Sam Bertin
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The Isle of Fern: A Storytelling Game for Kids Ages 8–10

I: INTRODUCTION

The Isle of Fern is a book shaped object (BSO) and deck of fifty illustrated cards for children ages eight to ten that explore the landscapes and wildlife of a lost island. It pulls from my aforementioned interests and it is my hope that it will allow children to engage in reading and storytelling in a way that traditional books do not allow for. Its format challenges what is normally considered to be a book and asks users to step into a new world limited only by their imaginations. This paper will discuss further the details of the project, define it within the context of gamebooks, and discuss the role of games in my life and how the relationship translates to my work. It will also examine the work of other artists and designers that have influenced *The Isle of Fern* through their challenges to conventional storytelling, and finally further contextualize my goals within the realm of child psychology.

II: CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

History and Examination of Gamebooks

Branching narrative storytelling, or stories that fork in the middle to lead to various outcomes, has its roots in the 1940s but they did not begin to gain mainstream attention until the 70s when Edward Packard authored *Sugarcane Island.* The story grew out of Packard's nightly ritual of telling his daughters

stories. His daughters provided several options for how the protagonist's story would play out and Packard finished each one. This experiment resulted in a series of books called *Choose Your Own Adventure* (*CYOA*) novels, which routinely places readers at crossroads and guides them to specific pages depending on which path they choose to take. *CYOA* novels are perhaps the most well-known gamebooks but the genre encompasses hybridized versions of written fiction and role-played gaming where readers explore scenarios by utilizing the mechanics provided by the author.

Gaining peak popularity in the 80s and 90s gamebooks foiled traditional reading where the story became more subjective and interactive. American gamebooks were mostly formatted in relatively traditional branching narrative structure, leaving the gaming aspects quiet and keeping the text mostly intact. Gamebooks emerging from British authors, however, brought the gaming aspects forward by adapting mechanics from popular roleplaying games akin to *Dungeons & Dragons* onto the pages of a novel. These novels truncated the stories into short, digestible paragraphs. These books included player statistics, monsters to fight, and dice rolls to determine outcomes. Chance took center stage in Europe whereas choice dominated America.

After researching and exploring various gamebooks myself I realized that my work fit broadly into the category but could be classified more specifically under the book arts term BSO. Shaped like a book, *The Isle of Fern* has a box, cards, and instructions, but beneath the form and all of the component parts lie endless numbers of existing stories and the possibility for more to emerge.

Gamebooks do, of course, come with issues of their own. Avid readers of *CYOA, Fighting Fantasy*, and other such gamebook series have spoken about the limited or broken 'replayability' of these novels. Gamebooks have been formulated so that readers can win in one of a couple ways or lose in one of many. At each loss readers are meant to turn back to page one and play again. However, when faced with a loss, readers often tend to travel back to the previous decision or die roll and choose the alternative to what resulted in a loss, hoping for a more desirable outcome; playing the book through entirely with little interest in the wide range of failures. The books offer a lot of options, but choices are limited.

This miscalculation in the use of gamebooks is something that I hope to remedy by keeping the instructions short and the possibilities wide. The primary focus should land on the freedom to create stories rather than be tied into a prefabricated collection of paragraphs or chapters. Additionally, the open-endedness of the format and the subjectivity of the cards should encourage frequent use.

Social Activities as Frameworks

Important to the conception of *The Island of Fern* is my background with the subjects of books and games; both of which I describe as social. In my experience as a reader, and gamer the one thing that has remained constant is that each activity not only is more fun when I have somebody to share it with but reading and playing are greatly improved as a result of doing so with a group.

It wasn't until the beginning of 2017 that I rediscovered my interest in reading when I began to read science fiction novels and discuss them with my

classmates as one would within the context of a book club. This discussion was open in a way I had not experienced prior in my education. It allowed and encouraged dissenting ideas, questions, and interpretations. It was an open forum and critical discussions were frequently met with laughter, banter, and friendly disagreement. It was reading at its most social. Following, I attempted to engage further with my interest in sci-fi by reading more on my own, but my efforts were for not because it was the social aspect that really got me engaged. Taking these experiences into IP I have tried to push *The Isle of Fern* to be a social, conversational piece. It can definitely be used on one's own, but the collaborative elements are where the project shines brightest. I have thought about *The Isle of Fern* as a book for a majority of its development, but most of my peers, friends, and family members have described it as a game. Both categories are true, and if users see my work as a game that is nothing short of a compliment.

Serious tabletop gaming is a relatively new hobby as I was only introduced to it in high school through Rio Grande's *Settlers of Catan* but growing up playing card games with family on vacations around the mid-west more than likely guided me to the hobby early on. Staples like *Uno*, *Phase Ten*, *Skip-Bo*, and *Racko*, were regularly pulled from either the toy closet in our basement or the more elusive, brown cabinet in the workshop, both of which were filled with countless other games.

Tabletop gaming is no longer just a hobby of mine; its influence on my life has left me able to see it as so much more. The distinction between my childhood and high school gaming experiences was that in high school the games provided

worlds to explore; roles to play; and stories to find, tell, and make ourselves. There are games about building cities, escaping sinking islands, fighting monsters, sports, taking pilgrimages, really just about anything. For a game to work in any form players absolutely must interact with each other; a fact I know not only from playing and observing, but also by designing a few games that died as a result of little to no player interaction.

Gaming for me quickly became a sort of escapism born out of desire more than need. There was competition some days, cooperation on others, and occasionally a chance to learn new mechanics as the plastic peeled from a brand-new box. While it is true that the possibilities of *The Isle of Fern* as a digital application are present, tabletop gaming has always provided a tactility that video games haven't which is important in conjunction with themes of exploration and discovery.

Forms and Functions of Books

In my research I have discovered numerous books, comics, and hard-to-define objects that have influenced how I perceive books. These examples generally offer a challenge to either the form or function of a book. For instance, Chris Ware's *Building Stories* is a collection of "books, booklets, magazines, newspapers and pamphlets" all housed in a single box. Each publication presents a story that revolves around one or more of the residents of an apartment building in Humboldt Park in Chicago, Illinois. The way in which Ware developed the stories in such a way that a reader can explore at their own pace and in their own desired order, plus the way in which he intertwined each narrative through

minute details is hugely inspiring to my own endeavors of non-linear storytelling. The various tenants of the apartment building have their own stories, but within each comic the other characters infiltrate in subtle ways that hint at their own goings-on. Ware carefully constructs a universe in the numerous pages of *Building Stories* and expertly displays an ability to build a world through this book.

During the summer of 2016, only a couple of weeks after beginning the illustrations that would have become *The Simon Deck,* I visited the Chicago Alternative Comics Expo (CAKE) and discovered an unorthodox comic by artist Aaron Renier titled *The Daisy Oracle* which consists of three wooden cubes painted black with single comic panels glued to each face. A user is instructed by an instruction panel on the outside of the box to roll the cubes as dice and unravel an aspect of the overarching narrative of an investigation of a break-in at a flower shop. The way Renier has written the text on each panel is ambiguous enough to allow the short phrases like "Even though it wouldn't have fixed anything" or "After I found the missing petals" link together. He has crafted a comic that works as a fluid rather than a rigid start-to-finish narrative.

Jason Shiga is yet another author who has challenged conventional norms of books through his work. His comic *Meanwhile* relies on a series of tabs and lines that readers use to explore the comic. They follow lines leading off of panels that weave over the tabs, onto other pages, and transform a bound comic into a storytelling labyrinth. It is a truly a unique approach to CYOA novels.

Though most of my inspirations have been rooted in comics, my endeavors in reading science fiction also sparked something inside me. Neal Stephenson's

The Diamond Age is a science fiction novel that follows a girl named Nell as she interacts with and learns from an artificially intelligent book named the Primer. This book is equipped with technology that pulls from Nell's life to formulate personalized stories and puzzles for her to solve in order to teach her moral and practical skills.

This novel began my serious consideration of a book as something more than pages between covers. It really exposed me to the idea of a book being influenced by its surroundings and adapting rather than simply offering a narrative to its reader. The Primer is advanced enough to learn and change as Nell uses it, which, apart from the concept of annotation, is a concept I hadn't considered prior to reading this novel. My project provides information with a few limitations (i.e. content of the illustrations, finite quantity of images, and lack of text), which really dictates how the user can interact with it.

On the Psychology of Play and Child Development

Key to the development of *The Isle of Fern* has been research into how children think. Understanding how my demographic thinks about and experiences similar objects or activities allows me to construct better stories and build a better final product. Though my target demographic for *The Isle of Fern* is ages 8–10, research I've read about child psychology deals with information gathered from groups younger than third and fourth grade. This being said the behaviors that authors Usha Goswami, Peter K. Smith, and David Cohen discuss are easy to digest and apply to older age groups than their derivative audiences.

This observation has made it easier to contextualize the behaviors of children during tests.

The range of available resources on child psychology and development is so broad that I have been able to find books that focus specifically on the subject of play. For example, Peter K. Smith's *Children and Play* is an extensive examination of the various forms of play through various cultures and their effects. The way Smith dissects these complex topics, like most authors, is by introducing each topic briefly at the beginning of the book and delving into more detail as the topics intertwine. As topics unfold, Smith references psychological history and current (as of 2010) research, contextualizing all the points he makes within the larger scope of the field.

As I read Smith's book, I identified terms and phrases, topics, and phenomena that align with my own observations as I have tested *The Isle of Fern*; Most notably the idea of a 'play ethos', or a "strong and unqualified assertion of the functional importance of play" primarily in education (28). My project is primarily focused on the concept of bringing an engaging and playful object into the worlds of third and fourth graders to better engage them in writing and creative problem solving. In this case I am the holder of the play ethos as I am the individual bringing play into classrooms. Smith, through a few examples brings up goals similar to mine and provides explanations as to how said goals were carried out.

Though her book is not entirely focused on play, Usha Goswami does make note of ways in which certain behaviors or environmental stimuli affect social interactions and vice versa. Goswami explains, "one of the most important factors

for social and moral development seems to be *conversation*…" and that "pretend play is another rich means whereby children come to understand beliefs, desires, and intentions and…is important" (57).

III: METHODOLOGY

After solidifying my concept, I began to approach the process of illustrating cards. As mentioned earlier, I had done sketches in 2016 that I used as a basis for the updated illustrations.

FIGURE 1. Preliminary drawings for *The Isle of Fern* produced in 2016

I was unsure about the medium I wanted to work in, and while I knew I wanted to incorporate hand-inked drawings, the method of coloring was

Figure 2. An array of pencil drawings used as reference for the final cards.

monochrome option using graphite, but finally landed on hand-inked line work and digital color.

I initially considered including a boy that lived on the island but as time went on I struggled with the possible inclusion of the character. I had a few early sketches of him and developed him further but each time I paired him with the other cards the potential stories felt limited. I was worried that kids would be inclined to write simply about Simon rather than insert themselves into the story

or if I included too many actions performed by Simon the stories would feel formulaic.

      With a small collection of cards including an illustration of the boy and instructions that mentioned him, I made a trip to my sister's third-grade classroom to play test with her students. The results were surprising in some respects and expected in others. For one, most kids were drawn to the tiger cards and wrote their stories around the actions of the tiger. This admittedly was the most striking card in this early stage but clearly exhibited much potential. The most surprising response I got from the initial play test was a story called *The Log and the Tiger* in which a lonely log meets a tiger and uses his ingenuity to help the tiger navigate the jungle. It was the clearest example of a student

Figure 4. The worksheet from my first playtest that includes *The Log and the Tiger*.

With the feedback from my first playtest I continued to develop more cards and improve upon the ones I had already before play testing again. The second group I play tested with was a fourth-grade class that included many students who spoke English as a second language (ESL), didn't give as much feedback. The language gap made these ESL students less able to write stories based on such abstract thought. The joy of this project is that it is limitless, but this playtest let me know that the rules really need to be firm in presentation.

In the early stages of *The Isle of Fern* my mindset was that of a book artist. I saw the project as a way of presenting a non-linear story and, though I recognized the more game-like elements, I was focused on its potential as an art book. This mindset led me to the material choices of book cloth & paper, the form of the box as a BSO, and my original plan for a reading nook installation. What was surprising and even frustrating at times were the responses I got from peers referring to my book as a game despite my referring to it as a book or BSO. I now embrace the reception as a game because it invites group interaction more and better communicates my intent to have users engage in a new form of play.

Another portion of this project that has taken much of my attention is the

Figure 5. Detail of the second prototype. Note the lack of drawer and the much deeper tray.

box that holds the deck of cards. I took inspiration for the box from common hardcover books, but I quickly realized with the dimensions that the cards would be improperly oriented if not rotated ninety degrees. I wanted the box to reflect the classic image of an old hardcover book so that when it sits on a shelf it blends in.

My first prototype was very poor quality and much too small. I made my second prototype out of MDF and secured the pieces together using masking tape. It was a box with a partition to separate the deck into two parts. The box also had a hard spine and no tolerances, which made closing the box difficult. After ordering test cards I realized that the tray was too deep but the clearest solution to this issue would make it too thin. My third prototype solved this issue by eliminating a majority of the tray and replacing it with a drawer that would hold stories from users as they play. This box functioned much more effectively and allowed for a bit more exploration outside the cards themselves. I have since iterated on this box to maximize the efficiency of the material as well as ensure it can be wrapped in book cloth easily. This modification primarily focused on making large planes of material thinner and eliminating a hard-to-wrap lip at the box's base.

A key part of my process was the acceptance of serendipitous discovery. As I worked, researched, and discussed with peers, I made connections to existing games and books. Titles like *Where the Wild Things Are, Lord of the Flies, The Jungle Book, Life of Pi, Apples to Apples, Dixit,* and numerous others were brought up in conversations for their similarities and overlapping themes. Some of these connections were made through images and others through language or

text. *Lord of the Flies* focuses on a cast of boys stranded on an island, one of which is named Simon. Coincidentally this was the name I was intending to give the boy that lived on *The Isle of Fern*. *Life of Pi* includes a boy adrift on a boat with a tiger. *The Jungle Book's* primary antagonist to Mowgli is Shere Khan the tiger, who somewhat resembles the tiger I drew. The serendipitous discoveries and connections I have made in the process of developing *The Isle of Fern* are truly countless.

<div align="center">IV: CREATIVE WORK</div>

The Isle of Fern is a 7.25" by 6.375" by 1.875" box wrapped in green book cloth with an orange ribbon and printed illustrations lining the inside.

The gallery display for *The Isle of Fern* consists of a 55.125" by 30.75" by 37.375" bar table on an area rug. There are two bar stools at the table to allow patrons to sit and interact with the two copies of the game.

Figure 6. Gallery Patrons interacting with *The Isle of Fern*.

V: DISCUSSION

My overall goals for the work in a gallery setting were that the space would be inviting to interaction and that gallery patrons would stop and play. Given the gallery opening patrons were welcomed into my installation and certainly played with the cards. What I did not anticipate or plan for were instances where players would open the boxes, remove cards, and not reset the game. For a majority of the opening cards laid out on the table, boxes laid open, and the drawers containing paper remained closed. This prevented users from reading the rules and understanding the importance of recording their stories. If I had known this would have been the case I would have provided instructions on the table that made my intended interactions clearer.

It was interesting to compare the interactions of children and adults. Albeit I orchestrated the younger interactions by visiting classrooms, I could tell there was more active discovery within my target demographic that older users. Kids seemed to want to see every card and make connections themselves rather than simply look at the cards. The stories that came out of the interactions tell a lot about the difference in how adult and adolescent minds function. Younger users made surprising observations and pulled from stories they were familiar with for plot devices and themes. Adults on the other hand wrote stories that varied from more challenging to more focused on the island itself and the mystery it holds. Both forms of interaction are great, and I think a familiarity with the cards would begin to hybridize them.

VI: CONCLUSION

The Isle of Fern was received very well by all who saw it. Though the gallery was visited by patrons outside my target demographic, I got confirmation that the game works the way I intended. Moving forward from the exhibition I plan to revisit some of the classrooms and visit other classrooms for the first time to have kids play the final version of the game. This will not only help me confirm with my demographic but will also help guide me toward an improved second edition. In addition to further testing, I intend to pursue this project further to improve the content and form in hopes of pitching it to a game-design company or publisher. *The Isle of Fern* is still a proof-of-concept in many ways and now that I understand the form I can produce various stories and modifications to it. I am already receiving requests to buy the current edition of the game and am planning to produce and sell custom orders for those who want a copy.

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