

Netflix's first interactive sitcom: Good for laughs, deserves a better app

Enlarge / In Netflix's latest interactive special, you can tell Ellie Kemper to wield a bazooka. Seriously. It's one of many reasons comedy fans should endure the special's quirks and annoyances.

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Sixteen months after *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* toyed with Netflix viewers, the streaming service is back with its newest live-action interactive TV special. This year, instead of a dark spin on '80s video games, we get a "breakable" version of the oddball comedy *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

If you come to this new interactive special hoping for one of the series's best episodes, you're out of luck. But if you're less interested in wacky New York comedy exploits and more interested in how interactive television is evolving, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend* might merit must-watch status—with the caveat that Netflix's app could use an update before it streams another "choose-your-own-comedy" special.

Some people are still *Schmidt* out

of luck

For the *Schmidt*-less among you: the series spent four seasons following Kimmy (Ellie Kemper), a cult escapee, as she re-acclimated to the modern world with a group of odd, new friends. While the series has officially concluded, this comeback special fast forwards to an entirely new, out-of-nowhere plot point and is therefore easy to watch for novices. She's about to wed a British prince (Daniel Radcliffe) who had previously never appeared in the series, but the wedding planning is interrupted by a discovery that her cult captor (Jon Hamm) may have imprisoned other people.

As Kimmy goes on a journey to unravel this mystery, two other plots play out simultaneously: the prince participates in a bachelor party while Kimmy's away, and Hollywood agent Jacqueline (Jane Krakowski) has to stall for time while her client Titus (Tituss Burgess) helps Kimmy.

- A normal pedestrian choice for most people, but choosing to wait for a very, very distant driver could be the difference between life and laughs in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend*.
- I think most women on the verge of marrying Daniel Radcliffe would have appreciated a "why not both" option here, but, alas.
- No matter what you pick, Titus will break into song. Which song, however, is up to you.
- Certain plot points, on the other hand, won't appear at all unless you make certain choices, which requires a complete do-over of the special.
- Chris Parnell will appear as a tripped-out festival organizer no matter how you complete this special. Well, except for one particular difference.
- How will you get from point A to point B? Maybe on bikes!
- Maybe on rider mowers!

- Maybe with Johnny Knoxville giving you the stinkeye!
- Jon Hamm and Jack McBrayer are each hilarious in this special, no matter which choices you make.

Thus, this special's first major divergence from *Bandersnatch* is that viewers are asked to make decisions on behalf of pretty much everyone, instead of a single lead character. What exactly does Jacqueline do to stall for time? How does Titus deal with a crowd of unruly rednecks? Whom does Kimmy call first with a question about her old cult life? At each divergence point, a two-option menu pops up at the bottom of the screen, which you can toggle with your remote or a touchscreen on most devices. (Sorry, Apple TV users. Even 16 months after *Bandersnatch* came and went, you're still *Schmidt* out of luck.)

At its best, *UKS* revels in the moments when one of the two choices is "wrong." Wait for a taxi that will clearly never arrive or sing an intentionally botched version of "Freebird" and a ridiculous sequence plays out before rewinding time. These moments are the golden stuff. Viewers are given no-brainer hints that these choices lead to silly, laugh-filled dead ends, and the show's writers get the freedom to write their characters into wacky sequences that wouldn't otherwise organically play out.

The interactive gimmick gives the writers a get-out-of-jail card for jokes that wouldn't otherwise work outside of an animated series, and it doubles-down on *Bandersnatch*'s brief WTF moments of dark comedy. Explaining these moments any further would dampen their hilarity for a first-time viewer, so please forgive my vagueness.

Comedy, now loading...

But in order to make room for these moments, *UKS:KvtR* is forced to build a bunch of "real" plot sequences to sew the timeline together. These sometimes dull the special's comedic

punch, particularly when characters must travel from one location to the next, as if the comedy was held up behind a game console's "loading" sequences.

Some of the special's decisions create massive forks in the story (and, thus, the gags and jokes you'll see), which might have been fine if Netflix's interactive format included nimbler rewind and fast-forward options. Sadly, even when you use some platforms' built-in "go back to a specific choice" seeking functions, you're still forced to re-watch a *lot* of the decision-making scenes that you've already seen. (These last approximately 15 seconds while the decision-making menu appears.) If you're a completionist, you'll have to watch some of these sequences three times to "unlock" every piece of footage in the special.

It works like an ancient Hypercard sequence.

And there's a good-news-bad-news twist to one of my favorite decision-making moments. Sometimes, when you pick the "wrong" choice in the special, time will rewind and you'll automatically choose the "right" thing. But other times, you'll get to manually pick again after the rewind, and the wrong choice will still be in the menu. Sometimes, when you pick this, the results are nuts—we're talking about the golden era of *The Simpsons* in terms of inspired wackiness. When those surprises hit, I found myself belly-laughing in ways I didn't expect.

But other times, re-selecting the same choice over and over led to... the same result playing out over and over. This exposes an inherent weakness in Netflix's system: it basically works like an ancient Hypercard sequence. Each choice links to full-motion video for both the on-screen action and your menu choices, as opposed to a dynamic menu placed on top of a separate video feed. And sometimes, Netflix doesn't go to the trouble of building an entirely new if-then sequence. In these cases, viewers can expect a redundant feed of "pick this again

and the same thing happens” choices.

An interactive drama can absorb some of these momentum-dampening moments as we watch characters ruminate or while we enjoy refreshes of stirring scenery. But a comedy set in the classic TV-sitcom mold of gags and punchlines isn’t nearly as amenable, so it’s frustrating to see some of *UKS*’ most refreshing and hell-yes comedic moments hampered by this format—even though on a few occasions, the laughs are likely doubled by the effort required to dig them out.

As a comedy nerd—a devotee who ascribes to everything from the Dick Van Dyke series in the ’60s to anti-comedy vanguards like *The State* and *Mr. Show*—I was charmed enough by *UKS:KvtR* to recommend it to anybody in a similar boat. As a kick-back-and-laugh diversion, on the other hand, the special is tougher to recommend, but most of that boils down to Netflix’s ho-hum app experience, not the cast and crew’s ambition. Go back to the interactive drawing board, Netflix, and help your next specials be a little less bitter to explore and enjoy.

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