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Is it real or is it a game?

By Christa Marshall

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A painting of circles in a corn field, which are in the shape of the ethanol molecule. The painting is the key clue in "Who is Benjamin Stove?" the latest alternate reality game. General Motors sponsored the

game to promote ethanol as part of its "Live Green Go Yellow" campaign. (Courtesy of WhoisBenjaminStove.com)



Two people play cemetery poker in Austin, Texas. Each tombstone represents a card. The last number in the year of death is the rank; the shape of the tombstone represents the suit (rounded graves are hearts, pointy ones are spades, etc.). Players win by finding two "cards" with the highest number of points. They must touch the card and each other for the game to count. (Courtesy of Dee Cook)



"Last Call Poker" players pose in a cemetery in Austin, Texas, after playing tombstone poker. (Courtesy of Dee Cook)

Jackie Kerr ventured into a Washington cemetery last fall searching for a game of poker where tombstones were used instead of cards.

Kerr, 26, of Baltimore, made the hundred-mile trip at the request of billionaire Lucky Brown. Kerr didn't know Brown personally, but she had read a plea from him on a Web site where he claimed playing the game would provide clues that might help a niece of his who had received death threats

about an antique gun she owned.

Strangely, Kerr had been getting phone calls about the gun, too. “They were really creepy messages on my answering machine.”

But Brown, his niece and her stalkers weren’t really a threat.

They were fictional characters on "Last Call Poker," a Web site game that asks players not only to solve an online mystery but also to participate in it through phone calls, online messages and wacky adventures.

The blend of online game and real-life mystery in "Last Call Poker" is typical in alternate reality gaming, or ARG, a fad that started five years ago by companies that were looking for a way to market new software and movies.

The games have become so popular that businesses like General Motors have started using them as educational tools, taking game players along for the recreational ride.

“It’s like a mystery novel, except [in ARG] the mystery novel talks back,” said Kerr, a biologist. “Imagine watching a movie and walking directly into the screen.”

For example, Kerr discovered that the main purpose of the cemetery poker game was to draw attention to tombstone dates, which contained a coded message that introduced another character into the game.

Alternate reality games began growing in popularity in 2001, when Microsoft created an ARG called “The Beast” to promote the film “Artificial Intelligence: A.I.”

“The growth has been phenomenal,” said David Szulborski, who creates many alternate reality games. “It started with a small group of Internet fans. Now I see middle-aged housewives trying it.”

Games typically start with a cryptic announcement on a general alternate reality gaming Web site. The announcement leads players to another Web site, the game “headquarters,” where they play for free. There, they read postings from fictional characters that are so authentic they often have photographs--supplied by the game creators--and detailed personal lives.

The characters are always trying to solve a mystery, which players participate in by communicating with each other through Internet names like “Scarpegrosse,” Kerr’s name on "Last Call Poker." They voluntarily supply their phone numbers to the game creators, readying themselves for spontaneous clue-seeking missions, like graveyard poker.

“You can be going through your daily routine and suddenly get a call asking you to drop everything and drive somewhere,” said Chris Love, a Albuquerque, N.M., player of “Who is Benjamin Stove?” a recent

ARG that asks players to solve a mystery involving a painting of circles in a corn field. “What’s cooler than that?”

But the appeal extends beyond a mere adrenaline rush.

Games often incorporate detailed information on a range of subjects, attracting history buffs and the simply curious. For example, “Who is Benjamin Stove?” provided clues that also helped players learn about Mayan civilization.

Social networking is also a big draw for players who typically spend months collaborating on a game.

“We go to each other’s weddings,” Kerr said. “It’s just like any other social activity, except we attend scavenger hunts rather than cocktail parties.”

The role-playing has its downside though.

Kerr says the games are time-consuming, requiring players to juggle leisure and family life. It also breeds paranoia, because players must determine if strangers calling or e-mailing them are truly who they claim to be.

“When new people emerge in our lives, our instinct is to ask, ‘Are they real, or are they providing information for the game?’” Kerr said. “Some people get too wrapped up in that.”

The level of dedication players have for ARG games has grabbed the attention of corporations, which have traditionally used the games to promote a single product, but they now are beginning to use them for broader marketing campaigns.

For example, General Motors sponsored “Who is Benjamin Stove?” to raise ethanol awareness.

The names of General Motor products did not appear in the game, but game creator Szulborski pointed out that the key clue--a painting of circles in a corn field--is in the shape of an ethanol molecule. Many of the game’s mythological references also involve corn, the main ingredient in ethanol.

Szulborski said that similar educational campaigns are in the planning stage at companies like Hewlett-Packard.

The companies may ultimately benefit from the games--General Motors, for example, sells cars that run on ethanol--but Szulborski said companies never used to devote time to something that didn’t involve an immediate profit.

“We’ve never used these games for this kind of information before,” Szulborski said. “I’m working on

an upcoming ARG that raises public awareness about a potential avian flu pandemic.”

To most players, the process of the game matters more than the purpose. Part of the thrill is perusing clues to figure out who the game sponsor is, and what it’s trying to achieve. Kerr said that “Who is Benjamin Stove?” players didn’t know General Motors’ exact involvement until the end, deepening the mystery.

“In the end, we’re puzzle solvers who like a challenge,” said Kerr, who discovered that “Last Call Poker” was a video game promotion. “If it’s for a good cause, all the better.”

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