

Waiting for O Superman

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Editor's Note

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The [Choose Your Own Adventure books](#), brilliant Generation X artifacts, worked not because within their covers was the Great American Novel, but because the opportunity to read multiple threads on a particular plot was engaging. I was lucky to get to read dozens of these titles as a kid; my grandmother worked in a bookstore in Palm Springs in the 1980s and when I would visit I would sit in the break room with the newest titles, working through every possible pathway to see what was possible. The plots alone were not exciting, but it became immersive when augmented with new pathways, doorways to nowhere, and doubling back to try again, and seeing if there was anything I had missed.

That bookstore is worth talking about. Bookland had [prime Palm Springs real estate, basically on the corner of Palm Canyon and Tahquitz](#) (now Tahquitz Canyon). During the middle of the 20th Century it was where vacationing celebrities would buy their relaxation reads, where the locals would get their magazines, and where Truman Capote would buy his daily newspaper. It served its community and watched the rise of Palm Springs from barren desert to modernist dreamscape. By the time I was thumbing through its CYOA case in the 1980s, the city was on a downward slope, and Bookland had big box competitors in the form of Super Crown and Brentano's. By the time a Barnes & Noble opened in Palm Desert at the turn of the century (primed to win the race of the big box stores), Bookland was a forgotten memory, long replaced by a T-shirt store. Choose Your Own Adventure books were by this time also an artifact of the past, considered by many to be a fad.

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Today, Palm Springs has experienced a resurgence as a getaway destination, and the idea of Choose Your Own Adventure has new life thanks to [Black Mirror: Bandersnatch](#), the newest Black Mirror — draped in nostalgic retro fashion as well as what many believe is a pilot run for more interactive television (and the data mining that comes with using platforms in our day and age).

The *Bandersnatch* story is enjoyable...follow the game designer through the struggles of bringing a game to market and how that experience branches out to address themes like free will. There isn't really free will though, as most of the choices push you back to the predominant plot line. And that makes perfect practical sense; it takes a lot of effort to develop a comprehensive story, and if every choice led to completely new events and outcomes the work required to produce such a volume would be prohibitive. CYOA books that consisted of <150 large font pages (and scattered images) would push people back to a handful of main plot lines, and they only required an author or small author team working entirely in text and drawing. I want *Bandersnatch* to take me to entirely different places based on my wholly unique choices rather than throwing me a cutesy Easter egg if I stumble somewhere the right way, but to produce and manage that much footage would currently be nearly if not completely impossible.

When *Bandersnatch* went live, I tracked my progress through the story the first time (including the times Netflix pushed me to go back and try things again), then immediately went back to the beginning and took entirely new pathways. It was not a disappointment to find out that some of the choices did not matter to the outcome; that was no different from the books of my childhood. It was only a disappointment that there were not more opportunities to follow the story in the same way I was disappointed when every page of one of my dog-eared CYOA books had been discovered and followed.

Part of the reason Choose Your Own Adventure worked was because it was its own enclosed story controlled by an authorial voice focused on the cohesion of plot and path, but it also worked because of that promise of the unknown, of forging pathways and getting to go back again and try again. One of the criticisms against *Bandersnatch* is that it is a gimmick, and if you were to just tell the story there would be nothing to drive the action or audience interest. Does *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* hinge on a gimmick? Sure. So does *Memento*, [Christopher Nolan's early 21st Century film about a guy without a functioning short-term memory](#) whose story is told from end to beginning. Neither experience is about the story as much as it is about engaging something traditional from a unique perspective, combining the authorial road map with the individual's sense of adventure. *Bandersnatch* is a streaming media version of the book structure, like a video game but on a television service, somewhat clunky but better than what has been tried before.

The capabilities of the technology have not hindered the societal expectations of viewers and pundits. The Black Mirror audience, waiting for new content since the Season 4 launch in late December of 2017, lit social media ablaze before any announcements or advertising (?) a new title, [having found a deleted tweet in November 2018 referencing a Black Mirror launch](#) on December 28. From that point, speculation ran rampant and any potential information on new Black Mirror was analyzed, dissected, deconstructed, reconstructed, and published for others to analyze, dissect and deconstruct. It was not until December 19 that Netflix started their advertising campaign, adding to an already overwhelming tempest of hype.

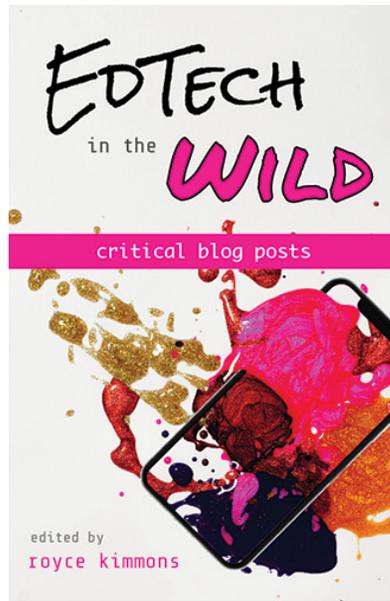
There's an elephant in this room: since the *Bandersnatch* launch, much of the 'future of television' stories are about the ability for Netflix to mine the data of viewers and their choices, using that information to tailor on-demand content mid-show. Many have noted the irony of tech dystopian *Black Mirror* as the trial balloon for data mining television streaming. After a month of breathless anticipation and a day of textual analysis, the conversation is about the tech and Netflix platform, which many have argued is what brought the episode down from what it could be. A good but not great *Black Mirror* episode is now the conduit for invasive technology.

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This is where I can't get [Like Netflix, but for Education](#) out of my head, the trope of EdTech marketing/hype/fluff that accompanies the newest innovation in the world of higher education. MOOCs or blockchain or the Internet of Things or iPads in schools or personalized learning get breathless coverage upon launch but never meets the expectations. Most of this EdTech is built on existing research but presented as a novelty or a serendipitous happening. When it fails to meet expectations, there are always mitigating circumstances to blame, and the media landscape moves onto the next hype machine to float before it crashes down.

We can't separate Charlie Booker and the *Black Mirror* show from Netflix and the technology platform funding his work and running the adaptive viewing software. But I don't want a month of show hype to lead to a day of show analysis and then months of tech hype counterbalanced by tech criticism. We were excited for *Bandersnatch* because we were excited for another story from the lens of *Black Mirror*, in the same way I was excited every time I visited Bookland to see what new Choose Your Own Adventure titles had been released. In education, we are excited to lead people into experiencing things and ideas they don't yet know they love. How can we bring our focus back to building remarkable opportunities for learning instead of being caught up in the endless hype cycles?

Jean Lyotard wrote in [The Postmodern Condition](#) that the technological revolution would largely render formal education redundant because the whole of the world's knowledge would be accessible by anyone who could access a computer terminal (he noted that teachers would not be lost in this new paradigm because someone would need to teach people how to use computer terminals). This did not happen, partly because instruction is vital to a learning environment and partly because knowledge is not so cut and dry that it could end up sterilized in a platform. But the hype still pushes us in that direction. The most frequently chosen pathway today argues that the world's knowledge can be accessed by computer and therefore formal education is redundant, but the computer does not function as anticipated and the removal of facilitation and development for learners makes the Internet experience one of consumption briefly highlighted by decontextualized curiosities. A pathway forward for technology, media and education needs to embrace that we cannot do it all, but we can use our history to do teaching and learning in a way to not only introduce but inspire and engage.



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