

VISUAL DESIGN AS METAPHOR: THE EVOLUTION OF A CHARACTER SHEET

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A character sheet is a resource commonly found in tabletop roleplaying games. It serves many purposes, from state tracking¹ to space for note-taking, and is a focal point of player agency—a player’s sense of ownership and control over the game world.

1. “State Tracking can be everything from keeping track of the scores of the different players of the game (like a cribbage board) or tables like the complex character sheets used in some roleplaying games.” Jeremy Gibson. *Introduction to Game Design, Prototyping and Development*. Crawfordsville, IN: Pearson Education, 2014, p. 59.

Any important player-facing information² that needs to be referenced during a game session typically appears on a character sheet. They can vary in size and scope from a few words on an index card to multi-page documents of crushing complexity. Although some games omit character sheets entirely, they remain an iconic bit of ephemera across the hobby.

As tangible links between the social and diegetic worlds, character sheets are often central to the roleplaying experience. For something so important, it is surprising how little thought sometimes goes into their design.

For my game, *Night Witches* (2015), I didn't want to fall into this trap. The game presents so many barriers by premise and content alone that I knew I wanted everything the players touched to be as engaging and usable as possible. As the primary and very literal point of contact between player and character, I knew that the character sheets needed to function efficiently while serving as objects of inspiration that communicated theme and hinted at possibilities for exciting play.

2. I use "player-facing" as quick shorthand to distinguish ephemera that is not explicitly GM-facing. Character sheets literally face the players. In some games this is a false dichotomy but here it makes sense.



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*Night Witches*³ is a tabletop roleplaying game about the 588th Night Bomber Regiment⁴ a group of Soviet airwomen who flew dangerous missions against incredible odds during the Second World War. Struck by their powerful story, I started toying with a game about them in 2007, but only really began serious work after playing Vincent Baker's brilliant game *Apocalypse World* (2010), which would be the inspiration for the underlying structure for my take on the *Night Witches* story many years later. The elegant and always consequential feedback loop between

3. For more information about *Night Witches*, see <http://www.bullypulpitgames.com/games/night-witches/>.

4. Good books on the Night Witches include: Kazimiera Cottam. *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*. Manhattan, Kansas: Military Affairs/Aerospace History Publishing, 1983; Kazimiera Cottam. *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II*. Nepean, Ontario: New Military Publishing, 1997; and Anne Noggle. *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1994 (my top recommendation).

fiction and mechanics in *Apocalypse World* was a natural fit for the kind of play I had always imagined for my game.

Because there is a lot of information to track in *Night Witches*, I knew I would need to include a character sheet. Since it occupies the middle ground of complexity, as does *Apocalypse World* (2010), I found the *Apocalypse World* model a useful one to follow. You need reference material to play the game, but the essential components generally fit on one side of a sheet of letter-sized paper. This includes your character's name and background, their "look", and the mechanical bits that make them special in the game world—moves they can make, things they possess and people they know.

While deciding how to organize the information players would need to reference to play *Night Witches*, I found that it generally fell into three categories. The first is static information—your character's name, for example. This rarely if ever changes. The second is stable information—your moves, for example. This changes once per session or less. And the third is volatile information, which changes frequently. A character's health—Harm, in *Night Witches* parlance—falls into this category. During a session you may be changing and erasing this many times. These categories of use don't map one-to-one with the frequency with which they are visually referenced, but they are reasonably close.

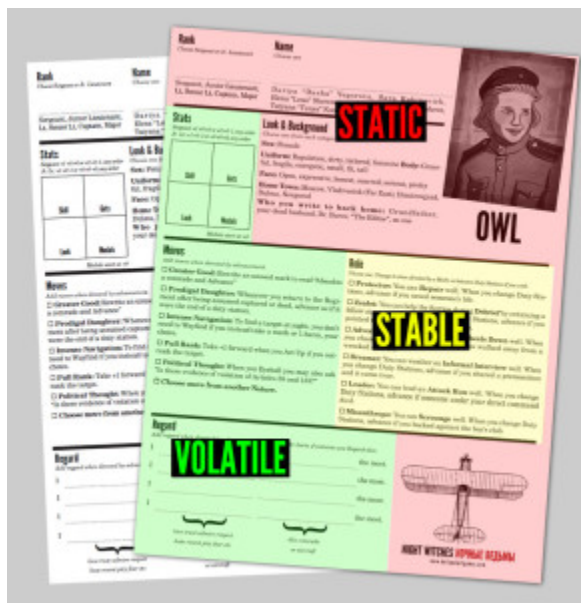


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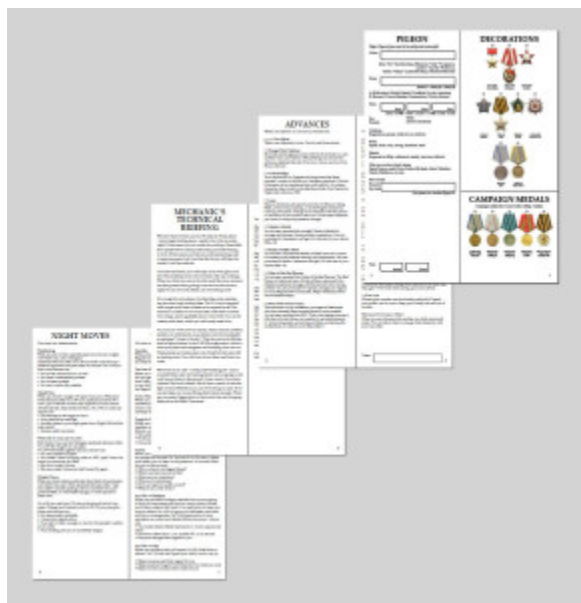
In the static information category, *Night Witches* has your character's name and rank, her look and background, and some localizing aids—regimental honors and information on the Regiment's command staff and your airwoman's place in it. In the stable information category, your character has a role, stats, moves, possibly some medals, and advancement options that all change infrequently. And finally, in volatile information, you have regard, harm, and marks, all game-specific subsystems that are referenced constantly in play. Stats and moves, while not volatile, are also subsystems that see continual reference at the table. These categorizations were obvious in some cases and less so in others. Over time they became clearer, and their placement was adjusted to reflect their use and utility.

My challenge was to present all this information in a way that was clear, easy to reference, and usable. One of my primary goals was to minimize both handling time and clutter at the table. Character sheets are physical objects that take up space,

and a paper-heavy game like *Night Witches* can be a little overwhelming. In addition to character sheets, there are duty station handouts and other necessary play materials, and I wanted to avoid a blizzard of paper on the table.

To this end, early character sheet designs involved presenting the material in booklets. I tried both portrait (4.25" by 11") and landscape (5.5" by 8.5") formats, each consisting of two double-sided pages, folded. While these designs neatly reduced table clutter, they increased handling time dramatically. There was no good way to put the volatile information where it would be easy to modify without also relegating often-referenced material to awkward locations within the booklets. I concluded, after a lot of painful experimentation and subsequent observation, that the density of information in this game made booklets a poor fit, and resigned myself to using a standard, double-sided sheet of paper. I was really in love with the portrait-oriented booklet, which I still think holds a lot of potential, but for *Night Witches* it was a poor fit and I reverted to a more common format.⁵ Therefore, the final design for the *Night Witches* character sheets is double sided, letter-sized, in portrait orientation.

5. Booklets have yet to come into their prime. My experiments with *Night Witches* and other games have led me to believe that the format is bad for traditional character sheets, which benefit from divorcing reference information shared by the entire table and player-facing and volatile information like statistics that ebb and flow within a discrete session, functions that booklets tend to combine. I think the booklet has a lot of potential in weird edge cases, like games that have hidden or transformational character components—perhaps where manipulating the booklet itself mimics the fiction in some way.



An early iteration of the character sheet design, utilizing a booklet format. Image used with permission of the author.

Having settled on the overall format of the character sheets in terms of usability, I then focused on aesthetic design. I wanted a clean, functional layout that echoed the game's book design, which is strongly influenced by mid-century Soviet texts. When designing the book, layout designer Brennen Reece and I collected visual references centered on the technical manual for the PO-2 airplane actually flown by the Regiment. As a result, both game book and character sheet feature functional groups of information broken up by strong lines: thick horizontals and thinner verticals where they add utility. The information is dense but allowed to breathe⁶ through the careful use of balanced white space.

One clear design goal was the incorporation of medals.

6. This is a layout term related to page arrangement—margins, kerning (character spacing), leading (line spacing), etc. We used wide-ish margins and very careful leading to provide balanced white space.

Historically, earning medals was a big deal in the Red Army Air Force, so it is incorporated into the game as both a mechanical and fictive component of *Night Witches*. Besides, they look cool, and displaying the visually striking medals makes the character sheet more colorful and interesting – which, in turn, makes the sheet more usable.⁷ The prominent display of medals serves to orient the player to the time and place of the game, an important added benefit in a game that is rooted in real history. Medals began on the front/bottom of the character sheet and, over successive iterations, slowly migrated to the back/top. As stable but not volatile information, they didn't need to be in constant view. Their presence on the sheet at all was enough to add visual interest and communicate theme.



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After I observed players sketching their airplanes or modifying airplane images on combat section information handouts, I also

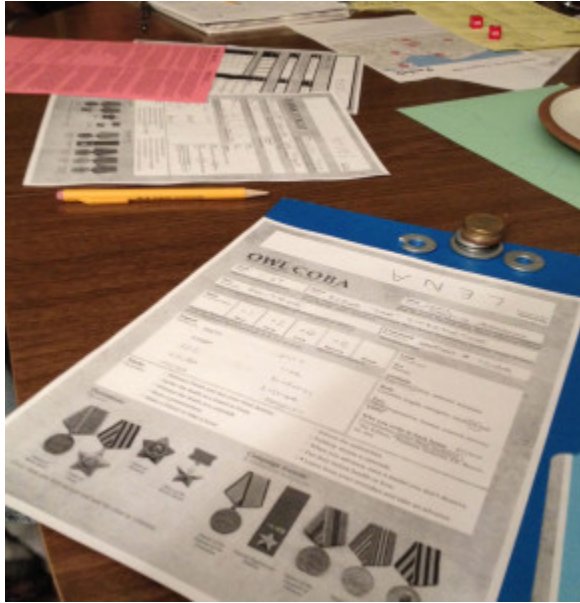
7. See Don Norman. "Emotion and design: Attractive things work better." *Interactions Magazine* 9.4 (July 2002), pp. 36-42.

added a small but detailed overhead of the trusty PO-2 biplane to the front of the character sheet, and a silhouette to the back. Like the medals, this adds a bit of visual interest and perhaps gently focuses players on the game's core—women, in airplanes, being heroes. These illustrations take up valuable space but I think the tradeoff is worth it.

The upper right corner of the character sheet is blank—space left free to staple on a passport-sized photo of an airwoman. I knew that relating to the women that the game is about would be very important for the players, and decided early on that we'd commission an artist (the talented Claudia Cangini, as it turned out) to illustrate a score of them. There is a well-established tradition of drawing a portrait of your character, as reflected in some of the earliest *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) character sheets. My character sheets for *Night Witches* recognize the value in this tradition, making it very easy for players to adopt an image they can relate to—an image they choose themselves or, if they prefer, draw themselves. As an added bonus, the affixed head shot gives the character sheet a more official, bureaucratic look very much in keeping with the time and place.

After making my initial design choices, I then had to test their actual usability. Jakob Nielsen recommends quick and dirty usability testing with a cohort of 3-5 users repetitively,⁸ which sounds like a gaming group to me. With this in mind I put my friends through the character sheet design wringer across the development process of *Night Witches* as we played through a complete campaign. Almost every weekly session saw them transferring information to a new sheet. I'm grateful for their patience.

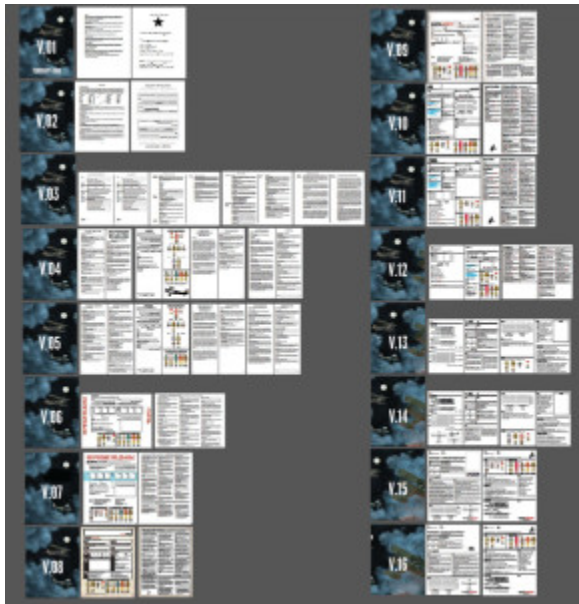
8. Jakob Nielsen and Thomas K. Landauer. "A mathematical model of the finding of usability problems." *Proceedings of ACM INTERCHI'93 Conference*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IOS Press, 1993, pp. 206-213.



Playtesting in progress. Image used with permission of the author.

By observing how the players interacted with the elements of the character sheet, I was given strong pointers that influenced my design decisions. One carry-over from the earliest version of the game was something I called the character's Story, represented by a simple structure that formed a sentence like "Mariya's Deadly Vengeance" or "Valya's Unlikely Love". I loved this idea, which presented a clear pointer toward a uniquely Russian blend of melancholy and melodrama, as well as incentivizing a style of play that fit the fiction I wanted to generate very well. I mechanically incentivized the use of your Story in various ways, and each one failed. Players didn't reference their character's Story, progressively more prominent placement on the character sheet had no effect, and it rarely entered play. In the end, based on my observations, it was removed from the game without any real loss and many of the elements built into Story found their way into moves, GM guidelines, and other areas of the game.

Another example of how observing playtests influenced my design choices is the selection and use of player moves. Inspired by Marshall Miller’s great game *The Warren* (2015), for a time, I had all the available character moves listed on every character sheet—a communal resource. By direct, painful observation I learned that this was a nightmare for a game as complex as *Night Witches*. Tracking who had taken which moves became complex and problematic. I eventually reverted to moves “owned” by individual playbooks, a far more common approach. It is illuminating how often I reverted to old, well-used forms in this process.



A visual representation of the evolution of the Night Witches character sheets. Image used with permission of the author.

Ultimately, I generated around two dozen versions⁹ of the *Night Witches* character sheet, some featuring modest, incremental

9. As a note, I only included about half these in my analysis as the other half were very incremental. So the image above of the multiple versions only shows 16 steps although there were quite a few more in the entire process.

changes and some showcasing radical departures. By carefully observing how these sheets were used in play, I was able to not only refine the visual design of the functional tool but also re-examine and improve the game itself, which addressed my goal of improving usability. I addressed my second goal of including aesthetics, theme, and inspiration in the character sheets by incorporating period-specific visual design choices, coupled with the careful use of images. What I learned through this very focused process is that the evolution of a character sheet, or any piece of essential player-facing ephemera, can mirror the evolution of a game's design and serve as a metaphor for design missteps and triumphs. By making a commitment to both usability and the aesthetics of play, I was able to iteratively improve *Night Witches* outside the realm of traditional playtesting.