'Cloverfield' is creating a monster buzz

by James Hebert

In the opening scene of "Cloverfield," the much-buzzed monster movie from "Lost" mastermind J.J. Abrams, a young man sticks a video camera in his mate's face as she emerges from under the bedcovers.

MONSTER BUZZ - Michael Stahl-David and Jessica Lucas slam the door on an uninvited beast in the monster flick 'Cloverfield.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sam Emerson. "Oh, I can just see this ending up on the Internet," she groans.

Actually, just about everything concerning the "Cloverfield" saga has shown up on the Web already. Everything except what's in the movie itself.

Since last summer - when a cryptic trailer debuted featuring jittery images of Manhattan under attack - a symbiotic network of sites has sprung up around the movie. Some of them, run (presumably) by those connected with the film, offer obscure clues to the mysteries behind the "Cloverfield" story. Others, set up by fans, exist to analyze, argue and generally fixate on the possible meanings of the puzzle pieces.

"I had another look at the video, and the mermaid has the hammer in one hand and the oven mitt in the other - but still no idea how this all fits in," reads a sample post from the site CloverfieldClues.com.

"Does anyone else have anything on the cheese?" implores another.

A more jaded commentator chimes in: "At this point, I hope the movie is a documentary narrated by J.J. Abrams on how Americans will spend six months obsessing over a viral marketing campaign."

That might not be giving the "Cloverfield" phenomenon quite the credit it's due. The movie's Web presence obviously calls to mind past viral-minded tizzies for films from "The Blair Witch Project" to "A.I.: Artificial Intelligence" to "Snakes on a Plane."

What seems different about the "Cloverfield" campaign, though, is that it's not simply a marketing push; it's also a work of sprawling, multimedia storytelling, with the movie just one component of the narrative.

The Web universe built up around Steven Spielberg's "A.I." way back in 2001 pioneered that idea, with its interlaced mysteries and interactive surprises. But a viewer still could appreciate that movie as a stand-alone work without having a clue about the clues strewn across the Net.

"Cloverfield," though (and consider this a spoiler alert - if talk of what a movie's missing can be considered a spoiler), leaves so many questions unanswered that it almost dares an audience to go learn more.

"You see all these scenes of chaos, and you have no idea what it's about," said Scott Wood, an executive producer at San Diego 1700-AM radio who attended a sneak preview recently.

Wood and colleagues Matt Bassin and Michael Gomez had a litany of basic questions about the movie and its featured creature after the screening. "Did they actually destroy it?"

"Where did it come from?"

And, of course: "What was it?"

That last question, at least, can be answered in simplistic terms: The thing looks a bit like a baboon crossed with an octopus and blessed with the temper (and teeth) of a T. Rex. Oh, and it's about 60 stories tall.

Some of the most talked-about online clues to "Cloverfield" have to do with a Japanese corporation called Tagruato, which owns a subsidiary that makes an apparently irresistible frozen drink called Slusho!

But Tagruato also is in the business of deep-sea drilling, and there are dark hints that the company has dredged up more than it bargained for. There also seems to be a connection between the frozen ocean floor that Tagruato excavated, and whatever ingredient it is that makes Slusho! go.

(No apparent connection, though, with Homer Simpson's beloved Squishees.)

Little of that comes up in the movie, although the main character, Rob, is moving to Japan for a new job (his MySpace page indicates it's with Slusho!) and the first sign of the monster's arrival is a capsized tanker - maybe one of Tagruato's - in New York Harbor.

Further clues no doubt will reveal themselves with repeated viewings, and it's possible the whole "Cloverfield" story could take months (years?) to play out in the saga's wider "metaverse." Or that it could never be totally figured out.

Abrams' "Lost," after all, has been running on ABC-TV for three seasons, and no one seems any closer to figuring out what's happening on that island - a matter of frustration for some fans.

But Dave Bolt, who runs a popular "Cloverfield" site (http://1-18-08.blogspot.com/), says he doesn't think the movie's Web push has turned people off. (Yet.)

"The one knock on viral campaigns is that people may drop out or avoid it if it becomes too complicated," says Bolt, who operates the blog and others from his home base in Tennessee. "(But) I never sensed 'Cloverfield' was too complicated to follow.

"The only real problem with the 'Cloverfield' campaign is that it has been real streaky and seemed a little rushed at times. It came out strong, went into hiding for a while, and came out again. During this downtime a lot of people lost interest.

"(For me), 'Cloverfield' has always seemed to be feast or famine. Either I have 10 things to write about or nothing at all."

Jeff Semones, president of the Los Angeles interactive-marketing agency M80, says there's a delicate balance between making an online campaign intricate enough to keep fans interested and turning it so esoteric that they burn out.

"You've gotta think about it," says Semones, whose company at the moment is orchestrating an online project for "Penelope," an upcoming fantasy film. "If your target audience has a tremendous amount of spare time to seek out these things, that's one side of it.

"But I think the other side of it is, you really have a small audience if you make it that complex."

That, says Semones, is where a dedicated online community comes in. If its members are all sharing information, each one only has to solve one small piece of the puzzle. Pride drives the quest, too, Semones says - "the social currency of being the first to know something," as he puts it.

Bolt agrees that the "Cloverfield" film feels like just one element in a storytelling galaxy.

"I definitely see this movie as just one cog on the wheel," he says.

For all the story's inventiveness, though, he doesn't forget that on some level the online component is still about promotion: "In the end, all viral campaigns of this size are selling you something," he says.

Bolt points out that in the past, fans have taken exception to such campaigns, feeling as though they're being manipulated.

"(But) overall, 'Cloverfield' has been a fun mystery for me," Bolt adds. "I think it will add to the movie as well as get me excited to see it. Overall, they have a nice little world that they have created."

Certainly nicer than (one more time: spoiler alert!) the world that the monster leaves behind.

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