There has to be a better way to binge

I've been binge-watching TV shows and movies since the 90s. First, it was churning through my sister's old VHS recordings of *Doctor Who* and *X-Files*, then there was collecting and watching whole series of anime piecemeal from places like Sam Goody and Suncoast. By the early 2000s, companies began releasing series by the season instead of by the episode (for actually affordable prices) and that made binge-watching shows a lot easier. Just popping to the library to pick up a season of *The Sopranos* was a heckuva lot easier than asking to borrow someone's VHS recordings. Now, binge-watching a show is simpler than ever, but the biggest complaint is that people have to binge for fear of spoilers and wish they could savor a show distributed episodically.

I don't care about that. Spoilers are rarely a barrier to enjoyment for me and I learned a long time ago how to space watching a really good show out to maximize the episodic thrills. No, my issue with the current binge model is it doesn't account for shared universes and all the weird watching orders that can be required. Nor does it account for older shows which often aired in a different order from which they were produced, leading to weird story inconsistencies as characters get introduced long after they actually show up in shows. And it seems like it should be an easy problem to solve for.

As Netflix, Disney+, Peacock, Paramount+, and whatever HBO Max and Discovery eventually become wage war with each other to be the top streaming service in the U.S. they are frantically focused on content. Which wasn't how the streaming wars were

supposed to be waged. The idea was that streaming would give us more choice, not only in content but in how we watched that content. Yet instead of new ways to engage with the shows we want to watch the streaming services are focused on acquiring new franchises or pumping millions into their established franchises. Concern for the actual experience seems to have taken a seat in the third row of the car.

This has led to weird situations like the lack of support for 4K and HDR in a lot of content across these streamers, franchises seeming to migrate from platform to platform with no fanfare, or HBO Max continuing to ship one of the buggiest apps around. Churn, where people are constantly subscribing to services and then dropping them when they've watched the content they've wanted to watch, seems to have become such an expected part of the business for streamers that there's little emphasis on actually keeping people on the platforms for longer than the duration of the shows they wanted to watch.

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But there are so many helpful little tweaks that streaming services have refused to use that I do sometimes wonder if any of the people running these platforms actually use them. This brings me back to how hard it is to binge older content. If you want to watch *Star Trek: The Original Series* you can either buy it from something like Apple TV or Amazon Prime or stream it on Paramount+. In both cases, you'll be watching in air date order as opposed to production order or in-universe chronological order.

Watching something like *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* or CW's *The Flash* is even more difficult. Those shows often include big crossovers with their sibling shows and unless you pull up a guide somewhere to figure out the viewing order of those crossovers you'll find yourself missing crucial parts of characters' story arcs.

“[P]art of the promise that came with streaming was a “better than cable” experience that allowed for personalization and curation that creates a more intimate connection,” Julia Alexander, Director of Strategy at Parrot Analytics and former *Verge* reporter told me. “People watch TV series in different ways, chronological, release order, or thematic – but services don’t allow for this personalization, and it’s counter-intuitive to what makes streaming so great.”

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This kind of personalization shouldn’t be a hassle. This is a very solvable problem for streaming companies because all it requires is custom playlists—a technology that been available for a very long time!

“Creating a more personal, intimate viewing experience increases satisfaction, and makes the inherent value of a platform more obvious, which can help increase retention,” Alexander said. “As companies vie for keeping customers’ attention month after month, allowing for more personalized curation goes a long way – and with such little effort.”

Yet despite what should be a relatively low lift, the streamers haven’t actually done it. It feels very weird that you can’t choose to watch *Star Trek: The Original Series* in a fan-preferred order instead of the air date order that front-loads some of the series’ most macho and sexist episodes instead of the more cerebral ones that made the show so enduring. That order was selected nearly 60 years ago by a bunch of execs who were scared of the science fiction show and wanted to entice people with alien ladies in bikinis and gods who like to engage in fistfights.

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The Star Wars universe is another one that could benefit from playlists that allow you to watch content in the order set in the universe, rather than the order they were filmed. Are you

supposed to watch *Solo* before or after *The Mandalorian*? Where does *Obi-Wan Kenobi* fall versus *The Bad Batch* or *Rebels* or the upcoming *Ahsoka?* Wouldn't it be nicer if Disney+, instead of a Google search, could help you figure that out? Franchises like the gargantuan Marvel Cinematic Universe, the smaller Snyder-verse, and even *Grey's Anatomy,* and *9-1-1* would benefit a lot from customizable playlists too.

Given some streamers, like Paramount+, already have playlists designed to mimic linear channels, playlists that queue up the shows in the order you prefer shouldn't be difficult. But it would require streamers to stop trying to see how many prestige shows they can mine from established franchises and start thinking about what made streaming so enticing to begin with: choice.

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