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Akroma Vanguard: Not Just for Beatdown Anymore?

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Into the Aether
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Let me start this by saying thank goodness that the awesome Akroma won the You Decide! Legends contest and got her own theme week. That made it easy for me to do a *Magic Online*-oriented Akroma piece, since Akroma happens to be a *Vanguard* avatar, and a mighty fine one indeed! What if the awesome Top 4 competitor *Reya Dawnbringer* had won? I suppose I could have stretched things by doing an Angel Tribal Wars deck or something... Akroma (and those of you who voted) saved us all from that fate.

Of course, another problem arises due to Akroma being a really good and competitive avatar for Vanguard. Anyone who's played the format has seen Good Creatures + Akroma to Make Them Even Better decks ad nauseum. I didn't want to snooze you to death before you could get past the theme section and read the rest of column. Obviously, I needed to shake things up a bit.

Making the Marginals

I decided to think about creatures that are interesting, fun and just *barely* on the wrong side of being playable or competitive. Tacking on two extra abilities, most of which are really good, good push them into the realm of ridiculous. At least, that was my hope. Outside of ridiculous creatures like Meloku and Keiga, blue creatures tend to fit the bill, and I toyed around with Moonfolk and Wizards (*Daring Apprentice* with haste!). *Shape Stealer* seemed cool, and the already decent Ninjas could get flat out nuts with flying and haste. *Clone* could improve upon the best creature your opponent had, and I also kept wanting to dip into Simic's Graft territory, since gaining +1/+1 counters along with other special abilities is bound to be fun. Sadly, this path was violating my basic premise of staying away from "already really good" creatures, since the Simic dudes are mostly an efficient lot.

Can't Keep a Mediocre Man Down

Looking over the *Dissension* spoiler for new cards to play with, I made note of a good number of cards that screamed "Nephilim!!" One even used flattery in its title, "*Might of the Nephilim*" to get attention. Two mana, +8/+8 at instant speed—how can you resist? Top off with a *Psychotic Fury* for double strike, that's some serious damage!

Wait a minute; didn't I just go down the *Nephilim road in my Emperor games* not too long ago? Actually, the focus of the deck wasn't so much all the Nephilim as it was *Ink-Treader Nephilim* (alongside Niv-Mizzet and other fun goodies). I also ran the *Nephilim recently in a Prismatic deck*. However, the more I thought about it, the more I thought a Standard Nephilim deck, running a full boat of the weird and wacky creatures, fit my criteria perfectly. The Nephilim can do some wacky and powerful things, but there's no denying that they need some help to be considered competitive-level good. Enter Akroma to staple two more abilities to their text. The life boost would also allow me a little time to get them into play. Perfect!

Five Color Green

Of course, now I had the practical concern of how to build a five-color deck that could consistently cast any of the Nephilim I happened to have in my hand on turn 3 or 4. *Dissension's* *Pillar of the Paruns* was a godsend of course. Green has tons of mana fixing, so I debated the usual suspects: *Sakura-Tribe Elder*, *Farseek*, *Birds of Paradise*, and *Kodama's Reach*. *Dissension* also had *Utopia Sprawl*, which was certainly intriguing.

After much soul searching, I decided I would run all four green/x dual lands from *Ravnica* block since they were Forests and could be enchanted with *Utopia Sprawl*, and they would allow me to cast *Farseek* on turn 2. Running 4 Pillars gave me 20 lands, and I ended up deciding to try four *Tendo Ice Bridges* on top of that.

I shuffled up and ran a few test games. Two things quickly became apparent: The green/x duals, *Utopia Sprawl*, and *Farseek* combination was fantastic, but the Ice Bridges were horrid. Twenty four of my spells had no colorless component to their mana cost, so once I used the Ice Bridge token for colored mana, they were often useless. This coupled with the Pillars occasionally being not so helpful took me back to the drawing board. Ultimately, I decided to swap them out for one each of non-Forest basic lands.

Running a few more test games, the mana worked out great! I was consistently playing a Nephilim on turn 3, and the abilities tacked on were proving to be quite helpful. The one glitch was my Nephilim gaining protection from

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NOVELS

Dissension
Ravnica Cycle, Book III
by Cory Herndon




red when I was holding a **Psychotic Fury**. I hated to ditch them, but the deck was marginal enough already that I didn't want to draw blanks. I ended up swapping them out for **Crime // Punishment**, which seemed like a great option for utility.



Did some more playtesting and had some great results in the casual room, especially if my opponent happened to be playing red or black creatures. In this one game against drunken_wookie (great screen name, by the way), he worked hard to keep me from drawing cards from **Glint-Eye**, and ended up killing it with **Putrefy**, but then I drop Yore-Tiller next turn, he gets haste and attacks, putting Glinty back into play attacking. Whoo-hoo!!



After playing more games in the casual room, I start to feel more and more confident in the deck. It just keeps winning! I decide to check to see if there are any 2x Standard Vanguard tournaments coming up, and sure enough one starts in 5 minutes! I suddenly realize I have no sideboard, so I scramble to put one together and sign up in time to jump in. This is what I played:

Akroma Nephilim, by Bennie Smith 

Avatar - Akroma, Angel of Wrath, +1 Hand, +7 Life When a creature comes into play under your control, it gains two of the following abilities at random: flying, first strike, trample, haste, protection from black, protection from red, or vigilance.

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
1 Island 1 Mountain 4 Overgrown Tomb 1 Plains 4 Stomping Ground 1 Swamp 4 Temple Garden 4 Breeding Pool 4 Pillar of the Paruns <hr/> 24 land 4 Dune-Brood Nephilim 4 Glint-Eye Nephilim 4 Ink-Treader Nephilim 4 Witch-Maw Nephilim 4 Yore-Tiller Nephilim <hr/> 20 creatures	4 Farseek 4 Crime/Punishment 4 Might of the Nephilim 4 Utopia Sprawl <hr/> 16 other spells 3 Arashi, the Sky Asunder 4 Leyline of Lifeforce 4 Worship 4 Hide/Seek <hr/> 15 sideboard cards

Most of you familiar with the more competitive Vanguard decks can guess how I fared with this deck: I got annihilated! I get schooled by a Loxodon Hierarchy/Zubera deck (with **Shirei**, **Shizo's Caretaker**), I get crushed by a Nekrataal/**Glimpse of Nature** deck in two quick games, and then lose a hard-fought battle against Rumbling Slum Zoo beatdown.

I think it's pretty clear that Akroma Nephilim is a fun casual deck that needs to stay out of the PEs! If you're looking for a more "standard" competitive Akroma deck, check out the one that [won the 4x back in February here by Patariba](#).

One last **Vanguard** note: if you're a fan of Momir **Magic** (I talked about it [here](#)), you'll not want to miss Brian David-Marshall's column tomorrow!

Adepts: Making the Game Fun (part 2)

Last week, we [kicked off a big interview with Kevin Boris](#) regarding the Adept team. This week, we wrap up his interview, and present some Q&A with two well-known Adepts.

ITA: *What are the biggest challenges in managing the game and player behavior?*

KB: We have set up a system that is as effective as possible in providing a safe and fun environment, but we realize we cannot please everyone. I will admit that our rules are strict, but we feel it is necessary to make the game a pleasant experience.

The hardest issue to deal with is that with digital objects and the ability to trade, we simply cannot control everyone's behavior. We have scammers and fraudsters lurking in the game. Everyone is responsible for all uses of their account, but often players make errors in trusting people they should not trust. Giving your password to some website that says "Free Avatars, just signup with your username and password" is a common way people give away their passwords. You would be amazed at how often players give away their password, account or security info.

ITA: *When you discover scams and frauds, do you post that information anywhere to inform the MTGO community?*

KB: We are working on developing either a web page or KB answer, which will help the community identify and list scams. Players are still encouraged to send these in, as we are very active to have the scam sites shut down.

ITA: *In paper Magic, judges can often determine a lot by body language, tone of voice and physical behavior. How do you adjudicate effectively in a virtual environment?*

KB: This is one of our toughest challenges. We cannot see the expression on someone's face. We must go simply by what they type.

As a team we must always read through the situation. **Magic** players are competitive, and with that they have a fire for the game. We don't want to take away from this, but we still want the games to be fun and respectful.

ITA: *Are you able to replay games and see what happened and what was typed?*

KB: We can review games and the chat for most instances. Casual games and tournament games are reviewable by our team. Bribery is our biggest concern with PE's, Drafts and Leagues. I realize we fall short of many people's expectations on this. I assure everyone we do take bribery seriously and are working to improve our consistency and effectiveness in busting bribers and colluders.

ITA: *Why is trade chat restricted in certain areas?*

KB: I understand that our policies regarding trading outside the designated areas are strict, but it is necessary. Otherwise the chat rooms would be unusable due to players attempting to trade and spamming. We saw this in the beta and early stages of **Magic Online**. We have to be strict otherwise traders try all kinds of ways to "get around the rules," so mentioning any transaction of any kind is prohibited. Ultimately this is a trading card game and we must allow players to trade. We must give a place for players to play and a place for players to trade. We have many players who simply want to trade and they should not be allowed to disrupt the game for players who simply want to play a casual game, or want to play in a competitive event.

ITA: *We are all dying to know anything about the much-anticipated release of MTGO III! What can you share with us about it now? How will the new version change or enhance the roles/duties of Adepts?*

KB: I am very excited about the release of MTGO III. I believe we will be able to provide a better and more exciting environment for the players. I hope that with MTGO III we can provide better help and more resources for our players to learn how to play, how to have fun and how to protect their accounts. We plan to provide better help files and more information so that our Adepts can spend time helping and teaching players how to play the game. The **Magic Online** world is a great place to be, but it can be overwhelming for a new player. We would like to be able to provide more functions and teachings to our great game. For those who have been around, we want to provide the same level of competitive and safe gaming.

For the Adepts, I would like to find ways for them to play in games with the players. I don't know if everyone realizes this, but all Adepts are **Magic** players and **Magic** Lovers. They have joined up because they want to help and they want to make **Magic Online** a great place to play or just hang out and spend time with friends. I hope as we move forward the potential relationships between Adepts and players can be further realized.

I welcome any suggestions to help improve the **Magic Online** Community. You can email me through our contact us system at <http://wizards.custhelp.com>. I cannot promise your suggestions will come to fruition, but I can promise they will be discussed and considered. I hope to see you online!

ITA: *You mention teaching players how to play the game... how can Adepts help in that regard now, and how might they better do so with MTGO III?*

KB: Currently we have a small Mentor Program on the free trial. We are planning to improve this as **Magic Online III** approaches. With a new version, there will be new questions and we hope to draw more players to the game. Again with **Magic Online**, there is so much to learn and we hope to be able to provide more information to our new players as well as find ways to make the game even better for our veteran players.

The Mentor program started in 2004. Our goal was to develop a way for new players to learn the game. We had Mentors on the Free Trial server helping players who were interested, but never took the leap to the Live Full Version Game. Mentors would play games with new players and show them how to play and feel more comfortable with **Magic Online** and the environment. With **Magic Online III** coming, we want to find new ways to teach the game to players and make their experience more exciting.

To finish up our overview on Adepts and the things they do, Kevin rustled up two team members to give us their "Adept-eye" view of doing the job, Adept_Sentinel and Adept_Gnome.

ITA: *Give us your vitals: name, age, where you live, what you do for a living, astrological sign, screenname and password, etc. (heh, just kidding on that last part)*

Adept_Sentinel: My name is... wait! I am not allowed to say, unfortunately. My personal information is kept secret to thwart possible disgruntled players from taking revenge or friends requesting special treatment should they violate the Code of Conduct.

Adept_Gnome: It's true: We're limited in what we can say about ourselves. I'm 29 years old, and my background is in computer programming.

ITA: *How long have you been an Adept? Why did you become one?*

AS: I became an Adept in March, 2003. I enjoy helping people and find myself doing so even on my play account. Being an Adept is a dream come true for me. **Magic Online** is a fantastic game and deserves a competent, caring support team. Hopefully, we can provide service in this manner.

AG: In August 2002, I was a know-it-all and wanted to show off my knowledge.

Nowadays I think I know "just enough". Adept work has since fostered a love in people and Psychology. I am a strong believer in [Responsibility Assumption](#), which means that I over-explain everything - even answers like this!

ITA: *As an Adept, what do you think you're particularly adept at? (*rimshot*)*

AS: Well, I learn every day. There is always room for improvement, I believe. I'd like to think I listen well and am compassionate toward my fellow players regardless of what their problem(s) may be.

AG: Translation! I know some French, but my speciality is between English and Internet English.

ITA: *Are there Adepts on the Betas, and if so how is it different than regular MTGO (assuming you work it)?*

AS: Yes, there are Adepts on the Beta server and it differs from the live server in that there is a more relaxed atmosphere. Most people are happy to be invited and follow the rules.

AG: Wizards of the Coast has a higher standard for the behavior of invitees, but our visitors have exceeded that. Adepts on a Beta shift are encouraged to play games in the Adept account, though Adepts on "Live" are not permitted to.

ITA: *What's the coolest thing about being an Adept?*

AS: It's cool having someone that had a problem come back and tell you the solution you suggested had worked for them. Helping people is very rewarding for me, personally. The Adept Team is a close - knit group that is also very cool.

AG: I'll give a different answer every time someone asks me this. One thing I'd like to mention is our old newsletter, named The Eye. It featured "fan-fics" set in the **Magic** universe, puzzles, and a Card of the Week designed around an Adept. It has since retired, but anyone that joins the team can pull up the issues from our archives!

ITA: *Step through a "day in the life of an Adept" for us (the wild parties, the paparazzi, the promiscuous fans).*

AS: Woke up, fell out of bed... No, seriously, the first thing I normally do is check e-mails, websites and message boards for any new information that may be helpful to the community. Then I prepare for my upcoming shift (forms, schedules, etc.). Throughout the day I will monitor rooms and answer questions, naturally. There are no groupies or wild parties although there have been a few Adept/WotC leagues that were quite fun. After shift, I usually log in and play a few games (constructed extended mostly).

AG: Adepts work from home - expect pink bunny slippers and a caffeinated drink on a guy or gal that handles 3 rooms at a time. We maintain a few reports as well. Over time, folks will come in for every server state, card combo, or player complaint, so it helps to research answers ahead of time! We have a program that stores our best-typed answers (they're called macros), so you needn't feel bad about asking us to repeat ourselves. As for the paparazzi Ehhhh, haven't seen any. What could they tell us that www.wizards.com journalists don't?

ITA: *How long have you played Magic? How much Magic do you get to play currently?*

AS: I started with the Microprose PC version around 1996. Currently, I enter local drafts one to three times a month, depending on how busy I am.

AG: I began in 1996 too, thanks to my cousin. I don't play much today, due to a World of Warcraft obsession. "Gnome", eh? This article will see print two days after my last "One Big Chaotic Deck" session with my friend Paul, who is returning to the Southern United States. Thanks, Paul, for introducing me to this very social **Magic** format!

ITA: *Do you play much Magic Online? Do you play under your Adept name or do you have a different screenname for when you're off-duty? Or once you log off as an Adept do you run screaming far, far away?*

AS: I duel on my play account just about every day online before and/or after my shift.

AG: All Adepts begin with a play-name, which they keep through and beyond their Adepting time. Because I work the midnight shifts, my favorite after-duty activity is ... sleeping!

ITA: *What's your favorite Magic format? Are you more a casual or competitive player?*

AS: I play mostly Casual Constructed Extended although local drafts are quite fun. I am learning.

AG: When I play, it's usually in Leagues around Release Events. I am a "[Timmy-Johnny-Vorthos](#)".

ITA: *What was the most outrageous player behavior you've had to deal with personally?*

AS: Players that (for one reason or another) do not abide by the rules occasionally have to be muted or shown the door. I don't enjoy this, as we are supposed to be having fun. At times, they come back on another account in order to cause more trouble. In rare instances, they come back on a third account wondering why they were dealt with so severely when all they had to do was follow the Code of Conduct. I try to explain the best I can, but am not always successful.

AG: I see it all in the Adept role, but when I'm not on duty ... I've been the target of name-calling and cussing ... *shrug*. On the Internet, it's not as intimidating as it could be.

ITA: *Here's your bully pulpit - what do you wish players knew more about when it comes to what you can or cannot do as an Adept?*

AS: I'd like for the community to know that we may not always be quick to answer questions, as we can already be involved in multiple Personal Messages. Thankfully, players (who may or may not have stayed in a Holiday Inn Express) often help in the Mass room, which is much appreciated.

AG: Well said!

ITA: *Has being an Adept made you a better player?*

AS: Yes, I tend to stay current with the Keywords, FAQs and strategies as I am aware I may be asked about them during my shift.

AG: Yes. I learned of the Sixth Edition changes from player's questions. Actually, I'm still learning things that way. Did you know you could kill a creature with **Cytoshape**?

ITA: *What are some of your other interests outside of Magic?*

AS: I enjoy Real-time and Turn-based strategy games as well as First Person Shooters, although I am not that good. My friends and I play Unreal Tournament frequently.

AG: I play Squash (a racquet-sport) with the amazing mother Gnome every week. Also cool: sketching, head music, puns, and small pets.

ITA: *Say I'm considering applying for a future position opening as an Adept. What advice would you have for me?*

AS: Certainly, friendliness and knowledge of the program are preferred. If you enjoy playing **Magic** and consider helping people to be worthwhile, then by all means submit an application (when they are being accepted; [you can go here](#)).

AG: Although the application says, "moderation experience is a plus", communication is a big winner with management. In a real interview, you dress to impress, but on the Internet, your spelling is telling.

ITA: *Is there a shadow Adept watching me right now? (glances over shoulder)*

AS: There is no such thing as an Invisible Adept. <waves hand>

AG: Come now, Bennie ... this is **Magic**, not Solitaire. Ah-h! Put the **White Knight** on the **Sliver Queen**. There. Perfect.

Thanks for shedding some light on the moderators who help keep *Magic Online* running smooth!

Behind the Curtain: Adventures in Programming *Dissension*!

Programmer extraordinaire [Rachel Reynolds](#) is back with some more behind the scenes stories of the trials and tribulations of a *Magic Online* programmer.

RachelR:

"We were running out of characters to map the split mana symbols to, and so I tried some that I thought might work. It turns out they were taken and the previous mappings overrode the split mana symbols I was trying to use, but the combinations I ended up with by accident corresponded pretty well to the colors of the guild they were representing. I liked how they looked, and kept the incorrect symbols for most of time I was programming *Dissension*.



"When I was trying to get split cards working, I didn't have the art ids to use for the second half of the cards yet (the art was initially passed off to me as one art file containing the art for both halves of the card, and I requested it split into two pieces so that I could get it to work online with the existing code used for *Invasion* block split cards), so I made up some to use temporarily. I ended up with some interesting combinations of split card names as half of the card was interpreted as a card from an old set:

Pure/Copper Tablet
Hit/Conservator
Rise/Clockwork Beast
Trial/Chaos Orb
Supply/Celestial Prism
Bound/Black Vise
Odds/Black Lotus
Crime/Basalt Monolith
Research/Ankh of Mishra

"**Experiment Kraj** was the card in *Dissension* I figured was the hardest to program, and I saved it for last. Initially, I got it to gain all the abilities, but it never lost them if the creature it gained them from left play or lost its counter. I then tried resetting the abilities each time the legal actions for the card were calculated, and in doing so I erased the ability to put **Experiment Kraj** into play, so you could never cast it at all. I then put in code to make sure it kept its initial abilities, and could play **Experiment Kraj** again, but it still wasn't losing the abilities from creatures that left play. It turned out that it was considering the cards to still have their counter after they left play and I had to make sure I was only looking for cards in the correct zone (when a card moves to a new zone, it is put into a zone called "limbo" that isn't displayed, and a new copy is created in the zone the card is moved to, I had to make sure that **Experiment Kraj** wasn't gaining abilities from cards that were in limbo).



"When I initially programmed **Infernal Tutor**, it had a check for what to do if you had no cards in hand and another check for what to do if you had cards in hand. However, the check for no cards in hand was first. So if you had no cards in hand, it would let you search your library for a card and put it into your hand. Then it would check and see that you had cards in hand, and it would let you do the other part too..."

Thanks, Rachel! Be sure to check in next week when we kick off Into The Aether Deck Challenge III!

Bennie Smith has been playing Magic since Arabian Nights, and writing about it nearly as long. Several of his early musings appeared on the Magic Dojo, and from there he became a featured writer for Star City Games and a Contributing Editor for Scrye Magazine before he started writing for [magicthegathering.com](#). While a casual gamer at heart, Bennie also thoroughly enjoys the competitive side of Magic and won the Virginia State Championship in 1999.



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