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Ostaszewski: NASA'S Deep Impact sure to be a big hit

By Lee Ostaszewski / Local Columnist
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Here's what NASA has been up to lately. Last month it launched Deep Impact, a unmanned spacecraft headed for an approaching comet named Tempel 1. What should make Deep Impact of interest to regular people, people who don't normally pay attention to space exploration, but who do on occasion enjoy watching stuff get smashed, is that the spacecraft will release a probe that will collide head on with the comet for the lofty, scientifically important purpose of "seeing what happens."

Is it just me or does it seem that the PR department has taken over NASA's mission operations? Call me crazy, but if three decades ago, as the moon missions were winding down and support for NASA waned, had the agency thought to start periodically launching rockets at various, interplanetary targets just to watch stuff explode, then space exploration would have been much more popular, funding would have increased, and we would already be colonizing the solar system.

Right now, I would be writing this column from my home overlooking the third fairway in one of many lovely, planned, gated, and pressurized-domed Martian communities with a typical planned-community name such as Boca Buena Vista del Mars Grande II.

Instead, today all we have on Mars are two small, robotic vehicles, the Spirit and the Opportunity, which look like folding, metal camping tables, but with wheels. Everyone at NASA is ecstatic, however, because the camping tables are still going strong, exploring the planet far longer than anyone expected: an entire year after the manufacturer's warranty ran out. (This is really good news since cost conscious NASA stubbornly refused to purchase the extended service plan.)

Another big success was the Cassini-Huygens mission that landed a probe on the Saturn moon Titan in January, although this wasn't solely a NASA project. The Huygens probe was built by the European Space Agency. I know what you're thinking, "The Europeans have a space agency? Next, you're going to tell me they have a Disney theme park and Hard Rock Cafes, too."

Well, I didn't know about it, either. The space agency, that is. But after doing some digging, I discovered that the Europeans have made significant contributions to space exploration. For instance, the European Space Agency is a full partner in the construction of the International Space Station, primarily in charge of making some curtains for it.

As for Deep Impact, the plan is for the spacecraft to get within 300 miles of the comet, then launch an impactor probe, shaped like a giant Jart, right at the oncoming comet resulting in a massive explosion that the mother ship will record, then release on DVD three months later, starring Bruce Willis.

Other reasons why I suspect this mission isn't merely for "scientific purposes" include: 1) "Deep Impact" is the name of a movie about blowing interplanetary stuff up, 2) "Armageddon" is a Bruce Willis movie about blowing interplanetary stuff up that people confuse with "Deep Impact," and 3) the scheduled day of impact is July 4th. Come on. The only thing left out was sending the Boston Pops into space to play the 1812 Overture.

It should be one heck of an collision, though. The estimated force will be the equivalent of setting off

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four tons of TNT. Not that any of us have a clue as to what exploding four tons of TNT would actually be like. Loud, I'm guessing.

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The impact will be tremendous, but NASA officials want to assure the public that they need not worry, and the agency reiterates that there is absolutely no danger whatsoever of Deep Impact accidentally causing the comet to lurch into a new orbit that puts it on A DIRECT COLLISION COURSE WITH EARTH!

Of course, if there's one thing we've learned over the last two decades of watching cheesy science fiction movies starring Bruce Willis, it's that whenever government officials assure the public that there is absolutely no reason whatsoever to worry, that's when it's time to start building an underground bunker.

(You can email Lee at lee.online@verizon.net)

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