Reality TV King, AOL Create Web Game Show

Mark Burnett's project features a hunt for gold. It's similar to one being developed by Yahoo.

By Chris Gaither and Meg James, Times Staff Writers

Further proof that the world of Internet entertainment is fast becoming as competitive as television came Monday, when reality TV impresario Mark Burnett and America Online announced an interactive Web program that — to some in Hollywood — sounded very familiar.

Burnett and AOL said they were jointly developing a treasure-hunt game show called "Gold Rush." Slated to debut online this year, the show would award $1.6 million in gold to Web surfers who can decipher the given clues and find the booty stashed in 13 locations across the country.

Meanwhile at Yahoo Inc., the Internet giant's Santa Monica-based media group has spent months developing its own scavenger hunt game: "Treasure Hunt." This project has an even bigger-name producer tentatively attached: Steven Spielberg.

Three people familiar with the Yahoo project claim that Burnett learned about "Treasure Hunt" while working with the company on another Web offering in development, "The Runner." These sources said that Burnett tried to get attached to "Treasure Hunt" as a producer, but Yahoo said no.

Reached Monday, Burnett disputed this account. He said he wanted to do a treasure-seeking project long before he hooked up with Yahoo. In fact, he said, when he and Spielberg had lunch "months ago," they were surprised to discover that they were both at work on similar ideas.

"It was like a million-to-one thing," Burnett said. Months later, he mentioned "Gold Rush" to Yahoo Chief Executive Terry Semel, Burnett said. But Burnett stopped short of pitching that project, he said, because his first priority was getting Yahoo to greenlight "The Runner," a find-the-secret-agent game that has yet to get the go-ahead.

Burnett said he approached his Internet deals the same way he did his TV shows, several of which have become hits. In television, he said, it's not unusual to do business with two networks at the same time.

"It's like I have 'The Apprentice' on NBC and 'Survivor' on CBS," Burnett said, referring to two of his most popular shows.

Yahoo spokeswoman Joanna Stevens declined to comment, saying, "We don't discuss projects in development."

Spielberg could not be reached for comment.

Just as in TV, developing shows for the Web is becoming a high-stakes business. Advertisers are expected to spend nearly $17 billion this year on online ads.

Yahoo and AOL are seeking to dominate this market by turning their online networks into new platforms for watching videos.

Customers — especially young ones — are clamoring for more videos to watch online, said Jack MacKenzie, senior vice president of entertainment at Frank N. Magid Associates.

"To go after the Mark Burnett brand is a significant step," MacKenzie said. "He carries a lot of cachet and, I think, can help make it financially viable because he can trade off his reputation."

Burnett also has a reputation for finding himself at the center of disputes over the authorship of ideas. In August 2004, for example, Burnett and DreamWorks SKG sued Fox Broadcasting Co., claiming that the network had ripped off their idea for a
boxing-reality show that they were producing for NBC.

They lost that battle, and their show, "The Contender," bowed to disappointing ratings.

Also that year, Burnett was sued by a businessman who claimed that Burnett stole his concept for a reality show that became "The Apprentice."

Last summer, a federal judge dismissed the plaintiff's copyright infringement claims. But a separate breach of contract suit is scheduled to go to trial in May in Los Angeles County Superior Court.

Burnett said Monday that his new Web offering would kick off with armored trucks delivering gold to secret hiding places across the U.S. AOL would pepper its websites and its services, such as instant messaging, with clues that players can use to find prizes. As is common with Burnett's projects, he expects the show to include traditional ads and product placement deals.

After years as the king of televised reality programming, Burnett said he was intrigued by the possibilities — and profits — that could come from expanding the definition of "prime time."

"Years ago it was a sin to make a personal phone call at the office," Burnett said. "Now people are online all day long at the workplace. More people are hooked up electronically to receive images on that little box from 9 to 5 than will ever tune in to TV at night."