

# Gamebooks and the Materiality of Reading

Marco Arnaudo | マルコ アルナード

Indiana University | インディアナ大学  
marnaudo@indiana.edu | ORCID: 0000-0001-9063-2367

## Abstract

The paper discusses how the gamebook form derives specific traits, affordances, and limitations from its being a material technology for the creation of meaning. These elements are discussed from the perspective of the author designing a gamebook and that of a reader navigating the text. The discussion allows us to understand the surprising resilience of the gamebook in today's digitally mediated world, as it is precisely its material nature that gives it a unique positioning in the field of interactive entertainment. After demonstrating the relevance of the gamebook in the present, the article discusses the material elements of the gamebook's three components: the section, the text, and the link. We see how the partition of the work into sections may interfere with the partition of the physical artifact into pages; how the inalterable fabric of the text can relate to a population of diverse readers; and how the explicit nature of the links can create peculiar types of spoilers. The impact of the spatial disposition of the sections in the book is discussed also. Next, the article analyzes the tension between the structure of the gamebook, which proceeds by prescribed reading paths, and the fact that the book is materially open to unauthorized interactions. The discussion focuses on purposeful departures from prescribed reading paths (cheating) and cases in which the author creatively exploited the material nature of the gamebook through mechanisms that require abandoning the narrative tree to be fully appreciated.

Keywords: Gamebooks; interaction; reader-oriented theory; *Choose Your Own Adventure*; *Fighting Fantasy*.

## 要約

本稿では、ゲームブックという形式が、意味を創造するための物質的な技術であることから、どのような特定の特徴、アフォーダンス、制限を導き出すかについて論じる。これらの要素は、ゲームブックをデザインする作者と、テキストをナビゲートする読者の視点から議論される。この議論によって、今日のデジタルに媒介された世界におけるゲームブックの驚くべき回復力を理解することができる。というのも、まさにその物質的な性質が、インタラクティブ・エンターテインメントの分野においてゲームブックにユニークな位置づけを与えているからである。現在におけるゲームブックの関連性を示した後、本稿ではゲームブックの3つの構成要素であるセクション、テキスト、リンクの物質的要素について論じる。作品をセクションに分割することが、物理的な人工物をページに分割することにどのように干渉しうるか、テキストの変更不可能な織物が多様な読者集団にどのように関係しうるか、リンクの明示的な性質が特異なタイプのネタバレをどのように生み出しうるかがわかる。また、本の中のセクションの空間的配置が与える影響についても論じる。次に、定められた読書経路によって進行するゲームブックの構造と、無許可の相互作用に対して物質的に開かれているという事実との間の緊張関係を分析する。規定された読書経路からの意図的な逸脱（不正行為）や、ゲームブックの物質的な性質を著者が創造的に利用したケースに焦点を当て、ゲームブックの読書経路を放棄することを必要とするメカニズムについて論じる。

キーワード：ゲームブック、インタラクティブティイー、読者指向理論、きみならどうする?、ファイティング・ファンタジー

## 1. Definitions, Purposes, Scope

A gamebook can be defined as a narrative printed on paper and partitioned into sections connected by links.<sup>1</sup> By following the links, the reader experiences alternative reading paths that usually lead to multiple endings.<sup>2</sup> A simple example from Richard Brightfield's *Secret of the Pyramids* (1983) is a narrative section that splits into: «If you insist on going along, turn to page 97. If you stay behind, turn to page 49» (21). Pages 97 and 49 present

each narrative branch's development based on the reader's choice by turning to that section. Most gamebooks ever published have been narrated in prose and have included black-and-white, decorative illustrations. Some gamebooks have included more dynamic visual elements by incorporating narrative elements in their illustrations or simply by being configured as branching comics.

Unfortunately, the gamebook as a storytelling device has received little academic attention.

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed definition and a more throughout theoretical analysis of the gamebook form, see Arnaudo (2023).

<sup>2</sup> A rare exception is in the *Powerpuff Girls Plus You Club* series (Cartoon Network, 2002), whose books featured multiple reading paths that ultimately converge into a single ending.



Aarseth's foundational *Cybertext* (1997) acknowledged the gamebook's existence but did not describe it in detail. Between the late 1990s and early 2010s, other studies of interactive fiction neglected the gamebook to equate branching storytelling almost entirely with digital texts. When gamebooks were discussed at all, they were described as inferior parallels of digital interactive fiction. Early scholars of game studies also drew many inaccurate generalizations. An example is Montfort, who wrote that the first book in Bantam Books' *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, Packard's *The Cave of Time* (1979), was "likely to have been at least vaguely inspired by actual computer programs, including very early interactive fiction" (Montfort 2003, 71). Montfort provided no evidence for this "likely" digital filiation and overlooked that Packard invented the *CYOA* formula in 1969 in his *The Adventures of You on Sugarcane Island*. The inspiration was the experience of telling bedtime stories to his three children, who all wanted the narrative to go in different directions (Packard 1976, 108).<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of the early 2020s, the kind of text-based digital interactive fiction these scholars celebrated has been entirely supplanted by video games and Japanese-style visual novels.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the gamebook has demonstrated unexpected resilience. As a form of entertainment for young readers, it has slowed down from the 1980s and early 1990s craze while continuing to have a real market presence. The *Choose Your Own Adventure* website cites the sale of 16 million copies since 2006, which seems far from editorial extinction.<sup>5</sup> Another classic series, *Fighting Fantasy*, continues reprinting its classic titles while adding new works (first release in the series by Jackson and Livingstone 1982). New series for young readers came into existence in the 2000s, too, like *Twisted Journeys* (2007-2012, 22 volumes, published by Graphic Universe) and several *You Choose* lines of the 2010s by Random House, featuring Scooby-Doo, Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Justice League (for a total of over 30 volumes).

Moreover, from the early 2000s, now-adult readers of the original gamebooks also started supporting a market for this kind of work. The presence of an adult audience allowed the creation and professional publication of longer, more complex, and more mature gamebooks than the first generation (Arnaudo 2023). The gamebook has done much more than survive and has entered an exciting new phase.

The continuation and maturation of the gamebook into the 21st century may have much to do with its material and physical nature. The immense market for gamebooks of the 1980s shrunk considerably in the mid-1990s, when video game consoles, computer games, and the internet were entering people's lives at a massive rate. Digital entertainment was new, thrilling, and exotic, differing substantially from people's daily work and social interactions. By the 2010s, digital interconnectedness had become so pervasive that a sense of fatigue had begun to seep in, as evidenced by the unexpected comeback of several analog forms of entertainment. David Sax (2016) described this phenomenon in a book titled *Revenge of the Analog*. While the trend is undeniable, the relationship between analog and digital is not as adversarial as the term revenge implies. For starters, the digital revolution was precisely what gave a special allure to material forms of entertainment that were simply the standard before. Also, today's fans of analog hobbies routinely employ the internet to pursue their passions even more effectively than in the past. Gamebook fans, for example, go online to learn about classic and new titles, read or watch reviews, feel a sense of community with distant peers, and support new works through print-on-demand and crowdfunding. In 2022, the gamebook for adults *Alba* by H. L. Truslove (2022) collected £272,794 from 10,301 Kickstarter backers. These phenomena represent not so much a revenge against the digital, then, but rather a hijacking of means – a way in which the analog employs digital mediation to spread its own quintessentially material form of expression.

Furthermore, adults enjoying gamebooks are probably educated individuals who appreciate reading in their leisure time. Chances are that many work in tertiary jobs that involve staring at screens and pressing plastic buttons for considerable amounts of time. Gamebooks made of paper, with their weight, texture, smell, and visceral haptic connection, offer a markedly different experience from this kind of work. Moreover, as many gamebooks require keeping track of scores, stats, and inventory, they often include sections for the reader to write in, deepening the emotional connection with the artifact and turning each copy into an individual recording of the reader's journey. Kevin Allen Jr.'s gamebook *Sweet Agatha* (2008) goes even further and requires that the reader destroys the book and rearranges the fragments to generate a narrative. With all this in mind, looking at the specific traits that gamebooks derive from their materiality seems particularly poignant.

<sup>3</sup> Brief mentions of gamebooks identifying them with the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series are in Douglas (2000, 24), Ryan (2000, 168, 194), Ryan (2006, 110–111), and Ciccoricco (2007, 7). Salter (2014, 15–20) discussed a larger range of gamebooks, but also included historical errors. The legitimacy of the identification of interactive fiction with digital media has been questioned by Wake (2016).

<sup>4</sup> The 2010 documentary *GET LAMP* by Jason Scott already described digital text adventures as having become a minuscule niche of readers-creators driven solely by love for the form, with no market to speak of.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cyoa.com/pages/about-us> (accessed 2023/09/29)

In this paper, I will discuss the unique affordances, interactions, expressive possibilities, and limitations that the gamebook derives from its physical qualities. I will not attempt to retell a history of the form from its antecedents of the 1930s and 1940s to the present.<sup>6</sup> I intend to discuss how the physical interactions with the gamebook artifact *typically* work. Plenty of exceptions exist, but even those can be better understood against a background of commonly found traits.

## 2. Inferences from Size and Length

The materiality of the gamebook influences the reader's experience at various levels. The fact that the entirety of the work is completely and unquestionably in the hands of the reader allows one to make educated guesses about the content and structure of the work. When we pick up a copy of R. A. Montgomery's *Space and Beyond* (1980; reissue edition 2006), for example, we learn from the cover that this slim, 144-page book features 44 different endings. This is enough to inform us that the narrative tree must branch soon, hard, and often, resulting in many short and parallel narratives. Conversely, reading on the cover of R. A. Montgomery's *Track Star!* (2009) that the book features 19 different endings, reveals an internal structure made of fewer choices and longer narrative branches.

The gamebook in comics format *You Are Deadpool* (2018) by Ewing, Espin, and Diaz provides another example. In the first pages of the last chapter, the story ends abruptly with Deadpool destroying the universe, which, given the nihilistic humor of the series, may even be seen as perfectly appropriate. For the reader of a printed copy of *You Are Deadpool*, however, it is impossible not to notice that the issue contains about 20 more pages that still need to be accounted for. Simply put, those pages are *there*, literally in your hands. Such consideration clues the reader to the existence of a narrative that continues in the rest of the episode despite the lack of any textual indication to this effect. A similar and more extreme case is in Butterfield, Honigmann, and Parker's *Return of the Wanderer* (1986). The book has 600 numbered sections, but if the reader misses or misunderstands a rule in the introduction, they may think the text ends after only two sections! The apparent existence of the remaining 598, which are clearly tangible in the object the reader is holding, points to the fact that other routes must be available.

The physicality of the gamebook may inform the reader not only about what is probably in it (as in the cases above) but also what is likely to be absent.

An example is in Michael Andrews' *Dungeon of Fear* (1994). At a certain point in the adventure, the protagonist enters the hallway of a mansion featuring four doors and a staircase (section 30). If presented early on and in a large gamebook, this configuration may imply the existence of an intricate and vast space to explore by moving through these exits. *Dungeon of Fear*, however, offers only 74 narrative sections, and many of them have already been experienced by the time the reader reaches this mansion. The reader may, therefore, realize that the book doesn't have enough structural and physical space to accommodate a complex system of locations departing from here. Three or four locations connected to each exit already would not fit. Even before making any choice, the reader can assume that most exits are made of a single section that will lead to an abrupt ending, loop back to the hallway, or merge with another branch soon afterward.

## 3. The Framing of the Sections

Materiality also influences the design and use of the sections in which a gamebook is broken down. Each section must be clearly and unambiguously marked because the reader will need to retrieve where the next section of the story is. The beginning and end of each section must also be clearly identifiable. Editors, therefore, tend to ensure that the page's physical edges do not interfere with the partitions of the text. When that is not done properly, significant problems of navigation may emerge. In Bill Fawcett's *Quest for the Unicorn's Horn* (1985), for instance, the choices offered at the end of section 78 are split between the bottom of the right page and the top of the following left page. Only the first two options are clearly visible at the bottom of the last page of the text, without indicating that a further choice is available in the next. This placement of materials makes it likely that the last option will be missed.<sup>7</sup>

Ryan North's *William Shakespeare's Punches a Friggin' Shark* (2018) occasionally exhibits a similar organization but does so on purpose and with creative intent. Several sections of this gamebook feature abrupt endings at the bottom of the left page. If you looked at such a page on its own (say, as an image on a screen), you would not doubt that that branch of the story ends there. However, suppose we look at the top of the adjacent right page (not because the text ever tells us to do so, but because that printed page is physically there). In that case, we find a postscript that continues that narrative branch and adds a humorous twist to the situation. The placement of that addendum is surprising precisely because it plays with our assumption that an ending at the

<sup>6</sup> For those who would like to gain an understanding of the history of the gamebook, I strongly recommend the database Demian's Gamebook Web Page (<https://gamebooks.org/>; accessed 2023/09/29). I owe to the founder,

Demian Katz, an incalculable debt of gratitude. Other excellent sources are Green (2014), Angiolino (2004), and Longo (2019).

<sup>7</sup> The same problem occurs in Keith Martin's *Island of the Undead* (1992), section 1. On this problem, see Arnaudo (2023).

bottom of a page must mark the conclusion of a section.

Since gamebooks added a branching structure to the pre-existing technology of the book, they have often appropriated the tradition of partitioning books by page. All early gamebooks employed this method. When offering options to the readers, they always directed them to this or that page. In the late 1970s, the solo modules for the role-playing game *Tunnels & Trolls* (St. Andre 1975) were possibly the first gamebooks to feature multiple sections on the same page, making more efficient use of space. Later, this method was adopted by popular series like *Fighting Fantasy* and *Lone Wolf* (cf. Dever 1984), which increased the story's complexity and length without requiring extra paper.

At the same time, the simultaneous presence of multiple sections within each page adds a challenge to the simple act of bookmarking. Inserting a traditional bookmark within a two-page spread can be of little help if that spread contains many sections, each referring to vastly different parts of the narrative tree. If the book is put away for some time, and several sections refer to similar places or situations, retrieving the correct position from the two-page spread becomes problematic. As many gamebooks require keeping note of stats and inventory, and the reader will often have a pencil at hand, making a note of the correct section becomes a more practical option. Alternatively, the reader can use a small bookmark (the size of a trading card) and lodge it tightly next to the book's spine, adjacent to a specific section. Magnetic clips attached to the desired section work, too.

#### 4. Identification in a Printed Medium

Each gamebook section is meant to present some content, usually in prose or comic form. Much of this content is medium-independent, meaning those words and images could exist in digital format. Yet, presenting such content on paper has some specific effects, the most prominent of which is the contrast between the work's interactive nature and the printed text's inalterable nature. Gamebooks operate in a fragile tension between a protagonist whose primary traits are permanently inscribed in the body of the work and a potentially large and diverse group of readers who may be interested in inhabiting different types of figures.

Gamebook series have adopted several approaches to this dilemma. Linguistically, most English-language gamebooks have employed gender-neutral language, allowing readers of different identities to latch onto the figure of the protagonist (Xing 2019). Narratively, some series have relied on vaguely defined and physically undescribed protagonists. The *Fighting Fantasy* series tends to sketch its protagonists only in terms of profession and

skills, making it possible to imagine them as of any ethnicity and gender identity. Visually, a common solution has been to show the scenes in the illustrations from the point of view of the unseen protagonist. This method has the advantage of giving great dramatic power to the image while allowing us to imagine any kind of protagonist in that situation (Arnaudo 2023).

Languages other than English may present different challenges, for example, forcing the author or translator to gender adjectives and even verbs. Additional layers of nuance may emerge, too. The Italian gamebook *Il gobbo maledetto* ("The Cursed Hunchback," Angiolino and Alegi 1993) addresses the reader using not just male grammatical forms but also the pronoun *voi*, which is a much more formal version of *tu* (you) and is only used with adults. The reader is, therefore, positioned as a male adult, limiting the possibilities for identification.

The one actual element of customization in gamebooks is through game mechanics, which generate content that belongs to the world of the story even when not explicitly mentioned in the text. At the beginning of many gamebooks, for example, the reader can assign certain items and skills to the protagonist. These elements are recorded on a separate sheet of paper or a specific page in the book. They may (for example) generate a protagonist wearing a green cloak, carrying a set of throwing knives and excelling at stealth. Another reader making different decisions may define the protagonist of the same gamebook as wearing heavy armor, wielding a large mace, and specializing in melee combat. Designing the protagonist as a stealthy assassin or a loud brawler allows the reader to imagine them walking and acting in different ways, even if the text does not offer any detail.

These options for customization are consistent with the fact that the protagonist of a gamebook is *tangibly* inalterable because such elements are not acknowledged in the main text. For this reason, variable elements such as equipment and skills are either not mentioned at all in the gamebook narrative (while their effects still apply) or are included in the form of if / then checks («If you wear a green cloak, go to 14»).

#### 5. Structural Spoilers

Another challenge in the design of a gamebook is what can be described as a structural spoiler. By this term, I designate the kind of assumption a reader can make about the content of the text based solely on its location in the narrative tree. For example, one can assume that the content mentioned in a given section is consistent with all sections leading up to it. The issue is particularly sensitive in goal-oriented gamebooks, like in the *Fighting Fantasy* and *Lone Wolf* series, where the protagonist must complete a

specific mission, and there is one and only one optimal ending. Once the reader reaches that ending, *any earlier event mentioned in it is revealed to be mandatory to beat the challenge*.

Consider this passage from the optimal ending of *Green Blood* (1993) by Mark Smith: «The Westerners are routed. They have faced a dragon, the elves and a hero among mankind and they have had enough» (section 500). This apparently harmless recap reveals that the protagonist's alliances with the elves and the dragon and their participation in the final battle are necessary to defeat the evil Westerners. If rereading the text, the reader knows that choices leading away from those alliances will always end in defeat. The problem is of some consequence when one considers that making and remaking choices is one of the main pleasures sought by readers of gamebooks, who would be reading linear fiction otherwise.

## 6. Labeling the Sections

The last basic component of the gamebook is the link, that is, the instructions that connect the sections of the text and that can generate many kinds of configurations.<sup>8</sup> Since the reader will actively move through the gamebook, the artifact's materiality requires that each link be clearly and explicitly identified. Typically, links are placed at the end of a section as a menu of options and may appear to give away some of the possible content in the section. In truth, gamebooks give no guarantee that what is to be found on the other side of the section will match one's expectations. The form of the gamebook simply places no obligation on the author because anything can be written in a section, regardless of what the previous link said. An interesting example is the Italian branching comic *Zio Paperone e l'anfora enigmatica* ("Uncle Scrooge and the Enigmatic Amphora," Concina and Cavazzano 1986). In a scene where the protagonists appear to meet with Neptune, the reader is asked to decide if that character is indeed the ancient god. He is revealed to be an impostor if you choose that he is not. If you decide that he is legitimate, the story still tells that that is not Neptune, but for different reasons! Only retroactively do you realize that that link (and potentially any link) can trick the reader with vastly unexpected twists.

Gamebooks in the *Plot-It-Yourself-A-Team* series (like William Rotsler's *Defense against Terror*, 1983) list purposefully vague and cryptic options in their menus of options, leaving the reader mainly in the dark about any of the content of the following sections. There are also modular gamebooks whose narrative content is partially or entirely determined by random selection and where the menu of options

connects the random outcomes with a section label, with no indication of the content. In my gamebook *The Inheritance* (Arnaudo 2021), for example, if the reader decides to explore a swamp, they roll two six-sided dice and check the result against a menu that reads like this: «2: Go to 18; 3: Go to 63; 4: Go to 48», and so on. No spoiler can be possibly evinced from these links.

Labels to navigate a gamebook are (maybe counterintuitively) marked clearly, even in the case of riddles and puzzles whose solution is the section number to go to. Once solved, the puzzle or riddle will still unambiguously lead to the intended section. To navigate a gamebook, the reader must be fully aware of the label of each section they are intended to turn to. The book must tell me that the story continues in section 279 before it makes sense for me to jump to section 279. This trivial requirement has pivotal consequences on the design and fruition of a gamebook. The most prominent effect is that each time the reader sees the same label in different parts of the story, they immediately know that those links lead precisely to the same section and content. Authors often try to prevent this problem by placing some textual distance between occurrences of the same numerical indication, hoping that the reader will not remember the previous indication. Authors may also disguise a connection to a particular place by adding a section whose only purpose is redirecting to that passage. For example, if multiple paths are meant to lead to a deadly trap in section 279, the text may offer a choice that points to a different page («If you go left, turn to page 77»), and then the text at 77 may simply say «Go to 279».<sup>9</sup>

In gamebooks, the physical distance between narratively connected sections also matters. If section 20 asks the reader to choose between sections 21 and 149, but section 21 is printed on the same page as 20, one may accidentally see spoilers (Arnaudo 2023). Similarly, if a menu of options includes sequential target sections (say, go to 282 or 283), reading the chosen section may give too much information about the other, especially if one sees that it contains an abrupt ending.

## 7. Synchronicity and Openness

These considerations lead us to the most consequential effect of the materiality of gamebooks. While the textual net is organized along prescribed reading paths, *all contents of a gamebook are physically available to the reader*. Digital texts and video games can sequester most of their content until the program decides it is the right time to release them. A savvy user may be able to access the code of a

<sup>8</sup> See analyses of branching structures in Ashwell (2015) and Laskow (2022).

<sup>9</sup> For more examples and further considerations on this point, see Arnaudo (2023).

digital artifact and use it in unprescribed ways, but only some have that knowledge. There exists no such technical barrier in gamebooks. No mechanism is there to prevent any reader from reading sections out of their intended order.

The complete, simultaneous availability of all contents of a gamebook has massive effects on the reading experience. This is true even when the reader is duly following paths and doing their best to stay on course. The possibility of spoilers caused by adjacent sections has been mentioned above, and it comes precisely from this factor. Moreover, to continue the narrative, the reader must physically look for the next section, which requires flipping through the pages and taking a passing look at materials that are outside the current storyline. Catching a glimpse of some unauthorized material is a natural and predictable element of this process. However, inadvertently seeing a few words on how the archvillain dies or where a treasure is hidden can certainly have a significant impact.

Other kinds of structural information may be gleaned from the synchronic nature of the gamebook. Moving back and forth through the text of Amy Goldschlager's *Career-Day Blossom* (2002), I noticed that a strangely large number of sections ended in «Continue on page 64». Similarly, I noticed that no sections were ending with the words THE END other than the one on page 64. Even before reading a significant portion of the gamebook, the normal process of textual navigation informed me that all reading paths converged into a single mandatory ending on page 64.

The problem is all the most pressing with illustrations, which, by their virtue of being visually prominent, will almost certainly be seen out of narrative order. Many books whose illustrations contain important spoilers have been published indeed. The risk can be turned into an advantage by making the illustrations a somewhat generic preview of places to explore, characters to interact with, and objectives to complete, which the reader will be curious to discover. Illustrations can also alert the reader that some interesting content remains to be encountered after reaching a particular ending, giving an incentive to attempt the adventure again.

However, little has been done or can be done to avoid such spoilers in branching comics. As most of their content is visualized, branching comics have simply no way of preventing the reader from acquiring unwanted information while moving back and forth in the text. While reading the branching graphic novel *Loup Garou* (Moon 2018), for example, you may inadvertently see a panel with an enemy ambushing you from behind a certain door. That casual, innocent glance tells you precisely what to expect when you find yourself in front of that door later in the story.

The physical nature of the gamebook also allows the reader to read entire sections of the work out of their intended order. This may happen by mistake, especially if one misremembers the section number to turn to. In the case of gamebooks, including game mechanics, the risk is also that the reader will skip or misunderstand the rules section at the beginning of the work. By contrast, no player of the demanding video game *Elden Ring* (Miyazaki and Martin 2022) will accidentally slay the final boss ten minutes into the game.

In the Shakespeare-inspired gamebook *Not Be or Not to Be* (reissue, 2016), Ryan North even jokes about the possible misuse of the narrative tree (Waldron 2015). Page 1 introduces the text and gives the reader a choice between starting the story on page 4 or reading the acknowledgments on page 357. One can assume that most people choosing to go to page 4 will take a passing or accidental look at page 3 on their way to the target section. If they do so, they will stumble upon North's humorous scolding of readers who don't follow instructions:

Whoah, whoah, slow down there, cowboy! At the end of that last bit, you were supposed to make a choice, and then jump to the page that reflects that choice. Instead of following those instructions, you just kept reading what came next like this is an ordinary book. THIS BOOK IS CRAZY INSANE; HOW ARE YOU EVEN ACTING LIKE THIS IS AN ORDINARY BOOK? You die without even having chosen your character, THE END, and your final score is "maybe learn to read books better sometimes" out of 1000 (North 2016, 3).

The passage looks far more like a prank than an actual implementation of harsh gamebook etiquette. The risk of the reader reading page 3 right after page 1 would have been minimized if the instructions asked one to jump to a much later page. The sentence in all caps on page 3 is also likely to catch the reader's eye, making one more likely to read the text incorrectly. The same occurs in North's *Romeo and/or Juliet* (2016), where section 1 allows the reader to start the story in section 3. As section 2 is physically printed on the same page as 1 and 3, sandwiched between them, taking a look at it is likely. Section 2, again, rebukes the reader for their inappropriate linear reading. In both cases, the reader's freedom to disregard prescribed paths is chastised playfully, and these traps only work because the trick text is materially presented so close to the correct one.

Tim Dedopulos seems to take the matter more seriously in *You Are (not) Deadpool* (2022) and *She-Hulk Goes to Murderworld* (2022). Section 2 of both books starts with a warning to readers who may have

misunderstood the branching structure of the work. *She-Hulk Goes to Murderworld* reads: «If you're reading this because you finished the first section and kept going, we must warn you that you're going to get confused and bored very quickly. This book only makes sense if you hop from entry to entry according to the directions».

## 8. Backtracking

The open and available nature of the contents of a gamebook also allows a considerable degree of freedom to readers who want to navigate the text creatively. By writing down notes about the contents of the sections, a reader can take advantage of an infinite number of saves, which can then be loaded (so to speak) quickly and never need to be overwritten. Just turn to the section you want, and you have rewound the story to that point. Even if no notes were taken, a player can recover a partially explored path by searching a specific area of the book («I remember it was around 200») and/or using illustrations as pointers («It was next to the dancing goblins»). Video games with alternate endings require more work than this, and “the player now has to go on a long repetitive trudge to explore the story tree, which probably will not be worth the effort and tedium, since there is likely a lot of repeated content upon a second playing” (Schell 2015, 302–303).<sup>10</sup>

Virtually every reader of gamebooks also uses the time-honored tradition of marking recent branching points of the story by placing a finger between the pages. These finger marks are obviously limited in number, but creating them does not interrupt the flow of reading, and they still allow one to return without effort to a previous choice. Alex Jenkins and Stephen Morrison even acknowledged this method in the gamebook *The Regional Accounts Director of Firetop Mountain* (2008). Section 127 requires a personality test in which you must declare the number of fingers you currently keep in the book. A reader who keeps two or more will be considered a coward; a reader with one or none a «maverick»!

Using fingers as temporary bookmarks also has very real effects on the act of reading. The haptic connection with the book is more substantial and deeper than when a book is read in the traditional way. Moreover, a reader may choose a narrative option leading to an area of the book with fewer finger marks simply because it is physically more convenient to go there.

The fingermark creates a peculiar type of narrative immersion at a higher level. In linear fiction, one can only be in one specific place at a time. With a gamebook, it is more of a matter of degree. When

you are keeping your options physically and literally open (or ajar), your attention tends to stretch across multiple storylines simultaneously. The section you are reading is where you are *the most*, but not exclusively. For example, I sometimes decide the path I intend to take, place a finger next to that branching point, and read the unchosen path first. Maybe that option seemed so ludicrous that I wanted to read it for fun. So, now I am reading this unchosen section with the mental caveat that it is not the real story. At times, the unchosen path turns out to be a lot more promising or exciting than expected, and I keep following it. The unchosen reality then becomes the real one with the simple flick of a mental switch. If I change my mind later, it takes me merely a second to return to the previous branching point and redefine again what is real and what isn't in the current storyline.

This process of assigning shifting degrees of reality to the branches of a gamebook is very smooth and natural, because it does not interrupt the reader's regular interactions with the artifact. Moving from section to section and following links is what the reader of a gamebook does *anyway*, making backtracking and testing alternative paths an extension, rather than a disruption, of the gamebook's usual mode of storytelling. Ryan North has also acknowledged this connection between parallel reading and the gamebook's physicality. He wrote that «in a multiple-path book, usually you'll have your fingers in several places of the book», and to address the needs of this kind of reader, he designed a bookmark resembling a four-toothed comb so that by slipping the teeth in different pages «you'll be able to remember where you are, *even when you're in several places at once*». <sup>11</sup> Such power to project the reader's attention across simultaneous alternative realities has no parallel in other forms of fiction. Tabletop role-playing games and board games require much more work to move from scenario to scenario and do not allow rewinding the story by default. Video games with multiple saves come closer, yet to return to a previous point, the player must still abandon the story, go to a save menu, choose a save, and wait for it to load. Video games do not permit their players to glide as fluidly and effortlessly between parallel realities as gamebooks do.

## 9. Story Mode and the Pleasures of Cheating

When it comes to gamebooks that include game mechanics, moreover, the open nature of the gamebook allows the reader to adapt the difficulty to their preference. A video game boss may have to be defeated for the story to progress. Still, the gamebook

<sup>10</sup> See also Rouse (2004, 15–16).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/breadpig/to-be-or-not-to-be-that-is-the-adventure/posts/354298> (accessed 2023/09/29).

will probably say something like, «If you defeat the boss, turn to 400», without anything preventing the reader from turning to 400. This point is acknowledged explicitly in the metafictional *You Played Too Many Gamebooks and Now You're Living One* by Adam Carter (2022): «Go back and cheat if you like. Choose something else, I can wait. This is only available in hardback, so cheating's easy» (section 197). Even when the gamebook contains puzzles or riddles, the analog medium of the gamebook makes it possible to crack the enigmas by blunt force. No gamebook can resist the assault of a reader scanning the first lines of every section until the one hinted at by the riddle is found.

In gamebooks, therefore, one can always choose to face as much or as little gamic challenge as desired, and the degree of difficulty can be adjusted in the middle of the book, a test, or a single move. All that is needed is to want to do so. One can choose to face two epic battles, skip the next three, and then make the following one harder by increasing the enemies' stats. In video games of the 1980s, when the gamebook form thrived the most, variable difficulty settings became popular while remaining far from universal (Schweizer 2016, 155–156). In this same period, gamebooks sold millions and millions of copies, all allowing any imaginable difficulty mode (normal, story, insane...). Video games have mostly caught up to the gamebook. Still, to this day, they do not allow players to switch difficulty as easily and instantaneously as gamebooks do – literally at the speed of thought.

An interesting phenomenon emerges when gamebook designers, aware of the reader's navigation power, try to regulate the situation by permitting some conditional cheating. The irony is that when a gamebook allows the reader to cheat, it does not expand the reader's freedom. Rather, conditionally authorized cheating represents an attempt to limit the absolute power to cheat that the reader already has.

An example is in section 381 of Luke Sharp's *Fangs of Fury* (1989), where the protagonist attempts to unlock a panel with a secret code while dodging the attacks of an evil wizard. We are told that the code is a two-digit number between 00 and 49, and the protagonist may have previously collected a key or a lockpick with that number printed on it. If so, the reader can turn to the corresponding section number to open the panel. If the reader fails to find the key or the lockpick, the text allows the reader to look up random paragraphs in the gamebook. The drawback is that the protagonist will be hit by one of the wizard's attacks for each incorrect attempt, suffering a loss of stamina or resources. This way, the reader is faced with three choices: to proceed to the correct

paragraph (if they know it), to guess the number while taking into account the penalty, or to use classic cheating and simply look up paragraphs in the indicated range (which is not large). Similarly, the protagonist of the *Sagas of the Demonspawn* series (1984-1985) by J. H. Brennan can spend power points to return to the beginning of a combat section and attempt it again (first book in the series, Brennan 1984). The player may, therefore, choose to play by the rules (accepting the consequences of a bad fight), ignore the outcome of a fight at a cost (spending power points), or ignore the outcome of a fight altogether (classic cheating).

These practices can also be found in modern gamebooks. Simon Osborne's *An Assassin in Orlandes* (Osborne 2016) allows the reader to choose one of two difficulty levels, classic and casual.<sup>12</sup> In the classic mode, the reader agrees to follow the rules and to use no more than three bookmarks to return to previous choices. In casual mode, the reader is explicitly allowed to return to earlier sections at will, ignore die roll results, and infinitely heal one's protagonist. Graham Wilson's *Bruidd* (2020) gives the protagonist an ability called timeslip, which can be used only a certain number of times and allows the protagonist to travel back in time in some text sections. While Osborne and Wilson seem to increase the reader's agency, in practice, they reframe and limit the freedom of navigation that readers of gamebooks have always had.

The ability of the reader of gamebooks to act against the rules is also occasionally addressed by the authors in a range of ways that go from didactic to surreal.

In *Trial of Champions* (1986), Ian Livingstone attempts to punish dishonest gameplay. The protagonist must collect several rings to succeed, and after a while, the text asks the reader how many rings are in the protagonist's possession. If the reader selects a number that can't possibly be acquired, the resulting text reads:

The Trialmaster does not wait to count the rings. In a cold voice he says, 'There is only one way to deal with liars.' Before you can draw your sword, a lightning bolt shoots you out from the wizard's outstretched finger and slams into your chest. So near and yet so far... you have failed the ultimate trial. (section 392)

Gamebooks inspired by the text adventure *Zork* used similar mechanisms, but the outcome was so humorous that, in practice, they gave readers an incentive to check them out. Page 87 of Eric

<sup>12</sup> The text was originally published in 2010 in digital format. In my study, I am only concerned with the printed version from 2016.



Meretzky's *The Cavern of Doom* (1983) asks the reader: «Did you get the scroll with the light spell from the rockworm tribe? If so, turn to page 91». If you turn to page 91, you encounter a rather annoyed «appointed Assistant Third Class in the Anti-Cheating Bureau of Zorkbooks, Inc., whose job is to prevent exactly the sort of brazen fraudulence you have just displayed». Since there are no light spells or rockworm tribes in the book, you are found guilty of cheating, and your punishment is to reach an abrupt end. Which, of course, is not that hurtful. You just return to your previous finger mark and take another path.

Other gamebooks go in the opposite direction, embracing the reader's ability to move freely in the text and perform unauthorized actions. *You Are (not) Deadpool* by Tim Dedopulos (2022) includes a system of collectible achievements similar to those found in video games. However, some of those achievements can be acquired only by cheating! While the rules stipulate that the protagonist can only carry up to five items at once, section 271 reads:

Be honest, now. Do you have six or more items with you? Yes? Take the achievement: *Compulsive Hoarder*. No? take the achievement: *Frugal*. Now, let's be even more honest, hmmm? Did you just tick off both of those achievements? If so, add the achievement: *Terminally Indecisive*.

The only way to collect two of those achievements is by cheating: first, by carrying more items than allowed, and then by giving oneself two mutually exclusive achievements.

## 10. The Locked Room

A similar situation is in what can be called a locked room, by which I mean a section of a gamebook that has no links directing to it. Still, because the locked room is printed together with all other sections, the reader can read it without any particular effort or technical knowledge. All it takes to find a locked room in a gamebook is a bit of luck or a mapping of the gamebook that reveals that some sections are unaccounted for. Finding hidden content in video games may require more specialized skills, like for the infamous Hot Coffee minigame in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Zwiezen 2021; Guins 2009, 161–167).

A locked room can be created inadvertently by a mistake in the editorial process. Steve Jackson's *Creature of Havoc* (1986) offers a perfect example. In section 237, the reader learns that a magical pendant can be used to reveal secret passages. When the

reader reaches a section starting with «You find yourself», they can locate a hidden section by adding 20 to the current section number. Unfortunately, the section intended to start with «You find yourself» begins with «You reach a dead end» instead! This mistake turned the hidden location 20 sections ahead into a textual locked room, making it impossible to complete the adventure as written. Cheating, in this case, became essential. This error was corrected in the 2002 edition of *Creature of Havoc* published by Wizard Books. Yet, when Wizard republished the book in 2010, the original error returned, with the section in question beginning with «You reach a dead end» again (Jackson 2002; Jackson 2010).

In other cases, the locked room was inserted by design as an Easter Egg to reward readers who took the time to explore every nook and cranny of the work. In the *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebook *Inside UFO 54-40* (1984), Edward Packard placed the only optimal ending in an inaccessible section by following the branching tree. This idea allowed children to safely break the rules (which was and still is one of the guilty pleasures that gamebooks can offer to young readers – see Jamison 2022). It also shows that unusual and experimental textual solutions can be employed in gamebooks for young readers.

The gamebook for adults *Life's Lottery* (1999) by Kim Newman employed locked rooms considerably more inventively.<sup>13</sup> Of the 300 numbered sections of the book, 9 are locked rooms, which is a highly unusual number already. Furthermore, suppose the sequence of locked rooms is read in sequential order. In that case, it creates a secondary narrative that can only be experienced by consistently and often breaking the rules of navigation (Arnaudo 2023). Once more, unique artistic potential has emerged from the gamebook's unique qualities as a material object.

## 11. Conclusions

This paper aimed to demonstrate the strengths and potential limitations of the gamebook form.

On the one hand, a lot can go wrong in the writing and editing of this material artifact, from mislabeled sections, spoilers that emerge from adjacent placement, structural positioning, or navigation, and limitations in the customization system. These potential weaknesses are showing up less and less in recent gamebooks. In the 1980s, an insatiable mass of children, tweens, and teens fueled a market of gamebooks that could get away with sloppy editing and construction. As the audience has switched to a fandom of discriminating adults, publishers now have every incentive to meet the

<sup>13</sup> On this book, see Short (2015).

higher standards of this kind of audience, leading to cleaner and more effective production.

On the other hand, as we have seen, the pleasures that a gamebook can generate are considerable, too, and, most importantly, they are uniquely tied to its analog nature and cannot be easily obtained from other forms of storytelling. The visceral connection one derives from literally sinking one's fingers inside the story and recording one's progress in the book are sensory experiences that create a strong bond with the artifact. At a higher conceptual level, a special kind of parallel and diffuse reading experience emerges, in which we can choose to have the hero take both the right *and* the left path, and go a long way on one, jump back in time, forward, sideways, gain and drop skills, live and die and live again, and in essence become a direct and creative expression of our desires. While a reader can potentially apply this kind of mental editing to linear fiction (one *could* reread *The Hobbit* and pretend that Gollum eats Bilbo), nothing in that form authorizes and incentivizes one to do so. The interactive analog engine of the gamebook, however, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, offers an experience of mutually exclusive readings, a galaxy of situations, a dreamland suspended between what is and is not. We may not be able to choose exactly our adventure (as shown above). Still, we certainly can choose how to assemble and recombine the blocks of the adventure in a way that only the materiality of the gamebook makes possible.

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