

Archives of role-playing's personal pasts

Nick Webber

Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK

nick.webber@bcu.ac.uk

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Introduction

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) are complex sites of play, and implicated in the production of meaning and affective relationships, characterised by emotional-physical responses.¹ Role-players are encouraged, through the structure and affordances of these games, to build such relationships with (their) game characters, supporting the development of serial narratives and experiences across multiple game sessions. In this short paper, I explore how these affective connections are built and maintained through, and in relation to, character (record) sheets, used in a range of games to specify, represent and ultimately capture and preserve game characters.

Materiality

Materiality is centrally important to discussions of players' relationship to tabletop role-playing games in particular,² and recent work by Banks, Bowman and Wasserman has also noted the functional materiality and (semi)tangibility of digital representations.³ For most players, the key relationship at play occurs between them and their in-game character(s); a relationship which recognizes the division of the two personas (player, character), even as it may also represent a substantial affective bond.⁴ During the moment of gameplay, there may be several sites of connection between player and character, manifest through multiple modes of material affordance, including figurines, character sheets and portraits, as well as through imagination.⁵ It is the character sheet, one of the more traditional and popular modes of character representation and connection,⁶ that concerns us here.

Character sheets, as a significant component of the majority of role-playing games, both analogue and digital, have been addressed in a range of research which considers their place within the activities of gameplay and role-play. They are understood as a "focal point of player agency,"⁷ a key source of information – for "what is true" – in an RPG,⁸ "effectively an avatar for the character"⁹ and, if nothing else, "a special sheet of paper," "similar to a CV."¹⁰ Functionally, these sheets record both static and "dynamic" or "volatile" information;¹¹ yet for many games (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*), the design of pro-forma and official character sheets focuses this information towards combat and acquisition, affording limited space for the affective information which players routinely seek to record – the character's best friend, for example, or where they were born.¹²

As noted, a character sheet is one of a range of modes of representation of the character, and thus of points of connection between player and character *during the moment of gameplay*. Yet non-digital role-playing games are, as many authors have suggested, ephemeral:

The moment they end, at the point of completion, they cease to exist. Each participant has memories of the game from their character's point-of-view, in addition to an assortment of props and costumes (live action role-playing games), character sheet and notes (table-top role-playing games, freeform).¹³

The character sheet, then, stands as one of the few enduring elements of the game post-play, notwithstanding suggestions that the sheets are, themselves, "an iconic bit of ephemera."¹⁴ It is perhaps for this reason that, although there are multiple connecting points, research suggests a tendency for players to see character sheets as in some way receptacles for the characters themselves, going beyond the suggestion of sheet-as-avatar to recognize a more substantial connection: "that Character Sheet *is* Silvernose [the Elf],"¹⁵ sheet *as* character, then. And while points of connection such as figur(in)es may be brought out for other uses between game sessions, a character sheet remains linked to a single, specified character in a material-ludic relationship.¹⁶

Game over?

As Evan Torner has suggested, prior to a play session, characters exist frozen on their sheets as "objects of sheer potentiality."¹⁷ Of course, this is equally true after a session, with characters returning to their rest like Bagpuss's friends, until next time. This is not to say that the mental model of the character, of which the sheet is a (or perhaps the) manifestation, is not subject to further exploration and amendment; but as noted already, the character sheet in some manner represents "truth," and we might thus interpret unrecorded amendments as a form of imaginative fiction. The sheet serves, then, as an authoritative record of a moment of a character's life, sedimenting information and growing with that character, as Rafael Bienia notes:

When the same character sheet is in use for several years, the changing character sheet expresses a certain age of a character that becomes a written account of the life and a material witness of the character beyond the narrative actors alone.¹⁸

This development may be manifest in stark terms: in Bienia's case, an initial four page sheet became, over time, a twelve page sheet.¹⁹ Yet if this sheet "captures" a character both through representation and as storage medium (the frozen pause of out-of-game), we must be mindful that there is no certainty of a future session of play. The temporary pause, from week to week or month to month, may easily become permanent. Thus, while the game may have ended, the character's story may not. And we must not forget that, for some characters, a given play session may encompass a more or less deliberate retirement, or the sudden end to a career in its prime.

Archives and manuscripts

How, then, can we think about these sheets, and the affective relationship they represent *beyond* the timeframe of a game itself? What, in essence, is the afterlife of these affective connections? The existence of online repositories of scanned character sheets attest that, for some at least, these sheets have an enduring value worthy of aggregation into what might be thought of as a personal archive or collection.²⁰ Personal collections of popular culture represent an example of what Walter Benjamin called "the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects."²¹ Through processes of collection, individuals build up not only a "tangible biography"²² but also an increasing affective connection with the objects thus collected. Such material, stored and, sometimes, shared, can be understood as a form of archive: partial, subjective and potentially inadequate,²³ but curated and kept even so. These archives may problematize and push back against normative conceptions of archives as formal repositories of (usually) written materials, responding to institutional events and contexts. Personal archives often contain "the objects,

ephemera, memorabilia and tactile ‘stuff’ that is most memorable, desirable or illuminating;²⁴ collections lent resonance “by the memories associated with them, and the personal experience invested in the event, and recalled through their contents.”²⁵ Elsewhere, individual engagements may emerge from a chance rediscovery of something put or filed away and long since forgotten about, prompting both memory and contemporary reflection; the experience of one Reddit poster, for example, in “finding a 20-year-old character sheet and finally realizing why your gamemaster was so nice.”²⁶

Our consciousness of the materiality of these sheets is not limited to the simple fact of their physical existence, however. As Bienia reminds us, these sheets are fragile in their own way, requiring and receiving care. Protective covers are used, damage through reinscription and erasure is minimized. “Old character sheets might show coffee stains, pencil notes with quotes from the game, doodles, and more – paper can turn yellow over time.”²⁷ In this respect, as we consider the nature of an archive of character sheets – the material archive, which informs the aforementioned digital scans, posts and reposts – there is in fact something in common with any other repository of manuscripts. The care for the material, and delicacy with which its various sections see erasure and reuse, recalls the creation of palimpsests: much like parchment, official character sheets are expensive. To understand character sheets in this way allows us to appreciate still further the nature of the affective relations taking place.

As mentioned already, pro-forma sheets – commonly used or replicated – offer few affordances for the recording of the affective information which often animates the connection between player and character. Responses to this are commonly found either in the margins of the sheets or attached as supplementary material, evoking ideas of annotation and marginalia. Marginalia serve as paratexts, here to the main text of the functional, form-like aspect of the character sheet. The form relates the character to the game as a system, as a set of rules; the marginalia, in turn, articulate something of the player’s relationship to the character – those things the *player* finds interesting or important to note, both about the events taking place for their character and about that character’s richness of being, their “self-definition in and by relation to the text.”²⁸ Marginalia, in historical manuscripts, also often served a mnemonic function, a means of committing ideas to memory through representations which offset the formality of a text by being rooted in everyday life.²⁹ Here, they consort with the formal text to capture the affective relationship of player and character, as they make that character more substantial, “a unique personality with a mind of its own.”³⁰ The character sheet, then, stands as a metaphor for, or representation of, a set of affective experiences and relations, which can be recollected through engagement with it as both text and paratext.

Conclusion

The character sheet is acknowledged as a major site through which players might connect to their TRPG characters, although it is one of only a number of different modes of engagement. Importantly, its specific material qualities allow it to extend the affective connection between player and character into the out-of-game space, and I argue it does so more successfully than other means of player/character connection. The specific materiality of the sheet allows it to serve a range of tangible functions, not only in building links between the social and diegetic worlds of the game,³¹ but also to contribute to the tangible biography represented by a personal (role-playing) archive.³² Notably, in the case of a character sheet, this is a biography both of player and character, and their affective relationship. Yet although the game affords and, indeed, encourages such relations, formal character sheets often support them less well, relegating them to the margins of record. In so doing, they establish a further

relationship, in tension with the formal context of game record, which allows character sheets to serve a mnemonic function after the fashion of manuscripts with marginalia in traditional archives.

Notes

¹ Brian Massumi defines affect, following Spinoza, as the body's ability to 'affect or be affected' (*Politics of Affect*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, p. 3).

² See, for example, Marcus Carter, Mitchell Harrop and Martin Gibbs. "The Roll of the Dice in Warhammer 40,000." *ToDiGRA* 1.3 (2014). <http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/20/31>.

³ Jaime Banks, Nicholas David Bowman and Joe A. Wasserman. "[A Bard in the Hand: The Role of Materiality in Player-Character Relationships](#)." *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 38.2 (2018), p. 64.

⁴ See Anne Mette Thorhaug. "[The Rules of the Game – The Rules of the Player](#)." *Games and Culture* 8.6 (2013), pp. 377, 384; Sarah Lynne Bowman and Karen Schrier. "Players and their characters in role-playing games." In *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*. Edited by José Zagal and Sebastian Deterding. New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 395-6.

⁵ Banks, Bowman and Wasserman, p. 68.

⁶ Banks, Bowman and Wasserman, p. 76.

⁷ Jason Morningstar. "Visual Design as Metaphor: the Evolution of a Character Sheet." *Analog Game Studies* 1 (2016), p. 126.

⁸ Liz Henry. "[Group Narration: Power, Information, and Play in Role Playing Games](#)." May 12, 2003.

⁹ Banks, Bowman and Wasserman, p. 66.

¹⁰ Rafael Bienia. *Role-Playing Materials*. PhD thesis, Maastricht University, 2016, pp. 128, 143.

¹¹ Bienia, p. 143; Morningstar, p. 129.

¹² Jeff Rients. "[The Elf That Is You: The Failure of the Character Sheet in Dungeons & Dragons](#)." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* 4.2 (2014), p. 11.

¹³ Anders Drachen, Marinka Copier, Michael Hitchens, Markus Montola, Mirjam P. Eladhari and Jaakko Stenros. "[Role-Playing Games: The State of Knowledge](#)." *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Morningstar 2016, p. 127.

¹⁵ Rients, p. 9.

¹⁶ Bienia, p. 144.

¹⁷ Evan Torner. "[The Self-Reflexive Tabletop Role-Playing Game](#)." *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*. 5 (2016).

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- ¹⁸ Bienia, p. 145.
- ¹⁹ Bienia, p. 143.
- ²⁰ See, for example, <http://www.angelfire.com/d20/deadfiles/deadfile.htm> or <http://plagmada.org/Home.html>.
- ²¹ Walter Benjamin. "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting." In *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1982, p. 67.
- ²² Marjorie Kibby. "COLLECT YOURSELF: Negotiating Personal Music Archives." *Information, Communication & Society* 12.3 (2009), p. 441.
- ²³ Louise Boscacci. "[The Archive in Contemporary Art: a literature review.](#)" *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science* 3.8 (2015), p. 4.
- ²⁴ Sarah Mills. "[Cultural–Historical Geographies of the Archive: Fragments, Objects and Ghosts.](#)" *Geography Compass* 7.10 (2013), p. 704.
- ²⁵ Paul Ashmore, Ruth Craggs and Hannah Neate. "Working-with: talking and sorting in personal archives." *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012), p. 87.
- ²⁶ As the post reveals, the contemporary realisation being that this had not, in fact, represented generosity at all: https://www.reddit.com/r/rpg/comments/8ccfpj/finding_a_20yearold_character_sheet_and_finally/
- ²⁷ Bienia, p. 145.
- ²⁸ H.J. Jackson. *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001, p. 87.
- ²⁹ See Raphael Samuel. *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*. London: Verso, 2012, p. 36.
- ³⁰ Thorhauge, p. 384.
- ³¹ As Morningstar, p. 127 notes.
- ³² Kibby, p. 441.