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Rearing Children of the Market in the “You” Decade: Choose Your Own Adventure Books and the Ascent of Free Choice in 1980s America

ELI COOK

Exploring some of the key tenets of neoliberal American culture, this article examines the historical forces behind the meteoric rise of interactive “Choose Your Own Adventure” (CYOA) children’s books in the 1980s. Despite selling over 250 million copies worldwide and becoming the fourth most popular children’s series of all time, the CYOA phenomenon has yet to be placed in its larger social, economic, historical or cultural context. When explaining the rise of interactive narratives, previous literature has mostly focussed on technological change – namely the invention of video games, computer consoles and hypertext narratives. Moving away from such claims, this article demonstrates how the incredible success of solely text-based CYOA books stemmed largely from the cultural ascent of individual market choice to the heart of American notions of agency, liberty, subjectivity and selfhood in the 1970s and 1980s.

INTRODUCTION

On 25 August 1981, *New York Times* columnist Aljean Harmetz wrote a short article on a new cultural phenomenon that was taking adolescent America by storm: Choose Your Own Adventure books. “The books do appear to be as contagious as chicken pox,” exclaimed Harmetz, noting that according to kids the “greatest care package” one could receive at summer camp that year included “Jordache jeans, whistle pops and an assortment of ‘Choose Your Own Adventure Books.’” Amazed by the books’ rapid ascent to the top of the publishing world, Harmetz described how Random House subsidiary Bantam Books had launched the series only two years prior yet it had already managed to publish a whopping 4 million copies (by the end of the 1981 calendar year it would be 5 million). At B. Dalton Bookstores in June, she continued, eight of the eleven books in the series were among the “top

Faculty of Humanities, University of Haifa. Email: elicook@gmail.com.

25 juvenile best-sellers.”¹ The books were not a hit only in liberal, urban bubbles like New York City. As *Publishers Weekly* gushed a year prior, the books transcended culture and class, selling extremely well in Christian bookstore chains as well.²

To explain the uniqueness of these interactive novels, which Harnetz claimed were “as much a game as a book,” she paraphrased a typical passage from one of the series’ most popular titles – *Space and Beyond*:

You are born on a spaceship traveling between galaxies. The spaceship is on a research mission. Something is wrong! You look at the scanner and see a nebula that is not supposed to be on your course. Suddenly the gases and particles of the nebula surround you. Your gravity generators and life-support systems might fail. The radiation counter interrupts the silence of space flight with harsh bleeps and crackles a warning of dangerous radiation levels. You can try to return to the mother ship. If you choose this, turn to page 4. If you rely on and trust your instinct that says to go ahead, turn to page 6.³

Always in the second person, CYOA books required “you” the reader to make narrative-changing choices on nearly every page. Be they seemingly mundane decisions or clearly life-or-death calls, these choices pushed the reader down a variety of alternative plotlines. Some would end in heroic fashion, with “you” discovering Atlantis or using time travel to meet the dinosaurs. Others – many others, in fact – would lead to a horrific death such as this:

A door to your right flies open, throwing a brilliant shaft of light into the corridor. Suddenly, you are surrounded by a circle of snarling chimpanzees. They begin to close in.

THE END.⁴

Despite their enormous popularity, the books in the series, as one critic of the era rightly noted, “aren’t very sophisticated, and there’s no depth of characterization.” This was in large part due to their structure, as the multiple-ending format caused the books to be shallow, as they fractured into a series of short vignettes rather than a single, thick, multidimensional story.⁵ Mostly of the science fiction, action, or fantasy variety – the most popular titles included *The Cave of Time*, *The Abominable Snowman* and *Journey under the Sea* – the book’s unique storytelling device allowed authors to quickly gesture at

¹ Aljean Harnetz, “Choose Your Own Adventure and Make Your Own Ending,” *New York Times*, 25 August, 1981, C1. ² *Publishers Weekly*, 15 Aug. 1980.

³ Harnetz. The Harnetz quote is actually a mashing of two different pages together from R. A. Montgomery, *Space and Beyond* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 1–3.

⁴ R. A. Montgomery, *Choose Your Own Adventure #15: House of Danger* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 36. For a website devoted to such grisly endings see <http://youchousewrong.tumblr.com>. ⁵ “Young Readers,” *Washington Post*, 20 Jan. 1980.

an assortment of creative, provocative, fun and even existential philosophical ideas or scientific theories without ever really developing a plot or characters around them. Perfectly designed for a television-dominated era in which it was believed that the attention spans of children were rapidly diminishing, one could swiftly consume five or six different stories, from beginning to “THE END,” in a matter of minutes.⁶ What is more, since so many endings led to “your” unfortunate demise, the dramatic pull of these books was significantly different to that of most science fiction or fantasy books as the narrative momentum was driven not by fear of the protagonists’ death. Anticipating one of the hallmarks of future video games, the reader came in knowing that he or she was going to die numerous times. As a result, the emotional charge of these books emanated not from traditional plot developments or character arcs but rather from the desire to choose “wisely” and experience many different endings.

By the time Random House decided to pull the plug on the series in 1999, almost two hundred titles had been written and it is estimated that the books sold roughly 250 million copies all over the world. The fourth-best-selling children’s book series of all time, the books quickly spread across the world, and were translated into thirty-eight languages, from Spanish to Urdu. The authors received thousands of pieces of fan mail from their enthusiastic young readers. “It is fun to choose your own ending,” wrote in one twelve-year-old. “In 20 years of teaching, I have never seen 12-year olds so excited about anything as they are about Choose Your Own Adventure,” exclaimed a teacher in 1983.⁷

Unsurprisingly, the immense popularity of the series led to a handful of spin-offs and competitors. By the mid-1980s one could purchase “Which Way Follow Your Heart” romance novels, “Play It Your Way” sports books, or “Which Way Secret Door” mystery stories. Corporate synergy began shortly after, with Star Wars and Disney versions of CYOA. One independent Toronto bookstore owner lamented their complete dominance in 1984, claiming that alternative titles “have all been purged to make room for yet another imitation of *Choose Your Own Adventure*.”⁸

As the millions of “Generation X” children reared on these books grew up, they have waxed nostalgic. National Public Radio has run two large segments

⁶ For contemporary accounts of children’s attention spans see Karen Moody, *Growing Up on Television: The TV Effect* (New York: New York Times Books, 1980).

⁷ I received a number of unnamed, undated pieces of fan mail following a personal email correspondence with Edward Packard, founder of CYOA, on 15 Sept. 2018.

⁸ Judith Appelbaum, “Decisions, Decisions,” *New York Times*, 27 Feb. 1983, 43. For data on total sales see Jake Rossen, “A Brief History of Choose Your Own Adventure,” at <http://mentalfloss.com/article/56160/brief-history-choose-your-own-adventure>; *Publishers Weekly*, 27 July 1984.

in the past five years on the history of CYOA. Recognizing this lasting imprint on American culture, Netflix recently sought to cash in on this nostalgia. In 2016, the online media giant entered into “extensive negotiations” with the CYOA publisher to license the Choose Your Own Adventure name and use it to produce interactive children’s shows. When talks failed, Netflix went another route, joining forces with the popular dystopian science fiction series *Black Mirror* to produce an interactive, stand-alone episode of the show titled “Bandersnatch” that was widely recognized as a reboot, commentary on, and tribute to CYOA books. (In fact, CYOA publishers are currently suing Netflix, claiming the episode was so dark it may tarnish the reputation of the book series.⁹) Fitting nicely into the main argument of this article, which examines the dual nature of interactive choice as a means of both bottom-up agency and top-down control, media commentators have already noted how the participatory nature of “Bandersnatch” could prove to be Netflix’s “secret marketing weapon” as it would allow the platform to “data mine your decisions,” monitor behavior, better understand viewing habits and “exploit and learn more about us and our preferences.”¹⁰

Why did CYOA books take off in the early 1980s and what can their meteoric ascent tell us about the changes in American culture, economy and society that took place in this era? What makes CYOA a particularly illuminating historical case study is that there were absolutely *no* technological innovations involved in its invention. The wholly text-based CYOA books could have appeared in the 1950s, or even the 1850s. Yet they did not. Something happened in America in the 1970s and 1980s that made these books not only possible but popular. The question is what.

The history of CYOA’s birth brings this last point home. The inventor was a lawyer by the name of Edward Packard. He conceived of the idea while telling his children bedtime stories in the mid-1960s. He realized that when he allowed them to make choices throughout the story, they were more engaged. Commuting to Manhattan every day on the train, Packard began to write *Sugar Cane Island* – the first CYOA ever (although at the time he titled the genre “The Adventure of You,” an important fact we will return too.) By 1969 the book was ready to be sold, so Packard hired a top-notch

⁹ Dan D’Ambrosio, “CYOA Publisher Sues Netflix over Black Mirror: Bandersnatch,” *USA Today*, 19 Jan. 2019, at www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2019/01/15/choose-your-own-adventure-publisher-sues-netflix-over-bandersnatch/2581489002.

¹⁰ Adi Robertson, “Netflix Sued by CYOA Publishers over Black Mirror: Bandersnatch,” *The Verge*, 11 Jan. 2019, at www.theverge.com/2019/1/11/18178846/netflix-black-mirror-bandersnatch-choose-your-own-adventure-book-trademark-lawsuit-chooseco; Jesse Damiani, “Black Mirror: Bandersnatch Could Become Netflix’s Secret Marketing Weapon,” *The Verge*, 2 Jan. 2019, at www.theverge.com/2019/1/2/18165182/black-mirror-bandersnatch-netflix-interactive-strategy-marketing.

literary agent and began peddling the book to eight or nine New York publishing houses. They all rejected him, explaining that it was “more a game than a book.” In a recent interview, Packard expressed a belief that his initial attempt failed because “it was just too strange and too new.” Yet when he tried again to push the same idea with New York publishing firms in the late 1970s (after publishing a few stories with R. A. Montgomery, a small-time Vermont publisher who focussed on child education) a shift had taken place. Now, ten years later, high-end publishing editors such as Bantam’s Joelle Delbourgo immediately recognized the enormous potential of the book. “I got really excited,” Delbourgo recalled over twenty years later in an interview with NPR. “I said ... this is revolutionary. This is precomputer, remember. The idea of interactive fiction, choosing an ending, was fresh and novel. It tapped into something very fundamental.” In the span of a decade, the idea of choosing your own plot went from “strange” to “fundamental.”¹¹

Delbourgo’s instincts did not betray her. The books sold like hot cakes in the early 1980s. Clearly, something happened in the 1970s and early 1980s that demands an explanation. Why is it that in 1969 choice-based interactive fiction was seen as a bad idea by New York publishers yet in 1979 it became a brilliant one? And why did these books go on to become so incredibly popular with 1980s preteens? Keen observers of the era pondered this very question. By 1983, CYOA was a household name, leading *New York Times* book industry expert Judith Appelbaum to ponder their success. “What aspects of current American culture account for the appeal of these books?” she asked.

Are they popular, for example, because options exist in abundance in the Real World of the 80’s or because clear choices nowadays are so hard to find? Do the books succeed because they combat feelings of powerlessness or because they encourage unabashed egocentricity? Or, more simply, are the various pick-your-own-plot titles winners because they’re fun?¹²

These are not easy questions to answer. What is more, they have rarely been posed. CYOA books in particular and interactive fiction more generally have been all but ignored by American historians seeking to understand the shift from the “New Deal order” to the neoliberal age.¹³ A growing coterie of literary and media scholars, however, have done groundbreaking work

¹¹ Packard’s story has been told many times. See Harnetz, “Choose Your Own Adventure”; Rossen; Scott Kraft, “He Chose His Own Adventure,” *The Day*, 10 Oct. 1981. For the NPR interview see NPR’s *Marketplace* episode from 11 April 2014 at www.marketplace.org/2014/04/11/business/how-choose-your-own-adventure-was-born.

¹² Appelbaum.

¹³ On the shift from a New Deal order to a neoliberal one see Gary Gerstle, “The Rise and Fall (?) of America’s Neoliberal Order,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (Dec.

analyzing and dissecting the pre-digital origins, cultural import, literary meaning, and social ramifications of interactive fiction and game books in recent decades. Yet because these scholars are not historians, these studies have not deeply interrogated why such interactive narratives took off specifically in the late 1970s and early 1980s, focussing instead on the development of the cultural form itself. For example, Marie Laure-Ryan, a top literary expert on interactive texts, noted in a talk in 2005 that the biggest debate in the field was between “pessimists” and “optimists” regarding whether or not interactive narratives could generate quality stories.¹⁴ Most importantly, none of these scholars have sought to link this new cultural form with the major changes occurring in American society at the time – namely the rise of market-fundamentalist neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s.

Rather than foreground this novel narrative technique in the social, economic, and cultural changes that constituted the rise of a neoliberal order, these scholars – many of whom have a background in computers – have tended to focus more on the rise of electronic, computerized and digital forms of interactive narrative. As a result, underlying this literature is an implicit (and sometimes explicit) causative explanation which contends that interactive fiction took off first and foremost out of *technological* – rather than cultural, economic, or social – change.

Nick Montfort’s fascinating *Twisty Little Passages*, one of the leading works today on the rise of interactive fiction, is a good example of how computer technology has dominated the historical account. In his book, Montfort spends only about two pages on CYOA books, arguing that they were “likely to have been at least vaguely inspired by actual computer programs, including interactive fiction.” Seeing such wholly text-based works as a minor by-product of revolutionary computerized narratives, Montfort focusses most of his attention on “electronic literature,” devoting entire chapters to Infocom, a computer company which created, among other things, the text-based adventure game *Zork* in the early 1980s. Other principal books on

2018), 241–64; Stever Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁴ The leading media and literary analyses of interactive fiction include Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Anastasia Salter, *What Is Your Quest? From Adventure Games to Interactive Books* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014); Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Espen J. Aarseth: *Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Marie Laure Ryan, *Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Ryan, “Peeling the Onion: Layers of Interactivity in Digital Narrative Texts,” talk presented at Interactivity of Digital Texts, Münster, Germany, May 2005, at www.marilaur.info/onion.htm.

interactive fiction, written by the likes of Janet Murray, Espen Aareseth and Anastasia Salter, have also taken a digital-centric approach. Marie Laure Ryan doesn't even think CYOA is "truly interactive" because the "text is static."¹⁵

Yet even a brief look at the creation and reception of CYOA books reveals the lacunae in such a computerized emphasis. Packard first thought up his idea in 1966, well before the first real text-based computer adventure games like *Adventure* were invented in the mid-1970s. In my own recent personal correspondence with Packard, I asked him if computers had been the trigger for his idea. He said no. Then there is the more central issue of reception (as with all cultural phenomena, the more important question is not who invented it first but why and when it stuck). CYOA books were far more popular and widespread than any interactive computer adventure narrative of the time. For instance, Infocom's best-selling *Zork* sold around 250,000 copies by 1984, making up a third of the company's sales. By that year, Choose Your Own Adventure had sold over 14 million copies. From a mass-culture perspective, publisher Elaine Delbourgo was right to view the CYOA books as a "precomputer" cultural phenomenon. It appears that most preteen Americans of the era first encountered interactive fictional adventures on the printed page – not the digital screen – through the pages of CYOA.¹⁶

Examining the rapid ascent of CYOA books – which, as noted above, required no technical innovation – allows us to push back on these implicitly technological explanations and explore the broader social and cultural shifts which took place in the 1970s and 1980s that undergirded the series' success. In so doing, it is important for me to note that I am not denying the artistic originality or lasting importance of such "electronic literature." For Montfort and other literary and media scholars interested in tracing the origins of our digitized present, it makes far more sense to focus on the crucial early manifestations and precursors of contemporary computer games. But as a cultural historian seeking to explain the rise of interactive, adventure fiction into a mass culture, I believe that we must look beyond the ascent of computers to explain how and why such choice-based narratives came to resonate with wide swaths of American children in the early 1980s.

So, if it was not merely a technological development, how are we to explain the mass ascent of CYOA in the early 1980s? And what can it tell us about the broader culture of American neoliberal capitalism? This article will argue that the meteoric rise of CYOA in this era reflected and reproduced the ascent of

¹⁵ Montfort, 71; Ryan, "Peeling the Onion."

¹⁶ On Infocom sales see Richard Dryer, "Masters of the Game," *Boston Globe*, 7 June 1997.

individual choice to the heart of American notions of subjectivity, agency, society, mobility and freedom.¹⁷

Written in the second person and presenting its readers with two options on nearly every page, CYOA offered its readers – much like the consumer marketplace – interactive choices which gave “you” a sense of autonomy, agency and emancipation. Yet at the same time it used this very freedom of choice to inculcate young readers with an individualizing market subjectivity while funneling them down certain predetermined narrative lanes. While truly interactive, the structure, parameters and possibilities of the books – including their rules, limits, identities and possibilities – were nevertheless rigidly constructed and controlled by adult authors with no input from the participating adolescent reader. While children were taught – again, much like in the broader neoliberal market – to take full responsibility for their decisions since they had been free to choose, such cultural “responsibilization” masked the many structural narrative decisions made by “choice architects” over which the young reader had little or no control. It is precisely this dual nature of choice in these game books – both as epitome of real, interactive freedom and as a tool of social control – that leads CYOA books to serve as a rich lens into the neoliberal experience. But before we can take a closer look at the books themselves, we must (briefly) examine the broader history of free choice in twentieth-century America.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF “FREE CHOICE”

The principle of individual choice was not nearly as central to postwar American thought or culture as it would become in the late 1970s and 1980s, nor was it synonymous with human freedom. If we recall Packard’s rejection by New York publishers in the late 1960s, it would appear that he first failed to sell his CYOA book to publishers in the late 1960s in part because the dream of free choice still held a relatively marginalized place in the minds of most Americans. While postwar Americans undoubtedly embraced choice in the sphere of politics (voting), consumption (shopping) or romance (dating), they nevertheless did not view the act of choosing, especially in the market, as the embodiment of human agency or social freedom.¹⁸

¹⁷ For an overview of neoliberalism see Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 1995); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Matthew Egleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁸ On postwar shopping see Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004). For dating see Moira Wiegel, *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating* (New York: Farrar, Straus,

When thinking of freedom, many of these Americans – who held vivid memories of the Great Depression and World War II – often thought more in terms of stability, solidarity, security, and safety – not the capacity to choose between various options on a menu. Their actions, in this regard, speak as loud as their words: divorce rates remained low in the 1950s and 1960s, only to rise to an all-time high in the 1980s. Rather than pick and choose various sexual partners throughout their twenties and early thirties, postwar Americans married young, many to their high-school sweethearts.¹⁹ Ensnared in the reliable arms of industrialized welfare capitalism or unionized labor, most workers preferred career-long job security to flighty labor flexibility. Looking approvingly at collective bargaining and unionization, they demanded not more *choice* in the labor market but rather more *voice* in the corporate workplace. In short, an American society that could still recall the cruel sting of the Great Depression and the enormous success of the New Deal and war economy seemed to believe that it was often better to have stable institutions provide, as Roosevelt famously noted, freedom from “want” and “fear” than dynamic markets provide freedom of choice.²⁰

The most popular and influential intellectuals in the postwar era echoed this skeptical approach to free choice. The mathematical, choice-obsessed economists that would come to dominate the social sciences in the neoliberal era were emerging in this time – but they had not yet conquered the mainstream. On the contrary, many of the leading thinkers of the postwar years were historians, sociologists, and institutional economists such as Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills, Theodore Adorno, and John Kenneth Galbraith, who emphasized how structural and historical conditions and conditioning dramatically shaped not only American life but American preferences.²¹ With the

Giroux, 2016). On voting see Alex Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), chapter 8.

¹⁹ On the rapid changes in marriage and divorce see Robert Schoen, William Urton, Karen Woodrow and John Bai, “Marriage and Divorce in Twentieth Century American Cohorts,” *Demography*, 22, 1 (Feb. 1985), 101–14.

²⁰ For emphasis on long-term job security in this era see Richard Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), chapter 1. For postwar labor relations and unionism see Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Sanford Jacoby, *Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism since the New Deal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²¹ The fact that historians were such central public intellectuals and their books so popular in this era is further evidence of this. See Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Knopf, 1955); John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Theodore Adorno, “Analytical Study of the NBC ‘Music Appreciation Hour,’” *Musical Quarterly*, 78, 2 (Summer, 1994), 325–77.

1950s and 1960s serving as the high time of American sociology's mass popularity – a discipline that has never thought much of the idea of free choice to begin with – postwar Americans learnt from William Whyte's "Organizational Man," David Riesman's "other-directed" individual, and Mills's conformist "white-collar" workers that their market choices were far from free or individual. Summing up some of the main points of this article, Mills put it best in 1959 when he noted how "freedom is not merely the opportunity to do as one pleases; neither is it merely the opportunity to choose between set alternatives. Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them – and then, the opportunity to choose."²²

Meanwhile, in the field of psychology, behaviorism – a school of thought which posited that all human decisions were responses to environmental stimuli and conditioning – still dominated the discipline, with behaviorists such as B. F. Skinner and John Broadus Watson questioning the very existence of free will – let alone free choice. According to these varying social scientists, most choices, be they mundane or life-altering, did not emerge from inner innate freedoms but rather out of external, extrinsic forces.²³

Even some of the leading economists of the day, always the most methodologically individualist of the social scientists, were skeptical of individual choice. Since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, the consumerist "utility theory" of neoclassical economics had argued that market demand was shaped by the innate wants and desires of the people. This assumption was ideologically important because it legitimized capitalism by arguing that free choice was the basic mechanism through which markets supplied people with what they wanted and desired. Yet by the mid-twentieth century, many leading economists grew incredulous about this idea. "Consumers' initiative in changing their tastes is negligible," argued the hardly left-leaning Harvard economist Joseph Schumpeter in 1939. "All change in consumers' tastes is incident to, and brought about by, producers' action."²⁴ Twenty years later, in 1960, not much had changed in Cambridge. Here is mainstream Harvard economics professor Alvin Hansen, sounding a lot like a Western Marxist of the Frankfurt school:

²² C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 174. For social thought in this era see Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). For contemporary critique see D. H. Wrong, "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology," *American Sociological Review*, 26 (1961), 183–93.

²³ For behaviorism see Kerry Buckley, *Mechanical Man: John Broadus Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989).

²⁴ Joseph Schumpeter, *Business Cycles*, Volume I (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), 73.

Nowadays consumers no longer act on their own free will. The demand curve is no longer the product of spontaneous wants. It is manufactured ... The consumer is “brain-washed” ... the process of consumer brain-washing has become a branch of psychoanalysis. Consumer wants are no longer a matter of individual choice. They are mass-produced.²⁵

Such postwar misgivings about “individual choice” were hardly limited to Harvard intellectuals. While corporations publicly presented an image of the utility-maximizing customer who always “knew best” and chose freely, the Freudian experts in “motivational research” that they hired in droves spun a different yarn, depicting the American citizenry as a conformist, irrational citizenry whose consumer choices could easily be manipulated and mass-produced by tapping into their subconscious fears and desires. Evidenced by Hansen’s quote as well as by best-selling books like Vance Packard’s 1957 *Hidden Persuaders*, while postwar Americans developed a deep anxiety that the advertising industry was transforming American consumers into the Manchurian Candidates of the supermarket aisle, they shared with corporate admen the same healthy skepticism regarding the existence of free consumer choice. The postwar decades, as a result, witnessed a wave of mass hysteria regarding brainwashing and subliminal messaging. By the neoliberal era, such fears dissipated as people confidently reasserted their “individual agency” – an emerging term whose usage skyrocketed in the 1980s.²⁶

Americans of all stripes in the 1950s and 1960s were often skeptical that there really was such a thing as free choice and whether or not it should be the main objective of social policy. Yet by the early 1980s, when CYOA books first exploded onto the scene, the principle of free choice was fast becoming hegemonic. In intellectual spheres, as Daniel Rodgers has noted, “conceptions of human nature that in the post-World War II era had been thick with context, social circumstances, institutions, gave way to conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire.”²⁷ Such developments, which first emerged in postwar neoclassical economics, paved the way for the hegemonic rise of “choice theory” in the 1970s and 1980s, as decision-based methodological individualism supplanted earlier historical,

²⁵ Alvin Hansen, “The Economics of the Soviet Challenge,” *Economic Record*, March 1960, 5–12, 10.

²⁶ Kenneth Lipartito, “Subliminal Seduction: The Politics of Consumer Research in Post-World War II America,” in H. Berghoff, P. Scranton and U. Spiekermann, eds., *The Rise of Marketing and Market Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 215–36; Cohen, 298; Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: McKay, 1957); Daniel Horowitz, *Vance Packard and American Social Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). According to Google ngram, the term “individual agency” skyrocketed in the 1980s.

²⁷ Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

social and institutional approaches. Be it “rational choice” or game theory in economics, “public choice” in political science or “decision theory” in management studies, an emerging cadre of social scientists conceived (and often modeled) the human experience as an ongoing series of individual free choices but little else.²⁸

Leading this ascent of choice amongst public intellectuals were undoubtedly Chicago school economists like Milton Friedman, James Buchanan and Gary Becker. Their main goal was not only to uproot Keynesian economics but to recast *all* of human society and history as nothing more than a series of individual choices. “The system under which people make their own choices – and bear most of the consequences of their decisions – is the system that has prevailed for most of our history,” Friedman declared in his best-selling 1980 book and PBS documentary appropriately titled *Free to Choose*.²⁹

If postwar Americans questioned whether markets gave people what they want, the individualized, rational-choice revolution of the 1970s and 1980s led most social scientists to follow the Chicago school’s lead and simply assume that they did. What is more, during this era the very idea of choice was privatized, as many intellectuals came to see market choice as the *only* true expression of human agency and social freedom. Downplaying the simple fact that the United States was a democracy and voting was also a form of choice, the rising wave of conservative thinkers contrasted the freedom of market choice with the coercion of government policy.³⁰

Structural changes in the American economy in the 1970s and 1980s – some of which grew out of the increased influence of precisely such free-to-choose ideology – also encouraged a more choice-centric worldview amongst large portions of the American public, be they poor wage laborers or wealthy capitalists. Deindustrialization and financialization led the way. Unlike the postwar experience of corporate middle managers or unionized

²⁸ For rational choice see Sonja Michelle Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003). On public choice see Nancy Mclean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radial Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017). For management studies see Leigh Buchanan and Andrew O’Connell, “A Brief History of Decision Making,” *Harvard Business Review*, 84 (Feb. 2006), 32–41. For the rise of choice in legal thought see Lawrence Friedman, *The Republic of Choice: Law, Authority and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). For an overview of choice theory see Michael Allingham, *Choice Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁹ Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 138. For Friedman’s great influence on the resurrection of free market economics see Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³⁰ Friedman and Friedman, 65.

factory workers which fostered values of security, stability, and conformity, the continued deterioration of the corporate industrial workplace – probably the single most important economic development of the 1970s and 1980s – threw millions of workers into a far more flexible and fluid labor market in which they were constantly forced to make choices not only about their employment but also about their economic survival. In the neoliberal era of de-unionized, freelance, contract, part-time, flexible, and “temp” labor in which workers switched jobs at a dizzying rate and thus had little ability to shape corporations from the inside, workers came to experience labor agency mostly through their freedom to quit a job they did not like for (hopefully) a more fulfilling – albeit likely equally temporary – one.³¹

If the working class came to experience choice via the labor market, for the well-to-do it was often via the stock market. As the “defined benefit” pension of postwar welfare capitalism and union solidarity was eclipsed by the choice-centric “defined contribution” 401(k) pension plan in the 1970s and 1980s, the middle and upper classes were compelled to choose their personal stock portfolio. As the financial sector boomed in the 1980s after barely budging for two decades, choosing the right mix of stocks and bonds became a central pastime of the rich, with an entire subculture of financial consultation and advice emerging around such crucial individual choices.³²

As Americans – rich and poor – were thrown into the more fluid market world of the neoliberal age, the principle of free choice seeped into everyday American consciousness. As Bruce Schulman has argued, the 1970s were the crucial decade in this regard, as “[s]eventies Americans developed an unusual faith in the market.” Unlike in the postwar decades, Schulman summarized, “the idea of social solidarity, the conception of national community with duties and obligations to one’s fellow citizens, elicited greater skepticism during the 1970s.”³³ By the early 1980s, in fact, many Americans had come to believe that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness meant, first and foremost, the individual freedom and interactive agency to pick from a menu of options. In a Gallup poll from the early 1980s, for instance, Americans listed “freedom of choice” as one of their most important and desired values, above the likes of

³¹ Louis Hyman, *Temp: How American Work, American Business, and the American Dream Became Temporary* (New York: Penguin, 2018). On changes to the American corporation see David Weil, *How Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

³² On changes in pensions see Michael McCarthy, *Dismantling Solidarity: Capitalist Politics and American Pensions since the New Deal* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017). On financialization see Greta Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³³ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), xv.

“following God’s will,” “having many friends,” “high income,” or “sense of accomplishment.” According to historian Eric Foner, by this era the ability to choose had “become perhaps the dominant understanding of freedom.”³⁴

The transformation in Americans’ approach to choice came to serve as one of the main ideological pillars of America’s “right turn” and its subsequent critique and dismantling of the so-called New Deal “nanny state” (a term born in the early 1980s that posits consumer choice as the wellspring of freedom). If choice was defined as freedom in this era, then social services and welfare programs provided only by the government or unions were viewed as a form of oppression. The key to human emancipation, therefore, lay in the privatization of everyday life, so that Americans could choose not only their toothpaste or detergent but their school or pension. Equating freedom with choice became such cultural common sense by this era, that it began to animate not only conservative agendas but liberal ones as well. The fight for equal access to free, safe abortions could have been called “pro-rights” or “pro-access” or simply “pro-abortion” but it was not, because by the 1980s “free choice” had become the political buzzword everyone wanted to hear.³⁵

One way cultural historians can recognize the hegemonic purchase of a certain idea is when it comes to be used as a euphemism to legitimize or mask ulterior motives. This appears to have been the case with the idea of free choice by the 1980s. In 1983, for instance, Boston school superintendent Robert Spillane criticized the city’s controversial busing and desegregation plan by arguing that “there’s a consensus that parents ought to have more freedom of choice.” Using the term “free choice” to combat racial integration was so rampant and obvious by this era that the *New York Times* felt the need to note in its article that Spillane’s term “freedom of choice” had become “a phrase that stands for community resistance to court-ordered desegregation.”³⁶

Reading letters to the *New York Times* editor from the early 1980s also reveals just how deeply the principle of free choice was becoming ingrained in the American psyche. In 1983, Shelley Lotenberg wrote in to applaud women who chose to be stay-at-home moms but made sure to “emphasize that

³⁴ Gallup poll cited by Boy Scouts of America, “What’s Important to Americans,” *Scouting*, Oct. 1983, 10; Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), xviii.

³⁵ For the politics of choice see Rodgers, 67–68, 107–9, 143–47, 214–19. According to Google ngram, “pro-choice” entered American discourse in 1976, “nanny state” and “choice feminism” in 1980, and “school choice” in 1985. On “choice feminism” see Michael Ferguson, “Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 8 (March 2010), 247–53; Eva Chen, “Neoliberalism and Popular Women’s Culture: Rethinking Choice, Freedom and Agency,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16, 4 (2013), 440–52.

³⁶ Margot Slade and Wayne Biddle, “The Judge Eases Boston School Controls,” *New York Times*, 9 Jan. 1983, Section 4, 8.

‘freedom of choice’ are the key words” when discussing the well-being of the housewives. Two years earlier, in 1981, Sandra Haber wrote in concerned that body image had led to a serious restriction of women’s “freedom of choice” because “women feel ‘too fat’ to date, to marry, to have sex, to change jobs, etc.”³⁷ In 1984, James Mancuso wrote to the paper complaining about the proposed big-car sales tax, noting that “the American public has emphatically stated by its actions that it wants freedom of choice on big car versus small car.”³⁸

As these letters reflect, freedom of choice became the rallying cry of Americans of very different types in the early 1980s. When Amherst College students staged a sit-in and hunger strike to protest the administration’s plan to end the campus fraternity system in 1984, they made sure to unfurl a large banner that called for “Freedom of Choice.”³⁹ On the other hand, in 1976, Robert Bradford – a leading member of the John Birch Society – was arrested for smuggling 3,900 vials of the illegal cancer drug Laetrile into the United States. The drug, which federal officials had branded a “cruel hoax,” had been made illegal due to its complete ineffectiveness. This did not stop John Birch members such as Bradford from founding and presiding over the “Committee for the Freedom of Choice in Cancer Therapy” which undertook the smuggling operation.⁴⁰

Be they left-wing college students, stay-at-home moms, or pickup-driving anticommunists, at the heart of Americans’ rising free-to-choose mindset lay the notion that individual choice making stood at the core of human experience, agency, and freedom. Much like the complex mathematical models of rational-choice economics – such a worldview imagined society as an atomistic market world in which people interacted with their surroundings and articulated their will power mostly by picking one market preference over another. Rather than a nineteenth-century civic-minded or producerist approach to the self in which Americans experienced autonomy through democratic political action or their labor’s ability to alter the environment around them, or the postwar approach popularized after the Great Depression and world war in which liberty was often seen as the shared struggle for security to be achieved through sacrifice, cooperation, and solidarity, the neoliberal free-to-choose mindset was deeply individualist and market-minded. It assumed that human beings shaped their destinies, created their identities, fulfilled their needs, actualized their potential, attained their freedom, and

³⁷ Sandra Haber, “No Headline,” *New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1981, Section 6, 166; Shelly Lotenberg, “Motherhood as a Career,” *New York Times*, 26 June 1983, Section 11, 21.

³⁸ James Mancuso, “Fuel Efficiency by Taxing Big Car Buyers,” *New York Times*, 29 Oct. 1984, A22.

³⁹ “Amherst Students Hold Sit-In,” *New York Times*, 21 Feb. 1984, A12.

⁴⁰ The *New York Times* covered the Laetrile story heavily in 1978. See, for instance, “Laetrile Backers Attack Current Cancer Treatment,” *New York Times*, 6 Feb. 1978, NJ15.

achieved their agency mostly by weighing and then choosing from a range of market possibilities. To choose was to be free and the more choices were made available, the freer one would be. Accordingly, so long as no obstacles were implemented that constrained the ability to choose (usually by the government or unions), people were ultimately free to determine their own fate through their myriad of subjective choices.⁴¹

This ascent of free choice also played a central role in what scholars of neo-liberalism have come to refer to as the “responsibilization” of everyday life. As Thomas Lemke explained in his analysis of Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics*,

as the choice of options for action is, or so the neo-liberal notion of rationality would have it, the expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision, the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them.⁴²

Few articulated the neoliberal ethos of responsibilization more clearly than Ronald Reagan, who as early as the 1968 Republican convention called “to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for his actions.” As President in the 1980s, Reagan helped to do exactly that, by arguing for “development of private institutions conducive to individual responsibility and initiative.” Equating freedom with choice and poverty with personal failing, there was no need for a substantial welfare state or government safety net in Reagan’s choice-centric worldview. He would make this point emphatically clear on numerous occasions, including once in a 1987 televised interview, when he argued that the homeless “people who are sleeping on grates” do so by “their own choice.”⁴³ Beginning with his famed “A Time for Choosing” speech from Barry Goldwater’s 1964 electoral campaign that made him a political rising star, Reagan was one of the first leaders to recognize the power of the free-choice ideal.

Erasing historical developments; institutional barriers; unequal conditions; and class, gender, or racial discriminations, this free-to-choose responsibilization conceptually ripped people out of the fabric of their own social existence

⁴¹ For the more general turn to individualism in this era see Schulman; Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009; Brown, *Undoing the Demos*.

⁴² Thomas Lemke, “The Birth of ‘Bio-politics’: Michel Foucault’s lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-liberal Governmentality,” *Economy and Society*, 30 (2001), 190–207, 201; Ronen Shamir, “The Age of Responsibilization: On Market-Embedded Morality,” *Economy and Society*, 37, 1 (2008), 1–19.

⁴³ Speech at the Republican National Convention, Platform Committee Meeting, Miami, Florida, 31 July 1968; “Reagan Says Homeless People Sleep on Grates from ‘Own Choice,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 Dec. 1988, at www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-12-23-mn-549-story.html; “Remarks at a Briefing for the White House Workshop on Choice in Education,” 10 Jan. 1989, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=35348; Schulman, 230.

and placed them on a seemingly level playing field in which everyone begins with more or less the same opportunities and alternatives. Make wise choices, Reagan and his ilk would argue, and you will undoubtedly succeed. Make bad choices and you have no one to blame but yourself. Life, in other words, was coming to be conceived as a free game of choices.

PLAYING THE GAME OF LIFE

“The Economy is a Game,” declared Michel Foucault in his *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures of 1979 – the same year that Bantam books signed Edward Packard to his long-coveted book contract. Foucault would hardly be the last thinker to equate the neoliberal market with a game. As McKenzie Wark and other “game theorists” have argued in recent years, game culture has not only “colonized its rivals within the cultural realm,” but it has also “colonized reality.” While ignoring CYOA, these scholars see a clear-cut connection between the rise of choice-centric neoliberalism in past decades and the skyrocketing popularity of game culture. Very broadly, they argue that in a competitive market society in which one is told, even at a relatively early age, that thanks to equal opportunity all social and economic goals can be reached by following the rules and making good choices, it is understandable why so many Americans – young and old – would be attracted to games which simulated these very same competitive, meritocratic, responsabilizing and individualized sentiments and norms.⁴⁴

Exploring the “gamification” of children’s books by the CYOA game book series allows us to return to a kind of neoliberal “ground zero” and trace one of the first important instances in which gamified notions of free, individual choice first came to shape mass culture in the United States. As one adult would later reminisce in a fan letter to Edward Packard, “we [now] have virtual reality and digital frontiers, but the ability of your books to transport me to other worlds, to captivate, motivate and elucidate was truly wondrous.”⁴⁵ What is more, while most critical scholars of neoliberalism have (understandably) focussed on schooling and education in order to explain how exactly adolescents became “children of the market,” examining CYOA books allows us to see the central role that culture played in not only reflecting neoliberal ideology, but also reproducing it in younger generations.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7; For a good overview of these arguments see Andrew Baerg, “Governmentality, Neoliberalism, and the Digital Game,” *Symploke*, 17, 2 (2009), 115–27.

⁴⁵ Fan letter received in correspondence with Packard, 15 Sept. 2018.

⁴⁶ For neoliberalism and children see Amanda Keddie, “Children of the Market: Performativity, Neoliberal Responsibilisation and the Construction of Student Identities,” *Oxford Review of Education*, 42 (2016), 108–22; Andrew Wilkins, “The

As Janet Murray argued in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, interactive fiction provided readers with “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.” Young CYOA readers would have surely agreed with Murray’s assessment. “I love the way you can choose your own adventure and that the author makes you feel like you are the characters,” noted one ten-year-old fan of the genre.⁴⁷ That CYOA was a huge hit with readers mainly because it gave rise to interactive agency was obvious to all commentators of the era. Harnetz titled her 1981 *Times* article “Make Your Own Ending” and, in her opinion, the key to CYOA’s stunning success was the fact that the genre “allows a reader to write his own story by making nearly two dozen choices that can lead to 36 or 42 possible endings.”⁴⁸

R. A. Montgomery, Packard’s first publisher, who went on to write many of the books in the series, echoed the same sentiment, arguing that it was the freedom of choice that made these books so popular. “The reading happened because kids were put in the driver’s seat. They were the mountain climber, they were the doctor, they were the deep-sea explorer,” Montgomery once said in an interview. “They made choices, and so they read.” Much like the Chicago school economists who modeled society as a series of individual choices, Montgomery went on to suggest that his books were also a microcosm of everyday life, arguing that “*Choose Your Own Adventure* is a simulation that approximates the choices that we face in our lives.”⁴⁹

The unprecedented choice-based menu format was not the only novelty in CYOA books that helped foster a highly individualist free-to-choose culture. There was also the unique use of the second-person “you,” which – much like the interactive choices – generated in the reader not passivity but agency. It was not “he” or “she” discovering a new planet or mutant species – it was “you.” In the early 1980s, when CYOA first exploded, second-person “you” narratives were practically nonexistent in American fiction – be it children’s books or otherwise. While literary experts may have been familiar with second-person European classics such as Michel Buror’s *La modification* (1957) and Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1979), this storytelling technique had not found its way into mainstream American literature.⁵⁰

Spectre of Neoliberalism: Pedagogy, Gender and the Construction of Learner Identities,” *Critical Studies in Education*, 53 (2001), 197–210.

⁴⁷ Ten-year-old quoted on front page of Montgomery, *Space and Beyond*.

⁴⁸ Harnetz, “Choose Your Own Adventure”; Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126.

⁴⁹ For Montgomery’s interview from 2011 see *Slate* writer Grady Hendrix’s blog post at www.gradyhendrix.com/ra-montgomery-interview.

⁵⁰ For the literary history of the second-person narrative see Bruce Morrisette, “Narrative ‘You’ in Contemporary Literature,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, 2, 1 (1965), 1–24. For a full-length bibliography see Monika Fludernik, *Style*, 28, 4 (Winter 1994), 525–48.

This, however, is not to say that Americans in the 1980s were unfamiliar with the second person. On the contrary, it was a staple of two enormously important corporate capitalist institutions that had been pushing the free-choice ideal for decades: advertising campaigns and business self-help books. Thanks in part to these two institutions, the second person became a leading narrator of the emerging neoliberal order in the 1970s and 1980s as it effectively helped shape and solidify individual market subjectivities by positioning American audiences in the role of profit-maximizing investor (capital markets), ladder-climbing employee (labor markets) or card-swiping shopper (consumer markets). Taking a closer look at the use of second-person narratives, therefore, shows that *Choose Your Own Adventure* books inserted market fundamentalism into the literary epicenter of adolescent mass culture, thus reshaping not only the children's book industry, but also its young readers.⁵¹

Well before the neoliberal era, advertising agencies had recognized that speaking to potential buyers in the second person could serve as a powerful marketing tool because it placed the public in the consumers' shoes and helped them to envision the enjoyment they would derive from the advertised product. In the 1970s, however, the second person really exploded, becoming the prevailing voice of the advertising industry and its biggest corporate clients. Classic examples include Burger King ("Have It Your Way"), Budweiser ("This Bud's for You"), Pepsi ("Come Alive! You're in the Pepsi Generation"), Newport Lights ("Revive Your Taste") and Johnson & Johnson ("Because You're Still Someone's Baby"). In the 1980s, "you" became even more pronounced in ad campaigns. Coca Cola shifted to the second person in 1985, going from "It's the Real Thing" to "Red, White and You." Other widely influential examples include AT&T ("The More You Hear the Better We Sound,") and even the Army ("Be All That You Can Be"). With American society doubling the amount it spent on advertising in the 1970s, reaching over \$50 billion by 1980, was it any wonder that New York publishers of the "Me" decade – as Tom Wolfe famously coined the 1970s – became enamored with Packard's book proposal titled "The Adventures of You?"⁵²

Around the same time, business self-help literature was also inserting the second-person voice into American life at greater frequency. While such

⁵¹ Such a process of institutional identity shaping is often known as "interpellation" or "hailing." See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 1971), 127–88.

⁵² For the use of second person in advertising see Guy Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising* (London: Routledge, 2001), 157. For advertising expense data see <https://galbithink.org/ad-spending.htm>.

second-person self-help narratives had earlier origins – most famously Dale Carnegie’s epochal *How to Win Friends and Influence People* from 1936 – the genre did not really reach its heyday until the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1972 and 2000, the self-help industry doubled its market share. What is more, the very nature of self-help changed dramatically in these years, as it transformed from a more collective enterprise based on peer support and mutual aid into a highly individualist phenomenon focussed solely on “you.” As Shulman and others have noted, “working on one’s self” became a central cultural trope of the 1970s and can also be found at the core of the Chicago school’s enormously influential “human capital” theory which claimed that personal income was determined by individual productivity, which in turn was determined by how wisely workers chose to “invest in themselves.”⁵³

As Roei Davidson has shown, the second person also came to be frequently used in personal-finance magazines – especially since the 1970s. According to his sampled data, while only 23.3 percent of the cover stories in *Kiplinger’s*, a leading personal-finance magazine, used the second person in the 1960s, that number jumped to 35.9 percent in the 1970s. (By the 2000s, it would hit 61 percent.) After years in which high finance had – through heavy regulations – been cordoned off from everyday American life, Wall Street reintroduced itself to Main Street in the neoliberal era through the use of second-person narratives designed to shape a new “entrepreneurial self” who freely chose his or her investment portfolio.⁵⁴

By the early 1980s the second-person narrative had become such a distinct voice of an ascendant neoliberal culture that it finally entered mainstream American fiction – mostly in satirical and critical form – through Jay McInerney’s 1984 novel *Bright Lights, Big City* and Lorrie Moore’s 1985 collection of short stories fittingly titled *Self-Help*. To conclude, while the 1970s was coined the “me” decade, it appears that the 1980s was, in many ways, the “you” decade.⁵⁵ If 1980s adults encountered the neoliberalizing second-person

⁵³ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Pocket Books, 1982). For the corporate capitalist turn in self-help books as well as their explosive growth since the 1970s see Micki McGee, *Self Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For self-help and the second person see James Phelan, “Self Help for Narratee and Narrative Audience: How ‘I’ and ‘You’? Read ‘How’,” *Style*, 28, 3 (Fall 1994), 350–65; Schulman, *The Seventies*, 99.

⁵⁴ Roei Davidson, “Financial Markets and Authoritative Proximity in Personal Finance Magazines,” *Public Understanding of Science*, 23, 6 (2014), 734–49. Sample statistics cited are based, in part, on Davidson’s unpublished data. On the “entrepreneurial self” see Ulrich Brockling, *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject* (London: Sage, 2015).

⁵⁵ Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City: A Novel* (New York: Vintage, 1984); Lorrie Moore, *Self-help: Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

voice mostly in commercials and self-help books, children did so via CYOA books. From the opening pages of these books, the individualizing and responsabilizing power of the free-to-choose second person outlook was palpable. Before any CYOA book even got going, there was always an introductory “warning.” Here is Packard’s typical warning from his 1980 book *Third Planet from Adair*:

These pages contain many different adventures you can have in outer space. From time to time as you read along, you will be asked to make a choice. Your choice may lead to success or disaster!

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

Think carefully before you make a move! One mistake can be your last ... or it may lead you to fame and fortune!⁵⁶

Montgomery’s opening warning was very similar: “This book is different from other books. You and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens in this story.” These warnings could not be clearer. Thanks to your free-to-choose agency, “you” (and you alone!) are responsible for your fate. Young readers appear to have embraced this argument with relish. “You decide your own fate, but your fate is still a surprise,” noted one delighted ten-year-old.⁵⁷

There appears to be a clear affinity between the second-person “you” of advertising/self-help culture and that of CYOA books, as the choice-based format meshed perfectly with 1980s corporate, neoliberal yuppie culture. In 1983, a new publisher named LifeGames published two CYOA books for adults that makes this point ever more evident. One was for men titled *Man on the Fast Track*. The other was for women, titled *Woman up the Corporate Ladder*. In the latter, “you” have a master’s degree in “economic development” from Stanford, “you” enroll in a Harvard Business School course “on the topic of creating a skilled and loyal labor force in undeveloped countries, and “you” have “a delicious affair with that hunk from the Atlanta Office.” Through it all, you are confronted with choice after choice: “If you decide to stay on at the Department of Commerce and hope that the coveted spot of undersecretary will soon become yours turn to page 155.” “If you ... agree to put in the false report, take the kickback, and split it with your boss, turn to page 163.” Some of the worst developments,

⁵⁶ Edward Packard, *Third Planet from Altair* (New York: Bantam, 1980), 1.

⁵⁷ R. A. Montgomery, *Journey under the Sea* (New York: Bantam, 1979). Fan cited on front page of R. A. Montgomery, *The Abominable Snowman* (Waitsfield, VT: Chooseco, 2006; first published 1982).

meanwhile, seem to be those situations in which you are deprived of choice, such as a job at an insurance agency where “your every move is dictated by a manual of policy and procedure.”⁵⁸

These books allow us to once more see the shared free-to-choose ideology that undergirded both CYOA books and neoliberal notions of success and failure. “Go one way and you’ll have a seat at the head of the Board of Director’s Table – and your face on the cover of *Time*,” read the back cover of *Woman up the Corporate Ladder*. “Select a different path – and brace yourself for the unemployment line.” The book clearly articulated the conservative turn of the early 1980s, in which it came to be broadly assumed that one’s success was not dependent on gender, race, class, initial wealth endowment, birthplace, or any other social circumstance or condition but rather stemmed solely from the individual life decisions one made. “Whatever happens to you,” the book declared on its back cover, “you have only yourself to congratulate or to blame – as you make the choices in the great new do-it-yourself reading game that every woman will want to play and win.” The opening pages continue this line of thought. “By the end of the book,” the introduction states, “you have created your own fate ... You may become the highly paid company CEO or just another frustrated drudge.” Much like Packard’s warning that “one mistake can be your last ... or it may lead you to fame and fortune,” here again we see again how the CYOA game format taught you, just like the business self-help books of the era, not only that you were free to choose, but also, just as importantly, free to lose.⁵⁹

The worldview developed in such CYOA books appears to have left a lasting impression on many young, burgeoning conservatives. In the opening pages of his best-selling 2017 book *Retaking America: Crushing Political Correctness*, right-wing Fox News pundit Nick Adams quoted the CYOA’s “you and YOU ALONE” warning verbatim in order to prove how “in many ways, the American people, are like those readers, able to control their future.”⁶⁰ Former Republican governor of Missouri Eric Greitins – a strident conservative who as governor passed a harsh anti-union “right-to-work” law steeped in free-to-choose language – cited the very same “you and YOU ALONE” mantra in his autobiography from 2017, adding that he was “addicted to the Choose Your Own Adventure series of books, in which I could create my own story.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Angela Harper, *LIFEGAMES 1: Woman up the Corporate Ladder* (New York: Mass Market Paperback, 1983), 3, 37, 51. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, back and front cover.

⁶⁰ Nick Adams, *Retaking America: Crushing Political Correctness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 8. (see image of cover)ns the power structures which undergirded the book are Palestinian arabs. w AMericans te tical, ideologica

⁶¹ Eric Greitins, *The Heart and the Fist* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 12.

THE CHOICE ARCHITECTS

With its ascent in the 1970s and 1980s, the neoliberal culture of choice downplayed the impact that social, structural, historical, or institutional forces played in the shaping of one's life path. Focussing on supposedly voluntary decisions made by free-floating, autonomous individuals in a seemingly meritocratic and equal-opportunity market society, this choice-centric approach did not account for wealth inequality, racial discrimination, asymmetrical power relations, class privilege or gendered oppression. Like a game (or economic model), the social conditions and power structures which undergirded market society and preceded market choices were rapidly being deemed irrelevant. All that mattered were the choices that "you" (and YOU ALONE!) made as you forged your way through the game of life. And since you were "free to choose," you were morally accountable and socially responsible for whatever successes or failures you incurred along the way.

The tremendously successful CYOA books in the early 1980s reflected and reproduced this neoliberal worldview among children. Not only did CYOA instill in young readers the empowered sense of free choice and individualized responsibility, but these books also obscured the predetermined plot decisions and narrative structures that had been foisted upon them by author and publisher. For while CYOA announced that "You and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens in this story," this simply was not true. While the reader was indeed offered unprecedented interactive control by making a series of choices which determined the multiple endings he or she would reach, all the possible paths he or she could go down had been carefully chosen, designed and planned out by the authors. While the reader may have rightfully relished his or her own exhilarating sense of agency, such freedom of choice was nevertheless greatly prescribed, delimited and bounded. The reader could choose to turn to page 4 and fight the dragon or page 12 and grab the jetpack, but he or she was nevertheless being funneled down a few predetermined and preplanned adventures. Somebody else – Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler have invented the useful term "choice architects" for such menu-making somebodies – had already decided for the reader which set of choices would or would not be made available to them.⁶²

Many media and literary scholars who have studied interactive fiction – especially those writing in the heady 1990s when the neoliberal culture of choice really peaked – have been largely uncritical about such interactive adventure narratives, hailing them as innovative sources of autonomy,

⁶² Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

freedom and agency. As *New York Times* book editor Michiko Kakutani noted in her review of *Hamlet in the Holodeck* from 1997, Murray's best-selling book on electronic literature – hailed by the author as “a thrilling extension of human powers” – was colored on every page by a “utopianism” that led “her to ignore or play down the more disturbing consequences of technology while unabashedly embracing its possibilities.” Such an emancipatory approach to interactive digital narratives appears to have been hegemonic in the 1990s. Referring directly to CYOA books as their inspiration, for instance, the Hypertext Fiction Workshop at Brown University used Internet hyperlinks in order to continue what CYOA had begun by creating a form of interactive fiction that would, they argued, “liberate us from the tyranny of the author.” A few years later, Montfort's approach was just as positive and optimistic. The main goal of *Twisty Little Passages*, he noted in the preface, was to provide a “richer” and “more enjoyable” experience of interactive fiction by contributing “some new thoughts on how to better appreciate its exploration – in the hope that new types of wonder will be possible.”⁶³

Of course there have always been critical voices, and as the years have gone by and neoliberal, free-to-choose ideology has come to be seen as a leading source of financial crisis, skyrocketing inequality, and oligarchic political rule, more and more commentators have begun to hint at the dark side of CYOA. Already in 1986, Nicholas Tucker wrote a scathing critique of these best sellers in the pages of *New Society*. “In children's Choose Your Own Adventure Books’,” he bemoaned, “self-survival is everything. Tolerance, compassion, and bravery lose to aggression, violence and self-interest.” By 2002, chatbot inventor and entrepreneur Mark Stephen Meadows was far less sanguine about CYOA. Referring to the books as “a heavily designed story,” he noted how “they guided you with a strict set of individual rules that only allow the reader a narrow margin of decisions.” Anastasia Salter echoed Meadow's point in her own, still upbeat but more balanced, history of interactive narratives from 2014, and by 2017 cultural critic and best-selling author Mandy Len Catron was using CYOA as a metaphor for the damaging ways we think of love in the neoliberal era:

From a narrative perspective, making the right choice is any outcome that gets you closer to a happy ending: marriage to the right person. I thought of the Choose Your Own Adventure books I loved as a kid. “You and YOU ALONE are in

⁶³ Michiko Kakutani, “The Art of Storytelling, Transformed by Hackers,” *New York Times*, 18 July 1997, C30; Charles McGrath, “The Internet's Arrested Development,” *New York Times*, 8 Dec. 1996, Section 6, 80; Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages*, xi.

charge of what happens in this story,” they warned at the start. But this wasn’t quite true. You could make choices, but there were only ever two options.⁶⁴

As all these commentators intuitively recognized, there was great power in building – and choosing – the choices. Such choice architecture allowed CYOA authors to subtly – yet forcefully and effectively – impart certain ideas to their readers by limiting the options made available to them. This is a most powerful socializing tool since children experienced such “lessons” as their own personal agency, not as top-down coercion. One example of this can be found in how CYOA authors – especially R. A. Montgomery – approached risk. In reading numerous CYOA books, I have noticed that the reader is almost always rewarded for taking high-risk decisions. Take, for instance, a passage from *Journey under the Sea*:

You wake up on the deck of the Maray and are quickly rushed to the decompression chambers to ward off the effects of the bends. Several days later you are over the worst and starting to worry about diving into the abyss again. Can you do it? Do you have the nerve?

If you decide to quit the expedition now, turn to page 31.

If you decide to return to the deep, turn to page 32.

Turning to page 32 extends the adventure in exciting new ways. Page 31, on the other hand, ends in heartbreaking fashion. “A special news flash announces to the world the discovery of Atlantis by an Italian research team heard by Dr. Marcello, a world-famous explorer. You regret your decision but you didn’t really have a choice. Did you?” Neoliberal rationality often views entrepreneurial risk taking as a central source of profit and a key determinant of the great wealth disparities between the daring well-to-do and the “risk-averse” poor. CYOA tended to reproduce this assumption through its choice architecture, as it frequently sent young readers the message that success is determined by your individual preference for assuming risk.⁶⁵

The power of CYOA’s choice architects to shape their stories – and their readers – becomes even more evident when one focusses on the identity of the books’ hero. While the second-person “you” could have enabled the books to be gender-, class-, and race-neutral, they were not. In all but one of

⁶⁴ Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative* (Indianapolis: New Riders, 2003), 63; Salter, *What Is Your Quest?*, 46; Mandy Len Catron, *How to Fall in Love with Anyone: A Memoir in Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 13.

⁶⁵ Montgomery, *Journey under the Sea*, 18, 32. On neoliberalism and risk see Jacob Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

the two hundred books in the CYOA series (*Deadwood City* was the exception) the hero was – by either implication or illustration – a white, middle-class boy. According to Packard, this was – ironically – not his choice. As Packard recently told NPR, “the publishers, Bantam, when they started bringing out the series in a big way, they said, you know, we have to represent it with somebody as you, the reader. And this somebody turned out to be a white boy, looking like sort of a junior James Bond.” As the imagery of this white Bond boy makes clear, behind the seemingly free choices presented to “you” in CYOA books lurked the very cultural, racial, economic, and gendered power dynamics that this free-to-choose culture had come to downplay, erase, or ignore.⁶⁶

In the end, despite the supposed free choices given to the reader, almost all of the CYOA books read eerily the same. Fantastical adventures in which individualistic, ambitious, heteronormative middle-class white boys must take high-risk decisions in order to leverage their actions into, as Packard noted in his 1980 warning, “fame and fortune.” While these books are all of the fantasy genre, is the message here significantly different from the pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps arguments of the neoliberal self-help genre for adults?

If Choose Your Own Adventure books serve as a fruitful cultural metaphor into the inner logic of neoliberalism, the influence of its choice architects offers a key insight into how exactly the “soft power” of market choice can funnel us down certain paths and thus shape our daily lives without ever using the blunt force of direct coercion. Yet such sentiments are rarely heard by the choice-centric mentality that still dominates our lives. When a rare critique of our culture of choice has been voiced in the past few years, such arguments have typically framed the problem as anxiety-inducing “choice overload” which, while important, does not question the deeper structural and power asymmetries that undergird market choices. In these books, choice is still seen as synonymous with “autonomy.” Moreover, the power of the people choosing the choices remains overlooked. *Nudge* became such an enormous best seller that it even inspired the Obama administration to create government “nudge units” that influence citizen behavior through choice architecture. Yet, ironically, in the book Susstein and Thaler significantly *downplay* the power of choice architects by stressing that their actions serve only as “nudges.” (They also conveniently focus only on positive nudges which improve human well-being.) Judging from the power of CYOA authors to

⁶⁶ Packard was interviewed by NPR’s *Voice of a Nation*, 16 Aug. 2010. For a transcript see www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129233140.

direct readers down certain narrative paths, one is tempted to refer to such menu-making power more as a series of “shoves.”⁶⁷

Such neglect of the power of choice architects and other structural, historical, or institutional forces that shape individual choice in a market society is no coincidence or mistake. Rather, it constitutes a central part of the gamified, free-to-choose neoliberal vision that has come to dominate American society since its first emergence in the 1980s. As Mckenzie Wark has argued,

All that counts is the score. As for who owns the teams and who runs the show, best not to ask. As for who is excluded from the big leagues, best not to ask. As for who keeps the score and who makes the rules, best not to ask. As for what ruling body does the handicapping and on what basis, best not to ask.⁶⁸

In free-to-choose culture we are taught to only examine *our* choices, not the conditions and structures which shaped the options made available to us. Best not to ask about that.

CONCLUSIONS

Popularizing interactive narratives and pushing them, often for the first time, into mass American adolescent culture, CYOA books set a crucial precedent and played a central, pre-computer, role in fostering a neoliberal free-to-choose subjectivity among impressionable youngsters in the early 1980s. Books such as CYOA not only mimicked and modeled themselves after the hegemonic market logic of the age, they also provided their readers with a care-free, low-stakes arena within which these often stressful cultural mores of incessant competition, free choice, personal risk, and individual responsibility could be nurtured, cultivated, and promoted. For the children of the 1980s, these books provided an important respite from the actual pressures of “real” neoliberal life. In the friendly and safe confines of the book, these children of the market were taught that they were all free to choose, yet the heavy burden that came with such freedom could nevertheless be lifted with a simple turn of a page.⁶⁹

In *Powers of Freedom*, sociologist Nikolas Rose argued that market individuals “are not merely ‘free to choose’ but obliged to be free, to understand

⁶⁷ Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: Ecco, 2004); Renata Salecl, *The Tyranny of Choice* (New York: Profile Books, 2011); Sarah Conly, *Against Autonomy: Justifying Coercive Paternalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). On Obama nudge units see “Obama’s Nudge Bridage,” *Forbes*, 16 Sept. 2015, at www.forbes.com/sites/beltway/2015/09/16/obama-nudge-government.

⁶⁸ Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 8.

⁶⁹ On games mimicking life see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 235.

and enact their lives in terms of choice.” Continuing, Rose notes how these subjects “must interpret their past and dream their future as outcomes of choices made or choices still to make.” Finally, he remarks that “their choices are, in their turn, seen as realizations of the attributes of the choosing person – expressions of personality – and reflect back upon the person who has made them.” In short, Rose restates the key argument of this article: that it is through personal choice that neoliberal subjects not only imagine their place in society, but build up their very selves. For millions of children of the 1980s, this individual, choice-obsessed journey often began with the dog-eared pages of their cherished CYOA books.⁷⁰

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

A historian of capitalism, Eli Cook is an Assistant Professor of American History at the University of Haifa in Israel and head of the American Studies Program. His book, *The Pricing of Progress: Economic Indicators and the Capitalization of American Life*, was published in 2017 by Harvard University Press. It received the Society for US Intellectual History Best Book Award as well as the Morris D. Forkosch Prize for best book on intellectual history. Special thanks to the participants of the History of Consumer Culture Conference at Gakushuin University in Tokyo as well as the members of the Tel Aviv Neoliberalism Workshop for their useful comments on earlier drafts. This study was partially funded by an Israel Science Fund grant.

⁷⁰ Nikoas Rose, *Powers of Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 87.