



Branching Scenarios in eLearning

What you need
to know

When I created our software for building branching scenarios, I assumed that everybody knew what scenarios were and how scenarios could improve your e-learning. I quickly came to realize that a lot of people had never used or even seen a branching scenario. Instead, they kept producing standard linear e-learning courses that did not engage learners. So I wanted to help you get started with scenarios by answering some frequently asked questions.

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What is a Branching Scenario?

Branching scenario is an interactive form of learning. It challenges the learner, requires them to make a decision and then presents them with the consequences. Each consequence produces new challenges and more choices. As the learner makes decisions, the story unfolds in unpredictable ways, thereby making such learning interaction engaging and fun.

Branching scenarios are similar to the Choose Your Own Adventure books. Only instead of saving a princess from a castle, e-learning scenario narratives are built around dealing with angry customers, negotiating with suppliers, managing employees and other business-related challenges.

Here are a few examples of branching scenarios:

-Learning about Marketing

<https://www.branchtrack.com/blog/2015/12/clark-aldrich-one-of-the-most-notable-simulation/>

-Learning about Cyber-security

<https://www.branchtrack.com/projects/dqtvrcju>

How is a Branching Scenario Different From a Quiz?

I know, quizzes also pose challenges and ask for input. The main difference is that quizzes are linear. The next question is always the same regardless of what the learner answered before. In a scenario, every response determines what's next. Scenarios aren't linear and therefore they are unpredictable and engaging. It means they are fun to play and re-play.

Quizzes often focus on checking the knowledge of the learner where scenarios are all about presenting realistic situations and asking to make practical choices. Scenarios don't care what the acronym for that fancy cross-selling technique is, they check whether the learner can actually sell a product to a virtual customer in a realistic setting.

Another significant difference is that quizzes provide straight-on feedback. You got this wrong, you got that right. By comparison, scenarios present consequences of the knowledge of the learner and allow the learner to understand whether this particular outcome is good or bad, and whether it could be improved in another attempt at playing through the branching scenario. As far as advantage and disadvantage go, this is one of the strongest reasons for using branching scenarios in e-learning.

Finally, nobody likes quizzes while almost everyone loves scenarios.

Why Should I Use Branching Scenarios in E-learning Courses?

Branching scenarios enable learners to put their theoretical knowledge into a practical perspective. How many times have you been in a situation where a manual or instruction makes perfect sense... until you have to actually do it for real? Trying and failing in a scenario quickly highlights skill and knowledge gaps and improves learning outcomes.

What are the Disadvantages of Scenarios?

Like all great e-learning, scenarios can challenge you with regards to three factors:

- **Time**
- **Complexity**
- **Cost**

I'll briefly explain each of the caveats (and how to deal with them) below.

Time. As with all new things, expect your first scenarios to take longer to build than you hoped. Authoring a branching script is harder than writing a linear course page by page and it also demands more creativity. Communicating with Subject Matter Experts can be difficult especially if they have never worked with a scenario before.

Building the final product with conventional authoring tools will present challenges of its own. Regardless of whether you use PowerPoint, Articulate Storyline, Adobe Captivate or any other tool, you will still need to create a lot of pages, buttons, actions, layers etc. It is easy to lose track of which slide leads where and spend a lot of time untangling your branching. Play-testing and quality assurance will also take extra time since you need to play through your scenario multiple times to make sure every branch works.

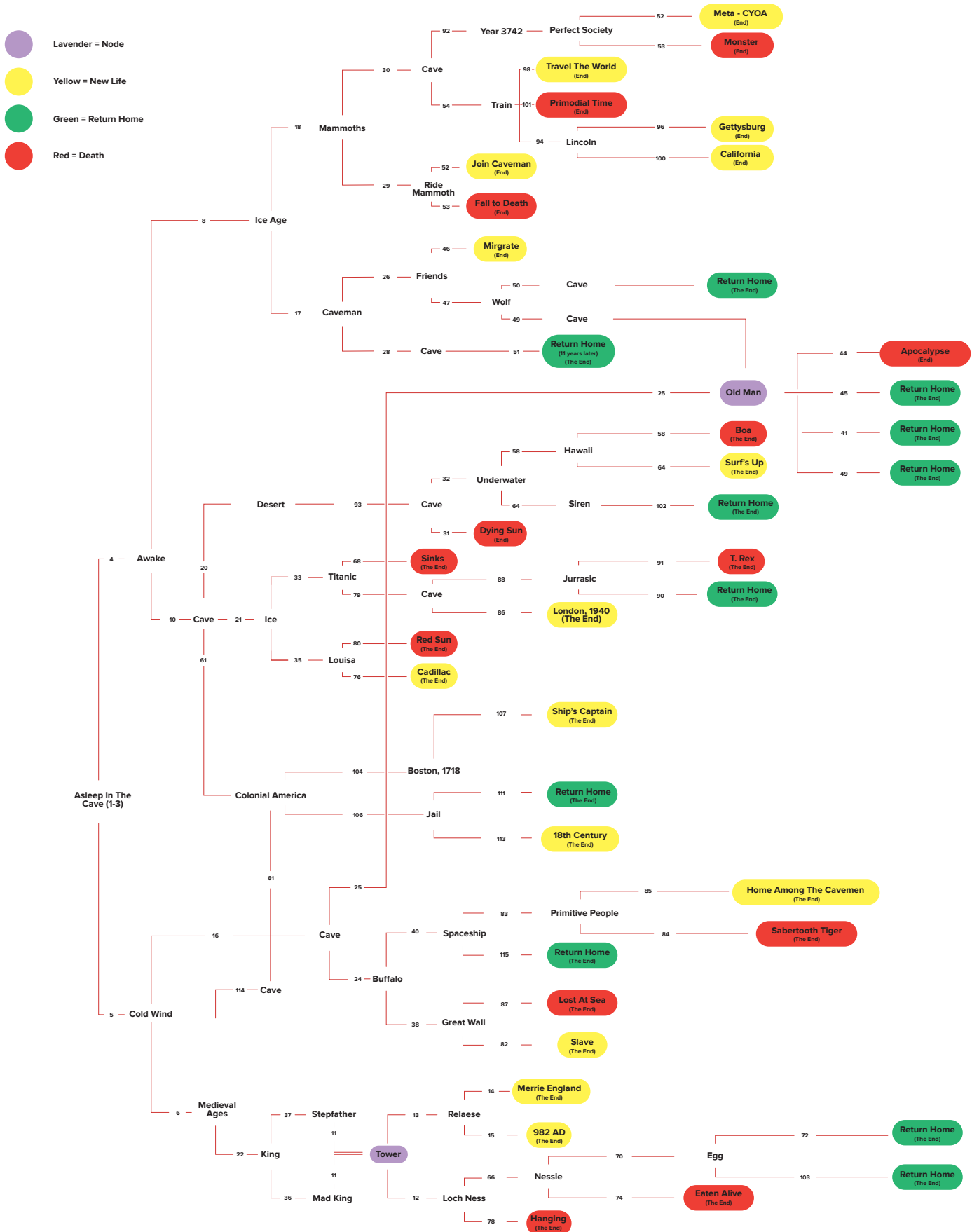
The best way to avoid spending extra time? Plan for more time! Seriously, make sure everyone understands that you are building something new and exciting and that you want to make it right, so you need an adequate time limit.

Using specialized scenario-building tools like BranchTrack also eliminates the most time-consuming part of the job, i.e. building all the slides. You only need to focus on writing your story, not on placing images on slides or copying and pasting texts.

The Cave Of Time

Choose Your Own Adventure

Narrative Map



Complexity. Scenarios are complex by nature. If they were simple and linear, we wouldn't call them scenarios, we'd just call them boring. My biggest challenge with my first scenario was that it was growing exponentially. As I created more branches, I had to create more choices. Each choice led to more branches and I was quickly losing control of what is going on (and running out of whiteboard space).

The best advice for avoiding an overgrown branching scenario is to start at the end. First, define the outcomes of your scenario. In a customer service training scenario, outcomes could be these:

- "A happy customer purchases a new product" (100 points)
- "A moderately satisfied customer leaves the store" (50 points)
- "A dissatisfied customer complains to the manager" (0 points)

Then work your way up from these outcomes and create a high-level outline of the scenario. What decisions lead to a customer being angry? How did we come into this situation? Where did all of this start? This approach guarantees that your scenario will be manageable and will not result in having twenty different endings that you have to write out.

Of course, having a good way to visualize your scenario is very useful, too. It can range from whiteboards to post-it notes to Excel flowcharts to specialized branching scenario software. The important thing is ease of use, ability to modify it on the fly and collaboration with colleagues and SMEs.

Cost. Branching scenarios are often the favourite kind of project for e-learning vendors and developers because the time and complexity involved guarantee handsome project budgets. Alas for the same reason many companies do not use branching scenarios in their training and settle for standard linear e-learning courses that are less effective and less engaging.

In my experience - and I have worked on the e-learning vendor side for quite a while - the cost comes from three main factors:

- **Time requirements.**

Without tools that are specifically designed for creating branching scenarios, e-learning developers spend more time than they should and must bill their customers extra.

- **Complexity.**

Without effective ways to communicate and review their projects, the project stakeholders spend extra time on communication and dealing with errors that result from poor communication. Developers, subject matter experts, internal or external customers spend time writing emails, pasting screenshots, counting slides, reviewing charts and doing other tasks that can easily be avoided with tools that are designed for branching scenarios.

- **Premium.**

Scenarios are considered the “extra” type of e-learning that deserves to be priced at a premium. I consider this unfair and made it my mission to make sure any company anywhere in the world can build and deliver branching scenarios quickly, easily and at minimal cost.

How Much does a Branching Scenario Cost?

Let's use the model from the previous section to estimate how much it would cost to build a branching scenario. Coming up with an idea, authoring a draft outline and then scripting the actual flow chart for a branching scenario could require about 30 hours from all the parties involved. Developing the graphics and building all slides, interactions and links between them would probably take another 30 hours. Quality assurance, playtesting, gathering feedback, implementing change requests and other post-production tasks would probably require another 20 hours. Of course, these are estimates and a scenario could be much more complex and take much longer but it would be really difficult to build it faster than that unless you are working off a previous project, templates or using a very simple branching structure.

So we are looking at 80 hours of costs for a branching scenario if we are building the scenario in-house. If you are working with an outside contractor, they will probably quote for at least 120 hours. I will leave it up to you to multiply this for the e-learning rate of your choosing but if you are paying under \$50 per hour, you are probably not getting the quality you need.

With the right tools, this amount could easily be reduced by a factor of two or even three. The scenario authoring would require about the same time, 20 hours, and development would be gone, and post-production would go down to 10 hours. This amounts to about 30 hours instead of 80 for a single scenario.

To sum up

I hope that the pros and cons of using scenarios in e-learning are clearer now.

Pros:

- Better training results because learners are more engaged
- Better on-the-job performance because scenarios put theory into perspective
- Lower learning curve because scenarios provide ready-to-use behavior patterns

Cons:

- Authoring, developing and playtesting a scenario-based training module will definitely take more time
- Costs, which are related to the time, will consequently be higher
- Using the wrong tools (or rather the tools geared towards classic linear course production) will increase both time, cost and overall production complexity.

P.S. Read this post if you are interested in learning more about how Action improves Learning - <https://www.branchtrack.com/blog/2016/05/action-learning-in-online-training/>

5 Killer Sales Simulation Features

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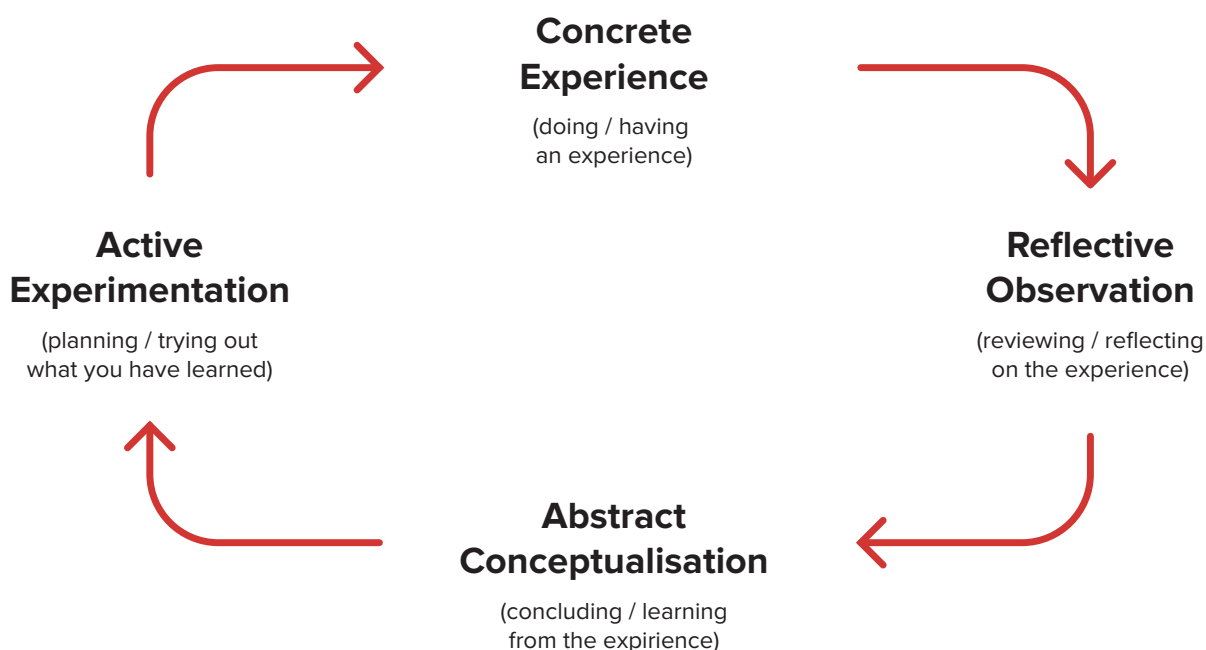
In the corporate world we know that having a well drilled sales force is a key aspect of achieving successful sales targets. If your sales team works remotely then this is critically important to the success of your sales strategy. Having a competent and adaptable staff will give your sales team the ability to:

- **Implement new products easily.**
- **Engage and communicate effectively with all organisation levels.**
- **Track performance and improvement targets more accurately.**

Sales training is important for successful product launches, consistent sales performances and meeting corporate targets. There are many different methods to train a workforce but the most important method for your business is the one that gives the best results.

Sales simulation training is based on **David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model**. It is a learning method which is simple to understand and is backed by scientific studies. The basic theory behind Kolb's Experiential Model is described as simply as *learning through experience*.

Learning through experience with sales simulation is exactly the type of training that will quickly turn lackluster sales employees into a well drilled sales force.



Therefore, these are my 5 killer sales simulation features which make sales simulation training the smart choice for your business.

The most effective way to learn is through experience

Traditional forms of training often involve a sales training presentation in a classroom environment where the sales team is trained through repetition and simple visual observation teaching.

This type of training does very little to stimulate the learning centers of the brain, the sales training pitch could be very useful, but unless the trainee's are stimulated, the pitch only lasts a short moment in the short term memory before being forgotten.

Practice makes perfect and by putting each sales team through a set of scenarios they can learn in an interactive and stimulating manner. People learn best by making mistakes, not by having their hand held throughout a boring presentation.

The difference between traditional sales training methods and newer sales simulation is that the latter forces your sales team to think for themselves. Sales simulation lets your staff experience the consequences of their mistakes instead of a trainer spelling it out. There is no right or wrong answer in these scenarios, your sales team will get to experience their mistakes and identify areas of improvement for themselves, but most of all, they'll remember it for future real life sales opportunities.

Implement a consistent systematic sales strategy for all staff

Your sales staff are a team of individuals, you will likely have a diverse spectrum of staff which have grown within the business over a number of years or have recently joined the team. This will eventually develop into wider inconsistencies in training. The training that new staff receive is more likely fairly evolved and modern. In comparison, some longer reigning staff who may be stuck in their ways but still lead with experience over newer staff will have been trained in early versions of your sales strategy. You can bring consistency to your sales training by using E-learning simulation scenarios which are easy to deploy even through mobile phones.

Sales simulation uses custom built scenarios to help drill consistency into a team of individuals. Over time the team will have developed bad habits and *their way of doing things*, but by using a range of scenarios on the team as a whole they can begin to identify areas of improvement for each other and follow a planned sales strategy more closely.

Bringing your sales team together as a unit is extremely important not just for sales consistency but for identifying areas of improvement in your sales strategy. You need to be able to trust your sales performance and analysis data, but you can only do that if you can trust that your sales team is working consistently.

During the simulation scenario all data is recorded for future analysis and use. In order to further develop your team you will have a plethora of data which will allow you to identify and give accurate feedback on weak points in your sales team performance.

Forge your sales team

You need your team to work towards the same goals, they can best achieve this by working together as a unit. Sales simulation creates an openness amongst your team and shows them that they have the same goals to work towards and how they should work together to achieve them. It is common for more experienced staff to become proud and unwilling to help others, but by drilling the team to work together and admit to but work on their mistakes they can improve their team performance targets.

“To learn from their experience, teams must create a conversational space where members can reflect on and **talk about their experience together.**”

DAVID KOLB

Forging a sales team is not about getting your employees to do what you want, it is about creating a culture of success. Simply telling an employee what they did wrong is not an effective method of improvement, but helping them to experience their mistakes through a simulation scenarios is. You need your team to be a unit that shares burdens and strives towards meeting targets, sales simulation is a key part of forging an an effective unit such as this.

Motivate experienced staff to learn new techniques

Staff who have been great assets for many years can sometimes become stubborn in their ways. What they have been doing for the past years has worked well for them, but this can be a sticking point when implementing new products and new strategies.

With these experienced staff members you need to show them through sales simulation scenarios that there are other ways to improve and hit even better performance targets. Simply telling them what they should be doing is not enough to inspire and motivate them to learn something new. But if you can show them through scenarios how easily they could improve then you may find that a new product launch strategy is more easily adopted.

Some staff members will have only been in a few different roles within the company in their entire career, this can create conflict and lack of empathy between other roles and departments. Sales simulation can allow you to place those staff into roles they've never been in before. This will help them gain experience and understanding of what the staff they often liaise with are required to do on a regular basis. Doing so will develop empathy between the staff and greater understanding thus helping communication between departments.

Identify staff competences, key leaders and weak teams

Traditional classroom and presentation based training methods are mostly a one-way street. There is no room for evaluating staff competencies in the way that a sales simulation scenario can. Identifying staff competencies is an integral part of understanding what it is your staff need help with.

Through the use of sales simulation training, your management team can evaluate your sales team's understanding and their capability to execute your company's sales process.

Your staff will engage with virtual customers and be given different options for responses. There are no wrong answers, the purpose of these scenarios is to allow your staff to go back and correct their mistakes, learning by doing.

Technology is monitoring and recording every step of the process which can help identify your strong and weak teams and the same for parts of your sales strategy.

Key leaders in your team will become apparent in ways you may not have noticed before. This will give you opportunities to plan and rearrange sales teams to give balance to your sales force.

Summary

To recap, these are just some of the advantages of sales simulation over traditional sales training:

- **Preparing employees, practice makes perfect.**
- **Identifying key leaders amongst sales reps.**
- **Easily evaluate staff competences.**
- **Improve learning in a shorter time.**
- **Implement a consistent systematic sales strategy for all staff.**
- **Engage all levels of the organization (familiarity).**
- **Team Sales performance, identifying weak and strong teams.**
- **Accurate feedback.**

With the advent of E-learning, Sales Simulation training has become more accessible and affordable than ever. E-learning scenarios allow you to simulate online customers easily and create a range of different scenarios for employee to train with. You can even provide E-learning training to your team using their mobile phone, allowing them to brush up on competencies and improve their sales performance whenever they want.

This is especially important if your sales team works remotely. You need a way to bring consistency to the team when executing your sales strategy and E-learning sales simulation scenarios are built to do just that.

The features outlined in this article are just a small part of what is possible when using E-learning sales simulation. The data you collect will be invaluable not just for improving current staff but also for developing better training schemes for new staff. You will also be able to identify where the strengths and weaknesses in your sales strategy. Sales simulation puts the power in your hands so you can mould the kind of sales team that will bring success for your sales strategy.