

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 78 – Don Jonas – Community Health

Black Mirrors and Frumious Bandersnatches

And now a personal word,

There is a show on Netflix called *Black Mirror*. Imagine if Rod Serling produced a series in the twenty-first century. *Black Mirror* is a cross between *Twilight Zone* and dark dystopian novels found on the Internet today. *Black Mirror* describes itself as sharp, suspenseful tales that explore techno-paranoia and collective unease about the modern world. In the first four seasons of the show, *Black Mirror* explored memory implants that record everything we see and do; a new service that lets people stay in touch with the deceased; a world in which social standing is determined by strangers voting each other up or down on their phones; a dating program that puts an expiration date on relationships; and soldiers returning home from war with strange technical glitches.

My favorite episodes are *Arkangel* about a worried mom who signs up for a device that monitors her daughter's whereabouts, and *San Junipero* about a shy young woman who bonds with an outgoing party girl across space and time. The episodes are disturbing, mind-bending, fraught with warning, and irresistible to watch.

What does *Black Mirror* have to do with Don Jonas and community health? There are so many answers to that question.

Here's one: season five of *Black Mirror* begins with an interactive movie called *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Set in 1984, the film follows Stefan, a young programmer who begins to question reality as he adapts a sprawling fantasy novel into a video game. The movie prompts the viewer at multiple points throughout the film to select one of two choices that affect what happens next. It is a choose-your-own-adventure story. The film has hundreds of paths and many distinct endings. Within each path, there are references to other paths and to decisions made and not made. Stefan senses that he is not in control of his choices as the viewer on Netflix is making key decisions for him. The illusion of free choice is disrupted in the film as we watch the film in suspended disbelief and participate as an actor in the narrative.

Why the name Bandersnatch? Layers upon layers here as well. The Bandersnatch is a fictional creature from Lewis Carroll's 1872 novel *Through the Looking Glass*. Carroll wrote:

*Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!*

After the publication of *Through the Looking Glass*, Carroll wrote a poem entitled “The Hunting of the Snark (An Agony in 8 Fits),” in which he referenced the Bandersnatch again. In the poem, an adventurer barely escapes a Bandersnatch whose “frumious jaws went savagely snapping around.”

Film critic and associate professor of English, Alissa Wilkinson, in a December 2018 article in Vox.com, connects the Bandersnatch to *Black Mirror*:

[S]omething about the sneaking, ferocious, fast-moving creature has captured the imaginations of writers, artists, and musicians in the century and a half since, as have many other elements of the *Alice* mythology. You can find references to Bandersnatches in science fiction and detective novels, in TV shows and video games, in comics and music, and more. ... So it’s easy to see why *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*—the story of a young man whose obsession with his work makes it possible for the work to turn around and bite him with its own frumious jaws—would explicitly make the reference.

In *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, Stefan goes headfirst through a mirror into a previous time in his life. He goes through a looking glass.

Don Jonas referenced decision points and different lives he might have led. He could have gone to law school. He studied political science in graduate school instead. He could have become an academic. He went into public policy work instead. He could have moved to Wisconsin. He returned to Charlotte instead. He could have remained a private consultant. He became an executive director of a community health center instead. He could focus on delivering core services within a limited budget. He is working toward an ambitious comprehensive solution of community health needs instead.

Don senses time passing. The past becomes immutable. Unless it doesn’t.

Like Don and Stefan, we make our choices. Our decisions are influenced. There are forces guiding us. There is culture that shapes what we value. There is always context. There is always the life we lead and lives that go unled. There is *what if* and *what might have been*. Our path is a labyrinth. We live in a multiverse.

The same is true about community health, but to an exponential degree. Millions of citizens are making decisions, all influencing each other, all leading to a myriad of outcomes. A day in the city is an infinite number of divergent story paths and parallel realities.

There is a choice we have at the bottom of the screen: *yes* to coming to terms with the choices we have made (knowing there is only so much we controlled) or *no* to the life we have led and living in regret. The frumious jaws of the Bandersnatch await.

Yes

No

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