WWE pulls a heel turn on Disney’s streaming tech

World Wrestling Entertainment last week rolled out a complete redesign of its WWE Network subscription video service. From a customer perspective, the new experience offers improved video quality, makes it easier to navigate through the service’s enormous programming vault, and introduces a much better search tool.

But this WWE Network revamp represents an even bigger change on the backend: WWE has walked away from Disney’s BAMTech division, the streaming technology company that came to prominence by ushering Major League Baseball into the digital video era before expanding to work with other major clients, including HBO (BAMTech built HBO Now), Hulu, the NHL, Sony (PlayStation Vue), and WWE.

WWE Network, which combines 24/7 programming with WWE pay-per-views and a massive on-demand library, was unveiled at CES 2014 at a press conference that featured CEO and chairman Vince McMahon and many of the company’s top past and present performers, including John Cena, Steve Austin, Paul “Triple H” Levesque, and Shawn Michaels. BAMTech cites the launch of WWE Network among the company’s crowning achievements.

But after declining to renew its deal with BAMTech at the end of 2018, WWE is now partnering with Endeavor Streaming, a relatively new player that uses Neulion’s technology as its foundation. With BAMTech focused on ESPN+ and Disney+, you might start to see other outside partners seek alternatives much in the way WWE has. For now, though, BAMTech is still working with the NHL, Major League Soccer, Riot Games, and others.

WWE’s reasoning is that it wants to own more of the technology

stack behind WWE Network, which will allow the company to more easily explore new features for the service. According to *Variety*, WWE also partnered with a user interface design firm for this next iteration of the service. Sure enough, the new WWE Network includes parallax effects and more visual flair throughout the experience.

[embedded content]

A WWE spokesperson confirmed that last week's redesign marked the switch to Endeavor and said the move will give the company a newfound flexibility, with the potential to offer different pricing tiers (including a free option and a more-premium VIP tier), better localization and multi-language support, and more.

WWE wants more control over its big-bet streaming service
Even now, users have said that the video streams look noticeably improved in some cases compared to what the network was previously serving up. The new WWE Network has been brought out of the stone age, and it now runs on HTML5 instead of Flash. It streams at 1080p where available, whereas everything previously maxed out at only 720p. On Android and iOS, the Network still lives inside the primary WWE app, but there's a standalone WWE Network app for TVs and streaming devices.

The huge infrastructure shift has also, unsurprisingly, introduced early bugs and issues: a small selection of content has gone missing, some subscribers are reporting audio / video sync issues, and WWE has thinned out its list of supported devices, leaving behind Blu-ray players, older TVs, and even Amazon's Fire tablets. If you're an avid WWE Network viewer, I'd recommend this detailed rundown of what's good and bad in these early days following the big refresh.

The new WWE Network experience on an iPad.
Generally, WWE Network's challenge has been steady growth, with subscribers usually peaking for the company's marquee WrestleMania event and being up and down during the rest of the year. With no contracts or commitments, subscribers are free to come and go as they please. The service averaged 1.688 million paid subscribers in Q2 (WrestleMania included), which was in keeping with WWE's projections but down 6 percent from the same quarter last year.

The company is also trying to reverse a decline in TV viewership as it prepares to bring *SmackDown Live* to the Fox network later this year. *Monday Night Raw* will remain on NBCUniversal's USA Network; WWE managed to reach astonishingly lucrative deals with both partners despite a downward trend in people tuning in each week. Last Monday night, WWE aired what it called Raw Reunion, a get-together of the company's top current names and hall-of-famers, including Hulk Hogan. The nostalgia play worked, drawing 3.093 million viewers. It's rumored that WWE is trying to recruit Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson for an appearance on Smackdown's Fox debut on Friday, October 18th.

While it's unquestionably the most important one, WWE Network is far from WWE's only streaming bet. The company's WWE Studios division is working on multiple projects with Netflix, including a just-announced multicam comedy series starring "The Big Show" Paul Wight. It's also producing a Quibi series that will feature WWE's female superstars. The company also soars among brands on YouTube, with over 46 million subscribers and 30 billion views. WWE claims that it's the second most-viewed channel in the world.

As for WWE Network, the first major test for this new iteration will come when WWE presents its annual *SummerSlam* event on August 11th.

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