

# AGAINST INTERACTIVITY. PHENOMENOLOGICAL NOTES ON *BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH*

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## ABSTRACT

Interactive cinema is one of the most interesting areas of experimentation with storytelling form. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), a stand-alone episode of the acclaimed British television series available on Netflix, has restarted the debate around this genre. This article

offers a discussion of several critical elements inherent to the experience of viewing *Bandersnatch*, specifically those related to its interactive, meta-reflexive, and ludic nature. The tensions between interactive and interpretative cooperation, between actuality and virtuality, between self-reflexivity and self-referentiality, between free choice and control, between co-authorship and authority, and between gaming and gambling, bring out the contradictions of a product characteristic of the current transmedial landscape.

## 1. A PROVOCATIVE OPENING

Let us suppose for a moment that I am not a great lover of videogames, have had no previous experience with interactive cinema, am unfamiliar with the “book-game” genre and the “choose-your-own adventure” philosophy, and do not have any nostalgia for the pop culture of the 1980s. In that case, an attitude of resistance toward *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), the interactive episode of the acclaimed British anthology series *Black Mirror*, would be understandable. Let me proclaim myself an old-fashioned spectator: I have no desire to choose how the film proceeds by reacting to the bifurcations that are continually offered to me. This is not out of inattention or laziness, but rather by choice: I choose not to choose, and to let the narration proceed unaware of my presence. Even if I do not interact by tinkering with the remote control, in fact, the flow remains unbroken, and after ten seconds one of the two alternative paths will nonetheless be taken. In this way, I am opposed to the interactivity of the experience that is being offered to me, and watch *Bandersnatch* in a “classical” and defiantly conservative mode.

What might be the motivations behind my skeptical attitude, in opposition to the enthusiasm for interactivity that has aroused the hyper-textualist imaginations of wide swathes of both the public and the critics? Bearing in mind (and partially departing from) the long-standing debate surrounding interactive storytelling (Koenitz et al. 2015; Cardona-Rivera et al. 2018), in the following pages I will attempt to draw out several reasons based on a critical phenomenology of *my* viewing experience of *Bandersnatch*. The analysis will show how a number of seemingly innovative and linguistically original aspects of the episode are in fact points of weakness, which make the interactive experience one that exists more on paper than in reality. Furthermore, it argues that the form of “actual interactivity” provided by the digital streaming platform that enables this experience (i.e. Netflix) is very minor compared to the “virtual interactivity” that characterizes all forms of use of complex narrative content. I will argue that rather than allowing the spectator to carry out a truly creative act that would elevate him/her to the level of the co-author of the text (Montani 2019), the platform-based and apparently “open” nature of *Bandersnatch*'s interactivity negatively impacts the spectator's capacity to participate in the narrative's unfolding.

The “freedom of choice” that *Bandersnatch* promotes makes the viewing experience individual and not replicable among different users (or only incidentally): each narrative

path is singular and different from all the possible others. This characteristic constitutes its most original aspect, but at the same time is the main limitation I will identify in the proposed analysis. On the methodological level, this analysis can only be auto-ethnographic and its results cannot be generalized without risking determinism. The concrete spectator protagonist of this analysis is voluntarily disposed to physical passivity (laying on a sofa in a relaxing condition) and voluntarily opposed to the request for interactivity made by the film. The attitude of “uninteractivity” described here is overtly in contrast with the invitation of this specific film and, more generally, with the ludic nature of interactive television. It has to be said also that *Bandersnatch* is an attempt to make interactive fiction accessible through the Netflix platform (that has 180 million subscribers worldwide) for a mainstream audience that is not familiar with this genre. In brief, in order to discuss the tensions between narrative architecture and audience participation at work within interactive streamed technologies, the analysis deliberately adopts a provocative position and focuses on the effects of interactive digital TV on the “classic” linear-film engagement. Given these premises and acknowledging these limitations, this article should be considered as a starting point for further discussion on the potentialities and the limits of contemporary interactive storytelling in audiovisual media at the intersection between film and TV studies, audience studies and game studies.

## 2. GLYPHS AND DRUGS

Before beginning, it is worth recalling that *Bandersnatch*, which premiered on Netflix on 28 December 2018, is a stand-alone episode of the series *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker and first broadcast on Channel 4 before becoming available through Netflix. Despite the anthology character of the series, of which each episode has a different cast and plot, there is always a focus on the damaging effects of the abuse of digital technologies on both individual and social levels, in an exaggerated but plausible future, one that is not so distant from our time and our way of using technological media. (For the most recent publications that analyze the philosophical implications of *Black Mirror*'s relationships between humanity and technology, see Cirucci and Vacker 2018; McSweeney and Joy 2019; Laraway 2020; Gibson and Carden 2020).

Unlike the other episodes of the series, *Bandersnatch* is characterized, as I have already noted, by the interactive nature of the narration, and more precisely by the possibility of

deciding in which direction the story goes by making a choice each time the film offers a “fork.” It is almost impossible to summarize the plot in a few lines, given that its (apparently) open nature offers multiple possible paths through around 40 bifurcations, with a total of 150 minutes of footage divided into 250 segments. With more than a trillion variations or ways to explore the narrative, the film’s duration can range from 40 to 150 minutes, with an average running time of 90 minutes, depending on the choices made by the spectator, with five main possible endings.

I will only provide some basic information about the plot. Significantly set in a dystopian and pre-digital 1984, *Bandersnatch* centers on the adventures of Stefan Butler, a young programmer who attempts to transform a choose-your-own-adventure style book into a videogame (hence, the meta- and auto-referential nature of narration). Stefan suffers from psychological disturbances related to the death of his mother when he was a child and does not have a good relationship with his father, who obliges him to see a therapist. At the gaming development company Tuckersoft, Stefan meets Colin Ritman, creator of cutting-edge videogames, who influences his creative and entrepreneurial choices, and attempts to convince him of the existence of a parallel reality, pushing him to use psychedelic drugs.

The binary options offered to the spectator vary in weight and significance: some are seemingly innocuous (two types of cereal to choose from at breakfast), others concern cultural consumption (which tape to listen to in a Walkman while taking the bus), and many pertain to psychological or existential dilemmas (whether to kill or spare the father, to attack the therapist or not). While some choices betray a product placement strategy within the film (Elnahla 2019: 3), others emphasize the characteristically negative way in which *Black Mirror* represents the relationship between humans and technology—albeit in the “vintage” variation offered by this specific episode. It seems to me that, in almost all cases, the choice is between an option that will let Stefan maintain a calm and rational attitude, and one that instead unleashes his impulses and makes him react to his problems violently. Each choice influences the way that the protagonist creates the videogame, leading to one of the five endings, each corresponding to a different evaluation of the videogame (or its failure to be completed) by a critic.

The forks are symbolized by glyphs, the visible signs of a diagrammatic bifurcation of paths and their progressive multiplications, and hence of the narrative’s indeterminate development. Here, we might already note some of the para-

doxical limitations that the particular nature of *Bandersnatch* imposes on the traditional modes of viewing in the digital age: once a decision has been made, one cannot turn back; I cannot rewind or fast-forward by using the timeline, as became possible for anyone with any film after the advent of the VCR. However, it is possible for some decisions to automatically lead to a previous point in the narrative, thus generating forced loops (which in turn lead me to opt for the alternative choice). The film cannot be downloaded onto my devices and enjoyed offline, as most of Netflix’s catalog can; it can be watched more than one time, but each time the choices made previously are cleared. As I have already noted, this means that the viewing experience is unique and differs from spectator to spectator; that each successive viewing by the same spectator is always different from the previous one; and that each possible successive viewing is influenced by the previous ones, in particular by the first.

### 3. CONCENTRIC TRANSMEDIAL INTERACTIVITY

Another necessary introductory note concerns the interactive genre to which *Bandersnatch* belongs. Interactive cinema has its origins in the big-screen adaption of Edward Packard’s 1976 novel *Sugarcane Island*, part of the “which-way” or “choose-your-adventure” genre popular in the ‘70s and ‘80s (for a historical account see Hales 2015). At the beginning of the 2000s, media theory began to explore in depth the characteristics, questions, and ambiguities of this genre within contemporary digital culture (Manovich 2001; Lunenfeld 2002; Shaul 2008).

Looking only at more recent years and following Zecca’s useful classification (2015), we can distinguish between different types of interactive films in relation to: 1) their distribution platform or viewing mode (theater, DVD, mobile devices, Internet); 2) the complexity of their hypertextual structure (with “real disjunctions” if the paths and the ending are truly multiple or “false disjunctions” if instead the choices lead back to a single path); 3) the level of the effective participation of the user (simply choosing between multiple options or carrying out game-like tasks); 4) their social-productive function (they are not only alternatives to traditional films, but also artistic projections, independent productions, viral marketing projects, grassroots practices, or even social advertising). Such offerings never had any real success due to a number of reluctances on the part of critics, the public, and above all the

market (in terms of both production and advertising), but the attention gained by *Bandersnatch* has reawakened awareness of the genre. The relevance of this title to the current discourses on media is closely linked to the new viewing possibilities offered by streaming online platforms. The ability to navigate the content in real time gives me the impression of narrative continuity, choice after choice, even if it is simply a matter of selecting the next video from a range of possibilities, as in the choice of the service's entire catalog. In fact, consulting the catalog of any streaming platform is an experience of interaction in the sense, however limited, of a choice between available options and the personalized construction of a program (or even a narrative that links different titles to one another, despite the fact that they are arranged by the recommender algorithmic system). *Bandersnatch* operates on the same principle, bringing it within the narrative itself.

As Shaviro (2010) stresses, the cultural passage from cinema to television, and from television to digital media, transformed the cinema not only into a digital product, but also into a digitalized experience. Obviously, the adjective "digital" is not limited to only signifying the production and distribution of a film through digital methods and platforms. The huge qualitative leap, instead, lies in the possibility for the user to interact with images and narratives, manipulating them, commenting on them, sharing them, and reshaping the viewing experience into active practices of semantic enrichment. This "viewer"—as Daly (2010) defines him/her, joining "viewer" with "user"—is the real protagonist of the crossmedial and transmedial adventure of "Cinema 3.0" (Daly 2008). The multi-route path of *Bandersnatch* within a "decision tree" structure (Salen and Zimmerman 2003) is in fact a hypertext, with a series of nodes that serve as connection points within and between texts, and create links between different stories.

*Bandersnatch*'s narrative transmediality, however, is "concentric," since it begins within the film's narrative (a book being transformed into a videogame) and moves to the exterior through the form of an interactive film, which is moreover distributed through a post-televisual platform that calls for a performative mode of use, which itself triggers further extensions characteristic of the participatory culture of the Internet (Jenkins 2006). It is, in effect, the very singularity of the viewing experience that incentivizes the construction of a virtual community for the sharing of individual experiences, in search of a shared meaning precisely as a function of the multiple ways to watch the film (or of all possible "Bandersnatches").

#### 4. CLICK FETISH AND BODIES UNDER CONTROL

I will now examine in detail the elements of weakness that, in my experience, paradoxically emerge from the linguistic innovations of *Bandersnatch* as an interactive work. I would like to note above all that for the spectator who is not predisposed to take part in an interactive experience—as was the case for me—the obligation to physically make a choice, armed with a Smart TV remote or touching a tablet display, can disturb the natural form of narrative engagement. I admit that I confused the initial guide giving instructions with the film's prologue. Once I understand what is required of me, I am not particularly disposed to interact, perhaps due to fatigue at the end of a work day, or the sedentary posture that normally characterizes my viewing of a film or an episode of a series while sitting on a couch. In fact, this physical gesture, however minimal and quick, continually "awakens" me from physical relaxation, imposing itself as a factor that makes me self-aware of my status as spectator, with the result of keeping me emotionally removed from the events of the narrative.

This seems to be an intentional reflexive strategy, meant to make me meditate on the mode of the narrative's construction (and thus on the impact of technology upon daily life) and not only on its content. On the one hand, I am supposed to derive pleasure from the digital control (or rather, control via the finger itself) of the content through a device (in my case the remote control, but it could also have been a mouse, or a tablet or smartphone's touch screen)—what Everett (2004) has called the "click fetish." On the other hand, there is a lost opportunity for relaxation and entertainment (the dystopian atmosphere of this and all of the stories in *Black Mirror* notwithstanding...), during which I am repeatedly disturbed by an unwanted physical engagement that obligates me to exit from the usual participatory paradigm and accept a more literal form of interactivity, similar to the one required by a videogame, albeit in a much more rudimentary form.

However, if it may seem obvious that a greater cognitive focus is obtained through the reduction of motility—the case of cinematic experience in a theater, in which movements are limited and attention is focused (with relevant yet rare exceptions; Klinger 1989)—it is also plausible that a small amount of corporeal activation leads to greater affective participation. On this front, it has to be noted that the contemporary trend of viewing audiovisual content through touch screen post-TV-set devices such as smartphones and tablets encourages mobility (the movement of body in space) and motility (the use of

body to interact with the device) and reduces the gap between the human body and technologies. As Ben-Arie and Knoeller (2015) note, the “progressive embodiment” of technological extensions—that is, the reciprocal adaptations of the human body and mind to nonhuman interface (Biocca 1997)—implies “an optimized user who is willing to perform gestures and allow these to be captured. It requires a more affective and less cognitive subject, a communicator, a consumer, a player rather than a producer; a performing user” (Ben-Arie and Knoeller 2015: 62). Paradoxically, the result of such technological embodiment is an unintentional concession to the nonhuman intelligence that captures, registers, compares, predicts and uses for commercial purposes our gestural expression and corporeal behavior. The illusion of controlling the interface is exactly what allows the interface to control me. While propagandizing the freedom of the performative act of interaction, digital interfaces such as streaming platforms (namely Netflix, in the case of *Bandersnatch*), “progressively subvert the notion of user agency” (Ben-Arie and Knoeller 2015: 62). I will return to the topic of control later on.

## 5. INTERPRETATIVE COOPERATION AND INTERACTIVE COOPERATION

Semiotics, narratology, and cognitive psychology, applied to literature and cinema, have already extensively described the constitutionally “open” form of any given work, which *always* requires an activity of comprehension and “interpretative cooperation” from its reader (Eco 1979). And even if it is not required, *homo semioticus* has an innate tendency to fill in the gaps with which a story is deliberately strewn, or simply to logically link the presented events together (even when there is no logic at all), and above all to hypothesize and predict future ones. As has been noted, however, it is necessary to distinguish between “interpretative cooperation” and “interactive cooperation” (Montani 2014). The first concerns the effort, even a great one, that the spectator is called upon to make in order to understand a more or less cryptic or complex narrative, such as in the genre of “puzzle-films” (Buckland 2009) or “mind-game films” (Elsaesser 2009). The diagrammatic structure of *Bandersnatch* is an emblematic example of narratives in which flashbacks, travel in time, and temporal dislocations abound. The binary process of making choices and the resulting combinations, the complexity of the causal chain, and the presence of multiple possible endings situates *Bandersnatch* within this genre.

However, given *Bandersnatch*'s specific nature, interpretative cooperation is associated with interactive cooperation. As Montani explains, “Interactivity requires that the text be *constituted* through cooperative activity” (2019). Differently from the former, interpretative cooperation resides in the unique and aleatory character of every single version of *Bandersnatch* that emerges from my viewing, which is supposed to be different from that of anyone else. Such a constitutive act precedes the text's comprehension, insofar as “Only after having constituted it [the spectator] will find himself in the conditions necessary to attempt to understand, and to feel, what he has gradually composed” (Montani 2019). The act of the constitution of the text itself is thus fundamental to its comprehension: without the first, the second would not even exist. It is as though all of the possible routes that can be taken are potentially present from the beginning of the path, and my choices actualize them at given moments, without any apparent predetermination.

It seems to me that in both cases—interpretative cooperation (*Bandersnatch* as a puzzle film) and interactive cooperation (*Bandersnatch* as an interactive film)—my activity and pleasure of narrative comprehension or composition takes precedence over the content. Cognitive or “navigational” tasks prevail over narrative and visual involvement; structure takes precedence over causality.

I realize that it is not, in fact, the gestural activation of the choice in itself (however modest) that frustrates my interactive experience. Rather, the paradigm of “constitutive interactivity” (i.e. “interpretative cooperation”) has a serious effect on the form of the narrative itself. How can I be happy with the ending I have reached if, choosing differently, I can arrive at all of the others? Can I really say I have seen *Bandersnatch* without having taken all of the paths and reached all of the endings? The hypothesis of constitutive interactivity is based on the existence of possibilities that are only virtually present until the moment of their actualization, but clashes with the actually predetermined nature of the narrative. Suddenly, I see the multiplication of possible endings, and paths to reach them, as a false virtuality. I have the impression that the different paths and endings are not really alternatives, but in fact all exist potentially and synchronically (it is the viewing of *Bandersnatch* in the “no choice” mode that produces a perfect version that includes them all). There are not as many *Bandersnatches* as there are alternative possibilities; rather, *Bandersnatch* is the actualized, linearized, and diachronically distended aggregate of all of the possibilities.



The analysis of the episode that has been offered thus far erroneously takes account only of the first viewing. However, as I have argued, it makes more sense to also consider the subsequent viewings and the ways in which they are influenced by preceding ones. This influence is also present within a single viewing, insofar as I understand that my choices may lead to a dead end and a consequent rewinding that requires me to go through the same fragment again, this time opting for the choice that was not previously selected. The principle of “retroactive causality”—choices in the present that modify not only the future but the past as well (for the application of this concept to film, see Elsaesser 2014)—seems to condition a single viewing of *Bandersnatch*, but the effect is even greater if we think of the experience as the aggregate form of all possibilities, in which the spectator will tend to choose a path based on possible future events of the narrative that s/he already knows as a result of previously undertaken ones.

## 6. GOODFELLAS

It is interesting that the choices preselected by the film in the case of my refusal to interact are always the most reasonable, balanced, and peaceful ones for the protagonist, at least in instances in which it is not merely a case of choosing between two brands of breakfast cereal. Indeed, Stefan accepts working in the offices of the production house, does not get angry with his father, doesn't kill him (or even if he does, doesn't cut him into pieces), regularly takes his medicine, goes to the psychiatrist rather than following Colin, tries to flee rather than attacking ...in short, despite everything, doggedly resisting his impulses, Stefan is truly a good boy! And the ideal spectator that Netflix anticipates is also a good boy (perhaps they thought that I would be offended if they had imagined me as a parricidal, unstable manic-depressive paranoid. And if, instead, I had chosen, what criteria would I have applied? Would I have sought to maintain the protagonist's calm, out of an unwarranted sense of duty, or would I have let loose the devil inside me?).

Here, I realize the trick. Through a system of renunciation (the only means of resistance that I have), I force the artifice to unmask itself; I discover that this pseudo-interactivity is subtended by a falsely experimental mechanism that only gives the temporary impression of proceeding via trial and error. Every “rational” choice, in fact, leads to premature endings, and thus to a routine that will take me back to where I was, and automatically force upon me the path that I previ-

ously missed, almost as though correcting the wrong answer to a multiple-choice question. If I want to go any further, I have to choose the most depraved option; sooner or later I must decide to follow Colin. Someone or *something* has already chosen for me, and offers me an interactivity that is only illusory. As we will see, this is a deceptive author, not because *it* hides itself or is unreliable, but because it brazenly and meta-reflexively reveals itself, and finally gives away its own mendacity by doing what it wants anyway.

Virtuality thus only seemingly prevails over directionality: both options exist to disregard my choice, which is simply cancelled as I watch. Behind the mask of authorial democracy an authoritarian regime is concealed. All of this redundant interactivity begins to frustrate me, ends up being a bother, and I am tired of having to start once again from the beginning. I am almost imbued with nostalgia for the old beloved film in which someone else decides in my place (and better than I would) and in which one emotionally fights to reach *one* ending, whether happy or sad! Another crucial theme forcefully emerges: the distribution of authorship. The gimmick (and the pretense) of *Bandersnatch* and of all interactive films lies in the way that they transfer some of the choices usually made by the author to the spectator. During a traditional viewing experience, the principle force and narrative efficacy lie fundamentally in what the spectator gives up to the author. Here, it seems instead that the author, possessed by “hypertext mania”, is ready to abdicate, or at least give up large portions of his control to me. However, this is pure illusion.

As I have already suggested, and as Elnahla notes as well (2019), in *Bandersnatch* the illusion of control is refuted by three factors. First, it is not possible to use the navigation bar to go back and forth on the timeline, as one can for linear films: this obliges me to respect the consequentiality of the flow of possible choices. Second, I have only a limited amount of time (10 seconds) to choose which direction to go in; otherwise, the system decides for me, imposing its own choice. Finally, some choices clearly lead towards a decision that the system considers to be correct (with a flashing “go back” that forces a return to an earlier point). In this way, despite the impression that I have a real capacity to direct things, it is the author and the technological interface who reveal themselves to be the true controllers of the narrative, on the basis of a series of decisions that have clearly already been made. Might the contradictory character of the forced choice, despite the impression of infinite choice, be a way to make me aware of the illusion? As we will see now, the ten-

sion between the illusion of the spectator's *authoriality* and the effective *authority* of the text is, reflexively, the main theme of *Bandersnatch*.

## 7. THE AUTHOR? FUCK YEAH!

My reputation as a good boy begins to be thrown into doubt when I am asked if I might not like some more action in a film that is beginning to get a little annoying. To signal this shift in genre, the episode gives me the choice not between "Yes" or "No," but between "Yes" and "Fuck yeah." The intensifying repetition of what is ultimately the same option might be the apex of my co-authorship, in which I can even choose to transform a drama into an action film (with plenty of karate). Instead, giving me my options and at the same time making it clear that I am limited to two variations of the same option, the real author seems to finally reclaim the authority. And indeed, if I do *not* choose to flee through the window, Stefan finds himself on the set of *Bandersnatch*, in a meta-reflexive folding in of the text upon itself.

This self-reflexivity is an integral part of the "defamiliarizing" genre to which *Bandersnatch* belongs: even prior to the negative conception of technology that is typical of all of the episodes of *Black Mirror*, the complexity of non-linear narrative provides a means for reflection and critical "activation"—a dynamic that is in itself opposed to classical emotional engagement. Thus, we touch upon a crucial point. As Conley and Burroughs write, "The audience constantly switches between the perception of endless choice and the reality of blockages, false promises, and pointless repetitions" (2020: 9). *Bandersnatch's* narrative is not weak simply due to its repeated and structural schizophrenia, but above all as a result of its self-reflexivity, its insistent leading to a closed circle that sooner or later reveals the limits of a world that pretends to be infinite.

The use of interactivity and the self-referential rhetoric reach a historical apex with *Bandersnatch*. Sucked into a paranoid spiral, Stefan never ceases to obsess over "not having control," thinking that "free will is an illusion," everything is a conspiracy, we are in a "cosmic diagram," and so forth (and this is indeed the case, given that he is a character in a film, even if he is oblivious to this). However, instead of trying to develop this theme in a critical sense, *Bandersnatch* ends up layering its reflection on free will onto a metalinguistic discourse. Stefan tries to act, to rebel against forced choices, refusing to take the ones that I suggest, and wants a sign. He

gets the Netflix "N" and a spectator that writes to him from the future through his computer monitor.

This is the moment when the ambiguity between autonomy and control becomes most evident. The meta-reflexive sequences show that it is not Stefan's mind that is ill, but that of someone else that makes him make mistakes. The self-referential folding-in at least allows me to find my place. If there is a diegetic spectator who is writing from another dimension, then that is not me. And even Stefan, at a certain point, finds his own position. He betrays himself when he renounces philology in order to descend into compromises with the market: "I've been trying to give the player too much choice ... and now they've only got the illusion of free will, but really I decide the ending." Just as a film usually behaves, *Bandersnatch* resists the spectator's expectations and rejects my choices, even if it sometimes guesses them, anticipating them only to thwart them.

## 8. IMPRESSION OF UNPREDICTABILITY

The gamic logic behind *Bandersnatch* affects my participation in the narrative unfolding. Since *Bandersnatch* poses itself halfway between a "database cinema" based on algorithms (Manovich 2001) and a very basic "decision-making" game, the interactive mode in which the story unveils itself conditions the pleasure of experiencing the narrative. In fact, the two options that appear on the screen at every fork end up anticipating and sometime revealing both the possible paths (e.g. killing the father/giving up), further unraveling the narrative, undermining emotional alignment, and neutralizing suspense. Each *dichotomy* announces a path that will sooner or later—in the virtual set of all possible choices—be taken. The pleasure is reduced to the ludic act of choice, and the rest is pure compliance with a pre-determined path. The pleasure of discovery is more important than its content; the real destination is the journey, as they say. By thus demanding the spectator's choice and by promising full control over the story, literal interactivity (interactive cooperation) ends up destroying psychological interactivity (interpretative cooperation). By contrast, in the "classical" viewing experience it was precisely the suspension of the outcome of a crucial event or the interior conflict inherent in an important choice that filled the spectator's experience (corporeal as well) with action. As Kinder argues, "Despite their subjection to the laws of causality, most narratives create the illusion that anything can happen, whereas

most games present a closed world with a clearly defined set of rules” (2002: 125).

The psychological dynamic with which we usually participate in the development of a plot, particularly at pivot points, is in a sense comparable to that of a particular type of game: gambling, that is, the total concession of any decision-making to an uncontrollable entity (as is indeed the case), which we nonetheless have the impression of being able to control. Obviously, each story is predestined to follow a single trajectory, but what counts is the way in which the outcome of an event is experienced by the spectator: with incertitude, a sense of unpredictability and trepidation, despite the consciousness of the fixedness and irrefutability of a destiny that is *already written*. This is a phenomenon that I call “impression of unpredictability” (D’Aloia 2013), which *Bandersnatch* gives up in favor of the illusion of interactivity.

## 9. PLAYING WITH FIRE

The stance I adopted in the last paragraph could seem narrow-minded in respect to both the closed-*versus*-open notion of narrativity and the passive-*versus*-active role of the audience. A short incursion into the relationship between interactive storytelling and game studies would help to clarify my perspective. The ludic performativity inherent to interactive cinema is typical of its “ludification” (Larsen 2017) and, more generally, of the gamification of contemporary audiovisual experience (including television), in which the human and the machine cooperate in order to generate a narrative (Galloway 2004).

As has already been noted with regard to its “concentric” or meta-transmediality, *Bandersnatch* is not only the story of a book that Stefan tries to transform into a videogame, but is itself a game from the moment at which the spectator is called upon to move the character between various “levels” of his path. In his classification of moments of gamic action, Galloway (2004) distinguishes between diegetic/non-diegetic actions (whether they are taking place inside/outside the narrative world) and human/machine actions (whether they are generated by the input of the user or by the machine). The fact that *Bandersnatch* allows one to experience the narrative both actively (by opting between the alternatives) or inactively (the next scene is automatically played whether or not an option is selected) denotes a key difference between this form of interactive TV and video games: “to consume a narrative, video games require interactions between hu-

mans and machines while interactive television provides the option for interaction without the necessity” (Stoldt 2019). As Kinder argues, the distinction between participation and passive readings that characterized the contemporary discourse comparing games and narratives “can be treated more productively as a continuum” (2002: 122). Interactivity – as factual intervention on the narrative – and cognitive activity – to decipher more or less complex storytelling – are both forms of agency, and “all narrative forms accommodate more passive modes or response, even games” (Kinder 2002: 123).

The tension between autonomy and control, between freedom of choice touted by the participatory media and the predetermination of the narrative within a pre-structured algorithm (Hebben 2019) raises a crucial question: am I really an active subject who plays with the fate of the character, or am I instead a passive one who is being “played” by a superior entity—the game master? “Do I have to start again?,” Stefan repeatedly asks himself, alluding meta-reflexively to the nature of the video game in which (with growing awareness) he is inserted. Just like in a video game, failure causes the player to lose a life, and to start again from the beginning of the level or from a “checkpoint.” Even the theme of the impermanence of death is explicitly dealt with through the suicide of Colin, who under the effects of drugs throws himself off the balcony to demonstrate to Stefan the existence of a parallel reality, or rather of an alternative path that the player will look for in his/her next “life” to reach his/her goal, or to find the “Easter egg.”

This suggests that the real stakes of the game do not lie in the mere construction of one story among a set of possibilities, but rather in exploring the meta-textual level and entering the diegesis in search of those clues that get to the most desirable ending. As films such as Steven Spielberg’s *Ready Player One* (2018) clearly explain, access to the Easter egg is granted exclusively to those players (and spectators) with a profound and “retro-maniacal” knowledge of the creative logic behind the game. Similarly, *Bandersnatch* will be most enjoyed by that niche of spectators who are part of the subculture familiar with interactive fiction games or with the choose-your-adventure genre, or who have a nostalgic passion for ’80s pop culture.

## 10. THE BIG N

Every choice I am forced to make constitutes a moment of self-analysis. At each fork I ask myself: did I make the right



choice? What kind of story am I writing? Am I bringing it to a conclusion too quickly? These questions concern *my* compositional activity, but they do not really have any effect on the direction of the film's narrative path, which has the diagrammatic form of an algorithm. The success of the ludic nature of my experience only further weakens the value of the linkages that I am laboriously called upon to construct. While in a game I can peacefully die and start again, here the unmasking of the illusion that I have just discussed is intentional and intentionally inscribed within the interaction with the narrative. Stefan becomes increasingly aware that someone is controlling him, but at the same time, through the meta-reflexive folding-in of the narrative, I too, as spectator/player, increasingly gain consciousness that someone is controlling me.

At this point it is clear to me that the brazen display of the N and the appearance in the text of the spectator who controls Stefan's free will both express the same anxiety about control that slyly pervades *Bandersnatch*. As Elhnahla stresses, "The interactive film genre is a soft form of panoptic surveillance" (2019: 4), one that is also typical of contemporary reality and television and the "surveillance society" more broadly. The spectator's scopophilia, a characteristic trait of the filmic experience (Metz 1982), is turned back onto me, as I am monitored in the choices through which I think I am satisfying my own voyeuristic urges.

In short, *Black Mirror* uses Netflix to put one over on me for the umpteenth time. The idea is that interactivity represents a kind of vaccine against the negative effects of digital technologies to which I and all of us would otherwise be passively submitted (Conley and Burroughs 2020: 3); but in the attempt to obtain this immunity I am drawn into a trap, and I fall into a new deception. I thought that I had transformed my role of passive observer into being Stefan's direct interlocutor, even carrying out for a moment the role of the omniscient narrator. Instead, just as I become aware of the dangers of technology, I discover that I have been a victim of it, trapped in a diagram and an algorithm, played by a game, controlled precisely because I am a controller. "Bandersnatch is thus critiquing acquiescence while simultaneously legitimizing Netflix's usage of algorithms" (Conley and Burroughs 2020: 9). As I stated earlier, the catalogue of Netflix itself is ultimately a game of choices, an interactive super-text to which, unaware, all of its subscribers adhere, myself included. Here too, as within *Bandersnatch*, I find myself seemingly before an infinite catalogue of choices, but in reality I am subject to the chains of the will of an Author.

## 11. IN THE ENDS

Let me try to sketch a summary of what I have tried to bring out in these reflections on *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. A phenomenology of my individual experience allowed me to identify a series of "tensions" in the narrative architecture and in the role of the spectator: between interactive and interpretative cooperation (or, between performative and psychological participation), between actuality and virtuality (or, between the poverty of effective choice and the richness of potential choices), between self-reflexivity and self-referentiality (or, between self-awareness and self-citation), between co-authorship and authority (or, between the illusion of choice and control), and between gaming and gambling (or, between decision-making and randomness). When "old" media like film and TV series encounter the "new" media of streaming platforms and smart devices, linguistic and narrative experimentation reaches extremely interesting and original levels, although beneath the spotlights of the mainstream market and not within the localized or elite niches occupied by artworks.

The impact of interactivity, virtuality, meta-referentiality, surveillance, and gaming logic on forms of established media experience reveals several contradictions in the crossmedial and transmedial hybridization of distribution platforms, devices, and in modalities of spectatorship. The arguments that, a bit provocatively, I have tried to make here are not meant to advance an aversion to interactivity founded on the simplistic and reductive idea that *Bandersnatch* is not a film because it is too interactive, and is not a video game because it is not interactive enough. There is little doubt that *Bandersnatch* could open the way to a greater interpenetration between types and modalities of audiovisual experience and that the new media environments offered by streaming on-demand services platforms like Netflix offer an ideal site for this possibility to take shape. As often happens, the "quality" intellectual products that gain commercial success represent privileged cases for discussing the critical relationship between pure concessions to cultural fashions and the anthropological implications of the evolution of our relationship with media.

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