The Paradox of Choice in Interactive Fiction: A Critical Analysis of *Bandersnatch*'s 'Choose-Your-Own-Adventure' Structure

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Abstract: This paper explores the emerging field of interactive fiction, with a special focus on the Netflix film *Bandersnatch*, and investigates whether interactive fiction truly empowers its audience to 'choose-their-own-adventure' through the use of free will or if it is simply a pre-scripted illusion. In particular, the paper explores the important role of artificial intelligence (AI) in interactive fiction, and how AI can be used to enhance the audience's experience of narrative agency and choice. The findings suggest that while interactive fiction offers a degree of choice and agency, the options presented to the audience are ultimately predetermined and limit the degree of free will available to the audience. However, the study also highlights the potential for AI to create more complex and dynamic narratives in interactive fiction that offer a greater degree of narrative agency and choice to the audience. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of the nature of narrative agency and the ways in which it is constructed in interactive fiction, as well as highlights the importance of balancing free will and pre-scripted elements in designing engaging and satisfying interactive fiction experiences.

Keywords: Interactive fiction, *Bandersnatch*, artificial intelligence, free will, narrative structure

The term Interactive Fiction has gained immense traction in the last couple of decades. From Chaucer to Sherlock Holmes, everything is being cast anew in the mould of Interactive Fiction. It seems that no branch of cultural production remains untouched by the phenomenon of Interactive Fiction. But what exactly is this phenomenon that has captured everyone's attention and got everyone talking?

Interactive Fiction, in its broadest sense, refers to any genre or form of fiction, ranging from epic poetry to narrative-driven video games, that is interactive. Regardless of its medium – whether it's a novel, video game, or cinema – Interactive Fiction is essentially a ludo-narrative. In other words, Interactive Fiction represents an intersection of the narrative conventions such as plot, characters, setting, theme, etc., with the participatory feature that is usually associated with ludic elements (gameplay). Since Interactive Fiction is a kind of ludo-narrative mutant, thus, ludo-narrative dissonance consequently becomes another essential feature of this genre. Ludo-narrative dissonance refers to the tension that is generated when gameplay is represented through narrative conventions, and the narrative is conveyed through ludic elements. Ruth Aylett and Sandy Louchart, eminent minds in the field of virtual reality, rephrase ludo-narrative dissonance as "the interactive paradox" which they describe as, "On one hand the author seeks control over the direction of a narrative in order to give it a satisfactory structure. On the other hand, a participating user demands the autonomy to act and react without explicit authorial constraint" (25).

The ludo-narrative dissonance brings to light the two essential yet contradictory strands of Interactive Fiction, i.e., ludic elements and narrative conventions. These two strands coalesce to give rise

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to forms that are peculiar to Interactive Fiction, namely playable stories and narrative games. Playable stores and narrative games, by their very natures, embody the interactive paradox, and in their inherent opposition reflects the distinction formulated by the French sociologist Roger Caillois between two varieties of gameplay, i.e., *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* refers to such games that do not have any defined or pre-determined goals. In other words, such games whose ultimate purpose is neither winning nor losing can be categorized under *paidia*. Hence, *paidia* games are essentially mimetic activities and they are not played for the ultimate reward to be gained by winning but for the sheer pleasure of playing. Indeed, the pleasure experienced by the players of *paidia* games resides in the fact that there are no hard-and-fast rules in such games; the rules if and when they exist, are created spontaneously by the players and can be re-negotiated at any point of the game. For instance, in children's 'make-believe' games the participating children spontaneously decide that a random tree would represent, say, the hut of a witch. Thus, the essential feature of *paidia* is the active engagement of imagination in building fictional worlds, adopting and assimilating foreign entities and establishing social relations. The most suitable examples of *paidia* games are the children's games that involve creating imaginary scenarios and using toys as props for validating their make-believe scenes, such as the popular Indian children's game of arranging weddings of their dolls.

The essence of *paidia* is reflected in the digital genre of playable stories. Like *paidia* games, the playable stories do not lead the user to winning or losing. The ultimate goal of the player is not to beat the game but to observe and participate in the gradual process of story-building. Consequently, the aesthetic pleasure derived from playing playable stories surpasses that of narrative games, which compel the player to focus solely on the ultimate goal of winning. The essence of playable stories does not lie in following a definite set of rules but rather in coaxing a good, enjoyable story out of the system by negotiating rules on the go, in the spirit of *paidia*. For instance, in a playable story like *Virtual Villagers* there cannot be any winner or loser; only participants who will help the distraught villagers survive, and in the process, create their own unique stories. Playable stories encompass simulation games (such as *Virtual Villagers*), role-playing games (like *Diner Dash*), games based on hypertext fiction and interactive drama – games that are played not for the ultimate goal of winning but for the sheer pleasure of it.

Ludus, on the other hand, refers to games that are strictly controlled by pre-determined rules, which are accepted by the players as the fundamental game contract, and following these rules results in the clearly defined results of winning or losing. The players of *ludus* games are motivated by their ultimate goal, which is to win the game. In constrast to the *paidia* games, the core essence of *ludus* games lies in the thrill of competition and the satisfaction derived from successfully completing the assigned tasks.

While *paidia* is reflected in playable stories, it can be argued that the spirit of *ludus* inspires narrative games. It is an indisputable fact that video games pre-date digital technology, as we all may be familiar with some of the rudimentary video games such as, *Speed Race* (1974), *Pong* (1972), etc. However, the most significant contribution of digital technology to the field of video games is their 'narrativization.' Narrativization in this context, refers to the transformation undergone by videogames from what used to be abstract playfields, such as two-dimensional football fields or race tracks, into concrete three-dimensional fictional worlds filled with recognizable, life-like objects and individuated characters. The fundamental difference between abstract games, such as chess or soccer, and narrativized games, like *Half-life*, *Resident Evil*, or *Grand Theft Auto* is that in abstract games the thrill is generated and the goals, which imply merely winning the game or scoring the highest points, are made desirable through strict adherence to the rules of the game. Whereas the charm of narrativized games lies in the fact that the players are given the opportunity to pursue goals that resonate with their everyday dreams or suppressed fantasies. The goals of narrative games often involve saving the world from invaders, fighting aliens and zombies, or rescuing the distraught masses from dangers – goals that surely strike a chord in almost every player's heart. Motivated by

such grandiose goals and convincing story-building, the players enter the narrative games with the sole purpose of accomplishing the goals and beating the game, all in the spirit of *ludus*.

In Interactive Fiction, ludic elements and narrative conventions are so inextricably intertwined that it becomes practically impossible to separate one from the other. I would validate my point by quoting the evaluation of the critics of the award-winning video games in the recent years. For instance, The Telegraph described *80 Days*, which was awarded the title of the game of the year 2014 by Time magazine as "Is it a game? Is it a story? Both, really. And a delight." Similarly, *Device 6* developed by Simogo, which won the Apple Design Award of 2014 was described by New-Gamer-Nation as "You'll think you've accidentally picked up your Kindle device and started a new book." It can thus be concluded that Interactive Fiction is an inextricable intermingling of ludic elements (gameplay) and narrative conventions.

Nevertheless, both the strands continue to retain their, albeit imperceptible, distinctness which can be discerned through the 'immersion' of the reader/player/user in the ludic and narrative elements, respectively. For instance, ludic immersion is the absolute engagement experienced by the user/player while solving a riddle or performing an assigned task. Ludic immersion can be compared to the intense concentration with which a mathematician solves an equation or the intense concentration with which a musician, say, a pianist renders a solo performance. However, this immersive experience is not contingent on the mimetic content of the game. For example, the ludic immersion of the players while playing abstract games, such as chess or soccer is the same as playing *Resident Evil* or *Second Life*, i.e., games with narrative content. In ludic immersion the active physical participation of the player is a prerequisite. Narrative immersion, on the other hand, suggests the mental involvement of the reader's imagination in constructing and contemplating fictional worlds that rely on the reader's mental engagement and even emotional involvement, to some extent.

Since interaction and user engagement are essential features of Interactive Fiction, it is natural that language occupies a pre-dominant position within this field. In the words of Nick Montfort, Interactive Fiction is "a program that simulates a world, understands natural language from an interactor, and provides a textual reply based on events in this world" (316). The pioneering incorporation of user's engagement with the narrative through natural language comprehension is indeed the trailblazing innovation employed by Interactive Fiction, though, unfortunately with limited efficacy. Though interaction through natural language endows the user with a life-like experience of freedom of expression, there is no assurance that the system will comprehend the input and respond in a coherent and logical manner if the user's utterance does not align with the pre-programmed set of possible utterances. More often than not, Interactive Fiction fails to seamlessly integrate the user responses within the narrative. Despite the promise of Interactive Fiction to grant unprecedented authorial power to the user/player, the narrative, in worst-case scenarios progresses only when the players are divested of their autonomy and are reduced to merely acquiescent objects who are compelled to solve riddles, overcome hurdles and unlock levels in order to complete the course of the game. Such cul-de-sac scenarios are described by the game designer, Chris Crawford as "constipated story." Similarly, game critic Steven Poole describes the situation in a tongue-in-cheek manner, "It is as if you were reading a novel and being forced by some jocund imp at the end of each chapter to go and win a game of table tennis before being allowed to get back to the story" (109).

Based on the methods of integrating natural language comprehension, Interactive Fiction can be categorised into two branches, namely i) Parser-based interactive fiction; and ii) Choice-based interactive fiction. Parser-based interactive fiction allows users to engage with the narrative by enabling them to type their responses in the designated dialogue box. Unlike choice-based interactive fiction, which compels users to select one item from the pre-determined options, parser-based interactive fiction does not limit the range of user's responses; they are given the freedom to interact with the narrative in whatever manner they wish. However, the catch in this too-good-to-be-true interactive freedom is that in most instances, the parser will fail to respond logically and adequately.

The parser rejects any input that it fails to process, thereby sacrificing the naturalness of language as well as the player's freedom of expression by severely limiting the player's use of vocabulary and syntax. The parser only accepts inputs that correspond to its pre-programmed list of utterances, which are usually truncated commands like, 'take potion', 'pick up sword', etc.; thereby compelling players to memorize the idiom of the system, almost like learning a second language.

However, the limitations imposed by parser-based interactive fiction on the free flow of natural language pale in comparison to the extreme restrictions in the use of language that occurs in choice-based interactive fiction. The choice-based interactive fiction allows the players to engage with the narrative by picking up an option from the list of canned utterances that appear before the players. Unlike in parser-based interactive fiction, the players are spared from memorising any specialised idiom since the lists of pre-determined choices appear before them. Consequently, in choice-based interactive fiction the system responds coherently and accurately to the player's inputs. However, this efficiency in response is achieved at the expense of the fluidity of narrative, since the narrative time is paused until a choice is made by the player which also affects the players' experience of immersing themselves in the fictional world.

Do You Want to Continue Reading?
1. Yes, of course
2. No
3. Undetermined
4. Do Not Pester Me with Impudent Questions!

Such menu-based or more commonly known, choice-based communication is the most essential and defining characteristic of Interactive Fiction across all media. They ubiquitously occur in every form of Interactive Fiction, whether it be 'Choose-your-own-adventure' novels, video games, or participatory cinemas, and endow the user/player/operator with the power to decide for themselves the course of the events that will take place within the narrative. The narratives of many video games and other forms of interactive fiction, in fact, progress through such interactions between user and characters, where the user selects an item from the given list of canned utterances. This interactivity forms the core essence of interactive fiction as it not only lures the user to participate and engage with the plot but also makes the user's participation indispensable, implying that the absence of the user's participation compels the narrative to terminate. This feature sets the reader/user free from the passivity often associated with conventional/traditional narratives and endows them with authorial freedom and autonomy. By selecting a specific item from the multiple choices available, the user feels responsible for the turn of the events that unfold as the story progresses. The authorial freedom experienced by the user makes them feel that they are not mere passive recipients of the events happening around them, directed by some unseen higher power, as happens in traditional novels or in rudimentary video games like *Super Mario Bros*. Instead, it leads them to believe that they are actually in charge of the events, in fact, they are the ones actively making things happen.

The authorial power endowed to the reader/user by the interactive fiction that has hitherto been denied by traditional narratives is undoubtedly alluring. However, when subjected to intense and close scrutiny the façade of the authorial power crumbles down leaving behind the bare scaffolding. For instance, supposing that this paper is indeed a form of interactive fiction, the multiple-choice-based dialogue previously presented would endow readers with the autonomy to decide how they want to engage with this paper. The power of choosing one option from the four given options will effectuate in readers a feeling of power and autonomy which would be missing if they were reading a traditional paper that does not demand readers' active participation. However, what if the reader

wants to engage with this paper in a manner that is not mentioned in the listed multiple choices available to him/her? At that point the impression of autonomy fades away as one realizes that the reader's choice is limited to the four options, determined by an unseen higher power, and the reader is, in fact, compelled to carry out the dictates of that unseen 'authorial power' by selecting one among the multiple pre-determined choices.

So, does this imply that the free will and authorial power promised by Interactive Fiction to readers are merely an illusion? Can it be concluded that Interactive Fiction is as rigid as the traditional texts, or perhaps worse, for it deceives the readers/users into believing that they have free will while insidiously compelling them to follow the course pre-determined by the higher 'authorial power'? If this is the case then why do people knowingly and willingly fall into the ruse of free will promised by Interactive Fiction? Or does Interactive Fiction genuinely deliver its pioneering promise of endowing the hitherto passive audience with free will and active engagement with the narrative? This paper attempts a philosophical enquiry into the newly emergent yet highly popular field of Interactive Fiction and conducts a narratological analysis of the multiple paradoxes inherent within it with special reference to *Bandersnatch*, and thereby formulates provisional answers to the questions raised above.

However, before delving deeper into the critical enquiry of *Bandersnatch*, it would be expedient to have a closer look at the medium of Interactive Fiction employed by *Bandersnatch*, namely interactive cinema. Up to this point this paper has predominantly focussed on the more common mediums of Interactive Fiction, like video games, choose-your-own-adventure or DIY novels, etc. However, recent years have witnessed the emergence of interactive cinema coinciding with the meteoric development in the field of AI (artificial intelligence). Many film critics have also used the term 'post-cinema' while referring to interactive cinema, though no consensus has yet been reached on the use and definition of the term.

Until the twentieth century the authority to effectuate alteration in films as well as in all other literary/artistic works resided solely with the author (author in this context implies the creator/performer, as the case may be). As we have seen in cases of other forms of Interactive Fiction, the advancement of digital technology endowed the audience of the cinema with the authorial power to modify the work; first by empowering them with the technical ability to alter the audio-visual parameters, such as contrasts, colours, sound/volume, etc.; and gradually by enabling them to modify the course and content of the story. Consequently, viewer's participation becomes the indisputably essential characteristic of interactive cinema, also known as 'post-cinema.'

A perusal of the varied definitions of post-cinema formulated by numerous film critics validates the assertion that interaction is the only unanimously accepted feature of post-cinema, thereby making it in the words of Richard Grusin a "cinema of interactions." According to Grusin, the 'interaction' is defined not only by its relationship,

> "With other (primarily) digital media, but also by its aesthetic sense in which we find ourselves faced with a cinema of interactions – the emergence of a visual style and narrative logic that bear relationship to digital media like DVDs and video games rather than to that of photography, drama, or fiction." (Grusin 73)

Correspondingly, another French film critic Peter Greenaway, emphasising the quintessence of interactivity defines post-cinema as, "Cinema must now become an interactive multimedia art form […]. We are forced to confront this new medium that will make *Star Wars* look like a candlelight reading in the sixteenth century" (Greenaway 112).

Apart from the fact that it employs interactive cinema as its medium, what exactly is this esoteric-sounding entity, *Bandersnatch*? As a primary approximation, the following rudimentary definition can be framed, *Bandersnatch* is an interactive audio-visual object, or perhaps a commercial entity that is accessible on the OTT platform, Netflix. A quick and expedient Wikipedia search undertaken in order to supplement the minimal definition of *Bandersnatch* informs that "*Black Mirror:*

Bandersnatch is a 2018 interactive film in the science fiction anthology series *Black Mirror*." The simultaneous presence of 'film' and 'series' in the above quoted one-line introduction hints at the amorphous nature of *Bandersnatch* which is mysteriously suspended between the two, seemingly irreconcilable universes of television and cinema. *Bandersnatch's* ambivalent nature is further heightened by its exclusive affiliation to Netflix. As Steven Spielberg's notorious opposition to the presence of Netflix films at the Oscars further testifies to its ambivalent artistic status: "From the moment you commit to televisual format, you make television films." Similarly, while some critics emphasise *Bandersnatch's* status as a televised series by linking it to the science fiction anthology series *Black Mirror*, others highlight its cinematic qualities. The confusion among critics regarding the artistic status of *Bandersnatch* is also reflected in the uncertainty of the award-bestowing institutions, since *Bandersnatch* has received awards in both the television and film categories. To the rudimentarily formulated description above, it can now be added that *Bandersnatch* pioneers the evolution of an unprecedented genre in the field of Interactive Fiction that conflates television and cinema and endows the viewers with autonomy to engage, respond and modify the narrative as per their whims, thereby enabling them to assume an authorial role.

The opening scenes of *Bandersnatch* resemble any other regular film: As 9th July 1984 dawns, a teenager named Stefan Butler wakes up and gets ready for the 'mega' event of his life. He is as irate as any other teenager, suffers from existential angst and debilitating self-doubt, and feels smothered by the overprotectiveness of his father. As it happens, Stefan is about to experience the most important day of his life because he has been given the opportunity to present the proposal of his game project, in the presence of the leading game design expert Colin Ritman, to the biggest player in the field of video games, Tuckersoft Company managed by business tycoon Mohan Thakur. Interestingly, the game project that Stefan is working on, which is tentatively titled "Bandersnatch", is inspired by a choose-your-own-adventure novel with the same title.

With its deceptively regular plot that strongly resembles coming-of-age movies, *Bandersnatch* catches its viewers off guard when the narrative suddenly pauses and the viewer is compelled to make a decision for Stefan. Initially, the decisions to be made are somewhat mundane or utilitarian, like choosing breakfast for Stefan or deciding the music that he would listen to on his Walkman. However, as the story progresses the decisions to be made assume a darker hue and deeper significance, with the choices increasingly reflecting Stefan's suicidal thoughts and existential angst. The choices to be made by the 'player-spectator' throughout the narrative can be categorised into two kinds: i) paradigmatic choices, and ii) syntagmatic choices.

Paradigmatic choices are those that effectuate catalytic changes; in other words, these choices merely serve to embellish the narrative without altering its fundamental trajectory. Under this category falls the decisions mentioned above such as, choosing breakfast and music for Stefan; along with similar decisions to be taken that occur as the story unfolds. For instance, choosing between the options of "scratching ears or biting nails" to express Stefan's anxiety during one of his sessions with his psychologist. Or the more simplistic choices that involve pseudo-options, like the one concerning "More Action? Yes or Fuck Yeah." It is apparent from the simplistic nature of the choices that they merely result in aesthetic consequences without actually affecting the narrative structure. Regardless of the choice the player-spectator makes in such situations, they do not have any repercussions on the narrative structure pre-determined by the author-programmer. Despite the superficial nature of these choices, it cannot be denied that they induce in the player-spectator a sense of authorial power, autonomy and transitory satisfaction.

In contrast to paradigmatic choices, syntagmatic choices are those that significantly affect the development of the narrative. One of the earliest syntagmatic decisions is faced by the player-spectator during the scene where Stefan presents his game project to Tuckersoft's boss, Mohan Thakur and game developer Colin Ritman. Mohan Thakur accepts Stefan's project and offers him with the choice: either to work independently from home or to develop the project with the aid of

Tuckersoft's employees in the office. At this juncture, the narrative pauses and the player-spectator must make an immediate decision. If the viewer chooses to work in the office, Colin Ritman slips up to Stefan to caution him, "Sorry, man, wrong choice." Hence, the moment from which the choice is made an ominous sense of doom permeates the atmosphere. As had been foreboded by Colin, Stefan feels his creativity throttled while working in team and consequently fails to satisfactorily develop his game project. Thus, the sequence ends with a televised show in which a game critic reiterates the failure of Stefan's project by rating the game zero out of five. However, the narrative does not move forward after the disastrous failure of Stefan's project. Instead, the viewer is compelled to continue the quest of successfully developing Stefan's video game, Bandersnatch. Thus, the viewer follows Stefan who undauntedly claims, "I'm trying again," which leads to a rewind of the narrative, and the story restarts right from the opening scene of the buzzing alarm clock until it catches up with the meeting scene at the Tuckersoft office. However, this time the player-spectator doesn't have any choice but to select the offer of working independently from home.

When analysed critically it becomes apparent that the choices offered by Mohan Thakur are in fact no choices at all but rather a ruse. The course of the story had already been determined by the author-programmer and one of the given options doesn't augur well with the pre-determined narrative. Hence, the player-spectator is obligated to begin from scratch and choose the option (implicitly) approved by the author-programmer. Therefore, the freedom and power experienced by the player-spectator in being able to decide the course of Stefan's life is curbed by the arbitrary authority wielded by the author-programmer.

Since the core essence of interactive fiction is user/player's engagement with the narrative, the player-spectator of *Bandersnatch* is endowed with the freedom to decide the course of actions at every crucial point of the narrative. However, to ensure that the narrative follows its pre-determined course despite the freedom of choice granted to the player-spectator, the author-programmer resorts to subtle, implicit interventions such as those demonstrated by the 'nudge' theorists. Through the implicit 'nudges' the author-programmer influences the decisions made by the player-spectator to suit his own purpose, without explicitly ordering or using any other coercive means that would curtail the player's sense of freedom and autonomy. The manipulative means employed by the author-programmer to maintain his/her authorial power is reflected in the working methods of Stefan's psychologist, Dr Haynes.

For instance, after he decides to work on his game project from home, Stefan finds himself increasingly frustrated and distracted because he thinks he is being constantly monitored by his father, with whom he shares a troubled relationship due to an unfortunate event that happened in past. He fixes an appointment with his psychologist Dr Haynes to talk about his worsening anxieties and debilitating mental health. To ease his anxieties Dr Haynes suggests that Stefan should talk about the traumatic event that scarred his childhood. The decision rests with the player-spectator to accept or reject the psychologist's suggestion. If the player rejects her suggestion, she persists: "You could learn things… I ask you again: yes or no?" Here, curiosity acts as the 'nudge' that pushes the player to 'make' Stefan accept the suggestion that he had initially rejected. The player will now be shown a flashback from Stefan's childhood which will help him/her in having a better understanding of Stefan's mental health problems and his troubled relationship with his father. The flashback takes the player-spectator to Stefan's childhood and shows him/her the events leading up to Stefan's mother's accident and how young Stefan held himself and his father responsible for her death, which gradually soured their relationship.

However, if the player persistently rejects Dr Haynes's suggestion to talk about Stefan's traumatic childhood the flashback is skipped and another sequence begins but not before flashing the phrase, "bad choice" on screen, which indicates the author-programmer's opinion about the decision made by the player. The phrase, "bad choice" with its admonishing undertone, also suggests that the player by refusing to talk to Dr Haynes about Stefan's past has, in fact, taken an unnecessary detour.

However, since the circumstances leading up to Stefan's mother's death and its repercussions on the lives of Stefan and his father are crucial to the pre-determined narrative structure, the author-programmer ultimately puts the player in a situation where he/she is left with no choice but to talk about Stefan's past. This episode presents a brilliant demonstration of the author-programmer's manipulative use of the 'nudge' technique through which he/she implicitly coerces the player into choosing the option that had been pre-decided by the author-programmer, while giving the player the impression of employing free will in making decisions.

Throughout the narrative, the player-spectator is constantly reprimanded by the author-programmer, in the form of phrases such as "bad choice" flashing across the screen, or Colin Ritman's forewarning, "Sorry, man, wrong choice," for choosing an option that was not meant to be chosen. Whenever an option is chosen that goes against the pre-scripted narrative structure, the player reaches a dead end, losing even the illusory authorial power endowed to him/her. In such cul-de-sac situations, the author-programmer, without letting the player discern his presence, exercises his imperceptible yet absolute authority by forcing the player to go back, to "try again" but presenting only such options that have been pre-approved by the author-programmer. However, it must also be noted that the player-spectator can go back and begin things from scratch only if it is approved by the author-programmer. For instance, the player-spectator is not allowed to go back to Stefan's childhood and make him do things differently that would forestall the impending death of his mother, in order to maintain the cardinal structure of the narrative.

The blatant curtailing of the player's autonomy by the arbitrary authority wielded by the author-programmer can also be illustrated through the following episode: In one of his worst moments of mental agony, the player has to decide for Stefan how he should be expressing his anguish. The choices available to the player are "spilling tea on the computer" and "answer Dad with a scream." However, "spilling tea on the computer" is a pseudo-choice and the narrative can progress only if "answer Dad with a scream" is chosen. If the player selects "spilling tea on the computer," which is a 'bad choice' that will inevitably lead to a dead end, the author-programmer would promptly rectify it by sending the player back on track and nudging him/her to choose the 'approved' option. However, the ultimate constraint of the player's autonomy in *Bandersnatch* occurs if the player, despite being rectified by the author-programmer, persists in choosing the 'bad choice,' i.e., "spilling tea on the computer." Unlike other instances in which a persistent choosing of the 'bad choice' by the player will lead to an omission of the entire sequence only to be repeated later with the 'bad choice' being eliminated; in this case choosing "spilling tea on the computer" repeatedly will result in an explicit refusal by Stefan to do so. He will instead choose the alternate 'pre-approved' option of his own accord in an utter disregard of the player's autonomy.

Though *Bandersnatch* endows the player-spectator with the freedom to make decisions that would affect the course of the protagonist's life, it succeeds in retaining the cardinal structure of its pre-determined narrative. The choices made by the player-spectator, except for resulting in a few minor variations, do not actually disrupt the narrative structure put in place by the author-programmer. *Bandersnatch* creates a new space for its player-spectator by placing him/her midway between the two extremes of the spectrum represented by the passivity of the traditional movie viewer and the active involvement of the video game player. As the plot progresses, the player-spectator feels increasingly baffled at the gradual erosion of his/her autonomy; a bleak experience which can be succinctly summarized in the words of André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, "The dictatorship of the work imposes itself on me, at the discretion of the television channel programmers" (192). Stefan's paranoia, as he expresses in one of his therapy sessions with Dr. Haynes, "I lose control over myself, it is as if someone else were making my choices, like choosing my cereal, yelling at Dad, listening to the music...." is gradually reflected in the condition of the player-spectator whose autonomy erodes as the narrative progresses and who is ultimately controlled by the author-programmer. One cannot help but acknowledge the eerie resemblance of the strangeness of the whole situation

that occurs in *Bandersnatch* with a fictitious scene conjured by Jorge Luis Borges: "Chess pieces that are unaware of being guided by a player, who does not know that he is guided by a god, a god who does not know that he is guided by another god" (193).

It is indeed baffling that though *Bandersnatch* undoubtedly belongs to the realm of Interactive Fiction – a field which promises unprecedented freedom and authorial power to the player/user/reader; it ironically emphasises more on curtailing the freedom of the player-spectator rather than enhancing it. In *Bandersnatch*, there are numerous instances of curtailment of the player's freedom as demonstrated throughout this paper and the restrictions imposed by the author-programmer on the choices made by the players in order to maintain the narrative structure. Such constraints relegate the player to a periphery position like that of Stefan, as both Stefan and the player are unsuspecting actors who are being controlled by a higher unseen power, i.e., the author-programmer. The basic tenets of *Bandersnatch* such as, its obstinate retention of the pre-determined narrative structure, implicitly coercing the player-spectator to choose the pre-approved options, the impossibility of going back and changing the choices made except when explicitly approved by the author-programmer, etc. substantiate the conclusion that Interactive Fiction like most other artistic/literary works follows a definite, pre-determined structure. Interactive Fiction's failure to deliver its promise of endowing the player/user/reader with authorial power and freedom to choose is due to the fact that AI and digital technology haven't yet evolved to the extent to enable the works of Interactive Fiction to include the infinite possible endings that each of the options, if developed properly, has the potential to lead to.

Other than the technological limitations, there are certain philosophical and scientific conundrums as well that obstruct the fulfilment of promises made by Interactive Fiction. Though Interactive Fiction builds upon the postmodern theory of the simultaneous existence of multiple realities, but due to temporal and spatial constraints it restricts its audience to experience only one reality at any particular point in time. Since it is practically impossible to assimilate the infinite realities, all works of Interactive Fiction including *Bandersnatch* emphasise the constraint rather than the freedom of player/user/reader. The impossibility of existing in multiple dimensions or experiencing multiple realities at one particular point in time is wonderfully captured by Robert Frost in his famous poem, *The Road Not Taken*:

> "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
> And sorry I could not travel both
> And be one traveller, long I stood
> And looked down one as far as I could
> To where it bent in the undergrowth;" (Frost: lines 1-5)

Hence it becomes clear that Interactive Fiction rather than emphasising the player's free will places more focus on the constraints and restrictions for maintaining its pre-determined narrative structure. However, the question then arises: Why do the audience of Interactive Fiction willingly allow themselves to be lured by such works that gradually erode their autonomy and inevitably end up controlling them? The answer perhaps lies in the immersive power of Interactive Fiction.

Narrative immersion, which implies the active engagement of the mental faculties of the user/player for constructing a story world as well as filling in the narrative blanks, is an essential feature of Interactive Fiction. The quintessential manifestation of the immersive power of Interactive Fiction occurs in the form of 'epistemic' immersion. Epistemic immersion entails the mental involvement of the user/player in the fate of the character controlled by him/her, the overwhelming desire to know what ultimately becomes of that character, and how the choices made by the user/player affect the turn of events in the narrative. Epistemic immersion is easier to evoke in the user/player in an interactive environment, rather than in the rigid narrative structure of the traditional literary/artistic works. Interactive Fiction, by piquing the curiosity of the player assigns him/her the role of an investigator to make sense of the fictional world as well as the destiny of the controlled character.

The player is thus empowered to navigate through the past, present and future phases of the controlled character's life, unravel the secrets of the character's past as well as experience vicariously the complexities of his/her life. The narratives of Interactive Fiction also include fixed and, consequently non-interactive sequences, such as the flashback sequence in *Bandersnatch*. Nevertheless, the non-interactive sequences are so seamlessly embedded into the interactive ambience of the narrative that the players continue to enact their assigned role of the investigator, picking up clues and attempting to comprehend the intricacies of the fictional world and the ultimate fate of the controlled character.

Besides epistemic immersion, Interactive Fiction also engages its audience by inducing in them an emotional immersion. As mentioned before, narrative interest views the fictional characters as individuated people with a life and purpose of their own; whereas ludic interest, on the other hand, views the characters as mere means to achieve an end. Hence, in traditional video games like *Super Mario*, the player will help the controlled character (Mario) to fight villains and overcome hurdles in order to rescue the princess, but the player is not motivated by any romantic interest in the princess to act so. Rather, he/she assists Mario to rescue the princess in order to beat the game, which is the player's ultimate goal. However, in works of Interactive Fiction, like *Bandersnatch*, the controlled character (Stefan) not only serves as a functional character to help or hamper the player's pursuit of his/her goal but also induces interest and emotional involvement in the player through his own individuated personality. Since the player controls Stefan's life by influencing the decisions he takes, the player begins to feel personally responsible for what will eventually become of him. Hence, the player develops an empathetic connection with Stefan and becomes emotionally invested in his life, which the player believes is controlled by him/her. Thus, Interactive Fiction without actually allowing the player to control the narrative keeps him/her thoroughly involved by employing the techniques of immersion and creating the illusion of free will and authorial power.

Interactive Fiction, through its controlled characters, exemplifies the struggles of life against a hostile or perhaps indifferent world that continues to follow its own course like the fixed narrative structure of *Bandersnatch*, unmindful of the choices made by humans. The core features of Interactive Fiction such as, the matrix of hyper-textuality embedded into its narrative structure; the frequent branching of the narrative into recombinant units; interactivity; acknowledging the existences of multiple realities; and the rejection of linearity, chronology and causality through its fragmented, non-linear narrative; have contributed significantly to the postmodern incredulity and consequent deconstruction of the metanarrative. However, despite its enormous potential, Interactive Fiction has its own share of drawbacks that obstruct the fulfilment of its potential. The most detrimental drawback, as mentioned before, is its inability to accommodate the infinite possibilities and multiple realities within its narrative structure. The inability to assimilate multiple realities results in the adoption of a fixed narrative by the works of Interactive Fiction, which gradually obliterates the freedom of the player/user and becomes the instrumental reason behind the failure of Interactive Fiction to endow its users with real authorial power and autonomy.

Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that Interactive Fiction is still at a nascent stage of its evolution, and has immense potential to usher in an unprecedented transformation in the way we interact with literary and other artistic works. Hence, it would be grossly unfair to dismiss Interactive Fiction at this early stage for its apparent flaws and inability to deliver on its promises. Rejecting Interactive Fiction at its nascent stage entails missing out on the exciting future possibilities that it holds the potential to develop. As Chris Crawford states, "To dismiss interactive storytelling on the grounds that it hasn't been done before is to reject the entire basis of the human intellectual adventure" (Crawford 50).

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