

As We Have Watched

What Now Arises from a Reconsideration of the Concept of Interactive Digital Narrative

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Abstract

If we consider the publication of *Bandersnatch* (Slade) by Netflix as a watershed moment for interactive digital narrative (IDN), are we to believe that we have now moved into a golden age or do we remain in an age of discovery? Tom Abba, in the *Journal of Media Practice*, situates the moment of publication of his article as a turning point for IDN, though Abba concludes that the degree to which experiments in IDN have been enabled has, up to 2008, been extremely limited. Now, some twelve years later and three years' post-*Bandersnatch*, the opportunity to experiment has finally been granted. A group of second year media production students at a UK university did so in collaboration with *Stornway.io* (an online IDN story map editor). This paper revisits Abba's 2008 article to reflect on issues that emerge from the experience of introducing IDN to undergraduate students on a program of study. Initial findings offer insights into the sequencing of the development process alongside an emerging framework for the generation of an aesthetic of dramatic agency. Re-evaluating the differences between IDN and other forms of interactive experiences establish a means for thinking about IDN as a distinct, unique practice. In conclusion, this paper poses a final question by asking if we can reconsider IDN in terms of what we have watched rather than, as Abba terms it, *what we might watch*.

Keywords

Bandersnatch, Interactive, Digital, Narrative, Fiction, Video

1. Beyond *Bandersnatch*

We now live in a post-*Bandersnatch* age, if we take the release of *Bandersnatch* (Slade) on Netflix as a watershed moment. You could almost possibly conceive of a Before *Bandersnatch* (BB) and After *Bandersnatch* (AB) periodization for interactive digital narrative (IDN). This hallmarked a triumphal moment, indeed, a great future for IDN was proposed; we were told that everything would be different now. Hot on the heels of the release of *Bandersnatch*, Netflix publicly invited proposals for interactive media in any genre, all the time suggesting it already had other ideas in production (Streitfeld). Headlines screamed at us that this “bold experiment in storytelling” (Christian) evidenced a “bright future” (Schwartz) for interactive storytelling. *The Guardian* called it, “game changing,” the “TV of tomorrow” that “herald[ed] a new dawn of interactive programming” (Mangan). *Wired* called it a “new era of storytelling” whereas the over-excited head of product at the time, Todd Yellin, claimed that Netflix was “just beginning to scratch the surface of the kinds of stories that can be told in this way” (Rubin). Yet, three years after *Bandersnatch*, we can look back at this triumphalism, most of which was possibly culled from the Netflix press release, to ask, what – exactly – happened next? The answer is: not a long one. Conversations with those in the field cite several reasons for the lack of significant follow-up releases: the complexity of creating interactive content; the cost of production; the possibility that, in fact, Netflix audiences do not really desire interactive content and prefer a more passive role, which is, after all, for what they are paying. Meanwhile, the increased practice of VR, advanced storytelling experiences in games, transmedia,

and other forms of entertainment seem to leave behind the claims for a “bright future” slightly bereft of validity.

Well, to be sure, we have heard this before (for example, 3D cinema makes its triumphant comeback every ten years or so) and even then, what happened post-*Bandersnatch* was even less significant. At least, not to the scale predicted by media back in late 2018. Nevertheless, there is a lot of interactive digital narrative created. Reading around the various trend prediction websites, there appears to be a lively interest in the growth or adoption of interactive video. Unsurprisingly, marketers lead the way. Shoppable videos, which allow customers to “shop while they watch,” (Rimmer) drive e-commerce trends, while the opportunity for creating interactive content on YouTube and Vimeo puts the capability for generating affordable, interactive content into everyone’s hands. Just do a quick search on YouTube and you will see an active area of production. There is a desire to create this kind of media with a clear interest among audiences. If experience is anything to buy, there is no doubt in my mind that it will be on YouTube and Vimeo, where interesting content will be found. The ease of use, the affordability, and the uncomplicated access to audiences will drive innovation. As someone new to creating media in this form, as someone who wants to probe the nature of IDN, and how it differs from all other forms of interactive experience available to us, I ask the following: what, exactly, is IDN and, by implication, what is it not?

2. As we would watch

Usefully, Tom Abba in his article answers well the question of what IDN is, situating the development of the form within a historical context up to the point that he writes in 2008. He offers several pertinent insights into the nature of interactive storytelling, though he concludes that, “thus far, the degree to which directors have been willing, or able, to engage with that experimentation has been limited” (Abba 25). Whereas three years AB (After-Bandersnatch), the opportunity to experiment has been granted since technology now enables us to do so. Consequently, there is a desire to better understand differences between traditional linear and interactive storytelling, if we are to seize the opportunity to play in this field of practice – more so, if we are expected to teach IDN to future media makers.

In his exploration of the form, Abba questions the conceptual possibilities for IDN of what might need to be retained from more traditional linear forms of story experience, and what might be discarded. He inquires if the act of interaction itself might give rise to narrative, thereby subsuming the role of author to a mode of address (Abba 19) that privileges the audience and their choices above all else. This assumed agency of the audience with the need to draw a story to a conclusion contrasts when “the reader is denied an experience of true narrative agency within an interactive environment” (Abba 21). Since we are told that, in the end of an IDN, every narrative eventually converges to deny the reader true agency. Whereas, in classical narrative forms, there is an end which brings some sense of satisfaction to the audience (Abba 21). In response, some claim that, in interactive fiction, closure is

not possible. This proposes an intriguing, yet reductive notion: is closure unachievable? If the experience itself proves satisfying and provides catharsis to the audience, maybe that suffices. Abba points out that we already live in such a world where we can easily find closure in our own experiences. So, why is it not possible for characters in our interactive story worlds (Abba 22)?

Clearly, there is a need to resolve the "competing desire of author and audience," (Abba 22) but perhaps all that is needed here is a means to reframe the role of the author. No longer does the author create a unified linear world with a closed ending. Instead, the author generates an expansive encounter with stories more akin to real world, embodied, lived experiences, which are open-ended, complex, and wherein choices reap consequences. If we consider the role of author differently, if we think of it as co-authorship, as a partnership between author and audience, then we might arrive at a balance (Abba 24). Achieving this balance requires a reconceptualization of traditional storytelling tools. Instead of employing writing that seeks to control through precision or by deploying semiotic codes in such a way as to impart the 'right' meaning for the audience, maybe the logic of writing for IDN relates more so to activating the audience's decision-making logic in service of our stories. Such an approach would require a psychological understanding of audience experience. Upon looking at the educational background for many whom call themselves experience designers, they tend to be psychology postgraduates. While these elements press the audience's proverbial buttons in terms of semiotic aesthetics for *mise-en-scène*, character, story structure, cinematography, production design and so forth, remain

important, IDN offers an additional dimension of experience that triggers engagement and participation at a cognitive and psychological level. After all, IDN is not intended to be a passive experience, the audience is expected to take an active part in the encounter. Co-authoring a narrative requires as much.

3. Someone's knocking at the door

An alternative to the BBC 'Storyformer' platform, Stornaway.io launched an independent story mapping editor that enables creators to quickly layout story islands, link them, and playtest them live as part of the design process. Having been introduced to the *Stornaway.io* founders, Ru Howe and Kate Dimbleby, there arose an opportunity for a partnership that allows for level five media production students from Solent University, to play with their platform to create their own IDN content. At the time, I had little understanding for how to teach writing for IDN, which differs from teaching traditional fiction screenwriting techniques employed for live-action narratives. An insight I found extremely valuable stems from a comment by Story Director, Cassie Phillipps. Revealed on a panel at the Game Developer's Conference (GDC2019), it is important to narrate the story first without interactive content and add the decision points thereafter (Phillipps). In the experience of developing IDN in a Writer's Room, Phillipps explains that, unsurprisingly, arguments often occur during the developmental process about how to shape the overall story arc. When the team reviews the story to incorporate interactive options, these same points generate the most debate when considering these decision-making opportunities. In reflection, these narrative points produce the most dramatic conflict, and subsequently,

facilitate more discussion; therefore, it is imperative to situate your decision points accordingly.

Watching students create IDN during the module was interesting; despite sharing this wisdom consistently, they still pursued interactivity, what they could do with narrative branches, how they might explore multiple versions, and so on. Initially, the focus on decision points drove the development of the plot rather than the story. It is quite common that early script drafts for this module are plot driven; a key learning outcome for students emphasizes understanding the difference between story and plot. After a couple of weeks of struggling to map out IDN ideas, we took the opportunity to step back to concentrate on solidifying one story arc down in a series of intensive group tutorials wherein I devised a character story arc canvas to structure the discussion. Following the tutorials, students developed a strong, simplified story, clear exterior/interior goals for their protagonists, character development arcs, and an underlying interior journey expressed through meta textuality (i.e., symbolism, metaphor, behavior, mise-en-scène etc.). As a valuable experience once we established the story arc, in pretty much all cases, the question for where to place the decision points and how to link them to dramatic conflict within the context of their story became clear.

Upon completing this process, students noticed how their decision points might be keyed into the story in a way that lured the audience into the story world. In his article on invisible agency in IDN, Sercan Şengün argues that the audience's ability to

“affect, choose or change the plot” (180) serves as a defining characteristic. Quoting Janet Murray (1997, 126), agency in IDN is “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (Şengün 180). Importantly, these choices must be meaningful to resonate with the audience. Here, the interactive potential of agency offered to the audience aims to emotionally engage in a way that challenges the audience to be complicit in the narrative possibilities in the story. Thereby, offering an “emergent experience” (Abba 20) balances the author’s intentions through the emergent narrative brought to the story by potential interaction.

We may interpret a few things from this: the idea of *satisfaction* coupled with the notion of *meaningful action* are good starting points to consider the audience’s experience, and, how we as authors, might want to conceptualize the way we deploy decision points in our narratives. Well-positioned decision points linked to the character arc of the story world should encourage the audience’s emotional entanglement with the characters, thus complicit in their decision-making when considering ethical or moral choices, and the in-story consequences these bring for these characters. However, is this enough to differentiate a game from a narrative fiction experience in the digital realm?

In making major contributions to the ludology vs. narratology debate, Murray explores the contested territory between games and stories wherein the two forms have overlapping, yet distinct pleasures. For Murray, games are pleasurable, because

they immerse us in shared attention with other human beings, via shared pattern recognition and shared rituals. On the other hand, pleasure that arises from narrative experience draws from our need to interpret causes and effects. Narrative experiences engage us emotionally and morally. Through narrative experiences, we participate in shared cultural values. Although each grant the audience agency, the quality of experience differentiates games from interactive fiction for Murray. Narrative agency is more than a property, function, or the capacity to have and make choices. It is necessary to exert “dramatic agency,” (Murray 101) which comes about through the pleasure we *feel* when we can meaningfully interact with a fictional world – not just through absorption within the story world, sometimes referred to as being ‘in the zone.’ A feeling of immersion arises when we surrender ourselves to the story world. The familiar notion of suspension of disbelief contrasts such an idea through co-authorship of an “active creation of belief,” (Murray 103) which becomes possible in IDN.

What we find is that “agency and immersion are mutually reinforcing,” (Murray 103) since they contribute to the experience in a complimentary way. Games can have narrative and narrative can be gamified. Game mechanics contribute hugely to the narrative possibilities for IDN. While narratology provides inspiration for developing games that embrace story as a means of building out the world into an emotional framework wherein the audience participates, the audience can actively and creatively test the boundaries of the story world to discover the depth and range of responses. If we must differentiate between game-orientated and narrative-

orientated forms of IDN, Murray, then, suggests that the best question to ask is, “does it make us cry?” (85). Yet, we are not expected to take this literally. An emotional response doesn’t *have* to result in tears. Instead, the idea advocates for a level of emotional entanglement that comes through the audience identifying with the characters in the story world. This baseline speaks to the sense that there are real consequences to actions, that the stakes are high, and that these fictional characters engage our empathy. When faced with the question “does it make you cry?,” what we imply is that we are able to empathize in a meaningful way with a fictional representation of the human experience (Murray 85).

4. Story effect and affect in IDN

Reflecting on this experience, I considered the etymology of the words, *affect* and *effect* (Merriam-Webster), with the intent to find a clear way to model the difference between decision points that impact plot and those that impact the story. There is merit in being able to articulate a model that sets out the difference between story and plot in IDN that might guide creators in their own work. In a higher education context, it is even more valuable to be able to explain clearly to students what is meant when decision points need to drive story. The ability to theoretically articulate this difference not only enables us to create more compelling IDN, but it also aids us in distinguishing between IDN and other forms of interactive experience such as computer games.

Effect is a noun that describes the result of a change or can be used as a verb to mean something that brings about change. Regardless, *effect* changes what happens in a story. *Affect*, however, is a verb that refers to the cause of a change, while also functioning as a noun which refers to feelings, emotions, and a psychological state of mind. In other words, *affect* implies that which brings about change – the how as it happens of the story. Arguably, what makes choice meaningful is the *affect* since it impacts the interior, emotional goals of the characters within the story arc, not the *effect* on the story narrative which only impacts exterior goals, propels action, and thus, fails to drive the emotional or psychological change that must take place to ensure a satisfying, meaningful experience for the audience. This model could be thought of as one in which *affect* and *effect* share an inverse relationship in a similar way to how *wants* and *needs* frame character arcs in screenwriting. Simply put, a story starts with *wants* over *needs*, but concludes with *needs* over *wants* (thus, the reversal at the conclusion of act two). In lay language, what drives the protagonist at the start of a story is their exterior goals, their *wants*. At the end of the story, the protagonist often fails to achieve their wants, but gets what they *need*. The point being: it is a character's interior goals that emotionally entangle an audience to make the experience meaningful.

effect =	to change the plot	what happens	EXTERIOR GOALS
affect =	to bring about change	how it happens	INTERIOR GOALS

Table 1. Model for IDN decision points.

Here, a sense of agency, commonly found in many interactive experiences, might be thought of as an agency of *effect* – it impacts what happens: you run about, change your hat, bash things, earn points, and level up. While simplistic, these examples capture a sense of what is involved in most, if not all, interactive games: importantly, the ability to impact the story is extremely limited; although agency exists, it is constrained to choices that impact or change the plot. To define a difference between games and IDN, surely, falls onto creators who seek to *affect* story. We want to be enmeshed in the moral, ethical agency of the characters, not just attack or run about. For a satisfying, meaningful IDN experience, there needs to be catharsis for the audience, which only comes about if our decision points *affect* the story. This differentiation between *effect* and *affect* appears to mirror the difference between agency and dramatic agency (Şengün 180). On interactivity, Murray talks about an aesthetic of dramatic agency where interaction aligns with dramatic pay off – which is not the same as winning (Murray).

The aim of physics in a game world is not necessarily to craft a sense of realism; rather, it can be used to create a sense of unreality or surrealism. For example, gravity need not be uniform, but it requires a set of laws that apply to all circumstances within the game world. If the game designer twists physics to add dimensional or locational hopping, there must be a means to deploy physics within the game world so that the player understands. Even when games use magic as a tool for manipulating the game world, there are rules, laws, physics that constrain and order its use. If IDN is to offer an experience that is truly immersive, captivating, and

participatory, it also needs a physics for its moral, ethical dimensions of a story world. What happens when moral conflicts arise between characters? What consequences arise from a character's unethical behavior?

Moral dilemmas require solutions. Ethical paradoxes require us to reflect on our choices and behavior. When we enter a fictional world, we don't suspend so much as *actively create belief* (Murray 136). For this to happen, the audience needs more than to know that objects will move through space in a predictable manner; they need to engage with the psychology of the characters they encounter in the story world. It is from within the *moral and ethical physics* (Murray, *Research into Interactive Digital Narrative: A Kaleidoscopic View*) of a story world that *dramatic agency* emerges.

5. What we have watched

In fictional and non-fictional subject disciplines, the nature of stories alongside the paradigms for conceptualizing interactive experiences are greatly contested. Yet, there are no definitive answers. Our definitions, terminology and conceptual frameworks are fluid and unfolding. As Murray suggests, we may well be developing a framework of concepts, devices, and technologies for a future form of story experience which has yet to emerge: perhaps it will, indeed, be the holodeck. Nevertheless, here is an illustrated outline of a few key insights that have so far emerged from the experience:

1. Write the story first, then incorporate the interactive elements later; look for the points of *dramatic conflict*, and add your decision points there;

2. Decision points should be "moment of decision and consequence" (Abba 21) for your characters, they should *affect* story arc – avoid decisions that solely *effect* exterior goals;
3. Your story world should be more than a physical universe, it needs a *moral and/or ethical physics* (Murray, *Research into Interactive Digital Narrative: A Kaleidoscopic View*) in which your characters and hopefully, your audience, are immersed.

Of course, there is more to remark upon. In particular, I look at how decision points might be embedded within an IDN as part of the logic for the story world in a way that avoids the distancing that occurs when a series of questions pop up. Instead, I advocate for deeper immersion and the suspension of disbelief. Furthermore, there are questions about how to onboard or induct the audience into the experience; here, there is much to learn from the techniques adopted by immersive theatre practitioners such as Punch Drunk and others. These immersive experiences often involve a gateway or threshold-crossing experience that serves as a signpost for the audience. Beyond this barrier, the rules of the story world apply, thereby insinuating an acceptance that things may be different. It also provides the audience with a means to decode the story world through genre reference, for example, thus enabling the audience members to adapt to new rules. These concepts provide fertile ground for further investigation. In response, I am keen to repeat the experiment for the next academic year with new students. No matter what the future entails, we might now

reconsider IDN in terms of what we *have* watched rather than, as Abba phrased it, what we *might* watch.

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