VIDEO GAMES

'Spore' Documentary Spawns Protest By Scientists Who Starred in It

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS—The National Geographic Channel is often praised for its meticulous science documentaries, but a show that aired last month focusing on the blockbuster video game Spore is coming in for harsh criticism. Surprisingly, the toughest critics are some of the scientists who appear in the film itself. They say that they were not informed before taking part that it would focus on a commercial product. "I literally never heard about Spore until I saw myself on television in this infomercial about the game," says Cliff Tabin, a geneticist at Harvard University. "It's an outrage."

The documentary, titled *How to Build a Better Being*, which aired on 9 September, puts Spore and its creator, Will Wright, front and center. Over the course of the 1-hour show, Wright visits several U.S.-based academic scientists to discuss their research. Between these scientific interludes, the documentary returns to Wright and Spore. "Journey into the billion-year history of the human body, led by computer game visionary Will Wright as he explores the breakthrough science that's revealing the secret genetic machinery that shapes all life in the game Spore," reads a description of the film on the National Geographic Channel's Web site.

Designer creature. Biologists complain that they appear to be endorsing the video game Spore in a National Geographic film.

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Tabin, along with Neil Shubin, a paleontologist at the University of Chicago in Illinois, and Michael Levine, a geneticist at the University of California, Berkeley, sent *Science* identical e-mails from the film's producers inviting them to take part. The e-mail describes the documentary as an investigation of "recent discoveries in evolutionary science" with no mention of Spore or Wright. "I thought I was being interviewed for a documentary about evolutionary biology," says Shubin, who appears to be playing the game in the film. "They didn't mention Spore until we were in the middle of [the interview]. … I sat there with Will Wright as he fiddled with it," he says. "I don't endorse video games, particularly one that claims to be about evolution."

Ellen Stanley, National Geographic's communications vice president, says there was no intent to mislead the participants. "Our producers were transparent with all of the scientists," she says. The production of such a documentary takes "several months" she adds, and "the idea for the film evolves during that process."

Spore is described in the film as "one of the most ambitious games ever, simulating the process of evolution," and a DVD of the film is included in the $80 "Galactic Edition" of the game. "There's no question that the impression one gets from watching [the film] is that Spore is scientifically based and that scientists endorse this as not only a valid representation of how life on earth arose but moreover a really cool way that kids can learn about it," says Tabin. But "the science is told in the most superficial way and not really explained or clarified," he says. "And then it becomes more about this computer game designer than it is about the science." (A panel of scientists asked to review the game's scientific content for an online *Science* feature, www.gonzoscientist.org, gave its treatment of evolutionary biology low marks.)

Stanley declined to comment about the relationship between National Geographic and Spore's manufacturer, Electronic Arts. "We had a great time partnering with the folks over at National Geographic," wrote a spokesperson for Electronic Arts in an e-mail to *Science*. "However, we don't typically discuss business terms of our partnerships."

–JOHN BOHANNON

Google Grants Fight Disease

Google.org, the philanthropic arm of the Internet search giant, has given more than $14 million to six programs aimed at identifying new infectious disease threats that could become worldwide disasters.

Among the winners are ProMED, a respected and well-utilized but perennially cash-strapped e-mail list that compiles reports about emerging diseases, and HealthMap, a Web site that takes outbreak reports from ProMED and other sources and logs them on world maps. The projects will use their combined $3 million share to expand their coverage of neglected countries. HealthMap, which relies on Google News, Google Maps, and Google Trends, will also receive support from Google technicians—"something that doesn't come with most grants," says its co-founder John Brownstein.

The rest of the funding, awarded for 3 to 4 years, will support efforts to monitor deforestation by satellite, use climate and weather data to predict epidemic hot spots, and improve the identification of pathogens in the lab. The Global Viral Forecasting Initiative plans to use $5.5 million from Google and another grant of the same size from the Skoll Foundation to hunt for new viruses in humans and animals in Africa and Asia.

–MARTIN ENSERINK

Cold Cash for Science

PARIS—The French government will spend more than €250 million over the next 3 years to make careers in science and higher education more appealing and reward its academic stars. The measures, including increased financial bonuses, are part of a "radical offensive" to make France's research system "among the most attractive in the world," science and higher education minister Valérie Pécresse said at a press conference this week.

Among the plans: A new contract with a minimal starting salary for Ph.D. students; a 12% to 25% pay hike for assistant professors; and bonuses of up to €15,000 for excellence in research or teaching and up to €25,000 bonuses for those who win scientific prizes. The plan is in line with recommendations from the French Academy of Sciences, which is "happy" with the plan, says academy president Jules Hoffman. But Sauvons la Recherche (SLR), a researchers' movement, opposes the bonuses. Eligibility criteria are vague and there's the risk of arbitrary decisions, says SLR president Bertrand Monthubert. **–MARTIN ENSERINK**

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