space inviters

NASA searches for the next generation of space explorers

By Mattheis Carley

For the 10% of Americans currently unemployed, there's good news: NASA is hiring! But you won't find a help wanted ad for astronauts in your local newspaper. NASA is (unofficially) searching for the next generation of scientists and engineers, but their recruitment technique goes a little bit beyond Craigslist. NASA's Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex recently collaborated with BRC Imagination Arts to open a compelling, new exhibit that reveals the future potential of space. Exploration Space renews a sense of wonder in visitors, encouraging them to take part in NASA's continued growth and exploration of space. Visitors learn about NASA's latest developments throughout the 10,000 square foot attraction, emphasizing the future of space technology by showing emerging projects, and most importantly, the next generation of people who are creating them.

It can be tempting to focus solely on NASA's astounding history, especially when its future is overshadowed by politics and apathy. With so many achievements and missions firmly lodged in the past, younger generations may not fully grasp the importance of continuing space exploration. Sadly, many might struggle to name the first person on the moon but could rattle off decades of sports trivia or all the latest celebrity gossip. NASA may even be considered a nostalgic notion of the past as baby boomers revel in memories of The Space Race and what many consider to be the agency's heyday. Today's youth seem to perceive space exploration as having more historical significance rather than a future of unimaginable possibilities.

Exploration Space seeks to change those perceptions by showing the new, fresh face of the NASA design team. Rather than only highlighting the cosmos, this human element is integral to the experience. Life-size images of young NASA team members are featured throughout the gallery, emphasizing the roles future generations will play in space exploration. Various projects are sketched out on enormous wall surfaces, accompanied by partial blueprints and concept drawings. Visitors feel as if they are a part of an in-depth NASA brainstorming session.

"This is a first for NASA and the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. Rather than celebrating the accomplishments of the past, Exploration Space is about the future. It is something entirely new and exciting," explains Matthew Solari, Director of Education Development for BRC Imagination Arts. "It puts guests where they want to be – at the center of the adventure."

The centerpiece of the exhibit is an immersive 10 to 12 minute live show presented by a NASA "Communicator" (a live actor who narrates and takes Q&A at the end). It utilizes a stunning array of video surfaces throughout the exhibit to envelop visitors in a story of how NASA is working to overcome the challenges involved in deep space exploration. The show concludes with a captivating call to action: "You are the ones who will lead us into the next frontier, and beyond. You are tomorrow's explorers."

BRC designed the experience to be almost entirely free-flowing. After the show, explorers have the opportunity to wander and interact with a myriad of new NASA concepts and technology including entering a full-scale model of a space capsule as it is under construction. Inside, a young NASA technician's laptop shows pictures of her friends and colleagues at work.

Visitors can test their dexterity and learn the challenges of maneuvering in space by

Full-sized 12' x 8' model of the Orion Crew Space Exploration Vehicle *that allows guests to walk inside and view the cockpit through non-reflective glass. Designed by BRC Imagination Arts and technically designed and fabricated by Lexington Design + Fabrication.*

Visitors check out the latest technology at NASA's Exploration Space. *Photo courtesy of BRC Imagination Arts.*

attempting orbital docking and lunar landing at video game-like stations. Before they depart for home, explorers can have their pictures taken and enhanced, portraying them as an astronaut on the moon, on Mars, or on a spacewalk. BRC created sleek computer stations with integrated cameras that allow the user to email the photo or post it on Facebook.

BRC is known for brilliant visual storytelling and used this as the primary communication method in Exploration Space. This approach is also essential to engage younger visitors. "The depth and breadth of educational content in the exhibit is stunning," continued Solari, who is also the Stage Director for the project, "but you never notice it. The team made a commitment to delivering rich content using almost entirely a visual language that is entertaining, high-tech and immersive."

The immersive environment might not be a fertile hiring grounds – yet – but it does awaken a sense of awe and wonder in guests and hopefully encourages them to pursue further education in science and exploration. And job seekers beware: NASA has yet to comment on whether a visit to Exploration Space qualifies as a resume builder. **ipm**

The Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex captivates over 1.5 million guests annually and is one of Florida's top tourist attractions. BRC has teamed Lexington Design + Fabrication, NASA and Delaware North Parks and Resorts on the project. Highlights include:

Orion Crew Space Exploration Vehicle - NASA's newest spacecraft concept, with capacity for four to six astronauts. The model shows the unique way an astronaut will ride, sleep and do daily tasks in space in the future. BRC and Lexington created a full-sized 12' x 8' model that is semi-open, allowing guests to walk inside and view the cockpit through non-reflective glass.

The LER (Lunar Electric Rover) - The most advanced moon rover, equipped to fully house two explorers for 14 days straight and transport them over thousands of miles of rough terrain on 12 special Michelin "Tweels" (tire-wheels). BRC designed this 10' x 12' exhibit model that Lexington tech-designed, cast in fiberglass and finished with high gloss and reflective automotive paint.

The ATHLETE (All Terrain Hex-Legged Extra-Terrestrial Explorer) - Future space exploration will require entire bases to be transported across a planet's surface. The ATHLETE is a giant 15' x 6' robot that crawls like a crab with its six legs-on-wheels over any terrain imaginable, carrying up to 1,000 pounds on its back. BRC acquired a two-legged portion of a full-sized aluminum model from Jet Propulsion Labs. Lexington crafted an atmospheric graphic wall and a mirrored wall, then bolted the model to the walls in a way that gives the illusion of being a complete vehicle.

Interactive Game Kiosks -- Lexington tech-designed and fabricated the futuristic-style kiosks that BRC designed for two interactive space games where visitors have fun trying out their skills at spacecraft landing, docking and staging.

"Join Us" Kiosks - To help spread NASA's message that they're seeking a new generation of space explorers, these four kiosks allow guests take photos of themselves in superimposed NASA space suits, with option to instantly email the photos with messages to friends. BRC designed and Lexington installed the kiosks with webcams, two-way mirrors, LED lights and keyboards.