“Josh: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure”
(Interactive Short Film)

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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Honors Thesis in Television, Radio, & Film
Abstract

A 20-something screwup goes to the store to buy dog food for his mom. Simple concept, right? That is, until the story leads this protagonist to either save the store from a pair of thieves, choke on a popcorn kernel, move out West after cussing out a nine-year-old, or pursue a life of crime with some community theater actors. “Josh: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” uses an interactive format to put power in the hands of the viewer and have them determine where the story leads. A comedic tale about finding oneself and the active decision making that it requires, the short film can be viewed multiple times until a satisfying ending is achieved. So, choose wisely! (Or don’t. We’re not your parents.)
Executive Summary

I was first introduced to the concept of a “choose-your-own-adventure” video while watching YouTube videos with my friend Jared at his family’s Seder when we were in middle school. The idea of controlling where a story goes and then backtracking to see every which way it could turn had me thinking of the innumerable possibilities within storytelling. After years of interest in this media format, I decided to try making one of these videos for myself.

Choosing the story for “Josh: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” was no small task. It required a lot of outlining, character conception, and considering what really mattered most to the story. My initial focus on the short film was too caught up in the format and creating convoluted parallels between storylines as opposed to the real heart and soul of its main character. After collaborating with my advisor, Professor Ben Frahm, and with my friend Rory, who would come to star in the film, I concocted an outline that served not only the format but also a coming-of-age-ish tale about a post-grad screwup who must travel to the store and buy some dog food for his frustrated mother.

Having production take place during winter break, I had to jump over a number of hurdles to finish filming “Josh” before this spring semester. A major challenge included finalizing a cast and crew amidst unforeseen conflicts. I had to compromise with having three separate camera operators over the course of four days instead of just having one Director of Photography. Difficulties with finding actors for certain roles brought about last minute changes that would affect our shooting schedule and also require me to jump in front of the camera myself. While these challenges took some ibuprofen to stifle, I was still able to have a ton of fun filming over the course of the long weekend. In fact, the time seemed to fly by for the amount of work my cast and crew was putting in.
A choose-your-own adventure requires a unique editing process, and I figured out a way to handle post-production in an organized manner amidst the chaos of this past month. While collaboration was difficult, I was still able to acquire help in sound editing and music composition for the project. Handling the visual editing myself, it was beautiful to see the short film that I played in my head for almost a year unfurl onscreen.

“Josh” is unique for a number of reasons. First, I had the satisfaction of utilizing my comedic voice and inner storyteller in a new format. While choose-your-own-adventures are not mainstream, they are increasing in popularity with companies like Eko (where I have chosen to distribute my project) and Netflix (where I am very unqualified to distribute my project). The short film requires multiple viewings to fully understand some of the jokes and storylines, and the endings hopefully encourage the consumer to go back and try out other routes within the story.

I hope that others can find this project and ones similar to it as fascinating as I do. There are a lot of stories in the world and a lot of decisions that can be made. Figuring them all out is just part of the game.
Choose-Your-Own-Chapter

Abstract ....................................................................................................................................... 2

Executive Summary .................................................................................................................... 3

Chapter 1: Prologue .................................................................................................................... 6

Chapter 2: Exploring the Format ............................................................................................... 8

Chapter 3: The Making of “Josh: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure”
  Part 1: Writing the Thing ......................................................................................................... 10
  Part 2: Filming the Thing ......................................................................................................... 16
  Part 3: Editing the Thing .......................................................................................................... 20

Chapter 4: What Now? What’s Next? ....................................................................................... 24

Credits ......................................................................................................................................... 26
Chapter 1: Prologue

When I was in seventh grade, my friend Jared invited me to his family’s Seder for Passover dinner. It was incredible – the food, learning all of the traditions – I loved it. One favorite memory, however, was watching YouTube videos on his Bubby and Zaidy’s computer. Back then, YouTube was full of fun parody songs and homemade skits, contributing to an arguably purer form of the platform before the new, monetized generation took over. After a few Smosh videos, Jared opened up a clip that would change my perspective on what storytelling could be: “Haircut (an interactive-adventure song).”

The Haircut song was created by Neil Cicierega, and its story allows you, the protagonist, to make decisions between linked videos when presented the opportunity to get a haircut. The simple decision to either grow or tame your mane leads to eccentric final possibilities from sleeping with Oprah Winfrey on live television to conquering the world with telekinetic powers. Bridges between storylines could be crossed by clicking embedded links at the end of each individual video. (This is a feature that YouTube has since gotten rid of since it did not work well on the platform’s mobile version.)

After my first viewing session, in which I decided to grow out my hair, became a hippie, fled from a protest gone violent, and successfully became the ruler of every bear in the woods, I was immediately drawn to starting from square-one and exploring each storyline the song could take me through. The concept of choosing the direction of a video added so many layers to the audience experience, and I was hooked. I started searching for more online videos like the Haircut song, and I even made my own little CYOA movie with friends in high school for shits and giggles. It was not exactly good, but it was a fun thing to piece together online and play.
back. (The video in its entirety is since lost because the links were deleted with YouTube’s platform update, and I forgot the password to the account it was posted on.)

During my sophomore year of college, I was reminiscing on these childhood memories playing with interactive content. I went back and found the videos, including the one that I made with my friends back in the day, and the idea of producing my own longer-form, professional-(ish) choose-your-own-adventure movie popped into my head. Technology had since advanced drastically, what with the advent of virtual/augmented reality and other interactive platforms, so creating something like this would be super creative and allow me to stand out! That was, until Netflix completely stole my thunder with the premiere of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*.

Okay, did Netflix really steal my idea? No. Todd Yellin, VP of Product at Netflix went on record saying the company had been planning for quite some time to push interactive content as part of innovation for internet television. My friends whom I had shared my plans for making a CYOA as my capstone project showed me an article about *Bandersnatch*’s development, thinking I would be disappointed now that my idea appeared less original. However, I realized I could spin this into an incredible positive: I had validation that interactive viewing was on the rise. Although improbable that CYOA’s will become the mainstream way of consuming video content, there exists an audience for it. I was more determined than ever to push my own voice through the medium.

Now, I just had to figure out what to make.

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Chapter 2: Exploring the Format

Before diving into my personal creative process for making a choose-your-own-adventure short, I feel it would be beneficial to quickly review the media format and where I envisioned this project fitting inside of it. At my internship this previous summer, I had the opportunity to explore some concepts tied to interactive storytelling and present them to my colleagues on FOX Entertainment’s Special Operations Team.²

The interactive storytelling genre actually began with an adventure book series by Edward Packard, initially published in 1979. These novels would allow the reader, who also was usually referred to as the protagonist of the story, to make decisions that drive the plot in different directions. However, instead of clicking locations on a screen, the book would provide page numbers where the new storyline would pick up. The series was a complete hit, as it bolsters over 180 titles and 250 million copies sold.³

With the introduction of personalized storytelling into video formats, the line blurs between what makes the content a purely narrative story vs. more of a game. I am not talking about Super Mario Bros. but more about role-playing games like Fallout or Bioshock. With these titles, the story is bent depending on which actions you take, giving ultimate narrative power to the consumer.

The obvious gameplay elements of CYOA content comes from the onscreen prompts to lead the story one way or another. Bandersnatch designed its choice screens to mimic those of popular RPGs from the 1980s, which also coincides with the videogame that protagonist Stefan is trying to program throughout the film.

Less apparent are those features of videogames that do not coincide as well with video content and cause what is considered “ludonarrative dissonance.” A term coined by Clint Hocking, who was once a creative director at LucasArts, ludonarrative dissonance describes issues that arise from the gray area between movie and videogame that interactive content creates. Two of these problems include audience regard for the story’s characters and overall investment in the story. Bear Grylls’s *You vs. Wild* is an example here. In this other Netflix original, the consumer decides what survival tactics Bear should use to survive out in the elements of varying locations. However, they know that it is all a farce and that no real harm will come to Bear. Even if a wrong decision is made, it is incredibly simple to just start over and pick a new path. Overall, the wellbeing of the character is not taken with much weight in some forms of interactive stories.

The second issue from CYOAs that applies heavily to long-form content is a “choice paralysis” that can occur with long viewing times. Flowcharts mapping *Bandersnatch*’s many storylines show how convoluted the film’s structure can be, and the vast amount of options could simply be too much for audiences to get invested in. Match this with the imperative attention that this content needs from its viewers to make informed decisions, and the work that goes into creating so many long storylines can go to waste.

To combat the challenges that I saw with other interactive online stories, I set out to construct a narrative that would follow a simple goal (similar to a game) but have an underlying meaning that encourages the viewer to make decisions for the benefit of the protagonist. After months of scribbling ideas, charts, and diagrams, “Josh” was eventually born.

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Chapter 3: The Making of “Josh: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure”

Part 1: Writing the Thing

In fall of 2018, I was gifted a small moleskin notebook, no larger than an index card or thicker than an iPhone. Its purpose, I decided, would be to record any ideas and logistics I had surrounding my capstone project. At first, my biggest challenge was focusing on small-scale story elements as opposed to a large flowchart of options. Instead of devoting myself to developing a character or conflict that audiences could relate to, I paid too much attention to how many endings there should be or what parts of a story circle the choices should break up. I was obsessed with the idea of having elements cross over between different storylines, so I fantasized what one little moment, such as a pair of robbers breaking into a house, could look like across pocket universes. A huge flaw in my mentality here, though, was that I was not focusing on any of the stuff that actually makes a good story.

If I have taken anything away from four years (three-and-three-quarters of a year?) on Syracuse campus, it is that story drives every form of media. It does not matter how high resolution your camera is or how much money went into a project: If your story sucks, the thing itself will suck. Not focusing on this element first made it more difficult to figure out what exactly I wanted to write. After shifting my method of thought, the pages of my moleskin switched from diagrams to lists of potential characters and storylines.

Looking back through the book, there were a lot of ideas that I did not end up using. Like, a lot of ideas. Bad ones too. I almost made a short film about a guy who has to babysit his friend’s chicken, except the chicken is played by a person. (Maybe I could still use that one someday.) My thought process does not usually allow me to sit and drill an idea for an hour. I have to think of something spontaneously, write it down, and then sit on it for a little bit. For
months, I exercised this, just jotting down a random storyline or character here and there. I would let scenes and exchanges play out in my head while spending too much time in the shower or out on runs. Despite my efforts, none of the things I thought about satisfied what I would consider the right story to translate into a choose-your-own-adventure.

The concept for “Josh” did not pop into my head until I was studying with Newhouse in Los Angeles last summer. I was thinking about the project a lot because I not only knew I had to write the thing come fall, but I was also developing that CYOA presentation for FOX. All I remember was sitting in my Communications Law class at 8pm on a Tuesday and wondering what the simplest start for a story could be. I thought, “What if a guy just goes to the store to buy dogfood?” I whipped out my book and wrote it down. After that, I asked, “Where’s the craziest place he could wind up?” I pondered some ideas that had come up earlier in the book. He pursues a life of crime with a pair of thieves. He decides to stay home instead and chokes on a popcorn kernel. Next thing I knew, I had a familiar flow chart on a page, except this one felt the most complete of any I had done so far. Have you ever written something down and just liked how it looks on a page? There was something so satisfying about having it laid out.

So, I had a premise. A 20-something-year-old goes to the store to buy dogfood and winds up either owning the store, joining a pair of thieves, or dead. Every time he had to make a choice, words would physically appear on both of his hands, prompting the viewer to alter the story. There were still some details missing, but I was able to begin ironing out scenes and characters. I walked into senior year with an idea, and that was all that mattered.

Version 0.5 of the script barely resembles the final product. I cannot call it Version 1 since I reworked a lot of the story elements before having a finished script, but I still think that this version is essential in the buildup of the story. I sorted the scenes into tiers that were written
with transitions to the different options. (For example: At the end of Scene 1, the transition line read, “CUT TO: 2a or 2b,” and the reader could turn to the subsequent scene. This resembles those original Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books.) The original script followed the summer 2019 flowchart and included different characters like a super-nerd little brother and an old lady who was in cahoots with the thieves who rob the pharmacy. The story and its characters were half-baked at best, and all of the dialogue was very literal. I was embarrassed to bring it to my advisor/grader, Television, Radio, Film Professor Ben Frahm, to have it looked at, but I knew that ripping out the bad parts of the script would have to happen before finding what worked.

My first story meeting with Professor Frahm concerned identifying who Josh is as a character and what motivates him most. On the surface, yes, he goes to the store to buy dog food, and this is meant to be a comedy, but what is the underlying story? What is it really about? At this stage, Josh had a passiveness that was more of a device for the choose-your-own-adventure storyline as opposed to an intentional choice. I had to figure out why it made sense for him to be at the will of another’s decision for a reason other than serving the format.

Before I had even started writing “Josh,” I knew I wanted my friend Rory to star as the protagonist of my capstone film. He and I acted and competed in speech tournaments together in high school, and we also make sketch videos with two of our other close friends. We both love It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia and can bounce off each other well comedically. I was going back to Long Island for a weekend in October, so I knew sitting down with him to alter the script would not only serve Josh as a character but also aid his performance when we shot the thing. The way I direct is heavily rooted in character discovery and decision making, so I wanted to implement this in the writing process as well. We spent an afternoon together in my hometown bookstore and basically gutted the entire existing script.
The first thing Rory and I did was figure out what Josh’s chip-on-the-shoulder was. What flaws held him back most? It seemed most logical to make him a bit of a screw up, a year-or-so out of college, and without serving any higher purpose. When we were eighteen, Rory got scammed into spending an entire afternoon at a network marketing meeting for this knife company called Cutco, so we thought it would be funny to make Josh a sucker who got raveled up in a similar pyramid scheme. This seemed to be a lighter and funnier opening than his mom actively pushing Josh out of the house. To add to Josh’s stress, we reworked the little brother into a sister, closer in age, who achieves the things that Josh failed to do (specifically, passing the LSAT and getting into law school). I cannot remember when we decided to make her a cocaine addict, but that somehow made itself into the script for the sake of comedy and subplot.

In terms of main story, Rory and I scrapped a timeline that saw a future adult version of Josh’s brother returning to the past to make him get his shit together (probably for the best) and re-worked the endings in which Josh would either save or rob the store to have them feel less final. We needed an ending where Josh found a positive purpose, but I thought this could not be done through being handed an opportunity like the keys to a pharmacy or pursuing a life of crime. To make these conclusions unsatisfying, we added the twists of him running the pharmacy out of business and having the thieves not be actual thieves but community theater actors researching roles. Now, Josh would return back home empty handed, and the viewer would be encouraged to re-watch the movie until he acquired the dog food.

By December, I basically had a whole short film, even though there were some pieces missing. Before making final changes to the script, I spent one afternoon outlining the story again, this time with index cards on my bedroom floor:
The new version of the story had four finite endings: (1) Josh dies because he does not go to the store, (2) Josh runs the store out of business, (3) Josh joins the robbers only to be disappointed, and (4) Josh moves out to Colorado and pursues his own path (We added a bit about Colorado in the first scene to show that this is an idea that Josh has had in his head before, but he had not yet had the drive to make that choice).

Scene 4a, the scene where Josh moves away, was the last one to figure out. The current version of the scene felt forced, and I did not have a real motivator for Josh to say, “Okay, this is it. It’s time to leave.” At the same time, I had not yet explored what would happen if Josh actually succeeded in getting the dog food. Although obtaining the bag was the impetus for the
whole plot, I had not thought to have an ending yet where he succeeded. This brought about the idea of one last temptation for Josh that could lead to more difficulty in returning home with something to show for his day. A girl selling lemonade in January was a perfectly illogical device to throw the hero’s way. Then, if Josh denied the temptation, we would feel some sort of character growth and return home with the dog food. Happy ending, right? Not until he realizes that the picture is bigger than the dog food and decides to make a new active decision for himself. I updated my flowchart on photoshop and got to writing the last changes in the script.

I exported the final 24-page pdf of “Josh: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” just before Christmas – two weeks before shooting began. I was thrilled to have everything on a page, but I knew getting it on a screen would be its own different challenge.
Part 2: Filming the Thing

Have you ever done something so repetitively over the course of a period of time that you have vivid dreams about it? Every night when “Josh” was in production, I dreamt about what needed to be updated on the shot list and which props we needed for the next day.

Pre-production for the project started about the same time I was wrapping up the script in November/December. After receiving a budget just over $3,000, I began by reaching out to any friends I knew would be interested in helping out on set the week after New Year’s. I decided early on that I wanted to shoot when I was home for winter break so that I could (1) use my uncle’s pharmacy to film in and (2) have the whole second semester of senior year to just focus on post-production, as I was also directing a musical during that time. My friend Pat, who Rory and I are also best friends with from high school, has his own small sound mixing company, so he offered to rent us his equipment and run audio on set. Through other friends from my hometown, I found an assistant director, assistant camera, some production assistants, and 95% of our cast. The only major role I had trouble filling was a Director of Photography.

Finding a good DP is already a challenge, but I was trying to find one during a holiday season and who had their own camera. I think by the end of it, I had talked to four different options, but each one fell through for different reasons. There were already a few members on my crew list who could be suitable camera operators, but none of them were available all four days that we had set for production, and none of them had their own camera. The main reason I wanted to find a DP with a camera was so they had experience working with their own gear and could bundle payment for both rental and operation. Leading up to the week between Christmas and New Year’s, I still did not have someone to take on the role, and I was getting increasingly anxious. Ultimately, I decided I would have to settle with having multiple camera operators
(three to be exact) over the course of the four days, and I would rent two high-end lenses to
match with the middle-quality camera I already own. It was not my first choice for how I wanted
to shoot the project, but I knew that the thing would still get done at the end of the day. Besides, I
wanted to focus mainly on the story and the comedy, so I had to shift focus back on my personal
priorities for the film.

Without a DP, I had to plan out all of the shots and schedules on my own, bouncing
logistics off of my friend Evan who assistant directed. I scouted locations and took photos at my
uncle’s pharmacy, Value Drugs, my aunt’s house where we shot the kitchen/living room
interiors, and around my neighborhood where we shot the house exterior and lemonade stand
scenes. For hours, I organized every angle that we needed and how long each shot should take
and then worked them into a shooting schedule that most efficiently accounted for weather,
travel, cast/crew conflicts, and breaks. I laid out props in a spare room of my house, bought
snacks, and made a plan with Evan to cover catering for the fluctuating number of people we had
on set each day, all while updating a spreadsheet of expenses I would need reimbursed. My
winter break became completely devoted to making sure these four days of production could go
as smoothly as possible. I could barely sleep the night before we started shooting.

Day One of production ran smoothly for the most part. A large portion of the day was the
crew getting acclimated to each other while we shot the opening scene and the ending where
Josh returns with the dog food. My favorite thing about the cast/crew for this project was that it
was full of people from different pockets of my life. I had three high school friends, two college
friends, a handful of childhood hometown friends, and a few new faces whom I had also just
met. Everyone was very patient. We pretty much stayed on schedule, and the biggest challenge
just ended up concerning how we would get lighting to be as even as possible. A lot of the color
from Day One had to be changed in post-production, and most of the ugly shots within the project were from this first day, but I still left the set feeling good about the rest of the weekend. If we kept this momentum, the entire shoot was set to go smoothly.

I completely jinxed myself into Day Two. This was already going to be the most difficult shoot, as we had to get everything done inside Value Drugs in one evening, and we could not start filming until after the store closed at 8pm. Shooting near windows had to be creatively avoided to keep continuity with time-of-day. This was also the day that our cast and crew numbers were highest. I had to make an actor change days before the shoot because an original cast member’s train would have arrived too close to call time, and I did not want to risk having to start late if they ended up taking longer than expected. Making that call and asking the actor to not be involved in the film was one of the harder things I had to do leading up to production.

Day Two had three major speed bumps that would affect the rest of the weekend. First, we tried shooting in the front of the store before it closed, and too many customers were still trying to shop. This led us to shoot an entire scene behind the pharmacy counter in the back, improvising a few lines to make sense of the change. Moving the location ended up being completely feasible, but it ate into our scheduling and put us behind by 20 minutes or so. The second speed bump was that my family friend who manages Value Drugs and played the store owner was unprepared for his scene. My uncle who owns the store has acting experience and was originally supposed to play that part, but he wound up being unavailable that night, and it was easier to switch the actor than the production date. We had to spend over an hour and a half shooting part of a scene that was only supposed to take us 40 minutes, and it set us back by even more time. After coming back from a shortened dinner break, we only had time to squeeze in everything that used Josh’s sister, Lisa, as this was also our last day with our actress Hannah.
The third speed bump of having to rush and not finishing meant that we would have to organize another night within our production period to come back to Value Drugs and get the rest of the footage we needed to complete the project.

I did not get home until 1:30am that night after closing up the store. I felt so defeated by the shoot, and I took things that were out of my control personally. I was nervous that the issues we had during this shoot would carry over into the subsequent days of production. The project I dreamt about for so long was becoming something that terrified me.

Fortunately, Day Three was the smoothest day of shooting. We did not have to travel, as production was just taking place outside my own house. The crew and cast were smaller this day, and it was fun working with a kid actor on set. We had our shortest shot list yet, so there was time to play around with improv and just enjoy ourselves during shooting. Staying on schedule proved easy, and production only lasted five hours. It was the breath of fresh air I needed to re-vitalize the project. Besides, I was gearing up to jump into frame myself for the final day.

Originally, I was not supposed to act in “Josh,” but I had another actor drop when the final schedule was sent out for production. The time to find a replacement was tight, and I would have had to branch out far to find them, so I figured I would play the second thief opposite my friend Jack. Day Four ended up being the most demanding shoot day, and it also saw the most location jumping. We were back at my aunt’s in the morning, shot exteriors at Value Drugs all afternoon, and then took a four hour break before returning to the store post-closing to pick up the shots that we missed from Saturday night. At the same time, though, we looked at the light at the end of the tunnel and were excited to finish what we started.

Bouncing in front of and behind the camera for the final day reminded me of when I started making videos as a kid. I loved directing my family and friends, telling them where to
stand and what lines to say, but I would always hand someone else the camera at some point so I could include myself in projects. I grew up performing and do not have as many opportunities to now, so I figured this would be a good chance to get back into it. Working with Jack and Rory as well as my other high school friend Jordan for the robber scenes felt like reliving those old days when I would act with them. It was so effortless and fun. We were not afraid to improv and try to make each other laugh sitting in the dumpster of Value Drugs’ parking lot. While Day Four was the longest day, it also went by the quickest. When I called cut for the final time, I could not believe how much we had gotten done. I went to bed that night relieved yet baffled by the idea of being done with this chapter of the project.

Part 3: Editing the Thing

I edit almost everything that I shoot, but I originally wanted to use a slightly different process for “Josh.” My plan was to put together a skeleton edit on my own, pass it off to a friend with fine editing experience, and have sound and color editors handle the rest. However, with the way this semester turned out, only half of that actually happened.

Because a choose-your-own-adventure is a unique format, I had to figure out a different editing flow than I was used to. Every scene of “Josh” needed to be exported individually and re-stitched online wherever I decided to distribute the movie. I had to spend extra time synching audio and video together, as we recorded both separately during production. This also just ended up being the longest project that I have ever edited, clocking in at over 20 minutes. After structuring the individual scenes solo, I spent a long session in a Newhouse editing suite cleaning most of the project with my friend Luke. It was tedious, but the first rough cut of my short film was complete.
Then, the semester moved online for the remainder of the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I had plans to collaborate more with Luke and bounce coloring edits off another student friend, but I would no longer be able to do those things in person. So, I went home from my spring break prepared to handle the rest of the video-related post-production on my own. The main thing that this situation meant was having to deal with a little more time and a little more patience. While my workload increased, I do feel good knowing that I had my own hand in every aspect of this film. I wrote most of the final script, headed production in a variety of positions, and saw the project through its final edits.

Before the last export could be made, I also collaborated with two parties for sound editing. I hired Pat to mix the audio and combine all of the channels that he recorded through on set into individual .wav files. His help was also great because we had to dub one line that Rory delivered incorrectly, and I did not notice the mess-up during production. Additionally, Pat fixed any mic pops or random volume peaking that occurred during recording. I mailed him a second hard drive from Syracuse with all of the project files and drove into Brooklyn to retrieve it once home for quarantine. (Have no fear, he dropped the hard drive in the back seat of my car, and we stayed at a distance the whole exchange.) On the music end of things, I was able to work with a girl named Emily, who I know through my student theater organization, to create four tracks for “Josh.” These included a main theme to complement transitions, positive/negative mood tracks to score the endings, and a suspenseful tune to play during the thieves’ entrance in the pharmacy. Having original music not only took out the hassle of licensing tracks from a website, but it also added a sense of authenticity to the project. Emily’s compositions have the perfect aesthetic of an adventure videogame, really adding to the playfulness that I was going for with “Josh.”
Someone I know from the BFA film program in the School of Visual Performing Arts told me about this program called Eko that she used in a class. Eko is a website that basically allows you to build interactive content and share it online. They have partnerships with Tasty and Buzzfeed and also post a lot of super professional-grade CYOA short films. Having found a location where I can directly include interactive elements to “Josh,” I knew that this would be the best way to structure a final version of the project.

Learning Eko’s interface was not particularly hard. There is a drag and drop feature that lets the user line up clips in the order that they please. I was also able to program the transitional buttons to be completely transparent and overlay them on Josh’s hands in the scene. That way, when the audience member is ready to make their choice, they can click directly on the words on Josh’s hands that we already shot practically. (I preferred this over using graphics because I wanted to avoid having the project feel like a videogame.) Once a choice is made, the scene seamlessly transitions into the next, allowing “Josh” to flow like a regular short film. This is something that cannot be done on YouTube because a new video would have to load, and advertisements could potentially break up the scenes. While Eko is less public of a platform, I felt it was the best way to turn “Josh” into an immersive interactive experience.

Viewing the short on a website like Eko also makes it easier for the consumer to go back and re-watch alternate storylines. I spent a lot of time working plot devices into “Josh” that can only be understood after the viewer goes back to every ending. For example, the only way you know that the thieves actually broke into Josh’s house too is if you choose for Josh to stay home at the very beginning of the film. You also will not know that the thieves do not actually steal anything and instead just re-arrange things in houses unless you watch the ending where Josh helps them rob the pharmacy. These two elements are essential in understanding why Josh’s
mom is frustrated with the house being all re-arranged in the ending when the protagonist returns home with the dog food. Details like this were ones I wanted to implement way back when I was still scribbling ideas in the red moleskin notebook.

For me, editing is the most strenuous part of any video project. There can be little fun in having your eyes melt in front of a screen for hours while sorting through footage and trying to line stuff up. Sometimes, Adobe Premiere crashes, and I have to waste 30 minutes redoing a sequence. Other times, something I put together just does not feel right, so I have to dig back into the original footage and find a different take that I like more. I had to jump through creative hoops like having Rory’s dialogue re-dubbed and digitally inserting a set piece to keep continuity inside the house (I won’t tell you where it is – go try to find it). At the same time, though, editing yields the highest results. There is nothing quite like watching a project for the last time before deciding that it is ready for its final export. I spent months conceptualizing this final product, and now here it is, in all its glory.
Chapter 4: What Now? What’s Next?

Okay, so I finished making the thing. It took a long time, a lot of thought, a lot of collaboration, and even more work than I could have anticipated. I allowed myself to struggle a bit, learn even more than a bit, and set myself up for future successes. So, what now?

First, I am a little disappointed that I did not have the opportunity to showcase my project as expected. I had originally planned to hold an informal screening in Bird Library with the help of my boss at the Blackstone LaunchPad, Linda Hartsock. There would have been a system in place to have the audience vote on which decisions Josh would make, and I would eventually go back and show everyone what would happen had they chosen differently. I obviously cannot hold such an event now, but I still plan to screen the project with my friends and family virtually and discuss with them their opinions on the short film. Behind the experience lies a lot of interesting psychological questions: Which paths were people most attracted to? Did they prioritize logically acquiring the dog food or go for what seemed to be the most interesting story? How easy was it for them to decide at each checkpoint? Were they likely to re-watch? Not only do I believe that “Josh” can entertain, but I think that it acts as a great conversation starter about story and decision making. I want to hear what others think about the medium of choose-your-own-adventures and how the future of media ties into it.

As mentioned in the Prologue chapter, I felt validated knowing that there is a market out there for interactive content. I cannot say I think this will become the new norm for storytelling (mainly due to the issues of ludonarrative dissonance and choice paralysis), but programs like Eko and Netflix investing in its growth show that the creative possibilities for user-directed stories is endless. Ultimately, I took what I knew – wacky comedy, inexplicable circumstances, and saying “fuck” more than I should – and threw it into the mix.
A heavy majority of “Josh” was an experiment for me. I had never written a script this long (or convoluted), worked on a set this intensive, or edited something so unique that compiled as many elements. This allowed me to openly accept the project’s shortcomings that I can continue to work on in the future. I recognize that the production value of “Josh” very much resembles a student film. There are students who can match professional-grade work and send their projects into festivals, and I do not think I am quite there with this one. However, I learned the working dynamics of running a set and translating my ideas through the work of others. A good director not only has to have ideas, but they must know how to communicate them and collaborate effectively. I focused on what I knew – the comedic timing, working with the actors, and having fun – and implemented as much of that as I could into the experience.

I am still not sure what I want to do as a lifelong career, but at the end of the day, I just like making things that other people can see and think, “Woah, that’s cool!” or “Hey, that’s funny!” That is why I am so proud of this short film. I found something I find interesting, made it my own, and created a product that I can share with others. It was the perfect ending to the adventure that I chose.
Credits

The Cast of “Josh: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure”

Rory Spillane
Hannah Doyon
Laurie Friedman
Emma Kowalchuk
Jack Levenberg
Taylor Hand
Jordan Hand
Stephen Soljanich
Tommy DeVito
Alexa Mountzouros

The Crew of “Josh: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure”

Evan Schild
Michael Loccisano
Patrick Zimmon
Sarah Gold
Kevin Brennan
Sarah DeVito
Jared Ross
Kimmy Friedman
Special Thanks To:

Professor Ben Frahm, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
Karen Hall, Renée Crown Honors Program
Laura McCall, Renée Crown Honors Program
Peter Triolo, Highline Stages
Linda Hartsock, Blackstone LaunchPad at Syracuse University
Jimmy Pastorelli, Value Drugs Pharmacy
Suzi Pastorelli and Howie Nordin
Luke Stirpe
Emily Graham
Yasmine Chahine
Marina and Anthony DeVito