An Exploration of the Appeal of the Cosmic Horror Series
of Gamebooks for Call of Cthulhu TRPG

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Abstract

This paper explores the appeal of the cosmic horror series of gamebooks "Alone Against the…" for the *Call of Cthulhu TRPG* by Chaosium. The purpose of this study was to collect and analyse actual responses to see how they aligned with the theoretical reasons found by reviewing the literature. The data were collected through a survey using Google Forms. The survey was shared in groups on Facebook and Discord specialising in cosmic horror role-playing. The results show that there is a strong negative correlation between age and wanting to learn the rules of *Call of Cthulhu* through the introductory gamebook *Alone Against the Flames*. Another major reason for playing these solo gamebooks was the difficulty in gathering a group to play traditional *Call of Cthulhu*. This problem seemed to affect older players more than younger ones. Overall, the findings reveal a diverse set of reasons why people have been playing the various gamebooks in the series.

Keywords: TRPG, gamebooks, Chaosium, Call of Cthulhu, Alone Against the Flames, Cosmic Horror

要約

本稿では，ケイオシアム社の『クトゥルフ神話 TRPG』のゲームブック『Alone Against the…（ひとりで〇〇に立ち向かう）』のコズミック・ホラー・シリーズの魅力を探る．本研究の目的は，実際の回答を収集・分析し，それが文献レビューによって見出された理論的理由とどのように合致するかを確認することである．データは，Google フォームを使用したアンケートで収集した．このアンケートは，コズミック・ホラー・ロールプレイング専門の Facebook と Discord のグループで共有された．その結果，入門ゲームブック『Alone Against the Flames（ひとりで炎に立ち向かう）』を通じて『クトゥルフ神話 TRPG』のルールを学びたい欲求と回答者の年齢の間には，強い負の相関関係があることがわかった．これらの一人用ゲームブックをプレイするもう一つの大きな理由は，従来の『クトゥルフ神話 TRPG』をプレイするためのグループを集めるのが難しいことであった．この問題は，若いプレイヤーよりも年配のプレイヤーに影響を与えるようである．全体として，調査結果は，人々がシリーズの様々なゲームブックをプレイしてきた多様な理由を明らかにしている．

キーワード：会話型 RPG（TRPG），ゲームブック，Chaosium，クトゥルフ神話 TRPG，Alone Against the Flames，コズミック・ホラー

1. Introduction

Gamebooks are a unique form of interactive entertainment that has been popular since the 1980s. These books offer readers the chance to become the protagonist of a story, making choices that determine the outcome of the narrative. While the most popular series of gamebooks have focused on fantasy and adventure settings, the horror genre in gamebooks has not been largely represented.

In this paper, I will explore the appeal of the cosmic horror series of gamebooks "Alone Against the…". Chaosium publishes this series of gamebooks and uses the rules for the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen 1981).

Horror is a genre that creates an atmosphere of fear, suspense, and unease in the reader. These emotional responses can be intensified when experienced alone, without the comfort or distraction of a group. Horror novels allow readers to experience this in a solo setting. Gamebooks may enhance these feelings by giving the reader control over the narrative, thus feeling more responsible for the outcomes.

Cosmic horror is a subgenre of horror that deals with the cosmic insignificance of humanity and, crucially, often involves the protagonist taking risky decisions in the quest for more knowledge. These themes can be replicated particularly well with the gamebook format.

By looking at the literature on horror, fear, and gamebooks, several potential reasons for playing this series of gamebooks were identified. A survey was completed to gather authentic feedback from players to discover why they had played these games. By exploring the interaction of horror and gamebooks, this paper seeks to shed light on the unique appeal of the subgenre and contribute to a deeper understanding of interactive storytelling.

2. A Brief History of Gamebooks

A gamebook is a story in which the reader (or player) is presented with a branching storyline and asked which option to take at various points in the story (Costikyan 2007). The term gamebook usually refers to the physical medium (i.e. printed books), while interactive fiction is commonly used to describe the digital version of this concept with hyperlinked text (Ziegfeld 1989). For the purposes of this article, I will refer to gamebooks as the printed medium. I will also refer to the consumer as a "reader", although the term "player" would be equally acceptable.

Although the concept of branching narratives (e.g., Borges 1941) and audience interaction (e.g., Webster and Hopkins 1930) existed before, the gamebook industry took off in the 1970s and 1980s. The series *Choose Your Own Adventure* became hugely successful, spanning over 180 titles and over 270 million copies sold (Chooseco n.D.). Like how Kleenex and Hoover became synonymous with their products, gamebooks are often called Choose Your Own Adventure (or CYOA) (Zagal and Lewis 2015). Other series soon followed, such as *Fighting Fantasy* and *Lone Wolf,* which both performed well.[1]

Gamebook sales waned in the 1990s, but they continued to be published. *Fighting Fantasy* was republished by Wizard Books in the 1990s and again by Scholastic Books in 2017. The children's horror series *Goosebumps* also released a series of gamebooks in the 1990s titled *Give Yourself Goosebumps.*[2] *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), a popular role-playing game, had its own series of gamebooks titled *Endless Quest*, with various series released in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2018.[3]

Gamebooks such as *Choose Your Own Adventure* and *Give Yourself Goosebumps* relied only on choices by the reader. Gamebooks based on TRPGs (such as *Endless Quest* for *Dungeons & Dragons*) involved the results of dice rolls and character statistics but required extensive knowledge of full RPG rules. Gamebooks such as *Fighting Fantasy* and *Fabled Lands* introduced reduced and simplified rulesets than were required by RPG gamebooks (Zagal and Lewis 2015).[4]

3. The Appeal of Gamebooks and the Dominance of Fantasy and Adventure

In traditional fiction, it is the author who controls the narrative. However, in gamebooks, the reader can make choices along the way. Through this, readers become more engaged with the story than traditional narratives (Moyer-Gusé and Nabi 2010). Similarly, by making decisions, the reader takes an active role in the story's development rather than being a passive observer. Hand and Varan (2008) argue that this allows the reader to experience a deeper connection with the narrative.

However, with the additional control comes increased responsibility. If a choice leads to a positive outcome, readers will feel more pleased that their choice resulted in a good outcome (Klimmt, Hartmann, and Frey 2007; Klimmt et al. 2012). On the other hand, readers will feel more negative and defensive about their choices that lead to sub-optimal outcomes (Markman and Tetlock 2000). These defensive feelings may lead to players starting again and trying to improve the outcome, leading to multiple playthroughs.

The gamebook industry has largely been dominated by the fantasy and adventure genres (*Fighting Fantasy*, *Lone Wolf*, *Fabled Lands*). Some series have dabbled in other genres, such as horror (e.g. *Fighting Fantasy*'s "Dead of Night," Bambra and Hand 1989) and science fiction (e.g. *Fighting Fantasy*'s "Starship Traveller," Jackson 1983). The children's series of horror gamebooks, *Give Yourself Goosebumps*, is one notable exception, with 50 books in the series. Apart from that, horror gamebooks have not been published as widely as expected compared to the high volume of other horror fiction (movies, novels).

4. The Paradox of Horror

Aristotle first discussed the concept of the "Paradox of Tragedy" in *Poetics* (1961). Morreall defines this paradox clearly as: "human misery is repulsive to us in real life, yet it somehow pleases us in tragedy" (1968, 1). Similarly, Bantinaki (2012) argues that fear and disgust are clearly negative emotions, but audiences are consistently attracted to horror. Moreall further argues that when we control the experience, such as closing our eyes or looking away, we can enjoy the source of these negative emotions. Conversely, we are disturbed when we encounter such emotions in real life in an unavoidable way. Gamebooks offer readers additional control over

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[1] Edward Packard's *The Cave of Time* (1979) was the first *Choose Your Own Adventure* release by Bantam Books, while Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone's *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982) kicked off Puffin Books' *Fighting Fantasy.* Published by Sparrow Books, *Lone Wolf* started with Joe Dever's *Flight from the Dark* in (1984).

[2] The series started with *Escape from the Carnival of Horrors* by R.L. Stine (1995).
[3] The first book in the series was Rose Estes' *Dungeon of Dread* (1982).
[4] *Fabled Lands* is a series by Dave Morris and Jamie Thomson and began with *The War-Torn Kingdom* (1995).

situations because everything is based on the reader's decisions.

Another factor to consider is that horror can be lessened in groups. Studies have shown decreases in threat perception (Fessler and Holbrook 2013) and stress responses (Häusser et al. 2012), as well as increases in risk-taking (Nordgren and Chou 2011) when in groups. Tedeschi et al. (2021) showed that larger groups decreased fear while watching horror movies, compared to smaller groups or watching alone. Gamebooks are intended for solo consumption and thus may provide a more intimate experience that heightens the feelings associated with horror.

5. Cosmic Horror and the Call of Cthulhu Tabletop Role-Playing Game

One of the many sub-genres within horror, and the focus of this article, is cosmic horror. It is often called Lovecraftian horror due to the heavy influence of American author H. P. Lovecraft (Bisevac 2023). Hawes (2019) describes cosmic horror as "the fear we feel when we are confronted by phenomena that [are] beyond our ability to comprehend." Major themes encountered in cosmic horror (often shared with general horror) include the fear of the unknown, the insignificance of humanity, helplessness, and isolation. The stories often follow a solo protagonist. Typical sources of support, such as police or local authorities, may disbelieve the protagonist, be incompetent, or be directly involved in the unnatural horror. An important common aspect is the protagonist's desire to find out more, to uncover secrets best left hidden.

This last aspect can be replicated well in gamebooks. Rational choices may lead to a safer, happier ending. However, it is the search for knowledge that drives the protagonist or reader. Thus, in cosmic horror gamebooks, the reader can be hoisted by their own petard while searching for knowledge they should not know.

Call of Cthulhu (Petersen 1981) is a tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) focusing on cosmic horror. It was initially developed in 1981 by Sandy Petersen and published by Chaosium. The game's name comes from the classic cosmic horror short story "The Call of Cthulhu" by H. P. Lovecraft (1928). In this TRPG, player characters are called "Investigators," regardless of their actual occupation. The scenarios are usually based around the "Investigators" trying to uncover mysteries. These breadcrumbs often lead them face-to-face with cosmic monstrosities, leading to death or loss of sanity.

6. "Alone Against The…" Gamebooks

In 1985, Chaosium published *Alone Against the Dark* (Costello 1985), a gamebook for Call of Cthulhu, followed by *Alone Against the Wendigo* (Rahman 1985). Both of these games were published for *Call of Cthulhu*, 2nd edition. In 1992, two gamebooks were published by other companies under licence from Chaosium – *Alone on Halloween* (Tynes 1992) and *Alone and in Danger - Again* in the collection *Grimrock Isle* (Triad Entertainment 1992).

In 2014, Chaosium released *Call of Cthulhu* 7th edition (Petersen 2014). This new edition marked significant changes to the rules, whereas previous editions only involved minor iterative changes. The popular website RPGGeek states: "For the purposes of RPGG, we are considering *Call of Cthulhu* 2nd through 6th edition to be so overlapping with regards to core rules that they are placed in the same [rpg] box" (RPG Geek n.D.).

Due to the change of rules, Chaosium released a new gamebook, *Alone Against the Flames* (Inglis 2015). This book aimed to teach the rules of *Call of Cthulhu* 7th edition to new players and help more experienced players bridge the gap from previous editions. A PDF of this gamebook and the accompanying introductory rules are available as free downloads on the Chaosium website. *Alone Against the Flames* has also been included in the Starter Set for *Call of Cthulhu* 7th edition (Chaosium 2018). This gamebook was followed up by the update and re-release of *Alone Against the Dark* (Costello 2017). *Alone Against the Wendigo* was renamed *Alone Against the Frost* and was released in 2019 (Rahman and Inglis 2019). Chaosium stated that the reason for the name change was to avoid cultural insensitivity. Finally, a new gamebook, *Alone Against the Tide* (Johnson 2020), was released in 2020.

The idea of teaching rules through a gamebook spread, and Chaosium uses this approach to teach other TRPGs in its product line. A gamebook (called a SoloQuest), *The Battle of Dangerford*, is included in the Starter Set for *RuneQuest: Role-playing in Glorantha* (Chaosium 2021), and a short gamebook (24 pages, 111 entries) called *The Domestic* is included within the core rules of *Rivers of London RPG* (Fricker and Hardy 2022). Mike Mason, creative director for *Call of Cthulhu* at Chaosium, also confirmed that a gamebook is in the works for the forthcoming release of *Pendragon* 6th edition (2023, private communication).

While gamebooks may help learn the rules, the hobby of role-playing usually requires a group of players to gather together in person or digitally. Role-playing is gradually becoming more mainstream, thanks in part to popular shows such as *Stranger Things* on Netflix (based on *Dungeons & Dragons*) and live streams of people playing TRPGs. *Critical Role*, for example, has over one million followers on Twitch, with over 32 million total views (TwitchTracker 2023), and recently had the most

successful Kickstarter project ever, raising over $11 million (Whitten 2019).

However, playing TRPGs is still a niche hobby. Recent data suggests that many people need help finding groups to play with (Solotaroff-Webber 2022). Gamebooks, then, may offer an alternative route to playing *Call of Cthulhu* for those struggling to find gaming groups.

Thus, the literature suggests several possible reasons why people may choose to play cosmic horror gamebooks for *Call of Cthulhu* TRPG. These reasons will be discussed further in the following section.

7. Methodology

This study sought to understand people's reasons for playing the "Alone Against the …" series of gamebooks for the *Call of Cthulhu* TRPG by Chaosium. The purpose of the study was to collect and analyse actual responses to see how they aligned with the theoretical reasons detailed in the previous section.

The gamebooks in question were the four gamebooks produced by Chaosium for *Call of Cthulhu* 7th edition – *Alone Against the Flames*, *Alone Against the Frost*, *Alone Against the Tide*, and *Alone Against the Dark*. For *Alone Against the Dark*, the study did not differentiate between playing it in the original format (1985) or the updated one (2017). Similarly, *Alone Against the Frost* (2019) was treated the same as its predecessor, *Alone Against the Wendigo* (1985), as the name change did not affect the story.

The data were collected through a survey created using Google Forms. The survey was shared in social media groups on Facebook and Discord. These groups focused on the *Call of Cthulhu* TRPG and cosmic horror role-playing in general. The number of members of these groups combined exceeded 10,000. However, it is difficult to assess how many unique accounts there are, as many people (the author of this study included) are members of multiple such groups. It is also challenging to obtain data on the number of active members in each group. Gamebooks are also a small fraction of the publications in *Call of Cthulhu*. With all of this in mind, this study sought to elicit 100 responses.

The survey did not require signing in to a Google account to encourage more participation. This decision meant that the number of responses was not limited to one per respondent. As a result, there is a possibility that individual respondents answered multiple times. However, it was decided that this was an acceptable trade-off not to exclude those who do not have a Google account or those who did not want to sign in to answer a survey.

The survey consisted of twelve questions, split over five sections. The first section gathered demographic data about the respondents, while the second section tallied the respondents' experience with both playing *Call of Cthulhu* and running the game as a Keeper. In *Call of Cthulhu*, the game master is called the "Keeper of Arcane Lore", or "Keeper" for short. The third section gathered information about how many times the respondents played each of the gamebooks and their reasons why. The literature suggested four reasons:

i. To learn the rules of *Call of Cthulhu*
ii. To make the horror more intimate and intense
iii. It is difficult to get a gaming group together
iv. To replicate the solo protagonist typical in cosmic horror stories

The following two reasons were also deemed probable:

v. I prefer solo gaming
vi. I found the story intriguing

These six choices were provided as suggested responses, along with an "Other" option. Respondents could select multiple reasons why they played each gameywbook. If they selected "Other" as one of their responses, the respondent was prompted to give further details in a free-form text box.

The fourth section asked the players to rank, on a scale of 1-5, each game they had played. The final section allowed respondents to provide any further comments on the topic in a free-form text box.

The survey was posted in several Facebook and Discord groups with the permission of the administrators. The members were made aware that the survey was focused on gamebooks and the "Alone Against the …" series, but all members were encouraged to complete the survey, even if they had never played any of the games. The survey was open for responses for two weeks.

The data were checked for questionable entries to account for the possibility of fraudulent or duplicate responses. Any responses that seemed suspicious were removed prior to analysis in order to preserve the integrity of the study. Suspicious responses included identical duplicate responses and responses which gave a reason for playing a particular gamebook but stated they had not played it.

Once the data were collected and cleaned, the reasons for playing each gamebook were totalled. A more detailed analysis was done to investigate any correlation between the reasons and each player's age, playing experience, and keeping experience. Data relating to age and experience were collected in brackets, and to calculate correlation coefficients, the mid-point of each range was taken. For example, for the age range 30-39, a mid-point value of 34.5 was used.

Correlation analysis is not appropriate for small samples. Thus, the calculation was only done for any reason with ten or more responses. For some of these reasons, this still involved a relatively small number of responses. Therefore, the results should be seen as indicative rather than absolute. These findings can be used as the basis for further exploratory studies.

8. Results

This study received 129 responses to the survey. After eliminating suspicious responses, 116 usable responses remained. The majority of participants identified as male (83.6%), with 12.1% female, 1.7% identifying as other, and 2.6% choosing not to disclose their gender. There was more variety in the age ranges of respondents, as shown in Table 1 below, which also indicates the relative percentages of each age group.

Table 1: Age ranges of all respondents.

Age Range	Number	Percentage
19-29	12	10%
30-39	28	24%
40-49	26	22%
50-59	42	36%
60-69	7	6%
70+	1	1%

Respondents also had a wide range of experience in both playing the Call of Cthulhu TRPG and keeping (running) it.

Participants were asked to report on the number of times they played each gamebook. Table 3 summarises that data. The number of non-zero plays (played at least once) is also included, as it will be used in data analysis later in the paper.

Of the 116 respondents, 22 have never played any gamebooks, while 16 have played all of them. When playing only one of the gamebooks, *Alone Against the Flames* was the most popular, with 33 respondents only playing that. It was followed by *Alone Against the Tide* (3) and *Alone Against the Dark* (2). No respondent had only played *Alone Against the Frost*.

Participants rated the games they played on a scale of 1-5, resulting in average ratings of 3.75 for *Alone Against the Flames*, 3.50 for *Alone Against the Frost*, 3.56 for *Alone Against the Tide*, and 3.44 for *Alone Against the Dark*.

The average number of playthroughs for each game were as follows (assuming a value of 5 for the category 5+): *Alone Against the Flames* – 1.99; *Alone Against the Frost* – 1.81; *Alone Against the Tide* – 1.78; and *Alone Against the Dark* – 1.45.

The reasons given for playing each game were also totalled and are presented in Table 4 below. A

Table 2: Respondents' experience playing and running *Call of Cthulhu* TRPG.

	Experience Playing	%	Experience Keeping	%
Never	1	0.9%	11	9.5%
Less than one year	16	13.8%	16	13.8%
1-2 years	12	10.3%	18	15.5%
3-5 years	27	23.3%	24	20.7%
6-10 years	9	7.8%	7	6.0%
11-20 years	7	6.0%	11	9.5%
21+ years	44	37.9%	29	25.0%

Table 3: Number of times playing each of the gamebooks.

# of plays	Flames	Frost	Tide	Dark
0	30	79	84	72
1	36	23	18	28
2	31	5	9	14
3	10	4	1	1
4	2	3	2	0
5+	7	2	2	1
Non-zero	86	37	32	44

Table 4: Reasons given for playing each game.

Reason	Flames	Frost	Tide	Dark
To Learn the Rules	**44 (51%)**	7 (19%)	8 (25%)	14 (32%)
The Story Intrigued Me	28 (33%)	**18 (49%)**	8 (25%)	15 (34%)
To Create Intimate Horror	8 (9%)	3 (8%)	3 (9%)	3 (7%)
Difficult to get a group together	25 (29%)	14 (38%)	**12 (38%)**	**20 (45%)**
Cosmic Horror Solo Protagonist	8 (9%)	3 (8%)	3 (9%)	1 (2%)
I Prefer Solo Games	10 (12%)	6 (16%)	7 (22%)	5 (11%)
Other	16 (19%)	4 (11%)	7 (22%)	9 (20%)

percentage value is also given for the proportion of people who played the game and selected that answer. Please note that the survey allowed multiple reasons for playing each game, which is why the sum of the percentages is greater than 100%. The most popular reason for each game is in bold font.

Respondents who selected "Other" were asked to provide further details, and 22 responses were submitted. These varied considerably, ranging from playing it on their podcast (2 respondents) and being a fan of gamebooks in general (2) to having the gamebook recommended by a friend (1).

The study received 35 comments, with six respondents wishing the author well on the paper. The most common comments related to respondents not having enough time to play (6 respondents), role-playing being more enjoyable in groups than solo (4), and wanting Chaosium to produce more gamebooks (3). One respondent expressed disappointment with the name change from *Alone Against the Wendigo* to *Alone Against the Frost* due to cultural appropriation, leading to the respondent lowering their rating of that particular gamebook.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the data, further analysis was done to reveal any correlation between the various responses given and the respondents' age, playing experience, and keeping experience. Reasons with fewer than ten responses were not analysed in this way due to insufficient data. The following tables present the correlation coefficient for each of these factors, separated by game.

Correlation coefficients show how closely related two values are. A coefficient is a number ranging from -1 to +1. A value close to 1 indicates a strong correlation, indicating that as someone gets older, they are more likely to exhibit a particular trait. A value close to -1 indicates a strong inverse correlation, which could indicate that as someone gets older, they are less likely to exhibit a particular trait. A value close to 0 indicates very little correlation

or connection between the two variables (for example, age and a particular trait). Using Cohen's (Cohen 1988) suggested effect sizes is a standard convention. Therefore, an effect size (or coefficient) of ±0.1 is small, ±0.3 is moderate, and ±0.5 is large.

9. Discussion

The previous section revealed some interesting results, and some which were expected. A significant majority of respondents were male, and horror is often more popular with males than females. Also, males tend to dominate the TRPG hobby. The social media sites from which responses were gathered also have a larger male population than female. Facebook has a gender split of 56.3% male to 43.7% female (Dixon 2023), while Discord has a wider gender gap with 65.3% males to 34.5% female (Ceci 2023).

There was, however, a good diversity of respondents in relation to age and experience both playing and running the *Call of Cthulhu* TRPG. With regards to experience (Table 2), it was interesting to see a large number of very experienced players (21+ years), with a drop in terms of medium-term experience. However, the number of respondents who have only been playing within the past five years was significantly larger. These figures may indicate that the game *Call of Cthulhu* had significant initial success with its first edition but experienced less popularity in other editions until the release of the 7th edition in 2014.

When it comes to playing the gamebooks, *Alone Against the Flames* was by far the most popular. This result is not particularly surprising due to its easy accessibility. It is included in the Starter Set, which has been translated into several languages, including French, Japanese, Spanish, and Polish (Mike Mason, 2023, private communication). The gamebook is also available as a free PDF download on the Chaosium website. However, it is somewhat surprising that there were not higher numbers of players of both *Alone Against the Frost* and *Alone Against the Dark*,

Table 5: Correlation of reason for playing with age, playing experience and keeping experience – *Alone Against the Flames*.

Alone Against the Flames (N = 86)

Reason	Age Correlation	Playing Experience Correlation	Keeping Experience Correlation
To Learn the Rules	-0.95	-0.79	-0.49
The Story Intrigued Me	0.47	0.24	0.56
To Create Intimate Horror	*Insufficient Data*		
Difficult to get a group together	0.86	0.56	-0.03
Cosmic Horror Solo Protagonist	*Insufficient Data*		
I Prefer Solo Games	-0.68	-0.41	-0.41

Table 6: Correlation of reason for playing with age, playing experience and keeping experience – *Alone Against the Frost*.

Against the Frost (N = 37)

Reason	Age Correlation	Playing Experience Correlation	Keeping Experience Correlation
To Learn the Rules	*Insufficient Data*		
The Story Intrigued Me	-0.72	0.23	0.26
To Create Intimate Horror	*Insufficient Data*		
Difficult to get a group together	0.79	-0.18	0.04
Cosmic Horror Solo Protagonist	*Insufficient Data*		
I Prefer Solo Games	*Insufficient Data*		

Table 7: Correlation of reason for playing with age, playing experience and keeping experience – *Alone Against the Tide*.

Alone Against the Tide (N = 32)

Reason	Age Correlation	Playing Experience Correlation	Keeping Experience Correlation
To Learn the Rules	*Insufficient Data*		
The Story Intrigued Me	*Insufficient Data*		
To Create Intimate Horror	*Insufficient Data*		
Difficult to get a group together	0.01	0.04	0.48
Cosmic Horror Solo Protagonist	*Insufficient Data*		
I Prefer Solo Games	*Insufficient Data*		

Table 8: Correlation of reason for playing with age, playing experience and keeping experience – *Alone Against the Dark*.

Alone Against the Dark (N = 44)

Reason	Age Correlation	Playing Experience Correlation	Keeping Experience Correlation
To Learn the Rules	0.52	-0.17	-0.36
The Story Intrigued Me	0.22	0.31	0.55
To Create Intimate Horror	*Insufficient Data*		
Difficult to get a group together	0.04	0.07	-0.16
Cosmic Horror Solo Protagonist	*Insufficient Data*		
I Prefer Solo Games	*Insufficient Data*		

as they were originally released back in 1985. Yet, they have only marginally more players than *Alone Against the Tide*, which is a new title only released in 2020. This finding may suggest that *Call of Cthulhu* gamebooks were less popular during the gamebook heyday. However, more research would be needed to confirm this.

Alone Against the Flames was the game that the average respondent played the highest number of times, with an average of 1.99 playthroughs for each person who played it at least once. However, this was quite close to *Alone Against the Frost* (1.81) and *Alone Against the Tide* (1.78). A noticeable drop-off was noticed for *Dark*, which was played on average only 1.45 times. *Alone Against the Dark* includes additional rules not included in the *Call of Cthulhu* TRPG. One respondent noted that these additional rules could have been clearer, and they did not like them. However, another respondent claimed that these mechanics were interesting. The average ratings of the games were also very similar, ranging from *Alone Against the Flames* as the most popular (3.75/5) to *Alone Against the Dark* as the least popular (3.44/5). Therefore, it is not readily understandable why respondents played through *Alone Against the Dark* fewer times than the other titles.

A few interesting observations can be made by looking into the reasons that people gave. Firstly, there was no consensus on the most popular reason for playing each game. The most popular reason for playing *Alone Against the Flames* was to learn the rules. However, for Alone Against the Frost, it was because the story intrigued the respondents. For *Alone Against the Tide* and *Alone Against the Dark*, it was because of difficulty finding a group. Despite this diversity in the most popular reason, those three answers were the top three responses for all four gamebooks.

Interestingly, although the literature supports that the case for creating more intimate and cosmic horror is often represented by a solo protagonist, these were the least selected reasons.

For *Alone Against the Flames*, it is not surprising that the main reason selected (51%) was "to learn the rules," as this is the stated purpose of the game, evidenced by its inclusion (as Book 1) in the Starter Set. It is slightly surprising that *Alone Against the Dark* was also played with the intention of learning the rules (32%). As stated above, *Alone Against the Dark* introduces new rules and mechanics only used in that gamebook, not in the rest of *Call of Cthulhu*. These additional rules would seem to make *Alone Against the Dark* less useful for learning the rules, but perhaps the perception of the game is not so. This discrepancy between perception and experience may be part of the reason for the lower rating and fewer playthroughs of *Alone Against the*

Dark. If the initial playthrough did not meet players' expectations of learning the rules, they might have been less likely to play it again.

With those high-level trends in mind, we can now look at the most significant correlation coefficients and find some interesting and surprising results.

There is a strong negative correlation between wanting to learn the rules and each of age (-0.95), playing experience (-0.79), and keeper experience (-0.49). This result is not particularly surprising as with most *Alone Against the Flames* results. Younger people with less experience with *Call of Cthulhu* are more likely to play this game to learn the rules. Surprisingly, the opposite was visible with *Alone against the Dark*, where there was a strong positive correlation between age and wanting to learn the rules. Older players preferred to use *Alone Against the Dark* to learn the rules. It is unclear why this is the case, as there is no corresponding correlation between playing experience and keeper experience (both have a negative correlation). There was insufficient data to check for this reason with *Alone Against the Frost* and *Alone Against the Tide*.

There was a weaker, but still surprisingly strong positive correlation in *Alone Against the Flames* between the story being intriguing and both age (+0.47) and keeper experience (+0.56). This means that as people get older, they are more likely to find this kind of story intriguing. This reason was initially assumed to be unrelated to age or experience and more of a personal taste factor. This surprising correlation is still present but much weaker, with *Alone Against the Dark* (0.22). We can see the opposite effect on display in *Alone Against the Frost*, which has a stronger negative correlation (-0.72), indicating that younger players strongly preferred this gamebook's story. There are insufficient data to check for this reason with *Alone Against the Tide*.

For respondents to *Alone Against the Flames* (0.86) and *Alone Against the Frost* (0.79), there was a very strong positive correlation between age and difficulty finding a gaming group. This finding suggests that older people find it harder to get together in gaming groups. There was, however, no correlation between age and difficulty in finding a group when it came to *Alone Against the Tide* (0.01) or *Alone Against the Dark* (0.04).

Overall, the findings reveal a diverse set of reasons for playing each gamebook. Although the gamebooks are in the same series ("Alone Against the…"), and they use the same ruleset (*Call of Cthulhu* TRPG), the reasons people had for playing each of them varied considerably from book to book. However, some generalities can be drawn from the results. The three most popular reasons for playing these games were learning the rules, finding the story

intriguing, and struggling to get a gaming group together. Despite the literature supporting the theory, there was little support from the data for horror gamebooks creating more intense and intimate horror or replicating the solo protagonist of cosmic horror fiction.

Alone Against the Flames was the most popular of the four gamebooks, and it was primarily used to learn the rules. Young people and those with less experience in the game favoured this approach. Difficulty in finding a group was a bigger worry amongst older respondents, although experience did not seem to be so relevant.

10. Limitations

This paper had a few limitations that should be identified.

The present study is limited by the relatively small number of cases. Although a total of 116 usable responses were gathered, once the responses were broken down into various categories, some values were relatively small. This rendered certain values unsuitable for data analysis, and some analysed values would have been more statistically robust with more responses. Therefore, these results should be interpreted as guiding but not conclusive, as this study was exploratory.

Another limitation was the simplicity of the survey. More detailed reasons may be collected in interview formats. However, this would either decrease the number of respondents, increase the time required for the study, or both. Future research would be wise to do a more extensive simple survey first to identify robust trends before gathering a smaller sample population for in-depth interviews.

Another source of uncertainty has been the possibility of data corruption through fraudulent responses. This issue was detailed in the methodology section and was mitigated as much as possible, but fraudulent data is always of concern in such data collection methods. Therefore, this limitation is also noted here for transparency.

11. Conclusions

This study explored why people chose to play each of the four "Alone Against the…" gamebooks for *Call of Cthulhu* by Chaosium. *Alone Against the Flames* was by far the most popular of these four gamebooks, likely due to its easy accessibility. However, it was interesting to note that *Alone Against the Frost* and *Alone Against the Dark*, which were released in 1985, only marginally outperformed *Alone Against the Tide*, a new title released in 2020.

The literature suggested at least six reasonable reasons why people might play these games.

However, the reasons for playing each gamebook were diverse, with no consensus on the single most popular reason. Nonetheless, the study has identified that three of those reasons were significantly more popular: to learn the rules of *Call of Cthulhu*, the story was intriguing, and it is difficult to find a group with which to play traditional *Call of Cthulhu*.

The present study is the first to investigate the reasons for choosing to play solo gamebooks for a role-playing game that is typically a group activity. A limitation of this study was the relatively small number of respondents; therefore, the results must be seen as indicative rather than conclusive. Despite its exploratory nature, this study does offer some interesting insights into the reasons for playing gamebooks for TRPGs, and it sets the stage for future research into the field.

Further research might explore the effectiveness of these games for people wanting to learn the rules. This could involve a self-assessment from respondents of their understanding of the rules, a critical analysis of which rules are covered in the gamebooks, a survey of how many playthroughs are needed to feel confident, and which game rules are still difficult to understand after playing the gamebooks. This research could be helpful for all TRPG companies, as learning the new rules of a system is widely accepted as one of the most significant hurdles to recruiting new players.

Another possible area of future research would be to investigate why it is more difficult for older players to gather gaming groups together. Is the solution to introduce more technology to access more players, to produce more gamebooks, or to produce more small-group games such as *Does Love Forgive* (Hardy, Kaminska, and Mazur 2020), which involves only one keeper and one player? Isolation is a prominent theme in horror, especially cosmic horror, but it is not a pleasant real-life emotion, and finding ways to combat it would be a positive move.

The overall reception of the gamebooks was positive, with some fans commenting that they wanted Chaosium to produce more such gamebooks. Chaosium has stated that they indeed intend to release more in the "Alone Against the …" series and possibly expand it to other settings within *Call of Cthulhu*, such as *Pulp Cthulhu*, *Down Darker Trails*, and others.

This study has shed some initial light on the reasons why people choose to play these gamebooks. It is hoped that it can inform improved game design in future publications. Future research can expand our understanding of this area and improve the gamebook experience of TRPGs for all.

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