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Interactivity in Fiction Series as Part of Its Transmedia Universe: The Case of Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

Begoña Ivars-Nicolas and Francisco Julian Martinez-Cano

Abstract

The special episode *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Brooker and Slade, 2018) is one of the few interactive experiences that can be found in a fictional series episode. Interactivity, as a generator of transmediality, can be considered in two ways: interactivity with respect to content, content interaction, when contributions, recognized and/or rewarded, are interventions by the user but directed and controlled, without intervening the main plot of the piece, and influential interactions, which can influence the course of history. This text studies how the use of interactivity in *Bandersnatch* contributes to generate a transmedia universe of the chapter, as well as the series.

Keywords: Black Mirror, content interaction, fictional series, transmedia storytelling, touchpoints

1. Introduction

The way in which audience consume audiovisual content has been transformed in recent decades. In this text we highlight two reasons mainly. On the one hand, the viewer has evolved by demanding personalized and participatory content, and, on the other hand, consumer devices of the moment are mobile and interactive [1]. The consolidation of platforms that offer online content on demand through streaming has displaced the traditional concept of television. From watching television in group in front of the device and in a passive way, now individual consumption is imposed through multiple media and mobile screens that allow interaction with the pieces. Television contents can be viewed on traditional television or by accessing cybermedia or distribution platforms on the Internet from a computer, smart tablet, smart phone, or smart TV.

This technological development has meant an important advance regarding the viewers. They have become users and producers of content that demand to be part of the narrative process. One of the main strategies for creating innovative storytelling is based on devising ways to involve the viewer actively in the development of the story. However, it should be noted that the involvement of the viewer in the creation of the audiovisual story is not a novelty. In 1999, the term *spect-acteur* [2] was used to refer to an active spectator in the construction of history.

The challenge is to seek and experiment with the way of telling stories so that they break with the linearity of the story and involve the receiver and immerse him in the universe of fiction or nonfiction that is shown to him and he wants to be part of it. Interactivity acquires a fundamental role in this challenge. The interactive narrative offers the user some open contents, audiovisual fragments, that are meant to be reconstructed by the audience [3]. García [4] calls these hypernarrative structures when they are built based on a double layer, the first that affects the interface through which the user accesses to the content and the second that influences the content itself. That is to say, the spectator stops being passive in front of the story and is given the power to select itineraries at certain moments of the storyline, forming his own organization and setting up his own story. The audiences have the possibility to choose their own montage of the narrative from the offers of the field of production, in a (re)personal interpretation of the story [5]. For Manovich [6], the temporary montage can be used to generate a sense of presence in a virtual space, experimenting with the meanings of the individual shots and altering them following the example of Kuleshov or building new meanings from isolated fragments. In this sense, Vertov [7] argues that montage can influence the indexed nature of cinema and can propose pieces that, ordered in another way, offer meanings totally far from reality.

The power to choose which option to follow is controlled by the author of the piece that has previously designed the possible itineraries. In addition, in some cases, without the intervention of the user, the story cannot continue. All this implies a whole lot of work to devise and make a story with several possibilities in its development, in order to offer these alternatives to the user. The intervention of the spectator can be carried out from outside the story, as a reader-author (lectoautor) [8], or from within as a character (avatar or immersion). The term reader-author [9] refers to the interaction of the user with the cultural product, always in a controlled manner by the author of it. The creator gives the reader the power to conduct the text or the audiovisual wherever he wants, but he always marks the route.

Interactivity, focused on the active participation of the viewer, has become one of the main resources for developing transmedia narratives. The transmedia narrative focuses on the elaboration of contents that expand the narrative universe of a main piece. Researchers have established that in this narrative extension two agents can participate. Firstly, the producers of the piece, in an organized way, elaborate others that expand the transmedia universe. Secondly, users, spontaneously and unplanned, contribute to this universe by participating, for example, in wikis or fan communities, or, also, generating their own productions as montages from the original material and spreading them on social platforms.

Beyond the intervention of the fans and their contributions in social networks, experimental projects such as *Mosaic* (Soderbergh and Solomon, 2017) or *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Brooker and Slade, 2018) are being presented, opening a debate on how the user can be involved in the transmedia expansion of a production, in such a way that this intervention influences the narrative but without the creator losing control over the entire transmedia universe.

Mosaic is a nonlinear episodic fiction in an interactive mystery game format that is consumed through an app, although there is also the linear version for television. The user must solve a murder, and for that he can choose from which character perspective he wants to get into the story, in order to discover the murderer. It gives rise to different narrative lines that eventually go through one or several characters and some variations.

On the other hand, *Bandersnatch* is the interactive episode of the *Black Mirror* series that involves the viewer, who defines the path to follow the story, allowing him to make the decisions that the protagonist faces and, therefore, derives in one ending or another.

This text analyzes the special episode *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Brooker and Slade, 2018) from the point of view of the involvement of the user in the feature film and how his intervention contributes to the transmedia universe of the piece. It is left for a later work to deepen into other contributions that make up the transmedia universe of *Bandersnatch*, for example, the official website, the videogame, the navigation guides created by fans for other users, or the interesting convergence of media through the web of *Tuckersoft*, the company for which the protagonist develops his video game (<https://tuckersoft.net/ealing20541/history/>), which offers one of the video games that appear in the plot, *Nohzdylve*, the title developed by Colin Ritman in fiction.

2. The transmediality in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Brooker and Slade, 2018)

The search for strategies applied to fiction and nonfiction content to capture the audience fosters the transmedia message. Transmediality affects the way of narrating, producing, or disseminating a story.

2.1 Transmedia storytelling

Jenkins determines that transmedia storytelling occurs when the “Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” [10]. As a result, an extension of the main piece is expected in other formats. In addition, although each piece must keep narrative independence and complete sense by itself, they are all part of a global story. Each medium does what is best for the storytelling using its own features to have a better product; for instance, a story can be introduced through a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world can be explored and experienced through a video game [11].

Jenkins explicitly alludes in these lines to an extension in other media. However, Askwith [1], in his research, gives less prominence to the media and focuses on the new information and additive comprehension, which the pieces offer with respect to the main one. The researcher establishes a classification in terms of the expansion of the television text in which he identifies eight different categories as the possible products related to these texts. Askwith collects points of contact, touchpoints, between the main piece and its derivatives, focusing on the information or innovative content they provide: “any content, activity, or strategic offering that allows the media consumer to engage with a television ‘brand’ in any manner other than watching the core program content through real-time or time-shifted (DVR) viewing” [1].

This classification has been complemented by Ivars-Nicolás and Zaragoza-Fuster [12] resulting in **Table 1**: tool for analyzing the transmediality of the narrative of a derived piece, which integrates other aspects such as the formats or means in which the pieces are spread, if a centralized control of transmediality is pursued, or the different degrees of interactivity.

Returning to the premise of Jenkins that the narrative dispersion should be in different media, the extensions in the organization of **Table 1** are contemplated in the same format and medium of those of the main piece. Without leaving the television medium, in the case of a series, they can be sequels, prequels, or spin-offs of the original series. However, this type of productions is not considered transmedia strictly speaking but intramedian, following the explanations of Harvey, that is, when the narration flows between different spaces within the same media [18].

Media/ platforms	Narrative dispersion	Narrative expansion: what the piece of added value brings to be considered expansive (additive comprehension), that is, part of the transmedia universe				
Type of formats, devices, etc. The qualities of the media are integrated, enhancing the piece	Follow a strategic or tactical modality (in any case, indicate if centralized creative control is pursued) Number of pieces made by the official team or by the fans Content type: text/photo/audio/video Order of creation of transmedia parts Autonomy of the piece's story within its universe	(1) Formal program qualities				
		(2) Expanded access				
		(3) Repackaged content				
		(4) Ancillary content	Textual extensions	Narrative extensions		
				Diegetic extensions		
			Relevant information			
			Extratextual information: industrial information, celebrity information			
		(5) Branded products				
		(6) Related activities	Themed activities			
			Experiential activities	(1) Player as themselves or original characters of their own design		
				(2) Player as recognizable characters from the program		
				(3) Player as a new token character		
				(4) Player as an unspecified agent or visitor		
			Productive activities			
			Challenge activities			
			(7) Social interaction	Horizontal: audience communities		
				Vertical: celebrity access		
				Diagonal: diegetic interaction		
		(8) Interactivity	Mechanical interaction			
			Content activation			
			Content interaction	Acknowledged contributions		
				Influential interactions		
			Social interaction			
			Degree of interactivity	Browse or activate content		
				Customize content		
				The content is influenced		
		Actors and their relationship with the reader, in the series or in the narrative				
		Immersivity				

Sources: [1, 12–17]; own production 2019.

Table 1.
Analytical tool for the transmediality of the narrative of a derived piece.

In this state of the question, it is necessary to consider how to name and classify those cases in which, starting from the original piece, the extension of the main narrative core is generated by the audience on it, remaining in the same format and medium, without forgetting that we are facing a growing consumption of content on Internet television, independently of the access device, assuming the hybridization of the two media. It is absurd to distinguish between series and web series, for example, as a differentiator of the medium in which the series is consumed, whether on demand or not. When the medium is the Internet, it is not easy to distinguish between a transmedia and an intramedian product, so, in this text, to address transmediality, the fundamental thing is that each of the stories that make up the universe of a piece tells something different and expands its narrative world, without taking into account the medium.

2.2 The case of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Brooker and Slade, 2018)

Black Mirror is a series of British fiction whose plot focuses on how technology invades and affects our lives. Each chapter is different in terms of plot, characters, environment, etc. It is not episodic, but they share a general plot, and each chapter focuses on a different aspect of the plot, being totally independent of the rest. Nor is there a linear chronology marked by what order of consumption is indifferent. The series consists of four seasons, a special chapter of Christmas and another interactive one. The fifth season is currently being shot. In the United Kingdom, the first two were broadcast on Channel 4 until Netflix acquired the rights managing and issuing the rest. In Spain, in addition, it has been aired on Cuatro and TNT.

The interactive chapter *Bandersnatch* debuts on December 28, 2018, and can be consumed on the Netflix platform. Directed by David Slade and written by Charlie Brooker, the plot, set in 1984, tells the story of a young programmer who has to adapt a science fiction novel to a video game in which the player has to choose between multiple paths that lead to different endings. As the protagonist advances in the programming of the videogame, he questions his own reality and the authorship of decision-making, which affects his personal life.

In interactive *Bandersnatch*, the challenge is to put the audience in the same position that the protagonist faces, giving the user the power to decide between different itineraries in the development of the plot. The course of the story, divided into fragments, stops at different times, just before actions that can be decisive in the plot, offering the user the possibility to choose what he wants to happen. In each of these ramifications of the story, two options are presented from which the viewer can choose one. The navigation interface offers two buttons to the viewer in the lower horizontal third of the screen, on a black background, being presented in text, in typographic, or with some graphic or image and icon, with a low level of representation. Interaction is not mandatory since there is always a prominent option, and, if after a short time, there is no activity on the part of the user, the story continues through the default itinerary. It is unknown if it is a suggestion of viewing by the creator, which could be considered as a main piece in a transmedia universe or without intention. There are several combinations and, therefore, proposals of chapters that trigger in five possible endings depending on the decisions that have been taken during the viewing of the piece.

In an interview conducted by the magazine *Fotogramas* [19], Brooker says that “[...] it is essentially a film, but in the process of creation it shares many things with video games.” The producer of the piece, Annabel Jones, describes it as “[...] an experiment, and we have created something very close to a movie, which is coherent with the character to the point where you can connect with it, but which

we have added a layer of interactivity to make the plot more alive and rich. And so within this story there is a message about control, free will, parallel dimensions ... and we have used technology to explore those concepts further” [22].

Below we explore the case of *Bandersnatch*, which was born as an interactive film and is considered the main piece of the transmedia universe object of analysis. Taking as reference the criteria of **Table 1**, the touchpoints are studied taking the chapters constructed by the users as the set of derived pieces that provide new information with respect to each other.

Bandersnatch can be consumed from the Netflix platform of online content distribution that is multi-device access through a smartphone, tablet or smart television, or a personal computer. The object interfaces, apart from the screens of these devices, can be the remote control, the mouse, or the touch screen, depending on the device and its characteristics. The chapter in question does integrate the qualities of the Internet medium through which it is disseminated, hypertextuality, multimedia, and interactivity, the latter being fundamental in the development of history enhancing the viewer’s experience.

The main piece of the universe is the chapter that the user consumes for the first time. It is necessary to qualify the unique and individual character of each piece, which implies that the main piece is not usually the same for another user. The derived pieces are those generated in subsequent viewings in which different itineraries are chosen.

It follows an expansion strategy planned in advance, both spatially and temporally, which is what Scolari et al. [15] call strategic modality. That is to say, it is a chapter devised and planned by the official producer taking into account the interactivity and the possible itineraries from the beginning, as well as the passivity of the user. He has the freedom to choose but always in a controlled manner between options studied to produce audiovisual products that are organized and with autonomy of the story and its meaning in all cases. There is no specific number of pieces since the resulting chapters are particular experiences that are not published or shared with the audience. As for the order of creation, we can group all the creations of the users on the same level, considering themselves as the first pieces in the transmedia universe. The authorship of these derived pieces will be established later given the involvement of creator and spectator in the realization of it.

Concerning the touchpoints, 1, 2, 3, and 5 refer to pieces that are not considered as part of the transmedia universe because there is no narrative expansion. Touchpoint 7 is also not addressed, focused on the pieces produced by fans, users, or other companies than the official one, without any control, as this is not the case.

Considering touchpoint 4, it could be debated whether *Bandersnatch* is partially compound by expanded content through narrative textual extensions, that is, unpublished content that broadens the viewer’s knowledge about narrative fiction, for instance, new stories such as sequels, prequels, or spin-offs of the original series. *Bandersnatch* does not stick to the characteristics of these three options. It is a chapter that can be understood as a film in terms of conclusion of the story, where the episode resulting from the interaction of each user does not suppose any continuation before or after that piece. The viewer designs the structure of a story that is always concluded. If it is watched, it can design a different story, although some fragments will always coincide and also the end may be the same one, because there are only five official alternatives.

Given this peculiarity, it is worth asking if these episodes suppose auxiliary or extended content, introducing new material and/or information which supplements, extends, or expands the consumer’s overall knowledge, being the content similar to that of the main piece in terms of relevance. The first time the chapter is consumed, there is no new information, and this would be the original piece for

the viewer, highlighting its unique character. However, *Bandersnatch* is a movie that varies as you go, and if one chooses to go back to a previous branch or fragment, when it is allowed, the viewer then takes information that can be used to redo the narrative structure in a different way. As in subsequent viewings, the choice of itinerary will be determined based on the prior knowledge acquired. It is as if the spectator had a crystal ball to choose or not an itinerary that he has already experienced or wants to know how the story can be by choosing the other option. The narrative expansion is based, in any case, on the capacity intended by the creator of the piece to generate curiosity in the viewer, so that the audience returns to consume it, wanting to know other itineraries or endings, reconstructing the story, in a different way to the reconstruction that could make another user.

However, there seems to be a clearer point of contact as related activity, touchpoint 6, than ancillary content. Askwith describes related activities as those in which the user is asked to play an active and participatory role, assuming a role related to fictional history (videogames, role-playing games), which recreates a specific event in an episode or set of episodes. It can also be the case that new narrative plots are devised, based on what is already known or supposed, but new in terms of not having been previously presented. The assumed role can be played by a player, by a character in the plot, by a co-protagonist, or by a visiting character without an identity of their own.

As explained in the previous point, in *Bandersnatch* new narratives are devised based on the knowledge that is acquired by consuming the piece. In addition, the viewer acquires an active and participatory role and is situated within the story, as an author-reader, acquiring the role of protagonist of the plot, taking its decisions, and personalizing the story that leads to a specific experience but in a controlled manner. The episode is not recreated, but fragments of it are taken in the new version of each spectator so that the viewer elaborates his own chapter, sometimes starting from the things that he/she already knows. The degree of experientiality of the piece is implicit in the curiosity of the viewer who, either because of the novelty of the interactive format to consume a film or because of the curiosity about the story and the character, decides to repeat his experience of consumption and deepen more, enhancing the feeling of immersiveness of the user.

But in addition to highlighting an experiential activity, *Bandersnatch* focuses this experientiality on interactivity. Askwith explains in touchpoint 8 that “At the most basic level, ‘interaction’ can be defined as any process that involves the reciprocal (bi directional) exchange of actions and reactions that occur between two or more entities” and details how it is possible to interact with a television program identifying four categories: Mechanical interaction, between the user and the device, which is the most basic and can be done using the remote control or the mouse to select channels, the controllers of a video, etc. Content activation, between the user and the audiovisual content, when the viewer chooses possible actions of the previously programmed content, in terms of plot, experience, or challenge. Content interaction, when that interaction has a real impact between the viewer and the program, for instance, through a voting system, being the most effective approach to generate participation, divided into acknowledged contributions or influential interactions. Social interaction, when online communication is between two or more people.

In *Bandersnatch*, the viewer faces decision-making before starting to reproduce the chapter, interacting mechanically with the remote control or mouse of the device, and activating the content that he wants to see. In addition, he participates actively interacting with the content, content interaction, to determine the development of the story. The level of interaction is basic since the user is aware of their interaction through the proposed system, reducing the level of immersion of the audiovisual product. Subtle interaction [20] is a term proposed to define situations in which the

user is not aware of their direct influence on the audiovisual narrative structure, which promotes advanced levels of immersion of the viewer, and it is achieved through the creation of different types of nodes within the ramifications of the story.

Interactivity is designed, so that the viewer activates content triggering a reaction, but, at the same time, interacts with this content because choosing one option or another involves influencing the development of the story in a different way and making this decision depends on the previous events. However, interaction is not an obligatory requirement for the narrative to move forward since, after a defined time, if the user does not interact, it automatically jumps to the option marked as default.

The content interaction can be recognized or influence the story. The recognized contributions do not alter the development of the story and consist of propitiating in a planned way a contribution by the user, and this participation is recognized or rewarded (surveys, tweets that are shown on the screen, gifts or prizes from the official website, etc.). Influential interactions, however, can influence the development of the story, for example, the interactive endings of some fictional products or any creative intervention of a fan that has effects on the narration (in the writing of the scripts to come, the dialogs, in the staging, the attrezzo, etc.). *Bandersnatch* is included in both categories.

The piece does not offer the possibility of recognizing or rewarding the user's activity in a strict sense. An example of recognition could be the possibility of saving the version of the piece concluded with the user's choices that can be seen later or shared with other viewers. However, Netflix, in addition to the control systems on the consumption habits of its audience, adds the interactivity layer that allows to monitor the activity of the users, focusing on their choices to configure the story and, therefore, recording these montages of the spectators. In this way, data is obtained such as the least-seen end, which could be considered as an anonymous recognition, as well as other temporary metadata, becoming a data mining test [21]. This information is downloaded into social networks to encourage interest or challenge the audience to look for less experienced itineraries. This technique fits with the concept of "contribution" as a type of interaction that Carolyn Handler Miller explains in digital storytelling [22] in which the user can send information that is then assembled or recorded and returned to users, for example, surveys whose results are displayed in text messages on the screen. These contributions can be recognized within a television program or within one of the associated contact points of the program, such as a website. However, a recognized contribution cannot significantly alter or influence the outcome or direction of a program.

Regarding the influential interactions [1] that offer viewers the opportunity to exercise some degree of meaning, *Bandersnatch* clearly offers some level of meaningful interaction, allowing viewers to determine or alter the program itself. For this, all the possible audiovisual fragments that can shape the story must be recorded in advance. This, in other productions in which the audience votes an end, is not very beneficial because only one of the ends will see the light. In *Bandersnatch*, not only all the shots are shown, but the curiosity of the spectators to see all the possible connections generates the consequent repeated consumption of the experience.

Ivars-Nicolás and Zaragoza-Fuster [12] establish three levels of interaction with the narrative that are complementary to those explained by Askwith and applicable in this case: (1) when the possibilities of interaction that are offered to the user are limited to browsing or activating contents that show information, whether in a linear structure or not and intranodal or internodal; (2) when it is allowed to personalize content, leaving some control to the user, but without affecting the narrative; and (3) when strategically designed tools are offered to stimulate an active participation of the spectator to influence the development of the story, giving rise to a co-authorship.

Bandersnatch starts from a mosaic-type organization created by the author and planned with limited itineraries. Subsequently, the user can take part in the narrative by configuring the structure of the storytelling at different times, throughout the story, and personalizing it according to his interests. It intervenes decisively in the process, and therefore it is a co-authorship of the audiovisual experience. Without the viewer's involvement, the different versions of the scriptwriter would not see the light. Even in a bifurcation of history, you can choose the option you consider or allow it to advance automatically with the option proposed by the creator. Although the ramifications are limited, the author offers a high number of possible constructions, some more common among consumers than others, but making it difficult or minorizing the coincidence of the creation of narratives among the spectators. On the other hand, it is a chapter that can be consumed again from other points of view, generating new narrative constructions in each viewing.

The navigation system, composed of binary choice points, has three different types [20]. In the simple node through its choice, we accede to the continuation of the narrative structure, or we return to restart the discourse. In this first level, the most common is that the choice does not modify the narrative structure. The attribute node, through which we are assigned a quality to continue our navigation throughout history, allows us to access other later options that are shown only if we have received the corresponding quality. Finally, there is the anti-attribute node, which is only displayed while the user has not acquired the specific quality. This definition of nodes contrasts with the low level of interaction, since the user is conscious in choosing his decisions but does not know that depending on the nodes he is choosing, he is granted different attributes or anti-attributes that alter the diegetic path.

However, a diegetic transposition in the construction of the product itself also appears, because in cases where we decide a wrong choice, we are invited to go back and resume the story from the beginning, which produces a hypertextual palimpsest. The assembly is crucial, especially the production method used, in which the scenes have to be repeated from different angles, to maintain a global continuity to all possible plots of the proposed hypernarrative. This production can be defined as multiperspective, and at the technological level, it evolves on a timeline that offers different options in each of the pre-established nodes and that according to these decisions gives us access to a new scene or sequence of the product, from a different perspective, influenced by the sense of our navigation, built from the technological development of the platform itself, resulting in the diegetic software.

3. Conclusions

Bandersnatch extends its transmedia universe by relying on the active audience and co-protagonist, designing its own chapters, and redesigning them. These resulting pieces suppose narrative expansions in which both agents have been involved: producer and spectator. The fundamental thing is that each piece tells something different, expands the information, and expands the narrative world within the medium in which they are disseminated, being a hybrid between television and the Internet.

Personalization, another key in *Bandersnatch*, goes beyond the choice of the viewing device or the moment reaching the content, the narrative. The user designs his/her particular story, supported by a content interaction, and becomes a co-author given the immense amount of possibilities of structures that, although proposed by the creator, would not see the light without the intervention of the user. The viewer chooses his itinerary in an "intelligent" story, as to the progress, and the choices are made, and some fragments are filtered, enabling different sets of possibilities within the story.

The challenge is clear, and it comes as an encouragement, which is presented to the spectators who seek co-authorship or control over the result. In these cases, the domain of information becomes a conscious pleasure that ends up repeating the experience again and again in search of more clues, more possible itineraries, and more information. This curiosity is enhanced by the novel format that integrates video game techniques with a film.


The *Bandersnatch* experiment is an example as a strategy to attract an audience that demands personalized and participative contents with immersive capacity. The interactivity is the main element for the creation of the transmedia universe that is carefully worked to enhance the participation and immersiveness of the user in the film, generating the necessary curiosity so that it returns once and again to consume the product and therefore it results in new transmedia experiences. It offers an unusual way of consuming audiovisual fiction, as well as contributing to the transmedia universe in which the main fictional core itself is transformed into several variations.

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