

## TECH-NARRATIVES AND TRANSMEDIATION

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*Warning!!!! Do not read this book straight through from beginning to end!*

*These pages contain many different adventures you can have in the Old West.<sup>1</sup>*

Technological development has continuously brought about new ways for stories to be told. Printing allowed for written word to be produced en masse, with readers exploring narratives in books, newspapers, comics, and other print mediums. Audio recording and broadcasting allowed sounds and spoken word to be heard on radios, Walkmans, and iPods. Animation and video cameras brought with them short films, movies, and television series. And the invention of the internet and interactive media now allows users to play with stories and connect with people from all over the world. At a 2015 Academy event that explored the past, present and future of the movie industry, former Chief Creative Officer of Pixar Animation Studios John Lasseter explained how “It’s not the technology that entertains people, it’s what you do with the technology.”<sup>2</sup> Content is key, but what medium and its use are important considerations to make. Each platform provides unique technological affordances. This is especially apparent in contemporary narrative design, increasingly so with the rise in transmedia storytelling – or multiplatform productions.

*"Transmedia storytelling" is telling a story across multiple media and preferably, although it doesn't always happen, with a degree of audience participation, interaction or collaboration. In transmedia storytelling, engagement with each successive media heightens the audience' [sic] understanding, enjoyment and affection for the story.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Packard, *Deadwood City* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 1.

<sup>2</sup> John Lasseter, "The New Audience: Moviegoing in a Connected World," (Oscars, 2015), Presentation recording. <https://www.oscars.org/events/new-audience-moviegoing-connected-world>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Pratten, "Introduction," in *Getting Started with Transmedia Storytelling: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

Transmedia storytelling utilises the strengths of a number of platforms to present narratives, creating something new and greater than the individual parts – a loose comparison might be made with the way interdisciplinary arts integrate disciplines, mediums, and the mixture of ideas and practice.<sup>4</sup> As writer, producer and director Nuno Bernardo explains, “...audiences are no longer confined to one medium,” because of this, creatives and producers should engage with audiences where they are consuming media, and “...we should concentrate on the experience rather than the device.”<sup>5</sup> With the development of new technologies and platforms, new combinations and opportunities are presented to storytellers.

### Interaction: Choosing Your Own Adventure

Netflix's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* is a television movie that, at release, was unlike anything seen on the streaming service before, in that it allowed viewers to interact with the story on smart televisions and mobile devices.<sup>6</sup> Interaction with a narrative is not a new concept. For example, the wildly popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* books have intrigued young readers since 1979.<sup>7</sup> Littered with choices, such as where to visit next – will it be the saloon on page 5, the hotel on page 6, or the sheriff's office on page 7?<sup>8</sup> – readers are taken on journeys to one of many endings. The advent of video games, and the level of interaction inherent to gaming, also lends itself to dynamic, choice-driven narratives. *Detroit: Become Human* allows gamers to “shape an ambitious branching narrative.”<sup>9</sup> The decisions players make influence the protagonists' lives, the web of choices leading to a large number of scene- (and ultimately story-) endings (Figure 1). Telltales Games' *The Walking Dead: The Game*, infamous for the phrase ‘[name] will remember that’, is another example.<sup>10</sup> And finally, other streaming platforms have tools that content creators have creatively used to make interactive short films. Popular YouTube-er Freddie Wong, for example, used YouTube's annotations features to invite viewers to ‘choose a cereal’ after the action-packed short, *Cereal Killer*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Tanya Augsborg, "Interdisciplinary Arts," in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinary*, ed. Robert Frodeman, Julie Thompson Klein, and Roberto C. S. Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 132.

<sup>5</sup> Nuno Bernardo, *The Producer's Guide to Transmedia: How to Develop, Fund, Produce and Distribute Compelling Stories across Multiple Platforms* (Dublin: Beactive, 2011), 6-8.

<sup>6</sup> David Slade, "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch," (Netflix, 2018), Television movie. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80988062>.

<sup>7</sup> "History of CYOA," Chooseco LLC, 2020, <https://www.cyoa.com/pages/history-of-cyoa>.

<sup>8</sup> Packard, *Deadwood City*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Detroit: Become Human*, (Sony Interactive Entertainment, Quantic Dream, and SIEA, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> *The Walking Dead: The Game*, (Telltale Games and Skybound, 2012-13).

<sup>11</sup> RocketJump, "Cereal Killer," (YouTube, June 19, 2011), Online video. <https://youtu.be/mzhVAJOHgQo>.

What makes *Bandersnatch* unique is that it is still considered a 'television movie', rather than a 'video game' (for example). Watching films has generally been classified a passive experience, but by introducing interactive elements – thanks to the allowance of technology, in this case smart televisions and mobile devices – it becomes an active one.<sup>12</sup> In an interview, writer Charlie Brooker explains how, introducing the interactive element – specifically the idea the story 'could remember earlier choices' – also introduced narrative complications.<sup>13</sup> The time a viewer took to make a choice had to be accounted for, the potentially awkward pauses being instead filled with dialogue or actions by the characters that felt natural to the scene. When choosing which cereal to eat for breakfast, for example, the father playfully teased his son (and therefore the viewer) for taking so long to make such an "important" decision (Figure 3). These down times had to be considered in the design of the narrative for the story to make sense – something that would not have been necessary if the technology did not allow for interaction (which would mean the movie, if produced, would simply be that: a movie).

A common limitation between the aforementioned platforms – smart televisions, gaming consoles, and the book – is the lack of their ability to create on the fly or improvise. That is, those interacting with the media are limited to the predefined choices presented by the creators. But what is evident, especially when interacting with a story 'map' as complex as *Bandersnatch's* (Figure 4), is that – when provided with enough choice – a viewer can certainly feel as though they are in control of the story, and have an experience that is unique to someone else – they form their own version of the narrative.

### **Creative Collaboration: *The Johnny Cash Project***

Another case study that demonstrates a way technology has influenced narrative design is *The Johnny Cash Project* – "a unique communal work, a living portrait of the man in black."<sup>14</sup> Technology, specifically internet and tools that enable online applications to be developed, allows for a unique narrative to be presented – a complete story, made up of thousands of smaller stories. The project has three elements at play: an original music video made for Johnny Cash's song *Ain't No Grave*, that is used as the basis for the other two parts; thousands of artworks created and submitted by anyone interested in taking part of the project; and a final outcome, or rather outcomes, viewers can watch

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<sup>12</sup> Ryohei Nakatsu, Matthias Rauterberg, and Peter Vorderer, *A New Framework for Entertainment Computing: From Passive to Active Experience* (2005).

<sup>13</sup> Charlie Brooker, "How the Surprise New Interactive Black Mirror Came Together," interview by Peter Rubin, 28 December, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/black-mirror-bandersnatch-interactive-episode/>.

<sup>14</sup> "A "Living Portrait" of the Man in Black," *The Johnny Cash Project*, 2010, <http://www.thejohnnycashproject.com/#/about>.

and interact with. Online, participants are able to choose a frame of the video to work on, creating their own artwork and thus adding a part of their own story. The culmination of these frames is presented to visitors of the project to explore, with the option to sort frames by rating, theme, creation time, or in a random selection (Figure 5). Ten years ago, over 250,000 people from 172 countries had contributed to the project.<sup>15</sup> Each frame of the video has a few options – some two, others more than ten – each radically different (Figures 6-9). With such a wide variety of frames for a ‘final’ video to be crafted from, it is incredibly unlikely for two people to experience the same video. And yet, it can still function as a method through which the song’s story is told.

As Michael Desmond explores, the ease of manipulation and sharing of portraiture are core aspects of the digital age.<sup>16</sup> Whilst *The Johnny Cash Project* is powered by a custom, purpose-built website application, an abundance of ways to share images – especially digitally – have enabled many similar projects. In 2013, Lexus created the *#LexusInstaFilm*, utilising the photo-taking abilities of modern phones and the sharing capabilities enabled through the Instagram platform to create a short film.<sup>17</sup> The narrative is a simple one: ‘a car drives along 1417ft of test track’ (and, it being an ad, ‘buy this car’).<sup>18</sup> The design of the narrative and use of technology required the short film to be pre-visualised, from which over 200 participants chose a frame to recreate in Instagram (Figures 10-13). Sharing online with the searchable hashtag, the frames were consolidated, and the final product was created. Much like *The Johnny Cash Project*, the *#LexusInstaFilm* used technology to allow people to provide a part of the narrative themselves, all parts coming together to make one whole.

## The Affordances of Transmediation

With the development of technology, new platforms, mediums and ways with which narratives can be explored become available. Whether it’s the amount of information able to be contained within a book, the ability to interact with storylines in video games, the capabilities of smart televisions, or the connectivity the internet and applications can provide, using the strengths of platforms ensure stories can be told, created, and designed in new, innovative ways. Newfound freedoms mean writers must consider the end user and the affordances of specific technologies when crafting their narratives,

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<sup>15</sup> xChrisMilk, "Johnny Cash - Ain't No Grave [Official Hd] - the Johnny Cash Project," (YouTube, September 29, 2010), Online video. <https://youtu.be/WwNVInt9iDk>.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Desmond et al., "Essay," in *Present Tense: An Imagined Grammar of Portraiture in the Digital Age*, ed. Michael Desmond (Canberra: National Portrait Gallery, 2010), 3.

<sup>17</sup> "Lexus Creates Film out of Instagrams: Photos from 200 Instagrammers Were Put Together," Creativity, AdAge, 2013, <https://adage.com/creativity/work/instafilm/32162>.

<sup>18</sup> Lexus, "#Lexusinstafilm -- Featuring the 2014 Lexus IS," (YouTube, July 19, 2013), Online video. <https://youtu.be/DgmQV7hGQXM>.

such as Brooker's care to ensure making a choice within *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* is coherent, meaningful and natural. Each viewer's individual experience becomes unique, and their own narratives are formed. Their own narratives can also contribute to a larger one. Technology has allowed collectives from all around the world contribute towards productions with incredible results, such as *The Johnny Cash Project* – this collective intelligence remains an important factor in transmedia storytelling.<sup>19</sup> It is exciting to consider how technological advances in the future might influence narratives in years to come, and our role in creating these stories.

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," Henry Jenkins and William Proctor eds. *Confessions of an ACA-Fan* (Weblog), 2007, [https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html).

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xChrisMilk. "Johnny Cash - Ain't No Grave [Official Hd] - the Johnny Cash Project." YouTube, September 29, 2010. Online video. <https://youtu.be/WwNVINt9iDk>.

## APPENDIX

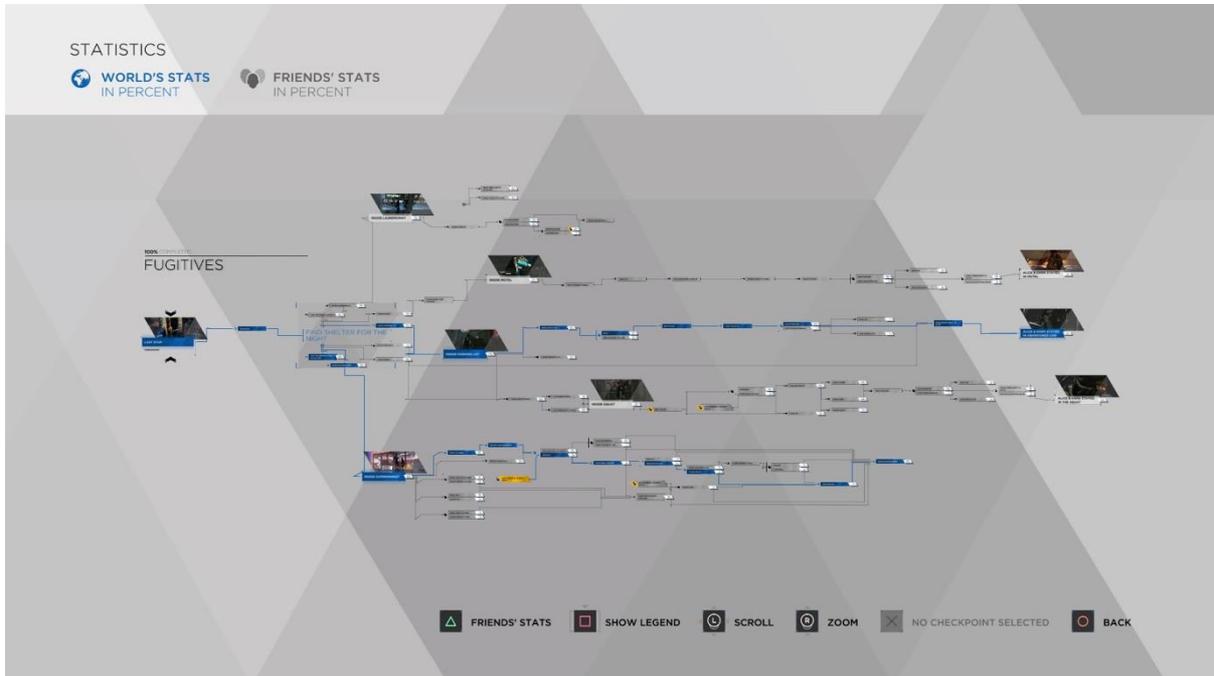


Figure 1: *Fugitives* (2018).

Screenshot from *Detroit: Become Human*, showing the 'web' of choices and the resulting endings a player could have experienced in one (of many) scenes within the game.

Sourced from: <https://imgur.com/a/C1vxlzX>

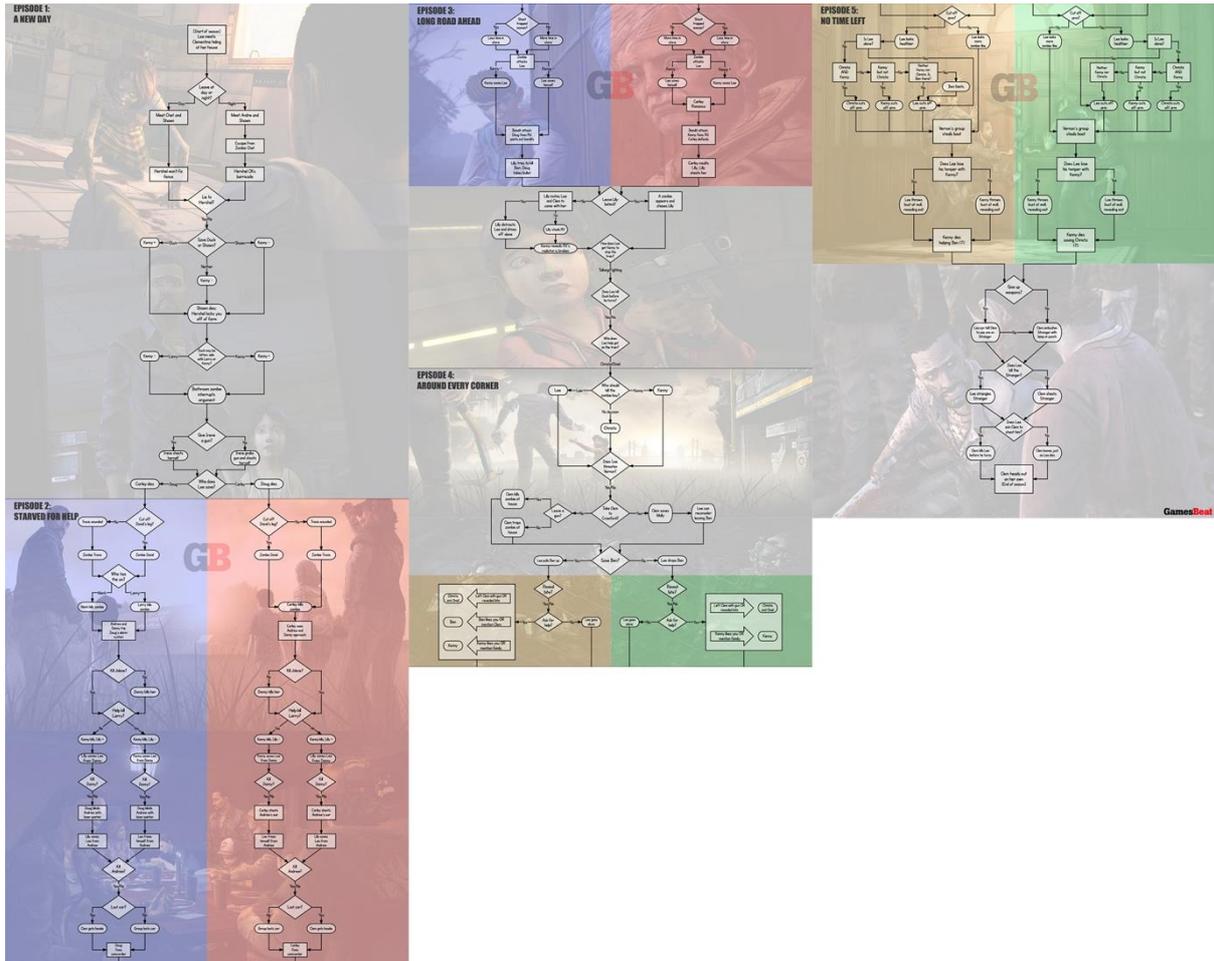


Figure 2: GamesBeat. *Handy visual guide to The Walking Dead: Season One (2013).*

Chart showing how choices might influence *The Walking Dead: The Game's* narrative.

Sourced from: <https://venturebeat.com/2013/03/31/the-walking-dead-season-one-plot-graph/>

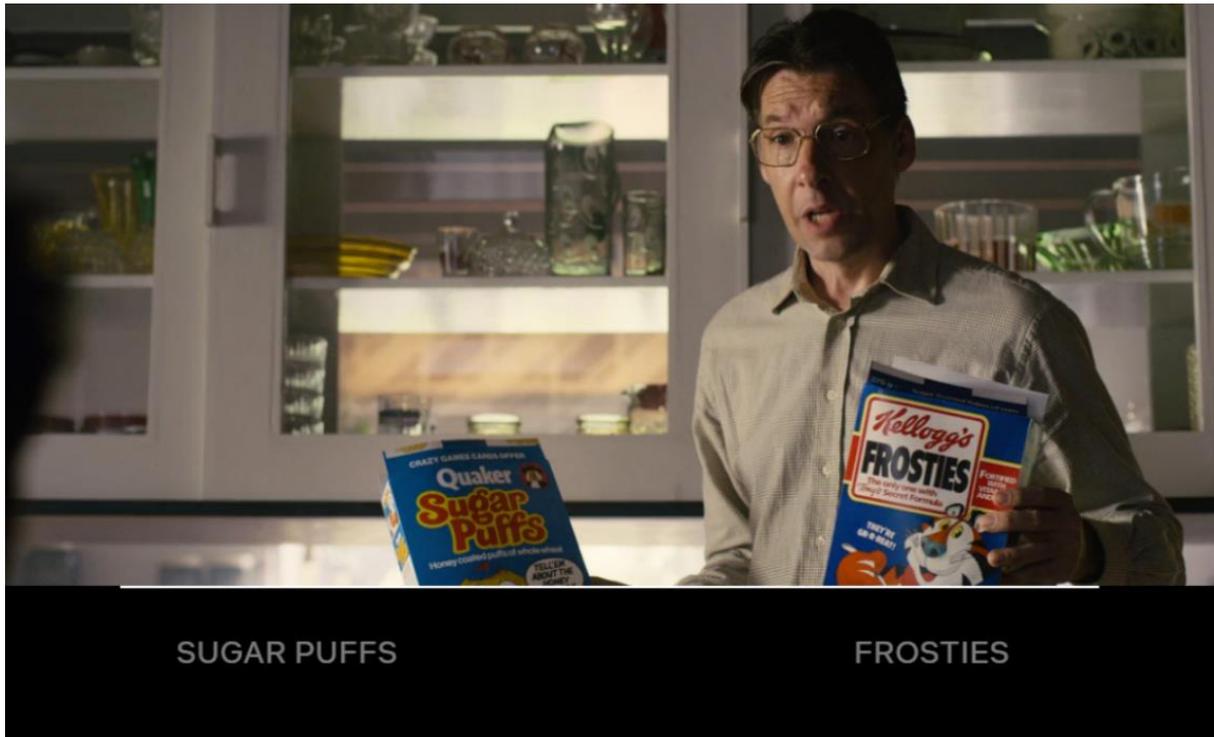


Figure 3: *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018).

Screenshot of the first choice presented in the television movie: which breakfast cereal to eat.

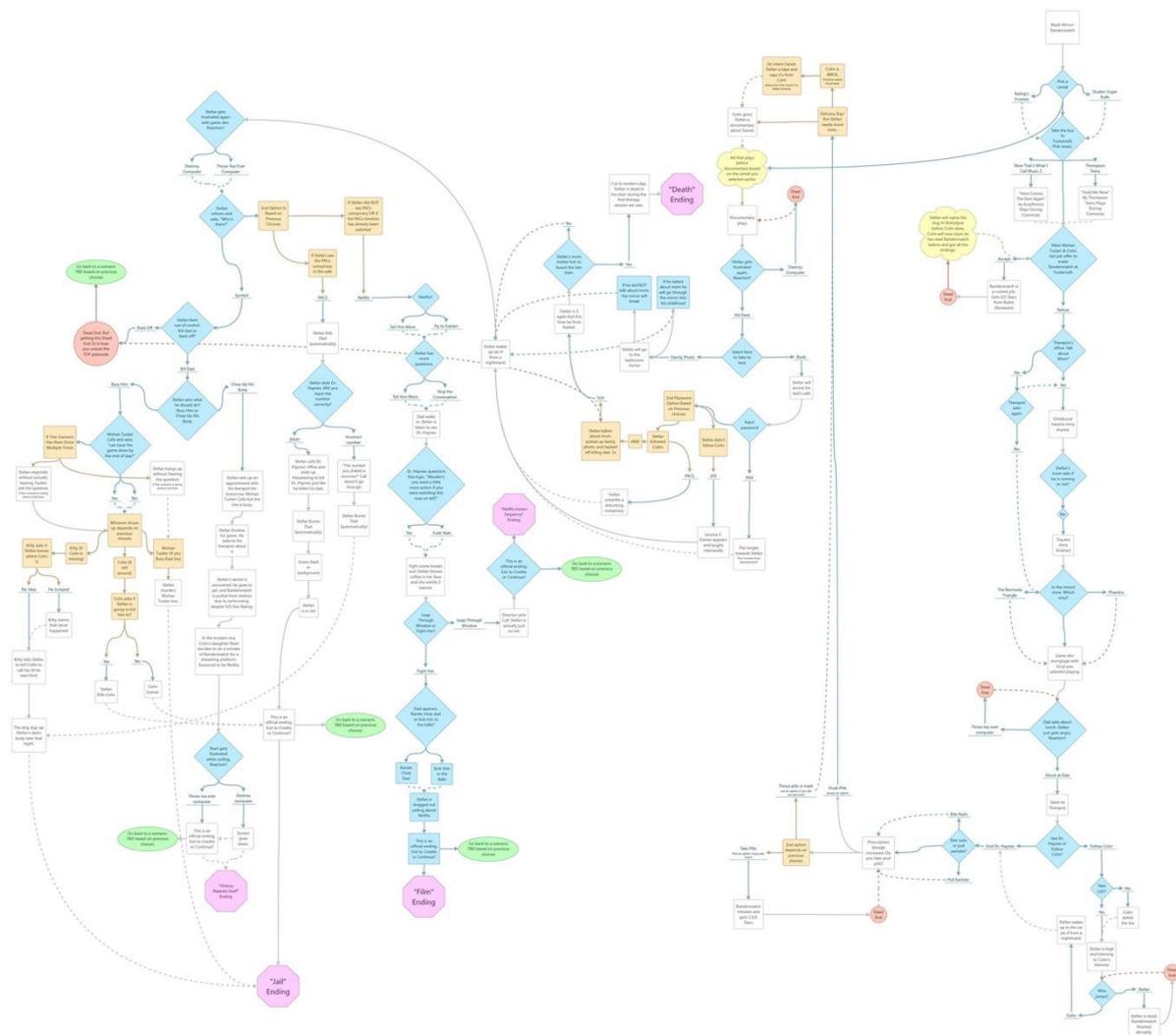


Figure 4: *Bandersnatch* Choices Map (2019).

An attempt at presenting *Bandersnatch*'s narrative as a simple flow chart, showing the complexity introduced by technology allowing something as simple as 'interaction'.

Sourced from: [https://www.ign.com/wikis/black-mirror/Bandersnatch\\_Map\\_-\\_All\\_Choices\\_and\\_Outcomes#Bandersnatch\\_Choices\\_Map](https://www.ign.com/wikis/black-mirror/Bandersnatch_Map_-_All_Choices_and_Outcomes#Bandersnatch_Choices_Map)



Figure 5: *The Johnny Cash Project* (2010).

Screenshot of the video player, allowing you to explore frames submitted by contributors.

Sourced from: <http://www.thejohnnycashproject.com/#/explore/TopRated>



Figure 6 (top left): Dadasoupe. *Frame #855*.

Realistic style artwork, screenshot from *The Johnny Cash Project*.

Figure 7 (top right): Lilian. *Frame #855*.

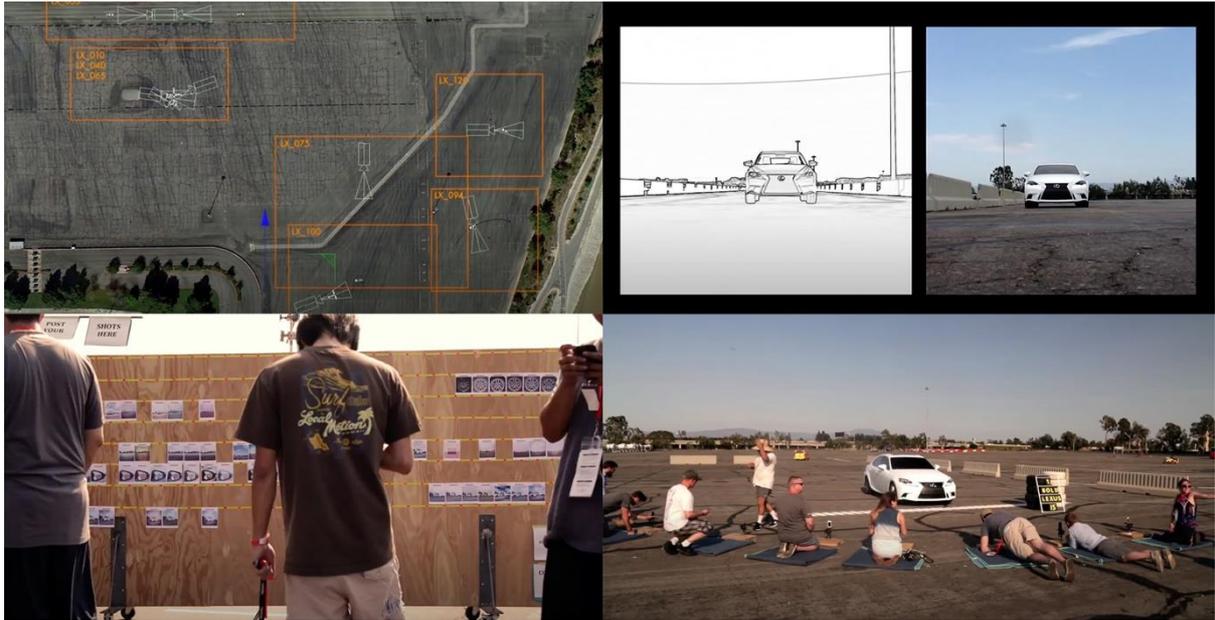
Abstract style artwork, screenshot from *The Johnny Cash Project*.

Figure 8 (bottom left): Nikola. *Frame #855*.

Sketchy style artwork, screenshot from *The Johnny Cash Project*.

Figure 9 (bottom right): Ian Meyer. *Frame #855*.

Pointillism style artwork, screenshot from *The Johnny Cash Project*.



Figures 10-13: #LexusInstafilm -- Featuring the 2014 Lexus IS (2013).

Screenshots from Lexus' mini-documentary, showing pre-visualisation and the photo-taking process.

Sourced from: <https://youtu.be/DgmQV7hGQXM>