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NASA, Microsoft introduce "searchable space"

March 24, 2009

NASA and Microsoft Corp. today announced plans to make planetary images and data available via the Internet under a Space Act Agreement. Through this project, NASA and Microsoft jointly will develop the technology and infrastructure necessary to make the most interesting NASA content—including high-resolution scientific images and data from Mars and the moon—explorable on WorldWide Telescope, Microsoft's online virtual telescope for exploring the universe.

"Making NASA's scientific and astronomical data more accessible to the public is a high priority for NASA, especially given the new administration's recent emphasis on open government and transparency," said Ed Weiler, associate administrator for NASA's Science Mission Directorate in Washington.

Under the joint agreement, NASA's Ames Research Center in Moffett Field, Calif., will process and host more than 100 TB of data, enough to fill 20,000 DVDs. WorldWide Telescope will incorporate the data later in 2009 and feature imagery from NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter, known as MRO. Launched in August 2005, MRO has been examining Mars with a high-resolution camera and five other instruments since 2006 and has returned more data than all other Mars missions combined.

"This collaboration between Microsoft and NASA will enable people around the world to explore new images of the moon and Mars in a rich, interactive environment through the WorldWide Telescope," said Tony Hey, corporate vice president of Microsoft External Research in Redmond, Wash. "WorldWide Telescope serves as a powerful tool for computer science researchers, educators and students to explore space and experience the excitement of computer science."

Also available will be images from a camera aboard NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, or LRO, when publicly released starting this fall. Scheduled to launch this May, LRO will spend at least a year in a low, polar orbit approximately 30 miles above the lunar surface collecting detailed information about the lunar environment.

"NASA is excited to collaborate with Microsoft to share its portfolio of planetary images with students and lifelong learners," said S. Pete Worden, director of Ames. "This is a compelling astronomical resource and will help inspire our next generation of astronomers."

This agreement builds on a prior collaboration with Microsoft that enabled NASA to develop 3-D interactive Microsoft Photosynth collections of the space shuttle launch pad and other facilities at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. The images featured on Microsoft's WorldWide Telescope will supplement existing imagery and data available on NASA's Web site, the Planetary Data System and other sources.

The WorldWide Telescope is a Web 2.0 visualization environment that functions as a virtual telescope, bringing together imagery from ground- and space-based telescopes for a seamless, rich media guided exploration of the universe. Through WorldWide Telescope and Microsoft technology, people will be able to pan and zoom in on these images and the most interesting locations on Mars and the moon without distorted views at the poles.

WorldWide Telescope

To further integrate the planetary data into WorldWide Telescope, Ames is developing a suite of planetary data processing tools. These software tools convert historic and current space imagery data into a variety of formats and images of the moon, Mars and other planetary bodies readily available for easy browsing and use by the general public, enabling the creation of enhanced educational tools for students and teachers.

SOURCE: NASA

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