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FILM REVIEW



## ***Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and how Netflix manipulates us, the new gods**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This film review of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, released by Netflix in 2018, discusses the nature of the interactive genre, focusing on its current and future effects on data mining, product placement, and programmatic advertising, highlighting the new, evolving role played by the viewer.

### **KEYWORDS**

Interactive film; Netflix; brand placement; programmatic advertising; media consumption

*Film by:* David Slade

*Production company:* Netflix

*Release date:* 28 December 2018

*Running time:* Variable; 90 minutes for default path

Interpreting works of art for what they convey about consumer behavior is not new. Such interpretation usually follows one of two approaches: first, focusing on what artworks tell us about consumer behavior and how art is consumed (e.g. Belk 1986; Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Jung and Franz 1964; Lévi-Strauss 2001). Secondly, questioning and clarifying what consumption can tell us about works of art and the meanings the latter convey, a classic example is Holbrook and Grayson's paper (1986) that entails a close reading of the consumption symbolism in an artistic text for what it conveys about the meanings contained therein.

This review, however, will deviate from those two approaches, for instead of focusing on consumption themes revealed in cinematic scenes, the focus will be on a new genre, the interactive film, and what it reveals about the evolving role played by the viewer, and how it affects the future of data mining, product placement, and programmatic advertising.

With the booming of the VCR (Videocassette Recorder) industry in the 1980s and 1990s, viewers started expecting the freedom to schedule their consumption as they please (versus the long prevalent traditional appointment viewing of cable TV); this was reflected in the mantra of the VCR: "giving choice back to the people" (Frederick 2001, 82). By the year 2000, the VHS (Video Home System) market was gradually overtaken by the DVD (Digital Versatile Disc). Although Netflix came into existence in 1997, it was in 2010 that it transformed its core business model, migrating its customers from a monthly subscription for DVDs delivered to the home to one for unlimited movie and TV downloads (Jenner 2016). In addition to accentuating the viewer's expectations of consumption choices, Netflix would also help in the creation of the "binge-watching" viewer behavior (Matrix 2014; Schweidel and Moe 2016). More importantly, by 2012, Netflix has started moving away from its original business model as exhibitor of film content, solidifying its role as a producer and distributor of original content.

Originating from interactive fiction and, later, computer games, interactive films could be viewed as another attempt to transform the viewer's experience of media consumption, liberating his/her

interactivity, and ultimately, shifting him/her from a passive to an active user in today's digitally global consumer culture. The interactive nature of this genre, however, makes its evaluation and analysis more difficult, for compared to a linear progress where plotting and filming is completely controlled, we are now faced with a multilinear and interactive narrative that we either unfold ourselves or may never even finish (Perron et al. 2008). Netflix started experimenting with the interactive genre in 2017, releasing a kid's adventure called *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale*. Two years later, Netflix would release *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, a film based on non-linear stories and a web of decisions. It is worth noticing that *Black Mirror* was not the first foray into this new genre of interactive films, for the choose-your-own-adventure format – which had its roots in Edward Packard's 1976 novel *Sugarcane Island* written in an “adventure for you” fiction format – was utilized in a handful of films. In 1992, Interfilm company signed a deal with Sony, outfitting 42 theaters around the US; buttons on a remote control installed in the armrests of the theaters' chairs allowed viewers to execute their choices when prompted to make decisions about the plot, and then votes were tallied and chosen scenes were played. Despite the novelty of the interactive experience, the four produced experimental films failed for various reasons: traditional film critics were not receptive of the new genre; the public's response was not good; there was a lack of marketing money; and, at that time, there was a shift toward the online medium. As a result, Interfilm, called the “first interactive film studio,” ceased to exist and the experimental theaters were dismantled (Napoli 1998). In 2016, *Late Shift* – a game-movie hybrid created by CtrlMovie, a small studio in Switzerland – became the first successful interactive film produced. In its theatrical version, offered in selected cinemas and at festivals, the audience were able to take decisions on behalf of the protagonist via their smartphones, and based on majority votes, the story changed while the film kept running seamlessly (Martens 2016; “Late Shift: Your Decisions Are You” n.d.).

*Black Mirror*, the anthology series, was first produced by the British public service television broadcasting station Channel 4, before Netflix succeeded in owning the series rights in 2015 after a bidding war between channels (Conley and Burroughs 2019). Created by Charlie Brooker (a writer, cartoonist, games reviewer, and radio presenter) with Brooker and Annabel Jones serving as the program showrunners, *Black Mirror* provides a dystopian social commentary on the themes of control, punishment, surveillance, the phenomenon of public viewing, and the role technology plays in extending the scope of the state's power. Netflix' interactive film, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, follows the popular UK dystopian show and is considered a standalone extended episode of the series. The film gives the viewers multiple options that ultimately have an impact on the storyline, altering the narrative flow, and changing the fate of the lead character Stefan Butler (played by Fionn Whitehead), a painfully-awkward 19-year old video-game designer in 1980s London, as he attempts to finish his video game that is based on a book, titled *Bandersnatch*, by a controversial author while becoming increasingly convinced his actions are being controlled by sinister outside forces. The viewer is also given the option to see most of the five variant endings without having to start from the very beginning, simply by choosing the option that appears as the credits begin to roll which allows him/her to loop back to a crucial moment in the film and change his/her choice. Throughout the film, viewers' choices are shaped by their: esthetic preferences (e.g. choice of music), consumption preferences (e.g. choice of breakfast cereal), backgrounds (e.g. older viewers may experience nostalgia for the early adventure and computer games while younger viewers might regard the film as a period drama full of quaint obsolescence), contextual information (e.g. if viewers have previously watched the *Black Mirror* episodes and are aware of its dystopian themes), and technological affordances (e.g. having access to and being able to use a smart phone, a tablet, a laptop, a smart TV, or a video game console on which the film can play).

To be able to recommend pre-existing material to its subscribers and to develop original content, Netflix utilizes its

capability of tracking when users start, stop, rewind, fast forward, and pause videos, in addition to logging time of day of viewing, the user's location, the device on which the streaming occurred, whether the user watched a

program from beginning to end, what if anything she or he watched next, and more. (Hallinan and Striphas 2016, 128)

Thus, with its production of original content based on what its algorithms suggest as the most effective choices, Netflix has moved away “from an undifferentiated mass toward an aggregation of highly differentiated micro-audiences” (Hallinan and Striphas 2016, 128). This has led to increasingly exposing the viewers to more covert and carefully integrated advertising, blurring the line between television content and marketing message in an ad-free binge-media era, ultimately increasing the role of brand placement. Brand or product placement – defined as a marketing practice in which a firm pays for inclusion of its branded products (through name, packaging, signage, or other trademarks) in films, television, and mass media programs (Balasubramanian 1994; Karrh 1998; Nagar 2016) – is increasingly being used as part of marketing mix strategies. With more consumers being able to skip through advertising messages, product placement, associated with an increase in sales, has become the alternative to the endangered traditional advertising messages (Piccalo 2004; Russell and Stern 2006). In addition to the advertisement potential (especially in a binge-watching era in which traditional advertisement interrupting the alternate reality created by the video content is an unwelcome reminder of the viewer’s true reality (Schweidel and Moe 2016), product placement provides details that ground the story in reality, hence, an implicit use of “reality engineering” (Solomon and Englis 1994). It is not surprising, therefore, that the first choice the viewer has to make in *Black Mirror* is to choose which cereal Stefan should eat: Sugar Puffs or Frosted Flakes (called Frosties since the story takes place in England), a choice that would later affect which TV commercial Stefan sees. At this stage, Netflix made a calculated choice to involve Sugar Puffs, a brand sold in the 1980s, instead of the rebranded 2014 version Honey Monster Puffs, deflecting any accusations that the film shows ads from real-world products. Yet this seemingly inconsequential cereal choice presents a future massive opportunity: providing Netflix with valuable advertising insight and programmatic product placement opportunities (i.e. programmatic advertising is the automated trading of the audience commodity; Andrew 2019). Another choice, with negligible results on the storyline, comes next: the choice of Walkman soundtrack, Tuckersoft: Thompson Twins or *Now That’s What I call Music, Vol. 2* compilation. The viewer’s music choice would not only decide what Colin’s musical preferences are, but would also give the viewer the control over which soundtrack accompanies the next few scenes. Afterwards, almost every other decision the viewer has to make affects the storyline drastically, covering themes of authorial control, government conspiracies, homicide, suicide, paranoia, madness, fate, free will, and failure/success, and ultimately providing the viewer with five main different endings.

Although Netflix does not usually share their data about how popular their programs are, it teased data about the film, for example, how “On the biggest day of Stefan’s life, over 60% of his friends from the future fed him Frosties.” and how “Compared to the rest of the world, Brits were ‘less’ likely to waste a good cup of tea” by choosing “throw tea” only 52.9% of the time in comparison to the rest of the world that did so 55.9% of the time (Demaria 2019). Such data is only the tip of the iceberg; the future has endless opportunities for Netflix in the streaming market, making it possible to market products that can be chosen based on content, microgenres, demographics, or even test different product designs (Damiani 2019).

If *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* is to be considered a new paradigm of media consumption, it definitely sheds light on the viewer (i.e. consumer) and the evolving, and sometimes misleading, role s/he plays. Although an interactive film, so far, is based on fiction, *Black Mirror* succeeds in resembling the genre of “reality television,” specifically the strategic elimination sub-genre (e.g. *Big Brother* and *Survivor*). In both genres, some of the important decisions are made by the viewership of the program (for example, audiences eliminating participants in reality TV and changing the storyline in interactive films). Furthermore, both genres blur the lines between reality and fiction, for even reality TV has an element of “soft-scripting” (i.e. premeditated scripting, urgings from behind-the-scenes crew to create situations of adversity and drama, and misleading editing). In *Black Mirror*,

aided by a software that seamlessly links the scenes with no buffering, the viewer experiences what feels like watching a slice of life unfolding in real-time, for example, when the scenes are frozen while Stefan is facing the viewers, awaiting their decision. Similar to reality television that equates pervasive monitoring with creativity and self-expression, and destigmatizes close surveillance (Andrejevic 2004), the interactive film genre is a soft form of panoptic surveillance. In addition, by giving the viewer the power to change the course of the storyline, the viewer's role changes from one of voyeurism to one of active surveillance. Nevertheless, and in reality, the viewer's new power only increases the tracking and profiling of his/her choices. We, the viewers, might control Stefan, but Netflix (the producer of this commodity) panoptically monitors and surveys us.

In today's world, surveillance has become an intrinsic part of daily life. The dependency on communication and information technologies for administrative and control processes have turned societies into "surveillance societies" where everyday, normal life is closely monitored (Lyon 2001, 1, 2008) whether face-to-face, or technologically (Lyon 2007). The fascination with the cinema is rooted in the consumer desire for peeping into others' lives, a scopophilic desire accentuated in today's digitally global consumer culture (Gansing 2003). To closely monitor viewers, streaming TV providers conduct marketing research directed toward segmentation and identifying individual (paying) consumers' preferences in an attempt to serve their needs and desires; drawing upon the consumer's consumption history to anticipate, suggest, and encourage future consumer behavior, hence, a fragmentation of mass audiences (Whitaker 1999, 145–146). However, the nature of the interactive film genre naturally subverts the idea that the film-makers have the final say over how the film progresses, giving the viewer the illusion that s/he has control over the storyline by making decisions on Stefan's behalf, and watching the consequences of those decisions unfold. Yet such an illusion is shattered when we look closely at three facts. First, with the film's new navigation controls, rewinding or fast-forwarding the film is impossible, forcing the viewer to follow Netflix' flowchart of possible choices. Secondly, although the viewer is given a frozen frame so that s/he can ponder two possibilities and choose one, it is always done with the clock ticking: the viewer has ten seconds only to make a choice, or a default decision is made. Once time is exceeded by an indecisive viewer, Netflix does the picking of a choice. Lastly, by occasionally steering viewers to a "right" answer or offering a "Go back" button, Netflix un masks the reality of its being the ultimate controller of the storyline. In one of the possible endings of the film, Stefan demands an answer to his question: who has been controlling him? In this meta moment, one of the answers is that his fate is being controlled by the streaming platform Netflix, "It's like TV, but online. I control it." This scene can potentially lead to another scene in which Stefan realizes that he is an actor on the *Black Mirror* set and, consequently, he breaks with reality. One can see this answer ("I [Netflix] control it") as the ultimate proof that the viewer is the omnipresence in Stefan's life. Paradoxically, it can also mean that in real life, in which the viewing of this film takes place, the viewer him/herself is being controlled and surveilled by Netflix, making Stefan's life a reflection of real life.

Ushering a new cultural zeitgeist, Netflix' *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* has garnered generally favorable reviews with its thematic uniqueness and stylistic innovativeness. Undoubtedly, the game-changing release of this film has opened the floodgates to a whole new era of film-making. Compared to traditional content, the interactive genre is a new form of data mining that has the capability of generating more pattern discovery and insights into trend analysis, surpassing the data of what, when, and for how long viewers watch a program, and collecting data indicative of real-time decisions, such as musical taste, product preference, and engagement with human behavior. Even the role we, the interactive viewers, play has now changed. Instead of being passive viewers/consumers, Netflix has given us the opportunity to become the new gods, an omniscient presence that controls the *Black Mirror* world. A closer look, however, shatters this reality, for the more control we are given, the more we are manipulated. To sum it up, although *Black Mirror* is set in the past, it could well pave the way to the future of integrating entertainment and consumption.

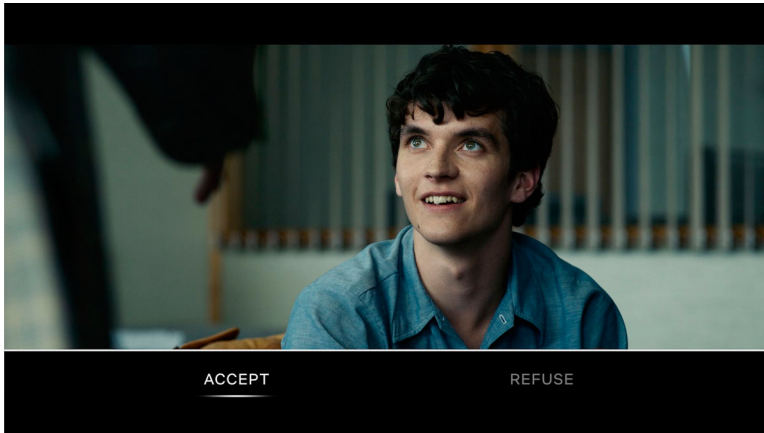


Photo: Netflix.

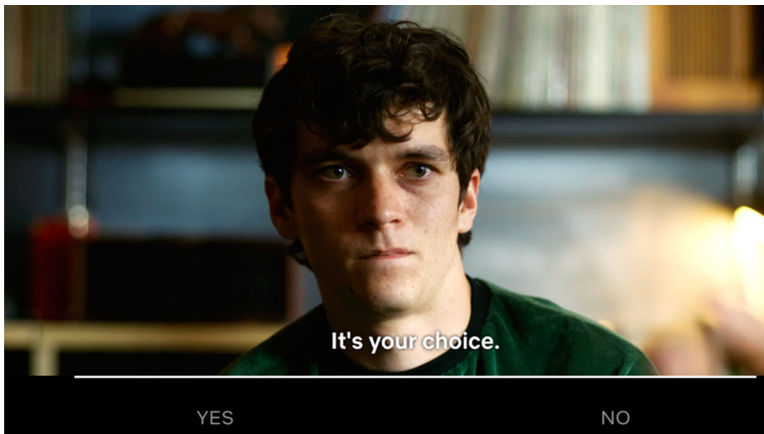


Photo: Netflix.

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