How Sony is enlisting gamers on Twitch, Reddit to develop new titles

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Think of Sony and games, and it's likely PlayStation that comes to mind. But the company has also had big success making online games for 18 years through its Sony Online Entertainment division.

Now, SOE has embarked on a fascinating experiment in game development. Through digital platforms such as Twitch and Reddit, Sony has enlisted gamers to help design some of its newest titles right from the start.

"As we started to build our games, we decided something like Twitch enabled us to expose gamers to the early part of the game development process," said John Smedley, president of Sony Online Entertainment. "We're going all in on that. We think it's a bold new direction."

Reddit, of course, is the hugely influential Internet discussion forum. Twitch is a fast-growing, interactive platform that lets people watch livestreams of other people playing their favorite games while also chatting with other gamers. Over the last year, Twitch in particular has become an important platform for companies looking to introduce and market new games, Smedley said.

The most ambitious effort by Sony to involve gamers in the development process involves a new zombie game called "H1Z1." From the Sony description: "Enter a world that has been overrun since the H1Z1 virus was first encountered! The Internet hoax was a cover-up and the world has paid the price! This is an Apocalypse!"

In April, Smedley kicked things off with a long, explanatory post on Reddit, introducing the game. There is also now a "subreddit" for ongoing discussions about the game.

Shortly afterward, "H1Z1" developers also began broadcasting "work in progress" versions of the game on Twitch. Fans can watch and ask questions during the progress.

The first broadcast on Twitch featured Jimmy Whisenhunt, an "H1Z1" game designer, and Tom Schenck, an "H1Z1" technical director. Whisenhunt said he and a lot of the game developers had been reading the Reddit threads and taking the questions and comments to heart. Then he launched into a live demo.

"I'm not sure how this is going to go, if I'm being honest," Whisenhunt said.

In fact, the demo went smoothly. And since then, Sony has done several more. Along the way, Sony has made tweaks to the game to allow players to make different moves based on the feedback. There's no release date for the game yet.

Smedley said he believes this kind of interactive approach has the potential to revolutionize [video game development](#).

Typically, a studio can spend years building a game, and huge sums of money. Usually player feedback comes at the end of the process. And developers don't get to see or hear the full reaction of gamers until the game is released. If the title is a dud, then it's money down the drain.

"There's a very big democratization of gaming happening," he said. "All these sources that let players comment in real time. It's changing the whole ball [game](#)."

Among the areas the company is discussing with players: monetization. It hasn't decided whether it will be a free-to-play, subscription or something else. "We started with a blank slate so we could open up the entire monetization discussion," Smedley said.

Although this crowd initiative has been embraced at the top, Smedley acknowledges that having that much interaction with players isn't always easy, or natural, for developers.

"I would say everybody is on board, but to different degrees," Smedley said. "Not everyone is comfortable interacting with a Twitch stream."

At the same time, the instant feedback can often be exhilirating for developers who are used to working on projects in secret for months or years.

"People like to share what they're working on," Smedley said. "And let's face it, we do fun stuff. We're making games. So, we don't often get a chance to share that part of it, the making of stuff. It's more than just a job to us."

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