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Cultures

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CULTURES

Races in *Dungeons & Dragons* are good for laying down the broad strokes of a character, but they often don't feel as "lived in" as the ethnicities we encounter in everyday life. One potent reason for this is a general lack of cultural complexity and diversity. D&D races tend to be presented as monocultural societies–all elves are the same the world over, and so on.

Various campaign settings–including the home-brew worlds of individual play groups–present some elements of culture for D&D players to draw upon. However, these are generally presented as "soft" elements, narrative descriptions that are not reflected in the game system, particularly in the advantages that player races offer. Even when there are clear mechanical choices presented within a single player race–such as the options for dragonborn breath weapons and the bonus power, feat, and skill given to humans–these options are not presented as cultural indicators of any kind. A dragonborn may have light-ning breath based on their Strength score, but those choices tells us little about the character or their place in dragonborn society.

But what if that choice had meaning? And what if there were several different ways you could configure *every* character's racial traits, reflecting the relation-ship that character has with the various cultures, factions, issues, interests, and personal decisions that confront members of his race?

In this brief guide, we aim to present a variety of alternative options for adding cultural complexity and diversity to the races present in your D&D game. Since it's impossible for us to know exactly what cultural options your home campaign might need (Are there dragonborn in your setting? We don't know!), we've chosen to focus on a few tools that we've found useful in building cultures for our own campaigns. We've included a number of examples of course, but these are primarily intended to inspire your own creativity, rather than to be implemented in your home campaigns. When you finish reading this guide, we hope you are immediately inspired to tweak a few racial build options, perhaps to give a bit of mechan-ical punch to a flavorful NPC or faction.

In our play experience, setting elements like culture are often most strongly felt when they are represented

in the system, giving some teeth to otherwise purely narrative elements. Whether you're primarily a fan of system or setting, the real jazz starts playing when you add those two together and get a sum greater than the parts. Consequently, setting creation and system tweaking often go hand-in-hand in our campaigns, because nothing jazzes up a new faction, a reoccurring villain, or a dramatic character choice like a unique feat or other new mechanic that indicates something very cool is happening. **Hard Boiled Cultures** is a guide to getting this jazz playing in your game quickly and easily, using simple principles that can be applied to whatever setting or combination of player races you use in your home campaign.

Cultural Norms

Our approach to creating cultural differences is deceptively simple.

From an out-of-character design perspective, we're going to be doing some reverse engineering. In trying to create cultural diversity within a single player race, we'll first examine the various racial traits that characters of a specific race typically possess and speculate about what cultural traditions gave rise to those traits. That's how we approach designing cultures from our vantage point as *players*, using this reverse engineering process to "uncover" surprising elements and options within racial identity that weren't evident before…

… but that's not how the *characters* will experience it. The characters within the setting, at the end of the day, experience the effects of our brainstorming in the opposite direction. In the setting, similar to the real world, a variety of different cultures developed within a single ethnic group and, *over time*, cultural differences cemented themselves as different racial trait options. As a result, certain individuals or groups within a race developed different ways of being human, or elven, or dragonborn.

But since we are D&D players, we'll proceed with the system front and center, and begin by approaching culture backwards—looking at the racial stats and bonuses (the end result) as hooks for the cultural influences that gave rise to them. Remember, though, that while out-of-character culture design doesn't follow the same lines of cause and effect that in-character "reality" does, it's still important to examine cultural design from both directions. Consequently, throughout the remainder of this guide, you'll see both approaches repeatedly used to derive cultural traditions from different racial trait options or, working from the other direction, to imagine cultural differences and to construct complementary build options for a given player race.

This brings us to the idea of cultural *norms*, modes of behavior that are considered to be normal or traditional for most members of a particular player race. Essentially, norms are the rules by which the most numerous, the most powerful, or the most well known members of a particular culture operate. Individual characters will be forced to position themselves in relation to these norms—determining where they fit and don't fit the expectations their native society has for them—but in reacting to those norms, they can also give rise to other, new cultures or subcultures within their race that view the world in a different way.

For the moment, just keep in mind that throughout the

next several sections we'll be talking about how a character interacts with the cultural norms of their home community. We'll also cover how those interactions affect the way in which that character expresses being human—or an elf, dragonborn, tiefling, or what have you—and what those interactions ultimately mean for that character's sheet.

Perspectives

For every cultural norm, there are four perspectives that may be applied to help create cultural differences within a race. These perspectives were originally proposed by Simon Carryer as a method for generating culturally rich NPCs in all sorts of roleplaying games, but we have specifically implemented them here with D&D in mind.

Icon	Perspective	Details
♥	Embodies	A cultural group or individual might embody, enact, or enforce a particular norm, possibly even glorifying it as a prime principle of life.
◎	Twists	A cultural group or individual might twist, alter, or avoid the norm, creating dissent, splinter sects, heresies, and underground conspiracies.
⚡	Breaks	A cultural group or individual might break the norm outright, creating hypocrisy (if the break goes unacknowledged), bitter rivalries, nations in exile, counter-cultures and more.
✴	Changed-By	A cultural group or individual might be profoundly changed by the cultural expectations associated with this norm, for better or worse.

The process of combining cultural norms and perspectives doesn't have to be as simple as taking one norm and pairing it with each of the four perspectives to produce four results. You could apply the same perspective to the same norm several times and produce different results each time—there's often not just one way to break the rules, as it were.

For example, if you decide that young dragonborn warriors are expected to apprentice themselves to older knights, one character might twist this norm by apprenticing outside dragonborn society, to a tiefling warlord, while another character, perhaps becoming a warrior late in life, might apprentice to a younger, but more accomplished dragonborn swordsman.

The mechanical effects of applying these perspectives will be discussed below, along with several examples of how this could work in practice.

Building Cultures

By now, you may have already figured out where we're going with this. For every race, take a few of its racial traits and extrapolate the cultural norm that those features express. Once you have determined a norm, reexamine it through the four different perspectives we discussed earlier. Perhaps one perspective is the "default," expressing the norm itself. However, you can also apply the other perspectives to the norm and figure out different cultural variations that might emerge as character interact with that norm. Finally, on a system level, you can determine how those cultural differences might be modeled as different racial built options.

All of that probably sounds a little too abstract. Fear not! We're about to dive into the specifics, by deconstructing what races are made of and how they can be changed by various cultural influences.

Degrees of Complexity

As previously mentioned, the degree of cultural complexity you might want to model through different racial trait options is likely to vary considerably in different situations. For example, if your setting is composed entirely of humans—or humans and NPC monsters—you might want to break down every single human racial trait into a variety of options, since there are no non-human races to provide additional diversity. However, if you're playing in a setting in which there are a number of different player races, you might
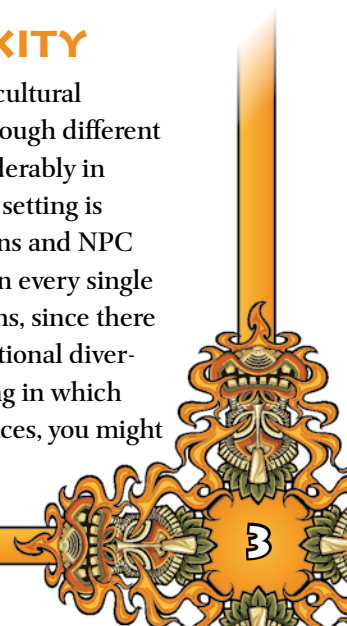
find it sufficient to create a few racial build options for each player race.

Generally speaking, there is a spectrum of options available for making culture more or less complicated, based on your needs:

1. Monoculture, each racial build is exactly the same, as in most of the core 4E races;
2. Some variation, as in the human and dragonborn racial trait options, but with those traits tied to cultural differences;
3. Ethnic "splats," where wood elves are culturally distinct from ice elves, dark elves, eladrin, and sea elves, while those all exist as optional builds under a single elven race;
4. Mix and match, where each racial build provides a variety of different options, making each tiefling relatively unique while still sharing a "family resemblance" with other tieflings;
5. Fully deconstructed identities, where the variety of racial build options is so diverse that it's possible an elf may have more in common with some dragonborn than with other elves.

The examples in this guide mostly range from 2-4 on this list, since we imagine that those will be the options most useful to the vast majority of DMs. But, by all means, if you want to see how deep this rabbit hole goes, we'd love to hear about the results.

Once you gain some familiarity with tweaking racial trait builds, you might also want to consider the benefits of having varying levels of complexity, depending on how prevalent a particular race or subculture is within your game. For example, if all the player characters are members of the Crimson Order, a halfling mystery cult, then you might want a variety of different builds for characters within that subculture, while treating all other halflings as more or less the same.

Ability Scores

The six core ability scores drive the heart of any character sheet. A +2 in any one of the core abilities grants a +1 bonus to a large number of things ranging from skills to attack bonuses and more. The choice of what race a player takes often comes down to which races offer +2's in the primary and secondary abilities that are most important to her character's class.

When cultural elements get brought into the picture for ability scores, the heavy weight that ability scores carry *must* be respected. As a guiding principle, large, sweeping cultural issues should give rise to ability score bonuses. This isn't a place where small differences are going to be significant.

To begin, choose a big issue facing the race, and tie it to one of the ability score bonuses. Decide upon the cultural norm that's in effect here and whether the ability score bonus is a result of embodying, twisting, breaking, or being changed by that norm. Once you've got that down, you can move on to creating other cultural perspectives on the norm and determining whether those different perspectives will change which ability score gets the +2.

There's really only one restriction on how ability score bonuses operate: you shouldn't create a racial build option that results in a "double +2" to the same ability score. That's why none of the elf cultures in our example below have a +4 to Dexterity or Wisdom.

When you find yourself pushing in a direction that would violate this restriction, you can either decide to pull back from it, or instead seek out the "human solution" – that is, to give the race only a single +2 in an ability score and compensate for the loss of the second +2 with some other racial ability. In the case of humans, they gain an element of flexibility applied to all the rest of their racial traits. However, a single, limited racial ability could be an alternative way to compensate for the loss.

Following a principle we'll elaborate upon throughout the next several sections, a single light-weight "feat-equivalent" ability could be a fair trade for one of the standard ability score bonuses. For example, suppose we wanted to make a subculture within the wood elves, a mysterious sect that adheres to an extreme interpretation of the vigilance norm. In that case, we could create an additional elven build option with +2 to Wisdom and a +2 racial bonus to Initiative and Insight.

Another minor element to consider: when a racial build offers its two +2's to ability scores that both feed into the same defense (Strength and Constitution; Dexterity and Intelligence; or Wisdom and Charisma), that set of bonuses could potentially be viewed as less valuable than a pair that spans two defenses. Whether or not you wish to compensate or charge the build for changing the pairing to or from a one-defense pairing is up to you.

Example: Different Ways of Being Elven

Before we move beyond ability scores, let's stop right here and create several different elf cultures.

Elves gain a +2 to Dexterity and a +2 to Wisdom. They're described as a quick, wary, forest-bound race. The "wary" description in particular seems to call out to that +2 Wisdom bonus—and given the forest-heavy elements of the race's description, we can decide that the default culture is one of "wood elves."

So what cultural norm leads to the wary wisdom of the wood elves? A solid norm that goes hand in hand with this might be: "Constant vigilance is the only way to stay safe." Looking at our set of perspectives, it's easy to say that the +2 to Wisdom *embodies* this norm. If that's the case, then we have three other perspectives we could apply to the norm to generate other cultures beyond the hyper-vigilant wood elves: *twists*, *breaks*, and *changed-by*.

To the right we're showing a sample set of cultural differences that might result. The cultures shown here avoid doing a +2 Dex/+2 Int combination for a particular reason – the tie between the elf race and the eladrin. We intentionally left Intelligence out of the equation to allow for the possibility that the eladrin are the product of an "extreme" cultural split, an ethnic group so different from the majority of elves that it is considered a full, separate race in its own right. That also means we leave it up to you to decide if the eladrin Intelligence bonus is an altered perspective on the norm of constant vigilance—and what that might imply.

We also decided to keep the +2 to Dex a constant through all of the above cultures, but it could have just as easily been swapped out for another ability score—just because this particular norm is tied to Wisdom doesn't mean that the Wisdom bonus should necessarily get changed when the perspective shifts. That's your call.

Finally, on the setting side of things, we've laid out the above four cultures as somewhat separate from one another. This is fine when you want there to be a strong correspondence between culture and geography, but that's often not the most interesting way to do this. Consider what might happen if there was a hub of elven culture in your setting, where *all* of the above types of elves coexisted in the same place. What sorts of rivalries would emerge between the brutal and direct mountain elves and the slightly paranoid

Embody: Wood elves are hyper-vigilant and forest-bound, believing that constant vigilance is the only way to stay safe. They are serious, focused, and just a little bit paranoid: +2 Dex, +2 Wis.

Twist: The hardscrabble, aggressive mountain elves are also security conscious, seeing the world as a dangerous place. But unlike the wood elves, they believe that the best way to find security is to be more dangerous than the inhospitable world. For them, maintaining safety requires investing in might: +2 Dex, +2 Str.

Break: City elves have turned their back on their more isolationist cousins. Security isn't a concern for them; they surround themselves with the incredibly varied and dangerous peoples of the world, and laugh at whatever fate throws their way: +2 Dex, +2 Cha.

Changed-By: Guard elves are seldom seen or, at least, seldom identified. Their ancestors swore deep, mystically-binding oaths that have since passed down through the bloodline. Guard elves sense, from a very young age, that they are bound to atone for the ancient sins of the past by protecting specific places or people. If necessary, they will die to see their oaths satisfied: +2 Dex, +2 Con.

wood elves in the city of Dal Paan, with the city elves playing one group against the other?

Things might get even more interesting if the different elven cultures lived together in Dal Paan for a few centuries, leading different cultural perspectives to bleed into each other and blend together thanks to intermarriage and cultural exchange. While the guard elf bloodlines might still be breeding true (even if their origin is only half remembered), the same can't be said for the other elven cultures. At that point, those same racial build options become less about who's a mountain elf and who's a city elf, and instead are more a question of "What's this character's individual perspective on the norm of vigilance?"

In such a setting, you could easily imagine a guard elf who doesn't realize she's a guard elf, growing up

in a city that was formed from and changed by these cultures as they merged together. One day, she might discover that that there's an ancient glyph on her family crest that no one recognizes, sending her off on an adventure to rediscover the ancient oaths made by her ancestors...

Skill Bonuses

Skill bonuses are more focused and limited than ability scores, so changing which skills are getting a +2 has a less palpable effect than changing an ability score. However, as with ability scores, this is not a territory where "doubling up" should be allowed.

It's easiest to do a direct one-for-one skill swap when building alternatives. Still, a +1 skill bonus is so trivial that exchanging a single +2 racial skill bonus for two +1's is also not recommended.

Supposing that you want to eliminate one of the racial skill bonuses entirely, remember that it takes a single feat to become trained in a skill, netting the character a +5. So a +2 to one skill is essentially a "half-feat" equivalent.

If you're looking to swap the dragonborn +2 bonus to History for a new minor ability—creating a cultural movement or outlook all about living in the now and turning a blind eye to the past—you should paw through the list of heroic tier feats and think about doing something that's roughly half as potent. In the case of our in-the-now dragonborn, maybe they've begun acting more fully as citizens of the world and, consequently, gain one or two additional languages instead of the +2 to History (based on the observation that there's a heroic tier feat that lets you learn three languages). On the other hand, maybe it's just better to turn the History bonus into a +2 to Diplomacy and call it a day.

Vision

Let's break down what we know about the different types of vision abilities. First, a number of races have low-light vision. Next, we know that at least one race can get low-light vision (and a +1 to Perception) by taking a specific racial feat. *No* player character race has darkvision, or blindsight, or any of the other exotic sensory variants (such as tremorsense).

By its nature, low-light vision is conceptually narrow—there are a few circumstances one can imagine for it to develop or vanish from a particular given race, but not many. Still, that wouldn't prevent us from imagining a tiefling subculture deciding that "The underground world must be shunned", based on their belief that the evil curse vexing the tiefling race came from associating with creatures of deep earth (something that could also lead to a host of interesting eating habits -- like a refusal to eat root vegetables and mushrooms, foodstuffs seen as tainted by the underworld). In that sense, one could view the default low-light vision as *breaking* this norm—and tieflings that lack low-light vision as *embodying* it.

Again using the feat as our unit of measurement, we can safely say that low-light vision is essentially equal to something "just shy of a feat" (for our purposes, low-light vision is the only sensory type really in play—but more on that later). So that becomes the trade that needs to occur when altering the vision-type of the default race.

If a race is losing its low-light vision, gaining a new race feature that's "just shy of feat" is a good way to go. For our surface-dwelling sect of tieflings, we might imagine them gaining a small damage or other bonus against creatures of a particular type (such as shadow, which would fit the shun-the-darkness vibe).

If a race is *gaining* low-light vision, it should probably lose one of its feat-equivalent (or nearly-equivalent) abilities. Supposing we were talking about a group of nocturnal humans, we might see them losing their bonus feat, or reducing the number of defenses they get their +1 bonus to.

While we've said that other sensory types beyond low-light are off limits, some DMs might be comfortable with potentially adventure-busting abilities like darkvision, blindsight, *et al* being viable for some characters. Since we don't recommend this, we can't offer any hard and fast rules for making those abilities available. Most likely, you would want to consider these abilities to be the equal of at least *two* feats, if not three, and trade for them accordingly. Some of the settings that Wizards of the Coast is producing will probably include PC races with darkvision, so it's certainly not out of the question. However, constructing one according to the guidelines offered here, which focus on swapping racial traits around, will most likely result in a cultural variant that doesn't have the usual full boat of racial features.

Size

Size alterations will be particularly rare—both Medium and Small sizes have a wide range of possible measurements within each of them, so most cultural differences should come out in the wash of cosmetic detail. Still, it's not outside the realm of imagination—especially in a fantasy world—to imagine halflings as a cultural variant of humans, similar to the diminutive ethnic groups that are found in Central Africa and other parts of the world. That sort of extreme physical difference would be more likely to express itself gradually, over a long period of geographical separation. If an ancient human culture followed the norm of "Height indicates the favor of the gods," one could easily see everyone below 5'3" getting sent over the mountains to live in an exile nation.

So if you're feeling particularly creative, feel free to slide the scale between Medium and Small with relative impunity. If anything, taking size from medium to small represents a very slight disadvantage, curtailing the sorts of weapons the character can use, while a move from small to medium slightly expands that. A small creature might be able to do a "squeeze" action into a slightly smaller space than a medium-sized creature might, but that's about as far as advantages go (though the creation of a few feats specifically in support of small-size PCs could definitely expand on that).

Going beyond the medium to small continuum is where things get tricky. Large creatures often have reach 2, which is a seriously potent advantage, probably the equivalent of two feats. Occupying two squares has its own ups and downs—you provide more cover for your allies, but you can't fit into small spaces and are potentially easier to flank (though with Reach 2 that gets a bit complicated). It's a brave DM that would allow a large PC race in her game; anything bigger than large seems difficult to justify. Similarly, tiny PCs would be difficult in practice, effectively having reach 0 and needing a number of other modifiers to adequately model the troubles and advantages of being so small.

Speed

From the official content released so far, a highly-mobile race with a speed of 7 seems to gain that extra quickness for the equivalent of a single feat.

Dwarfs are an interesting case—they have a speed of 5, but don't lose speed due to encumbrance and are designed with a bias towards heavily armored classes. We recommended that, with any race, no cultural variant should be faster than speed 7 or slower than speed 5. And, when creating speed 5 cultures, you should carefully consider why the only speed 5 race ensures that their speed will never get reduced to 4! With each one point shift away from the race's default speed, a feat-equivalent racial feature should be gained or lost, depending on whether speed increases or decreases.

Plenty of cultural movements and personal orientations could lead members of a race to develop high mobility or settle into a slower-moving lifestyle. Turn a tribe of half-elves into a culture of fast-moving nomads (embodying the norm of "Always keep moving") and an increase to speed 7 makes a lot of sense. Take a

population of apelords out of their native forests, force them underground with a band of dwarfs, and you might see a slower-moving "under-ape" variant emerge (as an outright breaking of the norm "Never call one place home", a principle passed down by the Walker in Mist, or, potentially, a consequence of following that norm until there was nowhere else to run). Such under-apes have likely traded their default speed 7 for speed 6, a +2 to Dungeoneering, and the ability to speak Dwarven.

Languages

Thanks to a feat from the core books, we can know that one language is worth rought one third of a feat. So adding or removing a language may be a good way to "pad out" any less-than-one-feat trades that we've mentioned already. But that sort of trade is an outlier, performed at the end of the tweaking process.

Stepping back from system for a moment and thinking about languages solely as a concept, it's easy to recognize that language is a *huge* part of culture. Simply trading out one of the race's core languages (never common, unless you're creating an NPC or highly isolated culture) can create a paradigm-shifting result.

Consider a group of dwarfs that don't speak Dwarven, instead speaking in the tongue of giants. We already know from their racial description that dwarves were once enslaved by giants. How would the vast majority of dwarves regard kinsmen who speak only in the language of a hated enemy? Dwarves that still converse with giants could belong to a subculture of former collaborators or second-class citizens that never quite recovered from the economic consequences of slavery or, on the other hand, a ruling elite that draws on their historical relationship with giants for security and power.

Because an extra language is a fairly minor thing mechanically (however significant its cultural impact), you can probably get away with allowing certain cultures to gain a third language without having to "pay" much of anything for it. Though if one of your starting race's racial features offers a pretty minor benefit, it's probably best to swap that out for your extra tongue.

Other Racial Features and Powers

Race-building (and thus culture-building) is as much art as science, and the guidelines for building them are not hard and firm. But in general you can think of most racial abilities (with a few exceptions such as the *dragon breath* of dragonborn) as being "feat-equivalent."

By this point, after going through the basics of racial trait options, you can probably see that most racial "extras" are ripe for being exchanged for other racial traits or standard heroic tier feats.

Want to trade out your *eladrin weapon proficiency* with the longsword for a +1 to poison and psychic damage? Go ahead—you're clearly a member of the outlawed poison caste!

You should carefully identify traits which are worth more than one feat. As a quick rule, any racial ability potent enough to be expressed as a power needs to be examined to see if it is the equal of two or more feats. Ask yourself these questions (they aren't the only ones to ask, but they're a good starting point):

✦ Does it allow for an attack as something other than a standard action?
✦ Does it affect an area rather than a single target?
✦ Is it an at-will ability?
✦ Does the ability otherwise create a strong, decisive advantage when used?

Each question that gets a "yes" is likely to indicate increasing the value of the ability by one additional feat. For example, *dragon breath* easily gets a "yes" to two of the above, making it the equivilent of *three* feats. This is not something that's easily traded away! But the eladrin *fey step* ability is an encounter ability that allows you to teleport across a distance smaller than a single move. Certainly, it gives an advantage when used, but is it strong and decisive? Maybe not. That power might be considered to be the equivilent of a single feat.

On the other hand, there are also racial abilities which aren't worth much at all. The *fey origin* racial feature is one such thing. If anything, it might be a minor liability, but it certainly seems to offer little advantage. Similarly, *trance* and *group diplomacy* both deserve a close look to determine if they're really the equal of a full feat (our guts indicate they're both more like half a feat).

An Extended Example: Tribes of the Ape

As an extended example of the ideas presented in this guide, let's take a look at the apelord race (as seen in **Races of the Shroud: The Apelord**). There are a number of techniques we could potentially use to create richer, more diverse ape cultures. We could create geographically separate or otherwise culturally distinct tribes. We could create cultural movements within specific tribes. We could even create opportunities for individual choice on a character by character basis, showing how individual members of the same community could possess dramatically different understandings of what it means to be an apelord. In this example, we'll do all three, to try to work things towards that "lived-in" feeling we might otherwise be lacking.

First up, let's inventory the basics:

> **Ability Scores**: +2 Strength, +2 Dexterity
> **Size**: Medium
> **Speed**: 7 squares
> **Vision**: Low-light
> **Languages**: Common (only one!)
> **Skill Bonuses**: +2 Acrobatics, +2 Athletics
> **Other racial features**: *Ape climbing*; *treetop tumbling*; *arms like clubs*; *rending blows*; and *shroudborn origin*.

Most of the other racial features are easily one-feat equivalent, though *shroudborn origin*, much like *fey origin*, is probably worth almost nothing in terms of its "trade value".

A few ideas come up right away. We could dial the size down to small and have a tribe of apelords that are more monkey/orangutan in nature, picking up a second language to make up for the relatively minor disadvantage of being small. But that doesn't suggest a particularly strong cultural element, so let's discard that idea in favor of something more interesting.

In the examples above, we've already talked about the idea that the apelord's speed of 7 could be tied to a cultural norm taken from the teachings of the Walker in Mist (see <bookfirst>Gods of the Shroud</book> to learn more about the Walker): "Call no place home. Stay moving." The *break* perspective subsequently inspired us to imagine a culture of under-apes that speak Dwarven, have a speed of 6, and get a +2

to Dungeoneering. The default apelord is already described as a nomad, so we can safely say that our standard issue apes embody this norm. Let's fill out this particular matrix with another two cultures—but remember, just because the apelord's speed suggested this norm, we don't have to change the race's speed with each perspective we choose:

> ### Norm: *Call no place home. Stay moving.*
>
> ♥ **Embody:** Most apelords follow this teaching of the Walker in Mist. Their culture is restless, wandering, and nomadic. Speed 7.
>
> ◉ **Twist:** Chased from their forest homes by the walking dead, many clans of apelords spread out over flatter lands. Divorced from the trees, these plainswalking apes live exposed to the elements, always on the move. Trade out Acrobatics +2 to get Nature +2 instead.
>
> ◈ **Break:** Some apes have been driven underground to escape the evils hounding them. These under-apes have acclimated to elements of dwarven culture and lost their drive for wandering and staying in motion, instead learning the ways and speech of their adopted culture. Speed 6, +2 to Dungeoneering, Language: Dwarven.
>
> ✳ **Changed-By:** Those apes not driven into the plains were sent south and west, to the oceans and inland seas. There, they learned of strange new wonders called "ships"—floating contraptions topped with woven vines and dead tree trunks (the rigging) that were always on the move, never staying in one place. Feeling a deep kinship, these apes set sail into uncharted waters. Lose the *treetop tumbling ability*, and instead gain a +1 to speed when swimming, and a +5 to Endurance for long-term swimming.

With this first norm, we've done the geographic version of culture building. We've taken a race, scattered it to various locales, and made changes to the race based on those locations. While these tribes

of apelords might intermix now and again, they're physically separate most of the time. While this helps build the world, it doesn't really let us model situations where cultural differences are perhaps the most evident—when two or more distinct cultures coexist. Let's find another norm that will let us explore that situation, perhaps one that will change the core ability scores.

♥ **Embody:** Our baseline apelord embodies this norm, using his great physical strength and nimble dexterity to overcome foes and obstacles alike. The traditional apelord has +2 Str, +2 Dex.

◎ **Twist:** The intellectualist movement among apelords has eschewed brute strength, instead choosing to focus on improving their minds, overcoming challenges with intellect, not brawn. Intellectualist apelords get +2 Int, +2 Dex.

✦ **Break:** The name "yellowback" is a dirty one among the tribes of the ape. But there are apelords painted with this epithet for seeking to find a softer way to resolve conflicts, using charm instead of force. Though seldom trusted by others of their own kind, these apelords are the most adept at integrating into other cultures and, as such, occupy a disproportionately large segment of the apelord mercantile class. Charismatic apes get +2 Dex, +2 Cha, and replace the apelord skill bonuses with +2 Diplomacy and Bluff.

✷ **Changed-By:** The drive to hit every challenge head-on has left many warrior apes dead in battle, now striding alongside the Walker in glory. But there are those who survive and have the scars to show it. These scarred apes are not as nimble as they once were, but the sinewy power in their arms is as potent as ever. Scarred apes have +2 Str, +2 Con, and swap out their Acrobatics +2 for a more apropos Intimidate +2.

Here we've created some strong cultural forces that we can see at play within a single group of apelords. Traditional and intellectualist apes might have fierce debates or contests to determine whether the mind or the body rules the day. Meanwhile, the charismatic apes (some sneer "yellowbacks") have some serious cultural prejudices to overcome and veteran, scarred apes, though few and far between, always have a voice that others will listen to.

If you ask us, this is where the cultural rubber truly meets the road: multiple cultural trends and groups that you can imagine all in one place, interacting with one another. The geographic stuff has its place, to be absolutely certain—that's how you might form strong *national* cultures (in the sense of a nation of people, not necessarily a nation-state)—but that's a more "macro" way of approaching things, and more intense, personal stories will tend to live more at the "micro" level.

Cultural elements don't always have to be homogenous, either. Consider the idea of exploring the different means individuals within a culture might choose to achieve a common goal. For this, let's focus on the intellectualist movement from our previous norm, and come up with a norm that's *internal* to that group—so the following is something we'd offer to those players choosing the intellectualist build for their ape characters. Additionally, let's double up on some of our perspectives to create more than four distinct options, since the intellectualist movement is full of drama and controversy,

As you can see from the results on the following page, Simon's "norm and perspective" method is a strong tool for providing interesting variety at nearly any level of a culture. The intellectualists might have just been a minor curiosity along the way before; now we have an assortment of perspectives in action within the movement itself, rendering what was once a simple philosophy now fascinatingly diverse. The stories surrounding these apes will likely be all the better for it.

Embody: The intellectualist movement originated among the ruling priesthood of apelords, the sacred community charged with keeping and dispensing knowledge. While several populist priests initiated the ongoing renaissance by spreading previously restricted knowledge to everyone, the priesthood as a whole strongly opposes intellectualism, since it diminishes their authority and power. Priestly apes replace the standard apelord skill bonuses with a +2 to Intimidate and a +2 to any one of the following list: Arcana, History, Religion.

Embody: Embody can also be taken as *enforce*, and that is certainly the case with the educator apes of the intellectualist movement. These scholars travel from village to village, ensuring that all apes—and members of other races – receive the benefit of knowledge, whether they're ready for it or not. Educator apes replace the standard apelord skill bonuses with a +2 to any two of the following list: Arcana, History, Religion.

Twist: Naturalist apes believe that they can only better their minds by getting in touch with the natural world. Choosing to avoid formal, structured learning environments, they instead live as far from civilization as they can, only returning annually to share what they have learned. Naturalist apes replace either of the standard apelord skill bonuses with a +2 to Nature.

Break: A splinter sect of intellectualists lead by an ape named Thunder Calls believe that deliberately seeking to improve one's mind merely cages it, stunting its potential. These "thunderers" avoid education entirely, instead diving head-first into every opportunity that life puts in front of them. Experience and error will be their teachers, or so they say. Thunderers keep the standard apelord skill bonuses.

Break: Iconoclasts believe that ape culture is backwards and ultimately doomed in the face of a modern world of learning, letters, and radical philosophy. These apelords have left the forests for the cities and encourage their brethren to likewise abandon ape life for civilization, even if civilization does not welcome them, Iconoclasts replace the standard apelord skill bonuses with +2 to Bluff and +2 to Streetwise.

Changed-By: Clothed in white robes worn over whatever armor they use, some of the most committed intellectualists become caretaker apes, living a life of service to others. Material gains do not remain with them for long, as they often spend the profits of their ventures on the communities they serve. Caretaker apes set aside their standard skill bonuses for a +2 to Heal and a +2 to one of the following list: Arcana, History, Religion.

Randomizing Cultures

With all of the above in hand, randomly generating cultures turns out to be a pretty easy thing. Take each of the norms you've "reverse engineered" from the basic stats of a race, and then roll 1d4 or 1d20 for each norm, consulting the following table:

d4	d20		Perspective Applied
1	1-5	♥	Embodies
2	6-10	◎	Twists
3	11-15	◉	Breaks
4	16-20	✸	Changed-By

If you've invented more or less than four perspectives, you'll of course have to tweak this random roll method.

Doing a little random generation is a good way to break up preconceptions you didn't know you had. If the random generator indicates that a character possesses two perspectives that seem to be in conflict with one another, solving the seeming paradox may lead you to insights you might not have come across otherwise. Give it a whirl!

Tapping the Players' Brains

A quick read through this document might lead you to think that we're laying out a lot of extra work for the DM to customize and complicate the races in her game, but that's not necessarily the case. There's nothing preventing an enterprising and delegation-inclined DM from entrusting the job of creating cultures to interested players.

Keep in mind, some of your players might gain a real sense of investment in and ownership of your game's setting if you let them take the wheel and invent a new subculture of dwarves to more effectively play that Dwarf Warlock they've been imagining.

Such players should easily be able to use these guidelines to invent this new culture and, in the process, reveal some strong plot-driving mojo you might not have otherwise discovered.

Another Extended Example: The Svartálfar

To bring this down to the personal level, let's consider a concrete example involving the co-authors of this guide. Imagine that Fred is planning a campaign in the ancient elven city of Dal Paan, using the elven racial build options from our first example. Jonathan, however, has been itching to play a Dwarven Warlock. While both players are concerned about how a dwarf character will fit into an elf-centric setting, they decide to approach this as an exciting challenge, not an obstacle.

Jonathan browses Wikipedia and reads up on traditional Norse dwarves, *dvergar*, sometimes called Svartálfar, "black elves." Inspired, he pitches a possible solution to Fred, having the dwarves in this setting share a fey origin with elves. Fred loves this idea and, together, they start exploring various modifications to standard dwarf build: adding *fey origin*, obviously, maybe getting rid of *cast-iron stomach*, altering the dwarven ability score bonuses to more closely align with elves, possibly creating a new *dwarfstep* ability to mimic elves and eladrin, and so forth, basing the changes on the information found in this guide.

Along the way, they also develop a stronger idea of who Svartálfar are and how they came to live in Dal Paan. Unlike elven cultures, the Svartálfar initially emerged from portals to the fey realms that exist deep underground. Connecting caverns to create immense subterranean cities, the Svartálfar established a ruling council of warlocks, mostly *fey pact*, but also some *infernal pact* (since demons are often associated with the underground) and a few crazy *star pact* ones who spend too much time wandering up to the surface and, consequently, serve as ambassadors to the surface world. Very quickly, the different core warlock builds have blossomed into different elite subcultures—and might each get associated with one of the four perspectives from our model, revealing a cultural norm or two moving beneath the surface of warlock politics.

Jonathan decides to play a *star pact* Svartálfar warlock, but wants the character to be an exile of

some variety, living among her distant elf kin in Dal Paan. However, Fred thinks it would be less interesting for Jonathan's character to be the only Svartálfar in Dal Paan and suggests that Jonathan come up with a reason for a group of Svartálfar would be living on the surface, among the other elves. Agreeing, Jonathan proposes that this group of Dal Paan-based Svartálfar had their home underground city (which perhaps has its own cultural characteristics) taken over by a mysterious entity, either demonic, fey, or some Cthulhu-esque monstrosity from the stars. Perhaps it was even unclear what exactly the malevolent entity was or where it came from, so, amidst the chaos, different factions within the ruling warlock council blamed each other and were unable to unite against the threat.

Jonathan's warlock, Julah, was able to save a group of Svartálfar from perishing because of a prophecy she made, but they are not entirely sure what happened after they left. Some Svartálfar have pushed to return to their underground home, searching for survivors or even trying to liberate it from the entity's hold, but so far Julah and the other remaining warlock elites have forbidden it. However, Julah's authority as a warlock has become somewhat suspect among the Svartálfar of Dal Paan, since the society they now live in does not operate under a ruling warlock council. Perhaps Julah and the few other warlocks (her allies or adversaries?) are trying to assert control, but urban Svartálfar society is changing rapidly in contact with other elven cultures, making things difficult for the warlocks.

When Fred and Jonathan discuss their ideas with the other players, Emily, who is in the process of creating a guard elf character, decides that her guard elf, Roland, has sworn to protect the Svartálfar settlement in Dal Paan, due to an ancestral promise to guard the poor, immigrant quarter of the city. Roland, as an soldier pledged to the rulers of Dal Paan, often works as a liaison between the city and its Svartálfar minority, working with the warlock council (the traditional but disputed leaders of the Svartálfar) but also, potentially, with emerging, rival sources of authority.

Fred, as DM, is also excited about the adventure potential of the corrupted underground city that the Svartálfar came from. Ultimately, though, he decides to save it until the characters have gained a few levels and have established relationships between themselves and other factions within Dal Paan.

Growing Beyond Your Culture

With all of this focus on developing culturally diverse player races, how do you allow cultures or an individual character's approach to their own cultural heritage to change, over the course of play?

Outgrowing Your Roots

Perhaps the easiest stance to take on character growth and a character's cultural heritage is that, while race and culture exert a hefty amount of influence over a character right at the outset, the more that a character develops, the less those racial and cultural traits matter, in terms of their presence on the sheet and potentially in play. Looked at sideways, this might even be seen as a metaphor for globalization or the consequences of an adventuring life: the more you travel beyond your native climes, the more you become a citizen of the world and not of any one particular culture. When you come home, your kinsmen may not even recognize you as one of their own.

Changing When You Change

Cultural identity could also be played as such a critical issue that, when a character alters her perspective on one of the core cultural norms for her race, the bonuses and other advantages that arise from that perspective change as well. This could mean that someone's Wisdom drops by two and their Strength increases by two when their cultural perspective shifts from *vigilance is the only way to be safe* to *might makes right in matters of security*.

This takes advantage of one of the great features of fourth edition. It's expected, even required, that characters change their abilities over time as they advance in levels. So why not also change when the character changes his stance on an important issue of his day?

Building on a Culture

Another way to keep cultural identity relevant over the course of play, as a character develops, is to develop *culture-specific* feats. This is a little more heavy lifting, though thankfully feats are not too hard to invent.

As a general principle, coming up with one feat per culture per tier, often reflecting the perspective that group has on a particular cultural norm, is a good way to go, meaning that three feats per culture will often do the basic job. Certainly develop more if that excites you, but it's not necessary.

With these feats in hand, you'll offer easy hooks into the elements of culture that players can opt into as the game progresses–and by giving that culture some additional real, mechanical weight, cultural issues will feel all the more important.

Experiencing Culture

Once you've opened the door to cultural differences, you needn't stop at tinkering with the intial racial build options. Consider this: there are many (though perhaps not enough) feats that are tied to race, so there's very little stopping you from developing additional feats that are tied to specific cultures within a given player race.

If you don't want to get into the feat-design game yourself, you can treat feats, skills, and powers gained through experience as indicators a character's developing relationship with their culture. Sure, every dragonborn might be able to take the *enlarged dragon breath* feat, but what happens when you decide that taking that particular feat indicates that the character was once associated with the radical Brotherhood of the Sacred Breath? And what about those *dragonborn frenzy* feat-takers, who could only have developed such ferocity from their participation in the forbidden blood sports that a dark cabal of tiefling warlocks have arranged for the amusement of their demonic masters?

Our reverse engineering trick could even be applied to those feats, generating a cultural norm and the perspective on that norm that lead to the feat. As always, once that pairing is determined, the three other potential perspectives on that norm are just itching to get a little detail–and a feat option–of their own.

Regardless, the point is that feats, paragon paths, and all the other benefits that characters gain through experience could easily grow into new elements of a culture and reflect meaningfully upon each character's individual experience and growth within it–or beyond it.

Cultural Norm (For:)

♥ Embodies ♥ Enforces ♥ Upholds ♥

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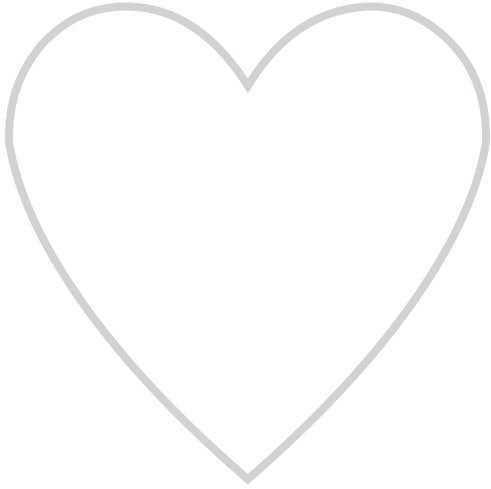
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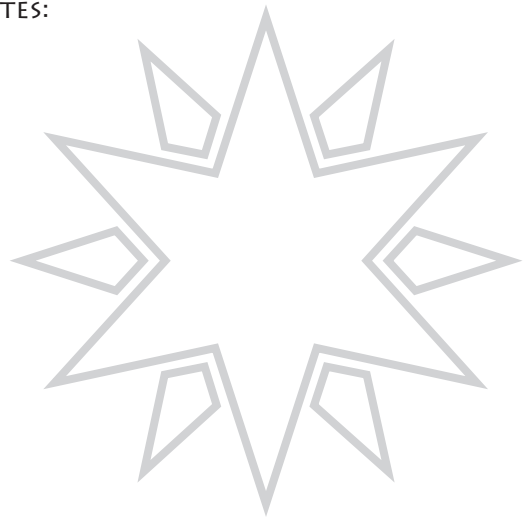### ⊘ Breaks ⊘ Rebels ⊘ Confounds ⊘

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