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## New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession

### Title

Choice of Chaucers: Teaching Kate Heartfield's Interactive Novel The Road to Canterbury

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1vv901z5>

### Journal

New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession, 4(2)

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### Publication Date

2023

### DOI

10.5070/NC34262324

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# PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

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## NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

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Volume 04 | Issue 02

Fall 2023

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## Choice of Chaucers: Teaching Kate Heartfield's Interactive Novel *The Road to Canterbury*

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Miller. 2023. Choice of Chaucers: Teaching Kate Heartfield's Interactive Novel *The Road to Canterbury*. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 4.2: 42–53.

[https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs\\_pedagogyandprofession/](https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/) | ISSN: 2766-1768.

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# Choice of Chaucers: Teaching Kate Heartfield's Interactive Novel *The Road to Canterbury*

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## Abstract

Kate Heartfield's 2018 interactive novel *The Road to Canterbury* invites a contemporary audience to join Chaucer and his fellow pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. This text-based game—or game-like text—enables the reader to make choices about the direction of the narrative in the fashion of earlier hypertext literature and the old Choose Your Own Adventure novels for young readers and other so-called 'gamebooks.' Based primarily on my experiences teaching *The Road to Canterbury* in an upper-level English course at a large public university, this essay reflects on how one might teach Heartfield's interactive fiction alongside Chaucer in mutually illuminating ways and in a variety of course settings.

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### Introduction: Interacting with Interactive Fiction

Kate Heartfield's 2018 interactive novel *The Road to Canterbury* invites a contemporary audience to join Chaucer and his fellow pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. This text-based game—or game-like text—enables the reader to make choices about the direction of the narrative in the fashion of earlier hypertext literature and the old Choose Your Own Adventure novels for young readers and other so-called 'gamebooks.' Based primarily on my experiences teaching *The Road to Canterbury* in an upper-level English course at a large public university, this essay will reflect on how one might teach Heartfield's interactive fiction alongside Chaucer in mutually illuminating ways and in a variety of course settings. This unique and uniquely interactive text stands out for several reasons even in the broad field of diverse and imaginative creative responses to Chaucer that has grown so increasingly crowded over the past several decades, during which time we have seen multiple film, TV, and Broadway musical adaptations of *The Canterbury Tales*, and more recently Chaucerian rap songs and slam poetry.<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Canterbury* has also attracted considerable attention outside the narrower remit of Chaucer studies: the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America recognized Heartfield's work with a nomination for the inaugural Nebula Award for Best Game Writing alongside two other interactive fictions released by her novel's publisher, Choice of Games LLC, and also the big-budget video game *God of War*, coincidentally or not also a work that plays with the Middle Ages ("2018 Nebula Finalists Announced"). The final nominee and the game-text that ultimately won the category was in fact *Bandersnatch*, the interactive episode of the Netflix television series *Black Mirror* that itself owes much to the gamebook and interactive fiction traditions; Netflix in fact became involved in a protracted trademark dispute with the owners of the Choose Your Own Adventure brand (Liptak 2020). As games and other interactive works continue to gain market share in the media landscape and the wider attention economy, an interactive *Canterbury Tales* adaptation presents a perfect opportunity for juxtaposing medieval and digital textuality in the contemporary classroom and encouraging students to draw perhaps unexpected connections between the two.

Interactive fiction (IF) is a label that has been applied to various kinds of narrative-based video games and text adventures over the past four decades or so, but we can of course find interactive elements of a more limited scope in premodern literature, including the prompts for audience debate characterizing the *demande d'amour* tradition, as in Boccaccio's "Questions of Love" and Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, or the more obvious medieval game-texts such as *Ragman Rolle* and *The Chaunce of the Dyse*, discussed so compellingly by Serina Patterson in her work on medieval games and their players (2019). As Andrew Higl has explained of contemporary IF, "Interactive Fiction is a particular form of text-based narrative game usually presented and played on a computer, in which readers respond to elements of a procedural (or rules-based, programmed) story by writing, and thus affecting the direction and outcome of the story itself" (2012, 4). Chaucer scholars may recognize that this definition does not derive from a monograph addressing contemporary video games or other digital narratives,

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<sup>1</sup> The major studies of Chaucer's popular reception include Steve Ellis's *Chaucer at Large* (2000); Candace Barrington's *American Chaucers* (2007); and Kathleen Forni's more recent *Chaucer's Afterlife* (2013). The pace of production of Chauceriana has only increased in recent years, however, and Barrington in particular continues to work extensively on new adaptations and responses to Chaucer in popular culture.

but rather from Higl's 2012 book on Chaucer's early reception, *Playing the Canterbury Tales: The Continuations and Additions*. Higl explains his invocation of interactive fiction in a book on premodern literature as a generative anachronism:

I want however to apply the term “interactive fiction” historically, using it as a way to understand a much older yet meaningfully “interactive” narrative work, the *Canterbury Tales*. I understand that it may seem anachronistic to begin with a term used for text-based interactive computer narratives, but my purpose is ultimately an historical understanding by way of this transhistorical comparison. (2012, 4)

Only a few years after Higl published *Playing the Canterbury Tales*, Chaucerian reception and interactive fiction converged all the more literally in Heartfield's text, affirming Higl's idea that the concept of interactivity itself may have much to tell us about Chaucer, Chaucer's readership, and how readers have responded to his works in other centuries than our own. In a teaching context, then, the hyperlinked interactivity of *The Road to Canterbury* can be used to emphasize the ‘interactive’ and otherwise game-like dimensions of Chaucer's fragmentary tale collection itself, as medievalists including Higl and Sandy Feinstein—with her early comments on “Hypertextuality and Chaucer” (1996)—have explored in their own work. A contemporary gamified adaptation such as Heartfield's allows us to explore, with students, the Chaucerian interplay of “ernest” and “game” in ways that are old and new.

While *The Road to Canterbury* could plausibly appear on any syllabus that involves reading some Chaucer, I first taught it in an especially appropriate course on medieval English literature that I had designed with the organizing subtheme of “Games and Play in the Middle Ages.” As such, I introduced students to several classic examples of scholarship in game and play studies, as we focused all semester on the intersections between literary texts and games. The primary texts on the syllabus included many of the more playful and/or agonistic tales among those that comprise the storytelling contest that is *The Canterbury Tales*; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with its festival atmosphere and series of structuring games; the Old English riddles (the foundational work on IF, Nick Montfort's *Twisty Little Passages*, cites riddles as the form's progenitor [2003, 37]); various flytings and fabliaux; and literary representations of fools and jugglers such as the poem from MS Harley 2253 known as *Le jongleur d'Ely e le roi d'Angleterre / The Jongleur of Ely and the King of England* (a useful student text which appears with an accompanying English translation in Susanna Fein's TEAMS edition of the manuscript). I positioned *The Road to Canterbury* at a point in the course calendar after we had already read several of *The Canterbury Tales* and one other contemporary adaptation, Patience Agbabi's 2014 poetry collection *Telling Tales*. In preparation for the first day of class discussion, I asked students to read/play the interactive novel all the way through from Southwark to Canterbury at least once, and then to complete at least one additional readthrough for a second class meeting on the text, making different choices along the way. The interactive fictions published by Choice of Games, written in the proprietary ChoiceScript programming language, can be accessed very easily by students as they can be read via a regular browser, the PC gaming platform Steam, Apple's App Store, or the Google Play Store. Several students in my classroom were already familiar with the publisher, and many more shared their experiences with similarly interactive games and texts, including most prominently 2019's *AI Dungeon*, which uses a large language model to generate unique dungeon crawl text adventures.

For all of its accessibility and many intriguing pedagogical possibilities, in the classroom interactive fiction by nature does present several practical difficulties, the most apparent among which is the simple fact that students will not have read and experienced the same text as one another (and the instructor will likely not have expended the tremendous labor required to comb through the entirety of the raw code structuring the work). IF compels us to discuss a variorum and not a fixed entity, but medievalists know that to talk about Chaucer is always to talk about a variorum. Embracing the additional complexity of navigating an interactive work can encourage students to recognize the homology between such a born-digital text and medieval manuscript culture at large, especially in the case of an unfinished work such as *The Canterbury Tales* extant in a number of often radically divergent manuscript copies. For example, I circulated volumes from the Variorum Chaucer project around the classroom to give students a better sense of the perhaps opaque editorial alchemy behind the preparation of modern editions that present a polished text. The previous week, we had also discussed how Agbabi's emphasis on and interest in performance in her Chaucerian poetry might give some insight into what we can hypothesize about the oral performance of medieval literature, and how her practice of reciting her work from memory itself allows for variation in performances. By this time in the semester, students themselves drew comparisons between the imagined experience of a premodern reader of a single manuscript copy of *The Canterbury Tales* and a reader who completes only a single playthrough of *The Road to Canterbury*. To read a given manuscript copy of *The Canterbury Tales* from "Whan that Aprill" to "Amen" results in a reading experience 'complete' in one respect but also fundamentally partial, just as an individual traversal of Heartfield's narrative will expose a reader to only a fraction of its 175,000 total words. Above all, teaching *The Road to Canterbury* allowed me to engage students with Chaucer and his legacies from new angles, but also provided a way to use Chaucer and medieval textuality to open and think through additional critical conversations surrounding interactive fiction, interactivity, digital textuality, and neo-medievalism(s).

Indeed, gamebooks themselves, the most immediate precursors of contemporary choice-based IF, have a long history and close relationship with pop culture medievalism. 1979 marked the publication of the first official entry in the Choose Your Own Adventure series, and thus the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the simultaneous explosion of (often neo-medieval) tabletop role-playing games, computer-based IF, and print gamebooks.<sup>2</sup> Many gamebooks incorporate other game elements in addition to the base branching-path narrative, including combat, customization of character attributes, and other features adapted from tabletop role-playing games. The majority of the more popular series of gamebooks with these elements adopt medievalizing fantasy settings in part due to the influence of J. R. R. Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons* on the early development of RPGs more generally. Examples of such series first launched in the 1980s include *Fighting Fantasy* (1982), *Endless Quest* (1982), *Lone Wolf* (1984), the Arthurian *Grailquest* (1984), and even more directly Tolkien-inspired lines such as *Tolkien Quest* and *Middle-earth Quest* (1985 and 1986, respectively). *The Road to Canterbury* itself shies away from the fantastical and does not employ a system of combat as such; readers can involve their character in physical altercations but—with a single exception I will discuss later—cannot

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<sup>2</sup> James Ryan has pointed to the 1930 novel *Consider the Consequences!* by Doris Webster and Mary Alden Hopkins as among the earliest self-conscious branching-path novels, with the same basic choice architecture for readers as in the later CYOA series and dozens of different endings (Mansky 2022). For a quick history of the gamebook, see Wake 2020, 191–94.

die or ‘lose’ before reaching an ending in *Canterbury*, unlike in many such gamebooks. All the same, the game does track various statistics and modifiers, including the amount of money and food in the reader/player’s possession, and even one’s humoral temperament (65% Sanguine, 35% Melancholic). These statistics can influence the outcomes of certain decisions and are themselves entirely the result of past narrative choices the reader has made. Therefore, the reader’s choices affect outcomes in more complex ways than a more simplistic printed branching-path fiction can allow. Also, unlike those many neo-medieval fantasy gamebooks and role-playing games, *Heartfield*’s interest remains chiefly historical, and she arguably proves more interested in Chaucer’s time than in his tales, as I will examine next.

### **Pilgrims at Play: Joining the Roadside Drama**

Before analyzing how *Heartfield* responds to *The Canterbury Tales* and describing how students might be guided through both texts, some further summary of the narrative of *The Road to Canterbury* is necessary, although necessarily difficult to provide. When beginning a readthrough of the text, all readers first encounter lines that echo Chaucer’s famous opening, but also read as rather hardboiled by comparison: “April in London means rain. It runs in the alleys and soaks the bricks dark as blood. This moldy, gray April of 1375 is even more dismal than usual. Plague and war have killed your family—and many of the Londoners who used to buy the cloth you weave” (2018). Some cloak-and-dagger intrigue does drive *Heartfield*’s main plot, inspired I think by Chaucer’s popular reputation as a sometime spy. The text’s basic premise is that the Tabard’s Host hires you—the player-character, an anonymous, impoverished weaver with no prospects—to join the company and try to convince Philippa Chaucer, accompanying her husband on this pilgrimage, not to share information in *Canterbury* that would derail a peace treaty between England and France during the Hundred Years’ War. Along the way down Watling Street, one of the other pilgrims also turns out to be a secret French agent with their own motives. The novel consists of ten chapters tied to different locations along the pilgrims’ road through which readers will proceed in different ways: “Southwark,” “Greenwich,” “Lesnes,” “Dartford,” “Gravesend,” “Rochester,” “Sittingbourne,” “Faversham,” “Canterbury Castle,” and “Canterbury Cathedral.” The central cast of characters includes your own player-avatar, a knight, a squire, a woman named Alisoun from Bath, a miller, a cook, the owner of the Tabard (named Bailey), a lawyer, a merchant, a prioress, Geoffrey and Philippa Chaucer, and a poetess from Constantinople named Selime. *Heartfield* routinely refers to all of these characters by personal names rather than their professions, and each departs to varying degrees from the personalities imagined in Chaucer’s *General Prologue*; for instance, the knight’s squire is not his son but instead a commoner eager for advancement into the nobility. You as the player/reader are certainly not the guildsman from *The Canterbury Tales* but a blank slate to customize by gender, name, backstory, and accumulating character traits, determined choice by choice over the course of the story. As with the majority of interactive fictions, you are also naturally addressed in the narration as “you,” always in the second person, although the choices from which you select appear written in the first person: I do this, I do that.

While the storytelling contest plays a major role in the narrative, with most of the characters contributing a tale, *Heartfield* proves significantly more eager to expand on the narrative links and the ‘roadside drama’ of the pilgrimage itself and not the actual tales related in *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer’s pilgrims, only a handful of which appear at any length here, most reduced to passing



allusions and fragments. With some clever cajoling, for example, you can persuade Geoffrey to recite a few lines from an early draft of the *Knight's Tale* to you in private, and the following exchange compressing the links surrounding *Sir Thopas* speaks volumes about where Heartfield's true interests lie:

Geoffrey Chaucer draws the short straw. He clears his throat.

"It so happens that I have composed a tale in verse, about a knight and an elf queen—"

The company groans.

"It's very good!" Geoffrey protests.

"No rhymes," says Bailey firmly. "That's one of the rules of the contest."

"Well, you never said so."

"I didn't think anyone would be so vain and precious as to try. Come on, then, tell us a story." (2018)

Geoffrey delivers not the *Melibee* but a similarly prosy account of his military service in the war, furthering Heartfield's desire to evoke fourteenth-century English history above all, and indeed none of the pilgrims in her interactive novel tells a version of the tale assigned to their counterpart in *The Canterbury Tales*. Unlike Agbabi in *Telling Tales*, who carefully and lovingly transplants the plots of Chaucer's tales despite her radical reimagining of them, here it is Chaucer's characters and historical setting to which Heartfield gives primacy. Of course, the interactive nature of the novel means that the reader remains free to customize both characters and history itself, influencing major historical events and choosing what to wear today.

Heartfield's approach to telling "a tale after a man" is thus clearly not to "reherce [it] as ny as evere he kan," particularly where the pilgrims' tales are concerned (Chaucer 1987, I. 731–32). The reader's own character is, however, able to choose to deliver a version of "Chaunticleer and the Fox"; I managed to succeed in being declared the victor in the contest only when telling this tale, in fact. Unlike the customizable tale told by the player-character, the stories that the other pilgrims tell are fixed, and consist of a mixture of 'autobiographical' historical fictions like Geoffrey's account and other narratives closely modelled on or more loosely inspired by a range of other medieval tales. The knight, for example, adapts the account of the early British king Herla from Walter Map, and Alisoun tells a version of Marie de France's *Laiistic*. In keeping with the interactive nature of Heartfield's framing tale, Alisoun even allows her intradiegetic audience to determine the conclusion: "Now, then, do you want the happy ending or the sad ending?" The reader is presented with the choices "Happy," "Sad," and "Flip a coin" (2018). How the pilgrims' tales proceed as tales seems always subordinated to the personalities and events of the frame tale that has come to dominate and define *The Road to Canterbury* as a historical novelistic project. Engaging directly and plainly with the major political issues of his time seems precisely what Chaucer does not do in his poetry, and pointing out the differences between Heartfield's almost educational approach to English political history and Chaucer's characteristic circumspection can be instructive for students in itself.

"Flip a coin": Heartfield also consistently thematizes 'choice' in a metafictional way, inviting readers to reflect on the implications of choice-based interactive fiction in relation to traditional linear



narrative. Emphasizing where these moments appear in the text can also prove useful in the medieval literature classroom, as they can be compared with how Chaucer invokes and reflects on medieval understandings of choice, freedom, chance, fortune, destiny, randomness, and providence in various of his works. Indeed, Susan Yager has pointed to previous scholars who have found a comparable kind of choice “built into the *Tales*, with its open invitation to ‘Turne over the leef and chese another tale’ (I.3177)”: “This freedom is identical to the reader’s liberty in choosing a path through a hypertext, which can be skimmed, annotated, reused or ignored at the user’s whim. The reader of the *Tales*, like the user of a hypertext, has an explicit license to roam, to interrupt, and to investigate” (2007). In *The Road to Canterbury*, the most salient exchange on this theme of choice appears when a ferrywoman challenges you to answer a question in order to cross a river, unmistakably recalling the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*:

“Well, what is it that all men desire?”

“Every man wants what every woman wants,” you say.

“And that is?” the ferrywoman asks.

“Choices.”

“Choices?”

“Herodotus says the greatest misery is to have no control,” you say.

“Yes!” says Geoffrey. “Therefore, mastery must be the greatest happiness.”

“We all want the power to choose, power over our own lives.” (2018)

The implications of Geoffrey’s enthusiastic interjection here generated considerable discussion among my students: does Heartfield imply a *Shakespeare in Love* trajectory, suggesting that Chaucer’s experiences on this pilgrimage in 1375 would directly inspire him to write *The Canterbury Tales*, and perhaps influence the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*? Alternatively, should we understand Chaucer to be mistaken in his interpretation and wrong to conflate “choices” and “mastery” or sovereignty? I should note that, unlike a printed Choose Your Own Adventure novel and some other kinds of adventure games and interactive fictions, texts released by Choice of Games do not allow the use of any kind of back button to undo a choice, with the exception of a full restart: choices are final, and therefore quite serious in this game.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, *The Road to Canterbury* does not in fact always offer readers a choice when advancing to the next screen. For one, whenever it is time for the next pilgrim to tell their tale for the storytelling competition, the single radio button reads *Draw Your Straw!*, meaning that readers cannot evade the ‘choice’ to submit to the operation of what Chaucer describes as “aventure, or sort, or cas” (1987, I. 844).<sup>4</sup> These repetitions of the Host’s singular instruction at the beginning of the

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<sup>3</sup> Other popular platforms for creating and sharing choice-based interactive fiction include Inkewriter and Twine, on the latter of which in particular see the 2021 collaboration between Anastasia Salter and Stuart Moulthrop, *Twining*, which builds on Salter’s invaluable 2014 monograph on interactive texts and games *What Is Your Quest?*. Either book can serve as an accessible introduction to scholars less familiar with either the history or present of hypertextual narrative.

<sup>4</sup> Tristan Sheridan has pointed to another interactive novel released on the Choice of Games platform in the same year that plays with themes of choice and agency in a similar way, Malin Rydén’s *Fallen Hero: Rebirth*. At one point, for instance,

pilgrimage that the company draw straws in order to determine who will tell the first tale alone—“Now draweth cut” (1987, I. 835)—introduces and calls attention to the operation of a certain degree of randomness in the deterministic structure of a conventional print gamebook. Even readers of IF must sometimes make a virtue of necessity, and Heartfield is of course taking advantage of the playful potential inherent in randomness that has driven so many games, medieval and modern, as well as reflecting in her own ways on that master medieval image of the wheel of fortune, referenced several times within the text.

One other crucial example of a metafictional reflection on choice merits a mention here because it demonstrates Heartfield adapting the terms of the storytelling contest to the expectations of her audience of interactive fiction readers. Unsatisfied with the low-stakes game that is the original tale-telling competition, Heartfield replaces a free meal at the Tabard with choice itself:

“What’s the prize?” asks Casimir with a grin. “I heard it was a free dinner here.”

A groan goes up.

The host holds up her hand to quiet it. “No, not this time. This time it’s something that I think even you, Casimir Polzin, will agree is most valuable: a choice.”

“A choice?” asks Selime, raising an eyebrow.

“Between three prizes,” says the host, and raises one hand. (2018)

The host brings forth a valuable relic, drinking horn, and sword, each of which the reader is able to customize further. Readers are thus encouraged to organize their reading around one or more goals, which might include some combination of winning the contest and acquiring the chosen item, beginning a romantic relationship with another character, successfully persuading Philippa and earning the fee promised by the Host, completing various ‘achievements’ that the game tracks as do many modern video games of all kinds, and more. For example, reaching the shrine of Saint Thomas represents an ‘achievement’ in itself that will not always be earned in every readthrough, should other events transpire that sidetrack that intended veneration. Gamifying the narrative in this somewhat crude fashion, furnishing the pilgrimage with objects to collect in one’s inventory and optional goals to complete, follows the conventions of IF on the Choice of Games model closely. Students were happy to discuss the potential limitations of these conventions and the limitations of the interactive work as a response to Chaucer more generally, and overall demonstrated a good understanding that the conventions of IF were in fact conventions, very different from but comparable in some ways to the conventions of medieval literature we had discussed so often in relation to Chaucer’s poetry: rhyme schemes, set pieces, rhetorical devices, and more.

In the end, as a creative response to Chaucer, *The Road to Canterbury* most resembles the so-called *Canterbury Interlude* prefacing the spurious *Tale of Beryn* in the highly unusual *Canterbury Tales* manuscript Northumberland MS 455, with its own extended descriptions of how several of the pilgrims comport themselves in the cathedral city. In order to fit more primary texts into the class schedule, I made the decision to teach the entire course in modern translation rather than having students read extensively

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“a button that says ‘You Don’t Get a Choice’ meets the reader at the end of the page,” troubling the supposed unlimited freedom of choice and reader agency in interactive works (2022, 58).

in Middle English, or I would have taught *The Road to Canterbury* with the *Canterbury Interlude* and likely *Beryn* itself as well, if only for the chess hustling. Comparing *The Road to Canterbury* with some of the much earlier continuations, revisions, and adaptations of *The Canterbury Tales* in this way can drive home to students that creative responses to Chaucer are not a twenty-first-century phenomenon, but span more than six centuries: readers have always been interacting with Chaucer and playing with his texts. At the more recent end of the spectrum, my “Games and Play” course included two additional pieces of contemporary neo-medievalism, David Lowery’s 2021 film *The Green Knight* and Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 medievalist tour de force *The Seventh Seal*. Like Bergman’s film with its inclusion of chronologically disparate signs for the medieval—a flagellant procession, the Black Death, the Crusades, and witch persecution—the fourteenth-century setting grants Heartfield the opportunity to explore one medievalizing set piece after another, and of course, readers will only experience a small portion of them during an individual reading. Readers can shop for pilgrim badges, watch a mystery play, help Chaucer make calculations with an astrolabe, watch the knight fight for his honor in single combat, and even find themselves wading through a minor peasant revolt: “‘Canterbury may lie that way,’ the alewife says, with a gap-toothed grin, ‘but all God-fearing people in England today are marching the other way, toward London, to ask the king to put an end to the laws that tie us to our lords and to our poverty’” (2018). Interested gamblers can even play a dice-rolling minigame within the game-text indefinitely, as long as you retain sufficient money in your purse to continue supplying the stake for one more game of hazard. (Just don’t let Chaucer’s own Pardoner find out how you’ve been passing your time, fortunately not one of your traveling companions on Heartfield’s pilgrimage.) *The Road to Canterbury*, then, could also work very well in a course dedicated to neo-medievalism itself to a greater extent than the one in which I taught it, and interesting parallels and divergences will emerge when it is set alongside other modern reimaginings of the medieval, particularly in games. In fact, *The Road to Canterbury* should not be confused with the hobby board game of the same name released in 2011, or the even more recent interactive chat-based game aimed at young people, the *Virtual Canterbury Tales*.<sup>5</sup> These gamified Chaucers, understood as the logical next stage of the trajectory Higl charts from Chaucer’s earliest reception, demonstrate the enduring appeal of the pilgrimage frame tale in particular as a site of play, perhaps because of its implied flexibility, openness to modification, and invitation to join the fellowship of pilgrims.

All in all, student response to the text was overwhelmingly positive, and our discussions were very instructive for me in numerous ways, particularly in what I learned about the range of their strategies for reading such an unconventional work. It emerged, for instance, that the students approached ‘playing’ the narrative very differently from one another. Some attempted to replicate their own personalities and proclivities in their player-characters, explaining that they made choices as they imagined that they would respond themselves if dropped into the same situations. Another student and then another, however, mentioned that they instead sought to role-play as an invented fictional

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<sup>5</sup> The 2011 *Road to Canterbury* game is discussed briefly as a form of medievalist board gaming in Miller 2019, 173–74. At the time of writing in 2022, the *Virtual Canterbury Tales* game administered by Marion Turner, Lucy Fleming, and other collaborators remains in its early stages, and is described on its website as “a pilot project exploring new ways of engaging diverse and young audiences with Chaucer through storytelling, theatre, and AI” (<https://www.virtual-chaucer.com/>). It combines live-action character performances with a chat interface or text parser after the fashion of a different strand of often more game-like IF, in contradistinction to the series of fixed choices provided by a Choice of Games title.

character that diverged considerably from their own personality, endeavoring to make choices consistently as that imagined character would. Also, as I have indicated, selecting a work of this nature for a syllabus effectively requires the instructor to take on the challenge—and reap the potential rewards—of teaching a text that they have not read in its entirety, with the consequence that students will always have different experiences that the instructor cannot have anticipated. For example, having read through the narrative numerous times to the end myself, and having looked over several segments of the code, I had thought it not possible for the reader’s character to die and thereby conclude the reading experience prematurely. But I was mistaken in that assumption, as we learned that one student had contrived to fatally injure themselves in a duel. Even so, this player death differs considerably from those for which the Choose Your Own Adventure series remains notorious: deaths in that series can occur quite early and represent a kind of fail-state, a disappointing ‘game over.’ By contrast, player death in *The Road to Canterbury* can only come late and seems to have been deliberately made difficult for readers to find, thus representing a kind of achievement, another reward for narrative exploration. The reader’s ‘death’ also does not punctuate the narrative abruptly but is followed by a unique ending in which, for the first time, we hear from Chaucer himself in his own voice and from his own perspective: he even reflects on your death and considers immortalizing you in his *Canterbury Tales*. (It’s a shame that Chaucer never did finish that “Weaver’s Tale” in reality!) I stressed in class that sharing such discoveries and surprises through a comparison of reading experiences can mirror how new generations of readers can produce novel interpretations of Chaucer’s medieval works through close reading and continue to make new observations about an old text, as if moving through them in original ways. Stumbling upon unique corners of a branching-path narrative simply literalizes this experience of a reader’s exploration of a narrative, and teaching contemporary texts of this sort affords many such opportunities for showing how the modern and medieval might be made commensurate.

The rare possibility of player death aside, *The Road to Canterbury* cannot be ‘won’ or ‘lost,’ but it does offer a variety of considerably different endings and outcomes for its player-character, and certain objectives and goals will have been met or not. During my own first read of the teaching week, I ended up penniless after failing to convince Philippa Chaucer not to subvert the peace treaty, although I was able to persuade the Wife of Bath to become my traveling companion for the future. In my second read, I not only convinced Philippa to preserve the peace, but my service as double agent of France was sufficient to earn me a French knighthood and my own customized coat of arms. (And I ended up the owner of a dog named Guinefort, to boot.) I was intrigued to see that my students were themselves more struck by the very last paragraph that readers see than they were concerned about their own outcomes and achievements, namely, a properly Chaucerian leave-taking in the form of “A Note from the Author”:

If you enjoyed this game, please thank Geoffrey Chaucer for providing the inspiration. His original *Canterbury Tales* was composed in the final quarter of the fourteenth century. This game takes some liberties with Chaucer’s life and character, but he was indeed married to the well-connected Philippa de Roet and was a soldier, a spy, and a civil servant, as well as a poet. As Chaucer would have said, attribute anything that displeases you in this game to the defaults of the author’s cleverness, and not of her will, as she gladly would have said it better if she could. (2018)

If, as I have argued, Heartfield remains less interested in the specific tales told by Chaucer than in the possibilities of the medieval setting and inventing her own loose historical fiction, it is clear that *The Road to Canterbury* was composed by an author intimately familiar with those tales and can provide a by turns playful and serious lens through which to examine both medieval literature and contemporary media cultures.

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