Game Theory

by Owen Rees

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Word Count: 225,167
You step onto the train, the carriage doors closing behind you. You’re breathing hard, having run to catch it. You look for somewhere to sit; but all the seats are taken; instead, you grab the rail above you and lean your shoulder against the carriage door. As you do, the train jolts forward, bumping off towards the city.

You look around the carriage. The other passengers are the usual mixture— you’re already late for work, so there are commuters of the more casual kind, students, a few older people and half a dozen tourists. The usual mixture— including the one standard deviation from the mean: that passenger whom, if not for themselves then for the reaction they inspire, stands out from the rest. At the far end, stood by the door to the next carriage, a sanitary cordon of seats surrounding him is yours, a strange, bearded man.

Your train starts to slow. It’s reached the points outside the next station, one of those places where trains stop and queue to a secret order of their own, for their turn to roll onward to the platform. You wait for quite a while, wishing that in the rush, you had remembered to pick up a book or newspaper. For distraction, you pick stories from the foliage of upheld newspapers and check the other passengers for the attractive or interestingly unattractive. Eventually, your eyes are drawn to the end of the carriage, to the man by the door. He is
preoccupied, his lips moving in an incessant but inaudible monologue. You decide not to stare too closely.

Time passes. Minute after tick-tock minute, each minute another minute you will spend again at work later, making up the time lost on the train. You sense an apologetic announcement arriving in the train driver’s throat. Then, unannounced, to everyone’s relief, the train moves. One passenger is not relieved, however: the man by the door grows agitated. Pacing back and forth across the carriage, alternately thumping and groping the air, he rants, enraged by something.

You don’t mind that. It’s funny, if anything: the train speeding you to work and this man forming an amusing story for when you get there. What’s he going to do next, you wonder, hoping his garments get rended? He answers your question by smashing the Emergency button, bringing you to an instant stop.

The alarm sounds, shrill and insistent. You steady yourself and look around the carriage. No one appears to be injured, and your first instinct is one of relief. Whatever caused the stop, whatever wounded animal or chicken-playing
teenager, is presumably saved. The sentiment is a general one, though there is one passenger who doesn’t share it: the strange man who pressed the alarm.

Watching him, silenced by the alarm but unstopped by it, dissipates your feeling of relief. Watching this mumbling, bearded, shoeless idiot makes you realise that there was no emergency, unless there is such thing as a psychological emergency. No, a strange man has trapped you on a train carriage with him. Your second instinct, then, is to march up the aisle and demand to know what made him commit such an outrage. But that idea makes you uneasy, even fearful: why has this strange man trapped you on the train? How sinister are his intentions? You reassure yourself that he has no knife or gun or bulky backpack, and that there is no danger of him pulling the bomb in the shoe trick, given he has no shoes.

Still, it isn’t especially reassuring. You can be trapped with a tame eccentric instead of a dangerous lunatic, but it won’t get you into work any faster. The train driver confirms as much: over the alarm, he announces that someone will need to come out from the depot to investigate. Your frustration rises from buzz to roar. But what can you do?
You could get off the train, you think. There are reasons why you shouldn’t—
you wouldn’t want to be *that* hijack victim, the one whose death is necessary
to prove the seriousness of the enterprise. But you turn, watch the man gibber
for a couple of minutes, and decide to risk it. But how will you get off the train?
You eye the area closest to you, and decide that

*You could smash the window and climb out*, or if you believe success unlikely,
you could instead

*Walk to the other end of the carriage, open the door and try to squeeze out
onto the tracks*, or if that seems a little basic, low-tech, and unlikely to result in
much, you could instead,

*Try to repair the alarm, signaling the driver that the train can move off safely*

You can click on your preferred option. But if none of those choices are
satisfactory, and this isn’t at all what you were expecting, you can click [here](#)
instead.
You decide to smash your way free from the train. An impetuous decision, possibly—a decision reached without full consideration of the other options, perhaps. But, and you can hardly be blamed for this, your desperation to get off the train overcomes a more reasoned approach.

Urgency does not translate into practicality, however. You cross the carriage to face the window. Your options are few— you have no battering ram— so you beat your bare fists against its surface. The window, unperturbed, easily absorbs your blows. You realise that it is not glass, but thickly reinforced Perspex, designed to withstand the heavy blows of vandals. You continue to beat your fists against it, though with steadily diminishing enthusiasm.

You might expect some sympathy or assistance from your fellow passengers. They are trapped as you are, and would, in all but one obvious case, relish an escape. But your listless drumming brings no aid. The reason is simple: having been captured by one gibbering maniac, they necessarily assume that you are another, working either in tandem, or in competition against, the bearded alarm puller.

Heedless, you pound away. You glance around the carriage, looking for an object to assist your quest, to make at least a minor fracture. Again, you curse recent changes to train design. If strap hangings still hung from the ceiling, you could wrench one free, and use it as a cosh against the intransigent window.
Instead, long metal rails are securely fastened to the ceiling. They appear your best hope. You grab the rail, and pull yourself up on it, hoping to pull it down with your weight. You tug, and heave, even place your feet on the ceiling to strain against it. You pull and pull, but to no effect. What else, you wonder, as you release and tumble to the floor?

You could head to the other end of the carriage to fiddle with the alarm or to force your way out of the door. Or instead, you could give up on getting off the train altogether, recognising that you are banging your head against a brick wall, or worse, a Perspex window.
Blocked by a driver’s cab behind you, you walk purposefully to the other end of the carriage. As you go, the other passengers stare at you, at once jealous of your courage and fearful of its result.

You reach the far end of the carriage. The man stands in your way. You can, at last, make out some of his commentary. Having deciphered it, you think it best and safest to ignore it. Instead, you edge past without comment, avoiding touching him or looking him in the face, as if you were simply exiting a crowded train which had reached your stop. He makes no attempt to stop you, ignoring you as he keeps ranting on and on.

The door from your carriage opens into the next. Between the two carriages, however, is a narrow gap, allowing you to squeeze out off the train. You open the door, and clamber down onto the tracks. To your right, a high concrete wall faces onto the train, so you turn to the left and, hearing nothing coming, step carefully over the track into the open air. You are off the train. As hijackings go, either yours was incredibly easy to escape from, or the film industry has repeatedly lied to you.

But though you easily escaped, escaping has gained you little real advantage. You stand on the tracks and survey your surroundings. On the other side, across three sets of tracks, is another high concrete wall. Looking down the tracks towards your destination, there is no easy way off the tracks. The next
station is a mile of track away, the station you left further back. The tracks are eerily quiet - no train approaching behind you, nothing coming towards you. Nothing, in fact, has passed the train since the alarm was pulled. The twitter of birds is suddenly audible.

Should you, you wonder, walk down the dangerous railway line, in the hope of finding another way to get to work? To arrive at the next station, to crawl onto the platform, just to join an angry delayed mob to wait for your emergency stopped train, which has crippled the rest of the line anyway? Or to find somewhere suitable to crawl off the tracks, some brush and a knocked down fence, then get a bus? Are you really so keen to get to work that you would do that, risking being mowed down by another train all the while?

If not, you might relent, and reluctantly climb back on the train. You could work on the alarm, hoping to get the train moving, or you could try to smash through the window to get off the train - though instinctively both feel pointless. You could instead give up on the idea of getting off the train entirely and return to your place at the other end of the carriage.
You look to the far end of the carriage. There, in a forlorn state, is the alarm.

The most sensible thing, you think, would be to have a closer look at it. There might be a connection to the train driver, or to the station control room, or a way to shut the alarm off. You need to inspect more closely but that will be a problem, as the man who set it off stands in front of it.

If you walk towards the alarm, how will he react? On the basis of probabilities, he wouldn’t react well. He would, at your approach, likely turn his violent talk on you, angry talk probably becoming actual violence. You might feel yourself well equipped to deal with that—able, at the first sign of trouble, to throw one hard chop, instantly subduing him. Equally, when it comes to chops, you may be more at home with pork or lamb, and unlikely to throw one away. With that in mind, you may be tempted to stay where you are, and wait for help to arrive. If that is how you feel, you may prefer to click here. If you feel more than confident with a chop, read on below.

Courageously, you decide to put him to the test. You walk down the carriage, ignoring the occasional whisper of caution from the other passengers. You walk up to the man, close enough to catch flecks of spittle. You walk up, and past him, without him ever turning to face you. For that, you are grateful—not only to have avoided any violence, but because his smell is quite incredible.
You reach the alarm, which is embedded in the metal wall of the carriage.

There is a microphone you immediately and excitedly realise. You press the buttons, say “hello” first cautiously then loudly, but to no response. You give it a light tap then a harder thump, again to no effect. The connection out is severed.

You are almost out of options, and consider returning to the other end of the carriage. There is little to prevent you from doing so, bar a reluctance to pass back through the cloud of spit emitted by your kidnapper. If you’re prepared to put aside your concerns on that score, continue reading here.

That fine covering of phlegm seeming too much to take, you try again with the alarm. Having exhausted the obvious methods of operation, you attempt something more elaborate. You pry at the alarm casing, aiming to get inside. It isn’t easy- no mere smack or shove could pry it loose, and to outright smash it would gain you nothing. Eventually, with the aid of your house keys and a great deal of wiggling, you pry a corner loose. With nimble fingers, you tug loose two wires from underneath, and begin to connect them to each other. You’ve just tied the torn end of the blue one to the yellow one when something strikes you.

Should an inspector board the train now, they would see one man in front berating the passengers and one behind, fiddling with the train’s alarm: they
would naturally assume that you are working together. You would have a hard
time convincing them otherwise: your ten minutes on the train are too short to
contract Stockholm Syndrome, and you cannot claim that you were under any
duress. Besides, what do you expect to happen to the train after you have
rewired the alarm? Nothing has happened so far, despite your impromptu
electronics, and you begin to wonder whether it would be best if you left the
scene before it does. Of course, you can linger here in hope, but, sooner or
later, it will make sense to return to the other end of the carriage.
Choices

During this book, you will have two types of choice: that is, not only will you choose what to do, but you can also choose what to read. You can choose whether to read sections of commentary like this one, whether to read digressions about game theory, politics and experimental literature (or not), whether to read extra description, characterisation or exposition or do without, and whether to read jokes that would otherwise take too long to set up. Normally, those choices will sit at the side of the story, function as optional extras, but here, to help you get the idea, they take the place of the plot, explaining why it is the way it is, and why you are where you are.

To return to the train then, there were good reasons why the options offered might not have appealed to you. Firstly, and most obviously, your escape seemed unlikely to succeed; you can confirm your failure by clicking here, here and if you are really glutton, here. Secondly, more existentially, you might have wondered exactly where you were going. You might have read (correctly) that this book is set at university, and wondered what you were doing commuting to work, or, by contrast, you might know nothing about the book, bar that you,
the reader, are its hero; you might feel that commuter trains and universities
make poor stages for heroics.

In other words, even if it would have been unrealistic for you to escape from
the train, even if you know that the action will shortly shift to a university, you
might still wonder why you are constrained by what’s realistic in the first place.

Why couldn’t you get off the train, flee the rogue Russian agent who has
kidnapped you, then uncover the dark conspiracy that prompted the hijacking?
Why can’t you burst from the train, rising into the sky with the aid of your
newly discovered magical powers, there to fight your kidnapper in his true
dragon form? Or why couldn’t you meet a vampire and then, after a decent
number of words have passed, have sex with them?

Any of these would, on the face of it, promise greater excitement than either
commuting or university, both of which, unlike vampire sex or powerful magic,
you will likely have already sampled.

The reason is two-fold. For one, those books have already been written, and
you have already read them. The original Choose-Your-Own Adventure series
or [Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone’s Fighting Fantasy](#) – the books that inspired this one- let you live out those kinds of adventure, minus the necrophiliac sex (though Alina Reyes’ *Behind Closed Doors* offers sex, albeit not with vampires). For two, if you, the reader, are the hero, it makes little sense to attribute you, whoever you might be, with mystical abilities or with special forces training. In fact, by contrast, there is good reason to attribute as little to you as possible.

Which is why the book is set at university, and consequently, why you can’t break free from the train off into a wild adventure. But because this is the first of these diversions, the book will make you a guarantee: stick with it and you will get the opportunity to uncover the dark conspiracy that prompted your hijacking; to take on a rogue Russian agent in a deadly game of cat and mouse; to gain, and use, magical powers; and to have sex with a vampire, though not all at the same time.
“Choosing” University

So you’ve stuck with it. But you still have questions: the most obvious being, if this book is not an adventure story, why is it set at university?

Regardless of where it ends up, it is obvious why the book begins on a train-begins in a deliberately normal, literally workaday setting- but why, if some more detailed back-drop is required (reached, as set out here, by means of mental escape) why go back to university? Why not to your youth or childhood? Why not throw you forward to old age or send you on to work?

You might not be interested in these questions, of course: you might be eager to skip ahead, wondering when the author will shut up and send you on the comic adventure you’ve heard the book contains. So if you want to know the reasons why the novel isn’t set at your work or in your old age or youth or infancy, click on them now to find out more, or carry on below if you feel you know as much as you want to.

University was not selected as a setting solely by process of elimination, however. Besides its own obvious nostalgic attractions for people who remember Choose Your Own Adventure novels, it has one other large merit as a setting for this particular type of fiction. It is a time at which you are bound neither by the ordered routines of childhood nor by the closing obligations of
adulthood; it is a time when, for good or ill, you still have time to take up canoeing. You can still change things, in other words, and that is reflected by your reasoning here, if you’re interested. It covers much the same ground as this section, albeit with considerably less transparency.

With that, you can return to the main stream of the book, at the moment where you begin University.
**Why not Work?**

The reasons are obvious. The scene in the carriage that opens the book is an accurate reflection of working life, comprised as it is, of routine and a varying but invariable degree of drudgery. Some jobs are exciting, of course, and there are exciting decisions to be taken in those jobs. But deciding which bit of employment case law applies, or whether an option has been fairly priced, or whether to film Davina McCall from the left or the right won’t make for an exciting read, nor is it likely that anyone could make more than one of those decisions correctly. A novel about the disasters that ensue when you decide that your bridge design is “as good as it’s going to get” would be neither fun nor realistic.

Further, many, even most, jobs have attractions for the people who do them, beyond the financial rewards. But most, even all, jobs do not hold that same attraction for the people who don’t.

Infancy, or BACK.
Why not infancy?

Childhood as a whole, and infancy in particular, are ill-suited to a book in which you, the reader, control you, the character. The reason for this, put simply, is agency. Children have little of it, and the younger they are, the less they have. Infants divide their time fairly equally between being satisfied and crying for what will satisfy them (usually the release of wind or to play with an expensive electronic device). You can see this represented in fictional form here and then here but the crucial point is that your cries will have only limited impact on the treatment you receive.

So, to return to the problem of agency, the life of an infant is bound almost entirely by the roles that their parents and carers play. At that age, you have little say in what you do, or in what those around you do. But you might say, if agency is the issue, and the aim, as you’ll discover, is to avoid yourself arriving at the point the novel began, what better place to start than infancy? It would be the perfect place to start that campaign, given that once you could exercise free will; you could make sure you did exactly what you wanted. It would be slow stuff, however. You would, leaving aside questions of inheritance, genetic or otherwise, have a great deal of choice, but you would have to wait a long time to exercise it. Ploughing through long sections on potty training, where
the choices, such as they, would seem limited, would be a hard price to pay for paying more attention to long division.

BACK, or Adolescence.
Why not Adolescence?

In theory, setting the novel during your adolescence would work well. Your teenage years offer a certain amount of freedom, after all, and if you are seeking, as the novel has it, to choose differently, and avoid your being on the train in the first place, it would seem a good time to start. Why then push forward to your university years?

In the novel, the answer centres on the annoying use of Facebook in later life, as expressed here (Be warned- it’s somewhat lengthy; you can click on the button at the very end of the tale to return here) But that hardly answers the question, does it? Why doesn’t the book send you back to school, and skirt the question of social media?

The answer is in the knowledge you would take back. What would you do if you went back to school? Oh, you’d work harder, of course, but your real aim would be to exploit your superior adult sophistication to exploit your fellow teenagers. Some good would come of your return- no doubt you would, with the benefit of hindsight, treat the people you treated badly much better. But a lot of bad would come of it, too- you’d find ways to treat the people who treated you badly much, much worse. And sexually? One doesn’t like to think about that aspect. One really doesn’t, that’s why the author refuses to write any part of the novel about it.
BACK, or Old Age
Why not old age?

You may find the decision not to set the novel in your old age baffling. If you can escape from today’s drudge, why wouldn’t you want to take your place amongst the master race? The enormous pension earned by your mid-fourties, the debts left behind for your children like a wild 18th century aristocrat, the tours, the cruises, the house bought for buttons and now worth billions? Why bother with work when you can skip straight to that?

You have a point. You might wonder why young women spend so much time reading about fantasy sex with parasitic bloodsuckers, when there are old people on every street corner, who are probably more than willing. From that point of view, what could be more pleasant than to imagine your retirement? (Things being what they are your retirement, unless you are already retired, will likely consist of two weeks in a holding facility, aged 90, before you’re boiled up for mulch. But you’re unlikely to fantasise about that on your way to work.)

But Elysium and this book are an ill-fit. As you can read here, if you skipped forward to your retirement, your life would be defined by what you’d missed, by what time had elapsed. How could you, as a character, spend your time ruminating on your past, as old characters do, when you had no past to
ruminate on? You would be as Rip Van Winkle, a man out of time, albeit that you could find out how Sherlock escaped off that roof as soon as you got there.

It would also leave you, the reader, somewhat short of choices. Which book to read, which television series to watch, or which holiday to take are choices, it is true, and probably the most pleasant ones, but hardly interesting material for a novel, hardly life or death stuff. By retirement, your life has taken on a more-or-less fixed form; your choices are taken, for good or ill.

And that’s why, though the power to make your fantasy of retirement a success theoretically rests with you, the reader, it ends in disaster for you, the character.

**BACK, INFANCY, WORK OR ADOLESCENCE**
You give up on the idea of a physical escape. The probability of escaping was never high, but all hope is now relinquished. You’re stuck on the train, with no prospect of getting off. The possibly hijacked, possibly stopped-for-a-good-reason, train; it is a considerable disappointment. The alarm is still sounding, not screaming so loud that you cannot think, but enough to make conversation difficult. Not that there is much of that, unless you count the stream of chatter from the man at the far end of the train. Your nearby fellow passengers- the attractive young man in sports kit, the cheerful girl with a fat black-covered novel, the befuddled blonde tourists and their young son, the hate-filled retiree, the black guy- sit in glum silence, burying themselves in their phones or other gadgets.

You’re stuck with them, an indeterminate wait ahead of you. It is, you reflect, your worst journey to work for some time. It’s not because you want to get to work, exactly: if something tremendously fun was happening on the train, some impromptu party or fantastical adventure, and you were not missing out on pay, things might be different. But that is not the case. Having left your phone at home, plugged into its charger, there is nothing to enjoy whilst stuck on this carriage, not even a forbiddingly lengthy game of Angry Birds. For a moment, you wish the hijacker, or alarm presser, or whatever he may be,
would initiate some massive and terrible violence, that something would happen. Instead, he just rants on and on.

You begin to blame work itself. Not the abstract concept, of course, as bad an idea as it is. No, you blame the actual location and identity of your employers, what they ask you to do, and most significantly of all, what they pay to do it. In different circumstances, you might feel satisfied with your job on the first, second and third measures. Your hijacked journey might be a usually short and pleasant one, to a lovely job with a wonderful employer, based in a tremendous location. But even if you love your job, even if your boss is wonderful, even if Pret A Manger is literally in the same building, they manifestly do not pay you enough: after all, you were on the train to be hijacked.

That is, as the optimists have it, the best-case scenario. There are worse and worst cases, of course: you might be on your way to a job you dislike, or even hate, for an employer you can’t stand, whom you object to on a personal and/or ethical level, and the pay might be crap. And given your current predicament, you are likely to believe that all the things that might be true are indeed true.

You question whether it was worth it, this journey to that end. Any journey, you feel, is bad enough, but this journey, with its indeterminate delay caused
by a certainly psychotic and possibly dangerous maniac, is too much. How did you get here? It cannot have been deliberate, or if it was deliberate, it was definitely, in retrospect, a mistake; wherever you set out to reach, you didn’t want to end up here.

It is a realisation that makes for little practical improvement in your situation, you might think. But watching your fellow passengers, their eyes blankly roaming the carriage for something of interest, you realise there is another kind of escape you can make - a mental one. While you are physically stuck on a rush hour train carriage with this drooling maniac, there is nothing to stop you your mind going off somewhere else entirely.

But where to send it? There are all the obvious places. To dream of favourite books or films, of upcoming sports matches and hoped-for kisses. To imagine killing your boss, or fucking them, either of which is fine, both a worry. There are all the good places. But old mistakes linger in your mind, their sum stood before you at the other end of the carriage, shoeless and shouting.

The answer seems obvious. Whatever brought you to this point, go back and change it. But how far back would you need to go to do so? Should you

Take no chances and return to your infancy. Armed with all the knowledge of your somewhere between 25 and 35 years, a prodigious future will be yours.
Or

Head back only so far as your school days and teenage years. With your adult knowledge and sophistication, academic and social success would be yours. And if not, if your life follows the same disappointing course, you would know to book leave for this day anyway.

Or

Forget the idea of correcting the past entirely, and project yourself into the future. Go forward to a time when your job, any job, is no longer necessary. To a world in which technology has freed us from the need to strive, or at least to a world in which you’ve got your pension and can travel outside peak hours.
Mentally departing the train, you begin your new life as an infant. You don’t want to start too early, of course—going through labour again would be traumatic on innumerable levels. You return, very briefly, at three months, but soon reject that; within minutes, you are hiked towards your mother’s bare breast, which is enough to convince you to return only once you’d moved entirely onto solids. So, you start again at six months, but you soon realise that even this is a mistake.

The life of an infant is an easy one, it’s true. You have no work to do, you sleep for 16 hours a day, are carried everywhere and have all your food prepared for you. You don’t even need to wipe your own bottom. Superficially, it all sounds marvellous.

But it’s not. Firstly, you quickly discover that the food is terrible. Lukewarm, flavourless mulch unseasoned and unsalted, with only so-called “natural sugars”, and served with tepid water: it appears designed to prove Cordelia from King Lear right after all. Worse, though you no longer have to wipe up your own faeces, the amount of time you spend sitting in your own gradually cooling faeces grows exponentially. It’s difficult to relax, too, when even a moment’s downtime is likely to be interrupted by an adult scooping you up and hugging you, presenting you to another adult to be hugged or taking you for an interminable walk through the streets or country strapped to a chair or
to your mother’s chest, for all the world like a dangerous patient awarded a rare outing into society. Nor can you entertain yourself: whilst you plan your rise to the head of a global empire, or to a job with a company car, at least, your parents offer pop-up books and inane gurgling. And while you soon display a preternatural physical and mental skill, your body is a terrible cage. Two-feet high, with fingers soft like uncooked chipolatas and a head the same size as your body, no sooner have you climbed on top of a chair, having twice tumbled painfully to the ground in the process, and at last reached the tabletop, when your mother again moves the television remote control out of reach.

There is little you can do, bar wait it out until it’s time to retake your Maths A-Level. If you wish, for instance, to

Object to your food, demand that an alternative be served in its stead, pizza, chilli-con-carne, steak, Haribo Tangfastics, anything but organic gunk, or

Demand that your mother put the pop-up book down, put the television on, hand you your favourite plastic duck and leave you to it, even if that means watching daytime television from the nineteen eighties., or

Tell your parents that all travel must stop, that thorough consultation must henceforward be carried out before they carry you off round the country, to be
thrust into the arms of whichever relative or acquaintance wishes to manhandle you, and that they should not expect the outcome of that consultation to be positive.

You can. Click to do precisely that. But doing so, you realise, will not do much for you. There are too many years to go. For, though the opportunity posed by an adult mind in an infant’s body is enormous, so is the discipline required to turn your eight waking hours to effect. Sure, by 6, you could be the best xylophone player the world has ever seen, by 9, you could speak French, German and a smattering of Portuguese and by 18, you could pass Maths A-Level. But would you? Would not thousands of hours of shovelled mush and story time dull that adult mind, melt it back to a near-liquid state, ready to be moulded once again, much as it previously was? Wouldn’t history repeat itself, and you end up on that train anyway?
Salt, Children and King Lear

*King Lear* is a play by William Shakespeare. In it, King Lear, who has grown old, and a little naive, decides to bequeath his kingdom to his children and retire. He has three daughters, and instead of simply splitting the Kingdom three ways, or picking the best monarch, he decides to award it on the basis of who gives him the most praise, asking what they would give up for their father.

Lear’s plan is airtight so far, you’ll agree. Lear’s daughters Goneril and Regan behave as you’d expect from their names: even though they hate the old gimmer, they praise him to the skies, offering up their lives, etc. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, the one that Lear really likes and would probably like to give the whole kingdom, too, says she loves him as much as she loves salt. And just salt, not even salt, chilli and garlic. Lear is slighted, divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan, and banishes Cordelia. He lives out his days in tranquil happiness, dividing his time between his two sensible, doting daughters.

Not really, it all goes about as badly as could be imagined, and everyone dies including Lear and Cordelia. Apologies for the spoilers if you haven’t read it.

Anyway, it’s easy to think Cordelia deserved what she got for the whole salt thing, until you’ve eaten baby food. Afterwards, you can’t help but realise how much she must have really loved Lear.
You cry. You’d like to state your objections reasonably. You’d like to use paragraphs and commas, make clever rhetorical arguments. But you can’t. So you cry.

There are millions of words you’d like to use, but your mouth will not let you, will not even go so far as to say mummy and daddy. Instead you can only cry, and so you do. When something is given to you that you don’t like, or something that you do like is taken away, and each of those is more likely to happen than getting what it is you wanted, you cry. You deploy your full range of cries, of course, a range far exceeding that of the out-of-practice adult. You use an extensive range of variations on the basic form: staccato bursts of sobs, cleverly deployed pauses, long lupine howls, a heart-tearing snotty snuffle. Nevertheless, they are just variations on that single genre, crying.

But however much you wail, you will rarely get your way. There are a few things that crying can change: clean your pants and get you cuddled, chiefly, and usually only in that order. But a change of diet or your own set of cutlery, a new television station or your choice of video, your choice of destination for your afternoon walk? Not likely. You’ll be fed tasteless paste and improving picture books, and be expected to like it. Your cries, however artful, however loud, will not change your parents’ minds— they are acting for your own good, after all.
Years stretch out in front of you, your influence on them negligible. You could bounce back as a toddler, or a seven-year old, but your positions are barely more powerful. There must be an easier way than this, you think, as you start crying again, hoping to convince your mother, this time at least, to put the parsnips back.
You are 14 again, 14 but half a life wiser. You choose a particular moment for your return to adolescence. You are walking to a GCSE History lesson—your fifth ever, in fact. You walk down the familiar corridor to room 5L, a little later than the rest of the class. They have gone inside, are already seated when you rush through the door. The teacher, Mr. Gilmour, gestures you towards the remaining seat. You scurry down the aisle as he completes the register. You pull the seat from beneath the desk, and start to sit down. And then you stop.

David Chalmers, in the seat next to yours, yanks away your chair. Forewarned, you squat in the space above, cast Chalmers an unimpressed look, then pull the chair back beneath you, sitting down with a triumphant clatter. The gale of laughter that greeted your crash to the floor never comes, and David Chalmers’ reputation as the funniest man in your GCSE History class will never be made.

You intend to take that reputation for yourself. From a quick glance around the room, you're confident that you can achieve this. For while you look fourteen, your classmates are fourteen. You are undoubtedly the most sophisticated amongst your peers, and will be able to persuade, bully or seduce them at will. You know this because there is not much to persuade and seduce. Your classmates are children: with half-grown bodies, pasty, acned faces and silly ways of
wearing their school ties. And you have all of David Chalmers' punch lines ready if you need them.

The lesson begins. This being Britain (in case you didn’t know) and this being GCSE History (which you did know), the lesson concerns Adolf Hitler. Mr. Gilmour, with that usual, and inexplicable, self-regard common to history teachers, describes Hitler’s early years, his struggles as an artist, his war service, the failed beer hall putsch. As the teacher progresses to the writing of Mein Kampf, you realise that British children spend more time learning about Hitler than the rest of European history put together; the contours of his career being now better-known in Britain than those of Jesus. The teacher, having speculated on the softness of Hitler’s sentence after the putsch’s failure, mentions that common science fiction scenario, in which someone heads back in time to kill Hitler (presumably to free up space on the GCSE History curriculum). Just on cue, James Exley, the fat little runt, pipes up, from his usual place in the front row,

“But sir, I thought that social and economic factors were crucial to the rise of Hitler. Even if you could remove him from the equation, wasn’t something similar bound to happen anyway? Keynes said as much in the Economic Consequences of the Peace in 1919.”
There’s always one, isn’t there, you think, and it was always James Exley. But Exley has a point. Do great and terrible men move humanity, or does humanity move in great waves, driven by economics and chance, great men merely the driftwood most prominent in the tide? Ordinarily, this is not a question that you need a definitive answer to. To be frank, there isn’t a definitive answer, nor is it as interesting a question as historians would have you believe.

You therefore lose interest in it and look around the classroom. It is strange to sit amongst your schoolmates knowing what is to become of them. Tania Fish for instance. She’s married and works as an insurance broker in Swindon, no children. She slowly, but definitively, lost that hard allure she possessed at 16, having gained it, you realize looking at her more closely, at some time between 14 and 16. And Paul Berry. He did really well and went off to Oxford, and then became an actor. An incredibly unsuccessful actor, one of those actors who are barely actors at all. He’s very funny on Twitter, though.

Rather than give Exley a clip, Mr. Gilbert takes his comment seriously. He takes the other side, talks about the responsibility individuals must always bear, of the Nazi Party's falling share of the vote in 1933, the policy of the KPD as dictated from Moscow, of all the decisions that people and parties needed to take for Hitler to take power, to make the future what it was. Tania Fish had sex with David Chalmers on the 6th Form trip to Brussels (so David Chalmers
said, he was probably lying about sex but they definitely did something). That may not happen, of course, now that he didn’t pull your chair away.

You look around the room. Steve - accountant. Still see him at his parents’ house on Boxing Day. Sarah - housewife in Australia. Melanie. Oh dear, Melanie. Melanie Smith (was Harper) of Facebook fame. Melanie Smith with her endless updates, with her terrible political commentary, her links to Adele videos and her multiple one line updates. Melanie Smith who is “tired#”. Melanie Smith who writes “Good Night” on Facebook every evening. Melanie bloody Smith. Sitting there, two seats from the front, one from the left, playing with her pen.

You don't listen to Exley's comeback, on the inevitability of historical processes. You're thinking about killing Melanie.

Which is probably a little strong. A hard word would do, just something as to her future conduct, said while her mind is still malleable enough to understand it. You decide to do just that, and having prepared a few words, you get up and stride towards Melanie.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Mr Gilbert asks. “Get back to your seat.” You do as he asks: you hadn’t thought of that. His intervention is for the best, you quickly realise. You want to become the most admired and adored person
in your class, in your year; it may not be your chief motivation for going back to school but while you are there, achieving it is irresistible. You cannot expect to do so, and give warnings to your classmates about their behaviour on social networking sites twenty years hence. Maybe, you wonder, you should kill her after all: it certainly seems the most ethical thing to do.

But would you get away with it? Or would you be found with a dead teenage girl at your feet, and nothing to explain it beyond her future use of Facebook? You would, even with a lot of clever planning, struggle to get away with it. Which is the thing they never tell you about Hitler. If you did go back to Vienna, and butcher a seemingly harmless Austrian street artist, you’d struggle to find a friendly jury. Living out your days in prison would mean, it’s true, that you’d avoid being trapped in a small space with a bearded lunatic, but this triumph would come at the cost of spending the rest of your life trapped in a smaller space with dangerous lunatics, some of whom are probably bearded, anyway.

You are faced with a dilemma, then. Is Melanie’s presence a price worth paying for your victory over David Chambers, is changing the past enough to make you be able to put up with the future? You must wonder if you haven’t lost sight of your original intention. From time to time, trapped on a train, we all do precisely this - rehearse past wrongs, occasionally our own but more plausibly
someone else’s, and have it, by the flick of a mental switch, end much worse for them and much better for you. You are tempted to press that button, to see all your wrongs revenged, to see the likes of David Chalmers brought permanently, humiliatingly low, but doing so can only be corrupting. Better, if you are to return to your past, to return at a point at which you can change the people you will later be annoyed by on social media, rather than your relationships to the ones you know. You press here to return to the carriage, before you try to murder any teenage girls.

A BUTTON
GCSE: A Short Taxonomy

GCSE: The General Certificate of Secondary Education is an English (and Welsh) academic qualification. Each GCSE covers a specific subject, such as English, Maths, Geography or History. They are generally taken at the end of compulsory education, i.e. when you are 16, or about to turn 16.

GCSE History: Also known as GCSE Hitler, an intensive course of study on the German dictator.

Adolf Hitler: Austrian-born German Dictator from 1933-45. But if you’re relying on this book for your knowledge of Hitler, it is a cause for some concern, and not just for your GCSE History result.
Your decision places you somewhere in the arc between 22 and 47. You could be older than that: you might be in your late fifties or your mid-sixties, even, and a future retirement a matter of years, even months away: but a future set around the time of the 2014 Jools Holland New Year Hootenanny would not make for a dramatic change. Indeed, if you were that close to retirement, you might have chosen to brave it out and stick with the carriage, or to lunge back into the past, fearful of creeping mortality. So let's assume you are somewhere in that span, and the date of your retirement some way further off in 15 to 40 years time (or 73 if the politicians get their way).

You leave the carriage behind, putting yourself into comfortable retirement.
You feel a little stiffer but not weak, not old. You turn and find a mirror, and though your face is a mess of cracks and wrinkles and your hair has grown thinner and gone past grey to white, your eyes have a welcome, recognisable sharpness. Next to you, a door thumps. You do not recognise your surroundings, but you appear to be in the narrow hallway of what appears to be a comfortable suburban home. The door thumps again. You look at your watch- 9.45am, Monday 20th December 2046. Perfect, you think, an early, yet comfortable, retirement, having avoided the years of strenuous exertion beforehand- it's like you're a public-sector worker. You look back in the mirror: you look content. The door thumps again, someone impatiently knocking from the other side. You think you had better open it, so move your hand to where the knob should be. There is no knob. You are wondering what to do, when the door opens, gently but firmly swinging open. You step back, out of its way.

On the doorstep is a frazzled-looking woman of thirty or so, carrying a grumpy-looking toddler. On seeing you, the toddler turns, climbing from disgruntled to outraged. "Were you going to let us stand out here all day?" the woman says, pushing past you. You follow her down the hall, turning right into the living room. It is much like a living room of the present, albeit with floating furniture. She stops in the middle of the room, where she places the toddler on the floor. You peer at the woman's face, you seem to remember her from somewhere,
though younger and without an aggrieved toddler in tow.

"Dad?" she says.

"Chris?" you ask, having worked it out. She looks like Chris from the canteen, the one with the wonky smile and the backside.

"Dad?" she repeats, concerned. "Are you ok?" She's your daughter, you realise, by Chris. The toddler begins to cry. "Listen, thank you for doing this," your daughter tells you, "I should be back by 7." She picks up the crying toddler, evidently your grandchild and hands it to you. The crying does not stop. It really doesn't stop. The child, its face contorted with in rage and torment, bucks to be released from your arms. You feel more than a little stiff, more than a bit old.

"Come on, Xenophon," she says, "behave for Grandy." The child does not follow his mother's instructions. This does not slow your daughter's exit.

"Listen, wait, Chris," you say, grasping at a name.
"Dad, that's the second time you've called me Chris. Are you sure you are ok?"

"What am I supposed to do with him?" you say, holding the screaming child out towards her. "What do I feed him?"

"His favourite, the thing you always make him." she says, laughing.

"Which is...?"

"Curdled limes, you know that. Listen, are you sure you're ok- I can call work, see what they can do?"

"No, no," you say, though you should probably say yes, yes. "What should I do with him?" you then repeat.

"Take him for a drive in the hovercar; you know how much he likes that."

"A hovercar?" you say "I have a hovercar?"

"You've got one of the last hovercars left in the sky. You were one of the first
people to get one, and you drove it to work every day for nearly 34 years." You shake your head in disbelief.

"Who's the Prime Minister?" your daughter asks, quickly.

You have no idea, though you don't like to admit it. So you search for a name. Some promising young politician would be best, though with such time elapsed, it seems ridiculous to speculate.

"David Beckham," you say.

Your daughter looks at you askance. "He's the Chancellor of the Exchequer. You're not okay, are you?" she says, taking Xenophon from you. Seeing his mother so upset is doing little for his mood. "I'm going to call work," she says, "and then we need to have a talk."

The talk goes badly. Your daughter discovers you have no memory of the last 35 years, remember nothing of her birth and upbringing, have forgotten Xenophon's hatching, and have no idea what has happened in the wider world. Worse, all you can remember of your spouse is a wonky tooth, long since fixed,
and an attractive back-side, long since disappeared beneath a much larger one.

Worst, you cannot safely operate virtual cutlery, rendering curdled limes, the staple food, entirely unpleasant. Your family take the reluctant decision to have you placed in full-time residential care, where you can be fed 20th-century style mush and watch old episodes of "Friends" on a device that can simulate "television".

Of course, that may be exactly what you had in mind, when you mentally retired from the carriage, and does sound superior to work in almost every respect. But sooner or later, you will need to return to that carriage by clicking here.
Xenophon- The Future of Children’s Names

Despite his futuristic sounding name, Xenophon is an ancient Greek writer, best known for his histories. As such, Xenophon is exactly the kind of silly name that you hope your own children will be bourgeois enough to give *their* children.
You are back in the carriage. You're disappointed to be there, of course.

Nothing has changed in those few minutes of mental escape. The same passengers— the attractive young man in sports kit, the cheerful girl with a fat black-covered novel, the befuddled blonde tourists and their young son, the hate-filled retiree, the black guy—sit in the same silence, the same rant rumbling on above them, the alarm untiringly trilling, the train still waiting. This could go on for some time. The prospect of physical escape is, you feel, more distant than ever.

All this might come as a disappointment. In your youth, especially when reading those books which purported to give the reader choice, you did not find yourself “stuck on a train”. Stuck in a cave with an aggrieved dragon, perhaps, but not on a train, with an attractive young man in sports kit, a cheerful girl with a fat black-covered novel, some befuddled blonde tourists and their young son, a hate-filled retiree, and a black guy. And a bearded could-be-hijacker. With the emphasis on "could be".

But here you are reliant on your own resources. No door to the left, no dice to roll, no puzzle which, if correctly resolved, will reveal the ranter's weakness to silver. With physical escape rejected as improbable, and little to do on the train, at least until the other passengers' phone batteries run out, another
mental escape remains your best option, or best option for thinking of several options. What to think of, though?

You could imagine yourself into the kind of situations that you found in those novels, imagine yourself a dragon slayer, an adventuring archaeologist or a post-apocalyptic motorcycling avenger. You could imagine yourself into the sort of scenario that you might find in an adult novel - imagine yourself an eighteenth century French gentleman or West African villager caught up in one war or another, or, less literarily but equally adult, an ex-SAS man fighting in one war or another.

But that type of escape would be escape at its most fleeting, a holiday from your present predicament. An end would be reached - the dragon slain, the secret of the idol discovered, your hopes for an independent Biafra dashed - and you would be back in the carriage, still stuck halfway to work with a bearded ranter. You need to go backwards again, you realise, to a time which would allow you to undo the present, to exercise different choices, to ensure that your present becomes the past.

You feel a certain disappointment at this. You want to cavil, to debate whether there really is no other option. You do not, however. To do so would lead, to worthless speculation about free will, to a debate about predetermination with the feeling that none of your words are your own, to a dead end.
You must decide a destination for your escape. But the choice is so obvious as to be no choice at all- you tried infancy, and found it too far back, while old age was too far forward, and adolescence featured too many other adolescents.

What’s left?

You look around the carriage, and take your only option.
Your room is standard; rather, it is the standard of fifteen years earlier, though almost certainly still standard today: at once cramped and bare, with chipped cream plaster walls, a determinedly brown, hard-wearing carpet, and a cracked and greying sink in the corner, which looks slightly embarrassed, eager to go, but unable to think of an excuse to leave. You sit on the bed, surveying your small room in Halls, and consider the sheer wealth of possibility before you. Any career, any type of personal relationship, any path can be yours, albeit that there may be an inevitable administrative burden in taking it. You sit up and twist around to look at what is behind you. On the wall is a poster depicting a variety of beers, whose attributes are satirically compared to those of the countries in which they are manufactured. You are a student again.

Parameters will need to be established, of course. Your social interests, your subject, your sexuality even— all that will, in due course, need to be decided. But not yet: you don’t want to sit here, lingering in your room— you don’t want to be one of those students, no not again. You want to get out there, meet people, do things. Where should there be though?

You could go down to the bar to meet your fellow students: it’s nearly that sort of time, you think, only a little optimistically. Or,
You could go to get something to eat in the canteen, worried about drinking on an empty stomach. While there, you could approach other people who are eating, and suggest they become your friends. Or,

You could think that it is too early to drink, too early to get hungry and settle down to do some work. You’ve got a lot of studying to do if you’re going to avoid being hijacked ten years from now. In other words, you do want to be one of those students.

So, time to press on. Unless you are wondering when the book will address the game theory of the title, which it does here.
You leave your room, and make your way down to the Halls canteen. Your room is on the top floor, and as you head down the stairs, you pass other students on the way, heading back to their rooms having eaten.

When you arrive, then, the canteen is already emptying. Most of your fellow students have already eaten- you pass bins of refuse, piles of used trays and buckets of dirty cutlery. A few groups are still dotted around the tables, their food nearly finished. There is no queue for food, and you walk towards the far end of the room, where two uniformed women stand behind a steel counter, ladles idle in their hands. You walk to the counter, and pick up a tray. Looking at the nearly empty seats around you, you wonder what food will be left. Cheese flan, you guess, grimacing at the prospect.

Given what you’re seeing, you might question your decision to eat in the canteen. From any perspective, it’s not likely to be a success. Realistically, you might not get the last slice of cheese flan you feared. You might find some tired looking dried out tuna pasta waiting to be scooped onto your plate, or a cheese sandwich on butterless bread, squeezed into a plastic packet. You might dream something broader, a reflection of the essential prosaic truth that canteen food is bad blown up for cartoon effect. Pies filled with hair, squirrel-gut burgers, fleas in whipped yoghurt, all served with lashings of spit, drool and
general mucus. You might question whether either is really necessary and click here instead, or you could take your chances below.

You walk to the front of the canteen, and pick up a tray. You look down the counter at the food available. It looks dreadful: you had not realised that it was possible to be so creative with mutton. You now know it is not that wise to be that creative with mutton. You pick up a plate, and push it gingerly towards the crone who will serve you. She chuckles, and slops something onto your plate. It looks like she’s emptied the Hoover. You move onto the pudding counter.

Having been served there, you move off, taking your tray to a nearby table. The few people in the hall put their heads down, and you are left alone to eat. You take some time before tackling the monstrosity in front of you- it is not clear whether one should use a knife and fork, a spoon or eat it with your hands. You decide that it might damage your skin if touched , so take on a knife and fork and settle to it.

The taste is not good. It tastes like a barbershop floor. But relief is at hand after a few mouthfuls, forced down with water; your mouth goes numb, the body shutting down your pain receptors. That doesn’t shut off the smell, of course, which would make a sewer rat nauseous.
Still, you polish it all off: you’ve not come down to the canteen for nothing.

Once you’re done, you lumber out towards the bar.
Do you really need to eat canteen food? No.

You are right to turn away. You are, with aid from this book, recreating this canteen from your imagination. The canteen may well serve some disgusting stuff, and it may suit the book to wallow in it, but you don’t need to. Why not have the canteen serve lovely food? Good plain food, fine stuff or piggily indulgent. The food need not even taste of food: you can imagine the food tasting like those tastes we like, but are not food.

But then you do not need to eat at all. If you wished to be doggedly realistic, you would need to spend the book refuelling and deciding when to take a toilet break; you would need to fold up your clothes at the end of each day and iron something to go out in; and as anyone who has played one of the more recent Grand Theft Auto games can confirm, all of that would be even less fun than it sounds. So let’s agree now that, while the book will depict you undertaking everyday activities, you don’t need to maintain a certain level of calories. That being the case, what reason do you have to visit the canteen at all?

None, except that, by dint of misplaced narrative expectations, you expected something important to occur to you while you’re there. Be assured: nothing will happen in the canteen (why would it?), and you can pass onto the bar directly. If you are desperate to sample the food, though, you can return to eat
it here, but a more sensible course would be to proceed directly to the bar here.
Fresh raw Oysters by the dozen, and lightly fried. Steamed Lobster or Seabass.

Fillet steak barely cooked. Game birds with foie gras and truffle sauce. Served with dashes of vegetable essence, exquisite reductions and a nitrous oxide chaser.
Burgers and thick chips, drenched in ketchup. Chicken Fajitas, sloppy with shredded cheddar cheese and sour cream. Sweets, Haribo, Fruit Pastilles and Minstrels shovelled into your mouth by the handful. Sweaty Lamb Doner Kebabs, with burning chilli sauce and coagulating garlic mayonnaise. Quavers.
Toothpaste. Pens. Genitalia.
Dear Student,

I want to extend a warm welcome to all returning, and especially to all new students on behalf of the University. I know you will have a rewarding and successful academic year. My office and the University staff are here to support your success as a member of the University community, as well as a student. Studying at University offers a unique opportunity to advance your knowledge and understanding of the world, and of your own subject area. It offers more than that, however. University gives you a chance to expand your world, and your world view, to learn new skills and to try things you never thought you’d try, and to meet people you never thought you would meet.

With that in mind, I recommend you attend the Freshers’ Fair on Tuesday. Every student society will have a stand, and they offer some incredible opportunities to try new things, as well as taking the interests you may already have further. A leaflet giving details is in your welcome pack.

A little less excitingly, but no more importantly, the pack also contains a copy of the University’s Regulations. When you’re reading them, you may notice that there are references to the regulations made by your college and by your department. You should have received these with the welcome pack sent out in advance to your home address, but if not, copies will be available at registration.
In addition to those services mentioned here or elsewhere in the welcome pack, please know that we, as senior members of the University, are all here to support you during your time as a member of the University community. I look forward to meeting many of you and working with you during your time at the University.

Wishing you a wonderful year,

Vice-Chancellor
The Fresher’s Fair

The 1999 Fresher’s Fair will take place on Monday 5th October, 10am-4.45pm, at the Student Union (Main Hall and Annexe, Minor Hall and Annexe, and Committee Room C). Almost all of the University’s societies will be represented- a list of the main ones is below- but it’s also a great chance to discover your Union and the services we provide, from gigs and club nights to sexual health services and financial advice. To whet your appetite, some of the societies involved are listed below- alphabetically to avoid any suspicion of favouritism!

Assassins

Carrot and Peas Society

Christian Union

Conservative Future

Drama Society

Field Sports Society

University Sports Union

Canoe Club
Indie Society

Islamic Society

Labour Students

Liberal Democrat Students

LGBT

Pagan Society

RAG

UKIP Students

Warlord Society
University Regulations

These regulations are as made under the Statutes of the University, having been approved as applying for the academic year 1999-2000 by the Court of the University at its meeting on the 10th November 1998 for that purpose. Where appropriate, the authority for the regulation made is stated. A full concordance is available for inspection upon request, from the office of the clerk to the court. Contact details for the clerk, together with contact details for each administrative and academic department within the University, are contained in the listings in Appendix III of this booklet-Contacts.
Preamble

Inside a University, as in any other community, a balance must be reached between the freedom of the individual and the good of the community.

These ‘Regulations- General Regulations for Students (Undergraduate and Graduate) provide the formal framework (as set forth in the more general statutes established under the University’s Statutes) required to assure the position of the University in three main respects: (a) as an institution with a high reputation for both research and teaching; (b) as an institution which ensures that the general body of its own members may pursue the aims and objectives of the University in satisfactory conditions; and (c) that it is accountable for those public monies it receives, and for which it has direct or indirect responsibility for their expenditure.
The preservation of freedom of speech and debate must be the first objective of any institution devoted to the promotion of learning, and all members of the University have a duty to show tolerance of the opinions of others, even when they may find those views unpalatable. The right to freedom of expression, however, must not be exercised in ways that interfere with the rights of the rest of the community or promote any such interference.

NB: In these regulations, ‘undergraduate’ is used in these Regulations to describe a person registered for a course (part or all thereof) leading to a first degree, a diploma, or a certificate in the University; ‘postgraduate’ is used to denote any person registered for either a higher degree or a postgraduate diploma of the University. ‘Student’ is therefore used as a term encompassing both undergraduates and postgraduates. The regulations continued within this booklet (Articles I to XXVII) are those of foremost concern to students as there defined. Regulations covering other aspects of the University’s operation, but not contained within regulations specified by a body other than the Governing Council (as prescribed in Statute I (Section 1.70 are contained in Articles XXVIII to XXXIV, and are available on request,
Article 1- Regulations regarding student registration (matriculation), keeping of terms, lodgings and Term time absence

1. Matriculation

On admission to the University every student must agree and sign to confirm their agreement to the following declaration (completing matriculation):

“I promise to observe the Statutes, and Regulations made under them, of the University in so far as they affect me, paying due respect, and where appropriate, abiding by the judgement of, to the Chancellor and other officers of the University”.

The period of study will be considered as having begun from the beginning of the Term in which the declaration has been made (and the student matriculates). The period of study is that which applies

Notes:
(a) Under the terms of Statue III (Section 4.1) matriculation is the term used for formal admission to a course of study in the University; it both confers membership of the University, and associated privileges, and the obligation to thereafter conform to the discipline of the University and to the regulations made for this purpose under Statue I (Section 6.7).

(b) Every student, whether residing in a College or elsewhere, becomes a member of one of the Colleges of the University and is entitled to both the privileges which this membership affords, and any discipline imposed thereby.

2. Of the Keeping of Terms

(i) The regulations for undergraduates (pages 106-112) prescribe the minimum period of attendance required to attain qualification for admission to a first degree or diploma in the University. It states this in Terms. For a term to qualify as a Term of Attendance, as required by those regulations and by a Statute III, an undergraduate must:
(a) reside in such place as is acceptable to the Master of his College, and
where the undergraduate wishes to reside at a distance of more than 20
miles from the University during Term, the Dean of his Faculty must also be
agreed, having be satisfied that the undergraduate will be able to comply
fully with the requirements of the course for which he is registered;

(b) be present in the University on the first day of each Term.

(ii) An undergraduate who intends to absent themselves overnight during
Term, either from their College or their Term time lodgings, must, before
absenting themselves, register their intention to be absent and indicate as
precisely as is possible how they may be contacted in an emergency, in the
manner prescribed in the regulations of their College. An undergraduate
may only be absent from a compulsory class they are due to attend when
they have received the express permission of the member of staff
responsible for that class, prior to their absence.

(iii) An undergraduate may not leave their Term time residence before the
last day of Term, except where the requirements set out above are
satisfied.
(iv) Requirements for postgraduate attendance are set out in the regulations governing their course of study, or where appropriate, by written agreement.

3. Of Lodgings

(i) Undergraduates not living in College, who have attained the age of 18 years, may live in the accommodation of their choice. Those under 18 years must live either

(i) in College, or;

(ii) with their parent(s) or guardian.

(ii) Students must register their place of lodging or residence with the Students Records Office by the end of the third week in the academic year. Where the student changes their place of residence within an academic year, they must register the change with the Students Records Office, College and Department immediately.
(iii) If a person in a house in which students are living contracts an illness or disease that is known to be infectious, the University Accommodation Officer must be contacted immediately.

4. Of Absence During Term

Any student, who is prevented by illness or other emergency from meeting the requirements above, or requirements contained within the regulations set by their department, must immediately notify their College office.

Regulations regarding the registration of Students: 5. Medical Registration, 6. Fees and other charges, 7. Documentary Standards

5. Of Medical Care

(i) All full-time students must register with a medical practitioner local to the University, and maintain this registration for the duration of their whole course of study

(ii) Part-time students, as defined in the schedule made under Statute III, and contained within regulation XXXI, need not register with a medical practitioner local to the University, but are not exempted from (iii).
(ii) Full-time students coming directly from overseas must, before they may be formally registered for their course, produce a chest X-ray dated within the previous 12 months, with appropriate certification, and present this to the office of the University Medical Officer.

NB: The University Medical Officer is prepared to give advice on personal medical problems to all students, and through his office, may register all students wishing to be registered.

6. Fees and other charges.

(i) All fees, whether payable to the University, or the student’s college, and whether payable sessionally or on a termly basis (as set in the regulations of the student’s college, in the regulations made by the University or department or by exceptional arrangement with their department or the University) are payable in advance.
(ii) Appeals against withdrawal requirements will not be considered until all debts have been paid.

Notes

“Debts” here denotes all monies payable under any regulations listed above, or agreed under regulation XVIII.

Payment will not be considered to be made until the University has received any money owed. Where payment is made by cheque, the University will consider any registration or matriculation made prior to the receipt of monies as provisional, and reserves the right not to recognise that registration, matriculation and any qualifying study undertaken until such time as payment is received in full. The University cannot accept payment by credit card or by cash, except where relevant regulations state otherwise.

7. Documentary Standards
(i) All correspondence with the University must be in writing, in a physical format. The University cannot, and will not, as a matter of course, accept “electronic” mail as a substitute, and it will not be recognised as such for the purposes of those regulations that require the student to correspond with the University in writing.

(ii) Clause 7(i) should not be read as overriding any regulation regarding “electronic” mail, or any other form of electronic documentation, contained within regulations regarding its use made by any Department or College of the University. Should any student be unclear as to whether “electronic” mail or other documentation will be acceptable, they are advised to consult the party to whom the correspondence is to be addressed in advance, and request confirmation in writing.
(iii) You begin to question quite what you read there. You realise that it is 1999, and that even advanced institutions like the University you are at, were still only crawling towards the light that “electronic” mail represented. But would they really request that you seek confirmation, in writing, of whether they would accept an e-mail? There is a certain logic to it, you suppose, but it also suggests a bored author, you think, one who, tired of his own conceits, has begun to slide in a certain sly humour. But that, too, depends on your own attitude. Did you really read down this far, making your way through all those painful regulations? Are you simply imagining this?

General Regulations relating to the course of study

In addition to those regulations set out above, the following general regulations are in place, and apply to all courses of study offered by the University (both taught and by research):

1. Information required upon registration
The student must, when registering for their course of study, give their full legal name and any other names they have legally held. If their name is subsequently changed, they must inform the Student Records Office in writing immediately upon the change taking place, and provide documentary evidence when doing so.

2. Attendance at Classes (Seminars, Tutorials, Laboratory and Practical Classes, and Other Practical Classes)

All students must attend Classes (Seminars, Tutorials, Laboratory and Practical Classes, and Other Practical Classes) as may be asked of them individually. Any student who must, or wishes, to miss a class of this sort should therefore obtain the permission of the person responsible for taking the class in question prior to its taking place. Where this is not possible, it must be reported to that person without delay, and with the cause of absence and explanation as to the lack of prior notification.
3. Vacations, and the use thereof

(i) During vacations (which are here defined as those periods between terms, as defined above and in Regulation XII, the expectation is that all undergraduates will continue with academic study, and/or, where deemed appropriate or necessary, to gain approved professional experience.

(ii) An undergraduate who wishes to remain at the University during part or all of any vacation must (except where attendance is required for their course of study, and defined as such within its regulations) notify their Department of their intention not less than 2 weeks in advance of the end of term.

(iii) Where the undergraduate gives indication, under the terms set above, an undergraduate must observe such relevant parts of those regulations as relate to the keeping of terms (‘Of the Keeping of Terms’) as may be required.

Responsibility for the enforcement of these Regulations lies with the appropriate Dean of Faculty.
Note: The attention of undergraduates is drawn to two parts of the Regulations for Undergraduate Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees:

(a) to paragraph 5.2 under which the Board of the Faculty has the power to terminate the membership of the University of an undergraduate who fails to perform satisfactorily the work prescribed for him;

(b) to section 7 which relates to candidates whose attendance at or performance in a prescribed examination is affected by illness or any other reasonable cause.
You head down to the bar, ready to begin your University career afresh. The bar itself is cause for little excitement—three small rooms in the basement of your halls. It is extremely full, even in the early evening, but then nobody has yet had the time or courage to explore beyond your halls, and so it is at something like the peak of its popularity. The bar has the look of a dissolute youth club, one that has stopped trying to keep young people off the streets, and instead laid out beer mats. The furniture is typical pub stuff, bar one room which, filled with beaten grey sofas, is presumably aimed at chill out lounge, but instead hits bail hostel.

At first look, the small bar, positioned against the wall in the right of the three rooms, looks busy, the queue three deep. You decide to put off getting a drink for a minute, to take a walk around, to survey all the other pale, surprised young faces.

Standing in the entrance, you turn left away from the bar towards the chill-out area, and then immediately stop. You turned left last time, you recall. You decided the queue was too long, turned left, and, within a dozen steps, tubby, sweaty Simon Stubbs stumbled first across your path and then straight into you. Despite your attempts to demur, he dragged you back to his table, fat friendly hand around your shoulder, insisting on introducing you to his own just made friends and buying you a drink, the first of thousands. You watch as
he gets up from that table, and walks unsteadily towards the fateful spot.

Those people gathered around that table, those people Stubbs introduced you to, were to become your closest friends, friends with whom you spent three years and still see. You went to lectures together, to parties, drank in pubs and slouched in front of Home and Away. You laughed, cried and shared, grew up together, really, and you slept with at least 2 of them. You hesitate- wouldn’t you want to do it all again, relive those golden times once more?

No thanks, you decide, and watch Stubbs sail off to the toilet unhindered. A list of possible motivations for your decision are here. Feel free to explore them, but don’t feel obliged to.

Instead, you turn right, and walk towards the bar. It is less busy than you had thought, with many of people queuing merely standing near the bar. You move past them, excusing yourself until you reach the bar. There are two staff behind the small bar, one older man in charge, and one young woman, presumably a student in a later year. Neither is moving very quickly.

You survey the plaques and photos of old sports teams, wondering what it was, above so many others, that the 74-75 Netball team did to deserve immortality. You look at the bar prices- pints priced up in chalk, while special offer “cocktails” are advertised on small pieces of pink card stuck to the optics- and marvel, as the prices are low enough to prompt a moral panic.
You look at the other people waiting to buy drinks. On your right is a small, nervous and frail boy, with short-pale blonde hair. He does not look old enough to be here. He concentrates intently on the barman, waiting to snatch his attention the moment he finishes serving. On your left, a brunette student stands, their eyes on the barmaid, one hand resting on the bar, fingers curled around a leather purse at the end of a long, slightly brown arm. She does not shift herself to look at you.

You decide to talk to one of them: it is, after all, the first night of university, where such things are allowed. Do you

*Turn left and talk to the girl*     or     *Turn to the right and chat to the chap.*
Possible motivations for not reliving your student friendships in exact detail

1. None of your friends owned a country house. In fact, none of your friends even knew anyone who owned a country house.

2. You still know them years later, and as a result, have been reliving your student days in excruciating detail and on a regular basis ever since. You may not need to have been there that time when Stubbs fell in a wheelie bin, but you certainly feel like you were. Indeed, the frequency with which these memories are revived makes you doubt they were all that fabulous to start with.

3. You slept with at least 2 of them. This could really do with a sub-set in and of itself.

4. They didn’t push you enough. Along with many, many more and wilder parties, you want long talks into the early hours about Marcel Proust, free jazz and the nature of time, fevered collaborations on quantum mechanics equations, and different people to sleep with. Not Stubbs falling in a wheelie bin. Again.
Possible motivations for not reliving your student friendships in exact detail—

for the author

There’s a wider reason for this. Should you choose to relive exactly your student days, there will be a lot more of what’s happened here- scenarios in which you, the character, remembers an event, and the book has to pause to explain to you, the reader, what that memory, and its importance, are.

Something like this problem is also observable in the old age and adolescent sections before you got off the train, though the problem lessens as the original set-up becomes less important to the story.
Sub-set of reasons for not revisiting the people you’ve slept with.

1. You regret sleeping with them. This is likely if you are a woman.

2. You say, when asked, that you regret sleeping with them. This is very likely if you are a woman (if, indeed, you admit to having slept with them at all). It is quite likely if you are a man being asked by someone you are currently sleeping whether you regret sleeping with them. It is entirely unlikely if not.

3. You enjoyed sleeping with them, but let’s make no bones about it, would rather sleep with some other, extra people as well. To continue in this frank vein, this applies pretty squarely to both sexes.

4. You loved sleeping with them. You loved it so much that you’re still sleeping with one of them, but this weakens rather than strengthens your desire to do so again on a fictive basis. Again, this goes equally for both sexes.
You turn your body so that you face the brunette. You wonder what to say. Should you say something simple, something unassuming- start with a plain “hi” or “How’s it going”? Should you begin with an observation, note that it’s “Busy, isn’t it?” or tell her that “The drinks are really cheap, aren’t they?” Or do you need something more elaborate, need what used to be called a chat-up line? You never get to decide.

“Hi,” she says, noticing the way your body has turned. “How’s it going? I’m Alex, by the way. This bar is very busy, isn’t it? - guess it’s those cheap drinks.” She smiles and you nod. “So is it your first time here or do you come here often?” she then asks playfully.

You agree with her about the bar, and tell her your name. You have a witty retort ready to finish with, when the barmaid interrupts you by asking Alex what she wants to drink. Alex reels off a long order, and the barmaid turns away to get it. The moment for a joke in response to the “come here often?” comment is irretrievably lost.

“That’s a lot of drinks,” you say instead.

“Not all for me,” says Alex, “I wouldn’t order 1 pint of Carling, let alone 3. Most of it is for the other people from my floor- they are over there,” pointing to a table at the back of the room, a dozen people squeezed round it, clutching
empty glasses. “Simon is getting the other half...Oh, he’s gone,” she says, referring to the blonde boy who had previously stood to your right. “He’s on my floor, too,” she says. “Is that who you’re here with?” she then asks.

Alex makes a good point. You cannot give a reason why you did not come down with the people from your floor, but you are sure that if you could, it would be good. You think it best to skip over the subject.

“I’m meeting them down here in a bit,” you say, glancing up at the clock above the bar as if to estimate their time of arrival. “I’d got sick of unpacking, so I just came down.” It sounds convincing enough, and Alex seems to accept it.

“Who’s this Alex?” a voice says, from behind you, as the barmaid puts the first part of Alex’s drinks order on the bar. Another young woman steps between you and Alex.

“I thought I would come and give you a hand with the drinks,” the friend says, “but I see there’s no need.”

Alex introduces you to her friend, Sam. The barmaid brings the second part of the order, and, after checking with Alex, goes off to assemble another double vodka, lime and lemonade. Sam asks “Who are you here with?”, but Alex helpfully fields it. “You should come and sit with us while you wait,” Sam says,
“don’t you think, Alex?” Alex doesn’t disagree. “Have you got a drink?” Sam asks. You shake your head to say no.

“Alex will get you one, won’t you?” Alex, a little ruefully, nods her head and asks you what you would like.

It was all, until that point, going rather well. You have struck up a conversation with two attractive and personable young people, who have invited you to join them for a drink, where they will introduce you to what you hope will be a wide and varied group of people. But now they want to know what you want to drink.

Your choice of drink is crucial. Your choice reveals all sorts of psychological and sociological information about you, of course, but, in the present situation, that is not why it is important. It is important because of its practical effect. Students often choose the strongest, cheapest alcohol available, this preference being the only thing that makes snakebite popular. It is a preference that, as people grow older, they abandon, often as a result of the catastrophes that followed its earlier indulgence. You are about to do just that, and order a pint of Becks Vier, in the knowledge that, though it sounds strong, it is helpfully weak. But you hit a snag- it’s 1999, and Becks Vier, and other, similar nice-but-weak lagers, won’t be invented for another decade.
Do you therefore

Hang the consequences and order a Stella Artois, braving whatever terrible and embarrassing incidents will follow: at least Alex is paying.

Or

Order a Carling, even at the expense of Alex’s disapproval. It is the sensible option.
Reasons for not being with the people from your floor

The reasons are not good, as it happens. Realistically, you would have come down with the people from your floor, wouldn’t you, or at least attempted to?

Your avoidance of the people from your floor could, within the book, be written off as the result of future experience, of disastrous and embarrassing evenings yet, and never now, to come, on your past or future discovery that everyone on your floor was a racist with poor personal hygiene. None of these would make sense to Alex, let alone the truth, that it was narrative expediency in action.

BACK
A list of sociological information that your choice of drink might reveal, if you ordered that drink from a bar.

Your gender: Drinks that may give us information about your gender include white wine (when ordered in a pub or bar), Malibu and lemonade, and vodka, lime and lemonade. If you order anything from this list, it is highly likely you are a woman. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, ordering a shandy (a lager or ale diluted with lemonade) is not a sign that you are a woman. By contrast, it is also sometimes claimed that women like drinking real ale- this is a myth. There is more chance of seeing a unicorn than a woman ordering bitter.

Your age: It would be normal, as life grinds on, for you to order a glass of red wine, a whisky with a splash of water or a gin and tonic from a public bar. But life does need to have ground on a bit before you do- it would be extremely pretentious for anyone to order any of those at eighteen, on their first night at University.

Your appetite for self-destruction: There are essentially two motivations for ordering an alcoholic drink. One is that, when consumed in sufficient volume, it
will lead you to an altered consciousness, a state in which you believe that you are having a better time than you would be sober. The second is that you like the taste, by which you mean that you have pursued the aforementioned altered state with such dedication and such frequency that you are now inured to the taste. Every alcoholic drink, with the possible exception of ginger wine, is fit to meet the first purpose, but some do not fit well with the second. No one ever ordered a vodka and Red Bull “to sip”, or used the words, “I’m driving, so just a vodka jelly shot for me.”

A list of sociological information that your choice of drink is less likely to reveal, if ordered from a bar.

Your social class: While the bar you are drinking in will likely tell everything one needs to know about your social class and standing, what you order at any given bar is of little value. Sure, there are drinks that you can order that might tell you something – buying champagne, the most expensive wine or lager, perhaps, or one of those cocktails you read about in a bar served in a Roman Centurion’s helmet, made from rum, antique papayas and Prince Harry’s tears. However, the ability to order such a thing, no matter how frequently you do
so, rather depends on where you are - no matter what your social class, you won’t have much luck in a Wetherspoons. BACK
You turn to the man on your right and try to get his attention. At first, you don’t say anything, just turn your body in his direction, and hope that he will begin the conversation. He keeps his eyes fixed on the barman. After a minute of this, you realise you will have to kick off your talk. You consider bumping him, as if jostled, and starting with an apology. That seems desperate, so you instead lean forward onto the bar, mirroring his position. You are in position, your head cocked to one side, your mouth open ready to loose a “How’s it going?” when the barman interrupts.

“What do you want?” he shouts. You are about to respond, when you realise he doesn’t mean you. The boy next to you quickly responds, in a high, sharp voice, “I’ll have four bottles of Two Dogs and a pint of Carling, please,” he says.

What is Two Dogs, you may feel like asking, depending on your knowledge of the period. Instead, you decide that now would be a good time to ask your question, as the barman nods, and after placing a pint glass under the tap to pour, turns around to get the bottles from the fridge.

“How’s it going?” you ask him, shouting amid the din of the bar.

He does not reply immediately. After a minute of waiting, it becomes obvious that he will not reply at all. His inaction places you in an awkward position. Is he ignoring you? Or is he so focused on his Two Dogs, so distracted by the
tumult and by Cast on the jukebox, that he has not heard you? You are left with two options. You may either, thinking his lack of response answer enough, leave your greeting to hang and turn to talk to the young woman, or you can repeat it, more volubly and with a tug at his arm, making sure he’s heard you, and can’t ignore you.
You clear your throat, making sure you will be loud enough. You consider your
greeting- stick with “How’s it going?” or trade down to the more egalitarian
“All right”? You think about the physical- a tap on the arm, a tug at the elbow
or a hand clamped on the shoulder? As the barman takes the top from the last
bottle of Two Dogs, putting them before the young man, and taking his ten-
pound note, you realise you don’t have long.

You settle for tapping the outside of your hand against what his flimsy bicep,
and another go at “How’s it going?” Nothing results. No inclination of his head
in your direction, no words from his lips. Instead, he silently takes the money
from the barman and collecting his drinks, leaves the bar and walks away. You
cannot avoid concluding that he ignored you purposely- there were no signs of
muteness or deafness where the barman was concerned.

You watch him walk away, before turning back to the bar. You realise there is
nothing for it but to talk to the young woman.
With a sense of resignation, you take your seat between the two male students. In total and including you, there are now ten people around the table - a man on either side of you, one of whom you recognise from the bar, and Alex and Sam at the end of the table. There are three more men and two more women who sit along the sides of the table; for the moment, you take no more notice of them than that and tune into what people are saying. You pick up the conversation.

In the absence of adults’ polished shop talk or small talk, the talk is about childhood, or rather the things that they remember from their childhoods, adolescence being still too present for you all to comfortably discuss. Absent the common and actual experiences shared by school friends, of infant plays performed together, or particularly dragon-like dinner ladies and the filth they served up- the discussion falls to products- to games, books and toys. One of the men next to you, the unfamiliar one, is talking.

"It's like," he says, "those Choose Your Own Adventures, do you remember those?" A murmur of agreement around the group.

"I remember them," Sam says, and "I remember them not being very good," Alex replies.
It seems to end there; the boy now flounders slightly. He does not have anywhere to go with the thought, you realise. He probably wishes he had stuck with the Game Of Life, which everyone had played. You also wish he had stuck with the Game of Life, in fact. He could have moved onto the Game of Games, if moving on was necessary, but went for something more complex, something with more nuance. Admirable but it simply hasn’t worked.

His pause allows you to get a better look at him. He is portly, chubby in the face, and thin black hair dangles in a straight line across his forehead. His eyes, nose and mouth bunch together at the bottom of his round face, leaving expanses of empty cheek and forehead: it is as if someone has let the plug out of the sink and his face has gathered in the plughole. He wears thick, round glasses that dominate his face, and all together, he puts you in mind, given the subject matter of the conversation, of Penfold from the cartoon *Dangermouse*.

“What I wondered when I read them,” he finally continues, having found something to continue with “was whether anyone ever put all those rules into practice.”

“One potion of luck, strength or skill...” says one of the other men, a tall, thin type.
“Exactly, I mean, can you imagine it? The rules used to go on for pages and pages, in close type and if you followed them you'd never finish...”

“Can you imagine getting to the end of a book and having to go all the way back to the beginning,” Sam says, “a really long one, just because you hadn’t read one bit you needed to, and then needing to read it all again.”

“That happens with computer games, though, or at least it sort of does,” Simon, the guy from the bar says.

“And that’s one reason, amongst many, not to play them, either” Alex says, and the rest of the table laughs, a little grudgingly in some cases. You might join in with the laughter or you might feel lost, you might be grateful for some elaborating information on Choose Your Own Adventures which you can find here. If not, you might well feel irked at the diversion from the main flow of the story the previous sentence caused. You will likely be even more peeved when told that there is another digression, on the subject of digressions, which you can read here.

The laughter has now subsided: there wasn’t all that much of it anyway. The conversation again dies off into silence: those around the table fiddle with their drinks glasses, and stare at their hands and the surrounding bar grows suddenly, spitefully noisy. The lull lasts longer, too, as Penfold takes no
responsibility for ending it. You wonder whether you can finish your drink and make your excuses.

Or should you say something? Ideally, you would have been asked your opinion. Under those circumstances, you could, as one often does, mumble something non-committal, then move everyone onto safer, and more fertile, conversational ground. But breaking the silence to mumble something non-committal seems pointless. You could be frank about your own views, of course. Again, if your views were that you held no strong opinion at all, your intervention might seem odd.

But you could say your views were extremely negative, and that your opinions of those who read, write or talk about Choose Your Own Adventure books were also extremely negative. This would seem odd and hypocritical, but it may ingratiate you with Alex. Or you could simply tell the truth. Tell your new friends about your love for the books- *for the genre*- then take the opportunity to gently correct some of the misperceptions they have, perhaps delivering an impromptu lecture on the development, and importance, of the gamebook, to use the proper literary term. That, you might think, wouldn’t seem odd at all.

But while you sit there thinking of ways to break the impasse, the silence persists. The other people in the bar seem ever noisier, seem to be having an ever better time as your table lapses into ever deeper silence. You wonder
whether your little group will break up before it ever really forms. Something must be done.

So do you tell them that

“Strictly speaking, Choose Your Own Adventures are one series amongst several, operating to the similar principles and are themselves part of a larger genre called interactive fiction.”

Then go on to say that you like the books a great deal, and that if they will allow you a little time, you’d like to elaborate on some of the reasons why, using examples from Khare - Cityport of Traps, the second novel in the Steve Jackson’s Sorcery! Series with photocopies of the relevant bits in case they don’t have their own copy to hand.

Or do you

Keep your mouth shut. Nothing good ever came from photocopies of Khare-Cityport of Traps.

You should touch your preferred option, and do so as quickly as possible- Alex is looking particularly bored with the waiting. Of course, if you want to Try Your Skill instead, you should press here.
What are they talking about when they’re talking about Choose Your Own Adventures?

You may have joined in the laughter at the strange quirks of the genre commonly referred to as “Choose Your Own Adventure”, or you may not. Talking about them may be completely alien, it may touch on distant, almost forgotten memories, or it may be utterly, frustratingly basic for you. You might, therefore, want to know more about these types of books, and want to read an essay for those who know nothing, an essay for those who know a little, or, if you know a lot, relish the cheap jokes contained in this essay, just to prepare yourself for the rest of the conversation. Alternately, you might feel that you know enough already and are ready to return to the story.
Digressions, Exposition and Lists of Digressions

The line between digression- a diversion from the main purpose of a story- and exposition- information necessary to understand the story, or a character in that story- can be a thin one. Do you need to know about the history of the genre to understand this novel, or does the author just want to tell you? Do you need to read the author’s musings on the Oyster Card? Do you want to? A traditional text leaves you no say in the matter.

By contrast, as you have gathered, there is nothing to stop the author putting whatever they like into this book, however abstruse or extraneous, and nothing to stop you ignoring it. Examples already abound,-from King Lear to the website address for the Fighting Fantasy novels. A complete list of digressions, both those past and those yet to come, is in the chapter index here. Given that it concerns digression , it would be hypocritical to host the information in the main text, but before you worry that readers who choose not to come here will have missed out, remember: they were the ones who didn’t want to hear about of interest in digressions when they had the chance .
Without being asked, you tell the group that

“Khare- Cityport of Traps was my particular favourite, and possibly the greatest novel in the entire genre. Let me tell you why”, or words to that effect.

However, while there is obvious and immediate relief that the silence has been broken, those around you do not seem keen on your proposed topic.

You put this understandable reluctance down to ignorance, an affliction you can soon cure. “So,” you begin, settling to your task, “Steve Jackson...”

“Let’s do shots!” Sam shouts, to noisy and universal agreement. Before you know it, the talk of the table, a moment ago non-existent, has turned to voluble argument over which tastes least bad, Sambucca or Tequila. You try, briefly, to turn things back to the infamous Cityport of Khare, but with no success. The others are now otherwise occupied: Alex, sadly, being particularly strident in her opposition to talking Khare. You accept defeat and join the debate, on the side of whichever spirit you think least worst.

After a few minutes, during which both sides, especially the girl with the grating laugh on the other side of Simon, put their views with more venom than seems necessary, a compromise is reached. Penfold and the girl with a red face will go round the table and take an order for either Sambucca or Tequila, collecting a couple of quid from each of you, to pay for it. You
consider whether to demand something else— a single malt or an Aftershock, say— but having heard the abuse Simon gets when he tries to opt out, you order one of the specified options. As the duo makes their way to the bar, the rest talk excitedly, discussing whether to play a drinking game when they return. It is better than silence, you suppose, but no substitute for well-informed discussion about gamebooks.

“Sorry,” you hear a voice behind you say. You turn around.

Sam leans on the back of your chair. “I shouldn’t have interrupted you like that. Honestly I’m terrible.” You tell her it’s not a problem. “I was interested, you know,” she assures you, “really, I was. Listen, I got you this, to say I’m sorry, sort of thing.” She hands you a pint, and you say that she didn’t need to, but Sam shrugs and smiles widely at you. You point out Penfold’s return from the bar, as you watch him wobbling towards you with a tray, and Sam moves out of the way, going back to her seat. As she goes, you catch Alex’s eye. Her expression is inscrutable. You take your shot from the tray offered by Penfold, and move forward to the rest of the evening.
At a signal, you drink your shots, in ragged order round the table. Some of you are stoic; others groan, moan or audibly shiver as the alcohol hits them. Having dispensed with your own, you put down the shot glass, and pick up your beer, perhaps taking a small sip to take away the harsh taste of the spirit. Others are still grunting, still emphasising the rough hit of the drink. Not all—Alex, after a brief shudder at her tequila, starts telling a story.

“That,” she says, holding up her glass “was a little rough.” No-one argues with her. “It’s not the same thing as it is in Mexico. Not just because of the way they serve it—no salt or lemon, just neat, or with Sangrita in some regions, of course, or because of where you’re drinking it—somehow these things always taste better in the country they come from, even Corona does. But the Herradura is just miles better than that stuff wherever you are.”

“You’ve been to Mexico then?” Penfold asks.

“Yes,” Alex replies, “I was there for a few months at the start of my year off.”

“Oh, I had a gap year,” Penfold replies, “Didn’t do much with it in the end. Worked for the first ten months in my local Woolworths, saved some money up, and then I followed the Bluetones around on tour this summer, all round Britain and as far away as Belgium. That was good.”
Alex nods. “I spent the first part of my time in Mexico working on a community
development project in Oaxaca, before having some time to travelling, and
partying, in Baja. The second part of the year- after a quick stop at home to
recharge- I trekked through the Caucasus, alone. What about the rest of you?”

Others- the lanky one, the one with the grating laugh, the boy with the spots,
the girl with the olive skin next to Alex- volunteer their own experiences, falling
somewhere between following the Bluetones to Belgium and drinking
Herradura in Baja California before walking through a warzone.

“I’m jealous,” says Sam, “I didn’t do anything.”

“You just stayed at home and worked?” asks Alex, confused.

“No,” Sam replies, “I didn’t have a gap year.”

Disapproval whistles around the table. No one is so rude to exclaim, like a
great aunt in high dudgeon, “Didn’t have a gap year? Preposterous!” but they
cannot hide their reactions: Alex’s eyebrows shoot up towards her eyebrows,
while Penfold has some kind of convulsion.

Sam continues. “No, I came straight from school- guess that makes me a baby
to the rest of you.” Nobody at the table disputes her claim. She senses the
others’ disquiet. “More shots?” she offers, hoping to placate them.
The others quickly accept and Sam scuttles off to the bar. Around the table, your new friends shake their heads at Sam’s lack of interesting experiences. You watch her as she takes a twenty pound note out of her purse and hands it over. The girl with the red face begins to tell everyone about their gap year, but Alex interrupts and turns the table’s attention to you.

“So,” asks Alex, “What did you do on your gap year?”

Regardless of the truth of the matter, Sam’s fate has persuaded you that you had a gap year, or that you at least need to say so. So do you

**Take the safe option**- claim to have worked for a bit, and then spent a few months in Thailand. You’ve heard of places there, you’ve possibly read *The Beach* or seen the film of the novel; you’ve eaten the food very often. You might even have been there.

Or

**Attempt something more difficult**. Having heard tell of Alex’s exotic travels, and recognising that something more creative and unusual is required if you wish to keep pace with her, manufacture a year spent on Guavo, a tiny and mysterious island, where, after a brief, eventful and ultimately tragic stay at the island’s largest armadillo farm, you sought redemption teaching English to
the destitute street children of the capital city, while taking hallucinogens with the High Priests of undiscovered tribes at weekends.

But in that choice, and in the choices already made, you may have detected a wider possibility emerging for you, a possibility that underlies your presence at the table. If that is so, you may wish to read this first instead. But only if.
The Bluetones referenced in a novel-

You may have read the name of The Bluetones and known nothing about them. You might imagine that they had some relationship to the blues (they don’t), or to the Blue Note jazz label (they don’t). You might have imagined that following them around on tour would be cool (it wouldn’t), or that doing so would make Penfold cool (it emphatically doesn’t). You might have turned here expecting an introduction to a new favourite band, only to find they had been mentioned for cheap comic effect.

That comic effect is, of course, extremely limited if the name of The Bluetones inspired any of those incorrect thoughts, rather than the snigger the author intended. For the record though, in case you haven’t given up and searched Wikipedia, the Bluetones were a British rock group, whose peak of popularity came in the mid 1990’s, two to three years before the novel takes place. They are best known for the song, “Slight Return”, which you might well recognise if you heard it, albeit that you might not know who recorded it. You might know “Marblehead Johnson”, too, if you were young and British in 1996 or 1997. They were one of the Britpop movement’s fellow travellers, one of those minor groups that bumped along in the wake of Blur and Oasis, though their sound was more like the Manchester bands of the late 80’s and early 90’s than either. They ground on together for a surprisingly long time, too, for the best part of a
decade, though one has to take the trouble to look them up to know that they carried on quite so long. One has to look them up to know most of that in fact.

In the novel, they are Penfold’s favourite band, and were chosen to perform that role because it is just about feasible that The Bluetones could be someone’s favourite band—someone with poor taste in bands, admittedly—though it would be very funny if they were. For Penfold to claim that he had followed Echobelly to Luxembourg, or Menswear to Utrecht, say, would be frankly unbelievable.
What you may, perhaps should, have worked out—there are no great secrets to this book, no great mystery hidden in the discussion of gap-year travel arrangements—is that you are not constrained by these options. In fact, your options are nearly endless. Not, perhaps, in the straightforward matter of your year off, but in how you respond to the question. For, in giving your response, you can choose the persona you wish to adopt: who the “you” you choose to be actually is.

The situation dictates as much. Here you are, at university, with nothing but your attendance at that university to define you. You can therefore adopt whichever personality you choose. A preternaturally wise, yet already world-weary, philosopher; an intense, even agonised, would-be artist and poet; a ruthless young striver, driven to own the world; a smooth and dangerous sexual libertine; to list a few you might conceivably choose. There is nothing, except any scruples you may have or any obvious requirements that you don’t, to stop you taking on any of those roles, though to adopt all of them might be a bit much.

You will have to be more careful with your history— you cannot pretend to have played sport at the highest level, to be the heir to the one of the oldest and grandest of European fortunes, or to have been a child film star, if you have actually haven’t. Those are the sorts of things that people can, and do, check.
But that handicap, as you have doubtless realised, is balanced by the uniqueness of your situation. You are equipped with hindsight, and rather a lot of it. In fact, it may be that you can think of better ways to use your hindsight, and may wish to do so here. But if you do not and, having selected your persona, you now wish to proceed, you should continue reading below.

You begin by responding to Alex’s question, with one of the options given, either Thailand or Guavo. This may cause some friction. Your chosen persona might be that of a fearless truth teller, a plain dealer who makes clear your view of others, even when that is difficult for them and you. If so, this may be a reason why you found yourself being kidnapped while commuting to a job you hate. Try tact instead.

Moreover, while you are at liberty to paint your own portrait, a picture takes more than a single stroke, no matter how broad. If you wish to be someone else, do not ask to choose something else: instead, ask yourself what would a sexually jaded intellectual tyro choose? Guavo or Thailand?

If you wish to role-play this section, click here now.
CHOOSING YOUR ATTRIBUTES

The preceding entry will have come as something of a disappointment for you, if you are a role-playing devotee. When, for Warhammer or something similar, you are required to create a persona, it is done on a much more formal basis. A small remainder of that was covered in the role-play section, and this section will serve as an amplification of it.

In the last role-play section, here, you were asked to allocate points against certain attributes. What you are asked to do there- allocate a limited number of points- is crude, by the standards of most similar systems, though it will serve well enough for this book. It echoes, gently parodies if one is honest, similar sections in the Fighting Fantasy series.

But as you may be aware, that is small beer compared to the customisation routinely available in role-playing. There, given a certain number of points, and the game you are playing, you may choose to be a mage or barbarian prince, a bard or ranger, to be cowboys, spacemen and superheroes, choosing a name and outfit, and which weapons with which to equip yourself,. Much of this has also been carried into the modern computer game.

And what could be more fitting than for it to be replicated here, reflecting the breadth of possible personas? You will choose from a menu of options, each
setting out a number of characteristics you might have. To keep you honest, you have 350 points available to equip yourself with characteristics, rather as a Barbarian can only carry one sword and one healing potion, so you may only choose some of the below. Remember you should choose the attributes that you believe will best equip you for life - it may take some time given the cap.

PERSONALITY - CHOOSE ONE OF THE BELOW

- YOU ARE OUTGOING, CHARMING, GOOD NATURED, SUNNILY OPTIMISTIC AND SUCCESSFUL IN MOST THINGS YOU ATTEMPT. - 175 POINTS

- YOU ARE UNDERSTANDING OF OTHERS’ FAULTS, NICE, DECENT, WELL-LIKED, AND ONLY SOMETIMES DULL. – 125 POINTS

- YOU ARE QUICK-TEMPERED, HOLD IDIOSYNCRATIC VIEWS ON THE COINAGE, OFTEN WITTY BUT PRONE TO LONG RANTS ABOUT THINGS THAT INTEREST ONLY YOU, NAMELY THE COINAGE- 100 POINTS

- YOU ARE OUTWARDLY PASSIVE, BUT ARE ACTUALLY CONNIVING AND EMOTIONALLY MANIPULATIVE, OFTEN GAINING WHAT YOU WANT AS A RESULT.- 200 POINTS

PARENTAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS YOU (PICK ONE FROM THE BELOW)
• LACK OF INTEREST DISGUISED BY REGULAR FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS.
  - 30 POINTS

• LOVING, FORGIVING, OVERLY INDULGENT OF YOU, IF ANYTHING. - 40 POINTS

• OUTRIGHT NEGLECT, LEAVING YOU AN EMOTIONAL HUSK. - 10 POINTS

• SORT OF WOBBLING ALONG IN THE MIDDLE LANE BETWEEN ALL OF THOSE- 20 POINTS

PERSONAL HABITS (PICK THREE FROM THE BELOW)

• A NOSE PICKER. NOT ALWAYS THAT SECRETLY.- 12 POINTS

• A HIGH LEVEL OF PERSONAL HYGIENE, SUPPORTED BY WELL-CHOSEN CLOTHES AND APPROPRIATE FRAGRANCE.- 100 POINTS

• IRONING YOUR CLOTHES BEFORE WEARING THEM. – 41 POINTS

• MUMBLING. WHEN ASKED TO REPEAT WHAT YOU SAID, MUMBLING LOUDER. 16 POINTS

• USING SEXUAL SWEARWORDS IN INAPPROPRIATE SITUATIONS.- 3 POINTS
• USING SEXUAL SWEARWORDS IN APPROPRIATE, OFTEN HILARIOUS WAYS. – 25 POINTS

• COUGHING WHEN EMBARRASSED. – 7 POINTS

• A SHAMELESS APPROACH TO CERTAIN, OFTEN AWKWARD, SOCIO-SEXUAL SITUATIONS. – 17 POINTS

• SCRATCHING YOUR PRIVATES WHEN ALONE— 3 POINTS

• BATHING/SHOWERING IN THE EVENING, RATHER THAN THE MORNING. – 1 POINT

• EATING PICKLED ONIONS, AND/OR PICKLED EGGS, THEN EXPRESSING SURPRISE AT SUBSEQUENT HALITOSIS. – 10 POINTS

• SITTING TOO CLOSE TO PEOPLE FOR THEM TO FEEL ENTIRELY COMFORTABLE WITH YOU. – 9 POINTS

SEXUAL TECHNIQUE AND EXPERIENCE (CHOOSE ONE FROM THE BELOW)

• PRACTICED AND POLISHED (115 POINTS)

• NONE, BUT A LOT OF ENTHUSIASM (12 POINTS)

A-LEVEL GRADES (CHOOSE ONE FROM BELOW)
You may note that a high degree of sexual experience and decent academic performance are largely incompatible. Female readers may object that this does not accord with their experience, and that academically successful young women often have wide and varied sexual experience. This is not under dispute, but the likelihood of a female reader reading this section might be.

CLASS BACKGROUND (CHOOSE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING)

- YOU ARE AN ACTUAL MEMBER OF BRITAIN’S ARISTOCRACY. YOU DON’T TRACE YOUR FAMILY TREE- YOU SIMPLY WALK UP THE STAIRS LOOKING AT THE PORTRAITS. YOU ARE UPPER CLASS. - 100 POINTS

- YOU ARE EXPENSIVELY EDUCATED, IMPECCABLY WELL-CONNECTED AND CONVINCED OF YOUR RIGHT TO RULE. VERY LIKELY, YOUR FAMILY HAS MORE MONEY THAN IF YOU WERE UPPER CLASS. BUT AS YOU HAVE NEITHER A HEREDITARY TITLE NOR A COUNTRY HOME IN WILTSHIRE PAID FOR WITH PROFITS FROM THE SLAVE TRADE, YOU CLAIM TO BE UPPER “MIDDLE” CLASS. – 95 POINTS
• YOU GREW UP ON A COUNCIL ESTATE, IN A SOLIDLY WORKING CLASS ENVIRONMENT. DESPITE LACKING ALL THE ADVANTAGES OF WEALTH AND PRIVILEGE POSSESSED BY OTHERS, YOU HAVE, NONETHELESS, ACHIEVED AS MUCH OR MORE THAN ANY OF THEM, AND MAY THEREFORE LUXURIATE IN YOUR OWN SUCCESS. – 47 POINTS

• YOU ARE REALLY MIDDLE CLASS. YOU DON’T HAVE ANYTHING INTERESTING MUCH TO DISTINGUISH YOU, NEXT TO THOSE WHO ARE EITHER MUCH RICHER OR MUCH POORER. – 54 POINTS

OTHER ATTRIBUTES (CHOOSE TWO FROM THE FOLLOWING)

• YOU REGULARLY PLAY ROLEPLAYING GAMES, SOMETIMES VISITING GAMES WORKSHOP TO DO SO, AND FIND THIS SECTION A BIT SHONKY. – 9 POINTs

• YOU HAVE HIGH LEVELS OF PHYSICAL FITNESS, AS A RESULT OF YOUR REGULAR PARTICPATION IN TEAM SPORTS. – 1 POINTS

• YOU HAVE READ EVERY WORD THAT TERRY PRATCHETT HAS PUBLISHED, OR AT LEAST MOST OF THEM, HE HAS PUBLISHED A LOT. – 6 POINTS

• YOU LIKED DRUM AND BASS, OR RATHER LIKE IT, FOR IT IS THE LATE NINETIES. YOU HAVE IT PLAYING WHEN OTHERS CAME TO VISIT YOUR ROOM. – 23 POINTS
• YOU ARE A FEROCIOUS CONSUMER OF ALCOHOL, AND ANYTHING ELSE YOU CAN GET YOUR HANDS ON, PUFF, WHIZ, YOU NAME IT. – 7 POINTS

• YOU LIKE TO EAT ONE CHOCOLATE BAR A DAY, AND ONE ONLY, USUALLY A BOOST, THOUGH SOMETIMES A TWIX. – 15 POINTS

• YOU ARE BEGINNING TO DOUBT THAT YOU WILL EVER ENJOY A COMPUTER GAME AS MUCH AS SONIC THE HEDGEHOG, EVER AGAIN. – 4 POINTS

• YOU TELL SMALL LIES EASILY, A LITTLE TOO EASILY IN FACT. –17 POINTS

• INVARIENTLY, YOU FIND OTHER PEOPLE INSUFFERABLY DULL BUT YOU HIDE IT WELL. – 21 POINTS.

• YOU HAVE GRADE 8 FLUTE AND GRADE 4 PIANO. – 3 POINTS

• YOU LIKE TALKING ABOUT YOUR EMOTIONS, BUT ARE UNINTERESTED IN POLITICS, TO THE POINT OF PHYSICAL PAIN. – 13 POINTS

• JAZZ IS YOUR PASSION. – 8 POINTS

• INSERT YOUR OWN CHARACTERISTIC- 10 POINTS

  o HIGHLIGHT THE TEXT ABOVE, AND ADD IN A NOTE A CHARACTERISTIC NOT COVERED
Having completed that, you may wonder what effect it will have on your subsequent progress. The answer is none, but creating your character is one of the essential parts of the role-playing experience. And having done so, you must know face the same dilemma as before. Consider the character you have created. Were you a neglected child with the ability to tell small lies easily? Are you an aristocrat with poor A-Level results and a passion for jazz? Will you pretend you had a gap year in Guavo or in Thailand?
You could, you realise, use your hindsight not just in the creation of a persona, but in the choice of that persona. It may be that hindsight tells you to become a charismatic seducer instead of a driven young entrepreneur, or vice versa. But there is another way in which your experience can be used to create a new and brilliant persona. You can take someone else’s.

You are reading this in 2013. The main action is taking place more than a decade before, in the late nineteen nineties- October 7th 1999 to be precise. In the time between then and now, all sorts of people have won tremendous fame and popularity, who were, back then, no better known than you are now. You could, if you wished, pre-empt them, and borrow a personality that they are yet to make famous.

You immediately realise this is harder than you thought. Their success cannot be the result of their looks or an intrinsic talent that you might lack, including their looks. The names that spring to mind are not useful.

You are about to abandon the idea and take the gap year plunge, when an improved variation occurs. If there is a paucity of real world people whose personality you would willingly adopt, what about fictional ones?

This, you must feel, is a much more productive area, albeit a narrow one. There are characters to avoid, obviously, the comic grotesques, the David
Brens, the brutal villains. More, some of the most popular characters- Batman, James Bond, all of the Transformers- already have a long and already pre-established history. But others do not.

Think of Jack Sparrow, hero of the Pirates Of The Caribbean films, for instance. A brilliant, unconventional performance by Johnny Depp, which turned an otherwise lacklustre film into a multi-billion dollar franchise. And you can get there first. Or, stretching things slightly, what about Harry Potter? Not Harry’s personality, of course: there is nothing much to that- no, why not claim to be **Harry Potter**? You could, of course, decide that if those two are the best that can be come up with, you would be better off making a straight choice between **Thailand** and **Guavo**.

You might raise an objection here, along the lines of the ethics of time travel. You might talk about the obligation not to change the past, about the damage of unintended consequences and other stuff straight from the science fiction playbook. You might, however, consider that, in a book that suggests you get yourself out of a hijacking through the power of intense wishing, unintended consequences are not your highest concern.
A list of personalities that were to become famous between 1999 and 2012, identifying only those who are genuinely very famous, so that their fame exceeds that of Huw Edwards, say, and excludes those, such as Rafael Nadal or Sienna Miller, whose example, their fame deriving either from their exceptional skill in their professional sphere or as a result of their outstanding good looks, you cannot hope to emulate.

Jade Goody, Simon Cowell and Nick Clegg are the obvious ones.
Becoming Jack Sparrow

Just as the book shows you making decisions with the benefit of hindsight, it will now offer you the benefit of foresight. You could become Jack Sparrow. Not directly, not there and then: you don’t claim your gap year was crewing a Portuguese Man Of War in the China Sea, but you begin to imply it. You don’t introduce yourself as Captain Jack Sparrow, but you do adopt the accent and start walking in that funny way that Johnny Depp does. The following morning, you get the hair, baggy trousers, teeth and cutlass.

Most importantly, you use his jokes, and win immediate and enormous acclaim for them. You use them sparingly, wary of having to resort to material from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th films, though with the knowledge that the material from the 1st film is good enough to keep people coming back in hope of more.

Your strategy works well. Women love you, find you charismatic and unusual, while men grudgingly admire you, because women find you charismatic and unusual. So successful is your performance that you consider, after graduation, putting together a crew and taking out a ship into the Caribbean, there to make your fortune. You instead settle for a job as a runner with a television production company.
The release of the first *Pirates Of The Caribbean* causes some damage but is by no means fatal. While your act would be less effective on those who meet you after its release, as they presume you are copying a now well-known screen character, it is all the more effective on those who knew you before. They now assume that Johnny Depp, and/or the writers of *Pirates Of The Caribbean*, met you, and modelled the character of Jack Sparrow upon you.

But here is where the foresight needs to be used in addition to hindsight comes in. While your identity theft would work well for a while, it is only a matter of time before you meet someone at a party, who, rather than believing you took your act from Johnny Depp, assumes that you copied the whole thing from a newly famous Russell Brand. With such foresight, you quickly decide to use your hindsight differently.
You tell them about your school days on the strict condition of confidentiality.

You missed most of the last year, you confess, as you were forced into hiding due to the rise of an evil wizard, Lord Voldemort, or as you prefer to refer to him, Tom Riddle. You eventually vanquished him and his allies, bringing peace to the wizarding world. You tell them that you were given extra time to do resits, which was the least they could do in the circumstances. They did, however, curtail what you could do on your gap year.

The others are a little bemused. “You are a wizard,” they say suspiciously.

“Isn’t there a series of children’s books about this?” a mildly incredulous Alex asks, “Harry Patter or something?”

You confirm that a woman is writing a series about your life to date. You think she’s written three or four of them, with the one about your third year having just come out. The books will be more traumatic, from hereon out, you admit. Even after all this time, the death of Cedric Diggory at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament gives you the odd waking nightmare. The table goes silent for a moment, in respect for your grief or in disbelief at your insanity.
You do not worry if it is the latter. You know the details of every Harry Potter novel, and can reveal these years before they are published. J.K. Rowling doesn’t even know all the details yet. Who would expect that much of your seventh year would be spent on an interminable camping trip? No one but Harry Potter himself could know that!

Better yet, you have the perfect alibi for your lack of magical powers. You cannot, by magical law, use your powers in front of those without them. You should not admit your true identity, either, but you can hardly hope to avoid talking about your childhood and adolescence for three years of university.

You are Harry Potter, then. But you have one problem. Until your claims about your life are verified by future volumes, you cannot hope to impress anyone. And the next new novel, proving you right, won’t be published until the following summer- 8 July 2000, to be precise. So, no matter how often you say you’ve got to call Ginny, until that external verification arrives, and is reinforced by its sequels, your status as Harry Potter isn’t going to get you very far.
Which is a complicated way of saying that, Harry Potter or not, you still need to choose whether you had your gap year in Thailand or Guavo.
On Being Harry Potter

It is possible that you are Harry Potter. The sort of people who spend their time reckoning these things estimate that *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final book in the series, covers the 1997-1998 academic year. After a gap year, that would leave you starting university in 1999. J.K. Rowling makes no mention of university, so you would need to attend a Muggle-run institution if you wished to gain a higher education; this chimes with the relentlessly vocational focus at Hogwarts. That much accords between Harry and you, those books and this one.

You might demure. You might say that Harry Potter married Ginny Weasley, and rapidly sired several children by her, yet here you are approaching strange women in bars. You would have a point. But consider this—consider all the people you know who married their childhood sweetheart. Did it run so smoothly? Was there no time when one or other turned their attentions elsewhere? You should not be surprised to be flirting with other affections.

But the substantive proof comes from your job. Depending on whether you have looked this up on the internet, you will know, or vaguely remember that
Harry went on to head the Auror department for the Ministry of Magic, Aurors being a sort of police who investigate evil wizards. J.K. Rowling also stated that the world was much lighter and better after Voldemort’s defeat, with many fewer evil wizards. In other words, Harry Potter ended up in what certain national newspapers call a civil service non-job.

Imagine Harry making his way to the Ministry each morning, somewhat forlorn and disappointed with his life, wondering if there wasn’t some way in which it could be different. So, yes, you could be Harry Potter.
You look from Simon to Penfold and back again, with multiplying disappointment: when you met Alex and Sam and followed them to their table, this was not what you had in mind. The rest of the table, turned toward each other in little knots of conversation, buzzes with jolly conspiracy. From your position, you have little hope of joining one of those other, better conversations. You will have to talk to Simon and Penfold instead. You may want to insist on role-playing this section, and if you do, you should click here.

So you are stuck with them and they are stuck with you. Simon looks as disappointed as you are, while Penfold puffs heavily, his breathing shallow. There is no feeling of discomfort, exactly. No fear that the conversation will be stilted or somehow embarrassing: there is no danger that you and Simon will trade waspish remarks about your respective lying. It’s simply that you’re reluctant to trundle through the obvious talk that will surely follow.

You have a very few other options, though. Indeed, you may choose to seize the most obvious, escape, and do so immediately. You notice the near empty pint glass in front of you, and the similarly short glasses in front of the two other men: you could insist on going to the bar. You could take your time there, hoping that, by your return, the table will have reconfigured. You will
have to buy them a drink, however. If you don’t go, then either Penfold or Simon surely will, leaving you stuck with whichever one hasn’t. The three of you exchange calculating looks. If you wish to insist that you should go to the bar, click here.

If you do not, there is no choice but to plunge into conversation with the other two men. You know well what this involves. You know that there will be no discussion of feelings, or emotions, or indeed thoughts. That’s not correct: you know that there will be no discussion of feelings or emotions or thoughts that do not relate directly to football, or to cricket or rugby at a push. Contemplating this, you think about refusing. You might think its sheer inevitability makes the whole thing silly. You could insist that your conversation cover the anxieties and excitement the three of you feel on your first night at University, or to talk about what you really value in life, what is truly important to you. It is unlikely that your proposal will be agreed: Penfold and Simon have already told each other which teams they support, and are now preparing to exchange views on how Leeds will cope in the Champions League. So if you refuse entirely to participate in such a conversation, you might be looked at strangely, be looked at as strange, in fact. But you could still try, and if you want to, you could click here; alternatively, you could find the
whole thing ridiculous, not believe that this scenario is realistic at all, in which case, you might click here.

But failing all that, you must start the conversation. You might expect that Penfold would start with some comments about his preferred England formation and Simon would reply and somewhere near the bottom of the page you would face some sort of dilemma, some question to be resolved, who should play left-back, perhaps, very much a live issue at the time. Depending on your level of interest in that sort of thing, you would probably skim through then click off to wherever seemed preferable.

But there will be no direct account of your conversation with the two men, rather a symbolic representation of it, something that captures its vague yet pedantic, passionate but beside the point, nature. That representation takes the form of a biographical essay on the QPR and Fulham player, Rufus Brevett. Now, you may not be planning to read that either. But remember, it is a representation of a conversation that you had, more or less against your will. Should you, at some point in the future, need to rely on it in court, say, to prove an alibi, perhaps, skipping any element of it could leave you caught out. But that’s not likely, so here you go.
Rufus Brevett (1969-)

Rufus Brevett was born in Derby in 1969. A defender, predominantly a left-back, he began his career with Doncaster Rovers in 1985, in what was then Division 4, making his first appearance in 1988. He played just over 100 matches at Doncaster until he was sold to Queens Park Rangers in February of 1991 for £275,000, at the time, and for some time afterwards, a record fee for a Doncaster player. QPR were, at the time, enjoying one of their periodic spells in the top flight, dating back to their promotion under Terry Venables in 1982-83. Venables’ achievement in getting that promotion saw him appointed manager at Barcelona.

Brevett established himself at QPR, playing 150 times in his seven years there. His first few seasons saw QPR thrive, with an ageing Ray Wilkins and a rising Les Ferdinand the stars. The early part of his career saw the Premiership commence, and he is a figure that straddles two eras. Bought by QPR at a time when clubs still scoured the English lower divisions for talent rather than trawling the lower divisions of foreign leagues, and when getting QPR promoted could get you the Barcelona job, he then stayed with QPR following their relegation. He was not to return to the Premiership with them. He was
instead transferred to Fulham. There is nothing surprising about any of this, an average player bouncing between average, geographically proximate clubs, nothing that made it unusual, save for the fact that Fulham had acquired a multi-millionaire backer who was prepared to spend a lot of money to get them promoted to the Premiership. Mohammed Al-Fayed indeed had grander ambitions than that, but even he did not have the money to make them a reality.

By 2001, Brevett was back in the big league then, a decade after his move from Doncaster. The wages were bigger, the acclaim was greater. Brevett didn’t stay at Fulham or in the Premiership long. In 2003, he moved to West Ham, who were fighting to avoid relegation, a fight they eventually lost, not for the first or for the last time. He stayed with West Ham in the Championship until 2005, then circled his way down, and eventually out of, the leagues via Plymouth, Leicester, and finally, Oxford. Since the end of his playing career, Brevett has had two jobs within football- Sporting Director at Swindon Town and Assistant Manager at Bedfont (the latter play in the Combined Counties Premier League in case you thought it was a misspelling)- as well as making media appearances as a former Fulham player. A complete statistical record of his career is here.
Why are you reading about Rufus Brevett and not David Beckham, say, who you might actually have talked about in 1999? Remembered more for his dreadlocks and unusual first name than his play, Brevett was a full-back, itself a position for those players not good enough to get in the team elsewhere. His career was, for fans other than those whose clubs he played for, defined in those terms. His career history shows him bumping around between minor clubs and getting relegated with West Ham like thousands of English footballers before him, and hundreds since. He made up the numbers. You’re reading about him because he is a perfect representation of the football boom, an obscure player raised to fame and wealth, without ever losing their obscurity.

Having read the biography of Rufus Brevett in its entirety, you click here to end the conversation.
You demand to be able to escape this terrible fate, to avoid being stuck, even for a few paragraphs, with Penfold and Simon, with the (other) men. You are meant to be able to choose your own path. And aren’t you able, or supposed to be able, to do so in a way that is consistent with game books like those in the Fighting Fantasy series? Yet here you are, stuck with Simon and Penfold, and you don’t remember losing a Luck roll.

First, the book can offer a little reassurance. You have not gone “wrong”. You have not slipped off the main path, fallen into a trap, or got lost in a dungeon, however much the present situation might make that seem likely. The conversation is a hurdle that must be passed, but it is one that you will pass. But that is as much reassurance as will be offered.

Because there will be no Luck roll, no opportunity to skip this section. You will simply have to endure a conversation with Penfold and Simon. Think of it, to borrow a concept from another type of gaming, as grinding. Grinding is the performance, within a computer game, of repetitive, rarely enjoyable, tasks, with the aim of improving your character’s skill levels, to gain what are often called experience points, enabling you to complete the more difficult and more glamorous challenges later in the game. It is practicing magic spells, or
collecting secret packages, it is defeating dozens of generic monsters to enable you to beat the interesting ones.

As such, suffering through the conversation is how you role-play this section, if you insist on doing so, chalking it up as a frustrating and boring experience necessary to get to the more interesting and distinctive content later on, in this case, a conversation with the young women who brought you to the table in the first place.

You may also add “conversational patience” to your Objects Held.
You are incredulous. Can it be true, you wonder: can it really be the case that men, when left alone with themselves, will talk about football to avoid talking about themselves? If you are wondering that you can’t be a man, or you are a man raised on some strange island community with no other men. You might be a woman, but if so, you can’t have spent that much time around men. Men will still, when in mixed company, start talking about a neutral, mutually acceptable topic, like football.

It is not necessarily football that plays this role, of course. Different men have different, neutral interests. Some men might talk about the structure of preferred stock, or whether the cast of Game Of Thrones was what they imagined when reading the book. What they don’t talk about is women. If they know each other well, perhaps, but not amongst men who are strangers, as you, Penfold and Simon are. It would be completely inappropriate for you to give a view on Alex’s arse, or on Sam’s sexual availability. No, you stick to the safe and the neutral, to a painfully predictable degree, at least until you know each other very well or get very drunk.

And it is that predictability that this section of the book sets out to capture, the disappointment one feels when trapped with people with whom one can
exchange only deadening small talk, talk that smothers whatever interest the topic itself might have. Never mind your plans for Alex or Sam; it takes the fun quite out of football to have to discuss it with Simon and Penfold.
You stand up, bolt down the rest of your drink and ask if you can get them anything.

Simon and Penfold each give you a tough look, then ask you to order them a pint each. They then turn to look at each other, and begin to work their way into conversation. You turn away, and push your way through the crowd to the bar, though you don’t push very hard. Once there, you take your time. You do not want to rush back to the table, to your seat between Penfold and Simon. You hope that some time away would see some realignment, or see the table reform into a whole. You even consider approaching one of the people at the bar, and asking if you can join their table. You are tempted: you could think of a much better gap year given the extra preparation time. But you reject the idea: you’ve invested quite a lot in the table you’re with, it’s a little late in the evening to change tables now, and there is no guarantee that wherever you go will be better.

Instead, you idle. You let people push past you; you assure others that they were ahead of you in the queue, even when this is dubious, until eventually you have no alternative but to order. Even then, you buy, and take the time to
really savour, a whiskey before you return with the three pints. Time passes.

What you hope is a lot of time passes.

Finally, you pick your way back across the room, squeezing between those standing, the three pints clenched firmly in your hands. You arrive back at your table, to find your seat still empty, Simon and Penfold waiting, and nothing changed. Disappointed, you sit down, picking up where you left off.
You tell them no. They look at you surprised. You tell them you won’t talk about football. They look shocked. They try to ignore you: Penfold starts talking about how Newcastle are doing, and Simon nods vigorously. You talk over him. You tell them that you, all of you, should talk about your feelings. You start. You tell them about your own life, your own fears and frustrations, your hopes and dreams. Simon and Penfold nod, say “hmmm” in a sort-of appreciative way, and when you pause, choked by the recollection of one of the sadder moments of your childhood, start talking about how Newcastle are doing.

You realise that you are achieving nothing. You can shut up, you can choose not to listen, but you cannot persuade them to talk about something meaningful. You could turn the conversation to favourite films, probably, or to favourite books, even, but to their innermost aspirations and feelings? Absolutely not, and it is something of a surprise that you should want to. Firstly, because it involves revealing so much of yourself to men who might be, who probably are, your rivals as well as your friends. Secondly, because if you did succeed in switching the talk from the outermost aspects of your existence to Penfold’s innermost desires, would you really be better off?
Finally, **thinking better of it**, you ask Penfold to elaborate on how he thinks Newcastle are doing.
“You stand accused,” the prosecuting counsel says, “of the most heinous crime, the only crime for which you may be sentenced to death: the crime of treason.”

Stood in the witness box at the Old Bailey, your tie uncomfortably tight around your neck, you don’t need to be reminded of your predicament. You are innocent, of course: on the night the Queen was assassinated, at that very moment, you were in your University bar, talking to Penfold and Simon. But you are struggling to prove it, there are wrinkles in your story: the others, turned away for the crucial twenty minutes, cannot confirm your alibi, whilst Simon, when called upon, could not be sure that you were you. Nonetheless, you are confident that you will be vindicated.

You tell the prosecuting barrister that you know the charge, but you maintain that you are innocent of it. Upon your denial, a murmur, a hubbub amongst the public and journalists in attendance picks up. The judge brings order to the court, then asks your interrogator to continue.

“Let us, then, return to the night in question,” the barrister says. “You contend that throughout the time in question, you were talking to Simon and to this
man.” He points to Penfold, who is sitting in the front row. You confirm that that is correct.

“And this man,” he points to Penfold again, “and you both agree that you talked about football.” You agree again.

“And you both agree that, while the conversation could not be described in simple terms, that it could be represented through the life of the former Fulham player, Rufus Brevett, which you covered in some detail.”

You nod, a little concerned about what is to come. You exchange a look with Penfold.

“How many times did Rufus Brevett appear as a substitute for West Ham?”

You don’t know the answer. You feel a little embarrassed to admit it, but you don’t see that it makes you guilty of treason. But as you tell him you don’t know, the gallery takes in a deep breath.
“I see,” the barrister says, “perhaps then I could ask another question. How many times did Brevett score for Fulham?”

Again you are forced to admit you don’t know, again the gallery takes an audible breath in shock. How are you supposed to know, you say? How are you supposed to remember arcane details from a conversation that took place several months before?

“Perhaps you don’t remember,” the counsel says, “because the conversation did not take place?”

“It did take place,” you cry.

“If, as you say, you and this man discussed Rufus Brevett for twenty minutes, wouldn’t that discussion have contained a detailed examination of the complete statistical record of his career?”

You realise you didn’t read that part. You have no answer to the question. The prosecuting barrister says that he has no more questions and takes a seat, to
cries of “Hang him” from the public gallery and an apologetic shrug from your own barrister.

The judge has heard enough, he skips the niceties of closing arguments and trial by jury, slaps a black handkerchief on top of his wig and delivers the death sentence. “Take him down,” he concludes, and the police drag you away to the cells. You wish that you had taken the admonition that you might need to rely on the detail of your conversation in court more seriously.
A short and simple history of the gamebook

The Choose Your Own Adventure is a brand name that, like Hoover, has come to stand for an entire genre of products. The term “gamebook” is used to describe the wider genre, as is the wider encompassing term “interactive fiction”, though the term “multiple choice narrative”, as proposed by the Oulipo, is perhaps the closest match to this novel.

The format of the genre, as you will have gathered, involves allowing the reader to have control over the main character’s actions. The books are usually, and unusually, written in the second person, addressed to “you”. So you are asked what you should do next. The decisions you make will result in one of a different number of endings, though it is usually the case that some endings are better than others, and there is usually one ending which the author intends you to reach, in which you “win” the game. The format was aimed at, and was popular with, children between the ages of 9 and 14, with the peak of its popularity in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

Different books within the genre take different approaches. The Choose Your Own Adventure series, an American series which was written and published
beginning in the 1970’s, gives the reader a choice at the end of each short section, with their choices leading to one of a number of different endings to the book. Others, notably the Fighting Fantasy series but also those books produced by TSR, maker of Dungeons and Dragons, included gaming or role-playing elements—broadly, this meant that, along with the choices they made, the reader’s progress will be determined by the outcome of a dice roll, which determined the outcome of combat and the like. The inclusion of these elements was reflected in the setting of the novels: science-fiction or more usually fantasy, in the dragons and elves sense. It is also reflected in the subsequent path of their creators—Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, creators of the Fighting Fantasy series of novels, are both now luminaries of the video-games industry.

And to a large extent, video games made gamebooks obsolete. *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* cannot compete with Grand Theft Auto V—not even, if we are honest, on quality of writing. You can still buy gamebooks, but the fact that they are shortly to be available for the IPad but are not in the average children’s library is telling. Their appeal is nostalgic, their obsolescence is their charm to those who enjoyed reading/playing them as children or adolescents. There are frequent attempts by authors in their twenties and thirties, who
share that nostalgia, to revisit the form, and write a gamebook for adults, and
the book you are reading is an example of that. The most successful example
has been Heather McElhatton’s *Pretty Little Mistakes*, though there are several
others.

Parallel to the decline of the genre, however, with its technological origins, was
the birth and to date extremely slow growth of the hypertext novel. The
hypertext novel is a novel that makes use of hypertext- the HTML code that
allows you to move from one internet page to another, or within a document,
as you have been doing in this book. Hypertext is a serious boon for the
gamebook- removing the need for the reader to leaf back and forth through
the book to find their next page. There is at least one reasonably famous
hypertext novel- Geoff Ryman’s 253, though tellingly it is more famous in print,
as a book. There are two reasons for that- it was published on web pages,
making it difficult or impossible to earn money through sales, both for author
and publisher, and perhaps, more importantly, it had to be read on a computer
screen, which is uncomfortable, bordering on impossible.

Which brings us to the development of e-readers and tablets, some variety of
which you hold in your hand, reading this book. The e-reader gives all the
advantages of hyper-text, without the difficulties of distribution. So you no longer need to keep a thumb in the previous page, in case you don’t like the outcome of your decision- you merely press back at the bottom of the screen, and there you are. The age of the interactive novel has come, and here we both are.

But what does that mean? In a game book, the machinery of a novel is constantly on display: the very act of choosing serves as a jarring reminder that you are reading, participating in, a fiction. As a rule, the genre attempts to address this through the use of the second person- by calling you you, as it were, by making the choice one that you take as a character, rather than as a reader. But in solving one problem, it opens another. In attempting to obscure its status as fiction from you, it makes it all the more obvious that the you in the book isn’t you the reader, making it, inescapably, a meta-fiction, a fiction that draws attention to its status as fiction.

The gamebook has always been conceived in terms of controlling a character, and this book is not an exception to that. But the choices an author can offer for your character are limited- a choice of drinks to ask for, and then only a limited one. Moreover, expanding the consequences- having a small decision
result in your brutal and premature death, as often happens in Fighting Fantasy novels - does not actually widen those choices. But if you are going to be offered a choice, there are a lot of choices that you can make, besides which spell to cast, or which chair to sit in. What this novel aims to do then, if it cannot honestly widen the choices for the character you control, is to widen the choices for you as a reader, reflecting the possibilities that hypertext, and the means for delivering hypertext in a convenient form, open up. By offering you the choice of whether to read this essay in the first place, say, and the choice now to return to the main story, or to read the next of the essays in the series, and, in due course, whether to participate in the game elements of the book at all. It is for this reason that the term “multiple-choice narrative” is preferable. Be warned, however, some material may be familiar.
A short history of the gamebook, for those who dimly remember them

Choose Your Own Adventure books are, as you may remember, one of a number of series of what people on the internet or in academia call “game books” or more broadly, “interactive fiction”; this book prefers the term proposed by the “multiple-choice narrative”. Choose Your Own Adventures themselves were a trademarked American series and aimed at children, aged 9-14, and there are literally hundreds in the series, covering every conceivable genre, or at least every genre it is conceivable for a child to read- there are no Choose Your Own Adventure novels allowing you to control a heroin addict, deciding what exactly you are prepared to do for a fix.

Outside that series, many gamebooks incorporated elements from role playing games. As well as the decisions you made, your character’s progress would also be determined by elements drawn from tabletop gaming- combat determined by the roll of the dice, character attributes- stamina, luck and the like- and the ability to pick up and carry objects (or write them down in the front of the book). The best remembered British series- *Fighting Fantasy* by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone- was of this type, and you may remember eagerly making a note of your equipment (“Sword”) and your skill and stamina,
the latter steadily decreasing with each battle against a Moon Demon or Mountain Ogre. You may also remember the many brutal and hideous deaths that those Moon Demons handed out to you, meaning that almost all of the book’s “endings” entailed you lying dead in a ditch.

You will also remember the genre- hugely successful in the 1980’s- fell out of favour after that. There are periodic attempts to revive it- *Pretty Little Mistakes* being one recent and successful attempt, this book being another, at least in the recent category- and to aim it at adults. But, tellingly, you can buy *Khare Cityport of Traps* for IPad, you can’t, at the date of writing, buy *Pretty Little Mistakes*. Why? Because the audience for these books is a nostalgic one, and the game book has long since been superseded by video games. *The Island of The Lizard King* simply cannot compete with *Mass Effect*- and tellingly, its authors, Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone both now work in the video game industry.

But what technology took from the gamebook with one hand, it gave with the other. You will remember the sheer physical awkwardness of the gamebook. Leafing back and forth through the book, to read a paragraph on 62 before setting off for 112, only to discover that 112 was a cave full of Lizard Men, and
going back to where you were, having kept your thumb in just in case. It was, in short, a fiddle. Hypertext- the technology that takes you from one place to another on the internet- ends all that. But it didn’t end the suffering of the game book, nor did it lead to a boom in interactive fiction, as academics call it. Why? Because though the technology was there, the means of delivering it were not. What makes a book like the one you are reading practical is the device you are reading it on. With the I-Pad and the Kindle, the age of the interactive novel has come, and here we both are.

But what does that mean? In a game book, the machinery of a novel is constantly on display: the very act of choosing serves as a jarring reminder that you are reading fiction. As a rule, the genre attempts to address this through the use of the second person- by calling you you, as it were, by making the choice one that you take as a character, rather than as a reader. But in solving one problem, it opens another. In attempting to obscure its status as fiction from you, it makes its status as a fiction all the more obvious, for you the character is never you the reader, making it, in essence, a meta-fiction, a fiction that draws attention to its status as fiction.
The gamebook has always been conceived in terms of controlling a character, and this book is not an exception to that. But the choices an author can offer you for your character are limited - a choice of drinks to ask for, and then only a limited one. Moreover, expanding the consequences - having a small decision result in your brutal and premature death, as often happens in Fighting Fantasy novels, and fairly frequently in this one - does not actually widen those choices. But if you are going to be offered a choice, there are a lot of choices that you can make, besides which spell to cast, or which chair to sit in. What this novel aims to do then, if it cannot honestly widen the choices for the character you control, is to widen the choices for you the reader, reflecting the possibilities that hypertext, and the means for delivering hypertext in a convenient form, open up. By offering you the choice of whether to read this essay in the first place, say, and the choice now to return to the main story, or to read the next of the essays in the series, and in due course whether to participate in the game elements of the book at all: it’s for this reason that this book prefers the term “multiple-choice narrative”. Be warned, however, some material may be familiar, but that’s your choice.
A Critical History of the Gamebook

“You are a warrior”, Island of The Lizard King, one of the Fighting Fantasy novels rather baldly states. This is unlikely: “you are a schoolboy in the 1980's” would have been more accurate. Placed in the past tense- you were a school boy in the 1980's- the revised version would still be accurate today.

As you aware, Choose Your Own Adventure novels are a specific, and trademarked, series that gave their name to a genre. They cover a wide range of subjects, allowing you to control adventurers, cowboys, soldiers and, in one case, Martin Luther King Jr. By contrast, in the Fighting Fantasy series, you were a warrior.

To that end, the Fighting Fantasy series incorporated many role-playing elements. You were required to set your strength and your stamina, to choose which potions and weapons to carry and when to use them, to use dice, paper and pencil to decide battles against enemies and to record your progress in the front of the book. All this was laid out in the rules section at the front of the book- a section that ran for 19 pages, about a tenth of the total text of the book. This was, you may recall, a bit of a faff. You, if anything like the author,
kept your finger in the previous page, and dispensed with the dice entirely. So
that, when, during the climactic battle against the Lizard King, in the
eponymous novel, your victory was revealed as dependent on your earlier
collection of a vervet monkey, a collection you had failed to make, you didn’t
own up to the deficit.

The genre more or less died. Why so, given its appeal was to children and the
simple-minded: more of which come along all the time? In short, computer
games were invented. It took them a while, but they long ago exceeded any
kind of role-playing that could be achieved in textual form. Computer games
subject you to the same rigours, of course, and often worse- see you mauled a
dozen times by a tiger before you realise you weren't supposed to go that way
at all, or have you spend hours of your life acquiring swimming or archery skills
to kill one lousy Mafioso. But those rigours are infinitely less cumbersome, and
are rigours- they can make you go back and collect the monkey, however many
hours it takes.

So why bother with a novel in this genre, a game book or interactive fiction, as
it is variously called? The main reason is the object you're holding. An E-reader
or tablet. The development of hypertext made the kind of book you're reading
infinitely more practical, meant that you could dispense with the labour of leafing back and forth through the text, trying to find 312. It made it more practical, but it did not make it a book- it made it a collection of pages on the internet that were linked together, the same as any other website. But the e-reader? The e-reader sees the interactive novel has come of age.

But what does that mean? In a game book, the machinery of a novel is constantly on display: the very act of choosing serves as a jarring reminder that you are reading fiction. As a rule, the genre attempts to address this through the use of the second person- by calling you you, as it were, by making the choice one that you take as a character, rather than as a reader. But in solving one problem, it opens another. In attempting to obscure its status as fiction from you, it makes plain the division between you the reader and the character, making it, in essence, a meta-fiction, a fiction that draws attention to its status as fiction.

The gamebook has always been conceived in terms of controlling a character, and this book is not an exception to that. But the choices an author can offer you for your character are limited- a choice of drinks to ask for, and then only a limited one. Moreover, expanding the consequences- having a small decision
result in your brutal and premature death, as often happens in Fighting Fantasy novels, and fairly frequently in this one - does not actually widen those choices. But if you are going to be offered a choice, there are a lot of choices that you can make, besides which spell to cast, or which chair to sit in. What this novel aims to do then, if it cannot honestly widen the choices for the character you control, is to widen the choices for you the reader, making them explicit, reflecting the possibilities that hypertext, and the means for delivering hypertext in a convenient form, open up. By offering you the choice of whether to read this essay in the first place, say, and the choice now to return now to the main story, or to the story or to read one of the other essays in the series. Hence, the book’s preference for the term “multiple-choice narrative”.

Be warned, however, some material may be familiar.
Ready, you pick up the two full pints and your own, and follow Alex across the room. The journey should be difficult: the bar is fuller than when you entered, and you need to manoeuvre carefully. You pull in your elbows, reducing your chances of knocking into someone, but hold the drinks a little in front of you, so that the drinks will not spill on you if someone does bump into you. There is no problem, however: the atmosphere, though febrile, is good, and students happily move aside for you, without your needing to ask them. You can tell it is the first night, and early at that.

You continue towards the table. As you go, you think about the people you have just met and are now following, and wonder about the impression you made on them. One of them, Alex, seemed interesting but a little cool, the other, Sam, more forward and outgoing, almost too much so. You liked them well enough, you think, on that small acquaintance, and consider them worth sitting with. You then wonder what the people they are sitting with will be like.

It is always difficult for an individual being introduced to a larger group, whatever type of group it is. The difficulty is simply down to the security offered by greater numbers- those in the group are already in the group, with only one individual to meet, while the individual must not only meet a number
of individuals, but a group that envelops them too. You wonder what the rest will be like: will they be male or female, and in what proportion, if the group is mixed? Will you have interests or character traits in common with them? And, most importantly, will the rest of the group resent your arrival as an intrusion or welcome you as an addition? You are pondering the last as you reach the table.

Their table is really two small tables shunted together, with chairs and short stools crammed around it and those sat at it squashed tightly together. By the time you reach it, Alex and Sam have already sat down, having handed drinks out to those who ordered them. They sit on the far side from you, at the end of the table, squeezed between a column and another table. There is no obvious seat free near them - the nearest is currently attached to the next table along. Noticing your arrival, they introduce you to the other people around the table, but so distracted are you by your search for a seat, that you do not pay attention. Have they used you as a packhorse, only to abandon you once their destination is reached? Having finished their introductions, they relieve your suspicions by pointing out a chair for you. It is at the opposite end of the table to them, between two particularly unprepossessing students, waiting for the 2 pints of Carling that you carry for them.
However long you intend to stay, it would now be rude, and a little pointless, to leave the two pints and walk off, so you must make a choice. Take the seat offered and suffer the company, or try to sit near Alex and Sam. If you would prefer the first, click [here](#). If you rather sit with two peaches than with two lemons, click [here](#).
You nod thanks for the offer of a chair, but, after handing the full pints to the two waiting for them, signal that you will sit near Alex and Sam.

No one gives an expression of surprise or disapproval, and you set off around the table. No one prevents you from taking the spare chair, and you drag it as near to Alex and Sam as is possible.

Sadly, owing to the aforementioned geography of bar stools, columns and tables, "as near as possible" still isn't very near. Your position is one that, in a theatre, cinema or stadium, would count as Restricted View. It would be near enough to have a conversation with Alex and Sam, but it is not near enough to allow you to participate in their conversation with the others. You hear little and see less. Indeed, the only thing you can see clearly is the empty seat on the other side of the table. You do think that one or both of Alex and Sam smell nice, though, on reflection that may be someone at the other table: they are closer to you. You realise that the options left are invidious. You could try to prise Alex and/or Sam away from the main conversation. You could keep your ears and eyes open, hoping to snatch something from the main conversation and shout a response to it: if you get lucky, the conversation may then
rebound in your direction. Or you could give up the fight and turn to talk to the people at the other table: you are closer to them, after all.

You could, or you could take your place in the empty seat at the other end of the table.
When the drinks are ready, Alex indicates that you should carry the two pints she had ordered to the table. To avoid spilling any of your own, you take two large, thirst quenching swigs, and having got a taste for it, another big swallow, before you pick up the two full pints and your half-full one, and follow Alex and Sam across the room. The journey will be difficult, you think: the bar is already fuller than when you entered, and you need to manoeuvre carefully. You pull in your elbows, reducing your chances of knocking into someone, but hold the drinks a little in front of you, hoping that, if you do get bumped, the drinks will not spill on you. There is no problem, however: the atmosphere, though excited and nervous, is good, and students happily move aside for you, without your needing to ask them. You can tell it is the first night, and early at that.

You continue towards their table. As you go, you think about the people you have just met and are now following, and wonder about the impression you made on them. You don't care, if you’re honest. One of them, Alex, seemed sour and up herself, the other, Sam, thick and mouthy. You throb with anger, with no particular reason for it- they are no different from the rest of their sex, attractive enough but little else to say for them. You then wonder what the idiots they are with are like.
More prats, plonkers and twerps to meet, you’d bet, all of them thinking they are better than you, with little to justify it. Nothing, bar their membership in a "group", a group that you don’t want to join. You shake your head angrily.

Gathered round a table, begging for a corner of it, just somewhere to place their disgraceful, piss-weak pint of Carling. Scum, you think. We humans are all scum, but they are more scum than most. What can you have in common with these weak, silly Carling drinkers? You stop, put down the two pints of Carling and finish the rest of your pint of Stella. It helps- you can see it even more clearly now. Student wasters, you think, eyeing the table. If only some acid rain would come and burn them all away, burn away this human swamp, leaving just you, a blinded, muted whore for company and a Stella tap, what a better world it would be.

Is it them, though, you wonder? The two women have sat down at the table, leaving no seat for you. Correction- there is a seat, stuck between two yakkety muppets at the opposite end of the table to the girls. It's like you've been punched in the gut. Destruction. They all deserve it, you think, shaking with anger. These women, these cheating treacherous women, and the anemic flotsam they want to sit you with. Is it them though, you wonder? Or is it the
furniture? The furniture always gets away with it, but it's always there, always causing issues, always needling you, always screaming your name and then falling silent when you look round. The table, the stools, all led by that brazen empty chair, and that wretched stool behind the two women, pouring poison in their ears, sexual self gratification its only concern? You can stop them, you think, can shut them up once and for all, but which one do you want to shut up first? That little weasel of a stool or the fat idle chair? It doesn’t matter, you realize: neither will last long.


To the carpet green below- thump,

    CRASH

Spill. Your fists full, formed.

You kick his legs away. You kick, gouge. You bite. You pick up one long shard of glass- still wet with beer, and shove it deep into the chair’s guts. Sweet viscera spills. Kick it down, smash it up. No laughs now, no smug voice from its deep basso bottom. Whimpers.

A heaped mess. Now you stamp now, stamping, stamping, stamping, kicking to wet splinters, stamping to silence Not at all.

Until there is no chair and no stool.

Someone asks you “Are you all-right?”
“Are you all right?” Sam asks. She looks concerned. You look around- she and Alex are sat at the table with their friends, as you had thought, but the glasses are still in your hand, and the empty chair and stool are thankfully unmolested. You decide that drinking Stella is not a good idea, and to stick to Carling for the rest of the evening.

You take a look at your surroundings through soberer eyes. Their table is actually two small tables shunted together, with chairs and short stools crammed around it, and those sat around it squashed tightly together. Alex and Sam sit on the far side from you, at the end of the table, squeezed between the wall and another table. There is nowhere to sit near them- the nearest chair is currently attached to the next table. They have introduced you to the other people around the table, but so distracted were you by your alcohol induced rage, that you did not pay attention. Have they used you as a packhorse, you wonder, only to abandon you once they reach your destination? They relieve your suspicions, however, by pointing out a chair for you. It is at the opposite end of the table to them, between two particularly unprepossessing students, who are waiting for the 2 pints of Carling that you’re carrying.
However long you intend to stay, it would now be rude, and a little pointless, to leave the two pints and walk off, so you must make a choice. Take the seat offered and suffer the company, or try to sit near Alex and Sam. If you would rather the first, click here. If you want to sit with two peaches rather than two lemons, click here.
So you chose to read this, what will henceforth be referred to as the role-playing option, the section that finally puts the game back into the gamebook. You tired of plot, description and characterization, and hungered instead for a lengthy rules section, which is, after all, what role-playing is all about. Let the game(book) commence!

INTRODUCTION

You are a reader of indeterminate age, controlling a commuter, again of indeterminate age. Having been the subject of a mysterious hijacking, and being disillusioned with your life, you became a student again, at an indeterminate university, on October 7th 1999. Now, armed with years of regrets and an adult’s wisdom, you will go through university again, putting right what once went wrong, and saving yourself from a terrible future!

But it will not be easy. You know well the perils that you face, the powerful enemies that wait in the darkness, the nefarious traps that you must escape to complete your quest. As you progress, you will encounter various trials and
challenges. It may take you several attempts to get through the book (it is quite long) and to complete your quest. As such, you may wish to draw a map as you go, so that you don’t repeat the same mistakes.

But before you embark on your quest, you must first determine your strengths and weaknesses. These attributes will be used to decide your progress at key points in the novel, and you will use this section to record them. Then, using the notes function of your e-Reader, you will be able to refer to them when told to. The attributes to be determined are Skill, Stamina and Luck. As it is university, and your enemies are more to be likely to be romantic rivals, those attributes may not be tested in the ways you are used to. They may not, in fact, mean what you expect at all.

**ATTRIBUTES**

Firstly, you must record a value against each. Below is a list of your attributes. You have 20 points to allocate between the three, one point for each of your years- use the highlight function in notes to mark your choices. And use it wisely!
Skill

Skill 1
Skill 2
Skill 3
Skill 4
Skill 5
Skill 6
Skill 7
Skill 8
Skill 9
Skill 10

Stamina

Stamina 1
Stamina 2
Stamina 3
Stamina 4
Stamina 5
Stamina 6
Stamina 7
Stamina 8
Stamina 9
Stamina 10

Luck

Luck 1
Luck 2
Luck 3
Luck 4
Luck 5
Luck 6
Luck 7
Luck 8
Luck 9
Luck 10
These scores may fall and rise as the novel goes on, as you acquire new skill or expend stamina.

**PUTTING YOURSELF TO THE TEST**

As you continue through university, you will be forced to try your Skill and Stamina against a wide variety of opponents, and to test your Luck in a wide range of scenarios. To do so, you will need a six-sided dice.

That might be a problem. You may not have a single six-sided dice to hand. You may not want to carry one with you for the time it will take you to read this book. You will almost certainly lose it, and rolling a dice will be inconvenient when on the bus, say. You may wonder why, when you are reading this book on a powerful personal computing device, you need to resort to a physical dice, rather than make use of a virtual one. You’re probably quite angry, and wish that you were reading an actual, physical, paper book, one that you could hurl violently across the room, rather than reading this book on an expensive personal computing device. Well, good news— you have all the dice you need to hand. When the time comes, merely press where it says Roll The Dice, and then choose a link— it will give you a random number: Roll The Dice!
And if you’re worried about cheating, each time you roll you will be sent to a different page. (NB While in MS Word or while reading a PDF, you won’t be able to return to your previous position in the document if you press roll the dice. The back button on an e-Reader will allow you to, however).

When you do need to test one of your attributes, you will need to take the number you roll, and add your attribute score (or scores). Depending on the situation you find yourself in, the outcome will directly determine your path. Roll well, roll wisely!

**OBJECTS**

As you continue on your journey, you may also collect objects that will help you in your quest. At present, for instance, you have collected a pint (now three-quarters drunk) of lager. This did not seem worth recording, as you will shortly drink the remainder. You will, in the future, be able to collect other, less transient objects, such as a plastic replica skull, a leotard and tights, a collection of early GBV vinyl or a traffic cone. When you gain such an object, you will be told to highlight it, and it will appear in the notes section for use
later in the novel. As practice, and as a gift to help you on your way, please highlight one of the objects listed in the paragraph above.

SPECIAL ABILITIES

On your way through university, you will also collect special abilities. While these will certainly include an increased tolerance for alcohol and a broad knowledge and understanding of daytime television, you will also gain skills through your degree, of varying practicality, with Golf Course Management at the zenith, and Classics the nadir, on that particular measure, at least. There are other, more occult skills to be acquired, however, which must, for the moment, remain mysterious.

BACK TO THE PLOT

You may have rather forgotten what was happening: a well-delivered rules section will do that to you. Silence had again fallen around the table, with no one prepared to take responsibility for lifting it. You were wondering if you should step into the breach, whether you should offer an opinion yourself, or leave it to one of the others. You are, after all, something like a guest.
To be precise, you were asked the following.

So do you tell them that “Strictly speaking, Choose Your Own Adventures are one series amongst several, operating to the same principles and are themselves part of a larger genre called interactive fiction.”

Tell them you like them a great deal, and that if they allow you a little time, you’d like to elaborate on some of the reasons why, using examples from *Khare - Cityport of Traps*, the second novel in the *Steve Jackson’s Sorcery!* Series, handing out photocopies of the relevant bits in case they don’t have their own copy to hand.

Or do you

**Keep your mouth shut. Nothing good ever came from giving out photocopies from *Khare-Cityport of Traps*.**

You immediately see the problem. The first, though it may reflect your true feelings, or at least an exaggeration of them, will hardly bring men and women
flocking to you. The second, though it seems superficially sensible, is hardly a sustainable solution: how long before the awkward silence is blamed on your presence?

You require some further, wiser, wittier alternative. And you have the means at your disposal. You can test your Skill, or rather your Social Skills. Coming up with an alternative will test them to their limit.

**BRILLIANT CONVERSATION RESTARTER- 8**

**ROLL THE DICE!** Then Add your Skill score as described above.

If the total is 8 or fewer, press here. If 9 or more, press here.
Believe it or not, *Scorpion Swamp*, the eighth of the Fighting Fantasy series and the chief inspiration, with *On A Winter’s Night A Traveller* by Italo Calvino, for this book, actually gives advice to this effect. Namely that the reader should draw a map, to avoid making the same mistakes twice, stop themselves from stumbling into the same pirate-filled dungeons, or sipping from the same poisoned wells. It was advice that demonstrated a touching faith in the reader’s honesty, or a very dry sense of humour.

Anyway, a lengthy rules section opens most gamebooks, including the Fighting Fantasy series, detailing how the game part of the game book should be played; this section is a tribute to them, though of shorter duration (the rules typically take up ten percent of the book), and of considerably reduced complexity. You may be entirely unsurprised by the information about the map, given that you have chosen to read and/or play this section. But, for this book at least, it is unnecessary advice, though if you want to “win” the game, the book would suggest role-playing at every opportunity.
And, to return to the map, at a figurative level, that is what you are engaged in with your trip back to university: revisiting your past with a map of those places to avoid if you wish to avoid the disastrous future. Sadly, as before, the map will not tell you which places to go instead, except by a process of elimination.
Embarrassing reading material and embarrassment over reading material

Embarrassment over reading material, or rather embarrassment at the media we are consuming, has a long history. It has not always been the case of that new technologies have made it easier to hide what we are reading or latterly, watching. The invention of the printing press did rather too much to spread knowledge, if the Church was to be asked about it. It was better that people were told what Jesus had said, rather than read it for themselves. But when people talk about new technology and its impact on the media, they no longer think of the printed book or celluloid film, but of that barrage of recent inventions - the video player, the walkman, the personal computer and all that has derived from them - that allowed us an ever wider choice of media, and ever greater privacy in which to consume it. It is usually said that pornography has driven the rise of, first, home video, and then the internet: it is even one of the e-book reader’s attractions. Without venturing too far into the seamy side of things, there are two reasons why the two things worked together. The video, and the internet exponentially more so, made filth much easier to find. But more importantly, it allowed said filth, which was nothing that could not have been exhibited in cinemas or sold in magazine form, censors permitting,
to be bought, and even more importantly, consumed in private. It cut out the public bit, the embarrassing bit.

Now it’s a bit strong to say that this book is in that category. It is not a copy of Playboy or Penthouse, still less Razzle or Readers’ Wives. And while there is some strong stuff, you would not want to wade through it all just for a few sex scenes. But there are other reasons to be embarrassed by your choice of reading matter. The sort of embarrassment that led Bloomsbury to create an adult cover for Harry Potter novels, the sort of embarrassment that made you think twice about taking Dan Brown on the tube. Now clearly, this sort of shame doesn’t afflict everyone- you may be happy to sit on the tube reading Dan Brown, there were thousands of people who were. But there is a question of degree. Think about it like this- what would you make of a middle-aged man or woman sat on a train endlessly rolling a dice, pausing only to flick the pages of a cheaply bound, bright covered paperback and then to manically scribble another branch onto their hand-drawn map? This, the book would suggest, is another of the e-reader’s merits.
You sit silently, patiently. You look around the table hoping that one of the others will say something- Penfold, Alex, the lanky lad, the girl with the red face on Sam's left, Sam herself. Nothing but silence. Deep, endless, forbidding silence. Silence. You put your glass to your lips, but find it empty. While waiting for the silence to break, you have finished your pint.

It is a serious situation. The table is covered with other people’s half and three-quarter-full glasses. If you stand up to get yourself another, you will feel obliged, at the very least, to offer to get more drinks. Worse, if you do get up and walk across to the bar, the conversation may restart in your absence. If easy, noisy banter did begin again, those remaining will soon pin their previous awkwardness on you.

While you consider your options, a terrible, endless silence endures. It is less mere quiet now than swallowing abyss, a black pit in which all the noise of the bar, all its lively expectation and first-night excitement, is drowned. The faces around the table grow ever greyer, sadder and more defeated: will anyone present speak ever again? Will the quiet spread, through the room, the city and beyond, a tongueless plague?
One thing you are certain of: you need a drink; any hostility is a price worth paying, if it means either that the silence ends, or that you can drink your way through it. You stand up, and lift up your empty glass to show the reason. With your free hand, you draw a circle in the air around the table, asking anyone if they want a drink. A few of them mutely shake their heads in return; the rest cannot manage even that, so broken are they.

You head off to the bar, troubled. Is three years of this the price of an improved future? You slump against the bar, disconsolate. You are fishing a note from your pocket, waiting for service, when a thick damp hand slams down upon your shoulder.

"Do you know," he begins.

"That you just fell into a wheelie-bin?" you respond, without needing to look.

"Well, yes," Simon Stubbs replies, "but that wasn't what I was going to say."

You ask what he was going to say, but he changes the subject and offers to buy you a drink. You look across the room. Alex and Sam, though very attractive,
both look very glum, while those around them look even worse, bereaved almost. You feel the weight of Simon Stubbs' soggy paw upon your shoulder, and you tell yourself one wouldn't hurt.

And if one wouldn’t hurt, you could argue that a few wouldn’t hurt. You can always catch up with Alex and Sam later in the evening. Or on another night. Or the following week. Or later that term. Or if you run into them after Christmas. Or next year. Or if you run into them before you leave university. Or if you run into them after you leave, walking in the street or in a pub or on a train.
You step onto the train, the carriage doors closing behind you. You’re breathing hard, having run to catch it. You look for somewhere to sit; but all the seats are taken; instead, you grab the rail above you and lean your shoulder against the carriage door. As you do, the train jolts forward, bumping off towards the city.

You look around the carriage. The other passengers are the usual mixture - you’re already late for work, so there are commuters of the more casual kind, students, a few older people and half a dozen tourists. The usual mixture - including the one standard deviation from the mean: that passenger whom, if not for themselves then for the reaction they inspire, stands out from the rest. At the far end, stood by the door to the next carriage, a sanitary cordon of seats surrounding him is yours, a strange, bearded man.

Your train starts to slow. It’s reached the points outside the next station, one of those places where trains stop and queue to a secret order of their own, for their turn to roll onward to the platform. You wait for quite a while, wishing that in the rush, you had remembered to pick up a book or newspaper. For distraction, you pick stories from the foliage of upheld newspapers and check the other passengers for the attractive or interestingly unattractive. Eventually,
your eyes are drawn to the end of the carriage, to the man by the door. He is preoccupied, his lips moving in an incessant but inaudible monologue.

Hang on, you think, he looks familiar. You are sure you know him from somewhere. And when he trips the alarm, you know where that where was.

You’ve done it again, you realise. You’re here again, in spite of your intentions otherwise. You have two choices, you realise. You could either try to escape the carriage again, with the same failure certain, or you could immediately get back to the past, and say something. Anything. Even that thing about really liking Choose Your Own Adventure books.
“Rushshe...gfasasgrushe fash...dagp?” You say, your intonation making your mumble sound as much like a question as possible. Sam at the other end of the table having listened attentively to what you said, looks at you carefully, before breaking the silence herself. “What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

You smile gracefully, as if the question was unnecessary but that you would, out of good manners, condescend to answer it. “I said sushru gdaftael because Simon reshagasea...of course, but for me...rugrugrug...dragons, dungeon or dungeons, really,” you conclude resignedly, but as if the point before draining what’s left of your pint. You nudge Penfold. “If you were having another drink, what would you choose?”

“I’ll have another pint,” he says, rather unhelpfully.

“What about a round of shots?” Sam pipes up, which is much more in the spirit, and, with little opposition to the general idea, a debate kicks off as to whether the shots should be Sambucca or Tequila. It threatens to become bitter, with the girl sitting next to Simon, the one with the grating laugh, being particularly strident on the subject. The silence is still a fresh memory, however, and a compromise is soon reached. Penfold and the girl with the red
face take orders for whatever shot each of you wants, along with a pound to cover the cost. This, however, begins another debate, after Simon tries to opt out of a shot altogether. Your job done, you sit back in satisfaction as the order taking goes on, and tentative plans to play drinking games form. As you watch, Alex leans in next to you, one elbow on the back of your chair, her forearm brushing your shoulder.

“What,” she asks smiling, “was that question again?”

“Rusterfrusdtheafga,” is all you can think to reply.

She laughs, turning her head towards you as she does so. “Hmm. The important bit was to make us talk though, wasn’t it? That was well done by you. Do you want another drink?” she asks, holding up her purse, and pointing at your empty glass. You tell her that another pint would be welcome. She smiles again, and turns away to go to the bar.

Your Skill has paid off. You delivered the group from silence, knowing that the mere act of doing so would be more important than the content of what you said. Then, by leading them to the subject of alcohol, you have not only given
them something to talk about, but ensured that they will soon be even more talkative late in the evening. You watch, satisfied, as Penfold wobbles back from the bar, carrying a tray covered with shots, while behind him, Alex smiles at you from the bar. Penfold offers you the tray first and you take your shot.

You move forward to the rest of the evening.
You answer immediately, without hesitation. “Thailand,” you say. You acknowledge the cliché, tell them, with particular attention to Alex, that you know it is not the most original place to have been, the most original thing to have done. You don’t add much in the way of detail: you don’t give an account of Phuket, or describe which Bangkok hostel you stayed in; they, understandably, don’t ask, and you, sensibly, don’t tell.

After you have finished speaking, Simon tells the story of his gap year. It sounds, in all senses of the word, fantastic. He describes night raves in teeming cities, and stoned days spent on idyllic beaches. He describes discovering a lost tribe living inside a waterfall while trekking: his decision to hide their existence from the outside world earns much approval. Throughout, the others are listening rapt, occasionally murmuring in wonderment or ooh-ing in approval. You cannot help but be impressed yourself: Simon has gone to some effort to embroider such detailed and colourful lies. With your own deception in mind, you do not challenge him and instead let his tall tales become established fact: an outcome that if it leaves you frustrated, is discussed here. This may leave you wondering about the game theoretical implications of your dispute with Simon which are discussed here. While you listen, another round of shots, fetched by the lanky guy, comes and swiftly goes.
Around you, the bar is getting ever louder. People talk and shout, and, in response, the music ratchets up, and the talk grows louder still, more fragmented and disorganised, drunker. It becomes harder and harder to hear across the table, and slowly smaller conversations break out, the group atomizing into little clusters: first the lanky guy and the girl with the red face on your left, then the boy with the spots and the one with the grating laugh on your right, then finally between Sam, Alex and the girl with the olive skin at the far end. Unable to hear what is being said by any other group or be heard by them and unable to move, you are stuck with Penfold and Simon. The three of you share an awkward moment of realisation, as you contemplate what is to come.

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Around you, the bar is getting ever louder. People talk and shout, and, in response, the music of the jukebox is ratcheted up, and the talk grows louder still, more fragmented, disorganised, drunker. It becomes harder and harder to hear across the table, and slowly, but surely, conversations break out, the group atomizing. First between the lanky guy and the girl with the red face on your left, then the boy with the spots and the one with the grating laugh on your right, then finally between Sam, Alex and the girl with the olive skin at the far end. Unable to hear what is being said by any other group or to be heard by them, and unable to move, you are stuck with Penfold and Simon. The three of you share an awkward moment of realisation, as you contemplate what is to come.
So you remain in your room, planning to do some work; you know what happens if you don’t. You might not really plan to work, not really really. You might think that if you stay to work something will happen to you. Being cynical because something always does. It being the first day of university, you can expect someone to walk through the door at any minute, with or without a revolver.

But nothing happens. You sit at the desk. You stare at the trees outside.


Nothing

Nothing

Nothing. Still nothing.

More nothing.

Nothing happens. You decide to wait a bit.
Still nothing happens. You can wait indefinitely and nothing will happen, you realise. You look at the space above, or the window lock below, and all that will happen is that you will wait for something to happen.

Thus convinced, you decide to do something. You will settle down to your work: you will read. You get up from your desk, and go to your shelves. As you do so, you discover another problem. You don’t have any books, and don’t appear to have decide on your degree. While this might be existentially troubling, you should be able to walk to the shelves and have piles of concrete detail fall upon you - the names of the books on your shelf, which course they relate to - the situation is not all bad. You have no work to do; you can go down to the bar with impunity.

You could still insist on staying, because something or someone always turns up. But if you do wait, what will entertain you while you do?

You have sent yourself to a time before the internet, before 3G networks - you have a mobile phone but the only person you can phone is your mother. You
can explore your CD collection. (This being the late 90’s, the CD collection comprises 1 album by Oasis, 1 by Blur and 1 by Echobelly, and cost several hundred pounds to assemble)

You scramble for something to read. You find no print at all, until you remember your fresher’s starter pack. You open it and go through the documentation contained within- a letter from the Vice-Chancellor welcoming you to the University, a flyer for the Freshers’ Fair, and a copy of the University Regulations. It’s thin stuff.. But if you wish to continue in your room for a while, hoping that your next-door neighbour will burst in with PG Tips midway through section on medical registration, you are welcome to.

Or you could accept that you are the hero, and you will need to act like it. You need to make events happen, not sit around in your room reading the University regulations. Because nothing is going to happen otherwise.
You cry. You’d like to state your objections reasonably. You’d like to use paragraphs and commas, make clever rhetorical arguments. You would. But you can’t. So you cry.

There are millions of words you’d like to use, but your mouth will not let you, will not even go so far as to say mummy and daddy. Instead you can only cry, and so you do. When something is given to you that you don’t like, or something that you do like is taken away, and each of those is more likely to happen than you getting what you want, you cry. You deploy your full range of cries, if necessary. You use an extensive range of variations on that basic yet expansive form- staccato bursts of sobs, cleverly deployed pauses, long lupine howls, a heart tearing snotty snuffle. Nevertheless, they are just variations on that single genre, crying.

But however much you wail, you rarely get your way. There are certain things that crying can get done: clean pants and cuddles, chiefly, and usually in that order. But a change of diet or your own set of cutlery, a change of television station or your choice of video, your choice of destination for your afternoon walk? Not likely, you’ll be fed tasteless paste and improving picture books, and
expected to like it. Your cries, however artful, however loud, will not change
your parents’ minds - they are doing it for your own good.

Years stretch out in front of you, your influence on them negligible. You could
bounce back as a toddler, or a seven-year old, but their positions are barely
more powerful. There must be an easier way than this, you think, as you start
crying again, hoping to convince your mother to put the parsnips away.
Frustrations at Thailand choice

This outcome may be a source of some frustration to you. You may feel that, watching the placid, unquestioning response to Simon, you would like to divert here, to do this differently. You might want to answer the question that hangs over your choice of Thailand, those smutty insinuations about creatures of the night; to launch into a lengthy account of sordid assignations: tell your new friends who you paid for sex, what you paid them and which activities you paid them for, in exact and excruciating detail, long past the point at which people start standing up from the table and walking away, shouting in disgust.

But there is no good reason why you would. You chose the simple and straightforward option, the choice least likely to cause you trouble, and no trouble has been caused. You can hardly complain, a page later, that there is no opportunity to deliver a monologue about your use of prostitutes. The book assumes that you are rational: that you want to get the best of a situation: ranting about your whoring is seldom the right way to go about that.

Having chosen safety then, you are expected to stick to it.
Objects you can collect and Cheating at Choose Your Own Adventure Books

You may wonder why, when asked to highlight one item from a list, and only one, you should not ignore the injunction and highlight them all. You may feel that, if you can collect some Objects by highlighting them, why not turn other objects into Objects by highlighting them? Why not collect the furniture from your room, the photograph of the 74-75 Women’s Netball Team from the bar, or the glasses on Penfold’s face, even? In short, there is no reason why not.

You might worry that your breach of faith could somehow be detected, but it cannot. You might recall the blandishments usually proffered—that you are “ruining it for yourself” being the most frequently deployed. But you will not ruin it.

This type of book, being in part a game, has always attracted cheating, as all games do. It is much like Solitaire, the card game: it is always tempting to take one card less than you ought, to find the 3 which should really have been a 4.

This is, as highlighted by Sam, exacerbated by the book’s story: you want to know what happens in a book, even at the expense of the game’s purity. And so you keep your finger in the page, you don’t deduct that point you were
meant to, you mark yourself a 10 when 4 was generous, you lie about whether you possess a monkey’s severed paw.

But as you’ll have noticed, in this book, you’re not compelled to take part in the game. To exercise choice, yes, but to keep a running tally of your Stamina, and to be sent back from page 400 to the start when said Stamina runs out? No. You will not even be asked to cheat. You can read the whole book, or rather read the whole story, without having to roll a dice, or **ROLL THE DICE**, if you prefer. So you can cheat, or not cheat, but you can also avoid having to decide.
You allow a hush to fall around the table, let the atmosphere bunch with expectation. All eyes are turned nervously towards you; the rest of the bar seeming both raucous and somehow distant. You look around the table, between the waiting faces; Alex looks bored, looks as if nothing could impress her, while Sam looks fantastically eager: you are glad that you did not tell them you went to Thailand. You stir the air, let it thicken just that little bit more and then finally, at last, you say the word.

“Guavo.”

There is no immediate reaction, no sharp intake of breath. They are impressed, you can see that: there is no suggestion that they will skip on to somebody else’s gap year, not while the rest of your answer hangs in the air. But there is caution. None of them would volunteer to place Guavo on a map, let alone list its principal exports. Some of them, therefore, doubt its existence. But they would not, however, want to ask you to place Guavo on a map, only then to find that you could do so. It is therefore simpler, safer to believe that Guavo exists than to doubt you. This may leave you wondering whether you actually could, if asked, place Guavo on a map: something answered here.
Having given Guavo as the destination of your gap year, you then add details.

You start small. You tell how you went out to teach English, living in the capital city, intending to travel at the end of your time there. Things get bigger: as Penfold hands you another pint, you describe the riotous nights you spent in the city’s colorful and dangerous ghettoes. As you drink, you tell them how, through your doomed affair with a local prostitute, you became embroiled in the epic struggle for indigenous rights, and of that struggle’s bitter and tragic climax. Having described the time you served in a brutal prison after the uprising, you are about to describe your second month on the island, when Simon interrupts.

“What I found so remarkable about Guavo,” he says, turning to you, “was that such beauty existed alongside such squalor, and in such isolation from the modern world.” He smiles, nods his head, then wags one neat finger in your face. “I knew it,” he says, “I knew I knew you from somewhere. It was that little hostel on the Costa Guana, we were there at the same time,” he declares to the table, who murmur approvingly at the coincidence.

It is quite some coincidence, you think. You didn’t visit the Costa Guana at the same time as Simon, not least because the Costa Guana doesn’t exist. Simon
appears to know this: his smile seems to dare you to dispute his version. Your first instinct is to do so: he is lying, and as it stands, more than half of the glamour that Guavo bought you is gone. If you want to follow that instinct and deny that Simon has visited Guavo, press here.

He has been clever, though. After all, even if the Costa Guana did exist, you wouldn’t have been there, because you haven’t yourself been to Guavo. He has stolen most of your acclaim, it’s true: but, in doing so, he also confirmed the truth of your story. Guavo is not so exotic as it was, is perhaps now not exotic at all, but no-one would doubt that it exists; the coincidence of your meeting too unlikely to be anything other than the truth. So you could decide to be magnanimous and share the credit with Simon, ensuring that you preserve some from yourself, by pressing here.
Guavo

Could you place Guavo on a map, you wonder? On one level, you could not.

Guavo does not exist. It is the author’s creation, and exists only inside this book: a spuriously exotic invention, aimed at mocking a certain sort of travel, the sort Alex described, some clue to this is in the name: it is compounded from “guava”, an exotic fruit native to Mexico, and “guano”, which is a fancy word for bird shit, specifically seabird shit. As such, at the deepest level, its climate, politics and location are just as nebulous as they sound. You could not therefore place it on a map, but one hopes that you knew that much.

That only answers half the question though. You, the reader, couldn’t place Guavo on a map, but what about you, the character? The fictional you claiming to have visited an invented island? Are you inventing the island or does it, in this book, really exist, somewhere off the coast of Chile? And if it does really exist, do you know that it does, or are your stories about it an incredible coincidence? All of this may all feel more than a little abstract, but it is important stuff. Are you lying, inventing an exotic island and claiming to have visited it? Or merely lying about visiting an island, coincidentally invented? Whichever, it says something rather firm about your character, and that of
Simon, who will soon falsely claim to have met you there, in case you hadn’t read that far before turning here.
You laugh uproariously, and with convincing effect. You slap Simon on the shoulder, quite hard. Of course, you say, I thought I knew you from somewhere. Simon cannot resist a grin in response, a grin that is at one smug and watery. You give him another slap on the shoulder, even harder. A round of shots is ordered, and as you wait, Simon adds his stories of Guavo to yours.

He tells of discovering a lost tribe living inside a waterfall whilst trekking: his decision to hide their existence from the outside world earns much approval. You are tempted to say that that tribe gets discovered by everyone who goes to Guavo, and everyone decides to conceal their existence from the outside world, that’s how they make their living. You decide against doing so for two reasons: you cannot complain about Simon’s deceit without potentially exposing your own, and more importantly, the others are listening rapt. Like small children at story time, they murmur and “ooh!” at his “adventures”, and by extension, yours. It is some sort of bargain, you suppose. The drinks arrive, and you down yours: you take the opportunity to give Simon one last hard cuff on the shoulder. You might be interested in the game theory behind your decision here.
Around you, the bar is getting ever louder. People talk and shout, and, in response, the music ratchets up, and the talk grows louder still, more fragmented and disorganised, drunker. It becomes harder and harder to hear across the table, and slowly smaller conversations break out, the group atomizing into little clusters: first the lanky guy and the girl with the red face on your left, then the boy with the spots and the one with the grating laugh on your right, then finally between Sam, Alex and the girl with the olive skin at the far end. Unable to hear what is being said by any other group or be heard by them and unable to move, you are stuck with Penfold and Simon. The three of you share an awkward moment of realisation, as you contemplate what is to come.
You give Simon a hard, dismissive stare. He immediately understands what is about to happen. He begins to blink, big and visible, and his story starts to trail off. The others, sensing something amiss, turn to you.

You tell Simon that you didn't see him in Costa Guana. You intend to leave it at that, but Simon chooses not to take the hint. He sticks to his story, even starts to expand on it. He adds details to his tale, little embellishments: he stops short of giving an exact date and time, but he tells you what you were wearing. You state firmly that you never met him in Costa Guana.

Your denial does not stop Simon. He moves on from your encounter. "After Costa Guana," he says, signalling for a reunion round of shots "I decided to go trekking in the lesser-known interior. Really wanted to get to know myself, you know, away from all the clutter of the modern world?" he tells the others. They seem to believe him, listening attentively. You interrupt him, saying again that you never saw him in Costa Guana.

He stops, looks at you carefully. The atmosphere changes slightly: the others sense that something is amiss between you. Simon attempts to restart his story, but you interrupt him again, and show your hand. You tell them that you
never met him in Costa Guana, because there is no Costa Guana, not on Guavo or anywhere else. You tell them that Simon is making it up, that he has never been to Guavo. You conclude that, judging from his appearance, you doubt he even had a gap year.

You get a swift and large reaction: Sam and Penfold gasp, while Alex gives off a subtle disgust. Simon does not crack, however. “That’s ridiculous,” he says, “of course, there is a Costa Guana. It’s between Sulaco and Suavo on the west side of the island. Perhaps you don’t speak enough of the language to understand that.”

You tell him that you speak the language well enough.

“Do you? I wonder whether you have been to Guavo at all,” Simon says, turning the tables. “The others will have to judge which of us is right then, won’t they?”

The others look back and forth between you and Simon, deciding which of you to believe. You think of a way to argue your case. You could either give more details of your own visit, reinforcing your credentials as a traveller, or seek to
expose Simon’s lies by attacking him: you are sure that, like you, he is lying about visiting Guavo. Both courses have their flaws: the more detail you give about Guavo, the more likely that a mistake will expose your deceit, while the more sceptical you are of Simon’s claims, the more likely is it your own will come under scrutiny. You must do something, however—so speak on your own behalf by pressing here, or savage Simon by pressing here.

If you wish to role-play this decision, press here.
It is easy to pretend that, when presented with two conflicting accounts of events, people decide which version to prefer based on a careful weighing of evidence: that they listen carefully to what both sides have to say, and reach a deliberate and fair conclusion. We would be pretending, however. In the ordinary run of things, people rely on their well-rehearsed and long-held prejudices to do their deciding for them. When, as in the debate between you and Simon, those predispositions can only take them so far. They don’t know either of you, and your situation in life is much the same. What can separate you from him, now that it comes to combat?

Your looks. How will the others decide which of you to believe? By deciding which of you they’d like to believe. It is not necessarily a matter of who looks the more honest, or the more plausible: they may well choose whichever of you looks best.

You realise as much and cut to the chase. You tell them that there should be no more talk, and that you should move to combat. They must judge you both, and take the word of the one that they consider better looking. You are confident. Simon has a milk-pale look, like a night-dwelling worm. He is at once too thin, bones threatening to break his papery skin, and hunched up, his
shoulders screwed up to his stooped neck. He definitely doesn’t look like he has just come back from six months on a tropical island. But the others will be the judge of that.

To win their favour, you must defeat Simon in combat. You must know, too, that failure will result not in bloody death, but worse, in enduring social embarrassment. Take your Luck score (whether your looks are good or bad is, after all, a product of chance), Roll The Dice, and add the two scores together.

SIMON – 8

If your score exceeds Simon’s, press here. If you fall short, the story continues here.
Your table mates confer amongst themselves, looking carefully between the two contestants. “It’s obvious, then,” Sam says, to general agreement. “Simon is the one telling the truth.” He offers to shake your hand, but you cannot bear to accept it: am I really that ugly, you wonder? “I don’t know why you bothered asking the question,” Alex says, and the table cannot help but laugh with her. The laughter does not do much for your self-esteem, and any delusion about your looks is now removed. It signifies, too, that you are now stamped as a serial liar, a gap year falsifier of the worst kind. The others stay silent, hoping you will take the hint. You see that all is lost: you reel away, covering your face with your arm, hot tears collecting in pools on your unusually shaped face.

You reach your room, damned by your own ugliness as dishonest, as well as by actually being dishonest. You are surprised, given that all the mirrors in your parents’ house, a house you had not been permitted to leave until you went to University, had shown you to be a man of moderate good looks. You check the mirror above your sink: encountering your decayed, rotten visage for the first time, you realise why your parents kept you away from reflective pools. You curse the hand luck has dealt you, leaving you a face fit for the Victorian Circus. You lash out: you wreck your room. You turn over the bed, you pick up the
chair and smash it to pieces on the floor, you beat your fists against the
innocent wardrobe. Then you turn on your worst enemy: the cruel mirror. You
take it from the wall and lift it above your head, ready to hurl it to the ground.
It slips from your grasp and falls. Though it falls only a short distance, the
mirror smashes through one of your face’s structural defects and directly into
your brain, killing you instantly.

The University would mourn your death though you had been a member for
only a short time and were best known for lying. Your parents would be
devastated, but delighted to discover that the blow left your face much
improved. They could replace your picture in family portraits with digital
images of your death mask, and were immensely proud to be able to hold an
open casket funeral, something which they had previously considered as
bordering on the irresponsible. That would more or less be that.

Realising what would be the result of your decision to challenge Simon over his
claims to have visited Guavo, and your failure to win a luck roll, you decide that
it might be more sensible to try the line of least resistance, and not challenge
Simon after all.
Your table mates confer amongst themselves, comparing the two contestants carefully. You give Sam a confident wink. Your confidence is not misplaced: you watch Simon’s face falls as the verdict becomes apparent. Alex says “On those terms, there’s only one answer, I’m afraid.” Your face breaks into a handsome grin, which you train on the unfortunate Simon. “I’m sorry, Simon,” she says, and he visibly crumples. You laugh. You repeat “Costa Guana” with a tone of incredulity. Simon starts to get up, pulling his chair back from the table.

You ignore him. You sweep your gaze around the table, training a smoldering look on each of your new friends in turn. They react differently: Alex meets your gaze frankly, while Penfold blushes a little. You feel well-established now, and decide to treat them to another story from your own time on Guavo. At the same time, Simon finally, actually goes, turning and heading for the door. You start to speak. “So,” you say, but are immediately interrupted.

“Wait!” Sam calls to Simon, who was shuffling, back hunched, towards the exit. He turns around. His expression is one of utter defeat, and he looks ready for one more blow. You hope that Sam makes it a hard one, really stamps the boot on the little worm. “It doesn’t matter that you haven’t been to Guavo,” she says. “If Guavo even exists,” Alex adds sharply. “I understand why you’d lie
about it,” says Sam. There is a murmur of agreement around the table. “We all understand,” says Penfold. “Please stay,” Alex concludes, the others joining her in beckoning Simon back to the table. His face lights up at this reprieve, and he scuttles back to his seat. He gives you a snide little smile when he sits down. This was not the hammer blow you were hoping for. Things soon get worse. The table, having taken Simon back, turns on you. “Besides which,” Alex says, “what kind of person is so monstrously arrogant as to challenge somebody to a looks contest, over their mutually fictitious gap years?” The others agree. “You love yourself too much,” Sam says, definitively.

You wonder how that can be. You consider storming out, angered by their refusal to allocate praise and blame based on good looks. Sure, that is the message that works of fiction usually try to impart, but it’s not one that you expect to see put into action, least of all at your expense. Perplexed, you look in the mirror behind the table. Love yourself too much? How is that possible, you wonder, as you stare at the dreamy beauty reflected back at you? You stare for quite some time, in fact.

So long do you stare, past ten minutes and more, that your reverie on your own beauty is taken for solemn reflection on your guilt. Sam, now feeling guilty
herself, interrupts you, and apologises for telling you that you love yourself too much, and Alex reluctantly allows you may have been to Guavo.

Around you, the bar is getting ever louder. People talk and shout, and, in response, the music of the jukebox is ratcheted up, and the talk grows louder still, more fragmented and disorganised, drunker. It becomes harder and harder to hear across the table, and slowly, but surely, conversations break out, the group atomizing. First between the lanky guy and the girl with the red face on your left, then the boy with the spots and the one with the grating laugh on your right, then finally between Sam, Alex and the girl with the olive skin at the far end. Unable to hear what is being said by any other group or be heard by them, and unable to move, you are stuck with Penfold and Simon. The three of you share an awkward moment of realisation, as you contemplate what is to come.
Simon tries to speak next but you interrupt him: “This is ridiculous,” you say, a sarcastic thunderclap. You don’t say any more than that. Your tone conveys it all.

Look at Simon, your tone insinuates, look at this lemon worm, this snivelling white rat: is this a man formed in the heat of Guavo? Simon might have been believed had he introduced the idea himself, but not now, you imply, not when he has so obviously bolted himself to your true adventures. Admit it, you seem to say, admit to themselves that Simon’s making it up.

In your eyes, Simon’s silence is a further plea of guilt. To the others, he seems to plead insanity. On your behalf, that is: while he says nothing, his rolling eyes and quivering lips suggest that you’ve cracked, Guavo’s brutal prisons evidently too much for you.

You are tempted to escalate things further: to jab your finger into his chest, to challenge him to tell the truth. Don’t deny it, you pathetic creature, you want to say, to slam your fist on the table, scattering drinks to the floor. But you settle for conveying your displeasure with a hard stare.
You might expect Simon to crack at this point and, a single pathetic tear crawling down his pallid cheek, pour forth a confession. He does not: instead he continues the pantomime that implies you are suffering from stress-related amnesia. You look to Alex and Sam, to the others around their table, expecting them to take your side.

An atmosphere of deep, if delicately expressed, suspicion has fallen. Though no one is so rude as to say it, they don’t believe either of you. You are left with little but the nuclear option.

“Costa Guana?” you say, though make it sound as little like that as possible, adding two superfluous x’s. “Different pronunciations: of course, I remember you. How’s it going?” Simon, having sensed the same death of faith that you did, eagerly grasps your hand.

It is too late to entirely repair the damage, but it also brings an end to the conversation. You wish you hadn’t challenged him at all. You might be interested in the game theory involved in the situation which is covered [here](#).
Around you, the bar is getting ever louder. People talk and shout, and, in response, the music ratchets up, and the talk grows louder still, more fragmented and disorganised, drunker. It becomes harder and harder to hear across the table, and slowly smaller conversations break out, the group atomizing into little clusters: first the lanky guy and the girl with the red face on your left, then the boy with the spots and the one with the grating laugh on your right, then finally between Sam, Alex and the girl with the olive skin at the far end. Unable to hear what is being said by any other group or be heard by them and unable to move, you are stuck with Penfold and Simon. The three of you share an awkward moment of realisation, as you contemplate what is to come.
The reason you have to apologise, or at least retrace your steps, and undo your decision to challenge Simon in the first place, is for the author’s, that is my sake. If you were allowed, at a rate of one, sometimes two, an evening, to insult one member of a group of friends, before abandoning that group for another, you would have exhausted every group of friends at the university in just over a year, allowing that, having inevitably acquired a reputation, you would find it harder to attract new groups as time went on. That sounds, it’s fair to admit, like a fairly fun book, but it would be an enormous one, particularly as you might change your mind and not insult one of them, not abandon that group of friends, requiring a novel to be constructed around your relationship with them. All of them. A novel in other words for everyone you could possibly meet at university. You will have to stick to the friends you’ve been given.

But why have you been maneuvered into a position in which you have to apologise to Simon? Because when the time of your triumph comes, as you must hope it will, its pleasure will be all the sweeter for your present humiliation. But the book has barely begun, so you cannot expect that pleasure just yet.
You take a deep, calming breath, hold it, then let it smoothly out. The others are watching you, waiting for your response to Simon’s challenge. You smile modestly, taking time to meet their eyes in turn, not just those of Alex and Sam but the lanky guy on your left and the girl with the irritating laugh too, all of them. You even give Simon a smile, before taking up your story again.

You tell them those details that only someone that knows Guavo could know. You describe the black volcanic sands on the northern shores. You describe the unique and colourful vegetation, the extravagant, ineradicable purple flowers that burst from the city’s overflowing gutters. You let them in on secrets: on arcane cultural practices, on the secret origins of Guavo’s strange dances and arrhythmic musics, on the intoxicating and bitter brews that Guavans drink, and the peculiar ways they drink them. You supply detail after overwhelming detail. Simon cannot compete, and looks aghast. The others are once again eating from your hand. They follow your every word, your every fact, enraptured. Emboldened, you begin to expand how you became embroiled in the protest movement, adding something about the political and economic context of that wonderful but benighted island, before describing the nature of the labour rights dispute itself.
“I thought you said it was dispute over the rights of the indigenous people,”

Alex asks suspiciously. Simon soon perks up. “Yes, I thought you did,” he says.
The others all agree.

An atmosphere of deep, if delicately expressed, suspicion falls. Though no one is so rude as to accuse you and Simon of having lied, they no longer believe you. For appearances sake, you bluster on a bit; you stick to the line that any dispute about indigenous rights is really a battle between capital and labour. After all, most disputes can be, if you need them to.

You might be interested in the game theory behind your interaction with Simon as discussed here.

Around you, the bar is getting ever louder. People talk and shout, and, in response, the music of the jukebox is ratcheted up, and the talk grows louder still, more fragmented and disorganised, drunker. It becomes harder and harder to hear across the table, and slowly, but surely, conversations break out, the group atomizing. First between the lanky guy and the girl with the red face on your left, then the boy with the spots and the one with the grating laugh on your right, then finally between Sam, Alex and the girl with the olive
skin at the far end. Unable to hear what is being said by any other group or be heard by them, and unable to move, you are stuck with Penfold and Simon. The three of you share an awkward moment of realisation, as you contemplate what is to come.
Penfold is laughing. “That’s so true about Beckham, mate,” he says, clapping
you on the shoulder. Even Simon is chuckling, though it is rather forced. “I
couldn’t have said it any better myself,” Penfold adds, before, with an air of
welcome finality, finishing his pint with one long swallow. Thirsty, you look
down at your own and find it empty. “You want another?” he asks. You and
Simon both say yes to another pint.

As Penfold heads to the bar, you look around the table. You find the little
groups, having come together, are now broken up. The lanky one and the girl
with the red face are now stood by the door, in violent conversation with
someone you don’t recognise. It’s past ten o’clock, and the bar is sliding into
mess. People stumble around, shouting drunkenly at each others’ ears,
clutching at unknown shoulders for support. People are, in other words, having
a good time. You envy them. But then you make a count. With Penfold, the
lanky guy and the red-faced one stood up, the three seats between you and
Sam are now empty. You try to catch her attention, to get yourself invited
down to that end of the table. You fail: she remains deep in conversation with
Alex. Getting no reaction from her, you give up.

You resign yourself to talking to Simon. Having spent the last twenty minutes
talking about football, you decide to ask him whether he likes cricket; whether
you like cricket it or not, his answer will provide a momentary diversion from midfielders.

You turn to face him. Before you can ask, Simon says “I’ll go and help Penfold with the drinks.” He says it as if he’s doing you a favour, sparing you a chore you really should have volunteered for yourself. He gets up and walks past you to the bar.

You look around again. It is clear that Simon has not done you a favour. In an extremely busy bar, where people are drifting around, making friends and acquaintances merely by drunkenly bumping into each other, you sit at a table surrounded by four empty chairs. You half-expect to be asked if you mind someone else taking them. You reflect on the choices that brought you here, and decide that they were almost certainly wrong.

“Oi!” You hear someone cry. You look up, and at the other end of the table, see Alex and Sam gesturing you to come and join them. You do not need to be asked twice and scoot round, taking the seat next to Sam.

“Sorry,” Alex says, as you sit down, leaning past Sam so that you hear her over the noise, “we invited you to come and sit with us, and then haven’t talked to you all evening.”
“I don’t think we need to worry, A.,” Sam says, “you were having a good time with the other boys, weren’t you?” You nod, say yeah with as much enthusiasm as you can muster. Sam smiles, pleased, but Alex looks sceptical.

“I’ve got your pint,” Penfold says, having returned from the bar. You take it, without getting up from your new seat. At the same time, the lanky one and the girl with the red face return and hover, as if they expect you to move. You face being returned to Penfold and to Simon, and to another long talk about the rights and wrongs of the play-off system, knowing you will never resolve the issue. Then the lanky one takes the seat next to you, Penfold the seat next to him, with the girl with the red face in his old seat and Simon back where he started. Simon gives you a look but you simply smile, as if it is you who have done him a favour, and turn to Sam and Alex. You click here to begin your conversation with them, or here if you wouldn’t like to talk to them.
Alex has a slim face on top of a long, elegant neck. Her hair, pulled back into a ponytail, makes it seem slimmer still, a few stray strands of brown hair falling either side of her neat white brow. Her expression is enigmatic, but if you had to guess it, you would describe it as superior amusement. It is most obvious in her olive green eyes, which have a sly glitter, and in her mouth, the corners of which twist ever so slightly upward, less a smile than a smile swallowed. Her nose, if you were looking for flaws, is a little pinched.

Though she does not move her hands much, you see that her wrists are slight, her fingers long and delicate, her nails filed and finely polished. When she does move, she moves swiftly, sharply. Her hands move as if to parcel up the air, to cut and slice it up, in definite emphasis of a point. Her speech has some of the same quality, chipping and chopping her sentences. When she listens, or rather when she wants to be seen to listen, she tilts her head to one side, by a mere few degrees, and holds it there very still. Coupled with her expression, you can never be sure that she is listening; this is either discouraging or encouraging, depending on how you feel about that sort of thing.

Sam differs from Alex. For one, she is obviously enthusiastic. When listening, she nods fast and often, often moving forward in attention and breaking into
smiles; her mouth wide, her lips thick and very red, and when she laughs, which is often, her teeth flash white against the black. For another, her hair is cut short, and dyed blonde: her fringe cuts a jagged swipe across her forehead. She is fuller of face than Alex, and her features are less classically pretty. Her nose is a bit squashed, and her cheeks a little sunk; but her eyes, framed by long, carefully created lashes, are especially lovely, two round and beckoning pools of blue.

When she talks, her accent is barely different to that of Alex, which is to say southern English, neutral. But where Alex chips and cuts her words, ending her sentences with sharp points, Sam gulps at hers, belching them out in streams. There is something more than usually ingenuous about her, not innocent so much as open. Of the two women, it's her you smell, her perfume strong, sweet smelling, girlish. Sam is, taste depending, less, just as, or more, attractive as Alex.

You may wonder why such vital, if rather overwrought, detail was here, rather than in the story itself. Surely you needed to know all that, you might think? If you are, the answer to that otherwise rhetorical question is here.
Or you might feel bemused. You were promised a description of the women, some actual detail on them, but what you got wasn't what you were after. It was very nice, but it was, you might think, too high-minded: literally so, in keeping its focus above the neck. If you were looking at two women, you wouldn't look there. If you want the low-minded sort of detail, then, you probably can’t help yourself from clicking [here](#).

If you've read enough description, however, and simply wish to return to your conversation with Alex and Sam, click [here](#).
Alex is slim, with long legs. You did not need to sit next to her to notice this: you saw as much as the bar. You saw her stand leaning against the bar; back turned towards you, and saw there, at the top of her long legs, suspended in tight black denim, like vacuum packed peaches, her taut buttocks. You detect in them a definite superiority, a sly sarcasm, even.

When you follow her to your table, you walk behind her and watch those slim legs cut the air like scissors. She could, can, cut with those legs, cut men's hearts into whatever shape she pleases. Hearts and more besides. When she listens, she leans forward, and her loose fitting top shows some cleavage. It is not large.

Sam is different from Alex. Her body is a series of improbable but welcome curves. It starts with a large, swelling chest that moves, fast and often. It sways, shakes when she laughs or walks, and when she leans forward to listen, a long, perilously thin crevasse forms between her breasts, which you worry about falling into. Her legs are less elegant than Alex's, less the sort used to advertise tights, more secateurs than scissors. But on top of her legs, swinging wide from her hips, is a furious rump, a backside that is really a back and two sides.
When she walks, next to Alex as they take you to their table, she is all soft undulation to Alex's snipping points. Where Alex threatens to slash and snap you into shape, Sam threatens to suck you in, devour you. She is, taste depending, less than, just as, or more, attractive as Alex.

You might raise an objection at this point. You might think that’s all very well, but it isn’t the sort of detail you look for when you look at women. You wanted something a good deal grislier than this, to start you speculating about their sexual persona or the shape of their genitalia. But you have done quite enough leering at women for the time being. After reading this, actually talking to them might be cleansing.
Reasons for generally minimal descriptions of the two female characters

The reason for the minimal description of the two women in the main body of the text, which is really a description of a description, is threefold. Firstly, it is to avoid placing too much weight on their gender. Giving too much detail about their appearance might alienate readers who prefer to take a romantic interest in another gender, readers for whom the description of feminine features, reminding them who it is they are pursuing, might be a little too much. The same motivation saw them given their ambiguous names. Secondly, it is to avoid placing too much descriptive writing in the text. Some people like descriptive writing, long, cleverly phrased accounts of the properties of things. Some people say it is necessary to make books work. You, reader, having chosen to come here, are likely to agree with them. Placed together, then, we have the third reason - in this type of book, in an e-book, the close characteristics, the grain of detail that would confirm their gender and/or bore readers less committed that yourself, can be placed at one remove here, where it need not bore them.
You might bridle at this, and point to the previous section, where the book held you hostage over a biography of Rufus Brevett. This is true, but you were meant to be bored in that bit.
If you’re desperate to revisit Scorpion Swamp (and why wouldn’t you be?), those books are still available, of course, and available to read on your phone no less. Http://www.fightingfantasy.com/

Frankly, this is the other, commercial, reason why this book doesn’t trap you in a post-apocalyptic wilderness: a lot of other people remain quite happy to do so.
So, having escaped Simon and Penfold, you settle in with Sam and Alex. You have not, you realise, spent much time with either of them. Since meeting them at the bar, you have spent less than five minutes alone with them, merely watched them from down the table as part of a larger group. Now sat next to them, you are able to observe them more closely. You watch how they move, study their body language, learn how they smell, if at all. As they talk, you can intuit some of what lies at the subcutaneous layer beneath their speech, guess at what their defining traits and habits might be. You get a sense of them. If, after reading all that, you still feel that you don’t have a sense of them, you can get a more detailed [here](#).

You are able to observe them as, having invited you to talk to them, Sam and Alex continue to talk amongst themselves.

“From Barnstaple,” Sam says, “It’s a small place in...”

“Devon,” Alex says.

“That’s right,” she says and smiles at both of you. “Small place but home. I had to go to sixth-form college in Exeter, though. Where are you from? I bet you’re from London.”
“Hants,” says Alex apologetically, sorry to disappoint Sam, who does indeed look disappointed. “North Hampshire. Nice but terribly dull. Parents liked the schools, I suppose.”

"I bet your school was really good," Sam says, meaning that it must have been private. "Mine was shit," she says, and Alex laughs. Alex doesn't comment on her school in return.

"College was much better," Sam says, "that's how I got the grades to come here," she says. "Did you go to college or..."

"6th Form," Alex says, "at my school." Sam nods. Alex isn’t answering the question Sam wants her to answer: what sort of school she went to. Sam moves on. "What A-Levels did you do, Alex?" she asks.

The change of subject is a wise one. Alex is instantly forthcoming.

"English Literature, French, Russian and History," she says. You can tell she would like to tell you the grades, but restrains herself for the moment.

"Russian?" Sam says, suspiciously "are you any good?"
"I did psychology, anthropology and biology," Sam replies. But having found something Alex wants to talk about, Sam changes her mind, wants to return to her original topic. An impasse is reached. Both turn to you.

"What A-Levels did you do?" "Where are you from?"

Each of them asks you a question, a different question. The two questions overlap, the end of one poking out after the other. One of them came first, of course, but even if it were possible to say which one, it would be irrelevant. Neither withdraws: both wait, watching you to see which question you will choose to answer, which station you choose to tune from the static, whose question you’ll answer: Alex's about your A-Levels, or Sam's about your origins?
You would, it can be taken, rather spend the rest of the evening with Simon and Penfold than talking to the people who attracted you to the table in the first place. You enjoyed talking about the composition of the England midfield, and would relish the opportunity to discuss the fascinating issue of the play-offs. After all, you came to this section because you were promised a complete statistical breakdown of Rufus Brevett’s career: given the choice between that and talking to girls, you know which one you prefer and no mistake.

Fair points. You are not going to be offered an opportunity to continue your talk about football with Penfold and Simon, though. As promised previously, after your interlude with them, the action moves on. It needs to move on as much for the author’s sake as yours.

However, just as your conversation with Penfold and Simon was represented not by a back and forth about Beckham, but by a biography of Rufus Brevett, your desire to continue that conversation can be indulged by similar means. As mentioned above, you were promised a statistical record of Rufus Brevett’s career, and there, a little further down the page, it is. Spend as much time with it as you like: pore over it, debate it with yourself, memorize it even: indulge yourself. Doing so for a period of two or three hours will provide an excellent simulacrum of talking about the play-offs with Penfold and Simon, and indeed
of all subsequent conversations with them, and most men. When you’ve spent
yourself, click here to talk to the women.

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You answer Sam’s question, saying where you are from.

“That’s so cool,” she replies. She sounds as if she means it, irrespective of whether your upbringing actually was “so cool”.

In response, you demur. It is possible that your upbringing was “so cool”. It is unlikely, however, that you thought so at the time. If you did, it’s not likely that, then or now, you would care to say so publicly. Everyone, including you, has told stories of childhood glamour, hardship, parental eccentricity or exaggerated boredom, aiming to garner admiration, sympathy or simply interest, but it’s not cool to actually say that your childhood was cool. You don’t, but Sam isn’t deterred by your downplaying. Breathlessly, she asks a question about the area you are from (a list of possible questions is here).

Sam then waits, eyes wide, for your answer. You respond in a way that is neatly self-deprecating, informative but unpatronising.

Sam is much taken with your answer. She laughs, and her hand falls on your thigh, then, with a slap, bounces straight off: you feel the imprint of her fingers linger afterwards. Alex is not so impressed, not interested at all, in fact.
Whatever information you gave Sam, Alex already knew, or was not interested to learn. As you talk to Sam, Alex looks away, towards the olive-skinned girl on her left, and then starts a conversation with her. You watch her turn away, but Sam pays her no attention. She picks up her glass, filled with something clear and fizzy, probably vodka and lemonade, and takes a big swig, before pointing her glass at yours to encourage you to do the same.

“I’m really glad we met you at the bar,” she says, “and I’m glad that you didn’t go off to meet the other people from your floor.” You lift your pint to your mouth, and nod in agreement. “You can always catch up with them another night, I suppose” she says, smiling at you. You nod again, though you have no intention of catching up with them, given Sam’s reaction to you.

Alex is a different matter, however. She has now turned her back on you completely, leaving you alone with Sam. You may be quite satisfied with that, and want to take your relationship with Sam to its natural conclusion, in which case you should continue your conversation uninterrupted here. Or you might see that early commitment to Sam as dangerous over-commitment. If so, you might want to draw Alex back into the conversation, by answering the question she asked you about your A-Levels here.
Or you might find all this a little slow-moving and psychological, and want to insist on role-playing this decision, in the hope that being bold/relying on your skill with dice will settle all such questions.
Sam has nearly finished her drink. You have nearly finished yours. You have both had quite a lot of drinks now, though you feel able to handle it. Sam rotates her glass in a circle, no more than a mouthful swirling around its bottom, as she tells you a long story about the first time she found a pub that served alcohol to underage kids in Barnstaple. Long before the story reaches anything that could be justifiably described as a conclusion, she lifts the glass to her lips and finishes her drink.

“I’m going to the bar,” Sam says. She adds, in a way that seems suggestive, “Do you want to come with me?”

You do. You could say just that, but you are confident. You should be confident. Sam has, since the moment you met, seemed keen, very keen. Does she really want to go to “the bar”? Why not, you think, cut to the chase?

“We could...” you say, and nod towards the door. Sam laughs, a very sexy, positive sounding laugh.

“Steady on,” she says, smiling, slapping her palm against your thigh, her touch this time making a chiding impact rather than a lingering impression, “I’ve only
known you five minutes.” She gets up, and you, only a little abashed, ask her if she still wants you to come to the bar with her. “I’ll be all right,” she says. She walks off, chuckling. You watch her make her way through the crowds up to the bar.

“On your own?” Alex asks, amused, having watched you for a minute. You turn to look at her. She looks even more superior than usual. She leans towards you to make herself heard over the bar’s din. “Was all interest in your origins spent?” You lean backwards, saying nothing in response; there is little you could say. Alex laughs, with more affection than you might expect. “What are you doing tomorrow after matriculation?” she asks.

You shrug; tell her you have nothing planned. “We’re all going to the Freshers’ Fair,” she says, and the girl next to her, the one with olive skin, nods vigorously. “It sounds terrible, I know, but everyone says you should go. It’s the best chance to see what’s on offer.” You nod, as if this sounds like a reasonable argument and not a strange fit of lunacy.
“What’s that?” Sam asks, arriving with three drinks in her hands, and another bottle clenched between arm and body. “We’re talking about the Freshers' Fair tomorrow,” Alex replies. “You were going to meet us there, weren’t you?”

You look at Sam, cautiously. “Oh, you definitely should,” she says without fuss, and hands you a pint. You agree, given everything you’ve heard, that you should meet them there. Sam nods, then restarts her story about a lax public house in Barnstaple. Your evening concludes here.
Sam has nearly finished her drink. You have nearly finished yours. You have both had quite a lot of drinks now, though you feel able to handle it. Sam rotates her glass in a circle, no more than a mouthful swilling around its bottom. She tells you a long story about the first time she found a pub that served alcohol to underage kids in Barnstaple. Long before that story reaches anything that could justifiably be described as a conclusion however, you cut across her.

“Alex....” you say.

It takes a moment for everyone to adjust their position. Sam continues talking for a second, like a car that, despite bursting a tire, takes some time time to skid to a sip, while Alex turns very slowly away from the girl with the olive skin and very slowly towards to you. Once she has, there is quiet between the three of you, as they wait to hear what you were going to say.

You might want another option here, some sort of get out. But under pressure, you cannot think of one, and instead go ahead with your original choice.
“You were asking about what I did for my A-Levels,” you say hopefully. You look briefly at Sam for confirmation, to be met with a look of brutal disappointment.

“I did,” Alex replies, at once icy and uncertain. You let her know which A-Levels you did and what results you got. The information comes a little late in the day, and Alex soon looks as disappointed with you as Sam does. You consider offering to get them a drink, but worry that on your return, they will have moved your chair elsewhere, or worse, filled it with Simon.

You decide instead that reckless honesty is the best policy. You tell them that you’re sorry if you come across as a little strange, but that you are nervous, it being the first night at University, and with them being both so nice, you didn’t want to give offence or ignore one at the expense of the other. You sound like a complete incompetent with designs on sleeping with both of them, but then you are nineteen, so that is to be expected.

“Listen,” says Sam, taking pity and offering you another chance. “We’re all going to the Freshers’ Fair tomorrow afternoon. Why don’t you meet us there and we can all hang out?” You don’t feel able to refuse her pity, even if a
chance to go to the Freshers’ Fair is pretty pitiful, as chances go. Alex then suggests you go and get another round of drinks, and when you return, your seat is where it was, unoccupied. Your evening concludes here.
You are not nineteen, of course. For all that you are outwardly in your teens, you are meant to making these decisions from the perspective of your jaded, unillusioned mid-thirties,. You might, in fact, be in your twenties or your sixties and you might, in real life, hold any number of illusions. Whichever applies, you may feel that your decision making has been unfairly maligned in this section. You could have thought of something other than persisting with your original plan: you could have told Alex that Sam was telling a brilliant story about underage drinking in Barnstaple, which she really needed to hear, say. It would have been desperately unconvincing, for sure, but better than what you signed up for.

But you did sign up for it, let’s remember, you chose it. The concept of moral hazard has had a fairly thorough airing since the financial crisis, but it can stand one more. It is the idea that, in economic terms, the likelihood of being rescued from your bad decisions leads you to make riskier decisions, make bigger bets because you won’t yourself have to settle the bill should they fail. Something like moral hazard exists here. If you believe that, having made a wild and risky decision, you can undo it before the consequences of that decision are played out, it will not only encourage you to make riskier decisions, but to skip out on them before the results play out. And if you must
do that, then you have a back button on your e-Reader for precisely that purpose.
Places and the questions Sam asks about them

London: Really London or one of the outside bits?

Wales: Are you from the Valleys then? Can you speak Welsh?

Scotland: Do you have a kilt? Do you wear anything under it?

Cumbria: Can you go swimming in the lakes?

Most of the rest of the North of England: Is it really cold?

Cornwall, Devon and the West Country: How far are you from Barnstaple?

Home Counties: There’s nothing interesting about the Home Counties is there?

Ireland: Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?

Expatriate upbringing (for all countries, including the likes of Belgium): Did you have servants?
The Potteries: Why are they called the Potteries?

Midlands: What A-Levels did you do?
You answer the question about your exams. Looking past Sam, you tell Alex which A-Levels (or Scottish Highers) you took, which questions were set for the exam, and, finally, what results you achieved. The last of those, the results, is the least important. You are frank about what they were: but whether good, bad or exceptional, the important thing is to emphasise just how little work was done to achieve them, doing so with a thoroughness that is ironic in the circumstances.

As you talk, Alex listens to you carefully. She seems amused by your chaotic revision methods, though there is no actual laughter to confirm this. She then asks whether you have read a book relevant to one of your A-Level subjects, assuring you that you should (a list of possible combinations is here)

If you have not read it, you thank her for the suggestion; if you have read it, you praise it as a good selection. Whichever, Alex agrees it was a good suggestion, and expounds on why. As she talks, you nod and offer verbal affirmations, while Sam looks blankly in the other direction.

You pay no attention. As you concentrate on Alex, so Alex concentrates on you, growing animated, even. She talks and you occasionally interject, offering
some small confirmation or more willing laughter. She leans forward, edging across Sam, enjoying the intellectual conversation you're offering. “This is the sort of thing I expected from University,” she says, “I’m really glad we met at the bar.” She offers you a smile that is much less enigmatic than the usual.

Sam does not smile, however, as you talk across her. She is now obviously bored, like a boyfriend on a shopping trip or a girlfriend stuck in front of the football. Like them, required to be polite and despite the stereotype, she does not attempt to overthrow her boredom: she does not take long sighs, does not ostentatiously check her watch, doesn’t burst in to change the topic of conversation to one that pleases her. Rather she stares, willingly but blankly, into the middle distance, lapsing into a near-catatonic state. That may not matter: you are doing very well with Alex, albeit committed heavily to her. You may be quite satisfied with that, feel your relationship will proceed to a natural conclusion, in which case you can continue your conversation here. You might see that early commitment, for want of a better word, as dangerous over-commitment, however. If so, you might want to draw Sam back into the conversation, by answering the question she asked you here.
Or you might find all this a little slow-moving and psychological, and want to
insist on role-playing this decision, in the hope that being bold/relying on your
skill with dice will settle all such questions.
Alex promises to tell you about her own absolute favourite book, the book that influenced her the most. Sam takes the opportunity to get up.

"Excuse me," she says, "I'm going to the toilet."

Alex nods, but does not get up to go with her as women often do. When she goes, Alex neglects to keep her promise: after telling you about two or three other books, books that used to be the book that influenced her the most, until the current favourite took over, she pauses to take a sip from her glass of red wine, then having taken that sip, stops talking entirely. She stares at the glass with suspicion. She tips the glass back and forth, as if it was a spirit level giving a suspect result. Eventually, she shrugs, and drinks the rest.

"That is the last glass of red wine I will be having in here," she says and shudders. "I'm going to the bar to get another drink. Do you want to come with me?" She smiles rather sweetly, as she awaits your response.

Your own pint long since finished, you definitely want another. More, you feel things are going well. She approached you at the bar, invited you to join her at your table, and now she wants you to accompany her away from her friends.
You feel confident. Why waste time, you think, why not press things to their natural conclusion?

"We could..." you say, gesturing with your head towards the door. She laughs: the laugh is rather more anxious than you’d hoped.

"Oh dear," she says, embarrassed, "it's...it's very early in our...acquaintance..." she trails off there, before repeating "acquaintance", then tutting at herself. She gets up, and edges past you, towards the bar. You ask her if she still wants you to come to the bar with her. "I'll be fine," she says quickly, before asking what you want. She then leaves you.

"On your own, then?" Sam says, on her return. There is some satisfaction in her voice. You tell her that Alex has gone to the bar.

"Didn't agree that Margaret Atwood was all that?"

You don’t respond. Sam laughs gleefully, as she sits down.
“Never mind,” she says, “neither did I.” You tell her that Alex has gone to the bar. She looks a bit disappointed, until you confirm that she is getting Sam another drink, too.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” she asks. Nothing special, you tell her. “You should come and meet us at the Freshers’ Fair. They’ve got loads of societies you can join, loads and loads. Go on, it’ll be a laugh.” You respond that it sounds a bad idea on any number of levels. “Go on, you should join something,” she says, laughing.

“Join what?” Alex asks, as she returns with three drinks. “I’m talking about the Freshers' Fair,” Sam says, “we should meet up there tomorrow.”

You look at Alex. The embarrassment has dissipated, at least on her part. “Sounds like a good place to continue our acquaintance,” she says, sitting down. “You definitely have to come then,” Sam says, and you agree. Your evening concludes here.
Alex promises to tell you about her own, absolute favourite book, the book that influenced her the most. Sam, looking more bored than ever and prepared to leave you with Alex, takes the opportunity to go. "Excuse me," she says, "I'm going to the toilet." You expect Alex to get up and go with her, but she merely nods. Sam gets up and Alex starts to tell you about the two or three other books that led her to read the book that is her absolute favourite of favourites, when you interrupt.

“Sam...” you say.

It takes a moment for everyone to adjust their position. Alex stops talking immediately, as if a fuse has gone, while Sam corkscrews back down to her seat, crossing her legs very slowly once seated. Once she has sat down, there is quiet, as they wait to hear what you were going to say. You might want another option, some sort of get out. But under pressure, you cannot think of one, and instead go ahead with your original decision.

You tell Sam that she asked you where you were from, and that you didn’t give an answer. “Oh,” she says, looking disappointed to have been stopped from going to the toilet. You proceed to tell her where you are from. Sam nods
impatiently, while Alex doesn’t look at you, training a glare of haughty disgust one foot above your right shoulder. You consider offering to go to the bar to get them a drink, but worry that on your return, they will have moved your chair elsewhere, or worse, filled it with Simon. You decide instead that reckless honesty is the best policy. You tell them that you’re sorry if that came across as a little strange, but that you are nervous, it being the first night, and with them being both so nice, you didn’t want to give offence or ignore one at the expense of the other. You sound like a complete incompetent with designs to sleep with both of them, but then, externally at least, you are nineteen, so that is to be expected.

Alex audibly sighs. “Well,” she says, “my absolute favourite book is...”

“Right,” says Sam, “I’m going to the toilet, and as much as you may want to know what her favourite book is, it’s your turn to go to the bar.” You start to get up, considering a trip to the bar small price to pay, both literally and figuratively, to extricate yourself from your bad decision. You ask Alex what she wants.
“A gin and tonic, I think. Listen, what are you doing tomorrow?” You shrug to indicate that you have nothing planned. “Why don’t meet us at the Freshers’ Fair? We’re all going. It will likely be dreadful…”

“It’s going to be great,” protests Sam, but regardless as to who is right, you don’t wish to reject the invitation. Having agreed to meet them there, you go to the bar to get drinks, and when you return, your seat is where it was, and unoccupied. Your evening concludes [here](#).
You are not nineteen, of course. For all that you are outwardly in your teens, you are meant to making these decisions from the perspective of your jaded, unillusioned mid-thirties. You might, in fact, be in your twenties or your sixties, and you might, for that matter, hold a number of illusions.. Whichever, you may feel that your decision making has been unfairly maligned in this section. You could have improvised something other than the disaster you delivered, if given the opportunity. You could ask Sam if she had an absolute favourite book that she wanted to tell you both about. It would be desperately unconvincing, for sure, given that you’ve yet to hear what Alex’s was. It would have been desperately unconvincing, for sure, but still better than what you signed up for.

But you did sign up for it, let’s remember, you chose it. The concept of moral hazard has had a fairly thorough airing since the financial crisis. It is the idea that, in economic terms, the probability of being rescued from your bad decisions leads you to make riskier decisions, make bigger bets because you won’t yourself settle the bill. Something like moral hazard exists here. If you believe that, having made a wild and risky decision, you can undo it before the consequences of that decision are played out, it will lead you to dip into them and immediately dive out, before seeing things play out. And if you must do that, then that is what the back button on your e-Reader is for.
The Meaning of Fuses Going

It’s intriguing that the word fuse is usually used figuratively to represent anger: “her fuse is gone”, meaning that her temper is exploding. This refers to the explosive meaning of fuse, the fizzling string on the end of the bomb, the trail of gunpowder leading to the barrel. But for most of us, for most of the time, the experience of a fuse going is not of the crash and bang of explosions or anger, but of a big click, and our electrical equipment lapsing into silence and darkness, followed by a placatory grovel at the fuse box. Unusually, in this scene and metaphor, Alex’s fuse going is meant in the latter sense, that your interruption, by breaking the circuit, has plunged the machine into instant, sudden silence. But it also, unfortunately for you, works in the other more familiar way, meaning your interruption has really annoyed her.
Alex seizes on one of the following, whichever saw your best result, and offers
the suggestion listed below:

**Biology:** *Lord Of The Flies* by William Golding

**Chemistry:** *The Periodic Table* by Primo Levi

**English Literature:** *Possession* by AS Byatt

**Sociology:** *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban* by JK Rowling

**Economics:** *The Great Gatsby* by F Scott Fitzgerald

**Mathematics and/or Further Mathematics:** *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

**History:** *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink

**Russian:** Поэма без героя. In translation.

**Media Studies:** *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

**French:** *Madam Bovary* by Gustav Flaubert, in French.

**Politics:** *What A Carve Up!* by Jonathan Coe

**Psychology:** *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood

**Anthropology:** *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver
Geography: *Waterland* by Graham Swift

Physics: *Sophie’s World* by Jostein Gaardner

If, by chance, you didn't take any of these, if you combined Irish with Hinduism and PE, say, there is still enough there to judge what Alex would recommend, if you’d forced her to.
You, wise reader, with your greater-than-usual sensitivity to role playing scenarios, sensed the jaws of a trap about to swing shut, and understood the need to immediately roll away. You were faced with committing to either Alex or Sam at the expense of the other, at this far-too-early stage in your story, or embarrassingly and belatedly addressing whichever one you had hitherto neglected, with uncertain effect. You may commend yourself on your perspicacity: you are in a painful double bind.

How, then, can you escape from this vice, short of storming away and never speaking to either of them again? Alcohol would seem an obvious answer: stand up and call for shots! After all, there are few social situations that cannot be improved by a round of drinks, as has already been proven on several occasions this evening. Nonetheless, though alcohol works very well as a social lubricant, there comes a point at which there is too much oil on the floor, and social situations turn slippery. In technical terms, when "a round of drinks" is multiplied enough times its utility declines, first slowly, then entirely, before turning entirely negative: there is a visual representation of this phenomena, which we could call a Round Curve, and which is also known as too much of a good thing, here.
The key point, then, is where are you on that curve? You've had a lot to drink-
here, here, here, and here, for example. If you shout for shots, will drinking
them lead you and the women into a wild bacchanal or see you stumble, slide
down the other side of the curve, landing in an even stickier state?

The more cautious reader will already have turned back, would rather settle
for one of two lesser evils than risk a worse ignominy, however glorious the
potential rewards. But you are not that reader. You are something braver.

"Shots!" you shout, and both girls readily agree. You go to the bar, and order a
huge number of drinks, enough for everyone at the table and more. Having
received them, you hand them out, ensuring that Sam and Alex get two each.
“What about you?” they admonish, and push three glasses towards you. You
cannot, in the circumstances, refuse.

After that evening of drinking, first drinking three shots and then maintaining
some semblance of self-control will not be easy. It will require a test of your
Stamina.
Take the Stamina score that you established earlier [here](#). The shots will be consumed in three rounds. For the first shot, subtract 1 from your Stamina score, then [Roll The Dice](#). Add the Roll to your revised Stamina Score, and if the total is 8 or higher, click [here](#). If not, click [here](#).

You lift the first glass to your lips...
Round (Indicative number may vary according to drinking ability)

Social Success
Your throat stings as you swallow the warm vodka, the alcohol muddy on your tongue. It doesn’t taste nice, but it goes down and stays down. You may regret this later, you think, but not yet. You smile at Sam and Alex and lift the second glass to your lips. The sickly aniseed of Sambucca fills your nostrils.

Now for the second shot, subtract 2 from your Stamina score, then Roll The Dice. Add the two together, and if the score is 7 or below, turn here. If 8 or above, turn here.
The Sambucca goes down with surprising ease. You nod to Sam and Alex, who follow you in downing a drink. They nod back. Your turn comes again quickly, it seems. You lift the third and last glass to your lips, the hardest test. At first sniff, you don’t believe it, but closer inspection shows your nose was the less deceived: it is whisky, and not very nice whisky. You must have been drunker than you thought, first to order it, then to choose it for yourself. The third roll is the hardest of all then. Now for the third and final shot, subtract 4 from your Stamina score, then Roll the Dice. Add the two together, and if the combined score is 9 or below, turn here. If 10 or above, turn here.
You down the shot, and though you feel the alcohol’s effect, you are convinced that you have remained within your limits. Right part of the curve, you think, and get on with enjoying the rest of the evening.

In fact, you’re enjoying it so much that you decide to deliver a poetic monologue. Not wanting to waste it on the few at your table, you stand on your chair and call the whole bar to attention, emitting an incoherent, yet undoubtedly loud, honking noise. At the conclusion of your lengthy and sometimes confusing celebration of your first few hours of university life, you make clear your feelings for Alex and Sam by thrusting your crotch towards them. Afraid that your gesture does not present your feelings with plain sincerity, you expose your genitals and, whilst continuing to thrust towards your new friends to a sinuous rhythm of your own devising, you perform what can only be described as a work of mixed puppetry and ventriloquism, introducing them to a character called Mr. Punch; you engage him in a lengthy argument; an argument which is eventually settled in Mr. Punch’s favour. Taken together, no one, least of all Alex and Sam, can hold any doubts that you’d like to keep your options open for the time being.
In truth, it wasn’t quite that bad. You didn’t get up on your stool, you didn’t expose your genitals and you didn’t thrust them towards anyone. You did speak, and at some length, but what you said was helpfully indecipherable, a glossolalia in which every third word was trousers. Sam and Alex uncharitably reconstructed it into the tale of your heated debate with Mr. Punch. The idea amuses them greatly but they treat you as a sort of benign eccentric; when they are done laughing, they take pity on you and invite you to meet them with the others at the Freshers’ Fair the following afternoon, after matriculation. You accept, barking “trousers” twice to signal assent.

Given your state, you worry that you may not remember the invitation the next day. In order that you do, you may choose to scrawl this on a piece of paper/collect an Object. Highlight the following: INVITATION TO MEET ALEX AND SAM AT THE FRESHERS’ FAIR. Your evening concludes here.
You put the glass down, whiskey drained. It was a little rough for your tastes but, truthfully, you're not sure what all the fuss was about. The alcohol itself won't have hit quite yet, of course, but you'll surf it easily enough, rise above rather than fall beneath it. You make a minimal, barely perceptible, gesture, just to demonstrate how easy that was.

"Bloody hell," says Sam. "Indeed," replies Alex, surveying the three empty glasses in front of you, and the full ones in front of them.

"You don't want this as well, do you?" Sam says, holding up her full shot glass. You shake your head no. "I suppose we better then... Fair's fair..."

"It was very good of you getting all this," Alex says, indicating the empty glasses scattering the tables with her own, still full, shot glass. She lifts it up, squints through the bottom of the glass as if looking for a flaw in a gemstone, before continuing. "Very good. But anyone would think...

Alex pauses, as Sam lifts her glass to her mouth and empties it, before making an exaggerated shudder, like a child slugging horrible medicine.

Alex continues "Anyone would think you want to get us drunk."

"Urgh," Sam says, shuddering again. "It’s working.” Alex doesn’t find this helpful. You nod towards her glass. You are not, actually, that worried about
getting them drunk: they have drunk plenty. You were concerned to escape from an awkward situation, and you have. Sure, you were probably hoping that ordering another round of shots would see the evening ascend into a Dionysian tumult, but it wasn’t essential that it did: you’re here for three years. You don’t share these thoughts with Alex and Sam, however. You merely offer another of your near-subliminal gestures, this one non-committal.

“Hmmm,” Alex says, appraising you carefully, but finding nothing to decide on. She eventually lifts her own glass to her lips, and drinks it off.

“You know, you should...”

“You should come and meet us at the Fresher’s Fair tomorrow,” Sam finishes for her, “If you’re not doing anything, we’re all going. Tomorrow afternoon.” When she has finished, she indicates who she means by we, by very slowly drawing a circle around the table with her glass. On the third loop round, Alex gives a gentle touch to her arm to let her know she can stop.

That seems like a good idea for you to agree to their offer. You chuckle to yourself: but for your clever decision-making and drinking Stamina, what chance is there that you would have received a joint invitation to the Freshers’
Fair? You may record this as an Object using the notes function on your E-Reader, for posterity and should add “Liver of Iron”. Your evening concludes here.
Your evening actually does conclude here. Within a few minutes, the bar calls
time, and things started to break up. No-one you were with had any liquor, so
there was no party afterwards. You say goodbye to the people you have met,
and make your way back to your room. Having got there, you want to check
that there wasn’t a party to which you weren’t invited. You wait ten minutes,
and then return to their floor. Disappointingly, or not, you find the doors
closed and the floor quiet.

You return to your room. You realise there is not much to do. There is no
television and no computer or other electronic device. You could read
something, but there seems to be precious little to read. You look through the
university welcome pack - a letter from the Vice-Chancellor, a flier for the
Freshers’ Fair (which may be of interest, if you don’t know what the Fair is) and
the university regulations, all of which you may have already read here.

You could leave your room, roam the halls, discover strange goings on or get
into scrapes. You could try, that is, as the time you spent examining the
welcome pack has seen the night drag on, and it is now half past 2. Apart from
three strange men in the computer room, no one is awake, nothing is
happening.
It is time for you to go to bed, then. You consider whether to brush your teeth next, or to drink a glass of water first. Before you can reach a decision, however, you realise this could take you a long time. You have at least a dozen more decisions to take before you get into bed, then breakfast to get through. It could take a very long time indeed.

If only, you think, life was like novels. In novels, when something boring happens, or rather when a long string of boring things happen in a row, the author, more or less elegantly, says “time passes”. The reader then doesn’t have to read about those boring things, and instead reads about some interesting things that happened much later on. Wouldn’t it be good if such a choice was open to you now, if you could skip from one interesting section to the next? (you can read the third of the sections on game theory here, but you may not class that as interesting)

Then you realise that you can do something about your situation. Aren’t you actually on a train carriage, having been taken hostage by a bearded madman? Let time pass, go back to the carriage while it does. Who knows- if enough time has passed there too, you might have been rescued. If not, you can return to
meet up with Alex and Sam at the Freshers’ Fair. The alternative is to spend several hours immersed in minutiae, bogged down in repetitious, almost animal decisions. You return to the carriage.
Several hours immersed in minutiae

For several, read several hundred, and for hours, read pages. It sounds like a Choose Your Own Adventure as written by one of the proponents of the nouveau roman, the novel of pure surface; which is to say, it would be a good deal more intellectually serious, and painfully better written than this book, but not something that you’d actually enjoy in the conventional sense of that word.

The reasons why you don’t have to endure matriculation, or indeed breakfast, are related to that. This section marks the end of the first portion of the book. You have been introduced to the main characters, and the context in which you and they interact. Your story will develop further when you meet them at the Freshers’ Fair on the following afternoon. The end of the section sees you return to the frame narrative, the train carriage. A frame narrative, for those not familiar with the term, is a rarified term for a story within a story: you entered the train carriage, beginning a story which wraps around and explains the main story, your time at university. A frame narrative adds perspective to, and often serves to make the main narrative more realistic.
But frame narratives often dissolve, leaving the main story to take over. Why return to it here? The main reason is structural. It isn’t necessary for the plot, and as discussed above, letting you skip breakfast isn’t necessarily a sign of good writing. It is not because this book is solely concerned with fun, or afraid of depicting you being bored. No, it is because the end of the first night is an appropriate time to end the first section of the book, with a return to the carriage the natural way to end that section, giving perspective. More than that though, the section you’re just finishing reading is designed to function discreetly, ending on the tantalising cliffhanger of a visit to the Freshers’ Fair, rather like the demo version of a computer game.

BACK TO THE CARRIAGE
The Freshers' Fair

The 1999 Fresher’s Fair will take place on Monday 5th October, 10am-4.45pm, at the Student Union (Main Hall, Minor Hall and Committee Room C). Almost all of the University’s societies will be represented- a list of the main ones is below- but it’s also a great chance to discover your Union and the services we provide, from gigs and club nights to sexual health services and financial advice. To whet your appetite, some of the societies involved are listed below- alphabetically to avoid any suspicion of favouritism!

Carrot and Peas Society

Christian Union

Conservative Students

Drama Society

University Sports Union

Field Sports Society

Indie Society

Islamic Society

Labour Students
Liberal Democrat Students

LGBT

Pagan Society

RAG

UKIP Students

Warlord Society

And a whole host of others!
Game theory is the name given to a set of theories that have emerged from
the mathematical modelling of decision making within games; it’s also the title
of this book. This section needs to start with a disclaimer: the title was chosen
after the book was conceived and begun and the book is therefore not about
game theory; the name was chosen for the reasons outlined here.

Nonetheless, the book will try to explain the basics of game theory, and will
reflect about how it might be applied to the games (this is a game-book) that
you are playing. It follows that, if you are an expert in it, you will find much of
what follows eminently dispensable and probably wrong. Mathematics and the
novel have had a rocky relationship, and this book will try not to make things
any worse, so anyone who works for the Rand Corporation may prefer to look
away now.

Let's begin by saying that the game in game theory refers to games in the
sense of poker or drafts or ludo. It’s not quite true to say that the theory seeks
to identify the best way to play a game: instead, it seeks to understand how a
given game would be played, what one can expect the outcome of a game to
be. This will, in one sense, reveal the best way to play a game, but at the core of the theory is the idea that the other player can apply the same logic, work out what is the best way for you to play the game, making the outcome predictable for the theorist and both players.

To move to a more concrete formulation, game theory begins by conceptualising actions within a game by the pay-off they will yield for each player, not only in financial or points terms, but by assigning them a utility. Utility is a philosophical term, and, for the purposes of this book, satisfaction would be a perfectly adequate synonym. Then, by logic and if necessary by calculation, it can deduce what you as player A should/will do, if necessary by deducing what Player B will do; as above, where there is no single answer to that question, it can assess what the probability of any action being employed. In addition, to game theory's belief in utility, that you know what you like, it also makes use of the concept of cardinal utility, which means that you are able to rank your preferences according to how much each will satisfy you. That means that you would be able to have a conversation like this

"What do you want with your sausages?"
You: beans.

"No beans; you can have peas or sweetcorn?"

You: "Can I pay extra for the beans?"

"No, we've run out."

"Sweetcorn, please. Definitely no peas."

In other words, you can place your preferences in rank order—beans, sweetcorn, peas—and you can assess how much you prefer one to another. Beans-10, Sweetcorn-5, Peas-0. The amount of utility derived matters: even if you lose the game you’re left with something. It is also important to note that it is because its calculations use utility, rather than those within a game, that game theory can consider games that are like scenarios or social situations.

To give an example, imagine that you are going to play a simple game. You and your opponent both make your move at the same time, and you each have two possible moves to choose from, making for four possible outcomes. Below is a
table showing the possible outcomes of the game, your score shown, then his.

Remember you both want to win: the object of the game is to maximise your own score.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Him Move 1</th>
<th>Him Move 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You Move 1</td>
<td>10, 0</td>
<td>10, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Move 2</td>
<td>9,9</td>
<td>9,7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Game theory would tell you two things. Firstly, that you should never play Move 2: whatever your opponent does you will always be better off playing Move 1, Move 1 being what game theorists call a dominant strategy (it is the best reply to your opponent irrespective of what he does). Secondly, because, and this is the important part, your opponent assumes you to be rational, he assumes you will never play Move 2, you will always make Move 1, and he
should therefore always play Move 2. The outcome of the game (Move 2, Move 1) therefore represents what is called a Nash Equilibrium, a state in which neither player has any reason to vary their strategy unilaterally, the Nash Equilibrium being named for John Nash, played by Russell Crowe in A Dangerous Mind.

It’s not hard to think of objections to that. Wouldn’t you want to draw 9-9 or win 9-7 than win 10-0 or 10-1? Quite possibly, but your objective in this game is to maximise the utility you receive, not to maximise the amount of utility the game produces. It’s possible to imagine a game whose object is to do that (in game theory, it would be called a coordination game), and in which the moves chosen and the result would be different, but that is not what is being modelled here. If you still find the result hard to believe, then you have certainly not got a sibling and have possibly never actually played a game.

This might also be an opportune moment to say something more about utility and instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality is, to simplify horribly, the idea that you know what you want and that you can choose accordingly, applying reason to select the means that will best satisfy your ends. That you
are able to operate in this way is a core assumption of game theory and will not be challenged here.

Now, one of the problems with writing about game theory, particularly once it is transferred from parlour games to the real world, is that any example is prone to counter example, simply because the ends you pursue, the specific thing that you want, may vary from that modelled in the example. This doesn’t invalidate the theory or the assumptions that underpin it, of course, it doesn’t mean that the maths is wrong, but it does mean that if, in an individual game or scenario, utility is incorrectly estimated, the basis on which the reasoning and maths were undertaken will be flawed. You’ll be playing a different game, in fact.

To illustrate the point further, imagine that what motivated you was being generous or, to avoid the question of altruism, being seen to be generous? Wouldn’t you then move 2 to share the satisfaction, the utility around? Not necessarily: because your preference for Move 1 may be because it is the more outwardly generous (giving a larger cheque to a charity), and the increased satisfaction from the other player might be a result of your reduced generosity
(or the general perception of your reduced generosity). One of game theory’s essential requirements

An objection with more merit might be that the game shown is simply too simple, and the correct answer too easily chosen: it is obvious. The book will therefore give a more complex example, of game theory in action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>He Move 1</th>
<th>He Move 2</th>
<th>He Move 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You Move 1</td>
<td>7, 1</td>
<td>0, 5</td>
<td>1, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Move 2</td>
<td>1, 0</td>
<td>10, 0</td>
<td>2, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Move 3</td>
<td>20, 1</td>
<td>1, 1</td>
<td>1, 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Nash Equilibrium would see you make move 2, and him move 3. In game theory, as above you reach this through something called Common Knowledge of Rationality, which is what it sounds like: you assume that the other player is rational and he assumes that you are rational. Because you do, he eliminates the possibility of making move 1, because there is no move by you to which it would be the best response. Now, if you understand him to be rational, and you understand him to have eliminated Move 1, you can in turn eliminate your own Move 1. You can also eliminate your move 3, on the same grounds, that it is now dominated by the possible outcomes of Move 2. As he knows that you know this, your opponent plays Move 3, giving a respective pay-off of 2, 7.

Move 2/Move 3 then is what is called a Nash equilibrium. It is possible to have more than one Nash Equilibrium in a game, which is where, for the moment, things get more complicated than you need them to be.

You can return by clicking here.
Famous games and not so famous games

Within game theory, certain games have attracted a great deal of attention. These are often simple, but by their very simplicity, reflect certain conflicts within society and the way in which society is organised. Some of those games, and the theories about them, are reflected in some of the games/situations in this book, and some, for reasons will become clear, do not. Two that do are centipede and Hawk-Dove. This section will cover the latter with reference to your relationship to Simon, as well as touching on what are called extended form games. It will give away some plot secrets, but not important ones. If you are precious about that sort of thing, you will be told when to skip.

Hawk-Dove is also called chicken, and under that name is familiar to most people. The scenario involves, most famously, two cars being driven towards each other, with the winning car being that which does not swerve: one driver looks cool and courageous, the other a coward. Of course, if neither car swerves, both cars crash, both losing much more heavily than if they both swerve. To put it in the kind of matrix originally modelled [here](#), that means it looks something like this
As with those played earlier here, Hawk-Dove is an anti-coordination game.

Coordination games are those in games in which it pays both players best to cooperate, a game in which it is better if both players swerve. But the point of
Hawk-Dove is not to cooperate, it is to win, just as is the case between you and Simon.

To apply this directly to the book, then, consider the situation that just occurred. You told a wonderful tale of Guavo, and Simon stole it from you, by claiming he had been there, too (the situation if you chose Thailand being similar but slightly different). You then faced the question: challenge him or let it go. Clearly, the situation can’t be translated to a coordination game- Simon has already compromised the acclaim you were due- but how does it translate to Hawk-Dove?

Superficially, it fits well. It might look something like this (with your decision to share/swerve meaning that Simon gets more of the acclaim, and a squabble leaving you both worse off):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Simon shares Guavo</th>
<th>Simon claims Guavo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are a few things wrong with that model, however, but the most important one is this. You and Simon did not move at the same time. He moved first, claiming to have visited Guavo. He went Hawk. This means that while the pay-offs may be correct, they weren’t all accessible to you at the time you played. It wasn’t a game of chicken as such and would have been better depicted as in the tree-like diagram called extended form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>alone</th>
<th>alone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You share</td>
<td>2, 2</td>
<td>-1, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guavo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You claim</td>
<td>7, -1</td>
<td>-10, -10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guavo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alone</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If you were being rational, then, you really had no choice but to share Guavo.

The extended form is much more apt for the kind of games you play in this book, but it also raises questions, which will have to be dealt with, after looking at another couple of contests between you and Simon. If you don’t want to read about what those contests are, click here.

The next section will use two examples of your games with Simon (a phrase that sounds both more fun and more sinister than the actuality) to illustrate a little bit more about Hawk-Dove and its place in the novel.

Let’s move forward to the Freshers’ Fair, which follows this section. Many things happen at the Freshers’ Fair, few of which have much bearing on anything outside it, but one of the things that does happen is that you and Simon join the same society- it doesn’t matter which society you choose to join. When you do, Simon challenges your fitness to join that society. So far, so Hawk. The difference being that if you Hawk back, you win, leaving Simon humiliated.

Then, later in the book, you and Simon clash over a girl in a night club. You discover that he is an unexpectedly good dancer. You can decide to take him
on in a dance-off, a dance-off that leaves you both deservedly humiliated. This is an outcome that closely correlates to the first game of chicken, but the reverse outcome to the second! What’s going on Game Theory, you may ask, a question that applies equally to the theory and to the novel?

You and Simon are playing what are called repeated games. Repeated games are useful, partly because they reflect the way people play games, partly because, especially when linked with what’s called evolutionary game theory, they can help to explain how players discover equilibriums (in evolutionary game theory, evolutionary stable strategies). After all, game theory aspires to predict what will happen in a game, and you could have predicted, before you decided on a dance-off, that Simon would respond in kind, leaving you both humiliated: Simon repeatedly plays Hawk.

Is it credible that he would always play Hawk and/or continue to play Hawk? No: eventually the cost of competing will knock him out of contention. After the ill-fated dance-off, you mutually adopt a new shared strategy (Dove-Dove): you become friends, one Nash equilibrium replacing the other.
Of course, if you haven’t read that far, you could now switch strategies and avoid the dance off. That would, in theory, leave Simon better off than you, but in practice, doesn’t. This leads into the problems mentioned earlier.

The two problems are this. Firstly, that looking at games in a book like this as one-shot encounters is unsatisfactory. The book could be considered as a single game, in an extended form that would encompass half a dozen players (each of the major characters), hundreds of decision and a mind-bendingly complex calculation (to know what each player will play at which point). One of the conditions for a Nash Equilibrium emerging is that the players are intelligent enough to discover it, and, for reasons that will be discussed in a minute, it has to be doubted that that is the case in this book. More profitably, sequences of individual interactions (between you and Simon, say) might be considered have the character of repeated games.

Either way, the prospects of solutions are fatally undermined by a second problem, however. It can be observed in Simon’s behaviour, but more significantly in the consequences of that behaviour: namely, that the games are rigged. It is a problem that cuts two ways: firstly, because the book has an incentive to cheat, to override the outcomes, whenever it would be more fun
to do so, and secondly, because your attitude is in question too. The book can model what it likes, but you, as reader, are not obliged to follow that model: what satisfies you may, in fact, be very different from what the book imagines. You might prefer ceaseless fight with Simon to sensibly avoiding conflict, completely reversing the example given above. Indeed, you might have a stronger conflict of interests.

Everybody can think of a fictional character they willed on to destruction, even as the writer seems to adore them: Anna Karenina being an obvious and famous example. What if you hate “you” and can’t wait to see yourself humiliated?

Which begs the question: if games are being played here, who is playing, and with whom?
The book has been honest from the start: it was not designed to illustrate aspects of game theory. The art comes first, and the science afterwards. This is surely preferable to laboriously worked examples, but it does mean that there are no direct examples to fit the most totemic of game theory’s games, The Prisoner’s Dilemma.

You may be familiar with the scenario, but if not, you will need the recapitulation. Two people are arrested for a crime, and held separately. Each are offered a reduced sentence in exchange for informing on the other. If neither inform, both will serve a short sentence; if one informs and the other does not, the informer receives a short sentence and the informed one a long one; if both inform, both will receive a sentence shorter than if informed upon, but longer than if both remain silent. The numbers below signify utility rather than length of sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>She betray</th>
<th>She keeps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As you can see, a Nash Equilibrium emerges in which you both betray, and always betray. This game, in which individually rational action leads to a collectively worse outcome than cooperation (but without your opponent changing her strategy, you have no reason to change yours), is of great interest to social scientists and philosophers, because, once the back-story is removed, it presents a situation in which, if a way can be found to enforce cooperation, overall satisfaction can be improved.

To give an example of the Prisoner’s Dilemma in practice, consider the following scenario. You and your partner are enjoying your first Christmas
together. You agree not to buy each other a lavish gift, instead giving the proverbial “something small”. You will use the money saved towards buying a home, say. Now, there are a number of ways in which one could model your utility, but whether you see the best outcome as not receiving a gift while giving, or vice versa, you can see how, unless your predilections are opposed, you will end up both giving large or both receiving small. It was this logic that produced the Cold War.

Another important game poorly covered is Stag Hunt. This game imagines that you are a hunter along with a friend. In order to catch a stag, both of you must hunt it, but doing so is more difficult, more risky than trapping a hare. It produces a matrix of expected pay-offs like this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>She hunt hare</th>
<th>She hunt stag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You hunt hare</td>
<td>1, 1</td>
<td>1, 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast to the Prisoner’s Dilemma, however, there are two Nash Equilibriums, both hunt the stag or both trap the hare. It’s called a coordination game, and it presents a modified version of that central dilemma—whether to cooperate when there is no mechanism to enforce it. A good real-life example of Stag Hunt can be seen in the labour market. When a trade union (or professional association, let’s not let them off the hook) seek to negotiate terms, their position is strengthened by the cooperation of all, in paying dues, for instance. It would be logical, however, for an individual employee to keep their hand in their pocket and not pay their dues: and if the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>You hunt stag</th>
<th>0, 1</th>
<th>2, 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You hunt stag</td>
<td>0, 1</td>
<td>2, 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

other member(s) understand this, it does not make sense for them
(individually) to pay their dues, either. This is sometimes called the Free Rider
problem.

Neither of these situations are directly portrayed in the book, though they are, whichever the outcome, so embedded in social life that you will find traces of them. It would be possible for the book to have placed you and Penfold in adjoining cells, confronted with damning evidence, but it hasn’t: it wasn’t designed to. There are two reasons why such a design would not be a good idea. Firstly, experimental evidence shows that, when asked to play games based on The Prisoner’s Dilemma, people often don’t behave as game theory would explain. Various reasons have been put forward for this, mathematical and sociological, but for this purpose, one is obvious: under laboratory conditions, it is extremely difficult to model the pay-offs that the Prisoner’s Dilemma presupposes. Assume that the payoffs were pounds: would you really care about the 6th pound enough to betray- would the payoffs still accurately represent the utility you would get from them? But imagine that you are threatened with prison, with years in a dark hole: whatever your beliefs, you can imagine yourself, along with everybody else, being tempted.
But this book, like those experiments, can only threaten you with the gulag, a threat that game theorists might term “non-credible”. You might even welcome the gulag. Think of the end of *A Tale Of Two Cities*: at the end of the novel, Sydney Carton goes to the guillotine in Charles Darnay’s place, doing a far better thing than he has ever done before, off to a better rest than he has ever known. Now imagine that you are in Carton’s place. It is very likely that you would make the same decision: a better rest than you have ever known sounds great, sacrificing yourself sounding satisfying. Except that you wouldn’t really be sacrificing yourself: in fact, you would be satisfying yourself.

For that reason, and for the reasons discussed in the previous essay [here](#), the real games in this book are those between author and reader. They, together with the game called centipede, are discussed later, at the start of the night-club section.
A short note on mathematics and the novel

While there is a whole movement devoted to using mathematics to create literature (the OuLiPo), the relationship between maths and the novel hasn’t always been a happy. One thinks of David Foster Wallace, praised elsewhere in this book for his use of footnotes and generally considered something of a voice of a generation. He wrote a book about infinity called Everything and More. The literary reviewers found the mathematics hard to the point of impossible to follow, which may have been as well, for the mathematicians simply found the maths wrong. A more recent example of maths gone wrong comes in Julian Barnes’ Booker winner, A Sense Of An Ending, where the equation \( a^2 + v + a_1 x s = \text{wtf} \) for a great many readers.
The Ouvroir Literature Potentialle

The Ouvroir Literature Potentialle (or OuLiPo) was, and still is, a French avant garde group. The OuLiPo, which means something like Workshop for Potential Literature, was a group of writers and mathematicians who sought to devise new literary forms by the application of constraints; this represented a third way, between the hardy perennials, the old forms like the realist novel or the sonnet and the liberties of the avant garde (freedoms which soon harden into their own genres).

Constraints are rules that the writer must follow in composing the work: the rule n +7, for instance, requires that each noun be replaced by the seventh following it in a dictionary, so “the Rumania n+7, for instance, requires that each Nova Lisboa must be replaced by the seventh following it in a didymium” (which, let’s be clear, is a demonstration of how a constraint works, not of how it might work to create a new and useful piece of literature). The three most famous members of the OuLiPo, were Raymond Queneau who comes up later, Italo Calvino, who came up here, and Georges Perec, who, being restricted to here, will get more space than the other two.
To give another example of a constraint, then, Perec wrote La Disparition, translated into English by Gilbert Adair as a A Void, a novel in which the letter “e” does not appear, the plot of which revolves around the disappearance of the letter “e”. This is an example of what’s called a lipogram- a text which draws only from a restricted group of letters. This constraint and variations on it (Perec then wrote a novel in which the only vowel was e) are typical of OuLiPo practice.

Perec also worked with constraints that are less immediately obvious, by using a Graeco-Latin Bi-Square, xx, and xx in creating Life A User’s Manual, while Calvino used a model square derived from Greimas in creating If On A Winters Night A Traveller (discussed elsewhere and an obvious influence on this book). The constraint, then, works to force the writer to virtuosity, much as traditional forms, such as the sonnet, had, rather than for its own sake. Of course, the suspiciously minded might question whether such constraints, those that impact on the writer but are far less obvious to the reader than a lipogram, make the books produced by the OuLiPo sufficiently different to the sort of formal exercises pursued more generally by post-modernists.
This book does not make use of constraints as such, though individual sections have structures that are something like constraints. It could be said that genre is itself a constraint, particularly when trying to

Incidentally, the Oulipo Compendium, a reference work on the OuLiPo which, appropriately, makes a reference work into a lively, readable thing, has the following entry

*Multiple-choice Narrative*

*The notion of a story whose evolution can be partly determined by the reader was apparently first introduced to the OuLiPo by Francois Le Lionnais. At the group’s 79th meeting, he presented the schematic plan of a detective novel, in which, early on, the reader would be asked: do you prefer a mystery (go to page x), a novel of suspense (go to page y), a sado-erotic continuation (page z)? Similar alternatives were to appear regularly throughout the book. Soon after, Raymond Queneau contributed his Tale Of Your Choice (The Appealing Tale of 3 Lively Peas). Here the reader is given two choices to choose from after each mini-event.*
The multiple-choice procedure has frequently been used in adventure stories for children. Simple in appearance and effect, it generally demands considerable organisational skill of the author.

Which is very nice of them to say.
If On A Winters Night A Traveller

If this book had a tagline, a high concept, a pitch of the kind they make in Hollywood and on the back of paperbacks, it would be “What If On A Winters Night A Traveller wandered into Scorpion Swamp?” If none of that means anything to you, it means it isn’t a terribly good pitch, and that you may want to know what both of those are. This section will cover If On A Winters Night A Traveller, and this section here Scorpion Swamp. They, and other sections like them, will cover what might be called books of interest. This section is the only one that includes this preamble.

If On A Winters Night A Traveller is a novel by the Italian post-modernist, Italo Calvino. In it, you (that is you, a character who is also the reader, a set-up that may seem familiar) are trying to read Italo Calvino's novel, If On A Winter's Night A Traveller. The copy you buy contains only the first chapter. After reading it, you return the book to the shop to get a replacement, only to be given the wrong book: a book which itself only has the first chapter. So it goes, as your quest brings you book after book, all of which contain only one chapter, each from a different novel. Of course, while this is going on and as the last line of the book points out, you are in fact reading Italo Calvino's new novel, If On A Winter's Night A Traveller.
There are certain obvious continuities, but before they are discussed, the book should probably acknowledge the obvious: this book is not as good as Calvino's (nor is it as good as the novels by Raymond Queneau, John Fowles and Julio Cortazar discussed elsewhere, though the fight with *Scorpion Swamp* is a little more even). It might be dangerous for the book to acknowledge this, but caveat emptor applies: if you're reading this, you've paid for it, and if you run off to read Calvino now, neither you nor the author will be any worse off.

With that said, let's return to what this book and the Calvino do and don't share. The first and most obvious is a self-conscious emphasis on the reader and reading. This emphasis comes from two different places, however: Calvino, wanting to write about the experience of reading, is moved toward the second person (to using you), whilst, for this book, calling you you is a necessity of its genre: but once that genre is chosen, once the book start addressing you directly, readerly self-consciousness becomes inevitable, the same point reached from different directions.

The other point of departure, again rooted in genre, is around choice. The Calvino (apologies for this formulation: it is quicker than the title and less ugly than an acronym) isn't interested in choice: there is only one way for you to
read it, and the you that reads the novel is a middle-aged Italian man in the 1970’s with a healthy interest in two sexy sisters. Statistically, your being a middle-aged Italian man in the 1970’s with a healthy interest in two sexy sisters diminishes as time elapses. This isn't necessarily a problem for Calvino: as his membership of the OuLiPo and the fluency of the book's different styles (each chapter being in a different literary genre) attest, it's really the playful virtuosity that matters, and it would be strange for Calvino to take decisions that would diminish it.

This book is different, in that choice is central and the identification between reader and character, the points at which you divert from each other and how this affects the choices you take are of much more importance. In turn, there are over a trillion ways to read this book, while the Calvino only has one: never mind the quality, feel the width.
Scorpion Swamp

*Scorpion Swamp* is a novel from the Fighting Fantasy series, written by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone. Game Theory is occasionally billed as a Choose Your Own Adventure for adults, but CYOA are a brand which has given its name to a genre. Insofar as this book has an inspiration, however, it is the Fighting Fantasy series. The history of the genre and this book's relationship to it are covered elsewhere, so this section will cover an actual example of the gamebook.

The first question you might want answered is why *Scorpion Swamp*, the 8th of the series. The answer is twofold: firstly, because it fits with *If On A Winter’s Night A Traveler* better than any other novel in the series, but more crucially, just as with James Wood and *How Fiction Works*, this book was assembled using only those books to hand (which for Fighting Fantasy novels, gave other options of *Dead Of Night* and *Island Of The Lizard King*, with *Dead Of Night* a late and flawed experiment in the zombie genre and *Island Of The Lizard King* missing several crucial pages.)
Scorpion Swamp begins by laying out the rules by which you play Scorpion Swamp. The rules occupy 26 pages with 182 devoted to the adventure itself: it would be easy to mock this, but the ratio of digression to action in this novel is equally high. Besides, the rules for Fighting Fantasy games do not vary greatly from book to book, meaning that you do not need to reread them each time. More on how they’re used later.

In Scorpion Swamp, you, the reader, taking control of a warrior must make your way through Scorpion Swamp, an area filled with traps and monsters. Unusually for a Fighting Fantasy novel, there is not a single way to do this: in Island Of The Lizard King, the object is to rid the island of its evil Lizard King.

This should be born in mind when authors boast of the number of endings a book has: Island Of The Lizard King has 150, but 149 shows you dying and one has you beating the Lizard King. Using the neutral term "gamebook" will help you understand why this might be so: in a game, there is a winner, or at least a clear and better outcome.

To return to Scorpion Swamp, and to give an idea of the action, you are a warrior, who is, as a consequence of a good deed, granted a special ring, which warns you of evil generally, and of dishonest merchants in particular.
Eschewing the obvious career as a financial regulator, you instead decide to explore Scorpion Swamp. You then travel to Fenmarge, a town on the edge of the forbidding swamp, rather like Bristol and Wales. There, you learn of 3 wizards who are willing to employ you on a mission in the swamp: Selator the good, Grimslade the evil and Poomchukker the mysterious; Selator wants you to find a healing herb Grimslade wants some silver amulets of power and Poomchukker, wants to establish a safe trade route through the swamp (Poomchukker turns out to be a capitalist rather than a magician). Once you’ve accepted a mission, you make your way into the swamp, mapping out its clearings and fighting your way past sword trees, crab grass and the Master of Frogs. After completing your mission, or stumbling on the point at which you can exit the swamp, you return to the magician who commissioned you, report on the success or failure of your mission, and/or assault them.

The content of Scorpion Swamp flags up something which is reflected in the structure of this book. The incorporation of role-playing elements, the fights, booby traps and deaths, adds an element of difficulty to the novel. Further, unlike a computer game, it requires self-discipline to accept death by dice-roll, or to admit to Selador you never found what he was asking for. Reading a game-book is too often like stubbing one's toes on the end of a boot, as you are
hustled through a story straight to an end, any end. This book therefore avoids death. Nothing you choose will kill you; it will only subtly alter your path; that includes choosing to read a diversion like this.
Game Theory- The Title

The book’s title reflects its two key elements- the game book and the theoretical fiction, the book that is in part a game, and the fiction that is a theory about fiction, the sort of highly wrought, metafictional stuff you’re reading now. Game theory is itself the mathematical study of decision making, and so a very apt title for a game book with intellectual ambitions (or a pretentious Choose Your Own Adventure, if you prefer).

The choice of title places two obligations on the book: that it should make some attempt to explain game theory and an attempt to suggest how it might and might not be applied to playing/reading/writing the book.
Entries after this point duplicate those above
You decide to smash your way free from the train. An impetuous decision, possibly—an decision reached without full consideration of the other options, perhaps. But, and you can hardly be blamed for this, your desperation to get off the train overcomes a more reasoned approach.

Urgency does not translate into practicality, however. You cross the carriage to face the window. Your options are few— you have no battering ram—so you beat your bare fists against its surface. The window, unperturbed, easily absorbs your blows. You realise that it is not glass, but thickly reinforced Perspex, designed to withstand the heavy blows of vandals. You continue to beat your fists against it, though with steadily diminishing enthusiasm.

You might expect some sympathy or assistance from your fellow passengers. They are trapped as you are, and would, in all but one obvious case, relish an escape. But your listless drumming brings no aid. The reason is simple: having been captured by one gibbering maniac, they necessarily assume that you are another, working either in tandem, or in competition against, the bearded alarm puller.

Heedless, you pound away. You glance around the carriage, looking for an object to assist your quest, to make at least a minor fracture. Again, you curse recent changes to train design. If strap hangings still hung from the ceiling, you could wrench one free, and use it as a cosh against the intransigent window.
Instead, long metal rails are securely fastened to the ceiling. They appear your best hope. You grab the rail, and pull yourself up on it, hoping to pull it down with your weight. You tug, and heave, even place your feet on the ceiling to strain against it. You pull and pull, but to no effect. What else, you wonder, as you release and tumble to the floor?

You could head to the other end of the carriage to fiddle with the alarm or to force your way out of the door. Or instead, you could take the book’s word dor it, realise you aren’t getting off the train and return to where you came from, recognising that you are banging your head against a brick wall, or worse, a Perspex window.
Blocked by a driver’s cab behind you, you walk purposefully to the other end of the carriage. As you go, the other passengers stare at you, at once jealous of your courage and fearful of its result.

You reach the far end of the carriage. The man stands in your way. You can, at last, make out some of his commentary. Having deciphered it, you think it best and safest to ignore it. Instead, you edge past without comment, avoiding touching him or looking him in the face, as if you were simply exiting a crowded train which had reached your stop. He makes no attempt to stop you, ignoring you as he keeps ranting on and on.

The door from your carriage opens into the next. Between the two carriages, however, is a narrow gap, allowing you to squeeze out off the train. You open the door, and clamber down onto the tracks. To your right, a high concrete wall faces onto the train, so you turn to the left and, hearing nothing coming, step carefully over the track into the open air. You are off the train. As hijackings go, either yours was incredibly easy to escape from, or the film industry has repeatedly lied to you.

But though you easily escaped, escaping has gained you little real advantage.

You stand on the tracks and survey your surroundings. On the other side, across three sets of tracks, is another high concrete wall. Looking down the tracks towards your destination, there is no easy way off the tracks. The next
station is a mile of track away, the station you left further back. The tracks are eerily quiet—no train approaching behind you, nothing coming towards you. Nothing, in fact, has passed the train since the alarm was pulled. The twitter of birds is suddenly audible.

Should you, you wonder, walk down the dangerous railway line, in the hope of finding another way to get to work? To arrive at the next station, to crawl onto the platform, just to join an angry delayed mob to wait for your emergency stopped train, which has crippled the rest of the line anyway? Or to find somewhere suitable to crawl off the tracks, some brush and a knocked down fence, then get a bus? Are you really so keen to get to work that you would do that, risking being mowed down by another train all the while?

If not, you might relent, and reluctantly climb back on the train. You could **work on the alarm**, hoping to get the train moving, or you could try to **smash through the window** to get off the train—though instinctively both feel pointless. You could take the book’s word for it, realise you aren’t getting off the train and return to where **you came from**.
You look to the far end of the carriage. There, in a forlorn state, is the alarm.
The most sensible thing, you think, would be to have a closer look at it. There
might be a connection to the train driver, or to the station control room, or a
way to shut the alarm off. You need to inspect more closely but that will be a
problem, as the man who set it off stands in front of it

If you walk towards the alarm, how will he react? On the basis of probabilities,
he wouldn’t react well. He would, at your approach, likely turn his violent talk
on you, angry talk probably becoming actual violence. You might feel yourself
well equipped to deal with that- able, at the first sign of trouble, to throw one
hard chop, instantly subduing him. Equally, when it comes to chops, you may
be more at home with pork or lamb, and unlikely to throw one away. With that
in mind, you may be tempted to stay where you are, and wait for help to
arrive. If that is how you feel, you may prefer to click here. If you feel more
than confident with a chop, read on below.

Courageously, you decide to put him to the test. You walk down the carriage,
ignoring the occasional whisper of caution from the other passengers. You
walk up to the man, close enough to catch flecks of spittle. You walk up, and
past him, without him ever turning to face you. For that, you are grateful- not
only to have avoided any violence, but because his smell is quite incredible.
You reach the alarm, which is embedded in the metal wall of the carriage.

There is a microphone you immediately and excitedly realise. You press the buttons, say “hello” first cautiously then loudly, but to no response. You give it a light tap then a harder thump, again to no effect. The connection out is severed.

You are almost out of options, and consider returning to the other end of the carriage. There is little to prevent you from doing so, bar a reluctance to pass back through the cloud of spit emitted by your kidnapper. If you’re prepared to put aside your concerns on that score, you can return by clicking here.

That fine covering of phlegm seeming too much to take, you try again with the alarm. Having exhausted the obvious methods of operation, you attempt something more elaborate. You pry at the alarm casing, aiming to get inside. It isn’t easy- no mere smack or shove could pry it loose, and to outright smash it would gain you nothing. Eventually, with the aid of your house keys and a great deal of wiggling, you pry a corner loose. With nimble fingers, you tug loose two wires from underneath, and begin to connect them to each other. You’ve just tied the torn end of the blue one to the yellow one when something strikes you.

Should an inspector board the train now, they would see one man in front berating the passengers and one behind, fiddling with the train’s alarm: they
would naturally assume that you are working together. You would have a hard
time convincing them otherwise: your ten minutes on the train are too short to
contract Stockholm Syndrome, and you cannot claim that you were under any
duress. Besides, what do you expect to happen to the train after you have
rewired the alarm? Nothing has happened so far, despite your impromptu
electronics, and you begin to wonder whether it would be best if you left the
scene before it does. Of course, you can linger here in hope, but, sooner or
later, you will need to take the book’s word for it and return from whence you
came.
You are 14 again, 14 but half a life wiser. You choose a particular moment for your return to adolescence. You are walking to a GCSE History lesson—your fifth ever, in fact. You walk down the familiar corridor to room 5L, a little later than the rest of the class. They have gone inside, are already seated when you rush through the door. The teacher, Mr. Gilmour, gestures you towards the remaining seat. You scurry down the aisle as he completes the register. You pull the seat from beneath the desk, and start to sit down. And then you stop.

David Chalmers, in the seat next to yours, yanks away your chair. Forewarned, you squat in the space above, cast Chalmers an unimpressed look, then pull the chair back beneath you, sitting down with a triumphant clatter. The gale of laughter that greeted your crash to the floor never comes, and David Chalmers’ reputation as the funniest man in your GCSE History class will never be made.

You intend to take that reputation for yourself. From a quick glance around the room, you're confident that you can achieve this. For while you look fourteen, your classmates are fourteen. You are undoubtedly the most sophisticated amongst your peers, and will be able to persuade, bully or seduce them at will. You know this because there is not much to persuade and seduce. Your classmates are children: with half-grown bodies, pasty, acned faces and silly ways of
wearing their school ties. And you have all of David Chalmers' punch lines ready if you need them.

The lesson begins. This being Britain (in case you didn’t know) and this being **GCSE History** (which you did know), the lesson concerns Adolf Hitler. Mr. Gilmour, with that usual, and inexplicable, self-regard common to history teachers, describes Hitler’s early years, his struggles as an artist, his war service, the failed beer hall putsch. As the teacher progresses to the writing of Mein Kampf, you realise that British children spend more time learning about Hitler than the rest of European history put together; the contours of his career being now better-known in Britain than those of Jesus. The teacher, having speculated on the softness of Hitler’s sentence after the putsch’s failure, mentions that common science fiction scenario, in which someone heads back in time to kill Hitler (presumably to free up space on the GCSE History curriculum). Just on cue, James Exley, the fat little runt, pipes up, from his usual place in the front row,

“But sir, I thought that social and economic factors were crucial to the rise of Hitler. Even if you could remove him from the equation, wasn’t something similar bound to happen anyway? Keynes said as much in the *Economic Consequences of the Peace* in 1919.”
There’s always one, isn’t there, you think, and it was always Exley. But Exley has a point. Do great and terrible men move humanity, or does humanity move in great waves, driven by economics and coincidence, great men merely the largest pieces of driftwood carried by the flood? Ordinarily, this is not a question that you need a definitive answer to. To be frank, there isn’t a definitive answer, nor is it as interesting a question as historians would have you believe.

You therefore lose interest in it and look around the classroom. It is strange to sit amongst your schoolmates knowing what is to become of them. Tania Fish for instance. She’s married and works as an insurance broker in Swindon, no children. She slowly, but definitively, lost that hard allure she possessed at 16, having gained it, you realize looking at her more closely, at some time between 14 and 16. And Paul Berry. He did really well and went off to Oxford, and then became an actor. An incredibly unsuccessful actor, one of those actors who are barely actors at all. He’s very funny on Twitter, though.

Rather than give Exley a clip, Mr. Gilbert takes his comment seriously. He takes the other side, talks about the responsibility individuals must always bear, of the Nazi Party's falling share of the vote in 1933, the policy of the KPD as dictated from Moscow, of all the decisions that people and parties needed to take for Hitler to take power, to make the future what it was. Tania Fish had
sex with David Chalmers on the 6th Form trip to Brussels (so David Chalmers said, he was probably lying about sex but they definitely did something).

That may not happen, of course, now that he didn’t pull your chair away.

You look around the room. Steve - accountant. Still see him at his parents’ house on Boxing Day. Sarah - housewife in Australia. Melanie. Oh dear, Melanie. Melanie Smith (was Harper) of Facebook fame. Melanie Smith with her endless updates, with her terrible political commentary, her links to Adele videos and her multiple one line updates. Melanie Smith who is “tired#”.

Melanie Smith who writes “Good Night” on Facebook every evening. Melanie bloody Smith. Sitting there, two seats from the front, one from the left, playing with her pen.

You don't listen to Exley's comeback, on the inevitability of historical processes. You're thinking about killing Melanie.

Which is probably a little strong. A hard word would do, just something as to her future conduct, said while her mind is still malleable enough to understand it. You decide to do just that, and having prepared a few words, you get up and stride towards Melanie.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Mr Gilbert asks. “Get back to your seat.”

You do as he asks: you hadn’t thought of that. His intervention is for the best,
you quickly realise. You want to become the most admired and adored person in your class, in your year; it may not be your chief motivation for going back to school but while you are there, achieving it is irresistible. You cannot expect to do so, and give warnings to your classmates about their behaviour on social networking sites twenty years hence. Maybe, you wonder, you should kill her after all: it certainly seems the most ethical thing to do.

But would you get away with it? Or would you be found with a dead teenage girl at your feet, and nothing to explain it beyond her future use of Facebook? You would, even with a lot of clever planning, struggle to get away with it.

Which is the thing they never tell you about Hitler? If you did go back to Vienna, and butcher a seemingly harmless Austrian street artist, you’d struggle to find a friendly jury. Living out your days in prison would mean, it’s true, that you’d avoid being trapped in a small space with a bearded lunatic, but this triumph would come at the cost of spending the rest of your life trapped in a smaller space with dangerous lunatics, some of whom are probably bearded, anyway.

You are faced with a dilemma, then. Is Melanie’s presence a price worth paying for your victory over David Chambers, is changing the past enough to make you be able to put up with the future? You must wonder if you haven’t lost sight of your original intention. From time to time, trapped on a train, we all do
precisely this- rehearse past wrongs, occasionally our own but more plausibly someone else’s, and have it, by the flick of a mental switch, end much worse for them and much better for you. You are tempted to press that button, to see all your wrongs revenged, to see the likes of David Chalmers brought permanently, humiliatingly low, but doing so can only be corrupting. Better, if you are to return to your past, to return at a point at which you can change the people you will later be annoyed by on social media.

A BUTTON
**GCSE: A Short Taxonomy**

**GCSE:** The General Certificate of Secondary Education is an English (and Welsh) academic qualification. Each GCSE covers a specific subject, such as English, Maths, Geography or History. They are generally taken at the end of compulsory education, i.e. when you are 16, or about to turn 16.

**GCSE History:** Also known as GCSE Hitler, an intensive course of study on the German dictator.

**Adolf Hitler:** Austrian-born German Dictator from 1933-45. But if you’re relying on this book for your knowledge of Hitler, it is a cause for some concern, and not just for your GCSE History result.
You feel a little stiffer but not weak, not old. You turn and find a mirror, and though your face is a mess of cracks and wrinkles and your hair has grown thinner and gone past grey to white, your eyes have a welcome, recognisable sharpness. Next to you, a door thumps. You do not recognise your surroundings, but you appear to be in the narrow hallway of what appears to be a comfortable suburban home. The door thumps again. You look at your watch- 9.45am, Monday 20th December 2046. Perfect, you think, an early, yet comfortable, retirement, having avoided the years of strenuous exertion before hand- it's like you're a public-sector worker. You look back in the mirror: you loo content. The door thumps again, someone impatiently knocking from the other side. You think you had better open it, so move your hand to where the knob should be. There is no knob. You are wondering what to do, when the door opens, gently but firmly swinging open. You step back, out of its way. On the doorstep is a frazzled-looking woman of thirty or so, carrying a grumpy-looking toddler. On seeing you, the toddler turns, climbing from disgruntled to outraged. "Were you going to let us stand out here all day?" the woman says, pushing past you. You follow her down the hall, turning right into the living room. It is much like a living room of the present, albeit with floating furniture. She stops in the middle of the room, where she places the toddler on the floor. You peer at the woman's face, you seem to remember her from somewhere,
though younger and without an aggrieved toddler in tow.

"Dad?" she says.

"Chris?" you ask, having worked it out. She looks like Chris from the canteen, the one with the wonky smile and the backside.

"Dad?" she repeats, concerned. "Are you ok?" She's your daughter, you realise, by Chris. The toddler begins to cry. "Listen, thank you for doing this," your daughter tells you, "I should be back by 7." She picks up the crying toddler, evidently your grandchild and hands it to you. The crying does not stop. It really doesn't stop. The child, its face contorted with in rage and torment, bucks to be released from your arms. You feel more than a little stiff, more than a bit old.

"Come on, Xenophon," she says, "behave for Grandy." The child does not follow his mother's instructions. This does not slow your daughter's exit.

"Listen, wait, Chris," you say, grasping at a name.
"Dad, that's the second time you've called me Chris. Are you sure you are ok?"

"What am I supposed to do with him?" you say, holding the screaming child out towards her. "What do I feed him?"

"His favourite, the thing you always make him." she says, laughing.

"Which is...?"

"Curdled limes, you know that. Listen, are you sure you're ok- I can call work, see what they can do?"

"No, no," you say, though you should probably say yes, yes. "What should I do with him?" you then repeat.

"Take him for a drive in the hovercar; you know how much he likes that."

"A hovercar?" you say "I have a hovercar?"

"You've got one of the last hovercars left in the sky. You were one of the first
people to get one, and you drove it to work every day for nearly 34 years." You shake your head in disbelief.

"Who's the Prime Minister?" your daughter asks, quickly.

You have no idea, though you don't like to admit it. So you search for a name. Some promising young politician would be best, though with such time elapsed, it seems ridiculous to speculate.

"David Beckham," you say.

Your daughter looks at you askance. "He's the Chancellor of the Exchequer. You're not okay, are you?" she says, taking Xenophon from you. Seeing his mother so upset is doing little for his mood. "I'm going to call work," she says, "and then we need to have a talk."

The talk goes badly. Your daughter discovers you have no memory of the last 35 years, remember nothing of her birth and upbringing, have forgotten Xenophon's hatching, and have no idea what has happened in the wider world. Worst, all you can remember of your spouse is a wonky tooth, long since fixed,
and an attractive back-side, long since disappeared beneath a much larger one.

Worst, you cannot safely operate virtual cutlery, rendering curdled limes, the staple food, entirely unpleasant. Your family take the reluctant decision to have you placed in full-time residential care, where you can be fed 20th-century style mush and watch old episodes of "Friends" on a device that can simulate "television".

Of course, that may be exactly what you had in mind, when you mentally retired from the carriage, and does sound superior to work in almost every respect. But sooner or later, even if only for something to entertain you in your senescence, you will need to return the explanation by clicking here.
Xenophon- The Future of Children’s Names

Despite his futuristic sounding name, Xenophon is an ancient Greek writer, best known for his histories. As such, Xenophon is exactly the kind of silly name that you hope your own children will be bourgeois enough to give their children.
Mentally departing the train, you begin your new life as an infant. You don’t want to start too early, of course- going through labour again would be traumatic on innumerable levels. You return, very briefly, at three months, but soon reject that; within minutes, you are hiked towards your mother’s bare breast, which is enough to convince you to return only once you’d moved entirely onto solids. So, you start again at six months, but you soon realise that even this is a mistake.

The life of an infant is an easy one, it’s true. You have no work to do, you sleep for 16 hours a day, are carried everywhere and have all your food prepared for you. You don’t even need to wipe your own bottom. Superficially, it all sounds marvellous.

But it’s not. Firstly, you quickly discover that the food is terrible. Lukewarm, flavourless mulch unseasoned and unsalted, with only so-called “natural sugars”, and served with tepid water: it appears designed to prove Cordelia from King Lear right after all. Worse, though you no longer have to wipe up your own faeces, the amount of time you spend sitting in your own gradually cooling faeces grows exponentially. It’s difficult to relax, too, when even a moment’s downtime is likely to be interrupted by an adult scooping you up
and hugging you, presenting you to another adult to be hugged or taking you for an interminable walk through the streets or country strapped to a chair or to your mother’s chest, for all the world like a dangerous patient awarded a rare outing into society. Nor can you entertain yourself: whilst you plan your rise to the head of a global empire, or to a job with a company car, at least, your parents offer pop-up books and inane gurgling. And while you soon display a preternatural physical and mental skill, your body is a terrible cage. Two-feet high, with fingers soft like uncooked chipolatas and a head the same size as your body, no sooner have you climbed on top of a chair, having twice tumbled painfully to the ground in the process, and at last reached the tabletop, when your mother again moves the television remote control out of reach.

There is little you can do, bar wait it out until it’s time to retake your Maths A-Level. If you wish, for instance, to

Object to your food, demand that an alternative be served in its stead, pizza, chilli-con-carne, steak, Haribo Tangfastics, anything but organic gunk, or
Demand that your mother put the pop-up book down, put the television on, hand you your favourite plastic duck and leave you to it, even if that means watching daytime television from the nineteen eighties. Or

Tell your parents that all travel must stop, that thorough consultation must henceforward be carried out before they carry you off round the country, to be thrust into the arms of whichever relative or acquaintance wishes to manhandle you, and that they should not expect the outcome of that consultation to be positive.

You can. Click to do precisely that. But doing so, you realise, will not do much for you. There are too many years to go. For, though the opportunity posed by an adult mind in an infant’s body is enormous, so is the discipline required to turn your eight waking hours to effect. Sure, by 6, you could be the best xylophone player the world has ever seen, by 9, you could speak French, German and a smattering of Portuguese and by 18, you could pass Maths A-Level. But would you? Wouldn’t thousands of hours of shovelled mush and story time dull that adult mind, melt it back to a near-liquid state, ready to be moulded once again, into much the same last? Wouldn’t history repeat itself, and you end up on that train anyway?
Salt, Children and King Lear

*King Lear* is a play by William Shakespeare. In it, King Lear, who has grown old, and a little naive, decides to bequeath his kingdom to his children and retire. He has three daughters, and instead of simply splitting the Kingdom three ways, or picking the best monarch, he decides to award it on the basis of who gives him the most praise, asking what they would give up for their father.

Lear’s plan is airtight so far, you’ll agree. Lear’s daughters Goneril and Regan behave as you’d expect from their names: even though they hate the old gimmer, they praise him to the skies, offering up their lives, etc. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, the one that Lear really likes and would probably like to give the whole kingdom to, says she loves him as much as she loves salt. And just salt, not even salt, chilli *and* garlic. Lear is slighted, divides his kingdom between Goneril and Regan, and banishes Cordelia. He then lives out his days in tranquil happiness, dividing his time between his two sensible, doting daughters.

Not really, it all goes about as badly as could be imagined, and everyone dies including Lear and Cordelia. Apologies for the spoilers if you haven’t seen it.
Anyway, it’s easy to think Cordelia deserved what she got for the whole salt thing, until you’ve eaten baby food. Afterwards, you can’t help but realise how much she must have really loved her father.
You cry. You’d like to state your objections reasonably. You’d like to use paragraphs and commas, make clever rhetorical arguments. But you can’t. So you cry.

There are millions of words you’d like to use, but your mouth will not let you, will not even go so far as to say mummy and daddy. Instead you can only cry, and so you do. When something is given to you that you don’t like, or something that you do like is taken away, and each of those is more likely to happen than getting what it is you wanted, you cry. You deploy your full range of cries, of course, a range far exceeding that of the out-of-practice adult. You use an extensive range of variations on the basic form: staccato bursts of sobs, cleverly deployed pauses, long lupine howls, a heart-tearing snotty snuffle. Nevertheless, they are just variations on that single genre, crying.

But however much you wail, you will rarely get your way. There are a few things that crying can change: clean your pants and get you cuddled, chiefly, and usually only in that order. But a change of diet or your own set of cutlery, a new television station or your choice of video, your choice of destination for your afternoon walk? Not likely. You’ll be fed tasteless paste and improving picture books, and be expected to like it. Your cries, however artful, however
loud, will not change your parents’ minds - they are acting for your own good, after all.

Years stretch out in front of you, your influence on them negligible. You could bounce back as a toddler, or a seven-year old, but your positions are barely more powerful. There must be an easier way than this, you think, as you start crying again, hoping to convince your mother, this time at least, to put the parsnips back.
You are back in the carriage. You're disappointed to be there, of course.

Nothing has changed in those few minutes of mental escape. The same passengers- the attractive young man in sports kit, the cheerful girl with a fat black-covered novel, the befuddled blonde tourists and their young son, the hate-filled retiree, the black guy- sit in the same silence, the same rant rumbling on above them, the alarm untiringly trilling, the train still waiting. This could go on for some time. The prospect of physical escape is, you feel, more distant than ever.

All this might come as a disappointment. In your youth, especially when reading those books which purported to give the reader choice, you did not find yourself “stuck on a train”. Stuck in a cave with an aggrieved dragon, perhaps, but not on a train, with an attractive young man in sports kit, a cheerful girl with a fat black-covered novel, some befuddled blonde tourists and their young son, a hate-filled retiree, and a black guy. And a bearded could-be-hijacker. With the emphasis on "could be".

But here you are reliant on your own resources. No door to the left, no dice to roll, no puzzle which, if correctly resolved, will reveal the ranter's weakness to silver. With physical escape rejected as improbable, and little to do on the
train, at least until the other passengers' phone batteries run out, another mental escape remains your best option, or best option for thinking of several options. What to think of, though?

You could imagine yourself into the kind of situations that you found in those novels, imagine yourself a dragon slayer, an adventuring archaeologist or a post-apocalyptic motorcycling avenger. You could imagine yourself into the sort of scenario that you might find in an adult novel - imagine yourself an eighteenth century French gentleman or West African villager caught up in one war or another, or, lessliterarily but equally adult, an ex-SAS man fighting in one war or another.

But that type of escape would be escape at its most fleeting, a holiday from your present predicament. An end would be reached- the dragon slain, the secret of the idol discovered, your hopes for an independent Biafra dashed- and you would be back in the carriage, still stuck halfway to work with a bearded ranter. You need to go backwards again, you realise, to a time which would allow you to undo the present, to exercise different choices, to ensure that your present becomes the past.
You feel a certain disappointment at this. You want to cavil, to debate whether there really is no other option. You do not, however. To do so would lead, to worthless speculation about free will, to a debate about predetermination with the feeling that none of your words are your own, to a dead end.

You must decide a destination for your escape. But the choice is so obvious as to be no choice at all- you tried infancy, and found it too far back, while old age was too far forward, and adolescence featured too many other adolescents.

What’s left?

You look around the carriage, and take your only option.
Salt, Children and King Lear

*King Lear* is a play by William Shakespeare. In it, King Lear, who has grown old, and a little naive, decides to bequeath his kingdom to his children and retire. He has three daughters, and instead of simply splitting the Kingdom three ways, or picking the best monarch, he decides to award it on the basis of who gives him the most praise, asking what they would give up for their father. Lear’s plan is airtight so far, you’ll agree. Lear’s daughters Goneril and Regan behave as you’d expect from their names: even though they hate the old gimmer, they praise him to the skies, offering up their lives, etc. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, the one that Lear really likes and would probably like to give the whole kingdom, too, says she loves him as much as she loves salt. And just salt, not even salt, chilli *and* garlic. Lear is slighted, divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan, and banishes Cordelia. He lives out his days in tranquil happiness, dividing his time between his two sensible, doting daughters.

Not really, it all goes about as badly as could be imagined, and everyone dies including Lear and Cordelia. Apologies for the spoilers if you haven’t read it.
Anyway, it’s easy to think Cordelia deserved what she got for the whole salt thing, until you’ve eaten baby food. Afterwards, you can’t help but realise how much she must have really loved Lear.
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- Win role-play and rescue failing conversation with silver tongue

You praise Khare Cityport Of Traps to your new friends

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- The Bluetones mentioned in a novel
- Your possible persona(s)
  - Persona role-play- allocate your attributes

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Your persona with the benefit of hindsight

- A list of personalities that were to become famous between 1999 and 2012, identifying only those who are genuinely very famous, so that their fame exceeds that of Huw Edwards, say, and excludes those, such as Rafael Nadal or Sienna Miller, whose example, as their fame derives either from their exceptional skill in their professional sphere or as a result of their outstanding good looks, you cannot hope to emulate.

- Decide to be Jack Sparrow, end up as Russell Brand.

- Decide to be Harry Potter, and in due course, achieve it.

- On Being Harry Potter

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- **You try and fail to go to the bar** (Bookmark:barnight9menbardiversion)

- **You try and fail to talk about something else**
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  (Bookmark: barnight10womenrathermen)

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  - What are their bodies like? (Bookmark: barnight11womendescriptionsssexy)
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  - Sam asks you about where you live (Bookmark: barnight13Samquestions)

  - You try to pull Sam, with limited success (Bookmark: barnight13Samquestiosreasons)

  - You try to bring Alex back in, with limited success (Bookmark: barnight13SamaskAlex)

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