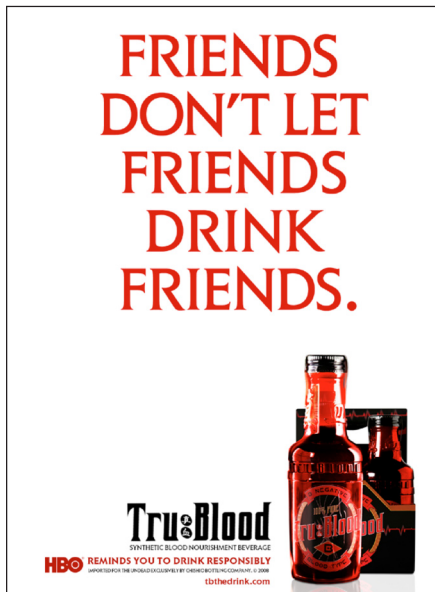


## The Vampires Are Coming, but Only After Months of Warnings

July 15, 2008

By DOUGLAS QUENQUA

HBO's new vampire series from Alan Ball, the Oscar-winning writer behind "American Beauty" and the hit series "Six Feet Under," will not start until September. But for a select group of horror film enthusiasts, the story has been under way for weeks.



An ad for a fictional product to promote the HBO series "True Blood."

The letters were written in dead languages like Babylonian and Ugaritic, but — to no one's surprise — the recipients duly pitched in to translate them. The group effort, carried out on blogs and message boards, led to a macabre Web site guarded by a beautiful vampire, where visitors could view short prequel episodes to HBO's new series and learn about a product called Tru Blood that obviates the need for vampires to feast on humans.

The campaign for the show, "True Blood," based on a series of vampire books by Charlaine Harris, is shaping up to be the most extensive that HBO has ever undertaken.

By the time the program begins, the promotional effort will be four months old, having required the full-time attention of six Campfire employees who are monitoring message boards, maintaining a fake blog and coordinating the precisely timed release of new materials. In addition, 20 freelancers are working on other technical aspects of the campaign. HBO and Campfire began plotting the effort in February.

The size and scope of the campaign are a testament to how desperately HBO needs a new hit, now that shows like "Sex and

the City" and "The Sopranos" have run their course. And Mr. Ball is a good bet, since he created one of HBO's last great successes, "Six Feet Under."

"True Blood," about a world where vampires emerge from the shadows to join everyday society, would seem to be a good candidate for such a promotion. It comes with a built-in fan base of people who have read the vampire mysteries, but the plot is complex enough that viewers could benefit from some advance explanation.

"I wanted the marketing campaign to tell as much of the back story as we could, so we could just jump into the story" with the first episode, Mr. Ball said. "I had a lot of specific ideas about educating the audience, and then the team at HBO brought me this marketing plan that exceeded all my wildest dreams."

THE MARKETING PLAN was the brainchild of Campfire, a production house and advertising agency with a reputation for staging large-scale campaigns with a cinematic bent. The founders of Campfire produced "The Blair Witch Project," a horror movie that was made for \$22,000 and earned \$248 million at the box office. Rather than pursuing full-time careers in Hollywood, the founders chose to stay in marketing.

"Blair Witch" traced part of its success to a Web-based campaign that began long before the film was released. Ubiquitous trailers tried to persuade moviegoers that the documentary-style story of ghosts and missing teenagers was true. And while it was all fiction, the results were real: the promotion helped usher in the digital age of movie advertising.

Mike Monello, a founder of Campfire and a "Blair Witch" producer, said he liked the real-time interaction with viewers that he could achieve in marketing but not filmmaking. "There's a dialogue with the audience, to me, that's just really exciting," he said.

In advertising circles, Campfire is well known for its role in Audi's "Art of the heist," a 2005 campaign that set a new standard for alternate reality games, or A.R.G.'s. Campfire, in conjunction with the now-independent ad shop McKinney (which at the time was part of Havas), staged a theft of an Audi A3 from a Manhattan showroom, then put on a fake international manhunt for the thieves.

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*(Page 2 of 2)*

Consumers were invited not just to solve the mystery, but also to become characters in the campaign, which appeared on TV, the Web and billboards, and also included live events. People who followed along found themselves immersed in a meticulously plotted and executed reality game — one in which they happened to learn nearly everything about the Audi A3.

“It’s just a very cool new way to do marketing,” said Ty Montague, chief creative officer at WPP Group’s JWT, who collaborated with Campfire several times when he worked at other agencies. “Any time you can make the marketing literally an entertainment experience, you’re a step ahead, and I think Campfire is great at that.”

Campfire was officially established in 2005, though Mr. Monello and Gregg Hale, also a producer of “Blair Witch,” began using the name — a reference to old-fashioned storytelling — when they worked at a production studio called Chelsea Pictures. The founder of that studio, Steve Wax, would become the third founding partner of Campfire, which is now based in SoHo.

The first campaign they worked on together was the introduction in 2004 of Sega ESPN NFL Football 2K4. For that effort, Campfire and the independent ad agency Wieden & Kennedy staged an elaborate story about a young man who was left with a crippling neurological disease after working as a tester on the game — he would black out and tackle strangers — and was waging an online campaign to make Sega suspend the product.

Few consumers seemed to believe the story was real, which did not bother Mr. Hale. “Our campaigns don’t depend on people thinking they’re real,” he said. “It’s about the storytelling.”

THREE YEARS LATER, Campfire, which has 20 full-time employees, is trying to branch out.

“Most of the clients we meet with, an A.R.G. is not their solution,” Mr. Monello said.

He points to the agency’s current work for Verizon, which centers on a branded reality show, “My Home 2.0,” in which families that are struggling economically are given a home makeover, including the company’s fiber optic service package.

But the most important promotion for Campfire this summer will be the one for “True Blood.” The first component is the Web site, where videos explain that vampires have developed a synthetic blood product that can make them stop feeding on humans and join society. But do they want to? Viewers are asked to debate this weighty matter (and have done so).

With Mr. Ball’s blessing, HBO gave Campfire “creative license to explain that world and the story surrounding the already existing characters,” said Courtney Monroe, executive vice president for consumer marketing at HBO. The plot in the prequels is about “the creation and discovery of the synthetic blood all the way through the decision among the vampires to live among the humans,” she said.

During the next few months, the campaign will expand to TV, print and outdoor ads. But this being a Campfire campaign, those elements will take an alternate reality approach: print ads will not promote the show, but rather Tru Blood, the fictional product from the series. Samples of the product (red sugar water in plastic vials) are being sent to the same people who received the letters.

“We wanted people to have a sense of discovery, an opportunity to dive in and be a part of the story before the massive elements hit,” Mr. Monello said. “We’re looking to build a passionate fan base.”