

Giovanna Santaera

***Black Mirror* – *Bandersnatch* and/as Intermedial Performativity through TV Series, Cinema and Digital Transcodification**

Abstract: This essay explores the intermedial and digital aspects of *Bandersnatch*, an interactive work part of the *Black Mirror* series, released on Netflix between 2018 and 2020. *Bandersnatch*, a choose-your-own-adventure style video game, blurred the lines between film, video, and interactive digital storytelling, raising questions about its categorisation and reception. This study examines the intermedial challenges of taxonomy, the role of digital codes in its transcodification, and the implications of its intermedial performativity. By analysing the structure, design, and user experience of *Bandersnatch*, this research reveals the complexities of its interactive storytelling, including the influence of media systems, technologies, and contexts on the user's choices and perception. Furthermore, it highlights the need for a transdisciplinary approach to understanding the hybridisation of media in *Bandersnatch*, recognising it as a macro-genre of transcodification that challenges traditional forms, processes, and practices of media cultures.

Keywords: Transcodification, interactivity, digital storytelling, performativity, intermediality

Introduction

Bandersnatch is an interactive work that is part of the *Black Mirror* series' narrative ecosystem, which could be experienced on the Netflix platform between 2018 and 2020. The digital producer conceived and financed the project realised by Charlie Brooker, the showrunner of the famous series, which has been dealing with technologies from a dystopian but also a realistic perspective since 2011.¹

At first glance, *Bandersnatch* tells about a young man who manages to get into a programming company in the 1980s to develop a video game, designed as a kind of *Imagine Software*. The imaginary ludic dispositif is a fictional re-adaptation based on an interactive novel by Jerome F. Davies, in which the reader can choose and shape the paths of the adventure themselves. Similarly, via *Bandersnatch*, Netflix users can take part in Stefan's journey (in which, like the book's author, he is in

¹ See McSweeney/Joy 2019.

danger of losing control) by making their choices between two options for just ten seconds at a time. The work could be realised in this way in trillions of possible variants with several different endings. The book cited in *Bandersnatch* has never existed, but a video game called *Bandersnatch* was developed in the 1980s, although it did not have the approach of *choose-your-own adventure*, as it is called.²

The experimental work *Bandersnatch* has been categorised as a form of interactive cinema. It has been also received as a kind of episode or event of the *Black Mirror* series, as an interactive digital video, as a film or series with a dominant video game modality and sometimes as a kind of *new medium* (namely, interactive digital storytelling).

This paper aims to discuss in the first section some questions of intermedial classification and critical reception of *Bandersnatch*, exploring issues and possibilities of its stratified performative intermediality. The second section will focus on the role and significance of the digital in order to analyse its intermedial transcodification and engage with its deeper references and experiences of our relationships through media. This meta-reflexive level leads us to discover how we can consider *intermedial performativity* as a kind of category in which collecting artistic projects that address a medial reflection.

Intermedial challenges of categorisation and reception

From a basic perspective, practices such as interactive cinema³ and digital narrative video⁴ combine film and video modalities with the adaptive and interactive capabilities of the digital. But they are not new. The interactivity of the *choose-your-own adventure* has already been used in novels and the first non-digital interactive films, characterised by the embodying of a kind of game system. As they are modeled on traditional cinema, the fundamental methods of filmmaking, image composition, and montage remain unchanged, even if they are challenged in terms of planning, production, and continuity. In this way, *Bandersnatch*, like cinema, developed and multiplied what it called *visual narrative branches* in a rhizomatic way: segments of stories were interconnected and could be assembled in variable conglomerates of pre-loaded contents at each point as a result of the different

² See Rowney 2018.

³ See Başcı/Tanakıncı 2019; Adler 2020.

⁴ See Roth/Koenitz 2019.

weight given to user choices assembling various routes, sequences, or variation of scenes. François Jost (2020) noted from a media archaeological and ecological perspective that *Bandersnatch* could be interpreted as a kind of cinema of *inter-action*. It was an example of what can be defined as *post-cinema*, but it is important to remember that similar works remediate historical paradigms, such as that of early films in this case. The cinema of *inter-action* reconfigures filmographic works as a performative, distributed sum of experiences of construction and fruition characterised by different notions of what film is, namely composed by different (artistic) codes and experienced in different spaces, of which the audience becomes quite intuitively aware. Based on this model, the transcodification of *Bandersnatch* must find out what *interactions* there were between the human and non-human elements, the environments, and the activated dynamics, as in the early cinema experience. Even though *Bandersnatch* has been considered a digital audiovisual video form, its language, close to the idea of *post-cinema*, has taken the historical features of cinematographic and audiovisual media and combined them with digital spaces, codes, and audience's interplays.⁵

Considering *Bandersnatch* as a video game, the user's activity was at the center of this kind of interpretation, which reduced the traditional notion of film experience to its opposite: bodily passivity. This distinction cannot be accepted from a phenomenological point of view, especially if we think about the immaterial cooperation that is necessary for any work, and also remember that in *Bandersnatch* users could make a choice without a physical gesture (in this case the system made an invisible selections based on the users' previous activities or an automatic advancement related to the branches' engineering). At the same time, the deterministic conception that users constructed the narrative experience only through their interactive, i.e. physical, choices on the technological platform can be reviewed if we consider that every artwork needs supports and apparatuses to be realised and that it has a medial function itself. Furthermore, in addition to the role of media, there were various elements such as cultures, beliefs, values and personal or social experiences that influence the design and choices of the users. Another current in the video game interpretation of *Bandersnatch* was the functional quality of the characters, but this could also be applied to other media. Additionally, Stefan, the young programmer, showed forms of resistance and dialectics with the outside world. So, users were also like a kind of *vector character* in themselves. It has been clarified⁶ that *Bandersnatch* could be recognised as a computer-based video game due to its main component, which is the *realisation of each view as a unique per-*

⁵ See Arcagni 2016.

⁶ See Rodrigues *et al* 2020.

formance, subject to early interruptions or unexpected rescues, non-logical shifts between one dimension and another, and varied repetitions of certain sequences. To address this question, *Bandersnatch* was inserted into a kind of *intermedial communication close to video games* that transcodes and re-signifies all the codes based on it, creating something new.⁷

On another level, *Bandersnatch* was also part of the *Black Mirror* series project. For this reason, it has sometimes been presented or explored as an episode or model for the entire *Black Mirror* series (which launched it as a *serial Black Mirror event*) and also as a tool for thinking about seriality in general.⁸ *Bandersnatch* basically combined the modular, segmented way and the ecological construction of seriality. The fact that it was part of the *Black Mirror* universe was initially hinted at in a very simple way through the Easter Eggs it contained.⁹ But self-references were highlighted by a meta-ending in which users could declare to Stefan that they controlled him by watching a series through Netflix. It also emerged in a branch where he discovered he was on the set of the *Black Mirror* movie for Netflix. For this metacritical point about the relationship between the audience and the platform, I would like to recall that the series first ran on Channel 4 and then moved to Netflix from the third season onwards, but the anthological series continues to remind us of our relationships with media and technologies, including its own and *Bandersnatch*. *Black Mirror*, like its interactive experiment, also consists of self-contained episodes that end in twisted ways and with open endings.¹⁰ Each of them is connected not only by the theme of human-technological narrative, but also by the way they advance stories built on real or possible media relations through the confusion of spaces and times between our past, present and future.¹¹ In this way, Netflix confirmed the deeper meta-reflexive intermedial idea of seriality as *complex storytelling* proposed by Mittell (2015), who also highlighted the development of an engineering model of digital writing for series in scripted/unscripted ways.

Finally, *Bandersnatch* has been analysed like an autonomous media form of *interactive digital storytelling*.¹² As mentioned earlier, users could also decide to not physically interact with the work, as made experimentally by Adriano D'Aloia (2020). This is an option that immediately problematises the idea of its digital-physical interactivity.

⁷ See Rodrigues et al 2020.

⁸ See Demaria/Piluso 2020; Ivars-Nicolas/Martinez-Cano 2019.

⁹ See Chapman 2018.

¹⁰ See Cirucci/Vacker 2018.

¹¹ See Maiello 2018.

¹² See Monteiro 2020.

In view of all this, the problems identified by a section of academic critics are related to the lack of recognition of the hybridisation of the media in *Bandersnatch* as a categorical challenge to experience the *complex transcodification* between audience, technologies, and artworks not exclusively in a rational or physical way, but both and through its digital immateriality. The second issue, in my view, concerns the analysis of interactive participation that have been limited to the enjoyable, immersive, or phenomenological realisation without considering contextual aspects.¹³ Moreover, the problems of *Bandersnatch*'s critics stem from external analysis. Even when the interface has been mentioned, it has been seen as a simple double choice or diagrammatic chart flow, considering the structural design of the story through a classic causal or dualistic view. For example, one of the most frequently cited and criticised choice has been the first between two brands of cereals because it has no narratively relevant scope. It served to familiarise the user, but someone has noticed that the cereal boxes reappeared in subsequent scenes recalling the cinematographic and video product placement. So, more profoundly, they connect sequences that reveal, through viewing, how, where, and when media contents might be partially influenced or shared as forms of complex relationships.

Digital codes and intermedial performativities

Now we can look at how *Bandersnatch* has been *transcoded*. First, Netflix engineers developed *Branch Manager*, a tool that allows to connect multiple script ideas from different branches of the ecosystem and prepared them so that they were not necessarily connected through a double-option choice.¹⁴ The same engineers have mocked up the common idea and different visual representations of *Bandersnatch*'s structure to decode it through a diagram or flow of the double-option system.¹⁵ Moreover, *Bandersnatch*'s visual continuity was guaranteed without interruptions by a JavaScript transcoding asset, based on what they define as *Seamless UI (User Interface)*. This was a media file composition that continuously uploaded different files to the pre-cache, segmented them, evaluated the external and internal *preconditions* related to the network (device, user, choices, and timing), and adjusted the outputs in each segment. Nevertheless, *Bandersnatch* could not be displayed on all devices due to the computational requirements. This shed light on one of the main problems associated with technologies as closed

¹³ See Roth/Koenitz 2019; Beugnett/Hibberd 2020; D'Aloia 2020.

¹⁴ See Roettgers 2018.

¹⁵ See Netflix Engineering 2019.

or incompatible systems. For this reason, Charles Brooker was not interested in creating an *interactive work* per se, but a story that could illuminate the interconnection between users and media. In addition, *Bandersnatch* analyses should take into account that the realisation was linked also to the so-called *Custom UX (User Experience)*, which consists of *choice points* influenced by the weights, rules and measures of the underlying JavaScript infrastructure and conditions in each segment and in different branches.¹⁶ Indeed, the selection of the scenes and branches were influenced by the previous choices.¹⁷ The engineering team explained that they created in this way a kind of granular control, distributed in the transcoding workflow.¹⁸ The system of the choice points was also based on Netflix's experience of profiling, viewing habits and preferences.¹⁹ So, in the different branches, choices were related to moral decisions, psychological states, actions or narratological ideal choices that sometimes allowed alternatives with only violent options (Roth/Koenitz 2019, 249). If users did not choose to interact, the system managed the choices.

Thus, as Lay and Johnson (2020) argued, the selections in *Bandersnatch* presupposed (not only in technological terms) external conditions, different subjects and objects, and parallel virtual co-existence possibilities, suggesting at least a shared dialectic accountability. Even if *Bandersnatch* did not start from social and cultural perspectives, – but I think that every medium contains these aspects from the beginning – Anna Catarina Monteiro (2020) argued that the project moved through the following aspects: positive and negative polarities for the choices; the ambiguous real and fictional character of the story told, which gave it a kind of proximity to our lives; pleasurable and regretful, but always cathartic kinds of interactivity linked to the technological system, human thoughts and emotions; and the singular and general effects of reception, which became a motif of debate. These kinds of works, she argued, might require a *techno-cultural linguistic approach* to understand how they are created starting from the relationship with the body, personal desires, prejudices, cultural assumptions, and social beliefs.²⁰

But if, from the engineers' point of view, the buffer was the enemy,²¹ continuity was creatively disrupted by Charles Brooker's working with them to force users to loop, go back, repeat the process or adopt Netflix platform inputs such as fast-

¹⁶ See Schuler 2019.

¹⁷ See Roettgers 2018.

¹⁸ See Schuler 2019.

¹⁹ See Damiani 2019; Cirucci/Vacker 2018.

²⁰ See Monteiro 2020.

²¹ See Netflix Engineering 2019; Reynolds 2018.

forward.²² So, Buffering as a kind of meta-reflexive interruption, as theorised by Appadurai and Alexander in *Failure* (2019), was thus intentionally produced as the most important and deeply dramaturgical goal of its interactivity. Indeed, the symbol of the buffer can be seen in the promotional materials of *Bandersnatch* and *Black Mirror* in the past used like a *visual trope*.

The last level of analysis concerns their use of intermediality from a literary perspective, with the final focus on media perception. In *Bandersnatch* it is summarised by the symbol the *glyph*. It indicated three interconnected paths divided into different branches. The glyph has been considered as a visual representation of the digital transcodification, the concept of *Bandersnatch* and the complex relationships and entanglements between digital agencies, infrastructures and technocultures to show their mediated reciprocity.²³ It has also been used in other episodes of *Black Mirror*, confirming how this project gathers the thoughts of the entire series. In *Bandersnatch* it came from the original novel and it was recognisable several times, especially with the PAX villain, a kind of monster reproduced like a *PAC* death video game. But the word *Bandersnatch* recalled the mythological being of the same name created by Lewis Carroll through a visual *ekphrasis* in the sequel to *Alice of Wonderland, Through the Looking-Glass* (1871).²⁴ The undetermined, unique (as neologism) and verbal description created, forming different mental images of this being, were used by Carroll to regenerate its linguistic ambiguity and uncategorisable quality as a challenge to any hierarchy.²⁵ In relation to Carroll's novel, *Bandersnatch* seemed to echo many aspects of *Alice in Wonderland*,²⁶ such as the madness and enquiries of a rabbit in the infancy by Stefan who also walked through a mirror. But the deeper reference was connected to this *intermedial ekphrasis* as an approach. This technique has been discussed by López-Varela, who has collected similar examples in other intermedial works. In these cases, she speaks of the development of an *intermedial ekphrasis*²⁷ as a process that connects the inter-artistic systems of representation and the medial discourses about them for the users.²⁸ Following this dispositif, in *Bandersnatch* the invisible but material dynamics were visualised by the users *experiencing* with their practice and imagination the interface that constructs the story with the complex interchanges between different forms of graphic, iconic, acoustic,

²² See Roettgers 2018.

²³ See Conley/Borroughs 2020.

²⁴ See López-Varela Azcárate 2015, 53.

²⁵ See Kérchy 2018.

²⁶ See Kérchy 2018; Pearce 2018.

²⁷ See López-Varela Azcárate 2015, 63.

²⁸ See López-Varela Azcárate 2015, 55.

computational and human transcodification in different spaces, temporalities, environments and conditions.²⁹ To simplify glyph and *Bandersnatch*'s intermedial ekphrastic approach, it resembles Wittgenstein's visual perception experiment, where the image creates a rabbit or a duck depending on how you see it but goes beyond that to imagine a third possibility at the end that grasps both, the conditions of viewing and the viewers.

A specific macro-genre of transcodification

To conclude, *Bandersnatch*, like *Black Mirror*, runs like a *media critic and theory tool*³⁰ or an *epistemological tool* to perceive the conflicts and different possibilities of media cultures through its experience.³¹ Because of this, *intermedial performativity* may be recognised as a macro-genre for similar works that challenge forms, processes (from production to the reception), and practices of our everyday life. This should help us to collect and analyse cases that use intermedial approaches and performative traits to produce an experience and a reflection on the media and their environments. If in the past intermediality has been explained as the passage or co-presence of recognisable codes,³² as a hybrid art form³³ and as a critical philosophical approach to the elaboration of representations, media and reality,³⁴ the next step is to recognise not only practices but the existence of works as *performative intermediality* in which these elements are co-present at all levels of content, material and experience, as already stated by some authors.³⁵ But this certainly requires further research to develop and share a methodology based on the necessary *transcodification* to the artistic, media archaeological, ecological and socio-cultural fields involved.

References

Adler, K. (2020), "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch" als Hybrid zwischen Videospiel und Netflix-Film. Eine Analyse von Intermedialität im digitalen Film, Munich.

²⁹ See Giomi 2020.

³⁰ See Cirucci/Vacker 2018; Conley/Borroughs 2020, 122.

³¹ See Tirino/Tramontana 2018.

³² See Rajewsky 2018.

³³ See Pethő 2011.

³⁴ Montani 2014.

³⁵ Eilittä/Louvel/Kim 2012; King/Page 2017.

- Appadurai, A. / Neta, A. (2019), *Failure*, Cambridge, Medford.
- Arcagni, S. (2016), *Visioni digitali. Video, web e tecnologie*, Turin.
- Başçı, E. / Tanakıncı, O. (2019), "An Evaluation on Forms of Movie Watching and Interactive Cinema in Digital Age: *Bandersnatch* Movie", in: *Conference Proceedings: Communication and Technology Congress – CTC 2019*, 109–118.
- Beugnet, M. / Hibberd, L. (2020), "Absorbed in experience: new perspectives on immersive media", in: *Screen*, 61(4), 586–593.
- Chapman, T. (2018), "Every Black Mirror Easter Egg we spotted in *Bandersnatch*", in: *Digital Spy*, 30 december, <https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/a25709606/bandersnatch-easter-eggs-black-mirror/> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Cirucci, A.M. / Vacker, B. (eds.) (2018), *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory*, Lanham.
- Conley, D. / Burroughs, B., "Bandersnatched: infrastructure and acquiescence in *Black Mirror*", in: *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 37(2), 120–132.
- D'Aloia, A. (2020), "Against Interactivity. Phenomenological Notes on *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*", in: *Series*, 6(2), 21–32.
- Damiani, J. (2019), "*Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* could become Netflix's secret marketing weapon", in: *The Verge*, 2 january, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/2/18165182/black-mirror-bandersnatch-netflix-interactive-strategy-marketing> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Demaria, C. / Piluso, F. (2020), "Distopie contemporanee: *Bandersnatch* come evento seriale", in: *Mediascapes journal*, 16, 37–49.
- Eilittä, L. / Louvel, L. / Kim, S. (eds.) (2012), *Intermedial Arts: Disrupting, Remembering and Transforming Media*, Cambridge.
- Ivars-Nicolas, B. / Martinez-Cano, F.J. (2019), "Interactivity in Fiction Series as Part of Its Transmedia Universe: The Case of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*", in: B. Peña-Acuña (ed.), *Narrative Transmedia*, London. doi: 10.5772/intechopen.86881.
- Jost, F. (2020), "What Kind of Art Is the Cinema of Interactions?", in: D. Chateau/J. Moure, *Post-cinema: Cinema in the Post-art Era*, Amsterdam, 159–173.
- Giomì, A. (2020), "Towards an Ontology of Digital Arts. Media Environments, Interactive Processes and Effects of Presence", in: *Rivista di Estetica*, 73, 47–65.
- Kérchy, A. (2018), "Alice's Non-Anthropocentric Ethics: Lewis Carroll as a Defender of Animal Rights", in: *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 88.
- King, E. / Page, J. (2017), "Intermediality and Graphic Novel as Performance", in: E. King. / J. Page, *Posthumanism and the Graphic Novel in Latin America*, London, 182–206.
- Lay, C. / Johnson, D.K.(2020), "*Bandersnatch*. A Choose-Your-Own Philosophical Adventure", in: D.J. Kyle (ed.), *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, Hoboken, 198–238.
- López-Varela Azcárate, A. (2015), "Transmedial Ekphrasis. From Analogic to Digital Formats", in: *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy*, 1(1), 45–66.
- Maiello, A. (2018), "Serialità", in: M. Tirino / M. Tramontana (eds.) (2018), *I riflessi di Black Mirror. Glossario su immaginari, culture e media della società digitale*, Roma, 222–231.
- McSweeney, T. / Joy, S. (eds.) (2019), *Through the Black Mirror. Deconstructing the Side Effects of the Digital Age*, Cham.
- Mittell, J. (2015), *Complex Tv. Teoria e tecnica dello storytelling delle serie tv*, Roma.
- Montani, P. (2014), *L'immaginazione intermediale. Perlustrare, rifigurare, testimoniare il mondo visibile*, Roma.

- Monteiro, A.C. (2020), "Interactive Digital Narratives: A Close Reading Of *Bandersnatch* To Analyze The Aesthetic Relations With The User", in: *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 3(1), April 2020, 57–72.
- Netflix Engineering (2019), *Netflix JavaScript Talks – Making Bandersnatch*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLqc0EX8Bmg> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Pearce, T. (2018), "*Black Mirror Bandersnatch* has massive throwbacks to its *Alice in Wonderland* origins", in: *Metro Uk*, 28 December, <https://metro.co.uk/2018/12/28/black-mirrors-bandersnatch-massive-throwbacks-alice-wonderland-origins-8288953/> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Pethő, Á. (2011), *Cinema and Intermediality. The Passion for the In-Between*, Cambridge.
- Rajewsky, I. (2018), "Transmedial Passages. Remarks on the Heuristic Potential of a Transmedial Research Perspective in the Wider Field of Comparative Literature", in: *Between*, 8(16), 1–30.
- Reynolds, M. (2018), "The Inside Story of *Bandersnatch*, the weirdest *Black Mirror* tale yet", in: *Wired UK*, 28 december, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/bandersnatch-black-mirror-episode-explained> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Rodrigues, L. / Gonzaga, R./Montanaro, P.R. / Andrade, L. (2020), "Comunicação Intermediática em Obras Interativas: Diálogos entre as Mídias no Jogo Final Fantasy VII", in: *Conference Proceedings: SBGames 2020*, 47–53, <https://www.sbgames.org/proceedings2020/ArtesDesignFull/209758.pdf> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Roettgers, J. (2018), "Netflix Takes Interactive Storytelling to the Next Level With *Black Mirror's Bandersnatch*", in: *Variety*, 28 December, <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/netflix-black-mirror-bandersnatch-interactive-1203096171/> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Roth, C. / Koenitz, H. (2019), "Bandersnatch, Yea or Nay? Reception and User Experience of an Interactive Digital Narrative Video", in: *Conference Proceedings, TVX 2019*, 247–254.
- Rowney, J.-A. (2018), "*Black Mirror's Bandersnatch* Game Was Real – and Truth about Jerome F. Davis", in: *Mirror*, 28 December, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/film/black-mirrors-bandersnatch-game-real-13785695> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Schuler, A. (2019), "Other Side of the Mirror: How Netflix's *Bandersnatch* Advanced Interactive Storytelling", in: *Streaming Media*, 30 September. <https://www.streamingmedia.com/Articles/Editorial/Featured-Articles/Netflix-Goes-to-the-Other-Side-of-the-Mirror-With-Bandersnatch-134349.aspx> (last accessed 10/02/2025).
- Tirino, M. / Tramontana, A. (2018), *I riflessi di Black Mirror. Glossario su immaginari, culture e media della società digitale*, Roma.