

Let's Play! : ~~choose~~ your next action

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introduction

This collection of writing explores the overarching concept of choice and will within the confines of depression. Diagnosed with this mental illness myself, this assemblage of research reflects my own sense of urgency to understand and destigmatize my own condition. In parallel, whilst making sense of the construct of choice and will within depression, explorations are made on its presence within the realm of games, and its use within entertainment through the genre of ‘choose your own adventure’.

Containing four sections, the collection will first study the idea of free will in depression. Through the combination of scientific studies and phenomenology, both psychological and physical constraints of depression will be investigated in order to gain a clearer comprehension of its impact. Next, the writing will branch into an examination of a game’s ability to construct a world in which players willingly participate. The section will touch on hidden psychological frameworks constructed into gaming mechanics that facilitate continual player engagement. Preceding the last section, a brief study of the ‘choose your own adventure’ genre will be made through its history and use in popular entertainment. Finally, distilling all the information compiled in the previous segments, the final section will be a creative written expression of what it means and feels to be living as an individual with depression.

As aforementioned, this collection of writing aspires to alleviate the harshness of my perception towards my own depression. With it, I hope to bring forth more patience, confidence, acceptance, nurture, and care towards myself. Nonetheless, it is also a hopeful attempt at helping persons outside of such confines to be able to appreciate and apprehend the multifaceted complexity of depression.

“The opposite of depression is not happiness, but vitality.”
- Andrew Solomon

i can't

: free will and depression

An inescapable world without will, that is what having depression can be. From my own experience with the illness, mundane routine tasks can be daunting, overwhelming and carry a sense of impossibility. At the height of my depression, I scarcely left my room and did not leave my home for a whole month. Sitting upright on my bed at the time seemed like a tremendous task, and the thought of going to the bathroom was equivalent to the act of scaling Mount Everest. Every step, every breath, every inch was a challenge both mentally and physically. This situation caused the loss of friendships, loss of opportunities and most importantly, the loss of my sense of self.

you can.

Can I? Everyone around me drilled these two words into me like a mantra.

You can! Just choose to be happy! You can't come again? Are you sure you are not just too lazy to come? Just tell the truth, you don't want to come. Sure, you "cannot" get out of bed.

How did this happen? Why couldn't I go outside? Why couldn't I just choose to put one foot in front of the other and walk out of the door? Why couldn't I just choose to get out of bed and get dressed? The answer is simple, because I couldn't. At least, in my mind, I couldn't.

a. What is possible?

Depression, the world's leading cause of disability according to the World Health Organization, alters one's experience and connection with the world.¹ The world can suddenly shift and present itself differently although nothing, in fact, has shifted. Waking up everyday is like a gamble, one can open their eyes and "everything looks just as it did before and yet utterly different".² Often, the difference is felt but one cannot put a finger to what it is that has changed. An existential structural change in experience is presented in the perception of the depressed.

Possibility, a course of action that may contain several alternatives and may be chosen, is proposed as the subject of change within depression in Matthew Ratcliffe's book, *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology*. Ratcliffe brings forth the concept of 'horizon' introduced by Edmund Husserl, the principal founder of phenomenology in philosophy.³ The concept revolves around the idea that an experience perceived of an entity also contains "a whole manifold of possible worlds", or in other words, multiple

¹ Matthew Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology*, International Perspectives in Philosophy and Psychiatry, First edition (Oxford, United Kingdom; New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 4.

² Ratcliffe, p. 41.

³ Christian Beyer, 'Edmund Husserl', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/husserl/>> [accessed 6 April 2022].

perceivable vantage points of said entity that one anticipates.⁴ This multitude of possible perceptions relate to the variety of possible futures the entity retains. Ratcliffe argues that this system of possibilities is fundamental and integral to our perception of *what an entity is* and that it simply is.⁵ Therefore, an entity comprises its current perception and its varied kinds of possibility. This system in which Husserl named ‘passive synthesis’ is what allows us to unconsciously experience and perceive an entity. One needs to be able to have a sense of multiple possibilities accessible to them to feel the dynamic fullness of the entity. Possibilities can present themselves in multiple methods; perceptual modality, mode of anticipation, relationship to agency, significance, interpersonal accessibility and bodily dispositions all make up the variety of possibilities that influences one’s experience.⁶

Anticipation plays an important role in which we either positively or negatively experience as our perception of possibilities create a framework of how one might expect future possibilities to play out. Built on past experiences and context, how one perceives can either evoke feelings of certainty or conflict. Regardless of its positive or negative outcome, the perception of possibilities that occur next is based on our certainty of what can proceed next. Doubts and uncertainty can only be distinguished if there is a sense of certainty present as a foundational comparison to a discrepancy perceived.⁷ Husserl states that “without a certain measure of unity maintaining itself in the progression of perceptions, the unity of intentional lived-experience would crumble”.⁸ As an example, if one cannot experience anything as tangible, this would result in the inability to experience a cup as tangible.⁹ Contributing to the lack of anticipation is the loss of the sense of agency or significance. Objects and situations can present itself with relevance in relation to an individual whether it is a threat or a positive enticement.¹⁰ This invitation provides possibilities that bring upon action from an individual. Yet, this pull of significance is redundant unless there is a sense of agency to be able carry out the action to fulfill the pull, furthermore, the sense of significance perceived can be diminished as a result of the loss of agency. To be situated in the world through the connection and existence of oneself, one needs to be in control and have certainty and to be able to be in control and have certainty.

Perception is not only in the mind, it is also in the physical. The body and its sensory system is a medium in which one navigates the world; “it provides our sense of orientation through which the world is ordinarily encountered in the style of confidence or certainty”.¹¹ In their analysis, Declerck and Gapenne argue that the body is more than its actuality, that it is an opening to the possible. One’s action does not only follow after a perception seeing as their action can be a prerequisite and open for the perception of possibilities

⁴ Beyer; Ratcliffe, p. 42.

⁵ Ratcliffe, p. 42.

⁶ Ratcliffe, p. 52.

⁷ Ratcliffe, p. 51.

⁸ Edmund Husserl and Anthony J. Steinbock, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, Edmund Husserl Collected Works, 9 (Dordrecht: Kluwer academic publ, 2001), p. 64.

⁹ Ratcliffe, p. 51.

¹⁰ Ratcliffe, p. 52.

¹¹ Ratcliffe, p. 59.

offered.¹² Not always derived from the mind, through the body, one can subconsciously understand their physical ability to act upon a possibility. In the perception of space, a staircase presented can either be a possible action or, can be perceived as an impossibility due to a recovering leg injury. In this case, the perception of its architecture is altered from a brief elevation to a staggering steep obstacle. In addition, Declerck and Gapenne state that before one can process and perceive their surroundings, one is already in the action of actualizing their perception. For instance, mundane, ordinary tasks that are intrinsic to an individual such as reaching out for a cup while reading or the opening of curtains can be carried out without any concentrated thought. The unconscious motion accounts for the ability of more possibilities to arise which is described as ‘motor intentionality’ in Merleau Ponty’s book *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Therefore, one’s relation to possibilities lies in part of one’s “perpetual moving-towards”.¹³ The perception of distance for example, has influence from not only the reference of one’s own bodily relation to space, but also the “variable reach of your intentions or of our movements”.¹⁴ The motor condition of an individual’s body which embodies one’s situatedness within the world can thus hold power and enable the accessibility of possibilities.

b. Choice matters.

Why is it so important for one to be presented with possibilities that enable the ability to choose? Choice allows for the perception of control. Possessing control over one’s environment is both a psychological and biological necessity essential to one’s survival.¹⁵

On the psychological level, choice aids in the capability to assert the self and induces a high sense of self-efficacy and confidence. Additionally, working as a reciprocating cycle, the positive anticipation of success in self-efficacy in turn actualizes the success of the anticipation which in turn supplement the high sense of self. Furthermore, this proves the dependency of one’s well-being on the ability to choose since, on the contrary, the removal of control results in the vicious cycle of disbelief in success that eventually leads to feelings of helplessness and depression.¹⁶ Therefore intrinsically, one has a preference for choice versus none, as studies have shown that whilst the actual impact of choice has no beneficial value, one will still favor the situation which contains the ability of choice due to the rewarding enjoyability it provides.¹⁷ Although there is an illusion of choice, the preference and possibilities presented protects one from developing negative behavior and inappropriate physiological responses.¹⁸ Persons with depression, anxiety, mood disorders, eating disorders and substance abuse all carry either an augmented or diminished sense of control over their environment. This imbalance of control can lead to the belief of incapacity to carry out actions successfully, hence, resulting in diminished general motivation and incentive to face challenges.

¹² Gunnar Declerck and Olivier Gapenne, ‘Actuality and Possibility: On the Complementarity of Two Registers in the Bodily Constitution of Experience’, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 8.3 (2009), 285–305 (p. 2) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-009-9128-4>>.

¹³ Declerck and Gapenne, p. 6.

¹⁴ Declerck and Gapenne, p. 6.

¹⁵ Lauren A. Leotti, Sheena S. Iyengar, and Kevin N. Ochsner, ‘Born to Choose: The Origins and Value of the Need for Control’, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 14.10 (2010), 457–63 (p. 1,8) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2010.08.001>>.

¹⁶ Leotti, Iyengar, and Ochsner, p. 2.

¹⁷ Leotti, Iyengar, and Ochsner, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ivan Grahek and others, ‘Motivation and Cognitive Control in Depression’, *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 102 (2019), 371–81 (p. 6) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2019.04.011>>.

Biologically, the regulation of emotion, cognition and physiology can be greatly affected by the loss of control. Harmful consequences can occur as the absence of control “can inhibit autonomic arousal, hormone release, immune system suppression, and maladaptive behaviors” and also “produce greater fear, more negative perceptions of the stimulus, narrowing of attention, greater effort placed on regaining control” within an individual.¹⁹ Current neuroimaging studies reveal the action of choosing corresponds to neural circuits in the prefrontal cortex and striatum involved in the processing of reward and motivation. This proves the capability of choice to decrease stress as another study correlated the mediation of stress with an increase in activity of the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC), the same region the action of choosing activates. Put into test, when rodents were faced with uncontrollable stress, they showed signs of stress-related behavior as opposed to controllable stress.²⁰ Furthermore, this elaborates the importance of choice in the case of persons with major depression, where in an attempt to reduce stress, there is a failure to normally call upon ventral portions of the MPFC.²¹ Lastly, in relation to the sense of self and self efficacy, the MPFC has shown to be especially active when choices involve self relevancy. Therefore, not only does the act of choosing reward the self, it also allows for the reduction of biological stress induced.

c. *Nothing matters.*

Within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), it states that one of the defining characteristics of mental disorder is “an important loss of freedom”. There is an implication that mental disorders confine and dictate scripts that one cannot escape.²² Realized through both mental and physical alterations, constriction and loss ultimately distort perceptions and relations with the world.

Motivation, an essential psychological factor which fuels our desire to take action, is highly influential to an individual’s biological, cognitive and social regulation. In addition, it is a necessity in facilitating growth, personal well-being and constructive social development.²³ Normal functioning of motivation, interest and engagement is often the single signifier and path that leads to improvements in life functioning.²⁴ Linked to deficits in cognitive control and impairments, depression not only reduces one’s ability to exert control but additionally changes the decision making process.²⁵ To have motivation, an individual needs to have desires or goals for it to be applicable to an action. Thus, the inaction from a depressed individual is a result of the lack of desire. These cognitive impairments, closely connected to an individual’s emotional and motivational processes, are central in depression and creates difficulty in processing reward anticipation, reinforcement learning, effort expenditure and value based decision making.²⁶ The cause is largely due to

¹⁹ Leotti, Iyengar, and Ochsner, p. 4,5.

²⁰ Leotti, Iyengar, and Ochsner, p. 6.

²¹ Leotti, Iyengar, and Ochsner, p. 6.

²² Gerben Meynen, ‘Free Will and Mental Disorder: Exploring the Relationship’, *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 31.6 (2010), 429–43 (p. 433) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11017-010-9158-5>>.

²³ Richard M Ryan and Edward L Deci, ‘Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being’, *American Psychologist*, 55 (2000), 11.

²⁴ Tanya Tran and others, ‘Physical- and Cognitive-Effort-Based Decision-Making in Depression: Relationships to Symptoms and Functioning’, *Clinical Psychological Science*, 9.1 (2021), 53–67 (p. 54) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702620949236>>.

²⁵ Grahek and others, p. 2.

²⁶ Grahek and others, p. 6.

anhedonia, the reduced or inability to feel pleasure or excitement in what would be ordinarily considered pleasurable. Anhedonia, highly associated with depression, provides a strong indicator of the mental illness. Typically, the alleviation from the psychological perception signifies a successful treatment and a predictor for improved social functioning.²⁷ This loss of pleasure can be exacerbated from stressors that cause dysfunctions in essential biological pathways for motivated behavior.²⁸ Studies into the mechanisms underlying anhedonia revealed an alteration and weakening in the activation of reward-related regions within the brain. On the contrary, research has found that there was a higher connectivity in the regions during loss and disappointment as opposed to relief and winning.²⁹ In summary, all correlated in a vicious cycle, the reward processing within an individual with depression is impaired firstly with the failure of the association of reward with a situation, which in turn results in the lack of desire, interest and anticipation, leading to the final component, avoidance of cognitive effort. Calculation of effort needed to exert to carry out the action. When faced with tasks, challenges and choices, cognitive effort comes into play to fulfill and meet the challenges presented in the day to day life. However, although still in need of further studies, research has shown that avoidance of this effort is driven by a reduced motivation system. Since the motivation is not powerful enough, the exerted effort outweighs the perceived reward to be gained from the action. Ordinarily, obtaining the expected award from the completion of the action results in a hedonic response and reinforces an individual's feedback integration, reward-based learning, and shapes future reward behavioral responses.³⁰ Yet, in depressed individuals, in absence of the reinforcement, the inaction generates the endless loop of motivation impairment to action.

In connection to the impairment, feelings of the inability to act is a common observation amongst persons with depression. Actions typically not strenuous such as pouring a cup of tea can be overwhelmingly difficult and "even habitual action had lost its usual 'tone'; it was bereft of a sense of vitality and spontaneity".³¹ Aforementioned, deficient in reward feedback and reinforcement, in addition to an anhedonic response, negative anticipation can be evoked as a result. Despite the awareness of importance or desire of an action, a depressed individual's negative expectation results in the belief of definite impossibility. Bringing forth the perception of impossibility even within the day to day life, it leads to the erosion of the self. What is felt is not the sense of disruption nor fragmentation but the diminished sense of self. Thus, with the disintegration and unpredictability of the illness in its presentation of possibilities, comes the loss of agency. Leaving the bedroom can be a daunting event one day but an intrinsic movement the next without any clear explanation. One has no influence over the possibility of their own actions which can result in feelings of indifference, loss of hope and drive in a world in which they have no control and no self.

Extending to the body, the high complexities of depression is not confined to the mind. Being a medium that enables possibility and meaningful engagement with the world, bodily capabilities and relations reflects the depth and structural meaning of the world. However, within depression, the body becomes an

²⁷ Anna Höflich and others, 'Circuit Mechanisms of Reward, Anhedonia, and Depression', *International Journal of Neuropsychopharmacology*, 22.2 (2019), 105-18 (p. 106) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ijnp/pyy081>>.

²⁸ Grahek and others, p. 5.

²⁹ Höflich and others, p. 109.

³⁰ Höflich and others, p. 106.

³¹ Ratcliffe, p. 156.

obstacle with symptoms in alignment with somatic illnesses and neurobiological changes. Studies have shown that the influence of the mind interlink with physical capabilities. When choices were presented to depressed individuals with anhedonic symptoms, hard physical actions were less likely chosen with the belief of impossibility and unwillingness to expend physical effort.³² Additionally, with an impaired body, the perception and experience of the world is altered with a sense of disconnect and diminished possibilities. Even the immediate spatial environment and world in which one is situated, in relation to the body's constraints, can drastically be misconstrued and reduced, such as, the shrinking of the world to the size of the bedroom or the bed.

Persons with depression often report physical discomforts such as and not limited to, body pains, headache, nausea, joint pain, numbness, loss of appetite and chest pains.³³ Most prominent are feelings of lack of energy, exhaustion and lack of vitality.³⁴ Feelings of heaviness and sluggishness overtake any desires, decisions, or emotions. Although fatigue can manifest in forms such as physical, cognitive and emotional, it is the symptom most presented as a primary complaint rather than depression itself as “somatic symptoms are often the main reason for patients seeking medical care”.³⁵³⁶ Depression is often accompanied by, CFS, chronic fatigue syndrome, an impairment that presents itself through extreme tiredness.³⁷³⁸ This syndrome can have additional symptoms such as and not limited to, continual tiredness even after sleep or resting, long recovery after physical exertion, problems sleeping, problems thinking, headaches, dizziness, and muscle and joint pain.³⁹ This by all means directly affects an individual's quality and productivity of life not only in the physical means but also mentally. Furthermore, the complexity and possibility of fatigue being present in all three forms creates difficulty and decreased motivation for in-depth research. Currently, the sole method of measurement of this symptom is self-report and self-assessment, making it even more overlooked and understudied.⁴⁰

³² Tran and others, p. 63.

³³ Ratcliffe, p. 76.

³⁴ Stephanie S. Leone, 'A Disabling Combination: Fatigue and Depression', *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 197.2 (2010), 86–87 (p. 86) <<https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.109.076604>>.

³⁵ Lesley M. Arnold, 'Understanding Fatigue in Major Depressive Disorder and Other Medical Disorders', *Psychosomatics*, 49.3 (2008), 185–90 (p. 186) <<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psy.49.3.185>>.

³⁶ Koen Demyttenaere, Jürgen De Fruyt, and Stephen M. Stahl, 'The Many Faces of Fatigue in Major Depressive Disorder', *The International Journal of Neuropsychopharmacology*, 8.1 (2005), 93–105 (p. 93) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1461145704004729>>.

³⁷ Leone, p. 86.

³⁸ 'Myalgic Encephalomyelitis or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS)', *Nhs.Uk*, 2017 <<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/chronic-fatigue-syndrome-cfs/>> [accessed 7 January 2022].

³⁹ 'Myalgic Encephalomyelitis or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS)'.

⁴⁰ Ruel R. Billones, Saloni Kumar, and Leorey N. Saligan, 'Disentangling Fatigue from Anhedonia: A Scoping Review', *Translational Psychiatry*, 10.1 (2020), 273 (p. 273) <<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-020-00960-w>>.

can't be too hard, can't be too easy

: the will to continue in gaming mechanics

My will to continue on thrives in the fictional world of video games as opposed to my own real life. How is a game, removed from my reality and has no contribution to my survival, able to motivate me to invest all my energy and effort I can in it? Why do I have such strong attachments to the characters and world within this fictional realm? Not unique to me, players take these fabricated worlds so seriously that they use real world money to buy and sell items that are otherwise useless outside of the digital medium. How are games so successful in its construct that it is able to capture their players so deeply?

a. The act of play.

Games ultimately craft experiences that provide fun pleasurable feelings of freedom, control and accomplishment through play. In comparison to our basic survival needs, where it is a necessity to carry out certain actions to keep us alive, the act of play is a willful action born out of curiosity and pleasure that comes intrinsically within an individual.⁴¹ Therefore, this shift in purpose fundamentally changes the dynamic and interaction between the medium and its users. The player is not choosing to participate through external pressure but from their own desire to carry out the action of play. The will, acted upon freely without extrinsic influence, creates a sense of freedom. This perception, in conjunction with the interactivity of games, results in a high sense of control over the type, flow and overall pace of the player's experience. They are truly playing for themselves and only playing for themselves.

Essential to its core, games provide the ability to problem solve within a clear structure set in place for its users. The innate pleasure that comes with problem solving within individuals allows the intrinsic yearn and will of play evoked. Being challenged with a problem and solving it through enjoyable play is a crucial element in gaming mechanics.⁴² Within a game, there is always a clear goal which contains obstacles that generate the problem that drives its players to engage and interact.

A game is essentially its rules.⁴³ For a game to be playable, there must be a set of rules that define the constraints and boundaries that make up the challenges within. These constructs tie all the components of a game together into a consistent package for players to solve. To clearly establish this framework, five important structures of rules are needed. Firstly, foundational rules that give the game the overall structure of the game itself. These rules are the base in which more specific rules build on, such as, when a player collects certain items, their power will increase. Secondly, operational rules which are slightly more specific, which inform what the player will do to play with the game itself. An example would be, the player can walk around to collect objects. On an intrinsic layer, behavioral rules are understood mutually between players unofficially, as a mark of good sportsmanship and social contract.⁴⁴ All players understand the

⁴¹ Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*, Third edition (Boca Raton: Taylor & Francis, a CRC title, part of the Taylor & Francis imprint, a member of the Taylor & Francis Group, the academic division of T&F Informa, plc, 2019), p. 40.

⁴² Schell, p. 46.

⁴³ Schell, p. 189.

⁴⁴ Schell, p. 185.

importance of following the set rules and to abstain from cheating. Written rules are, like its title suggests, rules that are communicated to the players to explain the framework of the game. Lastly, the most crucial rule is for the game to state a clear, achievable, and rewarding goal that the players desire and understand.

b. Manipulation of the mind.

To maximize efficiency, the human brain creates simplified versions of real life situations called ‘mental models’.⁴⁵ Easing the digestibility of information, these models make sense of the complexities of reality by creating shortcuts with our past experiences. When mental models are created, one is then able to synthesize, store and manipulate information to one’s needs in the given situation. Games precisely function within this model with even more clarity and detail. As mentioned previously, a distinct set of rules and a predetermined goal within a game provide players a framework of how to solve the problem presented. Not only is it laid out for the player, the model provides a pleasurable method to solve the problem. On the contrary, real life situations demand an individual to blindly decipher its constraints and contours without the assurance of right or wrong.

Packaging a neat, digestible model, games possess the capability to hold a player’s attention. In extremely successful cases, games have caused deaths due to the player’s neglect of their basic real world survival needs.⁴⁶ There have been instances of individuals playing video games non-stop, ignoring signals from their bodies to eat, sleep and even relieve themselves from 40 hours up to 3 days. What is responsible here is what game designers and psychologists call the ‘flow’, a state of sustained focus induced by pleasure.⁴⁷ Similar to the cocktail effect, where an individual can focus on a single conversation in the midst of a full room of conversations, the flow state is a state in which the individual is completely absorbed and immersed in an activity.⁴⁸ Though the state can be induced in other activities such as online shopping, due to its design and adaptability to the player, video games are one of the most effective mediums that immerses its players into the flow. Within the industry of game design, bringing individuals into the flow state is one of the most crucial goals of the designer. In order for this experience to happen, three key elements must come into play, clear goals, unambiguous feedback and the balance of challenges and skills.⁴⁹ As a result some conditions felt by the individual typical to the state can occur. Being in the flow, an individual will lose self consciousness and awareness with all their concentration on the task within the medium. They will adopt feelings of being in complete control and their sense of time will be distorted.⁵⁰

Aforementioned, the motivation to play a game comes from the player intrinsically. From the previously discussed importance of motivation, it is evident that one needs motivation in order to carry out an action. The voluntary drive to engage in video games is owed to the fulfillment of three components derived from

⁴⁵ Celia Hodent, *The Gamer’s Brain: How Neuroscience and UX Can Impact Video Game Design*, 1st edn (CRC Press, 2017), p. 91

<<https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315154725>>; Schell, p. 143.

⁴⁶ ‘15 People Who Have Died Playing Video Games’, *TheGamer*, 2017

<<https://www.thegamer.com/15-people-who-have-died-playing-video-games/>> [accessed 8 April 2022].

⁴⁷ Schell, p. 144.

⁴⁸ Fiona Fui Hoon Nah and others, ‘Flow in Gaming: Literature Synthesis and Framework Development’, *International Journal of Information Systems and Management*, 1.1/2 (2014), 83 (p. 85) <<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJISAM.2014.062288>>.

⁴⁹ Nah and others, p. 86.

⁵⁰ Nah and others, p. 87.

the self-determination theory. Most prominent in play and sport, the self-determination theory explains the necessity of three psychological factors, autonomy, competence, and relatedness in inducing motivation.⁵¹ These innate psychological needs are especially true and crucial to intrinsic motivation within an individual. Autonomy to carry out actions and choices in one's own way, proof of one's ability in competence and social connectedness in relatedness are all at the core of the satisfaction, accomplishment, challenge and community felt within a player whilst immersed in a video game.

c. The art of balance.

Games, intricate in its design, have implemented mechanisms to perfectly capture and engage its players. Through various methods, video games have been tailored to facilitate players to exercise the state of flow and meet requirements of the self-determination theory for intrinsic motivation. For instance, fairness within a game needs to be set in place for players to feel the possibility of defeating problems presented. This can be done through symmetrical or asymmetrical setups within the game. An example of a symmetrical game would be in Monopoly where everyone starts out with the exact same resources and opportunities. On the other hand, asymmetrical games may give different kinds of resources to different players but all are equally important. This method can offer another layer of depth to create a real-world situation and or personalization within a game.⁵²

To create voluntary engagement from players, another method is the careful balance between challenge and success. If a game is too challenging the player gets frustrated but if it is too easy, the player will become bored. It is important to keep the player engaged and in the state of flow in between the two. To maintain this middle path, designers have developed multiple ways of keeping a happy medium. Inside the game, designers usually increase the difficulty with each success to allow the player to develop skills gradually with just the right amount of challenge. These challenges are created in layers where gamers are able to choose their difficulty level, come back to achieve a higher score, and get through easier parts faster so as to not lose their interest.⁵³ Most importantly, the game needs to allow losing players a break by giving them an advantage over winning players to even out both the fairness and challenge presented.

Fulfilling the psychological competence aspect of the self-determination theory, rewards in video games acting as positive feedback enhance an individual's perceived competence.⁵⁴ The satisfaction comes from the immediate feedback and gratification video games provide in the form of praise, points, prolonged play, powers, self expression or customization, gateway to more content, status and completion. As a counterpart, punishments within a game bring forth the value of its rewards and the increase of risk excitement and pleasurable challenge. Typically, these elements are opposites of rewards such as, shaming, loss of points, shortened play, terminated play, setback, and removal of power.⁵⁵ Though possessing punishments within a game is a necessity in providing contrast to its rewards, it is crucial to provide players the ability to

⁵¹ Richard M. Ryan, C. Scott Rigby, and Andrew Przybylski, 'The Motivational Pull of Video Games: A Self-Determination Theory Approach', *Motivation and Emotion*, 30.4 (2006), 344-60 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9051-8>>.

⁵² Schell, p. 213.

⁵³ Schell, p. 218.

⁵⁴ Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski.

⁵⁵ Schell, p. 235.

understand and prevent them. If punishments are given at random and are unpreventable, the lack of control will lead to the loss of autonomy which leads to dissatisfaction and frustration. Studies in psychology have shown that utilizing rewards as reinforcement is invariably better than punishment.⁵⁶

Autonomy is enhanced when games integrate flexible ability over a player's movement and strategy. By providing them the possibility to make meaningful choices that hugely impact the game's trajectory, it reinforces feelings of control and intrinsic motivation. Meaningful choices are more effective in evoking these feelings than the completion of tasks or goals within a game as it emulates feelings of freedom and aids in the belief of active contribution from its players.⁵⁷ Guiding players along, the best games fabricate experiences that induce feelings of freedom within its actual limited, restrictive environment. Using indirect control methods on its gamers, designers employ tools such as constraints, goals, interface and the game's visual design to simulate the false facade of autonomy. As having too many options can be daunting, by subtly enforcing constraints on choice within a game, it gives the illusion of possibilities within the selected few options curated by the designers. Consequently, players will have no choice but to choose one of the choices presented, in the belief that the decision was out of their desired, meaningful will. Players do not realize that by having a goal set by the game itself, it additionally informs and predetermines their decisions within the game.

⁵⁶ Schell, p. 236.

⁵⁷ Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski.

you can?

: choosing your own narrative in entertainment

Always gravitating towards role-playing, story rich narratives, I love playing games or reading interactive stories in which through my own decisions and choice, I am able to influence the outcome of the narrative. There is something intimate about feeling in control and being presented with a wide range of possibilities, as if the stories were made just for me. Additionally, this component immersed me more than ever into the world of the story, allowing me to make my own mark and feel my own presence within the world.

a. A brief history.

Although the choose your own adventure genre was utilized in different forms, the genre was presented and made more apparent to the mainstream in 1979 by R.A Montgomery working at Vermont Crossroads Press and Ed Packard.⁵⁸ Together they introduced the popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebooks through Bantam Books. Inspired by their bedtime story sessions with their children, they found that their children were much more engaged when they themselves contributed to the narrative trajectory of the story. The series was a huge success and ran from 1979 to 1999 in 38 different languages. With Montgomery's experience in interactive role-playing games, the foundation of the books were based in game theory and role-playing simulations.⁵⁹ Consequently, through its impact, the series and concept itself grew leading to the creation of the genre within novels and books such as the infamous *Goosebumps* series by R. L. Stine which came out with its own *Give Yourself Goosebumps*. Reaching beyond the original medium, the series made its influence on various popular media formats such as gaming, film, and television.

In the world of gaming, the subtle controllability and the gamification of the narrative experience brought forward the popularity of games like Dungeons and Dragons, though the most popular gaming medium that uses this format are video games. With its immense culture and industry, video games have greatly refined and shaped the choose your adventure genre. For example, Bishoujo games in Japan, to this day an extremely popular genre of video games, when stripped down to its core is simply a story that branches out based on the player's decisions. The "winning" of the game is solely based on the interactions its players chooses and makes. Now successful video games such as *The Walking Dead* and *Until Dawn*, both categorized under the story rich and role-playing genre, truly immerse its players by utilizing the choose your own adventure genre as a explorative tool, storytelling mechanism and a layer of motivational engagement for its players.⁶⁰

Film on the other hand, is a medium in which its main goal is to tell a certain specific story, therefore, the genre is harder to implement within this industry. In addition, its stunted evolution is largely due to the delivery of the medium to the audience. Unlike games, the viewers do not actively and physically engage with the media form. The audience typically retains a passive engagement as a collective instead of an

⁵⁸ 'History of CYOA', *Chooseco LLC* <<https://www.cyoa.com/pages/history-of-cyoa>> [accessed 13 June 2022].

⁵⁹ 'History of CYOA'.

⁶⁰ 'The Evolution of the "Choose Your Own Adventure" Genre', 2021

<<https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-evolution-choose-your-own-adventure-genre/>> [accessed 13 June 2022].

individual active experience. The enticement of tailoring a narrative unique to an individual from the genre cannot be carried out on a group in a theater. As a result, by introducing an interactive component, it breaks a spell on the film and takes the viewer out of the world building of the experience. Although this is the case, there have been minimal attempts at this format, especially through now highly individualized online streaming platforms such as Netflix and its film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*.

Interestingly, these mediums often overlap such as the adaptation of books into films. Now more than ever, video games that predominantly come from the choose your own adventure genre are adapted into films and television shows due to its necessity in possessing a rich narrative. On the other hand, as technologies become more advanced, there is a growing trend of video games looking and feeling like a film thus further enhancing the experience of the game which solidifies the believability of its inner worlds of possibility and narration. Contrary to the inability of films to implement the genre, video games are extremely successful in bringing in elements from film such as cinematography, music scores, and story plots.

b. illusion of control.

Hidden beneath the guise of possibility, all these mediums in reality have a preset result. The use of choice is only an illusion that gives a sense of freedom, confidence and control to its audience as a form of engagement. The possibility of a choose your own adventure game to be able to be adapted to a film where there is only one clear storyline exposes the true shallow nature of control the audience actually has of the outcome.

Expanding on Netflix's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, the illusion of control and misconception of freewill is precisely what is explored within the film. The interactive film follows a man, Stefan, who decides to make his favorite adventure book into a game. Slowly, throughout the film, the lead comes to the realization that his life, much like the novel he loves and game he is designing, has already been predetermined. At certain points in the film, Stefan starts to break the fourth wall and questions whether his decisions are actually his decisions. Simultaneously, the audience is also confronted with the fact that their decisions are also shaped and informed by the film itself. With certain decisions leading to the death of Stefan and having to start over, right or wrong in the decisions are implied and the audience is forced to choose paths that the film itself permits them to take. The film brings forth deeper philosophical debates of free will, which is the belief that individuals have the freedom to do otherwise and have self-determination versus determinism, an ideology that it is impossible for one to act in any other way or take any action other than that in which they acted upon.⁶¹ ⁶² ⁶³ From the beginning of the film, the audience is already predisposed and led to

⁶¹ Timothy O'Connor and Christopher Franklin, 'Free Will', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/freewill/>> [accessed 13 June 2022].

⁶² 'Think Fast: Interactive Filmmaking Puts Consumers in the Spotlight (Or Is It Just an Illusion?) MIND(s That Filled) THE GAP(s) [XI] by Andrei-Gabriel Gheorghe, Mădălina Bianca Moldovan, Alexandra Vuțescu', *The Market For Ideas* <www.themarketforideas.com/think-fast-interactive-filmmaking-puts-consumers-in-the-spotlight-or-is-it-just-an-illusion-minds-that-filled-the-gaps-xi-a575/> [accessed 13 June 2022].

⁶³ 'Determinism | Definition, Philosophers, & Facts | Britannica' <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/determinism>> [accessed 13 June 2022].

believe that the end goal of the film is for Stefan to accomplish the game and receive a 5 star rating.⁶⁴ With this motivation and want subconsciously planted within the audience, the film already predetermines all the actions the audiences would take in order to achieve this reality for Stefan. Especially within the realm of consumerism and the current age of big data, the film highlights the reality of the uncontrollable and predetermined decisions individuals carry out in their day to day lives. In the film, as a response to his game achieving 5 stars in one of the endings, Stefan states to another character, “I’ve been trying to give the player too much choice...now they’ve only got the illusion of free will, but really, I decide the ending.”⁶⁵

The first interactive film ever made dates back to 1967 and was featured at the International and Universal Exposition (Expo 67), in Montreal, Canada.⁶⁶ Kinoautomat, a Czechoslovakian concept conceived by film director Radúz Cincera allows its spectators to respond and choose the narrative of the film’s storyline. Cincera’s film *One Man and his House* was highly received at the exposition due to the audience’s ability to actively participate and influence the film. Throughout the screening, at important moments within the plot, a host would come on stage and present various possibilities that Mr. Novak, the film’s main protagonist could take.⁶⁷ The audience then would input their choice by pressing buttons connected to the system and the option chosen by the majority would influence the film’s trajectory. The whole film is a long flashback of events leading up to the eventual burning down of a building which was shown at the beginning. The film was set up for the audience to believe the focus of the film was to figure out who was responsible and prevent the building’s demise but, during the final act, a dialogue between the Kinoautomat and the host occurs which reveals the true message of the film. Debating on whether or not Mr. Novak is guilty of burning down the building, based on the audience’s choices the host’s stance on the matter would always align with the plot the audience had chosen, the Kinoautomat on the other hand would embody all of the choices that were possible, therefore it would represent the “whole truth”.⁶⁸ When the host would argue against the machine in regards to events that had occurred which supported the audience’s decisions, the Kinoautomat would reveal another hidden scene or an alternative path that would have happened. This showed the audience the insignificance of their decisions and revealed the true message of determinism. Since the film already disclosed the ending at the beginning of the film, it was an indicator that no matter what decisions the audience took, the predetermined ending would be exactly the same. Cincera’s film was a satire on democracy as a political critique but additionally, just like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, it commented on the illusion of control individuals think they have.⁶⁹ At a certain point in the dialogue, in an argument with the host, the Kinoautomat states that only the author has the truth to who burnt the building in which the host responds, “And who is the author? It is you, ladies and gentlemen. This is not Mr. Novak’s story, it is your story. Mr. Novak, that is you...we are all Mr. Novak and we are all guilty.”⁷⁰ Subsequently, the ending of the film is then revealed in the burning of the building once again, thus reminding the audience that just like Mr. Novak, they had no control over what has already been predetermined.

⁶⁴ Howard Chai, “The Illusion of Control in “Black Mirror: Bandersnatch””, *Medium*, 2020

<<https://medium.com/s/story/black-mirror-bandersnatch-a-study-guide-c46dfe9156d>> [accessed 13 June 2022].

⁶⁵ David Slade, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, 2018.

⁶⁶ Nico Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle*, 1. publ (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), p. 276.

⁶⁷ Carpentier, p. 285.

⁶⁸ Carpentier, p. 287.

⁶⁹ Carpentier, p. 289.

⁷⁰ Carpentier, p. 287.

If life gives you lemons, you can't make orange juice.

lets play!

: depression

You are a depressed individual that has been confined to your bed due to your mental state.
You have been in bed for over how many hours?

You cannot even remember.

You definitely have not been outside of the house for a month.
Control and tailor your own unique adventure to get out of your bed.

Rules and Guidelines

Objective: get out of the bed

How to win the game: get out of the bed

You must think and act like a depressed person.
You must proceed to where your choices take you.

choose your next action:

- a. *start the adventure! (proceed to next page)*

..ss and you float through the vast starlit sky as you feel the fresh breeze across your entire fa-

your eyes open.
oh.
that was a dream.

the air is stale.
you feel heavy.
your gaze falls from the ceiling to the shadow in the corner of the room.

is it moving?

the air is getting thicker.
you should get up, out of bed.
but your body is not allowing you to move with its heaviness.
or simply, you just don't want to?

the air is suffocating.
suffocating you.
the shadow is definitely moving.
its steady crawl is on the outer fringes of your bed.

shit.

choose your next action:

- a. ~~fight the shadow~~ (cannot complete action due to low energy)
- b. surrender to the shadow (proceed to page 3)
- c. ~~scream at the shadow~~ (cannot complete action due to low energy)
- d. go back to sleep, ignorance is bliss (proceed to page 2)

you shut your eyes.
let's try this again.

the numbness of your body should be coaxing you to sleep. you shift around for a better position. your body is heavy anyway, it should put you to sleep like those weighted blankets.

except it doesn't.

what do you need to do again today? shoot, think you were supposed to meet up with Andrew? Oh yea, he was supposed to introduce his friend Soloman. You should get out more, meet more people. You can't even keep up with your current friends though. It's a miracle that Andrew is still reaching out even though you flaked on him multiple times already. Lois, on the other hand, has completely stopped talking to you.

It hurts. You remember the look on her face when you told her, disbelief, discomfort, distant.

It hurts.

Speaking of Andrew, you haven't started on the essay due in a week yet..... Andrew probably has completed it.... He always has his shit together. why can't you be the same..? Maybe mom is right, you are a lazy piece of garbage and it will never allow you to accomplish anything in life. You know what is garbage though? The essay. Why do you even have to do it? If you can't EVEN GET OUT OF BED, is there even a point in thinking about it? WHY CAN'T YOU GET YOUR SHIT TOGETHER?!?! WHY IS IT SO HARD TO GET UP? WHY IS LOIS NOT TALKING TO YOU?!?!? WHY CAN'T YOU JUST DEAL WITH IT?!?!? WHY DOES IT HURT SO MUCH?!?!?

WHY CAN'T YOU JUST BE. FUCKING. NORMAL.

choose your next action:

- a. ~~be normal ("normal" not defined enough to execute action)~~
- b. continue insomnia (please continue page)

why can't you just go to bed?
make it go away.

you shut your eyes.
let's try this again.

(please go back to page 1)

the shadow is washing over you at a painstaking slow pace.
you allow it to happen.

now you are the shadow. you are a part of everything. a displaced fragment of everything. an indistinguishable blur of everything. a mass incapable of decisions, controlled by everything.

you really should get out of bed, the weather is ni-you are just so tired.
mom said that staying in bed is a crime. You hear your roommat-you are just so tired.
if you don't wake up early and stay in bed until the afternoon, won't half of your life b- you are just so tired.
doesn't that make you a lazy, unmotivated pig? each movement feels like moving through wat-you

are just so tired.

you are wasting your life.

you **are** waste-you just

so tired.

you have to see Andrew tod- just

so tired..

he is bringing his friend Soloman.

you have to

start

your

essay

today-just so tired.

the deadline is

next week.

you

dirty laundry

all over the room -so

tired.

fitting of

a lazy pig.

you have

so

many

things

to

do

so

tired.

endless

errands

obligations

tired.

choose your next action:

- a. try at least just sitting up. (continue to next page)
- b. go back to sleep, fuck this. (proceed to page 2)

you slowly sit up.

that wasn't so bad?

you can hear the birds chirping outside..

you can see Mr.Miyazaki gardening through the window....

you can see a gentle breeze running through his flowers.....

....yellow..... pink..... purple..... orange.....

.... running through your willow tree....

....green....lush....enveloping....

....pools of soft dappled light dancing in your room....

....cool shadows in contrast to warm sunlight on your skin....

....low murmurs of leaves rustling in your ears.....

the weather is nice today.

maybe it isn't so bad.

choose your next action:

- a. try walking to the window. (proceed to page 8)
- b. start your essay (proceed to page 9)
- c. call Andrew (continue to next page)

Your phone is dead.

You didn't even bother to plug it in.
The cord is so far away, at the edge of the bed.

Is it far? Or is everything far?
But if it is far, you don't need to do your essay.
No obligations.
No expectations.
No pressure.

It doesn't matter if you can or can't get out of bed.

Yes. don't charge the phone.

then you can be far forever.

But, Andrew said he misses you. He cares.

choose your next action:

- a. charge your phone (proceed to page 10)
- b. don't charge your phone (proceed to page 11)

What is the weather like outside? You pick up your phone to check.

Your phone is dead.

You didn't even bother to plug it in.
The cord is so far away, at the edge of the bed.

Is it far? Or is everything far?
But if it is far, you don't need to do your essay.
No obligations.
No expectations.
No pressure.

It doesn't matter if you can or can't get out of bed.

Yes. don't charge the phone.

then you can be far forever.

But, Andrew said he misses you. He cares.

choose your next action:

- a. charge your phone (proceed to page 10)
- b. don't charge your phone (proceed to page 11)

when is the deadline for the essay again? Shit. You reach for your phone to check.

Your phone is dead.

You didn't even bother to plug it in.
The cord is so far away, at the edge of the bed.

Is it far? Or is everything far?
But if it is far, you don't need to do your essay.
No obligations.
No expectations.
No pressure.

It doesn't matter if you can or can't get out of bed.

Yes. don't charge the phone.

then you can be far forever.

But, Andrew said he misses you. He cares.

choose your next action:

- c. charge your phone (proceed to page 10)
- d. don't charge your phone (proceed to page 11)

While your phone is charging, maybe you should get out of bed and do something.
anything.

choose your next action:

- a. lift off the duvet (proceed to page)

No obligations.

No expectations.

No pressure.

Somehow it all of a sudden feels relaxing, like all the tension in your body is gone.

Nothing matters really.

why bother.

choose your next action:

*No action to complete because you don't care.
Please restart from the beginning.*

you lift the warm duvet off

you feel exposed.

bare.

maybe it is a bad idea.

the walls start moving in on you.

you see your essay on the desk, its due soon, only 3 days left, what is the essay on again? is Andrew done? what day is it? do you have enough time left? what would your mother think if you failed? what is everyone else doing? why is everything shifting in and out of focus? is something wrong with your vision? you haven't had a health check for a while. you should take better care of your body. you still have to follow up with your doctor. but you missed your session last week. they hate you. you wasted their time. you have to pay extra for not showing up. you don't have the extra money.

irresponsible, unreliable.

just don't go. just don't go. just don't get up. if you put the duvet back, all of this will go away. it's safer under the duvet.

make it go away

choose your next action:

- a. ~~distract yourself by going on the phone (phone is still charging, cannot complete)~~
- b. go under the safety of your duvet (continue to next page)
- c. ~~yell for your roommates to help (too embarrassed about your debt, cannot complete)~~
- d. ~~cry (you already dispensed all your tears, cannot complete)~~

you are under the duvet. please. fall asleep. please. make it go away. it is not working. why is it not working.
the blank word document labeled "essay" fills your mind. blank. unfinished. disappointed faces. your
doctor's face. your mother's face. Lois' face. disappointment.
your head is dizzy.

you no- tice you- r erratic gasps of br- eath
out. in. in.in. out.in. in.out.in.in.in. in.in. out.out.out. in.in.in.in.out.
like a fi- sh ou-t of wa- ter.
in. in. out. in. in. out. in. in. out. in. in. out. out. out.in.
you sh-ift your fo-cus to the d- uvet.
in. out. in. out. in. out. in. out. in. out. in. out. in. out.
you train your eyes on the weave of the fabric.
in. out. in. out. in. out.

in

out

in

out

the weave of the fabric mesmerizes you.

in

out

your eyes trace the intricate twist of the cotton strands.

in

out

following your eyes, your hands feel the softness of the cloth.
you feel the warmth caress of your now steady breath on your face.
with it, you slowly become aware of the rhythmic intervals of your breath.

Calling Andrew will help. He cares, at least he cares.

choose your next action:

- a. call andrew. (proceed to the next page)

you pick up your phone.

Charged, did you charge it? You don't remember anymore.

It doesn't matter.

your connection to the world outside is now within the palms of your hand.

what do you say to Andrew?
you cannot get out of bed?

SO STUPID.

What can he do about it?

But he told you he will not judge you in any way or form. He told you he cares, he told you:

"you are not a burden"

But still. You feel bad. It is as simple as:

1. ~~Sitting upright (completed.)~~
2. Lifting the duvet off your body
3. Rotating your body to face the edge.
4. Swinging your left leg off the bed
5. Swinging your right leg off the bed

Wait, don't forget breathing.
In. Out.

6. Lowering your feet
7. Planting your feet to the floor
8. Shifting your weight forward
9. Exerting pressure through your legs against gravity
10. Standing upright

And voila! You are out of bed.

"you are not a burden"

Okay let's try this. If you can formulate it in your mind, surely you can do it.

you lift the duvet slowly whilst looking at the intricate weaving of the threads.

you rotate your body, feeling the speckled warmth of the sun shift onto your back.

you swing your left leg,

then your right leg off the bed whilst taking care to focus on your breath.

in.
out.

You lower your feet slowly and plant it to the floor

"you are not a burden"

You shift your weight forward as the birds outside chirp you on.

You exert all you can into your legs.

Andrew cares. Someone cares.

you stand upright.

Congratulations you got out of your bed!

but, why?

did you actually want to get out of bed?

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