

Online scavenger hunt reveals Aurora's secrets



By Brock Weir

If these walls could talk!

Sure, we're all familiar with that expression, and we've probably thought it once or twice before, but now the secrets of Aurora's more historic walls, and even its landmarks, are ready to give up their secrets -- right on your phone.

Sure, it will take some digging, but all the very best scavenger hunts do, and if you learn something in the process, that's all that matters for software developer Mark Kolb, the brain behind Hidden Aurora.

Mr. Kolb and his company Brainy Games, launched Hidden Aurora, an in-browser app launched during Culture Days last month. People have already jumped into the hunt for Aurora's secrets, but the developers are hoping more will join the party.

"We have over 100 secrets in Aurora right now," says Mr. Kolb, indicating one at Caruso & Company, a store in continuous operation for over 100 years, and a landmark many Aurorans pass every single day. "We will show you a picture of what Caruso's looked like in the past and ask you what is there now. Behind Trinity Anglican Church, there is a little cemetery. Our game has a picture of one of the stones and asks who is buried next to it. The idea is that we will give directions on how to find the stones, people will find it, and seek out the information. Each of the secrets has a question and an answer."

The more you play, the more chances you have to win prizes.

Hidden Aurora was initiated last year through a grant from the North Newmarket Lion's Club. The software was already largely written for a project used by the York Region Festival Alliance but as soon as the grant money was in place, Mr. Kolb was hard at work piecing together a historical scavenger hunt first for Newmarket and then Aurora.

"The Aurora Museum and Archives sent me a whole pile of images of what used to be, for example, at Yonge and Wellington," he says. "From the Museum, we'll get background information on certain locations. Town Park, for example, has a lot of history with sports and military, so there are pictures in the game of things that happened in the past. The purpose is to educate the residents of what this Town used to be like many, many years ago so they have an understanding of why Aurora is how it is today."

To get started, one has to register their email address along with their first name or initials at hiddenaurora.ca.

From there, you select an avatar to appear on the leader board "and to keep track of how your neighbours are doing!" and you're good to go. Once you're out in the community, an image will pop up inside the web app letting you know there is something to be found nearby and clues will be provided to lead you to it.

"Almost all the secrets in the game you have to be within 100 metres of the location to actually answer the questions," says Mr. Kolb. "There are a number of secrets highlighted in red so that you can actually play from home, but we are encouraging people to take a walk, bring the family, and explore Aurora."

As more people do just that "get out and explore Aurora" Mr. Kolb is hoping the game is embraced by local businesses as well. Many establishments, particularly in the Downtown Core, operate out of buildings that house a lot of "secrets" just waiting to be uncovered.

Working together, Mr. Kolb says some of these secrets can help bring people through the doors of these shops and services.

During this collaboration with the Aurora Museum & Archives, Mr. Kolb, an Aurora resident, says he has learned quite a bit on his own community and how some of these historic threads are still relevant today. The railway which took people from Toronto to Lake Simcoe, passing through Aurora each day, is a particular point of interest, he says, because that was "the mass transit of the day" which had to make way for cars, but the need for mass transit is once again more relevant than ever. "I think a lot of people are interested in knowing what was around them at one time or another," says Mr. Kolb. "Some people get involved in the community that way, and this is a good outing with your family and never ending. We don't want the scavenger hunt to end. We just want more people playing."

For more information on Hidden Aurora, visit www.hiddenaurora.ca.