Bandersnatch: The spoiler-filled, choose-your-own-opinion review

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- You need a compatible device (modern mobile phones, laptops, smart TVs) to watch *Bandersnatch*. That indicator in the upper right corner shows up when you're set.
- Any time you want to rewind significantly, however, you'll need to restart the entire film. This removes, for example, some convenient "quick rewind" opportunities.
- You have 10 seconds to make each *Bandersnatch* decision, and largely all options presented to you are woven directly into the story (rather than you being some omniscient power).
- Some decisions turn out to *not* be decisions in the long run.
- This is just one of the film's fourth-wall-breaking, wink-wink Easter eggs. (There's only a few, and they're rare enough to not feel wholly distracting.)
- Ars staffers didn't agree about every aspect of the film, but this was certainly our favorite "decision" moment. (If you haven't seen the film, don't worry; this captured screen doesn't quite spoil what it's about.)

After catching up on post-holiday news and emails, Ars staffers got together in our staff chat room to talk about Netflix's weirdest one-off film yet: *Bandersnatch*, the *Black Mirror* "event" that launched on December 28. We'd all seen it, some alone and others in groups, and we all felt a mix of delight, confusion, and annoyance by the fact that it required us to grab our remotes and make choices throughout its 90-minute runtime. (Each choice leads to varying outcomes that range from minor to severe.)

Thanks to its interactive portions, we feel this *Black Mirror* film really is in the eye of its beholder, so we're leaning into its "choose your own adventure" qualities and letting you do something similar with our review. Which opinion outcome would you like? The choice is yours… or maybe you have no choice. (Meaning, it's a lot like *Bandersnatch*.)

Be warned: the reviews go in order of spoilers, from least to most. If you know *nothing* about *Bandersnatch*, stop after reading our first blurb, which is more explanatory. If you'd like to pick *Bandersnatch*'s mechanics and qualities apart a bit more, keep going.

You choose: A converted skeptic

Set in 1984, *Bandersnatch* follows the travails of a young programmer named Stefan (Fionn Whitehead), intent on making an interactive video game based on a fictional choose-your-own-adventure (CYOA) novel, *Bandersnatch*, from a tragic writer named Jerome F. Davies. It's a great, period-specific choice, since CYOA books were all the rage in the 1980s and 1990s. Plus, the fictional video game developer that Stefan wants to work with is apparently based on a real British company, Imagine Software, which really did try to develop a *Bandersnatch* CYOA game—and went bankrupt in the process.

Netflix is unlikely to go bankrupt, since *Bandersnatch* is quite a fun experience: an enticing blend of fantasy and

horror that doesn't take its dark rumination on the illusion of free will too seriously. (The title is an allusion to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* and "The Hunting of the Snark," both of which mention a mythical creature called the bandersnatch.) I was a bit skeptical going in; I'm generally not a fan of the CYOA genre. But I quickly got into the spirit of the thing. Netflix has made it super easy to make the choices, and after 10 seconds it will choose for you.

> *Who among us can resist the chance to experience what might have been?*

Some choices are minor, like which cereal Stefan should have for breakfast. Others are pretty major: should a central character live or die? Should Stefan drop acid or abstain? Should he run or fight? Each takes you down a different forking path, and when you finally reach the conclusion, you have the option of exploring some of the key paths not taken to see how they would have turned out. It's a brilliant stroke, since who among us can resist the chance to experience what might have been?

Of course, the illusion of free will also applies to the viewer. Technically, we get to make the various choices provided at key intervals in the plot. But it soon becomes clear that Netflix wants you to make certain choices, sometimes even telling the viewer, "That was the wrong choice, mate." (Judge-y much, Netflix?) The narrative has a maze-like structure. Some paths are short and end abruptly, requiring you to go back to the fork in the road where you made the "wrong" choice. Others take you all the way through the maze to any number of alternate endings.

That might be frustrating for some viewers, but it's thematically consistent with the film's premise. Ultimately, *Bandersnatch* strikes a nice balance between viewer interactive control and protecting the creator's vision. It's an impressive first foray into a challenging medium, even though

the novelty eventually wears off. Still, the CYOA format is rarely done this well, so kudos to series creator Charlie Brooker for pulling it off.
—Jennifer Ouellette, Senior Writer

The end! *Bandersnatch* gets a 3/5 review, and the author is immortalized in spite of her neighbor's dog pawing up something unfortunate in her backyard. Try again?

You choose: A nitpicker, pleasantly surprised

Bandersnatch is a bad film.

The end! *Bandersnatch* gets a 0/5 review. Try again?

Bandersnatch is a good film… when it doesn't stick you with brief, pointless dead ends.

In my first viewing of *Bandersnatch*, a few of my choices appeared to be either entirely right or entirely wrong. I say this because I had to dig through a flowchart of every *Bandersnatch* choice to discover that I'd missed every choice that led to a roundabout "you're going to do this anyway" moment. When asked whether to take drugs, I took the freaking drugs, and sure enough, that's the outcome regardless of whether you say "yes" or "no" to the offer.

Which is a shame, because *Bandersnatch* is at its best when it leads viewers to a meaningful choice, *then* cleverly rewinds them to pivotal points after a single path's confusion. It's like having a wise old professor read a choose-your-own-adventure novel out loud and guide you through a choice path no matter what, as opposed to letting you constantly flip backwards.

> *This moment is a serious kick in the pants for anybody who has a clumsy remote.*

The result is that the novelty of the choices never gets in the way of the ability to sit with a film and become attached to a particular plot line. Even if a logical path becomes odd or insane or hilarious, you get to sit with it for as long as the film deems it interesting, and *Bandersnatch* is also judicious about how long it keeps you hooked onto one line before freeing you to bite on the next one.

Most of the *Bandersnatch* experience contains convenient rewind hooks. One decision, sadly, doesn't get such a tidy rewind: the "type five digits" moment, which asks you to type exactly what's being spoken over and over by on-screen characters, in flashback fashion, to make a phone call. The gamer in me wanted very badly to come up with other number combinations and see the results, but my first guess was a dud. The result: an ending I'd seen before. Game over. No rewind. You gotta watch the whole thing again if you want to play with the number pad again, dumdum.

(I went back and typed a one-digit error into this part, and I got the same hard-stop result; this is a serious kick in the pants for anybody who has a clumsy remote for their preferred Netflix streaming box and mistypes a single digit, since this moment has no "delete" key.)

After getting through a full session of choose, watch, rewind, and choose again, racking up roughly 90 minutes of video, any viewer can start from scratch to recap a few moments of "flavor"—as in, inconsequential chunks that range from worthless to funny. But my favorite thing about *Bandersnatch* is that I didn't find a start-from-scratch redo necessary to feel like I'd gotten a good combination of interactivity and digestible story. Choice within *Bandersnatch* is as much of an illusion as the film asserts, and the *Black Mirror* crew doesn't drag the story in order to make an insulting "what you do doesn't matter" point.

So I loved how nimble the process felt. And I really loved how

these rewind-and-try-again moments always included interstitial comments that reinforced the story's lighthearted perspective on free will. Hats off to the *Black Mirror* crew for handling "interactive fiction" in a way that mostly felt smooth.
—Sam Machkovech, Tech Culture Editor

The end! *Bandersnatch* gets a 4.25/5 review, but the critic failed to review the graphics and has been suspended without pay. Try again?

You choose: An outsider

I haven't watched *Bandersnatch* yet, because my house mainly watches Netflix on an Apple TV, and the Apple TV Netflix app does not support this kind of interactive content. At some point, I will watch it on an iPad, I suppose, but that defeats the point of having an Apple TV for watching Netflix on a proper TV.
—Jonathan Gitlin, Automotive Editor

The end! *Bandersnatch* gets a 0.5/5 review, and the critic has been arrested for smashing a loved one's forehead with an Apple TV. Try again?

[embedded content]
Black Mirror: Bandersnatch trailer.

You choose: A triumphant triumvirate

I may have inadvertently stumbled into the ideal *Bandersnatch* viewing situation: a slow, communal viewing on New Year's Day. My group of three voted democratically (thumbs up for the first option, down for the second) on every 10-second decision, and we faced no time restraints to prevent rewinds. We had as much fun watching patterns emerge in our voting

records as we did watching the story of Stefan and his demons pan out.

That's not to say the narrative here stinks, but it feels secondary. Young developer Stefan has to battle the voices that may or may not be inside his head as he loses himself creating a choose-your-own-adventure game based on a potentially cursed novel. The story hints at things like fate versus free will and the Butterfly Effect. We collectively tried to keep Stefan rooted in reality as much as possible—take the meds a therapist prescribes, choose expressions of frustration and anger that avoid violence, etc.—which led to a few delightful pre-endings: situations where an "exit to credits" option appears but ultimately the "go back to [timepoint]" action takes center stage.

This represented my favorite part of *Bandersnatch*: its mechanics. Creator Charlie Brooker initially came up with the story's intricate decision tree by playing with Twine, an HTML-centric system that lets people click through text and images in a CYOA-style manner. Brooker's Twine inspirations are not only apparent but also unfold in slick fashion.

> *We tried like hell to keep Stefan on solid, pacifist, let's-get-this-game-developed ground.*

Every either/or option presented has been woven directly into the story. Maybe someone asks Stefan a question. Maybe two distinct options get physically presented. Or, if you encounter what seems like a choice in a flashback, only one option might show up because you can't alter time… unless you end up in a story arc where a trusted confidant red pills you. The script routinely references this. "The past is immutable," the therapist says at one point, and Stefan makes multiple references to feelings of "I'm being controlled by someone."

Again, my triumvirate tried like hell to keep Stefan on solid, pacifist, let's-get-this-game-developed ground. That ethos

first earned us some extreme meta-narrative with a dose of surrealism (totally fun). Then it took us to a pleasantly ambiguous end where our fate and reality was never explicitly spelled out (totally *Black Mirror*). But ultimately it seemed (and, based on conversations with co-workers, sounded) like this film has some overarching "final" characteristics to a few endings waiting for anyone who keeps refusing to skip to the credits. The version of this we stumbled into very much did *not* align with our peace-and-game-development platform.

I likely won't go back to see if that's something I can steer clear of—naturally Twitter has already surfaced a potentially exhaustive flowchart of what each decision leads to if I'm curious (and I thought the musical choice of "Thompson Twins or Now2" would be more impactful than the breakfast choice of "Sugar Puffs or Frosties"). Instead, *Bandersnatch* works best as an exceedingly fun proof-of-concept. To compare this CYOA ride to another niche film microgenre, it's the *Modern Family* episode of "screen" stories. The *Black Mirror* team has proven there's validity here and a lot of room for experimentation, but eventually someone *else* will come along and deliver a truly elevated version (like what *Searching* did for the on-a-screen devotees).
—*Nathan Mattise*, Features Editor

The end! *Bandersnatch* gets a 3/5 review, but that jumps one point to a whopping 4/5 once the critic finds a beloved stuffed animal under his bed. Try again?

Listing image by Netflix

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