

GAMIFICATION AND NARRATIVE DIVERSIFICATION IN INTERACTIVE FILM: A QUALITATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF “BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH”

Gamifikasi dan Kepelbagaian Naratif dalam Filem Interaktif: Analisis Tekstual Kualitatif “Black Mirror: Bandersnatch”

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ABSTRACT

Interactive films have introduced new ways for audiences to engage with storytelling by integrating gamification elements and branching narratives. This paper examines how gamification transforms the viewer experience from passive observation to active participation through a qualitative textual analysis of Netflix’s *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018). Using close reading, three key scenes were purposefully selected to represent distinct interactive nodes: (1) a low-stakes choice introducing interactivity, (2) a branching decision featuring a fail state that encourages replayability, and (3) a high-stakes branching choice leading to divergent storylines and multiple endings. Findings show that gamification mechanisms such as illusion of choice, game loops, and player agency significantly affect narrative diversification and audience engagement. Scene 1 illustrates how onboarding mechanics ease viewers into interactivity without affecting plot outcomes. Scene 2 demonstrates how fail states mimic game loops, requiring the audience to reattempt decisions, thus deepening their involvement. Scene 3 exemplifies meaningful agency where choices produce alternate storylines and endings, challenging classical linear narratology. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on interactive storytelling by proposing a theoretical framework that links gamification elements to narrative diversification. The analysis highlights the potential of interactive films to blur the boundary between watching and playing, offering valuable insights for filmmakers, multimedia designers, and scholars of narrative media.

Keywords: *Gamification, Interactive Film, Player Agency, Illusion of Choice, Narrative Diversification, Qualitative Textual Analysis, Audience Engagement*

ABSTRAK

Filem interaktif telah memperkenalkan cara baharu untuk penonton terlibat dengan penceritaan yang menyepadukan elemen gamifikasi dan naratif bercabang. Kertas ini mengkaji bagaimana gamifikasi mengubah pengalaman penonton daripada pemerhatian pasif kepada penyertaan aktif melalui analisis tekstual kualitatif *Black Mirror Netflix: Bandersnatch* (2018). Menggunakan bacaan rapat, tiga adegan utama dipilih secara sengaja untuk mewakili nod interaktif yang berbeza: (1) pilihan berkepentingan rendah yang memperkenalkan interaktiviti, (2) keputusan bercabang yang menampilkan keadaan gagal yang menggalakkan kebolehmain semula, dan (3) pilihan bercabang berkepentingan tinggi yang

membawa kepada jalan cerita yang berbeza dan berbilang pengakhiran. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa mekanisme gamifikasi seperti ilusi pilihan, gelung permainan dan agensi pemain mempengaruhi kepelbagaian naratif dan penglibatan penonton dengan ketara. Adegan 1 menggambarkan bagaimana mekanik onboarding memudahkan penonton ke dalam interaktiviti tanpa menjejaskan hasil plot. Adegan 2 menunjukkan bagaimana keadaan gagal meniru gelung permainan, memerlukan penonton mencuba semula keputusan, sekali gus memperdalam penglibatan mereka. Adegan 3 menunjukkan agensi yang bermakna di mana pilihan menghasilkan jalan cerita dan pengakhiran alternatif, naratologi linear klasik yang mencabar. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada kesedaran yang semakin meningkat mengenai penceritaan interaktif dengan mencadangkan rangka kerja teori yang menghubungkan elemen gamifikasi kepada kepelbagaian naratif. Analisis tersebut menyerlahkan potensi filem interaktif untuk mengaburkan sempadan antara menonton dan bermain, menawarkan pandangan berharga untuk pembuat filem, pereka multimedia dan sarjana media naratif.

Kata kunci: Gamifikasi, Filem Interaktif, Agensi Pemain, Ilusi Pilihan, Kepelbagaian Naratif, Analisis Tekstual Kualitatif, Penglibatan Khalayak

INTRODUCTION

Interactive storytelling has emerged as a fascinating phenomenon in today's digital media landscape. With the rise of streaming platforms such as Netflix, viewers are no longer passive observers but can become active participants in the narrative. One of the most prominent examples of this shift is *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), an interactive film that allows viewers to make choices that shape the story's progression and determine its ending. This innovation challenges traditional linear narrative conventions and introduces gamification elements into the film-watching experience. However, important questions arise: to what extent do these interactive elements truly grant "agency" to the audience, and how do they shape the overall narrative experience? This study seeks to address these questions through a qualitative textual analysis, focusing on how *Bandersnatch* uses illusion of choice, game loops, and narrative branching to create a deeper and more participatory viewing experience.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The emergence of interactive films such as *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) has challenged conventional storytelling by integrating gamification elements into the cinematic experience. Viewers are no longer passive recipients of a fixed narrative but active participants who influence story progression through decision-making. While this innovation has sparked interest among scholars and practitioners, there remains a lack of in-depth academic discussion on how gamification mechanics such as illusion of choice, game loops and branching narratives shape the viewer's sense of agency and narrative engagement.

Most existing studies focus on describing *Bandersnatch* as a cultural or technological novelty rather than systematically analyzing how its interactive structure constructs meaning. There is limited research that synthesizes concepts from game studies (e.g., player agency, replayability) and film theory (e.g., narratology, audience reception) to explain how these interactive nodes affect narrative diversification and audience experience. This gap creates a need for a theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous study that examines *Bandersnatch* not just as entertainment, but as a hybrid narrative form that blurs the boundary between film and game.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on interactive films remains relatively nascent, but scholarships on nonlinear narratives and gamification have been well developed in media and game studies. Murray (1997) defines agency in digital media as the "satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices." This concept is central to understanding the experience of interactive films like *Bandersnatch*, where each choice potentially leads to a different outcome in the story.

Sweeting (2018) argues that the illusion of choice is an effective design strategy in interactive media, as it provides a sense of control even when narrative outcomes may already be predetermined. This mechanism helps maintain narrative momentum while ensuring the story remains coherent and manageable for the audience. In *Bandersnatch*, early low-stakes choices, such as selecting a cereal brand, may not affect the story's ending but serve as an onboarding mechanic that familiarizes viewers with the interactive nature of the film.

Additionally, Guardiola (2016) introduces the concept of the gameplay loop as a foundation for video game design. The loop creates a cycle of trial, failure, and repetition that sustains player engagement and motivates continued play. In an interactive film, this is mirrored in scenes that force viewers to revisit earlier choices until they select the "correct" option to move forward. This not only heightens tension but also strengthens the sense of active involvement.

Finally, Rezk and Haahr (2020) suggest that agency in interactive films depends largely on how directly the viewer's choices affect the ultimate ending. They found that the most satisfying experiences occur when viewers feel their decisions lead to substantial consequences rather than superficial variations. This perspective underscores the importance of analyzing major narrative branches in *Bandersnatch* that result in distinctly different endings.

The movie "*Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*" released in 2018 is a Sci-fi and Thriller movie about the complexities of a 19-year-old video game creator named Stefan who tries to develop an interactive computer game in 1984. In this movie, Stefan tries to adapt a dark fantasy novel into an interactive video game. However, when he is too occupied in his mission, his version of reality mixes with a gloomy dreamlike state.

However, the narrative of this film is not linear but instead produced interactively. This film is the first film released by the Netflix streaming platform that allows audiences to experience making choices while watching. There are small choices the audience can make from choosing which breakfast to eat (Sugar Puffs or Frosties?) to big decisions (Get mad at dad or pour tea on the keyboard?) and the film's narrative can vary depending on the choices made. Through viewing, the audience will be given a certain amount of time to make two or more choices that will determine the shot and scene that will be displayed after that based on the choices that have been made. With the nature of the film created interactively, it allows various possibilities (nonlinear storyline through interactivity element) to happen in the story including multiple storyline and story ending.

In fact, in term of show time can also vary for each audience based on the choice made them. The shortest way through *Bandersnatch* will take 40 minutes, and the longest can take over 2 hours (Volvoikar, P. 2019). According to *Black Mirror* creator Charlie Brooker, there are five main alternative endings that can be watched in this film based on the choices made by the audience (Hurley, 2023). Selection can be done by simply tapping the text displayed below the screen for smartphone and tablet users, while computer users need to click on the displayed text. For smart TV and Android TV users, audiences only need to use the remote control to make choices. Furthermore, since Netflix is an online streaming platform that can be watched using various devices and viewing data is recorded, by using a certain algorithm, this platform is able to know the tendency of the movie genre that the audience is interested in, choosing the movies they want to watch based on the genre. Netflix makes it possible for movies to be interactive to watch and able to provide an interesting experience for the audience (Vielen, 2018) and allow audience to watch anytime including the interactive features including making choices, pause, save and continue, which in this particular situation very comparable with playing games where player can use all of this features.

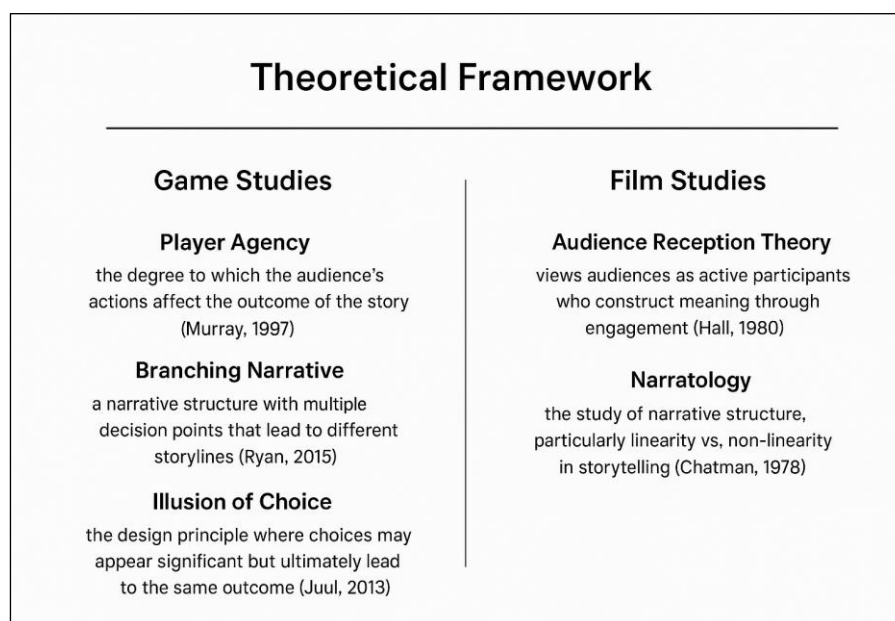
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws upon key concepts from both Game Studies and Film Studies (refer Figure 1) to build a robust theoretical framework for analyzing narrative diversification in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018).

From the perspective of Game Studies, three gamification concepts are central. First, player agency refers to the extent to which the viewer's decisions meaningfully shape the story's outcome, giving them a sense of authorship over the narrative (Murray, 1997). Second, branching narrative describes a story structure with multiple decision points, where each choice directs the viewer along different narrative paths, creating the potential for multiple storylines and endings (Ryan, 2015). Third, the illusion of choice captures moments where viewers are presented with options that appear significant but ultimately lead to the same or similar outcomes, serving to sustain engagement while maintaining narrative coherence (Juul, 2013). Together, these concepts help explain how interactive design elements transform a traditionally linear film into a game-like, participatory experience.

From the lens of Film Studies, two theoretical pillars are employed. Audience Reception Theory positions viewers as active participants who co-create meaning by interpreting, negotiating, and responding to the media text rather than passively consuming it (Hall, 1980). Narratology, meanwhile, provides the tools to analyze how *Bandersnatch* disrupts conventional linear storytelling by incorporating non-linear structures and multiple potential endings (Chatman, 1978). By synthesizing these two disciplines, this framework allows for a nuanced analysis of how gamification mechanics and cinematic techniques work together to diversify narrative outcomes and heighten audience engagement.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach, with close reading as its core method. Rather than collecting data through surveys or interviews, this method treats the film itself as the primary "text" to be studied. The goal is to explore how themes, structures and cultural codes are woven into the narrative and how gamification elements are deliberately constructed to shape audience interpretation (Brennen, 2017).

Close reading enables a careful and detailed examination of specific scenes, paying attention to formal features, narrative choices, and interactive mechanics that affect the viewing experience (Fiske, 2011). This approach is particularly well-suited for *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, as its branching structure creates multiple pathways and interpretive possibilities. Textual analysis helps to unpack how these pathways work to diversify the narrative and engage the audience.

Three key scenes were intentionally chosen as case study samples as shown in Table 1 because they represent different types of interactive nodes:

Table 1: Analyzing Scenes with Key Gamification Concepts

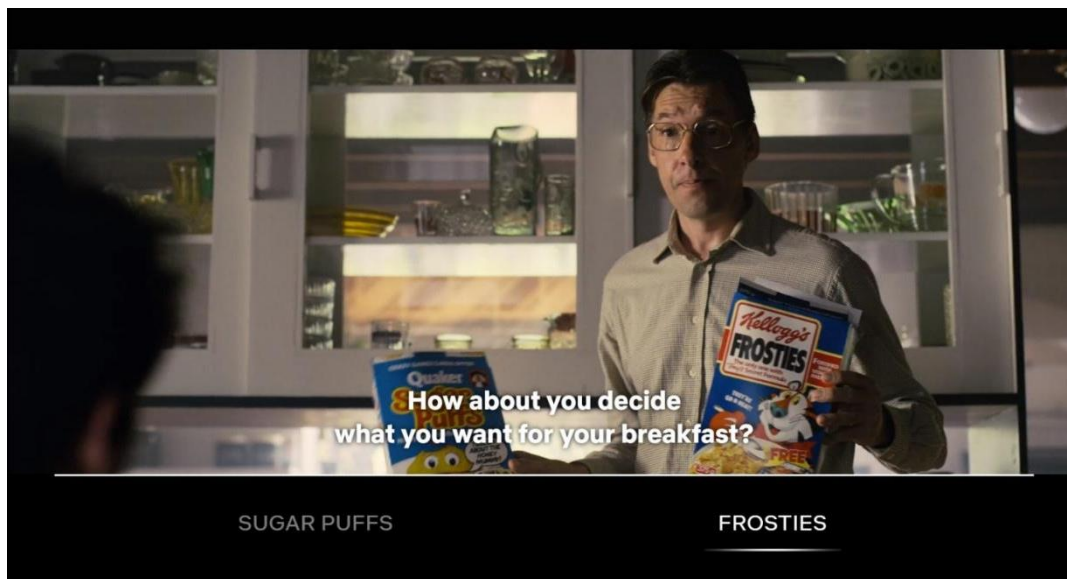
Scene	Type of Choice	Gamification Concept	Narrative Effect	Reference
Scene 1	Low-stakes choice (choose cereal)	<i>Illusion of Choice</i> – choice appears meaningful but does not alter narrative outcome	Functions as an <i>onboarding mechanic</i> to familiarize viewers with interactive interface without risk	Sweeting (2018)
Scene 2	Branching choice with fail state (Accept/Refuse offer)	<i>Game Loop / Fail State</i> – wrong choice leads to loopback (Go Back option)	Encourages replay and active engagement; audience must retry to progress narrative	Guardiola (2016)
Scene 3	High-stakes branching (Follow Colin / Visit Dr. Haynes)	<i>Player Agency</i> – choice leads to divergent narrative paths and multiple endings	Produces narrative diversification, increases viewer agency, challenges linear storytelling	Murray (1997); Rezk & Haahr (2020)

By analyzing these scenes in depth, the study connects each decision point with key gamification concepts such as player agency, branching narrative and illusion of choice and situates the findings within established work in game studies and narratology (Mittell, 2015; Bhandari, 2022). This approach provides a structured way to understand how interactive films like *Bandersnatch* blur the boundaries between watching and playing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first scene that will be used as research for this study is the scene at the beginning of the film where the audience must make interactive choices and contain elements of gamification for the first time through the process of watching this movie. In this specific scene, Stephen's father offers two breakfast options that Stephen needs to choose from, as shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: First option in Black Mirror: Bandersnatch" (2018).

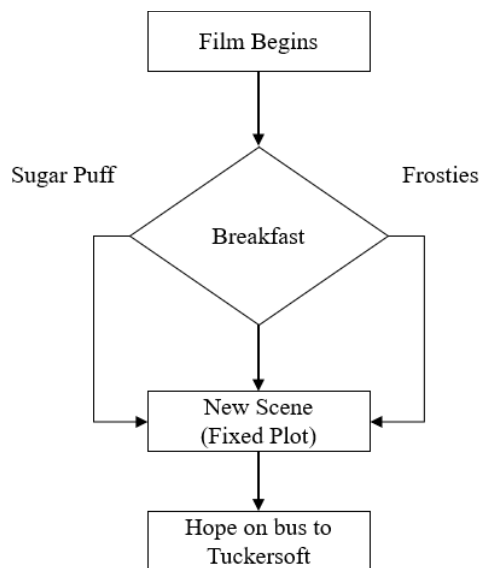


The element of gamification and interactivity that exists in this specific scene is the presence of two options where the audience able to choose (a) Sugar Puffs or (b) Frosties in a certain period of time, as shown in Figure 2 above. By having to make a choice (a) or (b) in a short (certain) period of time, the audience can experience their role actively where the audience has to make a choice like in a video game and feel directly involved for the first time in Black Mirror: Bandersnatch (2018) film.

The difference from the point of view of comparing this film to traditional films is the existence of choices that make the audience feel like they have a specific "role" during the viewing. In the movie Black Mirror: Bandersnatch (2018), the audience can feel or consider their role to be important, and an active role when watching should be carried out just like in a game, where active involvement is required. A gameful experience involves the subject perceiving that he or she is playing a game, whether or not the activity is normally associated with games (McGonigal, 2011). In contrast to traditional films, the audience is only able to passively watch and passively engage and cannot make any decisions, even small ones, where no storyline or narrative changes can be made and all films will only lead to a single ending.

However, based on the element of interactivity that occurs in this scene, the effect that will result from the choice made by the audience can be considered insignificant. If audiences choose (a) or (b), those choices do not change the film's narrative and have no direct effect on the film as a whole. This is because small choices, such as choosing between two different cereals in the context of this scene, are considered as insignificant. The reason is, either the audience chooses (a) or (b), the plot and narrative of this film still go in the same direction and have been determined (fixed plot). Figure 3 below shows how this process happens:

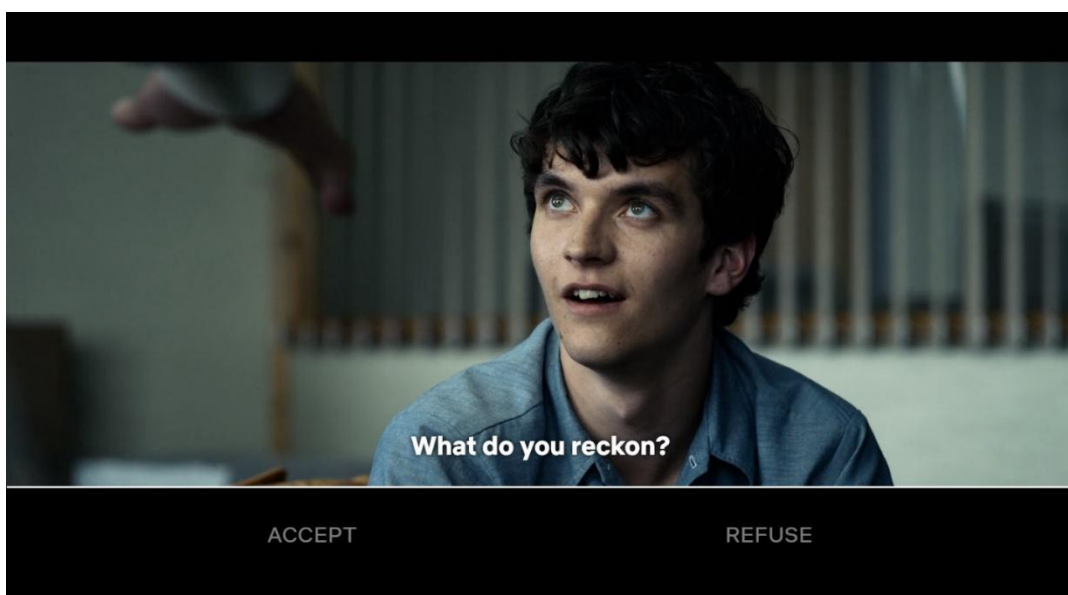
Figure 3: Flow of the option available for the first question which lead to only one new scene (fixed plot).



The audience can actively participate in the scene and sense the difference and experience, although there is little impact on choice or participation. Making minor adjustments doesn't transform the narrative or plot of this movie or take the story to a new level.

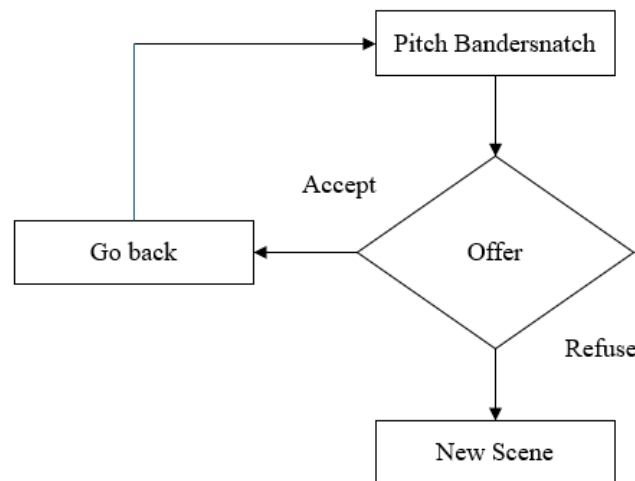
The second scene where research is done on gamification elements in the movie *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) is a scene where the audience once again has to choose between two options, namely (a) accept or (b) refuse as shown in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Second option available from *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018).



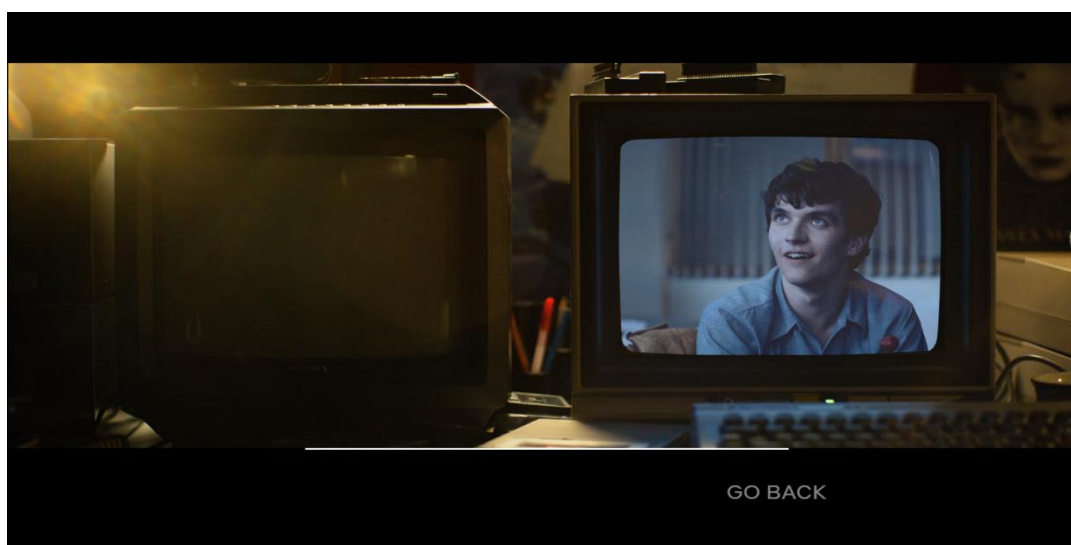
In the context of gamification elements, in the scene where the audience has to make this choice, the audience has already had the experience of answering the same type of question (option a or b) at least twice. Therefore, active audience engagement will be able to be done more smoothly or quickly because the audience is already familiar with options like this in the previous episode with the same display, and the difference is only seen from the text used in option (a) or (b), as in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Flow of the option available to select by audience



However, if the audience chooses option (a), which is Accept, the audience will be taken to a shot where the audience are forced to make a choice again (dead end) as shown in Figure 5. In the context of video games, it is similar to game over and the need to respawn again in gaming from the point where the player has lost or died to continue the game. On the other hand, if the audience chooses (b), they will be able to watch new scenes in this movie, which is the same experience as playing a computer game where the mission can continue if the player survives or chooses the right path.

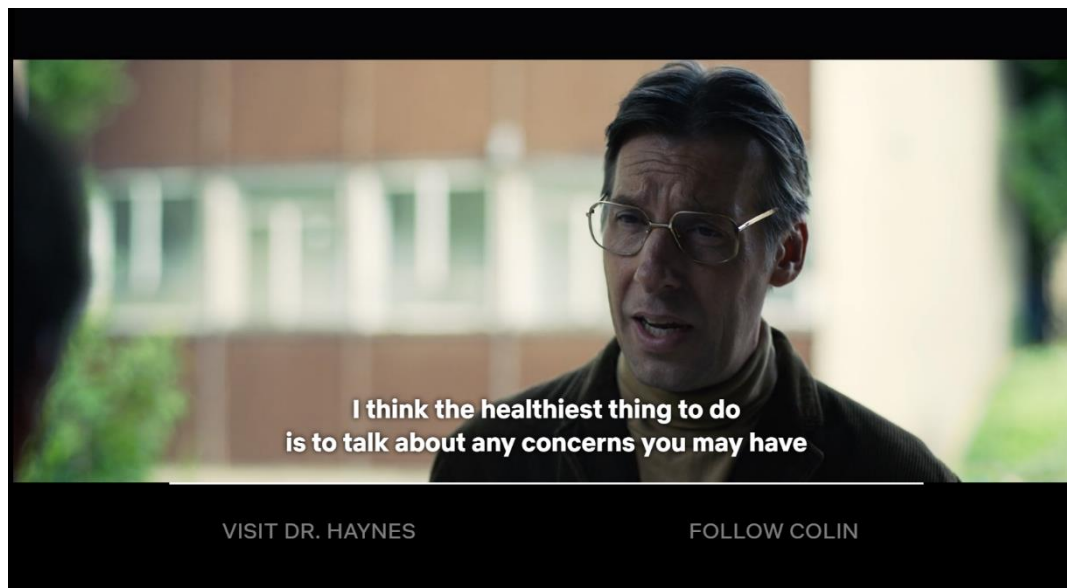
Figure 6: Dead end situation. Only Go Back button available to select.



The significant difference between this interactive film and the traditional film in this scene is that the audience can make a choice (a) or (b) as in the previous scene, but not only that, in this scene there is an option to repeat the story by choosing "Go Back," as shown in Figure 6 above. By choosing that option, the audience can re-watch the story from the last scene before the wrong choice was made. By this, audiences can continue watching again with a different narrative. This category of option is something unaccustomed to and does not exist in traditional movie watching, which is usually linear and the audience is only passively involved without any element of interactivity or gamification. The basic principle of the Hollywood cinema is that a narrative should consist of a chain that is easy for the spectator to follow (Thompson, K. 1999) which lead to only one possible ending.

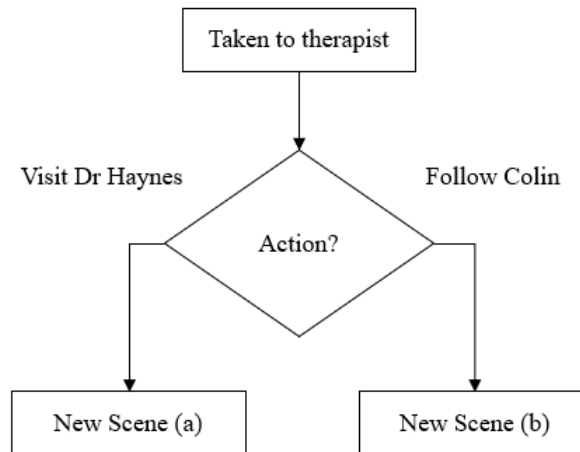
Through this scene, the choices made by the audience will cause impacts and differences in the narrative of the story that will be watched. If the audience chooses "Accept", as can be seen in Figure 5, the audience will be taken to a shot where audiences will see the display of Figure 6, which requires the audience to return to the stage of "Pitch Bandersnatch" and repeat the "Accept" or "Refuse" choice. If this time the audience chooses "Refuse", the audience will be able access and watch more existing scenes. The decision to choose between these 2 options results in 2 different storylines and the difference is very significant because the choice made will give the audience a choice of whether to continue watching or repeat the scene in Figure 6 by choosing to "Go back".

Figure 7: Two option come with two different storylines.



In third scene that will be observed from the Black Mirror: Bandersnatch" (2018) film, the gamification element produced is the same as in Figure 7, where the active involvement of the audience must involve choosing between two options, (a) visiting Dr. Haynes or (b) following Colin. At this point, the audience has made the same selection (a or b) several times and is already well aware of the gamification element available. The difference is in the text displayed in options (a) and (b), as shown in Figure 8 below:

Figure 8: New Scene will be determined based on option selected by the audience (a or b).



At this stage, every choice made by the audience will take the audience to a different storyline & narrative where Stefan will face different situations while allowing the audience to experience as if they were playing a game especially computer games that feature a "choose-your-own-adventure narrative" like graphic adventure games such as the Walking Dead series, "Life is Strange," "The Wolf Among Us", or role-playing games (RPGs) like The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt and "Fallout" series where combine narrative choices with point-and-click mechanics often featuring rich storylines and character interactions potentially impact the story, character relationships, and world events leading to different outcomes and endings through multiple options decided by the player.

The main difference in the interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) compared to traditional films in this specific scene can be seen in the existence of two choices that the audience can make, and each choice made (a or b) will lead the audience to a different narrative and storyline. In fact, it's not just a different narrative and storyline; the ending of the story will also change and vary (alternate ending). This is because a large part of the narrative in the upcoming scenes in this film is very dependent on and related to the choices made by the audience actively and at the same time being able to enjoy the film in a unique way. Unlike traditional film narratives, which are linear, the audience only watches the film passively and there is no interactive element at all. This causes the audience to not be able to make a choice, not be able to get involved directly, or change the ending of the storyline because the traditional film form only has one single pre-determined ending.

In examining how audience choices influence the progression of the story and its outcomes, this scene illustrates how the two available options (a) or (b) do more than simply branch into two narrative paths; they also unlock further decision points in subsequent scenes. This makes the choice in this moment a pivotal turning point in the overall narrative. For instance, if the viewer chooses for Stefan to follow Colin rather than meet Dr. Haynes, they are then confronted with another critical decision: whether Stefan or Colin should jump from the balcony. Selecting Stefan leads to an immediate ending, whereas choosing Colin keeps the story moving forward and eventually leads Stefan to visit Dr. Haynes. Once there, additional high-stakes decisions emerge, such as whether Stefan should (a) take the prescribed medication, (b) throw it away, or (c) flush it down the toilet each resulting in distinct narrative consequences. This sequence clearly illustrates how audience choices not only shape the immediate outcome of a scene but also set the trajectory for the unfolding narrative, reinforcing the interactive nature of the film.

Furthermore, the selection made starting from this scene will also lead the audience to various different endings, where there are at least five main alternative endings that can be watched in this film based on the choices made by the audience (Hurley, 2023).

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research could extend this study in several ways:

- i. **Comparative Analysis Across Multiple Interactive Films:** Analyzing other interactive titles such as *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend* or *You vs. Wild* could reveal whether gamification strategies used in *Bandersnatch* are unique or part of a broader trend in interactive media.
- ii. **Audience Reception Studies:** Conducting surveys or focus groups could complement textual analysis by capturing how viewers perceive agency, satisfaction, and emotional investment during interactive viewing.
- iii. **Quantitative Path Analysis:** Using data analytics to examine how often specific branches are chosen could provide empirical evidence of player behavior and preferred narrative outcomes.
- iv. **Cross-Media Comparisons:** Comparing interactive films with narrative-driven games (e.g., *Detroit: Become Human*, *Life is Strange*) could help identify key similarities and differences in design philosophy and player experience.
- v. **Cultural Context Exploration:** Investigating how cultural background affects interpretation of interactive narratives could offer insights into localization and global audience engagement strategies.

By addressing these directions, future scholarship can deepen our understanding of interactive cinema and its role in shaping the evolving landscape of digital storytelling.

CONCLUSION

Through a close reading of the three key decision-making scenes in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), this study demonstrates that audience choices significantly shape the direction of the narrative and lead to multiple possible endings. The findings show that the audience's role is transformed from passive spectators to active co-authors of the story, directly participating in the construction of meaning throughout the viewing process. This stands in contrast to traditional linear cinema, where audiences merely consume a pre-determined storyline without influencing its progression.

The analysis further reveals that gamification mechanics such as onboarding through low-stakes choices, game loops that encourage replayability, and major branching points that produce divergent outcomes are key drivers of this interactive experience. These mechanics do more than simply entertain; they deepen audience engagement, foster a sense of agency and diversify narrative possibilities in ways that challenge conventional narratology.

By employing a qualitative textual analysis approach, this paper contributes valuable insights for scholars, multimedia practitioners and filmmakers seeking to understand the relationship between gamification and narrative design. The study underscores the potential of gamification elements to enhance storytelling, offering a framework for future creators to design more participatory and immersive film experiences.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of continuous innovation in interactive storytelling as audience expectations shift toward more dynamic and personalized viewing experiences. As technology continues to evolve, integrating gamification into cinematic narratives may become an essential strategy for sustaining engagement and expanding the creative possibilities of film as a medium.

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