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Game Analysis
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Go on to the next page: Critical responses to Cave of Time

This essay serves as an introduction to and a theoretical backdrop for two text-based pieces that I created in response to Edward Packard's *The Cave of Time*. I hope to show that *The Cave of Time* occupies a strange space between narrative and game, and illustrate how my two pieces (*Every Path Through the Cave of Time* and *Cave of Time: The Computer Game*) can both elucidate and complicate that space.

Instructions

WARNING!!!

Do not read this book straight through from beginning to end! These pages contain many different adventures you can go on in the Cave of Time. From time to time as you read along, you will be asked to make a choice. Your choice may lead to success or disaster!

The adventures you take are a result of your choice. *You* are responsible because *you* choose! After you make your choice, follow the instructions to see what happens to you next.

Remember—you cannot go back! Think carefully before you make a move! One mistake can be your last... or it *may* lead you to fame and fortune!

So reads the first page of Edward Packard's *The Cave of Time*, the inaugural volume in Bantam's celebrated *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. Though not explicitly labeled as such, this page can be seen as *Cave of Time's* instruction page. The page therefore bears close examination, as it reveals how the text was intended to be used: not just as a book, but also as a game.

At the most basic level, these instructions describe how the book is intended to be manipulated as an artifact, and how the narratives within are arranged. *Do not read this book straight through from beginning to end*, it admonishes us. *Make your choice and follow the instructions*. The usual rules for reading a book are suspended here: progression happens not in an inexorable forward progression, from page to page, but instead along what initially seems to be a process of tactical decision-making. Moreover, the book contains not one but *many different adventures*, which may require repeated traversals to discover.

A closer reading of these instructions reveals that they explicitly frame *Cave of Time* as a game. The adventure you experience is, according to the instructions, *a result of your choice*, and this “choice” takes the form of a *move (make a move)*. Your “moves” can be good (they can *lead to success*) or bad (*one mistake can be your last*), just as moves can be good or bad in, say, a game of chess. Some endings, according to the instructions, are valued higher than others and, furthermore, *you (the reader) are responsible* for the ending that you reach.

Choices, moves, differently valued outcomes—these are all claims on being game-like. But does *Cave of Time* deliver on these claims?

To imply that *you (the reader) are responsible* for the narrative that results from traversing the book, the book must provide *meaningful choices*. In other words, given two alternatives, the reader must have a basis for choosing between the alternatives, and the resulting events must flow in a reasonable manner from the previously established premises.

Cave of Time, alas, does not do this. The examples below should help to illustrate.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire

Here is an excerpt from page 29, in which *you*, after having passed through the Cave of Time to Earth’s Ice Age past, have jumped on the back of a woolly mammoth. The following scenario presents itself in the main body of the text:

Suddenly the mammoth stops and turns its head -- listening for something. You look up and see human figures approaching from two sides. They are carrying spears and clubs. The mammoth begins to run. You hold on tight. The hunters follow -- screaming and yelling. You can’t see where the mammoth is heading, but you’re afraid the hunters may drive it off a cliff. Yet, if you jump off while it’s running, you could be badly hurt.

At the bottom of the page, you're offered two choices: jump to the ground (and go to page 52), or hang on (page 53). These are, of course, both reasonable choices, given the circumstances. But what means are available to help the reader choose one over the other?

Even though this decision is reached after the reader has already made five choices—near the end of a relatively long path through the book—there are no immediately clear criteria. Both choices are presented as equally risky (“the hunters may drive it off a cliff” versus “you could be badly hurt”) and, in any case, neither taking risky choices nor playing it safe have, up to this point, resulted in clearly distinct outcomes.

One eminently reasonable way to make the decision is to hold a finger at page 29 and skip forward to both branches, to see which one suits you better—a strategy, it should be noted, that the instructions explicitly forbid (*you cannot go back!*). In this case, however, the decision isn't all that important, since both page 52 and page 53 end the story. And though one ending results in your immediate death, the other isn't appreciably better: you live peacefully among the cavemen, but never return to your own time.

Choice is futile

Another notable example of meaningless choice in *The Cave of Time* is on page 23. Here, *you* have ended up face to face with a medieval king, who expresses incredulity when you attempt to explain your extratemporal origins. The King's knights, stewards, and advisors echo his disbelief, and you are given the option to either insist that you are indeed a time traveller from the future—“turn to page 36”—or to recant your tale in favor of something more believable—“turn to page 37.”

Again, reasonable choices; and again, ultimately meaningless, since *both* pages 36 and 37 end with the same instruction: “Turn to page 11.” *Either* choice you make on page 23 will ultimately lead to the same page, so this particular choice has no bearing on the outcome of the story at all!

This, in turn, means that no consistent relationship has been established with this choice; if, on a subsequent reading that takes a different path, you are presented with a

choice between telling the truth or prevaricating in favor of believability (as occurs on page 106), you still don't know which choice is better.¹

You can't win at *Cave of Time*

Another way that *Cave of Time* fails to live up to its claims to being game-like is the lack of an explicit rule that values one outcome over another. The instruction page does imply (as outlined above) that some outcomes are *successful* (*fame and fortune!*) and others are disastrous; but no criteria are explicitly established for judging which is which. There is no conflict, no puzzle, and no solution, because there is no goal.

Given the forgoing, we can conclude that while *Cave of Time* has a game-like structure, and poses game-like dilemmas to the reader, it isn't by any stretch of the imagination a game. The question that arises, then, is this: *why is Cave of Time fun?*

Of course, the first kind of *fun* that *Cave of Time* provides is literary in nature, and has little to do with the book's game-like structure. The text itself is full of imagination, bursting with strange ideas, and fun to read. I first read the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books as a child, and I was surprised and delighted to return to *Cave of Time* and find it not only readable, but at times stirring and evocative.

It is precisely those elements that make the book less game-like—the hairpin twists that result from the unforeseen consequences of your actions, the abundance of ambiguous and startling endings—that make the *literature* of the book so compelling.

Viewed in this sense, the bifurcating nature of the text could be viewed not as a way of creating a game, but a way of compressing the largest possible number of distinct story lines into a children's book. The text of all possible traversals of *Cave of Time* (as generated by one of my programs, discussed below) is over five times as large as the text of *Cave of Time* itself. That's a good compression ratio, and lot of wackiness for 115 pages.

¹ These problems could be solved to some extent by enriching the set of rules in the instructions: by explicitly stating, and then following through on, a rule that rewards daring or truthful behavior. This kind of rule, however, would constrain the narrative, forcing all choices in the book to fall into this pattern. This would be at odds with one of the things that makes the book fun: the feeling that the narrative could swerve in any direction, at any time.

Choose Your Own Usability Problem

Another source of pleasure—at least, for me—comes from exploring the structure of the book: the rules and the graph. Although the book sets no explicit goals, the structure affords (and almost demands) inventing goals of your own: to reach every ending, for example, and to reach every page; you might also want to find the shortest path through the book, or the longest one.

When used this way, the book becomes more game-like, and the text functions not just on a literary level: it functions as a mnemonic device for remembering paths you've already traversed, and as a reward for reaching paths you haven't.

Unfortunately, the book makes this use difficult. Each page tells you only where you can go next, not where you might have come from, and no provision is made for keeping track of which paths you've already traversed. (Backtracking of this sort is, in any case, explicitly forbidden by the rules.) You need a nimble mind, nimble fingers, or a bunch of bookmarks to keep track of which nodes in the graph you've visited, and which you have yet to discover.

The lack of meaningful, memorable choices between branches (particularly earlier in the book), combined with the rules and affordances that prevent backtracking, create an annoying experience: you have to start the book over after each reading. You must—almost as a punishment—spend a few minutes fumbling through the first few pages of the book, which you've read countless times before, in order to uncover new content. What should be rewarding (finding new paths through the book) becomes a chore.

Teasing out the differences: Critical responses

So we're left with the conclusion that *Cave of Time* is a synthesis of two elements: it's a set of related narratives that have been subjected to a strange compression algorithm, and it's a game: a game whose primary goal is to creatively traverse nodes on a graph, but whose interface prevents it from reaching its full potential. I've created two text-based pieces that attempt to tease out these elements, so they can be seen working independently.

Every Path Through the Cave of Time is an attempt to strip away from *Cave of Time* all ludic aspects. It consists of fifty-four texts: one for each possible path through the book. The resulting texts emphasize the aforementioned narrative wackiness, but also reveal how each of the stories rely on their cousin stories for context and cohesion. (One

doubts that *Cave of Time* would have launched a best selling series of children's books had it consisted of just one of these texts, rather than *all* of them in a compressed form.)

Cave of Time: The Computer Game, on the other hand, brings in extra elements to make the graph-crawling aspect of the book easier and more rewarding. It keeps track of what paths the player has taken through the book, and rewards points not just for reaching every page and every ending, but also finding the longest and shortest possible paths. Backtracking is both easy (just hit the “backspace” key) and encouraged—indeed, you can't “win” the game without backtracking. Introducing explicit goals and differently valued outcomes adds interest to the experience, but perhaps makes it too easy to ignore the narrative richness of the text.

Conclusions

Cave of Time (along with the other volumes in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series) shows that incorporating ludic, rule-based actions into a narrative isn't at all difficult. On the other hand, it demonstrates that the decision-making process narratives naturally afford (i.e., bifurcating story lines) doesn't lead to the kind of meaningful choice that we expect from a game.

The underlying issue, as is hinted at in the critical responses above, is the mismatch between what the book models and what it *claims* to model. The book purports to be an endless realm of narrative possibilities (“The adventures you take are a result of your choice!”), but, in actuality, the rules are elaborate enough only to model a simple branching graph. *Cave of Time* works best as a hybrid of these two forms—game and narrative—but is a satisfactory exemplar of neither.

The two “critical response” pieces mentioned in this essay can be accessed at the following URL: http://itp.nyu.edu/~ap1607/cave_of_time/.