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It's going to be a whole new Hulu.

The service for watching last night's shows will soon begin offering live TV as well. The company announced it would add live shows to its offerings — putting Hulu toe-to-toe with cord-cutting competitors Sling TV and DirecTV Now — sometime in the spring. Pricing and plans aren't final, but there will be different tiers and add-ons (including cloud storage), with some premium content (like Showtime) available.

Live TV isn't just getting bolted onto the existing service. With the change, Hulu is re-engineering its entire user experience, which it teased at CES 2017. I got a chance to sit down with Hulu reps and explore the new features and user interface, which combines its on-demand and live content. It's similar to its competitors, but offers some nice perks as well.

If the new Hulu has a philosophy, it's personal, personal, personal. From the home screen to the recommendations it serves up, the new Hulu is intended to be about you. That becomes clear the moment you launch the new app on your phone, which quizzes you on the kind of content you like — genres, networks and specific shows — before you even get to the home screen. Sorta like Foursquare, but for TV.

Once that's done, you can fire up Hulu on your TV, and it'll serve up a home screen just for you (like many services, Hulu supports multiple profiles for families). Like most over-the-top apps, the UI is very visual, generally overlaying menus on top of dramatic full-screen photos.

The first thing you see is your Lineup, a compilation of the content — live or on-demand — Hulu thinks is most important to you. If you told Hulu you like Eagles football and there's a game on, that'll be front and center. Shows you've favorited or recorded will be right under, in an ordered list.

After the lineup, the horizontal nav also lists TV, Movies, News and Networks. Each of these screens shows you content — live and on-demand — that you'd most likely be interested in, based on your history and preferences.

Having live feeds of the networks (which, like other services, streams local affiliate programming) means Hulu will stream lots of content that it can't offer on-demand, like news and sports. However, users will be able to save that content for later in a cloud DVR if you mark it. So you won't be able to access, say, a football game after it's broadcast unless you specifically tell Hulu to save that game before it comes on.

To help make sure you don't miss live TV moments that you might want to see, Hulu is introducing new kinds of mobile notifications. If you've highlighted a specific sports team, it'll alert you if a game is starting. And if a game is getting particularly exciting, you'll get an alert, too (a third-party company, Thuuz, has developed an algorithm for exactly this). Notifications are only for sports right now, but Hulu plans to introduce them for breaking news and when your favorite shows "expire."

It's a sad reality that shows come and go from various services, and Hulu arguably has one of the most frustrating expiration policies. While there are a lot of shows on the service with many seasons of content, some have just the current season, and others have only the most recent five episodes. There won't be notifications for expiring episodes at launch, but the UI will alert you about that content when you're navigating.

What Hulu should worry about

The demo I got of Hulu's new UI was canned, so I didn't get a chance to navigate it myself. From the looks of it, Hulu has done a good job of mixing together live and on-demand content into a single interface, although it's questionable if they ever should have been mixed in the first place.

Similarly, when Apple mixed together on-demand music streaming with downloads in Apple Music, it stepped into a minefield. It eventually rolled back the UI to better separate the two things the app does. Will the same thing happen to Hulu? There's a good chance — especially since there's no traditional channel guide for live TV — but that's not its biggest worry.

The thing Hulu should be worried about is brand identity. In trying to reinvent itself as a live TV service, it risks diluting its biggest differentiator — robust on-demand content. Yes, its competition does a lot of on-demand, too, but Hulu basically invented it. There are several TV series on the service, a feature that serves as a key part of its overall appeal.

From the look of its UI, which has clever ways of prodding users into saving things for later, it looks like it hasn't forgotten that. It'll satisfy cord cutters who want a live TV fix, but also has everything they want for a hardcore binge. - ***Mashable***



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