

An interview with Dave Morris

Dave Morris is the author of some of the best and most appreciated gamebook series ever written, including Golden Dragon, the masterpiece Blood Sword, and the revolutionary Virtual Reality and Fabled Lands. Il Mondo dei Librogames interviewed him to know more about his past works – and his projects for the future.

Except for the scarce author information provided in your books, very little is known about Dave Morris. Would you sketch a short autobiography of yourself?

Like most Englishmen, I am a bit of a mongrel. My maternal grandparents, originally from Dublin, lived in Buckinghamshire where many of my aunts and cousins still reside. My father's family are from Derbyshire – my paternal grandfather was a blacksmith, my maternal grandfather a builder. My father was an engineer. I mention all this because one sometimes looks at lineage and wonders what qualities, preferences, abilities are shaped by the people you came from.

I grew up in suburbia in the mid-1970s. And if you want to know what suburban England is like, see the scene where Harry is waiting for the night bus in *Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban*. But really that's only half the story. There are also fields and woods that I used to play in as a child and which provided fertile soil for an active imagination.

I began playing role-playing games just after I'd left school. I ran a weekly RPG session Oxford University, where I met Min (Mark Smith) and later Oliver Johnson. You asked for autobiographical details, so I'll add that I was at Magdalen College, *alma mater* to Oscar Wilde, T E Lawrence and Dudley Moore, among others. I lived for two years in the New Buildings (built in 1733; the name stuck) and the third year in the best rooms in college, right over the Porter's' Lodge. Apparently Oscar Wilde had once called out from my room to some friends below in the High Street. A group of passing toughs, taking umbrage at Oscar's flamboyant clothes and way of speaking, shouted insults – which he returned. They rushed up to his (and later my) room, intending to beat him up, but Oscar was a boxing blue and the fight went the other way...

Anyway, after leaving university, I published a role-playing game by my old friend Steve Foster called *Mortal Combat* and was invited by Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson to come up with the design for a much more ambitious RPG for Games Workshop to be called *Adventure*. That was their title, not mine. Well, it was finished but by then Games Workshop had the UK *RuneQuest* licence, so they were in no

hurry to set up a rival game. Luckily, my naivety worked in my favour – I'd never got a contract or an advance out of them, so I owned the game and was able to use it later as the basis for the *Dragon Warriors* system.

Just to illustrate how cliquy the whole game scene was at the time: I was introduced by Min to his school friend Jamie Thomson, who soon afterwards got a job at Games Workshop and enticed me back to write for *White Dwarf* magazine. At one point I was doing so many articles for them that I had to use various pseudonyms – Liz Fletcher was one. Also Phil Holmes. Another editor at White Dwarf was Ian Marsh, who lived in the flat above Paul Mason – who wrote several Fighting Fantasy books a few years later and was also in my RPG group. Joe Dever and Gary Chalk, who created the *Lone Wolf* gamebooks, also worked at Games Workshop for a time.

Your books and style show that you're a very educated person, and an avid reader. What are your main interests and readings, and which have been your main inspiration for your own work?

I didn't grow up in a very literary household. I mean "high" literary. We had lots and lots of books – I never had my nose out of a book – but it was textbooks and Ian Fleming novels rather than the Brontës and Tolstoy! In the early days it was storytelling that grabbed me, not the quality of the writing. The first book I remember taking out the library was a volume of Norse mythology that was almost as big as I was. I just buried myself in the darkness and ice and mystery and that's still there, right at the roots of all my thinking: Loki with the serpent spitting poison in his eyes, Odin gouging out an eye and hanging himself on the World Tree to gain knowledge... Great formative stuff for a seven year old!

Other influences early on were Marvel Comics, H G Wells, Bram Stoker, Daleks, the London Planetarium, *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, the Trigan Empire, the landscape of Surrey. My father – an engineer – taught me to see the pattern behind the world. So everything became fuel for my imagination, and I'd say I'm about fifty percent in reality most of the time.

As my literary tastes developed a bit, I became an avid reader with rather narrow interests, at least in fiction. It was all genre stuff, favourite writers being Mike Moorcock (his Burroughs Mars *hommages*), Robert E Howard, H P Lovecraft and Ellery Queen. Strange how tastes change: I still rate Howard as one of the master storytellers, but I doubt if I could wade through a single page of Lovecraft's prose today. At the same time (this is pre-teen we're talking about) I was into philosophy in that slash-&-burn way that children read, finding areas of interest in Plato and Descartes especially. I was amused to see my Wiki entry describes me as having a "poetic writing style" because at the age of 12 I vehemently agreed with Plato that "poets are the enemies of truth".

In mid teens I must have read a lot of utter trash, but I did discover Jack Vance (still one of my favourite writers, and a huge influence) and began to develop the rudiments of literary refinement. At least, I started to see why everybody made such a fuss about Shakespeare. I also began to discover girls – a bit late, as I went to a boys' school – and learned that they tended to read *proper* books and were often quite sniffy about science fiction. So I began to try Nabokov, Hesse, Hardy, Henry James, Graham Greene – and realized there were a lot more interesting questions in fiction than whether you could trust a robot with a positronic brain. It's a double-edged sword, though. I have a much richer appreciation of good literature now, but there are some intriguing stories that I simply cannot read. If the prose is too ugly, the rhythm of the language too blunt, I can't read it. As Virginia Woolf said, "Does the writer have a pen in their hand or a pickaxe?" I probably miss a lot of good stories because of that.

When, and why, did you choose to become a writer? Was it something you had always wanted to be, or did you have other interests that you may have pursued professionally?

At college I studied physics. I was always poised on the cusp between science and writing. I used to do well in English at school, especially writing short stories and essays, and in debates, but I am (or was) very competitive and goal-driven. I just liked solving problems, using mathematics to wrestle abstract ideas until you had an answer that actually applied to the real world.

What pushed me away from science was being at

Oxford, where I enjoyed the whole social scene so much that I gave up the pattern of relentless over-achievement that I'd followed at school. It wasn't a non-stop round of partying, but I didn't really buckle down as I would have had to in order to get a good First. So I got a respectable degree, but not good enough to do research in the field that interested me (subatomic physics) and so I started putting more effort into my literary work.

Games, and especially role-playing games, clearly have had a great influence on your life. How did you discover RPGs, and what did you use to play back in the day?

I was between school and college, so it must have been late 1975. I went into London with some friends to a tiny little shop called Games Centre in Hanway Street. It was hard to find and there was barely room to move inside – it looked like Steve Ditko had drawn it. We found a copy of *Empire of the Petal Throne*, and we clubbed together to buy it. On the train, my friend Nick Henfrey was looking through the box and I remember him saying, "I don't think this is a war game at all. I think you're supposed to play individual characters." That was a revolutionary concept to us. We'd seen the hex-gridded map in the box and we assumed it was some kind of fantasy war game. Anyway, I played one session of *EPT* and realized that I'd been waiting for role-playing my entire life. And that's still what Jamie, Oliver, Min and I play today.

Like many other RPG players you came to develop your own gaming world, Legend. Was it your own creation, or were there other people involved in its development?

It was Oliver and me together, though I should acknowledge the debt we owe to our players. In a role-playing game, everybody contributes to the atmosphere and it's really the atmosphere that makes Legend special.

Your *Dragon Warriors* RPG enjoyed quite a bit of success in the 80s, and it is still fondly remembered today – so much so that it's actually being republished by Mongoose Publishing. What do you think made *Dragon Warriors* different from the rest of similar products?



Empire of the Petal Throne

Atmosphere, as I say. Oliver and I wanted to create a fantasy world that felt really magical. A lot of what interests me about the Middle Ages is the sense that it really was another country. When I see documentaries from India, they often focus on that sense that the otherworld pervades this one. Primary sources from the Middle Ages often convey a similar sense. So we just packaged up Europe's Middle Ages as a fantasy world, and that – literally – is what Legend is: the dream of Old Europe.

The original publishing format of Dragon Warriors – six small gamebook-size volumes instead of the usual large-size manual – was very peculiar. Why was it decided to publish it in such an unusual format?

Most RPGs at the time were very expensive, and you could only buy them in specialist game stores. By opting for a paperback format, we could get wide distribution in book stores and keep the price down. You could buy the whole DW series for £10.50 at a time when a single D&D book was costing between £15 and £25.

What prompted you to start writing solo adventures, and which was your first published adventure?

It was actually *Castle of Lost Souls* in White Dwarf, and I only wrote it because I was mooching around the Games Workshop office and Ian Livingstone asked if I'd write them a solo adventure. Then Oliver and I were asked to write a Fighting Fantasy book, and almost the same week I got a call from Granada Books. It was a bandwagon at the time; all the game designers I knew were signing up to do gamebook series.

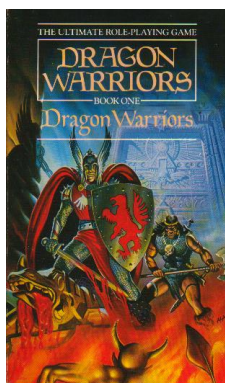
Golden Dragon was your first proper gamebook series. Why exactly was it called "Golden Dragon"?

The imprint of Granada (later Grafton) who published those books was called Dragon Books. By coincidence, I had a soft spot for them because Dragon had published the Edgar Rice Burroughs Barsoom books (*Princess of Mars*, etc) that I read as a kid. I mentioned that and Angela Sheehan, who ran the imprint, said, "Let's put Dragon in the series title." (Not the same reason that Dragon Warriors got its name – I think that was Oliver's idea.)

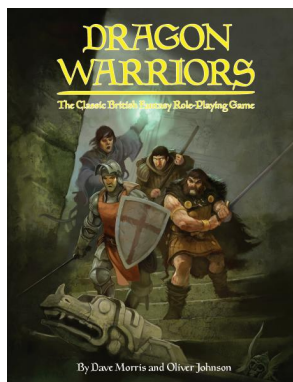
Golden Dragon shows many similarities to the Fighting Fantasy series, except for fewer paragraphs and an effectively simplified combat system that doesn't rely on player stats. Was it your intention to improve upon the FF system? Did Jackson and Livingstone's series have any influence on your work?

They influenced me in that I would never have written any gamebooks if not for them! But no, I don't think the FF books influenced my writing much. Although I did admire Ian's simplicity of language. One of my shortcomings is I never use one short word when a dozen fifty-buck words will do...

They were shorter because the publisher, Angela Sheehan, just decided on a whim that the FF books were a little too long. I can't remember whether the Golden Dragon books were cheaper as a result. After we'd finished six books, I proposed doing a new series of connected gamebooks set in a new fantasy world – less Tolkien/D&D, more the kind of science fantasy that Burroughs, Howard and Vance went in for. That series would have been called Black Dragon, but the new editor there, Adrian Sington, wasn't into gamebooks and I remember him saying, "Oh, I don't see any need for us to do any more of these things." Probably a mistake from their point of view, as the revenue from six more gamebooks would have paid his salary for the next few years!



Dragon Warriors, original edition



Dragon Warriors, Mongoose reissue

Golden Dragon is still heavily based on the so-called "true path" through the adventure, especially *The Eye of the Dragon*, where even spells are actually to be used like items, at the right moment and in the right place. What do you think of this particular way of structuring a gamebook? Do you think it was a necessity in the early days of the genre, or just an easier way to plan the adventure?

A lot of people talk about the need for a gamebook to have replay value, but why? The real point is that it needs to be enjoyable. Better to have one path and make it really gripping than to have a bunch of mediocre threads. So even if you look at a much later book like *Heart of Ice* – well, there you've got two main routes to get to Du-En, but once you're in the city there's a single main path. You can play it all kinds of ways with different alliances (thank heaven for codewords) so your choices make a difference, but the actual flowchart still follows a single main thread. Obviously we couldn't do that with Fabled Lands, where the point

of the books was that there wasn't a narrative thread. It was supposed to feel like an RPG where you can do whatever you like.

Golden Dragon also clearly shows your literary ambitions. The delayed plot explanation in *Crypt of the Vampire*, and the spectacular prologue to *The Temple of Flame* (the latter is so good that you used it again, slightly modified, in *Down Among the Dead Men*), are a display of storytelling skills that very few gamebook authors ever aspired to. Was it clear to you then that a gamebook is different from a set of instructions provided by a dungeon master? Do you think that gamebooks can be not only good games, but good books as well?

I often use that thing of a character waking up from a dream – *Necklace of Skulls* does it too, albeit in a “last night I dreamt of Manderley” style where you know from the start it's a dream. I aim for the same kind of narrative when I'm running a role-playing session – though incidentally I don't like the term dungeon master or game master, to my mind you are a referee or umpire. The players together are constructing a story, and you are guiding them and making the experience come to life. You mustn't just jump them through story hoops.

But, addressing your point, I do believe gamebooks can be literature. The best examples of the medium are a lot more worthwhile than a James Patterson thriller, for example. I don't necessarily mean more enjoyable – I've been stuck in airports with a James Patterson book, and they while away a couple of hours painlessly enough. But gamebooks can be thought-provoking. A gamebook can explore interesting ideas in real depth.

***Blood Sword* is one of the most ambitious and peculiar gamebook series ever written. How did you come up with the idea, and how did Oliver Johnson contribute to it?**

Peculiar? That's a great description – I'd like it on my tombstone! Oliver and I fire each other's imaginations. So although I don't recall the exact circumstances, I'm willing to bet we sat down with a bottle of wine and just declaimed ideas and bits of storyline at each other. If you watched us doing this, it would look like a duel. We both have a bit of the mad Celtic bard in us, I think. That's also why I used the poem by W B Yeats in the *Chronicles of the Magi* novels, which were based on *Blood Sword*. Yeats's poem certainly inspired us, and we also drew on an RPG campaign Oliver had run back in Oxford, which

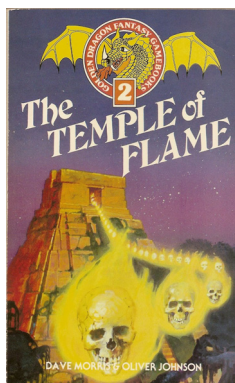
in turn was inspired by Russell Hoban's novel *Riddley Walker*. Nothing's ever lost.

Albeit being set in the world of *Legend*, *Blood Sword* uses very different rules from *Dragon Warriors*. Why did you decide to create a brand-new game system?

It was a different publisher. So, although we owned the rights in *Legend*, we felt that reusing the rules from DW in a rival publisher's books wouldn't be cricket.

The opportunity to play the same adventure with one to four different characters is certainly the most intriguing and innovative idea in *Blood Sword*. How difficult was it to balance each adventure for each character? Do you think that the whole series can be completed by each character alone, or did you and Mr. Johnson make things so as to favour and encourage team play?

I hope any character type can complete them solo, but it's impossible to get a perfect balance. I was playing a CRPG a while back, *Titan Quest*, and I was finding it fairly hard going with just a single warrior character. I wanted to try it that way with all the experience going to improve just the one character. Then a friend of mine (it was Jamie Thomson, actually) tried it with a team – a sorcerer, swordsman, archer. And he said it was much easier.



Golden Dragon, book 2: The Temple of Flame

Each *Blood Sword* book has a “best path” through it, which makes things considerably easier for any combination of characters. Did you mean the series to be completed finding such a path in each book, or did you consciously allow for some flexibility?

Despite what I said about replayability not being that essential in a good gamebook, the *Blood Sword* books probably can be played several times and you'll have different experiences each time. I wouldn't like somebody to play it two or three times and have 90% the same experience each time!

***The Battlepits of Krarth* is a very peculiar way to introduce the series, being only marginally related to the series' main plot. Did you plan it like that to stay true to what you wrote in *Dragon Warriors*, that “an underworld adventure is best to start with, because its structured format makes it easy for the GM to handle”? Was the book in any way**

inspired by Ian Livingstone's popular *Deathtrap Dungeon*?

There were quite a few of those "last man standing" scenarios in RPGs of the late '70s, a trend started by the US Steve Jackson with his *Death Test* packs. I expect that's where Ian got the idea for *Deathtrap Dungeon* and it must have been in our minds too. But mainly we wanted a standalone adventure to introduce the series and the game mechanics (those pesky tactical maps) before we got into the real quest. I'm sure we never made any choice because we thought it would be popular! I've always written just to please myself and the readers I imagine are into the same things as me.

***The Demon's Claw* is probably the most significant book in the Blood Sword series. Not only it provides a staggering gaming experience, but it's very rich in Arabian philosophy and lore (the "gift of possibilities" dialogue is especially striking). What's even more surprising is that the book features challenges which can only be possibly beaten through cheating, yet you're never reprimanded for it, like you are instead in other gamebooks. What did you want to achieve with such a complex, and rather experimental book like this? Did you explicitly want it to be more than just your average gamebook?**

Most definitely. I had just read Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare*, and a sort of fusion of Irwin's work and Calvino's led me to want to do a gamebook that took you right into the "knot of storytelling" rather than being an exercise in gameplay, which was what I'd been doing up until then. I felt like I was still on a roll with *Doomwalk*, but the difficult birth of *Walls of Spyte* (there was a bit of a break between books 4 and 5 for some reason, and originally Oliver was supposed to write it on his own) meant that got lost a bit at the end.

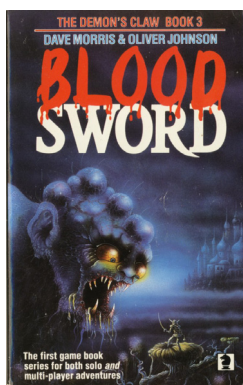
***The Demon's Claw* also introduces the use of codewords in gamebooks. This is a very effective anti-cheating device, and it also works very much like a string of code in a computer game in differentiating outcomes according to what you did before. Did you realize the full efficacy of codewords at the time?**

It wasn't so much to prevent cheating. Like I said elsewhere, if people want to cheat in a solo game, who are they hurting after all? It was lifted from the flags used in computer text adventures at the time. It was very powerful for remembering whole chunks of

prior actions. I got to the point where I had a subliminal bug-checker running in the back of my mind. I'd plot out twenty or thirty paragraphs, then I'd go to the gym and I'd be in the middle of a workout and I'd suddenly think, "Oh, there's a broken link between 27 and 30" or "I need a new codeword in 45" or whatever. I bet Plato did a lot of his best thinking the same way.

***Doomwalk* is an impressive melting pot of afterlife representations from very different cultures. Clearly a big inspiration comes from Dante's *Inferno*, which you also quoted in *Heart of Ice*. How well do you know Dante's work, and what is your personal opinion of it?**

I have *The Divine Comedy* within reach of my desk. I put him beside Milton as great poets who explore the imaginative journey that nowadays is the province of the best science fiction writers. By that I mean the SF writers who are interested in getting right to the core of big moral, spiritual and philosophical themes.



*Blood Sword, book 3:
The Demon's Claw*

***The Walls of Spyte* offers a rather different gaming experience than the rest of the series, being more heavily combat-driven and, on the whole, much more difficult. Is this due to Jamie Thomson's collaboration? Why was Mr. Thomson called to join the team for the final Blood Sword book, and what was his role in its planning and writing?**

Oliver was supposed to write that one. He plotted the whole thing on a big piece of paper, but then he had some other work commitment and I was busy on whatever book I did next, so Jamie stepped in to help. I think the first part outside *Spyte* was mostly written by Oliver. Then Jamie did the middle third or so, and I did the finale – the whole twist with *Blue Moon* using your own imagination to remain in the world, that stuff.

Probably for the first time in gamebook history, *Blood Sword* hints to the concept of a moral alignment of your characters. You can decide to play it good or evil; you can help people at your own expense, or turn them off, or even steal from them, be they rich or poor. Anyway, your actions are not judged in game terms, i.e. being good is not always remunerative, and being bad isn't necessarily a free ticket to punishment. This grants the reader an exceptional freedom of behaviour, and contributes greatly to identification with your character(s). Again, this is particularly evident in *The Demon's Claw*. When, and why, did you decide to integrate such an

important RPG element in gamebooks as well?

I remember talking to Joe Dever and he said he'd included a "moral element" in the latest Lone Wolf book. If you failed to rescue some kids from slavery, two or three paragraphs later you were attacked by an unkillable demon. And I was saying, "That's not morality – that's just economics! Morality is personal. If you're swayed by the awareness of punishment then you can't say it's a moral choice." So I decided to integrate that idea into the Blood Sword series – particularly fitting because the series dealt with these guys, the Magi, who had let their quest for power and survival override everything else. Selfishness and a lack of empathy, that's what constitutes "evil" for me. And the series of course culminated in the end of the world – but for once you weren't able to (or even trying to) prevent it. The end of the world was the whole point of creation.

Incidentally we played that same moment in a friend's Legend campaign recently. We were all characters on a pilgrimage in search of redemption, and he took us to a lost chapel in the forest. It was New Year's Eve of the year 1000 and there the world ended. Not with a bang, either. Unusual in role-playing. It was strangely affecting.

Blood Sword is a much loved and sought-after series. However, as of today, availability is very scarce, especially for the English edition. Can you give an estimate of the series' sales and success at the time of publication? Are there any chances to see it in print again?

I don't recall the sales figures, but it was right in the heyday of gamebooks and there were several translations, so it must have been pretty successful. I would love to see it in print again – not least because I could do away with the little tactical maps, a feature that we had to put in because the publishers wanted something to differentiate them from Fighting Fantasy. I would have thought just having decent stories with well-rounded characters was enough of an innovative feature!

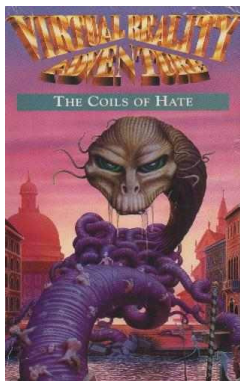
Dice rolling is a lot of fun in pen-and-paper RPGs, being only one way of interacting with the game world. Unfortunately, it can become tedious between the bounds of a solo-player adventure, especially when it is heavily abused like it was in later Fighting Fantasy titles. Enter the *Virtual Reality* series, featuring only one page of rules, and no role for luck whatsoever! The series' formula is apparently a step back to a simpler gamebook format like that of *Choose Your Own Adventure*,

but at the same time it's a great improvement in terms of freedom and easiness of play. How was the idea behind this series conceived, and what did you aim to do with it in terms of narrative and gameplay?

Even in the Blood Sword books, I was encouraging readers to ignore the dice if they felt like it. But the totally diceless approach actually came about because Min and I were thinking of people playing the books on a train or a bus, where it's not convenient to throw dice. And we're both very interested in the narrative more than the strict mechanics of the game – probably because of our background in role-playing. So we thought we'd try something that you could read like a novel, only with choices.

Virtual Reality came pretty late in the life cycle of the gamebook phenomenon. Was it difficult to get it published? How much success did it achieve in terms of sales and readers' appreciation?

It was a bit late. We must have done okay, because the publishers commissioned two more books after the first four, and there's yet another book in the series by Min that was never published. Probably if we'd done that series a few years earlier, it would have been the most successful thing either of us worked on. It wasn't too difficult to sell, though. Min is a very persuasive salesman, and we had two or three publishers interested in the series.



*Virtual Reality, book 3:
The Coils of Hate*

The involvement of Mark Smith in Virtual Reality is quite peculiar, the series being the only gamebook collaboration between you and Mr. Smith. How did he contribute to the series' creation, and what do you think of the way he used the series' format? Do you care to express an opinion on his two books?

It's interesting because people always want to put labels on you – "Oh, X is the creative one and Y is the rules designer," that kind of thing. When Min and I were talking to publishers about VR, he'd put on a suit and I'd go in dressed in my usual "writer's uniform" of jeans and open-necked shirt. So publishers would say, "Min's the business guy, Dave's the writer" but in fact we were both fully involved in the design of the series, the selling of it, and the writing.

If I'm going to draw a distinction, I'd say that Min's two books in the series are more like novels. *Coils of Hate* in particular deals with a serious theme (racial intolerance) and the writing and characterization are as good as you would find in many fantasy novels. Min is less concerned with the gameplay. So you

wouldn't necessarily be able to complete one of his books with any random combination of skills, whereas I always tried to make sure that was possible.

My books in that series deal with some serious themes too, of course. But I like to provoke speculation, whereas the issues Min covered (environment and race) are the kind that demand unequivocal answers. And I thought his beautiful prose and finely-drawn character sketches (especially Lucie and Caiaphas in *Coils of Hate*) would give his books the edge purely as novels. Min's family escaped from the Nazis and I think you can tell that *Coils of Hate* was one from the heart.

***Down Among the Dead Men* is an extraordinary gamebook. Although you've often used the theme of sea travel in your gamebooks, you had never before given it an explicit pirate twist like in this one. Seeing that the title of the book was anticipated in *The Keep of the Lich-Lord* (in the name of an inn!), how long did you entertain with the idea of such a story before finally getting to write it?**

Like most of my ideas, it was probably ticking away in my subconscious for years. Some of these ideas get a first outing in my role-playing sessions, then they get packed away to get worked on by "the boys in the basement" as Stephen King puts it. Then one day the full-blown concept springs back into my conscious mind, I thank the hidden side of me for doing all the hard work, and I get on and write a book!

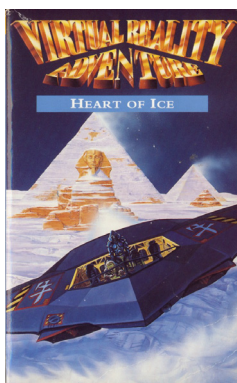
***Heart of Ice* is arguably the most mature gamebook ever written. The plot is superb, character design and development is among the finest ever seen, the atmosphere is perfect and the multiple endings mean that if you survive to the end, you can always "win" – if you can call a victory any of the ambiguous, bittersweet finales! *Heart of Ice* is a story full of deeper meanings, and it is so good that it may even have inspired a movie, called *Post Impact*. What inspired you to write such an original and mature story in gamebook format? Is there some particular message you wanted to convey to your readers?**

I'm not so much into trying to give my readers messages, I just have certain topics that interest me and I like to get readers thinking about them. Questions, not answers. *Heart of Ice* was another one that got started as a role-playing session – I can pinpoint it exactly to Christmas 1976, I was back

home after my first term at college and I needed a scenario for a large number of players. Believe it or not, I started with the idea of doing a serious version of *It's A Mad Mad Mad Mad World*, kind of the way *Failsafe Point* is like a serious version of *Dr Strangelove*. The idea of Du-En came from marvelling at the buildings of Christ Church, absolutely deserted late on a frosty night after the end of term, with the buildings lit up pale against this immense field of stars.

After the first game session, I was walking home with one of the players and he said how he was imagining Du-En as a movie, and what he liked was that the focus of the session had been in the tension among the characters camped out in this ruined, snow-filled city. So a mere 18 years later it became a book, and – maybe you're right – ten years after that a movie. Starring Superman, no less! I haven't seen *Post Impact*, mind you, so I have no idea how similar it is to the book.

Even more so than *The Demon's Claw*, *Twist of Fate* is a great, passionate homage to the *Arabian Nights*, with a lovely ending that perfectly sums up the essence of role-playing. How much do you owe to Arabian myths and tales?



*Virtual Reality, book 5:
Heart of Ice*

The Arabian myths one of my "Hippocrene sources" that I return to again and again for inspiration. I have the complete Mardrus and Mathers translation, Burton's translation, the Dulac illustrated editions. A bunch of movies, from Michael Powell to Steve Barron. All the *Prince of Persia* games. And the boardgame by Eric Goldberg, of course! That's just the Thousand and One Nights – I also have stacks of Arabian folktales, the Rubaiyat, all kinds of Arabic material. What it means to me is perhaps best

expressed in the *Sandman* story "Ramadan" – it's more than a historical period, it's a conduit to a place of the imagination. Of course, I'm hardly the first British writer to fall in love with Arabian culture...

Quite the opposite of *Virtual Reality*, *Fabled Lands* is possibly the most sophisticated gamebook series ever conceived. Why did you and Mr. Thomson decide to develop such a titanic project, and why did it come so late in the 90s, when the gamebook era was practically over? What was the reason behind the series being cancelled halfway through?

It was pricing. Jamie and I were well aware the gamebook market was shrinking, but we felt that a discerning hardcore would make a series like that viable. We wanted to deliver an open-ended

experience (what would nowadays perhaps be called a “sandbox” RPG) and we thought the people who wanted that would pay £7.99. The publishers insisted on starting the series at £4.99. If they had increased the price after book two, we would have been a success and we could have gone on to complete the series. But for some reason they stuck at the low price. Considering the amount of material in each book, I think the higher price would not have lost us many readers. We sold about 10,000 units of each in the UK, I think – it may have been more. At £7.99 that would have worked.

The incompleteness of Fabled Lands is one of the greatest disappointments for gamebooks fans, so much so that some readers have been planning for some time to write the missing books themselves.

Can we hope to see the series completed one day or another? Did you plan some kind of ending or greatest achievement for players, or did you just want readers to be able to complete every quest and just keep playing until they had nothing more to find?

I think one of the other books has been written by somebody on the FL Yahoo group. Rather than returning to them as gamebooks, I’d prefer to see a Fabled Lands role-playing game so that readers could continue adventuring in that world forever. That’s why I didn’t really want there to be a single “save the universe” quest in there. It was supposed to be a series of books that you could play through, and in doing so you’d create your character’s life history. Like role-playing.

Jamie has written part of a Fabled Lands novel. It’s good – it’s funny, fast-paced, sort of a Spiderwick target age group, so younger than the gamebooks but that might be a way to bring it back now.

It is very interesting to see your name as the author of one – and just one – book in the long-running Fighting Fantasy series, along with Jamie Thomson. What is the story behind this book? What do you think of Fighting Fantasy in general, and what is your opinion on your own contribution to the series?

If anybody wants “the collected works of Dave Morris” then I’d say they shouldn’t worry too much if they’re missing *Keep of the Lich Lord*! It was okay, but it didn’t feel very personal to me. It doesn’t have any of the depth of backstory – the ur-text, I mean –

that I normally create for my books and that I hope percolates through in the finished product.

Oliver and I were originally signed up among the first authors on the Fighting Fantasy series. If you look in early copies of the FF and Sorcery books, you’ll see that *Lord of Shadow Keep* was going to be the eighth or ninth in the FF series, something like that. Then

Oliver and I met with Angela Sheehan, our editor on the Golden Dragon series. We all went to a pub after the meeting and I left them to it, and next morning Oliver rang me, hung over, to say that he’d talked Angela into signing us to four more books. Just to meet the deadlines, Oliver then pulled *Shadow Keep* from Puffin – but originally that was supposed to be by both of us, and it would have been a Fighting Fantasy book.

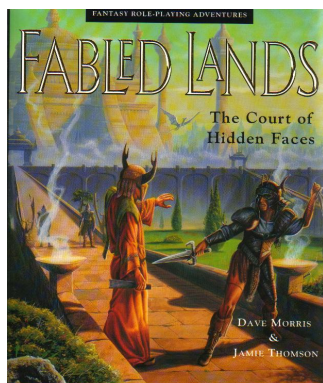
I’m not a great fan of Fighting Fantasy. It’s not my taste in fantasy at all, that “guild of thieves” type thing with dwarves and elves propping up the tavern bar. In fact it really turns me off big-time. That said, I’m enormously appreciative of what Ian and Steve did. They created a whole industry that let a lot of us do some work we’re very proud of. So I don’t care for the FF books myself, but I’m glad they did them.

Some of your gamebooks were tie-ins based on TV shows like *The Transformers* and *Knightmare*, or on board games like *HeroQuest*. Some of them even include novellas to accompany the interactive adventure. Were those books commissioned to you, or did you propose to write them? In retrospect, do you think they were interesting books, both to write and to read?

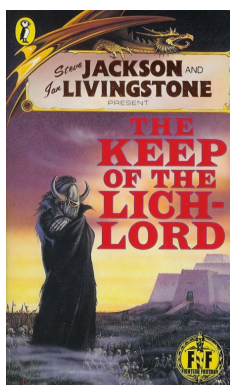
The novella parts were interesting. Sometimes frustrating too, especially the *HeroQuest* ones, because of course I was dealing with somebody else’s property and the Hasbro executive had a lot of ideas about how the story should go. All I’d better say is that probably he would have gained just as much benefit from my ideas about how to market toys. But overall I’m quite happy with those books. The second *Knightmare* novella had a lot of my little shticks in there – the blurring between

dream and reality, the bittersweet ending. And in all of them I got to make magic feel like something a bit eerier and more awe-inspiring than the usual D&D fireball-bazooka effect.

The gamebook parts of the *Knightmare* books were mostly too short to do anything very interesting –



Book 5 in the Fabled Lands series



The one Fighting Fantasy book by Dave Morris

although actually, come to think of it, I rather enjoyed writing the gamebook sections in *HeroQuest*, especially books 1 and 2. There were some little touches that I thought were quite good. (This btw is often a sign that the writer is actually doing his worst work...)

Most gamebook authors found a good formula and stuck with it in all their works, barely modifying rules in different series and projects. You, instead, have always proposed something totally new and different every time you created a new gamebook series. Did you take it as a personal challenge to always create something new? Differentiating your works so much from one another was important to you, as a way of experimenting with new ideas? Or did you just want your readers to never risk getting bored with your books?

I don't want to bore myself! As a purely commercial calculation, trotting out the same formula every time is more likely to be successful. That way readers always know what they're getting. You see the same thing with the Jackson & Livingstone books. Steve was always experimenting with new settings, new game mechanics. Ian stuck to the basic D&D fantasy world, never played about with the gameplay, and I'd guess he sold about twice as many books. My feeling, though, is that I'm spending a good chunk of my life inside my head, so the idea of doing several dozen Golden Dragon Gamebooks – no matter what they paid me, it wouldn't have been enough.



Dave Morris, 1993

Who are the people you best worked with as a gamebook author? Are you still in contact with some of them?

Gamebooks were always a little clique. Everybody knew everybody and used to hang out. I see Oliver and Jamie Thomson and Min Smith all the time. We get together at least once a month for role-playing games. Jamie is a very close friend of mine and we have a small company called Fabled Lands LLP that develops cross-media properties.

Oliver Johnson is one of my oldest and dearest friends. He's a very talented writer and I really hope that his latest novel *The Knight of the Fields* finds a publisher. It's what fantasy should be about. Most fantasy books bore me because they're just our world

with a tiny tweak. Well, if you can tell a story without magic then I think you should, just the same way that science fiction stories should not just be westerns in space or whatever. Bob Shaw and Ursula LeGuin have both expounded at length on this theme, so I'll leave it there. Anyway, Oliver's new novel describes a world that is fantastic right through to its core. The effect of that is – like the best Gothic literature – to take the reader on a journey back into some almost-forgotten dreamtime of our childhood. It fulfils the requirement of great literature: after reading it you are not the same person you were before.

Paul Mason (who now publishes *Heart of Ice*) is also a good friend. We never actually worked together, though. I don't see him nearly as often as I'd like because he lives in Japan, though he came over to stay with us in the UK last summer. He's just finished an excellent whodunit set in medieval China which will hopefully become a series.

Your gamebooks were illustrated by extraordinarily talented artists such as Leo Hartas, Russ Nicholson, and Bob Harvey. Did you have a good experience working with them? What opinion do you have of their work?

I love Russ Nicholson's stuff – I own some originals – and I feel he's unfairly neglected these days. Russ has a very inventive mind and he's by no means "just" an illustrator. He would often come up with ideas for the FL gamebooks –

the walking cities of the Uttakin, for instance, and that was ten years before *Mortal Engines* ☺

I'm godfather to Leo's youngest son, Inigo, and Leo and I are working on a comic strip called Mirabilis (www.mirabilis-yearofwonders.com) that is running in Random House's weekly comic The DFC.

What do you think is the best way to structure a gamebook? How many possible paths to victory should there be? What about the role of chance: how much should your success depend on a dice roll? Some gamebooks have an estimated success rate of less than 10%, regardless of starting conditions: what chance should you have to complete an adventure when you've learned the path to victory? And about combat: how much is too much?

Ideally a gamebook should be completed at the first attempt. Any time you kill a character, as the writer

you've failed. I prefer to let players make mistakes that sidetrack them, and chip away at their hit points, rather than taking them straight to a death paragraph. It's the same in a computer game – if I get killed and have to start again, it just annoys me.

Combat is too much any time that it just feels like a wandering monster. You know, you're in the vampire's castle and three skeletons attack you. Yawn. But if you found a stack of boxes in his wife's bedroom, and they turn out to be his wife and a bunch of ghostly little vampire babies... Then that would be more interesting, worth having in the book.

And I really don't like the idea of a player failing because of unlucky dice rolls. I think they would be justified in cheating in that case. I certainly wouldn't put in a section to kill off players who cheated, as Ian and Steve did a couple of times in FF. If you want to fudge the dice rolls, why not? You bought the book, it's up to you.

Is there one of your gamebooks that you like best?

It's got to be *Heart of Ice* – by a very long margin. It was almost exactly what I wanted it to be. If only it could have been a bit longer, though. I ran out of time and space there at the end. No work of art is ever finished, only abandoned.

I think *Down Among the Dead Men* ain't too shabby either. And *Twist of Fate* but I really wish I could have come up with a better title. I was looking for a line in FitzGerald's translation of Omar Khayyam, but *Noose of Light* and *The Sultan's Turret* had recently come out as novels so it would have looked like I was copying them.

The Demon's Claw and *Doomwalk* felt like quite a high point – you see, I like most of my own books! And I have a soft spot for *Necklace of Skulls* because it's set in Mexico and Guatemala, and I wrote it right after getting back from there on honeymoon. We climbed almost every Maya pyramid they had.

Back in the day, did you read other authors' gamebooks? If you did, what did you think of them? Did any of them leave an impression on you, or inspire you to do something similar?

I guess not. I read some of them. I quite enjoyed the *Duelmaster* books that Jamie and Min did, and the books Paul Mason wrote for the FF series, but even they weren't really much of an influence. I think the things that interested me about the whole gamebook medium were not what the other gamebook writers

were doing at all. What influenced me more was talking over ideas with those guys in person. Most of them used to play in the role-playing sessions I ran, after all – Jamie, Oliver, Min and Paul.

The best-selling gamebook series have enjoyed a sort of renaissance in the last few years, with *Fighting Fantasy* first and then *Lone Wolf* getting back in print. Do you think there is still room for gamebooks in the 21st century? Can they really stir love in a brand-new audience, or are the reprints just a nostalgia operation for people who grew up with them twenty years ago?

They're competing with computer games now. Although my godson and his brother occasionally play my old gamebooks, they get more excited by *God of War* and *World of Warcraft*. It's not just gamebooks that have tailed off – novels don't sell like they used to either.



Leo Hartas with some of his works

Your gamebooks are just the work of a great storyteller with a seemingly endless fantasy, or you also enjoy travelling and adventuring all over the world in real life?

I used to travel a lot – the Far East, North and Central America, Egypt, western Europe. Not so much nowadays as I don't get the time. I like to go and immerse myself in a place; a few weeks won't do.

There are references to Italian places and culture in some of your gamebooks. Have you actually been to Italy? If yes, how do you like the country? Are there any works by Italian authors that you know and like, apart from Dante's?

One of my major influences – and this is not a writer, but an author in the wider sense – is Sergio Leone. I mentioned before that I'd had an idea in my mind of *Heart of Ice* as a movie. Well, it would have been a Leone movie. It's that combination of operatic/mythic significance with ordinary messy human life – the fly walking in the sweat of a man's face. Leone's films are all about how the stories we construct make sense of what would otherwise be a short, senseless existence.

And on the subject of constructed narratives and how they shape our lives, two of my favourite authors are Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino. I think you can see Calvino's influence right through *Blood Sword*, especially. *Castle of Crossed Destinies* was one of the books that set me on the path to being a writer with the specific obsessions I seem to have. And Calvino's

book of Italian Folktales suggests he shares my interest in the through-line from ancient oral-formulaic stories to modern narratives.

I am also – and here’s something from left field – a fan of the Don Camillio stories. I got into these at school, where I was in charge of the library and I found we had a whole set of English translations. I can’t exactly tell you why. I suppose it’s partly because the village, like Deadwood in the TV show, stands for the whole world. I like that kind of conceit, reducing big abstract ideas to specific situations. It’s the essence of storytelling, I guess. But also I just like the relationship and the implied backstory of Don Camillo and Peppone. Once you care about a writer’s characters, he or she can lead you anywhere – another important lesson!

I haven’t visited Italy in person but I would love to. I have my eye on a Palladian villa near Padua as venue for my birthday party next year – if my work schedule permits, it would be great to then take some time and travel around the whole country. I have a project that’s been taking shape for a couple of years – it involves Da Vinci, sort of – and I’d really like the opportunity to soak up the culture and the landscape.

Did you also write non-game books during the 80s and early 90s? What were they about, and what kind of reader were they aimed at?

I’ve written all sorts of stuff. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles books. Stingray, Thunderbirds, etc – not such a sell-out as you might think, as I loved those Gerry Anderson shows when I was growing up. When my godson went to see the *Thunderbirds Are Go* movie (the re-released 1966 movie, that is) I said to him, “I saw that movie when I was about your age.” And he was baffled – he thought I’d gone senile. He was saying, “Dave, it only came out last month.” But it was same movie, and there he was getting inspiration and enjoyment from the same things I did.

And I’ve written horror stories, movie novelizations. Even a teen vampire romance novel. That last is the one book of mine that was never published – not because it was rejected, but because the publisher decided not to continue the series. Actually, hang on – that wasn’t the only one. I also did two novellas to tie in with the C.O.P.S. animated TV show, and that never went ahead because the show didn’t get broadcast in the UK. I’ve written so much that sometimes I forget these things...

I also wrote a big doorstop of a book on computer game design, and several books about videogame art and design.

What have you been doing since 1996, when the last of your gamebooks were published? Are you still in the games business, or do you just write about games?

I’m not currently doing any game-related work – but see below.

What do you think of video games? Do you play them? Have you ever considered collaborating to the video games industry?

I spent just over ten years in the videogame industry, having been lured in by Ian Livingstone, who was



Dave Morris as Reason, 1992

chairman of Eidos at the time. I designed a game called Warrior Kings that was a top 10 seller in the UK. After Eidos, I co-founded a game development company called Black Cactus, consulted for a whole bunch of publishers, and spent a year at Elixir Studios working on an interesting story-&-character based game for Microsoft – who, unfortunately, wanted a game more like The Sims so we got canned. When Elixir folded as a result of that, I decided I’d had enough of the videogames industry. A few weeks later, David Fickling started planning his comic (www.thedfc.co.uk) so I jumped at the chance to work on something for that.

What are your current projects? Can you reveal anything?

I mentioned Mirabilis. Leo and I dreamed it up about twelve years ago but it’s taken us this long to find the right form in which to do – and to sign up with a publisher, David Fickling, who really understands and believes in it. Leo is illustrating and it’s colored by the very talented Nikos Koutsis. Between them, they are working some amazing visual magic. It’s a huge adventure with an epic sweep (planned to be around 280 pages) that travels the entire year and spans the globe.

The story takes place in a lost year forgotten by history, “sometime between Victorian and Edwardian times”. Jack Ember, a poor young army officer, is sent to investigate strange happenings by the eccentric boffins of the Mythological Society. A green comet has appeared in the sky and, as it gets

bigger, the barrier between imagination and reality starts to dissolve and fantastic things weave themselves into everyday life. Jack's mission takes him across the world to find adventure, danger, friends and foes. Along the way he meets Estelle Meadowvane, the beautiful young amateur astronomer who discovered the green comet – and in this one year when the impossible has become possible, despite the barriers of class and wealth that separate them, maybe Jack and Estelle will even find love. I say maybe because I'm writing this like Dickens – an episode at a time. So I don't know exactly where the story is going to end up.

In theory *Mirabilis* is for kids (or young adults at any rate, that term usually denoting anyone of 11 to 14 or so) but in the same way that Harry Potter or *Dark Materials* are for kids – that is, really, as long as there's still part of

your imagination that has a childlike sense of wonder, I'm hoping you'll like it at any age. I'm a massive, insatiable comics fan – Moore, Ditko, Gaiman, Mignola, these are names that set my pulse racing. My wife's right, I'm such a geek.



A recent photo of Dave Morris

What plans do you have for the future?

I'd like to do more comics. It's a new medium for me to be working in, but it's one I've always loved and what I'm able to do with it feels very fresh – to me, anyway. As a writer, you always want to keep moving forward, stretching yourself, getting better. Or if not better, then at least different.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Thank you. We write in order to reach out to others' minds. I'm gratified and honoured to know that my work has been appreciated so much.