Metanarrative Horror:
The Existential Dread of Choice

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Keywords

existentialism, horror, agency, metanarrative, Stanley Parable, Bandersnatch

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The dichotomy of sandbox versus railroad offers a paired set of existential horrors. In its benign form, the sandbox paradigm symbolizes freedom of action, where players can roam virtual worlds at will. The benign railroad represents structure, providing players with linear but cohesive experiences. Taken to their extremes, both styles represent something darker: the hopeless, aimless wandering of infinite choice on the one hand, and the restrictive mind control of non-choice on the other. Rather than designs to be avoided, however, we argue that these twin horrors represent an opportunity for new design space. By understanding the philosophical anxieties that define this *existential dread of choice*, we can manipulate agency mechanics (Habel and Kooyman 2014) to produce self-reflexive horror experiences unique to interactive metanarrative.

The application of existential philosophy to ludic experience is central to this work. Others have noted how the grim fantasy of *Dark Souls* franchise is replete with themes of suffering, perpetual cycles, and sin (Meade 2021), and therefore lends itself to the perspectives of Nietzsche and Camus. Jean-Paul Sartre, meanwhile, makes a natural co-pilot for interpreting multiple-choice video games such as *Life is Strange*: "If our existential choices were predetermined like in a video game," writes de Miranda, "Then we would be mere automata" (2018, 4). We position these crises of freedom and restriction in the context of Jenkins's treatment of "boy culture" (Jenkins 1993). Painted as the free-range exploration of backyards, forts in woods, or prospecting through creek beds, this style of play exists under constant threat. Always there is the specter of parental restriction; of the call to head home and wash up in time for supper. But consider how much more horrible it would be if the call for supper never came. This existential dread of choice — confinement and claustrophobia on the one

hand and the dreadful liberty of agoraphobia on the other — can be exemplified through a close reading of two games.

The first of these is *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch,* a Netflix interactive film which serves as an exemplar of the railroad (Netflix 2018). Like the eponymous Choose Your Own Adventure book that drives its plot, *Bandersnatch* is a game of forking narrative and binary choice. It is also a metanarrative, as the interactor faces the same dilemmas as the film's protagonist, Stefan. This troubled young video game designer is told by a senior colleague: "When you make a decision you think it's you doing it, but it's not. It's the spirit out there that's connected to our world." The line is of course referencing us, the player. But at the same time, it gestures towards the existential dread that undergirds the experience. In this same scene, both Stefan and the interactor are forced to choose between an LSD tab and abstinence. "Don't feel pressured," we are told. But the music swells. The clock ticks. In deliberate counterpoint to the diegetic reassurances, every ludo-cinematic trick in the book is used to make us feel EXACTLY as pressured as the protagonist. In the end, we are slipped a tab in our coffee regardless. Our choice did not matter, and so the scene concludes with the appearance of a demonic figure named 'Pax, the Thief of Destiny.'

As an experience, Bandersnatch stands in stark opposition to freeform play. Its horror does not lie in monster makeup or jump scares, but in stealing player agency and replacing it with a monstrous structure. Yet the absence of any structure at all makes for an equally horrific playground. *Stanely Parable 2* serves as an exemplar of this latter brand of terrible fate (Crows Crows Crows 2022). The controlling, omniscient narrator from the original game remains a central figure, still critiquing our choices and scripting our paths. In these ways, it is aligned with the railroad and with restriction. But the sequel allows us a reprieve from the narrator's oppressive oversight. Upon encountering a skip button that allows us to leap further and further into the future, our prison eventually breaks. So does the world. We emerge from a concrete bunker into a blasted landscape. It is the distant future, the narrator is presumably centuries dead, and we have gained a radical sense of freedom. There are no rules to constrain us, and therefore no more game. Such narrative agoraphobia contrasts with the claustrophobic design of the railroad, but it is just as unnerving in its own right.

Both *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and *The Stanley Parable* are metanarratives, commenting on the nature of play as we play. In that sense, the reflexive gameplay plunges us into existential crisis, demanding that the interactor question the extent of their agency, both as player character and as a player. This is the existential dread of choice in action, rendering play into an exercise in powerlessness. Both sides of the existential coin can serve as an engine for horror design, powering self-reflexive experiences through alternating bouts of freedom and restriction of choice.

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