



How HBO, Netflix Are Changing TV with Branching Narratives

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Filmmaker Steven Soderbergh's new series Mosaic for HBO is definitively not a choose your own adventure story.

"When people say 'choose your own adventure,' I just blow up," he told Film Comment in an interview. "Mosaic is a fixed universe. Your choices don't alter what happens. You get to decide how you want to navigate your way through this universe."

Yet, the 'choose your own adventure' concept is probably a good place to start when it comes to wrapping your head around what the project actually is. More accurately, it's a branching narrative that weaves viewers through an established storyline. What changes is not the arc, but how they experience it as it unfolds.

"It's a murder. Not a murder mystery so much," Soderbergh says. "There are two different time frames, one contemporary and one four years ago. This case that everyone thought was solved gets reexamined with interesting results. So you get to go back and forth depending on who you want to follow at what point."

The multiverse version will exist in a free app that's set to debut in November. Starring Sharon Stone, it will take about seven and a half hours to watch all the various nodes.

HBO will also air Mosaic as a stand-alone series, which he says is scheduled to premiere in January 2018.

"I offered HBO the possibility of doing a linear cut because I needed more money to develop the technology," Soderbergh says. "I called them and said I have a lot of material that's not in the app; 'I can cut a six-hour episodic version of this that will be its own thing.' And they said, absolutely."

Kid Tested & Society Approved?

Soderbergh and HBO aren't the only major players in television starting to explore this type of interactive storytelling.

Netflix seems to be taking a page from the young audience often associated with, dare we say, choose your own adventure books, and appears somewhat more comfortable with the term.

After two years of tinkering, as Wired puts it, over the summer the streaming service launched branching narratives for children's programs Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale, and Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile.

Unlike Mosaic, in Netflix's projects the storyline is not set; viewers make decisions at predetermined points, and those choices change the arc.

Puss in Book provides 13 different ways to shape the story, and includes two possible endings. It can take between 18 to 39 minutes to watch, depending on what you decide, with three thousand possible variations, Carla Engelbrecht Fisher, director of product innovation, told Wired.

[Image: Netflix]

Buddy Thunderstruck offers eight opportunities to change the story, averages 12 minutes, and includes an ending that loops back through the narrative.

"You could stay in Buddy forever," Fisher joked.

The streamer's third interactive show, Stretch Armstrong: The Breakout, is slated for 2018 as a follow-up to upcoming animated series Stretch Armstrong & the Flex Fighters.

The content begs the question: is this kind of active viewing something audiences actually want?

Ovum TV analyst Tony Gunnarsson told Wired these types of experimental formats are usually well received-at first.

"Novelty is always the key driver," he says.

But children are also a great demographic for testing it out. Among other reasons, "kids' content is essentially cheap to make," Gunnarsson says.

Indeed, children's programming was a natural place for Netflix to start, "since kids are eager to 'play' with their favorite characters and already inclined to tap, touch and swipe at screens," Fisher said in a blog post. "They also talk to their screens, as though the characters can hear them. Now, that conversation can be two-way. It's really about finding the right stories-and storytellers-that can tell these complex narratives and bring them to life in a compelling way."

'Cave Painting of this Format'

"Compelling" being a key.

When creating Mosaic, Soderbergh and writer Ed Solomon made it a point to focus first on the narrative before tackling how the branching part of it would work.

"We weren't working back from a piece of technology that we were injecting story into," Soderbergh said. "Ed and I were working on the story, and then we'd say to the tech people, we want to be able to do this. And they would say, let us come back to you when we figure it out. I was very concerned that the story I was going to shoot wouldn't exist just to prop up some piece of tech."

Also, while Netflix takes a more decision-making approach-i.e. in an encounter with strangers: "Should Puss fight them valiantly, or chitchat with them over tea?"-Mosaic "rides the seam of a traditional narrative" by giving viewers choices and then letting them sit back to enjoy the screen in front of them.

"You download the app, and the first chapter begins. At the end of that chapter, you are given the possibility of going right or left, and after that you just keep going," Soderbergh said.

One the biggest challenges was ensuring the whole thing runs seamlessly.

"Branching narratives have been around forever, but technology now allows, I hope, for a more elegant, intuitive form of engagement than used to be possible," he said. "We spent a lot of time on how you touch this thing. I wanted to make sure that it was beautiful and simple, so that when the opportunity arises for you to decide whose perspective you want to follow, it feels organic

and not like an interruption - like the thing is just stopping cold. So there was just a lot of trial and error about how that would work."

Soderbergh also realizes he's only scratching the surface of branching narratives, and their potential to impact a shifting television industry rife with OTT services, emerging digital players like Facebook, and virtual and augmented reality.

"I was very aware while we were making it," he said, "that this is the cave painting of this format-that somebody else is going to take this thing and push it way further."