

Tales From the Clipped

How to Build and Maintain a Morgue File for Art and World-Building Reference

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What is a “morgue file”? The term is decades old, originating in police and newspaper practice, and refers to archives of old cases or stories, kept for reference but not often used. These archives were called “dead storage” because the cases or stories to which they applied were no longer active, and from there it was a short step to calling the room or facility in which they were stored a “morgue”.

The phrase spread to other applications in the years before desktop computer technology led to a decline in its use. It was adopted by authors and especially artists to describe a compendium of handy reference material that can be pulled out and consulted on demand for a wide variety of subjects—often surprising ones.

Types and sources of material

There are three general categories of references that may find their way into a morgue file. The most obvious, of course, are intact books and magazines—most notoriously the old standby *National Geographic Magazine*. The classic morgue file fodder, however, are individual clippings from magazines, newspapers, and other printed sources. More recently, digital images, especially on the Web, have proliferated at an exponential rate.

For the most part, where to find this material tends to be self-evident. However, there are more obscure sources that should not be overlooked. Special-interest magazines, catalogs, Sunday newspaper advertisements, brochures and data sheets provided by manufacturers or sellers, used bookstores, library sales, and hobby shops may offer up hidden treasures. For that matter, one can always grab a camera and make one’s own, if the subject is accessible.

Problems and solutions

Building and maintaining a morgue file brings with it a number of common pitfalls. Fortunately, many of them are easy to avoid simply by keeping in mind that a morgue file

is not simply a collection: it is an ongoing process that should continue throughout the owner’s creative career.

Keep the morgue up to date; don’t build it to a certain point, decide it’s “done”, and let it gather dust after that. Don’t be content with the first images found of a particular item; keep an eye open for newer or better references. Likewise, be on the look-out for interesting material that may apply to future projects; it’s frustrating chasing around for reference on something in a current project and delaying that project perhaps unnecessarily.

Most people tend to be rather literal when thinking of reference material, but there’s a whole other class of handy images. Abstract effects such as lighting, shadow, texture, and color can be difficult or impossible to duplicate convincingly from memory. Landscapes, studio photography, and art photography can be lifesavers. Some artists even use their own props and lighting to create photos on the spot as reference for a specific project.

Organization

It doesn’t matter how many useful photos are in one’s morgue file if they can’t be found quickly and easily. Sturdy bookcases and, if necessary, magazine holders (with labels) are an obvious solution. For clippings, good-quality filing cabinets containing hanging files are probably best. Whatever the storage method, make sure the most often consulted sources are ready to hand.

In addition to their value as reference sources, public and university libraries are good models for organization. Of course, a morgue file is vastly smaller and doesn’t need the elaboration required for a collection of hundreds or thousands of books.

If no organizational scheme suggests itself, look around at those used by others. Find one that seems to make sense and use it initially. If something better comes along later, switch to it instead. After all, a properly main-

tained morgue file should change over time as the owner and his or her work evolves. Such change may entail reorganization or at least the addition or deletion of categories.

Printed versus digital: pros and cons

There are advantages and disadvantages to both printed and digital source material. While the financial bar to print publishing has dropped tremendously in the last couple of decades, most printed sources are still the province of professional publishing and therefore benefit from professional editing. On the other hand, digital sources—notably on the Web—tend often to be the products of enthusiasts and aficionados, and while quality can be wildly uneven, it is also possible to find details that simply don't make it into the more staid world of print.

A printed source doesn't crash or freeze, and its format won't become obsolete and thus unreadable in a few years. It requires no power or external technology (other than illumination), and is supremely portable. Most—but by no means all—books and magazines are assembled and published by professionals, and the quality of the text and illustrations will tend to reflect this, whether it is the composition, cropping, and printing of photos or the editing and fact-checking of the writing.

On the other hand, a printed source may be bulky and is easily damaged by environmental hazards. Cross-referencing multiple sources can take significant planning. Photos may be of good quality, but often are simply "beauty" shots that do not contain sufficient or desired detail. A large library of books and magazines can take decades and hundreds or thousands of dollars to build, and its bulk and weight can be difficult to move.

Digital storage, whether on a hard drive or a CD, is now compact and inexpensive. CDs especially are less susceptible to environmental hazards. Opening a large number of references may clutter a computer desktop, but one isn't faced with a messy, precarious pile of books or clip-

pings that continually threaten to slide to the floor in a pile. A talented, devoted amateur may produce material that is unpolished but that contains facts and details rarely bothered with by other sources.

On the other hand, it's all too easy to collect so much material that it's impossible to sort through—especially if file names are cryptic strings of letters and numbers—and even smaller collections are harder to browse casually than printed material. Many digital photos taken and posted by amateurs are murky or poorly composed. Text written without benefit of professional editing or fact-checking may contain bias or outright misinformation and may simply be unreadable. JPEG images lose data every time they are manipulated, which may include simply moving them from one location to another on a hard drive. TIFF images don't lose information, but the cost for this is huge file size. Last, but not least, a single power spike or head crash can wipe out years of work, so archive early and often.

Other considerations

Amassing a respectable morgue file brings with it certain issues. One of these is reputation: friends and acquaintances may come begging for material if they know one's collection contains particularly useful and accessible material. Before acceding to such requests, it may be wise to take notes of what has been loaned to whom—especially where irreplaceable items are concerned. Be sure a borrower appreciates the value of the loaned material; if he or she does not, carelessness and damage may result.

Another issue is copyright and fair use. It is acceptable to clip or download (the electronic equivalent of clipping) an image and make an archive copy for personal use. However, copyright law prohibits the posting, reproduction, distribution, or sale of copyrighted images, or the illegitimate claim of copyright on an image copyrighted by another. Remember, references are just that—they help the artist create his or her own *original* images.