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Angels Among Us

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Making Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Welcome to Akroma Week! As one of the numerous prizes for winning the [You Decide "Legends Head to Head" Competition](#), this week's theme is dedicated to the lovely and victorious Akroma, Angel of Wrath. Stay tuned this week for all sorts of Akroma-themed fun.

As I always stay on theme (okay, I strayed once... once; it was [Un-set after all](#)), this means that today's column is dedicated to Akroma. Being that this is the design column, it wouldn't take a rocket scientist (a quick aside: we had an all-Hasbro meeting earlier this year via teleconference where the head of Hasbro said that Wizards R&D was filled with rocket scientists – truth is we have only one, Henry Stern) to deduce that I'm going to talk about the design of Akroma.

Yes, this is where I explain the key role I had in the creation of this classic card. Oh, and don't worry, I was in the thick of it. When the story of Akroma's creation gets turned into a movie of the week ("God of Wrath"), central casting is going to have to go out and find someone to play me. Because I played a vital role. You see, I'm the R&D member that tried to kill Akroma.

Angel in the Centerfold

You heard me. I didn't like it. I thought the players wouldn't like it. I tried to kill it. There's actually a little more to the story than this, but hey I've got an entire column to kill on this topic, so I think I have a little time to tell this right.

I thought long and hard how to tell this story. To do some research, I looked up Akroma in Multiverse. That's the name of the database we use for **Magic** (and many of our other TCGs). There are a number of fields in the database (expansion, name, mana cost, etc.). One of them is labeled "dev comments". This is short for developer comments and is the place where R&D (designers too, despite the name of the field) talks to one another about upcoming cards. When you want to get a sense of what a card went through, this is the place to check.

Anyway, once I looked at the dev comments, I realized that my search was over. The dev comments explained what happened better than anything I could dredge out of my memory. Thus I decided that I would tell the story of Akroma's design and development through the dev comments themselves.

You see, I'm the R&D member that tried to kill Akroma.

What I'm going to do is first show you the comments unedited and unabridged, in all their glory. Then I will repeat it with some DVD-style director commentary where I explain exactly what is going on. Before I show you the comments, let me first set up who's talking in it. Everyone is required to initial their comments so that people know who is saying what. For historical purposes this allows us a nice glimpse back in time.

MR – That's me. At this point in time I was just a designer. I wasn't on the *Legions* design team, although as always, I contributed a smattering of stuff (for example, the provoke mechanic and Phage were both my contributions). *Legions*, for those too new to remember, was where Akroma appeared.

Bill – Bill Rose. The current VP of R&D. At the time, he had a role that essentially was a combination of the current Head Designer and Head Developer roles. Bill wasn't specifically on either *Legions* team, but as the guy who oversaw everything, he always was poking his head in.

ME – Mike Elliott. Mike was the lead designer of *Legions* (as well as *Onslaught*).

RB – Randy Buehler. At this point in time Randy was just a developer. Randy was not on the *Legions* development team, although contributed on the development much as I contributed on the design.

HS – Henry Stern. Yes, the rocket scientist (Henry used to be an aerospace engineer designing satellites before coming to Wizards). Henry was not on the *Legions* development team, but was one of the more experienced developers at the time. Are you getting the sense that everyone in R&D chips in on every set regardless of who the teams are?

WJ – William Jockusch. William was the lead developer for *Legions*.

Rei – Rei Nakasawa. At the time Rei was on the Creative Team.

BB – Brandon Bozzi. Brandon is still on the Creative Team, but back then almost all his time was spent on **Magic**. (He now works on numerous other brands; as well as **Magic**).

PT – These were the initials that stumped me when I first looked at the comments. I spent the entire first draft racking my brains trying to figure out who PT was. Paul? Peter? Penelope? Prudence? Finally, I gave up and

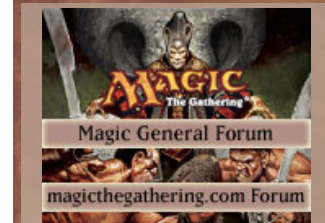
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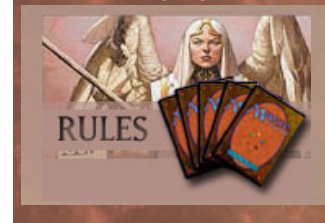
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RULES



decided to ask people at work. Henry was stumped. Bill was stumped. Then Del (**Magic's** lead editor) chimed in that she looked up PT's comments and it seemed he or she mostly forwarded along comments of the playtesters. That's when I figured it out. PT stands for Playtesters. At the time, William had a habit of quoting the playtesters in dev comments when he felt it was appropriate.

Now that we know who the players are, let me show you the comments. Remember the first time through I'm going to show them as-is with no commentary. The following is uncensored. This is what appears in the developer comments field for Akroma:

ACTION FIGURE

MR (2/14/02): I think iconic cards should seem cool in addition to powerful. While this is powerful, it isn't cool.

Bill: Completely disagree. This is for Timmy, not Johnny.

ME What, no pro red?

RB 2/15: seems cool to me, though I don't understand why it has pro black without red

HS I would prefer to see it lose haste + trample and gain pro red.

WJ 2/21: Took off haste and trample because card was too busy and because it was Timmy inflation.

Bill: The idea for this card was a creature that has all keyword abilities. Timmy will like the version with all abilities.

Bill: Mark wanted Akroma to have the ability: Whenever Akroma is put into a graveyard from play, return Akroma to play under its owner's control. I'm undecided between this and the original Akroma. Maybe both? Probably not.

Bill: The point of this card is to have all abilities. As is, it's not special. With trample, haste, and pro red, it would be.

WJ 3/11 At what point did you realize that we were pulling your leg? :)

Rei: Hey, she sucks now; she's got phasing!

ME 3/12 Changed Rampage 1 to Rampage 6, I assume this was just a typo. You don't want the card to be that weak, do you?

Bill: fixed. old card - Flying, first strike, protection from black, protection from red, Trample, attacking does not cause CARDNAME to tap, haste, Amplify +4/+4, Morph o4oWoW, Cycling o2, fear, Rampage: 6, islandhome, flanking, shadow, phasing, snow-covered forestwalk, bands with other Angels.

BB 4/5: early on we had discussed giving her an Avenging Angel-type ability, Creative would still like to push for this if possible.

PT 4/8: "The card is not ridiculous enough."

RB 4/29: seems fine as-is to me

MR (5/9/02): I think a card like this will get some notice when it is first seen, but I don't think it will be memorable (no one will be able to tell you exactly what it does) or particularly flavorful. I'm not saying that I don't want to do a "kitchen sink" creature but I believe our main villain for the block is the wrong place.

RB 5/13: Phage is at least as villainous as Akroma, probably more. This seems like a fine place for a kitchen sink creature.

Let's see I call Akroma "not cool", say I "don't think it will be memorable" and deem it not "particularly flavorful". Go Rosewater. Now let's run through the comments one more time, this time with the DVD-like director commentary:

ACTION FIGURE

From time to time throughout **Magic's** history it looked as if we were going to make **Magic** action figures. *Onslaught* Block was one such time. Akroma was deemed a good action figure opportunity. (Ironically, female figures do very poorly in the traditional action figure market – they tend to be left for "shortpacks", figures done in a much smaller number meant to be highly collectable.) Often in the beginning of the dev comments field we'll stick words to act as identifiers. This allows us to search for certain things like a particular mechanic, a reoccurring theme or possibly the quality that we're planning to make it an action figure. No, the figures were never made.

MR (2/14/02): I think iconic cards should seem cool in addition to powerful. While this is powerful, it isn't cool.

Let me explain the madness. *Legions* had two central iconic legendary creatures: Akroma and Phage. They essentially were the two villains of the story. And at the end of the *Legions* story they fight and end up merged as Karona. You know, the False God. (A quick aside – let me publicly apologize for **Karona, False God**. That card is an embarrassment to card design. I actually had zero to do with the card and I'm still embarrassed. We took two iconic beloved cool legends and combined them into a pile of, well a word I'm not allowed to use on this site. Of all the balls dropped with the design of legendary characters, this is one near the top of the list. My humblest apologies.)



Figure yes, but not quite an action figure.

We knew we wanted these two cards to be awesome. The design for Phage came pretty early. The character had a death touch that killed any living thing she touched. I had been wanting to make a creature that killed the opponent when it damaged them (and thus winning the game). Phage was a perfect fit. Add the ability to a creature with the basilisk ability and we nailed Phage's flavor and made something new and innovative. Thus, in my mind the bar was set pretty high. (Phage is, to this day, in my top ten of cards I've designed. – yeah, yeah I'll do that column one day.)

My concern with Akroma's design wasn't that it wasn't going to interest anybody, but rather that it was a pretty mundane design for what was supposed to be such an important card. What do I mean by mundane? Making a card with a lot of keywords is very easy to design (I call it a "kitchen sink" card later in the dev comments). There's not much finesse to it. As a designer, it seemed kind of uninspired to me. (Before the column is over, I'll walk through some of the important design lessons of Akroma.)

This is why I called the card not "cool". Phage was so awesome to me that I wanted it paired with something equally awesome.

Bill: Completely disagree. This is for Timmy, not Johnny.

Bill slightly misreads my comment. I'm saying that "I, as a designer, am unimpressed". Bill, knowing that I'm the biggest Johnny in R&D, hears it as "I, as a Johnny, am unimpressed." Mostly what Bill is trying to say here is that *he* finds it cool. (Bill is a Timmy/Spike.)

ME What, no pro red?

The first version only had protection from black. We were trying to set up the Akroma/Phage conflict and so we were more thinking of Akroma as an anti-black card. Mike was trying to find ways to add more keywords. Unlike me, Mike was bought into the concept at this point.

RB 2/15: seems cool to me, though I don't understand why it has pro black without red

Randy chimes in on the oddness of pro red missing. The funniest thing to me is that I'm not sure how many cards have dev comments with Mike and Randy agreeing on anything.

HS: I would prefer to see it lose haste + trample and gain pro red.

Henry brings up an issue that came up numerous times with this card. Haste and trample aren't white abilities. What are they doing here? The short answer is that we allow a little bleed on creature abilities, but we save those bleeds for special occasions. The fight was over whether this was a special enough occasion. I think time has shown that yes it was. (Or possibly no it wasn't, if you don't like high-profile cards setting incorrect precedents.)

WJ 2/21: Took off haste and trample because card was too busy and because it was Timmy inflation.

Yes, haste and trample were removed. That side won the battle. But, as we all know, not the war.

Bill: The idea for this card was a creature that has all keyword abilities. Timmy will like the version with all abilities.

So how exactly did Akroma get back her out-of-flavor keywords? Well it helps when the Head Designer/ Head Developer speaks up on their behalf.

Bill: Mark wanted Akroma to have the ability: Whenever Akroma is put into a graveyard from play, return Akroma to play under its owner's control. I'm undecided between this and the original Akroma. Maybe both? Probably not.

Now we see what I was up to. Not liking this version, I designed something I thought was more flavorful and more special. In the story, Phage killed everything she touched and Akroma couldn't be killed (being a creature of pure thought – no really, Ixidor literally dreamed her up). My suggestion was to make a creature that couldn't be killed. (Years later I would make the indestructible ability.) Death Touch Woman versus Can't Die Woman seemed awesome to me.

In addition, I thought the "can't die" version was closer to what the Phage design was. It was flavorful and an ability that hadn't been done yet. Much of my fight in the dev comments stems from my desire to do the version I found cooler. As you'll see below, I had a few things to learn.

Bill: The point of this card is to have all abilities. As is, it's not special. With trample, haste, and pro red, it would be.

Bill cuts to the point. If we're going to do this card, we need to do it. If we want to commit to every ability, we need to commit. Anything less isn't interesting.

WJ 3/11 At what point did you realize that we were pulling your leg? :)

I'm not quite sure what this comment means. It's possible that the development team knew Bill would override them and changed it just to get a rise out of Bill. Although I know for a fact that there were people in the department that didn't like the haste and trample.

Rei: Hey, she sucks now; she's got phasing!



At this point, the development team starts having some fun. The card gets turned into the version listed a few lines below. Basically the card is turned into a version that had every existing keyword. Rei is making a joke about this.

ME 3/12 Changed Rampage 1 to Rampage 6, I assume this was just a typo. You don't want the card to be that weak, do you?

The dev comments field besides being a place where a lot of important work gets done is also a place where R&D messes around. Different R&D members kept changing the all-keywords version to make it more and more ridiculous.

Bill: fixed. old card - Flying, first strike, protection from black, protection from red, Trample, attacking does not cause CARDNAME to tap, haste, Amplify +4/+4, Morph o4oWoW, Cycling o2, fear, Rampage: 6, islandhome, flanking, shadow, phasing, snow-covered forestwalk, bands with other Angels.



Bill returns the card back to its real version. Haste and trample have returned. Above is a truncated version of the all-abilities card.

BB 4/5: early on we had dicussed giving her an Avenging Angel-type ability, Creative would still like to push for this if possible.

Brandon speaks up for the Creative Team, who wanted her to actually reflect her story quality of not being able to die. The Creative Team were the only ones that backed my version. (And yes, "discussed" is misspelled – see I told you I didn't change anything.)

PT 4/8: "The card is not ridiculous enough."

As I pointed out above, William liked to put playtester comments in the file when he felt it was appropriate. That said, I'm not sure if the playtesters are advocating making the card crazier or mocking how crazy it is.

RB 4/29: seems fine as-is to me

If these comments make me seem like the biggest detractor, Bill and Randy come across as Akroma's biggest defenders.

MR (5/9/02): I think a card like this will get some notice when it is first seen, but I don't think it will be memorable (no one will be able to tell you exactly what it does) or particularly flavorful. I'm not saying that I don't want to do a "kitchen sink" creature but I believe our main villain for the block is the wrong place.

I think it's important to note that I didn't dislike the design of Akroma. I disliked the design for Akroma. I was more than happy to stick this card in *Legions* or some future set. I only wanted to move it off a story character that I felt wanted a more flavorful design. Where I was the most off is the idea that it wouldn't be memorable. For some reason I assumed over the years that we'd do a lot of kitchen sink creatures and they would blur. As it turns out, we've made them pretty special and not done too many.

RB 5/13: Phage is at least as villainous as Akroma, probably more. This seems like a fine place for a kitchen sink creature.

As you can tell by the dates on the names, this series of comments went on for three months. Somewhere around this time, the file got locked down and the decision was made.

Angels in the Outfield

The most interesting thing about Akroma as it relates to design is how much I learned about design from the card. Its popularity has made me realize several important things:

#1 - There's Nothing Wrong With Obvious

When I look back at the comments, I realize that I was being a bit of a design snob. Just because the design was boring from a technical design-sense doesn't mean the card is boring to players. Cards aren't judged by how much work it takes to make them. To be blunt, few people care. Cards are judged based on what they do and how much fun they are. A designer has to use that metric when judging cards.

#2 – Overkill Can Be Okay

Aesthetics like simplicity and brevity. Visceral gut response, on the other hand, often enjoys indulgence for the sake of indulgence. Cards aren't just things that are examined and processed. Cards are emotionally taken in. Hitting an emotional nerve can be just as potent as calming one.

#3 – Flavor Can Be Achieved In Various Ways

Akroma obviously has proven flavorful. My mistake was assuming that that the only marker was how well it lined up with the character as portrayed in the novel. The card might not line up exactly with the book (although to be fair it doesn't contradict it either), but it does create a flavor for the card unto itself. You cannot look at Akroma without getting some sense of the power she represents.

#4 – I Can Be Wrong

This is the most important lesson of all. Often in the rush to prove you're correct, you fail to take the time to learn why you're not. I actually enjoy looking back at old dev comments. Sometimes it's to see how I was talking sense in the presence of madness. Yet other times it's a humbling experience to learn how I didn't know what I was talking about at all. Akroma was one such lesson for me.

And that is what Akroma means to me. Man, I'm glad she won. (You will be too, but we can't talk about that part just yet.) I don't know what I would have done for [Eron the Relentless](#) Week.

Speaking of things to come, later this week we'll be premiering Selecting *Tenth Edition*. This is a wonderful interactive feature where we let all of you have input into what goes into *Tenth Edition*. The feature will work a lot like the previous Selecting Nth Editions but we have a few new tricks up our sleeves. Definitely check it out later this week.

That's all I got for today. Tune in next week when I talk about some odds and ends that I've been needing to get around to (hint: the word "lawsuit" might appear).

Until then, may you learn the humbling power of occasionally being wrong.

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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