

Drakes and Dragons, Wurms and Worms

A look at the fine distinctions between creature types in Magic, and the Vorthosian dialogue that plays out between creative team and artist.

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As part of the **Magic** creative team, one of my responsibilities is *sketch review*. That's when we look through the rough sketches that will one day become **Magic** art, evaluate them, and make comments and recommendations. When art director Jeremy Jarvis announces that new sketches are in, I fire up Multiverse (meaning, in this context, Wizards' internal database of **Magic** card information, not the infinite worlds of the **Magic** setting) and step through the sketches, making comments as I go. My comment is almost always the same. I'll tell you what it is—are you ready? Here's my most common comment:

DB 11/14/2007: Okay.

That's because, most of the time, the artist is on the right track, and there's nothing to fix. Most of the time, everything is looking good at the sketch stage, so each of us on the team says "Okay" in rapid succession, and Jarvis tells the artist that he or she is free to finish out the piece.



(One of the reasons that this scenario is so common is that we have awesome artists and that Jeremy is an awesome art director. I give them enormous props for how smoothly the art development process goes—at least from my perspective!—because it's a crucial part of **Magic**'s incredible success and growth. Jeremy brings in only the most talented artists to work on **Magic**, many of whom have a profound grasp of the game's visual style from day one. Many, many of our artists have been illustrating **Magic** cards for several years—some of them even since Alpha, over fourteen years ago. That is a lot of practice learning about what's cool to us and what makes us excited—which is feedback they get from sketch review—but the crazy thing is, a lot of them don't need it. They have *talent*. "Cool" is clearly built into their bones from the get-go. It blows me away.)

But sometimes, "Okay" isn't enough. Sometimes there are flavor details that are off in the sketch, and we have to get them corrected. Sometimes we have to play Vorthosian Traffic Cop.

OFFICER VORTHOS

Sir, please pull over!

ARTY McDRAW

Oh great. What did I do, miss a stop sign?

MRS. McDRAW

(*from the passenger seat*) Just see what he wants, and you can get back to drawing.

OFFICER VORTHOS

Sir, were you aware you were illustrating a dragon in a drake zone? (*into CB*) Station, this is Flavor Unit One reporting an eight-three-niner in progress.

ARTY McDRAW

What gives? I read the art description, it said drake—I'm illustrating a drake!

OFFICER VORTHOS

No sir, this is a dragon. See how it's got front legs as well as wings? A drake is like a dragon, but has no front legs, only wings and back legs.



ARTY McDRAW
Oh, you mean a wyvern!

MRS. McDRAW *shakes her head.*

OFFICER VORTHOS
No, sir. We don't do wyverns here in **Magic** country—around here the two-winged, two-legged dragon-relatives are known as [drakes](#). The word "drake" comes from the same etymological root as "dragon"—the Latin *draco*, meaning "snake" or "serpent."

MRS. McDRAW
Actually, there are some wyverns in **Magic**. [Flowstone Wyvern](#), [Silver Wyvern](#)—

OFFICER VORTHOS
Ah, but they're an extinct breed. Note that the printed creature type for all of **Magic's** wyverns was Drake (except for [Cerulean Wyvern](#), which is now a Drake in Oracle). License and registration, please.

ARTY McDRAW
Fine, but look, can we speed this up? I have a lot of work to do on this piece.

OFFICER VORTHOS
It's best if you cooperate, sir. If I let you go now, and we find evidence that you're still illustrating a dragon in a drake zone, I'll have to bring you in. Here's a tip to stay out of trouble: drakes tend to be blue-aligned rather than red-aligned.

ARTY McDRAW
But I drew him blue-aligned—see? He's flying down to his friend, this vedalken mage.

OFFICER VORTHOS
I see that, but he's—he's actually *breathing fire* on the vedalken. That's another trait we associate with the dragon, not with the classic drake.

MRS. McDRAW *chuckles.*

ARTY McDRAW
Fine, no fire. (*erases*) In fact, I'll remove everything and start from scratch. "Draco" means "snake," right? So we'll just start with a snake body. There.

MRS. McDRAW
Actually, honey, now you've—you've drawn a wurm.

ARTY McDRAW
That's no worm!

OFFICER VORTHOS
No, sir, not a worm with an "o"—although **Magic** [has those, too](#), infrequently. A worm has a snakelike body, but is an invertebrate, and usually has regular segments—whereas a wurm has an endoskeleton, reptilian scales or plates, and a saurian head similar to a dragon's.



A Ravnican ragworm (modified by the Simic Combine) – Art by Nick Percival

ARTY McDRAW
So... you mean a wyrm?

OFFICER VORTHOS

No, a *wurm*, with a "u." The spelling "wyrm," with a "y," is a [Dungeons and Dragons](#) tradition that refers, again, to a dragon, but what you've drawn there is a wurm. In art descriptions, we commonly refer to wurms as "wingless, limbless dragons" to get artists on the right track, although wurms are different in kind from dragons.



ARTY McDRAW
What's the difference?

OFFICER VORTHOS

Wurms aren't just flightless and limbless—they're also usually green-aligned: forest dwellers. Or it might be more accurate to say that the forest tries its best to dwell *around* a wurm. Wurms are preternaturally hungry and relentless when pursuing their prey—let's just say they don't ponder the effects of deforestation as they crash through the trees after their food.



A Dominarian crawl wurm – Art by Daniel Gelon

MRS. McDRAW
But officer, aren't there nongreen wurms?

OFFICER VORTHOS

Yes, ma'am. In fact there have been [wurms of all colors](#), but they are the exceptions that prove the rule. Wurms are overwhelmingly green-aligned. They are green's savagery and size epitomized.

MRS. McDRAW

You said that wurms have saurian heads, like dragons'. But I've seen wurms with heads that look nothing like a dragon's. Some don't even have eyes.

OFFICER VORTHOS

That's true. Wurms from different planes can have vastly different morphologies, especially in their head and jaw anatomies. Truly, the essence of a wurm is its mouth.



An Otarian metamorphic wurm – Art by Thomas M. Baxa



A Phyrexian trench wurm – Art by Wayne England



A Ravnican autochthon wurm – Art by Michael Phillipi

ARTY McDRAW
Okay, so, I've drawn a wurm. Can I go now?

OFFICER VORTHOS

No, sir—this is a drake zone, remember?

ARTY McDRAW

Oh, right—so I add some wings, and I'm done. There. You got your drake.

OFFICER VORTHOS

Not so fast, Mr. McDraw. A drake is, once again, different in kind from a wurm. A drake is generally blue-aligned, about the intelligence of a dog, and a common servant to mages. Drakes have dragonlike heads, long reptilian tails, and scaly wings, but also have back legs, somewhat like a bird's.



A Dominarian drake – Art by Greg Staples



A Jamuraan spitting drake – Art by G. Darrow and I. Rabarot



A Ravnican drake familiar – Art by Darrell Riche

MRS. McDRAW

But what about **Pendrell Drake**? Or **Shrieking Drake**? They have front limbs in addition to wings.

OFFICER VORTHOS

Those two we subpoenaed on that matter in *Garruk v. Forelimbed Drakes*, a landmark civil case that consolidated the definition of drakehood. The defendants, Pendrell and Shrieking, agreed to pay a fine for the right to remain Drakes. They've repaid their debt to flavor society.

ARTY McDRAW sketches, then shows OFFICER VORTHOS the result.

OFFICER VORTHOS

So... now you've drawn a dragon, a four-limbed, two-winged saurian predator. And it's eating...

ARTY McDRAW nods wryly.

OFFICER VORTHOS

... what appears to be... a man in a police uniform. With a sign that says "VORTHOS" on it. Sir, despite your insubordination, I believe we're finally getting somewhere. You've drawn an archetypal **Magic dragon** here, the ultimate representation of the chaos and ferocity—and reckless, irrepressible independence—of red mana.



A hellkite of Shiv – Art by Kev Walker



A hellkite of Bogardan – Art by Scott M. Fischer



Dominarian dragon – Art by Daren Bader

OFFICER VORTHOS

Head shape, wing shape, body shape, scale colors, breath weapons, spell knowledge, age—all these characteristics vary from plane to plane and from dragon to dragon. A **dragon engine** is completely different from a **furnace dragon** of Mirrodin, despite them both being related to artifacts. An Otarian **eternal dragon** is totally distinct from a Kamigawan **spirit-dragon**, despite sharing a second creature type. Some dragons have bare indications of wings, backed by jet turbines. Others have enormous earlike wing structures jutting from their massive heads. Others have crystalline ice structures integrated into their scales and glacial winds frozen into their hearts.



A furnace whelp of Mirrodin – Art by Matt Cavotta



An ancient Dominarian dragon – Art by Mark Zug



Rimescale_Dragon_640

A rimescale dragon of Terisiare – Art by Jeff Easley

ARTY McDRAW

Yes, officer, I think I'm getting it now. Is this drake okay? It's got the rear limbs, no forelimbs, two wings, long reptilian tail, and a dragonlike head. Are the claws at the tips of the wings okay?

OFFICER VORTHOS

Yep, they're fine. That's pretty good. I'd lose the nose horn—it's distracting.

OFFICER VORTHOS writes on his pad, tears off the ticket, and hands it to ARTY McDRAW, who looks at the paper.

ARTY McDRAW

All that—and you write—"Okay"?!

This might not represent exactly how sketch review goes, but the Vorthosian spirit is the same. We in the creative team have to be picky about the anatomical details of dragons, drakes, wurms, and worms—as well as flamekin, kithkin, Lorwyn elves, Llanowar elves, *Mirari*-mutated Otarian elves, boggarts, moggs, akki, nantuko, leonin, shades, viashino, demons (which usually fly via enormous bat wings), vampires (which usually fly but *rarely* have wings—they just float around magically), morph spiders, specters, angels, hellions, loxodons, gnarrs, nezumi, vedalken, Keldons, slivers, soratami, kavu, and more—not to mention the characteristic details of specific characters (how many times have artists illustrated *Gerrard Capashen's* goatee and vest, or Teferi's personal staff?).

Sure, individual creatures have individual variations—that's what makes any given card interesting and makes each year's setting look different from the last. *Saltskitter* is a flat-bodied, white-aligned desert wurm. *Two-Headed Dragon* has an unusually even number of heads. *Tattered Drake* has the whole undead thing

going on. And the difference between some types can be subtle sometimes—ask me what makes an Avatar different from an Elemental or a Spirit, and my answer will be a whole lot more abstract than a matter of counting limbs.

But as a whole, our job is to keep the boundaries sharp and the taxonomy crisp, so that **Magic** keeps its recognizable look and feel set after set, artist after artist. When it comes down to it, we want a healthy dose of the familiar each time we planeswalk someplace new. Whether we're on metal world or city world or ice world or some crazy world we can't yet imagine, a drake better look like a drake.

Next week, however, we take a look at a race that is a bit harder to get a visual fix on.



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