Objective- Develop Interactive storytelling in Hotstar originals

Introduction

OTT services have been experimenting with interactive viewing experience for some time. Interactive storytelling enables the viewer to make decisions for the character in the movie/series and thus each decision branches into a different storyline and ultimately several different possible endings. But this is only one of the many possible models/frameworks for interactivity. With rise in internet penetration and smartphone among the masses & also rising competition in the OTT services space, the players have been exploring the possibilities of creating series/movies/sports events with a layer of interactivity where the viewers are given a chance to predict the next event etc in the platform. Though the buzz around this model has been fairly recent, Interactive storytelling is not a new concept. This style of narration where the reader/audience can make decisions for the character has been prevalent for a long time especially in theatres and story books/novels etc.

The question here is what could be the implications of Interactive storytelling going mainstream & how will this change the viewer behaviour.

Why is interactive storytelling the next big step in OTT streaming?

Netflix's Blackmirror: Bandersnatch, the "choose your own adventure" film was a phenomenal success in netflix globally, catapulting the emerging technology into the spotlight. There is some obvious advantage of developing interactive films like eliminating possibilities of piracy, but the success of Bandersnatch points to something even more important to the OTT services- A **new revenue stream.** Following are the key areas where the interactive storytelling will have profound impact-

- **User Data for developing new internal marketing infrastructure**
- **User engagement leading to user stickiness**
- **Improvement in production tools-** discover innovative technologies to reduce the production cost through automation in script writing, sequencing etc.
- **Sponsored contents based on user preference. -** Till now, OTT services focused on collecting data on ways in which users engaged with content- what to watch, how long to watch etc. With interactive films, OTT services can collect data on product preferences, musical taste, user response to specific human behavior etc.

New wave of interactive media is the blurring of lines between high-quality passive filmed or animated content (movies and TV shows) and consumer-decision driven active video game content. This phenomenon could be the answer to OTT services's problem of low user retention rate

What does interactive storytelling achieve that linear films can't?

User behaviour- The typical linear films/series fosters discussion among a group of friends regarding how the next episode of the series would transpire. Here the discussion is centred around the actual contents/ events in the episode. Whereas in interactive films, there could be multiple endings and therefore each viewer in a group will have different stories to tell. In this case, the focus would be on the decisions and the values of the viewers that drove them to make those decisions.

Relationship/ involvement with the character- In Interactive storytelling, the viewer develops a strong connection with the protagonist for whom they are making decisions. In a way, the viewer is compelled to give a good experience/ happy ending for the protagonist. But in linear films, the viewers may develop a connection with the protagonist but may not necessarily feel responsible for the circumstances affecting the protagonist.

Perception of movie/tv series as an artform- As the interactivity transforms the passive, laidback content into an active content, the perception towards movie/tv series in terms of viewing experience will change.

In linear films, the director and the production team are solely responsible for creating the movie, its storytelling style and the impression the movie leaves on the viewers. But in interactive videos, this responsibility is shared by the creators of the movie and the viewers themselves. The series/movie would be judged based on how well it is structured to make the viewer feel like their decisions in the movie are meaningful.

Is this the right move for Disney+hotstar?

Hotstar has already ventured into the interactivity viewing experience as they released **watch n play** feature during the IPL season. In this feature, while watching the match, the user chooses what they think will happen on the next ball, and waits for the result while watching the match. If the viewer gets it right, they win points, redeem prizes with them. This feature was well received by the cricket fans as the engagement increased considerably during the season.

Now the question is should Hotstar should invest in developing interactive web series/movies for India at this juncture. Following key points may help in making this decision-

- **Production software improvements-** The interactive viewing feature has potential to solve several key pain points for the user and of the platform. But the production challenges

involved in interactive movies will be the biggest hurdle in this space. Netflix had to develop the software in-house called **"branch manager"** which would enable the editing team to handle various decision trees. A new entrant will have to develop a similar/ better version of such technologies to make the films more effective and marketable. Being a first mover is crucial to accomplish this.

- **User data collection-** Streaming platforms like Netflix attributes much of its earlier success to having a strong emphasis on user data which powers its recommendation engine. Collecting user data of how users make decisions within the interactive films/web series will give deep insights on user behaviour and motivation. These data would allow the platform to iterate rapidly and get ahead of competitors.

Business goals

Increase the user retention rate of paid subscribers - The viewers simply close shows they are bored with and switch to a new one. This means that streaming services have to come up with new ideas to keep people hooked.

As the majority of Indian viewers are unfamiliar with the idea of interactivity layer in the web series/ movies, it is important to thoroughly gauge the user's cognitive limitations and identify their pain points when it comes to their overall viewing experience. Besides, it's crucial to introduce just enough interactivity to enhance the narrative without making it feel like a video game.

User persona to focus-

Weekend binge watcher- young, busy tech-savvy individuals who spend a large portion of their weekends binge watching their favourite tv series, movie. This user segment relies heavily on social media to discover new content & platforms.

User pain point – Interactive film viewing

- **Watching the show alone is not fun –** A large number of Users tend to feel quite disinterested in the web series when watching it on their own.
- **Low Relatability with the protagonist-** when the users are compelled to make decisions on behalf of the characters in the movie/series, they would want the characters to be relatable.
- **Lack of Meaningful choices-** The viewers would want to be presented with questions which can be perceived as meaningful or having a real impact on the storytelling.
- **Users want the decision making process to be fun and exciting –** Users need interesting premises and context when it comes to taking decisions in interactive films.

- **Lack of Shareability-** The users don't know how to communicate their experience of interactive viewing to the social media friend circle.

Prioritisation- Business goal alignment & feasibility

Problem	**Alignment with business goals**	**Feasibility**
Watching the show alone is not fun	-strongly correlated as this problem will lead to users not watching the entire web series/film & may churn.	- As the high-quality long videos haven't undergone much innovation in terms of viewing experience, the OTT services will have a wide range of formats at its disposal to make the viewing more fun.
Low Relatability with the protagonist	-moderately aligned to business goals. The proportion of user segment facing this issue may be low	Creating one fit all model when it comes to character design is not feasible.
Lack of Meaningful choices	-strongly correlated to business goals as solving this issue can increase user satisfaction	Increasing the number of choices that make a significant impact on storyline can raise production challenges considerably. Therefore, not feasible.
Users wants decision making process to be fun and exciting	-strongly correlated to business goals as solving this issue could increase user satisfaction and ultimately user retention.	Highly feasible as this problem is not correlated with production and is only a matter of setting the right format for questions within the film/web series
Lack of Shareability	-moderately correlated as solving this issue adds a layer of social element increasing user motivation and retention.	Moderately feasible. But this may become problematic as users may spread spoilers.

Based on above prioritisation, following problems can be focussed on-

- Watching the show alone is not fun
- Users wants decision making process to be fun and exciting

Solutions:

Watching the show alone is not fun

Group viewing with friends in real time-

The user can invite his/her friends for watching the movie/web series together. The group member can decide the time for watching within the video. The group members can also be provided with an option to message each other while watching the video.

Comment feature for group member

The users can invite his/her friends for watching the movie /web series but each one can watch the movie/web series whenever they wish without any time commitment. The user can leave reactions/comments for the scenes and the group members watching later can see the comments left by the other group members as and when the particular scene is played.

Watch the video with random viewers online-

The users can watch with other random users online. This model requires no time commitment.

Users wants decision making process to be fun and exciting-

Clue- based progression model- Model in which the viewer has to watch out for easter eggs/ clues for choosing the right option for the protagonist. If the viewer fails to spot clues in the scene and ends up making the wrong choice, the film reaches a dead end and compels the user to go back to the previous scene and attempt the question again.

Live collective decision making- Model in which the users view the movie/web series as a group and make collective-decisions for the protagonist.

Suggestion based decision-making- Model in which the viewer makes decisions for the protagonist, based on the responses of their friend circle.

Evaluation of solutions

Problem: Watching the show alone is not fun

Group viewing with friends in real time-

combating Isolation – social media models have not been able to solve this issue though the user's friends, well-wishers are present on the platform. The reason is that users are not binded by similar experiences. This drawback is solved through group – viewing as the group members are experiencing varied emotions/feelings from a singular source. This adds a new layer of

anticipation and curiosity among the group members as they are compelled to wonder what the group members' thought reaction was, to movie/web series. This brings a **sense of togetherness** among the viewers.

Group viewing -real time- As the **time commitment** is required, it is possible that there would be delay and rescheduling etc. There is also the possibility of a group member ceasing to watch in the middle of the show thus reducing the enthusiasm of fellow viewers in the group. But time commitment can also be an advantage as the individuals may feel the need to be much more involved in an activity for which they have set aside time to indulge in.

Impact: medium, Effort: medium

Comment feature for group members –

In this feature, there is **no time commitment necessary** among the group members. The users can form groups with friends and watch whenever they please. The viewer will be prompted to share their thoughts, observations, feelings etc in the form of comment which will be visible to the fellow group members when they reach that time stamp in the video.

The viewer can also react to the comments made by the previous group member and the group members who have finished watching will be notified.

Impact: high, Effort: medium

Watch the video with random viewers online-

In this feature, there is no sense of companionship among the viewers. Instead, there is a sense **of curiosity** about the newly met group mates who would react to the video. **Discoverability & opportunity to know new perspectives** are other elements that are advantageous for the user.

Impact: medium, effort: low

Solutions	**User effort**	**Sense of companionship**	**Uniqueness**	**Effort to build feature**	**Dependency On other users**
Group viewing with friends in real time	**High**	**High**	**Medium**	**medium**	**High**
Comment feature for group members	Low	Low	Medium	medium	Low

Watch the video with random viewers online	Low	Low	low	medium	low

Users wants decision making process to be fun and exciting

Clue-based progression model- this feature is **cognitive challenging** for the user to indulge in and **highly engaging**, compelling the user to pay sharp attention to storyline and screenplay. The users may have to replay the videos more than once in order to unravel clues/ easter eggs.

The issue with this model is that the audience for interactive movies may have **varied cognitive abilities** and one fits all model doesn't work. Those users who love complex puzzles may feel disinterested if the questions are very easy to solve. Those users who possess low cognitive abilities may be discouraged to continue with the videos if the questions are not easy.

Impact : High, effort : medium

Collective decision-making through voting model- In this feature, the decision-making process doesn't require the user to think critically. The decision is taken collectively with each group member individually selecting an option simultaneously. The option that receives the maximum number of votes gets selected. But the dependency of users on other users is high as team formation is a necessity for this model to work.

Impact: high, effort : high

Suggestion based decision-making- In this model, the user is influenced by the decision taken by their friends. Though the user effort required is low, the user engagement with content is also low considering the fact that knowing what friends' choices were takes focus away from the content to friends' responses.

Solutions	**User effort**	**Uniqueness of solution**	**User engagement**	**Dependency On other users**	**Effort to build feature**
Clue-based progression	High	High	High	low	low

Live collective decision making	Low	High	High	high	Medium
Suggestion based decision making	Low	Medium	Medium	low	medium

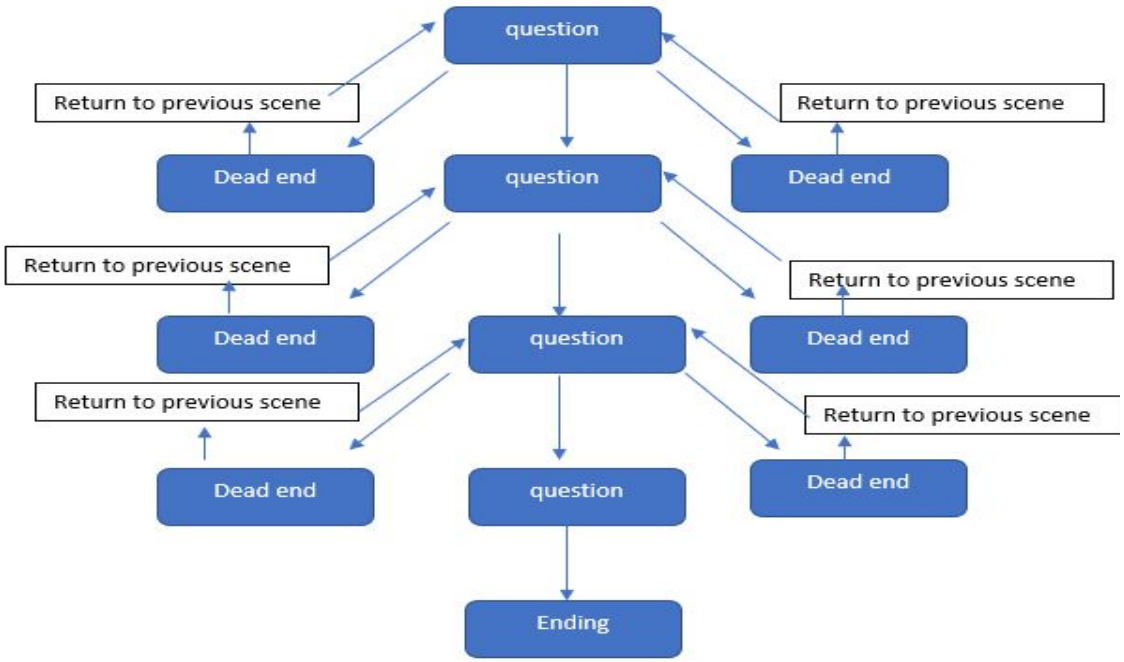
Based on evaluation done above, clue- based progression models can be prioritised for making the decision making process interesting for the user. This model requires further analysis as production challenges are inevitable for any interactive film format.

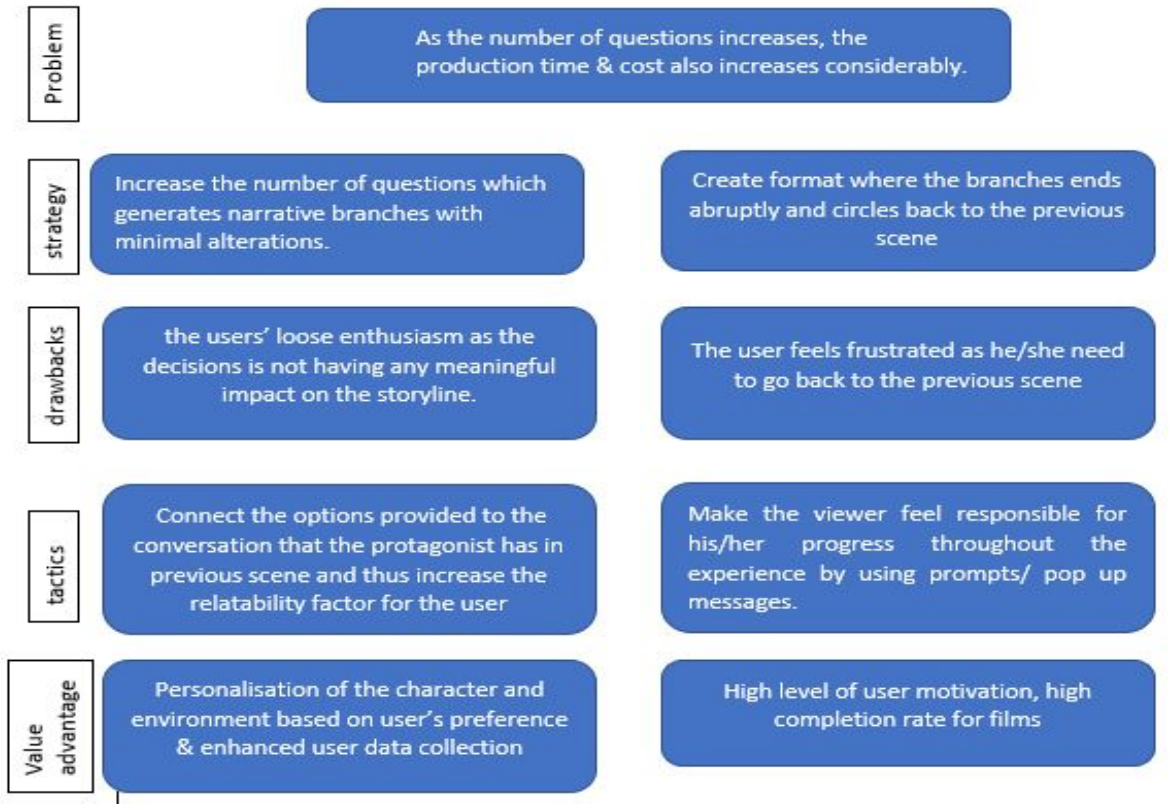
PRD for Clue based progression model

Objectives and key results:

Customer's problem	User wants the decision-making process to be fun and exciting
Vision statement	A viewing format in which the user engagement and use retention is high.
Goals & KPI	Success is measured by increasing % of DAUs watching the interactive film, increasing # of DAUs watching the entire interactive film/web series.
Persona	Users who are looking for fun and excitement, love thriller series/movies.

Clue-based progression- narrative branches





Action plan

Stakeholders- user research team, designers, developers, writers & film makers

User research team- tasks

- Estimate the ideal duration for the easter egg model interactive films-based user response
- Determine the optimum difficult level for the puzzles/questions for a smooth user experience.
- Determine the optimum time to be given to the viewer to make a decision.
- Estimate the optimum number of questions that the user wishes to answer through the movie.
- Estimate the ideal distribution of questions between the impactful and non-impactful type.
- Determine the ideal positions for placing impactful & non impactful type questions in the overall sequence.
- Determine the ideal genre that works well for the user persona.
- Determine the time that the dead-end branches should be played.

Writers & film makers- task

- Consult the user research team to determine the optimum genre to build the narrative, optimum difficult level for the question etc.

Designers- task

- Determine the design of the interactive platform, font size, colour- background, font.
- Determine the user journey map exploring different scenarios when the user is faced with the question- **a)** user responds within the given timeframe **b)** user doesn't respond within the time timeframe etc.
- Determine the animation to be input for transitions from one scene to another.

Feature development plan:

Features name	Clue-based progression model for interactive films.
Description	A question format within interactive film/web series in which the user needs to discover clues/ suggestions from the video in order to correctly answer the question.
User problem	The user wants the decision making process to be more exciting and fun
Value proposition	To increase user engagement and completion rate of the interactive films
Assumptions	- Users will be willing to put effort and have high motivation to progress through the interactive films if the decision making process is exciting.
MVP	An interactive web series/movie in which the user progress through the movie by answering questions, which are based on clues embedded in the previous scenes of the webseries/movie

Primary metrics:

KPI	**benchmark**	**Time frame**
Increase in the completion rate of the interactive fim/web	20% month on month increase	2 months after launch

series.		
Increase in the # of viewers who finish the episode/movie in a single session.	15% month on month increase	2 months after launch
Increase in the # of viewers who attend all questions.	20% month on month increase	2 months after launch
Reduce the # of drop offs when the user selects the wrong option and is routed back to the previous scene.	**1**0% month on month reduction	4 months after launch
Increase the # of users who select an option within time limit.	10% month on month increase	3 month after launch