

# ***Revisiting the Cinematography of Black Mirror: Bandersnatch: Problems and the Future of Interactive Movies***

**Jiachen Wang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>School of Animation and Digital Arts, Communication University of China, Beijing, China  
a. afeliciano79253@student.napavalley.edu*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** This thesis primarily delves into the historical evolution and current state of interactive filmmaking. It places special emphasis on the pivotal role played by "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch," a groundbreaking work in the interactive film genre. Through a comprehensive analysis of the film's interactive elements, plot structures, and overall audience reception, this study identifies prevalent challenges within the contemporary interactive film landscape. It then proceeds to offer insightful recommendations aimed at fostering the advancement of interactive filmmaking in the future. By scrutinizing the intricate facets of interactive storytelling and the way they contribute to the overall cinematic experience, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the genre's strengths and weaknesses while providing valuable guidance for its continued growth and innovation.

**Keywords:** interactive movie, Black Mirror, Bandersnatch

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, the rapid rise of highly interactive video games has dealt a huge blow to the traditional art of movie narrative. Filmmakers have begun to think about how to make movies break the boundaries of the screen and allow the audience to participate in the narrative process of the movie. Interactive cinema has become a hot topic [1]. The evolution of interactive cinema from its inception to the present day gives us an insight into the factors that have shaped its trajectory, i.e., the state of the art, the popularity of streaming platforms, the diversification of interaction methods, and the development of curricula. Most important is the audience's desire to participate in the film's narrative [2].

In this paper, we will build on the current state of interactive cinema, using Black Mirror: Bandersnatch as an example, to explore the problems and future development of interactive cinema. Through this study, we hope to contribute to the discussion of the narrative and effects of interactive movies and to improve our understanding of the modes of interaction in film. Improving the quality of interactive films will make them more popular and stimulate the interest of more filmmakers. We will analyze Black Mirror: Pandasnakey ) with specific examples of interactive modes (including interactive node settings, option settings, and interface design) and plot narrative modes (the effects of interactions on the plot and characters, the articulation of plot segments, etc.). The aim is to draw

reasonable conclusions and improvement measures for the current narrative problems and dilemmas of interactive movies.

## 2. Literature Review

Interactive movies have a long history, which can be traced back to the birth of the first interactive movie "Automatic Movie" in 1967. Due to technical constraints, the movie was paused at key moments in the plot, and the host would come on stage to guide the audience to make choices; the audience would make choices, and the staff would play the corresponding clips at the end. Although there are many shortcomings in the coherence of the story and the uniqueness of the audience's personal choices, the light and shadow tension of the movie camera combined with the interactivity, playability, and player autonomy of the game created the precedent of "movie + game." [3] Narrative concept. Later, in the development of early video games, it was not uncommon to use real-life materials interspersed in the game screen instead of digital animation: in the real-time strategy game "Command and Conquer", professional actors from Hollywood were invited to shoot video clips in the game by the filming team, which greatly enhanced the authenticity and immersion of the game. In the later development of film and television, creators focused more and more on the immersive experience, adding many interactive options; the game's graphics production became more and more refined, and the camera connections and scene transitions became more and more cinematic [4].

In *The Logic of Cinema*, Abel Raffé argues that the viewing process for the audience is like flipping through an album of photographs selected, organized, and arranged by some image maker [5]. The advent of interactive cinema has brought about a fundamental change in this phenomenon. The viewer is no longer a page of a photo album, but an organizer and arranger. The interactive film breaks the limitations of the screen of traditional movies, realizes the interaction between the movie and the audience, makes the audience and the fate of the protagonist produce a strong connection, become a "grasshopper on the rope", and even really feel the emotion, morality, human nature, and the hesitation and hesitation brought by the selection process. Interactive movies are essentially a way to break the "fourth wall". The "fourth wall" means that if the audience appears directly in the drama, film, and television works, then the work breaks the boundaries between the virtual work and the real world, realizing the audience and the artwork interaction, but the traditional way of breaking the "fourth wall" is usually the actor directly to the audience to ask questions, dialogue, and let the audience make a choice. But the traditional way to break the "fourth wall" is usually for the actors to ask the audience questions and talk directly to them, allowing them to make choices to control the story. This is one way to break the fourth wall. "It's a very new approach. In the middle and second half of the movie, Stefan encounters a bottleneck in the production of the game, repeatedly recognizes the presence of the audience and their influence on the story, and asks the audience out loud, "Who's controlling me? This is how the film visually demonstrates to the audience how to break the "fourth wall" [6].

In recent years, with the popularization of mobile devices and the development of streaming media websites, watching film and television is no longer limited to fixed occasions (such as movie theaters and cinemas), but can be viewed online using mobile devices alone, and interactive films with a sense of fusion and gaming experience have begun to enter the public's field of vision. *Black Mirror: Pandasnaakee*, an interactive movie released by Netflix at the end of 2018, is a milestone in interactive movies. It tells the story of the subtle impact of technological development on the social life of mankind, but the difference is that while previous *Black Mirror* series were fixed-length sci-fi dramas that told a fixed story in each episode, *Black Mirror: Pandasnaakee* opens up an innovative narrative that puts the control of the story's development in the hands of the audience. The audience can make choices for the protagonist at key points in the plot. Different choices will lead to different directions of plot development. There are many different endings to the story, and the ending viewers see will

be a unique one of their choosing. Its screen is well-made and the lens connection is smooth, achieving the sense of light and shadow and audio-visual impact of a movie lens, as well as the interactivity of a video game.

### 3. Cinematic Interactivity and "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch"

The movie revolves around Stefan, a 16-year-old boy who conceives the idea of creating a game after discovering the book *Bandersnatch* left behind by his late mother. Motivated by a game that allows players to choose their own paths, Stefan confronts challenges on two fronts. First, he faces resistance from the publishing company that invested in his game, with the owner prioritizing the game's commercial potential over Stefan's creative vision, guidance, and support. Second, Stefan grapples with strained family dynamics, including lingering guilt over his mother's death stemming from childhood stubbornness and his father's failure to comprehend his emotions and thoughts. The entire movie focuses on Stefan's journey to overcome these two dilemmas while developing his game, experiencing personal growth, and rediscovering his true self.

In traditional cinema, the aesthetics of narrative storytelling have always been a central topic of discussion for screenwriters. A well-crafted film script typically includes elements like background exposition, conflict, development, climax, and resolution. Typically, the audience's engagement with the plot during the viewing process is driven by pivotal plot points and unexpected twists. However, when narrative agency is ceded to the audience, it can disrupt the story's logic and rhythm, leading to a significant disruption of the narrative flow and potentially compromising the overall quality of the film [7].

#### 3.1. Insufficiency in Story

The concept of interactive movies means that viewers can enjoy different experiences by choosing their favorite plots on their own. The plot of the story should be enriched by diverse audience choices.

The overall flow design of an interactive movie presupposes several fixed basic endings and designs the triggers for these basic endings. Since the audience does not know these basic endings, they will not make choices according to the established "flow". However, even if choices are made at different points of interaction, the audience will inevitably return to a few fixed basic endings due to the limited number of endings. As a result, the process by which the viewer reaches these basic endings varies and therefore triggers different subplots and different sequences of story development. This will lead to dozens or even tens of plot modes derived from the several basic endings. Depending on the audience's different choices, these basic endings can lead to dozens and dozens of plot processes [8].

The endings of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* can be categorized into five modes that are not significantly different:

First, Stefan discovers that he is part father and part psychotherapist in a program called PAC (Programming and Control), and he ends up killing his father and going to prison; second, Stefan finds a childhood rabbit toy in a safe, travels back in time, and dies with his mother on an accidentally derailed train; and third, Stefan goes insane while designing a game, kills my father and is arrested and imprisoned. (i.e., the viewer who triggers the first ending also gets a sense of Stefan's obsession in the movie, and the viewer who triggers the third ending also gets a sense of the conspiracy between Stefan's father and the psychotherapist.) ; Fourth, Stefan kills his father After dismembering it, and continuing to complete the game programming, the game was a great success after it was launched, and the time jumps to Colin's daughter trying to rebuild Stefan's game, and the entire content of the previous film is the content of her game; fifth, Stefan Clashing with the therapist and grappling together, they try to jump out of a window, only to find themselves filming.

### 3.2. Problematic Interaction Point Setting

In the movie *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, nearly every five minutes, interactive multiple-choice questions are presented to the audience. However, not every choice significantly influences the plot's direction. For instance, the first interaction point involves selecting the brand of breakfast cereal for Stefan, and the second is about choosing the music he listens to on the bus. These everyday life details have little bearing on the overarching plot of the movie [9].

On the contrary, removing such unrelated details could streamline the narrative pace, ensuring that the audience remains focused on essential plot elements. From the perspective of traditional movie narrative logic, the introduction of these frequent interaction points can disrupt narrative continuity and create a sense of disjointedness due to the non-linear storytelling. Thus, it seems advisable to reserve interaction points for moments with substantial impact on the plot's development, allowing the audience to make choices that lead to markedly different outcomes.

Take, for example, the interaction point where Stefan decides whether to take medication prescribed by the psychiatrist. Opting to take it results in a narrative ending where the game receives a meager 2.5-star rating upon release, and the story concludes. Conversely, refusing the medication leads to a narrative path where the game encounters issues nearing release. Staying faithful to the original, Stefan postpones the game's launch to make adjustments. Despite these apparent differences, both endings ultimately culminate in a game production failure. In this instance, the choice of taking the pill seemingly diverges the story into two distinct endings, but in essence, both outcomes share a common theme of game failure. The variations in these storylines lack essential distinctions, and the options' logical connections to the storylines are somewhat deficient.

### 3.3. Limited Autonomy of Audience

Interactive films aim to immerse the audience in a narrative experience, but true autonomy for viewers is often limited. The outcomes of various storylines may not always provide fully open-ended solutions [10].

At the third interaction point in the film, Stefan is presented with the opportunity to join Mohan's game company to develop *Bandersnatch* game. Should the viewer accept the invitation, Colin informs Stefan that this is the wrong choice, leading to a narrative loop returning to Stefan's arrival at the game company five months earlier. Here, the viewer must now opt to decline the invitation and continue the game's development alone at home.

This choice is not entirely voluntary on the viewer's part, nor is it the initial direction they desired for the story. Instead, it's a choice necessitated by trial and error. Consequently, those who initially accepted the invitation must revisit the sequence from the game company to Mohan's offer.

Even though the director streamlined the repeated segments by removing tedious scenes, viewers may still experience some degree of boredom due to the recurring content. The fatigue stemming from episode repetition results in a prolonged delivery of information that ultimately becomes redundant and meaningless.

These "non-multiple choice questions" fundamentally do not grant viewers the power to alter the plot's course. The film continues to tell the story and culminate in the outcomes envisioned by the writer and director. The tension between the audience and the creators over such superficial choices has been a constant in interactive cinema's evolution.

If the audience were afforded too much narrative control, essentially "telling" the story instead of the director and screenwriter, it would undermine the roles of these creators in the narrative process. Thus, striking the right balance in the audience's narrative agency is crucial in interactive cinema. In this medium, audiences and creators should ideally share the stage. The writer and director can establish essential elements like time, place, background, conflict, character identities, and

protagonist characteristics, as well as multiple potential endings. The finer narrative details should be left for the audience to fill in, with their diverse choices significantly influencing the story's conclusion and the characters' fates. This approach allows the audience to genuinely participate in shaping the narrative, moving beyond superficial choices that have little impact on the fixed script and endings. Audience participation extends not just to interaction but to influencing the very fabric of the story.

### 3.4. A Story with No Choice

During the evolution of interactive cinema, a recurring challenge has emerged, characterized by a kind of "competition" between the director and the audience for control over the narrative. Filmmakers have engaged in discussions about the balance between audience participation in the storyline and the director's control over the narrative's direction. It's a delicate equilibrium where audiences should be granted a certain level of narrative agency, but the director must retain control over the overall "tone" of the film.

An example of this interplay can be seen in the fifth interaction point of the film, where the psychiatrist inquires if Stefan wants to remember his mother's past. If the viewer chooses not to recall, the psychiatrist suggests that there might be something worth remembering. Here, the director and writer strategically placed this narrative juncture to guide the audience toward a specific choice, one that best serves the overall storyline. This moment aims to illuminate Stefan's past guilt related to his mother's death and his strained relationship with his father, thus advancing the plot. However, audiences won't necessarily align with the writer's perspective. Instead, driven by empathy, they often choose what's in Stefan's best interest, protecting his psyche from reopening the wounds of his past. This phenomenon underscores the ongoing "competition" for narrative control among the director, screenwriter, and audience in interactive films.

In crafting interactive cinema, the director must meticulously determine the locations of interaction points, the content of each choice, the resultant plot developments from audience choices, and various possible endings stemming from these choices. Audiences, in turn, must exercise independent judgment when making decisions, and the director should refrain from overtly influencing their choices. Furthermore, scriptwriters should focus on creating options and interaction points that are audience-centric, making choices easy to understand and align with while skillfully guiding the plot.

## 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, even though the storyline in *Black Mirror: Pandasnaakee* may be lacking, it has, to some degree, introduced innovation and advancement to the realm of interactive cinema. When we examine the evolution from movie games to a retrospective view of interactive films, we recognize that cinematic interaction goes beyond mere plot amalgamation. It is a form of creative innovation that empowers the audience to observe and actively engage with the content. In essence, it underscores that the essence of film creation lies not solely in formal innovation but in the creation of meaningful and valuable content within the story itself.

## References

- [1] Wang H.(2023). *Interactive Movie Research under the Perspective of Communication Game Theory--Taking "Black Mirror:Pandasnaakee" as an Example*. *Sound Screen World*, 5, 121-123.
- [2] Diao, Y. (2020). *Research on the Development of Interactive Movie under the Threshold of Integrated Media--Taking "Black Mirror:Pandasnaakee" as an Example*. *New Media Research*, 6(14),112-114+124.
- [3] Zhang H.(2019). *Narrative study of interactive movies in the era of melting media--Taking Black Mirror:Pandasnaakee as an example*. *Film Literature*, 16, 65-68.
- [4] Hu L. (2020). *Textual analysis and cinematic boundaries of Black Mirror:Pandasniki*. *Film Literature*, 8, 96-98.

- [5] Huang Y.(2021). *The Push-Pull Tug-of-War between Authors and Audiences in the Context of Interactive Cinema--Taking Black Mirror:Pandasnakey as an Example*. *Media Today*,29(07), 93-96.
- [6] Zhang H. (2019). *Narrative study of interactive movies in the era of melting media--Taking Black Mirror:Pandasnakey as an example*. *Film Literature*, 16, 65-68.
- [7] Zhang S., Sun X. (2021). *The Aesthetic Thoughts of Interactive Cinema in the Perspective of Intermediality-An Examination Centered on Black Mirror:Pandasnakey*. *New Works in Film*,4, 46-53.
- [8] Tao M.,Wang F. (2019), *A new sample of interactive web series on streaming platforms--Taking the American drama Black Mirror:Pandasnakey as an example*. *China TV*, 7, 98-102.
- [9] Wang L. (2020). *Narrative analysis of the film black mirror: pandasnakey[J]*. *House of Drama*, 6, 68+70.
- [10] Zhao J. (2022). *Research on Dramatized Narrative of Interactive Video "Black Mirror: Pandasnakey"* [Doctoral dissertation, Sichuan Normal University]. DOI:10.27347/d.cnki.gssdu.2022.001172.