

THROUGH DRAGONS' EYES

The Evolution of a Draconic Matriarchy

by Jennifer Brandes and Chris Hepler

Dragons. What good are they?

At the simplest level, they're the fantasy equivalent of a flying tank; a supervillain capable of leveling towns with their destructive breath, chomping city guards like beef jerky, and letting loose the infrequent Godzilla bellow. Killing one gives players great satisfaction; dragon-hide boots are quite the fashion statement. (Statement: "Aw, yeah, we *bad*.")

But after a while, this appeal fades, and the gamemaster plays them as hyper-intelligent super-manipulators who use vast networks of servants and spies to control local politics and gain hordes of worshippers as the first step in a master plan spanning hundreds of years. These dragons are ultimate campaign villains or powerful patrons who jerk the PCs' strings to keep the plot moving. On this level, most dragons are effectively unkillable; they are part of the world, sometimes even written in by the game company not to change no matter what the player characters do.

While it is legitimate to want to keep dragons powerful and mysterious behind-the-scenes figures, many gamemasters go too far, making the dragon's machinations so far above the characters' heads that they are unable to even *influence* it. To keep players interested in a story where their characters are merely cogs in a vast machine, such GMs play up the dragon's mystery and grandeur, his "inscrutable motives," and how incredibly lucky the PCs should feel to even be included in such a wondrous being's plans. Players will generally go along with this.

Once.

DRACONIC WEAKNESSES

Gaming advice for years has been telling players that some of the best characters have flaws. They have bad tempers, bum knees, ex-husbands, yellow streaks, and pasts they're ashamed to admit. These provide story hooks and good moments of roleplaying. Without flaws, a character is merely a shallow one-time extra, or too-perfect automaton which takes the plot out of the hands of the heroes. This applies to recurring dragons, too. Both heroes and dragon should struggle and triumph on their own qualities, or fail because of their flaws.

This concept is simple; the execution is tough. The trouble occurs when the

gamemaster tries to think up a dragon's problems and can't find one that makes a good bit of characterization or an original story hook.

Because weakening the dragon in combat abilities often makes it vulnerable to annoyed (or annoying) player characters, the most obvious and oft-used solution is to give the dragon dragon-size opponents; demons, other wyrms, ancient vampires/elves/mages/cults, et cetera. The logical fallacy here is that if it's nasty enough to give a dragon trouble, and the dragon is mega-powerful/intelligent/amazing, what are the player characters doing here? They become witnesses to a legendary battle between an unstoppable force and an immovable object. But protagonists should do more than witness.

Bringing in equalizers like magical toys to soup up character combat abilities works for the "game" half, but the "roleplaying" part often feels cheap, making the characters into eggshells armed with hammers, a *deus ex machina* that happens to be carried or worn rather than a living being.

A few other Hollywoodisms have been done. There's the "amnesiac dragon in human form" trick, "evil wizard who never leaves the castle because he's secretly a dragon," surprise, and "oops, looks like you have a magical widget or something else a dragon wants, better turn it over," number. All of these are legitimate ways of delivering the dragon and can work...*once*. But they've been done in published material, which your jaded players may have already read or played.

What do you do for the encore, in other words, the rest of your campaign?

This requires significantly more thought.

Naturally, the dragon will keep any of its flaws as mysterious as possible, building up reputations of being inscrutable or having secret plans. Gamemasters and gaming companies love this reputation for their dragons. Dragons have brains the size of coffee tables, live for thousands of years, breathe fire and practically sweat magic; no victory over them should feel cheap. By keeping the dragon mysterious, the players are prevented from knowing too much and starting to play research-and-destroy.

But to interact with a character repeatedly, it must be *understandable*. If you are trying to create a sense of mystery, know that a mystery needs a solution, or your players will start tuning out or mumbling, "oh, no, not *again*" when the word "dragon" is mentioned.

Mystery writers, more than any other genre of writers, must know all the secrets that are kept from their characters. Only then can they slowly dole out hints and clues, few enough to keep you guessing but often enough to keep your interest without turning the story into a big hunk of cheese. In the same way, gamemasters who use dragons must know or be able to improvise, whether or not they plan to tell the players, *why* and *how* the dragons act the way they do. Otherwise it's not a mystery, it's simply poorly planned.

DRAGON SOCIOBIOLOGY

For a dragon to play a world-spanning chess game among others of his kind, the gamemaster must know the cultural rules dragonkind creates for itself...meaning they need to create a draconic culture or at least behavior patterns.

This is not impossible. Dragons are, after all, big lizards, and probably share many physical and behavioral characteristics with real reptiles. There are numerous problems with reptilian biology (they haven't ruled the earth in 65 million years, and

snakes are the fastest-disappearing vertebrates on Earth) that could easily be adapted as dragon flaws. If cold-blooded, your great wyrm will be sluggish and slow at night and in the early morning, and may hibernate in the winter, be unable to leave his tropical lair, or have hundreds of human servants tending his hearthfires so he can stay awake all year round.

Even if warm-blooded (more likely for something sentient and able to generate fires internally), reptilian dragons may be irritable and have trouble moving for a week every few months as they shed their skin, have weak eyesight and rely on "smelling" with their tongues, or drool constantly to better lubricate big hunks of food like komodo "dragons" do today. (And man, do they *stink*.)

Then consider their behavior. Most domestic mammals such as dogs or cats apply the affection and behavior given to their mother to the owner. Even rabbits and guinea pigs, no smarter than most reptiles, can learn to recognize voices and run to greet their owners. But snakes or lizards are not social animals and are not dependent on parents (though crocodilian mothers do protect the young). A big snake, if fed regularly for years, develops no affection for its owner, and if unfed, remains as dangerous as one just acquired (though it may be under less stress). They simply lack the need, in their normal lives, for anything approaching affection. While a sentient dragon will probably have learned human ways, a villain whose first response is to rule only by fear and reward will create enemies...even in his own organization.

Research 'Til It Herps

Michael Crichton transplanted modern animal attributes for his dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*, and a little look into herpetology can help create unique dragon design details...which will undoubtedly influence any dragon society.

Roll Herp Feature

- 1 Nearly blind (common to burrowing reptiles, e.g. sand boas) or no ears and fine-tuned vibration sense (snakes)
- 2 Eagle-like sight (for any flying dragon)
- 3 Cheetah-like speed (dragons with feet directly beneath the body)
- 4 Neck ruff, hood, or tail rattles for threat display (defensive: implies predators)
- 5 Reptile muscle: double mammal-muscle density and strength, lower dexterity
- 6 Thick skull used for ramming in mating season; average dragon may have 4' of solid bone and knock around bulldozers (pachycephalosaurus)
- 7 Immune to venom/breath weapon and eats other dragons (king snake/king cobra)
- 8 Needs running start/giant jump to get airborne (archaeopteryx)
- 9 Bony spike in throat to puncture armor of swallowed prey (egg-eating snake)
- 10 Doesn't urinate, but expels whitish lumps of uric acid with feces (most reptiles)
- 11 Independently focusable eyes, sticky, clublike tongue 2.5 times body length (implies slow-moving ambush-hunter)
- 12 Digestion requirement: vomits up prey with inadequate heat/humidity (cold-blooded desert/tropical herps) or stores meat until it rots a little (crocodiles)
- 13 Mouth rot, parasites, cloacal or hemipenis infections (most reptiles)
- 14 Vulnerable to cryptosporidium bacteria (Irritation in stomach leads to nodules of tissue growth over a period of years until they are too large to let food remain in the stomach without agony, vomiting, eventual starvation, and death. Crypto

- spreads by close contact and is a reptile's nightmare, similar to AIDS.)
- 15 Breeding balls (large female comes out during mating season and is courted by dozens of smaller males pushing each other off to mate with her, common to ribbon snakes, sea-kraits, and anacondas)
 - 16 Can squirt blood from eyes, play dead, void bowels at will, stink, or spit poison; tail may look like a head (all defensive, implying predators)
 - 17 Wraps body around eggs and hiccups to keep them warm (Burmese python), or returns to the water/lava/clouds to lay eggs (toads)
 - 18 Feeding and defensive behaviors hardwired separately; will retreat rather than drop prey and fight (snakes)
 - 19 Mimicry (not an actual dragon, just a big lizard the real one keeps around)
 - 20 Incredibly fat, sleeps in water (anaconda dragon...may be lured out of lair by offering favorite prey of nature-show hosts or maidens resembling Jennifer Lopez)

HOW DRAGONS SEE THE WORLD

Dragons are aliens.

Though they might interact with humans and try to understand them, they start off on a completely different footing than your typical near-immortal being. Elves, even if millenias old and more powerful than minor deities, still share much of daily life with humans -- they walk upright on two legs, see light in the visible spectrum, have opposable thumbs, and require a tool or magic to accomplish almost anything. The average fantasy human(oid) wakes up in the morning in a house she built with others of her kind, gets dressed in clothes which she sewed, cooks food in pots and bowls, works all day farming seeds she planted with tools she carved, and maybe meets six others of her species and can go see dozens more when they head into town that evening.

An adult dragon gets up (naked), flies around, kills prey with its claws, eats it raw, snoozes where it wants to (what will bother it?), takes shelter from the rain in a natural cave, lake, or burrowed underbrush, and flies hundreds of miles if it wants to see others of its species, which it can live without for years at a time.

Everything humans take for granted is different for dragons. They don't die of old age and can feed themselves with little effort, so they don't need jobs...or schedules...or even a concept of time. They have never, for all their power, built a tool or created something new. They don't have to. If they wait long enough and attack ferociously enough, they get the prey they want. This is why their plans usually take years to accomplish -- because they know no way other than to stalk, hunt and ambush their goal.

Think about all the ways in which we take tools and building for granted -- not to mention cooperation, families, words, old age, and a hundred other things dragons have never had -- and you'll understand how alien they really are. Even if they can change to human form, they will still think in the way most natural to them...human culture is like a foreign language, and the concepts don't translate all that well.

Humans evolved sentience because they were weak. Without claws, teeth, tough hides, fast legs or poison fangs, humans were snack food if they didn't cooperate, use tools and get smarter. Natural selection happens when a species is threatened; those that out-think or out-perform the threat survive. Dragons, as the undeniable top of the food chain, have little pressure to change (they probably evolved consciousness back in a

primordial magical age where demons were a constant threat), so are not as adaptable as scrawny, spunky humanoids. When a dragon is faced with an undefeatable opponent, it waits for a better angle of attack. A human thinks...and designs a better weapon.

Adventure Hook: You Two-Legs Are Crazy...

After the player characters have completed a mission for their dragon employer, he assumes human form and takes them out to a nearby village to celebrate. Sure, the dragon has done this before...a few decades ago. In his eagerness at playing "dress-up," he eventually gets drunk and reverts back to natural behavior -- constricting or chewing live food, picking things up in his teeth, scratching itches by rubbing his face against a doorframe, etc.. The village watch, not fond of either dragons or "mild-mannered foreigners," and try to provoke and/or arrest the lunatic. The PCs need to chaperone their drunk and irrational employer (who wants a flying claw-fest to settle any insults), and get him safely home (don't drink and fly). The movie *Splash* has a good example of how a supernatural creature might behave when stuck in an unfamiliar human form.

YAK'EN DRAGONS

Ya'ken is a sample draconic culture, which provides numerous reasons for dragons to interact with human cultures and personal motivations and experiences to make them distinct from each other. This society can exist in any FRPG where the dragon culture is not already described in detail. Even if you have been playing with dragons for years, the ideas below are easy to integrate since most of them are personal details the wyrms don't share with just any player character.

Ya'ken (draconic for "competitors, mates, and I") dragons live primarily in temperate to warm climates, though their warm blood allows them to travel freely in colder areas. They lair primarily in dormant volcanos or very deep caves with warm stones to rest on. Their appearance varies according to what's common in your game world, but they average over 100 feet long and 60 tons in weight.

The Language of Motion and Emotion

Language, the basic building block of communication (or miscommunication), is the first and most obvious difference between Ya'ken and humans. Humans created language to communicate -- for warning each other of danger, planning, communally raising children, and so on. Dragons are solitary hunters, with no need for elaborate conversations except for the purpose of learning and studying. Ya'ken language reflects these different priorities, using only two pronouns, "I" and "not-I" instead of "I," "you," "he," "we," and "they." With little interest in objects (why does a dragon care about the difference between a cart, a wagon and a sled?), Ya'ken language is limited for describing the physical world, but far more expressive than human languages for analyzing the details of magic.

Since they hunt by following movement rather than color or sound, Ya'ken speech has a larger component of physical body language than modern human societies, and the dragons pay more attention to a human's scent and nonverbal signals than to whatever squeaky noises are coming out of their mouth. By using an elaborate aerial dance, with

each tail twitch, claw extension and muscle shift carrying its own meaning, dragons can communicate visually across great distances, or respond to another's mind-to-mind communication without interrupting.

This also affects their perceptions of magic. In most games where characters can perceive magical auras, they are described in terms of color -- red for anger, black for despair, and so on. But movement-oriented Ya'ken watch the motion of the auric energy, the pattern expressing the emotion. When this view of auras is superimposed over the physical world, dragons are surrounded by constant activity, every human's movements contradicting or supporting the dance of emotions inside her...meaning they are very good at detecting lies.

Formal Ya'ken language mimicks these emotion patterns, using physical flight to symbolically follow the same paths as magical energy. This language is more complicated than simple communication, reserved for communications to the gods, or for important plans elders discuss among themselves, over the heads of the young ones.

THE DRAGON LIFE CYCLE

To flesh out the specific events that shaped *your* dragon's life and beliefs, you must first understand how he grew up. Just as you wouldn't design a human character's history without thinking about their parents, if they had any siblings, whether they went to school and what they do for a living, believable dragons came from somewhere.

Egg-Laying and Birth

Although some reptiles (boid snakes, rattlesnakes, some chameleons and skinks) give birth live, the majority lay eggs, and most fantasy games have already mentioned dragon eggs. The next question is how many? Again, many games and fantasy novels mention huge caches hidden in an immense lair or nest.

While this is common in reptiles -- most snakes and lizards have clutches of anywhere from 3-15 for relatively small kingsnakes up to 60 or more for 7-foot-long Nile monitors -- large clutches are generally a response to heavy predation on the young. Since young herps often receive little or no protection from their parents, most face an extreme mortality rate in the first few months of life.

Dragons, on the other hand, *do* care for their young, and the combination of a 120-foot-long pissed-off Mommy and the fact that the infants are larger than most predators, means baby dragons have relatively little to fear. Yak'en dragons, therefore, needing to focus their attentions on only a single infant to provide it a proper draconic education, lay only one viable egg at a time. The rest of the clutch consists of unfertilized look-alike decoys for predators (including inquisitive adventurers) who manage to get around the protective parent. There are, of course, legends of identical or Siamese twins...

Yak'en females retain the eggs internally for five years, approximately half the gestation. When the shells begin to harden, the female searches out a suitable nesting spot where the eggs can finish incubating. Generally, they choose somewhere warm and damp, such as a swamp or hot spring, where they lay 10-15 eggs inside a mound of rotting vegetation. The eggs are soft-shelled when laid, but eventually harden to about the consistency of boiled leather armor.

After four and a half years, the developing dragon experiences a moment of "Quickening," becoming aware of himself as a distinct being. He can see auras and hear

through the shell, and tests his muscles with limited movements. At this point, the young dragon might survive a premature tearing of the egg.

The Quickened egg is given to a male to care for to cement alliances between the parents. The *revi* ("father-teacher;" dragon paternity is a secret closely guarded by the females) gives up all other duties at this point, taking six months to bond with the unhatched infant, establishing the first mind-to-mind communication, and letting the young one imprint on him.

The actual hatching is an intensely private event between infant and *revi*. The older dragon hums beneath his breath for the entire six hours of hatching as the infant breaks through the thick shell with its claws, accustoming the infant to his voice. When the hatchling finally emerges, the first thing it sees and hears is its *revi*, and Ya'ken will compare all other auras to the *revi's* aura for the rest of their life. This auric imprinting, if not done on a dragon, can drastically warp the developing dragon's view of magic.

Hatchlings

Hatchling dragons are comparatively helpless and clumsy at birth, but they develop quickly and can hunt small prey after a few days. They learn comparatively faster than a human, and are capable of speech and logical thought from before birth, so their education begins immediately.

The *revi* is still completely focused on care of the hatchling, taking no interest in politics or other matters, and may seem, to human acquaintances, to have completely disappeared. He spends years at a time in or near his lair, teaching the young one to speak, fly, hunt and use magic. The infant has no contact with other dragons until after its first shed (1-6 months). Until it has survived that time, no other dragon is told of or can acknowledge the new one's existence; it is a non-person. This isolation further intensifies the bond between *revi* and child. No other relationship is ever as close, and the pair often continue working closely together even when the hatchling reaches adulthood.

Some time after its first shed, the dragon meets others of its kind for the first time. The other dragons remain deliberately casual, the dominant female (*kek'ri*) and nearby males gathering at the *revi's* lair, ostensibly to catch the *revi* up on events it missed out on while parenting. They pay little attention to the infant; dragon society is based on accomplishment, and they have no praise for effortless achievements such as birthdays. If there is anything *wrong* with the infant or the *revi's* care of it, however, the *kek'ri* immediately takes up residence nearby and closely watches the delinquent *revi*. If he seems an unsuitable parent, he is stripped of all status and banished, while another male takes over the infant's upbringing.

Young dragons spend almost all of their time learning, committing to memory the complete draconic history, learning the theory and practice of magic and choosing their own field of special interest. They rarely range more than a few miles from the lair, feeding off of prey the *revi* brings back for them, and have no contact with humans aside from the *revi's* most trusted servants.

Dragon childhood lasts about a century.

The Rite of Becoming

When the dragon reaches a hundred years old, it begins ranging further from home, spending more time alone, and is often irritable and short-tempered. When the *revi*

notices, he is obligated to perform a Rite of Becoming for the young one. Without warning, the *revi* challenges the adolescent to progressively harder tasks -- digging a lair, hunting, casting spells, performing rituals. With each test, the *revi* becomes more abusive, hurling insults at the child and hovering condescendingly over it. The physical proximity pricks at the young dragon's territorial instincts, driving it to distraction, though properly trained hatchlings fight the instinct until the assigned tasks are complete.

This continues until the hatchling attacks the *revi*. The adult fights back ferociously and the young dragon must use all of its cunning and magic to force the much larger elder to yield. After the young one relaxes, believing itself to have won, the *revi* teaches one final lesson, throwing the youngster down and scratching two deep ruts on the sides of its jaw, reminding it that even as an adult it must mind its place with its elders. If the younger dragon is a smart-aleck and anticipates this strike, the sudden attack is delivered days or months later by other members of the dragon community.

When the scars heal, the young dragon leaves the lair and journeys to the nest of the area's *kek'ri*. There, the Rite is concluded as the adolescent recites from memory the Chronicle of Names, the complete geneology and accomplishments of the area's dragons, and the Code of Law which allows a group of territorial predators to form a society (such as not using the true name of any dragon in public, not intruding on another's territory, and not interfering between a *revi* and his charge). The physical and astral scent of the adult female triggers an explosion of growth hormone, and the hatchling grows in a few years from its pre-Rite forty feet to its full size of 100 or more. At this time, it is voracious and will even eat vegetation, hut roofs, and termite mounds just to keep its stomach full.

Hatchlings who cannot complete the Rite are forever on the bottom of dragon society. They will never mature physically, be allowed to mate, or have a voice in major decisions. They continue to live with their *revi* usually as the overseer of his human servants, the equivalent of being kept in a playpen in your parents' house for the rest of your life.

After passing the test, the adult dragon chooses its official name; the former nickname remaining a secret between *revi* and child. It returns to the lair once, to formally thank his *revi* for his efforts, then leaves forever. Most dragons use this time to travel before they select a territory, collecting new experiences, journeying around the earth and even the metaplanes/astral space/outer planes/Deep Umbra/Shadowlands.

To learn more about the other races with whom they share they world, adult dragons may spend years in human(oid) form, mingling with communities ranging from small villages to palace courts. Such a disguised dragon might easily become friends with the player characters, keeping his true identity secret until circumstances force him to reveal it.

Dragon characters of this age make good recurring NPCs. Still on the fringes of their own society, they may become deeply involved with human politics, and genuinely *care* about the lesser races, yet they are still weak enough to need help from a group of player characters (or to be defeated by them). Though technically full adults with opinions respected by other dragons, these *ya'ken* cannot mate or participate in the highest levels of politics until they become elders. This period lasts nine hundred years.

Adventure Hook: Watch Out For the Little Guy

A dragon who failed his Rite of Becoming has become bitter and floun

away from the *revi*, often taking human form and living among human towns and cities where he can at least have an approximation of a life and status. Young and cruel, he is the archetypal dragon villain who demands respect from humans or destructively rages. He's invested in stockyards, pork bellies, and/or kidnapping and slave rings to eat, paying off the local law and hiring and training goons. In effect, he's a big-time mob boss. The local dragons consider him small potatoes and are bound not to interfere, since the *revi* is taking his own sweet time punishing him. A vengeful human whose family was hurt by the dragon's opium cartel or slave ring hires/begs the PCs to infiltrate the organization and bring Mr. Big down. The antagonist and atmosphere of *New Jack City* could serve for this dragon.

The Rite of Acceptance

After their first millennia, dragons go through their final physical change as the sexes become distinct for the first time. Females experience another growth spurt, often topping 150 feet or more, and lay their first clutch of non-viable eggs. Male dragons remain the same size, but their color deepens and they grow horns, neck frills and other ornaments as they become physically capable of mating.

The mature dragon goes before the *kek'ri* to perform the Rite of Acceptance, so named to remind the young dragon that the ceremony is not a promotion but an acceptance of the responsibilities of an elder.

The Rite is personalized to the dragon's strengths and weaknesses, often a years-long project which tests the dragon's magic, intelligence, subtlety and persistence -- anything from designing a magical maze to protect a certain treasure from all but the rightful owner, to negotiating a peace treaty between warring spirits, to raising an obscure peasant family to become the rulers of a nearby human kingdom without anyone suspecting his involvement. The test often involves meddling in human society, since other sentient species are the greatest challenge. When working on the Rite which is the last hurdle before reaching full adulthood, a dragon is impossibly dedicated and persistent, a great recurring villain or stern taskmaster for PCs.

When the dragon completes his or her test, all the area's elders (an extended kin-group of uncles, half-brothers and cousins) gather for the final ceremony. The new elder takes flight, slowly telling the history of his family in the ritual dance language (see above) taught to him by the *kek'ri*. As each other dragon present is named in the litany, he joins the original, "speaking" in unison to reconfirm his own Acceptance, until all are in flight.

As the recitation finishes, the dragon receives a vision or sign from the gods, revealing her true name. Declaring, "I am named," the dragon keeps the true name a secret, but adds her common name to the end of the litany. The Rite leaves a magical scar in the dragon's aura, identifying her as an elder upon first sight. If your game has special powers for great or elder dragons, this is when she learns to use them.

Adventure Hook: Not Necessarily The News

Naturally, humanoid media from any age (T.V. news in a modern fantasy game like **Shadowrun**, or scholars and magicians in medieval settings), know little first-hand about draconic rituals, and would love for the PCs to help them witness and record a Rite of Acceptance. Just as

naturally, the dragons will kill any unauthorized lesser being who intrudes on their sacred day. The security is understandably unbelievable, and two game sessions are spent in preparation -- an initial adventure where the scholar tests their stealth skills, a second "real job" where they steal a powerful counter-magical item off a military base -- before they try to get near the Rite of Acceptance itself...the talisman doesn't make it easy, it makes it *possible*.

If they succeed, their employer analyzes the dragon's hierarchy and magical theory, and eventually, her work finds its way into the hands of the resident evil empire...allowing them to give the dragons real trouble.

After this, male dragons either mate with the *kek'ri*, or (if the female is his mother) searches out a new territory and mates with the *kek'ri* there. After the female's Rite of Acceptance, she does not mate immediately, but instead joins the *kek'ri* in her territory for the next decade to learn her responsibilities. Here lies the sexual dimorphism.

Females are the arbiters of *ya'ken* society, outranking even the most powerful males because of their control of the most important resource in dragon lives -- the right to mate and reproduce. They are the final authority in all disputes, the keepers of tradition, and the ones able to unite all the area's dragons for a single cause. Adult females develop magical spells and powers to make their heads living memory banks, preserving all the memories of the area's dragons back for millenia and making them extremely wise and dangerous.

Young females between Acceptance and mating are known as *krlanka*, and most sane males avoid them, as they are short-tempered to the point of lashing out at anything that irritates them. This rage in a normally patient creature is fueled by an uncomfortable bit of reptile biology dragons do not reveal to humanoids...they go into heat.

When the *krlanka* can no longer keep herself from attacking her mentor, she flies far from home, leaving their kin-group to mate with non-relatives. Very lucky females find an area where a *kek'ri* just died. Most must challenge and kill an existing *kek'ri* to get access to her harem, and this bloody battle partially accounts for the rarity of female dragons in some gaming supplements; the adult sex ratio between males and females is about seven to one.

Once she has taken a territory, the new female mates insatiably with every elder male in range, and darn near nothing will distract dragons from this purpose. (If you only mated once a millennia, you'd be single-minded, too.) The males imprint on her at this time, learning to react to her scent and aura as dominant even if she is much younger.

Adventure Hook: The Face That Launched A Thousand Ships

When the major kingdoms in your fantasy game go to war, the enemy forces find an ancient document (or recent report; see previous adventure hook) explaining the dragon mating process. Hoping to cause a distraction, especially if the PCs' kingdom has allied with dragons, they find a *krlanka* elsewhere on the continent and convince her that the local female is ripe for a takeover. When she arrives, the battle between elder females will range across the countryside, with no concern for the humans caught beneath, and if the *krlanka* wins, all other draconic activities (like helping turn major battles) stop for the mating frenzy.

The characters' kingdom learns of this plan at the last minute (or the

dominant female, awkward and heavy with about-to-be-laid eggs, enlists the characters' help since no other dragon can assist her) and asks the PCs to drive away or distract the upstart...in other words, get between a sex-crazed dragon and her first chance to mate, take a territory, and come of age. A lower-powered task is to distract her until the battles are over, evacuate the area, or find another female she can challenge elsewhere, and quickly, as she gets progressively more berserk and...um..."needy."

Alternately, the PCs can side with the younger dragon and assist her in challenging the old female, hoping to buy themselves a powerful friend in the new dragon hierarchy.

Dragons who fail the Rite of Acceptance remain mere adults for the rest of their lives. Though they are physically and sexually mature, no other adult will mate with them without being scorned. Frustration often drives them to become dangerous outcasts, a single-minded pair (i.e. Romeo and Juliet dragons needing help faking their deaths), or even attacking younger adults of their own kind. Almost invariably, they spiral downward until the elders are compelled to destroy them. Of course, the elders might not interfere until after the outcast has already wreaked serious havoc among humans and is fatigued...

Courtship and Mating

Krlanka females mate with a dozen males in succession for weeks at a time with little chance for intimacy. For established females, however, especially with newly Accepted males, courtship builds over several days, as the two bathe and polish each others' scales, and engage in deep mind-to-mind communication. As their desire builds, the female suddenly pulls away, mentally and physically, taking to the air. The male, enraged at the sudden loss of closeness, follows. Their chase can range over miles before the male finally catches her and wraps her back legs and tail in his, wings still beating rapidly. The mating dragons surround themselves with illusions to preserve privacy; many odd heavenly sights humans have attributed to the gods are actually a dragon mating veil. The mating takes up to six hours and is repeated two or three times in a several day period.

Like many reptiles, dragons can store sperm, meaning that females need mate only once with each male, drawing on the stores each time to fertilize an egg. Females never again experience "heat" like when they are establishing a territory. Paternity among dragons is a matter of opinion, as all males mate with the same female and the eggs she lays may or may not be from her most recent mating.

This correspondingly eliminates the concept of physical rape in Ya'ken society; it won't get them anywhere. Instead, dragons mentally or physically dominate each other in order to score points in endless political games, which leads to rewards given by the female, including supplemental matings and suspected fatherings. Male dragons believe females can select which sperm fertilizes each egg, but the females aren't saying.

Care of eggs often, but not always, goes to the female's most recent mate. Becoming a *revi* is the most coveted position in dragon society, so assignment of eggs is carefully thought out based on who has shown the most promise. By doling out this privilege carefully, the *kek'ri* keep the males in check, forcing them to focus aggression into games rather than outright competition.

However, despite their power over the males, females are also driven by their biology. Because they spend much time carrying or guarding eggs, female Ya'ken tend to be slower and more deliberate than males, thinking on an ultimate rather than proximate scale. Since the eggs are so vulnerable, females tend to have little interaction with human societies, remaining secretive and set in their ways, as they rarely hear new ideas. Intelligent enough to remember and make sense of every detail of what has/is happening within their territory, they may plan ahead almost to a fault, caring more for what will happen in ten years' time than tomorrow. They epitomize the idea of being unable to see the trees for the forest.

Naturally, there are individual differences among dragons, and particular *kek'ri* may choose to risk dealing with humans, but this exception will be harshly judged by the often rigid dragon society.

Games, Competition and Politics

Ya'ken politics leads dragons to collapse governments, instigate human wars, blot the sun from the sky with the odd spell, and collect information in abundance whenever they aren't doing anything else. However, at their core, these "politics" are overgrown relationships, revolving almost entirely around mating and reproductive rights. The *kek'ri* (with an instinctive understanding of natural selection) want the strongest, smartest, subtlest, and most powerful males as fathers and *revis* to the next generation.

To prove themselves, the males arrange intricate games and competitions, pitting their wits against other dragons, human governments and the spirit world. Their status and egos are completely bound up in these games that so annoy humans, and they care only for the outcome, not what lesser beings might get hurt in the process. The games need not have any practical benefit for the dragons; they can be anything from trying to get kings to bow to them to gradually replacing another dragon's spies with illusionary look-alikes without the other noticing, to trying to destroy a single flower while another exerts all his will to hold it together. Eventually, the games will pay off for an amorous wyrm.

The easiest way to think of these games are as a global combination of *Monopoly*, *Diplomacy*, *Risk*, and the card game "Mao," in which the rules are secret. The dragons collect hoards of money to fund their projects and use magic or rare art objects as tokens of payment to one another...the money used in *Monopoly*. When a human steals something from the hoard, sometimes it's because the dragon let it happen and is making a transfer to someone who won last round. The human may get to keep it if the rules say he stays within a specific province, or else the new owner's agents will steal it back. Other times the dragon will stop at *nothing* to retrieve it, because the human actually pulled it off alone. When a player character tries to convince a dragon why he should not be punished, the dragon is thinking whether or not those lines work an explanation for his actions for other dragons ("You had this walking Spam chunk who disrupted your plans at your mercy and you let him go because he *talked* nicely?" "Why yes, have you considered...").

Outsmarting a single human is no big deal; learning and adapting to a new foreign-species "game" like nuclear proliferation and outsmarting an entire organization such as a government is worth many points. Outsmarting an older dragon through proxies such as human governments (where more things could go wrong) is considered playing

Advanced Houses and Humans with a handicap and accords the most status.

Females mostly take part in these games as judges, and are even less likely to care what humans get hurt in the process. However, they will punish males who attract negative attention, like making the local humans hate and hunt the area's dragons. Such failures are usually ostracized or banished for years at a time.

Older dragons who have already been *revi* once or twice and are favored by the *kek'ri* tend to play games that take much longer, even human generations, to complete. With less time pressure, these older males can become more attached to the humans they're playing with, and their games often have more finesse than younger ones, challenging themselves to provoke a war on a specific day and hour rather than just planning the war itself.

Death

Dragons do not die of old age. In the natural course of things, they can live forever, though humans may kill a few, and females usually die every few hundred years as the new generation of *krlanka* mature.

When a Ya'ken perishes, its kin group locates the body, then flies in circles around it, keening. Together, they breathe or fling destructive spells onto the body in a continuous stream until it is reduced to ashes, preventing necromancers or evil spirits from using the body (and keeping adventurers from wearing dragonhide). The Burning can take days, and often hatchlings and adults drop out from exhaustion while the dragons' closest servants attempt to keep away inquisitive onlookers.

When only ash, stains, and smoke is left, the gathered dragons flap their wings in unison, scattering the remains. They then return to the dead dragon's lair, where the *kek'ri* tells the story of the dead one's life as it will be added to the histories. The survivors compete for the dragon's belongings: the youngest male selects the prize; the oldest male chooses the challenge; the female sets the conditions.

The dead dragon's servants are not considered possessions, and do not go to a different master. They are expected to literally or symbolically sacrifice themselves in their master's memory within a year of the dragon's death, once they have tied up loose ends.

Sometimes not all of the body burns during the death ritual. Instead, the intense heat mummifies a body part (talons, eyes, heart), holding some of the dragon's spirit and turning it to a charm allowing the user to draw on the deceased's knowledge. These are given only to especially promising hatchlings.

Adventure Hook: The Hell Bowl

The most wild and crazy PC hears of a dragon which was just killed by a horde of demonic spirit creatures not too long ago. If they run fast enough, they might be able to get their hands on some of the pieces. Plenty of other adventurers are already mounting their horses, taunting the heroes. "Race you there?"

It's a setup. As they check out the semi-abandoned lair, they are blocked in by wyrms returning from the Burning. A down-to-earth gambler dragon makes lunch and tells them to settle down. They said back at that old rumormill they were looking for craziness, right? Other dragons kibitz and chat amiably...blocking the entrance.

Seems the demons took dragon parts back to their home with them, and we can't have that (if your dragons never die, a part was ripped off a live one). Big points go to the wyrm that gets the pieces out of Hell (or wherever) and he's playing with the handicap of using proxies (guess who). The dragons open a betting pool, let the PCs choose their avenue of approach into the metaplanar city, create a dimensional gate, and they're off. Their dragon will be cheering.

Yes, they're pawns, but like pawns there's eight teams of them, and the one that becomes a queen does so by running through while the others get wasted. The adventure works best if you mix in some old foes or strong personalities on the other teams, can design a detailed, horrific city of evil with many different types of enemies and the PCs know when to fight and when to hide.

FURTHER READING

Gaming books, Godzilla and Tolkien clones aren't the only draconic model to work from: give these a whirl. Sometimes they're neater when they're just dumb animals.

Bell, Clare, *Ratha's Creature* and *Clan Ground*. Big cats instead of dragons, but still a neat presentation of sentient creatures who hunt, have no thumbs or tools and go into heat. In the Young Adult section in most stores and libraries.

Deitz, Tom, *Darkthunderer's Way*, the third in a (worthwhile) series, where the main characters come up against an uktena (Cherokee dragon). Some neat stuff about using its scales to shapeshift and the jewel in its forehead to see the future.

Crichton, Michael, *Jurassic Park. Lost World* and movies aside, the original book had some great (psuedo)science and descriptions of dinosaurs that can be easily turned into dragons.

McCaffery, Anne, The *Dragonriders of Pern* series, especially *Dragon Dawn*. The quintessential science fiction dragon series, where the dragons are genetically engineered to fight airborne parasites. The young adult series, *Dragon Song*, *Dragon Singer*, and *Dragon Drums* give more information on firelizards -- dragons the size of parrots.

Pondsmith, Mike. *Castle Faulkenstein*. R. Talsorian Games presents a species of dragons which are human-sized, have light-weight bird bones, and look like pterodactyls -- a good example of dragons who *aren't* super-powerful.

Rawn, Melanie, The *Dragon Prince* series. Although the dragons aren't the focus of the series, they still have a pretty complete ecology and life cycle worked out.

Yolen, Jane, The *Dragon Blood* series. Life on a planet where robber barons raise dragons for pit fights. The first book is a pretty straightforward story of a boy who steals a dragon to buy his way out of slavery; the sequels get into some weird stuff with gaining dragon powers by sheltering inside a corpse. Also Young Adult.