

Producer-Audience Relationships as Explored Through *Black Mirror*'s "San Junipero"

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With the constant rise in media prevalence, understanding the role media plays in shaping culture is crucial. One place to start is by looking into the workings of producer-audience relationships – that is, how producers create intended meanings that audiences then interpret in different ways. Drawing from popular media case studies, a deeper dive reveals how meaning is shaped through the interplay between producers and audiences. This dynamic can be found in the anthology series *Black Mirror*¹, specifically the episode “San Junipero,”² which offers insight into the workings of producer-audience relationships through its explorations of audience interpretation, television genre, and sexuality.

The producer-audience relationship can first be explored through the theory of encoding and decoding, which was introduced by Stuart Hall (2003). Hall (2003) argues that audiences actively decode messages based on their cultural and lived experiences, regardless of the producer’s intended meaning. In the case of “San Junipero,” producers Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones explicitly state their intentions in a video interview. Jones mentions that the idea stemmed from the ways elderly people are often represented in media as having a “personality lobotomy,” so they wanted to show a refreshing take highlighting the realities of elders still wanting to chase sexuality and fun (SYFY WIRE, 2017). Hall (2003) states, “... the audience is both the ‘source’ and the ‘receiver’ of the television message,” (para. 4), indicating that Brooker and Jones may have used the absence of realistic elder representation as the source to work with,

¹ A science fiction series that explore dystopian realities centered on the consequences of technological advancements.

² “San Junipero” follows the story of two young women, Yorkie and Kelly, who fall in love but struggle to navigate their relationship. The twist at the end of the episode reveals the two women take part in a trial period of an alternate-reality called San Junipero, where people can opt to consciously spend five hours per week living at any age they chose. In the real world, both women are elderly and don’t know each other, but remain young in San Junipero where they met. Yorkie has been paraplegic for the past 40 years, and plans to permanently upload her consciousness to San Junipero, giving her the opportunity to live out the life she never got to have. Kelly debates whether or not she will pass away naturally – in hopes of being reunited with her late husband in the afterlife – or give her consciousness to San Junipero – where she is guaranteed life with Yorkie –, and ultimately decides on the latter. The episode ends with young Kelly and Yorkie happily beginning their new life together in San Junipero.

hoping audiences would pick up on that theme on the receiving end. However, the inclusion of unconventional elderly representation was overlooked by much of the audience as the focus instead fell on the significance of the episode's ending for the younger versions of the women. Brooker calls the end of the episode a "hopeful and optimistic tale" (SYFY WIRE, 2017), and while many viewers shared on Reddit forums that they interpreted the ending as such, others felt it was actually the contrary. One poster shared, "even if it was supposed to be a happy ending, I don't see it as one, realistically" (u/StarChild413, 2023), emphasizing Hall's point and showing that regardless of what producers aim to get across, audiences will ascribe varying meanings.

The episode's unexpectedly happy ending actually caused quite a lot of controversy among *Black Mirror* fans, as the show is known and loved for its episodes typically having dark and twisted ones. This reaction can be explained through the lens of genre, which genre theorist Amanda Klein (2018) argues "tells audiences how to think, feel, and act" (para. 9). Since audiences are used to the show featuring the grim aspects of technology in the science fiction realm, they've been "trained" to interpret and understand *Black Mirror* in that sense. "San Junipero" straying from the typical subversive and bleak endings has proven to leave some audiences disappointed and expecting more. Reddit users discussing "San Junipero" have shared that while the episode was executed well, it didn't feel like it fit with the show stating, "I would have loved this episode if it was part of a show other than *Black Mirror* (jojo_apollo, 2023)" and "great story, good characters, but not so good *Black Mirror* episode (Leading_Snow_9575, 2024)." To understand the disconnect, it's important to consider how Klein (2018) defines genre as "texts that share the same iconography, conventions, plot formulas, and themes" (para. 2). So when "San Junipero" followed almost all of the same genre conventions as previous episodes, yet diverged where fans find the most fulfillment from the show, it left some audiences

disoriented. However, Brooker and Jones shared that this was actually their intention, as “San Junipero” was released in the fourth season of the show, and they felt *Black Mirror* was getting too predictable at this point (SYFY WIRE, 2017). The producers made the conscious effort to redefine the genre, opening up the possibility to explore science fiction in less daunting ways. For some fans, the execution of this choice was successful and the “twist” of not having a twisted ending actually made the episode better. One poster shared, “this episode was enjoyable BECAUSE it was different. It's a breath of fresh air, and I liked the vibe” (u/RoughLime1947, 2025). This highlights how genre influences audience expectations and producers’ decisions, yet meaning mostly lies in the individual ways audiences experience the media.

Another area where Brooker and Jones were intentional in their creative decisions was the representation of queer identity. Representation, according to gender theorists Tonny Krijnen and Sofie Van Bauwel (2015) is the end result of countless decisions made during the production process. This is supported by Brooker who mentioned in the video interview that the main characters were originally going to be a heterosexual couple, but he made the conscious decision to challenge himself to tell a different narrative (SYFY WIRE, 2017). Creating a gay couple forced Brooker to think more deeply about the characters of Yorkie and Kelly to write a compelling story that portrays queer love with thoughtfulness and respect. With “San Junipero” being the show’s first representation of queer identity, this became one of the biggest topics of conversation surrounding the episode. Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) state that the “meaning of representation is not fixed in the representation itself but is co-created by its audience,” (para. 3) which is evident in the varying ways audiences have considered the queerness in the episode. Some Reddit audiences found the inclusion of gay characters to feel “gimmicky,” while LGBTQ+ fans snapped back, with one stating, “It's not a ‘gimmick’ if people have actually

experienced it” (u/This_Makes_Me_Happy, 2021). When discussing what makes ‘San Junipero’ resonate with fans, one Reddit user shared the sentiment, “queerness, lesbian representation, wholesome ending” (u/Adorable-Woman, 2021) to which another replied, “yeah it’s the combo: queer love stories rarely get happy endings” (u/Ash_Castle, 2022). However, not all identifying viewers were equally moved, as one lesbian user responded to the same thread, saying she found the episode “meh” (u/hexensabbat, 2021). These varied interpretations highlight that including LGBTQ+ themes alone does not guarantee meaningful representation; the portrayal must also resonate with audiences who identify with those narratives. For many, Brooker’s decision to include queer characters was successful, highlighting how important including representation for a popularly marginalized group is. The queerness became one of the main reasons fans adore “San Junipero,” which overall solidifies a harmonious relationship between the meanings created by the producers and interpreted by the audience.

With all of this being said, it becomes clear that meaning in media is not created through just the producer’s intentions or the audience’s interpretations, but rather the way the two work together. Despite not every considered theme from Brooker and Jones being fully grasped by audiences, “San Junipero” still acts as a successful *Black Mirror* episode. Through its strong producer-audience relationship, it was able to craft a compelling narrative that defies conventional genre bounds and represents sexuality in a relatable way.

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