Life and death in the second person: Identification, empathy and antipathy in the gamebook

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Abstract

This essay argues that the second-person address of the interactive gamebook generates a mode of identification between reader (player) and character that functions not through immersion or presence but through an estranging logic that arises from the particular affordances of the print form. It begins by situating the gamebook, an influential but short-lived genre that enjoyed its heyday in the 1980s and early 1990s, in relation to other forms of second-person narrative as well as Interactive Fiction and video games, before turning to a consideration of the points at which the forms diverge. Taking Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone's *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982) as its example, the essay then examines the ways in which the gamebook's highly-demanding print form undermines notions of transparency, arguing that identification with the gamebook *you* is specific to, and reliant upon, the material properties of the print text.

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Fig. . "The locked door bursts open." Image © 1982 Russ Nicholson.

The locked door bursts open and a nauseating stench hits
your nostrils. Inside the room the floor is covered with bones,
rotting vegetation and slime. A wild-haired old man, clothed in
rags, rushes at you screaming. His beard is long and grey, and
he is waving an old wooden chair-leg. (36)[1]

Something is not quite right. You landed a fair blow on him, but he appears not to have noticed the wound! You deduce that this Undead creature is not vulnerable to normal weapons. (310)

If you are still alive, turn to 201. (339)

These three extracts, taken from Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone's *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982), show both the range and the paradoxes of character-reader relations in the interactive gamebook. In this they serve to introduce the key concerns of this essay, in which the gamebook *you* is figured in terms of identification, empathy and antipathy in an attempt to account for the curiously-estranging structures of interactive second-person print narrative. The first of the extracts, an encounter with a crazed prior adventurer, gestures towards the intent of the gamebook. Focalized from a perspective that allows the reader to identify with the narratee/protagonist, the reader is invited to respond to the Fighting Fantasy slogan "YOU are the hero!" in the affirmative: "I *am* you". The second extract might at first appear to be a continuation of the first mode, but upon further inspection "something" is indeed "not quite right". Here the narrative makes an unusual (unnatural) projection into the mind of the protagonist, offering through a process of deduction, the reader's own deductions: "You deduce that…" As this doubled-deduction

might suggest, the reader is momentarily distanced from the narratee, empathising with – "I *am like* you" – but no longer identical to the adventurer struggling to despatch the Wight. The third extract, "If you are still alive, turn to 201" is one relatively few accounts of the adventurer's many deaths to be given in the narrative. Struck by a poisoned dart, the adventurer is the "you" who may or may not be alive, while the injunction "turn to 201" is directed vertically beyond the storyworld to the actual reader. Any attempt to deny the difference between the "you" who may or may not be alive and the "you" who is directed to turn the pages of the book results in absurdity and the reader can only respond – to the adventurer – "I *am not* you." The impossible nature of this exchange, an example of what I am calling antipathy, captures neatly the paradoxical nature of the gamebook *you* which situates the reader in multiple positions at once; here dead and not dead, character and reader.

The origins of this tension – a tension inherent in the mediated immediacy of the gamebook *you* – are helpfully articulated in critical accounts of the ways in which second-person narratives address the reader. Brian Richardson terms second-person narrative in this mode autotelic: "the direct address to a 'you' that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of the fiction" (*Unnatural* 30). Irene Kacandes' "apostrophic Talk mode" similarly invokes the reader whose response (talk here is indicative of dialogue) assumes an ethical stance involving "not so much the proper attitude of listening as the recognition that one is called both to identify and not to identify with this 'you'" (145). David Herman, whose

discussion of the second person takes a spatial turn, describes this "apostrophic" address to the reader as "vertical" and that which remains within the storyworld as "horizontal," offering an account of a "you" that is "doubly-deictic" (345) in which actual and the virtual (story) worlds interact. The result of this formulation is to recognise in "you" an "ontological interference pattern produced by two or more interacting spatiotemporal frames" (345), an analysis which proves extremely productive in readings of postmodern texts for which such interference might be a desirable, even defining, feature. At the same time, Herman's insight is helpful in revealing the tension in second-person gamebooks which, inviting readers to align themselves with the characters within the story world, seek to naturalise their use of second-person address, conflating the horizontal and the vertical in order to connect virtual and actual worlds. This tension, variously described as "juxtaposition" (Richardson), "talk" (Kacandes), and "interference" (Herman), provides the starting point for my analysis of the gamebook *you* and, to anticipate my conclusion, it is this tension that makes possible a form of identification-through-dislocation that is specific to this print form of interactive fiction.

The Warlock of Firetop Mountain: Genre and Focalization

The Warlock of Firetop Mountain is the first of Puffin Books' Fighting Fantasy series (1982-1995), a series that ran to 59 books, was translated

into 22 languages, and sold an estimated 17 million copies worldwide.[2] In terms of its story, it is a conventional quest narrative in which an unnamed adventurer travels to Firetop Mountain in search of treasure, enters the cave system under the mountain, and encounters a series of monsters, traps and mazes, before eventually locating the sorcerer's riches. The denizens of Firetop Mountain – whose number includes a mad barbarian, cavemen, a crocodile, a dog, a dragon, dwarfs, a ghoul, a giant, giant bats, giant rats, a giant sandworm, a giant spider, goblins, gremlins, a room full of ghoulish hands, an Iron Cyclops, a minotaur, an ogre, a selection of old men (wild-haired or otherwise), orcs, piranhas, a small snake, a troll, a vampire, a wererat, a werewolf, a wight, and a room full of zombies – are despatched in a series of violent encounters that culminate, should the adventurer be successful, in a fight to the death with the Warlock Zagor. No justification is offered for this act of trespass, and the wanton acts of destruction and theft that follow are apparently motivated by nothing more than greed and an insatiable appetite for adventure. Even the werewolf guarding the keys to the Boathouse, himself an unlikely moral arbiter, "will have nothing to do with fortune-hunters" (141) such as the story's unnamed protagonist.

While its dungeon-crawl narrative is perhaps unremarkable, the innovation of *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* lies in its deployment of an interactive second-person narrative form alongside a basic game mechanic that makes reading and playing coterminous activities. Described on its cover as "part Story, part game," *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, "is a book in which YOU become the hero!" As the compound

designation "gamebook" makes clear, *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* is both story and game, and is taken here as exemplifying the gamebook genre. Reader-players of Jackson and Livingstone's gamebook are required to read and internalise eight pages of rules (the print equivalent of the digital game's code), including the seven-stage "How to fight creatures of the underworld," that will allow them to both "run" and "play" ("narrate" and "read") the gamebook. Written in what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the "internal-ontological" mode (108), the gamebook functions through the identification of the reader-player with the story's protagonist. Accordingly, following the injunction to "become" the hero, readers use two six-sided dice to generate a set of characteristics (Skill, Stamina, and Luck), and compile a basic inventory of items to which they add as their reading progresses. The gamebook is "ergodic," to use Espen Aarseth's term, in that "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1) with readers tasked with determining their route through the lexia and performing low-level computations and book keeping throughout. As the development of this game mechanic might suggest, gamebooks, unlike storytelling games for which "[t]he process is the point, not the output" (Hindmarch 52), generally include victory conditions. "Winning" in *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, for example, equates to the successful negotiation of Zagor's subterranean maze and the subsequent despatch of the sorcerer.

In line with gamebooks generally, *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, takes the form of a series of non-sequential "chunks" (Murray 55), or "lexia" to use the term taken up from Roland Barthes and popularised by

George Landow in *Hypertext 2.0* (3). Individual lexia (*The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* is made up of 400, ranging from 3 to 252 words) generally equate to unique locations within the maze-like space beneath the mountain and present brief scenarios in a style that might be described, and the phrasing is deliberate, as lacking in character. Their apparently-neutral focalization takes the form of largely (but not consistently) uninterpreted sense data, as in the following example: "The door opens to reveal a small, smelly room. In the centre of the room is a rickety wooden table on which stands a lit candle. Underneath the table is a small wooden box. Asleep on a straw mattress in the far corner of the room is a short, stocky creature with an ugly, warty face; the same sort of creature that you found asleep at the sentry post. He must be the guard for the night watch" (82). In this passage, as is typical, the narrative is based on sense data the concern of which is predominantly spatial. Mieke Bal's model of focalization, which distinguishes between perceptible objects, in which the focalizer "sees something that is outside itself," and non-perceptible objects, "visible only inside the 'head,' 'mind,' or 'feelings'" (156) provides a helpful language with which to discuss these lexia which generally approximate to "external" observation rather than "internal" interpretation. In limiting the description to perceptible objects, the narrative orients the reader spatially as the text's focalizer. In keeping with the narrative's focus on perceptible objects a number of lexia are accompanied by black and white illustrations that supplement the text in orienting the reader spatially as the point from which the gamebook world is perceived. As Russ Nicholson, the illustrator of eight gamebooks in the

series, recalls, "I as the reader was given the task to *visualise* this to the best of my ability, the image you now *see* is what I *saw*" (my emphasis).

The gamebook's apparently characterless (or character-light) narration is central to the success of a vertically-addressed second-person narrative which requires the reader to "go far beyond what is actually contained in the objective stratum of the work in the process of objectifying the portrayed objectivities" (Ingarden 50) precisely because it is the individual reader that the narratives seek to "concretize" in the role of the protagonist. As Kacandes puts it, "the 'emptiness' of 'you' (potentially) allows all who hear it to feel addressed" (151). Kacandes' "potentially" is, of course, significant. As Bal remarks, "[p]erception depends on so many factors that striving for objectivity is pointless" (145) and while value-judgements such as the "ugly" attached to the description of the orc's warty face are unusual, and references to past experience ("the same sort of creature...") more unusual still, the attempt at neutrality is only partially successful. M. Angeles Martínez's argument that empathy results from "matching features across a particular reader's self-concept and a focalizer's character construct" (119) is helpful in understanding the import of these "fillings in" of the "empty" *you.* What is most notable in Martínez's argument is that the focus is on empathy, and not identity. Empathy, like metaphor, requires a degree of difference – one does not empathise with oneself – and literary immersion is only ever, as Martínez puts it, a "partial leap from the real to the fictional world" (119). The second-person gamebook, in which "YOU are the hero," aspires to a level of engagement that is characterised not so much by empathy (I *am*

like you), a "partial leap," as by identification (I *am* you). Following this line or thought, while these adjectival and temporal intrusions to the otherwise empty gamebook *you* are likely to do little to disturb the reader's experience in terms of immersion, they are indicative of the dislocating effects this form of narrative might have in terms of reader-character alignment.

Each lexia, barring those that terminate the narrative, concludes by presenting the reader with a number of possible actions. These take the form of what Jeff Parker calls "Blatant links," in that they are "strictly navigational" (2001): "You may either return to the corridor and press on northwards (turn to 208) or creep into the room and try to take the box without waking the creature" (82). In "making it impossible for the reader-user to continue without physically performing the actions suggested by the text" (Ensslin and Bell 54) these links embed what Jill Walker calls "forced participation" (45). Jackson and Livingstone's "YOU become," as the capital letters suggest, takes the form of an imperative (the same might be said of the "Choose" of R. A. Montgomery and Edward Packard's "Choose Your Own Adventure" books). In selecting from these menus of possible actions readers "send the history of the virtual world on different forking paths" (Ryan 108) and move the narrative on towards success or failure. "Winning" requires the selection of a sequence of lexia that maps as closely as possible onto what Jackson and Livingstone describe as the "one true way through the Warlock's dungeon" (*Warlock* 17). The test of this mapping, arguably Jackson and Livingstone's most innovative gamebook mechanic, comes in generating the location of the final lexia by

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combining three numbers found at key points on the reading path. In story terms this equates to locating three keys (found by killing a Minotaur, a Snake, and an Iron Cyclops) and using them to open the locks on the Warlock's treasure chest. In the absence of the correct set of keys the number of the "winning" lexia cannot be generated and the story stops (without properly "ending"): "this is the end of your journey. You sit on the chest and weep as you realize that you will have to explore the mountain once more in order to find the keys" (139). The will to power evinced by this model of successful reading, in which a thanatic drive towards narrative closure sees failed adventurers "weeping" with frustration, is, in an ideal reading, supplemented by the pleasure (the playability) of the middle in which as-yet unreached endings are anticipated. Accommodating the demands of both story and game requires, as Ryan puts it, "a seamless (some will say miraculous) convergence of bottom-up input and top-down design to produce well-formed narrative patterns" (99) with "narrative pattern" equating to the realisation of a successful conclusion rather than aesthetic merit. In the case of this particular gamebook successful resolution of the quest might well be said to take precedence over the generation of story.

Gamebooks in relation to other print second-person narratives and Interactive Fiction

While critical accounts of the second person tend to draw on what Monika Fludernik has described as "the standard illustrations: Michel Butor's *La modification* (1957), Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979), or Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984)" ("Introduction" 282), "[t]he genealogy of second person fiction is surprisingly rich" (Richardson, *Unnatural* 17). As Richardson suggests, and Fludernik's bibliographies (1994, 2011) confirm, writing in the second-person mode can be found across a wide range of periods and genres and is used in ways that are both "conventional" and "unnatural" (Richardson, "Keeping"). As Richardson notes: "[t]hough second person narration seems peculiarly suited to the concerns of postmodernism, it is important to observe that numerous other aesthetic stances have found the strategy fruitful: romanticism (Hawthorne), expressionism (Aichinger), magical realism (Fuentes), realism (O'Brien), and high modernism (Butor)" (*Unnatural* 35). To this list it is possible, and germane to my purpose here, to add digital Interactive Fiction and video gaming (Ensslin and Bell 2012).

A notable absence from the now extensive body of work on the second person is the short-lived but extremely popular genre of the print gamebook, a form which appears to fulfil, almost to the point of excess, the requirements of Fludernik's preliminary definition of second-person narratives as those "whose (main) protagonist is referred to by means of an address pronoun (usually *you*)" ("Introduction" 288). The distinctive qualities of this "gamebook *you*" are brought into focus when considered alongside the long-standing discussions of second-person address in non-game print narratives. The form shares features with each of the "three

types" of second-person narrative identified by Richardson as "standard," "hypothetical," and "autotelic" (*Unnatural* 18), without being reducible to any single mode. The analysis that follows, which retains Richardson's terminology, takes each of these modes in turn in order to locate the gamebook within, and to an extent without, the tradition of second person narrative.

The "standard" form, as the name might suggest, is the most common type of second-person narrative: "[i]t can be identified by its designation of the protagonist as 'you,' rather than 'I,' 'he,' or 'she' (Richardson *Unnatural* 18). Such narratives are usually told in the present tense from the perspective of a single protagonist who generally remains distinct from the actual reader and who remains firmly located within the story world. Richardson gives the opening paragraph of McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) as one of many possible examples: "You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head…" (*Unnatural* 23). The designation of this mode of writing as "standard" serves to indicate the relative "naturalness" of the form and of the three types of second-person writing is perhaps closest, though as after all perhaps not so very close, to realist literature. To be more specific, the use of the second person in the gamebook resonates with Franz Stanzel's suggestion that in "the novel of in the second person… the 'you' is really a self-dramatization of the 'I'" (quoted in Richardson *Unnatural* 21). In this, writing in the standard mode approaches the intent (if not the form) of the gamebook which requires that its readers become habituated to the form, and which aspires at all points to erase any markers of "unnaturalness" in order to connect the

"you" of the text to the "I" of the reader. This, of course, is where the similarity ends, in terms of structure the gamebook *you*, which takes the reader as the object of its address and as the subject of its narrative, is closer in many ways to writing in the hypothetical and autotelic modes and is, as is the case with many standard second-person narratives, far from "natural".

The relation of the gamebook *you* to "hypothetical" second-person narrative is telling. Second-person narratives in the hypothetical form are, as Richardson notes, marked by "consistent use of the imperative, the frequent employment of the future tense, and the unambiguous distinction between the narrator and the narratee" (*Unnatural* 29). By way of contrast, the gamebook *you* is aligned with choice (albeit circumscribed), avoids the future tense altogether (that the future is unknown is an essential untruth of the form), and functions precisely through the ambiguous relationship of reader, narrator and narratee. This notwithstanding, while the hypothetical use of the second person initially appears to have little in common with the gamebook *you*, the resemblance of writing in this mode to the user's manual – as is suggested by Richardson's use of Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help* (1985) as his example – recalls the fact that the reader of the gamebook must learn how the gamebook functions and to obey its commands: "Turn to 81". In effect the functioning of the game*book* requires that it also be game*manual*.

Of Richardson's three types, the gamebook *you*, addressed vertically to the reader, is most closely aligned to, though not identical with, the autotelic, a form of second-person narrative that takes full

advantage of the ambiguity of the second person pronoun in order to address, simultaneously or sequentially, both the actual reader and the character(s) in the storyworld. As Richardson puts it, the "unique and most compelling feature [of writing in the autotelic mode]… is the ever-shifting referent of the 'you' that is continuously addressed" (*Unnatural* 31). To better understand the gamebook's vertical address it is worth pausing on the autotelic, reading the gamebook *you* alongside Richardson's example, one of the "standard examples," Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Calvino's novel, which makes getting "caught up in the story" (25) the theme of its opening chapters, and which makes much of the potential of the autotelic address to blur actual and story worlds provides an illuminating counter-example to the gamebook's immersive second-person address. As has been widely noted, initially it is possible, tempting even, to identify with Calvino's "you" (that you, like the actual reader, is beginning a book) but this potential for identification rapidly declines as the experiences of the actual reader and the reader within Calvino's narrative diverge. Thus the actual reader attempts is challenged with making sense of the conflicting subject positions on offer. So, while Ludmilla, another reader-character within the storyworld, expresses a preference for novels "that bring me immediately into a world where everything is precise, concrete, specific" (30), the possibility of immersive reading for the actual reader is undermined through a sequence of what Calvino's narrator calls "those virtuoso tricks so customary in modern writing" (25). Calvino's narrator summarises the effect well: "Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost, as when a person appears

who, from the name, you identified with a certain face, and you try to make the features you are seeing tally with those you had in mind, and it won't work" (9). This account of reading, taken from a novel written in the most playful form of the second person, is highly suggestive of the tensions inherent in the gamebook *you* for which reader-character identification is key: the features "seen" should indeed tally with those the reader has in mind.. Play in the gamebook, a different form of play entirely, requires that language be anything but playful.

From this brief survey, the tensions inherent in the gamebook's use of the second-person begin to come into focus. Its movement between these three "types" of second-person address is not perhaps unusual in and of itself – Richardson "enumerates tendencies rather than stipulates invariant conditions" (*Unnatural* 19) – but the gamebook *you* is peculiar in terms of the relation it forges between the standard, the hypothetical and the autotelic. It is standard in its approximation of a first-person narrative in which that first person (reader and/as character) is "specific and individual as regards their time and place" (Margolin, quoted in Fludernik "Introduction" 287), it contains elements of the hypothetical in that it includes an embedded, and quickly-internalised, set of user-oriented instructions, and it is autotelic in its combination of vertical and horizontal address. Moving rapidly between these three modes of address, the gamebook *you* is a dynamic form that, if it is to prove successful in connecting reader and character, demands the rapid habituation of an inherently unnatural mode of address.

An alternative, if not competing, tradition into which the gamebook might be situated is that of digital narrative and video games, and one need not look beyond the Fighting Fantasy franchise, perhaps one of the earliest transmedial successes, or indeed the careers of its authors, to locate the gamebook within the history of these digital relations. *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, for example, appeared as a computer game for the ZX Spectrum (Crystal Computing 1984) with "cassette animated graphics" (Cunningham 7), a board game (Games Workshop 1986), as two chapters of the third-person novel *The Trolltooth Wars* (Puffin, 1989), a roleplaying game (Myridor 2003), a Nintendo DS game (Big Blue Bubble 2009), an iOS game (Big Blue Bubble 2009), a PlayStation game (Laughing Jackal 2011), an iPhone Game (Commando Kiwi 2013), and is soon to appear as a Kickstarter-funded graphic novel. The careers of Jackson and Livingstone, the founders (with John Peake) of Games Workshop, the British producer of table-top games, take a similar trajectory. Making the connection of digital and "analogue" gaming in the first issue of Games Workshop's newsletter *Owl and Weasel* (1975), where computer games appear on their list of "progressive games" (1), Jackson and Livingstone both pursued successful careers in the digital gaming industry. Following the sale of Games Workshop in 1991, Jackson went on to work at Lionhead Studios (1996-2006), producers of *Black and White* and the *Fable* series, and Livingstone, at the time of writing UK Department for Businesses' Creative Industries Champion, joined Domark in 1992 (later Eidos), the makers of *Tomb Raider*.

The gamebook's relation to digital narratives and games is well established if little discussed. Anastasia Salter, in what is now a fairly standard account of this shared history, summarises the "predigital roots of interactive narrative," tracing "three stages of these early interactive narratives: structured collective oral storytelling (*Dungeons & Dragons*); gamebooks and *Choose Your Own Adventure* stories; and interactive fiction and text-based games" (11). A similar trajectory is suggested in Tristan Donovan's *Replay: The History of Video Games* (2010) where the development of Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle's MUD – Multi-User Dungeon – is linked to "pen-and-paper role-playing games and choose-your-own-adventure story books" (291), while Greg Costikyan, making the connection between print and digital texts explicit, and responding to the relative invisibility of the genre in critical work, observes that gamebooks are, "almost identical to hypertext fiction (read a passage, select a link, read another passage) except that hypertext is the purview of the literati, and game books are viewed as degraded hackwork" (8).[3]

While the contribution of gamebooks to the history of digital narrative and gaming is, as Costikyan suggests, rather underdeveloped in accounts of those forms, the value in exploring the relation of the two forms lies not so much in finding similarities as it does in identifying the different affordances of print and digital media. A clear indication of these areas of potential difference comes in the early discussions of interactive fiction that set out to define the new genre as a distinct narrative form. Writing in 1984, at the height of the gamebook's popularity, Anthony J. Niesz and Norman N. Holland would claim that "Interactive fiction has

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become possible only with the advent of high-speed digital computers that are capable of handling words" (113). This attachment of interactivity with digital media has since become an essential component in definitions of the form. For Ryan interactivity is "the property that makes the greatest difference between old and new media" (99) while Nick Montford, whose *Twisty Little Passages* (2003) remains one of the key works on the area, defines IF as "a form of digital narrative and computer game" ("Interactive Fiction" 249). The decline of the gamebook, a decline tied to the rapid development of affordable personal computers, would appear to support this position. As Christian Swinehart notes, "Gamebooks were getting more complex... Suddenly you needed to have a pencil and paper and do math to move along, and at that point what a computer is there for is to keep track of a set of numbers and crunch them for you" (quoted in Hendrix). In effect, Jackson and Livingstone's Fighting Fantasy gamebooks, which emerged in 1982, seven years *after* Will Crowther and Don Woods' *Adventure* (1975-1976), were already out of step with the progress of technology – simultaneously testing the limits of the book as technology (attempting to translate role-playing games, a form of collaborative oral storytelling, into a solitary print activity) just as other competing technologies were emerging.

The connection of interactivity and digital media, and the implicit exclusion of print narrative, comes to be dependent on the perceived quality of interaction. As Ensslin and Bell put it, "hypertext fiction foregrounds the importance of the authored text and limits reader agency to varying degrees of navigational freedom rather than allowing readers to

enter into co-productive, dialogic text construction characteristic of IF"
(59). While the dialogic nature of the interaction afforded by digital
narratives and games, be they textual or graphic in form, remains open to
question, as Salter says, "the only actions possible in either system [text-
parser or point-and-click] are those intended by the designer" (40),
Costikyan's suggestion that gamebooks are closer to hypertexts than IF is
helpful. Gamebooks are paper-hypertext, the "paper" in this hybrid term is
far from insignificant, rather than paper-IF (a combination that would
almost certainly be seen as a contradiction in terms).[4]

 The emphasis on the gamebook's paper form in this account of the
genre is deliberate. As Roger Chartier observes, "[r]eaders and hearers…
are never confronted with abstract or ideal texts detached from all
materiality; they manipulate or perceive objects and forms whose
structures and modalities govern their reading (or their hearing), thus the
possible comprehension of the text read (or heard)" (3). In line with
Chartier's claim, my reading of the gamebook's second-person address
turns on the understanding that the affordances and limitations of the
print medium have a specific bearing on the nature of the text's
immersive potential. In contrast to the increasingly "transparent,
perceptual immediacy" (Bolter and Grusin 22) offered by video games, the
technology of the book "gets in the way." Their print technology, in many
ways a marvel of portability, makes present and available the complete
range of lexia, material that that the digital hypertext conceals (here
Murray's "chunks" seems to better capture the manifest physicality of the
gamebook). In the absence of a parser, "that part of the program that

accepts natural language input from the interactor and analyzes it"
(Montford *Twisty* ix), any "meaningful reaction to input" in the print
gamebook can only be supplied by the reader: interaction requires the
learning of the rules of the game whereas in video gaming the algorithms
(code) controlling the game environment can be largely concealed with
the effect that "[t]he player stops functioning as a 'game executor' and
can focus instead on her role as 'game player'" (Deterding 34). In focusing
on interactive print fiction, my contention is that while IF might offer a
level of interaction (dialogic where the gamebook is navigational), and
while video games might afford a level of immersion (through faster and
faster graphics, high fidelity sound, improved game physics, and most
significantly concealed code), it is when the discussion is shifted to
questions of identity that the dislocating effect of the gamebook *you* can
be most clearly distinguished from these digital relations.

You and I read interactive fiction: The gamebook's triple *you*

The discussion that follows returns to *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* to
offer an account of the tripartite nature of the gamebook *you*, reading
Jackson and Livingstone's text alongside Nicholson's interior pen and ink
illustrations, in order to trace the shift between readerly identification ("I
am you"), empathy ("I *am like* you"), and antipathy ("I *am not* you").

The perspective most commonly taken in (and given by) *The
Warlock of Firetop Mountain* can be seen clearly in the extract with which

this essay began: "The locked door bursts open and a nauseating stench hits your nostrils. Inside the room the floor is covered with bones, rotting vegetation and slime. A wild-haired old man, clothed in rags, rushes at you screaming. His beard is long and grey, and he is waving an old wooden chair-leg" (36). In this passage, which comes early in the narrative, the reader is confronted by an "adventurer *like*" (263, my emphasis) but not identical to, herself. Here the invitation is not to identify with the wild-haired old man, but with the perspective from which he is seen. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer puts it, "very often immersion is engaged there not as much through our empathy with what is represented (even if it is a person) as much through our identification with a subject that sees, that looks, that is in the position of a witness" (161). Thus the gamebook *you* might be said to be characterised by a refusal to construct the identity of either character or reader, remaining "empty" in order to generate identification ("I *am* you") not through likeness but through the deployment of a shared perspective from which to observe and construct the exterior world and its inhabitants.

The majority of the book's 34 full-page interior illustrations conform to this perspective. The illustration of the Wild-haired Old Man (Fig. 1) that accompanies the passage above, for example, clearly aligns character and reader through a shared visual field reminding us that the apprehension of the storyworld locates and characterises the protagonist. By way of contrast, Nicholson's illustration to entry 240 (Fig. 2) – "The box is light, but something rattles within. You open the lid and a small SNAKE darts out to bite at your wrist! You must fight the Snake."– depicts the adventurer's

hands holding a box opened to reveal a snake poised to strike. The snake, the object of the viewer's gaze and the subject of the narrative, is presented from the same perspective as the wild-haired old man.
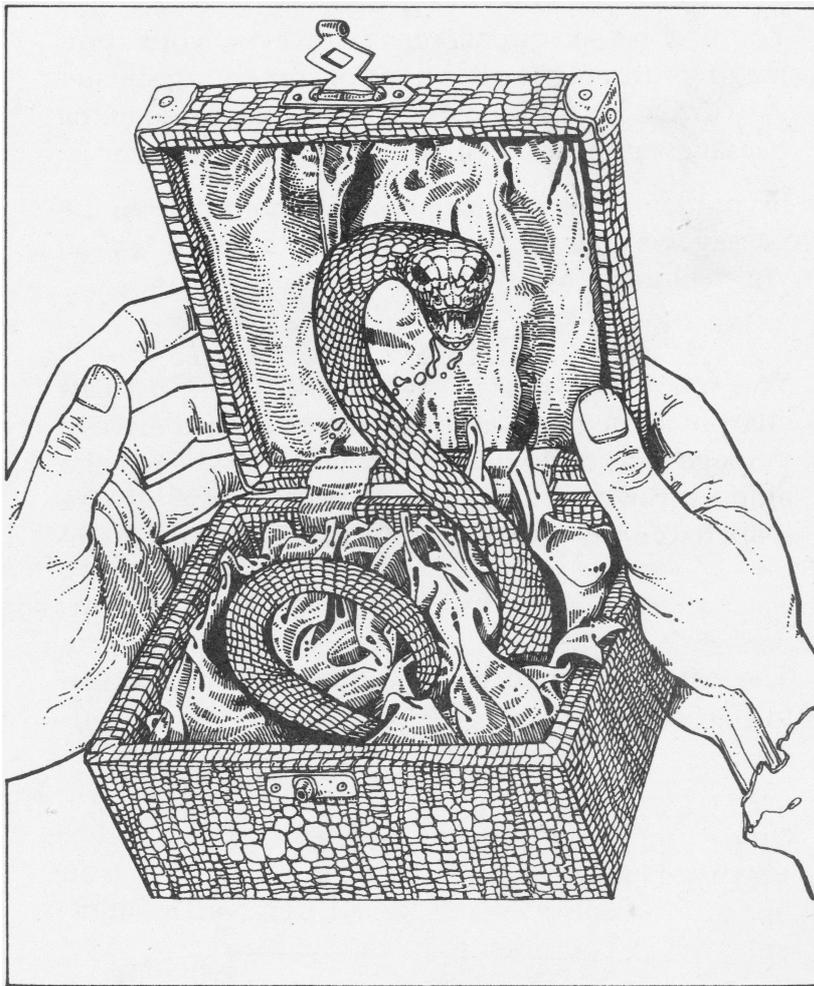

Fig. 2. "You open the lid and a small snake darts out to bite at your wrist" (240). Image © 1982 Russ Nicholson.

Where this illustration differs from the others in the volume, and indeed the text that it illustrates, is in the presence of the adventurer's hands

within the frame of the picture. The appearance of these hands in the reader's peripersonal space in a position approximates that of the reader's own hands invites an illusory misrecognition of self on the part of the real reader.[5] That the hands appear to be those of a male adventurer recalls Judith Fetterley's observation that literature "insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms" (xii). That they even more clearly belong to a white adventurer possessed of two hands goes further in reminding us that the gamebook *you* is far from neutral.[6] The inevitable failure of this illusion results in the reader regarding these hands as if represented in the third-person. In effect, the reader is invited to see herself from an external, third-person, perspective (at best an act of empathy) while simultaneously being tasked with translating the book's second-person narrative into first-person experience (an act of identification). This dual perspective, combining empathy and identification, along with the ethical response demanded by such an act, captures well the relation of reader and character as they interact across deictic levels.

If Nicholson's "hands" are taken as indicative of the shifting reader-character relation, the limits of this identification are encountered in accounts of the adventurer's death. While the majority of these go unremarked in the text (there are numerous points at which the adventurer might die) five are made the subject of the narrative:

The Ghoul dances with glee around your body, lays it next to the others on the ground, turns you over and sinks its teeth

25

into your rump. It is not often it gets fresh meat to feed on. Your adventure is over. (64)

As you approach he rises from his coffin, spreads his cloak and takes you under it. Your last living memory is a flash of pain as his sharp teeth sink into your neck. You should never have let yourself get into eye-contact with a VAMPIRE! (118)

the darts strike you and you never regain consciousness. (198)

your charred remains have formed a small black outline on the floor. Next time do not try to strike the chest! (379)

As you try to turn the third key, small catches drop and your last memory is a sting of pain as three small darts pierce your skin. Each is treated with a quick-acting poison. Remember not to use this combination of keys next time! (387)

The absurd contradiction inherent in the act of witnessing one's own death ("you never regain consciousness") recalls Maurice Blanchot's observation that death "is not a simple event that will happen to me, an objective and observable fact; here my power to be will cease, here I will no longer be able to be here" (42). There is, perhaps understandably, no attempt to illustrate these passages, but illustrations of the dead (such as that in Fig. 3) are commonplace.

Fig. 3. The corpse's eyes flick open and it quickly sits up and slashes at you with its long sharp fingernails (275). Image © 1982 Russ Nicholson.

In contrast with the ontological confusion evoked by the passages recounting the experience of death, in images such as that of Ghoul (Fig. 3) the dead are objects of the adventurer's gaze. Properly speaking, faced

with the impossibility of one's own death, the reader, for whom the doubly-deictic *you* must finally coalesce into a single vertical address, is expelled from the storyworld. "Your adventure is over," an extension of the video game's now-familiar "Game Over," serves to confirm the necessarily simultaneous end of both "adventure" and "you" as the reader surveys the charred remains of a character of whom it is only possible to say "I am not you".

By way of summary, the shifting relation of actual reader to storyworld character, which ranges from homodiegetic identification ("I *am* you"), to extradiegetic empathy ("I *am like* you"), to what might be termed extradiegetic antipathy ("I *am not* you") is neatly captured by the book's cover illustrations.
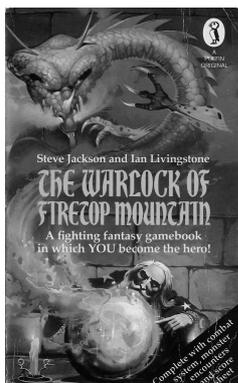
Fig. 4.   *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1982.
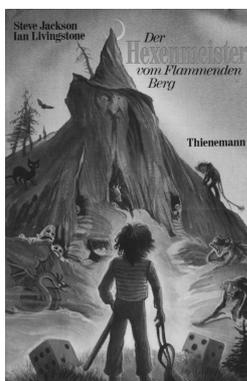
Fig. 5. *Der Hexenmeister vom Flammenden Berg*. Stuttgart: Thienemann, 1982.
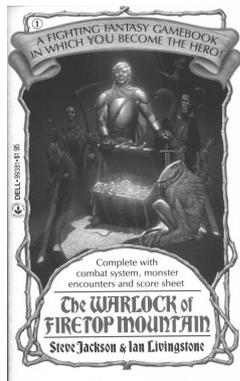
Fig. 6. *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*. New York: Dell, 1983.

The Puffin jacket (Fig. 4) features Peter Andrew Jones' painting "The Ultimate Spell" depicting the Warlock "seen" from the perspective of the protagonist and approximating gaming's first-person view in presenting the image as if focalized by the reader-player (I am you). Reinhard Michl's illustration (Fig. 5) for Thienemann's *Der Hexenmeister vom Flammenden Berg* (1982) features the protagonist in the form of an androgynous, childlike, silhouette from a perspective close to that given in third-person video games in that the adventurer-avatar is present (I *am like* you). In contrast to these two jackets, in which the reader-player occupies the same, or at least proximal, space as that from which the narrative is focalized, Richard Corben's illustration for the DELL edition (Fig. 6) features a male hero looking directly at the reader, his eyes returning the gaze by which he has been apprehended (I *am not* you). This multiplication of reader-character relations indicates the demands placed on the reader who must, it seems, occupy several positions at once. As I shall go on to conclude, rather than undermine reader-character

identification, these apparently paradoxical demands underpin the reader's relation to the gamebook *you*.

Conclusion

The dislocating effects of the gamebook *you*, whether seen as oscillation between deictic levels, or at the point of collapse when the boundaries of those levels are most rigidly upheld, points the way back to interactivity (choice) as a generator of identification. In order to pursue this line of thought it is necessary to make a clear distinction between identification and immersion, two terms that have hitherto been used in a manner that might suggest that they are interchangeable. Identification is understood here in terms of the merging of reader and (a single) character within the storyworld ("YOU become the hero!") while immersion can be broadly understood as "getting inside the story." The gamebook's "becoming" is, as I have tried to suggest, derived from the alignment of the focalizing perspectives of reader and character and the engendering of a close empathetic relation predicated on the "emptiness" of the target character. While identification might be said to be at the service of the immersive reading, it does not follow that for fiction to be immersive the reader need identify, or indeed empathise, with any particular character or characters. As Ryan reminds us "[t]he personal experience of many fictional characters is so unpleasant that users would be out of their mind – literally as well as figuratively – to want to live their lives in the first-person mode" (124). The significance in insisting on this distinction becomes clearer

when one understands immersion as a mode of attention. It is, as Schaeffer tells us, "an inversion of hierarchical relations between inner-worldly perception (and, more generally, attention) and imaginative activity" (154). This extended act of "imaginative activity" is undermined by the gamebook's highly-demanding, technologically-cumbersome, form, which, lacking in "transparent immediacy," interrupts the "flow" of the story with alarming frequency. At the same time, the gamebook *you* capitalises on these interruptions to "imaginative activity" (the rolling of dice, annotation, book keeping, map making, and, above all, the choice of the reading path) in order to generate a relation between reader and character that is arguably unique to the genre and which affords a level of identification between reader and character that is perhaps ill served by the term empathy, which suggests connection imbued with distance

Gamebooks, then, promote reader-character identification not through their efforts to facilitate immersion (the pleasure of easy identification offered by the near simultaneity of reading/playing) but through the very awkwardness of the dual perspective that they demand. This dualism, present in all reading activity but central to the gamebook, requires the reader, divided as it were between two planes, to engage in parallel activities. On the first plane, the reader is engaged in an act of immersive empathetic reading. On the second the reader must be conscious of the act of reading in and of itself, of the act of responding to the text's many demands. The ontological contortion involved in the act of "becoming" the hero takes place in the space between these two planes. Consciousness of the act of reading, *choosing* (the second plane),

distinguished from consciousness of *acting* (the first) is what generates the (always-limited) sense of "being" the character. As Eric Matthews puts it:

> To be conscious of oneself as choosing is, first, to be conscious of a *point of view* which is one's own, of a place which one occupies within the world of objects, but which is yet not the position of another object… Second, it is to be conscious of having a *duration in time*, of a relation between what one is perceiving and doing now and what one has done in the past. (130)

Matthews' phrase "to be conscious of oneself as choosing" is telling.[7] Indicative of a certain dualism, it identifies what is essential in the gamebook, the unavoidable foregrounding of the print game's rules (rules that become increasingly invisible in the code of digital narratives and games). In this identification with the gamebook *you* can be helpfully distinguished from what writers on video games call presence, "the mental state where a user subjectively feels present within a video game space" (Nitsche 203). Seemingly paradoxically, it is through the reader's awareness of her role as the "executor" of the print text, the absence of presence, that the gamebook *you* is invested with being.

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Endnotes

1 References to the 400 lexia of *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* are given in parenthesis: (400). Where references are to the book's numbered pages the reference is given in the following format: (*Warlock* 17).

2 Subsequent to the cancellation of the series by Puffin Books, the Fighting Fantasy books have been republished, and the range expanded, by Wizard Books. For a comprehensive history of the Fighting Fantasy series, its precedents and antecedents, see Jonathan Green's *You are the Hero* (2014) and Grady Hendrix's "Choose Your Own Adventure: How *The Cave of Time* taught us to love interactive entertainment" (2011).

3 See also Irene Kacandes' *Talk Fiction* (2001), Nick Montford's *Twisty Little Passages* (2003), and Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin's *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games Playable Media* (2010).

4 See Irene Kacandes' *Talk Fiction* for a discussion of Julio Cortázar's 1963 novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1966) as "paper hypertext" (p. 200).

5 The presence of these hands in *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* recalls Murray's account of watching the 3-D film *Across the Sea of Time* (1995): "When the lunch bag is placed before us, a small hand reaches, as if from behind us, to take it. The audience sees only the back of the hand, which we recognize as belonging to the boy [Tomas] – but I also immediately thought of

operating it, as if it were a cursor in a videogame!" (47).

6 The complexities of the gamebook's apparently "empty" *you* are clearly seen in the results of a survey of readers ("WHO ARE YOU?") undertaken in issue four of *Warlock*, the official magazine of the Fighting Fantasy series. The response, published in issue six of the Jackson and Livingstone's magazine: "You're almost all male, for a start. The Warlock gets quite a few letters from girls (maybe it's his charismatic personality!), but it's the fellas who like filling in questionnaires. Only 8 out of over 500 respondents were female. And nearly all of you are between 9 and 17 years old; although we had a reply from a man of 60, and the letters we receive lead us to believe that we have quite a few readers who are too young to bother with questionnaires" (Fighting Fantasy Feedback 46). While the survey gestures towards a community of readers, largely young and largely male and the sense that the Fighting Fantasy "hero" is at once neutral and masculine was an issue raised repeatedly in the letters pages of the magazine. "Although my friend and I think your books are fantastic, we have one major complaint" wrote one reader, "All your adventurers are male!!!" (Jackson and Livingstone, "Warlock's Quill" 14).

7 That Eric Matthews is discussing Henri Bergson's concept of person is highly suggestive here. While the temporal structure of the gamebook might well be described as an "illegitimate translation of the unextended into the extended" (Bergson *Time* xxiii), Bergson's distinction, made in *Matter and Memory*, between "[t]he duration *wherein we see ourselves acting*" and "[t]he duration *wherein we act*" (243) offers a potentially-productive parallel with the dual

structure of the gamebook *you*.