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'SHUN THE FRUMIOUS BANDERSNATCH!': CHARLIE BROOKER, FREE WILL AND MK ULTRA WALK INTO A BAR

Review by Shannon Rollins

Slade, David. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch.* Performances by Fionn Whitehead, Will Pulter, Asim Chaudhry, Craig Parkinson, and Alice Lowe. Produced by Netflix, 2018. Film.

<div align="center">

Sugar Puffs
Thompson Twins
Refuse
No
No

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Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* has always explored the impact of technology, social media, and contemporary culture's high focus on digital connectivity. Candy-hued "Nosedive" (S03, E01) questions the integration of an Instagram/Yelp-esque mashup into daily interactions, Star Trek-inspired "USS Callister" (S04, E01) exposes behavioural dissonances from the same personality online and offline, and nannycam-gone-wrong "Arkangel" (S04, E02) prods at the line between ethics and personal safety. *Black Mirror* has never been a stranger to dystopian introspection of the near-future. As other Netflix programming such as *Bird Box* (2018) and *You* (2018) capitalise on Brooker's oeuvre and transition social media critiques into a booming genre, Brooker must have felt some pressure to retain his crown. With this proliferation of entertainment centring on our culture's obsession with screen technology and its transformation of what constitutes a meaningful encounter, the full-length *Bandersnatch* is both a revelation and a free will metanarrative. Across its possible two hour-plus running time, *Bandersnatch* charts the downward spiral of aspiring coder Stefan Butler as he attempts to translate a Choose Your Own Adventure novel (belonging to his deceased mother) into a genre-redefining video game of the same name.

As a child of the late 1980s/1990s I have fond memories of the Choose Your Own Adventure genre, devouring a variety of titles spanning *Jem and the Holograms: Find Your Fate* (1986) and *Goosebumps: Give Yourself Goosebumps* (1995). Brooker depends on the nostalgia Gen Xers and older millennials hold for these analogue hypertexts. He further leverages this nostalgia in setting *Bandersnatch* in 1980s London. Brooker's signature style balances a multi-layered narrative and singular focus on the A-plot, so *Bandersnatch*'s introduction of viewer choice and multiple B-plots immediately signals to the audience that this is no ordinary *Black Mirror*. Fionn Whitehead's performance as Stefan is both poignant and heart-wrenching; Stefan's anxieties,

trauma, and intelligence radiate through each socially awkward encounter with his father, therapist, and colleagues. There are no allusions to friendship, extended family, or life beyond Stefan's unnamed mental illness. In this way, Stefan reads as a direct descendent of Victor Frankenstein, completely consumed – to the point of madness – by the desire to transform the Choose Your Own Adventure novel *Bandersnatch* into a computer game that captures the novel's binary A/B plot selection process. The manic obsessive behaviours, loneliness, and conflations of love/revulsion are trademarks of a Frankenstein allusion. As with Shelley's novel, as *Bandersnatch*'s narrative quickens, and Stefan grows more isolated by his task, the viewer's participation takes on sinister connotations.

With each decision Stefan must make, the viewer must choose between two options. In the beginning, this is simple and inconsequential: Sugar Puffs or Frosted Flakes? This rapidly transitions into making life choices for Stefan and questioning your own moral compass as you push Stefan to confront therapy sessions, drug use, parental boundaries, mental health, and the possibility of free will. Prior to pressing 'play,' I had determined that after each conclusion I would re-watch Bandersnatch – and change my answers to these questions – as many times as it took to unlock every possible ending. Initially I had chosen this course of action to explore all possible outcomes. However, by the mid-point of my second round of adventure-choosing, I realised that each decision I made was either based on my own moral compass or a grudging determination to find a different pathway. The constant pressure of the A/B structure forces the viewer to make small allowances with their own impulse control: in one permutation of the hypertext, Stefan considers his medication as *Bandersnatch* presents the viewer with "flush them" or "throw them away." The viewer is aware that either choice is detrimental to Stefan's diminishing control over his mental state and is powerless to effect positive change. At moments like these, *Bandersnatch* shows the method in its metanarrative madness.

Without delving into the realm of spoilers, one particular set of decision making led to another character – one over whom I had no direct control – making a catastrophic decision during a bought of recreational drug use. The ethical weight of each decision I made weighed on me as a viewer: did it say something about me that I forced Stefan into traumatic or violent situations? Ultimately, after unlocking all endings, I came to the conclusion that only one of the possible endings could be construed as 'happy' – and that even that narrative ended with suffering. In one version of events, the viewer is exposed to the same scenes as another ending but with a sentimental frame. Brooker's ability to splice the same scene – that of Stefan's mother calling him to join her – means events can be delivered as either a heart-wrenching tragedy or a sick MK-Ultra-esque experiment. Brooker's reliance on wordplay and substitution are intended to keep the editing smooth from one choice to the next – a tactic that succeeds in maintaining pacing. And yet, with repeated viewing, this same tactic distracts the viewer from cinematic nuances. Stefan has two 'boogeymen' who haunt his obsession-fogged mind, one left-brained and one right. When choosing the more analytic path, Stefan's haunting is in the shape of *Bandersnatch* novelist Jerome F. Davies. On the more creative (read: manic) path Stefan is instead met with Davies's own tormentor, a monstrous demon named Pax. Like Stefan, Davies also became obsessed with the concept of free will, binary pathways, and distrust of those surrounding him. This level of metanarrative is common for Brooker, and expertly

delivered as the viewer connects Lewis Carrol's 'bandersnatch' which cannot be outrun with the unrelenting pressure of obsession. The inclusion of the stuffed rabbit subplot increases the Carrol connection.

In all storylines, childhood trauma – namely the tragic death of his mother – dictates Stefan's mental state and stimuli response. Stefan and his father Peter are awkward in each other's company, with Peter at times appearing afraid of his son's volatility. Stefan blames himself for his mother's death in a train derailment: five-year-old Stefan refused to leave the house without a misplaced toy (a stuffed rabbit), and the delay caused her to take the later, doomed train. Here the Carrol reference is nearly too heavy handed as the rabbit toy is, in fact, late for a very important date. On one path, Stefan dreams that he moves through the bathroom mirror – literally through the looking glass – into the past, where his five-year-old self discovers the whereabouts of his rabbit. Regardless of which pathways the viewer chooses, *Bandersnatch* ensures that they learn of both his mother and his rabbit's loss. This glimmer of humanity is crucial to the more gore-laden moments where Brooker transitions from flirting with horror to accomplishing it.

For those unmoved by nostalgia-driven cinematography, kitsch creatures, gore, or drug-induced special effects, *Bandersnatch*'s reliance on novelty will prove insufficient. For this audience, a rapid ending – which I experienced on my first viewing – would be enough to drive the viewer away. *Bandersnatch* must be revisited to be fully appreciated, with each storyline tapping into a different emotional vein – and rounding out Stefan's character. With one possible pathway ending the story and restarting 'game play' in less than ten minutes, the opening song "Relax" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood (1983) commands a mind-set shift for the viewer while also highlighting a round of intense foreshadowing that includes mechanical medication-taking, Sex Pistols-referential graffiti, and several remarks from Stefan's father. 'Rounding out' Stefan, and making sense of his madness, becomes the viewer's responsibility. This transitions the viewer away from traditional narrative in a way that is unnervingly on-brand for *Black Mirror*; the 'black mirror' reflection in the case of *Bandersnatch* is that there are no objectively 'right' choices or 'wrong' paths – only a moral compass.

In crafting *Bandersnatch*'s pathways Brooker appears to have taken cult coming-of-age-in-the-80s stories into account; one storyline bares remarkable resemblance to *Donnie Darko*'s portrayal of philosophy and madness (2001), while another delves into the territory of the Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things* (2016-2019) by alluding to a questionable LSD human behaviour study with strong MK-Ultra overtones. For me, this plot branch read as the least convincing and the least satisfactory. Framing Stefan's harrowing experience as a 'bad trip' – orchestrated or otherwise – diminishes the character's definition. As such, though it handily engages the key theme of free will via metanarrative, upon later reflection the dosing storyline cheapens Stefan's struggles with mental health. Likewise, Choose Your Own Adventure requires a rapid pacing that is insufficient to fully explore the study's context and purpose. Due to this, the MK-Ultra storyline read as pandering towards the portion of *Black Mirror* fandom that delights in Brooker's conspiracy theory episodes. Regardless of these small quibbles, *Bandersnatch* is a prescient and innovative addition to Weird Fiction, contemporary satire, and techno-horror genres. Fans of binge-watching and *Black Mirror* alike can only hope that Brooker

incorporates learnings from his foray into Choose Your Own Adventure in future seasons – and that other programmes take note of this masterclass in full-concept television.

BIONOTE

Shannon Rollins is an independent researcher based in Antwerp, Belgium. She holds a PhD from the University of Edinburgh where she studied the material impact of twenty-first century romance fiction on women's dress practices in Anglo-American steampunk cultures. Her most recent publication "The Frankenstein Meme: The Memetic Prominence of Shelley's Creature in Anglo-American Visual and Material Cultures" (*Global Frankenstein* 2018) investigates the continued cultural currency of Frankenstein's monstrosity in Western cultures. Her current research interests include steampunk in the Anthropocene, the impulses driving retrofuturistic technologies (from both maker and mainstream cultures), and the contexts of female representation in contemporary Science Fiction.