

'On Wisdom and Intelligence Scores in Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition'

An introduction the Dungeons & Dragons

'Worldbuilding' - the term describes the process of laying out the foundational systems of a fantasy setting, and it is now ubiquitous in entertainment broadly. But to dwell on this term, I think, conveys some of the remarkable ambition involved in the task of creating a fictional world.

To build a world, one claims some understandings of how 'a world' functions. In creating characters to populate this world, one claims the ability to assemble, with the tools available to them - digital, physical, of the imagination - a 'someone.'

And because any idea of 'the real world' and 'personhood' is an abstraction in itself,¹ and because each project of fiction draws on shorthand established by other work in the genre, a fictional world is a tangled web of abstractions on top of abstractions. Each of these abstractions, consciously or unconsciously, facilitate certain exercises of power. At every step, choices are made about what should and should not exist, and about the nature of the relationships between entities, and through this, the logics of the historical forces of colonialism and modernity transform into the language of elves and dragons, or spaceships and aliens.

Until this point, everything we have said applies to movies, cartoons, books - to any genre that creates fiction. What sets the role-playing *game* apart, however, is that games, because they must limit the actions of one or more *players*, must define their *rules*, and by this, must make many of their abstractions explicit and tangible.

A movie needs only to lay out the logics of its world to the extent that they are engaged by its plot. The role-playing game, however, must build its world to the extent that it accommodates all the choices that a player is allowed to explore.

So as player agency expands, the game designer(s) must define the outcomes of a wider range of possible actions, and by this, reveal more of their implicit beliefs about the world.

It is within this framing that I am excited to present to you the way that Wizards of the Coast LLC introduces its property, the game Dungeons & Dragons, to new players² -

¹ "[If we accept that the world is bigger than our thoughts,] the only way we can approach the world's complexity is by abstracting it, substituting its irreducible alterity with manageable concepts." - Critical Globalisms Syllabus, 2020

² <https://dnd.wizards.com/get-started>

The Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game is about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery. Like games of make-believe, D&D is driven by imagination. It's about picturing a crumbling castle in a darkening forest and imagining how a fantasy adventurer might react to the challenges that scene presents.

In this fantasy world, the possibilities are limitless.

Unlike a game of make-believe, D&D gives structure to the stories—a way of determining the consequences of the adventurers' actions. Players roll dice to determine whether their attacks hit or miss and whether their characters can scale a cliff, roll away from the strike of a magical lightning bolt, or pull off some other dangerous task. Anything is possible, but the dice make some things more probable than others.

“In this fantasy world, the possibilities are limitless.”

What sort of game can sustain this claim?

~

Here is an overview of how the game is played, from the ‘Player’s Handbook’ (referred to as the PHB from here on) - the core rulebook for Dungeons & Dragons. These lines are from the 5th edition of the PHB, which is the most recent and widely played version of the game.

“In the Dungeons & Dragons game, each player creates an adventurer (also called a player character, or PC) and teams up with other adventurers (played by friends). [...] One player, however, takes on the role of the Dungeon Master (DM), the game’s lead storyteller and referee. The DM creates adventures for the characters, who navigate its hazards and decide which paths to explore. [...] The game has no real end; when one story or quest wraps up, another one can begin, creating an ongoing story called a campaign. Many people who play the game keep their campaigns going for months or years- [...] The group might fail to complete an adventure successfully, but if everyone had a good time and created a memorable story, they all win.” (PHB p. 5)

This is the typical flow of gameplay: The DM sets the scene, the players engage with the scene through their individual characters (their ‘player characters’ or PCs), dice are rolled to determine the success if the PCs’ actions “in cases where the outcome of an action is uncertain” (PHB pg5), and the DM describes the impact of these actions on the world.

This basic system was first developed in bits and pieces in the 1970s by two tabletop gamers, Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax from the midwestern USA. Since then, D&D has had an eventful life - from moderate success among tabletop fans in the 70s, to gaining wider popularity in the 80s and then promptly becoming a target of the ‘Satanic Panic’ that overtook the country during that decade. By the late 90s, TSR, the company founded by Gygax and a partner for the purpose of distributing the early versions of D&D, was on the verge of bankruptcy - older fans had moved on, and D&D was forced to compete with video games and smartphones for the attention of younger fans.³

³ "The Story of D&D Part One: The Birth, Death, and Resurrection of Dungeons & Dragons." Geek and Sundry, 4 Jan. 2018,

A struggling TSR was purchased by Washington, USA-based game publishers Wizards Of The Coast LLC, who embarked on a multiple decade process of streamlining the convoluted rules that TSR had spread across multiple rulebooks, as well as of marketing to a wider audience. However, this project alone cannot explain the remarkable resurgence that Dungeons & Dragons has experienced since around 2017. In a 2019 article for NYT, critic Ethan Gilsdorf outlines the factors that came together to propel D&D's "surprising return to mainstream culture":

- The release of the 5th Edition of their rulebook - the most concise and accessible volume to date
- What Gilsdorf calls the "mainstreaming of geek culture"
- A generation of celebrities that grew up with fond memories of D&D and bring the game to new audiences - some examples: Stephen Colbert, Anderson Cooper, and Vin Diesel
- Digital distribution platforms like the video streaming site Twitch and the surge in popularity of podcasts has allowed for people to easily broadcast their game sessions, and allowed others to experience the stories and the characters without having to open up the rulebook or coordinate a group of friends⁴

"Over half of the new people who started playing Fifth Edition got into D&D through watching people play online," says Nathan Stewart, senior director at D&D.⁵ I count myself in this new wave of D&D players, whose image of the game has been fundamentally shaped by the way that it is played by comics, celebrities, and voice actors for audiences online. These live-streamed games are a far cry from the tables that Gygax and Arneson must have been part of in 1974. The original versions of D&D were *heavily* combat focused - rules were optimized for 6 'combat encounters' for each day of in-game adventuring. Player Characters were expected to fall like flies. It was common for players to create multiple PCs just to get through a single dungeon puzzle.

This early philosophy towards D&D could not be further from this⁶ [footnoted] reaction that fans had to an unexpected PC death in 2019, during the second season of the livestreamed D&D show 'Critical Role.' The entire cast had to make statements on twitter to placate their legion of despondent/furious fans.

'Critical Role,' the show that introduced me to the game, was the first group to stream full sessions of their D&D game online - which was a bold move considering that these sessions typically last between 3 and 4 hours each. However, their style of play was a great fit for the medium. The cast were friends from the LA voice acting circuit, and they had committed to their D&D characters like they would have to a professional voice acting project - with each of them developing full personas for the PCs, and immersing themselves fully in their characters and their fictional relationships. Instead of '6 combat encounters per day' (combat mostly consists of rolling dice and doing math - not much fun from a spectator's perspective), we got a group of

⁴ Gilsdorf, Ethan. "In a Chaotic World, Dungeons & Dragons Is Resurgent." The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia, 13 Nov. 2019,

⁵ DeVille, Chris. "The Rise of D&D Liveplay is Changing How Fans Approach Roleplaying." The Verge, 16 Nov. 2017,

⁶ Hoffer, Christian. "['Critical Role' Cast Speaks Out After Controversial Episode](#)." GAMING, 27 Dec. 2018,

fully realized characters travelling a rich high-fantasy setting, into which Matthew Mercer, the dungeon master for Critical Role, had woven opportunities for each of the characters' complex and emotional backstories to be revealed and explored. There was love and loss, triumph and heartbreak - plenty of laughs, and even some tears. It was a product that could compete on video platforms with movies and TV for the attention of someone that had never played D&D before. The dice added unpredictability and drama, and the live chat feature on the website Twitch, where the streams were hosted, allowed audiences to feel like part of the action. The formula worked - Critical Role is now in its second season, with nearly 2000 cumulative hours of content, and 60k viewers for their weekly streams, and millions of fans worldwide. Other popular shows since, while varying in mood and setting, have continued with this formula of character-focused, narrative-heavy gameplay, and the new players inspired by these shows expect the same from their own games. D&D, which began as an alternate ruleset for war tactics games, I would argue, is seen by many new players as the site of a deeply personal exercise in representation of self, and an opportunity to establish meaningful relationships and community in the real world.

These new demands on the game from a new and increasingly diverse player base have exposed issues - both with regard to the accessibility of the D&D community, and the representation of different groups in official D&D published content. In a 2016 interview with Game Informer magazine, Critical Role cast member Laura Bailey said, "A lot of girls have written me on Twitter or on Facebook and said, "I never knew this was something I was allowed to do, and now that I've seen you guys playing, I've started actively finding a group."" It's not difficult to see how earlier versions of the game might have dissuaded these women from participating. The first rulebook for D&D was titled 'Men and Magic.' In the early rulebooks, scantily clad women in chainmail bikinis abound. Female characters were given an inherent penalty to strength. While I could not find demographic stats for the game in the 70s and 80s, it's hard to imagine that this was a welcoming environment for anyone except for Gygax, Arneson, and their cohort of white male table-top gamers. In 2019 however, Wizards of the Coast reported that the proportion of female players was "38% and climbing."⁷ Critical Role has also established that many of its in-game characters are LGBTQ+, and has highlighted same sex relationships between its non-player characters ('NPCs' - which are controlled by the Dungeon Master, or DM⁸) in both seasons. A lesbian relationship between two PCs is developing in the second campaign as of December 2020. D&D and Wizards have also improved representation of gender and sexuality, with male and female presenting characters appearing about evenly in the illustrations that populate their official published content, and LGBTQ relationships between NPCs featuring prominently in their prewritten adventure modules. Game writer Eleanor Tremeer compiles some of their efforts in these areas in their article for Geek and Sundry.⁹

⁷ Alimurung, Gendy. "How Dungeons and Dragons Somehow Became More Popular Than Ever." The Washington Post, 18 Apr. 2019.

⁸ Sorry for all these abbreviations.

⁹ Tremeer, Eleanor. "D&D Has Excellent LGBT Representation." Geek and Sundry, 8 July 2019.

D&D has, in my opinion, struggled a great deal more to translate their stated ideals¹⁰ of inclusion and diversity into practice when it comes to issues of representations of race, ethnicity, and cultures. A great deal of critical work to address this has been done by PoC players of the game - oftentimes players who are members of the groups that D&D materials have represented in a derogatory way. Gamers and critics @danielhkwan and @DeeEmSteve host an award winning (26 hour!) video series titled 'Asians Read: AD&D Oriental Adventures' - an extensive critical reading of a pair of official D&D books from 1985 and 2001 that establish the "mystical world of the Orient!" in the world of D&D.¹¹ The organization they established, Asians Represent, also did a similar project on another D&D publication - 'Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures,' from 1992 ("Adventure in an exotic land of sultans, scimitars, and genies!")¹² Both these adventures are still being sold by Wizards of the Coast. To Wizards' credit, recent efforts have been made to remove harmful stereotypes from their newer books, and also to reprint some problematic modules, however, Oriental Adventures and Al-Qadim seem too deeply entrenched in stereotypes to be salvaged without a full redesign, and Wizards has not announced plans for this at the time of writing.

I lay out this context in order to serve as a topic introduction as well as introduce some of the cultural significance of critical writing on D&D. To summarize:

- Dungeons & Dragons has experienced a resurgence in popularity over the last half-decade, a significant factor for which has been 'D&D liveplays' - unscripted sessions of D&D streamed online.
- A certain style of play thrives in this online format - with a focus on building relationships and narratives, forming a deep relationship with one's own PC, and developing them as an exploration of identity.
- New players drawn to D&D by these shows believe that D&D should be able to provide them with similar experiences in their own games.
- These new players are more diverse than the original player base of North American miniature war-game enthusiasts.
- Diverse players¹³ have found issues with how aspects of their identity and culture are represented in D&D's world, as defined by its published rulebooks and adventure modules.
- Steps are being taken by both D&D as well as independent creators to make the characters and geographical settings in the game, in Wizards' own words, "as welcoming and inclusive as possible" - "[for] everyone, not just fantasy versions of northern Europeans."¹⁴

¹⁰ Wizards of the Coast/D&D Team. "Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons | Dungeons & Dragons." D&D OfficialDungeons & Dragons, 17 June 2020,

¹¹ The Asians Represent Podcast. "Asians Read... AD&D Oriental Adventures (Part 1): Introduction." YouTube, 29 Mar. 2020,

¹² The Asians Represent Podcast. "Critical Read | Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures | Episode 1." YouTube, 22 June 2020

¹³ Defined in contrast to the group from the previous point

¹⁴ Wizards, "Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons | Dungeons & Dragons."

The work of identifying and eliminating reductive stereotypes is an important work. The blatant exoticism, sexism, and prejudice that has found its home in D&D's published content as well as the community that developed around its niche hobby roots not only excluded certain groups from the game, but also imposed itself on the imaginations of the players that have been engaged by the game over the years. The work of better representation in D&D is important not just to empower the imaginations of more diverse players, but also to prevent players from dominant groups from learning and reinforcing historical modes of oppression in their fantasy worlds. It is clearly important that the fictional continent of Zakhara (the site of the 'Al-Qadim' adventure module) not impose violent stereotypes onto Middle-Eastern players and the stories they want to tell, but it is also vital that Western players' imaginations of the Middle-East are not informed by the warped stereotypes present in the current version of Zakhara.

However, there is a level of game design that has largely escaped critical analysis in these discussions of representation, role-playing, and the building of fictional settings in D&D.

There are 6 numbers that form the mechanical core of every character built in Dungeons & Dragons - these numbers are called 'ability scores,' and no matter how culturally informed a future rewrite of Al-Qadim is, the characters that live in this place, and much of their ability to impose their will on the world around them will be defined by this conceptual foundation.

These ability scores are numerical representations of the attributes -

- Strength
- Dexterity
- Constitution
- Charisma
- Intelligence
- Wisdom

Attribute scores are the rarely interrogated foundation of D&D, and the genre of roleplaying games that it inspired lives in the shadow of these colossal abstractions.

Project Focus and Methodology

Each of these ability scores governs your effectiveness at certain types of actions in the game - these actions are called 'Skills.' A high 'Strength' score, for example, will make you more effective at the 'Athletics' skill. You would make an Athletics check when trying to leap across a chasm, or escape the grasp of a giant snake.

This should already raise some questions. Should being able to jump long distances and fight off a grapple be dependant on the same Ability score? I certainly know people that would be effective in one of those situations and not the other. Yet this is the type of shorthand that D&D must develop in order to accommodate 'endless possibilities.' Whether the player wants to

move a rock, cast a spell, or charm a king, there's got to be a score for that. And in the service of practicality, some generalizations must be made.

I am interested in how this system is constructed. Who was Gary Gygax imagining in his mind when he was thinking of a 'Strong' person? They were clearly good at both jumping and wrestling. How did he picture a 'Dextrous,' or 'Charismatic' person? The definition, quantification, and application of each of these terms is clearly loaded with subjectivity and implication. In each of the 6 ability scores, links are drawn between ability, phenotype, race, background, and vocation that deserve interrogation. I want to focus on two scores in particular - 'Intelligence' and 'Wisdom.'

These terms have been the site of application for real-world systems of power and of epistemic domination for centuries. I believe that the framing and deployment of 'Intelligence' and 'Wisdom' in D&D is likely fraught with many of the same implications. There is a rich archive of critical writing on real-world systems of knowledge and their implications - I intend to introduce some of these theories to the critical scholarship around D&D, to reveal the ways in which systems of power from the real world express themselves in the game world through the game's framing of its knowledge systems. I am interested in the impact of these framings - both on the agency of PCs in the game world, and on the imaginations of the players at the table.

As my primary text, I have chosen the *Player's Handbook* (PHB) and the *Dungeon's Master's Guide* (DMG) for the 5th edition (-the latest and most popular edition) of Dungeons & Dragons. These two books are the official 'core rulebooks' of the game, and are intended by Wizards of the Coast to cover everything that players and dungeons masters need to know to run a D&D game.

The format of my investigation is informed by Antero Garcia's 2017 paper, where they investigate how the systems of D&D shape racial and gender identities in the game-world.¹⁵ Their investigation follows three steps. To paraphrase, they are:

- How are gender, race, and power defined explicitly and implicitly in the rules systems of D&D?
- How do these constructions reflect the influences on the gaming system?
- How do these constructions shape player experience within D&D's virtual worlds?

Heavily borrowing from Garcia's method, I intend to structure my investigation in three similar steps:

- Step 1: How are 'Intelligence' and 'Wisdom' explicitly and implicitly defined in the Player's Handbook and Dungeon Master's Guide for the 5th edition of D&D?

¹⁵ Garcia, Antero. "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, vol. 24, no. 3, 7 Apr. 2017, pp. 232-246.

- Step 2: What real-world epistemologies are reflected in these definitions? What real-world identities and knowledges do these systems privilege?
 - Step 3: How can this analysis inform the construction of a more equitable D&D knowledge system?
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Step 1: Explicit and implicit definitions

As of 2020, D&D is over 45 years old. As the game has grown, more and more rules and characters have been piled on top of the Ability score system, which has remained largely unchanged through the decades. Hundreds of creatures, scores of spells, and whole new Races and Classes have been added to the game, each with its own relationship with the concepts of 'Intelligence' and 'Wisdom.' While the explicit definitions of the terms might have remained stable, they are mobilized in new and interesting ways with each new addition of content to the game.

With all this considered, the question, "What are Intelligence and Wisdom scores in D&D and what do they do?" is not a straightforward one.

Explicit Definitions of Ability Scores

The PHB and DMG make numerous statements along the lines of "Intelligence measures ____" or "Wisdom reflects ____." There are also sentences like, "Some with high Intelligence might be ____," or, "Having a low Intelligence might leave you open to ____." I will be considering all of these statements as 'explicit definitions' for Intelligence and Wisdom for the purpose of this investigation.

I will not quote all the relevant passages from the rulebooks in this paper for the sake of brevity, but I have footnoted a link to the Google Doc¹⁶ where I note all the relevant sections from the PHB and DMG, and provided page numbers for reference. I hope it will be a useful reference to use while reading this paper, as it contains the original language from PHB and DMG which I will often be paraphrasing here.

Collating all the explicit definitions (documented in the first sheet of the Doc), we find that Intelligence is associated with:

- Rationality, logic, and deduction
- Information recall and memory
- Years of study at an institution

Wisdom is associated with:

- Intuition

¹⁶ [Google Doc Link](#)

- Keen senses and awareness
- Mysticism and spirituality

Many of these are highly abstract and loaded terms in their own right, so let us wait until more connections can be drawn.

We can develop our understanding of these terms further by means of implicit definitions, i.e. How Intelligence and Wisdom are *applied* in the game rules. These applications of the Ability scores is what I will be exploring in rest of the sections of Step 1.

Ability Scores and 'Class'

In D&D, Ability scores influence how effective you are at your chosen role in the party - this role is called your 'Class.' For example, the 'Fighter' class relies on either Strength or Dexterity to hit its enemies and deal damage. In the PHB, there is one Class that relies on Intelligence for its effectiveness, and two that rely on Wisdom. All three are Classes that use magic, but in very different ways. The Class that relies on Intelligence is the Wizard, and the Classes that rely on Wisdom are the Cleric and the Druid. Full descriptions of these Classes from the PHB can be found on sheet 2 of the Doc. Here are the significant notes for the purposes of this paper:

Wizards:

- They gain their magic through "years of apprenticeship and countless hours of study"
- They can "manipulate the structure of reality" and "unravel "the secrets of the multiverse"
- They dedicate their lives to spellcasting

Clerics:

- Their power is granted by a deity, and they gain magic by "devotion and intuitive sense of [their] deity's wishes"
 - (The PHB doubles down on this to explicitly tell us that "Harnessing divine magic doesn't rely on study or training [...]")

Druids:

- They are "priests of the old faith" who gain magic either through-
 - The blessings of a nature deity
 - Or "a transcendent union" with nature itself
- Druids work to teach "civilized folk to live in harmony with nature."

Through this, we are told that the Intelligent Wizards gain power by spending years studying the fundamental truths of the universe.

The wise Clerics and Druids are granted power indirectly, channelled either through a deity or through the mystical powers of nature.

Both Wisdom-based classes are 'spiritual,' while the Intelligence-based class is concerned with 'knowledge.'

Ability Scores and 'Skills'

Having a high ability score will make you naturally more effective at a certain group of 'Skills.' In sheet 3, we can find the list of 'Skills' that are governed by Intelligence and Wisdom - each of which have 5 skills under their purview.

Intelligence Skills:

- Arcana, History, Investigation, Nature, Religion

Wisdom Skills

- Animal Handling, Insight, Medicine, Perception, Survival

This grouping is immediately suspect. Druids have a transcendent bond with nature, and clerics can literally talk to their gods, but they are both Wisdom-based classes, and 'Nature' and 'Religion' are both Intelligence checks. This means that a high-Intelligence Wizard will nearly always be more useful when the PCs come across an obstacle that requires understanding of Nature or Religion to overcome.

Ability Scores and 'Races'

Just as 'Class' in D&D refers, more or less to vocation or party role, 'Race' is a troubling misnomer - because 'Race' refers to 'species' in the world of D&D. This usage of 'Race' as 'species' is inspired by Tolkien, who was the first to use the term to describe the realm of fundamental and irreconcilable biological and cultural difference between entities.¹⁷

Each race and subrace¹⁸ in D&D has intrinsic bonuses to certain ability scores. In the PHB, there are 4 that have specific bonuses to Intelligence, and 2 with specific bonuses to Wisdom. I found that within the race of Elves, there was an opportunity for an interesting case study - the subrace 'Wood Elves' receive a Wisdom bonus, while subrace 'High Elves' receive an intelligence bonus. As they are both types of elves, comparing them to see what made one group Wise and the other Intelligent might be revealing.

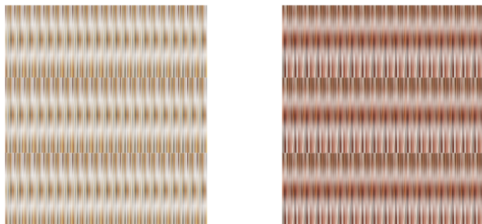
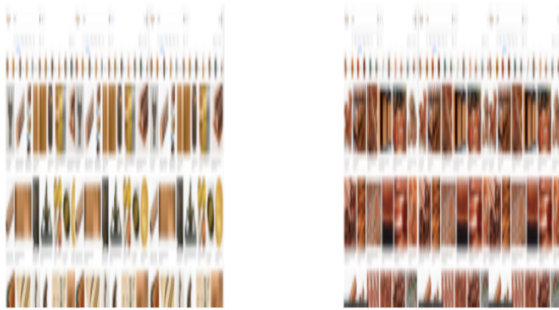
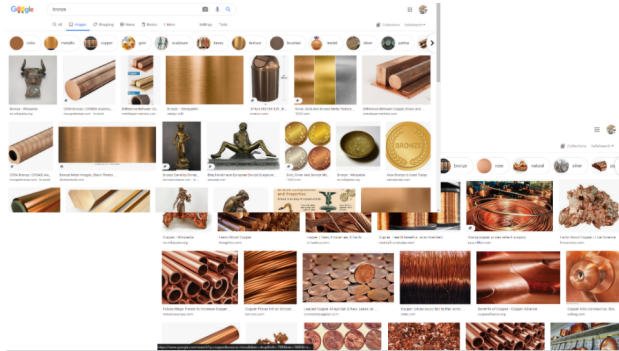
As the name might suggest, Wood Elves made their homes in "native forests." They had "keen senses and intuition" - which lines up with our understanding of the framing of the Wisdom ability score so far. High Elves, the Intelligent ones, had "a variety of different cultures within them," and their "keen mind" gave them a mastery of magic. So far, these two subraces each seem to represent excellent archetypes of their respective ability score! -which was why I was interested to find that the PHB took time to briefly mention their respective skin tones.

According to the rulebook, High elves have 'Bronze or Alabaster' skin, while Wood Elves have 'Copperish' skin. From 'Alabaster,' it is clear that the High Elves can have pale skin while the

¹⁷ Sturtevant, Paul B. "Race: the Original Sin of the Fantasy Genre." *The Public Medievalist*, 20 Dec. 2018.

¹⁸ Which races are afforded subraces and further degrees of physiological and cultural diversity is interesting, but beyond the current scope.

Wood Elves cannot, but I was also interested in 'Bronze' and 'Copperish' as somewhat more vague euphemisms for skin tone. In order to compare 'Bronze' and 'Copperish' as descriptors of skin tone, I ran a Google image search, and compressed the images multiple times to average out the colors.



(Images courtesy Google)

On the left is 'Bronze,' the skin tone of the Intelligent High Elves, and on the right is 'Copper' - for the Wise Wood Elves.

Ability Scores and 'Backgrounds'

Since D&D Players typically do not create characters that are newborn infants (-not conducive to epic fantasy storytelling), D&D has provided options for certain 'Backgrounds' that you can choose from during the process of creating your character. Backgrounds give some indication of what your character's life was like before they embarked on the adventure that you and the other players are about to create.

Since we start the game with our Ability scores and Class already decided, it can be assumed that Triss the Wizard, for example, developed their high Intelligence score and found their calling as an arcane spellcaster during their earlier years - the years that are described by the 'Backgrounds.' Thus, backgrounds provide clues as to how a Wise person might have gained their Wisdom, and an Intelligent person their Intelligence.

Conveniently for our purposes, the PHB has one background that is associated with Wisdom skills, and another tied to Intelligence skills. Their full descriptions can be found in the 'Backgrounds' sheet.

The Intelligence-based background is that of the 'Sage.'
The Wisdom-based background is that of the 'Folk Hero.'

A character that has lived as a Sage has spent their life "devoted to scholarly pursuits." In the medieval fantasy setting that D&D places itself, there is a certain class (economic class, not D&D class) of people who were able to spend their lives this way. As a sage, you "scour manuscripts and listen to the greatest experts" to become "a master in your fields of study."

The folk hero "come[s] from humble social rank." "The people of your home village regard you as their champion" and you stand up to defend "the common folk everywhere." When you select this background, you gain an ability called 'Rustic Hospitality'- "Since you come from the ranks of the common folk, you fit in among them with ease."

I was left wondering if it was even possible for the PHB to call a character 'poor' more times in two paragraphs than they had managed to do here.

Ability Scores and 'Creatures'

D&D uses the same system of Ability scores to describe every sentient creature in the game.

This means that we can see how the game assigns Intelligence and Wisdom scores to all manner of creatures - from zombies and dragons, to bats and sharks.

In the 'Creature Stats' sheet of the Doc, I have tabulated the Intelligence and Wisdom scores of every creature listed in the PHB. While there is another rulebook called the Monster Manual that contains hundreds more creatures and their Ability scores, I believe that these 30 from the PHB are a reasonably representative sample for our purposes.

We find that the average Intelligence score for creatures beyond the playable options for PC's (Elves, Humans, etc) is around 2 or 3, while the average Wisdom score is around 10 or 11.

Step 2: Identifying associated real world systems

Psychometry

Before addressing any of the findings that emerged in Step 1, I want to address the overarching idea that quantifying Intelligence and Wisdom represents - that it is possible to assign numerical values to an individual's mental capability.

Psychometrics is defined as "The art of imposing measurement and number upon operations of the mind." This definition comes to us from Victorian-era English polymath Francis Dalton, who was the founder of this field of study. Dalton was fascinated by the study of human difference, the extent to which it was hereditary, and the study of how Darwinian theories applied to human beings. Extending his study to measurement of the differences between cultures, he went on to invent the term 'eugenics,' in 1883.¹⁹ Applying his findings about the factors that determined the 'resilience' of certain civilizations, Galton, in not so many words, was an advocate of genocide. "There exists a sentiment, for the most part quite unreasonable-" he said, "against the gradual extinction an inferior race."²⁰

In the early 20th century, French psychologist Alfred Binet created the predecessor of the IQ test for the French Ministry of Education. At the time, it was created specifically in order to evaluate the academic performances of students in the same classroom, in order to determine for whom additional tutoring might be necessary.²¹ When American psychologist Lewis Terman translated the test to English in 1916, he framed it as a way to broadly measure a person's innate capacity for success. He was obsessed with the idea of 'genius' as a genetic/biological condition, and established the Intelligence Quotient, or 'IQ' test (based on Binet's work) as the way to measure it. Based on his tests, he wrote that Mexican-Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans possessed a "mental dullness [that] seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they came."²² He began the movement that we know today as scientific racism, and a few years later became chair of the Stanford psychology department.²³

¹⁹ Galton, Francis. "Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development." 1883, doi:10.1037/14178-000.

²⁰ Charny, Israel W.; Adalian, Rouben Paul; Jacobs, Steven L.; Markusen, Eric; Sherman, Marc I. (1999). *Encyclopedia of Genocide: A-H*. ABC-CLIO. p. 218. ISBN 978-0-87436-928-1.

²¹ O. L. Zangwill, 'Binet, Alfred', in R. Gregory, *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* (1987) p. 88

²² Terman, Lewis M. *The Measurement of Intelligence: An Explanation of and a Complete Guide for the Use of the Stanford Revision and Extension of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1916. Internet resource.

²³ Trivia: his son would go on to head Stanford's Engineering School and, as a way to provide local opportunities for graduating engineering students, established the 'Stanford Industrial Park,' inviting tech companies to set up on university land - this would become what we know today as Silicon Valley.

It is rare that a method framed to measure human psychological capacity does not produce results that line up with the racial and cultural beliefs of the framer. The question is, and always has been, “What is it being measured *for*?”

Totalities of Knowledge

By creating a system of Intelligence and Wisdom that can be applied to any creature in D&D, the game has created what scholar Anibal Quijano would call a ‘totality of knowledge.’ In his 2007 paper *Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality*, Quijano describes the concept as a ‘universal paradigm of knowledge’ that ignores the ‘irreducible’ and ‘contradictory’ nature of other ways of conceiving the world. By applying a very particular understanding of Intelligence and Wisdom to animals, magical beasts, and ethereal creatures from other dimensions alike, and then assigning them numerical values that allows them to be compared and ordered, D&D creates a totality of knowledge can be used as the basis of hierarchies. Ability scores make statements like, “giant eagles are more intelligent than orcs”²⁴ possible, creating a field of comparison for mental capability where there cannot reasonably be any, and then declaring one as more capable.

Quijano says that a very specific totality of knowledge was created by European Colonialism that was based on ideas of rationality and modernity. This was a system that allowed for domination, because the only alternative to the ‘rational’ was the ‘irrational,’ and the only alternative for the ‘modern’ was the ‘primitive.’ This system of knowledge, which used rationality as a universally applicable concept, allowed for Europe to dominate various parts of the world that did not match their framing of ‘modern’ and ‘rational’ in order to save them from their primitive ways. D&D’s framing of a rational and universal ‘Intelligence’ is clearly in this European Colonial tradition, and because it was framed as a way to justify physical and epistemological domination of non-Europeans around the world, diverse D&D players might find the Intelligence Ability score as defined in D&D to be incongruent with, or even contradictory to their own ideas about Intelligence.

Orientalism

In his landmark 1978 book *Orientalism*, scholar Edward Said, gives us the other side of the colonial project of knowledge construction. While they created the idea of the rational and modern subject with themselves at the center, they produced a certain image of the non-European as well - this process of imagining and portraying the ‘other’ in a way that justified European imperialism was what Said called ‘Orientalism.’ He observed that, to colonial Europe, the same images and language - of dangerous dark-skinned men with turbans and scimitars, seductive belly dancing women, mystical shamans, and primitive animalistic tribals - could be used to describe anywhere from Morocco to India. The same tendency is shown in the term ‘Orient’ itself, which has been used over the years to describe everything East of Western

²⁴ It’s true - Giant Eagles have an Intelligence score of 8, and Orcs have a 7

Europe - which encompasses the *vast* majority of the world, and its breadth of human experience.

Let us look closely at the Druids and the Clerics. One group pledge themselves to the protection of nature, and the other serve the interests of the gods. These two motivations have very little to do with each other - in fact, many gods are explicitly destructive and seek to raze the earth and turn it into a fuming hellscape. What could a cleric of a god of destruction and a druid of the forest have in common? Well, they're not Wizards. And that is, perhaps, the extent of it.

I believe that the ability score of Wisdom is the 'Orient' to the 'Occident' of Intelligence - it is the category of 'everything else.' Let us not forget that the dark skinned elves are wiser, and animals on the whole are wiser than they are intelligent.

The skills that are categorized under Wisdom make a lot more sense in this framing, because they are a real hodgepodge collection-
Animal Handling, Medicine, Perception, Insight, Survival.

Taming a wild horse? Wisdom.

Diagnosing and healing an injury? Wisdom.

Spotting distant ship on the horizon? Wisdom.

Discerning political intrigue? Wisdom.

Building shelter in the forest? Wisdom.

The only real commonality between these activities is that the exalted and cerebral Wizard of Gary Gygax and Fred Arneson's European fantasy tradition would rarely engage in them. He is up in his tower, above the common rabble with their petty concerns, pondering the great mysteries of the universe.

(Dis-)Embodied knowledge

When we first looked at the link between Skills and Ability scores, we discussed the incongruence between Druids and Clerics having profoundly deep bonds with Nature and Religion respectively, but Wizards being better at those Skills because they were categorized under Intelligence.

Here are the descriptions of the Nature and Religion skills from the PHB:

Nature: "Your Intelligence (Nature) check measures your ability to *recall lore* [my emphasis] about terrain, plants and animals, the weather, and natural cycles."

Religion: "Your Intelligence (Religion) check measures your ability to *recall lore* [my emphasis] about deities, rites and prayers, religious hierarchies, holy symbols, and the practices of secret cults."

Rather than introduce a Skill called 'Lore' that can be governed by Intelligence, the PHB takes the terms 'Nature' and 'Religion' and privileges *academic knowledge* of the topics over *practiced and embodied knowledge*. In D&D, you might be an expert at living in the wilderness

(through proficiency in the Survival skill), or you might be able to speak with animals or even *turn into one* (with your Druidic powers), but those abilities are governed by Wisdom, and do not give you the 'fundamental truths' of Nature. Wisdom might allow you to *do*, but you must be Intelligent in order to *know*.

This primacy afforded to conceptual knowledge rather than practical experience was discussed by Ijlal Muzaffar in his September 2020 lecture on design, colonialism, and intellectual property for the class *Ethics of Humanitarian Design*. In the discussion, he talked about the role that British colonialism played in the origins of copyright law. In order to gain ownership over the high quality handmade fabrics and crafts that were produced in India during the early colonial period, British capitalists established the conceptual category of the 'design.' Through this move, the craftspeople became simply laborers, while the 'intellectual property' that was the 'design' - which is where the true 'essence' of the object apparently was - could be owned by someone else entirely. Because the craftspeople could not produce a 'concept' in the language of the colonial capitalist, their knowledge was rendered illegitimate. *Doing* was severed from *knowing*, in order to allow for economic exploitation.

Physiognomy and Raced Labor

In Step 2, we saw how Ability scores are deployed in Race, Class, and Skills in D&D, but we have not explicitly stated the combined effect of these applications.

To state it clearly, the through-line of Ability scores between Race, Class, and Skills means that in D&D, your physical attributes determine your physical and mental ability, and make you naturally predisposes to certain types of work.

In his 2000 book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, the scholar Cedric J. Robinson describes how 'racialism' - which is the assigning of certain intrinsic characteristics to certain groups of people based on appearance - was used by European Colonial Capitalists to dehumanize the African people in such a way that they might be enslaved. The link between race and labor was constructed retrospectively to justify the violence. The 'Black slave' was, as Robinson incisively puts it, "a consequence masquerading as an anthropology and a history."

Put simply, the correlation that Attribute points constructs between Race and Class in D&D is also a way of linking a group's physical appearance to a 'natural' role for them in society. While the PHB encourages you to reject these associations, and play a certain Race "against type," they dig themselves deeper by explicitly stating that a 'typical' association between Race and Class - species and vocation - does in fact exist in their world.

Just like in the real world example of racial capitalism, I believe it is more than likely that the Ability score link between Race and Class in D&D came retrospectively - to justify the designers' imagination of what an elf, orc, or gnome's place should be in their fantasy society.²⁵

²⁵ This insight came out of my conversation with game designer James Mendez Hodes, whose article *Orcs, Britons, and the Martial Race Myth* was a big motivator in my choosing D&D as topic of this paper.

Step 3: Lessons for DMs and players on how to incorporate these findings

- Games scholar Ashlee Bird, who writes and teaches on indigeneity and video games, introduced me to a game system called FATE RPG - which is one of many that allow the player to define many of their own attributes, rather than just assign numbers to predetermined Abilities and Skills. This might go some way in breaking the trap of hierarchical totalities of knowledge as defined by Quijano, and move us towards the alternative that he lays out in his paper - of multiple legitimate knowledge systems coexisting in society.
- For those DMs who are not confident in proposing/collaborating on a wholly new framework for Ability scores in your home game, I'd like to draw attention to a 'Variant' rule in the PHB that I rarely see used. It is on page 175 and is titled, 'Variant: Skills with Different Abilities.' It lays out an example of a player trying to complete a long swim from an island to the mainland. The PHB suggests that if the player has proficiency in the Athletics skill, that proficiency might be added to the Constitution check - because it is more than plausible that proficiency in Athletics would help you swim more efficiently and conserve energy! This allowance in the PHB should open up a huge variety of options at your table for entirely reasonable combinations of ability scores and skill checks that were previously impossible - Intelligence-based Persuasion checks, for example! Or Wisdom-based Nature checks for your Druid!
- Every time a player runs up against a situation where the game mechanics seem inadequate, encourage them to make note of it so you can discuss it together with everyone in the group. Should how much a PC *cares* about a task affect their performance? I certainly think so, but aside from handing out inspiration dice, there is hardly a mechanic to accommodate for that. Discuss homebrew options with your players that allow them to better tell the stories that they want to tell.
- Transfer abilities and bonuses from Race to Background. This is a straightforward way to keep the fun Abilities and vital Ability score bonuses that different character builds rely on to be effective, but also prevent the problematic link between appearance and ability that we have been discussing so far. Did your high elf grow up in a mountain fortress, smithing steel from the age of 9? Take your +2 Constitution and proficiency with Smith's Tools... and maybe even the Half-orc's Unrelenting Endurance ability thrown in! The more atypical the combination of Ability scores, Abilities, and Skills the a player wants for their character, the more weird and wonderful their backstory has to be - and I think your game might benefit from the quirks, potential plot hooks, and roleplaying investment that these elaborate backstories might promote.

DMG p. 264 has a less dramatic version of this suggestion in a variant rule called 'Background Proficiency.'

Conclusion

I hope that this work has shown the extent to which the framing and application of Intelligence and Wisdom Ability scores reflect the colonial knowledge systems and Western archetypal imaginations of their authors. As the audience of D&D becomes more diverse, and new players look to D&D as an opportunity to explore representations of self that do not align with the Western white male power fantasy, I hope that they might recognize how the mechanical foundations that hold their stories might be hostile towards them.

I believe that Ability scores as a whole deserve more interrogation as this shift in playerbase and expectations takes place around the game, and I hope that this paper can be the first of many critical interrogations into the fundamental mechanics of D&D, and how they impose themselves onto both the PCs and the players around the table.
