

This Summer, Read a Gamebook

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | June 15, 2015



Here's something I never knew existed: gamebooks.

When I was a kid, I devoured the Choose Your Own Adventure series, checking out every book I could find in the library and reading them exhaustively—I wasn't done until I'd tried every choice available. If you've somehow avoided exposure to these things, they were ingeniously designed children's books that played with non-linearity: you'd typically start on page 1, as is the custom, and maybe the story would continue in a linear fashion for another page or two. Before long, though, the reader (usually inserted into the story as protagonist via the second person pronoun and a careful avoidance of gender-specific descriptors) would encounter a choice:

- *If you would like to continue further into the dark woods, turn to **page 276**.*
- *If you've had enough excitement and would rather return home immediately, turn to **page 315**.*

(NEVER choose the latter option—it only leads to a swift and disappointing ending. Adventures never happen without a little reckless curiosity.)



From that point forward, page numbers as we know them would cease to exist, acting instead as catalog numbers for the continually branching plot. There was usually one path through the story to reach the "good" ending, with all other paths terminating in the protagonist being killed or trapped forever in some unendurable circumstance. I clearly remember working methodically through *The Cave of Time*, the first and most famous of the series, using up to 8 of my fingers at any one time as bookmarks so that I could return directly to decision points and explore the alternate branches (I still needed my thumbs to flip the page, though I could do it with my chin or nose if necessary). I'd estimate I saw about 10%-20% of the over 200 CYOA books published over a 20-year span, (plus a few derivatives from other publishers, such as R.L. Stine's *The Deadly Experiments of Dr. Eeek*). One prevalent but puzzling feature of these books was their lack of internal consistency: in *Dr. Eeek*, for example, the titular doctor is a chimpanzee who has staged a *Planet of the Apes*-like coup; in others, he's just a human who can't remember to pay the electric bill.



Despite my early love for the format and my later fondness for Interactive Fiction, CYOA's more freeform digital cousin, I had no idea that there existed a third, intermediary format: the gamebook. Introduced in the mid-'70s (and thus preceding *The Cave of Time* by several years) for use with the *Tunnels & Trolls* role-playing system, gamebooks are a marriage of the CYOA branching path-style storytelling and the stats, dice-rolling and

equipment-managing of a tabletop RPG. Gamebooks have been published for many RPG systems, including *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Call of Cthulhu*, but there were also dedicated lines of gamebooks with a self-contained, often pared-down combat system. Popular examples include the Fighting Fantasy series, *Lone Wolf*, and the card-driven *Chainsaw Warrior*, a one-of-a-kind homage to ultraviolence that could only have been conceived in the late 1980s.



To understand a gamebook, you have to picture a *Choose Your Own Adventure* story in which you can die—not just because you flipped to the wrong page, but because you made a series of tactical blunders that, combined with unlucky combat outcomes or poor saving throws, gradually chipped away at your health. In these books, it's not just about finding the magic path to the ending; it's also about surviving the journey. Outside of combat, a gamebook is also capable of remembering things a standard *CYOA* wouldn't, such as if you picked up that key behind the trick wall panel in the first room. How does it pull off such a trick? It's simple: you're expected to write it down.

These classic titles have recently experienced a period of revival thanks to the proliferation of high-tech mobile devices. Pioneered by a company called Tin Man Games, who have ported 9 Fighting Fantasy classics to iOS and Android platforms, alongside dozens of original works spearheaded by their Gamebook Adventures series, these digital gamebooks feature nice amenities like colorized artwork, bookmarks that will never fall out, and automated stat and inventory tracking, but they are otherwise essentially unchanged from their original format: they even retain the “turn to page XXX” wording, despite the fact that assigning page numbers to a digital hypertext is totally arbitrary and aesthetic.



The Gamebook Adventures books are plentiful, fast-paced, and regularly reduced to clearance-bin prices. As for the writing, it varies from high-grade pulp stock to unbearably bad (I had to abort their sci-fi spinoff, *Infinite Space*, after 30 tedious pages of exposition). What killed the books for me, however, was the copyediting, which often seemed to be striving to meet some errors-per-page quota. Try as I might, I couldn't get my internal narrator to gloss over the arbitrary commas and other stylistic quirks endemic to the Gamebook Adventures brand, so after a half-dozen downloads, I decided to simply ignore their existence.

Luckily, there are a few less prolific publishers of digital gamebooks to satisfy the persnickity reader. You can start with Choice of Games, who aren't much better than Tin Man at eliminating textual errors but who have shown consistent dedication to inclusiveness: the typical Choice Of title makes allowances for a number of queer identities, and *Choice of BroadSides* goes so far as to upend historical gender norms if you choose the female option.



You can also check out *Joe Dever's Lone Wolf*, a high-frills reboot of the classic series that features real-time, fully rendered combat in place of the typical dice rolling. When it comes to reimagining the gamebook format, however, you can't beat inkle studios. Founded by Interactive Fiction author Jon Ingold in 2011, inkle's claim to fame is their jawdropping reimagining of Steve Jackson's *Sorcery!* series of gamebooks, themselves originally part of the Fighting Fantasy line. While *Sorcery!* is ambitious in its colorful world map, fluid narrative-driven combat system, and persistent memory (the game will subtly recall details from not just the most recent choice, but an encounter you had 3 towns ago), *Sorcery! 2* is simply mind-blowing, a sprawling game that begins just when you think you've reached the end. They followed that success with the critically acclaimed *80 Days*, a Jules Verne-inspired steampunk journey around the globe. (If you thought *Sorcery! 2*'s city of Kharé was huge, *80 Days* lets you travel freely around the *entire world*—although sightseeing won't help Phileas Fogg win his wager.) Most recently, *Sorcery! 3* raised the bar again with an improved, open-world map and thousands of new choices to ponder. inkle has also created the free-to-download *inklewriter*, allowing you to easily craft your own choose-your-path stories and share them online.



While inkle deserves all the props they get, their creations are so far beyond the boundaries of traditional gamebooks that it's hard to decide if that's what they really are—"story-driven games" would be an equally apt descriptor. If you're looking for the same level of quality in a more book-like package, you need to check out Cubus Games. This Barcelona-based publisher isn't as well known as Choice of Games or Tin Man, but for my money, they're the only publisher that comes close to touching inkle. (And for an all-Spanish team, they do a great job of keeping the English text clean and engaging.)

I owe my Cubus Games allegiance to a sale they put on in November of last year. For three days during the week before Thanksgiving, they reduced the price of their flagship title, *Heavy Metal Thunder*, to free. I had never given *HMT* a second glance, mistakenly inferring from the app's title and icon (three streamlined jets flying in formation) that it was about some aerial warfare thing.



As it turns out, *Heavy Metal Thunder* is actually a sci-fi story about the last push of humanity against a seemingly inevitable alien invasion—think *Mass Effect 3*. That's not the only similarity to *Mass Effect*, either; *HMT* also has a robust skill tree, a far cry from the linear stat advancement you get in a traditional gamebook. At the end of each chapter, you may gain skill points based on your performance in and out of combat, allowing you to customize the protagonist to your liking—you can boost combat skills like accuracy with ranged and melee weapons, or you can invest in less measurable talents like Public Speaking, Xenology, Computers and Piloting,

abilities that may or may not prove useful during your adventure. You'll also need to manage a tight inventory (again, weighing the value of universally beneficial items like stimpacks against unknowns like key cards and trinkets) and keep yourself topped up on blood (health), oxygen, fuel, and food, the bare necessities of deep-space survival.

Backing up this RPG-like gameplay system is an ambitious, convention-breaking sci-fi storyline. I won't spoil much, except to say that the player character begins the game amnesiac, floating through the void, the only clue to his identity being his badass jetpack armor and a dogtag reading "Mr. Wiggles." From there, the story shifts unpredictably between surrealism (I mean, seriously, "Mr. Wiggles"?), satire (the half-destroyed space stations and craft you visit are plastered with notices vehemently denying the alien invasion and urging employees to, essentially, Keep Calm and Carry On), and sci-fi coolness in the tradition of *Escape from New York*, *Starship Troopers* or the aforementioned *Mass Effect*. Then, 2/3rds of the way through, it earns its "Heavy Metal" moniker as the story accelerates into full Ragnarok. The sequel continues in much the same fashion, with the protagonist fighting alongside a group of "human fanatics" with names like Heimdall, Uther, Grishnak, and Wolf Tits—all together, the infantry unit's "team" name is the Venice Clovers.



That sale bought Cubus Games a second glance and a lifelong fan. I picked up their other gamebooks without hesitation, expecting more of the same...which is exactly what I didn't get. I don't mean that in a bad way, though; their small catalog is surprisingly diverse. *Necklace of Skulls*, set in a world of Mayan myth, is a lot less combat-focused than *HMT* and considerably shorter. It makes up for this with more distinct story branches (you will skip entire chapters each playthrough) and a choice of four unique characters, from scion to sorceress. You must divine the best combination of their diverse skill sets, the goods you can trade for the few cacao beans you're given to subsidize your journey, and the path you'll take through the story; only then can you survive to the final confrontation with the sorcerer *Necklace of Skulls*.



Cubus' most uneven work, but the one of greatest potential interest to the Entropy community, is *The Sinister Fairground*, a gamebook-in-translation adapted from an experimental, collaborative project (*En la Feria Tenebrosa*) penned by a dozen members of Nocte, the Spanish association of terror writers. If *HMT* was a little gonzo at times, this one's a haywire ride through absurd juxtapositions in tone and style. Your character—an anachronistic greaser type—must navigate a cursed fair broken up into a number of attractions, each a self-contained chapter handled by a different author. Some of these are combat-heavy, like the *Marionettes' Marquee*, while others, like the *Maze of Terror*, focus more on riddles, and still others, like the *Hall of Mirrors*, are likely to end in a swift death. Some are winkingly referential and others are genuinely unsettling. And, in Cubus Games fashion, there is an absurdly well-stocked souvenir shop full of

obscure items that may or may not prove useful depending on which paths you take through the attractions, assuming you luck into some cash to begin with.

I make no apologies—I am a Cubus Games booster. As such, I'm duty-bound to inform you of their latest project, *The Frankenstein Wars*, which is [seeking funding on Kickstarter](#) through July 1. It follows some madcap story tying the incestuous Genevan scientist to the upheaval of the French Revolution, and it's got a host of innovative gameplay features...but honestly, I didn't look much further than the developer's name. Cubus Games has earned my trust.