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# SOLO VOYAGES



An examination of the Solo Gamebooks phenomenon

*'Fighting Fantasy - the bestselling phenomenon of our time!*' proclaims the blurb on Steve Jackson's 'introductory roleplaying game' of that title, and a glance at any list of juvenile bestsellers will confirm it. So popular are these solo gamebooks, by Jackson, Ian Livingstone, Joe Dever and Gary Chalk, J H Brennan and others, that the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* children's section says she's worried that publishers might stop producing 'real books' altogether! There seems little chance of that. Either the craze will die out, as crazes do, or else computer technology will become so cheap and universally portable that software versions will make the book format (which does have its disadvantages) obsolete. When everybody has a pocket computer they can load up and play on the train, in the doctor's waiting room, or clandestinely in a boring geography lesson, there will be no need to keep flicking pages back and forth and rolling dice any more. For the moment, however, paperback publishers are all leaping onto the solo gamebook bandwagon, and who can blame them?

In the introduction to **Fighting Fantasy**, a handbook designed to bridge the gap between these volumes and rpgs proper, Steve Jackson states that solo gamebooks 'are very much simplified versions of Fantasy Role-Playing Games' but in fact the form originated quite independently. In the 60s experimental writers like Raymond Queneau and B S Johnson produced texts with multiple possible plots arranged in separate sections to be shuffled or selected by the reader.

Michael Moorcock did much the same thing on a larger scale with the **Jerry Cornelius** quartet, designed to be read in any order.

The idea of turning this into a game rather than an artistic statement about the randomness of the universe came with **State of Emergency**, a 'Programmed Entertainment' by Dennis Guerrier and Joan Richards, published by Penguin in 1969. You-the-reader join cabinet meetings and top-level political discussions in 'the newly independent Republic of Lakoto', and have several (but not very many) chances to make important decisions about hydro-electric power schemes, representations to the UN, and whether quietly to assassinate a dangerous general. Many choices are dead ends labelled with stern notes like *'Reader: we are going to give you another chance at this point because we think that you are making a fundamental error'*! Ultimately, **State of Emergency** steers you towards the only possible conclusion the authors will allow: that Lakoto cannot survive without economic and military 'aid' (could it possibly be relevant that both writers are civil servants?). This sort of patronising refereeing survives in some of the junior gamebooks, such as S Eric Meretsky's **Zork** adventures (*'You probably deserve another chance. Go to page 24 and try again'*). The opposite principle, of having as many diverging stories as possible in one volume, has led to books like Edward Packard's **Deadwood City**, published in 1979. Every page ends with a choice, and no two forking paths ever join up again.

With the growing popularity of the role-playing game phenomenon in the late 1970s came the scenario or adventure module with which the readers of **IMAGINE** magazine will be familiar. One of the major drawbacks of most rpgs, however, is that they require at least two people to participate, one as player and one as referee, and so it wasn't long before some game producers started to publish 'programmed' adventure modules for use with one or other of the popular rpg systems. These modules took the form of a series of cross-referenced paragraphs, each describing a room, encounter or event, so that a lone player could take one or more characters through the adventure without the aid of a referee. Characters, combat and other details were handled according to the rules for the game system in question. This approach was pioneered by the producers of **Tunnels & Trolls** and the now-defunct **The Fantasy Trip**, and solo adventures are now available for a number of systems.

One common analogy used to describe a roleplaying game is that it allows the players to write their own adventure story — *'Have you ever read a book or watched a film and thought "I would never do that" when the hero does something stupid?'* was the kind of line which appeared in some advertising — and as rpgs grew in popularity, the programmable story books began to reappear, stimulated by the growth of rpgs and in some cases trading off them quite heavily (TSR's own **Endless Quest** books, for example, feature the same settings as their more popular rpg

lines, and the game titles are featured on the covers almost as heavily as the titles of the books themselves, although interestingly the **Fantasy Forest** series, clearly aimed at a younger market, trades off the **Dungeons & Dragons** cartoon series rather than the game itself).

Other programmable story books have extended the range of settings to cover the whole gamut of junior fiction. Most prolific is the imported Bantam **Choose-Your-Own-Adventure** series, again with an accompanying series for younger readers, which boasts settings ranging from UFO encounters through deep-sea exploration to discovering lost tribes, while the old favourite of the precocious young detectives is used by Blackie in their **Mystery Squad** series. Teenage Romance gets in on the act with the Corgi **Dream-Your-Own-Romance** series; TSR's much-heralded **Heartquest** series was also expected to cover this market in many quarters, but instead consists of fantasy adventures rather condescendingly slanted towards the young female reader. And, almost inevitably, Indiana Jones is giving young readers the chance to become his kid sidekick in the Sphere Indiana Jones **Find-Your-Fate** series. Even the **Famous Five**, those normally clean-living, wholesome middle-class anachronisms, have succumbed to the deadly lure of the gamebook. Two of their adventures have already been released in gamebook form by those dastardly Hodder & Stoughton fellows, and two more are to follow.

Bantam's **Time Machine** series uses 'real' historical settings, giving some indication of the educational possibilities of this kind of book, but how well they fulfil this potential is open to question.

The impetus which has come from the growth of the rpg hobby shows most strongly in the popularity of the gamebook series. These are derived from the solo programmed adventures mentioned previously, and feature a simple game system at the beginning of the book. Instead of just accepting the static role of presidential adviser, young explorer or ringbearer provided by the authors, you-the-reader can now enter the world of the text with your own rpg character, in the form of a number of attributes generated by dice rolls. The possibilities for combat, luck and advantage are enormously increased. So is the likelihood of getting killed and having to start all over again. Now, add a goal — one desirable end among the multitude of possible outcomes — and the quest is on.

The better gamebooks are designed according to a secret map, just like a dungeon plan, so that choices correspond to available routes and the frustrated adventurer will be better informed next time around (provided you take the trouble to make a map or keep notes as you go). A common fault of the inferior gamebook is the sense of disappointment in finding that your second and third choices merely lead to the same events happening in a different order, because the author has skimmed on the design.

There are at present five gamebook series on the market: **Fighting Fantasy**, **Sorcery!**, **Grailquest**, **Lone Wolf** and **Demonspawn**. As the titles suggest, the bulk of the adventures take place in a fantasy setting, although **Starship Traveller** uses the Fighting Fantasy system well in an SF adventure, and the forthcoming **Freeway Fighter** in the same series is an obvious tie-in with Ian Livingstone's popular **Battlecars** board-game. The other series are all fantasy of one kind or another. **Sorcery!** is a development of the Fighting Fantasy system, and is set in a similar generalised fantasy world, while **Grailquest** uses a Disneyesque Arthurian setting and **Lone Wolf** has a custom-built, if somewhat derivative, fantasy world as the backdrop for its linked adventures.

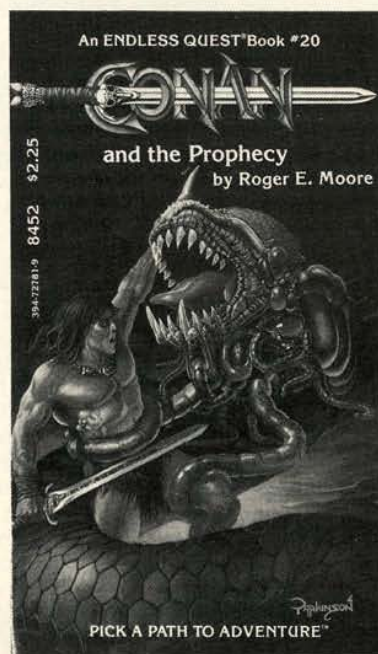
As far as the design of the adventures themselves is concerned, there seem to be two basic structures, which for the sake of argument we can call 'tree' and 'rope'. The tree structure is typified by **Deadwood City**, with a number of diverging paths leading to several alternative endings. The Bantam **Choose-Your-Own-Adventure** books are another example of this structure, priding themselves on the number of possible outcomes. The rope structure, on the other hand, has a number of strands which allow a certain amount of freedom but remain firmly braided around the main plotline or the author's idea of the 'right' course of action; **State of Emergency** and the **Zork** series mentioned above use this structure. The gamebooks all use the rope structure, for several reasons. One reason is that, like rpg adventures, they deal with a specific quest, and if the player is allowed to diverge too far from this the point of adventure is lost. Also, the gamebooks' rpg heritage has led to their giving the player a great many detailed decisions, so that they have a great many short entries rather than the fewer, longer entries of the programmable story books, and the provision of diverging



plotlines with a number of alternative endings would make the whole structure insanely complicated. A gamebook of, say, 400 entries has only one or two possible endings — the character either completes the quest or dies in the attempt — and if widely divergent plotlines leading to a number of different endings were to be written into the adventure, it would need an additional couple of hundred entries for each divergent plotline. The result of this would be that the books would become a lot bigger, filled with material which has no real relevance to the main thread of the story, and readers would either be constantly getting lost up blind alleys or would be paying more money for extra entries which they wouldn't use.

Perhaps because the gamebook is still in its infancy as a genre, many of the adventures are 'zoo dungeons', with little or no reasoning behind monster placement — aging D&Ders like Graeme are reminded of early Judges Guild products like the **GenCon IX Dungeons**. The first few **Fighting Fantasy** adventures suffer from this, although **Deathtrap Dungeon** tries to justify it in the same way as the **Death Test** modules for **The Fantasy Trip** by turning the adventure into a kind of gladiatorial entertainment for a powerful ruler with a private menagerie of monsters. The later **Fighting Fantasy** books, such as the **Island of the Lizard King**, show some improvement in this respect, but the **Lone Wolf** series stands out above the rest, with very few illogical or gratuitous encounters.

The game systems used in these books must of necessity be less complex than those of a 'full' rpg, with fewer attributes and simpler combat and magic systems. In some cases this simplicity has led to crudity and lack of realism, but some systems show a great deal of elegance and thoughtful design. **Fighting Fantasy** and **Lone Wolf** both use a skill attribute to govern combat, while the developed **Grailquest** magic system in **The Den of**



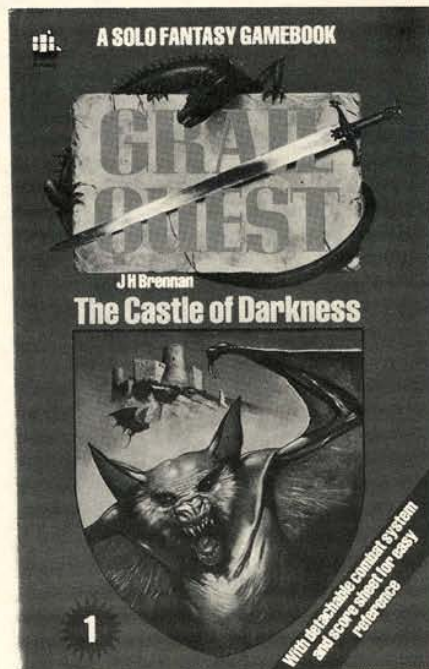
**Dragons** is more complete than that of many 'full' rpgs, with Life Point costs for each spell, and a chance of spell failure. The Sorcery! magic system features a Stamina cost for each spell, and also has material requirements, so that the adventurer must collect various weird and wonderful items along the way (and what else do you do with a green wig?), but it can turn into a test of memory as much as of ability.

Most systems require the use of two six-sided dice, but there have been some attempts to get round this, making the book itself the only necessary item of equipment and making it easier to play on a train or wherever without dropping your dice all over the place. The Sorcery! books have a random dice roll result printed at the bottom of each page, so that the player can flip to a page at random whenever a dice roll is required, while the Lone Wolf books have a 0-9 random number table in the back of the book, the idea being that you close your eyes and stab with a pencil. A nice idea, but it does become a little unwieldy in practice, and we tended to lose our places as we flipped or stabbed; and it can sometimes be difficult to be completely honest about the results.

One question which few of the gamebooks tackle with any conviction is that of character advancement and experience. In one form or another this is a feature of most rpgs, but it is largely ignored by the gamebooks. Fighting Fantasy requires a new character at the start of each adventure, with no equipment or treasure carried over, and this is fair enough given that the adventures are unconnected. Sorcery! on the other hand is explicitly continuous, the adventures going together to make up a four-part quest, but apart from the possibility of carrying over the character and equipment to the next book and the occasional statement that an encounter or item will be useful in later books, the question of experience is ignored. Lone Wolf pays lip service to the idea by permitting the character one

additional Kai Discipline (the quasi-magical mental powers which serve Lone Wolf as a magical system) at the beginning of the second and subsequent books, but lip service is all it is. Only in Grailquest is the idea of character advancement really tackled; each fight won or problem solved earns the character one experience point, and at the end of each adventure experience points can be traded off for extra Life Points.

Another frequent criticism of nearly all the gamebooks is the 'instant death' situation — you walk into a room and the roof spontaneously collapses, for example, or you are given no opportunity to check for traps in a corridor and seconds later find yourself impaled on poisoned spikes at the bottom of a deep pit. In many cases this is due to bad or lazy design, but these and similar situations can arise out of the limitations of the gamebook format — there is simply not enough room to cover all the options which rpg players take for granted.

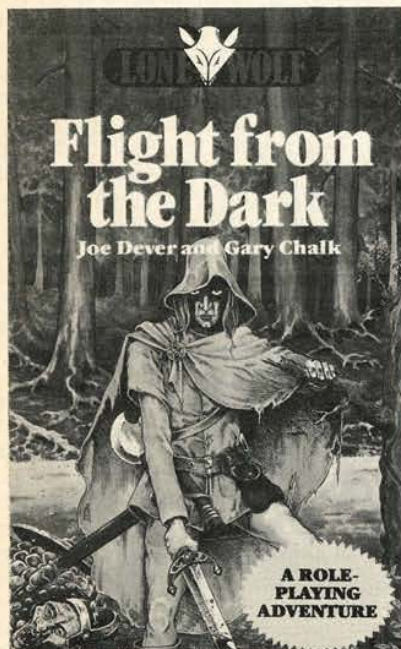


These problems point out the inherent limitations of the gamebook format, and for this reason it could be argued that the fear of solo adventure books forcing 'real' books out of the market is not completely justified — sooner or later players will turn to one of the 'full' rpgs in search of greater freedom of action.

Events have, indeed, turned full circle with the publication of **Fighting Fantasy: The Introductory Roleplaying Game**, in which Steve Jackson turns the Fighting Fantasy gamebook system into a 'full' rpg for refereed group play, with advice for the aspiring Games Master and two Fighting Fantasy adventures in the familiar 'dungeon' format. At £1.75 it is the cheapest and most widely distributed roleplaying game on the market, but it does suffer from the total lack of a magic system or any provision for character advancement. The Fighting Fantasy series has become the focus of a fairly large marketing exercise on the part of Puffin

Books, with book and software packages and the launch of the quarterly **Warlock** magazine, mentioned in **IMAGINE** #15. Software is also planned for the Lone Wolf series, which is supported by a range of figures from Citadel Miniatures and a Lone Wolf club, with newsletters, competitions and other events. Interestingly, the Zork storybook series has apparently sprung from a successful series of computer adventure game, widely acclaimed by those who are knowledgeable about such things. The quality of the adventures has evidently not survived their translation into book form, and we hope that the Fighting Fantasy and Lone Wolf adventures will not suffer in the same way when they are made into computer games.

Hodder & Stoughton's Famous Five series deserves a special mention since it is neither a pure gamebook nor a pure storybook. There is no game system as in Fighting Fantasy or the other gamebook series, but the format of over 300 short entries is distinctive of a gamebook rather than a storybook. The choices, in fact, are very few; in most cases the entries end with a puzzle or coded message, to be sorted out using the expensively produced Codebook, Map, Measure and Torch cards which come with the book. The poor reader can't even decide which way our heroes go — whenever a choice of routes presents itself everyone automatically wants to go in different directions and you have to roll the expensively-produced special die (each face has the silhouette of one of the gang, with one 'mystery' face) to see whose will prevail. And as if that wasn't enough, you've got to solve the mystery before your expensively-produced Picnic cards run out, because when you run out of cherry cake and ginger beer — gosh! — you jolly well have to start all over again! The book and other components are of very good quality, but the whole package costs a thumping £3.95 — slightly more than two Sorcery! volumes, and not much less than three of any other series. We think we know what most readers will prefer.



**IMAGINE** readers are in a special position with regard to solo gamebooks. The very existence of a book like Steve Jackson's Introductory Roleplaying Game implies that the majority of gamebook readers pick them up well before discovering anything about D&D or any other rpg, and our analysis of the structure and systems used is more detailed, perhaps, than most gamebook writers would expect from the market they're aiming at.

But how do the solo gamebooks measure up as stories — as books to be read, if not in the usual way and order? It goes without saying that no gamebook could possibly accomplish more than a part of what a conventional fantasy novel can. Extended and developed characterisation, description, suspense and even dialogue are all out of the question in a text which is going to be read only in selected fragments (unless, of course, it is Grailquest, in which case the character-

isation and dialogue are more of a curse than a boon). What remains is an episodic narrative, its scenes mostly very brief — its action abbreviated too, usually into ritualised bouts of violence — and its momentum provided either by one all-important goal or by the need to accumulate information and solve obstructing mysteries. It's more like the form of a comic strip than a prose narrative.

Although the point of a gamebook will always be the game rather than the story, the game is bound to be more absorbing if the writer pays attention to that side of the design — compare, for example, the GENCON IX Dungeons mentioned above to the 'G' and 'D' modules for AD&D. When the writer of a gamebook takes on the role of Dungeon Master, he or she also inherits the DM's responsibility to create a satisfying atmosphere and make sure that the players are kept involved. Is the dead end really a dead end, or would it be worth looking for a secret door? Computer game programmers, too, do better if they devote plenty of memory to strong, persuasive text, rather than packing it all with beautifully intricate little subroutines that just look curt and uninteresting on the screen. A DM can rely on contributions from the players themselves, but the solo gamebook writer has to hold the audience alone. The form can be frustrating enough already, with its loops, dead ends, pitfalls and incidental

labyrinths, especially when you're slogging around for the fourth time because you still haven't figured out how to defuse the exploding chest. If, on top of that, you get the feeling that the writer doesn't care — that the text is disjointed, needlessly repetitive, or just flippant — then you'll be sorely tempted to chuck in *The Quest for the Mystic Jewelled Thingummy of Fabled Wassaname* and watch the box instead.

The main motivation to try again will always be that you think you stand a better chance this time. For this reason, gamebooks where you get clobbered whatever you do — or, in some peculiar cases, where you win whatever you do — are disenchanting. So are the gamebooks where the different areas of play don't seem to relate to each other, and you find yourself suddenly back at the west bank of the river staring stupidly at the same leaky ferry you rowed across not half an hour ago. One of the great attractions of rpgs, whether group or solo, is the sense of being in a consistent, controlled environment, where actions have specific consequences and the rules — and the geography — don't change when you're not looking. Reality may well be full of contradictions, feeble plot construction and inadequate characterisation — but Game Masters shouldn't emulate it.

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b) Without bothering to look, you attack the nearest bush with your trusty sword. A very angry looking, large hairy creature emerges, holding his rear end with one hand and a book called **Beyond the Wall of Tears**, one of the many solo adventures available with **Tunnels & Trolls** role-playing system, in the other.

The creature advances, menacingly. Your blows are useless (you already hit its one vulnerable spot). Terror stricken, you cringe before the behemoth, ready for death to strike.

"Look luv", it says, "if you want to borrow my copy you'll just have to wait till I'm finished".

Amazed, you back away from the scene. To avoid any further such confrontations, you resolve to buy **Tunnels & Trolls** from your nearest retailer.



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