

Chapter 13

The Viewer–Participant Performing Morality in Interactive Storytelling in *Bandersnatch*

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter wishes to interrogate the capability of interactive cinema to test, unveil, exercise, and challenge the viewer-participant's moral layout. Looking at Netflix's Black Mirror: Bandersnatch, the chapter mainly explores the implications and outcomes of performing morality in a digital space mediated by a new mode of telling and receiving stories. The analysis looks at possible obstacles in exercising—in a genuine manner—moral imperatives and looks at the nature of the story as well as the format as catalyst for self-reflection and moral awareness. The chapter then explores the possibility that moral conduits are the product of active practice, and that interactive cinema embodies such practice.

INTRODUCTION

In the short history of cinema, audiences went from experiencing movies in public spaces—a performance in and of itself—to engaging with them in the intimacy of 'one's home, where social roles and responsibilities make way for genuine behavior. Alongside social performance, the viewer experience was—and still is—largely mediated by the venue itself, and not the format of the content. Between theaters and streaming platforms, audiences have been exploring stories as finite products mainly because the technology still makes difficult any kind of viewer participation within the narrative, while people need time to adjust to new ways of consuming entertainment. Furthermore, producers need to understand how to market interactive movies, because of the paradox of our times. As such, on the one hand, 'people's arguably slow familiarization with new technologies can lead to their distrust in the potential of new forms of entertainment. But on the other hand, digital markets are flooded with new

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6605-3.ch013

apps, platforms, and content, which may overstimulate and ultimately reduce 'consumers' active interest in anything new. However, interactive movies are now produced and offered—in limited number, still—on streaming platforms such as Netflix, where viewers can insert themselves in the flow of the story and presumably decide one character or 'another's life trajectory. Even when the viewer chooses not to engage and simply witness the story as a regular movie-goer, the experience of watching is akin to a slow reveal of a cubist performance that allows for at least a marginal engagement with the idea of interactivity. As such, even in the absence of choices made by the viewer-participant, audience members still experience multiple timelines and are able to see more than one ending or one set of permutations. In *Bandersnatch*, for example, there are several abrupt endings that force the viewer into a loop, where the movie resets to a previous, sometimes seemingly randomly picked scene. Therefore, the viewer is able to observe the plot unfolding into ramified realities, all happening at once. This absence of a linear time is supported in particular by 'Colin's interventions throughout the movie, when he seems to pull together all the timelines, breaking the fourth wall in the process. Therefore, with this form of digital storytelling come a few considerations about the moral implications and performance of choices viewers make to shape the story to their liking, albeit in a quite controlled manner.

In the pages that follow I will focus on Netflix's *Bandersnatch* (2018), a choose-your-own-adventure type of digital content, a movie—or standalone episode, the distinction at this point being irrelevant—of the British science-fiction anthology *Black Mirror*. With roots in performance art, interactive texts, and video games, this type of movie experience might just be the dawn of a new form of telling and consuming stories. While I am not setting out to design a morality chart or propose a universal set of moral values or rules, I am attempting to inquire into the possibility that such content may exercise or unveil the moral fiber of an individual. I begin by looking at modalities of performing morality upon viewer engagement with the story in *Bandersnatch*, and by questioning what exploring the story means for the viewer's moral journey. I then approach the ethics of the form, questioning whether the movie's self-awareness affects the viewer/participant's moral strategy and the extent to which the viewer still remains an active participant in the story. I continue to explore how morality is mediated by architectures of story reading and story delivery, ending with a short overview of the didactic nature of interactive cinema in the viewer/user's exploration and practice of morality.

BACKGROUND

This present paper is placed in the broader context of digital narrative and new media forms of entertainment, where, according to Ciccoricco and Large (2019), fiction must "balance familiarity (pattern recognition and representation) and novelty (defamiliarization by means of its distinct interface) just as it, and its interface, must balance simplicity and complexity in its aesthetic treatment of narrative" (p.58). The paper is further predicated on the assumption that this new form of entertainment validates the prediction of a heavily technologized commercial era, where the lines between the human now and what comes after are blurred by humanity's increasing reliance upon technology, but where we, as civilization, maintain and in fact increase our sense of accountability and community (Braidotti, 2013, p.49). As such, this paper flirts with the horizon of posthumanist entertainment consumption, in a future when moral practice could potentially distinguish human from machine.

Quite a few articles, books, and chapters have been written on *Bandersnatch* already. They engage topics such as free will, agency, trauma, and marketing possibilities in light of Netflix's capabilities to

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