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Upcoming NASA MMO Game: Astronaut: Moon, Mars, and Beyond

Reference : www.roddeberrry.com

By: Jill Rayburn
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A few weeks ago, I reported that the MMO game "Astronaut: Moon, Mars, and Beyond", based on NASA and space exploration, is being developed.

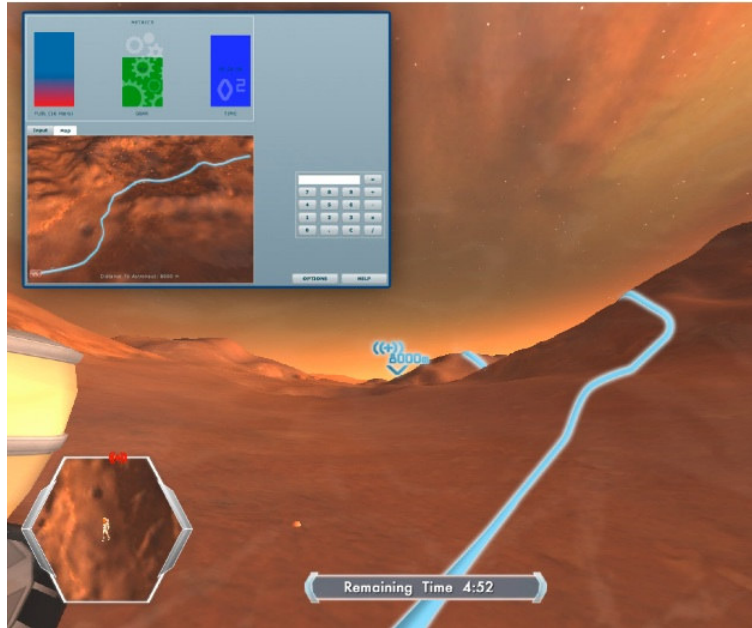
The three companies who have come together to develop this game, Virtual Heroes,

Information in Place, and Project Whitecard, are all industry leaders in the field of serious games. Serious Games are defined as "game technology used for other than purely entertainment purposes such as strategic messaging, training and education and mission planning and rehearsal" - in other words, using game technology and situations to teach in an entertaining way. Recently, I had the opportunity to talk to two individuals from Virtual Heroes: Jerry Heneghan, company founder and CEO, and Bradley Willson, the Game Designer for "Astronaut: Moon, Mars, and Beyond".

Jerry's industry background includes being a Game Producer at Tom Clancy's Red Storm Entertainment, a program manager in the Technology Assisted Learning Division of the Research Triangle Institute, and most recently an Executive Producer for the America's Army Game Project. Brad has had previous experience working on the Midnight Club Racing series, Red Dead Revolver, and Table Tennis games for Rockstar Games, bringing his experiences on these games and applying those positive things in innovative ways to his work at Virtual Heroes. His last project was an HIV awareness project in Africa that was published by Warner Brothers and released in 2008. Jerry and Brad both have a desire to bring life lessons and previous industry experiences to their work in the serious games industry, and this has already come through in their previous projects at Virtual Heroes. "It [bringing previous experiences into play] is important. There is a balance between the fun and the education, and we at Virtual Heroes in our serious games sector, we're really focused on making the games accessible and fun to the user base. We are also incorporating the learning objectives or the education or the immersion we are looking to get," says Brad. It is this outlook that will help

make “Astronaut: Moon, Mars, and Beyond” not only a wonderful game, but hopefully a valuable educational tool.

Virtual Heroes is not new to the serious games segment of the industry. They are the developers of the award-winning “[America's Army](#)” game, and the platform for this game is actually the basis for several training simulations that are used by the US Army Special Forces and the US Secret Service. Virtual Heroes is currently working on “HumanSim”, which will enable health care professionals to practice assessment and decision-making skills on virtual patients in realistic and challenging situations. They have also introduced “Zero Hour: America's Medic”, a project done for the Department of Homeland Security which trains first responders to handle natural disasters and potential terrorist attacks (you can view a demo for “Zero Hour” at Virtual Heroes main webpage).



Space exploration is also not new territory for Virtual Heroes. They are already working with Information in Place on a project called “Virtual Astronaut”, funded by the National Science Foundation. This project uses a highly immersive video game that incorporates problem solving, authentic missions, real technology, and real career information to motivate students. “The purpose of [Virtual Astronaut] is to get middle school students excited about science and math,” Jerry said. Virtual Heroes is also involved with a similar project with the other member of the “Astronaut: Moon, Mars, and Beyond” team, Project Whitecard, for the Canadian Space Agency.

This project is specifically to get Canadian school students excited about math, and the companies are preparing to deploy software to some 50,000 schools across Canada.

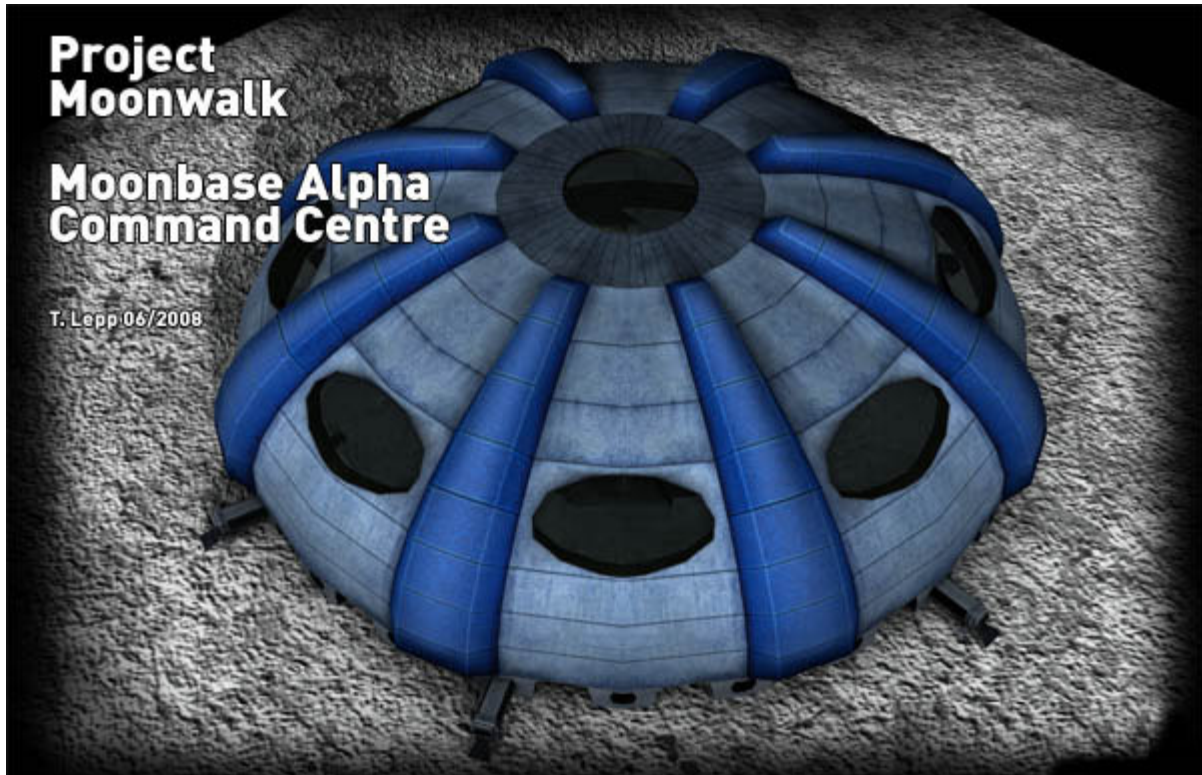
As these companies had already been working together on other projects, it was natural for them to decide to form a team when NASA announced the opportunity to compete for the rights to develop this official NASA game. It is through programs like the ones above that this team has already shown that they have what it takes to be successful with “Astronaut: Moon, Mars, and Beyond”. This team was one of 170 teams competing for the “prize” of developing this game, and it is not surprising that they won this opportunity.

“Astronaut: Moon, Mars, and Beyond” is still in the pre-production stage of development, but I did get some information about plans for the game itself. They are currently working on storyboards, and creating the look and feel that the game will have.

An important note that Jerry emphasized to me is that NASA is not providing funding for this effort; rather the funding is being provided by the three companies in the development team. The game will be run as a commercial operation, and there will be a small monthly subscription fee for playing the game, just as there is currently with many MMOs.

Instead of funding, NASA's contribution is to provide the development team with access to everything that they do

that will not compromise national security. Also, within NASA, there are two proponents that will be working on this project. One is the Learning Technologies Group, and the other is the Innovative Project Partnerships Office. Developers will be working with these offices and meeting with many people within NASA to make sure that all aspects of the game are correct. This partnership with NASA will allow the developers to include real astronauts, scientists, and other people involved with space exploration in the game, as well as realistic situations, and potentially historical situations as well. While there are no guarantees at this point, it is possible that one feature of the game will be for the player to run simulations of historical missions.



Virtual Heroes experiences with previous serious games will have a definite impact on "Astronaut: Moon, Mars, and Beyond". One such way Jerry mentioned involves their health care work. The team will be bringing in the technology used in products like "HumanSim" and "Zero Hour" so that players will be able to manage their character's physiology while on missions. "These will not be your typical plastic game characters that many games have, these will be really what we call dynamic virtual humans, and we think that's really cool and exciting," says Jerry.

As with other games, players will create their characters, and as those characters are developed, the player will unlock new activities, tools, and areas. However, a contrast to many other games is that instead of shooting and killing things to advance, players will be learning how to use technology, build things, explore surroundings, and work together as a team. This game will be using "first person exploration" which allows the player to interact with their environment and the technology and machinery around them, as opposed to games that focus on shooting or fighting. Another feature will be to allow teams of people not only to learn to work together, but also compete against other teams to complete challenges such as building habitats or colonies, or solve problems and complete missions.

This game is being developed using the Unreal game technology. This will allow for content development to be opened up to contributions from anyone who is interested. Templates will be provided for such things as spacesuits, vehicles and robotic kits, to allow players to design these elements for possible inclusion in the game. Many schools have already signed up to be part of the team that will be not only using the game for classroom education, but

hopefully be making contributions to the game itself.

The question that everyone wants to know is when will this game be released, and naturally it is a bit early to have any firm release date. However, the development team is currently planning to have a playable demo available by the end of this year, with the full game to be released sometime in 2010.

Virtual Heroes is definitely a company to watch in the field of serious games, and I plan to look at some of their other projects in the future. However, they are but one of the three companies that comprise the team that is developing "Astronaut: Moon, Mars and Beyond". I am hoping to get in touch with representatives from Information in Place and Project Whitecard very soon, and provide a look at their projects.

Photos: VirtualHeroes.com, InformationInPlace.com, ProjectMoonWalk.com

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