

## Choose Your Own Narrative - Interactive Productions and Their Aspects |

### 自分の物語を選ぶ・インタラクティブな作品とその側面

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#### Abstract

Guest editorial of the fourth issue, discussing the currently increasing interest in gamebooks and providing an overview of the papers part of this issue on interactive media.

Keywords: editorial, JARPS, gamebooks

#### 要約

インタラクティブなメディアをテーマにした第 4 号発刊のゲストエディターの趣旨説明である。昨今ゲームブックへの関心が高まっていることを論じ、また本号に掲載されているさまざまな論文を紹介している。

キーワード：趣旨、RPG 学研究、ゲームブック

#### 1. You Will Never Play Alone: The Many Facets of Gamebooks

Tabletop RPGs and LARP often dominate the discourse when considering research on role-playing games. Despite their longstanding presence, gamebooks remain underrepresented in academic studies, though they are fondly remembered out of nostalgia. Perhaps they were once viewed as merely an “introduction to RPGs,” which limited their perceived potential.

But is it just merely nostalgia? How can we overlook the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series,<sup>1</sup> the fifth best-selling children’s book series ever, especially when it was recently reissued? And how can we label gamebooks a niche when *Fighting Fantasy* boasts tens of millions of copies sold worldwide, translated into over twenty languages?<sup>2</sup> Recently, crowdfunding campaigns for independent gamebooks have seen significant success. Even with the evolution of gaming consoles, computers, and smartphones, gamebooks continue to captivate with their age-old paperback format. They have also made a seamless transition to digital formats.

Gamebooks are not just surviving; they are evolving and finding new relevance in the 21st

century. The turn of the millennium introduced a second generation of reader-players to these interactive media, descendants of the first generation who had experienced the gamebook’s inception, peak, and decline. Both generations have seen its revival, with classic titles reissued alongside high-quality independent works. However, this textual hybrid, being “part game, part book,” still seems somewhat niche.

Promotion, mediation, and sharing are essential to reviving the gamebook culture. James Ryan “discovered” in his research what might be the first gamebook (or a prototype of it), *Consider the Consequences* (Webster and Hopkins 1930), and shared his findings on a local radio show (KZSC Santa Cruz 88.1FM 2018). Jacobo Feijóo’s *Diseño narrativas in librojuegos* (“Narrative Drawings in Gamebooks,” 2021) offers insights into the structure of *Choose Your Own Adventure* style books, which some categorize as “interactive fiction” (Green 2014; Schick 1991; Silva 2019; Silva 2022) and others as “rule-less gamebooks” (Katz 1998–2023). I have been striving to spotlight this hybrid text in academic journals and conferences across various countries, ranging from Brazil, Cape Verde (Silva 2021a), Turkey (Silva 2021c), to India (Silva 2021b), and, now,

<sup>1</sup> Originally published by Bantam Books 1979-1988, beginning with Edward Packard’s *The Cave of Time* (1979).

<sup>2</sup> The *Fighting Fantasy* series began with Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone’s *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982), first published by Puffin Books.



Japan (Centro de Língua Portuguesa no Mindelo Camões I.P. 2021). Other scholars picked up my work, showing how this emerging field is gaining traction. The reissue of *Cain's Jawbone* (Mathers 2021) during the pandemic served both as entertainment and therapy for many isolated from their RPG groups. A surge of Brazilian university students from diverse disciplines have chosen gamebooks as their undergraduate thesis focus. Compared to ancient literary genres such as the epic, the fairy tale, or historical fiction, the gamebook, if considered a literary genre in its own right, is still taking its initial steps.

Most first-time reader-players are captivated by gamebooks. They describe them as solo RPGs or as games in book form: “It’s like an RPG, but the GM is the book, and I’m the player!” “It’s like a video game but in a book!”. The experience feels like combining the positions of reader, player, and (co)author of a playful narrative offering countless possibilities. The format appeals to young readers seeking innovative, interactive experiences and older generations reminiscing about their youth. It is a way of keeping in touch with a pleasant part of the past, full of good memories, sticker albums, action figures, and dolls. It does not matter whether it is printed or digital. The gamebook is described as a good companion on a long bus trip, while waiting for the subway, or during leisure time, requiring just a pencil, paper, dice, or a smartphone app.

What does the future hold? Will gamebooks focus more on narrative than combat? Will they incorporate features from other media, such as cinema or video games? Will the game-reading cease to be individual and be shared through social networks? Will YouTube channels be created and turned into gamebooks (and what will they be about? Superficial reviews, deeper approaches, curiosities about playful texts and their authors)? Streaming platforms have centered on interactive episodes, but only the future and the creativity of game designers and writers can tell us. Many contemporary interactive formats owe their inspiration to gamebooks, such as solo adventures, interactive dramaturgy, game comics, interactive comics, interactive phone calls, interactive game shows, interactive short and long films, interactive videogames, text adventures, point-and-click games, interactive games, among many others. And as we speak, an independent author might be releasing a new gamebook, albeit without the fanfare it deserves. Gamebooks seem like an excellent starting point if interactivity is considered the future of various sectors.

I recently showcased a children’s gamebook, *O Fantasma do Relógio* (“The Clockwork Ghost,” Beuren 2019), in Kampala, Uganda, at an NGO focused on youth leadership. The NGO members were intrigued by its alignment with their mission. Gamebooks empower young readers to make decisions, face consequences, and learn through experience, all while fostering a love for reading. For an upcoming course I teach, I intend to use another gamebook, *Starship Traveler* (Jackson 1983), in a Human Resources Management class, precisely because it is an adventure that involves recruiting allies for intergalactic missions, having to evaluate each available resource, avoiding waste, acting assertively. Even if gamebooks were not created with a pedagogical purpose, this is just one of their potentialities. I never imagined that my childhood introduction to the\* Temple of Terror\* (Livingstone 1985) would shape my academic and personal journey.

I am deeply grateful to the *Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies* (JARPS) for allowing me to guest-edit a gamebook-focused issue. This is another step towards giving gamebooks the academic recognition they deserve. Understanding gamebooks is to understand the roots of modern entertainment.

## 2. First Insights into Gamebooks

The future of the gamebook seems promising. It both delights the first generation of reader-players through nostalgia – who grew up enjoying series such as *Fighting Fantasy*, *Lone Wolf*, and many others<sup>3</sup> – and still surprises the second, the children of the first generation. In a role-playing game, the gamebook could be a powerful weapon or secret magic: Few know about it, and those who have tried it have usually approved it.

The gamebook will always be an excellent option if the new generation of readers is looking for interactivity, active participation, and sharing their impressions. Understanding gamebooks is understanding where much of today’s interactive media originated. In an age in which we are trying to maintain a healthy reading habit through more technologies, the gamebook always seems to have room to mediate.

I expect that more innovative gamebooks will tend to move away from formula fiction and experiment with features such as the *legacy* resource<sup>4</sup> – *O Enigma do Sol Oculto* (“The Riddle of the Hidden Sun,” Soarele 2022) is one evidence for this – and other innovations, but that the standard Tolkienian fantasy will also continue to be popular. Perhaps

<sup>3</sup> Joe Dever started the *Lone Wolf* series with *Flight from the Dark* in (1984), illustrated by Gary Chalk and published by Sparrow Books.

<sup>4</sup> A book that changes in some parts as you play it. Unlike regular gamebooks, you “save” the game in certain parts and acquire skills/upgrades that persist between games.

gamebooks that also use illustrations as part of the narrative will focus more on a good, developed plot than the game system itself. Decolonial approaches, social problems, everyday dilemmas – like those encountered in the mobile gamebook app *Ti Primeiro* (“You Go First,” Melgo Cinema, n.d.) – there are so many possibilities.

### 3. About this Issue

This issue of the *Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies* (JARPS) features five contributions that delve into various facets of gamebooks, offering both empirical research and insightful reflections.

Kondō Kōshi (Adventure Planning Service) was the editor of the first run of the Japanese version of the fantasy gamebook magazine *Warlock*.<sup>5</sup> His invited paper opens this issue with a history of gamebooks in Japan.

“Gamebooks and the Materiality of Reading,” by Marco Arnaudo (Indiana University), explores printed gamebooks’ unique attributes, features, and limitations. Thanks to its characteristics, the gamebook is resilient enough to adapt and maintain relevance amid a digital age in which interactivity is highly valued. He delves deep into their structure, features, and adaptability in a digital age, offering a comprehensive analysis beyond mere description.

Peter Clynes’ (Kanazawa Seiryō University) “An Exploration of the Appeal of the Cosmic Horror Series of Gamebooks for Call of Cthulhu TRPG” presents a survey exploring the preferences of cosmic horror fans who would rather play the gamebooks of the franchise instead of Chaosium’s TRPG. This study provides valuable data on the appeal of gamebooks and their potential for broader applications, for example, to implement gamebooks in school environments.

“Pause to Reflect: Ruminating on Interactive Methodology in Ethnography Writing” by Laya Liebeseller’s (University of Wisconsin) shares in an explorative piece her research on tabletop roleplaying groups in the Midwestern United States during the pandemic, involving playful storytelling, guided characters, and interactivity. Though still in progress, her insights on interactive methodology and ethnographic writing can inspire new approaches in the future.

Closing the issue, Camila Concato presents a review of the PhD dissertation “Literatura e livros-jogos: a adaptação literária e seus benefícios”

(“Literature and Gamebooks: Literary Adaptation and its Benefits,” 2022) briefly summarising each chapter with her impressions.

### 4. Notes from the Journal Editors

This issue on interactive media and fiction is the first guest-edited release of JARPS, and we invite similar contributions and collaborations on various aspects of analog role-playing. The 2024 special issue will be a shared project with Michael Freudenthal (University Sorbonne Paris Nord), research fellow at Game in Lab, and concerns questions of access and accessibility

Future issues of the journal will concern other areas of researching and practicing non-digital role-playing games. We still welcome more contributions dealing with questions of solo-play or interactive media beyond the current issue. If you plan to apply TRPGs or larps in an educational or therapeutic setting, please consider writing about your project as a “Case Report.” If you encountered resourceful books on role-playing games, why don’t you review them and contribute to further the discussion on TRPGs and larp (“Book Review”)? Most welcome are theoretical papers exploring key ideas, such as immersion or bleed, and original studies, for example, about how players interact with gaming elements, how particular genres re-shaped the field, or how organizers deal with transparency and accessibility. Please let us know if you would like to be considered as a reviewer.<sup>6</sup> We are looking forward to further exploring the field of non-digital role-playing games together with our authors and readers. We hope you find some of your questions about gamebooks answered in this issue, that they give you new ideas about role-playing, and that some techniques or tools will enrich your practice.

Special and guest issues alike, each covers a specific aspect of current role-playing game-related research and practice, such as educational applications, player-character relations, or the human body in play. Potential guest editors are asked to submit their ideas for a possible issue via the regular submission system.

Since 2023, JARPS is also open to rolling submissions. We welcome contributions even if they do not match a particular issue’s topic or if they are submitted outside a call for papers’ timeframe. After review, we will include such submissions in later issues.

<sup>5</sup> The British *Warlock* centered on the *Fighting Fantasy* series but was short-lived (1984-1986). Its Japanese cousin soon shifted its focus to tabletop role-playing games and ran from 1986 to 1992. In 2018, the game studio GroupSNE started publishing a new magazine under the same name.

<sup>6</sup> During the account creation process on this website, you can choose to be registered as a reviewer and inform the editors about your areas of expertise.

We look forward to many new insights and deep discussions about analog role-playing games.

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