



Gygax fixated on race. Whether or not it was “important” mechanically, he considered it important enough to continually describe what people had settled where, who their ancestors were, where they’d mixed—and more rarely, offer a comment like those shown above. Of all the information he could offer gamemasters, he no doubt considered this one essential. And while few games have been quite this obsessed with an overt discussion of human race—outside of a few infamous titles I won’t dignify with names—they have inherited his focus on “demihumans”. Even that very name implies a “lesser” quality through the demi- prefix. And while that clumsy name was often discarded, humans are almost always the dominant species.

Other “non-human” races often take on roles analogous to human cultures, often in ways that reflect the most troubling stereotypes of our modern world. The Tezcat of *Palladium RPG Book VII: Yin-Sloth Jungles* are perhaps the most offensive, crass form of the “African cannibal” stereotype. The Vistani of *Dungeons & Dragons’ Curse of Strahd* and *Critical Role’s Tal’Dorei Campaign* Setting represent a particularly virulent view of the Romani. And Gygax uses gnomes in *Epic of Ærth* as stand-ins for... Jewish people. I’m sure you can think of other examples from your RPG books.

Now, obviously “*don’t do that*” is the obvious response to such mistakes; it’s not the major design insight I’m looking to. There are ways of playing with traditional fantasy species like elves or dwarves that minimize their role as a particular ethnic stand-in. Talking to the minorities impacted by these is the easiest way to start with this sort of thing, but the point is categorization is a tool of power, whether that power is a governmental state or an influential game writer. And like all forms of power, it can become a type of violence—not in the sense of taking a swing at someone, but in the sense of attacking the identity and agency of real people. Granted, having a nasty stereotype in a game isn’t the major problem that discriminatory policing or hiring is. But it’s a tiny tentacle tip of a larger, more cephaloidic system of racism, and worth cutting out of our hobby.

But at the moment, I’m more interested in categorization as a larger part of our hobby. Classes pin people into roles, and the treatment of those roles is impacted by the prejudices of their developers—it should be no surprise that most of the early *Dungeons & Dragons* creators played spellcasters (chiefly, magic-users), and as a result they get the lion’s share of in-game toys. Whenever we categorize something, we often decide how potent it is in relation to others, intentionally or unintentionally. In addition, creating a list of things emphasizes its importance. Next to me, I have a 30-year old list of guns created for *Cyberpunk 2020* printed on dot-matrix paper. There’s scores of guns, from the real-world Ruger Blackhawk to the fictional Teen Dream. And with enough patience, I’m sure I could find out the best overall gun, and discard the rest of the list. Despite having over ten pages of guns and ammo, there’s no doubt some ideal weapon to draw on the streets of Night City. And the fact that list exists is testament to how important guns were to *Cyberpunk 2020* players; there’s no similar list of computers or cool jackets, ironically.

That isn’t always a bad thing. Picking from a tall list of options feels like a powerful choice. If I pick my gun, it’ll be an important gun, because I discarded another nine pages of gun to get to the one I put on my hip. The monster I put into a dungeon gains importance because I chose it for my players. But ideally, you want your categories and lists to serve a greater purpose.

On the other hand, games like *Apocalypse World* avoid the “superiority” game mainly by focusing on giving characters distinctly different options instead of simple numeric distinctions. The choice becomes one of choices, opening up future options for your character instead of just trying to find the right balance between caliber and range. That’s not to say you can’t have a list of guns, or a list of guns with different numbers, but bear in mind that doing so sends a signal to the players that guns are important. (Ideally, I think if you’re going to go full gun porn, at least make them distinct in terms of unique abilities / traits.)

If your character creation opens with a list of species and their traits, that pushes players to think of the differences between people and which is optimal for their goals. Having elves and dwarves be different doesn’t just simulate the differences between elves and dwarves, it also signals to players that they’re different and emphasizes their stereotypes. Mind, stereotypes aren’t necessarily a bad thing; they can be an easy way to help players build a concept. But they also create a potential bridge between fictional stereotypes and real stereotypes, and when your orcs are described as wielding spears, beating on hide drums, and having shamans... well. Mistakes can be made. But if your choice is between an Earth-born human, a space-born human, and an uplifted octopus, that’s a different story.

Lists are more than just collections of items; categorization informs the themes of your game and emphasizes items of importance. They’re a thing of power, even in the small sphere of a tabletop elfgame. That power can be used to guide and aid players, but it can just as easily mislead or hurt them.

Just something to put down on your...

