



One of a kind Visitors faces are scanned to create a unique biometric record of their identity at the Science Museum's 'Spies' exhibitions

This column will self-destruct in five seconds

John O'Connell learns the art of espionage at the Science Museum

The phenomenal success of Charlie Higson's Young Bond books – the latest, 'Double or Die', currently tops the *Bookseller's* Children's Books Chart – suggests today's pre-teens find spying every bit as exciting as previous generations of kids.

'The Science of Spying' at the Science Museum is an interactive exhibition focusing on the 'human skills' associated with espionage. 'The idea is that you enter as an ordinary civilian but leave as a spy,' says content manager Anna Flaherty. Bearing your personal spy ID card, you enter via secret doors disguised as newspaper and flower vendors' stalls and find yourself in the 'recruitment' area. Here, you stand facing your opponent at the controls of computer consoles resembling old-school Space Invaders machines and test your ability to lie convincingly as you ask and answer questions relating to the pictures you see on the screen. You can also test the steadiness of your hand as you handle a stick of dynamite; learn about disguises and how to use a rudimentary cipher system; and choose the items you want to take with you on your mission. (Answer: as few as possible. 'The real spies we worked with on

this were keen to debunk the idea that spies rely on James Bond-style gadgets,' says Flaherty.)

A single narrative thread runs through the exhibition. A sinister company called Osteck is up to mischief. Can you infiltrate it, work out what it's up to and thwart its cunning plan for world

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domination? A good place to start might be the rubbish bin of one Mr Grant, tipped as a wrong 'un by Most Secret Sources. Are these thrown-away letters addressed to an alias? And why has he been to such a lot of mobile phone conferences recently?

The 'recruitment' room leads into the 'technology' room. Here, kids can make 3D maps of their faces or sit on enormous glowing computer keys which vibrate Morse code while adults peruse a collection of the latest spy equipment, from

lightweight spy-planes to keystroke loggers, RFID tags and 'smart water', which leaves an invisible stain on your skin. Inside the spy control centre – banks of busy computer screens: all very '24' – the civil liberties debate plays out before your eyes as you follow a data trail of passports, credit cards, car registration info and CCTV footage.

In the next room, Osteck's Security HQ, you undergo further screening before – if you're smart – putting together the final pieces of the puzzle. On the way out you can examine an assortment of surveillance and counter-surveillance gadgets likely to be used by the security services in the near future. (The organisers invited technoboffin designers to submit ideas and sketches.) There's a vanity mirror which constructs a composite image of you in your environment by hacking into local CCTV cameras, and a reptilian bionic leg – for leaping over walls and running at speed – which resembles one of HR Giger's designs for 'Alien'.

It's all good fun, and certainly alerts kids to the perils and pleasures of life in our surveillance-obsessed society, even if, at the end of the day, it's more interested in promoting 'enquiry skills' and touching cross-curricular bases (design and technology, ICT, drama, English) than in anything resembling hard science. Like last year's exhibition of computer games 'Game On', 'The Science of

Spying' can't help but prompt the question: 'What's this doing in the Science Museum?' The answer is: delivering the 'blockbuster entertainment qualities' families increasingly expect from a day out. Indeed, *The Science Of...* – the company that conceived and built 'The Science of Spying' and was responsible for 2005's 'The Science of Aliens' – exists specifically to create blockbuster exhibitions which open at the Science Museum before heading off on five-year global tours. ('The Science of Aliens' is currently running in Paris and Miami.)

It's hard to imagine a ten-year-old who won't love 'The Science of Spying', though parents wanting tales of Cold War derring-do or Bletchley Park might want to head for the Imperial War Museum – or, indeed, the Science Museum's own hilariously creaky telecommunications gallery (behold the wonders of Prestel), with its Enigma machine hidden away in a glass case at the back.

'The Science of Spying' is at the Science Museum, Exhibition Rd, SW7 (bookings: 0870 906 3890) until Sept 2. Open daily 10am-6pm; adm £8, cons £6, family ticket £18 (1 adult, 2 children) or £25 (2 adults, 2 children); during school holidays and half terms £10/£8/£23/£32. Tickets are timed and during busy periods your stay is restricted to 1 hour 15 minutes.

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