

Ian Livingstone

Rebecca: [00:00:00] hello and welcome to shelf healing. UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick. Our guest today is Ian Livingstone. Ian Livingstone CBE is one of the founding fathers of the UK games industry, and co-created a whole new genre of books with the Fighting Fantasy series of children's books. He co-founded Games Workshop in 1975 and brought games such as Lara Croft to avid gamers in the nineties the Warlock of Firetop Mountain, the first Fighting Fantasy game book was published in 1982. And has sold over 17 million copies in, I think, 30 languages. Ian's on many advisory boards and received many awards for his contribution to the video game industry over the years. He has a new book written with Steve Jackson called Dice Men: Games Workshop 1975 to 1985, which will be published by Unbound in the autumn this year, 2021.

The first question to get us started should be fingers crossed nice and easy. Do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

Ian: [00:01:11] Reading is wonderful in multiple ways, but the most important thing for me is that it stimulates the imagination, like no other kind of media. I mean, they say video games stimulate the senses, but reading stimulates imagination and in the same way that role playing games like Dungeons and Dragons stimulates the imagination.

And the imagination is so powerful. That every story is different to each person. There's no preconceived images of what the characters and the environments or the adversaries are. So that's, that's wonderful in itself. And the fact that we can all have our own little individual adventure in our minds is a very compelling experience. As long as the story is in itself, compelling.

Rebecca: [00:02:00] That that idea of compelling stories I think is, is quite essential to that whole new genre of books that you co-created in the eighties, those sort of, that idea of that multiple choice idea of a, of a book. Was it that sort of agency that, that drew you to that idea or did it just sort of come to you in a flash of inspiration.

Ian: [00:02:22] It happened really as a result of events we used to put on, at Games Workshop, obviously we started Games Workshop in 1975, we became distributors of Dungeons and Dragons and were manic obsessive players of Dungeons and Dragons. Here was a game, a milestone in gaming history. It. There's three rulebooks in a box, which didn't look very much, but as soon as you open the box, it opened your imagination.

Like no other game I'd ever done before. And I don't think any game ever will. Again, it was more of a design a game kit than a game in itself. One person had to design a labyrinth. Rooms and passageways and a dungeon and the other players to come roles of heroes and wizards and clerics and thieves and through role playing the character types, they would navigate their way through the dungeon master's dungeon, killing monsters and finding treasure and acting in character.

It was effectively theater on the fly and, having played this for many, many years and selling Dungeons and Dragons through Games Workshop we used to run these events called games

day. And at one particular games day in 1979, the editor from Penguin Books was there with a stand saying playing politics book that they'd launched.

And she was fascinated by how enthusiastic everybody was paying role-playing games, D and D in particular. And she said, To Steve, Steve Jackson, my business partner and I would we like to write a book about this, this hobby of role-playing. And we said, well, rather than write a book about the hobby, why don't we create a book that gives you an experience of what that hobby is that role playing experience.

She thought that was a great idea. And, um, so we'd realize we kind of presented ourselves a bit of a problem. How are we going to do this? So we thought we would just say the essence of a role-playing game and substitute the dungeon master with a book itself, giving people multiple choice, but we just didn't want a simple branching narrative we wanted that that gaming element.

So we decided to act to, to add a, a, a very simplified game system to that, to present, uh, player or reader with, uh, an interactive experience with a game system attached to it. So we created three attributes skills, stamina, and luck, and those would be going up and down throughout the adventure, but the book itself was a, was 400 paragraphs, which if you read sequentially made no sense whatsoever, and it's effectively a story that was broken into multiple choices at the end of each paragraph, you were presented with a choice. If you want to simplistically, if you want to turn left. Go to 71, if you wanted to turn right. Turn 142, and then there were problems as well and puzzles that people had to solve so there were riddles and and if you found a key in one room, you'd be able to open that door further on in the dungeon. So there are hundreds of ways of going through books, the books, but only one correct way. So we set about creating what we call the magic quest, this concept for this book, and went back to Geraldine Cook, who was the editor, and she was fascinated and thought it's an amazing idea, pretty radical for the time, because there was nothing. No interactive books around and she took it to her MD who apparently laughed so hard, nearly hit his head on the table. So thought it a preposterous the idea that anything other than a linear narrative, but to her credit, she persisted with her belief in it and took about a year for her to convince the powers that be at Penguin, that they should publish this book.

So Steve and I said about writing it and we renamed it as the Warlock of Firetop Mountain. Cause we thought that would speak to a role-playing audience and it was launched in August, 1982 with not much fanfare, to be honest, I think we did more promotion ourselves through our own magazine, White Dwarf than Penguin Books because they had really no idea what a role playing book was it, I mean, it just looked, looked like a normal book, but as soon as it kind of hit the playground and that's the power, the word of mouth was the virality of the day. And so pockets of schools around the country became hugely obsessed with, with the books and, um, and they reprinted, I think the Warlock some 15 times in the first couple of months, cause they still didn't have belief in this kind of strange interactive book. And there were very, I tell you about some of the tales of, of how people thought they were a threat to society in many ways.

Rebecca: [00:07:19] Definitely. Definitely.

Ian: [00:07:21] For example, um, the Evangelical Alliance published an eight page warning guide saying. Because you're going to interact with ghouls and demons you're bound to get possessed by the devil. I mean, just amazing isn't it. A worried housewife in deepest suburbia phoned up a local radio station said that having read one of my books her child levitated. So. The kids were thinking, Oh right. For £1.50, I can fly can I? That's the local vicar at Penguin Penguin books who where then in Chelsea threatened to chain himself to their railings until our books were banned . Magazine articles written, uh, saying that children's imagination that are being stimulated too much because these books, they were burnt in, in, in South Africa protests, there were petitions sent into Penguin Books and in the UK saying, Oh, we the undersigned what Fighting Fantasy game books, banned because our children are spending too much time with them when we're worried about the content of them. Of course, this is still, there's no such thing really as bad publicity and people thought they were amazing, but at the same time, teachers are beginning to wake up to the fact that, Hey, these are actually quite good for reluctant readers.

They're great for critical thinking. The agency given to the reader was empowering and that you could. It could fail, but that, but then you were immediately wanted to start over again and try again and encourage creativity in terms of writing or in terms of art, because we had these wonderful, uh, realistic illustrations both on the cover and inside the books themselves. And over time, they realized that they actually improve literacy by 17% because people are so, Hey dad, what's the sarcophagus. Um, you know, the children want to know everything about these because it stimulated the imagination. In many ways through the agency, they imagine themselves in the shoes of the character that they were being in these books, they weren't, it wasn't a passive experience. Like most books are where you may or may not relate to them. So the, the main character, this is a book in which you, the reader are the hero. And of course it it's all about you. That's a lot more powerful, a lot more engaging and also a lot more successful.

So, yeah, they were enormously successful and the eighties, and I'm delighted that they're still in print today, albeit not selling the same kind of numbers, but they've survived the test of time, which is fantastic.

Rebecca: [00:10:02] They have. That, that leads nicely into my next question is that there's something very special about the create your own adventure aspect to the game books that calls out to, like you said, reluctant readers and helps improve literacy, and also gives that sense of, of bibliotherapy, you know, being able to have agency within a book and change the narrative as you go, you go through has obviously made a huge difference to a number of, of people's lives.

And like you said, with, with the increased literacy rate and the word of mouth and the kids thinking for £1.50, we can learn to levitate. Was that something that you thought of when you were, when you were writing them, did you think they'd have that kind of impact on the kids reading them?

Ian: [00:10:48] We had absolutely no idea. We were just delighted the our first book was in print and we'd run into WH Smith and look on the shelf. And there, it was, that was a huge moment. I had no idea that it would be successful because Penguin had no expectations

whatsoever about the sales potential. As I said, they only printed like 10,000 copies and we're pretty much convinced that they weren't going to sell those.

But, um, no, nobody had any idea just how, how well they would, they would succeed. I mean, they were effectively you know video games before video games around, uh, being able to control the destiny of your own character was a pretty interesting concept for people.

Rebecca: [00:11:30] Yeah, it's that idea, you know, people see themselves in books, but with the game books, you are in the book, like you said, you are the character, there are no other characters. The reader is the character.

Ian: [00:11:42] Yeah. And then loads of people, cheated of course, you know, peeking around thinking around the corner. And I used to see people on public transport on buses and trains are there. I called the five, five fingered bookmarkers they had the fingers is in multiple pages, but that's absolutely fine with me. As long as you're enjoying it. And you're reading. The important thing is that they got children reading and it was funny. What you think is what qualifies as reading because in education today, when the school automatically thinks or the Department for Education, perhaps thinks that you must start children off with good Shakespeare.

And I think it doesn't matter if it's comics or Fighting Fantasy game books as long as you learn to love reading, you can move on to Shakespeare as, and when you're ready. So often as a case you'll hear that children are put off reading because they're started on, on Shakespeare before they're ready. Obviously some teachers adapt Shakespeare can slip to be a contemporary experience, which is brilliant, of course, but for those who don't risk alienating children from the joy of reading.

And I remember being on Saturday Superstore in the eighties, I had like number one, two, and three in the best sellers list. And I had to talk through the top 10 with John Craven. And we went from 10, nine, eight, seven, six. He asked me why, what was it, what was good about this book? That book, this, when we finally got to three, two, one, and it kind of looked maybe the kind of slightly puzzle phase expression then said, yeah, but when are you going to write a proper book? And they are books and they're getting children reading. Is that not the important aspects here? To get children to understand the joy of reading is surely the ambition of, of any author.

Rebecca: [00:13:32] Yeah, definitely. Is, is there a particular book that's profoundly affected you in your life?

Ian: [00:13:40] Uh, the one that I really related to when I was younger was probably On The Road by Jack Kerouac.

And, uh, you know, it was always a bit of a non-conformist at school. I didn't do very well. I only got one, A Level, the worst possible grade. I didn't go to university. Um, I like playing games. I played chess for the school about the thing I enjoyed. I, I liked, I tend to think myself as, as not an academic, I like learning by doing the like creativity.

I like new things and I don't like. Being processed, which kind of thought I was at school. And I somehow managed to get my O Levels to enable me to go to Sixth Form but the head teacher said no Livingstone, I know you've, you've passed your own levels, but someday you think you'd rather be better off going to work in a garage or something than kind of wasting your time studying for A Levels, I guess, you know, it's a strange way to try and motivate people but I thought, well, I'm definitely going against at six for me Tuesday. I shouldn't be there. But, um, yeah, I guess he was proven, right. Because I did find it excruciating and didn't try very hard.

Rebecca: [00:15:02] You have always had a very long and successful career in the games industry. Is that a particular game that you returned to over and over again, like comfort food, but sort of in game form.

Ian: [00:15:15] Well, I'm too old now to enjoy any sort of twitch games that involved fast reflexes, just get completely destroyed by anyone half my age or younger. So I don't bother with those too much. I do enjoy playing board games. I'm sitting in a room, the collection of over a thousand board games, and I still enjoy playing video games, but the ones that I like playing them, all strategy games, games, like Civilization. They're where you're kind of planning ahead and try to find optimum solutions to problems rather than just twitch game play, as I say, which is just doesn't suit my numbed reflexes, but board games, I find wonderful because, um, Not, not quite wonderful during the pandemic, but when you're sitting around a table with like-minded friends and enjoying doing deals, stacking them in the back and messing around with the bits and the boxes, uh, it's a great social experience.

And, uh, I spent many an hour I've run this thing called the games night club since the eighties, the same six people. And I write the newsletter after each session, I've written 470 newsletters now. And, uh, we keep, uh, score every game played and I tally them off at the end of the year. We have this trophy as a kind of a spoof gentleman's club, but it's really the newsletter just to really, to assassinate the characters of my fellow gamers.

Rebecca: [00:16:53] That sounds fantastic. Are you, are you a five player or a six player?

Ian: [00:16:57] There are six that we are six, but it's usually only five turn up and it's very hard to find good six player games. But the games we were allowed to play are kind of mid core Euro games, like, um, Splendor and Ticket to Ride, um, Century Spice Road and Caylus that kind of stuff. Not too heavy, a silly, not too light.

Rebecca: [00:17:25] Right? Well, you've written many newsletters. You've written children's books, obviously. And you're currently writing your, your book about Games Workshop with Steve Jackson. And obviously you co-wrote a lot of, a lot of that except for your newsletters. Do you find there's a difference? In how you feel when you write alone compared to when you write with someone like Steve?

Ian: [00:17:47] Well, we only actually wrote one book together, the first one Warlock of Firetop Mountain, simply because it is absolute nightmare trying to do it. You're handing over like four books at once to somebody, you have to explain where all the items are in the first half of their adventure. So in Warlock, I wrote the adventure up to the river, of which

there were three crossing points I created and he wrote what happened beyond the river eventually meeting Zagor the Warlock himself but I'm trying to get consistent consistency and style and tone. And. And descriptive narrative is really impossible. So with Warlock, it effectively needed a rewrite who could Steve kind of edited the whole thing through after we'd try to fuse the two halves together. So we thought never again. So we then, after that alternates it.

With, um, he wrote one, I wrote one, he wrote *Citadel of Chaos*, I wrote *Forest of Doom*, then I wrote *City of Thieves* and *Deathtrap Dungeon* are some of my early favorites. And then we actually couldn't keep up with demand because we were running Games Workshop during the day Dungeons and Dragons at first and then we created, we lost the exclusivity on D and D instead.

That's how Warhammer came about. And we launched Warhammer and a whole bunch of Games Workshop board games, and systems, our managers and *White Dwarf* magazine. And so the time, and at the same time, Penguin Books are demanding more and more Fighting Fantasy gamebooks because they couldn't believe how amazingly successful they become.

So we had like social lives of a slug, and it was impossible to do everything. So that's how the Present series of Fighting Fantasy books came along. And so he was all Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone presents some effectively ghost written where we kind of set out the plots and it will be fleshed out by the guest author.

But, um, yeah, I've written over 15 of my own. Uh, the last one was *Assassins of Allansia* that came out in 2019. And as you know, more recently I've been writing and the *Dice Men* again, it's. It's one I've written about 90 odd percent of it. And Steve chipped in where is able when he has had time to do so. And, um, but again for consistency style it's, it's been on me this time. So it's the bulk of the book, but it's been great fun talking to a lot of employees and, and reading through *White Dwarf* magazines and the predecessor to that was *Owl and Weasel*. Which came out before *White Dwarf*. And finding out what we used to do all those years ago. I can't believe it was 45 years since we started Games Workshop.

But again, it's incredible how Workshop has prospered. I mean, we sold out in 1991 and, uh, it was floated on the London Stock Exchange in 1993 and has grown ever since, and next to extraordinary success, albeit doing pretty much what we did at the same time. You know, we built up this Games Workshop experience where. Yeah, we sold it around products or in shops promoted through our magazines and crazy kind of hobby experience where we employ, um, gamers, players like us on traditional retailers because through their enthusiasm and knowledge, that really was a place where people could learn as well as by, by their games and learn how to paint the figures, learn about the rules.

So we wanted people to enjoy their time there rather than just being sold stuff. And kind of that experience I think is pretty much the same as it is today. albeit in a much more professional way and much more grown up way in many ways. And it's extraordinary, you know, Workshop is now worth three and a half billion pounds.

Amazing. Fantastic. I moved into video games and yeah, no regrets about that. And I'm still actively involved even in my advanced age. I'm on the board of eight video games companies and I'm also chairman of Sumo Group PLC headquartered in Sheffield, another publicly listed company.

Rebecca: [00:22:04] Yeah. Do you think that the story aspect that you found through Dungeons and Dragons and through the game books, do you think that that story aspect of games such as Laura Croft helped players get a similar sense of that sort of therapeutic feeling that you can get from reading because over the years, lots of those games with strong stories have repeatedly won awards. So there must be sort of some draw perhaps to the story aspect of, of games?

Ian: [00:22:36] Well, everyone likes a story don't they. I mean, who doesn't? So in the early days of games there, wasn't the horsepower in the machines. Yeah. To provide music of any quality or, or sound effects or particularly great graphics. And of course there's no room for story, but now in recent years we've seen our stories becoming ever more. Any more, every more important as well as the gameplay itself. But when people ask me, what's the most important things about a video game, I will say gameplay, gameplay, gameplay, graphics, and technology, crucial vital of course, but still play a supporting role. And I would say the story is. Oh, but it's people buy games for the game, play experience mechanics. And that's the paramount feature of any game.

Rebecca: [00:23:30] Yeah. But then you've got games like Skyrim, which I would say is very similar to your game books. You know, where there is a big story, but people can go wherever they like. There's that agency again where it's the multiple choice, isn't it?

Ian: [00:23:44] Well yes of course! And Dark Souls as well. It's kind of open-world RPGs where, well, you can take on a role and go guide these fantastic journeys of the mind with other players, you know, most play online games, happy days, the more and more video games technology through the platforms and the consoles and PCs themselves allow for a much more compelling experience and it's pervasive.

Broadband gets better and bigger over time that allows the gameplay experience to be more, more, um, immersive and more compelling experience. I mean, you know, we're human beings, we are social animals and the more you can get to that social behavior, the more fun the other game will be at, it adds an additional and a meta level of, of enjoyment, which is what you play a single player is to my mind is can't be as much fun.

I mean, if you. If you go for a wonderful meal or look at the best sunset in the world on your own, that's not as good as it is doing it with somebody else. So the more games become massively social and the more games have persistent worlds and more games have user-generated content. The more that you can personalize worlds, the more you can communicate with your people, the way that the metaverse is now a third place inside games where you don't just play together, you can hang out together. The more the games and you will continue to create I mean, this is a game. The game video games industry is now, and then just do worth \$150 billion a year, 3 billion people now play games, and

they're still huge chunks of the world that hasn't really gotten off the ground yet in games playing. So I think games helped define us as who we are as human beings.

We, we entered this world and we learn through play. We interact with everything and. And that's the best way of learning. And I would say games are effectively a contextual hub for learning and you can learn through play. And I think that's not always spoken about in the media who tend to criticize games for content that shouldn't be played by children anyway, and games are rated the same way films are.

So an 18 game. Hello. Should not be played by children. But if you could park your prejudice against one or two titles and think cognitively what's happening when you're playing the game, you can't get through a game without problem-solving. And again, you can't get through finding friends, a game book without problem-solving and we are problem-solving animals. So that ticks a big box. So there's a, there's a great plus right there from being able to problem solve. You learn a game intuitively no one really teaches you that. How to play. You learn through trial and error. But you're not punished for making a mistake. You're encouraged to try again. So it's not like a, an examination which is a binary. You got it right or wrong. You're either able or less able well, you know, certainly categorized in a, in a win loss situation. You know, we are encouraged to play, try again, and over time everyone can be a winner, so everyone should effectively pass the exam. It's just that we all learn a different race, but in a game we can all be.

And judged as, as, as winners or losers and games really enable creativity. I mean, Minecraft is digital Lego for want of a better expression. And the ability is wonderful 3D contextual worlds. Share them with your friends and children can learn in context about the world. They, a child can apply the heat of a furnace and the game to sit like a sand and create a glass, take that glass, put it in that world, and we won't forget that if they were told by somebody that the front of the class, that fact and their minds being off about something else. They likely forget that. Certainly forget it after the exam, but having done it with their own being that should remain with them or cement itself longer in their memory than it would otherwise games like Rollercoaster Tycoon really are management stimulation.

Understanding the physics of design, the rise in that world. Understanding the pricing models necessary to get people to go on your rides. Understanding staffing levels required to run those rides. This is a management simulation simulation, and if people still don't understand. The power of games through not through learning through the power of games. Think from when we're able to fly again, how the pilot learns to fly, would you prefer that pilot learn by reading a book? Uh, how many degrees do you turn the aileron I can't remember now, or using simulation software, which is effectively a game, but without the scoring. So it's that learning by doing and that kind of, as I say, that, that context. Yeah, that I think is a great plus for games that is usually missed by the, by education.

Rebecca: [00:29:03] Mm. And like you said, with the Fighting Fantasy books, sort of video games before video games were there, you weren't afraid to use complex narratives, complex decisions, difficult problems, new words that, that, like you said earlier, children are really excited to learn and try and try and try until, until they get to the end. And it's the proper ending. It's, it's a nice escape. I think for children.

Ian: [00:29:30] And they don't mind failing, yes. Failure is a success work in progress, and you're encouraged to try again. You're not suddenly told. You failed. And that's what I find wrong about the examination system.

Rebecca: [00:29:45] Yeah. Is there a particular book or a game that you would recommend to someone who maybe wants a nice moment of escape and sort of therapy and fun and enjoyment?

Ian: [00:29:58] A Fighting Fantasy game book or somebody else's books?

Rebecca: [00:30:01] Any book you like, feel free to go Fighting Fantasies.

Ian: [00:30:07] I'm going to recommend a Fighting Fantasy game book to children age 10 or 40 one's the most, my most popular ones are probably *City of Thieves* or *Deathtrap Dungeon*, but for other books, I definitely recommend the ones that I enjoy. Let's say *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac, I loved his spontaneous prose, attitudes to writing he really felt he was living in the moment and trying to cross America and the excitement of being on the road. And I know all the thrills and adventure of the moment and the way he writes and that sort of a style of come on, stop, stop, stop. And, yeah, that's, that's what gets me excited.

Rebecca: [00:30:58] Lovely. Thank you so much for taking time out of your day and joining me for this lovely interview.

Ian: [00:31:04] My pleasure.

Rebecca: [00:31:06] Absolutely brilliant chat with one of my all-time favorite people Ian Livingstone who brought us so many brilliant things, not least the Fighting Fantasy game books, which if you have never read one go buy yourself a Fighting Fantasy book they are amazing. I hope you enjoyed this episode. I thought it was super interesting had great fun chatting to Ian. As always follow us on Twitter @ Shelf Healing with a little underscore between Shelf and Healing. Thanks as always to Nicholas Patrick for the music. And I'll be back next week with another episode of Shelf Healing bibliotherapy interviews