

# Castaways: A Critical Take

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | June 14, 2014



*(This Critical Take is intended to be read in conjunction with Session Report: Castaways, posted in two parts over the last two weeks. [Part 1](#) [Part 2](#) Taken as a whole, the Session Report and Critical Take form a full review of the game.)*

One of the most common complaints raised against tabletop games with a strong narrative focus—by which I mean a focus on fixed narrative elements, which often take the form of flavor text or non-gameplay-related “fluff” on the cards—is their inherent arbitrariness. The stories told lack any narrative cohesion or sense of structure. Oftentimes, they don’t even make a whole lot of sense. In Flying Frog’s *Fortune and Glory: The Cliffhanger Game*, players can get trapped in an ice cave...in the middle of Egypt. The first edition of *Betrayal at House on the Hill* included an underground lake that was infamously fond of appearing in the house’s attic.

That’s because many narrative-heavy games follow the model popularized by titles such as *Talisman* (1983), *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (1985) and *Arkham Horror* (1987), in which the players’ “adventures” consist of moving their characters to various locations on the board and having random things happen to them, either via drawing cards or a table-based lookup system. This format, for all its flaws, has proved enduring, surviving in more recent titles such as *Betrayal at House on the Hill* (2004), the Dungeons and Dragons Adventure System games (2010), revised editions of the three classics listed above, and even yet-to-be-released titles such as *Shadows of Brimstone* (published by Flying Frog Productions, who specialize in exactly this sort of thing).



Fortune and Glory's contribution to the system is Cliffhanger Cards—if you fail an adventure, flipping the card over takes it to its thrilling, high-stakes conclusion.

How valid is this complaint? Here's a typical narrative that might emerge from playing any game on this list: "My friends and I were on a quest to save the world. So first, I went to the bar and got into a fight over a girl. At the dance hall, I found \$5 lying on the ground. Then I stopped by the carnival, and a spooky fortuneteller told me I had a cursed destiny. After that, I fought a wolf and a bear, then I went to City Hall and was elected mayor. Then I was turned into a frog by a witch." Et cetera. The individual story elements are interesting, but they don't fit together in any meaningful way, except accidentally—the most memorable sessions of games of this type are the ones in which, against all probability, the dissociated vignettes actually have some semblance of continuity, although creative-minded players can always quilt together these story fragments, no matter how arbitrary, in interesting ways.

Video games, which are designed to be played over multiple sessions and can automate much more fine-grained random or procedural minutiae, can get away with presenting linear, fixed narratives as a frame for excitingly varied micro-narratives, i.e. the actual gameplay, but tabletop games don't have that luxury. They have to convey broad narrative strokes in comparatively infinitesimal windows. The system described above endures, in part, because if you want a game that tells a story, it works *just well enough* to get you through.

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*Castaways* is different. Released in 2013 by board game publisher HomoLudicus and designed by Spaniard Alberto Corral, it takes an approach to storytelling that blends the tried-and-true "random things happen" approach with the more cohesive structure of a Choose Your Own Adventure book. It's a clever workaround, and could have set a new standard for the medium, had it succeeded in producing a narrative that is any more interesting or well paced

than the old guard.

Appropriately for a game that attempts to revolutionize tabletop storytelling, the goal of *Castaways* is to tell a good story—not just a sequence of events, but an honest-to-goodness narrative with emotional peaks and valleys, danger and treasure. Ostensibly, it’s a game about surviving on an uninhabited island, but that’s just the launching point for the player’s remarkable true story of hardship, survival and the will to power. You can’t win *Castaways* just by surviving, although you can lose by dying. Survival involves banding together as a team in order to chart the island, find a path to the summit, and gather the necessary supplies to signal passing ships before time runs out. If you do make it off the island, though, there can be only one winner, and the rules are very clear about who that will be: the player with the “best tale to tell.” I’ll hold off for a moment on how that gets decided. For now, I’m more interested in the kind of story being told.



Even before you start playing, you can tell that *Castaways* is more than just another shipwreck story; it is, or wants to be, *the* shipwreck story: not just a game about being lost on a desert island, but about the entire genre of desert island tales. The characters that the players represent are not archetypes, as in most adventure games (e.g. “The Tracker,” “The Climber”); they are historical castaways whose stories have been made into novels (Juana Maria, the winner of the Session Report, was the basis for *Island of the Blue Dolphins*); they are authors in the shipwreck genre; some are even named after famous shipwrecks. The three characters in the Session Report were real historical figures, but we also have Daniel Defoe, Alexander Selkirk, Ann Alexander and Vasa Sultana (whose name is an amalgam of two historical shipwrecks). These aren’t just characters in a story—these are the names the stories are built on.

If this approach had extended to the cards themselves—if the adventures of the castaways had included details celebrating and illuminating the history

of the castaway narrative—the game as a whole might have been more memorable. Its approach to the problem discussed in the first paragraphs of this article isn't inherently flawed. The game comes with a thick deck of cards, each labeled with a unique number from 1 to 105. Like page numbers in a Choose Your Own Adventure book, these cards are linked together in cause-and-effect chains, but jumbled so as to prevent the player from accidentally peeking ahead. For instance, card 24 might instruct the player to find card 76 and add it to the interior of the island, or add card 5 to the camp board. There are 22 possible narrative paths, each beginning with a 0-numbered story card, 8 of which are chosen randomly each game. This ensures that the narrative is more structured than one random thing happening after another, but still offers enough variability to keep the game interesting in the long term.



Except that it doesn't. To be perfectly clear, this isn't a problem with *Castaways'* mechanics. Executed smartly, they could have been used to create sprawling, surprising, divergent narratives that reinvent instead of parrot the genre. The problem is that the stories being told here, branching out from the 22 starting cards, just aren't that interesting. It's the worst of both worlds: on the one hand, there are too many of them; the story is spread too thin, wide rather than deep. Accounting for branches and decision points, each narrative arc is disappointingly brief, sometimes as short as 3 cards. On the other hand, even with 22 mini-narratives, there's no variety. In the Session Report, I was attacked by hostile natives and hounded by a jaguar. With a different mix of cards, I might have had a run-in with cannibals or a wild boar. I could have bartered with pirates, or with yet another group of natives. I might have found the camp of a former castaway, but instead, I found the camp of some different castaways.

Some of the story arcs are barely recognizable as such. In the Session Report, I encountered the story arc that begins with a total solar eclipse. The next (and last) element of that particular arc is a basket of fruit

placed on the altar. There's no indication that the fruit is connected to the eclipse, except that one card puts the other into play. And once the fruit is dealt with—either eaten or ignored—that particular story thread ends (oh, if you steal it, you can get—you guessed it—attacked by natives). Another story is about finding a goat.



The Goat Tracks story arc in its entirety.

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Luckily, the dynamic story of the players themselves is far more interesting, if approached with the right mindset. As mentioned previously, *Castaways* can end in one of two ways: everybody loses if the players fail to signal a ship before time runs out, or, if they do make it off the island, only one player wins. There's no shared victory, but there is shared defeat. This style of gameplay, called semi-cooperative, is often derided by hardcore board gamers because it's easy for someone with a bad attitude to "game the system," intentionally throw the game when it becomes clear that someone else is going to win. For a game like *Castaways* to function, everybody has to buy into a concept of tiered victories, in which it's preferable to come in second place than to come in last, both of which are better than the entire table losing—but, if this does happen, the player who was poised to win is the one who loses the most. This creates a natural catch-up mechanic: the closer you are to a winning position, the greater stake you have in keeping the game afloat, so players who are doing better have to spend more of their time and resources averting disaster while others take advantage of the distraction to close the gap.



If you can get into that mindset—which has more in common with *Survivor* than survival—*Castaways* is full of devious ideas to keep the intrigue flowing. It's integrated as deeply as the basic structure of play. Each round, players receive 2 pawns to allocate to separate actions, a style of gameplay known as worker placement. All actions exist on twin spectra: usefulness; and payoff in Story Points, or SP, which are used to determine the winner...if the players find rescue. The most efficient way to generate SP is to write in your diary—you may not be having a very interesting adventure, but damned if it won't sound good. However, this is essentially a wasted action from the viewpoint of survival. A higher-risk, higher-reward option is to explore the island, which is how the players encounter the story cards described in the previous section. This has the advantage of being both useful and lucrative (not to mention fun)—the players cannot signal ships until they've exhausted all three decks of exploration cards and reached the summit of the island—but it is also dangerous. Exploration can quickly sap a castaway's energy, which is a resource required to perform most actions, and even cause injuries, reducing the player's maximum energy and, very rarely, leading to a premature demise.



The potential payoff and fun factor of these explorations is such that everybody wants to be a part of them, but this is seldom possible—there are a number of thankless but necessary tasks, like

lighting the campfire or gathering food, that cannot be ignored. Importantly, in many cases, the payoff does not match the effort involved. For instance, lighting the campfire requires a herculean expenditure of energy but yields no particular benefit for the player who took the action. However, if it doesn't get done, everybody suffers. The players are allowed to pool their energy on a single large action like this, but the energy is spent one by one, in seating order, *before* you know if the action succeeds. The trick is to expend *just enough* to make sure it isn't hopeless—if the action fails, your energy is wasted—but little enough so that the brunt of the heavy lifting falls to your teammates. Sometimes, the players must decide on a course of action as a group, with any disagreements settled via a test of strength—each player rolls a die, with the higher value winning. What's interesting about this system is that various items, especially weapons, can provide modifiers to your strength rolls, so you soon have de facto leaders hoarding guns and ammunition, which could be used to hunt for food or survive certain story encounters, just so they can bully everybody else into doing what they want.



And then there's the salvage—pieces of equipment washed up on shore from the shipwreck. Salvage is divvied up on a first come, first served basis, and like lighting the campfire, there are some items that nobody wants to take but *somebody* has to—items like the mirror, which significantly increases the chances of rescue but is worth a measly 1 SP. There are items like the medicine, which is worth a not insignificant 5 SP and can be used to save a teammate from death—but if you use it, you lose the SP. And there are items like the gold and jewels, which can significantly change the flow of the game when they appear, as they did in my session report. They're worth a potentially game-deciding 8 SP, but they add a new action to camp, called "Greed," which lets other players expend energy in an attempt to steal them. Soon, everybody is spending half the day trying to steal the treasure and the other half resting from their efforts, and progress toward rescue screeches to a halt.

The fact is that the only way to play the game is to temporarily step into the role of a sociopath, somebody who will lie, manipulate, steal, and even pretend to feel empathy, all in service to number one. Most cooperative games, like last month's *Space Alert*, bring out the best in people, allowing them to skirt an ideal of communication and collective intelligence. *Castaways* does the opposite: it allows its players to splash in the dirty puddles of their most self-serving instincts, the ones that civilization has taught them to squash, but in a safe setting in which nobody actually gets hurt. It allows us to become antiheroes, the kind that we like to root for

but would never actually want to meet. It's not *Robinson Crusoe*; it's *Lord of the Flies*. That, too, has a kind of therapeutic value, and it tells a better, more nuanced story than a lost dog and a fruit basket.

