



'Black Mirror: Bandersnatch' Explores Interactive Storytelling

01.04.2019

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch is essentially "a story about fascinating new technology that's around fascinating new technology," says Todd Yellin, VP of products at Netflix.

The streamer's first interactive storytelling experience for adults is set in 1984, and focuses on young video game programmer Stefan (Fionn Whitehead), who develops the fantasy novel "Bandersnatch" into a video game and begins to question reality.

To get even more meta, the film becomes a sort of game for viewers as well, putting them in the driver's seat as they make decisions that determine the direction of the content, revealing multiple storylines and endings.

"Part of the excitement of working at Netflix is constantly inventing what is internet TV. There is a lot of responsibility because we are innovating on this whole new form," said Yellin in a featurette about how the project came together.

Netflix is one of the major players to embrace the concept of choose your own adventure-style programming, and debuted Black Mirror: Bandersnatch on

December 28 after two years in the making.

The streamer has been playing around with branching narratives for a couple years now, focusing on children's programs including Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale, and Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile.

RELATED: How HBO, Netflix Are Changing TV with Branching Narratives

"We felt that if it didn't succeed in the kids' space, it wouldn't succeed with grownups," Yellin told Wired. "Kids don't know how something's supposed to be, they just know how it is."

The experiment paid off as children cheered and booed at the screen, and paved the way for a larger undertaking.

"We tried a couple of kids specials and it was time to roll up sleeves and go, 'How about if we do something bigger? How about if we did it for adults?'" said Yellin in the featurette.

And Black Mirror, a science fiction anthology series that "taps into our collective unease with the modern world"-often focusing on technology-became the perfect vessel for such a project.

"I think we only wanted to do it if we thought it was adding an extra layer thematically," said Black Mirror producer Annabel Jones. "We didn't really want it to feel like it was just a gimmick."

Ballooning scripts, a massive amount editing and confusing experiences for actors who performed the same scenes multiple times with slight variations were just some of what went into the development.

"It was very challenging at every stage," Charlie Brooker, creator, writer and producer of Black Mirror, said in the above featurette. "There were points where in working stuff out, it got like trying to do a Rubik's cube in your head, and I had to literally get up from my desk and kind of walk around the house holding my head."

Netflix is also not the only content producer to play around with interactive storytelling.

HBO dipped its toe the interactive space in 2018 with Mosaic from Steven Soderbergh, which premiered as both a branching narrative as well as a stand-alone linear series.

The show explores a murder from two different time frames and allows viewers to choose different characters and re-examine the case from different perspectives.

It's "a story that you navigate â€" a story that lets you go deeper to see the bigger picture .. a story with multiple perspectives â€" And when it's all over, you'll want to look again, and again, and again," HBO said in the trailer.

RELATED: Whatever You Think You Know, You're Wrong, in 'Mosaic'

At its core, the potential of interactive storytelling is beginning to emerge as major entertainment companies such as Netflix and HBO continue to explore the possibilities.

"The fact that we're combining technology and design and innovation with incredible global storytelling really leads to exciting experiences like Bandersnatch," Yellin said.

And who knows what's next.