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A Rare Treat

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hey there, welcome to Super Happy Fun Splashy Rare week! I'm sure my colleagues will be discussing the myriad ways to get Akroma into play. Perhaps something on the art, and how the dev team came to that exact casting cost and ability set will also be said. In Limited Information though, all we're curious about is how good a fancy-pants rare is in your deck. Or, how good is it in your hand? (Hint: not very.) No one's denying a 6/6 flying, first strike, double-pro, heaven-wrought, Ixidor-wrought, beast of earthly delights is a good card in the abstract, but how does Akroma play out in practice? For that matter, how do all these glossy rares do in the field? It's not a simple question; rarity is tricky subset of cards for Limited play. They're certainly exciting and different, but are they good?

Akroma, Angel of Wrath is one of flagship splashy rares of recent memory. She's big and game winning, but in practice, really wasn't worth the effort to use in draft. After all, in *Legions*, you already had things to do at eight mana...



Rares really are difficult to measure for Limited play. As their name would imply, a particular rare isn't seen that often. The commons are plentiful enough; enough drafts will give you a very clear understanding of the relative strengths of Galvanic Arc versus Skyknight Legionnaire. But how about Woodwraith Corrupter versus Mausoleum Turnkey? Or Master Warcraft against Faith's Fetters? These kinds of decisions are not easy, both because rares are more complicated to analyze and the decisions involving them come up far less frequently.

Their difficulty in analysis does not mean they should be excluded from consideration, oh my no. Besides, if anything, rares are fun! They're unusual, they're different, they're valuable...When I crack some pack in a draft, the rare spot is the first place I go to. The odds are wayyyy better I'll be picking a common or uncommon. Percentage-wise, those two categories have more overall playable cards, as well as more quantity in a given pack. The rares though, they're cool! Once in a while, you'll even hit the jackpot and get the super power rare. Cards so good they have to be rare, just so they don't ruin Limited games. Examples of the super power rare category include Meloku the Clouded Mirror, Visara the Dreadful, and everyone's favorite 5.0, Umezawa's Jitte. Most rares do not fall into that category, thank goodness. By the same token, most aren't as bad as Tangleroot or Bloodbond March.

Nope, most of the gold symbolled cards fall somewhere in between Breath of Fury and Demonfire, and as mentioned above, that makes them a tricky call. How good is Cerebral Vortex exactly? Or Biomantic Mastery, or Bioplasm, or Necroplasm, or or...Well there are a lot of rares to examine, and frankly, the answer to all those questions is usually "it depends".

It's my belief that people tend to look for reasons to grab a rare. I do understand this impulse, really. However, while I still look at the rares first, I think I can quell my urge to automatically grab it, even if or especially if the rare is in my colors. An on-color rare seems to be a siren call. Looking at packs I receive in a draft, I find the rare missing way more frequently than they should be. Statistically speaking, there aren't that many good rares that I would take over some of the commons and uncommons being passed. Even accounting for cash-money, I cannot believe that Glares of Subdual and Watery Graves are opened that often on my exact right. Still, the rare seems to be missing an awful lot, leading me to believe people want rares in their deck. Is it because they rate this random rare better than Ribbons of Night, or do they just want to find out for themselves? An interesting question, which we'll address in a bit.

The flipside on a person not knowing about a rare is shying away from the unknown card for the safe "easy" pick. This instinct might be unusual, but it does happen and it's just as damaging to a win percentage. Some of those rarely seen cards are indeed complicated and bizarre, but that does not, in itself, make them bad.

I would define the strengths of most rares in Limited in degrees of potential. Rares, more than any other commonality, produce game-winning effects if the situation is...just...right. Analysis of these types of cards is tricky, because they're laden with possibility, but said possibility is hard to see before the game actually begins. I like to use a two step process when analyzing cards for a Limited deck, and I'd say rares get this treatment more often than most. The process goes something like:

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1. Imagine this card in the ideal game situation

and

2. Foresee the likelihood of your deck getting to that situation.

As a made-up example:

You're drafting a base White/Red deck in an RGD 8-4 queue. Your deck is quite aggressive, as base Boros decks often are. Particularly exciting to you are the double **Veteran Armorer** and double **Conclave Equenaut** in your pile. You open your *Guildpact* booster and see the following 15:

Skarrgan Pit-Skulk
Wild Cantor
Infiltrator's Magemark
Gigadrowse
Cry of Contrition
Beastmaster's Magemark
Silhana Ledgewalker
Crystal Seer
Gruul Nodorog
Leap of Flame
Lionheart Maverick
Aetherplasm
Belfry Spirit
Hissing Miasma
Spelltithe Enforcer



Not the most impressive pack in the world. For our deck, the pick is either **Belfry Spirit** or **Spelltithe Enforcer**. Under the analysis plan above, **Spelltithe Enforcer** is examined as such:

1. Ideally, the Enforcer would be one of multiple threats on the board, against a screwed opponent who can't spend the mana necessary to get out from under the thumb of a 3/3.
2. Likely? Not really. It's adequate as a damage source, but a five mana 3/3 with no evasion is not particularly impressive. Furthermore, the taxing effect has a very narrow window of usage. It's only good if **Spelltithe Enforcer** comes out as early as possible, *and* only against an opponent under severe pressure *and* having mana troubles. Possible, but not very likely against strong players who mulligan well.

Belfry Spirit:

1. Ideally, the Spirit and bats would be part of a big attacking force. Perhaps a bat or two could be tapped for Convoke, allowing you to both continue attacking and create additional threats.
2. This is quite likely. Even against an opponent who kept a reasonable draw, three more power worth of fliers looks good with or against a typical draw. Further, your double Convoke cards appreciate having extra guys in play. Note that while **Belfry Spirit** is best early on where Convoke matters, **Belfry Spirit** is *far* from useless later on in the game. **Spelltithe Enforcer** is exactly as useful as a blank 3/3 would be in the late game, which is to say, not very.

The winner here is clearly **Belfry Spirit**. The probability of **Spelltithe Enforcer** having *more* impact than **Belfry Spirit** is way too unlikely to give serious consideration. In all likelihood, Enforcer should *never* be picked over **Belfry Spirit**. Too many unlikely things have to go right for it to be the stronger presence.

That's the shortened version of this kind of analysis; the full deal is probably worth its own article. At the moment though, it's good enough to apply to the poll question from two weeks ago:

Given the following deck:

Selesnya Guildmage
Civic Wayfinder
Farseek
Bramble Elemental
Compulsive Research
Courier Hawk
Selesnya Sanctuary
Guardian of Vitu-Ghazi
Seeds of Strength
Gruul Guildmage



Gruul Turf
 Wildsize
 Repeal
 Gristleback
 Mourning Thrull
 Silhana Starfletcher
 Izzet Signet
 Infiltrator's Magemark

What is the best pick from this first pack of *Dissension*?

Macabre Waltz - Silkwing Scout - Assault Zeppelin - Carom - Rakdos Signet - Rakdos Ickspitter - Ogre Gatecrasher - Ocular Halo - Aurora Eidolon - Rakdos Carnarium - Simic Ragworm - Azorius Aethermage - Trygon Predator - Hit // Run - Experiment Kraj



What is the best pick from this first pack of <i>Dissension</i> ?		
Experiment Kraj	3973	33.6%
Trygon Predator	3071	26.0%
Assault Zeppelin	2232	18.9%
Hit // Run	890	7.5%
Simic Ragworm	418	3.5%
Rakdos Ickspitter	366	3.1%
Silkwing Scout	221	1.9%
Ocular Halo	215	1.8%
Carom	83	0.7%
Rakdos Carnarium	82	0.7%
Macabre Waltz	61	0.5%
Azorius Aethermage	59	0.5%
Aurora Eidolon	59	0.5%
Rakdos Signet	58	0.5%
Ogre Gatecrasher	42	0.4%
Total	11830	100.0%

Before I get into my thoughts on the matter, some pros contributed their ideas for this dilemma.

Ted Knutson:

This pack is basically impossible, since there are good picks in any number of directions you want to take your deck depending on preference and playskill. I'd pick the Experiment Kraj with Hit // Run second and probably Ocular Halo third. My rationale for this comes from the fact that the Kraj is almost impossible to deal with when he's on the board, making your whole squad better and simply dominating combat. Hit // Run probably fits your token theme slightly better and it has an almost equal "I Win" factor, plus it adds additional versatility since you will almost certainly splash a Swamp for the Hit side of things, but even with all your mana fixing, I don't want to jank up my manabase into a fifth color. Halo, on the other hand, is one of those cards that helps good players generate card advantage and draw what they need to win matches. It's great, but I don't think it edges out the Kraj for "fat beats bombyness" or Hit // Run for giving your deck extra power and versatility at the same time.

My pick: Experiment Kraj



Ken Krouner:

This pick is more about the evaluation of specific cards than it is about strategy. Clearly you are taking some sort of Simic card here (or the Ocular Halo, but that isn't really on the table as far as I'm concerned). This pick boils down to three cards: Experiment Kraj, Assault Zeppelin, and Trygon Predator. I think the Kraj is the first one we can eliminate fairly easily. There's no need to grab a double-double card here and while I haven't played with him yet, he seems to be harder on your mana than his value to a given game. So it's between the two fliers, and I think it's basically personal preference. Both are great cards. I tend to like utility in my draft decks so I chose Trygon Predator. While I think the Predator is the best pick, I make it a habit early in draft formats to play

with rares even if I think a common or uncommon may be better, just so I can know for sure. If I did this draft today I would take the Kraj to try it out, but I think the best pick is the Predator.

My pick: **Trygon Predator** (usually)

Tim Aten:

I think this pick is pretty straightforward, all things considered. The possible choices are **Silkwing Scout**, **Trygon Predator**, **Assault Zeppelin**, **Ocular Halo**, and **Experiment Kraj**. **Silkwing Scout** is inferior to the other fliers, and **Experiment Kraj** is quite powerful, but takes quite a bit of time (and specific mana) to get running, so those are out. **Ocular Halo** is the best card, but we could really use a creature, so we unfortunately have to ship it along. Predator and Zeppelin are pretty close, but we already have a handful of three-drops, so I'd go with the Zeppelin.

My pick: **Assault Zeppelin**

Olivier Ruel:

The choice has to be made between four cards: Kraj, **Assault Zeppelin**, **Silkwing Scout**, and **Trygon Predator**. Scout is very good, but the other two fliers are a level above. Between the two fliers, I would take the 3/3. You already have two turn 2 fixers and many early drops. If there were no Signets or **Farseek**, I'd take the Predator though. I'm not that sure about Kraj; I've played it once only so far, but I'd definitely pick it here to give it a try. If you're U/G in the last pack, you'll go for Graft creatures, and Kraj is good combined with them, as well as the **Gristleback**. In this pack, you'll notice **Simic Ragworm** is definitely wheeling too, giving you a nice combo.

My pick: **Experiment Kraj**

Quite a variety of responses! It's clear from the data and the commentary there's no automatic choice here. Before I get into my decision, let's discuss what cards aren't worth serious consideration.

First off, **Macabre Waltz**, **Rakdos Signet**, **Ogre Gatecrasher**, **Simic Ragworm**, **Azorius Aethermage**, **Aurora Eidolon**, and **Rakdos Ickspitter** have to go. These cards are not in our colors and/or are weaker versions of what's available.

Color-wise, this looks like an easy G/W/U deck to me. While Red cards are possible to cast, **Dissension** does not enable very many quality mono-Red cards, with the exception of **Cackling Flames**. Being that this set also strongly supports G/U and U/W cards, it's clear the focus of our remaining picks is going to be Azorius and Simic. We can keep in the Red makers for **Gruul Guildmage** activations, but I wouldn't expect any Red cards and certainly no Black ones to make the final build.


As a G/U/W deck, we can look at the options more clearly. **Hit // Run** has to be cut at this point. I like this card a lot and Teddy K seems to favor it even more, but the mana cost is too prohibitive, especially with the on-color options left. We can also remove **Rakdos Carnarium** from consideration.

Of the cards left, we have **Silkwing Scout**, **Ocular Halo**, **Carom**, **Assault Zeppelin**, **Trygon Predator**, and **Experiment Kraj**. **Carom** is a nice card and fits our cheap, combat-oriented theme, but it's still weak compared to the alternatives. **Carom** mana would be better spent with one of the two Guildmage activations, or playing another threat. Similarly, **Ocular Halo** loses appeal. The mana cost is a little high, especially at the cost of a creature not attacking. The Halo is definitely a good card, fitting onto a **Drift of Phantasms** or **Vigean Hydropon** nicely. As Olivier mentioned, the **Simic Ragworm** could come back, giving another nice Ocular combo. Tim Aten seems to be very impressed with this card, so perhaps it's not getting enough scrutiny, but were I presented with this pack today, it wouldn't be on the radar.

The three fliers and Kraj are left. Of the fliers, most everyone agreed **Silkwing Scout** is the weakest. A 2/1 flier for three is reasonable but unimpressive. The mana-fixing ability is more of a bonus than a reliable effect. It's also debatable whether the mana search is better than trample or **Floral Spuzzemimicry**. Regardless, 2/1 is just too small compared the equitably costed 2/3 or 3/3. As the readers and pros have said, **Silkwing Scout** is just not good enough compared to the other two fliers.

The choice between **Assault Zeppelin** and **Trygon Predator**, on the other hand, is a lot closer. The readers and KK chose **Trygon Predator** as the best flier, but I'm forced to disagree. The deciding point for me was, as Olivier mentioned, the presence of the Signet and **Farseek**. Those cards increase the chance of getting out a turn 3 Zeppelin, and to me that tips the scales. If there was no way to get AZ out on turn 3, then I probably would go with **Trygon Predator**. Certainly a saboteur ability looks better on an unblockable creature than trample, but that extra point of power is not inconsequential. I don't know they'll have artifacts or enchantments, but I do know they have twenty life points. If there's an artifact or enchantment you're scared of them playing, kill em' before they draw it!

My decision would ultimately be down to **Experiment Kraj** versus **Assault Zeppelin**. 3/3 > 2/3, but 4/6 > 3/3. Still...

Tim and Ken said they didn't want to commit to a double-double spell at this point, but I think for this deck, there's no reason not to. We already know we're heavy Green, and whether it's through Simic or Azorius, we're going to be decently Blue as well. It's most likely that Forests and Islands will be our most plentiful basics, so at this point I'm not afraid of a  card.

It's the stats and abilities versus total mana cost that has me concerned. First, I think everyone can agree that given enough time, **Experiment Kraj** wins the game. ∞/∞ creatures are tough to deal with. Still, I'd like to give it the 1-2 analysis.

Assault Zeppelin:

1. Ideally, this deck is winning with evasion and cheap threats. It would be grand if **Assault Zeppelin** would come out on turn 3 or be cast on turn 4 following an efficient threat. It might not break a game open, but it blocks well and presses any kind of advantage.
2. This deck is designed to come out speedy and strong. It's possible a deck could match our aggression, but I don't think any normal deck could actually exceed it. Therefore, at its worst, the Zeppelinid deflects their aggressive opening and at best it pushes our own. **Assault Zeppelinid** has a good chance of being a factor whenever it's drawn. With this deck and its diverse threats, Zepps could easily be the nail in the coffin.



Experiment Kraj:

1. Ideally the board would be, at worst, a standoff. At that time, with lots of activated abilities, Kraj would go to work and make our creatures a real force to be reckoned with. Eventually Kraj would do his/her/it's/ooze's thing and break the stalemate wide open. Of course if we already have the initiative of aggression, a four power creature is nothing to sneeze at either.
2. Likelihood... well certainly not impossible. In regards to that activated abilities part, Olivier Ruel said that **Simic Ragworm** could be our 9th pick out of this pack. That, or a different Ragworm or **Vigean Graftmage**, is certainly a strong possibility. With those two in play, your monsters would get gigantic fast.

The point of contention I have is the stalemate potential. This deck is *aggressive*. Combat tricks, cheap and evasive creatures, *bloodthirst*; all this adds up to a deck that's not interested in making the game go long. The pressing the advantage aspect is more likely, and at that point Kraj might as well be **Gruul Nodorog**.

Comparing them side by side, I agree with Tim Aten and would pick **Assault Zeppelinid**. While Kraj could single-handedly flip the game, our deck is designed to avoid that situation in the first place. Essentially, **Assault Zeppelinid** fits this deck's aggressive, evasive mold perfectly. AZ is worth taking to enhance the core strategy. Kraj is very, very good in a different deck; a deck that even matches these very same colors. In some other draft it could be the pick. But this deck likes to attack and it has things to do with its mana in the late game. Stay on target and pick the card that fits *this* deck, this time.

Finally, Ken Krouner and Olivier Ruel both said something interesting regarding Kraj. Both players indicated that they liked Kraj at this instance because they wanted experience with the rare. This is an excellent reason to take a card, although hopefully you get your practice taken care of before the Top 8 draft of youu PTQ. The analysis given here is useful, because your decks' needs change from draft to draft. However, there are ways to get some practice in with rares, without waiting to open them in a pack (and passing them anyway).

The first is everyone's favorite format, Reject Rare Draft. [Mark Gottlieb was the first](#) to talk about this style of drafting, and more recently [Chris Millar jumped in](#). If you do an RRR, throw in the rares you want to examine. If they have any potential value in Limited at all, they'll get playtime. Pick them yourself or watch your fellow drafters give them a test run.

Another option is Rotisserie Draft. The [original explanation is here](#). If that's too lengthy, Rotisserie replaces sealed boosters with every single card in a large set (or two small ones). All you need are some friends, your brain, and a really big table. It's a very interesting format on its own, but it has extra appeal as a great testing ground for rares, since *they're all there!* If there's a marginal rare you're just not sure about, it's almost a guarantee you'll have the time to get it.

Both of these formats are good practice areas for all kinds of bizarre rares, and they're a lot of fun besides. There's also the old stalwart - asking people their opinions on particular cards. Even if you don't have the experience with a rare, one of your comrades may have. Feed your curiosity now, so you don't have to struggle with the right pick when it really matters.

That's it for this episode of splashy rare week. Come back next time when we discuss a very common male problem. Until then, thanks for reading.

-Noah Weil



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