

Making a game out of reality TV

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Can video games give reality television a second life on the Internet?

Electronic Arts, the largest video game publisher in the world, and Endemol, the developer of reality TV shows like "Big Brother," announced a partnership Monday to create online versions of the format, open to fans around the world.

Called "Virtual Me," the partnership will build on the interactive element in reality TV shows like "Big Brother," which locks a collection of misfits into a house and generally allows the audience to oust one of them each week, using text messages or the Internet to vote.

Participants will design their own Internet alter egos and subject them to the competition of reality shows, in the hope of winning 15 minutes of virtual fame.

The collaboration aims to tap the growing popularity and media hype surrounding online virtual worlds like "Second Life" and community-based Internet games like "World of Warcraft," which have attracted millions of users.

The video game industry has been forging closer links with movie studios for some time - Electronic Arts publishes games based on the "Harry Potter" books and movies, for instance - but EA described the partnership with Endemol as the first significant linkup between a game publisher and a television production company.

"If you can bridge that gap, you're bound to have something that's popular," said Piers Harding-Rolls, an analyst at Screen Digest, though he noted that the partnership, at first glance, was "not amazingly different" from some other efforts by media companies to tap into online communities.

For Endemol, which has been put up for sale by Telefónica, the Spanish telecommunications company that owns a 75 percent stake, the agreement with Electronic Arts is also a way to try to breathe new life into reality TV.

"Big Brother," which was developed in the Netherlands in the late 1990s, has been adapted for local production in more than 60 countries and has given birth to scores of imitators. But in recent years ratings have increasingly been driven by sensational developments and confrontations in the "Big Brother" houses, rather than the novelty of the format.

"For us, it's a logical step," said Peter Bazalgette, chief creative officer of Endemol, by telephone from Cannes, France, referring to the deal with EA. "While broadcasters remain relevant, more and more young people are going online."

While viewer numbers for some reality TV series started to flag a few years ago, Endemol has lured back "Big Brother" audiences by adding variations on the format and by courting controversy.

Last year, for instance, a female participant gave birth during the Dutch version of the show. This winter "Big Brother" landed on the front pages of British tabloids and nearly caused a diplomatic crisis when one participant was accused of making racist comments about an Indian actress, Shilpa Shetty, who went on to win.

Gerhard Florin, the executive vice president of Electronic Arts International, said games on the "Virtual Me" site would be monitored to make sure things do not go too far.

Endemol and EA declined to provide specific financial details, though they said they would share revenue from the project.

While downloading the software will be free for users, the companies said "Virtual Me" would earn money by selling advertising and by offering users upgrades for their avatars. A player

could, for example, pay for designer clothing for an avatar, perhaps improving his or her chances of winning.

Florin and Bazalgette said "Virtual Me" would begin this year with "Big Brother," though they have not yet decided which country would be first.

Later, the collaboration may be extended to other Endemol reality programs and contest shows, like "Star Academy" and "Deal or No Deal."

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