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Summer viral campaigns are here; is anybody feeling pinpricked yet?

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Viral marketing has gone positively bubonic.

While this unconventional approach to building buzz online is nothing new, it has achieved full-blown plague status in the walk-up to the summer movie season.

"Forgetting Sarah Marshall," "The Dark Knight" and "Hancock" are just some of the movies employing viral marketing -- and the sheer volume is only part of why this strategy has become problematic.

For the uninitiated, viral marketing involves hatching multiple interconnected Web sites that plug a movie by extending its story lines online. That in turn gets blogs and social networks linking in -- hence its viral nature.

Gone are the days when marketing a movie online involved simply buying a URL like DarkKnight.com and uploading a trailer. Warner Bros. has launched more than 30 Web sites during the past year in support of the latest in the "Batman" franchise, a trail of virtual bread crumbs intended to sate fans until the July 18 release.

Although the bulk of these campaigns play out on the Internet, they also frequently move offline, often in the form of wacky public events intended to amass die-hard enthusiasts. One "Knight" site provides clues pointing to screenings that were scheduled for Monday in 12 different cities, including Hollywood & Highland.

But fans expecting a handy online guide that lists dates and locations for the screening will be disappointed. Instead, you'll arrive at a spooky Web site featuring portraits of presidents whose images had been defaced by the telltale makeup of the Joker. Clicking on each portrait links to a set of coordinates that require accessing Google Maps to decipher.

Nothing is ever simple in viral marketing. Take the sheer depth of the "Knight" campaign, in which dozens of seemingly marginal elements of the film have Web sites of their own, including a fictional bank, a travel agency -- even a deli, for crying out loud. Some are simple, single-page trifles, while others lead into games that would require wartime code-breaking skills to maneuver.

That's viral marketing for you: compelling, creative and intricate but above all just plain exhausting. Since when should marketing feel like doing homework?

There's no direct pitch to consumers urging you to actually see a movie. Instead, these sites ask you to suspend

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reality before actually stepping into the theater. Just check out HancockWasHere.com, which arranges video clips from the film as if sightings of the titular superhero performing incredible feats were being witnessed by some obsessed fan.

I understand the rationale behind the viral style. What better way to cut through the promotional clutter that has become so enveloped in cliché that the mere sight of a movie poster makes the average eye glaze over? That's the simple brilliance of "Sarah Marshall," whose stark black-and-white scrawlings echoing the movie's title -- and referring to the Web site -- were crudely effective.

But when too many movies adopt the same understated marketing tone, its novelty wears off. When "Cloverfield" played around with viral strategies, it was cool. Now that everyone else is copying -- not so cool.

Fine, you might say; viral marketing isn't your cup of tea. Why ruin it for those who enjoy it?

But my point isn't to state personal preference; I question whether these elaborate schemes are worth the resources the studios devote to them. Even among the most dyed-in-the-wool fans, it is hard to believe too many have the time or inclination to justify all this. And even if they did, what sense is there in pitching woo so fervently to an audience already guaranteed to show up to theaters? Maybe money is better spent targeting audience segments that aren't as likely to buy tickets.

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