

“To Live Your Life Again, Turn to Page 1”

Affordances of Narrative and Play in Neil Patrick Harris’s *Choose Your Own Autobiography*

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Abstract:

*In this article, I explore a trend in contemporary popular culture of combining elements of narrative and play via a case study of Neil Patrick Harris’s book *Choose Your Own Autobiography*. I introduce play and narrative as distinct yet often intermingling symbolic forms that both come with particular affordances. I then analyze the ‘mechanics’ of Harris’s text by investigating how these affordances shape the experience of reading (or, more generally, using) his autobiography, and in a second step I connect these characteristics to the meanings and politics entailed in the book. Taken together, I argue that the autobiography’s ludonarrative elements allow the text to portray the multiplicity of Harris’s identity and to self-consciously highlight the constructedness of stories of life writing.*

Introduction

Contemporary (US) popular culture is increasingly characterized by a fusion of the symbolic forms of narrative and play. This liminality of the two forms is, perhaps, most visible in video games, a medium that almost always builds on telling a story in an interactive and frequently nonlinear way. Yet through practices that have been described as convergence (cf. Jenkins, *Convergence*) or remediation (cf. Bolter and Grusin), more ‘traditional’ media—which is to say, traditionally narrative media—have also more recently integrated ludic elements, from choose-your-own-adventure books to twist films, so-called ‘complex’ television, or postmodern ‘cult’ novels. While previous scholarship has explored how such texts can be understood as combinations of different media or specific aesthetic principles traditionally associated with these media, my focus will be on conceptualizing them as fusions

of the symbolic forms of narrative and play, which are not intrinsically tied to any particular media. Specifically, in this article, I want to examine one recent example of popular literature that uses both narrative and ludic elements to make sense of experience: the actor and comedian Neil Patrick Harris's memoir *Choose Your Own Autobiography* (2014), which is stylized as a choose-your-own-adventure book. I argue that the book's fusion of narrative and playful characteristics allows it to both ambiguate the otherwise more linear narrative of Harris's biography and to thus metatextually explore and point to the constructedness of any story of one's life.

To explore the book's ludonarrative elements, I will first briefly establish my understanding of play and narrative as symbolic forms and discuss in how far I see them as increasingly intermingling in contemporary popular culture. After, I will examine Harris's autobiography in two steps: first by analyzing its ludonarrative 'mechanics,' second by connecting the intricacies of these mechanics to the cultural work that his autobiography does. My focus will thus be not so much on a close reading of the text than on a reading of its mechanics, of which of its elements we could consider narrative, which ludic, and how they work together to create a text that renders the story of Harris's life differently than a purely narrative version would have. This analysis can thus serve as a case study to illuminate how contemporary popular culture makes use of ludic elements in its narration in a mostly symbiotic and innovative way.

Ludic Textuality: Narrative and Play in Contemporary Popular Culture

I propose the term ludic textuality to describe contemporary popular culture's propensity to combine and interweave characteristics of narrative and play, which, in scholarship so far, has mostly been discussed for video games. As was established in this book's introduction, the humanities have been privileging narrative for a few decades, and one particularly prominent example of this overemphasis coming to the fore was the ludology-narratology debate that characterized early game studies. As part of these debates, some scholars argued that the ubiquitous and dominant framing of video games as a form of narrative needed to be countered with conceptualizations that understood them exclusively as a particular type of *ludus*, or play (cf. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 189-204; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan). To circumvent the pitfalls of this debate, I understand the majority of video games as particularly prominent examples of ludic texts, that is, texts that primarily are characterized by elements of play but that combine these with other symbolic forms, most often narrative (but also, for instance, ritual or the database). This emphasis on symbolic forms, then, also highlights that such ludonarrative texts exist beyond video games and, in fact, characterize contemporary popular culture (cf. Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 37-38).

I have previously outlined my understanding of ludic textuality and of play and narrative as symbolic forms in an article discussing the video game *Alan Wake* (2010) and the TV show *Westworld* (2016-). While my interest here centers on tracing these dynamics in a print book, many of the underlying theoretical assumptions are similar, so I will briefly refer to some of this previous writing in order to establish a theoretical basis, amended by a few additional theoretical considerations (for a more detailed account, cf. Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 114-19). In this perspective on narrative and play as symbolic forms, I understand both as being characterized by particular affordances. That is, play and narrative should not be conceived of as having certain 'essential' markers or elements that homogeneously or consistently characterize them, but rather as exhibiting specific tendencies or inclinations for how they can be engaged with and made sense of. Caroline Levine, who adapts the term from design theory, notes that affordance "describe[s] the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (6). This perspective helps us to move away from a particular object's or text's 'intended' use and instead shifts the focus towards the "potentialities [that] lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements" (6-7); in this sense, the [term] "crosses back and forth between materiality and design" (9).

Understanding symbolic forms as having certain affordances equally de-emphasizes a producer's intention and instead foregrounds a particular text itself as well as its potential use(s) by readers, viewers, players, etc. For instance, most narrative novels afford to be read linearly, from beginning to end, and even though a reader can also skip pages or turn immediately towards the ending, the novel's narrative will usually make less sense that way—while it is thus possible to skip pages, the novel's narrative form does not particularly afford it. A more ludic choose-your-own-adventure book, in turn, in which at the end of many pages the reader is asked to make a decision of what should happen to the protagonist by turning to a particular page, affords nonlinearity: Reading such a book from front to back makes little sense, neither narratively—the story is incomprehensible and incoherent—nor ludically—the ludic potentials for agency, making significant choices in the text, are ignored. Since different ludonarrative texts entail different allegiances to the symbolic forms of narrative and play, their particular affordances cannot be easily generalized, which makes them so interesting to analyze individually and in detail.

As I have previously argued, this perspective productively 'marks' narrative as a symbolic form, seeing it as "not necessarily a 'neutral' way of processing information but as one that comes with certain biases or preconceptions" (Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 115). Among the 'prototypical' characteristics of narrative, I would especially list coherence, order, and causality in relation to the depicted events, the linearity of that representation, and a drive towards closure and finality. Play,

in turn, is characterized by interactivity, agency, nonlinearity, and iteration (116).¹ While there are a number of texts or cultural practices that adhere to these prototypes quite well—for instance, a novel like *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) that mostly affords to be engaged with as a narrative, or an activity such as playing hide and seek or a football game that is mostly governed by ludic elements—there are also numerous examples that feature some narrative and some ludic elements, a liminality that could be called ‘ludonarrative.’

This liminality is the case, for instance, in so-called twist or mindgame films that mostly build on a narrative experience but afford to be engaged with in an iterative way once a twist has been revealed, when revisiting the text yields a significantly different experience (cf. Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 31-39). Other examples include TV shows that encourage a participatory engagement (like *Westworld* [2016-] or *Russian Doll* [2019]), postmodern novels like *House of Leaves* (2000) that use footnotes and other formal and typographic innovations to render the reading experience nonlinear (cf. Schubert, “Narrative and Play” 118-19), the genre of choose-your-own-adventure books, or the large majority of contemporary video games.² In all of these examples, narrative and ludic characteristics coexist, and they can sometimes work symbiotically or at other times compete or interfere with each other (cf. 117-18).

In the following, then, I will more specifically look at how the medium of the book can use ludonarrative elements. Playful elements in novels have a longer tradition (cf. Aarseth), and previous scholarship has used ‘play’ metaphorically, especially to describe elements of postmodern fiction (cf. Ryan 177). In turn, contemporary US culture, sometimes separated from earlier decades by being dubbed post-postmodern (cf. Herrmann et al.), is increasingly characterized by ludonarrative fusions. Again, instead of a focus on remediation, my interest in such novels is to see them as part of a larger trend towards ludic textuality, which is not media-bound (but, in its properties and characteristics, certainly media-specific). Methodologically, to analyze ludic textuality in these texts, I am less interested in a focus on a close reading than in an analysis of what could be called the ‘mechanics’—or the ‘narrative architecture’ (cf. Jenkins, “Game Design”)—of the text. To use video games as an analogy, instead of a focus on narrative elements, I instead highlight

1 Later in this article, I will explore these characteristics in more detail when I analyze Neil Patrick Harris’s autobiography. For a more general discussion, cf. Schubert, “Narrative and Play” 116-17; Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 36-37.

2 *The Stanley Parable* (2013) is an example of a video game that turns this very liminality between narrative and play into its main appeal (cf. Schubert, “Playing”). Generally, video games are also a fitting example to establish that these fusions are not necessarily one by medium but by symbolic form, as I have argued elsewhere (Schubert, “Narrative and Play” 117). Hence, it would be reductive to consider video games a form of (only) play and novels a form of (only) narrative.

the 'gameplay': the way the text has to be engaged with in order to function. The mechanics of a purely narrative novel are usually not suited to a detailed analysis since they are so well known to us and have, in fact, become part of the characteristics that we consider a novel to have; something similar is true for a purely ludic activity. In turn, investigating how a ludonarrative novel works 'mechanically' is worthwhile because there are numerous specific ways in which ludic and narrative characteristics can (and can fail to) work together.

More specifically, this would be an investigation of how such a ludonarrative novel *affords* to be read or, more generally, to be used. For instance, a novel like Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) affords multiple ways to ('physically') be read, since every page features text from two different narrators, but one is printed upside down, in addition to other textual choices that readers can make in traversing the book. These mechanics not only work descriptively, but instead, they are also semantic, contributing to how the text makes sense of experience (cf., e.g., Bray). This is also in line with how gameplay and narrative in video games can be understood. While some ludological approaches maintain that "a game's theme does not determine its meaning" and that "meaning emerges from a game's mechanics" (Johnson qtd. in Green 11), more narrative-driven perspectives assert that "mechanics themselves do not possess meaning on their own" but are "part of a larger, interconnected system by which a digital story takes shape" (Green 12). While I agree with a perspective that sees mechanics and content as interconnected, I disagree with the claim that the mechanics of a text do not possess meaning by themselves. The way *Only Revolutions* is narratively and ludically rendered, for instance, already signals an interest in openness and ambiguity, in "assembling and reassembling, combining and recombining" (Bray 196), which its contents also evoke—thus, "[t]he rigid form of *Only Revolutions* is clearly inseparable from its meaning" (Bray 184). Additionally, the fusions and clashes of two different symbolic forms also allow these ludonarrative texts to engender metatextual moments of reflecting on their own mechanics and constructedness. This meaning-making potential of a text's use of different symbolic forms will become apparent in the following reading as well.

"Choose Wisely": Ludonarrative Mechanics in *Choose Your Own Autobiography*

Neil Patrick Harris's autobiography, published in 2014, is more precisely titled *Neil Patrick Harris: Choose Your Own Autobiography*, and the title page specifies that the book is "By Neil Patrick Harris" but also adds: "As unshredded and pasted back together by David Javerbaum," a comedy writer. Harris, in turn, is primarily known as an actor and comedian, especially for his eponymous role in *Doogie Howser, M.D.*

(1989-93) and as Barney Stinson in *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-14). Accordingly, his autobiography is light and humorous in tone, centering around topics such as his early acting successes, his interest in stage magic, and his later performances in musicals and stints as host of the Tony and Emmy Awards.

However, this particular example of life writing becomes more unique through its form: Still before the first page, the book interpellates the audience as Neil Patrick Harris himself, telling them: “[T]his is a choose-your-own autobiography . . . and YOU AND YOU ALONE will be responsible for living the life of Neil Patrick Harris. Throughout this book, you will be presented with choices. [...] And remember, the decisions you make won’t just be affecting you. From this point on, Neil Patrick Harris’s life . . . is in your hands.” The rest of the book continues to use this second-person address and relates aspects of Harris’s life in brief chapters (on average between two to four pages), at the end of which readers have to make a decision of what to do and, thus, to which page to turn to next. In its form, the book thus combines the genres of life writing and choose-your-own adventure stories, also called ‘gamebooks’ (cf. Wake). In the following, I will look at the book’s mechanics by discussing how the affordances of narrative and play mentioned before influence the experience of navigating Harris’s autobiography. The fusion of these characteristics will establish the book’s liminality as part narrative, part play.

Some of the core characteristics of autobiographies—and, on a higher level, narrative—that we might expect from the genre are superseded in *Choose Your Own Autobiography* by elements of play. Specifically, this concerns the narrative form’s drive towards ordering events in a causal relationship and thus establishing a particular coherence (Nünning and Nünning 66), which is complicated by the book’s ludic focus on interactivity and a potential for agency. The individual chapters of the book are certainly driven by causality, relating events that follow each other, and the specific element of choices at the end of each segment additionally highlights that causality since readers have to make a semantic choice that will directly lead to another outcome. In turn, these choices can be understood as a low level of interactivity—instead of only actively reading and interpreting, which all kinds of narrative texts demand, readers also have to interact more physically with the book, going back and forth across its pages (cf. Aarseth 1-2). However, this interaction is not merely physical either, since the book encourages readers to make informed choices, thinking about what they want to happen to Harris next. In other words, this setup affords a level of agency on the readers’ side that is typical of play.

Together, these possibilities infringe on narrative’s usual focus on coherence, order, and causality. For instance, the book begins (conventionally enough) on page 1 with a description of Harris’s birth, further establishing the second-person address: “You, Neil Patrick Harris, are born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on June 15, 1973, at what you’re pretty sure is St. Joseph’s Hospital” (1). At the end of this first section, at the bottom of the page, the book includes the following instruction in

italics: "If you would like to experience a happy childhood, turn to page 8. If you would prefer to experience a miserable childhood that later in life you can claim to have heroically overcome, turn to page 5" (4). If readers go for the first option, they will continue hearing about Harris's childhood, and at the end of that chapter, they can choose again between "exploring the world of theater," "start[ing] [to] learn magic," or reading a speech Harris practiced at age 13 (11). If they went for the other choice—or if, after reading through this chapter, they are not happy with their original decision anymore and go back to the previous section to reconsider their choice—they can read about an alternative take on Harris's childhood, a crueler version, which ends with the option to continue with the happier one or to turn to a much later page in order to meet one's own children, decades later (7). These elements work against narrative's penchant for coherence and order since one event does not 'logically' lead to another one but rather to multiple possible ones, which overall facilitates various possible reconstructions of Harris's life. At the same time, it gives more narrative power and agency to the readers of the text in deciding what it is they want to engage with, akin to controlling a video game character.

These characteristics also lead to the book encouraging a nonlinear reading practice. By play's nonlinearity, I do not mean a lack of chronology (since, of course, narrative can be achronological as well) but the lack of "one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences," so that "the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text" (Aarseth 41). In this sense, a nonlinear text has the "ability to vary, to produce different courses" (41-42). Ludonarrative video games like *Heavy Rain* (2010) or *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) have used this nonlinearity to render the choices of their players more impactful, increasing a feeling of agency: making a specific choice about what the protagonist will do will potentially lead to different endings, and if players want to experience another ending, they would have to play parts of the game again to choose differently.

In *Choose Your Own Autobiography*, this works similarly, but the 'cost' of going back to reconsider a choice is lower, since it only involves going back a few pages. Still, at times, it might not be easy to retrace one's steps, since the choices usually lead to very different sections of the 291-page book. Almost all endings of chapters thus function as nodal situations, "allow[ing] for more than one continuation, which means that the two continuations that are both *possible* from one point have to be *different* from each other" (Domsch 1; emphasis in the original). The agency readers have in being able to shape the course of the story thus leads to more than just one definite, linear path in which the narrative can unfold. While the chapters themselves are experienced linearly, getting from one chapter to another overall creates a nonlinear text. Due to this nonlinearity, reading through the autobiography and making certain choices until readers arrive at one of several endings

will very rarely be the same experience, since the choices offer dozens of paths to traverse the text. The experience of each session of reading the book (or even that of different readers) can thus differ drastically, leading to different storyworlds of Harris's life being reconstructed.

In turn, this nonlinearity also invites readers to make choices and to revisit previous nodes, which connects narrative's drive towards closure with play's focus on iteration. Initially, these might seem like opposite ends of a spectrum—either providing closure and finality on something or revisiting it in a repeating fashion—yet they are actually combined symbiotically in the book. Specifically, having to make a choice on where to 'go' next is always narratively motivated within the possible world that readers can construct of Harris's life, and narrative's penchant for closure will tend to compel readers to bring the story to a close, in turn increasing their investment in the choices they can make to engender that potential ending. Since there are multiple pages that proclaim an ending to the book, the experience of one path from the beginning to an ending will usually not take long, encouraging another read-through. Instead of the focus on an overall story that provides closure, the book (somewhat paradoxically) highlights multiple narrative strands as leading to different types of closure in themselves.³

For instance, if, as mentioned above, readers choose Harris's 'miserable childhood' and then go for the option to meet their children, they have three choices at the end of that: taking their children to a Disney World trip, seeing a "real happy ending. Not a metaphorical 'happy ending,' sicko," and a third option taking up the second one: "Although if you want that, that's back on page 78" (Harris 279). The first option eventually leads to the same page as the second option, offering no choices but instead telling readers to "[g]o on to the next page" (287), which leads, indeed, to a happy ending.⁴ One of these routes thus only takes fifteen pages to get to the end of the book, experiencing only about five percent of the potential narratives of Harris's autobiography. Fittingly, at the end of that last page, the book thus prompts readers: "To live your life again, turn to page 1" (291), directly evoking a logic of iteration. One of the primary pleasures of Harris's autobiography is thus not to receive *one* account of his life but to 'witness' the effects of the choices one can make, to exert one's agency in shaping the course of Harris's life, but also to go back to previous choices and see where other decisions could have led. While a reader could, of course, put away the book after reading just fifteen pages of it,

3 Readers can also never 'get lost' on these paths, so a given path will always eventually lead to an ending, emphasizing closure as well.

4 This ending happens on the very last page of the book—in most choose-your-own-adventure stories, in contrast, the happy ending is not actually placed at the end of the book, since it would be too easy to be found by readers who simply want to skip to that and then retrace their steps

its specific mechanics afford an engagement in an iterative, nonlinear, and interactive manner. These characteristics ultimately render the story of Harris's life as multifaceted and fragmented, an aspect to which I will turn next.

"Turn Back to the Page You Were Just On": Playful Identities

The elements I have discussed so far characterize *Choose Your Own Autobiography* as a liminal text between narrative and play. Beyond being just formal characteristics, narrative and play as symbolic forms can be considered as particular ways of making sense of experience—in this case, the experience of an entire life of a person. The text's ludonarrative poetics thus also come with their own particular politics, and I want to point to four larger ways in which the book's meanings are intertwined with its ludic textuality.

First, the text's interactivity, its potential for agency, and the resulting nonlinearity render the account of Harris's life fragmented and multifaceted. This is a telling of one's life that goes against the "classic idea of a coherent self sustained over a lifetime" (Wong 4). Instead, the book is in line with postmodern and experimental life writing that underscores "subjectivity as performative," as "situational," and "as dialogic and narrative-based" (4-5, 5, 5). All of these characteristics go in a similar direction, highlighting that "there is no core identity but only changing surfaces," that "identity shifts according to its context and community," that we "have multiple identities simultaneously," and that "the project of becoming a self is to claim the act of self-narration in a discursive web of signification and questioning" (5). In other words, such autobiographies subscribe to the postmodern notion of understanding identities as "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Hall 6). Yet Hertha Wong's focus on such identities as "narrative-based" is compelling in this context as well, because narrative, as I outlined above, usually affords coherence, not a multitude of fragmented identities. In this sense, while many contemporary autobiographies might subscribe to a discursive understanding of identities in their content, their (narrative) form might implicitly or explicitly work against that. Harris's ludonarrative mechanics, in contrast, support and enhance the plot's interest in depicting identity as multifaceted. The choices readers can make in the course of Harris's life overall highlight multiplicity, as some paths pursue Harris's acting career, either on TV or on stage, while others focus on his interests as a magician and entertainer, or his experience as a father, or as a gay man. Thus, the text's ludic elements offer competing narratives of Harris's life, highlight the agency readers have in reconstructing them, and overall establish the constructedness of these retellings.

Second, the text's particular characteristics complicate some of the usual appeals of autobiographies. For one, this concerns processes of identification; as Paul Eakin argues, the "identification of reader with autobiographer [...] constitutes the fundamental motive for the reader's interest in autobiography" (36). Generally, Harris's narrative of a white, upper-class, gay man might not be something every reader can identify with, but this is a potential problem that concerns any autobiography (or any text, for that matter). However, the book's particular interpellation of the reader as Neil Patrick Harris, using the second-person narration to address the reader and thus affording agency to make decisions as if they were Harris—and as if they could determine his path in life—intensifies this issue.

Additionally, the text's potential for agency leading to nonlinearity also creates a problem of unreliability, since not all of the segments are necessarily reliable. The choices about Harris's childhood, for instance, are essentially two mutually exclusively retellings of his earliest years. Likewise, most of the endings that stem from making apparently 'wrong' choices, like being violently beaten up by the actor Scott Caan (66), are clearly not part of Harris's actual life. In this particular example, the book even signals that explicitly, speaking of "an alternate universe [...] where Scott Caan takes a swing at you" and contrasting that with "the actual universe" (65). Other over-the-top endings do not make this so explicit, so the overall text does not seem concerned with appealing to be particularly reliable, 'authentic,' or 'nonfictional,' instead embracing perspectives that understand autobiography as also fictional (Eakin 49). Thus, the book aligns itself with a more experimental strand of life writing that consciously plays with some of the conventions of the genre, which seems particularly fitting for a text that is overall often humorous in tone. The two chapters about Harris's childhood, in turn, add another dimension to this unreliability: From the exaggerated tone of the 'miserable' childhood, we can assume that this is the one meant to be considered unreliable.⁵ However, some of the parts of the 'miserable' childhood, like the existence of Harris's grandparents, are not mentioned in the 'happy' version, so that those can potentially be seen as part of Harris's actual experiences as well. The structure thus acknowledges that a reflection on one's childhood as 'purely' happy is surely to be an oversimplification, and in presenting this in a binary way with the miserable version, the book seems self-aware that any attempt to narrate one's life is a construction, pointing to this unreliability itself.

Third, a closer look at how the text's mechanics of nonlinear nodal branches are used can connect these formal choices to some of the text's less visible politics. Instead of focusing on the general existence of certain mechanics, such a perspective traces the text's choices in navigating in more detail: which choices causally

5 For instance, Harris's mother here is described as "Cruella Bathory Harris, [...] the kind of mom who drinks alcohol and smokes crack a lot because she is an alcoholic crack addict" (5).

lead to which other ones, which chapters are particularly difficult to reach, which paths (or particular plot elements) are always somehow mentioned in every read-through and which ones are optional, etc. This connection of form to the text's politics is particularly significant in terms of how Harris discusses his identity as a gay man. One of the earliest of these references occurs after a chapter mentions his childhood interest in musicals, since one of the options to continue from there reads: "You know, a lot of young boys who are into theater turn out to be . . . umm . . . you know, why don't you just turn to page 27" (16). There, the chapter starts: "From early in life you are drawn to guys in a tingly kind of way" and, at the end, readers have the option to "get laid" (27, 29). This is one of several points at which one of the options to choose references Harris's queer identity, and it is in fact difficult to choose a path to an ending that makes no such reference, for instance by focusing on Harris's partner David Burtka (e.g., on pages 107, 121, 168, and 194) or when Harris describes his process of publicly coming out. As part of these chapters, readers can choose to "come out in a rational, controlled way" (which is what happened in Harris's life), "come out in a reckless, over-the-top way" that ends his career and leads to another ending of the book (which, again, is an unreliable narration of what happened to Harris), or "choose not to come out" by turning to page 101 (173). There, however, the text tells readers: "Have courage, Neil. Don't be scared. Life is an adventure. [...] Now turn back to the page you were just on and say yes to adventure!" (101). Significantly, there are no other options offered, so readers must go back to choose a way for Harris to publicly come out.

This is a highly significant choice when considering the meaning-making potential of play: Readers, here, would be stuck in a loop should they choose to continuously ignore Harris's gay identity, so the effective lack of a choice renders this part of Harris's life as significant purely on the level of how it is mechanically included in the text. The book thus uses the mechanic of (ostensibly) being able to make a choice but here recurs to narrative's linearity, forcing a specific path onto readers: They cannot choose not to come out. This makes sense of experience not in a narrative way but specifically through the combination of narrative and ludic affordances and how they are implemented in the text. Additionally, while these chapters retell the story of Harris publicly coming out, there is no such central 'coming out' on the plane of the book. If readers did not know about Harris's queerness, they could 'stumble upon' this fact in a variety of different ways throughout the text, the coming-out story being just one of many. In a way, this reduces the centrality of his sexuality in his life story, yet on the other hand, his sexuality is present—slightly less visibly—throughout the entire book, referenced and discussed repeatedly as a part of other stories. This fits with a self-description of Harris as not very 'politically queer'—"you are not, by temperament, an activist" (169)—or as not seeing his homosexuality as the one aspect that defines him. In other words, being gay is only one of his identities, a self-identification that is mirrored and expressed in

the mechanics of this autobiography.⁶ In this way, Harris's queer identity is plotted through the mechanics of the text, and something similar is true for other aspects of his identity that fill the ludonarrative characteristics of the text with particular meaning—especially his privileged position as a white upper-class man and how that enables him, for instance, to include the chapter about a miserable childhood as a joke, as an alternate reality.

Finally, all of these ludonarrative elements, both individually and together, allow the book to self-consciously address its own process of constructing multiple selves. Many of the characteristics I outlined above lead to more or less explicit references to the discursiveness and constructedness of any life story, and the book's generally nonlinear form overall contributes to that by offering multiple possibilities of such stories. This metatextual interest of Harris's book is also buttressed by inclusions of material from other text types, such as recipes, interviews, a Twitter feed, or segments akin to a commercial break, while another chapter that talks about Harris's husband David features typographic corrections by David on how Harris describes him. These parts question the alleged authority of one voice narrating his life, and the metareferential elements overall further highlight the constructedness of narratives, even—or especially—those about ourselves. Additionally, other parts of the book acknowledge its ludonarrative elements, since there are pages that can only be reached by 'breaking the rules' of the game, browsing through the book or randomly turning to a specific page rather than following a path. These instances directly point to that fact by sarcastically stating that "it's impossible to imagine anyone violating this book's explicit instructions by casually flipping through it out of sequence" and that "everybody else reading this book will strictly follow instructions and only go to the pages to which they are directed" (Harris 97, 175). Acknowledging this reading practice, which is similar to practices of 'cheating' in video games (cf. Consalvo), again allows the book to point to its own constructedness, here explicitly as a hybrid of narrative and play, which in turn is transferred to the constructed nature of the autobiography that readers are both reading and creating.

6 In a similar vein, after learning about Harris's queerness in one chapter, readers can choose to turn to a particular page "[i]f [...] this whole thing is giving you gay anxiety" (83), which then leads them to a parody interview for *Totally Straight Guy* magazine (94–95). This presentation also 'plays' with Harris's identity: It offers readers who might not be interested in or might not be able to identify with his queer identity a way to explicitly acknowledge that but then makes fun of attitudes of people who are in disbelief that Harris is gay—especially because his character on *How I Met Your Mother* was such a womanizer—through the figure of the magazine's interviewer.

Conclusion

Focusing on Neil Patrick Harris's *Choose Your Own Autobiography*, this case study has highlighted how some contemporary pop-cultural artifacts are neither only narratives nor merely games but position themselves liminally between the two. Harris's book affords to be engaged with both as narrative and as playful by combining characteristics such as causality and closure with nonlinearity and iteration; sometimes, some of these elements work together symbiotically, while at other times they impede each other. Yet, together, they allow the autobiography to self-consciously turn inward, highlighting its own 'mechanics' of discursively constructing multiple stories of somebody's identities—and suggesting such metatextual elements as potentially pleasurable for how readers can explore the book. As a piece of life writing, *Choose Your Own Autobiography* thus manages to implement its interest in fragmenting identities not only on its content level but also via its form, combining the two to complicate and ambiguate more coherent portrayals of identity. In the process, the book also marks practices and characteristics that one might assume to be 'neutral' or universally applicable to autobiographical texts as specifically narrative, contrasting them with ludic elements.

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