

# On, Off and In the Map: Materialising Game Experiences Through Player Cartography

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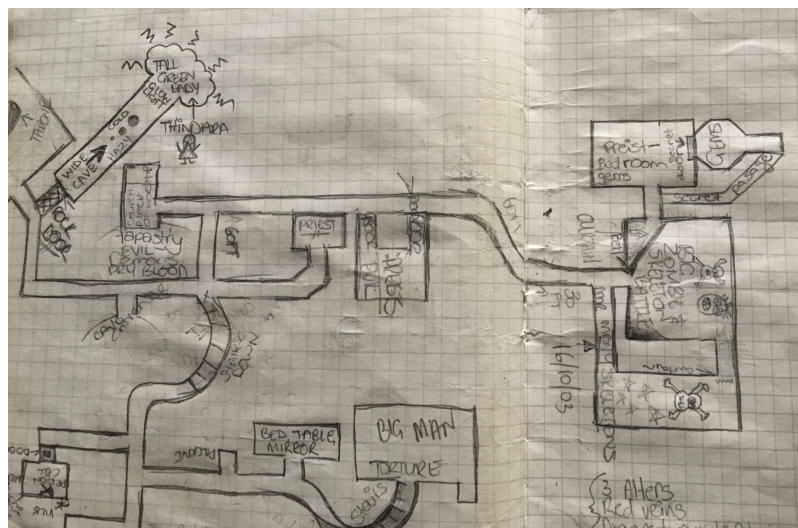
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## Keywords

materiality, affect, memory, maps, history

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on game maps; not the paratextual elements supplied by game developers, but rather maps produced and used by players (see Figure 1). It emerges from a long-term project exploring the remnants of game experiences and the ‘afterlife’ of gameplay. My aim is to understand maps as more than instrumental tools or devices created to be used in the ‘moment’ of the game. Instead, I seek to understand maps as recording devices, which capture narratives and experiences, and subsequently preserve them. I situate these maps within discussions of materiality, colonialism and story, emerging from material culture studies and anthropology, literary studies, geography, and, of course, game studies. In doing so, I contribute to discussions in our field about the ways in which players make meaning from their game experiences, and the value and importance of historical practices around games. These contributions will have particular value to colleagues working in historical games studies, game history and analogue game studies.



**Figure 1:** Example of player-made tabletop RPG map from 2003 (author’s personal collection).

I am especially interested in the materiality of these maps, which emerges not only in their existence and relation to place, but also in the way that, in charting progress through a gameworld, they chronicle experience and record a past. Here, then, I ask what narratives – and what pasts – can and do such maps record? How do they offer an account of experience – of the past (Carr 2009), say, or of space (Keogh 2018; Schniz 2021)? And what is it that is made material in their materiality? The materiality of maps is important in understanding their place in our experience of the world, and for thinking through divisions often made between the physical and digital. Writers on maps highlight the way that our experience of digital maps cannot be disentangled from physicality (Palmer and Lester 2013; Kent 2019), and work on ‘digital materiality’ (Leonardi 2010) reminds us that the idea of materiality also incorporates a sense of ‘practical instantiation’ (materialising) and ‘significance’ (mattering). Materiality is about the physical, the useful, and the meaningful – and player maps can be all of these.

Cartographic practices in games are, however, enmeshed not only in discussions about materiality, but also about colonialism. The colonial overtones of maps have not gone unremarked in game studies (see, for example, Lammes and de Smale 2018; Mukherjee 2017), and mapping, along with naming, are part of a set of (player) activities which can be understood as ‘imperial acts of taking possession’ and re-enactments of empire (Fuchs et al., 2018: 1482, 1495). In many games, this exploratory process is connected with conflict, and associated with what John Rieder (2008: 31) has referred to as ‘the discoverer’s fantasy’, in which a land and its inhabitants are only given structure and meaning by the arrival of the adventurer or protagonist. Mapping in games, then, often represents the objectification of space, in the service of player narratives. If we accept Daniel Miller’s (2005) argument that materiality is produced in the relationship between subject and object, this objectification surely limits the stories these maps can tell.

To explore these issues, I draw upon a range of physical and digital maps, along with resources connected with a variety of games, including rulebooks, archives, blogs and the games themselves. While many player maps can be found in more or less formal archives such as PlaGMaDa, others are preserved in personal, informal archives, which illuminate individual lives and the shared contexts of game communities. Comments on posts about maps (and, relatedly, character sheets, see Webber 2019) discuss retaining (or losing) their own maps in a manner which attests to their meaningfulness, and their (physical and affective) materiality: ‘I still have all of mine saved in a box of treasured possessions. Is there a name for this kind of perversion?’ (Tom 2009).

I conclude that player maps, are enmeshed within and contribute to relationships of meaning; and these relationships result from the maps’ material qualities and affordances. The colonial overtones of these maps produce a particular kind of materiality, an intellectual and emotional quality to players’ relationships with their ideological material. Yet this is not the only quality of player-map relationships, nor is it necessarily the principal one. Such maps serve not only to record, but also to orientate, to capture imagination and set it into form. In doing so, they capture experience, through their notation, their gradual development and their absences, and create a lasting affective bond which can be returned to later to evoke memory. Maps can tell stories which are simultaneously individual and collective in character, and recognisable and legible by others with similar experiences. Thus the value in these maps – their meaning, auratic character, and nature as record – *is* their materiality, the product of the relationships between them and the players who make them, use them, and keep them for posterity.

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