
THE EXPERIMENT

by Kieran Coghlan

An Entry in the 2013 Windhammer Prize for
Short Gamebook Fiction

Your Attributes

You are about to take part in an experiment. Before you begin, you must decide on your character's attributes. You have 30 points to distribute between your character's Strength and Intellect scores. You can distribute these points however you wish, you could put 30 in Strength and 0 in Intellect if you wish or vice-versa and anything in between these two extremes.

INTELLECT

STRENGTH

Once you have done that, you may begin the gamebook at section 1.

1

You push open the heavy glass front door of the modern-looking building and cross the tiled floor to the front desk where a red-headed receptionist is typing away, oblivious to your presence.

'Ahem,' you cough. 'I'm here for the experiment?'

She ceases her typing and peers out at you over a pair of designer spectacles.

'Dr. Mullan's Office. Up the stairs and third door on your left.'

You thank her and ascend the stairs two at a time to a carpeted corridor. Pot plants line the walls and a window in the far wall brightens the place. A cleaner with a trolley strolls past you, giving you a curt nod. Carrying on, you soon find yourself outside Dr. Mullan's office and knock on the door.

'Come in!' rings out a jolly voice.

You push open the door into a wide office, a large window in the far wall looking out over the park. Bookshelves, crammed with thick hardbacks, line the walls to your left and right. The only other furniture is a desk in the centre of the room, two plush red leather armchairs either side of it. Dr. Mullin stands next to one of these chairs, gazing out the window with his hands clasped behind his back. He turns as the door clicks closed behind you.

'Ah, how wonderful that you could make it,' he says. He is of indeterminate age, blue-eyed with sandy-hair, greying slightly at the temples. A closely cropped beard and brown three-piece suit complete the ensemble of the academic.

'Please, take a seat,' he says with a smile.

Will you sit down on the chair nearest you (turn to 14) or remain standing (turn to 21)?

2

The doctor puts his hands into his jacket pockets and pulls out two packets of potato crisps.

'Now these two packets of crisps,' he begins, 'are identical as to how many crisps they contain and their nutritional value. The only difference is the flavour. The one in my left hand is prawn cocktail while the one in my right is cheese and onion. Now, we are going to have a packet each. You choose which one you want and I shall have the other. Which will you choose?'

Make your choice and then turn to 9.

3

'An interesting choice. Perhaps you tried to second-guess the author and considered that Intellect might actually be more useful than it generally is in gamebooks. Maybe you genuinely thought it would be. Or maybe this is not your first playthrough and you thought you'd try things with a higher Intellect this time to see what difference it made to the proceedings.'

Turn to 22.

4

'Ah, a contrarian, are we?' smirks the doctor before crunching down on a few more crisps. 'Contrarianism is an interesting phenomenon. The desire to do the opposite of what is expected of one is so great that it can supersede the desire to do what is logical. But is it really freedom of choice when the only reason to do other than what is expected is so you can satisfy an urge to do other than expected?'

Turn to 8.

5

'No, it wouldn't be one of the more popular series though it had its merits I suppose. A point of interest about this series that makes it fairly unique however (as well as winning it a fair bit of ire from gamebook fans) is that often times the reader will fail because they happened to be reading the book on a Tuesday afternoon or some other arbitrary period of time.'

Turn to 18.

6

The scowl on the doctor's face dissolves as he bursts into laughter at your show of defiance.

'Very well, my friend, very well. You may stay standing if you wish. Your reaction is a fairly common one to such an unreasonable command as I just made. We are not under the control of others, after all. But then whose control are we under?'

Turn to 2.

7

He smiles.

'An excellent reason. Convention and etiquette dictate so much of what we do, don't you think? The choice is of course always there to rail against them, but so few of us do.'

Turn to 2.

8

He pours the last few crumbs from his crisp packet into his open mouth before crumpling it up into a ball and tossing it over his shoulder.

'Before this experiment began,' he says, dusting his hands of the last few crumbs, 'you were asked to allocate points between your Strength and your Intellect. Which did you put more points into?'

If you put more points into Strength, turn to 11. If you put more into Intellect, turn to 3. If you put 15 points into each, turn to 17.

9

He hands you the packet you chose and snaps open his own one, stuffing a few crisps in his mouth.

'Now,' he says between crunches. 'Did you choose the flavour you preferred or that you prefer less? Or did you have no preference between the two?'

If you chose your preferred flavour, turn to 19. If you chose the flavour you like less, turn to 4. If you had no preference between the two flavours, turn to 15.

10

He nods. 'Then you are probably aware that those gamebooks get a lot of flack from gamebook fans for having the player fail for happening to be reading the book on a Tuesday afternoon for instance.'

Turn to 18.

11

'Probably the obvious choice. Strength does seem to be of more use in gamebooks in general. Plus, while you would expect a reader's intellect can make up for his character's lack thereof, a body-builder would be hard-pressed to find a way to lend his own strength to the character he controls.'

Turn to 22.

12

You sit down somewhat uneasily. Dr. Mullan sits opposite you, regarding you coolly for a few seconds before a broad smile once more splits his face.

'You seem to really respond to authority,' he says. 'No doubt there is a reason for that. But anyway, here you are now sitting across from me. And where else could you be?'

Turn to 2.

13

He smiles.

'Of course, if I am right, you could never have chosen other than to agree with me. And if I'm wrong, you are utilising your own free will to decide that free will doesn't exist. A sobering thought.'

Turn to 24.

14

You sit down heavily on the soft chair and Dr. Mullan does likewise on the other one. Resting his arms on the desk, he leans in towards you, an eager smile on his face.

'Now I want you to answer me something. You sat down as soon as I offered you a seat. Why?'

What will you answer?

'It seemed the polite thing to do.'

Turn to 7.

'I saw no reason to remain standing.'

Turn to 23.

'I was tired and welcomed the opportunity to sit.'

Turn to 16.

15

'Interesting,' he says, flicking a crumb from his beard. 'Are you familiar with the story of Buridan's ass? The ass stood equidistant between two bales of hay, each as bounteous and fortifying as the other. But the ass could see no reason to choose whether to eat from the hay stack to his left first or the one to his right first and so starved to death. Still, you made a choice between two seemingly equally appealing options, so you are no ass. There must have been something that drove you to the decision you made, even if what it is be unknown to you.'

Turn to 8.

16

He strokes his bearded chin.

'Ah, inhabiting a role I see. Very much expected in these circumstances, but not necessary I assure you. Still you had reason to assume you would be tired after taking those steps up here two at a time so I cannot fault your logic.'

Turn to 2.

17

'A pragmatic choice. After all the introduction and title of this gamebook gave you absolutely no clue as to what to expect so it stands to reason you would cover the bases by giving yourself a decent score in each attribute.'

Turn to 22.

18

'But apart from the fact this is a more blatant example of a player being doomed to fail before he even began, is it any more unfair than victory conditions in other gamebooks? If a player fails because he rolls a 1 where he shouldn't have, was this player any less doomed when he started than the one who played a *Wizards, Warriors and You* book on a Tuesday afternoon? Just because he could theoretically have thrown a different number is meaningless since the way he threw the dice was dictated by various mechanical causes he had no real control over. Similarly, is the player who made a choice that ends in failure not doomed before he began because he was always going to make that choice?

'Consider the choice of crisps offered you. Now say the prawn cocktail crisps had been poisoned and had you taken them you would have failed this gamebook. You had no reason to think them poisoned, yet if you had the inclination to choose prawn cocktail crisps over cheese and onion, you would have lost. And since you would have had that inclination (whether conscious or unconscious) before you began, failure would have been as guaranteed as it would be for the poor soul who began a *Wizards, Warriors and You* book on a Tuesday afternoon.

'Since every choice has a cause, free will itself does not exist. Gamebooks offer alternative choices, but the choices made are the only choices that reader could ever have made. Gamebooks are therefore not exercises in having free will over how a story goes. Perhaps it could be said they are exercises in testing a reader's quality of judgement, but more often they are exercises in guessing how an author thinks. If we fail in doing so, we can restart the gamebook and select different options from last time,

but these options would never have been selected without the meta-knowledge that the first choices led to failure.

'So are you convinced? Is free will a lie and a reader's fate in reading a gamebook, and in life in general, determined before he has even begun?'

What is your answer?

'Yes' Turn to 13.

'No.' Turn to 20.

19

'The logical choice,' he says before popping a few more crisps in his mouth. 'Why would you choose that which you like less? But then if you would never have chosen to do so, was it really a choice at all?'

Turn to 8.

20

He chuckles.

'Perhaps you're right. But if you are, you could just as easily utilised your free will to decide free will doesn't exist. And if you're wrong, then it was always determined that you would conclude that determinism is false. Which is a bit of a mindfuck, I think you'll agree.'

Turn to 24.

21

The doctor's smile fades into a scowl.

'That was not a request. Sit down. Now.'

Will you comply (turn to 12)? Or will you defiantly remain standing (turn to 6)?

22

'As you can tell, I have dispensed with the illusion. You're not really a non-descript individual sitting in an office undergoing some vague experiment. You're a doubtless complex individual reading a gamebook. And I'm not really Dr. Mullan, renowned psychologist and metaphysician, I'm the authorial voice of someone who didn't leave himself enough time to do a proper entry for this year's Windhammer competition.' He sniffs. Or at least, you just read that he does so.

'Now that's out of the road, I can get to the true meaning of this experiment. Gamebooks as a genre differentiate themselves from normal narratives in that they grant the reader choice to determine how the story goes. Right from the start of this gamebook, you've made choices. You chose how many points to allocate to Strength and Intellect. You chose whether to sit down or not. You chose what packet of crisps to take. You had reasons for all those choices. And since you had those reasons could you really have taken any of the alternative paths that presented themselves?

'Of course, some gamebooks introduce a random factor. Dice-rolling is a common example of this. Sometimes your failure is not due to your choice, but because you rolled a 1 at the wrong time. But is this truly random? The way a dice falls is determined by how it is thrown even if the amount of variables are so great that the thrower would find it impossible to predict how it will land. But a dice thrown in such a way to land with 1 facing up, will never land with a 2 face up. Let me ask you, are you familiar with the gamebook series *Wizards, Warriors and You?*'

Are you?

If so, turn to 10. If not, turn to 5.

23

He nods.

'And why should one do something that one sees no reason to do? Rationality is ever our guide.'

Turn to 2.

24

'Well, that concludes the experiment,' he says, clapping his hands together. 'Feel free to give it another go if you like. Or don't. The choice,' he smiles, 'is yours.'