Interactive Storytelling: The plausible future narrative of linear and non-linear films.

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Abstract: This study aimed to understand the format of interactive Storytelling in cinema from the perspective of viewers. The study was anchored on the basis of the following research questions: Can Interactivity entice viewers to watch content they otherwise wouldn't watch? Does adding interactivity in otherwise passive content elevate the quality or experience of content? Do viewers of passive content desire the ability to make a few narrative decisions along the way? The paper presents the dynamics of the audience's behavior in an accelerating and overly connected world, that instigated the need for interactive storytelling. The results obtained from the study showed that interactivity of the film elevates the quality of viewing experience and can compel the audience to watch the film to an extent.
Key words: Interactive storytelling, simulation, passive content, narrative decisions.

I.   BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The popular streaming platform Netflix officially launched Black Mirror: Bandersnatch on December 28, 2018. This was an Interactive storytelling movie that allowed the audience to choose what they get to see and traverse through the multiple story paths. The audience had the power to make decisions for and on behalf of the protagonist throughout the movie, with decisions ranging from the choice of cereal to life or death situations. Each decision the viewer makes directed the movie to a particular story path, and ultimately an ending. Following the success of Bandersnatch, media companies have double-down their investment in developing interactive programming. The success of this format, also meant that creative directors and content producers are forced to adapt. In such a scenario of changing and evolving audience behavior, there are various questions posed regarding the future of films. The recent hype though justified should has not yet taken over the linear format of films. While any new content is always welcomed by the audience due to easy accessibility, we should also keep in mind that reviews and criticism have a major role to play in its success.

While the format of interactive storytelling is still progressing, the study attempts to understand the power and impact it can hold on the future of films.

II.   INTRODUCTION

Cinema has always been an a medium of fascination and of great influence since it's time immemorial. Films have been a medium for educating, bringing about awareness, creating social change, a medium of entertainment with their transformative power and meaningful dialogue. Serving various purposes and meeting various demands, films have evolved over time. Regardless of the function a film aims to serve, there is always a narrative in every film that strives to finds its way to audience. Along with films, the taste and content consumption patterns of audience have been evolving. As a result, the present media, offers a varied range of formats to meet the new demands. New forms of storytelling have emerged, each having their own different labels: linear, nonlinear, interactive, transmedia, deep media and more. All these forms despite of their differences have one thing in common, exchange of information that creates meaningful dialogue. The creation of new forms of storytelling can be attributed to several factors. The most important factor is the technology. In the past, post- production of multiple storylines was an arduous task, programming software for branching narratives did not exist, TV's and movie theatres did not have the necessary user interface. The present however is laden with script writing software, smartphones, personal computers and a range of streaming platforms that can make new forms of storytelling possible.

Various streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon prime video, HBO and sling TV are working towards providing unlimited video services. Netflix officially launched Black Mirror: Bandersnatch that followed the format of Interactive Storytelling. Unlike the linear narrative of films where the audience is a passive consumer of information that is given to him or her, the format of interactive storytelling makes the viewer have a say in how a plot can progress.

The movie Black Mirror: Bandersnatch became a massive success in the streaming platform. This was not the first ever show to have an interactive format of storytelling. Adventure books and games with multiple story paths have existed in the past. HBO, another popular streaming platform has released Mosaic in 2017, which was a six episodes interactive series directed by Steven Soderbergh. Despite of its previous existence, success and media attention drawn towards Black mirror: Bandersnatch has made the format of interactive storytelling quite popular in the recent years. Interactive storytelling is still in progress. Linear format of films still stands as a major chunk of cultural and journalistic production. However, the power and impact of narrative fiction with the emerging forms of storytelling cannot be ignored.

III.   LITERATURE REVIEW:
Every journal, article, book and news report referred to provided deeper insight and new perspective that provided deeper insight and new perspective that provided a direction to the research study. Interactive storytelling in films still remains an unexplored field of study.

The following sources were however crucial in navigating through the study.

The book, A philosophy of cinematic art by Berys Gaut provided an insight into the nature of narration, character identification and audiences' emotional responses. It also shows that nature of film medium plays a central role in understanding and evaluating films. What is quest? From adventure games to Interactive books by Anastasia Salter traces the collapsing distinction between creator and consumer. The book lists out the three stages of early interactive narratives and identifies predigital roots of interactive narratives.

The news reports, Netflix releases interactive episode of TV show " Black Mirror" by CNBC David Reid (28 Dec, 2018) and Black Mirror: Bandersnatch- the TV of tomorrow is now here by Lucy Mangan (Jan,2019) provided insights into changing patterns of audience behavior, and also addresses the other perspectives of interactive storytelling of how it may find specific rather than general audience. The refugee offered by a standard television and the pretexts of controlling to lure the audience is also addressed in the reports.

The analysts and critics of interactive storytelling have still left scope for consideration of the factors of viewership experience, temptation of interactivity that can compel the viewers to watch a film. The perspective of viewers at a large is taken into consideration within the purview of this study.

IV.   METHODOLOGY:
The study attempted to examine the perspective of audience on the format of interactive storytelling. The viewing experience with respect to films and gaming experience were both taken into consideration to understand their perceptions of interactive and semi interactive content. The differences in the nature of active and passive content were taken into consideration while framing the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of a series of 15 questions that takes approximately five to ten minutes to complete. It was made clear to the respondents through instructions that their participation is entirely voluntary and they can withdraw themselves at any point of time during the research. The participants who were not familiar with or haven't watched or played any interactive storytelling format were asked to imagine a scenario where there are given such a choice to choose a story path.

The information basis and empirical base for the research was the data collected from 52 respondents through the questionnaire circulated online. The year of study was 2019.

The respondents were initially screened on their level of familiarity of interactive format by giving examples of popular interactive content. To understand the role of interactivity in enticing viewers to watch content, the respondents were enquired regarding their fascination and the appealing factors with respect to the format. To understand the quality and experience of interactive viewing experience, the respondents were asked to choose the words that best described their experience. The viewer's level of satisfaction, present and future preferences, understanding of the format were explored through a series of questions and multiple-choice options. These variables served as the basis to understand the research questions at various levels.

It was made clear that there was no right or wrong answer to any question, and that questions can be answered keeping their cinema viewing experience or interactive gaming experience in mind. In accordance with the best research practices all the responses were kept confidential to the best of ability and were used for academic purpose solely through consent.

V.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:
Respondents' characteristics:

The respondents of the study (N=52) consisted of 80.4% male and 19.4% female. They belonged to the age group of 15 to 26, active consumers of various streaming platforms. A majority of respondents belonged to the age group of 19-20. Of the 52 respondents, a majority of about 67.3% of respondents were familiar with or

have watched the interactive storytelling films. A proportion of about 22 people were familiar with having played interactive storytelling games.

The responses were analyzed to understand the following research questions:

-Can Interactivity entice viewers to watch content they otherwise wouldn't watch?

The study revealed that of the respondents, a majority of the people who were familiar with the film were noted to be fascinated with the format of interactive storytelling. They found it fascinating to interact with characters, making their own story choices and see it influence the direction of story.
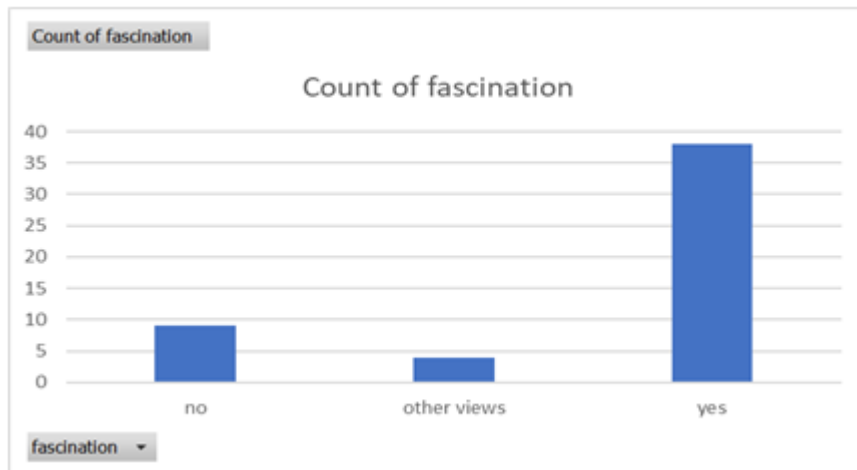

Figure 1: Illustrates the count of fascination among the respondents.

The respondents' fascination with the format of interactive storytelling was found to have an influence in compelling them to watch the film.
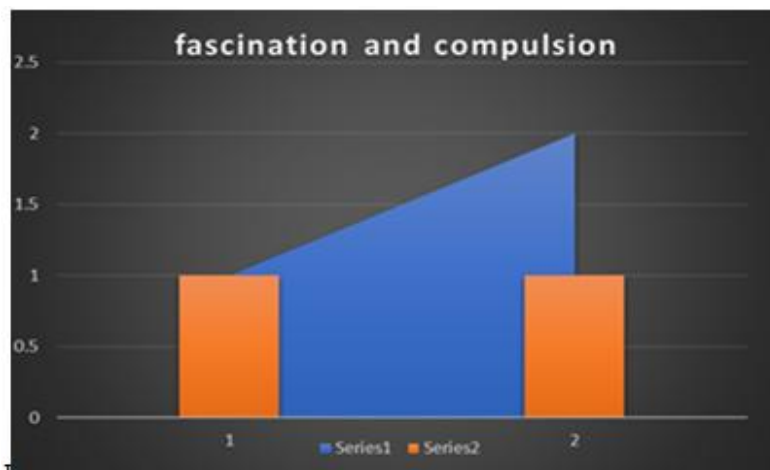

Figure 2: Illustrates the fascination (series 1) and compulsion (series 2) count of respondents.

Does adding interactivity in otherwise passive content elevate the quality or experience of content?

A majority of the respondents were however not satisfied with the ending they reached in the first attempt. Of this majority, while some of them found themselves exploring all possible endings the others tried a couple of different paths gave up and read the remaining plotlines online.

However, interactivity of the film was found to have elevated their satisfaction of cinema viewing experience to an extent.
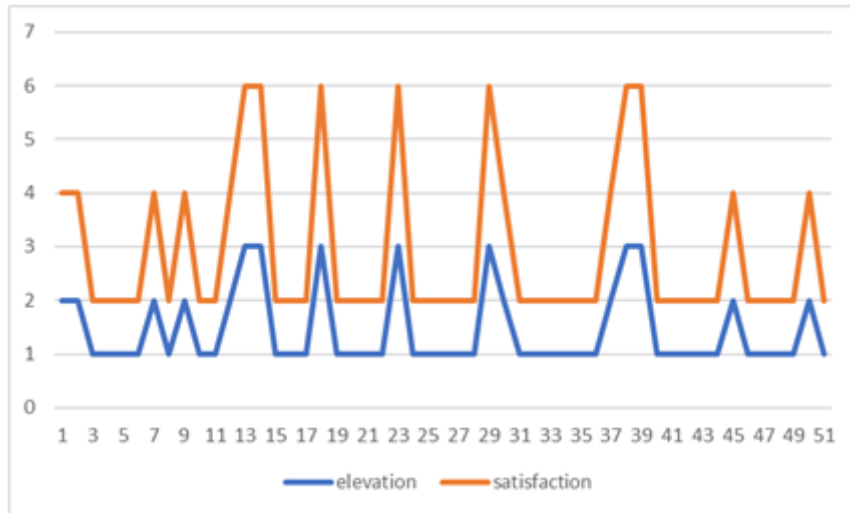
Figure 3: Illustrates the level of satisfaction and elevation of experience of respondents

-Do viewers of passive content desire the ability to make a few narrative decisions along the way?

A majority of respondents stated that each ending explored, sort of built up to the same ending, felt burdensome to make decisions at times, and that being asked to constantly choose took them out of the crucial moments of the film.
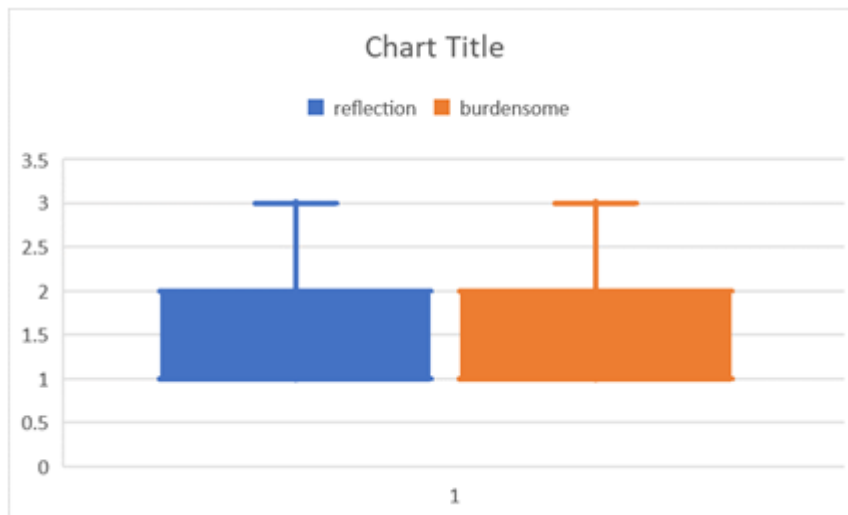

Figure 4: Illustrates the count of reflection on endings and burdensomeness to choose.

However, the differences among the proportion of majority and other views was not so drastic implying that despite of some drawbacks, there were specific audience that enjoyed even these aspects of the format. The study revealed that in terms of preferences, for future films, a majority of the respondents preferred to watch a film with multiple, interactive story path over single story path films.

When asked to describe their viewing experience in terms of having ' watched' the film or 'played' the film, a proportion of 26 respondents described their experience as having ' played' the film, while a proportion of 23 respondents described their experience as having watched the film.

One of the major finding of the study is that despite of varied perceptions and preferences among the respondents, a majority of respondents agreed that both the format of films fascinate them equally.

VI.   CONCLUSION:

The study concluded that unmet needs of semi interactive passive content, and power to choose could compel the viewers to watch the content. Viewers to an extent desire the ability to make a few narrative decisions along the way. Interactivity in films does elevate the quality of viewership experience. These findings support the potential of interactive storytelling to emerge as the popular mode of storytelling format in future.

However, interactive storytelling does not seem to emerge as the only possible future of films. The findings of the study showed that despite of the temptation of interaction, the format of Interactive storytelling in films tends to appeal to specific audience. Another crucial finding of the study was that regardless of any format of storytelling, films continue to be a subject of fascination as well as medium of entertainment for the audience.

Research gaps:

The sample size was limited.

The respondents were limited to the age group of 15-26, and since among them a majority of the respondents belonged to the age range from 19-20, the viewer perspective of the other age groups could not be studied.

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