JOURNAL OFINTERACTIVE BOOKS

To the Bitter Ends

Exploring agonistic text-reader-relationships in "Choose Your Own Adventure Books"

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ABSTRACT

This essay takes a look at Bantam's "Choose Your Own Adventure" book series, specifically at its first instalment, Edward Packard's *The Cave of Time* (1979). Similar to Cortázar's *Rayuela* (Hopskotch), Packard's narrative is organised in small segments at the end of which readers must make a choice to determine how to continue the branching story and to ultimately reach one of many endings. Drawing from theories of reading literary texts and cyberfiction proposed by R. Barthes and E. Aarseth, the paper seeks to come to an understanding of how readers may approach such interactive fiction and which role 'cheating' plays in it.

KEYWORDS

Choose Your Own Adventure*;* Edward Packard; Interactive fiction.

CITATION

"Choose Your Own Adventure" is a series of interactive fiction books published by Bantam Books, New York. The original run of 184 books released between 1979 and 1998 and propelled a format of children's and young people's literature first introduced in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s (Katz 2024) to immense success and popularity (Hendrix 2011; Jamison 2022). With many English-speakers having been exposed to "Choose Your Own Adventure books" over the course of the 1980s, the series' title itself has become a widely used idiom. The books in the series prominently features multi-branching narratives (Ryan 2001, 248–249; Lebowitz/Klug 2011, 121) in which readers, as the series' title suggests, take on the role of the protagonist by choosing which way they wish to progress through the story. Whereas in his famous 1963 novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1966) Julio Cortázar suggests two separate ways through its 155 chapters that move, either step by step or hop by hop, from one segment to the next, "Choose Your Own Adventure books" ask readers to make a choice between multiple options.

The series' first instalment, the 1979 book *The Cave of Time* by Edward Packard, with illustrations by Paul Granger (i.e., Don Hedin), is the main object explored in this paper. After discussing this genre-defining book, building on Roland Barthes' ideas about reading as layed out in *The Pleasure of the Text*, I will briefly compare *The Cave of Time* to its 1986 video game adaptation as well as the game books *Consider the Consequences!* (1930) by Doris Webster and Mary Alden Hopkins and a recent choose your own adventure book by Dustin Brady titled *Escape from a Video Game: The Secret of Phantom Island* (2020) to broaden our understanding of how *The Cave of Time* may have inadvertently introduced an agonistic way of reading.

By means of internal focalization, readers experience the *Cave of Time*'s story 'through the eyes' of the unnamed protagonist. The text addresses readers in the second person to promote identification. Readers are put into the position of the protagonist and, therefore, encouraged to identify with them, which potentially increases immersion and tension. *The Cave of Time* introduces readers to their roles in a single sentence at the outset of the plot: "You've hiked through Snake Canyon once before while visiting your Uncle Howard at Red Creek Ranch" (Packard 1986, 2). Even of places named 'Snake Canyon' and 'Red Creek' were not scattered across the USA, the names are vague enough for readers to easily fill them with individual meaning or take them merely as the set pieces they are. On top of that, Hedin's illustrations mostly show the protagonist—a child of about ten with bobbed hair, wearing loose-fitting leisure clothes—from behind.[1] When their face is seen, it is drawn cartoonishly which leaves gender-identification somewhat fuzzy, which helps readers identify with the character (see McCloud 1994, 28–41). Evidently, *The Cave of Time* went to some length to make the protagonist available to readers to identify with. Whereas the protagonist is intentionally left vague, Packard sets out a number of precise rules that guides reading *The Cave of Time* (and later stories in the series). To this end, the book in-

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[1] Raymond Montgomery who authored many books in the series, is quoted as saying, that "we wanted Choose Your Own Adventure books to be non-gender specific", but illustrations that depicted male children often contradict this intent (Hendrix 2011).

cludes a "Warning!!!!", accentuated with four exclamation points, with the frontmatter, to make readers are aware of their role and the rules which to follow:

> Do not read this book straight through from beginning to end! These pages contain many different adventures you can go on in the Cave of Time. From time to time as you read along, you will be asked to make a choice. Your choice may lead to success of disaster! The adventures you take are a result of your choice. *You* are responsible because *you* choose! After you make your choice, follow the instructions to see what happens to you next. Remember—you cannot go back! Think carefully before you make a move! One mistake can be your last … or it *may* lead you to fame and fortune! (Packard 1986, 1).

The narrative, the note states, is laid out in a way that does not allow for reading from the first page to the last line by line, page after page, as suggested by the structure of the book. Instead, readers must proceed through the text as instructed by the text. Accordingly, the story is broken up into segments that vary in length but generally range between a half-page and two pages of prose. Each segment closes with either the instruction to continue reading on a specific page, or, more frequently, prompts readers to choose between two or up to four options for how to continue the story. For example, after the first segment, in which the protagonist falls asleep in a cave, echoing Washington Irving's *Rip van Winkle*, readers get to choose between returning home to the uncle's ranch by turning to one page or to wait for some time by proceeding to another page. With every such decision, readers progress through the text as the plot branches out. Branches may cross-connect or loop back. In *The Cave of Time,* the number of decisions to be made from the beginning of the narrative to reaching one of its ends, ranges from four to as eight, depending on the path followed. As Packard has planned and written the branching story, laid out and mapped the plots beforehand, there is, of course, no free choice to be had in *The Cave of Time* and readers have no actual influence on how the individual stories pan out (Tresca 2011, 107). Limiting readers further, the warning sets another rule: once a decision has been made, it must be followed through, no matter what outcome it may lead to. Returning to a previous node to take a different path is forbidden. All readings are expected to start from the beginning and move through to one end. Afterwards, a new attempt may be made. This is reflected in the way the text is structured: each node has a page number for an address and instructions at the end of a node will move readers along to another node (e.g., "If you decide to start back home, turn to page 4." [Packard 1986, 3]). But as moving backwards through the text is not allowed, nodes do not indicate where they were reached from.

Let us compare this reading-by-rules with Roland Barthes' understanding of reading as laid out in *The Pleasure of the Text* (orig.: *Le plaisir du texte*, 1974), an essay that originated around the same time Packard published *The Cave of Time*. Barthes (1975, 10–11) unveils: "we do not read everything with the same intensity of reading; a rhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the *integrity* of the text; our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or to skip certain passages (anticipated as 'boring') in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote (which are always its articulations: whatever furthers the solution of the riddle, the revelation of fate)". According to Barthes, experienced readers like himself move through texts at different speeds, intensities, rhythms, skipping and selecting text as they please—or as the reading of the text exudes pleasure. The "*integrity* of the text" (ibid., 11) takes a backseat to such a self-deter-

mined reading that has emancipated from the author's (suspected) intentions. Barthes (ibid.) posits, "the author cannot predict tmesis: he cannot choose to write *what will not be read*. And yet, it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not that creates the pleasure of the great narratives". From this vantage point, Barthes (ibid., 12) identifies two "systems of reading: one goes straight to the articulation of the anecdote, it considers the extent of the text, ignores the play of language […]; the other reading skips nothing; it weighs, it sticks to the text, it reads, so to speak, with application and transport, grasps at every point in the text the asyndeton which cuts the various languages—and not the anecdote". Deviating from the common usage of the term (Ette 2010, 415), Barthes calls the former way of reading "tmesis", which, among other things, describes a rhetoric device in which a word or phrase is split to enclose another. As Espen Aarseth explains in the context of his discussion of hyperfiction, for which "Choose Your Own Adventure" books may be seen as precursors (Costikyan 2007, 5; Tresca 2011, 100), "[f]or Roland Barthes, tmesis is the reader's unconstrained skipping and skimming of passages, a fragmentation of the linear text expression that is totally beyond the author's control" (Aarseth 1997, 78). To make this clearer, Aarseth (ibid., 79) differentiates between "homolinear reading (with the line)" and "heterolinear reading (tmesis)". The latter, Aarseth (ibid., 78) argues, only lends itself to linear texts such as the 19th century novels mentioned by Barthes (Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, Proust, Verne, Zola). Hyperfiction reading, conversely, demands close attention of readers who "must scrutinize the links and venues in order to avoid meeting the same text fragments over and over again" (ibid.). Instead, Aarseth continues, a reader's "disoriented movements" as they navigate the hypertext, "might be confused with tmesis. This is not, however, Barthes's 'textual bliss' but, rather, the reader's textual claustrophobia as he skims the *déjà-lu* nodes" (ibid.). Aarseth refers to Stuart Moulthrops 1995 *hegirascope* as a text that is particularly challenging in this respect, because the text fragments, which connect to each other via hyperlinks, are exchanged automatically "like a non-interruptible slide show" (ibid., 80). While in paper gamebooks like *The Cave of Time* "the interaction is one way, with the player determining the pace of the interaction but not the actual results" (Tresca 2011, 100), in *hegirascope* readers even lose influence on their own reading pace. There is no textual *plaisir* to be had here. The addition of text-links may "give the reader some slight sense of control, but he is left with the feeling of rowing against the current in a mighty river" (Aarseth 1997, 80). Aarseth assumes a passive, even submissive stance on the reader's side. Experienced readers of *Hegirascope* and similar hyperfiction may instead look up the HTML source code, guess at individual HTML pages, access file listings, take screenshots, save local copies of the files making up the website, and so on. This third way of reading can be added to the two modes proposed by Barthes and Aarseth. It is peculiar to hyperfiction written in HTML and accessed from a browser but there are similarities to how "Choose Your Own Adventure" books may be read. Such a mode of reading obviously runs counter to the strict, rule-based mode suggested by *The Cave of Time* to guard its integrity: do not read page by page as you would any other codex-style book[2]; do follow the instructions given to you by the text, do make choices; do not renege on your choices. To ensure rules are not disregarded, *The Cave of Time* asks moral commitment and virtue of the readers—"*You* are responsible because *you* choose!" (Packard 1986, 1)—in return for a few dozen minutes of entertainment and the promise of fame and riches: "One mistake can be your last … or It *may* lead you to fame and fortune!" (ibid.). The enormous success of the series suggests that this, indeed, fostered reader engagement.

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[2] It is noteworthy that the codex, rightfully insists, "is intrinsically neither linear nor nonlinear but, more precisely, random access", because "any book can be opened at any page and can be started at any point" (Aarseth 1997, 46).

The Cave of Time adds 'intentional' failure states to reading in the form of endings that frustrate and disappoint. As Italo Calvino exemplifies in his novel *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979; *If on a winter's night a traveler*, 1981; Ryan 2001, 200–2003) at the same time when *The Cave of Time* appeared in print, reading a book could fail for many reasons before. Unlike *Rayuela* whose second reading path proposed by Cortázar leads into a loop proceeding from chapter 58 to chapter 131 to chapter 58 *ad infinitum*, calling into question the meaning of the end in literary texts, *The Cave of Time* is built around its forty endings. Conversely, *If on a winter's night a traveler* highlights the beginnings, starting off ten stories from different genres that all end prematurely. In this text, the protagonist, called 'reader', is addressed as 'you' and serves as a doppelganger of the real-world reader. He fails ten times before the novel finally closes with the stereotypical ending of the reader marrying the woman reader introduced early on in the book. In the final chapter we find both readers lying in bed and the woman reader asking: "Aren't you tired of reading?" And you say, 'Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino" (Calvino 1981, 260). This self-referential quip makes very clear that the actual novel by real-world Calvino as well as the many books begun in the novel have come to an end. After ten frustrating and premature ends a final, cliché ending ironically delivers closure and thereby satisfaction to readers both intradiegetic and real.

In *The Cave of Time* failure doesn't lie in technical issues of literature presented by Calvino (e.g., binding errors, bad translation, forgery) but in what happens to the protagonist. In fact, advertising for the "Choose Your Own Adventure" series leans heavily on the number of endings each book offers with the total number of ends to 'chose' from often printed in large letters on the front cover. Gerald Price stressed the importance of the end for any story: "Students of narrative have pointed out that the end occupies a determinative position because of the light it sheds (or might shed) on the meaning of the events leading up to it. The end functions as the (partial) condition, the magnetizing force, the organizing principle of narrative: reading (processing) a narrative is, among other things, waiting for the end, and the nature of the waiting is related to the narrative" (Prince 2003, 26). Within the framework of *The Cave of Time*, endings with desirable outcomes, the prospect of which the warning note stressed ("fame and fortune!" [Packard 1986, 1]), possibly exert the largest magnetizing force. Christian Swineheart (2022) analysed the books in the "Choose Your Own Adventure" series and has visualized their structure. He has identified great, favourable, mediocre, disappointing, and catastrophic endings of which the latter ones are the most remarkable. No less than thirteen endings close off with the demise of the child protagonist. Consider this example:

> You hold tightly to tufts of wool, hoping the mammoth will slow down enough so you can safely slide off. But suddenly it pitches forward, making a terrible bellowing. In an instant you realize you are falling through space. You cry out helplessly as you lose your grip, falling faster and faster. Thousands of years later when Dr. Carleton Frisbee, the famous paleontologist, finds your bones next to those of a woolly mammoth in the Red Creak excavation, he is amazed at how closely you resemble a twentieth-century human being (Packard 1986, 53).

Having come through the cave of time to emerge in the neolithic age, readers find themselves on the back of a giant mammal. In similar endings, *The Cave of Time*'s readers tumble through the narrative only to inadvertently suffocate (ibid., 101) or get hanged (ibid., 78). The reader has no grip on the narrative, clutching helplessly at the text which the author has decided will end here. From the perspective of the overly sensitive adult reader with a background in literary studies this ending seemingly adds insult to injury by having the protagonist's remains being studied by the

caricature of a researcher (Fig. 1).

To child readers, however, this mockery may be sufficient enough to divert themselves from the protagonist and shrug off their demise. Where the irony in Calvino's self-referential ending is typical for the adult novel, Packard can rely on humour, the characteristic tone of children's literature (see Morgenstern 2009, 79). It bears mentioning that death has been an important theme of children's literature for as long as such literature has existed (Rauch Gibson/Zaidman 1991, 232). Talking about death in children's literature has undergone significant shifts. For instance, in 17th and 18th century England, books about the death of children intended "to help save children's souls from eternal damnation" against a background of high child mortality (ibid.). As child mortality decreased and morals changed, so did the—sometimes macabre—depiction of death in children's literature—ranging "from a bluntly pictured state of nonexistence to an emphasized continuity of spirit or nature seen as providing comfort to the griever" (Moore/Mae 1987, 56). In 1970s America, influenced by the televised death of Lee Harvey Oswald and the Vietnam War, parents "tend not to shield children from life's harsh realities" (Rauch Gibson/Zaidman 1991, 232), which allowed for a steep increase in children's books about dying and bereavement (ibid.).

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You hold tightly to tufts of wool, hoping the mammoth will slow down enough so you can safely slide off. But suddenly it pitches forward, making a terrible bellowing. In an instant you realize you are falling through space. You cry out helplessly as you lose your grip, falling faster and faster.

Thousands of years later when Dr. Carleton Frisbee, the famous paleontologist, finds your bones next to those of a wooly mammoth in the Red Creek excavation, he is amazed at how closely you resemble a twentieth-century human being.

The End

Fig. 1 | Edward Packard, *The Cave of Time* Toronto, Bantam, 1986 (19th ed.). Illustration of p. 53. Photo of the author.

The Cave of Time, thus, first appeared in a setting in which death, including the death of a child (see Moore/Mae 1987, 57), did not seem at all outlandish in a text intended for a young audience. As Timothy Moore and Reet Mae (1987, 61) found in a survey of a sample of relevant children's books, depictions of deaths often "were vivid and horrifying, and the lack of reassurance and support may make death seem more frightening", judging that "whatever literary merits these books may have, they are unlikely to enhance genuine understanding of death and its meaning" (ibid.). With regards to choose your own adventure books, Gary Westfahl (1996, 217) assumes that "young readers who read descriptions of themselves being eaten by a saber-toothed tiger are not crushed; they simply shrug it off and start the book again, starting a new life and this time entering the cave on the left, not the cave on the right." Still, the bluntness and inescapability of the delivery may make readers aware of the fact that they are, figuratively speaking, a puppet on a string pulled by the narrator. Readers may feel taken advantage off by an authority they have no influence over. There may, in fact, be a sense of having lost in a game that was heavily stacked against them from the outset. Consider the philosopher chanced upon "in a brightly-lighted chamber, in the center of which is a bearded, old man seated in a chair" (Packard 1986, 25), who can be seen as an avatar of the narrator or, depending on readers' inclinations or narratological instruction, of the author himself. The old man asks of the protagonist why they want to return to their own time. The possible answers (ibid.) are:
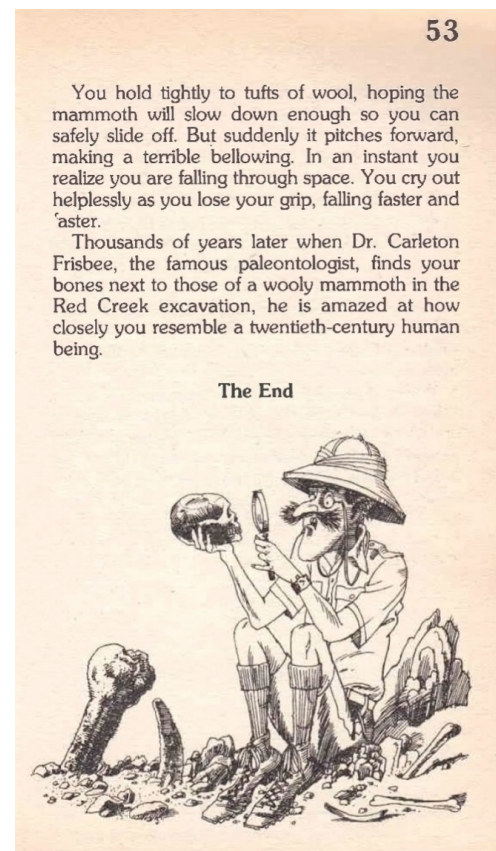
1. Because I want to be back with my family and friends.

2. Because I don't want to take a chance of being in a bad time'.

3. I would like to try another time, but only if you can assure me that I will eventually get back to my own time.

4. Who are you?

All four answers offered by the text seem equally sensible and inconspicuous, but three (1, 2, 4) will lead to desirable outcomes while number 3 cheekily transports the protagonist into a war zone where they will surely die. Readers who chose the third option, perhaps to continue their adventure but without risking to die, are delivered the following ending:

> 'Ah, you are a shrewd one,' the old man says. You'll try to get two loaves of bread, rather than settle for one. Well, I'll show you one other time, and, if you don't like it, just say so, and I'll return you to your own time, if there is time to do so. […] You follow his directions […] and come out onto a street. Instantly you realize there is a war going on. Bombs and rockets are exploding all around you. You cry out to the old man, asking to be returned to the Cave of Time, but there is no time left. / **The End** (Ibid., 44).

Faced with this cruel defeat which is not framed by humour, it seems fair to assume that some readers may feel tricked by the heartless philosopher and, if they are so inclined, by way of extension, the author. It may occur to a reader that it is not them reading—or, indeed, playing—a book, but that is them who are being played. Reader of *The Cave of Time* may, thus, in a manner of speaking, turn the table on the narrator (or the assumed author), who prompts them to make choices whose outcomes they can hardly predict, by glimpsing ahead, or turning back to make a different choice to undo 'bad' decisions that lead to undesirable outcomes (Costikyan 2007, 5).

Despite these examples, Westfahl (1996, 218) points out two patterns in *The Cave of Time*: "people-oriented decisions generally led to good results (seven good, two bad results)" and when deciding between risk taking and risk avoiding, "risk taking generally had good results (nine good results, one ambivalent result, two bad results), being passive had mixed results (four good results, three ambivalent results, three bad results), and going backward generally had bad results (one good result, four bad results)" (ibid.). Packard explains that this element of contingency, so that similar decisions may lead to different outcomes, is by design: "I didn't want it to be a random lottery but I didn't want it to be didactic so that if you always did the smart thing you always succeeded. I tried to balance it" (Qtd. in Bryant 2016, 80).

John Morgenstern (2009, 72) observes that within a spectrum of understanding the reading of a literary text as either a form of play or as a form of game, the latter notion has historically dominated in literary criticism. In turn, "[r]eading tends to become agonistic as literary critics wrestle with authors to wrest their meaning from them. They then turn on each other in an endless, and enjoyable, game of one-upmanship" (Ibid.).[3] According to Morgenstern this notion of literature "tends to the view that the book produces a representation whose relationship to the world is that of map to territory" (ibid., 72). If patterns like the ones described by Westfahl emerge, they can be learned and utilized by readers. By trying again and again, readers can potentially identify, if subconsciously, a certain likeliness to succeed. It is at this point, that readers move from reading the book to playing the book, learning not only its overt rules (as set out in the manual) and its hidden patterns. Unwilling to remain puppets played by a narrator or an imagined author, readers may, possibly subconsciously, choose to take on the challenge

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[3] In this sense, deconstructivist readings that decry the logic of fixing a meaning are only one more turn of the screw of "one-upmanship".

to 'beat' the book. Seen from this angle, *The Cave of Time* appears as a game which, according to John Morgenstern (2009, 72), "can be described abstractly by listing its rules, delineating good moves and defining a range of possible outcomes". Unlike play, which "is not without rules but they are often implicit and immanent in the actual performance. Play is more provisional and experimental" (Ibid.). "By learning the correct answers to each question, players gradually piece together the proper sequence of events required to solve the game" (*Family Computing* 1986). This explanation from an article about the video game adaptation of *The Cave of Time* perfectly sums up how the "Choose Your Own Adventure" books are game-read, too. In 1985, Firebird Software, a subsidiary of British Telecom, and Bantam Software, a subsidiary of Bantam Books, cooperatively released an adaptation of *The Cave of Time* for Apple II and Commodore 64 home computers.[4] Adapting the book for computers, this video game offers insights into the way the book itself can be play-read.

As Kevin M. Flanagan points out, "[t]he basic adaptation paradigm for videogames tackles a set of issues common to other kinds of transmedia transformation: the movement of textual material from one medium, platform, delivery method, time, or cultural context to another" (Flanagan 2017, 442), adding that "[v]ideogames have a tradition of interactive genre types that differ immensely from those of books or movies" (ibid., 445). However, in the case of *The Cave of Time* and its video game adaptation, this is not so, since the book itself builds on mechanics that are akin to those utilized in games. So, while video game adaptations of other materials face challenges because with video games "adapters such as programmers, creative producers, and game designers must translate linear narratives or stable fictitious properties into quasi-ludic, player-controlled experiences" (Flanagan 2017, 443). Building on Henry Jenkins' concept of convergence culture, Tatjana Ristić and Darjan Kubik (2023, 188) argue that it is essential in dealing with video games "to talk about adaptation in the context of convergence culture – a culture […] where old and new media collide". The video game adaptation of Packard's choose your own book can be understood as an example not only for this "flow of content across multiple media platforms" (Jenkins 2006, 2) and "the cooperation between multiple media industries" (ibid.) but also of "the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (ibid.).

The Cave of Time game makes a number of obvious changes from the book. It replaces Hedins' illustrations with graphics of the time and adds a music score. It elevates the philosopher—who enjoys some prominence in the book due to a large illustration (Packard 1986, 42) and who seemingly rules over time, sending the protagonist home or into his demise—to the role of the narrator. As such, the philosopher hails the player at the start of the game: "Greetings traveler, you must help me! The evil Time Grouches have stolen 4 objects from Time. Challenge them, and return the objects". The game will track players' progress and when they reach an ending, of which there are several in the game, the old man will present a score with points awarded "Years in the Cave of Time" and "Sands of time collected". Augmented with a precise goal (the retrieval of four objects), which the book didn't have, antagonists (Time Grouches) to keep players from reaching the goal, a score system to evaluate their achievements, and, live action segments, in

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[4] It could be assumed that Packard based his book's game-features on early text-based video games such as ADVENT (also known as *Adventure* or *Colossal Cave Adventure*; see Tresca 2011, 18), but this doesn't seem to be the case. As far as it is known, Packard authored the first book using this mechanism in the 1960s—years before ADVENT was programmed and circulated—but only got to publish it in the late 1970s (Rossen 2014; Abramovitch 2022).

which players, e.g., try to hold on to the mammoth known from the book (see above), the game exhibits many key elements to be expected from video games of the time but differs from the book in considerable ways. Despite these differences, in a sense, the video game adaptation is truer to the spirit of the ruleset established by the book, than the book itself may be. Because unlike the book, the home computer can assert control by limiting what inputs the player can do and how to transform them into outputs. Like the book, the game only presents specific choices, which are programmed into its code. Unless players disassemble and re-program the game, they must follow the rules and offers the game sets. While they can start and end the programme at any time, the game limits their agency insofar as it makes turning back or taking a glimpse of what lies ahead virtually impossible to most players. Ironically, this is a departure from the book, because, disregarding of the strict rules set out by the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, readers may, in fact, "re-roll their dice" at any point. The book, being merely a stack of sheets of paper, cannot at all resists readers' intentional or unintentional reading malpractices. Indeed, asking for such a high moral commitment from readers may promote 'illicit' reading practices, because it rests the protagonist's fortune on the reader's shoulders who, in turn, may seek ways to achieve lucky outcomes, because humans generally avoid failure, where possible. Thus, there are 'correct' decisions that lead to success, and 'incorrect' decisions that lead to the protagonist's demise or other states of failure. If readers seek to achieve the former and avoid the latter, they may choose to break the rules to *guarantee* favourable endings, rather than suffer defeat.

Morgenstern (2009, 72) underscores the notion of children's books as objects of play, but "unlike the play of pre-schoolers, a book is clearly a thing created by someone other than yourself and having a certain fixed form, but Deleuze has invited us to think of this thing, not as an authorized map, but as an 'assemblage' or 'machine' designed to create chains of percepts and affects. The writer constructs the machine and invites the reader to play with it. […] As a consequence we would cease to ask what this book is about but, rather, what does it do and what do children do with it". We have ample anecdotal evidence of readers taking on the author's invitation to play by 'cheating' their way through the decision tree—"since the rules were entirely adjudicated by the player, it didn't matter very much. A player could 'cheat' at any time" (Tresca 2011, 107). In the words of Tim Bryant (2016, 81):

> The social agreement not to cheat or no to dismiss the game outright is, in this peculiar fusion of novel-reading and solo-gaming, entirely up to the isolated reader. In these books, taking the role of the spoil-sport only ruins the game for oneself by paging through the book for beneficial outcomes, bookmarking one's progress at every step in order to backtrack at the first sign of failure. There is no social agreement beyond the self, so this role is almost impossible to envision in the context of game books.

As "no one is watching" (Barthes 1975, 11), readers may emancipate from rules set by text and/or author to regain some control. They may choose to accept rules and adhere to them just as well as they may bend or ignore them when they see fit. This may come as the actual choice to "manhandle" the text, or, more subconsciously, as the act of defiance. Barthes (or his translator Miller) uses this expression to explain a way of critique exemplified in *S/Z*. Seeking to map the pluralities in a text, layers of potential meanings, Barthes' "commentary, based on the affirmation of the plural, cannot therefore work with 'respect' to the text; the tutor text will ceaselessly be broken, interrupted without any regard for its natural divisions (syntactical, rhetorical, anecdotic); inventory, explanation, and digression may deter any observation of suspense, may even separate verb and complement, noun and attribute; the work of commentary, once it is separated from any ideology

of totality, consists precisely in *manhandling* the text, interrupting it" (Barthes 1990, 15). In his exemplary reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine,* Barthes abandons this text's integrity, cutting it up "into a series of brief, contiguous fragments" (ibid., 13). Similarly, readers of *The Cave of Time* may find themselves "paging through the book for beneficial outcomes, bookmarking one's progress at every step" (Bryant 2016, 81) but this seems no more at odds with the text of a gamebook than critically "manhandling" is at odds with any other text. Indeed, Bryant (ibid.) argues, that "[th]e cheater, however, is the role these books push all readers to play because of their combination of formal rules of decision-making and structural feature of replayability". In digital games, failure states are varied; typical cases are reaching a time limit, failing to collect a given number of points, or failing a skill check by putting in commands – usually pushes of a button on a controller or a key on the keyboard – that are incorrect, in the wrong order, or lack the appropriate timing.[5] In *The Cave of Time* all failures lie in choosing the wrong answers. Whereas a player of certain digital games has to build up muscle memory on top of learning aspects of playing the game by heart, learning *The Cave of Time* only involves learning all answers by heart, which is, ultimately, a mundane and tedious prospect.

While reading *The Cave of Time* for entertainment or even *plaisir* is not necessarily the same as an attempt of critique, readers may well seek knowledge about the stories and plots laid out on the books pages through reading it, looking paths that lead to favourable outcomes – or 'wins'. This is made easier by the fact that the structure of the text is overt. Because it is composed of author-fashioned segments with signposted entry – and exit-points, navigating the "Choose Your Own Adventure" text can be easier than, e.g., Proust's, Zola's, or Dickens's novels which present as 'walls of text' that span many hundreds of pages. Tyring to 'win' *The Cave of Time* by either learning the correct answers, identifying its patterns, or 'cheating' are reactions to the reader-text-antagonism introduced through the addition of endings with unfavourable outcomes.

The authors of the "Choose Your Own Adventure" series became cognisant of this reader behaviour as the series advanced. "The warning at the beginning of the book tells you, 'Remember – you cannot go back!' But of course you *can* go back, and you will. After the first few books, the warnings stop saying 'You cannot go back!' They understand that going back is the point – not the making but the *re*-making of choices, the revocability of it all. In childhood, you get to take things back. It's a small compensation for having very little power in the first place" (Jamison 2022).

Packard adds a "Special Warning!!!!" to "Choose Your Own Adventure" nº. 12: *Inside UFO 54-40* (1982) which reads: "While you are on board *UFO 54-40*, you may hear about Ultima, the planet of paradise, and you may wonder of one of your adventures will lead you there. Sad to say, many never reach Ultima, because no one can get there by making choices or following instructions! There is a way to reach Ultima. Maybe you'll find it" (Packard 1982, n.p.). Thinly veiled, Packard invites readers to not follow instructions (Hendrix 2011). Only by doing so, readers may reach page 101 which none of the nodes link to. Here they read: "You did not make a choice, or follow any directions, but now, somehow, you are descending from space—approaching a great, glistening sphere.

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[5] For example, Nintendo's famous platform game *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) expects players to perform certain inputs that translate to Mario's movements on the screen in specific ways (jumping, running, and so on). Letting Mario fall into a pit or jump on spikes will lose players one life. On top of that, player's reach a failure state when they exceed the time limit of 300 seconds per level. In this context, a 'life' functions as a play-turn. If all lives are lost, i.e., all turns are used up before the end of the game, the game concludes prematurely.

It is *Ultima*—the planet of paradise" (Packard 1982, 101). After a double page illustration that makes finding *Ultima* by browsing through the book simple enough, the explanation continues: "No one can *choose* to visit *Ultima*," says Elinka. 'Nor can you get here by following directions" (Ibid.). Elinka congratulates readers on breaking the rules and reaching paradise because of it. Conversely, Michael J. Tresca (2011, 107) points out that in other instalments of the series "[t]here were even traps to catch players who jumped ahead and made decisions that would be impossible if they read the book properly. These traps punished the player with failure". Accordingly, "[i]t seemed gamebook authors were divided as to whether or not a player should stick strictly to the letter of the law when it came to the gamebook's structure" (Ibid.). Initially, the series demanded strict adherence to its rules, but by the time *Inside UFO 54-40* was released, this stance had softened notably. One of *The Cave of Time's* predecessors, the 1930 release *Consider the Consequences!* by Doris Webster and Mary Alden Hopkins,[6] identified by James Ryan (see Mansky 2022), had readers approach the text on a very different footing:

> Life is not a continuous line from the cradle to the grave. Rather, it is in many short lines, each ending in a choice, and branching right and left to other choices, like a bunch of seaweed or a genealogical table. No sooner is one problem solved than you face another growing out of the first. […] This game may be played as solitaire, a courting-game, or a party stunt. When the players disagree, follow the choice of the majority, but make a note of the dissenting opinion, so that you can return later and find out what happens […] when other advice is followed (Webster/Hopkins 1930, n.p.).

Readers are not meant to identify with either of the main characters: Helen, Jed, or Saunders. Instead, they should keep a distance that allows them to make decisions for the protagonists. To assist with this, Webster and Hopkins' narration is focalized externally and the protagonists are spoken about in the third person. Accordingly, the instructions at the end of a segment read, for example: "The reader is to make the choice for Helen" (Ibid., 5). Readers have no dire consequences to fear, since they don't identify with the characters and are encouraged to return to past decisions and nodes to revise their choices based on knowledge gained in the process of reading. Webster and Hopkins even include decision trees in the book that serve as maps to help readers navigate the text. By laying open the structure of the narrative, omitting strict rules, defining failure states as reversable, and encouraging readers to exert their own free will, Webster and Hopkins fosters agency in readers, instead of promoting a state of antagonism between text and reader.

After this predecessor, let us turn to a recent example of a book in the "Chose Your Own Adventure" style. Dustin Brady has authored a number of such books. *Escape from a Video Game: The Secret of Phantom Island* was released in 2020 by Andrews McMeel Publishing and continues his series of a books about the over-the-top video game hero Cooper Hawke, who is somewhat reminiscent of Duke Nukem and similar hyper-masculine action hero protagonists. Like the books by Packard as well as Webster and Hopkins, Brady's book is prefaced with an introduction which begins with a short reflection on the book as a medium and sets the tongue-in-cheek tone for the rest of the experience: "You know the deal with books by now, right? Left to tight, top to bottom,

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[6] Webster and Hopkins have authored more interactive books: *I've Got Your Number!* (1927), Help Yourself (1928), *Marriage Made Easy* (1928), *Tell Your Own Future* (1929), and *Dynamite: Or, What Do People Think About You?* (1937). They follow the same basic principle: readers should answer groups of yes-or-no-questions after which a key is assigned to them according to a simple calculus that can be looked up for advice or psychological insights. The books were marketed as party entertainments.

keep turning pages until you see 'The End.' You've probably read so many books that you could write a book on reading books (Please don't. It would be a very boring book)" (Brady 2020, 5). The introduction then introduces advice on how to read the book as well as rules readers should adhere to. Readers may only turn to pages when prompted to by the text. Additionally, the text warns: "Because this is a video game, wrong moves will often bring death. Just like a video game, though, death isn't permanent. Each death sends you back to a checkpoint where you'll get to try another decision" (ibid.). In order to make the experience more similar to playing a digital game, the introduction suggests to "keep track of your deaths. Each time you lose a life, return to the last checkpoint and cross a life off this page. If you lose all your lives, you must restart from the beginning" (ibid., 6). On top of that, the introduction establishes two game modes akin to the 'New Game Plus' mode found in some digital role-playing games: "On your first read-through, focus only on beating the game while losing as few lives as possible. Don't go back to try different options […]. Once you beat the game, go back and find every ending. Record the secret letters associated with each achievement in the back of the book to discover a code you can use to unlock a whole new story" (ibid.). Brady follows Packard's "Choose Your Own Adventure" books with regards to its general structure and its narrative focalization. In fact, the first word of the introduction, leaving aside its title and the frontmatter, addresses the reader as "you" (ibid., 5). The story proper begins with the narrator instructing readers to "[c]lose your eyes and picture the greatest video game experience" (ibid., 7), leaving no doubt that readers are meant to identify with the protagonist. Similar addresses are frequent in the text. Brady adapts key concepts of recent digital gaming such as 'lives' and 'deaths', 'health', achievements, loading (by returning to a previous 'save point'), and so on.[7] In doing so, *Escape from a Video Game* presents itself as a gaming experience. But while it establishes text and reader as antagonists, it also offers aids to readers to make the experience appear fairer and to lower the stakes.

What do we make of such books and the reader behaviour potentially associated with some of them? At this point, Julian Kücklich's insights on cheating in digital games can help us. Kücklich builds on Aarseth, who understands a (cyber)text "as a machine—not metaphorically but as a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs" (Aarseth 1997, 21; Kücklich 2009, 160). To study cybertext, Aarseth constructs the "textual machine" as a triangular relationship between verbal signs, the medium, and the operator which interact with and effect each other (Aarseth 1997, 21). To serves his argument about digital games, Kücklich modifies Aarseth's textual machine, introducing Gotthard Günther's "concept of the transclassical machine", a machine that, unlike the "classical or 'Archimedic' machine, such as a windmill", "'does not have moving parts, at least not in the usual sense of the word'", and Dirk Baecker's notion that "the digital computer can be regarded as a transclassical machine, insofar as it is a 'machine, which does not work but directs and steers critically'" (Kücklich 2009, 160). In his classic *Das Bewußtsein der Maschinen* (1957), Günther includes a lengthy quote of science fiction author John W. Campbell, jr., to highlight that revolutionary electronic machines are not nearly as impressive as large jet

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[7] In digital gaming, 'death', or 'losing a live' refers to reaching a failure state. According to Westfahl (1996, 211), this terminology was introduced in digital games. Connecting video games to the pinball machine, he argues, "the direct ancestor of the video game is the pinball machine. Pinball players receive three balls to manipulate, with the reward of extra balls for successful efforts. When this system was transferred to the video game, a striking new terminology emerged: the video game player was given three 'lives.' When the player's first electronic avatar failed, it 'died,' and the game started again with the player's second 'life.'"

engines with thousands of moving parts, but often humble, small, and easily overlooked. An example of this is the transistor which made digital computers possible in the first place (Günther 2021, 62–63).

I hold that the codex, too, is such a humble, small, and easily overlooked machine. This idea is, of course, not a new one. Recall the earlier Morgenstern quote in which her refers to Derrida's notion of the text as machine. As early as 1927, Ivor A. Richards starts off his *Principles of Literary Criticism* with the assertion: "A book is a machine to think with, but it need not, therefore, usurp the functions either of the bellows or the locomotive. This book might better be compared to a loom on which it is proposed to re-weave some ravelled parts of your civilisation" (Richards 1930, 1). N. Katherine Hayles (2002, 26) termed "Writing Machines" all "the inscription technologies that produce literary texts, including printing presses, computers, and other devices" as well as "what technotexts[8] do when they bring into view the machinery that gives their verbal constructions physical reality". Steve McCaffery and bpNichol (2000, 18) write about their own notion of the "book's mechancity": "By machine we mean the book's capacity and method for storing information by arresting, in the relatively immutable form of the printed word, the flow of speech conveying that information. The book's mechanism is activated when the reader picks it up, opens the covers and starts reading it". Souvik Mukherjee (2015, 25) underscored "how the machinic and the textual are originary and how the study of newer machinic media like video games helps to highlight this relationship in all forms of text".

While Aarseth (1997, 22) limits his study to cybertexts, he does include "codex literature" in his argument, pointing to experimental texts by Milorad Pavić and Laurence Sterne as well as artists' books "that challenge the presumed properties of the book from within". Such books can make readers aware of the codex as a medium and its specifics, pulling it from a state of being so familiar and inconspicuous that it has become almost entirely naturalized. I maintain that "Choose Your Own Adventure" style publications must be included among the list of books that help readers and scholars to unearth the machinic properties of the codex and the nature of interactions and signs it co-produces with its operator(s).

Machines will serve different kinds of operators. For digital games (specifically *multi user dungeon games*, or MUD's), Richard Bartle (1996) has identified four types of operators—or players: *Achievers, Explorers, Socializers*, and *Killers*, according to the four main interests they pursuit. Setting aside *Socializers* and *Killers*, for whom the interaction with other players is the primary concern, let us focus on *Achievers* and *Explorers*, who are chiefly interested in interacting with the game itself. On the one hand, "Achievers regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal, and all is ultimateubserviantant [sic] to this" (Bartle 1996) They operate the machine within its framework of rules and offers to reach a goal and to ultimately 'win'. On the other hand, "Explorers delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them. They try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out-of-the-way places, looking for interesting features (ie. Bugs) and figuring out how things work" (Ibid.). This set of players is predominantly intrigued by finding out how the machine works. *Achievers* are, in a manner of speaking, Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* before he is sucked into the machine, trying to turn bolts ever faster to beat the

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[8] Hayles (2002, 25–26) chose the term 'technotext' to describe works that "connects the technology that produces texts to the texts' verbal constructions. Technotexts play a special role in transforming literary criticism into a material practice, for they make vividly clear that the issue at stake is nothing less than a full-bodied understanding of literature".

speed of the unstoppable conveyor belt. *Explorers* are Chaplin after he re-emerges from the machine, turning his spanner on noses and nipples instead of bolts all the while being enthralled by the bliss offered by the machine.

Aarseth (2004, 4) notes that a fifth category is missing from Bartle's taxonomy, who he half-jestingly describes as "the cheater. This lowly creature, for some reason not mentioned in Bartle's typology, can often be spotted far into the ranks of game scholars as well as among the average players. […] Where is the respect for the game? And, more importantly, how is the flavor of the game kept intact?", before admitting that, "yet, at times, most of us have done it". Cheating, I argue, is less of a type of player and more of a specific way of operating the machine. In fact, I hold that using cheats (such as God modes) programmed into a game is part of the gameplay experience and must not be dismissed by scholars who want to develop a complete understanding of a game. In any case, *Achievers* may want to cheat to reach their goals, and *Explorers* may cheat to find out how the machine works. Kücklich argues that playing a game on a digital device can be conceptualized as players moving through "gamespace" by following the topographical boundaries delimited by its rules. "Cheating can then be regarded as a sort of transversal movement to the one suggested by the flow from ruled to unruled space, because it refuses to take the constraints of the space for granted and actively rearranges its topology" (Kücklich 2009, 165). Drawing from Charles S. Peirce and C.W. Spinks, Kücklich (2009, 165) argues that cheating "can be regarded as a form of abductive reasoning" as "a way of overcoming the antagonism between player and game. Player and game are in a creative conflict with each other, insofar as their interplay can be said to format gamespace and make it accessible to both game and player. Creative abduction plays such a prominent role in games because a certain element of deceit usually is involved […]. Whether we are playing against a person or against the computer, our opponents are usually reluctant to disclose their strategy" (Ibid.). In other words, operators—players, readers—may choose to follow the rules set out by the machine, or they may try to find exploits, loopholes, ambiguities, gaps in the rules that level the asymmetric playing field of control between machine and operator. In this sense, readers of "Choose Your Own Adventure" books, traverse the topology of the sideways. Doing so, they may find segments of text that otherwise inaccessible as we have seen. This includes both ideal endings and traps, because for Explorers experiencing and learning both may be desirable to complete their understanding of the game.

In conclusion, different kind of readers may approach gamebooks like *The Cave of Time* the way they are intended to, i.e., read according to their rules, to experience a special kind of rule-based, 'game-like reading experience'. *Achievers* may seek out the 'best' ending, starting as often as it takes to reach the 'win'. *Explorers* may read through the whole text to find every ending and map out all possible paths. However, readers may instead choose to treat the *Chose Your Own Adventure* book as a 'book-like gaming experience', in the way outlined by Webster and Hopkins in *Consider the Consequences!* In this context, cheating is one way of exploring the text faster and more thoroughly, or of balancing out the asymmetrical agonistic relationship between machine and reader to secure a 'win' even in the face of seemingly harmless choices that lead to undesirable outcomes. As Jesper Juul (2013) pointed out, players generally enjoy a challenge and accept failing, but they do not want to fail too much. Thus, when players of "Choose Your Own Adventure" books get to the point where the control asserted by the machine feels overpowering and unfair, they may resort to other means of playing. After all, "no one is watching" (Barthes 1975, 11).

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