

# The Elf That Is You: The Failure of the Character Sheet in *Dungeons & Dragons*

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Using the unusual genre of the Character Sheet in the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, Rients demonstrates some of the problems that arise when a text is written by someone outside its audience. He explores the issues that arise when the creator of a text has power over the reader and a different level of investment in the activity surrounding the text. Rients connects the problems facing this obscure form of writing to other textual productions.

## Part I: What the Heck is *Dungeons & Dragons*?

Before eleven million people adventured together online via *World of Warcraft* and before the *Lord of the Rings* was a billion dollar movie franchise, there was *Dungeons & Dragons*, known to its fans simply as *D&D*. First published in 1974 as a small brown box containing three poorly edited booklets, *D&D* provided the rules framework for an unlimited array of adventures and launched a new genre of hobby, the role-playing game, by spawning thousands of imitations and adaptations. The *Dungeons & Dragons* phenomena peaked in the early 1980s with three million players in the U.S.; boxed sets containing shiny, new, better-edited rulebooks in nationwide toy, book, and department store chains; and a merchandising empire that included T-shirts, tie-in novels, action figures, and a Saturday morning cartoon (Eckleberry, Mohan, and Winter 14). It was a heady time to be a fan of the game. *D&D* is now considered the domain of nerds, and maybe it always was, but in the early 1980s, even the cool kids at school would show up to some of my *D&D* games. At that time, *Star Wars* was about the only other intellectual property with star power.



Figure 1. One of many versions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, 1981 (Moldvay, Basic Set).

What makes *D&D* different from George Lucas's tales of a galaxy far, far away is that the centerpiece of the franchise isn't the relatively passive experience of sitting down to watch a movie spectacle; rather it is in an interactive, imaginative experience. The traditional mode involves three or more people sitting around a table surrounded by papers, pencils, funny-shaped dice, and usually snacks. One person, the referee or Dungeon Master (DM), supplies the rules being used for the particular tabletop session and constructs the adventuresome situation (dropping the magic ring in the volcano, slaying the angry dragon, etc.). The referee plays all of the supporting roles in the adventure, while all the other players assume individual heroic

personas: each week Arnold plays a bow-wielding elf, Betty assumes the role of a grim knight, and Charley becomes a wild-eyed holy man (Livingston 11). The people and places played by the referee pass through the game like the fast cut a film director uses to move the audience from one location to the next in the blink of an eye, but the player characters (PCs) feature in every scene of every adventure.

In order to provide structure to an infinite world of magic and wonder, the rules for *D&D* can get rather long and cumbersome. My favorite version of the game requires two booklets of sixty-four pages each, and that's considered too light and breezy by some hardcore fans. But not all those rules are needed all the time. The most recent edition of the official rules of the National Football League clocks in at over 300 pages, but not every fiddly rule in it is required to play a pickup game in the park with some friends. Similarly, individual players can show up to a *D&D* game with little or no knowledge of the rules, as the referee can explain crucial rules as they come up (Swan 18).

The relationship between a referee and the players is not altogether different from that of a teacher and his or her students. Ideally, the teacher

and the referee both have the best interests of the rest of their groups in mind, while the students and players hopefully come to the table in a spirit of good faith and cooperation. However, the social situation creates a gap between referee/teacher and players/students that can be difficult to bridge. The Character Sheet demonstrates how that gap can impact writing performed by people on either side of this power relation.

## Part II: What the Heck is a Character Sheet?

Remember those papers I mentioned in front of each player at the table? The referee can have a wide selection of documents at his or her station, including the rules, but each player has one key document in front of him or her: the Character Sheet. Some players will make use of other documents as well, but the difference between sitting at the table watching as a spectator or actually going on these dice-powered adventures of the imagination is whether or not someone has a Character Sheet in front of them. Arnold might play Silvernose the Elf, and a little metal figure on the table might mark Silvernose's location in the evil sorcerer's lair, but that Character Sheet *is* Silvernose. Without Arnold's Character Sheet, Silvernose doesn't exist. Many referees keep everyone else's Character Sheets in a folder they retain between sessions because if a player loses his or her Sheet, he or she can't play until a new character is created. The information on the sheet is too detailed and diverse to be reconstructed from memory. In some ways, a Character Sheet is a little like a notebook that a student might use over the course of a semester. The information it contains is similar to everyone else's notebook in the class, but uniquely customized to the needs and interests of one particular individual. And if that notebook is lost, it won't be easy to replace, and the final exam probably isn't going to go well.

As I mentioned earlier, a player can sit down and play *D&D* with literally no knowledge of the rules whatsoever, but he or she can't play without a character or a Character Sheet. That document is a player's passport into the game. Much of what occurs in a *D&D* game happens and is gone with no records kept beyond the memories of the players, like attending a live show of a band as opposed to downloading their studio work. The Character Sheet is the one tangible, persistent object that uniquely connects the player to the game activity.

Check out Figure 2, the front page of a Character Sheet for *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*, one of the best of the *D&D*-derived games published in recent years. The Ability Scores box is located to the left, right under the

game’s logo. By the numbers, my character, Donnal McDonnal, is a pretty likeable fellow with a Charisma of 15, but all of his other abilities cluster around the average range of 9 to 12. (Note all the items listed in the same box under the heading “Modifiers.”) Like the abbreviations on the back of a baseball card, much of the information on this Character Sheet is baffling to the uninitiated. What does it mean that Donnal is “+1 Loyalty” or “-1 Daily Travel Distance”? Unless one is already a member of the *D&D* tribe, so to speak, the meaning of these terms can only be guessed at. That’s a big problem considering that this sort of document is typically thrust in front of new players as their invitation into the game.

## LAMENTATIONS *of the* FLAME PRINCESS

WEIRD FANTASY ROLE-PLAYING

Name: Donnal MacDonnal Player: Jeff Rients

Fighter	1	N
Class	Level	Alignment
17	11	0
Age	Sex	Current XP
		2,000
		XP for next Level

### MODIFIERS

**Charisma** 15 +1 Retainer Recruitment, Loyalty

**Constitution** 2 -1 Hit Points, Daily Travel Distance

**Dexterity** 9  AC, Ranged AB, Initiative

**Intelligence** 11  Saves vs Magic Effects, Languages

**Strength** 12  M&M All, Open Doors

**Wisdom** 12  Saves vs Non-Magic Effects

### SAVING THROWS

Paralyze	Poison	Breath Weapon	Magical Device	Magic
<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">14</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">12</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">15</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">13</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">16</span>
Mobility Hazards (Puncturing, Hold, Etc.)	Instant Death/ROD Situation	Acid Effects	Spell-Like Effects from Items	Spells or Innate Abilities

### ABILITY SCORES

**Charisma** 15 +1 Retainer Recruitment, Loyalty

**Constitution** 2 -1 Hit Points, Daily Travel Distance

**Dexterity** 9  AC, Ranged AB, Initiative

**Intelligence** 11  Saves vs Magic Effects, Languages

**Strength** 12  M&M All, Open Doors

**Wisdom** 12  Saves vs Non-Magic Effects

### ATTACK BONUS

<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">+2</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">+2</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">+2</span>	Surprise Chance	Max HP
			<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">8</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">8</span>
Base AB    M&M AB    Ranged AB			● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●	Current HP

### COMMON ACTIVITIES

Architecture	Barkskin	Chalking	Languages
<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>
Open Doors	Search	Weight of Hand	Speak Attack
<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>
	Stealth	Trickery	
	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	
<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">000</span>

### ARMOR CLASS

<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">15</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">15</span>
M&M	Ranged
<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">15</span>	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">13</span>
Without Shield	Surprised

### COMBAT OPTIONS

- Standard Attack  
AB+0, AC+0
- Parry  
 AC+2 /  AC+4
- Press  
AB+2, AC-4
- Defensive  
AB-4, AC+2

### WEAPONS

Name	AB	Damage	Range		
			S	M	L
Spear	+2	d4	10'	20'	60'
Longsword	+2	d8			
Dagger	+2	d4	10'	20'	30'

### RETAINERS

Name	Position	Class/Level	HP	Wgt	Stm

#### CAST CLERIC SPELL

#### CAST MAGIC USER SPELL

Figure 2. Pre-printed Character Sheet, 2011 (Raggi).

The rest of the Character Sheet similarly intimidates as much as it informs, but even a quick glance can tell you—with sections labeled “Attack Bonus,” “Armor Class,” “Combat Options,” and “Weapons”—that *D&D* emphasizes combat. About a third of the front page is devoted to rule details for violent conflict. Looking at cues like this, a lot of players, including some veterans of the hobby, make the mistake of thinking that *D&D* is all about rushing headlong into combat with the forces of evil. Similarly, the personal possessions and treasure owned by a character often appears on the first or second page of a Character sheet, implying a focus on the acquisition of material wealth.

### Part III: Why the Heck Should I Care?

You’re reading this article in this journal where there’s no particular reason for me to assume that you’re a big *Dungeons & Dragons* nerd like me. So here’s what I find interesting about the Character Sheet from a writing research perspective: it is largely a *failed* genre of writing. I’ve mentioned some of the reasons already. Though it is the primary document used by players, the Character Sheet is completely baffling to most new players, and the emphasis on combat abilities on the front side of the sheet sends the wrong message about *D&D*, encouraging players to see their characters as hammers and all the world as a nail. Similarly, the Character Sheet’s emphasis on treasure and equipment fosters a mood of material acquisition that often better suits the boardrooms of Wall Street rather than the stuff of legends. And the use of graphic elements in pre-printed Character Sheets, as with Figure 2, may be helpful to experienced players but tends to intimidate novices; pre-printed Character Sheets look less like a fun game and more like filling out a tax return.

There are other reasons to be dissatisfied with most incarnations of the Character Sheet. With all the space devoted to combat abilities and equipment, there’s very little room for detailing the things that make a character really a character. Out of the hundreds of fill-in-the-blank sheets I’ve seen over the years, only one had a spot for listing the character’s best friend. Very few have a place for where characters are born or who their family is or the places they’ve visited or enemies they’ve made. Many, many players record this sort of information somewhere, typically in the margins of the Character Sheet or on a separate sheet of paper they keep in front of them. If players routinely record this information about their character, why isn’t there room for that stuff on most Character Sheets? Information of that type goes a long way towards fleshing out a good *Dungeons & Dragons* character, in much the same way that these relationships make for a rounder character in a novel.

Following the model laid down by *D&D*, a Character Sheet for Batman would tell us about his utility belt and martial arts skills but would nowhere indicate that he fights crime because his parents were murdered by a back alley mugger—important information for understanding Batman’s character. Looking at Borg the Fighter (Figure 3), it is obvious how, by the omission of social or biographical information on this early example of the Character Sheet, many young players (me included) ended up playing every character as a murderous orphan with no interests beyond killing goblins and stealing gold. Borg is little more than a collection of fighting abilities and weaponry, so we assumed the game was all about fighting.

NAME: BORG		CLASS: FIGHTER	
STR	17	HIT POINTS:	6
INT	8		
WIS	10	ARMOR CLASS:	3
DEX	7		
CON	15	ALIGNMENT:	LAWFUL
CHR	6		
LEVEL: 1 X.P. POINTS: 0 MONEY: 10 GP			
(NEED 2000)			
SAVING THROWS		ATTACK ROLLS	
POISON	12	AC 0:	17
MAGIC WAND	13	AC 1:	16
PARALYSIS	14	AC 2:	15
DRAGON BREATH	15	AC 3:	14
SPELLS	16	AC 4:	13
		AC 5:	12
EQUIPMENT		AC 6:	11
1 LONG SWORD		AC 7:	10
2 DAGGERS		AC 8:	9
1 SHIELD			
1 SHORT BOW			
20 ARROWS			
50' ROPE			
1 BACKPACK			

Figure 3. Early example of a handwritten Character Sheet, 1981 (Moldvay, *Basic Rulebook B5*).

Additionally, some of the space on most Character Sheets is occupied by objects that don’t need to be there. Looking back at my character sheet for Donnal McDonnal (Figure 2), near the top of the right-hand side is a box labeled “Saving Throws.” These are the numbers I must try to roll to ward off death by a dragon’s fiery breath or a giant scorpion’s poisonous stinger. When it comes time to avoid such dangers, those numbers become critical information, but that doesn’t mean it needs to be on the Character Sheet. The referee has a big chart listing the Saving Throws for all character types, so I don’t really need them on my Character Sheet.

Similarly, many Character Sheets allocate space for calculating Encumbrance, which basically involves tallying the weight and bulk of your armor and other gear to see how much all that stuff slows your character

down when he or she tries to run away from the monsters. In a game like *World of Warcraft*, the computer does this for the player, but in the non-computerized world of tabletop *D&D*, theoretically the game should stop while Encumbrance is recalculated every time a character picks up or drops something. But most referees rarely enforce the Encumbrance limits because it only slows down the pace of the game, so most character sheets with Encumbrance information on them waste space on a rule that's usually ignored.

However, not every player or every game-group uses fill-in-the-blank forms like I did when making Donnal McDonnal (see Figure 2). Prior to the rise of cheap laser printing and photocopying, a large number of Character Sheets were handmade, typically on college-ruled, spiral-bound paper or graph paper. Nowadays a fair number of Character Sheets are still made this way, and still others are homemade on a computer and then printed for play, while the rise of online *D&D* games—conducted via Internet text chat, Skype voice chat, Google Hangouts video chat, etc.—has led to a growth in entirely electronic character sheets. Donnal McDonnal has seen many adventures since the version pictured in Figure 2, but I now keep his character sheet solely online in a Google Drive file, because I now play that character only in online *D&D* sessions.

But even with the freedom afforded to players by starting with a blank page (or screen) to make their own character sheets, there is a tendency to make the same old mistakes. The official Character Sheets (found in the back of the rulebook for each photocopying, for sale as a pre-printed pad, or available as a PDF download on the game's official website) carry a lot of institutional weight. Everyone emulates these bad examples, so their bad practices become the default positions for constructing new examples of the genre of the Character Sheet.

Figure 4 is another front page for one of my Character Sheets, made on Google Drive but printed out for tabletop play. The large amount of handwritten additions to this character sheet show how even an experienced player trips over the genre. I can spot at least three places where a Character Sheet I made for my own use failed to meet my needs, despite the fact that I've been a *D&D* referee for over three decades. First, I didn't include a field for my character's patron deity, even though religion is important to the character concept. Secondly, I failed to allocate space for my Experience Point tally; as I have done with a zillion prior Character Sheets, I resorted to keeping a running tally in the marginal white space of the page. And third, in the bottom margin, I noted "seek the Questing Beast." Why didn't I specify a space on the sheet for quests, clues, and other plot points? Because thirty years of prior Character Sheets had taught me that such a space is not a standard element of the genre, whether it should be there or not.

27  
 Polymachus, son of Therion  
 Character level 3  
 Lawful Good half-elf fighter level 1 / paladin 2  
 HP 12-18 Aegean AC 18 Touch 11 Flat 17  
 AC 27 AC 27  
 Str 14 +2  
 Dex 13 +1  
 Con 14 +2  
 Int 9 -1  
 Wis 13 +1  
 Cha 17 +3  
 Fort 12 Refl 14 Will 15  
 BAB +3  
 Hit +1  
 Toughness Mounted Combat  
 XP 425  
 250  
 675  
 100  
 1350  
 2125  
 100  
 2225  
 1050  
 3075  
 150  
 4225  
 400  
 4625  
 gods: Loxias Protector of supplicants Master of Oracles  
 -----RACIAL ABILITIES  
 \* Medium: As Medium creatures, half-elves have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.  
 \* Half-elf base land speed is 30 feet.  
 \* Immunity to sleep spells and similar magical effects, and a +2 racial bonus on saving throws against enchantment spells or effects.  
 \* Low-Light Vision: A half-elf can see twice as far as a human in starlight, moonlight, torchlight, and similar conditions of poor illumination. She retains the ability to distinguish color and detail under these conditions.  
 \* +1 racial bonus on Listen, Search, and Spot checks.  
 \* +2 racial bonus on Diplomacy and Gather Information checks.  
 \* Elven Blood: For all effects related to race, a half-elf is considered an elf.  
 \* Automatic Languages: Common and Elven. Bonus Languages: Any (other than secret languages, such as Druidic).  
 \* Favored Class: Any. When determining whether a multiclass half-elf takes an experience point penalty, her highest-level class does not count.  
 -----SKILLS  
 Knowledge (Nobility & Royalty) +0  
 Knowledge (History) +0  
 Knowledge (Religion) +0  
 Ride +2 Diplomacy +6 Swim +3  
 -----FEATS  
 Power Attack [General]  
 Prerequisite Str 13.  
 Benefit  
 On your action, before making attack rolls for a round, you may choose to subtract a number from all melee attack rolls and add the same number to all melee damage rolls. This number may not exceed your base attack bonus. The penalty on attacks and bonus on damage apply until your next turn.  
 Special  
 If you attack with a two-handed weapon, or with a one-handed weapon wielded in two hands, instead add twice the number subtracted from your attack rolls. You can't add the bonus from Power Attack to the damage dealt with a light weapon (except with unarmed strikes or natural weapon attacks), even though the penalty on attack rolls still applies. (Normally, you treat a double weapon as a one-handed  
 Lay on Hands 6 pts  
 seek the Questing Beast  
 3il w Nevada  
 Nevada  
 Cedar  
 Washington

Figure 4. Online character sheet I created with handwritten additions, 2010.

Ultimately these problems are repeated over and over again because of the power relations surrounding the production and distribution of this kind of document. Character Sheets are designed for players but by referees and game designers (all of whom are referees). And while any player can become a referee and any referee is welcome to switch roles and become a player, the psychology of the “mostly player” and “mostly referee” types are quite different. Referees tend to be more deeply involved in the hobby. They buy the bulk of the products, read most of the rules, participate in most of the



online discourse, and write most of the journal articles in which they try to convince other people that this stuff is interesting. The typical referee spends at least an hour or two on preparation prior to each hour of actual play. For a lot of referees, *D&D* isn't just a game or a hobby, it's a lifestyle choice. On the other hand, players tend to take the hobby a little more in stride. They may not think about the game much at all between sessions, apart from, "Thursday we're looting the vampire lord's treasure vault. Cool." All a player really needs to do to prepare for a session of *D&D* is to show up ready to play (Swan 18).

So the referees—with their totally different and somewhat obsessive view of the game—end up designing Character Sheets filtered through their own preconceptions of what *should* be important to the players. And because the referees do most of the heavy lifting to start and maintain the game, few players object to the situation. I doubt many players ever consciously realize, "Hey, this Character Sheet doesn't fulfill my needs as a player," or that such a comment would be a legitimate criticism they can offer to the referee. This is especially true because newbies are trained to accept that the confusion caused by a Character Sheet is simply part of the game's learning curve, rather than a problem that can be addressed.

As long as referees are making Character Sheets for their players and players are emulating previous examples of the genre, the Character Sheet will never completely serve the needs of the player base that uses it. Both the slick, pre-made, fill-in-the-blank versions (like Figure 2) and the homemade Character Sheets (like Figure 3) will continue primarily to serve the referees' ideas about what is good for the players, rather than satisfying the players' actual needs. Referees, as the main experts on the game at most tables, lack the perspective necessary to make Character Sheets that are truly friendly and helpful for new players.

Similar circumstances can be found in a variety of other forms of writing. For example, a teacher preparing a hand-out for his or her students must keep in mind not only his or her own goals for the classroom, but also the capabilities and interests of the students. But on the other side of the equation, students shouldn't just let their eyes glaze over when the teacher doesn't meet them halfway. Or citizens confused by the layout of the ballots in their polling place shouldn't passively accept the situation when instead they could take up the issue with election officials. Texts like ballots tend to be designed by political insiders who don't necessarily understand or care about the needs of the common people until citizen action forces them to take such concerns into consideration. It's up to both parties to keep the lines of communication open.

The case of the Character Sheet is closer to the case of the well-intended teacher rather than the apathetic bureaucrat. The uniformity of design that haunts the genre is a lingering side-effect of the need for many blank sheets back in the days before most of us had easy access to printers and decent word processors. Players back then either purchased pads of character sheets produced by the publisher, photocopied blank sheets from the rulebook, or made their own sheet that mimicked such one-size-fits-all approaches. To improve the utility of the Character Sheet in *D&D* today, the referee and the players need to be in dialogue about this important genre. Once the players' needs are better understood, the group could have a conversation about what is important to them for each particular game and work together to build a custom sheet accordingly. Alternatively, each player could take it upon him- or herself to design Character Sheets that meet his or her needs, as not all players have the same agendas when playing the game. Some information would be common to all Character Sheets, but that doesn't mean critical information needs to be displayed in the same place or in the same way on all sheets at the table. Additionally, new types of Character Sheets could be developed specifically for new players to help them learn the game by replacing the abbreviations that pepper a typical Character Sheet with actual words and cutting anything that the referee could look up for the player. New players would need to be involved in this process, as they would be in the best position to identify where the Character Sheet is most confusing. (Or at least I think those are three ways to address this situation. As a longtime referee, I'm actually part of the problem.)

But there's a bigger point I'm trying to make here. Every text we encounter has been shaped by unknown people and invisible forces, the way decades of past *Dungeons & Dragons* play impacts what kind of Character Sheet I hand a new player. Now that I understand that fact, I can do something about it. As a referee, I can try to work with my players to better fulfill their needs, and as a player, I can speak up to other referees. That lesson applies to other texts in the world around us, especially those designed for our use by people in power. Such texts need to be dissected and examined by the end user and, if found wanting, redesigned. Just because the government hands us a form to fill out or an instructor supplies us a syllabus for the semester doesn't mean we have to passively accept it. We should investigate these texts and their histories and challenge those who make them to work with us to make them better.

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Returning to school after almost two decades in the world of banking, Jeff Rients now studies English literature at Illinois State University. He has been obsessed with *Dungeons & Dragons* since spotting a copy on the shelf of a toy store back in 1981.

