As attention spans become shorter – Gen Z’s is said to be 8 seconds, versus millennials’ 12 seconds – entertainment companies are devising ever-more inventive, multi-sensory experiences that draw viewers in by allowing them to interact with the content.

“Bandersnatch,” Netflix’s interactive spin-off of the “Black Mirror” series, saw its take on viewer-guided television honored with an Emmy for Outstanding Television Movie at the 2019 awards. This dystopian tale, written by Charlie Brooker, is set in 1984 and centers on a young programmer’s quest to turn an alternative ending book into a computer game. The film offers the viewer the chance to choose over “a trillion” narrative possibilities, Pitchfork reports.

Reviewing “Bandersnatch,” Aisha Harris of the New York Times writes that “it was a treat to play around with the endings...and exist in a state of rapt attention,” adding that “it’s difficult to check your phone...lest you miss small details and clues that resurface later, or the chance to 'make' a 'choice.'”
But if Netflix’s foray into interactive television is about commanding the viewer’s undivided attention, interactive podcast app Entale responds to people’s urge to jump from one media source to another to explore a topic. The platform, which enhances podcast content with social media posts, images, links, quotes, and product recommendations, in September raised £2 million, or $2.45 million in funding from dmg ventures, the venture capital arm of Daily Mail and General Trust Plc. “Our users don’t need to search for what’s being mentioned - they can see and engage with the story as it’s told,” Entale says.

“The reason we built Entale was because we were frustrated that we couldn’t dive deeper into a story, whether that's by being able to see pictures of a crime scene, read articles being discussed, or buy products recommended,” says Hannah Blake, head of business development and partnerships at Entale. “With Entale, you can satisfy your curiosity by exploring all of these things, either whilst listening or afterwards.”

Blake says that since Entale launched, the company has found that users spend between 30% and 50% of their listening time interacting with the extra content, and 10% of the time clicking to external sites. And according to the company’s own studies, there was a “40% better editorial recall and 95% uplift in brand recall when listening to the same episode of a show on Entale, compared to [listening on] Apple [Podcasts],” Blake says. Blake adds that she believes the urge to consume content from multiple sources is “less a case of impatience, [and] rather an insatiable appetite to explore further into a topic or complete a journey, from inspiration to purchase, for example.” Following its funding round, Blake said Entale is focusing on “automating the creation of the interactive elements,” alongside commissioning original content “to really push the boundaries of what stories are possible to tell on our platform.”
These multi-layered media experiences can also take a more esoteric turn. In September, Björk released her 2015 album Vulnicura as a VR experience. Intended to be viewed on a headset, the experience weaves in many of the visuals that were part of the Björk Digital Exhibition, a touring show that opened in 2016. In an interview with Dazed Digital, Björk relates how VR can add another layer of intensity to the emotions that her music expresses.

“[VR has] the potential of making the invisible, emotional things we feel with our bodies actually happen,” Björk told the publication. “The way I experienced my heartbreak was that I had a big wound in my chest and I was sewing that...and all the blood in my veins was black lead because of all the sorrow.” Detailing how the track ‘Family’ translates this into a VR experience, Björk explained that it “allows listeners to sew their wound with the gadget they hold in VR.”
Mark Ronson, meanwhile, debuted his “Pieces of Us” music video on Instagram Stories, a move that Fast Company said “may just be the future of music videos.” As Instagram Stories are temporary, the video – filmed on a phone - was reposted every 24 hours, and is now on Ronson’s IGTV channel. With a plethora of filters and stickers used in the video, viewers could also add their own visual elements in their own Instagram Stories.

Gaming is another immersive entertainment channel that musicians are dipping their toe into. This spans, Dazed reports, Fortnite hosting a virtual Marshmello concert, to K-Pop band BTS releasing BTS World, a simulation game that “takes players back to the start before the band's debut, to pursue the role of BTS' manager, with the ultimate goal of fostering BTS to become superstars,” its makers say.

As these new cross-platform formats continue to gain widespread attention and even critical acclaim, they point to a seamlessly immersive and interactive future of entertainment.

New entertainment formats

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