

Roll Initiative: RPGs and the Archives

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If you're like me, sometimes a little escape is necessary when the real world gets a little too real. Lately, that means of escape is role playing games (RPGs). Surprisingly, a handful of RPGs feature archivists and archives not only within the lore and history of their worlds, but as playable character classes and adventure settings. Of course, as a scholarly exercise, we should examine how RPGs and tabletop games represent our profession. After all, you never know when knowledge of a beholder or a death knight might make all the difference in a battle for the very soul of the archives! Get your character sheets and bless your dice, kids. It's time to roll for initiative!

As a caveat, I am not familiar with every RPG in existence; my knowledge is based on the published sources I could access that contain persons, places, and materials related to archives and archivists. This review also features a special interview, via email, with [Critical Role's](#) phenomenal Dungeon Master (DM) Matthew Mercer as a means of picking the brain of an archival institution's creator that's still actively defining itself via character interaction and exposition within the game.¹ Where experience is concerned, I dabbled in RPGs in college. My roommate at the time was a DM, and he spoiled me with what I was able to get away with while playing my pole-vaulting, war dog riding halfling ranger (shout-out to Karl Smith!). Mostly, I've been an observer of other people's games and the live-streaming web series *Critical Role*. My knowledge of game mechanics is also limited, so if it sounds like I may not have a firm grasp on how skill points and stats work across all platforms, it's probably because I don't. This is not that type of review, my dude.

Key to any RPG is the world in which the adventure takes place. It's a blank slate of possibility—yet, still mimics the institutions of our society—and world building is crucial to carving out a conceivable reality for players. World building grounds the players and their characters in the RPG's reality and sets the parameters for what is and isn't possible, presenting challenges where players can adhere to those rules or attempt to subvert them. And what's part of any world that often requires knowledge and exposition to advance the storyline? If you said institutions of higher learning and organizations bent on dominating the narrative of society for their own gain, then you are a cynical human being and we should be friends. Cynicism aside, understanding how an RPG views the archives not only reveals the extent of an author or creator's understanding of the institution, but also how the relationship between archives and knowledge is built into the realms they have created.

¹ Matthew Mercer, email message to author, April 30, 2018.

Archival institutions within RPGs appear to share common mission statements and practices. In the RPG world *Pathfinder*, the Dark Archive “must record, store, and research its library of hazardous objects.”² Additionally, the Dark Archive pursues ways to use said items to expand their influences and alliances. The Dark Archive, however, was created out of a desire for revenge (the best reason or the greatest reason?!). Its founder, Zarta Dralneen, was arrested under false pretenses but no record of the charges or arrest exist.³ Once released, her reputation shattered, Dralneen’s response isn’t to prevent such atrocities from happening to others, but to ensure the archive is properly stocked and armed with information and “dark” artifacts to use against her enemies.⁴ The Dataphiles of *Starfinder* are similarly “devoted to researching, finding, codifying, and controlling any information they can get their hands on.”⁵ They seek to uncover the secrets of institutions and organizations in power (a nod to groups like Anonymous and WikiLeaks) and choose which secrets to store and share via their data vaults in the Archive’s Cortex.⁶ The Dataphiles are a relatively new faction, but their leader, the android *Historia-7*, is committed to their cause as well as finding her mentor, *Historia-6*, who unexpectedly disappeared.

Within the world of *Critical Role*, the *Cobalt Soul*, a government-protected library/archives and monastic order, and its sister institutions act as the “recordkeepers of history.” They operate as a mostly public source of information whose members “dedicate themselves to uncovering mysteries and sharing their findings with others” in service to their goddess the Knowing Mistress. Matthew Mercer was gracious enough to answer some of my questions via email. In response to the make-up of the *Cobalt Soul*’s ranks, he said:

There are a number of positions within the *Cobalt Soul*, with duties assigned accordingly. Members come from varying backgrounds, and at a baseline aid in maintenance, organization, and protection of the Archives. Monks are considered the more enlightened members, being chiseled into open minds and becoming the gatherers who helm expeditions to the hidden places of the world to record their findings and return to bolster their writings. Archivists act as administrators at each Archive, delineating tasks, overseeing the training of new members, and occasionally mediating the acquisitions of sought-after artifacts and records in the

² “Dark Archive (faction),” PathfinderWiki, accessed April 24, 2018, [https://pathfinderwiki.com/wiki/Dark_Archive_\(faction\)](https://pathfinderwiki.com/wiki/Dark_Archive_(faction)).

³ Erik Mona, Mark Moreland, Russ Taylor, and Larry Wilhelm, *Pathfinder Society Field Guide* (Redmond, WA: Paizo Publishing, LLC., 2011), 15.

⁴ Mike Moreland, “Dark Archive Faction Status Report – Year of the Sky Key,” Paizo, July 28, 2014, <http://paizo.com/threads/rzs2rbel>. Writing as Zarta Dralneen: “Archival work may not seem glamorous until you remember what powerful artifacts we are handling. So long as we prove our competence, we will enjoy nearly unfettered access to this vast collection that everyone else is too afraid to handle.”

⁵ “Dataphiles,” Paizo, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://starfinderwiki.com/sf/Dataphiles>.

⁶ Thurston Hillman, “Faction Overview: Dataphiles,” Paizo, July 26, 2017, <http://paizo.com/community/blog/v5748dvo5ljzi?Faction-Overview-Dataphiles>.

field. Expositors are the out-of-sight special agents of the Cobalt Soul, infiltrating and extracting information and truth from the more corrupt and guarded places in society, answering only to the High Curator. At the top of each Archive sits a High Curator who holds rank over all others of the Archive they represent, designing the goals of their people and interfacing with the political forces they must work alongside or defend against.⁷

In all three cases, the archival institutions in these worlds are *actively* involved in acquiring knowledge and artifacts. The main difference between the worlds is how each institution uses that acquired knowledge. Acceptance of donations is a fair assumption as well, but each archive-based group makes a point of stressing the *labor* of their agents in bringing those materials and experiences to the archive. Within the archival community the philosophical debate over the collecting activities of archivists remains to this day. Are we Sir Hilary Jenkinson's passive custodians or Theodore R. Schellenberg's active collectors and processors? Do we adhere to the purity of provenance and the chain of custody or do we acknowledge our role as architects constructing the societal narrative? RPGs, it seems, have solved this existential dilemma as it suits the needs of their various worlds. Archival agents pursue their materials, making the archives, in a fantasy setting, an institution committed to active collecting.

The difference, then, is in how each archival institution uses that acquired knowledge and who has access to the archive. The *Pathfinder* and *Starfinder* worlds are more interested in collecting and using records and artifacts for specific agendas—mostly for revenge as far as the Dark Archives is concerned. Acquired knowledge is an asset, something that can be used to accomplish a goal, but access is limited to those who are part of the organization. Matthew Mercer, however, sees knowledge within *Critical Role's* world of [Exandria](#) as “a key element to progress.”⁸ During the first live-stream campaign (episodes 1-115, the *Adventures of Vox Machina*) the theme of Shared Knowledge vs Hoarded Knowledge plays out in the final story arc between the Whispered One ([Vecna](#)) and the Knowing Mistress ([Ioun](#)). The Whispered One is obsessed with being the sole possessor of information, eliminating anyone with knowledge detrimental to his plans for godly ascension. In contrast, the Knowing Mistress emphasizes the power of storytelling as a means of sharing information, challenging her potential champion to navigate her divine library using his bardic prowess; essentially, sharing knowledge to gain knowledge.⁹

To put it another way, *Critical Role* creates an epically metaphorical battle between transparency and secrecy, which archivists of all kinds can relate to. There are magic missiles and healing potions for one, but mostly we relate to the idea that archivists should be advocates for transparency, access, and accountability. The

⁷ Mercer, April 30, 2018.

⁸ Mercer, April 30, 2018.

⁹ Critical Role, “The Endless Atheneum,” live broadcast July 27, 2017, <https://geekandsundry.com/critical-role-episode-106-the-endless-atheneum/>.

battle between the Whispered One and the Knowing Mistress is also indicative of a postmodern approach to archives in that the collections we acquire, appraise, arrange, and describe are constructed narratives by archivists. We're storytellers sharing what we've found with our communities and users, but the danger always exists of falling in line with powerful regimes which try to control the societal narrative and, unfortunately, the archive often plays a part in those plans.

The current live-stream campaign (*The Adventures of the Mighty Nein*) appears to be taking such an approach with the Cobalt Soul ensconced within the imperial city of Zadash. It's too early to tell how involved the organization is in political matters, but its complicity in government-fed propaganda recently reared its ugly head when a high-ranking member, Expositor Dairon, used derogatory language and mirrored imperial sentiments toward an enemy group.¹⁰ The Cobalt Soul may have an agenda to provide public knowledge, but its members are not invulnerable to corrupting influences. Which leads us to wonder: who are the agents of the archive in RPGs and how are they framed within the game as playable characters?

In addition to sharing similar goals, RPGs are all in agreement that archivists as a character class are smart. The higher their ability scores (aka stats) in Wisdom and Intelligence, the greater the archivist's advantage to uncover important information for their adventuring party.¹¹ In tabletop games, these advantages are facilitated by character cards. The archivist card for *Pandemic* grants the player an extra card in their hand as well as the ability to put a "dead city" card back into play. In the H.P. Lovecraft inspired *Eldritch Horror*, the librarian (*I know, I know*) card gives the player an extra action to use her Tome abilities (because books). In both cases, these advantages can either overpower or severely weaken the character, which is a concern.¹² Either way, the archivist's intelligence and the game creator's preconceived notion of what an archivist is determines that status.

Those preconceived notions color how the archivist functions within an RPG's game mechanics as well. Consensus places archivists within either the Wizard (studious, arcane magic-users) or Cleric (healers and divine magic wielding fighters) class, or a rough combination of both.¹³ Even Matthew Mercer suggests a Knowledge Domain Cleric as one option for building an archivist character.¹⁴ Wizards typically achieve power through a spellbook that holds their spells. Only through study and transcription can they build their repertoire of magic. Wizards also have their choice of arcane traditions (schools of magic) from which they receive certain spells and

¹⁰ Critical Role, "A Favor in Kind," live broadcast April 26, 2018, <https://geekandsundry.com/watch-critical-role-a-favor-in-kind-campaign-2-episode-16/>.

¹¹ Ability scores are capitalized according to their format in RPG manuals and character sheets. See *Dungeons & Dragons*, <http://dnd.wizards.com/products/tabletop/players-basic-rules>.

¹² Fran, "Ranking the Pandemic Roles," September 12, 2010, <http://gametheoryblog.blogspot.com/2010/09/ranking-pandemic-roles.html>.

¹³ For a full breakdown of RPG character classes, see *D&D Beyond*, <https://www.dndbeyond.com/characters/classes>.

¹⁴ Mercer, April 30, 2018.

bonuses to ability checks. Clerics, however, are endowed with divine magic based on their deity of worship and the domain they choose that provides access to specific spells. Depending on a cleric's background, her magic can be taught by her deity or bestowed on them as they level up. Homebrew options exist as well, one of which creates a Wizard School of Archiving—like our very own *Harry Potter and the Collecting Policy*!¹⁵

Quite a few traits and feats bolster the archivist's mighty brain power. *Pathfinder's* Dark Archive has a specific trait, "Arcane Archivist," that gives the player +1 to their Use Magic Device checks based on years of experience handling magical items. An article outlining an archivist character for the *Dungeons & Dragons* 3.5 edition outlines three feats: Dark Knowledge, Lore Mastery, and Still Mind.¹⁶ All three provide the archivist with the ability to glean knowledge or protect their mind from spells and enchantments that would harm their valuable gray matter. A third-party publisher for *Pathfinder*, Ascension Games, features supplemental traits and skills for archivists, one of which is labeled "Appraisal" and functions as an intelligence check.¹⁷ The monastic tradition of *Critical Role's* Way of the Cobalt Soul gives credence to the idiom "know your enemy." The tradition provides feats that give the player the ability to extract information through combat and the expenditure of ki points.¹⁸ Two of these feats, Extract Aspects and Mystical Erudition, have already been utilized by the party's resident monk Beau (Marisha Ray).¹⁹

The monks and expositors of *Critical Role* have the most balance between brains and brawn. While not archivists by title, they are agents of the archive and perform their duties in service of what the archive represents so it still counts. Many RPGs and tabletops, however, like to point out how squishy archivists are compared to other fighters and spellcasters. The Dataphiles state outright their need for "trained combat specialists." The previously mentioned *D&D* article points out exactly how weak archivists are with their low hit points, low armor class, poor attack bonus, and terrible reflex-save bonuses.

This doesn't mean that a player couldn't try to fortify their archivist as they leveled up, but spellcasters, which archivists are for the most part, are limited to the type of

¹⁵ Cenycal, "Wizard School of Archiving," *DnD 5e Homebrew*, December 6, 2015, <https://dnd-5e-homebrew.tumblr.com/post/134653845421/wizard-school-of-archiving-by-cenycal>.

¹⁶ Skip Williams, "Archivist: Magical Scholar," *Wizards of the Coast*, December 12, 2006, <http://archive.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/cwc/20061212>.

¹⁷ "Archivist," *Path of Iron*, Open Gaming Store, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.d20pfsrd.com/classes/3rd-party-classes/ascension-games-llc/archivist/>.

¹⁸ "Ki" is the magical energy utilized by the Monk class. Monks harness this power to create magical effects and exceed their bodies' physical capabilities. The amount of ki points are determined by the character's level and can be "spent" to perform extra feats during combat. Ki points can only be restored after a short or long rest within the game.

¹⁹ Matthew Mercer and James Haeck, *Critical Role: Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting* (Seattle: Green Ronin Publishing, 2017), 104.

armor they can wear that would give their armor class (AC)²⁰ a significant boost. The reason being that heavy armor prevents spellcasters from performing the movement aspect of their magic. “Well that’s easy to fix,” you say with total confidence, “I’ll just stay the hell out of combat and support my party from very, very, very far away.” To which I would then reply, “That’s what you think!” While that might seem like a sound strategy, the game itself ensures that it isn’t always possible to avoid combat. Even though an archivist is a walking brain that could be felled by a stiff wind, that doesn’t mean the player can entirely avoid combat encounters. Spells have a range that the spellcaster must be within to cast, so keeping yourself out of the fight may only be possible if your character decides to sequester herself within the archive for the rest of their natural, unnatural, or supernatural lives. But, if you are so inclined to put yourself in the fight it might be best to partner up with someone who absorbs damage. Basically, get yourself a raging barbarian for a platonic life mate and never let them go.

Being an archivist in real life has its difficulties. Being an archivist in an RPG could literally mean the destruction of the whole world or death by a Hollinger mimic. So, six of one half a dozen of the other, I guess. What’s important, though, is that even in worlds populated by dragons, androids, and Elder Gods there’s still a place for heroic bookworms who use members of their party like human shields. Or elf shields. Or half-orc shields—you get the idea. As Matthew Mercer puts it, “Skill with a blade is useful, but understanding the depths of the challenges ahead of you can be a mightier weapon in the long run.”²¹

²⁰ The number that indicates how difficult it is to land a successful blow on a character or creature with an attack. The higher the number, the harder it is to deal damage.

²¹ Mercer, April 30, 2018.