Choose Your Own Adventure is a Dead-end

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I've been asked to write a short paper exploring an aspect of authoring that I think has problem, or presents as one. So here goes.

First point. CYOA derives from a range of paper-based works popularised in the 1980s and 90s. They present narrative as small sections, broken by a 'decision point' offered to the reader as an agency-led intervention into the delivery of the story. In doing so, and especially when they're understood alongside paper and pencil and dice games of the same era, they provide a single-person equivalent of what is necessarily a group activity - roleplaying games. RPGs have a storyteller at their heart - the Dungeon Master (DM) or equivalent, who is guiding the action, introducing threats and generating story on the fly - RPGing is about emergent storytelling. About letting story emerge from player actions. What CYOA does/did is remove the DM from the equation and provide an adequate substitute in the person of the author of the book. CYOA then, operate in relation to specific other media - and importantly, other shared experiences, and it's worth remembering that as we go forward.

Second point. Most new (or emerging) media remediate another media form. It's an in-between state, a transition from being one thing (film as recorded theatre, for example) and becoming something that's native to the new medium itself (film, with the conventions of editing, mise-en-scène, etc) as it matures, and creators figure out what to do that's genuinely new and exploits affordances of the platform, technology and its audience's relationship with those things. Digital CYOA is remediating the analogue, paper-based form, and that's fine, insofar as it goes.

Third point. CYOA also exploits something particular to the physical form of the book. We read a book, conventionally speaking, from front to back. The form of the thing is shaped that way, to guide us through chapters, cliffhangers, changes in character and narrative perspective, driving us forward, through the text toward the last page and the eventual reveal; the conclusion. We have a tacit understanding of how that works because the book (the one in front of me now, for example) has a fixed number of pages (in this instance - 91, it's a short novel). As we work our way through, we are aware of how far we've come and how far we have to go in a simultaneous, forward/backward state. I'm a short way through this book, and so there's a lot of story to go, a lot of things still to happen. All of those things are tied up in the physicality of the book. CYOA subverts those physical affordances of the book, the page count, and offers something markedly different. The story does not go as far as the end of the book, in fact it's very likely that it will end - through decisions we've taken, or by the random roll of a dice - a good way short of that final page. On the one hand, that signifies that

the story is shorter, is contained in some way by our actions and by the mechanic at work, but conversely, it suggests that there are many stories contained within these pages - that just as our route is not a function of a linear page count, then the world we're exploring through the pages (and paragraphs, and fractions of narrative) is much larger than one bound by a strict order. There are other routes through this, other paths to take, and each one is a different journey.

Fourth point. Those things are a function of CYOA's relationship to the book, to the physical, bound object. They might be an accident, but they are there nonetheless. In a digital instance of CYOA, they don't apply, and have no relevance. For a digital CYOA, I have no idea how long (in relation to a bound whole) the hypertext is, my understanding of that length has nothing to do with a physical object that contains it, and there are no analogue conventions with which to play. Digital is inherently hypertextual, is functionally fragmented and broken into pieces; that's its natural state, not a subversion of the usual rules of storytelling and form, and that's principally why I'm still waiting to see a digital CYOA that finds something new to say about form, and about expectation. I don't hate the form, but am frustrated that it hasn't evolved, or responded to a digital environment.

CYOA has a tendency to be a digital catch-all solution - if you want to see how far this perception permeates then try having a conversation with; a TV executive, a publisher, a director; in fact anyone who works with story and storytelling (bring up digital storytelling and set a timer - you'll have to deal with the CYOA question before the end of the first coffee). CYOA opens a conversation, and provides common ground, something that everyone present can understand, and curtails that conversation by its sheer ubiquity. That isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it is all too frequent for that ground to be the foundation, rather than a conversation starter. Projects are made that adopt CYOA as a default mode because no-one thought any harder about the subject after that initial conversation; money is poured into them, the project eventually sees the light of day; it generally falls far short of what everyone thought it was going to be; the digital-as-new discussion stops dead.

Then we wait for the cycle to begin again with a new set of characters in a year or so's time.

I think we can do better.

A note. I was considerably more impressed with Charlie Brooker's Bandersnatch than I expected to be. Principally, I think, because Brooker does understand the relationship between form and content, and had something to say that wove between the two. A CYOA about a video game developer works *because* it's about a video game developer.