

PLAYING ADOLESCENT: *CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE* AND THE SUBJECT OF  
PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

By

LISA KAYE DUSENBERRY

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2007

© 2007 Lisa Kaye Dusenberry

For Mom and Dad

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my parents for their love and support. Without them, this project could not exist. My mother bought me my first pick-your-own-path novel many years ago and instilled in me a desire to read for fun. My father has been invaluable to all my written work as he meticulously read every piece of writing I produced, no matter how many times I asked him to. Also, my director, Kenneth Kidd, and my reader, Terry Harpold, were very supportive of this project, and I appreciate that they saw what I wanted to write as much as what I actually wrote.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	4
ABSTRACT.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	8
The Emerging Adolescent .....	11
The Question of Agency: Re-presenting Adolescence .....	16
Adolescent (Read/View/Play/Us)er.....	20
2 <i>CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE</i> NOVELS.....	24
Illusory Choice and Coded Endings .....	27
Constructing the Boundaries of Agency .....	31
Resisting the Structure.....	34
Changing with the Times.....	40
3 FROM MANUAL PARTICIPATION TO WEB-BASED MANIPULATION.....	49
4 ADAPTING AND RE-CREATION: CYOA DVD GAMES .....	54
5 READING PLAYER: POTENTIAL MEDIA AND ADOL-ESSENCE THROUGH TEXTS.....	61
WORKS CITED .....	64
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	66

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

PLAYING ADOLESCENT: CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE AND THE SUBJECT OF  
PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

By

Lisa Kaye Dusenberry

May 2007

Chair: Kenneth Kidd  
Major: English

Using participatory media designed for adolescents, this thesis examines the construction of reader-as-player and the tension between the structures of genre and medium and the power of the reader to interact with those structures. It explores how the institutional forces encoded within texts attempt to shape and control the reader, and also how these texts stimulate resistance, making the adolescent simultaneously victim and agent—a player who depends on the structure of the “game” to create and subvert meaning. To explore what it means for the adolescent reader to be a player, this thesis focuses on four different versions of a popular young adult text, *The Abominable Snowman*.

*The Abominable Snowman*, in all its forms (book, DVD, and web-based game), exemplifies the convergence among participatory media, adolescence, institutional power, subjectivity, and agency. This thesis strives to synthesize all of these issues and to examine the significance of their intersections. A detailed inspection of the genre/form illustrates the complex social and individual forces that mold and define the adolescent in contemporary society. By examining how the user of each text is expected to participate with it, the constraints of each structure/medium are revealed. Within these constraints, the adolescent player can then resist the

guiding influence of adolescent literature and media, which try to resign the adolescent to her lack of social power.

Choice in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* format is, then, a double-edged sword forcing the reader into particular paths but also allowing the reader to play within the text's boundaries. The text can never become more than a potential text until the reader agrees to inhabit its structure. Conversely, the reader cannot gain any power or manipulate her status, until she takes up a relationship to the text. It is this mutual/codependent desire that generates agency and creates a space for resistance and negotiation.

By further examining the forms of ideological and structural elements of media for adolescents, the social position of the adolescent and the conception of what is an "ideal" adolescent can be challenged. Explicating and deconstructing texts created for adolescents is integral to this process. By understanding how and where spaces are created for adolescent agency, the adolescent (and society in general) can undertake a mutation from reader to player to, hopefully, producer, each change building on the skill sets that were generated in the earlier process.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed.

—Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*

In her introduction to *Kids' Media Culture*, Marsha Kinder suggests that one of the basic conflicts concerning media for children is the struggle between those who construct the child as a passive victim of media culture versus those who construct the child as an active agent (1-5). What she is elucidating is a division that shows up repeatedly in regard to childhood and adolescence, although the opposed terms may vary somewhat. This clash can be observed in the contrast of the child that exerts control/independence or conversely versus the child that needs to be controlled and guided. The adolescent inspires both fear and awe, passively accepts social dictates and yet spurs social change—the puppet/prisoner of social institutions and the teenage rebel who refuses authority. None of these positions when taken alone fully defines the adolescent, but the tension between these polar impulses generates a socially constructed subject position. Texts for adolescents, in both print and digital forms, encode this fundamental tension in their structure and content, and a thorough examination of the forms of adolescent literature and media<sup>1</sup> illuminates American culture's complex relationship to the adolescent, as well as the way a given medium influences the type of subject its user is allowed to become.

This thesis examines the construction of reader-as-player through the lens of participatory media for adolescents. It explores how the reader is subject to institutional forces encoded within texts which attempt to shape and control her, and also how these texts stimulate resistance,

---

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, the use of the word media will encompass both traditional print literature and digital media.

making the adolescent simultaneously victim and agent—a player who depends on the structure of the “game” to create and subvert meaning. To explore what happens when the adolescent is cast as a “player” (instead of passive reader or fully empowered agent), this thesis focuses on four different versions of a popular young adult text. These versions of the same text make evident the tensions between the power of the text as an instrument of institutional forces and the power of the reader as an active agent.

*The Abominable Snowman*, in all its forms, exemplifies the convergence among the theoretical constructs discussed in this thesis (participatory media, adolescence, institutional power, subjectivity, and agency). Each of these constructs is an object of intense critical inquiry; however, currently there is little scholarship that strives to synthesize all of these issues and to examine the significance of their intersections. Often, popular genres/formats for children are widely assumed to be simple in their purpose and in their relationship with the reader. However, a closer inspection of the genre/form illustrates the complex social and individual forces that mold and define the adolescent in contemporary society.

One genre/form that receives further scrutiny in the remainder of this thesis is the *Choose Your Own Adventure* format, popularized in the early 1980s and which has recently seen a resurgence in popularity and crossed over into other media. Of particular interest in this thesis is *The Abominable Snowman* (1982) (the thirteenth book in the original *Choose Your Own Adventure* series), *The Abominable Snowman* (2005) (the first book in the newly revised *Choose Your Own Adventure* series), *The Abominable Snowman: Secret Online Endings* web-based game (2006), and *The Abominable Snowman* interactive DVD movie (2006). By examining how the user of each text participates with it, the constraints of each structure/medium are revealed.

Within these constraints, the adolescent player can then resist the guiding influence of adolescent literature and media, which try to resign the adolescent to her lack of social power.

The *Choose Your Own Adventure* format is of particular interest in discussions of adolescent agency and subjectivity because it purports to allow the adolescent reader control over the text. This is the element that all four versions of *The Abominable Snowman* share. The rhetoric used to market each text is one of empowerment and freedom (the adolescent has the power to be whoever she wants and go where ever she wants (Ladden)). It is the conscious acknowledgement of the reader's role in piecing together the narrative that foregrounds the element of play in the text. The choice offered to the reader is problematic but essential to exploring the adolescent-as-player (agent within a structure). As the narrative in all four versions of *The Abominable Snowman* (and in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* format in general) has been determined before the reader enters the text, her choices are in fact already limited. More subtly, institutions that socialize adolescents have already played a role in outlining the appropriate paths, goals, and punishments within the content of "choosing" an adventure. They have provided rules of play both structurally (how to "read" the novel or "play" the game) and contextually (which decisions are the "best" and why).

However, the choice represented in the novel is not entirely illusory; the reader is asked to make decisions that matter within the context of the story and those choices are treated with respect within the novel's structure (at least for the most part). The reader's choices lead to (more or less) logical results and the reader can depend on the narrative to follow the rules that it has set. The reader can then choose to either subvert the rules or play by them on her own terms in order to manipulate the text toward outcomes she desires. Choice in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* format is, then, a double-edged sword forcing the reader into particular paths but also

allowing the reader to play within the text's boundaries. In-depth analysis of each text will further clarify this point but, before textual analysis can be done, two important contexts must be established and theoretically grounded: the adolescent and the player.

### **The Emerging Adolescent**

The American adolescent reader as we currently know her is a relatively new character, although the moment when "adolescence" is acknowledged as a significant cultural identity is much debated. There are suggestions that adolescence as its own distinct period was first acknowledged after the American Civil War and began to appear in literature as early as Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel, *Little Women* (Cart 4). It was not until G. Stanley Hall's comprehensive *Adolescence: Its Psychology*, published in 1904, that the term gained credibility, denoting a specific stage of life mediating between childhood and adulthood. By the late 1940s and early 1950s adolescence became a distinct field of investigation. In his monograph *From Romance to Realism*, Michael Cart notes that librarians began to discuss attending to adolescents in the 1940s and 1950s, but "it was not until 1958 ... that this 'excitement' became institutionalized in the American Library Association's formation of a Young Adult Services Division" (6). The institutional concept of the adolescent reader is barely half a century old.

Theorists and librarians have struggled with defining contours of adolescent literature for over 50 years; the market for and demographic of adolescent literature still remains amorphous today. In fact, even publishers and booksellers have not been able to regulate and categorize the adolescent reader. Adolescent readers locate their texts in children's, young adults', teens' and adults' sections—illustrating both the institutional conflict over the role and position of adolescents in society and the resistance adolescents exhibit against social codification. In her article "Judging a Book by Its Cover: Publishing Trends in Young Adult Literature," Cat Yampbell remarks on the problem presented by the "Young Adult" market: "Motivated by

pressure from peers, parents, and educators, children who read will move directly from Young Readers into Adult Literature, completely bypassing most, if not all, of the Young Adult novels. How can publishers create a market specifically for the teenage audience? Does YA need to encompass the ages of 12-18, 13-19? 12-25? 14 and up?" (350). Yampbell goes on to comment that location of adolescent texts in bookstores demonstrates the ambiguity of the definition of adolescent readers and YA material.

When a book is placed in a section marked for younger readers, it loses its appeal to many teenagers. To be forced to enter the children's section or even a "young" adult section is to cede social power and status. Yampbell writes that, as of 2000, many booksellers have dropped the young adult designation in favor of a teen section; however, there is a mixed reception of the difference between young adult and teen, with some research showing that adolescents prefer the term young adult to teen (352). Each institutional categorization constructs a slightly different subject position for the adolescent reader and she has to negotiate with the implications of stepping into, performing, or disavowing the role of "teen," "tween," "young adult," and/or "adolescent."

The definitions of these terms are fluid and they are often conflated with one another or differ only in an emphasis to one side or the other of the age spectrum. In general, they refer to people between the ages of 12 and 18, but those age markers are socially and culturally constructed. The 12-18 age range in the United States represents a group of people who have increased autonomy, but no authorized institutional power. They are old enough to be somewhat independent from their parents, but not legally considered autonomous nor afforded the rights and protections of adult citizens. It is this strange transition between complete dependency and socially sanctioned independence that is difficult to demarcate, both socially and commercially.

The struggle with the need to define a distinct period between childhood and adulthood is intricately linked with two other important modern trends—identity politics and technological advancements.

In his book, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*, Leerom Medovoi makes a compelling argument that the American cultural fixation with the teenage rebel stems from the unique social position of the teenager. In Cold War America, adolescents enjoyed a position of limited autonomy; they were not allowed to take a significant economic role in society, but were allowed freedom from home and family. The adolescent subject became the object of both fear and awe. In the tradition of G. Stanley Hall's writings on adolescence and Herman Remmers and D.H. Radler's *The American Teenager* (a 1957 report based on social opinion surveys), the adolescent was often considered a person of unlimited potential who would "contribute to our society much more than that society could possibly give him" (qtd. in Medovoi 29). The development of adolescent potential becomes a social necessity because this endorsement of the positive power of the adolescent is accompanied by fear—fear that the adolescent will disrupt the status quo. As Medovoi notes, "the political concession ultimately made to a sovereign teenhood was deeply fraught and circumscribed by powerful fears and rhetorical turns that were themselves clearly associated with the conservative Cold War culture of containment" (29). Adolescent autonomy both threatens the homogenizing force of consumer society and empowers the newly acknowledged adolescent with agency. This emergent adolescent identity creates a context through which our conflicting idea of adolescents (victim or agent, "good boy" or rebel) and their social position begins to make sense.

The adolescent gains power as she differentiates herself from (rebels against) the institutional authority surrounding her, but only to a point. At some point, she must be brought

back into the system or face complete loss of power (i.e., ostracization, imprisonment).

Adolescence, identity, and selfhood are all intrinsically related to concepts of agency. A “victim” presents no challenge to authority and is, in fact, completely subjected to it. On the other hand, a boundless agent who is completely free of authority is impossible and undesirable—to be completely outside authority destroys the adolescent’s ability to effect change and actively participate in the world. The position of the adolescent is somewhere between these two poles of complete subservience and total agency. Taking on an adolescent identity is not, then, a way to acquire institutionally sanctioned authority, but a way to reconcile one’s sense of personal power with one’s position in the larger social structure. The adolescent must take up some level of social power to traverse the gap between childhood and adulthood, but must also fit within the given power structures to make that power (both individual and institutional) meaningful.

While the social construction of adolescence is focused around emergent, autonomous identities, it also has a significant engagement with emergent technologies. Cart writes that “the more technologically advanced the culture, it seems, the more likely it is to recognize adolescence as a separate and distinct stage of human development, worthy, thus, of a body of literature that addresses the stage in language, themes, and content accessible to those who populate it” (7). Technology provides another view into the ambivalent relationship we have with adolescents in American society. Mirroring the tension between awe and fear surrounding the power and potential of the adolescent, the connection between adolescents and technology is both respected/encouraged (as a way of adapting to and controlling the world) and met with suspicion (because it provides the adolescent a means to power not yet fully regulated by adult, social institutions). In his monograph *Consuming Youth*, Rob Latham summarizes this polarized relationship toward adolescents and technology: “These new mutants ['screenagers' or 'vidkids']

have embraced advances in consumer technologies avidly and fearlessly, making them an adaptive success in a social environment that fosters and mandates unceasing change" (Latham 52). While they are successful users, adolescents are also empowered and changed by technology, becoming an object of fear for adult society. Through their relationship to technology, adolescents can seemingly become producers and then resist their identity as consumers. This makes them both powerful and dangerous. Latham notes that adolescent participation with technology can be seen as a utopian freedom, since it can lead to adolescents becoming producers (programming their own games, changing the existing code, etc.) (53).

However, this freedom is not unbounded. Products for adolescents are ruthlessly marketed and designed to increase adolescent participation in the general consumption of goods and services. The focus of the products is not necessarily to empower the user, but to acquire satisfaction and to elevate her status among her peers. Adolescents simultaneously set the trends and require social policing to make sure these trends are safely encoded within the boundaries of institutional discourses: "the statistical objectification of youth—of their tastes, values, and discretionary spending patterns—is a uniquely contemporary enterprise, a testament not only to their inescapable social presence but to the profit-seeking motives of consumer capitalism" (Latham 42). The adolescent subject position ends up being a dialectical space between sets of opposing forces, all of which have some foundation in the relationship of the adolescent to institutional forms of power. Adolescence is positioned between childhood and adulthood, conformity and rebellion, adaptability and monstrosity, dependence and autonomy.

The technological prowess often attributed to adolescents is an element of the destabilized boundaries between adolescents and adults. Concurrent with the desire to delineate adolescence as a stable period with certain expectations and a particular social position came the destruction

of the boundaries between the adolescent and adult: "One particularly deplorable result, in the eyes of the critics, of this mass-consumerization of youth was its radical destabilization of the adult-child polarity, leading to the development of a cultural dialectic in which the opposed sides began to exchange properties" (Latham 46). By creating an adolescent market, the boundaries between youth and adult became both circumscribed and traversable—a site of resistance to social expectations. The social limitations of ‘adolescence’ create a space for agency. Adolescents embody both restriction and liberation, upholding and disturbing their own categorization. It is this dynamic of “empowerment and exploitation” that can be explored through participatory media specifically marketed to adolescents (Latham 67). Within the convergence of technology and identity politics, adolescence as a subject position takes on cultural meaning, suggesting two important questions: what is the adolescent’s relationship to agency? How does the relationship between agency and media transform how we think of the adolescent subject?

### **The Question of Agency: Re-presenting Adolescence**

Adolescence is most often referred to in terms of education and social protection. What is it that texts (books, films, videogames, etc.) teach adolescents? How can we reach them more effectively? How do different media socialize youth? How do we fight the corrupting influence of media on youth? How can we use adolescent literature in the classroom to better connect to students? Education, library science, psychology, and media studies all approach and discuss adolescence as a distinct category, but often focus on ways adults can more carefully teach, guide, regulate, and control the adolescent. Even adolescent literature as a medium can be seen as a powerful socializing force used to accustom adolescents to their lack of power. But this discussion often comes as a result of the failure to analyze what options the adolescent has to subvert and negotiate her position. In order to navigate between adolescent media as a totalizing,

dictatorial discourse (which allows for no significant resistance) and adolescent media as an empowering tool of liberation from confining social expectations, I will use elements of Roberta Trites' argument from *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, and elements of Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's discussions of agency. Taken together, these approaches help define adolescence in practice. In putting forth the concept of adolescent reader-as-player, I demonstrate that Trites' argument about the socialization function of adolescent literature does not preclude meaningful resistance on the part of the adolescent and that the ability to exert agency and enact resistance is in fact predicated on the institutional discourses that Trites deftly examines.

According to Trites, adolescent literature is an "institutional discourse that participates in the power and repression dynamic that socializes adolescents into their cultural positions" (54). The subject position of the adolescent becomes important because the narrative authority within an adolescent text is often ceded to adult or institutional power and "the source of narrative authority in a text can reflect much about the text's ideology" (73). By examining the structures that contain adolescent characters and, by extension, adolescent readers, the dynamics of power and repression are made clear. The limitations and boundaries of adolescent texts reflect the dominant notion of what adolescence means and "demonstrates that YA novels teach adolescent readers to accept a certain amount of repression as a cultural imperative" (Trites 55). While Trites' attributes this function specifically to adolescent *literature*, an argument can be made that media marketed to adolescents shares this same purpose. Both literature and media set out institutionally defined roles for the adolescent to experience and reinforce the limitations of adolescent power. Both written and digital texts do this via structures and rules that are socially determined and which control/define the adolescent subject. And purpose of adolescent media is

often to move the reader beyond adolescence (i.e., to maturity) and, thus, to fundamentally transform the adolescent's role and position in society (more precisely, to eliminate the "adolescence" within her).

Given the purpose of adolescent media, the reader's subject position becomes one of disempowerment—a position to be vacated as quickly as possible. Of course, counter to the push toward maturity created by the institutional function of adolescent media, the adolescent reader can take on an active element role in creating and negotiating the meaning of the text, which serves her purpose and does not necessarily support a straightforward goal of acculturation. The overall purpose of adolescent literature might well be the imposition of institutional authority on the adolescent subject, but the very institutional structure that is meant to categorize and disarm the adolescent creates sites of resistance and mediated meaning. Thus, the adolescent can be seen as a player traversing the structure of the text and mutating<sup>2</sup> its intended function and meaning.

In order to comprehend and complicate our understanding of the "adolescent subject position," we must understand its foundation in discourse. Stuart Hall (calling upon Foucault) explains the idea of the subject position. In order for the subject of a discourse to wield power, "they—we—must locate themselves/ourselves in the *position* from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus become its 'subjects' by 'subjecting' ourselves to its meanings, power and regulation. All discourse, then, constructs subject-positions, from which they alone make sense" (Hall 56). Given this, a subject position is not necessarily confined to an individual, but is a space carved out for a particular group to exist within. When a person takes on a subject position, she becomes subordinate to its power and regulation, but is also able to effect change and mount resistance from within that position. As Foucault notes, ""There is not, on the one side, a

---

<sup>2</sup> My intention here is for "mutation" to be a meaningful term. A mutation is somewhere between a transformation and a monstrosity; it keeps what already exists but alters it in particular ways.

discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it” (101). Discourse often produces “reverse” discourse, which utilizes the vocabulary and structures of power (which oppress/repress) to mount resistance and create contradictory positions and uses within the already established discourse of power. Power and repression (domination and subordination) are not separate entities, but rather are dependent upon each other for their existence. The structure of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel creates a space where resistance can become *meaningful* and agency permissible. Without the interplay between agency and restriction, the text would no longer have a function and could not participate in the socialization of the adolescent reader.

For Trites, one of the problematic elements of adolescent literature is the way the adolescent reader is displaced both by adult infringement on the narration and by targeting a specific type of adolescent reader. She notes that “a crisis in reading adolescent literature occurs, however, when the actual reader is displaced, when the subject position of the actual reader is violated” (73). The adolescent reader is asked to experience literature by identifying with characters that do not share her subject position (e.g., race, gender, age, nationality, etc.) and where the adolescent narrator is often subsumed by adult voices.

However, what Trites sees as a “crisis” is perhaps more generative as a fracturing of the idea of a unified, all-encompassing adolescent subject. These moments of disconnection provide the adolescent with opportunities to initiate a negotiated reading and experience the play of the text in a way not specified by institutional authority. While the text’s assumptions about the adolescent subject are integral to its structure, it does not exert absolute power over the reader-subject. The reader has the ability to resist the text’s influence and consciously feel violated by or manipulate the text’s assumptions. The reader is not in full control of the text, although she

participates in creating the meaning of that text. As John Fiske notes, “popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology. The victories, however fleeting or limited, in this struggle produce popular pleasure, for popular pleasure is always social and political” (2). The conflict between institutional discourses (which carve out subject positions) and individuals (who resist and alter those positions) is generative.

To add another layer to the complex nature of subjectivity, we may consider Judith Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power* and its examination of the contingent nature of subjection. She writes, “The term ‘subjectivation’ carries the paradox in itself: *assujettissement* denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection—one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency” (83). This codependency is muted in Trites’ discussion of adolescence. The institutional structures are necessary for creating the adolescent, just as the adolescent subject exerts influence on those institutions. In order to have autonomy, there must be a structure from which one has autonomy. The rules of these structures are fundamental to our exploration of the subject position created for adolescents. Having established the emergent and conflicted nature of “adolescence” and its relationship to subjectivity, what does it mean for the *adolescent* subject to be constructed as a player (as opposed to a victim or unlimited agent)?

### **Adolescent (Read/View/Play/Us)er**

To what position do we assign the adolescent when she is interacting with participatory media? If the text is a traditional book, we designate her as a “reader.” As the definition of text has broadened (via cultural studies) to encompass many forms of media, the subject position of the user has mutated. The “reader” now might be a player, a viewer, a user, or even (in the case of virtual communities) a resident. The relationship between such a reader and the text is one that

calls for exploration. Has the reader always been a player, actively participating in the narrative, even without the “participatory” structure? Has the change in medium fundamentally changed the relationship between reader and text? Or, has the structure adapted and mutated to accommodate the addition of new media—where reading, playing, viewing, using and residing with(in) a text are all branches of an age old relationship of power between individuals and socio-cultural artifacts.

Participatory media has a special relationship with its user in that it asks the user to respond to it or to take action in order for the text to function. This is not an entirely new relationship, but rather a mutation of the established reader-novel dynamic. The reader-response tradition put forth by scholars such as Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, and Stanley Fish has certainly suggested that the reader plays an active role in the meaning of a text. The reader is responsible for interpreting the text and, thereby, creates meaning specific to herself (using her own life experiences as context for her textual interactions). The reader can even subvert the structure of a text by skimming the parts she finds uninteresting or reading the end first. In doing so, she might become a player using the structural rules of the novel (read from page one to the end in order, do not skip passages) as a basis for meaningful resistance and authorizing her own meaning from the text. However, participatory media represents a shift in this relationship because it asks the reader to be active within the structure and imparts some control to her. In doing so, it invites her to explicitly become a producer of meaning.

There is an ongoing debate in game theory over the nature and definition of play, but for my purposes, the definition proffered by Eric Zimmerman’s essay “Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games” is appropriate as it provides a simple but useful relationship of play to structure: “Play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of

and also despite the more rigid structures of a system” (159). Thus, play in this sense is the space of resistance that is opened up by certain aspects of the structure (institutional discourse) of adolescent media. The adolescent subject is a player, negotiating between the rules of the system and her own desire for power and control. While the “rules” terminology makes sense in the context of an adolescent participating in a game, it might seem strange to extend this concept to the reading of *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels (or even reading in general). However, the structure of the novel and its presentation to the reader implies a set of rules or a contract between the reader and the novel.

It is justifiable to apply theories of play to texts that are not specifically marketed as games. For play to exist there must be rules (implicit or explicit). The rules of the text make it a location that is generative of subjectivity; they are not simply restraints but also markers of possibility. Without a structure, there is no way to create meaning; the *relationship* between the structure and the players is what creates meaning as Jesper Juul notes in his book *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*: “Rules specify *limitations* and *affordances*. They prohibit players from performing actions such as making jewelry out of dice, but they also add meaning to the allowed actions and this *affords* players meaningful actions that were not otherwise available; rules give games *structure*” (58, emphasis original). While Juul’s observation refers to more traditional games, it applies to *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels and games because they ask the reader to enter into a pact with the structure and use those constraints to create textual meaning, just as traditional games do.

By asking the reader to construct the narrative of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel, the novel creates a space for play that cannot be completely subsumed by the ideological or institutional purposes of the text. The adolescent can enter that space and become a player,

negotiating her position to the text and the meaning gathered from it. She is no longer the passive victim of the regulatory impulse of adolescent media, nor is she an extreme agent who can completely destroy the structures in a *meaningful* way<sup>3</sup>:

But even though the play only occurs because of these structures, the play is also exactly the thing that exists despite the system, the free movement within it, in the interstitial spaces between and among its components. Play exists in opposition to the structures it inhabits, at odds with the utilitarian functioning of the system. Yet play is at the same time an expression of a system, and intrinsically a part of it. (Zimmerman 159)

Much as the adolescent can be viewed as a middle ground between the oppositions of exploited and empowered, play is the middle ground between structural control and unbounded freedom. By examining the space created for play in participatory media for adolescents (through the tensions between media's institutional impulses and the transgressive actions these structures make possible), we can come to understand the subject position of the adolescent. As we will see in relationship to the four iterations of *The Abominable Snowman*, the adolescent is a player in these senses—both resigned to and manipulative of her captivity.

---

<sup>3</sup> The reader could always choose to destroy the novel or game, but in doing so she completely obliterates the relationship between herself and the novel/game and ultimately loses whatever power she meant to gain.

## CHAPTER 2

### *CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE* NOVELS

Each of the versions of *The Abominable Snowman* contains elements of institutional and ideological control. In regard to the original novel version, this thesis explores the elements of structure and content that delineate a specific adolescent subject position (the ideal adolescent) and then complicates that “confining” structure by illustrating the adolescent’s ability to become a player.

R.A. Montgomery’s *The Abominable Snowman* is the thirteenth book in the original *Choose Your Own Adventure* series and was published in May 1982. The book’s tagline is “You’re the star of the story” and it puts the reader in the middle of a Himalayan adventure. “You”<sup>1</sup> (the reader) and your friend Carlos are experienced mountain climbers, and together you have vowed to search the Himalayas for the elusive Yeti. The book, in total, contains 13 Yeti sightings, one helicopter crash, two alien encounters, and, if you are lucky, one unicorn sighting. But, the reader will not encounter all of these events in one reading unless, of course, she chooses to subvert the rules of the text—that is, to read out of the order prescribed by the institution. In order to navigate the narrative, the reader is asked to place herself within the story as “you” and make choices about how to proceed. As in all of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels, the first page(s) of the novel set up the backstory where the reader is informed of whom she is playing. In this case, “you” is a skilled mountain climber who raised funding for a Himalayan adventure. You must obtain permits and guidance for your trip, find your missing expedition partner, safely explore the icy paths through the mountains, and/or make your presence known to the Yeti. Your success is measured by whether or not you meet the Yeti, how

---

<sup>1</sup> “You” always indicates a reference to the reader of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel.

you prove yourself as a mountaineer, your courage, and your compassion for others. With 28 possible endings, there are several different paths to success, failure, or a combination thereof.

*The Abominable Snowman* is a prime example of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* format. Since their introduction in 1979, *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels have been popular with young adult readers.<sup>2</sup> Unlike most series fiction (for example: Nancy Drew, Tom Swift, etc.), *Choose Your Own Adventures* are not unified by characters or narrative theme. The sole constant between the titles is their narrative structure. Offering readers the ability to “choose” the next action within the narrative sequence, the series became a hit with its audience, spanned multiple re-printings<sup>3</sup>, and included over 180 titles by 1997. The commercial success of the original *Choose Your Own Adventure* series has spurred the publication of other “plot your own story” series including: pick-your-own-path books, adventure game books, and many others.<sup>4</sup> There are even educational versions that allow teens to explore and virtually enact the various lifestyle choices they will eventually have to make on their path to adulthood. But the premise and rhetoric of each series remains the same; you, the reader, must piece together the plot. You have been entrusted with the power to control the narrative. But even as the rhetoric suggests the

---

<sup>2</sup> Nick Montfort has done a very nice history of participatory media focusing on interactive fiction, but the origins of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* format can be attributed to the same developmental history as interactive fiction, coming from ancient riddles and the experimental literature of Raymond Queneau and the Oulipo. He mentions the format in passing: "The juvenile fiction series named *Choose Your Own Adventure*, of similar inspiration [Queneau's "A story as you like it"], began in 1979 with Edward Packard's *The Cave of Time*—too late to influence the early stages of interactive fiction, and in fact likely to have been at least vaguely inspired by actual computer programs, including very early interactive fiction. It was one of several series of childrens' books (in many languages) that asked readers to choose the next step to take after each page or so of text. There were more than two hundred such books published in the two main Bantam series, *Choose Your Own Adventure* and *Choose Your Own Adventure for Younger Readers*. *The Cave of Time* was itself made into a graphical adventure game by Bantam Software and published in 1985" (71).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the fifth book in the original series, *The Mystery of Chimney Rock* was in its 14<sup>th</sup> printing by 1982, just two years after its release.

<sup>4</sup> Despite the commercial success of the series, there has been little scholarly attention focused on the genre. Most references to *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels are found in the few works that deal with interactive fiction or describe the series' relationship to hypertext.

reader is empowered by the participatory narrative, the choices offered by the *Choose Your Own Adventure* structure are often illusory and the ideological implications of the structure itself promulgate a specific, controlled adolescent subject position, luring readers in with the seductive offer of control.

The positioning of *Choose Your Own Adventures* as literature for young adults is a calculated choice. The series appears to hand over authorial control to the reader, offering a group that is normally constructed as powerless (against adult and social authority) a means of control and empowerment. However, the structure of the novels governs the reader's power and creates a relationship between the adolescent and institutional authority. It constructs and carefully furnishes the appropriate amount of power to the adolescent reader, while allowing its authority to remain invisible and unquestioned within the text. Functionally, there is a double level of narrative power in a *Choose Your Own Adventure*. The position of the visible narrator is occupied by the reader who selects the narrative action; the invisible narrator is the one posing the choices who appears to cede his narrative power to the reader, while at the same time maintaining the structural and ideological authority of the novel and effectively constraining the agency of the reader. This is a modified version of what Trites refers to as the duplicity of adolescent literature in displacing the adolescent reader and resigning her to her lack of social authority: "It is as if these characters and the implied readers they are addressing must lose authority for a while to an adult, usually a parent figure, to gain personal power by the end of the narrative" (75). While the adolescent is not losing power to a parent figure, the choices she is permitted are structured for her by the novel (and, by extension, the adult author(s) of the novel).

This conflict between authority, agency, and repression is shared among all of the *Choose Your Own Adventures*. First, this thesis approaches the ways that the novels construct a

restrictive adolescent subject position based on their presentation of choice to the reader and the pressure they place on her to accept cultural ideologies and her own lack of power. Then it complicates the position of the adolescent subject by examining how the rigid structure of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* actually creates a space for resistance and agency in which the adolescent reader can challenge the subject position that has been created for her, thereby becoming a player.

### **Illusory Choice and Coded Endings**

One of the unique aspects of *Choose Your Own Adventures* is the entrance of the reader into the fictitious world. The reader becomes an actor within the story (the “you” who follows the broken but linear path to “the end”) and a subject selecting the path of the actor (the one who chooses the order of narrative events), yet the exact relationship between reader and narrator is unclear. The choices presented to the reader are stable; they always already exist in the text, waiting, as it were, for the reader to pick from among them. The unseen, unknown narrator who is not present in the novel’s plot (sometimes conflated with the author) poses these choices to the adolescent, limiting the possible behaviors the adolescent can explore and creating a sense of expectation about the appropriate course of action for the reader-player. The correct choices lead to socially acceptable, happy endings and the incorrect choices lead to depression, death, and sometimes an invitation to start over in hopes of reaching a more successful conclusion. The tone of the various endings and the construction of choices as correct or incorrect reinforce cultural ideologies and demonstrate to the adolescent the limitations of her power, both as a character within the story and as a subject outside the narrative events.

*The Abominable Snowman*’s endings run the gamut from the best possible ending to the worst, with a variety in between. Within the first few pages, the novel assigns the reader her primary objective: find and document the existence of Yeti. There are several endings that

accomplish this objective—each accompanied by its own level of fame, fortune, status, and virtuous behaviors.<sup>5</sup> The freedom of choice in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* format comes into question when the text uses cues to guide the reader toward choices that will lead to positive endings. For example, the reader comes to a point in the text where she is offered assistance by a Nepalese government official. If she accepts his help the first time it is offered, he joins the team under her direction, supplies her with needed equipment, and often nuanced knowledge of the area for her quest. If, however, she refuses the assistance of the Nepalese government official, she is offered the opportunity of apologizing (since she has greatly offended him) and he becomes the leader of her expedition; while his service is then invaluable, she has lost status/power because she is no longer in charge of the expedition. If she refuses him the position of leader (i.e., is not humble), then her adventure abruptly ends with the revocation of her permit to search for the Yeti and she returns home, unsuccessful in her search. Finally, if from the outset she refuses him and then refuses to apologize for the offense she has caused, ‘Nature plots against her’ and the monsoons make it impossible for her to continue her quest.

If the reader chooses against the trajectory of the text, the outcome is not positive and she is chastised for a lack of virtue, caution, humility, and/or judgment. Before the reader even selects the action, the text has indicated which path is the “incorrect” choice and will lead to an unpleasant trip home or even to the reader’s death. While being able to choose the incorrect path is a kind of agency (because the reader can resist the totalizing power of the text and find pleasure in or use value from the “unacceptable” outcomes), the novel’s ideological trajectory is established through its conscious attempt to guide the reader’s choices towards particular

---

<sup>5</sup> Here it becomes necessary to establish which version of *The Abominable Snowman* we are discussing. The version from the original run of the series (1982) and the newly released version (2005) differ in significant ways, which are discussed in detail in a later section. For now, the discussion is limited to examples from the original version.

outcomes and its punishment of her resistance with death. The static and predetermined nature of the reader's options (imbued with social assumptions about appropriate behaviors) places the reader within an institutional framework and set up the "rules" governing her interactions with the text. While the text does not explicitly state its policing impulses, it does attempt to condition the adolescent subject into ideal behaviors and motives.

The attentive reader soon realizes that a few of the endings in the book are more desirable than others. The endings that the novel conditions the reader to pursue are those that bring fame, wealth, and comfort or even superior mystical knowledge, while also allowing everyone involved to survive the hazardous trek. These desirable endings can only be reached if the reader graciously accepts the advice and help of the Nepalese people, does no harm to the Yeti, and is obedient to knowledgeable/official authority. For example, the "best" ending in the novel is the one that leads to "heaven-on-earth," without sacrificing the reader's friendship with her climbing partner. In order to reach this ending, the reader must pick the sequence of events where she values her friend's life more than her quest, asks for help from the proper officials, listens to her Nepalese guide, sacrifices herself by going into the scary thicket first (because only one person can pass through with ease), accepts the invitation of the Yeti (even though she is afraid), overcomes her fear in order to find her friend, and, finally, willingly and respectfully accepts the spiritual guidance of the Nepalese monks and several mythical beings. All of these decisions have socially positive functions that teach appropriate obedience to authority, selflessness, concern and compassion for others, and valuing spiritual rewards over material rewards. These are the desirable traits of the ideal, "responsible" adolescent—one who will obey authority and make sacrifices when necessary for the good of others.

The text challenges the reader to keep choosing actions that will lead to this “successful” ending, which exerts pressure on the reader to play the part of the ideal adolescent and perform socially desirable actions. Actions that are counter to “common sense” or lead to dangerous behaviors without selfless motives lead to negative endings. It would be cowardly to leave her partner in peril or endanger her Nepalese guide in order to save/protect herself, and the text refuses to reward those behaviors. If the reader is not brave enough to face the hardships of the trail and her own fear of the Yeti, she loses out on the glory and fame that comes from saving stranded travelers, documenting the Yeti and returning home triumphant, or, even better, discovering the secret of mythical beings (the Yeti and the unicorn) and heaven-on-earth.

But her choices do not just affect her own future; they can lead to the suffering and deaths of those around her as well. If, for example, the reader chooses to ignore the warning of her guide and brave the icefall (where “Without warning, tons of ice come down upon you... Few people will risk going there” (Montgomery 1982, 69)), she and her guide are immediately crushed and killed when the ice fall buries them. While there are other places in the text where taking a risk leads to a positive outcome, the language here makes it clear that the dangers are too great; the text places doubt in to the reader’s mind, “You understand the danger. It is well known that these regions have taken many lives. You had hoped that you could avoid the dangers of the Khumbu Icefall” (69). If the reader gives in to the “temptation,” she is punished with death *and*, to add insult to injury, the text makes sure that she does not even get to glimpse the Yeti to slightly redeem her brash choice.

On the other hand, if the reader chooses caution, she still reaches an end-game, but it is one that matches her cautious persona. She must leave without documenting a Yeti, not because she failed, but because she has reached a greater understanding about the rights of the Yeti: “That

night, all your supplies mysteriously disappear. It is further warning to leave things as they are in these high mountains. The Yeti have their own way of life, and they do not want you—or anyone else—to disturb it. The End” (89). The text reassures the reader that her caution was warranted, but (as a result of the previous choices she has made involving looking for her partner and not taking on a government official as a team member) she still leaves Nepal empty-handed if a little bit wiser. By presenting these various negative endings, the text encourages the reader to accept a specific set of values and act accordingly.

The outcome of each choice seem designed to socialize the adolescent reader into accepting and naturalizing positive cultural and ideological impulses because “it is for the best” and will lead to the most successful outcome for their lives. Through the calculated structure and content of the novel, the adolescent reader learns to perform a specific identity in order to be rewarded with more social power or to take on a desirable/respected persona. However, the power of the institutional discourse does not negate any power the reader has in interfering with the text’s didactic aims. If the reader takes the structure as indicative of guidelines for participation (rules), she can actively engage the structure and content to accomplish her own aims.

### **Constructing the Boundaries of Agency**

From the very outset of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel, the reader is given a defined subject position and placed within the particular power structure of the novel’s choice system. The original *Choose Your Own Adventures* include a bolded exclamation before page one, such as this one from the 1982 version of *The Abominable Snowman*:

**WARNING!!!!**

Do not read this book straight through from beginning to end. These pages contain many different adventures you can have in the Himalayas as you search for the Abominable Snowman. From time to time as you read along, you will be asked to make decisions and

choices. The adventures you take will be the result of your choices. After you make each choice, follow the instructions to see what happens to you next. Be careful!  
Mountaineering can be dangerous. Think before you make a move. You cannot go back. The mountain range is vast. The terrain will often be unexplored. Your expedition will be difficult. Good luck!

This warning appears in different variations throughout the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series.

One variant states “Your choice may lead to success or disaster!” and “*You* are responsible because *you* choose!” (Packard 1982). The warning in each book constructs the reader as an agent whose specific purpose is to select a pathway in the direction of “success” and “adventure.” Her choice defines the narrative and dictates the consequences. But the reader must still “follow the instructions” in the text to reach the consequences that it has manufactured for her. Her position of unbounded agency is immediately limited by the novel; she is *not* to read the text through linearly. She *must* make the choices at hand and, hopefully, she will choose fame and fortune and/or to responsibly navigate the dangerous terrain; if not, she will find disaster.

This warning represents the initial pact between reader and text that allows her to become a player. As Bernard Perron writes in his essay "From Gamers to Players and Gameplayers", “the player then knows that the rules of a given game (or even of play, as we’ll see) will limit his moves. But he accepts those by playing....The player knows his or her choices might be very limited and that his or her freedom will be controlled in some ways but will act as if these were not” (241-242). The reader is not an uninitiated, unthinking person capable of only accepting what the text gives her, but rather an active and *willing* participant in the illusion of the play. She accepts that the novel (by inviting her to participate in its construction) will provide some limitations in order to make her choices meaningful. The text brings her into the space of participation only if she agrees to play (mostly) by its rules. If she refuses this initial pact with the text, she cannot take on the position of a player; she is exiled from the system and not allowed to participate in the meaning-making process.

As part of this pact, the reader is told she may go on the adventure, but to do so she must assume the position of the primary agent (“you”) within the narrative and operate within specific constraints. She must agree to make choices when the unseen narrator calls upon her to do so, and she must agree to take responsibility for events and actions that result from this choice, even if she would not perform any of them were she truly in the situation. This creates an interesting slippage of the reader into the character of “you”. To borrow a term from video game theory, the character “you” in the story becomes the reader’s avatar. The power and popularity of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel comes from this invocation of the second person voice. The text suggests that the reader is alive within the story-world, participating in the creation of meaning.

However, this is an illusory second person voice. The “you” (even from the introductory warning) becomes not the reader but an avatar representing the ideal adolescent subject (according to the novel). The avatar acts within the implicit ideological framework of the text, performing actions that are often stereotypical and encoded with assumptions about race, gender, and class that the reader is forced to assume through the second person voice. The “you” language automatically implicates the reader within the text, but the introductory set up of each *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel also suggests that the “you” is not the reader per se but an enhanced, imaginary reader. The adolescent reader has to imagine herself as capable of the actions included in the text and be able to incorporate the backstory provided. Therefore, she creates a fictive “you” or avatar to enact the actions of the text.

The reader is asked to graft herself on to the traits of the avatar and the text suggests that she is empowered through her identification with it. By identifying with the avatar, she is able to test actions and take on the “power” of choice; thus (recalling the purpose of adolescent

literature), the reader is taking on a more “mature” position and the novel steps her through the process of problem solving that is required of a socialized adult. It is this identification with the avatar that allows the reader to predict the trajectory of the path behind the choices she is presented with. Her understanding of and ability to embody the avatar’s boundaries and backstory alters her ability to find the “successful” path through the narrative. If she identifies with the avatar, the reader might make choices that she would not make if she (without the backstory experience) were in the situation as herself or she might employ a different kind of logic or problem solving to figure out what path to take.

By taking on the avatar, the reader is then empowered to make choices that will lead to the “best” results. The avatar is a site of agreement between the text and the reader—part of the pact that makes reading a *Choose Your Own Adventure* a game. The text agrees to build choices and behaviors that are consistent with the avatar and the reader uses the knowledge of the avatar to traverse the text. The reader’s avatar, then, becomes the object of manipulation, bargaining, and negotiation between the reader’s desires and the text’s desires to institutionalize and socialize the reader. While the structure of the novel attempts to contain the reader in the subject position of the ideal adolescent, the reader can resist how the novel positions her by becoming a player through reading the novel against itself, using her understanding of the textual rules to mutate the purposes of the text, and/or withholding her identification with the avatar, “you”.

### **Resisting the Structure**

Up to this point, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* reader has primarily been constructed as one who is at the mercy of narrative and ideological structures of the text. But the reader is far from powerless; she takes an active role in shaping and redefining her position as a subject. The reader-as-player has the power to violate the rules of the text to some extent. She can cheat the text, but she cannot completely disregard all of its rules and still retain a relationship of power

with it. For example, she might purposefully misread the novel by reading all the outcomes and choosing her favorite without relying on the element of chance or by returning to an earlier point in the structure to try a different option or by reading the novel linearly instead of following the options set out for her. The reader can choose how she relates to the avatar presented within the text. If she refuses identification with the avatar as an extension of herself (and, thus, have an impulse to self-preservation), she might choose to aim for the worst possible ending. She might choose a goal for her reading of the text that is different from the text's stated goal of survival, fame, and/or spiritual enlightenment. In doing so, she might subvert the ideological intentions of the novel and avoid allowing her choices to be controlled by the text's cues. However, each of these options is only a form of resistance in that the ideological and structural formation of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel creates the conditions for its existence. As Foucault notes

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault 100-101)

The *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel functions based on a particular discourse of power, and the structure of the novels delineates the reader's power and initiates a relationship between the adolescent and institutional authority. But, while the novel defines certain boundaries, this does not completely undercut the agency of the reader. In actuality, it is this limitation of agency that allows the adolescent subject to participate as an active consumer, and perhaps even as an active producer of the text.

To fully understand the adolescent subject position as it relates to participatory media, we must return to the idea of a reader as a player. She takes on an active role beyond just a passive scanning of the text and following the appropriate, provided paths. In a participatory format, the

reader becomes to some degree a player, manipulating the game world created by the text.

Games cannot function without rules: “The rules of a game add *meaning* and *enable actions* by setting up *differences* between potential moves and events” (Juul 19, emphasis original). This can be related to the position of the adolescent subject in relation to the game-task set up by a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel. The existence of the rules creates a space for agency, as Gareth Schott explains (citing the example of videogames) in his essay “Agency In and Around Play:”

Focusing on agency, then, implies that the player does more than simply respond to stimulation, but also explores and manipulates the environment and seeks to influence it. In this respect, gameplay may be no different from many other areas of human activity. It is a regulated activity, governed by the boundaries of social and physical environments, but equally in real life we live in environments that place constraints on our behaviors.... Gameplayers may seek to accommodate themselves to the game’s rules and objectives, but they may also seek to exercise control and behave otherwise. Agency, then, involves *intentionality*: it is not just a matter of expecting or predicting future events, but also of intervening proactively in order to bring them about. (134-139, emphasis original)

In becoming a player (and in order to enact meaningful resistance), the reader of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* must *intentionally* respond to the rules set forth by the novel, while deciphering the text’s intentions and analyzing her position in relation to those intentions. As the text of the novel is ideologically coded, she can recognize where the text wishes to take her and choose to accept or subvert that desire. The existence of the rules (choose a branch and follow its twists and turns to its conclusion, making choices at each junction and hopefully ‘winning’ by garnering the best outcome) is what makes the experience of the reader meaningful.

Recalling the Fiske quote, cited above, the pleasure in popular media comes at least in part from the reader’s interaction with the text and the conflict produced by reading against the dominant meanings. Without defined rules, the reader could not take pleasure in subverting the structural authority of the novel, for example by reading it linearly or cheating by looking at all the outcomes before choosing a path. Anecdotally, I have yet to meet a single person who reads

*Choose Your Own Adventure* novels and does not admit to “cheating” the structure in some way. Cheating is an expected outcome of the participatory structure, which calls in to question its position as a method of resistance. If cheating is an expected, then it might be a way for the structure to provide false agency to the reader. Because she can cheat, she is not controlled by the structure. However, because cheating is expected and (at least supposedly) one cheats to reach desirable outcomes, cheating is not a radical kind of agency. Cheating, then, becomes a sanctioned form of rebellion for the reader. It becomes a form of resistance in that it allows the adolescent access to herself as a subject and alters/subverts the decision-making process.

The structure of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel is what makes any form of cheating meaningful (it cannot be cheating if there are no rules to transgress) and, thus, the structure curbs the possibility for unbounded agency through cheating. The tension between institutional structure and reader agency creates play and leads to negotiated meanings/positionings. As Zimmerman notes that

the real trick is that the designed structure can guide and engender play, but never completely script it in advance. If the interaction is completely predetermined, there’s no room for play in the system. The author of a choose-your-own-adventure creates the structure that the reader inhabits, but the play emerges out of that system as the reader navigates through it. Even if the reader breaks the structure by cheating and skipping ahead, that is merely another form of play within the designed system. (159)

The reader can resist the structure, but that act of transgression is only meaningful because the structure exists in the first place. The adolescent can only modify/fracture her subject position because the structure tries to frame it to begin with. Zimmerman raises an important point that both the text and the reader must share in the illusion that the reader’s choices matter. The choices must come at moments of impact within the text and the reader must feel like the outcomes of her choices significantly modify the textual journey. And this is the reader’s power of play. The structure is dependent on her willingness to play in order for narrative meaning to be

established. If the reader believes that the endings are too scripted or that her choices do not matter, she will stop participating in the structure and the *potential* narrative<sup>6</sup> represented by the unread novel will never come to fruition. The text needs the reader-player as much as the reader-player needs the text to create a meaningful relationship within the discourse of power.

However, the structural subversion (reading against the structure) is not the only one of note. The reader/player can also subvert the ideological tendencies of the narrative, purposefully choosing endings or branches that have negative outcomes. These tests can be seen as enacting resistance (purposefully putting the reader in conflict with the narrative authority of the text) and as a way for an adolescent reader to try out the different ideological positions that the text has delineated. In real life, she may choose not to challenge authority or not to commit socially unacceptable actions, but she can try out those positions in the novel and test out the ideological backlash. While the content of the *Choose Your Own Adventures* is not extremely original, it often includes death, horror, crime, magic, supernatural events, spiritual awakenings, and various international intrigues. An adolescent can use the novels as a sounding board for behaviors to gauge social reaction and, perhaps, come to an understanding of how the “ideal” adolescent that represented by the prescribed “happy ending” has been constructed. This is what makes participatory media for adolescents an important area of research. Because of its historical relationship to riddles and games and its continued extension into controversial media like videogames, examining the slippage between reader and player can inform our concept of the “adolescent” and help us understand her subject position as a player of culture.

The adolescent is offered an opportunity to move from consumer to producer through participatory media. While this participation can be non-generative (e.g., she does not create new

---

<sup>6</sup> As Montfort explains: “a potential narrative [is] a system that produces narrative during interaction” (23). He is working off of the Oulipo’s concept of potential literature (26).

endings for the novel), the reader is allowed to create meanings based on her own pathway through the text. As the technological component of the media becomes more widely available, the adolescent's ability to act as producer increases. While the publication process of novels is highly controlled and the adolescent's ability to act as a producer of the text (as an artifact) is blocked, her inclusion in the process of storytelling and meaning-making can act as a catalyst for her to question the means of production and her relationship to them. Starting with *Choose Your Own Adventure* formats might lead the adolescent reader to formats where she can act as an actual producer, programming her own interactive fiction games and/or modifying and programming virtual worlds. But the adolescent's ability to become a producer is predicated on recognizing and accepting, rejecting, or negotiating the ideological structures to which she is subject. She cannot modify a virtual community until she understands the rules governing it, just as she cannot take pleasure from transgressing the structural and ideological rules of the novel without recognizing the structures and their importance in organizing and defining her agency. It is through this recognition of the "rules" and her posturing with them that she becomes an active player.

Butler reminds us that a subject position represents a state of dependence. In order to be a subject and to have any kind of agency, there must first be a structure to which one can be subject:

If Foucault could argue that a sign could be taken up, used for purposes counter to those for which it was designed, then he understood that even the most noxious terms could be owned, that the most injurious interpellations could also be the site of radical reoccupation and resignification.... As a further paradox, then, only by occupying—being occupied by—that injurious term can I resist and oppose it, recasting the power that constitutes me as the power I oppose. (Butler 104)

In order to be meaningfully empowered, the adolescent subject must first internalize and then negotiate her social position. She has to enter into a relationship (pact) with the power

structure. Once she acknowledges this relationship, she can exert her ability to assign a different meaning to the signs and structures around her. While Butler's and Foucault's arguments work with more extreme forms of domination and subversion ("radical reoccupation and resignification"), the less radical position of the adolescent as player is important in its relationship to the impulse to normalization seen in adolescent texts. Agency does not have to mean (and perhaps cannot mean) having the freedom to reach outside the structure or the freedom to avoid every discourse that might try to organize or structure the subject. Instead, agency in the context of the media we are exploring encompasses the ability to occupy, understand, and redirect the way the "ideal" adolescent is constructed.

### **Changing with the Times**

Up to this point, the discussion has been specifically about the 1982 version of *The Abominable Snowman*. The differences between the two versions (1982 and 2005) are subtle but significant, and they simultaneously suggest a further restriction of adolescent power and an increased desire to assist the adolescent in her play with the text. The end-game sequences of the new version are more didactic, which leads to a violation of the relationship between player and text and causes difficulties with the reader's ability to identify with and manipulate her avatar. On the other hand, changes in the illustrations show an increased desire to see the adolescent subject identify with the avatar she has created, and the new introductory warning acknowledges the reader's agency and her importance to the text, more directly inviting her to play within the structure.

While the sequence of events in both versions of *The Abominable Snowman* is exactly the same, the newer version includes additional sentences at the end of 10 of the 28 end-game sequences. These new sentences remove the ambiguities of some of the original endings by more firmly casting the ending as positive or negative ("Regretfully you decide to withdraw and leave

the *Yeti* to their lives in the high Himalayas. You know that it's *the right thing* to do" (2005, 89, emphasis mine)). Many additions in the new version also introduce temporality to the ending (a gesture toward the future), while the original version of the book remains firmly in the present moment. This allows the original version to avoid violating the reader's subject position by arbitrarily aging the avatar and forcing the reader to figuratively "grow up". For example, one addition informs the reader that "years later you entertain your grandchildren with stories of finding the *Yeti*" (2005, 103, emphasis original). This ending includes assumptions about the reader's life goals and values of family, as well as forcing her avatar to age.

But the most telling changes come from the endings that serve to more strictly indicate the positive or negative nature of the ending. In the original version of the book, one of the endings leaves the reader heading for the police after catching some poachers. It says "You forget about the supplies *for now*, and go to the police. The End" (63, emphasis mine). This ending leaves open the possibility that the reader was later able to get supplies and continue on the quest; it is a complex ending, one where the novel's ideological impact is harder to decode. The "correct" behavior given the situation is not obvious to the reader. This gives the reader-player more room to interpret the actions she took and their ramifications. But the newer version of the book adds two additional sentences, "Later you decide to cancel the expedition for the season. There will always be another chance" (59). While this ending does allow for the possibility of eventually reaching the goals the text has set out for the reader, it forces her to cancel the current expedition, and more strongly punishes the behaviors that led to becoming trapped by the poachers. This recodes the ending, making it more obviously negative than its predecessor. Endings like this more staunchly emphasize the ideological structure that the adolescent is playing within and the rules the adolescent is playing with/against become less flexible.

Another example of this occurs when the reader chooses to refuse to trust her guide and leaves the monastery (out of fear) to search for the Yeti on her own. The original version of the book allows the reader to interpret the ending as positive, negative, both, or neither: "You collect Carlos from in front of the monastery and continue your search for the Yeti. The End" (72). However, the new version makes sure that the reader knows this ending is a failure, "Months later you are no closer to success than you were at the start. The *Yeti* are elusive and your funds run out. You tried and tried hard. Your grandfather's words come back to you, 'Everyone has the right to fail. Take chances; live life!'" (72). The reader did not take the chance when she could and, thus, asserted her "right to fail." Instead of leaving the reader's completion of the quest a mystery, her best effort becomes futile against the denial of the "spiritual" awakening that would occur had she chosen to stick with her guide and the monastery, although this awakening is no longer as notably spiritual in the new version of the book.

The new edition backs away from some of the spirituality of the older edition. In the "best" ending, the concept of finding "Heaven-on-Earth" (Montgomery 1982, 59) is replaced with finding your way to "knowledge" and now you can begin the "real" journey (one of enlightenment) (Montgomery 2005, 60). This change in language suggests a shift in what society considers valuable and what the tasks of the adolescent are; she must seek knowledge, but now it is not necessarily explicitly spiritual knowledge. Unlike the previous example, this alteration makes the ending slightly more ambiguous and general, opening up more space for the adolescent to interpret "knowledge" as it applies to her life. But similar to most of the revised endings, the changes to the novel represent a cultural-historical shift in society's relationship to adolescents and children through media. As each new genre or medium is developed, it provides a new path to agency and, often, a new level of "freedom" that causes a panic. Subsequent

versions of the genre or artifacts of the medium must then reflect more control or become more institutionalized. The change between “Heaven-on-Earth” and finding one’s way to “knowledge” indicates a neutralization of some of the more radical didactic elements of *The Abominable Snowman*. Both versions of the novel are invested in Buddhism, Nepalese spirituality and lore, and reverence for nature. However, the newer version has to alter and soften some of its language to make the spiritually didactic element more “appropriate” for its young audience.

This alteration is part of a larger shift to illustrating the consequences of actions and further limiting and refining the element of choice now that the *Choose Your Own Adventure* genre is over 25 years old. The choices available must, to some extent, conform to the social and institutional impulses of the time and the revised novel must make the choices and end-games acceptable to parents, as well as adolescents, in order to reach its audience. The new endings add consequences that were not present in the original version and alter the direct spirituality of the novel; these are both symptoms of an increased social concern over the freedom of adolescents and children, as well as the capability of the medium to provide unrestricted choice. The threat represented by the genre of the novels and the content (representative of late 1970s and early 1980s values) had to be controlled through the revision of a few key passages. This need to further delimit the power of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* genre will become more evident as we move in to a discussion of the DVD game in a later section.

However, the new endings do not and *cannot* eliminate all of the supernatural, spiritual, and natural elements of the plot. Both the new version of the novel and the original version revolve around encounters with the supernatural—the yeti, aliens, and unicorns play an integral role in the “successful” endings. Why have these controversial elements not undergone revision to change them in to more “rational” sequences, i.e. narrative pathways that might serve the

didactic and institutional purposes of the literature even more clearly by providing the adolescent with real world choices she might actually encounter? The answer to this question lies in the genre. To work as a popular novel and as an engaging *Choose Your Own Adventure*, *The Abominable Snowman* must provide unexpected and fantastic results for *some* of the choices it provides the reader. If every choice followed a direct, logical, real-world path of reasoning, there would not be the exciting potential of the narrative that engages the reader as a player.<sup>7</sup> The novel must offer moments of the unexpected so that the reader will remain engaged with the novel as a site of possibility. If the reader could absolutely predict the outcome of every decision, there would be no game and, more importantly, no negotiation of power between the reader and the novel. Unexpected results allow the reader to see a specific series of actions and behaviors in a particular social light (the novel's power) and allow the reader to play with the unexpected (the reader's power).

Not only do the new endings represent a social "sanitation" of the novel's controversial elements (not showing enough explicit future consequences and advocating too openly for a specific spiritual path), but a few of the new endings seem to eliminate the significance of the reader's choices from the novel. These endings make the reader-player's choice seem arbitrary and betray the pact that the reader-as-player has with the text. One such ending refuses the reader her memory of the event, forcing the avatar to forget the journey she has made. Instead of leaving the ending ambiguous with "Several minutes later you look back, not knowing whether you made the right choice or not," the new version of the end-game tacks on a final sentence, "Your memory of recent past events is blurring, slipping, vanishing" (63). While this does not

---

<sup>7</sup> There are explicitly "educational" pick-your-own-path books. They follow a much more explicitly institutional purpose to keep adolescents from exhibiting unacceptable social behaviors such as drinking, using drugs, and having pre-marital sex. See Neal Starkman's 1988 book *Your Decision* or Christine DeVault's 1989 series *The Sexuality Decision-Making Series for Teens*, which includes *Too Soon For Sex?* (abstinence), *Taking Chances with Sex* (birth control), and *Don't Let it Get Around* (STDs).

actually affect the reader (making her forget the story), it removes the avatar's ability to reflect on choices that led to the end and makes the loss more final. If what might have happened was important enough for the avatar's memory to be purged, perhaps the reader now knows what the "right" choice was. The "right" choice could not be one that leads to losing control over one's own memories. If the reader identifies with the avatar, this new ending sharply constrains her subject position as an enactor of the potential narrative and asks her to take on the lack of reflection and lack of power manifested in the new ending.

The other quirky new ending that interferes with the slippage of reader into avatar is the "dream" ending. In the original version, it was possible to be shot by a Yeti cannon and die (the image of the Yeti cannon is "the last thing you remember" (33)). But in the new version it reads, "And that is the last thing you remember—until you wake up in your own bed. It must have been the awesome trippledecker with mustard, anchovies, and chocolate syrup. The End" (32). While this ending leaves the avatar alive (an improvement in state to be sure), it also makes the entire choice experience of the reader part of a dream. Perhaps death by Yeti cannon was deemed too violent an outcome for adolescent readers, which suggests an interesting social relationship to weapons since death by a crushing ice slide is still considered appropriate in the 2005 text. Aside from being a cheap way (a soap opera tactic) to exit the narrative, it removes any power the reader might have felt she had in the "real world" of the narration and translates it into the dream world. If the reader is actively trying on persona and identifying with her avatar, this new ending suggests that any control she has is only in her dreams and the novel has control over her. It can destroy the story world (which seems to be mostly based on the real world) and completely remove any sense the reader has of being able to guess what comes next. The reader cannot expect the narrative to remain consistent and make choices based on its internal logic. The pact

between reader and structure has been violated; thus, the reader begins to suspect that her choices are arbitrary and she slips back from active player to victim at the mercy of the text. The reader is now insecure in her relationship to power as an agent because the narrative removes the possibility of meaningful resistance. These less ambiguous new endings (for the most part) represent a reinforcement of the institutional desires that the text must graft on to the subject.

In its re-released edition, not only has *The Abominable Snowman*'s text been revised, but so have the illustrations. The more recent book has a new illustrator and the difference in the illustrations is striking. Aside from the improved graphic quality and the photograph-like representational style (due perhaps to changes in publishing technology), the illustrations in the new book do not interfere with the relationship between reader and avatar. In most *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels, the avatar is a product of the reader's imagination. She is not assigned physical traits, a gender, or a sexual preference, nor is she depicted in the novel itself. But the original *The Abominable Snowman* has illustrations of the reader's avatar sporting short curly hair and a body unobscured by bulky winter clothing. This removes some of the power the reader has to invent her own avatar. She might even interpret the images as gender specific, which then might lead her to interpret the behaviors exhibited in the book as gender coded.

The slippage between reader and avatar is threatened by this visual representation of the character. The new version, as a general rule, avoids showing any part of the avatar; however, a few of the illustrations show an avatar who is carefully rendered as gender neutral with no noticeable physical features (always wearing huge bulky winter clothing and with its face masked). This movement away from visually defining the avatar represents an acknowledgment of the pact between reader-as-player and the text. The relationship between reader and text only works insofar as the text does not destroy the illusory context that the reader has agreed to

participate in. When the avatar remains visually unidentified, the text does not violate the reader by making her feel that her presence in the text does not matter. The invisibility of the avatar allows the fictive “you” to remain the reader and instead of becoming a pre-defined character with whom the reader is expected to identify.

Finally, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels that are currently being re-released carry a notably different warning to the reader than that typical of the earlier editions. The new warning is one that acknowledges the reader’s agency as a player. While the wrong choice still might end in disaster or death, the reader is encouraged not to despair, “At anytime, YOU can go back and make another choice, alter the path of your story, and change its result” (Montgomery 2005). No longer does the text imply that the reader’s choices are irrevocable or that the reader cannot subvert the text’s rules by refusing to follow each choice to its inevitable conclusion. The recognition of the reader as a player with her own motivations changes the relationship of power between the text and reader. This new pact between them acknowledges the text’s dependence on the reader to move it out of *potential* narrative and into meaningful, enacted narrative. It also illustrates that the adolescent subject position has changed over time. In the last 25 years, identity politics, technological advancements, reader-response criticism, cultural studies, and media theory have all converged to change the shape of “adolescence”. And it may be possible to detect evidence of this in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. And as the concept and role of the adolescent has changed, the media and form of information she uses has changed. As participatory media moves into digital formats, the position of adolescent-as-player must be further analyzed. *The Abominable Snowman* has now been adapted for other media (WWW and DVD), which leads to the question of how the medium of a text for adolescent readers changes

the adolescent subject position and the ability of the adolescent to participate in its creation, maintenance, and mutation.

### CHAPTER 3 FROM MANUAL PARTICIPATION TO WEB-BASED MANIPULATION

In general, we already refer to users of games (WWW or DVD) as players, so it may seem strange to take this up as an argument. However, the use of the word player to designate “one who plays a game” is fundamentally different from the subject position designated by the term player. A person who plays a game is not automatically a player subject (reader-player); to take on the subject position of player, the user must consciously engage with the structural (ideological and medial) of the game. What is of interest here is the spaces that the structure instantiates for resistance and agency, and how the adaptation of the potential narrative closes, alters, and/or restructures those spaces of resistance. Working with adaptations from the print versions of *The Abominable Snowman* allows for a more direct examination of how medium intersects with the position of adolescent-as-player. For this purpose, the two new digital texts/formats of *The Abominable Snowman* are examined in turn: the web-based game and the DVD game.

*The Abominable Snowman*'s accompanying website promises the reader of the traditional book a new “secret” ending if she chooses to play the web-based game. The concept of extending a print text through an online website provides for many possibilities; it seems like a promising step in allowing the adolescent to move from passive consumer to active producer by requiring more skill-based interactions. However, in this particular case, the web-based game fails in the execution. The website assumes that the reader comes to the site expecting to enhance her experience with the book and find new material (the promised secret ending). The web-based game directs her to read from a specific page in the book to set up her interaction with the game. Thus, the contract that the reader made with the book by agreeing to take on the adventure is extended to the web-based game. The reader expects that the web-based game will follow the

same kind of institutional frameworks that the novel has set up, but also expects there to be a new set of rules that she must take on in order to participate within the new medium.

After she has refreshed her memory of the story from the print text, the reader can move on with the web-based game. The game provides her some new back story in order to situate the game she is expected to play within the context of the larger narrative she has been creating. In the book, the reader has found her team member's backpack on the trail and must decide whether to continue on the trail or not; the web-based game then intervenes in the narrative. The reader must search through this backpack looking for clues. In order to sort the items, the reader must play a matching game and her performance in the game will dictate the outcome of the adventure. Now the game gives her a new set of rules that she must follow to successfully move on in the narrative: "There should be two of each item inside this backpack. Successfully match them all to help your friend Carlos. Fail and Carlos is on his own..." ("Choose Your Own Adventure Books: the Abominable Snowman"). The wording of the instructions immediately sets up an institutional relationship between the game and the reader-player. Success and failure have been defined. The web-based game is much more direct in delineating which option is the negative option, because the choice is predicated on the reader's skill at completing the task. The reader must acknowledge these rules (choose pairs, do it in the time allowed) and click the "play" button to enter into the game.

The rules narrowly define success and failure (100% matches + within the time allotted = success) and success can only be obtained through one pathway. This is encoded within the web-based game format—it is goal/progress-oriented and, unlike the text version of the story, it is temporal in nature. Before the reader could take all the time she wanted in making a decision, but in the new format she can only rely on her skill in manipulating the web-based game (including

using the mouse, identifying the pictures, and remembering their placement). Her acuity in traversing the interface and utilizing the mouse are the elements that she exerts control over. The element of physical control creates the adolescent as a different kind of player-subject. Unlike the print text, in which the reader became a player by thinking about the choice structure and using her ability to guess potential paths and subvert their meanings to increase her power over the text, the web-based game user becomes a player in her manipulation of the graphical interface and her talent/skill.

In essence, she is no longer choosing the path so much as she is breaking the path (like the first explorer in unknown territory). The reader is no longer supposed to just choose; instead she must prove herself worthy/capable of that choice. This engagement of the reader's skill facilitates her movement into the role of player. Her actions matter and she gets direct feedback about her abilities (a score). However, unless she can physically hack the code of the game (the digital equivalent of cheating), her options for resistance are limited. How then can the adolescent resist the structure of the web-based game? She might engage her own goals instead of trying to complete the matching process as fast as possible.<sup>1</sup> However, once she understands the rules of the game (i.e., there is no points-based penalty for wrong guesses but it takes longer to move on from wrong matches than correct matches), she can begin to manipulate the outcome of the game. By understanding which actions will get her points and which ones will cost her points, she can manipulate her score.

If the reader accomplishes the task the game has set for her within the time limit, she is directed back to a particular point in the book and placed in a positive text-based narrative path. If she fails to complete the task, she is directed back to the book and placed in a negative text-

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, the reader might decide to see how close she can get to the time limit without losing or might "fail" on purpose to see where the game takes her in the narrative.

based narrative path. This is the point where the web-based game fails to live up to both its potential and its rhetoric. While the idea of the reader becoming a player by physically participating in and manipulating the text is exciting (a step towards actual production), this particular web-based game only includes one slice of the narrative. There are no other web-based games that extend the text further nor are there levels of the one available abominable snowman game.

Ironically, if the reader plays through the game successfully, she finds herself right back where she would have been had she made one of the choices presented to her in the next two sequences of the novel. This is a violation of the adolescent's position as player. Her skill and participation do not really matter to the narrative arc of the larger text. The web-based game simply replaces one decision that she would have made in the print text and does not alter the narrative. If the reader's actions do not force change or elicit a response from the text, then any agency the adolescent has is denied. Her participation is no longer *meaningful* and does not open up a space for play within the system. This particular example is a violation of the position of reader-as-player, even though it still allows her the same ability to enact a potential narrative because it asks for greater participation and skill on her part, but does not use the advantages of the new medium to augment the outcome. If the reader can reach that narrative conclusion by following the rules of the print text, why should she agree to a second set of rules when the web-based game does not deliver a new ending or supplement her current knowledge of the story? This violation of the reader's relationship with the structure of the game only occurs if she reaches the "successful" outcome, however. Should she fail to complete the game, she is still sent back to the print version of the text, but she is placed on a new narrative pathway—one that

she could not have reached without playing the web-based game from her point of departure in the print text.

In theory, this type of web application could add more dimensionality to *Choose Your Own Adventures* by incorporating skill and strategy along with the text-based elements. This would support the adolescent-as-player and, hopefully, foster the adolescent as producer. But in its execution, this particular web-based game fails to add additional value to the text. It interrupts the print narrative for a single frame and it returns the triumphant reader to the same path she might follow in the print version. Instead of offering a “secret ending” with new content and allowing the reader the ability to further manipulate the potential narrative, the web-based game offers only a momentary diversion that does not meaningfully alter her ability to resist the structure of the novel or the game. Despite this particular web-based game’s narrow and confining scope, the possibility in this kind of cross over between print media and digital media cannot be overlooked. It accentuates the linkage between reader (of a text) and player (of a game), treating them as one and the same, and facilitating the movement from passive consumer to active participant, expecting that the reader will have no trouble moving between her role as player within the print text and as player of an online text.

## CHAPTER 4 ADAPTING AND RE-CREATION: CYOA DVD GAMES

The final iteration of *The Abominable Snowman* for examination is the newly released DVD “Interactive Movie” game. The DVD “stars” the three North family siblings (Benji, Crista, and Marco) as they journey to Nepal to meet up with their Uncle and continue their dead parents’ quest to find and document the Yeti. It follows a strict branching tree structure and offers two choices at each branch. Each decision leads to a 3-6 minute video segment in which the reader watches the plot unfold and is presented with another choice or an end-game sequence. There are 11 possible end-games that the user can reach, with consequences that vary from death by tigers to life-long family adventure and the happiness of Shangri-La.

The adaptation from novel to DVD game presents one significant problem for this analysis. While the intended audience of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels is one on the cusp of adolescence (10-12), the intended audience of the DVD is younger (7-9). This change in audience is most evident in the inclusion of a “Mom’s Guide” to the DVD on the DVD’s website. The purpose of the guide is to provide a “cheat sheet” for parents so that they may talk their child through the choices the child will be making. It offers tips on how to evaluate the child’s decision making process by what character she identifies with and what each choice teaches the child. For example, if the child chooses to have the North siblings parachute (ditch) out of a plane, the guide provides the parent with some information about what will come next: “if they [the child and the characters] choose to ditch: They will see the freeing of the animals of the Himalayan’s [sic] that the poacher was hiding away. They will learn the right thing to do is to trust their instincts” (Debroff 23). The guide provides questions the parent can ask the child to “help” her successfully navigate the DVD and to impress upon her the decision-making process and social implications of her decisions.

While using adolescent theory to discuss the DVD is somewhat problematic because of the change in audience, the DVD game is invaluable to our discussion because it represents another step in the narrowing that the revision of the original *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel began. It may work with a younger audience, but it suggests the same social sense of panic over the ability of children to choose and the necessity of teaching them the right choices. The DVD game's change in audience is a symptom of the general social fear that children are maturing sooner and participating in negative social behaviors sooner. Therefore, a younger audience needs to be reached and their choices need to be institutionally structured to ease the sense that they are out of control.

Aside from altering the target age group of the novel, the DVD game also moves the *Choose Your Own Adventure* from an alphabetic format to a visual format, which results in significant changes to the structure of the narrative and to the relationship between the reader and the text. Whereas the print version of the story depends on the reader's imagination to form her own avatar, the DVD format depends on visual representation and identification. Although the game might have been possible in the second person format, the designers chose to adapt the narrative to a third person point of view.<sup>1</sup> This fundamentally alters how the reader becomes part of the story and her relationship to the choices that are being made. The shift in point of view means that the reader is no longer placed within the narrative itself, freeing her from some of the ideological, personal, and ethical constraints that she was subject to with the print texts.

The reader no longer has an avatar that she is forced to identify with and exist within. This frees

---

<sup>1</sup> Every DVD based pick-your-own-path game I have encountered has changed the second person narration to a third person narration. One would think that a second person version could be done using the camera as the user's eyes, but I have not seen a version that attempts this. Earlier versions of the DVD pick-your-own-path games include two games based off of the Choose Your Own Nightmare series, *The Curse of the Mummy* and *The Night of the Werewolf*. Both DVDs were produced by Multipath Movies. Incidentally, all three DVD games (*The Abominable Snowman* included) rely on animation to bring the game to life, instead of live actors. Perhaps this is because the DVDs are considered to be a children's text or because of the supernatural/spectacular elements of the stories.

her from having to take on the back story of a character and from merging her thought processes with the persona packaged into “you.” At the same time, it also liberates her from ramifications of her actions. She no longer faces death; the three main characters of the story are now the ones who face death. This changes the stakes for her decisions and alters how she can become a player (e.g. manipulator of the structure) with the text. The removal of the reader as an actor of the story seems to invest her with more power; she becomes a god-figure external to the pathways of the narrative. She exerts direct control over the characters’ actions. She can force the three siblings to parachute out of the crashing plane or make them stay in the plane and hope for the best.

The reader’s identification (or lack thereof) with the characters in the story becomes critical to the “success” of the institutional discourse the DVD is attempting to instill in the reader. The DVD game must draw the reader into the structure by providing her with characters that are of interest to her. The DVD loses the unique aspect of the novels because the reader does not become “you” but rather becomes the god-like manipulator of the text’s characters. Instead of the text providing cues to the reader about what choice she should make (either evoking her “memory” about the subject or dropping textual indicators into descriptions), the animated characters overtly argue over each decision, providing their static lists of pros and cons for the reader.

Based on the character the reader most identifies with, she might choose specific paths. Christa (the middle child and only girl) often argues for the adventurous options or those that involve animals and nature. By contrast, her older brother Benji almost always wants to give in to authority, follow the safe path, and err on the side of caution. When it comes to making a decision (such as whether to parachute out of the plane or to ride out the bumpy landing), conflict ensues. Benji thinks parachuting is too dangerous and it goes against the natural order of

his world. Christa is willing to risk a few broken bones for the thrill of parachuting out of a plane and through an unwillingness to trust the authority of the pilot. The reader's feelings toward these characters can influence her to choose a particular path. The DVD then leads the characters to particular endings based on their personalities and the reader's choices. This is part of the pact between the DVD and the adolescent-as-player. The adolescent agrees to make conscious choices when prompted, but only if these choices seem based on a coherent, internal logic. The characters must argue for the appropriate choices based on their personalities and the outcomes of these choices must be consistent with these personality traits.

In his book, *Interactive Storytelling: Techniques for 21st Century Fiction*, Andrew Glassner notes that "decisions are made [by the reader] when they matter. But recall that such moments are when the writer's control is most essential! How characters behave under stress is precisely what reveals their real personality. As time goes on, if the audience is not consciously constructing a coherent personality, they may end up making decisions that don't work together" (Glassner 242). The DVD game must work to set up coherent and recognizable personalities on which the reader can base her choices. If the text betrays these character traits, it violates the reader's position as a player. As we would expect in the transition between a written and a visual medium, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels depend on the reader's life experiences and her ability to pick up on ideologically coded language, whereas the DVD game depends on its character's personalities and visual representations to convey its institutional messages.

As part of its "pact" with the reader, the DVD game provides supplementary instructions on how the reader should make her choices. This set of rules creates a space for the adolescent to play with the structural expectations. The game informs the reader "here are some things to think about when making decisions in your life: Stop and think about it[;] Explore your options[;]

Consider the consequences (good and bad)[;] Choose your best decision[.] Don't be afraid to ask your parents, your teacher, or someone else for help making decisions" ("Training"). This presents formal constraints to the reader's process, but she can disregard them. It also illustrates the impulse of the DVD's designer to suggest that she seek guidance from institutional authority. This knowledge is valuable however; the reader-player can better guess the likely outcomes of her choices through her knowledge of the DVD's predilections and manipulate the ending to satisfy her purposes.

To reach the most successful endings, each character must become more like the others; Crista must learn to cede her power to appropriate authority figures; Benji must learn to take some risks and overcome fears. Through the ending, the adolescent reader-player is brought within the structure and homogenized into the "ideal". The characters (and reader) are rewarded with happy endings when their family stays together and when they listen to each other. If, however, the reader chooses to have the characters give in to their personality flaws, she reaches a negative end-game. The negative endings have didactic lessons about not trusting strangers, not wandering off on your own, and the perils of choosing risk over safety. The greatest number of choices the player can make in any one viewing is four before reaching an end-game. This significantly narrows the narrative possibilities and limits the number of different options and social roles the adolescent can test out. This repeats the same power and repression dynamic that presents itself in *The Abominable Snowman* novels. Socially positive behaviors are rewarded; negative behaviors are punished.

While it would seem like the adolescent reader-as-player in the DVD game has more freedom from institutional discourses/structures because she is no longer a character within the story, this is not the case. The reader can only make choices at certain points on the DVD and, if

she does not decide quickly enough, the DVD randomly picks a path for her. This allows for the reader to be more passive than she can be in the text version. It also represents the ability of the text itself to take over the narrative; the DVD game is not a *potential narrative* because it does not require the reader's participation to enact the narrative function. The reader can let the DVD's algorithm make every choice for her, and, since the game automatically starts over after any end-game, it can run itself eternally (or at least until the DVD player wears out). This undermines the relationship between reader and text that fosters the subject position of player. On the other hand, a reader can also use this automatic play feature as a point of resistance if she actively thinks about its purpose. She might use it to see the various combinations of outcomes the DVD will generate for her. Her refusal to make a decision within the given time limit could be seen as an act of resistance to the structure the DVD has set up for her. However, this act of resistance is still only *meaningful* because the structure exists in the first place.

The reader's options for resistance have also been limited by her inability to have free access to all points of the narrative at any given time. She must be willing to sit through the entire narrative multiples times because she no longer has the ability to cheat by holding her place in pages of a book. The DVD scene selection menu has been deactivated and she must sit through the narrative to its completion in order to try any other series of options. After completing the narrative through to an end-game, she is allowed to restart at any choice she made during that particular session. However, the entire tree structure including every narrative option is never available all at once. While the structure makes the process of cheating harder, it is not entirely impossible. The DVD player technology (the remote control) opens up a new version of skimming the print text. The reader can resist the DVD's narrative impulses by fast forwarding directly to the choices and bypassing its narrative build up.

The DVD medium constrains the reader's ability to navigate the text but also opens up new options to resist the progression-based narrative. The adolescent can become a player by understanding the medium-related constraints of the DVD and the sets of instructions it gives her. She can then utilize her knowledge to generate meaningful conflict with the text. In the end, the change from second person to third person makes the DVD game less intimate and, to some extent, alienates the reader from the process of enacting meaningful narratives. The codependence that the participatory format fosters becomes contrived and loses some of its significance in this DVD adaptation.

CHAPTER 5  
READING PLAYER: POTENTIAL MEDIA AND ADOL-ESSENCE THROUGH TEXTS

The social relationship between American adolescents and adults is one of conflict and multiplicity. On the one hand, the adolescent is easily manipulated—a puppet of the institutions to which she is subject. On the other hand, the adolescent embodies a dangerous agency that threatens the status and power of the adult. The adolescent subject position traverses both of these extremes, especially in the case of participatory media formats. In order to exert agency within participatory media, the adolescent must become a player. The player both desires the text and is desired by it in return. As Perron notes “it is the player’s state and presence of mind that determine this free activity [of play] and make acceptable the given though arbitrary rules. The fun of play is the fun of the player” (240). The text can never become more than a potential text until the reader agrees to inhabit its structure. Conversely, the reader cannot gain any power or manipulate her status, until she takes up a relationship to the text. It is this mutual/codependent desire that generates agency and creates a space for resistance and negotiation.

Participatory forms of media for adolescents are constructed to socialize adolescent readers and reproduce a socially acceptable, “ideal” adolescent. But, complementing this social function are the gaps that each medium and each text creates for agency and resistance. Many forms of adolescent media include openings for subversion and suggest that the individual has the power (if not duty) to rebel against institutions and their discourses. This rebellion might not change the fundamental position of the adolescent within society but, as Fiske notes, the “fleeting and limited” victories produce both pleasure and politicized cultural meaning (2). Eventually the ideological systems are influenced by resistance, co-opting and integrating those spaces and desires into the dominant social fabric. Rebellion and resistance are far from hopeless, just as the adolescent is far from powerless. The adolescent is neither completely empowered nor

completely helpless; she is, as Latham suggests, both exploited and empowered, both victim and agent (67). The adolescent is a player; she creates meaning in her interaction and negotiation of the structures she is subject to.

By further examining the forms of ideological and structural elements of media for adolescents, the social position of the adolescent and the conception of what is an “ideal” adolescent can be challenged. Explicating and deconstructing texts created for adolescents is integral to this process. By understanding how and where spaces are created for adolescent agency, the adolescent (and society in general) can undertake a mutation from reader to player to, hopefully, producer, each change building on the skill sets that were generated in the earlier process. The movement from reader to player to producer is not solely about the adolescent (re)claiming agency, but also about the adolescent taking pleasure from her active relationship with the text. Montfort summarized this feeling in regard to interactive fiction, but it can be extended to participatory media in general as well: "Learning to operate the text, and discovering what language is accepted and understood, is part of the pleasure of interactive fiction" (Montfort 34).

The adolescent’s relationships are fundamental to all of the questions posed in this thesis. Putting her into a relationship with the institutions, power structures, and texts she encounters clarifies the tools available to her to enact resistance through play. Zimmerman notes that “play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system.... This definition of play is about relationships between the elements of a system” (159). To understand the adolescent as subject, her relationship to the elements of the system must be made clear. These relationships can only be

unearthed through careful examination of the texts that connect her to institutions that delineate her power and status.

## WORKS CITED

- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.
- Cart, Michael. *From Romance to Realism: 50 years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.
- "Choose Your Own Adventure Books: the Abominable Snowman." *Choose Your Own Adventure*. 30 Nov. 2006. ChooseCo LLC. 6 Feb. 2007  
<[http://www.cyoa.com/Final/snowman2822\\_swf.htm](http://www.cyoa.com/Final/snowman2822_swf.htm)>.
- Debroff, Stacy. "The Abominable Snowman: Mom's Guide." MomCentral.com and ChooseCo. 01 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.dpiworx.com/work/AbominableSnowmanGuide.pdf>>.
- Fiske, John. *Reading the Popular*. Oxford: Routledge, 1989.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*. Robert Hurley, trans. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Glassner, Andrew. "Branching and Hypertext Narratives." *Interactive Storytelling: Techniques for 21st Century Fiction*. Natic, MA: A K Peters, 2004. 239-257.
- Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publications Inc., 1997.
- Juul, Jesper. *Half-real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.
- Kinder, Marsha. "Kids' Media Culture: An Introduction." *Kids' Media Culture*. Marsha Kinder, ed. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. 1-28.
- Ladden, Cassidy. "CYOA Theme." By Russ Desalvo and Arnie Roman. Rec. 2005. *The Abominable Snowman*. Goldhil Entertainment, 2005.
- Latham, Rob. *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Medovoi, Leerom. *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- Montfort, Nick. *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.
- Montgomery, R.A. *The Abominable Snowman*. New York: Bantam Books, 1982.

- . *The Abominable Snowman*. Waitsfield, VT: Chooseco, 2005.
- Packard, Edward. *The Mystery of Chimney Rock*. New York: Bantam Books, 1980.
- . *The Mystery of Chimney Rock*. New York: Bantam Books, 1982.
- Perron, Bernard. "From Gamers to Players and Gameplayers." *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. New York: Routledge, 2003. 237-258.
- Schott, Gareth. "Agency In and Around Play." *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, and Play*. Carr, Diane, David Buckingham, Andrew Burn, and Gareth Schott, eds. Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2006. 133-148.
- Starr, Carol. "Brief History of the Young Adult Services Division." *YALSA*. 1 Dec. 2006  
<<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/aboutyalsa/briefhistory.htm>>.
- The Abominable Snowman*. Dir. Bob Doucette. Perf. William H. Macy, Frankie Muniz. DVD. Goldhil Entertainment, 2006.
- "Training." *Choose Your Own Adventure DVD*. Lean Forward Media. 6 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.choosemovie.com/howto.php>>.
- Trites, Roberta S. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2000.
- Yampbell, Cat. "Judging a Book by Its Cover: Publishing Trends in Young Adult Literature." *The Lion and the Unicorn*. 29 (2005): 348-372.
- Zimmerman, Eric. "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games." *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*. Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 154-164.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lisa Kaye Dusenberry was born in Denver, Colorado. She completed her undergraduate degree in English with minors in media studies and information science and technology at Colorado State University in Spring 2005. After completing her thesis at the University of Florida, she plans to pursue a doctoral degree focused on children's and adolescent's culture. Her areas of interest continue to include digital media, participatory media, video games, interactive fiction, and adolescent literature.