

Be a part of the narrative: How audiences are introduced to the “free choice dilemma” in the interactive film *Bandersnatch*

Hanxue ZHANG | Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

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ABSTRACT

The first major interactive film on Netflix with live-action scenes was Bandersnatch, released in December 2018. Bandersnatch offers viewers a unique viewing experience distinct from traditional cinema, as it provides the viewer with multiple choices within the narrative trajectory. Digital interactive media technologies have become increasingly popular due to public demand for interactive engagement and a democratisation of text control. There is a social desire to deprive the author of total control over the story; to co-create stories using imagination while adhering to formal limitations and structures; to play with the text as an incomplete form; for the ability to rearrange the story's order, alter its quality, and other such things. These meet the audience-creative user's needs and satisfaction (Cover, 2004). Where personal emotions can be invested and free choice can be exercised in cyberspace, the emergence of interactivity as a kind of audience engagement is a robust culturally rooted desire. This article attempts to understand and analyse the uses and gratifications experienced by the audience during the interactive viewing process. However, digital participation proves to have limitations. Through a case study of the interactive film Bandersnatch, this paper explores how the interactivity and the features of video games can be used to give users so-called “free choice,” but that can actually be frustrating and ultimately offer only the illusion that the audience has any significant control over the story. In the end, the decisions made by the audience offer some relevant affordances to the interactive user but eventually proceed to reinforce the ideological control from the production team.

KEYWORDS

Bandersnatch; Interactive narrative; Video games; Free choice; Author's control; Author-Audience Relationship; Democratisation.

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1. Introduction

In December 2018, the first major interactive movie on Netflix featuring live-action sequences was called *Bandersnatch*. Since *Bandersnatch* gives the audience multiple choices within the narrative trajectory, it offers a unique viewing experience that sets it apart from traditional cinema. Digital interactive media technologies have become increasingly popular due to public demand for interactive engagement and a democratisation of text control. It is a need to deprive the author of total control over

the story; to co-create stories using imagination while adhering to formal limitations and structures; to play with the text as an incomplete form; for the ability to rearrange the story's order, alter its quality, and other such things. These meet the audience-creative user's needs and satisfaction (Cover, 2004). Where personal emotions can be invested and free choice can be exercised in cyberspace, the emergence of interactivity as a kind of audience engagement is a robust culturally rooted desire. This article attempts to understand and analyse the subjectivity unleashed on the audience during the viewing process, which has long been suppressed by the dominance of the author. However, the producer team restricts audience interactivity and engagement at a range of levels in order to retain narrative control over digital participation. Indeed, the audience's active participation in the cultural production of interactive films is limited, allowing producers to maintain a dominant position in the film's main theme's ideological output. By applying the interactive film *Bandersnatch* as a case study, this paper examines interactivity in films and how interactive mechanisms can be set up to give the illusion that the audience has control over the story and free choice. In the end, the decisions made by the audience proceed to reinforce the ideological communication from the production team.

As early as 1994, Marshall McLuhan anticipated that 'obsession with the older patterns of mechanical, one-way expansion from centres to margins is no longer relevant to our electric world' (36). The space in which the audience sits has transitioned from the closed cinema with many viewers watching the screen in silence, to the home-based DVD where they can decide how long they want to watch and pause, end, or start at any time. Ultimately, in the online space, the audience can choose content on diverse devices, such as mobile phones or computers. They have the freedom to select the content they wish to enjoy, and viewers can watch it alone or with others in various scenarios. They can even adjust the video speed to match their preferred viewing pace. As digital tools continue to proliferate globally, the participatory engagement intensifies, ushering in a new era where consumers become co-creators. The participatory culture not only transforms the mode of communication but also redefines consumption patterns and content creation dynamics (Piccinini et al., 2015: 1645). The connection between the audience and media communication tools evolves into a symbiotic relationship where users actively contribute to and shape the narrative. Information flows bidirectionally, with the audience playing a vital role in

transmitting, interpreting, and even generating content. This participatory paradigm marks a departure from the traditional model, embodying the essence of a culture where the audience is no longer a passive spectator but an active participant in the rich tapestry of digital communication.

The change of the audience's role from 'passive viewer' to 'active user' has become part of a global consumer culture. The paper emphasises that the audience's role and position in *Bandersnatch* have changed from that of traditional media. We are no longer passive viewers and consumers. Kristoffer Gansing (2003) provides a novel perspective on how interactivity is already reflected in the *medium and the inevitability of its development*. In addition, the audience participating in the interactive film is not the audience in the usual sense. Nitzan Ben Shaul (2008) mentions in his book: it seems incorrect to call them viewers who participate in interactive dramas because they do more than watch. Calling them players does not seem entirely correct because it does not provide enough interactivity to prove that it is a game. Based on the interaction mechanism of *Bandersnatch*, in this paper, we refer to the audience as--users.

'The Internet is touted as a democratic space in which anyone can participate in cultural production' (Keltie, 2017: 1). The audience's role has shifted dramatically from the pre-20th century idea of the academy in such a media environment of increased audience participation. The idea that audiences are passive media consumers has changed since the twentieth century (Keltie, 2017: 14). Audience theory and audience practice have refuted Adorno and Horkheimer's claim made in the early 1980s that audiences are positioned as highly passive consumers (Hall, 1980). The Uses and Gratifications theory has superseded the passive audience framework as a result of the linear pattern of one-way propagation in the 'sender-message-receiver' (Hall, 1980: 128) being replaced with more intricate multi-step patterns.

The manner and extent of audience participation in the medium are also inextricably linked to changes in the form of the medium. The rise of streaming media in digital communication culture has altered how cultural content is dispersed. In the 2010s, streaming services like Netflix became increasingly popular and sophisticated. The emergence of new media technologies and platforms (here, notably, recorded, digital, and interactive forms of communication) not only necessitates the development of a 'new media theory' but also provides numerous opportunities for re-examining older forms of media theory and how they conceptualise information exchange, transmission,

authorship, discourse, and audience reception (Cover, 2004: 173). Audiences in the cultural industry can now share and watch video content in novel ways. For example, interactive films aimed at adult audiences emerged on Netflix in 2018, and interactive animated programs aimed at children and adolescents have long been released. Transitions in digital communication have influenced media consumption patterns.

Our current form of media communication is a decentralised, consumer-centric model. These changes may also provide a foundation for the development of interactive films:

Despite allowing greater participatory access than broadcast television, the Internet is not an entirely democratic medium, either to access or to use. Nevertheless, audience-created texts, from social media activity to Web series, operate as forms of resistance to the culture industry whilst utilising online platforms that the industry is also slowly extending into. (Keltie, 2017: 5)

Black Mirror was initially commissioned by Channel 4 in the United Kingdom and then co-produced by the US media company Netflix. From an 'anti-utopian' perspective, the series expresses the impact and concern of the constant development of science and technology. *Black Mirror* has found a space in popular culture over the last decade to become a moniker representing the negative impact of digital technologies on human beings and society (AKŞİT and NAZLI, 2020). Netflix released its first interactive film, *Bandersnatch*, as part of the *Black Mirror* series around Christmas in 2018. *Bandersnatch* is a stand-alone film presented as a video tale mixed with elements of the interactive video game and TV series (Nee, 2021). Thus, the audience can control the protagonist's actions and choices through the remote control or touch the screen (AKŞİT and NAZLI, 2020). *Black Mirror's Bandersnatch* was marketed as the first interactive narrative aimed at a mature audience on the streaming platform Netflix (Rezk and Haahr, 2020: 183). The far-reaching influence of *Bandersnatch* has aroused the attention of scholars. It has been widely praised for its unique theme and innovative style (Elnahla, 2020).

Bandersnatch is a movie set in the 1980s about a protagonist named Stefan. Inspired by a book called *Bandersnatch* left by his mother, Stefan decides to make a choose-your-own-adventure video game similar to the content of the novel. The death of his mother has always been a trauma in Stefan's heart, and he has been receiving psychological

counselling. With the deepening of the game's production, he begins to have strange ideas and behaviours. This film adopts a non-linear narrative method and uses different branch narratives to guide the audience to choose the protagonist's behaviour in given plot points, finally conducive to different endings. These thoughts and actions of his are presented to the audience in the form of choices, which the viewer makes in conjunction with the plot and his/her own experiences, thus controlling and guiding the trajectory of Stefan's destiny. It allows the audience to operate through the touch screen (of a mobile phone or digital tablet), or the keyboard (of a laptop or desktop computer), or a remote control (of a TV set): the viewer/user can/must choose between two options to control the plot. This sets the movie apart from most other viewing experiences, allowing the viewer to watch it alone or in a private setting. This unique viewing mechanism predicts that different audiences will watch various protagonist endings and have a distinctive viewing experience. The film does not have a set viewing length; viewers will need a minimum of 40 minutes to watch it and make the minimum number of mandatory choices to bring the plot forward, but most people will experience it for around 90 minutes due to more reticulated choices at the given narrative forks. The choices are presented as dichotomous. If the options are largely simplified, they will be shown as "yes" or "no" choices. Since each viewer makes his/her own choices, the viewing time also varies.

The emergence of interactive movies has brought an unprecedented new experience to the audience, and it also marks that content producers gradually put a certain amount of power back into the hands of the audience. *Bandersnatch* guides the development of interactive video through the powerful platform of Netflix. This case study will focus on how *Bandersnatch* establishes a "cyberspace utopia" for the audience as a way to satisfy their non-social need for relaxation and escape. Digital interactive media technologies purport to satisfy audiences' need for interactive participation and democratise textual control, stripping authors of their control over the story as *Bandersnatch* envisions, promoting the democratisation of visual identity while attempting to unleash the subjectivity of the viewer, a subjectivity that the primacy of the author has long suppressed. Therefore, this article analyses how *Bandersnatch* creates a fantasy world of free movement for the viewer, identifying the consequences to the uses and gratifications benefits and the ostensibly democratic interactivity that stem from the viewer's limitations in terms of choice and interaction.

A cinematic language such as the one in *Bandersnatch* is presented as an interactive film that reconstructs the meaning and character of the narrative's authorial agency. In the end, the study reveals that there is tension between the audience agency and the interactive mechanism of *Bandersnatch*.

2. Literature review

In most realistic and naturalistic dramas, actors pretend that the audience does not exist when performing while the audience sits in the auditorium, and the actors on the stage will not interact with the audience off the stage. Accepting the transparency of the fourth wall is part of the suspension of disbelief between fiction and the audience. It allows the audience to feel fiction as if they were witnessing an actual event (Wallis and Shepherd, 2018). The fourth wall is not a set design but a performing convention in a theatre venue. In a theatre performance, the actors ignore the audience and focus entirely on the world of the play. Breaking the fourth wall is a violation of this performance convention. It can be called 'breaking the fourth wall' to speak or greet the audience directly in games, films, plays, or TV programs (Bell, 2008; Abelman, 2013). Meanwhile, in other media, such as film and television, producers try to incorporate different approaches to breaking the fourth wall between the audience and the work of art.

For example, in the 1961 film *Mr. Sardonicus* produced and directed by William Castle, before the last scene of the film, the film viewers can use a card given to them at the beginning of the film to vote on the fate of the villain: each viewer can raise or put down the card to decide whether Mr. Sardonicus should be cured or dead. Presumably, no viewers choose compassion, so another ending has never been screened (da Silva et al., 2019). This interactive approach breaks the fourth wall at the structural narrative level, attracting the audience to enter the story. This draws viewers into the fantastical world of plays, films, or television shows. Characters may occasionally go so far as to solicit audience feedback and involve them as active participants in the narrative.

Interactive movies with immersive experiences are not an entirely new form of entertainment. The first film in history to have user interaction in plot design was *Kinoautomat* in 1967, directed by, and three Czech New Wave auteurs. It is a black comedy, and the audience at the cinema theatre could press a red or green button on

their chairs to vote for two different plot developments at a particular moment in the film. There were nine narrative forks during the movie. The performance would be suspended at each ‘time node’ of the plot. The host would come on stage and let the audience vote between the two scenes. Finally, the plot selected by most of the audience through the buttons would be projected (Burgos, 2019).

In this study, the concept of interactive drama aligns closely with Brenda Laurel’s (1986) useful definition of it. Laurel contends that interactive drama involves a first-person experience within a fantasy realm, allowing the user to create, enact, and observe a character whose choices and actions influence the unfolding events, akin to a theatrical play. Interactive drama presents a nuanced and highly interactive world through the use of multi-line, fork-structured techniques. This narrative realm lacks a predetermined route and conclusion, integrating the audience’s style, experience, ideas, personality, and other real-life elements. The audience’s experience is accepted by interactive drama and reshaped by the dramatic fate.

For a long time, scholars have not agreed on a uniform definition of interactive film. Film and new media have been called ‘interactive films’ by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000: 93) [1999] by merging features of new (digital) media and established media. Kristoffer Gansing (2003: 1,6,7) writes that interaction in digital media has become a daily practice and subverted audience consciousness to consume film and television content. Janet H. Murray (2017: 126) [1997] once explains that ‘in interactive digital narratives, the audience has dramatic agency—the ability to make meaningful choices and to see their effects.’ This ‘dramatic agency’ is what *Bandersnatch* tries to give to the audience. Agency is the condition of activity rather than passivity. It refers to the experience of acting, doing things, making things happen, exerting power, being a subject of events, or controlling things (Liu et al., 2010). Based on this narrative model, some scholars argue that the interactive film provides the audience with limited agency.

Paradoxically, it has been acknowledged by academics like Henry Jenkins (2006b; 2009b) that participatory culture does not occur equally. Observing and understanding (from the viewer’s perspective) whether the control of narrative text and audio-visual language by forms of interactive media offers the possibility of equal democratic participation or whether it attempts to influence the viewer’s ideology regarding unequal power relations. ‘In contrast, participatory culture, as a concept, arguably

enables audiences to challenge the power structure of the culture industry by participating not only in the consumption of cultural products but also in their production (Keltie, 2017: 2).’ The continuous construction and reinforcement of audience agency provide a framework for the conceptualisation of participatory culture. The shift of agency towards the direction of the audience makes it a constant challenge to the internal power of the cultural product.

Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century by Henry Jenkins (2009a: 7) provides a summary of participatory culture’s characteristics: ‘relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.’ Additionally, they noted that a culture that values participation is one in which individuals feel somewhat socially connected to one another and value the contributions they make. Thus, as the participatory nature of the mass media continues to evolve, the relationship between the audience and the media grows ever closer. The audience’s place in the participation culture is also becoming increasingly important. Jenkins (2009a) points out in his research on the characteristics of online participation that media consumers crave a participatory experience in which the audience can feel that their contribution is essential. This is a key requirement for the emerging phenomenon of cultural integration. Since the early 1990s, there has been a fundamental shift in our individual and collective participation in mass media, as Henry Jenkins (2006a) suggests in his book *Fans, bloggers, and games: Exploring participatory culture*.

3. Methodology

This article will adopt a qualitative research method, using *Bandersnatch* as a specific sample. *Bandersnatch* is not the first Netflix drama with interactive and technical features, but the first interactive film with a mature audience. The number of people who watched it also indicates a significant global influence. This study will be based on Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis method to explore how *Bandersnatch*’s audio-visual language and mechanism settings enable a deeper emotional experience for the audience. Fairclough divides the analysis into three steps or ‘dimensions’: ‘description, interpretation and explanation’ (Titscher et al., 2000: 52). This analysis will interpret the film text from the perspective of its filmmakers,

audiences, and critics. The audience's comments on IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes and Twitter will be used as key information to analyse their viewing experiences and journeys as a way to deconstruct *Bandersnatch* itself. Moreover, this article will use "Uses and Gratifications" theory as support to examine *Bandersnatch* by positing three layers of analysis heuristically: Narrative choice and deeper emotional engagement, Ease and escapism, and the illusion of a democratised space in the interactive film.

3.1. Details on the method of enquiry

According to the classic uses and gratifications theory, how the audience uses the media depends on the satisfaction, demand, hope, and motivation they have or want to obtain from the media. This approach focuses on how the audience uses different media in relation to their expectations and the different gratifications they seek from using them (McQuail, 1997). In the 1970s, researchers focused on the audience's motivations and developed new forms of media to their study that people used to meet social and psychological needs (Biocca, 1988). In his book *Audience Analysis*, Denis McQuail includes, a new variant of the uses and gratifications theory on media-personal interaction with Blumler and Brown in 1972. Following a study of a large number of British radio and television programs, they outlined the most important types of media gratification:

- a) diversion: escape from routine, escape from problems and release emotions;
- b) personal relationship: make friends, look for people of the same taste, social function;
- c) personal identity: self-referencing, exploring reality and strengthening values;
- d) surveillance.

This theoretical model provides a clearer picture of the cognitive and emotional demand factors that can influence the audience's behaviours when using media. A more specific reason for media use is summarised in the theoretical framework constructed by Cecilia Von Feilitzen (1999):

- 1) entertainment and emotional satisfaction;
- 2) information and cognitive needs;
- 3) social needs (get recognition, communicate with others);
- 4) non-social needs (especially those related to escape, the need for solitude and emotional adjustment);

5) some needs related to consumption patterns and the medium bring a degree of intrinsic satisfaction to the user (McQuail, 1997).

Early U&G research was primarily descriptive, attempting to group the audience's responses into meaningful categories (Berelson et al., 1986; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1966; Lazarsfeld et al., 1968; Merton, 1948). In this context, Mass media scholars became embroiled in a theoretical tug of war regarding the active or passive nature of the audience.¹ Some regarded part of the audience as active, believing they were 'individualistic', 'impervious to influence', 'rational', and 'selective'. The other camp regarded an audience as a passive, thinking that they were 'conformist', 'gullible', 'anomic', 'vulnerable', 'victims' (Biocca, 1988: 51). However, in the 1980s, researchers reassess the long-standing concept of the active audience (Ruggiero, 2000). Levy and Windahl (1984) try to elaborate a relatively more complete concept of audience activity in theory. They tested the audience-oriented model linking activity with U&G.

According to Levy and Windahl's (1984: 73) concept of a 'totally active audience', audiences would participate in three different types of audience activities when using mass media (1984: 59): 'Preactivity' refers to behaviour that occurs before an experience, such as when choosing mass media content, 'Duractivity' refers to personal participation and psychological attention during the experience process, and 'Postactivity' refers to behaviour that occurs after an experience, such as discussion or reflection. Each person participates in these activities to varying degrees.

The uses and gratification of ideas centred on audience activities are now considered one of the most useful conceptual basis for the study of media, as it is possible to take advantage of one of the strengths of the Internet-interactivity (Siraj, 2007). Today's audiences can watch TV series and movies through mobile phones, digital tablets, laptops, and other electronic devices. *Bandersnatch* offers the viewer the possibility of active choice, giving the viewer something of a sense of satisfaction. With the continuous integration of the characteristics of the media and technological innovation, the interactive relationship between the media and the audience gradually reveals its superiority.

¹ See, for example, Christopher, David, and Aidan Leuszler. "Horror video games and the "active-passive" debate." *Games and Culture* 18.2 (2023): 209-228.

4. Discussion

4.1. – Narrative choice and deeper emotional engagement

Stefan is the protagonist in the interactive film *Bandersnatch*, and it is through choices that the audience determines the narrative content and ending in relation to him. *Bandersnatch* would then allow the audience to choose Stefan's behaviour, actions, and ultimate fate, according to their own preferences, values, and cognition. David Griffin (2018) argues that *Bandersnatch*'s production team found a way to enhance the audience's personal feelings. Griffin claims that he was able to feel more involved in the film after making a series of choices for the protagonist Stefan. Alan M. Rubin et al. (1985) propose that if the viewer participates in the action closely relating to the characters, s/he is likely to create a parasocial relationship with the characters, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the audience's understanding of the character's behaviour. This is why the interactive film can make the audience feel more empathy by no longer passively watching and accepting the output of the content but actively participating in the story's plot development along with the protagonist.

Bandersnatch presents to the audience their first narrative fork with the obligation of choice in the third minute of the movie: the choice is about whether Stefan will eat cereal or not at breakfast. As the second-choice moment, when Stefan has to decide which music tape to listen to, it seems an irrelevant narrative fork that has no meaning or impact on the advancement of the plot. However, according to Nada Elnahla's (2020) textual analysis of the various options that appear next in the film, these two options have a particular impact on the viewer's perception and experience. For example, the audience's first cereal choice for Stefan will affect which brand of cereal appears in the advertisement content while Stefan sits in front of the TV set (it appears somewhere in the latter of the film). Moreover, this otherwise innocuous choice invokes the user's personal choices for something as intimate as their breakfast cereal and creates a perceptual first-person identification with the character. The audience's choice of music has this effect even more profoundly, and it not only determines the musical preferences of the protagonist but also controls the soundtrack in the following scenes (Elnahla, 2020: 508). At the same time, the background music can guide the film's rhythm and give emotional colour beyond what is on-screen, providing the audience with a sensory supplement and sense of the emotion of the protagonist.

The use of shots and camera movements in *Bandersnatch* also enhances the audience's involvement. When there are clips in the film that require the audience to make choices, the photograph lens that the audience can see will first focus on Stefan's face. The film adopts a close-up picture composition, using zoom in shots to constantly close the distance between the character and the audience. In the early 1990s, close-up shots of characters were introduced into interactive movies. However, due to technical limitations, most of these shots were static. Producers believed that staying on a frozen screen could give the audience space and the possibility to think so they could choose freely (Perron et al., 2008). Nevertheless, it is not presented as static shots in *Bandersnatch*. The images in the film are dynamic when the choices are offered. The main focus is on close-ups of Stefan, with the camera pulling towards the protagonist's face, directly conveying his expression change when faced with a choice due to pressure. In *Bandersnatch*, when offering the audience a choice, the cinema camera forces the audience to gaze at the protagonist for an extended time, and this prolonged gaze makes the character present a sculptural still-life-like state that creates a great tension with the environment as a material background, forcing the viewer to think about and perceive life in the power of silence. These shots can mobilise the contemplative experience of the aesthetic subject and activate the subjective consciousness of the audience's viewing behaviour in the aesthetic relationship. These shots prompt the audience to empathise with Stefan in some way to immerse the audience in the plot and the emotions of the protagonist.

4.2. Ease and escapism

The U&G approach has a crucial theoretical branch arguing that the audience seeks a non-social need through media use, using the online spaces to escape and thus adjust their emotions in the form of solitude and to gain a psychological sense of relaxation (McQuail, 1997: 72).² As discussed in the previous section of the article, escaping from reality to feel at ease is inseparable from a narrative that provides sufficient immersion. A fictional narrative can draw the audience into the story and thus isolate the audience

² Katz and Foulkes (1962: 379) argue that: "The favourite answer of the popular-culture writers to this question, 'What do people do with the media?' is that they use it for escape."

from the real world. When the audience chooses Netflix to watch *Bandersnatch*, they have isolated themselves from the problems in the real world and entered the virtual world. At this time, the satisfaction of escape has been reached.

The first important choice in the movie is when Stefan needs to decide whether to create the game on his own or form a team with his partners in the game company. A cautious audience may choose to work with the team to ensure the successful release of the game. However, it may then turn out that choosing this option will allow the company to mess up Stefan's game. This choice has to be made in ten seconds, so the intense and thoughtful viewing process allows the audience to become more immersed in the plot. Adding time constraints to the choices sections breaks up the relaxed atmosphere but also helps to immerse the audience.

Bandersnatch does not allow the audience to choose a temporary exit. This rule makes it mandatory for the viewer to be fully engaged once they start watching, and it is not possible to store nodes (as is the case with games) for viewing on a random later date. Although today's technology has let the audience archive, the essential difference between interactive movies and video games lies in the continuity of their plots. While watching *Bandersnatch*, you must start again from the beginning if you want to quit. In this way, the audience can, at least according to the design, spend more time immersed in the plot and have a sense of attachment to the story. The interactive *digital* narrative is a new concept, previous studies have shown that when the audience interacts with digital content, this will produce positive emotional effects (Nee, 2021). The design choice in interactive films makes it necessary for the viewer to spend a relatively long and continuous time navigating the film if they wish to achieve its primary uses and gratifications reward of discovering how their plot choices will be ultimately resolved. The viewer is emotionally and thoughtfully invested in the interactive film for an extended period, isolating this viewing time from real-world time.³

As mentioned, the media plays a role in people's personal lives by providing a way to escape reality and engage with content that provides satisfaction and fulfilment. The responsibilities of the protagonist's role in the virtual society constructed by the film's

³ Cf. Cover, Rob (2004), New media theory: Electronic games, democracy and reconfiguring the author-audience relationship. *Social Semiotics*, 14(2), pp. 173-191.

narrative are transferred to the audience through choice so the audience can temporarily forget about the responsibilities of their role in the real world. *Bandersnatch*, a film where different choices can lead to different results, makes for a new cinematic experience every time with the same media mediator. With the premise that the audience will spend significant time on *Bandersnatch*, Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010: 64) findings are relevant. They point out that 'virtual game worlds offer the highest degree of social presence and media richness.' Some players spend too much time on interactive games, so they begin to identify with the virtual characters as actual incarnations. In *Bandersnatch*, the responsibility that initially belonged to the protagonist Stefan is transferred to the audience.

Then, Stefan mentions to the doctor, while undergoing psychotherapy, that he feels he is being controlled and monitored. Such a plot gives the audience a hint that everyone is already in the game. During the viewing process, the viewer only needs to be immersed in the choices made under the sole authority of the individual. Sleep, pleasure, and individuality are examples of non-social needs (in that they can be met independent of other people), and meeting them proffers certain valuable satisfactions. The consequences of the individualised options in *Bandersnatch* have a positive effect on the viewer, and therefore the pleasure part of the non-social need is fulfilled.

There is a claim that the mass media fulfils desires by providing an escape. For individuals experiencing feelings of alienation or powerlessness, the media offers a way to withdraw from real society or find meaning and connection in the media. The media offers a range of content choices that cater to the interests and preferences of the audience, providing a form of satisfaction and diversion from everyday life (Katz & Foulkes, 1962). In summary, the audience's choice-related behaviour when watching *Bandersnatch* can fulfil part of the need to release emotions and escape from reality and problems.

4.3 – The illusion of a democratised space in interactive film

The score of *Bandersnatch* on *IMDb* is 7.1/10; the audience score on *Rotten Tomatoes* is 53%. The score shows that *Bandersnatch* has gone from the audience's high expectations and high score to a downturn. After collecting and analysing most of the viewers/critics who rated the movie on *IMDb* from 1 to 5, it was found that the locus of concern within their comments revolved around the idea of "choice".

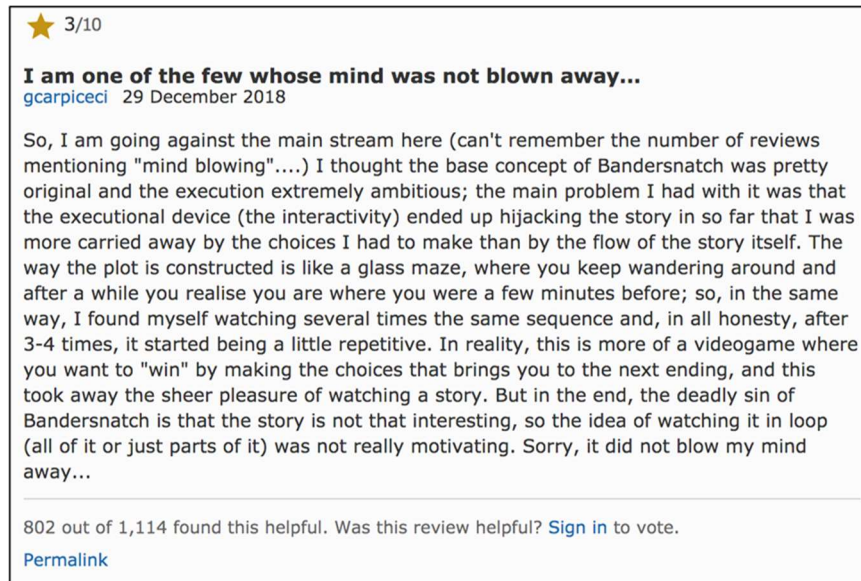


Fig. 1. IMDb user reviews: this user felt that the flow of the film was broken by the interactive choices and felt that the content after the choices was repetitive.



Fig. 2. IMDb user reviews: this viewer felt that Bandersnatch did not offer a real sense of choice.

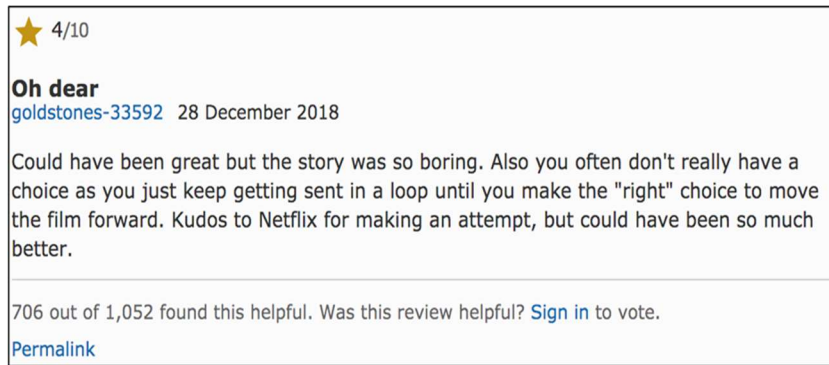


Fig. 3. *IMDb* user reviews: this viewer found the storyline boring and his/her choices did not really work.

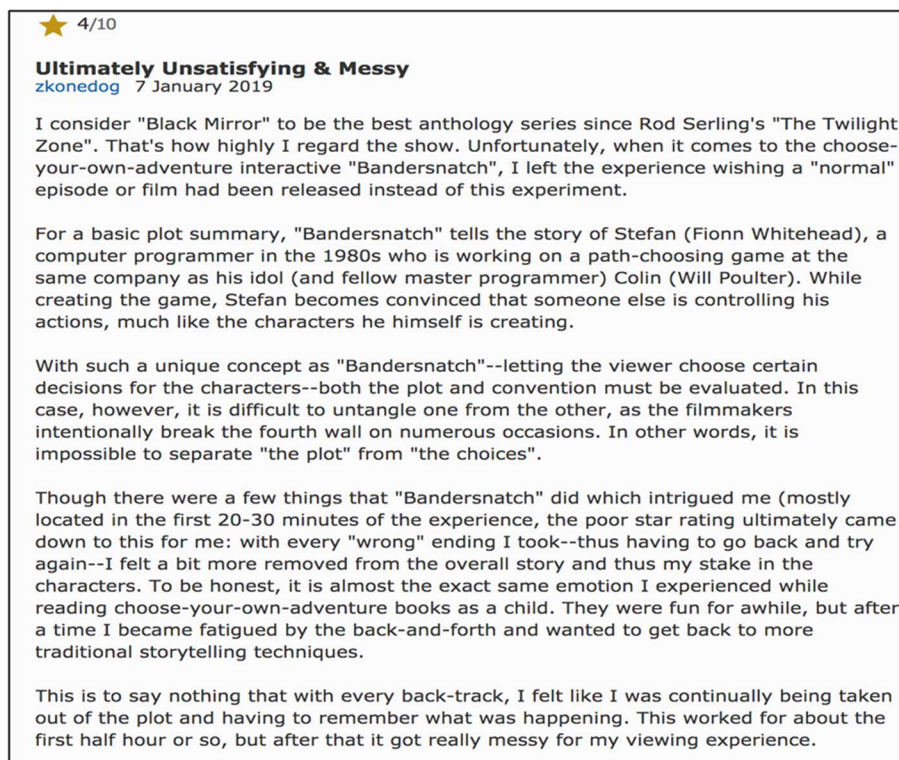


Fig. 4. *IMDb* user reviews: this viewer was exhausted and confused by the back-and-forth choices.

Some initial general comment on the tome of the concern regarding "choice." Not only was there a broad consensus that the choices were largely superficial or illusory (in that they knew there were only limited possible endings available), but the audience also felt they had to spend much time making repetitive choices. This repetitiveness and passivity bored them and separated their feelings from the plot and the protagonist. For instance, both the eighth and ninth choices in the film provide the audience with

the helpless feeling of being sent to dead ends.⁴ The eighth choice is that Stefan needs to complete an action under the operation of the audience: one is to pour tea on the computer, and the other is to get angry at his father. Suppose the audience makes the first choice according to their own evaluation and expectation: spill tea on the computer. After a few more selection rounds, the audience will return to a picture of two old TV sets. The system requires them to make a new choice at this plot node. The only way to continue the story is to choose to be angry with Stefan's father. I.e. there actually is no choice, just a cyclical return to the necessary "correct" choice. Forced return plot points like this occur throughout the movie more than once. In choosing whether to follow Colin or go to the doctor to confide in the node, for example, you *must* follow Colin in order to trigger a more extended storyline and meet the expected ending. If you choose to find a doctor to confide in after going through the latter two choice processes, the audience will then see a conclusion in which the game created by Stefan is listed in the market, an unsatisfying ending.

Users are or become aware that they lack agency and free will in this interactive film, but they do not know the reason, and they cannot explain why they will be contradicted and cheated because of the film presentation after watching. They watch the movie within the choice illusion created by the director. Users feel the limitation of option design when they apply agency to disconnected narrative choices. Moreover, during the selection process, users may have a time limit to think. They must make a choice within ten seconds, or a default selection and playback will be made based on the data collected by the system. Christian Roth and Hartmut Koenitz (2019: 249) call this characteristic 'passive consumption'. In the case of 'passive consumption', there is no way for the user to feel that agency is protected. As such, the ten-second time limit selection mechanism, rather than positively involving users in the plot due to the effect of urgency, also it might actually make them feel that they are being forced to decide by the filmmaker, shattering the illusion of voluntary choice.

Bandersnatch has other defects in the choice constructions. For instance, an interesting sequence, already mentioned earlier, is when the user has to decide for Stefan either to smash his PC or to pour tea on it. The consequences of the two choices

⁴ Cf. Juul, J. (2013). *The art of failure: An essay on the pain of playing video games*. MIT press.

are entirely at odds with what the user expected. Therefore, while users do not endorse either of the two options, they must choose between the two. In order to move the story forward, the user is forced to choose an option that is not in line with his/her wishes, and this has to be done within ten seconds. These defects may be due to the needs of the plot setting, but in the end, the user feels that the choice is limited. Murray (2017) asserts that taking intentional action and seeing the consequences of our own decisions are the inner core of agency mastery. Hence, when the user lacks the power to choose or does not see the expected result after choosing and is constantly trapped in the plot, s/he is likely to feel impatient and cheated. More extreme choice settings also appear in the screening process. When Stefan's mother asks him if he wants to go to the railway station with her, there is only one option "no" on the screen. Imposing and restricting or proposing incoherent choices may hinder, rather than foster, a feeling of freedom (Sengün, 2013: 6). It is easy to observe that in *Bandersnatch*, with its limited narrative paths and ways of presenting endings, user audience can only follow a pre-determined trail of choice-based viewing activities. This type of selective interaction is not a creation but an illusion of public participation. The author's intention in displaying only "No" on the screen at this point is to create a paradox with having freedom of choice. This implies that the previous experience is an illusory ability to choose for both the audience and Stefan.

Joshua Matthews (2019: 4) concludes that the freedom of choice *Bandersnatch* provides to the audience is merely an illusion. In participating in the film, the audience first thinks they have many choices, but the filmmakers have made all these choices for the audience in advance. Austin S. Babrow (1988), who also doubts the extent to which specific, conscious motives govern audience behaviour, summarises the past experience and suggests that the interpretive framework theory should be used to think. According to this theory, certain audience choices are meaningful, while other media exposure behaviours are motivated by mere habit and conditioned reflexes and can be considered unmotivated behaviours (McQuail, 1997). The media user--here, the *Bandersnatch* viewer--creates a psychologically satisfactory ending based on his/her own interpretation of the plot, analysis of the character's personality, and grasp of the character's emotional direction. However, when essential choices come up, for example, when the viewer chooses to click on an option on the screen that they have their heart set on, the result is that the game designed by Stefan was released via the game company to a poor reputation, the audience

will vicariously be the main protagonist and think that this is a dire consequence. In this case, whenever the viewer chooses to advance the plot point to the game's release but it is poorly received, they will remain dissatisfied with the ending and may believe that they have made the "wrong" choice and choose to start over. Therefore, in repeated selection, viewers might lose interest and motivation through too much banal repetition in tandem with too many dissatisfying moments of disappointment.

5. Conclusion

Audiences frequently watch "normal" films and TV series in a multi-purpose, casual manner. They perceive watching itself as a relaxation-oriented leisure activity. However, the interactive film viewing and participation procedure changes this single and straightforward relationship. While navigating an interactive film, the audience transforms from relaxed, unconcerned bystanders to participants or controllers responsible for the story's direction. In this circumstance, the audience needs to be more focused on the content, which helps to prolong the length of the user experience and their bond with the film or TV show. *Bandersnatch* uses digital technology to combine film narrative and game interaction. The addition of this technology deepens the audience's emotional engagement while watching the film. It transforms the user's identity from viewer to user.

Bandersnatch ostensibly offers a new perspective on the democratisation of user participation. However, in the process, the film's producers maintain absolute control of the narrative by limiting the audience's interaction and participation. While the audience can partake in a more integrated viewing experience when watching *Bandersnatch*, in prolonged immersive film viewing and selection, viewers can find themselves always repeating choices and backtracking the plot, which can cause a certain amount of stress and burden. At last, the audience will become aware that their agency of choice does not entirely belong to them and that *Bandersnatch's* director controls the plot as its only demiurge. *Bandersnatch* gives the audience the illusion that they have the same authorial rights as the screenwriter and director. But behind the freedom of choice is the pressure and illusion that viewers cannot interpret themselves when and after watching.

Through the analysis of *Bandersnatch's* narrative content, audio-visual language and audience feedback, it is not difficult to find that this interactive film can indeed extend

the audience's comprehensive feelings and experiences to a certain extent, and the use of interactive forms in film and television dramas can highlight the functions of entertainment, emotional satisfaction, deep immersion, and escaping from the pressure of reality. (In principle, the interactive film could attempt to lead the audience into an imagined utopia by using interactive mechanisms to give them the right to make choices unavailable in the ontologically real world). Nevertheless, it breaks the audience's illusion at the last moment and pulls them back from cyberspace to real space. The freedom initially thought to be handed over to the audience is not realised, thus causing the feeling of a more profound struggle after "waking up". The imbalance between the audience and the creators is still there.

A big part of the audience, initially unaccustomed to the interactive film format, is invited/forced to take back their subjective initiative of choice, adapting little by little to the process of interactive viewing, opening up to the desire for more autonomy in the film text. They grow accustomed to this form of control while watching/navigating the film but then gradually or suddenly realise that they never actually had the freedom to guide the protagonist's choices and the course of his destiny in the film's narrative space. In this way, they are constantly stimulated to nurture a level of demand that is eventually shattered, resulting in an even sharper disappointment.

Since the viewing process is relatively private, almost always from a single viewpoint, the entire experience differs from that in a cinema. In the cinema theatre, we are inevitably affected by peers or groups in the same closed space. For instance, if someone laughs, we may be driven to laugh involuntarily; or if we cannot catch the meaning of a scene or dialogue, we may want to discuss it with the people around us or hear others discussing it, which will affect our attitude and behaviour during the viewing, limit the release of personal perceptions of first-hand feelings and thoughts about the film. *Bandersnatch*, on the other hand, allows the viewer to return to a private room similar to a home cinema, maximising the viewer's sense of autonomy (but also, in a sense, of isolation) in the narrative and within the intensity of interaction with the narrative material.

Interactive movies give audiences a space, opening up novel opportunities for the democratic development of participation among users. Interactive movies seek to liberate the audience's subjectivity, which has long been constrained by the author's dominant position, while simultaneously encouraging visual identity's decentralisation.

These choices have value because they engage the audience in the story interactively, shatter the fourth wall structurally, and increase their level of engagement, which helps them comprehend the significance of the protagonist's journey to the satisfying ending. However, there are still significant restrictions and controls even though new digital technologies can increase audience participation in narrative construction. Tension is created between the audience's attempt to release more subjectivity through this satisfaction and gratification and the interactive cinema's integrated mechanism. From this hypothesis, we determine that the idea of audience fulfilment and satisfaction fostered by the mechanism of choose-your-own-adventure is, in fact, an illusion that serves the narrative's pre-determined purpose.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hanxue ZHANG is a Ph.D. student at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. Her research interests include new media forms, interactive films and television, audience behaviour and psychology, game study, interactive narrative design, and ethnographic documentary film. In 2022 she delivered presentations on different research topics at the Interdisciplinary Seminar-workshop about games hosted by Tongji University and East China Normal University, the Chinese DiGRA Conference, and the International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative