

CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE: IMMERSIVE AUDIENCES. BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH

MARTA LOPERA-MÁRMOL
IVÁN PINTOR IRANZO
MANEL JIMÉNEZ-MORALES

FROM BORGES TO NETFLIX: THE RECYCLED NARRATIVES

The interactive genre and format of “choose your own adventure” was first introduced by Edward Packard’s novel *Sugarcane Island* (1976) and based on models that, from a conceptual point of view, had been introduced into the literature by Borges with *The Garden of Forking Paths* (*El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan*, 1942), and Italo Calvino, in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (*Il Castello dei destini incrociati*, 1973) and even *If a winter night a traveller* (*Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979). In 1992, Interfilm produced four interactive films after signing a deal with Sony that allowed audiences to choose the scenes through a remote control installed in the armrests of the theatres, but the films failed for different reasons; film critics and audiences disliked the genre, there was a shift towards the online medium, and there was not enough investment on marketing cam-

paigns (Elnahla, 2020). Hence, “Interfilm, called the “first interactive film studio”, ceased to exist and the experimental theatres were dismantled” (Napoli, 1998). Nonetheless, in “2016, *Late Shift*, a game-movie hybrid created by CtrlMovie, a small studio in Switzerland—became the first successful interactive film produced” (Elnahla, 2020). Echoing this phenomenon in 2017, Netflix released *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale*, and two years after, the hyper-narrative interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2019), with an experimental tone directed by David Slade.

Black Mirror (Charlie Brooker, Channel 4, Netflix, 2011-2019) is an award-winning anthological and techno paranoia TV series, clearly inspired by *Twilight Zone* (Rod Serling, CBS, 1959–1964), with narratives set in near-future dystopias and sci-fi technology that comment on contemporary social and political issues. Charlie Brooker created the series with heavy involvement by executive producer Annabel Jones, and it was aired on Channel

4 from 2011 to 2013, including a special episode titled *White Christmas* in 2014 that held a Britishness that would be diluted when the series moved to Netflix, where three further series aired in 2016, 2017 and 2019. Nevertheless, it is improbable that TV series will return to Netflix, given complicated legal disputes; Annabel Jones and Charlie Brooker have departed Endemol Shine Group to start their own new company. *Bandersnatch* is the first movie from the *Black Mirror* saga, and the plot is set in 1984, predating the world of apps and downloadable consciousness. The chosen year is very significant, it's Orwell's novel about surveillance and biopolitics further described by Foucault, and an emblematic moment for science fiction in literature. Together with Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) at the film level, both introduced a criticism to scientific and political views in a futuristic and modified present—yet seen feasible—the same way *Black Mirror* does. *Bandersnatch*'s plot, clearly under the *hyper-narrative interactive cinema* framework revolves around a young programmer, Stefan Butler, who starts to question reality when he adapts a mad writer's fantasy novel into a video game with videogame's company help, Tickersoft.

The term *hyper-narrative interactive cinema* was first coined by Shaul (2008). Its function can be defined as “hyper-narrative structures, interaction and audio-visual design [that] should manage the multi-tasking split-attention problems these constructs engender and—most importantly—use this multi-tasking to enhance rather than reduce engagement” (2008: 12). Along those lines, *Bandersnatch* marks a breakthrough for interactive storytelling turning the classic narrative of “choose your adventure” to “what those adventures could be”, that is, it predicts a future of what the television spectrum can become, it presents us with the possibility of making something factual into something real. Through a coding polarity of ones and zeros, Netflix has developed an algorithm to see the alid and down moments of its

AUDIENCES' FORM OF CONSUMPTION HAS CHANGED THROUGHOUT CINEMA HISTORY, SO THE MODES OF PRODUCTION HAVE ALSO BEEN ALTERED, MAINLY WITH THE COMPETITIVENESS OF STREAMING PLATFORMS

series at a narrative level from an audience reception perspective, which can allow them to make all the shifts necessary to avoid failing on the attention span, at the same time its algorithm chooses similar titles and covers of series and films that its particular consumer might be interested. This phenomenon turns the viewer into a TV-user, a notion that has already passed the concept of *prosumer* and makes him/her also the co-creator of the narrative—although not truly—. This active responsibility in the audience follows the US tradition of *uchronia* and counterfactual exploration, both in the field of superhero comic books, with the Marvel series *What If?* (1977-) and in the cinema and popular narrative Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009); Philip K. Dick's *The man in the high castle* (1962) and television fiction *Fringe* (J. J. Abrams, Alex Kurtzman, Roberto Orci, Fox: 2008-2013), *The man in the high castle* (Frank Spotnitz, Eric Overmyer, Amazon Studios: 2015-2019) or *What If* (A. C. Bradley, Disney +: 2021).

The film guides the viewer/player down a path that is already set to one degree or another—although complex—, but it doesn't stop being a mere illusion of choice. Undeniably, audiences' form of consumption has changed throughout cinema history, so the modes of production have also been altered, mainly with the competitiveness of streaming platforms. Thus, the way of narrating stories has evolved to meet the new needs of a public thirsty to discover the latest innovations. Nonetheless, *Bandersnatch* doesn't give viewers authentic free action, “but one which is strictly confined by the nature of the medium itself and as

much as the praise for it focused on its innovative branching narrative” (McSweeney, Stuart, 2019: 277). Hence, *Bandersnatch* shows that free will is unattainable, and those choices are already given to us by societal rules and control mechanisms in a Foucaultian panoptical manner (Foucault, 2012). Netflix has used a “story control” strategy that Aparici and García Martín (2017:21- 22) have compared with “building a reality of the *ad hoc* world according to the interests of the authority in order to reproduce and preserve the established order”. Moreover, *Bandersnatch* plays between the classical narration and the videogame; in fact, the movie is not only thematically about video games but acts as one. It presents itself as a blend of a video game and a film. Nonetheless, the film lacks free will, autonomy, and independence from the plot for the viewer to enroll fully, and that is precisely the self-parody of *Bandersnatch*. It presents criticism of the loss of individuality over the concept of choice. The film also themes the transformation in which technology affects reality, its main character lacks—as the audience—free will, and its existence depends on the instant but the post-geographical and historical setting.

From the point of view of the interactive design of the story, the display of decisions that do not allow generating alternative routes or creating

other endings fits Netflix’s desire to adapt *Bandersnatch* reception to the most extended smart-tv devices and a level of medium demand on TV-users (Scolari, 2016). Despite its shape and allusion to a mirror-universe like that of the video game, *Bandersnatch* does not exactly fit the autonomous idea of ergodic fiction (Aarseth, 1997; Eichner, 2014; Crisóstomo, 2021), autonomous, self-guided, and exploratory, which has recognized literary exponents such as *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski or *S* (2013) by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. A vital element of the whole immersive experience is *Black Mirror’s* proposal as a comparison with other apps and social media platforms; while *Tik Tok*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, etc., allow an interaction algorithm in real-time and often in a self-learning manner, television series and TV movies have not yet presented that possibility to that extent, which can cause a paradoxical, comparative feeling in the audience, who is now used to getting an immediate response of the algorithm to any of its choices. Nonetheless, it positions itself as an in-between possibility. However, the production of the proposal would be pretty hard to follow in future audio-visual oeuvres—mainly if they do not count on a big budget—. The interactive movie consists of 250 segments with a total duration of 312 minutes. Undoubtedly, questioning how the industry can finance and develop as a format, maybe as they did later on with *Unbreakable Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* (2020) with thirteen endings and fewer segments.

There is another relevant question when analyzing the interactive design of *Bandersnatch* concerning the rest of the social media platforms. It is about the user interface and its different mechanics. While in social networks, the interface promotes a type of *distributed browsing* based on algorithmic processing and generally horizontal dissemination of content, the *Bandersnatch* interface is based on a type of *distributive browsing*, which leads the user to options chosen by him/herself but without any wish to create a culture of

WHILE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS, THE INTERFACE PROMOTES A TYPE OF DISTRIBUTED BROWSING BASED ON ALGORITHMIC PROCESSING AND GENERALLY HORIZONTAL DISSEMINATION OF CONTENT, THE BANDERSNATCH INTERFACE IS BASED ON A TYPE OF DISTRIBUTIVE BROWSING, WHICH LEADS THE USER TO OPTIONS CHOSEN BY HIM/HERSELF BUT WITHOUT ANY WISH TO CREATE A CULTURE OF SHARING AND PARTICIPATION

sharing and participation. *Bandersnatch*'s browsing interface ignores the community element that social networks contain and offers a restrictive computational environment in contrast to social network platforms. By neglecting the idea of the *algorithmic community* (Klobucar, 2011), a clash occurs. This mismatch between digital ecosystems, also in their design and aesthetic formulas, directly causes an inconsistency in the expectations of the *Bandersnatch* user. Accustomed to the current inertia to distributive browsing and the creation of algorithmic communities, he/she/they finds here what could be a supposedly anachronistic device, which favors its structure for production reasons, but also because it seeks to bring back a past and more rudimentary interactive experience, as we have pointed out and will see later.

Watching and playing (Papazian & Sommers, 2013; Perron & Arsenault, 2015) are the two extremes of a narrative process of continuous entry and eviction of the story that links contemporary movies, series, and video games. In this link, which generates an imaginary reciprocity capable of engendering an interactive television experiment like *Bandersnatch* at the same time as serialized adaptations of acclaimed video games like *The Last of Us* (Craig Mazin, Neil Druckmann, HBO, 2023), there is a third element that is social networks. Precisely for this reason, the research described below starts from the economic dimension and the business and advertising possibilities of a limited model of interactivity that has its echo in the networks to broaden its hermeneutic scope to two essential nuclei that link cinema, television fiction, video games, audiovisual and social networks in the era of platforms: on the one hand, the nostalgia and the effects of the archive structure provided by the platforms in the form of a repository and, on the other, the importance of the notion of the multiverse and the coexistence of narrative alternatives that this same structure lavishes.

Precisely for this reason, a plural theoretical and methodological approach is necessary, attentive both to a hermeneutics of devices (Pintor, 2021) cultural studies on phenomena such as melancholy (Pintor, 2009), and nostalgia (Boym, 2001), sociology and philosophy of culture (Berardi, 2020, 2021) and cultural studies, to the contributions of video game theory (Pérez, 2021, 2012) and to a history of television and the construction of multiverses and counterfactual fictions whose origin goes back to literature and comics. *Bandersnatch* is, above all, a cultural object whose features are configured as "cultural symptoms" (Cassirer, 1987) at a central crossroads for modes of audiovisual consumption, in which the multiplication of screens and modes of interaction suggests the possibility of different narratives. At its base, however, common themes and structures, universal narrative patterns (Balló, Pérez, 2006) survive as the essential way of dialoguing with the essential narrative forms. As far as audiovisual fictions are always recognition machines of the human, what kind of image of ourselves does *Bandersnatch* give us back?

OPENING A NEW WORLD FOR ADVERTISING: INTERACTIVE ADVERTISING

For the first time, *Black Mirror*'s users find themselves being affected by the same technology and it shows them the worst of themselves by allowing them to control the characters in the film from their privileged position. Netflix announced that it will invest more into interactive narratives—moving into other genres—which positions *Bandersnatch* as the pilot and harbinger for future proposals. In this sense, *Bandersnatch* is a logical step forward from the techno-centered critical plot about "control society" (Deleuze, 1990) of the firsts *Black Mirror* seasons to a new model of techno-environment experience exploring the origins of contemporary immersive experiences. Unsurprisingly, 1984 is the birth year of the Ap-

ple-Macintosh visual environment, the CD-Rom as physical support for interactivity—that went on for decades—and even that of the Metaverse Marc Zuckerberg’s promoter.

Audiences are now using the devices themselves and feeling the automated disaffection that these can cause. *Black Mirror* had already explored the possibilities of subjective vision, of being situated in the character’s eyes, in episodes as significant as *The Entire History of You* (#1x03), *Men Against Fire* (#3x05) or *Nosedive* (#3x01), under a quasi-voyeuristic tradition that takes root in cinematographic works such as *The Lady of the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960). However, *Bandersnatch* exposes also how the user enjoys the characters’ suffering, so much so that even having the possibility of avoiding tragedies, he/she chooses to see what happens.

Bandersnatch breakthrough as a new business model for advertising, coined by Lopera-Mármol *et al.* (2020) as *interactive advertising*, in which the consumer gets targeted via big data through some sort of entertainment media form. The known not-so-free choices act as a way of choosing the narrative and the path of the main character and gather audiences’ data by making them choose products from different brands, asking them whether they would eat *Frosted Flakes* or *Sugar Puffs* for breakfast. In other words, it acts as a former product placement enhancement, but that can be later on micro-segmented by the statistics obtained. Those results can afterwards be applied and marketed within the platform or go further and sell raw data to product companies. As mentioned, Netflix previously studied user engagement with its content. By doing so, they could track real decisions. “The main character is controlled by the interactor, which is limited to binary choices, one of which will be chosen automatically, if they do not decide before a timer runs out” (Roth, Koentiz, 2019: 253). Curiously, while being present and even made evident to audiences, this

type of data collection was not the reason for the rejection of the hyper-narrative *interactive film* but instead was seen as a game. Thus, “*Bandersnatch* enabled Netflix to track real decisions and gather the information that could ascertain user’s musical tastes, genre and product preferences” (Lopera-Mármol *et al.*, 2020: 165).

CURIOSLY, WHILE BEING PRESENT AND EVEN MADE EVIDENT TO AUDIENCES, THIS TYPE OF DATA COLLECTION WAS NOT THE REASON FOR THE REJECTION OF THE HYPER-NARRATIVE INTERACTIVE FILM BUT INSTEAD WAS SEEN AS A GAME

Because of its narrative structure, *Bandersnatch* constitutes an apparatus (Foucault, 1979: 33) attuned to contemporary social surveillance (Dubrofsky, 2011; Jones, 2016, MacIsaac *et al.*, 2018), with which Byung Chul-Han (2015a, 2015b, 2018) has called a society of transparency and exploitation expanding Foucault and Deleuze’s work. Indeed, the kind of data collecting that *Bandersnatch* promotes can be seen as part of the “lateral” (Andrejevic, 2005), “social” (Marwick, 2012) or “horizontal” (Gill, 2017) surveillance logic that characterizes post-social media society or what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls “surveillance capitalism”, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2019, 2020, 2021) “semicapitalism” and Herbert A. Simon (1971) “attention economy”. In the same way that we deliver our data to the smartphone, smart-tv or tablet apps and monitor our own physical patterns, *Bandersnatch* reveals, in a certain way, the possibility of overlapping television fiction and the behavior of social apps. This new way of data mining by Netflix can be used to steer choices in the writer’s room and future projects. Considering that from now it only presents users with two options, they are very tailor-made for data harvesting, and it opens a field for the future for the

streaming platform to present scenarios with a more significant number of choices. *Black Mirror's* interactive movie probably did not get the results people expected. Nonetheless, the creators would undertake a similar project since they observed: "that 94 per cent of viewers were actively making those choices" (Strause, 2019).

THE ETERNAL QUESTION: LACK OF ORIGINALITY OR NOSTALGIA?

Bandersnatch, as mentioned, offers an authentic recreation of the 1980s from cereal packs, clothes, cars, and music to computers, leading to a nostalgia for the era which has been pervasive during the second decade of the 21st century. "Thematically, however, the decision to set the film in the 1980s is primarily connected to the fledgling years of the video games industry" (McSweeney and Stuart, 2018). Like many other postmodern television series of the Netflix stamp, such as *Stranger Things* (Matt & Ross Duffer, Netflix: 2016-), *Everything Sucks!* (Ben York, Michael Mohan, Netflix: 2018-), *TEOTFW* (Jonathan Entwistle, Charles S. Forsman, Channel 4, Netflix, 2017-2019) has a nostalgic tone. In fact, the *Black Mirror* critique of the transhuman dystopia episode *San Junipero* (#3x04) embodies Svetlana Boym's ideas in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) and is an endorsement of sanitized nostalgia. Almost as if it were a mannerism, this sort of *retromania* phenomenon coined by Reynolds (2011) responds to the success of reruns of analogue era into digital platforms with shows such as *Dawson's Creek* (Kevin Williamson, WB, 1998-2003) or *Friends* (Marta Kauffman, David Crane, NBC, 1994-2004), reboots such as *Bel-Air* (Andy Borowitz, Susan Borowitz, Peacock, 2022-) from the iconic *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Andy Borowitz, Susan Borowitz, NBC, 1990-1996) and revivals like *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (Amy Sherman-Palladino, Netflix, 2016), but also responds to the fact that—due to its DVD rent origin—Netflix's *raison d'être* is nostalgia, in

other words, "nostalgia is written into its brand identity" (Fradley, 2020: 231).

It is the *depthlessness* concept that Frederic Jameson (1991) assertively coined: newer TV series are falling under a repetitive frame of older styles which in turns becomes a style in itself, and no "originals" or "prototype" are there to be found. Hence, this phenomenon alludes to a limitation within Netflix's nostalgia that can be understood as politically insipid since it "effectively renders any backward-looking televisual artifact "nostalgic" by default" (Fradley, 2020: 232). Netflix offers a nostalgic component not only because of the particularities of its content. The idea of nostalgia appears imprinted in the concept of a repository, which is, in short, any on-demand platform. As Giulia Taurino (2019: 10) points out, "The metaphor of the library, or of a catalog, containing a collection of audiovisual texts, results particularly effective to describe Netflix's inner dynamics. When the memory of a movie or a television show is not only stored in an inventory, but also indexed and made available to search, mediated nostalgia can become an intrinsic property for the sustainability of the Netflix archive and its business model in multiple ways". In that sense, *Bandersnatch* offers a meta-discursive interpretation of the notion of the repository, straightly referring to the archivist condition of Netflix—with multiple options stored in its narrative—and embracing the term *nostalgia* beyond the context of the plot or the re-programming choices of the platform.

Unlike melancholy, whose implantation in post-9/11 television fiction roots the concept in a cultural and even medical tradition (Burton, 1652; Panofsky-Klibansky-Saxl, 1964) that dates back to Greek antiquity (Pintor, 2009), nostalgia—of the Greek νόστος [nóstos], "return", and ἄλγος [álgos], "pain"—is a relatively modern concept, used to address the soldiers' longing for home. From the point of view of the study of television fiction, how a series like *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, AMC: 2007-2015), al-

ready the final chapter of its first season, defines the idea of nostalgia from one of the products that the protagonist, Don Draper (John Hamm), sells the Kodak slide carousel: "It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn't a spaceship, it's a time machine. It goes backwards, and forwards... it takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called the wheel. It's called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels around and around, and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved." *Bandersnatch*, in this sense, participates in an exercise in nostalgia that transcends the mood, the subject and the historical period evoked and that concerns the whole of Golden Age television fiction and the current serial expansion of the MCU, the Marvel Cinematic Universe: the idea of the plurality of alternatives, the multiverse.

IF WE UNDERSTAND THAT SCI-FI ALWAYS CONSTITUTES A TESTIMONY OF THE VULNERABILITY OF EACH ERA, AN IMPLICIT REPRESENTATION OF THE IMAGINARY OF THE CATASTROPHE AND THE STORY OF THE PERMANENT POSSIBILITY OF OTHERNESS, THAT IS PRECISELY WHAT THE BANDERSNATCH SCALE OF DECISIONS TRIES TO TRANSFER IN A PIONEERING WAY TO THE SPHERE OF TELEVISION CONSUMPTION.

Indeed, just as J. J. Abrams and David Lindelof nurtured series such as *Alias* (J. J. Abrams, ABC: 2001-2006), *Lost* (J. J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, Damon Lindelof, ABC: 2004-2010), *Fringe* and *Leftovers* (Damon Lindelof, Tom Perrotta, HBO: 2014-2017) with multiverses and alternative dimensions taken directly from the narrative of comic-book series such as *Fantastic 4* and *X-Men*, *Bandersnatch* embraces a diversification of alternatives in which both literary ascendants and

comic-books and video games coincide. When the screenwriter Julius Schwartz resurrected in 1956 a super heroic character like the Flash and corrected issues of narrative continuity with the old Flash thanks to the incorporation of parallel and alternative dimensions, a path was opened that, although paleo television only explored punctually in some episodes of series such as *The Twilight Zone*, breeds contemporary seriality, from Marvel series such as *WandaVision* (Jac Schaeffer, Disney+, 2021), *Moon Knight* (Jeremy Slater, Disney+, 2022) or *S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Joss Whedon, Jed Whedon, Maurissa Tancharoen, ABC-Marvel, 2013-2020) to series like *Stranger Things* or experiments as radical as *Twin Peaks. The Return* (David Lynch, Showtime, 2017), by David Lynch.

In the rest of the *Black Mirror* episodes, the idea of alternatives appears limited in the same way as the future projected is increasingly closer to the present in a redefinition of the sci-fi genre (Pintor, 2018). Conversely, *Bandersnatch* turns into a past in which plural narrative options seem more plausible and fit the fashion of the aforementioned eighties: choose your own adventure books. Although the elements that shape *Bandersnatch* do not necessarily conform to the codes of that science fiction, the projection into the story's past and the multi-option structural logic do. If we understand that sci-fi always constitutes a testimony of the vulnerability of each era, an implicit representation of the imaginary of the catastrophe and the story of the permanent possibility of otherness, that is precisely what the *Bandersnatch* scale of decisions tries to transfer in a pioneering way to the sphere of television consumption. Also, in this sense, this work can be placed in the context of the thematic guidelines that emerged in the different ages of post-9/11 television seriality: the dialogue with otherness that has allowed sustaining the great discourses of TV fiction from that fundamental date—the terrorist threat, the plot, the vulnerability, the mourning for the loss, the search for safe spaces and, above all,

the counterfactual reversion of dramatic events, from *Fringe* to *Devs* (Alex Garland, Hulu, 2020)—is also the one that *Black Mirror* has identified in its well-known icon, that of the smartphone's broken screen.

For *Bandersnatch*, the real threat is not only that of that broken screen that identifies the logic of video surveillance or the substitution of traditional emotions for vicarious forms in a perfect fit with the Baudrillardian critique of contemporary society (Jiménez-Morales, Lopera-Mármol, 2018)—Is it possible to imagine a more heartbreaking sequence than that of the couple in *The Entire Story of You* making love while playing the first time they did it with their device?—, but an even greater one: the possible futility of the exercise of choice itself. If, as Borges has pointed out when referring precisely to multi-optionality, “all men are the same man”, any individual who lived an eternal time or, at least, a very long time, would tend to accumulate all experiences by elimination of options. The essential question of eligibility in contemporary narrative supports, from television to apps, video games or literature, is the possibility of generating a differential experience, that is, that, eventually, a user manages to create a new option both for himself and, potentially, for others.

Although this would displace the discourse towards participatory fiction, the “fan-made” audiovisual and the “user-generated content” (Cason, 2007; Askwith, 2007; Evans, 2011; Jenkins, 2009; Scolari, 2014), what is most relevant is to conceive to what extent a fiction such as the one proposed by *Bandersnatch* can interpenetrate with social networks and openly connected devices.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* is a means to be, a question to be made, an invitation to problematization rather than a cinematographic piece based on the construction and arches of the characters, the plot, the cliff-hangers, and the aesthet-

ics (Bernstein, 2019: 496). The film is a paradox, and it sells the idea that audiences are being invited to join an immersive adventure, and while it does, up to a point, it is genuinely a criticism of the lack of choice. The user does not control *Black Mirror*. It is *Black Mirror* that controls the user. It seems to be a new idea that could switch the way television and film fields and spectrums are conceived but aren't yet as successful as the apps they are trying to catch up with, and they try to do so with an archaic yet a compelling form of old literature. In *Bandersnatch's* narrative, decentralization is shaped via existential inquiry, the pressure of choice, the desire of the individual to move out of time and space with the technology and escape to reality with gamification, presenting itself as a diluted form of a videogame. However, the film does not hold onto a center with its narrative structure that moves away from time and space but emphasizes the decentralized structure with its interactive setup, which “granting full agency seems not possible with the current Netflix technology and pre-recorded material. It is, therefore, crucial to identify design strategies for offering the audience meaningful choices that use the limited agency this format provides to the best effect” (Roth & Koenitz, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, *Bandersnatch* didn't get quite the recognition that it would have been expected from a “made in Black Mirror” stamp. Firstly, there was a lack of originality within the proposal, although there were few metanarrative winks to past episodes and even in one of the endings, a website is created—following the original one of the themes—*Tuckersoft*.¹ This meta-narrative aspect allows it to include another “episode” from the film. Secondly, while trying to be in between videogames and film, it had shallow interaction compared to other works, there was a lack of dramatic development, and the options offered to viewers are limited, especially if we consider those familiar with video games. Thirdly, the plot wasn't as developed and jaw-dropping as other *Black Mirror* episodes.

Bandersnatch highlights the main features of interactive fiction cinema today. On the one hand, the connectivity, both devices as users, becomes an active agent in creating the narrative, although a pre-established script is followed, which helps develop the transmedia narrative. On the other hand, virtuality is presented as a space for interaction and data gathering with advertising and search engine optimization tools and the hypermediation of the supports. Interactive fiction films are experiments following a production pattern that, through different strategies, try to involve the viewer and require the users' participation to make sense. By creating *Bandersnatch*, Netflix was able to get more data from its subscribers and potentially for companies (Lopera-Mármol et al., 2019) and stand out among other streaming platforms with an original form of audio-visual from one of their most well-known TV series, becoming the brand's innovation badge.

The essential contribution of *Bandersnatch* is the experience and consolidation of a new mode of interaction with the audience, including the attempt at a new definition of the very notion of audience based on the user and the idea of gameplay (Pérez, 2012). In many ways, and as Berardi (2019, 2020) points out, the gradual substitution of the phenomena of physical conjunction in society by the digital connection has generated a redefinition of the public sphere. Within this redefinition, networks and fragmented consumption foster an emotional turn in which video games (Pérez, 2021), networks (Berardi, 2021) and television series (Pintor, 2015, 2015b, 2017, 2018, 2018b) have become the productive center of the visual, narrative, and relational modes of contemporary society. *Bandersnatch* is a symptomatic product in terms of nostalgia, the idea of the platform as a repository transferred to the narrative itself, and the reprogramming of modes of consumption that also reveals the paradox of the link between the notion of interactivity and verticality that the algorithms print on the commercial model of the platforms. ■

NOTES

- 1 Available at <https://tuckersoft.net/ealing20541/history/>

REFERENCES

- Andrejevic, M. (2002). The Kinder, Gentler Gaze of Big Brother: Reality TV in The Era of Digital Capitalism. *New Media & Society*, 4(2), 251-270.
- Aparici, R., García Marín, D. (2017). Arqueología de la narrativa digital interactiva y la nueva comunicación. In M. Medrano (ed.), *¡Sonríe, te están puntuando! Narrativa digital interactiva en la era de Black Mirror* (pp. 13-31). Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Askwith, I. (2007). Television 2.0: Reconceptualizing TV as an Engagement Medium. Retrieved from <http://cms.mit.edu/research/theses/IvanAskwith2007.pdf>.
- Balló, J., Pérez, X. (2006). *La semilla inmortal. Los argumentos universales en el cine*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Berardi, F. 'Bifo' (2019). *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. London, NY: Verso Books.
- Berardi, F. (2021). *The Third Unconscious*. New York: Verso Books.
- Berardi, F. (2020). *Fenomenologia della fine*. Roma: Nero.
- Bernestien, G. (2019). Jugar al cine: Black Mirror y la interactividad como cruce interdisciplinario. *Revista de la Asociación Argentina de Estudios de Cine y Audiovisual*, 20, 489-497.
- Borges, J-L. (1942). La forma de la espada. *La Nación*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur.
- Boym, S. (2001). *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Burton, R. (1652). *The Anatomy of Melancholy: what it is, with all the kinds, causes, symptoms, prognostics & severall cures of it*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Cason, J. (2007). User generated content. In V. Di Bari (ed.). *Internet è cambiato. E voi?* (pp. 253-257). Milano: Edizioni Il Sole.
- Cassirer, E. (1987). *Antropología filosófica. Introducción a una filosofía de la cultura*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

- Crisóstomo Gálvez, R. (2021). *El Yo en Serie. Identidades en las series de televisión contemporáneas*. Barcelona: Laertes.
- Deleuze, G. (1990). Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle. In G. Deleuze (ed), *Pourparlers 1972-1990* (pp.240-247). Paris: Les éditions de Minuit.
- Dubrofsky, R. E. (2011). Surveillance on Reality Television and Facebook: from Authenticity to Flowing Data. *Communication Theory*, 21(2), 111-129.
- Eichner, S. (2014). *Agency and Media Reception: Experiencing Video Games, Film, and Television*. Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Elnahla, N. (2019). *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and how Netflix manipulates us, the new gods. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 23 (5), 506-511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2019.1653288>
- Foucault, M. (1976): *Histoire de la sexualité I. La volonté du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (2012). *Vigilar y castigar: nacimiento de la prisión*. Mexico City: Siglo XXI.
- Fradley, M. (2020). The Aesthetics of Nostalgia TV: Production Design and the Boomer Era, by Alex Bevan. Bloomsbury Academic. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, 19, 230-241. <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.19.22>
- Gill, R. (2017). The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 606-626.
- Han, Byung Chul. (2015a). *The Burnout Society*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Han, Byung Chul. (2015b). *The Transparency Society*. Stanford, California: Stanford University. Press.
- Han, Byung Chul. (2018). *The expulsion of the other*. Queensland: Wiley Polity Press.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2009). *Fans, bloggers y videojuegos. La cultura de la colaboración* [Fans, Bloggers and Video Games. The Culture of Collaboration]. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Aarseth, Espen J. (1997). *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Klobucar, A. (2021). *The Community and the Algorithm: A Digital Interactive Poetics*. Wilmington: Vernon Press.
- Lopera-Mármol, M., Jiménez-Morales, M., Bourdaa, M. (2020). Televting Strategies in the Age of Non-Advertising TV. In L. Mas-Manchón (ed.), *Innovation in Advertising and Branding Communication* (pp. 154-188). New York: Routledge.
- MacIsaac, S., Kelly, J., Gray, S. (2018). 'She Has Like 4000 followers!': The Celebification of Self within School Social Networks. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(6), 816-835.
- Marwick, A. E. (2012). The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life. *Surveillance and Society*, 9(4), 378-393.
- McSweeney, Terence and Joy, Stuart (2018). Change Your Past, Your Present, Your Future? Interactive Narratives and Trauma in Bandersnatch. In T. McSweeney, S. Joy (eds.), *Through the Black Mirror*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19458-1_21
- Napoli, L. (1998). Interactive Filmmakers Hope to Make a Comeback. *The New York Times*, August 17.
- Panofsky, E., Klibansky, R., Saxl, F. (1964). *Saturn and Melancholy: studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*. London: Nelson.
- Papazian, G., Sommers, J. M. (eds.) (2013). *Game On, Hollywood!: Essays on the Intersection of Video Games and Cinema*. London: McFarland & Co.
- Pérez Latorre, O. (2012). *El lenguaje videolúdico: Análisis de la significación del videojuego*. Barcelona: Laertes.
- Pérez-Latorre, Ó. (2021). The Devil of Emotional Gameplay is in The Details. Microanalysis of Affective Complexity Scenarios in Video Games. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 31, 71-84.
- Perron B. & Arsénault, D. (2015). De-framing video games from the light of cinema. *Game Journal*, #4.
- Pintor Iranzo, I. (2009). Melancholy and Sacrifice in Contemporary Science Fiction. *Formats, Journal of Audiovisual Communication*, V, <https://raco.cat/index.php/Formats/article/view/137001>
- Pintor Iranzo, I. (2015a). Nunca volveremos a casa: la figuración del hogar en *Mad Men*. In R. Crisóstomo et.

- al. *Mad Men o la frágil belleza de los sueños en Madison Avenue* (pp. 107-132). Madrid: Errata Naturae.
- Pintor Iranzo, I. (2015b). The Walking Dead: Profanazione e sopravvivenza. In G. Frezza (ed.), *Endo-Apocalisse. The Walking Dead, l'immaginario digitale, il post-umano* (pp. 243-264). Cava de' Tirreni: Areablu Edizioni.
- Pintor Iranzo, I. (2018). El vacío, la cólera y el mal en la ficción contemporánea. Una estética de la negatividad. In M. Huerta, P. Sangro (eds.), *La estética televisiva en las series contemporáneas* (pp. 60-85). Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch.
- Pintor Iranzo, I. (2017). El morador del umbral. Un espectador para Twin Peaks. VV.AA., *Regreso a Twin Peaks* (pp.203-228). Madrid: Errata Naturae.
- Pintor Iranzo, I. (2018b). Capital of Emotions, Emotions of Capital: Continuity and Iconographic Survivals of the Gestures of Submission and Deprivation of Freedom in Black Mirror. *Millars. Espai i Història*, 45, 115-146.
- Pintor Iranzo, I. (2021), *TikTok. The update that never ends*. CCCB Lab. Retrieved from <https://lab.cccb.org/en/the-update-that-never-ends/>
- Reynolds, Simon. (2011). *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. Faber and Faber.
- Roth, C., Koenitz, H. (2019). Bandersnatch, Yea or Nay? Reception and User Experience of an Interactive Digital Narrative Video. TVX '19, June 05-07, 2019, Salford <https://doi.org/10.1145/3317697.3325124>
- Scolari, C. A. (2014). Narrativas transmedia: nuevas formas de comunicar en la era digital. In J. Celaya, (ed.), *Anuario AC/E de Cultura Digital. Focus 2014: uso de las nuevas tecnologías en las artes escénicas* (pp. 71-81). Madrid: Acción Cultural Española (AC/E).
- Scolari, C. (2016). Bandersnatch. Apuntes sobre la construcción del «teleusuario». *Hipermediaciones*. Retrieved from <https://hipermediaciones.com/2019/01/06/bandersnatch/>
- Shaul, N.B. (2008). *Hyper-Narrative Interactive Cinema: Problems and Solutions*. Amsterdam: Consciousness, Literature and the Arts ,18.
- Simon (1971). Designing organizations for an information rich-world. Retrieved from digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu.
- Strause, J. (2019). 'Black Mirror' Duo on the Challenges of Netflix's First Interactive Movie – and Why They Would Do It Again. *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 24. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/black-mirror-team-complexity-bandersnatch-netflix-data-1213270/>
- Taurino, G. (2019). *Crossing Eras. Exploring Nostalgic Reconsiderations in Media Franchises*. In K. Pallister (ed.), *Netflix Nostalgia: Streaming the Past on Demand* (pp.9-25). Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Virilio, P. (2003). *Art and Fear*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs.

CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE: IMMERSIVE AUDIENCES. BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH

Abstract

In 2019, Netflix, with an intent to seek alternatives to survive, jump on the big data trend and satisfy new audiences, released a hyper-narrative interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* based on non-linear stories and a web of decisions, following a “choose your adventure” literature structure with a solid nostalgic tone characteristic of its *raison d'être* and postmodern TV series. The film proves that free will is actually unattainable and that choices are already given to us in a Foucaultian panoptical manner (Foucault, 2012). Hence, immersive audiences are not as involved in the narrative as it could be perceived at first glance but are instead used as an element of big data and market segmentation. Nonetheless, *Bandersnatch* explores and becomes a breakthrough as another form of perceiving and conceptualizing television and the film spectrum. Beyond its thematic video game approach, the interactive film acts like one. It is a blend between a video game and a film. In conclusion, the experimental film does not hold onto a center with its narrative structure since it moves away from time and space but instead emphasizes the decentralized structure with its interactive setup that wants to become more than a viewing experience for audiences.

Key words

Black Mirror; *Bandersnatch* Interactive; Movie; Videogame, Immersive, TV Series, and Audiences.

Authors

Marta Lopera-Mármol holds an international PhD in the Communication Department from Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF). She is also a research member of the Communication, Advertising and Society Research Group (CAS-UPF) and a research affiliate at the Cambridge Center for Alternative Finance (CCAF) at the University of Cambridge. She holds an MRes in Social Communication from UPF and a B.A. in Audiovisual Communication from the University of Barcelona, with a minor in Marketing and Management. Currently, she co-directs a project on media sustainability framed under the UPF Planetary Well-being initiative. Marta has published several articles in high-impact peer-reviewed journals and different book chapters. Lopera-Mármol has undertaken international studies as a visiting scholar at King's College of the University of Cambridge and Université Sorbonne Nouvelle III (Paris), and research stays at La Trobe University (Melbourne) and the Hanzehogeschool of Applied Sciences (Groningen). Her main lines of research are television series, mental disorders, and media sustainability. Contact: marta.lopera@upf.edu.

ESCOGE TU AVENTURA: AUDIENCIAS INMERSIVAS. EL CASO DE ESTUDIO DE BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH

Resumen

En 2019, Netflix, con la intención de buscar alternativas para sobrevivir, sumarse a la tendencia del *big data* y satisfacer nuevas audiencias, estrenó una película interactiva hipernarrativa *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* basada en una red de decisiones y en historias no lineales, siguiendo una estructura literaria de “Elige tu aventura” con un sólido tono nostálgico característico de su razón de ser y típico de las series de televisión posmodernas. La película demuestra que la voluntad es en realidad inalcanzable y que las opciones ya se nos dan de manera panóptica foucaultiana (Foucault, 2012). Por lo tanto, las audiencias inmersivas no están tan involucradas en la narrativa como podría percibirse a primera vista, sino que se utilizan como un elemento de big data y segmentación de mercado. No obstante, *Bandersnatch* explora y se convierte en un gran avance como otra forma de percibir y conceptualizar la televisión y el espectro cinematográfico. Más allá de su enfoque de videojuego temático, la película interactiva actúa como tal. Es una mezcla entre un videojuego y una película. En conclusión, la película experimental no se aferra a un centro con su estructura narrativa ya que se aleja del tiempo y el espacio, sino que enfatiza la estructura descentralizada con su configuración interactiva que quiere convertirse en algo más que una experiencia visual para el público.

Palabras clave

Black Mirror; *Bandersnatch* interactivo; Película; Videojuego; Inmersivo; Series de televisión y audiencias.

Autores

Marta Lopera-Mármol es doctora en Comunicación por la Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF). También es investigadora del Grupo de Investigación Comunicación, Publicidad y Sociedad (CAS-UPF) e investigadora asociada del Cambridge Centre for Alternative Finance (CCAF) de la Universidad de Cambridge. Obtuvo un Máster en Comunicación Social por la UPF y B.A. en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universidad de Barcelona, con mención en Marketing y Gestión. Actualmente, co-dirige un proyecto sobre sostenibilidad mediática enmarcado en la iniciativa Bienestar Planetario de la UPF. Marta ha publicado varios artículos en revistas de alto impacto y diferentes capítulos de libros. Lopera-Mármol ha realizado estudios internacionales como profesora visitante en el King's College de la Universidad de Cambridge y la Université Sorbonne Nouvelle III (París), y estancias de investigación en la La Trobe University (Melbourne) y la Hanzehogeschool of Applied Sciences (Groningen). Sus principales líneas de investigación son las series de televisión, los trastornos mentales y la sostenibilidad de los medios. Contacto: marta.lopera@upf.edu.

Ivan Pintor holds a Ph.D. in Communication Studies from Universidad Pompeu Fabra (UPF). Senior lecturer at UPF and member of the CINEMA Research Group. He currently teaches Contemporary Cinema in the Bachelor's program in Audiovisual Communication at UPF, and Cinema, Television and Comic-book History in the UPF Master's in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual Studies program. With Jordi Balló, he is the Principal Investigator of the project *Visual motifs in the public sphere: Production and circulation of images of power in Spain*. He has published articles in journals and contributed to more than 50 books, including *Black Lodge* (2021), *Figure del fumetto* (2020), *Les Motifs au cinéma* (2019), or *I riflessi di Black Mirror* (2018). He writes at the newspaper La Vanguardia and has organized conference cycles for different European museums. His lines of research are gestures in film, iconology, and iconography, hermeneutics and myth criticism in film, comparative film studies, television series, sequential narrative, transmedia, and intertextuality. Contact: ivan.pintor@upf.edu.

Manel Jiménez-Morales (Girona, 1978) is a professor of Communication at Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) and vice-rector for Educational Transformation, Culture and Communication. Graduated in Audiovisual Communication (UPF) and in Theory of Literature (UB), he has a doctorate in Social Communication (UPF). Jiménez-Morales has been a visiting professor at the University of Oxford, UCLA, and the British Film Institute, and has taught at various international universities. His lines of research are narrative and audiovisual aesthetics and new educational and cultural formats. Among his publications stands out *Transmedia Narratives in Spain: four fictions in search of a cross-media destination*. Contact: manel.jimenez@upf.edu

Article reference

López-Mármol, M; Pintor, I; Jiménez-Morales, M. (2023). Choose Your Adventure: Immersive Audiences. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch. L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 35, 1-14.

Ivan Pintor es doctor en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universidad Pompeu Fabra (UPF), profesor en el Departamento de Comunicación de la UPF y miembro del grupo de investigación CINEMA. Imparte clases sobre cine contemporáneo en el Grado en Comunicación y Cine, televisión e historia del cómic en el Máster en estudios contemporáneos de cine y audiovisual en la UPF. Junto a Jordi Balló, es el IP del proyecto *Visual motifs in the public sphere: Production and circulation of images of power in Spain*. Ha publicado artículos en revistas indexadas y contribuido a más de 50 libros, incluyendo *Black Lodge* (2021), *Figure del fumetto* (2020), *Les Motifs au cinéma* (2019) o *I riflessi di Black Mirror* (2018). Escribe en el diario La Vanguardia y ha organizado ciclos de conferencias y exposiciones para diferentes museos europeos. Sus líneas de investigación son la gestualidad en el cine, iconografía, iconología, hermenéutica, mitocrítica en el cine, estudios de cine comparado, series televisivas, narrativa secuencial, transmedia e intertextualidad. Contacto: ivan.pintor@upf.edu.

Manel Jiménez-Morales (Girona, 1978) es profesor de Comunicación en la Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) y vicerrector de Transformación Educativa, Cultura y Comunicación. Licenciado en Comunicación Audiovisual (UPF) y en Teoría de la Literatura (UB), se doctoró en Comunicación Social (UPF). Jiménez-Morales ha sido profesor visitante en la Universidad de Oxford, la UCLA y el British Film Institute, y ha impartido docencia en diversas universidades internacionales. Sus líneas de investigación son la narrativa y estética audiovisual y los nuevos formatos educativos y culturales. Entre sus publicaciones destaca *Narrativas transmediáticas en España: cuatro ficciones en busca de un destino cross-media*. Contacto: manel.jimenez@upf.edu

Referencia de este artículo

López-Mármol, M; Pintor, I; Jiménez-Morales, M. (2023). Escoge tu aventura: Audiencias inmersivas. El caso de estudio de *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch. L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 35, 1-14.

recibido/received: 25.04.2022 | aceptado/accepted: 20.11.2022

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com

