

Cyberlinks

Reality craze pursues Roger on the run

By Patti Hartigan
GLOBE STAFF

Meet Roger, a stranger in Berlin. There he is changing money at the airport. There he is snapping a picture at the Brandenburg Gate. There he is blending in with the crowd. But Roger isn't just another tourist: He's a fugitive with a \$10,000 bounty on his head. He's being pursued by a professional manhunter, and his moves are being monitored on the Internet.

Run, Roger, run.

This isn't the scenario of some Cold War spy thriller; it's a game being played right now on the streets of Berlin. Called RealityRun (and chronicled on www.realityrun.com), the game offers the latest twist in reality entertainment. Roger, said to be a Dutch gym teacher who describes himself as "very fast and flexible," must survive undetected in Berlin for 24 days, completing arcane tasks and eluding his would-be captors. He is wearing a microphone, and Berlin residents can call a 900 number to

hear his voice and guess his whereabouts. They can also watch him on the Internet when he retreats to his "nest," a lair equipped with Web cams where he is allowed to relax for two hours a day. Anyone providing information that leads to his capture pockets the \$10,000; amateur sleuths can also collect if they successfully confront Roger in public. If nobody finds him, Roger gets the cash. Today is Day 5.

This stunt is hot news in Berlin, where radio jocks and television crews are tracking Roger with the purple passion of sportswriters chronicling a close pennant race. "Berlin Hunts Roger!" scream the headlines. "\$10,000 Bounty!" The Web site is reportedly receiving 600,000 hits a day.

Of course, some folks are also asking the requisite questions about the rise of voyeurism and the fall of civilization. One story quoted a German spokesman for Amnesty International who dismissed the game as "undignified for human beings." And in the RealityRun chat rooms, skeptical netizens are doing

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a reality check of their own. "There is no Roger. It's just a marketing stunt," wrote one user. "Ich bin nicht ein Berliner dumkopf."

The founders of the game insist that Roger is for real. They see the game as a kind of postmodern Iron Man contest modeled after Stephen King's novel, "Running Man." Alexander Skora, the game's inventor, is a triathlon athlete who scoffs at reality-based programs like "Survivor" and "Big Brother." "They are boring," says Skora, a 29-year-old lawyer. "It's people doing time. Blah, blah, blah. People become famous for doing nothing, but the reality runner has to be creative and smart."

But let's be real. For all the postmodern mumbo jumbo, the game is about two things: money and sex. The money part is obvious. The organizers aim to create a RealityRun franchise, repeating the game in a new city every two months and staging a final contest in New York next spring. Visitors to the Internet site can vote on the next city. (Boston isn't listed, but write-ins are accepted.) They plan to take a cut of any earnings Roger and future Reality Runners make as a result of their instant celebrity. "We're going to market the star potential of the participants, and we'll get a piece of everything they do," says Alan Wolan, a New York entrepreneur who is funding the game. "Why shouldn't we? We make them famous."

As for the sex appeal, consider: In his disguise, Roger cuts a dashing figure in a black cape, fedora, and boots. (Costume by Zorro!) In the profile released by the produc-

ers, he allegedly describes himself as "an active heterosexual" who was once arrested for nudity in Greece. Yesterday, he was required to sneak into a women's restroom and take a photograph outside a stall. After the photo was posted on the Web, folks scoured Berlin for the sexy someone in the slinky black sandals.

"Part of having fun is making a lot of money, but there is also a sexual aspect to it," says Wolan, CEO of GoGard, a postcard advertising company. "He's being hunted. There is a sensual connection..." A pause. "I wanted to use the word erotic, but I thought that would scare you off."

Au contraire. We asked for an interview. Skora called Roger on a cellphone and acted as an intermediary. "I keep on moving," Roger says. "I am not sitting anywhere longer than 15 minutes at a time. People are looking at me quite differently." Is he stressed? "I am under enormous pressure, but if I show that, people will react to that. I am being open. I am smiling." He says he had to beat a hasty retreat from a restaurant after flirting with a waitress who got suspicious.

The heat is on. Run, Roger, run.

The hottest movie on the Internet now is a three-minute short called "405: The Movie." Think LA freeway. Think disaster. Think comedy. And there you have it, a clever short by aspiring filmmakers Jeremy Hunt and Bruce Branit. The whimsical film stars a DC-10, a hapless driver, and a clueless old lady.

The filmmakers posted the short piece on the Internet in June, and it spread like crazy. (You can see it at www.405themovie.com or www.ifilm.com.) Shortly after the film's release, they were signed by Creative Artists Agency; they quit their day jobs at a special effects shop two weeks later. More than a million people have downloaded the film. "It's been an amazing two-month ride," says Hunt. "We're meeting the entire town."

Everyone seems to love this scrappy duo—except for the folks at American Airlines. The airline's name and logo are on a jet that makes an emergency landing in the film. "We would have preferred that they had made it a generic or fictitious airline instead of using ours," says American spokesman John Hotard, who said the company plans to contact the filmmakers. As for Hunt and Branit, they're not too worried. "This thing has gotten much bigger than we intended," says Branit. As far as they're concerned, there's still something special in the air.

"I laughed until the tears were running down my face!"
—Stephen Holden, THE NEW YORK TIMES

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'RealityRun' Makes Dash To San Francisco

By Neva Chonin

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Imagine you're on the run in San Francisco with a \$10,000 bounty on your head. Your only goal is to elude capture for seven days.

There's one problem. You have to wear a live microphone that broadcasts your movements live on the Internet 24 hours a day. People across the globe are tracking you. Professional bounty hunters are on your trail, too.

An existential nightmare? Well, yes. But it's also "RealityRun," the Internet reality show that became an international sensation when it launched in Berlin last month. It arrives in San Francisco for its U.S. premiere Nov. 13.



FREDERIC LARSON /
The Chronicle

Alexander Shora

Expect unmitigated mayhem and a media frenzy. During the Berlin game, the "RealityRun" Web site reported more than 650,000 hits a day, and newspapers and radio stations across the country joined in the hunt.

Here are the basics: Two Runners are set loose to survive on \$100 a day and complete daily "missions." If they escape capture for seven days, they're \$10,000 richer. If they don't, the person finding them collects the prize. Internet fans who can't pursue the Runners themselves can feed clues to a designated RealityHunter and split the money if their tips lead to a capture.

Helpful hints supplied by the "RealityRun" Web site (www.realityrun.com) will include 24-hour live audio, digital photographs taken by the Runners and live Webcam footage of Runners visiting a secret "nest" to recharge their cell phones, which supply the Internet connection for their microphones.

Successful Runners move on to the next city in the yearlong "RealityRun" World Tour, of which San Francisco is the first stop. Finalists will converge in New York to compete in the \$100,000 Mega-"RealityRun" World Tour Finals on Sept. 10, 2001.

"RealityRun" creator Alexander Skora says San Francisco made sense as the U.S. launch point.

"It's one of the few American cities where you can get by without a car," he says. The 30-year-old German has settled here for the duration of the show. "You can do anything by foot, bicycle or public transportation. And how many other places have so many people using the Internet?"

Starting tomorrow, those aspiring to be

"RealityRun"ners or a RealityBabe — the person who coordinates the Runner hunt online — can submit applications to the "RealityRun" site. Alas, San Franciscans are banned from becoming Runners. The fugitives can't be familiar with the area in which they compete. Prospective RealityBabes should be multilingual so they can communicate with the game's international fan base. The casting deadline is Oct. 24. Finalists will be announced in early November.

Some changes have been made for the show's U.S. premiere: The run has been cut from 24 to seven days; there will be two Runners instead of one; Runners must now complete three missions a day as opposed to one; and RealityHunters will be drawn from a revolving cast of local celebrities.

Look for "RealityRun" to hit TV as well: Skora recently signed with the William Morris Agency to negotiate North American TV rights, and an Argentine station will start its own round-the-clock coverage.

He's also considering having celebrities "visit the nest every night, blindfolded, when the Reality Runner comes to recharge his batteries."

Blindfolded celebrities. Battery-fueled fugitives. "Survivor" was nothing compared to this.

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