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Twisty Little Novels, All Different



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My upcoming novel *Subcutanean* is built from procedural text, but it's not interactive. Each time someone orders a copy, they get a print (or digital) book containing a full-length novel, with nothing in the text itself suggesting it's anything other than definitive. But no two copies are exactly the same: key scenes, moments, and words will be altered from one to the next.

"Huh." I stirred the pot. "Not really my thing."

"Leaving the house isn't really your thing, yeah, I get it." He came over beside me and reached a bronzed hand over to pinch a couple of noodles, wincing at the heat and slurping them up fast, grinning. "But sometimes you have to get outside your comfort zone, you know?" He licked his fingers and fixed me with a look that said he wasn't taking no for an answer, and maybe it said

"Huh." I blinked. Green. His eyes were green. "Not really my thing."

"Leaving the house isn't really your thing, yeah, I get it." He took the unlit cigarette out of his mouth and slipped it back into his pocket, came over to stand by the railing next to me, facing the twilight. "But sometimes you have to get outside your comfort zone, you know?"

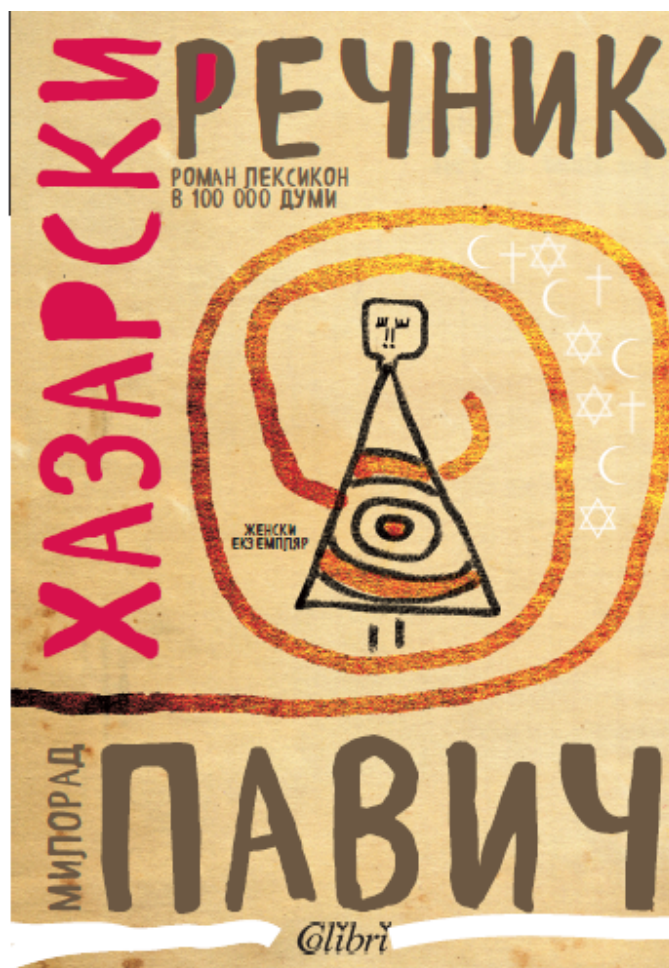
"Uh. I've got Bio homework." I looked down helplessly at

Excerpt from two different renderings of the same scene in *Subcutanean*; sometimes, the whole scene would be different.

Writing fiction that exist in multiple versions is, of course, common in digital narrative games, where alternate versions exist to create a sense of responsiveness to the player's actions. Because I romanced this character, now I'm getting a scene where we go on a date: neat. Alternate versions also offer the promise of replay, although I'd guess in most longform interactive stories, the majority of the audience only plays through once. Replay and rereading are more common in shorter pieces where exploring the possibility space is part of the intended experience, like in Liza Daly's *The Ballroom* where each interaction alters a short core text with a consistent structure.

But neither of those justifications apply here: the reader will have no control over what version of *Subcutanean* they get, and while you could certainly buy two different copies, returning to the beginning of your book to reread it will not change its text. So why the hell would I do something like this? Why write procedural text without the motivation of responsiveness or replay?

There's of course a long tradition of books appearing in multiple versions: from pre-Gutenberg hand-crafted manuscripts, to updated editions and different translations, to versions with annotations, abridgments, or illustrations. Sometimes authors rewrite or revise their earlier books in nontrivial ways. After finishing his epic *Dark Tower* series, Stephen King extensively rewrote its first volume *The Gunslinger* to be more consistent with what ended up coming after. And if you read *The Hobbit* between 1937 and 1951, you met a radically different version of Gollum not nearly as wretchedly consumed by the Ring, which hadn't yet assumed its full weighty significance when Tolkien first wrote him. Less commonly, fiction books have appeared simultaneously in two different versions: *Dictionary of the Khazars* was printed in "male" and "female" editions that alter a single key paragraph (and itself consists of three "books" with contradictory histories).





Covers for a recent printing of both Dictionary(ies) of the Khazars in their original Serbian. Image courtesy @miloradpavicoofficial

Sometimes, though, different editions or variants are merely part of the frame story. *The Princess Bride* famously frames itself (in both the book and the movie) as an abridgment of a much longer and stuffier work, with asides about the tedious material that's being omitted. This "original version" is completely fictional, but the power of this frame story is in making the reader feel special: like they're getting the best possible version.

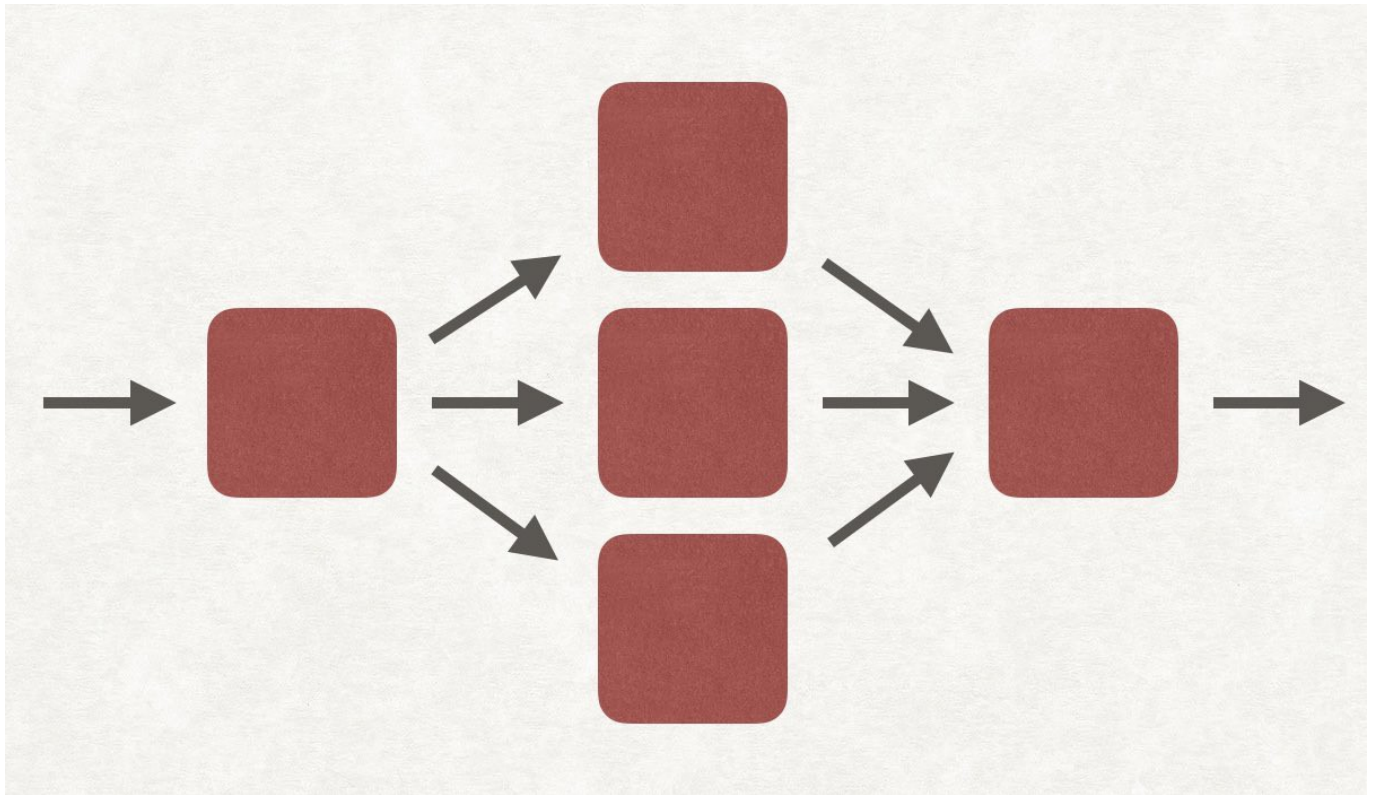
This effect exists in games too, more than I think we always appreciate. In my other upcoming book, on the legacy of adventure games, my collaborators and I write about the way Telltale would begin its games with stark bold text announcing that the story would adapt to the choices you made. Whether any particular choice actually mattered or not was irrelevant: the point was the way that text framed your perceptions of that story and your responsibility to it. In much the same way, a film that begins with "Based on a true story" wants you to feel a certain way about what you see in it, regardless of whether any particular moments happen to be real or fictionalized.

Subcutanean's story centers a descent into a world of overlapping possibilities and alternate realities. The fear, temptation, and uncertainty of what they might contain is a key part of its psychology. So framing the reader's experience as being, in a way, incomplete — getting just one version out of many, and not knowing what the others might contain — is a specific choice, made for this specific story.

Given that I'd set out to write such a thing, the next obvious question was: without replay or the need to respond to input, what kinds of variation should there be?

Very early on it seemed obvious that branching paths would serve little purpose. What's interesting about a branch is the choice itself: we don't read texts of single paths through Choose Your Own Adventure books, and in narrative games authors generally attach major changes to significant player decisions rather than randomly. You get the evil arc because you chose to be evil. In addition, for *Subcutanean* I had a very particular story I wanted to tell: I knew how I wanted it to start and end, and much of what I wanted to happen in between. So I was left with a method of procedural authoring that's

mechanically very simple: moments of variation in an otherwise linear text. The challenge was figuring out how to make this aesthetically interesting.



I went through many concepts, but two in particular proved especially fruitful. First, I focused quite a bit on the notion of “pivot words” that can change your whole interpretation of a scene. How do you think about each of these pairs of lines differently?

She was never cruel.

She was almost never cruel.

“I can forgive you.”

“I can eventually forgive you.”

He was trying to quit smoking.

He kept trying to quit smoking.

The teenage cast of *Stranger Things* have been talking in interviews about how a key line in Season 3 was filmed two different ways, changing just a single word that implied something more or less strongly about a character. In a linear medium, you have to choose one of these takes in the editing room; but what if both could coexist?

(The “add a word, ruin a movie” meme is a more facetious take on this. Some of my favorites: *Casual Friday the 13th*, and *Iron Deficiency Man*.)



Another pretty good one, courtesy @fazz68

Pivot words, of course, are also appealing from a workload perspective. Why write six hundred words creating a different version of a scene when you can just write one? Especially given that readers would only see a single version of the text, finding ways to minimize the amount of extra writing I had to do seemed smart.

(In actual fact, there are also a lot of six hundred word alternate versions of scenes in *Subcutanean*, too: fans of my work will be unsurprised to hear this. But I like the principle of the thing.)

Another way to make variants more economical — and interesting — is to not have each choice of text be random, but to have some choices affect others. This is how changing text in linear fiction works: if you change one scene, you might need to go back a few chapters earlier to properly set the new version up, “laying pipe” for plot and prop logistics or foreshadowing character moments or themes. Likewise you might need to change later text to make sure the revised scene is properly paid off. Raymond Queneau’s famous work of potential literature *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* is a ten-line sonnet where each line can appear in any of ten different versions:





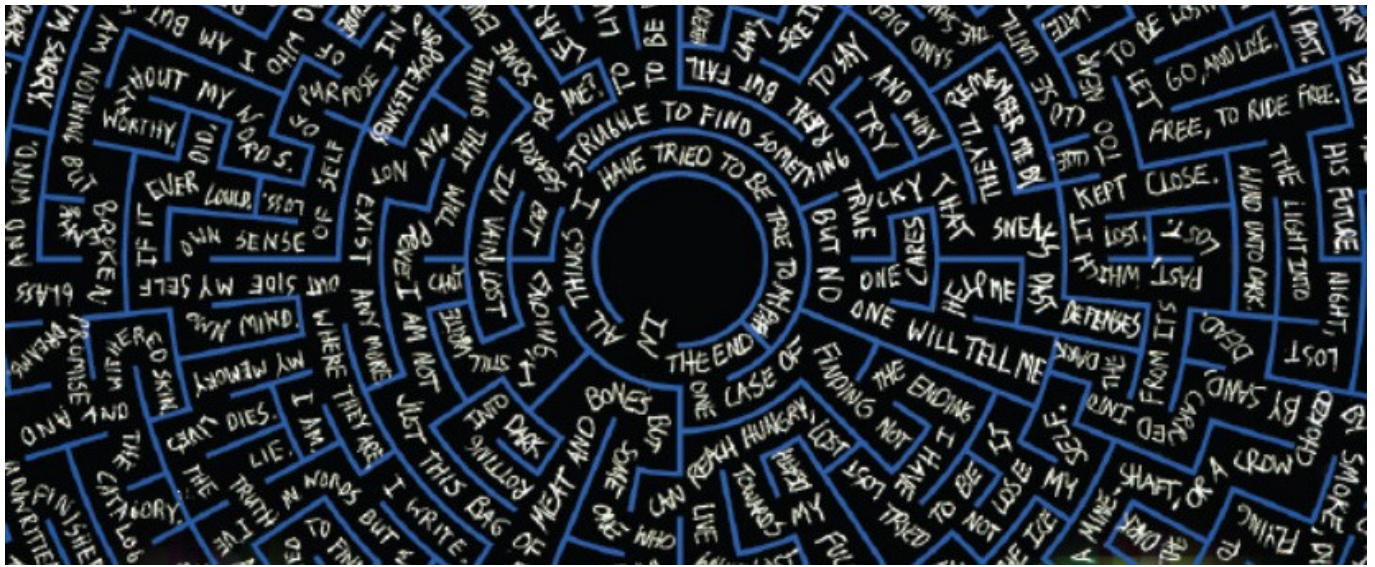
Raymond Queneau's 1961 "Cent mille milliards de poèmes" (A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems), 1961

On paper, when you choose one line it's hard to elegantly add constraints on how other lines should be chosen. But digitally you can, and for prose instead of poetry doing so is vital to flow, coherence, and readability.

Subcutaneous, as it turned out, did rather a lot of this — making sets of linked choices together, for all kinds of reasons — but I'll save the details on that for a future post.

Keep tabs on Subcutaneous and find out how to get your own unique copy, or follow the project on Twitter, Facebook, or Goodreads.





From The Ice-Bound Compendium, by the author and Jacob Garbe.

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