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## At museum, die another day

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By Amanda Lewis - Wandering down a city street somewhere in the Middle East, you can hear the chatter of merchants and smell their exotic wares. You slip into a command center to receive instructions from your boss back at the CIA, and then you and the rest of your operations team snap into action, monitoring the security cameras of a nearby hotel.

Washington, D.C., has always been home to intelligence gathering and clandestine missions, but soon regular citizens will have the chance to experience life as a secret agent — at least, for an hour — when the International Spy Museum's interactive exhibit "Operation Spy" opens to the general public.

While hiding from security cameras in a dark tunnel or interrogating a suspect via videophone, participants must work together to figure out who to trust and stop a nuclear-triggering device from falling into the wrong hands. "Operation Spy" represents the next level of immersive gaming, in which the player determines the outcome through his decisions and abilities.

"People are looking for a learning experience beyond simply seeing something lying on a shelf or interacting with a sort of jukebox-sized device," says executive director of the museum Peter Earnest, who led the team of retired CIA, FBI and even KGB operatives who designed "Operation Spy."

The plot was inspired by the case of A.Q. Khan, the Pakistani scientist who in 2004 was discovered to be selling nuclear technology and materials on the black market.

"We were trying to create a situation in which time is of the essence and not everything goes right," Mr. Earnest, a CIA veteran, explains.

If a participant misses an important clue or can't crack a safe, the game continues. With six different endings and countless opportunities for mistakes, "Operation Spy" reveals that not everyone was meant to gather intelligence.

Participating in "Operation Spy" occasionally feels like watching an episode of "24" with a dim-witted friend who can't figure out how Jack Bauer knew where the bomb would be. While some of the effects felt forced and elicited snickers from participants, rushing down a hall and up the stairs to a waiting helicopter actually got my adrenaline pumping — that is, until I heard the faint music in the background, ushering us on.

"Operation Spy" is neither the first nor the last immersive game to hit the United States.

"Tomb," an Egyptian-themed adventure that opened in Boston in 2004, challenges participants to solve ancient mysteries or be forced to leave the game through the "death hallway."

Matthew DuPlessie, director and CEO of the company that designed and operates "Tomb," thinks immersive games, which "allow people to be the hero, to be the main character in the movie," represent the future of entertainment.

Mr. DuPlessie's firm, called 5W!TS, had already been considering an espionage-themed follow-up to "Tomb" when the International Spy Museum called, eager to collaborate. Mr. DuPlessie was the project manager for the design and production of "Operation Spy," which is twice the size and several times the complexity and budget of "Tomb."

"When a theme park calls a ride interactive, you may be strapped into a seat and rolling through. Something scary happens, and maybe a jet of air hits you behind the ear," he says. "'Operation Spy' is very different. You are making the decisions. You're not strapped in a car going through a predefined experience."

Negone, a company owned by Differend Games, already operates attractions far more complex in Spain than those stateside and plans on expanding immersive gaming worldwide. In "The Escape," a high-intensity interactive adventure in Madrid, the player must escape from a 31st-century prison by solving a series of puzzles and overcoming physical challenges. RFID chips monitor each player's progress, and failure to escape results in being taken back to your "prison cell" — game over.

The Spy Museum has also begun offering less intensive programming geared at showing the public what it's like to be a spy.

An "Elite Surveillance Team" led by former CIA agent Antonio Mendez began meeting last week. For an annual fee of \$180, members of the team will learn to monitor a "surveillance zone" just like actual agents do, even if they may never actually need that particular skill in real life.

The people who paid \$48 to participate in this week's "Body Language 101" workshop will likely use any newfound abilities when playing poker, not interrogating terrorists.

Those who designed "Operation Spy" acknowledge that the experience might not be the most realistic representation of life as a spy.

"To be fair, it's certainly romanticized," Mr. DuPlessie said. "In reality, espionage is a very drawn out, painstaking process. Many agents may have a lifelong career and only on a couple of occasions experience that type of stress."

But perhaps these experiences will help average Joes sympathize with how difficult it is to be an actual intelligence agent.

Near the end of a recent test drive of "Operation Spy," one woman who disagreed with one of the choices the group had made commented, "We made a terrible decision. It looks like we're all going to die."

Her companion smiled and said, "Just like real life, huh."

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