



Oct. 11, 2004. 01:00 AM

As seen on TV: Drama to extend its plot via Web

`Alternate' reality will offer extra stories, puzzles

ReGenesis hopes interactivity will build viewership

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TORONTO STAR

"Executive Director of NorBAC Caroline Morrison reports that the lab is studying the cause of a highly contagious mystery illness that has killed 10 people in Northern Ontario and put hundreds in quarantine. Medical authorities are classifying the illness as a hemorrhagic fever. Hemorrhagic fevers cause internal bleeding in victims."

—**NorBAC Weekly Newsletter**, Oct. 24, 2004 (from the extended reality game *ReGenesis*)

"We've been very careful to use this to create publicity and interest. But panic, we're challenged to avoid panic, because it's not in the best interest to have people frightened of it," says Evan Jones, associated producer of the extended reality portion of The Movie Network's upcoming 13-episode television series *ReGenesis*, scheduled to premier Oct. 24.

Extended reality is a hybrid of the "alternate reality gaming" (ARG) concept, the latest trend in online entertainment which uses a variety of communication platforms, such as television and radio, newspapers, the Internet, e-mail, telephones and regular mail, to deliver stories and puzzles to public audiences to enhance products such as video games, movies, television programs and books.

The variation on the ARG concept in *ReGenesis* is that the actual television series also interactively links the audience to the characters in the drama. Viewers then become virtual players in the narrative.

"The way we're saying it is that we're `pushing forward' the narrative; we're not saying that it's changing the narrative but it is being driven by the users," Jones explains.

ReGenesis focuses on the fiction of a virus outbreak in Northern Ontario that threatens to spread to Toronto and across the continent. The disease is being tracked by the North American Biotechnology Advisory Commission, formed by the governments of Canada, the United States and Mexico "to investigate questionable advances in biotechnology."

In the program's plot, there are secrets at the fictitious NorBAC and private, perhaps corporate, agendas that are brought to light by a grassroots group, which communicates with viewers and characters within the drama via the Internet Web site <http://www.sciencesucks.com>.

"We've basically created two organizations that are at war with each other," says Jones.

The extended reality part of the television series — primarily played online through the Sciencesucks and NorBAC Web sites — fills in background information around the drama.

"I was just baffled by the amount of storyline content that just sits on the cutting room floor, because it's not able to fit into those one-hour episodes," said Jones, a graduate of the Canadian Film Centre, who has been working with *ReGenesis* scriptwriter Avrum Jacobson.

While the TV series premiere is still two weeks away, the creators of the *ReGenesis* extended reality game are already building an audience of loyal fans, through online discussion boards that are linked to NorBAC and Sciencesucks.

It's the kind of brand loyalty that marketers strive for in advertising and promoting their products and services.

According to New York-based market research firm Youth Intelligence's Trendcentral.com Web site, while alternative reality games "haven't quite hit the mainstream at this point, marketers should be taking note of ARGs, as their diverse media format seems conducive for brand integration and promotions."

Alternate reality games have been used in limited capacity on other film and television projects, including *Alias*, *MI5* and *Artificial Intelligence*.

In the case of the *AI* extended reality game, which ran just over six months, more than 4 million people visited associated Web sites, 1 million viewers registered to play the game and 8,000 fans registered and played the game from start to finish.

"The whole structure of extended reality gaming ... is that we're trying to help each other," Jones says.

"It's a collaborative process."

Collaborating to understand the story draws viewers together into a tight-knit community, creating a group that can be targeted in an ad or marketing campaign.

"The type of user that participates in these experiences is completely different from the normal type of viewer you would get on a Web site," Jones explains.

"People who visit Web sites are there for ... the one piece of information that they came for," he says, adding that they usually skip over most banner advertising.

But extended reality gamers learn quickly that they can't limit themselves to scanning or "skimming" Web sites for fast information.

"What users in this experience learn is that the online experience can't be about skimming because you're experiencing content that is part of the story," says Jones.

So far, there are no plans to push advertising in *ReGenesis* farther than directing viewers and game players to properties other than those belonging to its producers — Shaftesbury Films Inc., The Movie Network, Movie Central, Xenophile Media and the Bell Broadcast and New Media Fund.

However, Jones believes there are many opportunities for advertisers and marketers.

"It's not so much a banner advertisement model as it is a product placement model that we're working

on, because we're setting things within the fiction."

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