating funky Island of Dr. Moreau-type creatures. How could we not show these guys off?

In addition, the Simic wanted to play into Blue's adaptive nature. With a lot of creatures, we could focus these energies into adapting creatures. Also, because the Azorius was in the set, we knew we had our slow guild. We also knew that the Rakdos was covering the fast guild slot. This meant that the Simic needed to be more middle of the road speed-wise. Put all these factors together and we ended up with the ever-evolving creature guild.

The way the Simic play is that they build their army and they keep adapting into a more and more deadly force. This allows them some early beatdown, but their true strength lies in the fact that their creatures strengthen over time. This is a nice mix of Green's growth strategy with Blue's desire to keep moving towards perfection.

Which leads us perfectly into today's preview card. Before I get to it, let me fill you in a little on the Simic keyword, graft. It's a creature mechanic that allows creatures to improve other creatures. It's also important to know that +1/+1 counters are involved. (You'll see why in a moment.) Anyway, the Simic are all about creature experimentation. This means that almost all of the creatures in the guild are a result of this experimentation. (The remaining ones do the experimentation – and even they pretty much were all guinea pigs at one point.) Few experiments are as memorable as today's preview card, which is probably the reason he's a legend. But enough of my build-up, let's get to our preview card.

[Click here](#) to see something "awesome".



Awesome, huh? Let me quickly run you through what this card actually does. Okay, if a creature has a +1/+1 counter on it (and remember the Simic will have the ability to make this happen – and anyways Kraj is perfectly capable of doing it himself) then Kraj gains all activated abilities. An activated ability is any ability that has a cost, then a colon and then an effect. Flying? Not an activated ability. (Although activating flying, a.k.a. jump, is). Tap to do something? Activated ability. Pay mana to gain an ability until end of turn? Activated ability. Pay any cost to do just about anything: activated ability.

Until you've gotten Kraj in play, you probably won't realize how nuts he is. I can't tell you the number of games that I got him out and did crazy, crazy stuff. The Simic guild, by the way, is full of activated abilities (as well as the entire *Ravnica* block, really). One last note for the people that pay super close attention: In each guild, there is a guild leader and another guild member. One of them is always a CCDD "monster" and the other has an ability that directly interacts with the two colors of its guild. The seven guilds in *Ravnica* and *Guildpact* always broke the

same way. Two guilds in *Dissension* (the Simic and the Azorius – Rakdos' leader is well... Rakdos, a giant demon) have the color-affecting guy as their leader and their CCDD "monster" as their other guild legend. It just turns out that the Azorius and the Simic were the two guilds where a more normal guy rather than a big "monster" ran the guild.

Guiding a Better Mousetrap

Hopefully today's column gives you a little hint in what you can expect from the three guilds in *Dissension*. Stay tuned to magicthegathering.com for the next two weeks as we start showing off the guild keyword mechanics as well as other cool things *Dissension* has to offer, including the feature-packed [Dissension mini-site](#) (go check it out now if you missed it). I promise to fill in some of the vaguer points from today in future columns as the set becomes public.

Join me next week as I preview another gold split card and explain how exactly they ended up in *Dissension*.

Until then, may you know the joy that is Kraj.

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.*



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