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'Quest' for Reality

Imagine, Fox space out with pricey series

By JOSEF ADALIAN

Fox is putting big bucks behind a space-themed unscripted skein from the creative forces behind "Apollo 13" and the co-creator of blockbuster videogame "Halo."

Imagine Entertainment's Ron Howard and Brian Grazer, along with Imagine TV prexy David Nevins, will work with Fox reality guru Mike Darnell to exec produce the show.

"Halo" co-creator Alexander Seropian and Jim Banister, who now head up Spectrum MediaWorks, created the Fox skein and will also exec produce the project, which carries the working title "X Quest." **Brady Connell and Jim Jusko of Base Camp Films will serve as exec producer-showrunners.**

Basic conceit of "X Quest": Two teams of ordinary folks with no special training are locked into separate, very cramped high-tech biocrafts designed to simulate life in space. Based on the same technology NASA uses to train its astronauts, the multimillion-dollar machines are built on a mechanism that allows them to tilt, shake and move like a spacecraft.

"From a visual standpoint, this show will seem like a \$150 million movie," Nevins said of the skein. "It's the ultimate in summer tentpole programming."

Nevins noted the "sets will be practical," with every button, display and videoscreen actually serving a purpose. Press the wrong button and bad things may happen.

"They'll live, breathe, eat and sleep inside these biocrafts for about 30 days," Darnell said. "And it's going to look to them and to the viewers like they're in space. At no time will we break through the fourth wall."

Producers plan to use CGI technology in post-production to make the unscripted skein feel more like a summer blockbuster.

"It will look like you're watching 'Apollo 13,'" said Darnell, who declined to give a pricetag but did say the show would be "extraordinarily expensive."

The "X" in the show's working title will ultimately be replaced by a word or words that more accurately describe a key theme of the show, Nevins said. Those details aren't expected to be revealed until closer to the launch of the skein, which is being prepped for a summer 2006 takeoff.

"There's going to be a mystery surrounding the show," Nevins said. He plans "a little bit of a news blackout" after Fox Entertainment prexy Peter Liguori unveils the show Thursday morning at the summer TV Critics Assn. press tour in Beverly Hills.

Vidgame vets

Seropian and Banister will help "X Quest" merge the worlds of reality TV and videogames, Darnell said.

And Banister and Seropian are expected to spearhead production of a videogame tied to "X Quest."

Fox project has no connection to the upcoming "Halo" feature from the net's sister film studio and Universal. Seropian has also been out of the "Halo" loop since leaving game creator Bungie Studios in 2002, two years after the company was snapped up by Microsoft.

"X Quest" has been in the talking stages for months, with producers first pitching the project to former Fox chief Gail Berman before Liguori arrived. New prexy seemed instantly sold on the concept.

"From a showman's point of view, it's a daring, creative, big idea," Liguori said. "And from a programmer's point of view, it's got its toes in a number of different worlds: the videogame audience, the sci-fi audience, the reality audience."

"X Quest," which was packaged by CAA, reps Imagine Television's second high-profile reality skein this year. Company is also prepping production on the NBC skein "Treasure Hunters."

Planetary explorers

As for the specifics of the game, players will be eliminated from the cast at what Nevins called "irregular" times. And at various points throughout their mission, the players will "be able to get off the ships" -- and step into elaborate simulations of planets, comets and asteroids.

But neither players nor viewers will ever see camera crews or any other hint that the players aren't really in "space."

"It's total immersion," Nevins said. "We call it 'story dwelling.' They'll be living inside this (world)."

In addition to being exposed to extreme weather conditions, players will have "specific tasks they'll have to accomplish," Nevins said, with Darnell alluding to the players "literally being in a race" against their competing team.

"There's a story they're following, a purpose to their mission," Nevins said.

Nevins added there will be "a significant reward for the winner" of the competition. When asked if that reward might involve a chance to actually go into space, Nevins and Darnell both said they wouldn't disclose any information about the prize.