

Web Game With a Message Debunks H.I.V. Myths

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Hot or Not, a Web site where people submit photographs of themselves so that strangers can rate how attractive they are on a scale of 1 to 10, has spawned many imitators (plus a fair number of critics who view it as a sign of the end of civilization as we know it).

One new spinoff, Pos or Not, has a serious purpose (tasteful or not). The site, www.posornot.com, introduced in late April, is an H.I.V. education effort disguised as a game. It shows photographs and brief biographies of men and women ages 21 to 30, and asks visitors to decide whether each is H.I.V. positive or negative. The message is that you can't judge someone's virus status by looks, occupation or taste in music.

The site is sponsored by MTV's college network and the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonprofit group that focuses on health policy. "We feel it's another kind of activist tool to get out the word about H.I.V. protection," said Stephen K. Friedman, the general manager of mtvU, the college and university offshoot of Viacom's MTV network.

The first trial by mtvU of what Mr. Friedman calls "games for change" was Darfur Is Dying, an online simulation of a refugee camp that has logged more than 1.5 million plays since 2006. Other companies have sponsored games about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the immigration debate and the world's water resources.

The network wants the word about its H.I.V. site and its message to be spread like a popular YouTube video. It enlisted celebrities like Wyclef Jean, a musician, and Rosario Dawson, an actress, to make promotions for the game, which are playing across MTV's networks.

The game — if it can really be called that — was played about 5.1 million times by 400,000 people in its first three weeks, according to mtvU. Entertainment Weekly's Web site suggested it might be the "most depressing use" of an Internet trend ever, but suggested that any H.I.V. outreach effort could be beneficial.

Mr. Friedman said that in a media-saturated climate, maybe young people have to be shocked into paying attention. "Looking at the statistics that one in four people who are H.I.V. positive in the U.S. don't know it, it's pretty staggering," he said. "We hope that something like this will get under their skin."

"If it makes some people uncomfortable," he added, "that's not necessarily a bad thing."

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