ANCESTRY & CULTURE
An Alternative to Race in 5e
ANCESTRY & CULTURE: An Alternative to Race in 5e

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Hi! I’m Eugene Marshall (he/they), a game designer, writer, and editor. I am half of Arcanist Press, a new, independent game publishing company. In addition, I am the lead fifth edition writer and game designer for Sigil Entertainment, as well as a freelance game designer, writer, and editor. For my day job, I am an Associate Professor of Philosophy working on the history of philosophy and the philosophy of games.

I’m a long-time D&D GM, both for my friends and in the Adventurer’s League. I have written several adventures and settings for D&D, Savage Worlds, Cypher System, World of Darkness, Lasers and Feelings, and other systems, now or soon to be available on DriveThruRPG and DM’s Guild.
What is Ancestry and Culture: An Alternative to Race in 5e?

Have you ever wondered why there are half-elves and half-orcs in your favorite fantasy roleplaying game, but not half-dwarves or half-gnomes? And why only allow orcs and elves to have children with humans and not others, or with each other? Why can’t we play the child of an elf and an orc or a gnome and a halfling?

What’s more, what if we want to play a human raised by elves, like Tolkien’s Aragorn, or a halfling who grew up among orcs? Wouldn’t such characters be different from a halfling who grew up among her own people, for example? It would be a delight to have character options that support such a diverse cast of characters.

Well, now we can! This zine of rules allows you to easily create a variety of new character combinations and types, without having to make sweeping changes to the core game rules. What’s more, these rules supplant the problematic concept of race as it is traditionally used in character creation, replacing it with two concepts: ancestry and culture. Ancestry provides those heritable traits that a character might receive from their biological parents, such as height, average lifespan, and special senses like darkvision. Culture, on the other hand, is an integrated system of beliefs, values, and symbolic practices shared by a particular group or community. Cultural traits include language, skill training, values, and education.

Why Replace Race with Ancestry and Culture?

Why replace the rules for race in character creation for the world’s most popular tabletop roleplaying game, you might ask? First of all, because doing so allows for much more diverse characters, more interesting stories, and richer roleplay. Think of the possibilities of playing a character of both dwarven and elven ancestry, or a gnome raised among orcs—and imagine what their diverse communities might be like, where dwarven and elven food, art, and architecture mingle! What might their buildings look like? Their clothing? In short, we want to replace race with ancestry and culture because replacing it is easy and makes for more fun!

Beyond that, there is a more serious reason to replace the concept of race in your games with ancestry and culture: simply put, because the very concept of race in this game we love is problematic.

First of all, scientists and philosophers who study race reject the concept of race as a biological fact that discretely individuates groups of people. Race is not a biological reality; rather, it is a social concept constructed and employed differently at different times in history and in different places in the world. It is not like eye color, but like citizenship: something that is based in social relations and concepts, not biology.

In other words, the concept of race as it has been used from at least the Enlightenment forward to the twentieth century is, frankly, bankrupt. This is not to say there is no such thing as ancestry, heritage, and genetic difference, of course. Indeed, our genetics are real, but they are a function of our individual ancestry, not our race. What folks call racial differences simply do not map
cleanly onto anything in our biology as simplistic as the concept of race. What’s more, that concept in the real world has been used to justify historic atrocities. Indeed, racists still use these bogus, faux-scientific justifications to support their prejudice. Because these harmful concepts have no place in our world, they need not be in the stories we tell with our friends either.

### Race Matters in Fantasy

But what about race as it appears in fantasy? After all, some people say, orcs and elves and humans aren’t really different races, despite what the fifth edition rules call them; they are different species. And fantasy worlds simply are not the real world, so what is the problem with having different races? These questions do not address what is problematic about fantasy races at all, however, regardless of whether we call them races or species, or whether we speak of historical or fantastical settings. Consider what triple-Hugo Award winning novelist [N.K. Jemisin says](https://www.nkjemisin.com/) about orcs (and, by extension, half-orcs):

> “Orcs are human beings who can be slaughtered without conscience or apology…. Creatures that look like people, but aren’t really. Kinda-sorta-people, who aren’t worthy of even the most basic moral considerations, like the right to exist. Only way to deal with them is to control them utterly a la slavery, or wipe them all out. Huh. Sounds familiar… The whole concept of orcs is irredeemable. Orcs are fruit of the poison vine that is human fear of ‘the Other.’ In games like Dungeons & Dragons, orcs are a ‘fun’ way to bring faceless savage dark hordes into a fantasy setting and then gleefully go genocidal on them… They’re an amalgamation of stereotypes. And to me, that’s no fun at all.”

Jemisin points out that monstrous races, like orcs, are often not so subtly veiled stand-ins for age-old, racist stereotypes. For many people, this legacy makes it hard to enjoy a game that contains such tropes. It’s hard to ignore the fact that, when he first created miniatures for the fantasy races, Gary Gygax chose Turk minis to depict orcs and repainted Native American figures for trolls and ogres. Although orcs and goblins are fantasy races in a fantasy world, they are created and depicted by real people in our world, and the systems of fantasy racism and real-world racism are unavoidably linked.

Game designer and writer James Mendez Hodes argues persuasively, and with scholarly care, that “…racist myths from the British academy and army fueled J.R.R. Tolkien’s creation of orcs as an analogue for Asian people… D&D, like Tolkien, makes race literally real in-game by applying immutable modifiers to character ability scores, skills, and other characteristics. The in-game fiction justifies these character traits as absolute realities; they also just happen to be the same cruel and untrue things racists say about different ethnicities.”

As Mendez explains, the origins of the races in fantasy roleplaying games are derived from racist stereotypes from the real world. And transposing them onto fictional fantasy races, or species, does not remove the problem. As [Mendez later says](https), “If you find a way to scrub an explicit signifier from a racist expression, but keep the expression intact, you preserve the racist dynamic without the explicit identification.” And this applies whether you call the groups in question races...
or species; either way, it replicates the problems that the concept of race faces in the real world.

Mendez and Jemisin are right to protest. The way race is often used in fantasy games, particularly in its depiction of “monstrous” races like orcs and half-orcs, is deeply problematic. What’s more, the way that fifth edition and earlier editions treat the offspring of different groups, such as humans and elves, is similarly problematic. As blogger Graeme Barber puts it, “Where [racism] flashes up in its most obvious forms are in how the game instructs players and DMs to treat the ‘half’ races (specifically half-elves and half-orcs), how POC [people of color] are depicted and treated, and in how ‘monstrous’ races are all but dismissed as ‘people’ or being part of the world. I can sum a lot of the narrative design and world build up as ‘If they don’t look like us, we either want to have sex with them or kill them.’” Barber goes on to point out the obvious fact that “elves living near humans would have practices for raising mixed children, and vice versa. Remember mixed people aren’t ‘torn’ between their ancestral lines by default; that’s just not how it works. Nor are they ‘natural diplomats’ between them. That’s all old and racist narrative baggage.”

**A Way Forward**

So what are we who love playing fantasy games to do? Only ever play humans? Rob fantasy creatures such as elves and dwarves and orcs of their distinctive narratives and lore, or make them all the same? Jettison the fantasy races entirely?

Fortunately, we need not go to such extremes. Indeed, it is not difficult to replace race in character creation in our favorite roleplaying game. As shown in this zine, we can acknowledge that gnomes and elves and humans and dwarves might in general have certain biological markers that distinguish them, such as height and lifespan and darkvision, without also ascribing intelligence or weapon mastery or good and evil to their biology. Obviously, these latter features are more a result of upbringing than genetics. Why not therefore separate out biological ancestry from cultural heritage?

Some advantages of this are as follows: this separates the value-laden concepts of ability bonuses and alignment from biology; it places skills, weapon proficiencies, languages, and other behavioral differences where they belong, in one’s upbringing; and these rules do so in a way that leaves the rest of the game mechanics largely intact. Indeed, one should be able to swap out the race options from character creation for these rules without much change elsewhere at all, though it may change the way the fantasy world is depicted (hopefully for the better). And it does so in a way that preserves the core narratives and lore of the fantasy creatures we love so much. Further, using these rules also allows for a lot of fun new roleplaying opportunities, as you can now have mechanics that support a much richer and more diverse collection of characters.
Character Creation

The character creation rules below replace the race choice in character creation for the world’s most popular roleplaying game.
Ancestral and Cultural Traits

The description of each ancestry and culture includes both inherited and cultural traits that are common to members of that ancestry or culture. The Age, Size, and Speed traits are tied to a character’s ancestry, as these are most likely to be inherited traits, shared with biological parents. The Alignment, Languages, Skills, and many other traits are tied to their culture, as they do not depend on one’s biological parents as much as they do on the systems of belief and practices of the community of one’s upbringing. Each entry distinguishes between them clearly.

For example, a dwarf who grows up among other dwarves would possess all of the traits from both dwarf ancestry and dwarven culture, whereas an elf who grew up among dwarves would possess elf ancestral traits, such as Keen Senses, Fey Ancestry, and Trance, but dwarven cultural traits, such as Combat Training, Tool Proficiency, Stonecunning, and proficiency in the Dwarvish language. Weapon training and languages aren’t genetic, after all; one learns them from one’s family and community. Thus, if an elf grew up in dwarven culture, they would learn dwarven weapon training and languages, unless those who raised them specifically chose to raise them as culturally elven.

You will also find rules for creating characters with more than one ancestry below. For example, your character might have one elven parent and one dwarven parent. Some players might balk at the notion that individuals of different fantasy ancestries could have children together, especially when their physiologies seem to differ as much as, for example, a dragonborn’s and a gnome’s might. If such issues of realism bother you, then by all means do not use those rules or allow them at your table. For those players who are not bothered by such issues, or for those who wish to explain their character as having a magical, rather than a biological, origin, these rules can provide such options.

Ability Score Increase

Ancestry does not by itself endow a person with higher or lower Intelligence or Strength, or any other ability modifier. Cultures do sometimes promote certain behaviors and lifestyles, however, which can increase one or more of a character’s ability scores. For example, education systems can promote different activities and values, such as athleticism, academic excellence, public speaking and rhetoric, or perseverance. These differential education systems might slightly shift the range of abilities among those young people who undergo them, subtly increasing their average Strength, Intelligence, Charisma, or Constitution.

Even so, some players may wish to shy away even from this limited form of cultural baggage. Rules are provided below for fully customizing one’s culture, so that no specific ability score can be identified with a particular culture. Instead, each player may personalize the culture in which their character grew up. This personalized culture option can be found in Appendix A.
Ability Scores as Culture, not Ancestry?

Some readers may wonder why ability score increases appear in culture rather than ancestry. This choice allows us to move away from the problematic notion certain ethnic groups have higher strength or intelligence, as those notions are often at the heart of racist attitudes in the real world. And rather than removing ability score increases entirely, or dividing them up in some more complex way such as a point buy system, these rules keep them under the umbrella of culture for simplicity and ease of use.

Age

The age entry notes the age when a member of an ancestry is considered an adult, as well as the ancestry’s expected lifespan. This information can help you decide how old your character is at the start of the game. You can choose any age for your character, which could provide an explanation for some of your ability scores. For example, if you play a young or very old character, your age could explain a particularly low Strength or Constitution score, while advanced age could account for a high Intelligence or Wisdom.
Alignment

Ancestries have no innate alignments whatsoever, as behavioral tendencies toward goodness or chaos or law or evil are not genetically inherited. Cultures are not straightforwardly good or evil either, though values are indeed often a part of a culture’s belief systems. Even so, those values could never be reduced to simple concepts like goodness, evil, law, or chaos. What’s more, such cultural beliefs do not dictate the beliefs of an individual character, though some cultural norms might weakly influence an individual’s alignment, though it is up to the player whether such influences are present or if they instead reject them.

Nevertheless, some general cultural influences are described in this entry, with weak tendencies toward particular values described, so that players might have a sense of the various cultures they may choose and because they are familiar to players of the game. These are not binding for player characters; they are included only to give players a sense of what their character’s chosen culture is like, though some of the more problematic descriptions have been removed or revised.

Indeed, players may even decide to drop alignment completely, as it plays very little mechanical role in the game and is overly simplistic in many ways. It has been included here only so that players looking for it see that, if it must be retained, it is better attributed to culture than biology.

Size

Characters of most ancestries are Medium, a size category including creatures that are roughly 4 to 8 feet tall. Members of a few ancestries are Small (between 2 and 4 feet tall), which means that certain rules of the game affect them differently.

Please note that the Size recommendations listed here are always modifiable. For example, you may wish for your character to be a human, elf, dragonborn, or orc little person, in which case you might prefer your character be Small rather than Medium.

Speed

Your speed determines how far you can move when traveling and fighting.

Languages

By virtue of your culture, your character can speak, read, and write certain languages.
Dragonborn

Common wisdom is that those of dragonborn ancestry descend from real dragons, inheriting the color of their scales and their affinity for certain elements from those draconic forebears. Dragonborn culture, however, has little in common with that of dragons, having developed its own distinct beliefs and traditions.

Dragonborn Ancestral Traits

Your draconic physiology manifests in a variety of traits you share with other dragonborn.

**Age.** Young dragonborn grow quickly. They walk hours after being born, attain the size and development of a 10-year-old human child by the age of 3, and reach adulthood by 15. They live to be around 80.

**Size.** Dragonborn are taller and heavier than humans, standing well over 6 feet tall and averaging almost 250 pounds. Your size is Medium.

**Speed.** Your base walking speed is 30 feet.

**Draconic Ancestry.** You have draconic ancestry. Choose one type of dragon from the Draconic Ancestry table. Your breath weapon and damage resistance are determined by the dragon type, as shown in the table.

**Breath Weapon.** You can use your action to exhale destructive energy. Your draconic ancestry determines the size, shape, and damage type of the exhalation.

When you use your breath weapon, each creature in the area of the exhalation must make a saving throw, the type of which is determined by your draconic ancestry. The DC for this saving throw equals 8 + your Constitution modifier + your proficiency bonus. A creature takes 2d6 damage on a failed save, and half as much damage on a successful one. The damage increases to 3d6 at 6th level, 4d6 at 11th level, and 5d6 at 16th level.

After you use your breath weapon, you can’t use it again until you complete a short or long rest.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dragon</th>
<th>Damage Type</th>
<th>Breath Weapon</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Acid</td>
<td>5 by 30 ft. line (Dex. save)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Lightning</td>
<td>5 by 30 ft. line (Dex. save)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brass</td>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>5 by 30 ft. line (Dex. save)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronze</td>
<td>Lightning</td>
<td>5 by 30 ft. line (Dex. save)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copper</td>
<td>Acid</td>
<td>5 by 30 ft. line (Dex. save)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>15 ft. cone (Dex. save)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Poison</td>
<td>15 ft. cone (Con. save)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>15 ft. cone (Dex. save)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Silver</td>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>15 ft. cone (Con. save)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>15 ft. cone (Con. save)</td>
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**Damage Resistance.** You have resistance to the damage type associated with your draconic ancestry.

**Dragonborn Cultural Traits**

Dragonborn culture is intense and exciting, leading those raised within it to be striking and remarkable individuals. Grand festivals and elaborate holidays are frequent, each centered around a different physical competition or performance. In general, practices in dragonborn culture and education tend to promote athleticism and personal character.

**Ability Score Increase.** Your Strength score increases by 2, and your Charisma score increases by 1.

**Alignment.** Because dragonborn culture values intense commitments and expression, many raised in this culture find themselves drawn to one side or the other in the cosmic war between good and evil. Most dragonborn are good, but those who side with evil can be terrible villains.

**Languages.** You can speak, read, and write Common and Draconic. Draconic is thought to be one of the oldest languages and is often used in the study of magic. The language sounds harsh to most other creatures and includes numerous hard consonants and sibilants.

**Dragon Lore.** Dragonborn communities are often proud of their draconic heritage. You have advantage on any Intelligence checks to recall information about dragons.

Thalendra Croldraneraath  
*Dragonborn & Elven Ancestry, Dragonborn Culture*
Dwarves

The origins of dwarves are shrouded in myth, with some saying that their ancestors were fashioned from the very stone itself. Dwarven culture reflects this tradition, often celebrating practices related to the working of stone and metal.

Dwarven Ancestral Traits

Your dwarf character has an assortment of inborn abilities, part and parcel of dwarven biology.

Age. Dwarves mature at the same rate as humans, but they’re considered young until they reach the age of 50. On average, they live about 350 years.

Size. Dwarves stand between 4 and 5 feet tall and average about 150 pounds. Your size is Medium.

Speed. Your base walking speed is 25 feet. Your speed is not reduced by wearing heavy armor.

Darkvision. Accustomed to life underground, you have superior vision in dark and dim conditions. You can see in dim light within 60 feet of you as if it were bright light, and in darkness as if it were dim light. You can’t discern color in darkness, only shades of gray.

Dwarven Resilience. You have advantage on saving throws against poison, and you have resistance against poison damage, most likely a feature of your ancestors’ diet.

Dwarven Toughness. Your hit point maximum increases by 1, and it increases by 1 every time you gain a level, due in large part to the long history of difficult labor required to survive underground for generations.

Hill Dwarven Cultural Traits

Characters who grows up in a hill dwarven community take on several distinctive cultural traits, in part due to their long history living underground and valuing skill with traditional dwarven weapons and crafts. Dwarven culture values perseverance in labor and the maintenance of their traditions. Further, respect is shown for their wise elders.

Ability Score Increase. Your Constitution score increases by 2, and your Wisdom score increases by 1.

Alignment. Dwarven society is well-ordered, with strict laws and customs governing behavior. As a result, the culture tends to promote lawful values, with a strong sense of fair play and a belief that everyone deserves to share in the benefits of a just order.

Dwarven Combat Training. You have proficiency with the battleaxe, handaxe, light hammer, and warhammer.

Tool Proficiency. You gain proficiency with the artisan’s tools of your choice: smith’s tools, brewer’s supplies, mechanic’s tools, or mason’s tools.
**Stonecunning.** Whenever you make an Intelligence (History) check related to the origin of stonework, you are considered proficient in the History skill and add double your proficiency bonus to the check, instead of your normal proficiency bonus.

**Languages.** You can speak, read, and write Common and Dwarvish. Dwarvish is full of hard consonants and guttural sounds, and those characteristics spill over into whatever other language you might speak.

*Therrick Stonecrag Greenleaf, Dwarven Ancestry, Elven Culture*
Elf

A legend among elven communities describes how the first elves sprang from the dripping blood of their god when they were stabbed in battle, while others say that elves descended from their cousins in the Feywild.

Elven Ancestral Traits

Your elf character has a variety of natural abilities, the result of thousands of years of elven ancestry.

**Age.** Although elves reach physical maturity at about the same age as humans, the elven understanding of adulthood goes beyond physical growth to encompass worldly experience. An elf typically claims adulthood and an adult name around the age of 100 and can live to be 750 years old.

**Size.** Elves range from under 5 to over 6 feet tall and have slender builds. Your size is Medium.

**Speed.** Your base walking speed is 30 feet.

**Darkvision.** Historically accustomed to twilit forests and the night sky, you have superior vision in dark and dim conditions. You can see in dim light within 60 feet of you as if it were bright light, and in darkness as if it were dim light. You can’t discern color in darkness, only shades of gray.

**Keen Senses.** You have proficiency in the Perception skill, a trait that all people with elven ancestry share.

**Fey Ancestry.** Thanks to your fey heritage, you have advantage on saving throws against being charmed, and magic can’t put you to sleep.

**Trance.** Elves don’t need to sleep. Instead, they meditate deeply, remaining semiconscious, for 4 hours a day. (The Common word for such meditation is “trance.”) While meditating, you can dream after a fashion. After resting in this way, you gain the same benefits that other humanoids do from 8 hours of sleep.

High Elven Cultural Traits

High elven culture is rich in traditions and history, celebrating their long legacy of scholarship, acumen, and dance. Those who grow up immersed in this culture often take on certain traits.

**Ability Score Increase.** Your Dexterity score increases by 2, and your Intelligence score increases by 1.

**Alignment.** The elven culture values freedom, variety, and self-expression, so those who grow up in it may lean toward the gentler aspects of chaos. Elven culture tends to value and protect others’ freedom as well as their own.

**Languages.** You can speak, read, and write Common and Elvish. Elvish is fluid, with subtle intonations and intricate grammar. Elven literature is rich and varied, and their songs and poems are famous among other cultures. Many bards learn their language so they can add Elvish ballads to their repertoires.

**Elven Weapon Training.** You have proficiency with the longsword, shortsword, shortbow, and longbow.
**Cantrip.** You know one cantrip of your choice from the wizard spell list. Intelligence is your spellcasting ability for it.

**Extra Language.** You can speak, read, and write one extra language of your choice.

*Nym Auvyrae, Elven & Tiefling Ancestry, Human Culture*
Some scholars in gnomish culture recount tales of gnomes shaped from ancient, magical gems, perhaps with the aid of a god. Gem crafting is a skill valued in gnomish culture to this day.

**Gnomish Ancestral Traits**

Your gnome character has certain characteristics in common with all other gnomes.

**Age.** Gnomes mature at the same rate humans do, and most are expected to settle down into an adult life by around age 40. They can live 350 to almost 500 years.

**Size.** Gnomes are between 3 and 4 feet tall and average about 40 pounds. Your size is Small.

**Speed.** Your base walking speed is 25 feet.

**Darkvision.** Your ancestors were accustomed to life underground. You have superior vision in dark and dim conditions. You have superior vision in dark and dim conditions. You can see in dim light within 60 feet of you as if it were bright light, and in darkness as if it were dim light. You can’t discern color in darkness, only shades of gray.

**Gnome Cunning.** You have advantage on all Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma saving throws against magic.

**Rock Gnomish Cultural Traits**

Rock gnomish culture and education tend to promote cleverness and ingenuity, qualities that produce many inventors of great renown.

**Ability Score Increase.** Your Intelligence score increases by 2, and your Constitution score increases by 1.

**Alignment.** Gnomish culture also values kindness and harmony. Many culturally gnomish people work to uphold harmonious relations or apply their ingenuity to better their fellows, often as sages, engineers, researchers, scholars, investigators, or inventors. Others take a more personal approach to these values, becoming minstrels, tricksters, wanderers, or fanciful jewelers. Those raised among gnomish society are generally good-hearted, and even the tricksters among them are more playful than vicious.

**Artificer’s Lore.** Whenever you make an Intelligence (History) check related to magic items, alchemical objects, or technological devices, you are considered proficient in the History skill and add double your proficiency bonus to the check, instead of your normal proficiency bonus.

**Languages.** You can speak, read, and write Common and Gnomish. The Gnomish language, which uses the Dwarvish script, is renowned for its technical treatises and its catalogs of knowledge about the natural world.

**Tinker.** You have proficiency with artisan’s tools (tinker’s tools). Using those tools, you can spend 1 hour and 10 gp worth of materials to construct a Tiny clockwork device (AC 5, 1 hp). The device ceases to function after 24 hours (unless you spend 1 hour repairing it to keep the device functioning), or when you use
your action to dismantle it; at that time, you can reclaim the materials used to create it. You can have up to three such devices active at a time.
When you create a device, choose one of the following options:

- **Clockwork Toy.** This toy is a clockwork animal, monster, or person, such as a frog, mouse, bird, dragon, or soldier. When placed on the ground, the toy moves 5 feet across the ground on each of your turns in a random direction. It makes noises as appropriate to the creature it represents.
- **Fire Starter.** The device produces a miniature flame, which you can use to light a candle, torch, or campfire. Using the device requires your action.
- **Music Box.** When opened, this music box plays a single song at a moderate volume. The box stops playing when it reaches the song’s end or when it is closed.
HALFLING

The origins of halfling ancestry are a mystery, though tales in halfling culture mention that their forbearers wandered far and wide before settling down into small pastoral communities.

HALFLING ANCESTRAL TRAITS

Your halfling character has a number of traits in common with all other halflings, regardless of culture.

**Age.** A halfling reaches adulthood at the age of 20 and generally lives into the middle of their second century.

**Halfling Nimbleness.** You can move through the space of any creature that is of a size larger than yours.

**Lucky.** When you roll a 1 on the d20 for an attack roll, ability check, or saving throw, you can reroll the die and must use the new roll.

**Naturally Stealthy.** You can attempt to hide even when you are obscured only by a creature that is at least one size larger than you.

**Size.** Halflings average about 3 feet tall and weigh about 40 pounds. Your size is Small.

**Speed.** Your base walking speed is 25 feet.

LIGHTFOOT HALFLING CULTURAL TRAITS

Lightfoot halfling culture is warm and welcoming, placing value in hospitality and good neighborliness. Those who grew up among halflings often make good comrades and allies.

**Ability Score Increase.** Your Dexterity score increases by 2, and your Charisma score increases by 1.

**Alignment.** Halfling society also tends toward neatness, both in their physical spaces and in their social relations. As a rule, they are good-hearted and kind, hate to see others in pain, and have no tolerance for oppression. They are also orderly and traditional, leaning heavily on the support of their community and the comfort of their old ways.

**Brave.** You have advantage on saving throws against being frightened.

**Languages.** You can speak, read, and write Common and Halfling. The Halfling language isn’t secret, but members of halfling culture are loath to share it with others. They write very little, so they don’t have a rich body of literature. Their oral tradition, however, is very strong. Almost all people in halfling societies speak Common to converse with the people in whose lands they dwell or through which they are traveling.
Human

Historians report that humans developed fairly recently, compared to many other ancestries. Despite their relative novelty, those of human ancestry have spread across the land and established human communities virtually everywhere.

Human Ancestral Traits

Your human character has a few traits in common with all other humans, regardless of their upbringing.

Age. Humans reach adulthood in their late teens and live less than a century.

Curiosity. Your natural curiosity leads you to dabble in a variety of activities. You gain proficiency in a skill of your choice, as well as with an artisan tool of your choice.

Size. Humans vary widely in height and build, from barely 5 feet to well over 6 feet tall. Regardless of your position in that range, your size is Medium.

Speed. Your base walking speed is 30 feet.

Human Cultural Traits

Human culture is defined by its curiosity and love of novelty. As such, its members vary widely, adopting new practices more frequently than those of other cultures often do.

Ability Score Increase. Your ability scores each increase by 1.

Alignment. Those raised in human cultures tend toward no particular alignment, just as human cultures themselves tend to change and vary as well. The best and the worst are found among them.

Languages. You can speak, read, and write Common and one extra language of your choice. Human communities typically learn the languages that its members brought from their own heritages. Because so many elves and dwarves live among humans, for example, members of human society are fond of sprinkling their speech with words borrowed from other tongues: Orcish curses, Elvish musical expressions, Dwarvish military phrases, and so on.

Human variation

If players find human culture uninspired, GMs can allow players to create humans with fewer ability score increases in exchange for some other benefit, such as a feat. Such characters would have two different ability scores of the player’s choice increase by one and gain a feat, such as Grappler.
**Orc**

Those of orcish ancestry tell tales tracing their origins to their primary god, though the details are not included in orcish myth. Indeed, some scholars of orcish ancestry or culture even claim that the orcish ancestors came from a faraway world.

**Orcish Ancestral Traits**

There are people of orcish ancestry who can be found outside of the secluded, often remote orcish communities.

**Age.** Orcs mature a little faster than humans, reaching adulthood around age 14. They live to be about 75.

**Size.** Orcs are somewhat larger and bulkier than humans, and they range from 5 to well over 6 feet tall. Your size is Medium.

**Speed.** Your base walking speed is 30 feet.

**Darkvision.** Thanks to your orcish ancestry, you have superior vision in dark and dim conditions. You can see in dim light within 60 feet of you as if it were bright light, and in darkness as if it were dim light. You can't discern color in darkness, only shades of gray.

**Relentless Endurance.** When you are reduced to 0 hit points but not killed outright, you can drop to 1 hit point instead. You can't use this feature again until you finish a long rest.

**Orcish Cultural Traits**

Some orcish communities exhibit a traditional culture, one that values physical ability, competition, and confidence. Others embrace technology and mechanical innovation. Orcish society is often familial and matriarchal, with a focus on providing for the community, especially via hunting, military training, or the construction of homes.

**Ability Score Increase.** Your Strength score increases by 2, and your Constitution score increases by 1.

**Alignment.** Orcish cultures tend toward a live-and-let-live worldview. People raised among orcs are not as often lawful, tending instead toward a more relaxed attitude.

**Confident.** You gain proficiency in the Intimidation skill.

**Powerful Attacks.** When you score a critical hit with a melee weapon attack, you can roll one of the weapon’s damage dice one additional time and add it to the extra damage of the critical hit.

**Languages.** You can speak, read, and write Common and Orcish. Orcish is a guttural language with hard consonants. It is one of several languages written in the Dwarvish script.
Garza Ironhammer, Dwarven & Orcish Ancestry, Orcish Culture
Tiefling

Tiefling heritage is often credited to humans who entered into a fiendish pact with a demon or devil. Usually, however, those of tiefling ancestry have no connection to this event in their lineage.

Tiefling Ancestral Traits

Tieflings share certain ancestral traits as a result of their infernal descent, whether inherited from a parent or from a more distant ancestor.

**Age.** Tieflings mature at the same rate as humans but live a few years longer.

**Size.** Tieflings are about the same size and build as humans. Your size is Medium.

**Speed.** Your base walking speed is 30 feet.

**Darkvision.** Thanks to your infernal ancestry, you have superior vision in dark and dim conditions. You can see in dim light within 60 feet of you as if it were bright light, and in darkness as if it were dim light. You can’t discern color in darkness, only shades of gray.

**Hellish Resistance.** You have resistance to fire damage.

Tiefling Cultural Traits

Predominantly tiefling communities are rare. Most tieflings belong to other cultures, as the tiefling heritage is not reliably inherited from generation to generation, particularly when couples of diverse ancestry have children. The tiefling societies that do exist, however, often embrace their infernal heritage and make it their own, which leads them to become more comfortable with their identities.

**Ability Score Increase.** Your Intelligence score increases by 1, and your Charisma score increases by 2.

**Alignment.** Tieflings do not have an innate tendency toward evil, though many non-tieflings falsely believe they do. Evil or not, an independent nature inclines many in tiefling culture toward a chaotic alignment.

**Infernal Legacy.** You know the *thaumaturgy* cantrip. When you reach 3rd level, you can cast the *hellish rebuke* spell as a 2nd-level spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. When you reach 5th level, you can cast the *darkness* spell once with this trait and regain the ability to do so when you finish a long rest. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for these spells.

**Languages.** You can speak, read, and write Common and Infernal.

Mixed Ancestry and Diverse Culture

The ancestry and culture options above assume that a character has a single ancestry and culture. Thus, if a character has elven ancestry, this assumes that their ancestry is primarily elven. Most commonly, this would mean that both of their parents are of elven ancestry.
Some characters have mixed ancestries, however. For example, a character can have an elven parent and a human parent, or a dwarven parent and a halfling parent. Other characters can have parents who themselves have mixed ancestry. The rules in this section provide mechanics to generate such mixed ancestries. Of course, almost all characters in a fantasy world probably have some degree of mixed ancestry. These rules are intended to allow players to make characters that have two primary ancestries, however, rather than one dominant one.

Finally, rules for creating diverse cultures follow the rules for mixed ancestries. Diverse cultures represent those that are a combination of several cultures, as one might find in a multicultural urban environment.

**Mixed Ancestral Traits**

Your character has inherited qualities from biological parents of two or more ancestries. Perhaps your parents are an elf and a human, a halfling and a gnome, an elf and a dwarf, or one or both are themselves of mixed ancestry. Regardless, your ancestries provide you certain inherited characteristics. In addition, you may have traits that are unique to children who claim more than one ancestry.

Characters of mixed ancestry might look almost entirely like one parent or the other, or anywhere on the continuum between them. Thus the two children of a dwarf-tiefling couple might both look tiefling, dwarven, some combination, or one might look tiefling and the other dwarven, even though they are siblings.

**Age.** Pick two of your ancestries from the available options. Select a number in between the two ages listed for when people of those ancestries come of age, and again between the numbers listed for their average lifespans. Write these down; these are your age at which you became an adult and your expected lifespan.

**Size.** Pick the listed size from your chosen ancestries and choose one of the sizes listed. If both of your ancestries are size Medium, then so are you. If both are Small, then likely so are you. If both Small and Medium sizes appear in your chosen ancestries, you may choose which size you are.

**Speed.** Your base walking speed is 30 feet, unless both of your chosen ancestries have a base speed of 25 feet, or your size is Small, in which case your base walking speed is 25 feet.

**Darkvision.** As long as one of your ancestries has the Darkvision trait, you may have darkvision as well, if you choose.

**Additional Ancestral Traits.** You may select one other ancestral trait from each of your two chosen ancestries. For example, you might select Fey Ancestry from an elven ancestor, or Hellish Resistance from a tiefling ancestor. If you have a dragonborn ancestor, you may select Draconic Ancestry and either the Breath Weapon trait or the Damage Resistance trait, but not both.
A note on balance

Some players may have concerns that the various ancestries and cultures here are not perfectly balanced. What’s more, a certain kind of player might try to use these rules to make a more powerful ancestry and culture combination than other players have. To be sure, these ancestries and cultures are not perfectly balanced. Then again, the original races are not perfectly balanced either, yet this has not broken the game or caused all players to use the same few slightly more optimized races.

Allowing players to mix and combine ancestries and cultures is primarily valuable for narrative, rather than mechanics, but these options have been created with mechanical balance in mind as well. As always, you can discuss with your players if you wish to adapt the rules for your table.

Diverse Cultural Traits

People of mixed ancestries are most often found in multicultural communities where elves, humans, dwarves, and halflings, among others, live together. Anyone of any ancestry can be found in such communities, which is one of the strengths of such cultures.

Ability Score Increase. Your Charisma score increases by 2, and two other ability scores of your choice increase by 1.

Alignment. Those who grow up in such diverse cultures often share a pluralistic and open-minded bent. They value both personal freedom and creative expression, demonstrating neither love of leaders nor desire for followers.

Skill Versatility. You gain proficiency in two skills of your choice.

Languages. You can speak, read, and write Common and two extra languages of your choice that might be spoken in your community.

Appendixes

Below are some additional rules, options, and resources for replacing race in your favorite fantasy roleplaying game.

Appendix A: Personalized, Anti-Essentialist Culture

The rules above reject the essentialist concept of race, which supposes that your biological ancestry determines your personality and abilities. They instead assign many of those features to one’s culture, particularly those that refer to skills and alignment. However, you might not like the somewhat essentialist picture this paints of culture; after all, do we want to say that simply because you grew up among orcs, you are somewhat more likely to be strong or athletic? Do we want to assign any traits at all, uniformly, to a culture?

It might be reasonable to say yes, if the orcish communities in a setting simply have a more physically oriented education curriculum for their young people.
Similarly, elvish communities might have their children study a simple cantrip or the use of the longbow. This may not, at a glance, seem problematic to some people.

Even so, if you would like to avoid even this hint of cultural essentialism, you have another option, one that can allow you to retain elements of cultural representation while adjusting them to your liking. What’s more, you can retain or jettison whichever elements of the culture concepts presented above that you prefer.

For example, perhaps your character grew up in a traditional orcish community, but she was the child of the village scribe, so she has a +2 to Intelligence rather than Strength. Or maybe you are of gnomish ancestry and grew up among gnomes, but you chose to become a gnomish wrestler, and so have a +2 to Constitution rather than Intelligence. After all, in every culture, one can find a vast variety of interests, personalities, and professions.

The option below allows you to personalize any culture. To use it, describe what ancestries are found in this culture, then select the traits below, as usual. Combine this with one of the ancestry options above to customize your character even more.

**Personalized Cultural Traits**

**Ability Score Increase.** One ability score of your choice increases by 2, and another ability score of your choice increases by 1.

**Alignment.** What alignment your character adopts is entirely independent of your ancestry or culture and, as such, is a personal choice.

**Personalized Proficiencies.** You gain proficiency in two skills of your choice.

**Languages and Tools.** You can speak, read, and write Common. You have proficiency with one tool of your choice and speak one extra language that might be spoken in your community.

**Appendix B: Other Races**

The rules contained in this document refer only to the races and subraces available under the Open Gaming License. Fortunately, you can use the principles in this document with other races and subraces in your favorite roleplaying game. The following process allows you to replace any race with a corresponding ancestry and culture.

**Step 1: Identify Ancestral Traits**

Only traits that could only be biologically inherited belong in this category. These include things like age, darkvision, size, and speed. Other traits that seem biological, such as resistances (like tieflings’ resistance to fire or dwarves’ resistance to poison) might belong here as well. In the above examples, we also opted to include a few traits that grant advantage on certain saves, such as Fey Ancestry and Gnome Cunning, since these may be a result of magical ancestry rather than upbringing.

Ancestry might include physical traits like wings, claws, horns, gills, long limbs, powerful builds, or natural armor. Other unique bodily features also fall into this category, such as the ability to mimic sounds or change shape.
Beyond these obvious bodily features, most other racial traits—both from the Open Gaming License and from other races—can be ascribed to culture rather than ancestry.

**Step 2: Identify Cultural Traits**

Any trait that concerns a skill or magical talent can usually be attributed to a creature’s culture. These include language proficiencies, skill and tool proficiencies, and any form of training with weapons or armor. Some examples in the rules above are Dwarven Combat Training, Elven Weapon Training, or the orcish Powerful Attack, which suggests a style of combat that is reasonably understood as having been learned.

In the above rules, magical skills and talents are included this category, such as an elf’s cantrip and a tiefling’s ability to cast *thaumaturgy* or *darkness*. Some might balk at this, suggesting that these abilities are innate biological inheritances, like a dragonborn’s breath weapon. Though this may be reasonable, it’s also reasonable to assume that such magical talents require training and that elves or tieflings who grow up outside their own cultures may not learn to harness these abilities. Conversely, it may be odd to say that someone of dwarven or halfling ancestry could learn a cantrip from being raised among elves or the *darkness* spell from growing up in a tiefling community, but we would rather ascribe as many traits as possible to culture to avoid biological essentialism, as well as to avoid making some ancestries more mechanically powerful than others.

Next, ascribe any ability score increases to culture. This may be controversial to some who imagine that all dwarves have a high Constitution, for example, or that all orcs are naturally strong. And to some extent, a few biologically inherited traits remain a part of these ancestries, including Dwarven Toughness and orcs’ Relentless Endurance. Nevertheless, increased Strength or Intelligence simply cannot occur without experience. Even if we were to suppose that orcs possess a slight genetic disposition toward Strength or gnomes toward Intelligence, individuals who do not exercise or study will not develop those supposedly inborn traits. In other words, simply being of orcish or gnomish ancestry is not sufficient to grant ability score increases. Thus, they are best suited to come from culture, since that is where education, training, and experience occur.

**Step 3: Check for Balance**

Once you have divided up the standard racial traits and assigned them to either ancestry or culture, evaluate them for balance. Ideally, the traits from the original race divide equally between ancestry and culture. Try to allocate traits to both ancestry and culture so as to make either a desirable mechanical choice. Though many players choose their character’s ancestry and culture based on roleplay and backstory motives, it’s helpful to balance the mechanical advantages so that they are perceived as equally viable, with no one ancestry or culture clearly more powerful than the others.

Congratulations! You have now transformed the outdated race category in your favorite fantasy roleplaying game into the less problematic and more flexible categories of ancestry and culture!
On complexity versus ease of use

Some players might prefer to choose traits from a menu so they can exactly specify their character’s traits. These rules avoid such an approach, for two reasons. First, point buy ‘race’ building systems are so much more complex as to be prohibitive. One goal of these rules is to encourage as many tables as possible to remove racial essentialism from their fantasy gaming, so these rules should be as simple as possible, requiring only two simple choices rather than one. Second, spending a pool of points by choosing ‘racial’ traits from a menu robs ‘races’, ancestries, and cultures of narrative value. If every elf, dwarf, and halfling can have literally any of the fantasy traits, from wings, to darkvision, to fey ancestry, to halfling nimbleness, in what sense do these categories have any narrative purpose at all? This approach is certainly an option, but doing so robs the fantasy worlds in which we play of a rich narrative resource which many players would miss.
Light of Unity
An Ancestry and Culture Adventure

The forest village of Unity has fallen under a curse. A shadowy force emanates from the heart of the forest, corrupting all things. What is behind it? And how can the characters work together to put it to an end?

Adventure Primer

“So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.”
–Baha’U’Llah

This adventure is optimized for five 3rd-level characters, but it can be scaled for a party of three to seven characters between 2nd and 4th level. It takes approximately two to four hours to play and begins in a forest village in your setting of choice.

Adventure Background

The multicultural village of Unity lies near the heart of a great forest. At the forest’s center, a forgotten portal to the Realm of Shadows is slowly corrupting the land, leading the village elder, Urka Stonehammer, to issue a call for help.

The portal lies in the hidden Temple of Shadow beneath a circle of obsidian obelisks. Within, a magical barrier known as the Lightward keeps the shadow at bay. The Lightward was once sustained by an order of clerics, but they died out long ago and the ward is fading. Recently, a group of human archaeologists accidentally disrupted the ward, causing shadowy corruption and denizens of the dark realm to spill forth.

Only renewing the Lightward can drive out the shadows and save Unity, but doing requires blessings from the three major cultures represented in the community.

Adventure Summary

The adventure’s story is spread out over three to four parts and takes two to four hours to play.

• Call to Action: A Village Cursed. The characters have heard the call for help and come to Unity, where they see the effects of the curse firsthand. The village elder, Urka Stonehammer, welcomes them and asks for their aid.

• Part 1: Investigate the Curse. Urka directs the characters to investigate the curse and speak to several members of the community. The evidence suggests that the source of the curse is at the center of the forest.

• Part 2: The Circle of Stones. The characters arrive at the circle of obelisks and must fend of shadow zombies to gain entry to the temple beneath.

• Part 3: Temple of Shadows. Within the temple, the characters find three braziers that need to be lit—but once they begin to do so, shadowy foes emerge from the gate and attack! Only after the braziers are lit and the foes are defeated can the temple be cleansed.

• Conclusion. The characters return to Unity, celebrated as the heroes they are.
**Adventure Hooks**

The characters may have come to help the village of Unity for a number of reasons. For example:
- They may be freelancers for hire, hired to solve the mystery of the curse and protect the community.
- One or more of the characters is from Unity, or has family here, and an elder, family member, or friend has asked them to intervene.
- They heard rumors of corruption in the forest and wish to help.

**Adjusting the Adventure**

This adventure includes suggestions for scaling encounters to fit the capabilities of the party. To approximate the party strength for the adventure compared to the expected average party level (APL), consult the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Composition</th>
<th>Party Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-4 characters below 3rd level</td>
<td>Very weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 3rd-level characters</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 characters above 3rd level</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 characters below 3rd level</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 3rd-level characters</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 characters above 3rd level</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7 characters below 3rd level</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7 3rd-level characters with an APL equal to 3</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7 characters above 3rd level</td>
<td>Very strong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Arriving at Unity**

The people of Unity are plagued by a curse of unknown origin. The characters are just arriving as the village elder approaches to greet them.

Journeying through a secluded valley, you emerge from the forest road to see an industrious-looking village, featuring an impressive mixture of architecture, but surrounded by fields overgrown with thick thorny vines. As you enter the village, you can’t help but notice the dour looks of the residents.

The village is built within a majestic forest, with large elven, orcish, and dwarven communities, as well as smaller human and gnomish ones.

**Dimensions & Terrain.** Unity is a village of a few hundred people, with well-built homes surrounding a village square that features a large communal garden. A few fields that once held crops surround the village, but they are overgrown with vines.

**Weather.** The air is cool and damp, with a chill wind and heavy clouds above.

**Sounds & Smells.** People whisper as the characters arrive. There’s a fetid, swampy smell in the air, though no swamps are nearby.
Creature Information

The villagers themselves are of a variety of ancestries, with orcish, dwarven, and elven, being predominant, both in terms of ancestry and culture.

Urka Stonehammer, the head of the village council, greets the characters. She wears a red, ankle-length, stitched surcoat over a cotton shirt. On her head she wears a linen caul that contains her bundled hair. Her face is lined with deep wrinkles, suggesting a life of laughter.

Another seven or eight villagers have gathered in the square as well.

Call to Action: A Village Cursed

Urka thanks the adventurers heartily and offers them food and drink, as well as warm, damp towels for their hands and faces. She explains what the villagers are calling a curse: their fields are overgrown with thorny vines and many folks have fallen ill. More generally, people feel ill at ease, as though some fell presence is watching them. Urka entreats the characters to speak to the other village elders and investigate the effects of the curse, so that they might discover its origin and stop it.

Prove Your Worth. Urka says that, if the characters demonstrate their ability and virtue, then the elders will each teach them a blessing, which acts as a boon against evil. Urka and the other elders are hesitant to grant the characters this power until they prove that they are worthy of the blessing.

Part 1: Investigate the Curse

The characters must investigate the symptoms of the curse and speak to several of the villagers, especially the other two elders.

Objectives

The characters must learn where to find the source of the curse. Ideally, the characters also receive the three blessings they need to rekindle the Lightward and close the shadow portal.

Earning the Blessings

Each elder knows a blessing in the language of their culture. Should the characters impress or please the elders, they grant the blessing by speaking the words aloud, slowly, so that the characters can learn it and use it in the future.

Urka’s Dwarvish Blessing. “Megum við sjá ljóss okkar í þér og ljóss þitt í okkur. Saman skulum við tendra ljósið sem berst frá myrkrinu.”

Cela’alon’s Elvish Blessing. “Lotesse lye elea lye me’a e’ lle ar’ lle me’a e’ lye. Alye’, let lye tursa i’ me’a tanya tampa i’ huine.”

Korgash’s Orcish Blessing. “Maausan kulknej ukee our lighav shal lat agh your lighav shal uuk. Togeavher, leav uuk kindur avhe lighav avhaav warduk parmab avhe darkneukuk.”