

**Online Communication in the Digital Age**  
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**Lecture – 40**

**Playing with Stories: Interactive Digital Storytelling in Film and Games**

Good morning, dear friends and welcome to this module. In the previous modules of this week, we have introduced the concept of digital storytelling and how transmedia storytelling has encouraged audience to explore the various interactive possibilities of fictional and real worlds. Today we shall look at how these forms of storytelling have emerged with fields like film and entertainment to evolve into new forms of interactive media. Interactive cinema is a dynamic form of storytelling that invites the audience to engage with the narrative actively. Unlike traditional films, it empowers viewers to make choices that influence the plot's direction blurring the line between passive viewership and active participation.

### Interactive Cinema\*

- In the 1990s, large-screen interactive movies faced limited success, as exemplified by Interfilm's early efforts.
- Immersion Studios, however, has reignited interest in this field with a focus on immersive edutainment projects.
- Their productions seamlessly merge dramatic storytelling and dynamic interactivity, immersing viewers in a world of surround sound and expansive visuals.
- Unlike Interfilm's rudimentary three-button model, these movies incorporate live action and 3D animation, offering deeper and more meaningful engagement.



Source: <https://www.alterface.com>

\* Miller, C. H. (2019). Digital Storytelling 4e: A creator's guide to interactive entertainment. CRC Press.

In the 1990s, large screen interactive movies faced limited success as exemplified by inter-films early efforts. Immersion Studios, however, has reignited interest in this field with a focus on immersive entertainment projects. Their productions seamlessly merge dramatic storytelling and dynamic interactivity, immersing viewers in a world of surround sound and expansive visuals. Unlike inter-films rudimentary three-button model, these movies incorporate live action and 3D animation offering deeper and more meaningful engagement. The revolution of interactive cinema has been remarkable from early experiments with branching narratives to the sophisticated interactive storytelling of today's video games and digital experiences. It reflects the growing desire for audience engagement and creative possibilities in the context of storytelling.

- Touchscreen consoles grant a personalized experience, allowing exploration and control during game-like segments, creating a distinctive fusion of large-screen and small-screen interactions.
- Stacey Spiegel, CEO of Immersion Studios, sees their movies as powerful educational tools for three key reasons.
  - First, the immersive narratives dissolve the boundary between the viewer and the story, fostering suspension of disbelief.
  - Second, the audience's role in making decisions with real consequences keeps them attentive and engaged with the material.
  - Third, the social, collaborative aspect enhances the learning experience.
- Immersion Studios employs three levels of interactivity: individual, collaborative, and competitive.
- Their creations combine gaming elements with narratives, aiming to evoke strong emotional responses and nurture ongoing learning through supplementary resources like posters and websites.



Source: <https://playbackonline.ca>

Touch screen consoles grant a personalized experience allowing exploration and control during game-like segments creating a distinctive fusion of large screen and small screen interactions. Stacey Spiegel, CEO of Immersion Studios, sees their movies as powerful educational tools for three key reasons. The first is the immersive narratives dissolve the boundary between the viewer and the story fostering suspension of disbelief. Second, the audience role in making decisions with real consequences keeps them attentive and engaged with the material.

And thirdly, the social collaborative aspect enhances the learning experience. Immersion Studios employ three levels of interactivity, individual, collaborative, and competitive. Their creations combine gaming elements with narratives aiming to evoke strong emotional responses and nurture ongoing learning through supplementary sources like posters and websites. Interactive cinema is also often referred to as a hyper story.

## Interactive Cinema as a Hyperstory\*

- Hyperstory is a term used by filmmaker Marge Szperling to describe the works of i-Cinema she produces.
- Influenced by literary works of James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon and films like *Citizen Kane* and *Pulp Fiction*, she constructs narratives that link to multiple story versions based on viewer choices.
- Her film *Uncompressed* (2000) explores various characters representing archetypes and thematic oppositions, shot in distinct styles with color codes.
- The hyperstory approach offers a more intricate view of the world, with each storyline showcasing different perspectives, encouraging audience engagement, and challenging their preconceptions.



Source: <https://www.agencetopo.qc.ca>

\* Szperling, M. (2000). *Uncompressed: The Interactive Film* (Doctoral dissertation, Art Center College of Design).

Hyperstories embrace non-linear structures making each viewing unique and offering a deeper level of engagement. Influenced by literary works of James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon as well as by films like *Citizen Kane* and *Pulp Fiction*, she constructs narratives that link to multiple story versions based on the choices of the viewer. Her 2000 film, 'Uncompressed' explores various characters representing archetypes and thematic oppositions shot in distinct styles with color codes.

The hyper story approach offers a more intricate view of the world with each storyline showcasing different perspectives, encouraging audience engagement and challenging their preconceptions. Hyper stories have evolved into the choose your own adventure game, adapting interactive narrative techniques for broader audience. Emerging in the 20th century with printed books, choose your own adventure stories extended into video games, interactive movies, and now on digital platforms.

## “Choose Your Own Adventure”

- The interactive "choose your own adventure" format debuted in Edward Packard's 1976 novel, "Sugarcane Island."
- This innovative concept had earlier influences from Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1942) and Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973) and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979).
- In 2016, CtrlMovie's *Late Shift* marked the initial triumph of interactive film.
- Netflix embraced the trend with *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale* in 2017 and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* in 2019.



Source: <https://www.goodreads.com>

The interactive choose your own adventure format debuted in Edward Packard's 1976 novel *Sugarcane Island*. This innovative concept had earlier influences from Borges 1942 work *The Garden of Forking Paths* and Italo Calvino's 1973 work *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* as well as 1979's work *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. In 2016, Ctrl movies *Late Shift* marked the initial triumph of interactive film. Netflix also embraced this trend with *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale* in 2017 and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* in 2019. These experiences empower users to make choices driving the storyline's direction, character fates, and also the outcomes.

This evolution caters to diverse storytelling preferences showcasing the genre's adaptability across various media. *Bandersnatch*, an interactive episode of the *Black Mirror* series, embodies the choose your own adventure genre in film form. The following trailer briefly introduces the film.



Based on the book, Jerome Davies was a genius. See that bloke who went cuckoo and cut his wife's head off? When it's a concept piece, a bit of madness is what you need. You're not hearing voices. There's no voices but there is something. *Bandersnatch* was the final score. It lets you see the bigger picture. You're not in control. You're not in control.

## Case Study: *Bandersnatch*

- *Bandersnatch* is the first interactive film in the Black Mirror series and unfolds in 1984, drawing on Orwell's surveillance themes.
- The hyper-narrative, interactive storyline centers on Stefan Butler, a programmer adapting a fantasy gamebook into a video game in 1984.
- The film explores postmodern themes, particularly the concept of free will, and takes its name from a video game project by Imagine Software in 1984.
  - The term "bandersnatch" originates from a fictional creature created by Lewis Carroll, which appears in his 1870s poems "Jabberwocky" and "The Hunting of the Snark".



Source: <https://www.theepochtimes.com>


Let us further discuss this film and explore its revolutionary impact on modern day entertainment. *Bandersnatch* is the first interactive film in the Black Mirror series and unfolds in 1984, drawing on Orwell's surveillance themes. The hyper narrative interactive storyline centers on Stephen Butler, a programmer adapting a fantasy game book into a video game in 1984. The film explores postmodern themes, particularly the concept of free

will and takes its name from a video game project by Imagine Software in 1984.

The term Bandersnatch originates from a fictional creature created by Louis Carroll, which appears in his 1870s poems, Jabberwocky and the Hunting of the Snark. Viewers navigate the narrative by making choices, leading to multiple storylines, endings and character fates.

## Format

- *Bandersnatch* provides a device-specific tutorial for viewers, offering choices within a ten-second window.
  - It comprises 150 minutes of unique content segmented into 250 parts, offering over one trillion possible viewing paths.
- Some scenes are accessible through different routes, leading to distinct choices.
- The film features five primary endings with variations, though it boasts between ten and twelve endings, including elusive "golden eggs" endings.
- Series creators emphasize that no ending is privileged, offering the opportunity to revisit choices and explore alternate paths. However, some choices may lock certain endings.



Source: <https://www.theringer.com>

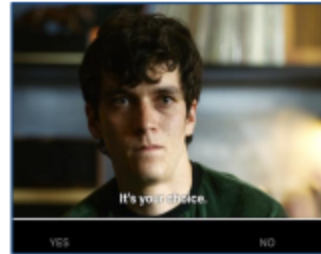
Bandersnatch also provides a device specific tutorial for viewers offering choice within a 10 second window. It comprises 150 minutes of unique content segmented into 250 parts, offering over 1 trillion possible viewing paths. Some scenes are accessible through different routes leading to distinct choices.

The film features five primary endings with variations, though it boasts between 10 and 12 endings, including elusive golden arc endings. Series creators emphasize that no ending is privileged, in fact, offering the opportunity to revisit choices and explore alternative paths. However, some choices may lock certain endings. This branching structure reflects the essence of interactive storytelling, offering a unique and immersive cinematic experience. Bandersnatch pushes the boundaries of traditional film, giving audiences the power to determine the protagonist's decisions, ultimately shaping the unfolding drama. Thus, Bandersnatch's distinctive blend of interactive choices and branching narratives underscores its status as a hyper narrative interactive cinema.



## Hyper-Narrative Interactive Cinema

- Shaul (2008)\* introduced the term "hyper-narrative interactive cinema."
- It refers to managing multi-tasking challenges while utilizing interaction, audio-visual design, and hyper-narrative structures to amplify engagement rather than diminish it. (2008, p 12.)\*
- Bandersnatch revolutionizes interactive storytelling by evolving from "choose your adventure" to exploring the potential of television, blurring fact and fiction, and shaping the future of narrative possibilities.



Source: <https://www.bustle.com>

\* Shaul, N. B. (2008). Hyper-narrative interactive cinema: Problems and solutions (Vol. 18). Brill.

In a 2008 work, N.B. Shaul has introduced the term hyper narrative interactive cinema. It refers to managing multitasking challenges while utilizing interaction, audio visual design and hyper narrative structures to amplify engagement rather than diminish it. Bandersnatch revolutionizes interactive storytelling by evolving from choose your adventure to exploring the potential of television, blurring fact and fiction and shaping the future of narrative possibilities. The viewer's decisions guide the plot's progression, resulting in diverse story arcs, which is a prime example of how interactive cinema has evolved into hyper narratives. Consequently, such works have transformed media consumption practices.

## Change in Consumption Practices

- Netflix employs coding, using ones and zeros, to assess audience engagement and make narrative adjustments in real-time, ensuring sustained interest.
- This transforms viewers into active participants, going beyond consumers, and involving them in co-creating the storyline.
- Audience involvement in narrative follows the American tradition of uchronia and counterfactual exploration.
  - Examples include works like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Marvel's *What If?* (1977- present) comics , films such as Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), and television fiction such as *Fringe* (2008-2013).



Source: <https://www.goodreads.com>

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- *Bandersnatch* intricately guides viewers down pre-defined paths, albeit complex ones, offering an illusion of choice.
- In the ever-changing landscape of cinema driven by competitive streaming platforms, storytelling has adapted to cater to an audience thirsty for innovation.
- However, it becomes evident that *Bandersnatch* does not provide true free will, but confines choices within the medium's limits.
- This underscores the notion that societal norms and control mechanisms, akin to Foucault's panopticon, predefine our choices.



Source: Slade D. Black Mirror: Bandersnatch [Netflix streaming]. United States: Netflix; 2018.

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However, it becomes evident that Bandersnatch does not provide true free will, but confines choices within the limits of the medium. This underscores the notion that societal norms and control mechanisms akin to Foucault's panopticon predefine our choices. This Bandersnatch skillfully straddles the line between traditional storytelling and video gaming, not just thematically, but also functionally. This shift has compelled content creators to craft increasingly immersive and interactive narratives that blur the boundaries between passive and active participation, presenting itself as a unique fusion of both mediums. However, it falls short of granting viewers true autonomy, mirroring its own critique of the loss of individuality within the concept of choice.



We will discuss the concept of the panopticon and control in later modules where we take up the dangers of modern digital communication media. Regarding story interactive design, Netflix's choice to limit alternative routes and endings in *Bandersnatch* aligns with catering to a broader smart TV audience and meeting medium demand from TV users.

## Interactive Design

- *Bandersnatch* diverges from the concept of autonomous ergodic fiction.
- The team initially considered using GIF animations for choices but switched to text options, temporarily letterboxing the frame to make the choices clear
- The lighting, sound design and aspect ratio of the film change while this takes place, designed to make the viewer feel pressure
- To familiarize viewers with the interactive concept, a seemingly trivial cereal choice was included, which influences the story and in-movie advertisements if choices aren't made.
- This not only shows the viewer how choices are presented during the film, but how their state is recalled by the Netflix app later in their viewing



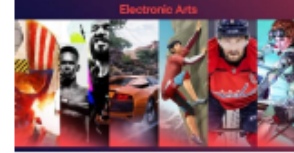
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## Game Developers and Hollywood

- In the 1990s, there was talk of Hollywood and Silicon Valley merging, but these efforts often fell short.
- However, in 2003 and 2004, Electronic Arts (EA), a major game publisher, moved to Los Angeles to collaborate with Hollywood's creative talent.
- EA emphasized that while games and movies were distinct, they could draw inspiration from each other, emphasizing the importance of storytelling and immersive environments in games.
- Hollywood screenwriters began working on games, talent agencies facilitated industry connections, and film studios like Warner Brothers ventured into interactive entertainment, signaling a shift towards an entertainment-focused approach in the gaming industry.



Source: <https://www.ea.com>

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- Video games in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are increasingly cinematic, employing high-quality visuals, sound effects, original scores, and intricate plots.
- They're enlisting Hollywood stars for voice-over work, crafting extensive, tailor-made dialogues for an authentic gaming experience.
- In the Spider-Man game (Treyarch, 2002), writers crafted unique dialogues unrelated to the movie, ensuring a tailored gaming experience.
- Additionally, Tobey Maguire and Willem Dafoe lent their voices, enhancing the game's authenticity.
- Many modern video games feature plots that resemble compelling movies.
  - Rockstar Games' description of Max Payne 2 on their website portrays it as a cinematic experience, blurring the lines between game and film.

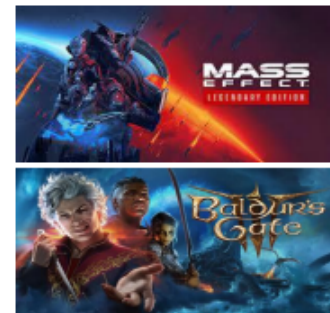


Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

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## What Makes Video Games Appealing?

- Video games offer a captivating experience by transporting players into rich fantasy realms, allowing them to assume thrilling roles without real-world risks.
- Players have agency, controlling the game's direction and outcomes, which is a fundamental allure.
- Games cater to the universal desire for play and imagination, offering socially acceptable enjoyment at any age.
- Various motivations drive gamers, from escapism and stress relief to intellectual stimulation and competition.
- The continual increase in challenge levels maintains player engagement, while the adrenaline rush of conquering challenges provides a satisfying sense of accomplishment.



Source: <https://store.steampowered.com>

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This transmedia nature is evident as games extend beyond their virtual confines, incorporating books, films, web series, merchandise and even real-world events, in order to create a comprehensive and immersive story world.

## Games as Transmedia

- Transmedia involves narrative and diegetic extensions, along with viewer engagement.
- Experiential activities like video games, offering interactive contributions, are considered both cross-media and transmedia. (Simons, 2014)\*.
- Felix Schröter's work, *The Game of Game of Thrones* (2015)\*\* , explores the relationship between transmedial storyworlds and video games, focusing on George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and three video game adaptations.
- He examines how narratives can be likened to games through underlying rules, outcomes, goals, and conflicts, rather than traditional narrative elements.



Source: <https://store.steampowered.com>

\* Simons, N. (2014). Audience reception of cross-and transmedia TV drama in the age of convergence. *International journal of communication*..., 8, 2220-2239.

\*\* Schröter, F. (2015). The Game of Game of Thrones. George RR Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire and its Video Game Adaptations. *IMAGE. Zeitschrift für interdisziplinäre Bildwissenschaft*, 11(2), 65-82.

Transmedia involves narrative and diegetic extensions, along with viewer engagement. Experiential activities like video games, offering interactive contributions are considered, both crossmedia and transmedia. The 2015 work of Felix Schroter's, titled *The Game of Game of Thrones*, explores the relationship between transmedia story worlds and video games, focusing on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and three video game adaptations. He examines how narratives can be linked to games through underlying rules, outcomes, goals and conflicts, rather than traditional narrative elements.

This interconnected narrative approach enriches the gaming experience, engaging players on multiple levels and expanding the reach of the game's story across diverse mediums. We

will be looking at the video game Quantum Break, from the Finnish video game developer Remedy Entertainment, as a case study for this module.

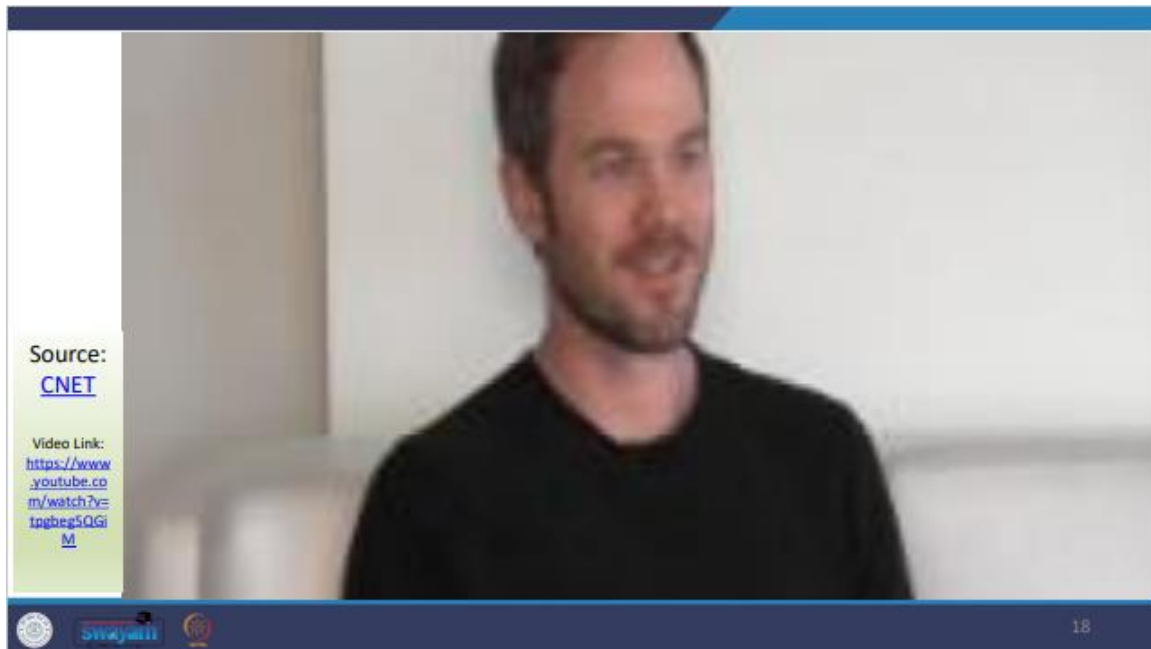
## Case Study: Quantum Break

- *Quantum Break*, released in 2016, is an action-adventure third-person shooter video game developed by Remedy Entertainment and published by Microsoft Studios for Windows and Xbox One.
- The game's narrative revolves around Jack Joyce, who gains time manipulation powers following a failed time-machine experiment.
- He clashes with his former friend, Paul Serene, regarding the impending "End of Time."
- The game combines action and platforming elements and features "junction points" that influence the storyline.



Quantum Break was released in 2016 and it is an action-adventure third-person shooter video game developed by Remedy Entertainment and published by Microsoft Studios for Windows and Xbox One. The game's narrative revolves around Jack Joyce, who gains time manipulation powers following a failed time machine experiment. He clashes with his former friend Paul Serene regarding the impending end of time. The game combines action and platforming elements and features junction points that influence the storyline. In the following video, actor Sean Ashmore talks about his role as the protagonist Jack Joyce and what themes are central to the plot of this video game.





I mean I got involved with Quantum Break kind of like a lot of great opportunities in my career. I just got a call from my agent saying hey there's um you know Microsoft and Xbox are starting this new IP and they're interested in talking to you about it and Remedy Entertainment is going to be involved and I know Remedy. I love Remedy games. I beat Max Payne on the set of X-Men 2. So this short story of a Quantum Break, it's basically about a time travel experiment that goes awry and Jack Joyce, our lead character, and Paul Serene who is their best friends at the beginning basically gain these abilities through the this experiment going awry and really what the game is about is stopping the end of time.

So there's like these huge stakes. It's a science fiction action-adventure shooter along with an incredibly in-depth live action in-game show. So, this was a totally different experience, and you know the motion capture process is in one way it was like really challenging because you're working in an environment where nothing is there. I mean I'm sure everybody's seen it now. You wear those suits, and you have a head cam and you're in sort of a blank empty warehouse and it's just actors and a few basic props and that's it. For me what I care about is like the story is huge and exciting but there is real relatable drama.

Like to me the idea of two friends becoming the worst of enemies is like something that I want to explore and know about. That's like just good drama. So, when you put it in the midst of this gigantic science fiction adventure, I think that's something people are going to like really enjoy. Alongside Ashmoure, the game features actors Aiden Gillian and the now late Len Sneek.

That portrayed important roles in the game. Quantum Break embraces transmedia storytelling by intertwining its gameplay with a digital series and novel creating a unified narrative experience across different media platforms.



## Transmedial Properties of Quantum Break

- Quantum Break's transmedia approach aligns with Henry Jenkins' concept of the transmedia storytelling
  - the game focuses on the main character and the digital series enhances supporting characters and their motivations.
- Players briefly control the antagonist, Paul Serene, making choices based on his time-travel-induced premonitions.
- Following each choice or junction point, a 20-minute digital series episode reflects the player's choice, impacting the game's events.
- Players find quantum ripples or hotspots during the game, interacting with them to trigger additional scenes in the digital series episodes, like a vanishing cardboard T-Rex that baffles characters.



Source: <https://quantumbreak.fandom.com>



The transmedia approach of Quantum Break aligns with the concept of the transmedia storytelling proposed by Henry Jenkins. The game focuses on the main character and the digital series enhances supporting characters and their motivations. Players briefly control the antagonist Paul Serene making choices based on his time travel induced premonitions. Following each choice or junction point a 20-minute digital series episode reflects the player's choice impacting the events of the game.

Players find quantum ripples or hot spots during the game interacting with them to trigger additional scenes in the digital series episodes like a vanishing cardboard t-rex that baffles characters. Therefore, the combination of gameplay and live action content demonstrates how video games can extend their narrative beyond the screen engaging players on various levels simultaneously. In conclusion, interactive digital storytelling is a multi-faceted and evolving art form that bridges the gap between traditional narratives and active audience participation.

## Conclusion

- Films, games, and new media converge in interactive digital storytelling.
- Audiences transition from passive spectators to active co-authors of narratives.
- Transmedia storytelling showcases the dynamic and interconnected nature of this medium.
- The evolution of hyperstories paves the way for complex, multifaceted narratives.
- Groundbreaking works like *Bandersnatch*, *Alan Wake*, and *Quantum Break* exemplify the boundless potential of interactive storytelling.



Films, games and new media converge in interactive digital storytelling. Audiences transition from passive spectators to active co-authors of the narratives. Transmedia storytelling showcases the dynamic and interconnected nature of this medium. The evolution of hyper stories paves the way for complex multi-faceted narratives. Groundbreaking works like *Bandersnatch*, *Alan Wake* and *Quantum Break* exemplify the boundless potential of interactive storytelling. Interactive digital storytelling offers a unique fusion of creativity, technology and audience agency assuring an exciting era of narrative exploration through digital means. In the next week, we will discuss the ethical aspects behind modern communication media in our digital era. Thank you.