

The Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Calculus (Pearl/Brave New Idea)

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Abstract

Some of the most remarkable results in mathematics reveal connections between different branches of the discipline. The aim of this paper is to point out a modest, but still remarkable, similarity between a range of different interactive programming systems.

use a simple formal mathematical model that we call *the choose-your-own-adventure calculus* to
todo

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1 Introduction

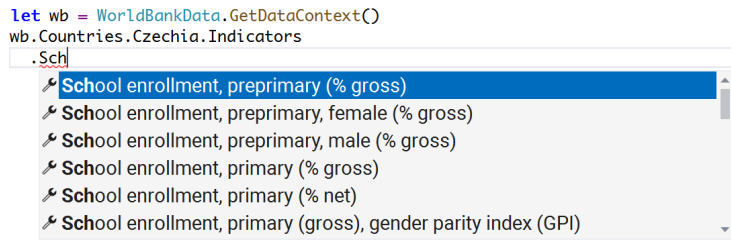
Multiple interactive programming systems, ranging from code editors for object-oriented programming languages to data exploration systems and interactive proof assistants, exhibit a remarkably similar pattern of interaction. They offer the user, who can be a programmer, a data scientist or a proof writer, a range of choices that the user can select from in order to complete their program, script or proof. The user can initiate the interaction iteratively, using it to create and refine a larger part of their program.

There are subtle differences between different implementations of the general pattern. In some systems, the resulting source code will contain a trace of the choices made by the user. For example, when choosing an item from a list of class members, the code will contain the member name. In some systems, the interaction results in a block of code that can be included in the source file, but does not include a trace of the interaction. For example, invoking a proof search or case split in Idris [3] constructs a well-typed program, but leaves no trace of the command used to construct it. The nature of the generated options also varies. The list of choices may include all possible options that are valid at a given location, or it may list only a subset of the valid options. In some cases, it may also include incorrect options as, for example, in auto-completion for dynamic languages [5].

The aim of this paper is to formally capture the recurring interaction pattern:

1. We motivate the formalism by reviewing four different systems that implement a variation on the interaction pattern. These include type providers for data access in F# [21], type providers for data exploration in The Gamma [14, 12], AI assistants for semi-automated data wrangling [17] and tooling for interactive proof assistants [2, 3, 22] (Section 2).
2. We introduce the *choose-your-own-adventure calculus*, which is a small formal structure that models an interactive system where a user constructs a program by repeatedly choosing from a list of options offered by the system (Section 3).
3. The calculus allows us to make the aforementioned subtle differences precise. We define the notions of *correctness* and *completeness* for the choose-your-own-adventure calculus. To distinguish the different ways of embedding the interactions in the edited programs, we also formally define *internal* and *external* mode of system integration.
4. We show that various programmer assistance tools, such as search and AI-based recommendations can be built on top of the primitives offered by the calculus, showing how the choose-your-own-adventure calculus supports of transfer of ideas across different kinds of interactive programming systems.

The main contribution of this paper is conceptual rather than technical. We capture a pattern that is perhaps not surprising in retrospect, but that is easy to overlook until it is given a name. We use formal programming language theory methods to precisely describe interesting aspects of the pattern. Moreover, our work also confirms that programming language theory methods can be extremely effective for studying not just *programming languages*, but also *interactive programming systems* [7].



■ **Figure 1** F# code editor showing completions offered by the World Bank type provider.

2 Motivation

Computer scientists studying programming have long focused on programming languages as syntactic entities, sometimes neglecting the interactive environments in which they are inevitably embedded [6]. Notably, in many of the motivating examples that we draw from in this section, the interactive aspect of the system is only described in supplementary materials [3, 21, 2]. Only recently, programming language theory started to be used to study interactive environments [1, 9]. Our work contributes to this research direction.

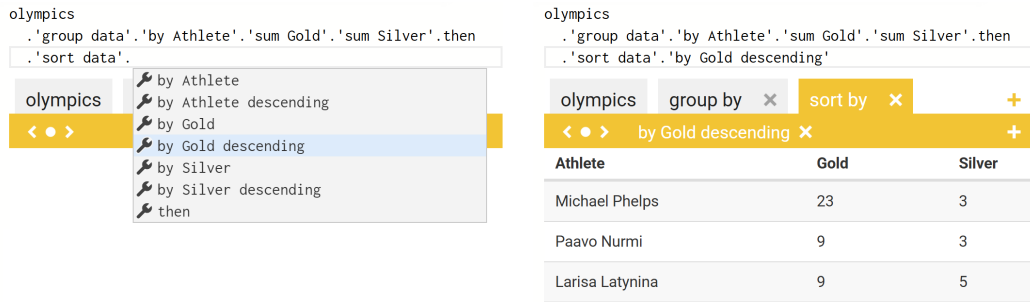
The following sections review four different instances of the choose-your-own-adventure interaction pattern. In all of those, an interactive editor offers the user some kind of a completion list during working with the system.

Type providers F# type providers [21] are a mechanism for integrating external data sources into the F# type system. A type provider is a compiler extension, loaded and executed at compile-time and at edit-time. It can run arbitrary code to read the structure of external data and use it to generate a suitable statically-typed representation of the data, typically as objects with members. Type providers can, for example, infer the type from a sample JSON [16] or read a database schema.

The example in Figure 1 shows a simple type provider for accessing information from the World Development Indicators database. The provided `wb` object allows the programmer to access any indicator of any country in the database by choosing an appropriate `[Country]` and an `[Indicator]` in a chain of members `wb.Countries.[Country].Indicator.[Indicator]`. The result is a time series with values for the given indicator and a country. More generally, the example can be seen as a special case of a type provider for slicing n-dimensional data cube [14] – we choose a fixed value for two of the three dimensions (country, indicator, time).

When using the type provider, the user types the first line of code and triggers auto-completion by typing `wb` followed by the dot. The rest of the code is constructed by choosing an option from a list and typing another dot.¹

¹ This interaction pattern has been lightheartedly called *dot-driven development* by Phil Trelford [19].



■ **Figure 2** Constructing a query in The Gamma. We count the number of gold and silver medals for each athlete and sort the data by the number of gold medals.

Data exploration The Gamma [14] is a programmatic data exploration environment for non-programmers. In The Gamma, type providers are the primary programming mechanism. They are used not just for data access, but also for constructing queries.

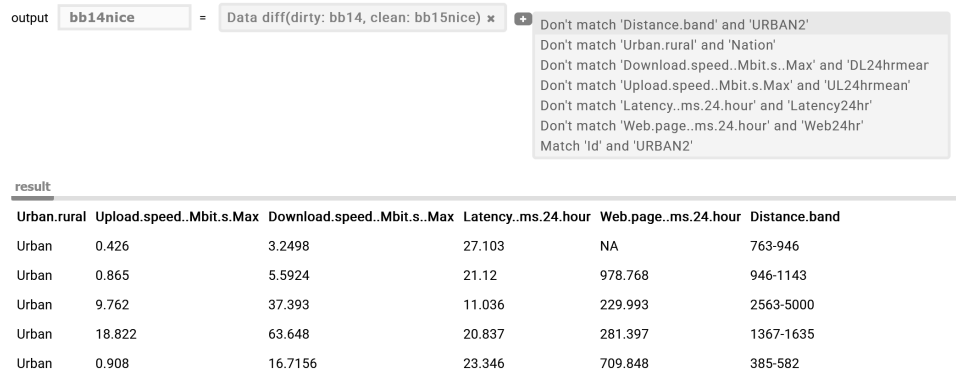
The type provider shown in Figure 2 lets the user construct an SQL-like query by repeatedly choosing operations and their parameters [12]. It keeps track of the schema and uses it to generate all possible valid parameters. When sorting data, it generates an object with two members for each column – one for ascending and one for descending sort. Similarly, the grouping operation first offers all columns as possible grouping keys and then lets the user choose from a range of pre-defined aggregations (sum, count, average, concatenate). The system also evaluates the query on the fly, providing a live preview during editing [13].

The interaction pattern is the same as before. After the user triggers auto-completion, they repeatedly select an operation and its parameters to construct a query. One notable difference is that the structure of the generated types is potentially infinite (the user can keep adding further operations) and so the types are generated lazily.

AI assistants The third instance of the choose-your-own-adventure interaction pattern comes from the work on semi-automatic data wrangling tools known as AI assistants [17]. An AI assistant guides the analyst through a data wrangling problem such as reconciling mismatched datasets, filling missing values or inferring data format and types. An AI assistant solves the problem automatically and suggests an initial data transformation, but it also generates a number of constraints that the user can choose from to refine the initial solution. If the initial solution is not correct, the user chooses a constraint and the AI assistant runs again, suggesting a new data transformation that respects the constraint.

Figure 3 shows an example. It uses the datadiff [20] AI assistant, running in a Wrattler notebook [15], to merge broadband quality data published by Ofcom for two subsequent years. The format of the CSV files for the two years differs. Columns were added, removed, renamed and their order has changed. In the example, we selected 6 columns from the year 2015 and want to find matching data from 2014.

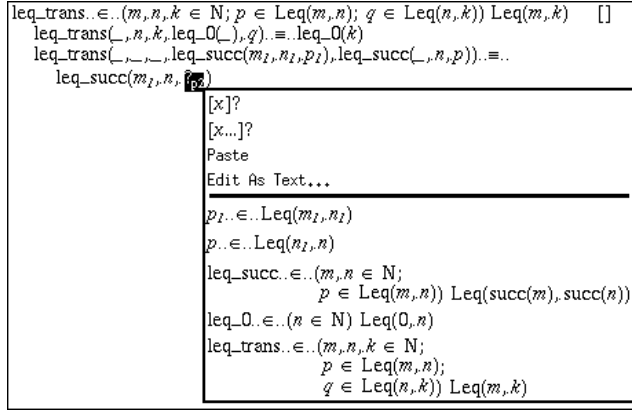
When the AI assistants runs automatically, it correctly maps the numerical columns, but it incorrectly maps the `Urban.rural` (2014) column to `Nation` (2015). This happens because both columns are categorical and have three values with similar distribution. A data analyst can easily spot the mistake. They click the “+” button to add a constraint and choose `Don't match Urban.rural and Nation` to specify that the two columns should not be matched. Datadiff then runs again and finds the correct matching.



■ **Figure 3** Using the datadiff AI assistant to reconcile the structure of the two datasets. The user is offered a list of constraints to prevent or force matching between specific columns.

The interaction patter is the same as in the previous two cases. The analyst constructs the correct data transformation by repeatedly choosing from a list of options, until they obtain the desired result. However, the way the interaction pattern is implemented differs. First, in the case of type providers, we are gradually constructing a program by adding operations to a method chain. Now, the AI assistant synthesizes a data transformation (program) and we are gradually adding constraints to control the synthesis. Second, in the case of type providers, the completion list offered all possible members of the object. Now, the list offers constraints recommended by the AI assistant which may not be complete.





■ **Figure 4** Constructing a proof of the transitivity of the \leq relation in the ALF editor. The user is offered a range of variables and constructors in scope at the current location. [2]

Interactive theorem provers A fourth example of the choose-your-own-adventure interactive pattern can be found in interactive theorem provers. When writing programs in systems like Idris [4], the user typically works by stating the desired conclusion and filling the implementation with a hole. The system provides a range of interactive editing capabilities to fill the holes [10]. It can, for example, generate a case split or search for a proof [3].

Systems like Idris provide key bindings to invoke the completions, but the functionality could also be offered through a user interface. An example that illustrates this is the interactive editor for the ALF theorem prover [8], which is based on the refinement of an incomplete proof object [2]. This is illustrated in Figure 4. The user is proving the transitivity of the \leq relation for Peano arithmetic natural numbers. They pattern match on the proof argument p and complete the first branch. For the second branch, they need to fill a hole $?p_2$ (called a wildcard in ALF). They trigger a completion and a pop-up menu shows the available variables and constructors, including `leq_trans` that can be used to complete the proof. After choosing `leq_trans`, two new holes are generated for its arguments. Those can be, again, filled interactively, by choosing p_1 and p from the completion.

The interaction pattern is again the same. The user repeatedly triggers a completion and uses it to refine and complete their proof by filling holes. There are subtle differences too. Unlike with AI assistants, each completion directly refines the proof that the user is editing. Unlike with type providers, a completion may generate multiple new holes, rather than just adding to a chain of operations.

The ALF editor is a historical example, but a similar user interface could be built for systems like Idris or Coq. The two would work differently. As in ALF, Idris source code represents the proof itself and a completion would replace a hole with a suggested term. In Coq, the proof is a series of tactic invocations and so selected completions would be added to this list and would form a trace of the interaction with the user.

3 Formal model

A system that implements the choose-your-own-adventure interaction pattern repeatedly offers the user a range of options to choose from. Each of the options is designated by an identifier. The system also maintains a state during the process which determines subsequent options. The state may not be visible to the user, but the user can always explicitly request the program constructed so far.

We can think of the interaction with the system as navigating through a tree structure, starting from a root and choosing one of the possible branches in each step.² In the following definition, the key `choices` operation can thus be seen as returning branches of a given node.

► **Definition 1** (Choose-your-own-adventure system). *Given expressions $e \in \mathbb{E}$ and states $\sigma \in \Sigma$, a choose-your-own-adventure system is a pair of operations `choices`, `choose` such that:*

- `choices(σ) = ($\iota_1 \mapsto \sigma_1, \dots, \iota_n \mapsto \sigma_n$)` is an operation that takes a state and generates options designated by an identifier ι_i and represented by a state σ_i ,
- `choose(σ) = e` is an operation that returns generated program for a given state.

The definition is not a programming language calculus in the usual sense in that it does not define a concrete syntax with reduction rules. It is an abstract algebraic structure that captures the structure of a system that supports the choose-your-own-adventure interaction pattern. The definition is close to that of an AI assistant [17], which is written using a language specific for the data wrangling domain (such as cleaning scripts or input and output data) but is structurally similar. It is also worth noting that the definition may describe not just trees, but also graphs with cycles – a system can return to an already visited state. This is not practically useful, but it does not pose a theoretical problem.

External mode of embedding One of the subtle questions about the choose-your-own-adventure pattern raised in the introduction concerns the different ways in which a trace of the interaction is embedded in the interactively constructed program. In the *external mode*, the interaction results in code that becomes a part of the edited program, but it is not possible to reconstruct the steps used to generate the code.

The choose-your-own-adventure interaction pattern is typically used to complete a partial program. To model this, we assume that the host language has a notion of a hole, written as `?` and that a user can select a part of program to invoke the completion on. We write $E[e]$ for a completion context, akin to evaluation contexts in operational semantics.

We assume that, for a program containing a hole in a completion context $E[?]$, we can construct an initial choose-your-own-adventure state using an operation $\text{init}(E[?]) = \sigma_0$.

► **Definition 2.** *An expression $E[?]$ is completed as $E[e]$ via external embedding of an interaction with a choose-your-own-adventure system consisting of `choices` and `choose` if:*

1. $\text{init}(E[?]) = \sigma_0$ obtains the initial state of a choose-your-own-adventure system,
2. σ_n is a system state such that $\forall i \in 1 \dots n. (\iota_i \mapsto \sigma_i) \in \text{choices}(\sigma_{n-1})$, i.e., the user makes a series of choices resulting in a final state of the system σ_n ,
3. $E[e]$ where $e = \text{choose}(\sigma_n)$, i.e., the final program is constructed by replacing the hole in the completion context with the expression e generated from σ_n .

² Serving as another evidence for the surprising effectiveness of the concept of a tree [11].

As we will see when we revisit the earlier examples formally, the external mode of embedding is used, for example, in the case of interactive theorem provers like ALF or Idris. In those systems, the user triggers the completion on a proof (program) containing a hole. They then fill the hole and, possibly iteratively, further holes in the generated proof. The final expression is embedded in the source code, but it does not indicate what options, identified by ι_1, \dots, ι_n , were selected in the process.

Internal mode of embedding In the *internal mode*, a trace of the interaction with a choose-your-own-adventure system is embedded directly in the constructed program. This is the case with type providers, where a user chooses a sequence of object members to be accessed. The same would be the case in a completion system for Coq that would offer tactics to apply, because the resulting proof would contain a record of the selected tactics.

To talk about the internal mode formally, we again need the `init` operation, but also an operation `decode` that extracts identifiers of invoked completions from an expression. An internal embedding is the same as external embedding with an additional constraint:

► **Definition 3.** *An expression $E[?]$ is completed as $E[e]$ via internal embedding of an interaction with a choose-your-own-adventure system consisting of choices and choose if:*

1. *$E[?]$ is completed as $E[e]$ via external embedding using `init`, choices and choose through a series of choices designated by identifiers ι_1, \dots, ι_n ,*
2. *it also holds that $\text{decode}(e) = (\iota_1, \dots, \iota_n)$.*

If a choose-your-own-adventure system is integrated in a programming language through internal embedding, we can reconstruct the choices through which the user constructed an expression e in a completion context $E[e]$, assuming they used the interactive system rather than entering the code directly. This also means that we can reconstruct the final state σ_n of the system by starting from $\text{init}(E[?])$ and following the choices specified by ι_1, \dots, ι_n .

4 Examples

The internal mode can also be used when working with theorem provers.

In Coq, where proofs are represented as series of tactics,

However, this would also be case in a completion engine for the Coq proof system that would offer a choice of tactics to apply, because Coq proofs are represented

4.1 Data exploration

4.2 AI assistants

4.3 Interactive theorem proving

5 Properties

6 Applications

[18]



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► **Lemma 4** (Lorem ipsum). *Vestibulum sodales dolor et dui cursus iaculis. Nullam ullamcorper purus vel turpis lobortis eu tempus lorem semper. Proin facilisis gravida rutrum. Etiam sed sollicitudin lorem. Proin pellentesque risus at elit hendrerit pharetra. Integer at turpis varius libero rhoncus fermentum vitae vitae metus.*

Proof. Cras purus lorem, pulvinar et fermentum sagittis, suscipit quis magna.

Just some paragraph within the proof. Nam liber tempor cum soluta nobis eleifend option congue nihil imperdiet doming id quod mazim placerat facer possim assum. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed diam nonummy nibh euismod tincidunt ut laoreet dolore magna aliquam erat volutpat.

▷ Claim 5. content...

Proof. content...

1. abc abc abc



■ **Listing 1** Useless code.

```
for i:=maxint to 0 do
begin
  j:=square(root(i));
end;
```

► **Corollary 6** (Curabitur pulvinar, [?]). *Nam liber tempor cum soluta nobis eleifend option congue nihil imperdiet doming id quod mazim placerat facer possim assum. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed diam nonummy nibh euismod tincidunt ut laoreet dolore magna aliquam erat volutpat.*

► **Proposition 7.** *This is a proposition*

Proposition 7 and Proposition 7 ...

8.1 Curabitur dictum felis id sapien

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► Remark 8. content...

9 Pellentesque quis tortor

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libero in gravida convallis [?], orci nibh sodales quam, id egestas felis mi nec nisi. Suspendisse tincidunt, est ac vestibulum posuere, justo odio bibendum urna, rutrum bibendum dolor sem nec tellus.

► **Lemma 9** (Quisque blandit tempus nunc). *Sed interdum nisl pretium non. Mauris sodales consequat risus vel consectetur. Aliquam erat volutpat. Nunc sed sapien ligula. Proin faucibus sapien luctus nisl feugiat convallis faucibus elit cursus. Nunc vestibulum nunc ac massa pretium pharetra. Nulla facilisis turpis id augue venenatis blandit. Cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.*

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10 Morbi eros magna

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A Styles of lists, enumerations, and descriptions

List of different predefined enumeration styles:

■ `\begin{itemize}...\end{itemize}`

■ ...

■ ...

1. `\begin{enumerate}...\end{enumerate}`

2. ...

3. ...

(a) `\begin{alphaenumerate}...\end{alphaenumerate}`

(b) ...

(c) ...

(i) `\begin{romanenumerate}...\end{romanenumerate}`

(ii) ...

(iii) ...

(1) `\begin{bracketenumerate}...\end{bracketenumerate}`

(2) ...

(3) ...

Description 1 `\begin{description} \item[Description 1] ... \end{description}`

Description 2 Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui.

Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.

Description 3 ...

Proposition 13 and Proposition 13 ...

B Theorem-like environments

List of different predefined enumeration styles:

► **Theorem 10.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Lemma 11.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Corollary 12.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Proposition 13.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Conjecture 14.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Observation 15.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Exercise 16.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Definition 17.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Example 18.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Note 19.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Note.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Remark 20.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

► **Remark.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

▷ **Claim 21.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

▷ **Claim.** *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.*

Proof. *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.* ◀

Proof. *Fusce eu leo nisi. Cras eget orci neque, eleifend dapibus felis. Duis et leo dui. Nam vulputate, velit et laoreet porttitor, quam arcu facilisis dui, sed malesuada risus massa sit amet neque.* ◀