

Notes & Briefs

Space Tourism, Tsunami Hucksters, Artificial Friends, etc.

The incipient space tourism industry has seen a breathtaking flurry of activity in the wake of last October's X Prize victory by Burt Rutan's SpaceShipOne.

First came the news that billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson was working with Rutan to create several new spacecraft—modeled after SpaceShipOne, but larger—to serve as the fleet of Virgin Galactic, a company which will sell suborbital space trips for about \$200,000 each. The company reportedly has more than 7,000 people already signed up, and the first flights are planned for 2008.

Another X Prize competitor, AERA Corporation, also reportedly plans to launch a space tourism business. In March, the company signed a five-year agreement to use the U.S. Air Force's launch facilities and support services at Cape Canaveral. Although the company still hasn't successfully launched

anything into space, its website claims that next year it "will begin taking civilians into space with its reusable launch vehicle."

Other companies, including Pioneer Rocketplane and XCOR Aerospace, are planning flights in the next few years, with tickets priced around \$100,000. And Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com, has quietly let it be known that the small space company he founded a few years ago, Blue Origin, will be building the infrastructure on a site in western Texas for trips into space.

The chief uncertainty facing these private space pioneers relates not to the technical or financial feasibility of their plans, but to the question of government regulation. The new industry is hoping for a light regulatory touch, and indeed, draft regulations circulated by the Federal Aviation Administration in February are generally

hands-off. Nonetheless, wary of future regulation, several companies have banded together to form the Personal Spaceflight Federation, a trade association intended to promote their mutual interests and establish standards for the new industry.

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The Internet served as a source of news, comfort, and charity in the wake of last December's devastating tsunami. Dozens of videos and hundreds of photographs of the disaster made their way online; several websites helped families seek information on missing relatives; and some aid groups went online to raise millions of dollars for the victims.

Unfortunately, swindlers also exploited the tragedy to make money over the Internet. Fake tsunami-relief websites popped up, asking for money and supplies to be sent to anonymous post office boxes. Scammers auctioned off cheap objects on eBay, claiming the funds they raised would go to aid tsunami victims. And spammers got in on the act, too, sending forth huge numbers of e-mails—including some with computer viruses attached—posing as legitimate charity appeals.

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In a report published in February, Britain's government-run Medical Research Council called for improved long-term monitoring of children and mothers involved in assisted reproductive procedures, especially in vitro fertilization (IVF). The Council concluded that medical privacy regulations were preventing the kind of data

collection that would be required to establish the safety of IVF, and particularly the safety of new techniques for the biopsy and genetic testing of embryos. While IVF appears to be reasonably safe, the report argued, it is for now impossible to track the health of IVF children, and therefore impossible to study the long-term effects of the technology. The Council's key recommendation was for an exception to Britain's privacy laws that would allow for a national registry of children conceived by IVF, to assist with tracking health effects over time.

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In recent articles in these pages, *New Atlantis* senior editor Christine Rosen has discussed the phenomenon of "absent presence"—the tendency of cell phone users, iPod listeners, and others to disengage from the world around them. A tragic example of this tendency was reported just before Thanksgiving last year, when Kim Barry, a fellow at the NYU School of Law, stepped onto a one-way street while listening to music on her iPod. At the same time, a truck driver was backing into a parking spot while talking on his cell phone. Though onlookers attempted to warn both parties by shouting, neither heard. Barry was hit by the truck and killed.

In related news, a study recently conducted by University of Utah psychology professor David Strayer shows that drivers talking on cell phones have significantly slower reactions—so that a driver in his twenties when talking on a cell phone reacts as

slowly as a driver in his seventies. Cell phone distraction is reportedly the cause of 2,600 deaths and 330,000 injuries a year in the United States.

And according to several news reports, those who are bothered by cell phone rudeness are increasingly turning to jammers—devices that prevent making and receiving cell phone calls. Jammers are illegal in the United States, but are available online and through a domestic black market. According to ABC News, they are commonly used “in theaters in France and Japan, in churches in Mexico, and in the Indian parliament.” But even though they are banned in the U.S., there are strong indications that they are secretly being used by businesses, organizations, and individuals seeking respite from boorish behavior.

America’s largest nuclear security investigation since the end of the Cold War has ended on a strange note. Last summer, two disks containing secret data supposedly went missing from the Los Alamos National Laboratory. This news led to massive investigations and became an issue in last year’s presidential campaign when Senator Kerry used the story to denounce the Bush administration. While the investigations failed to turn up the missing disks, they did reveal a number of hitherto unknown security lapses at the lab—resulting in the firing of several employees, a months-long cessation of secret research, and a \$5.8 million fine for the University of California (which manages the lab).

Early this year, however, the Department of Energy revealed that it had learned that the missing disks never actually existed; the whole story was sparked by a mistake involving inventory barcodes.

An odd tale of our times: When a young Richmond, Virginia boy was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2003, he named it “Frank,” after Frankenstein, and his family raised money for his medical expenses by selling bumper stickers saying “Frank Must Die” on eBay. The family learned in February 2005 that chemotherapy and surgery had successfully killed the tumor; the boy is now apparently cancer-free.

In an interview with News.com in January, Bill Gates compared opponents of intellectual property to communists. “There are some new modern-day sort of communists who want to get rid of the [intellectual property] incentive for musicians and moviemakers and software makers,” he said. “They don’t think that those incentives should exist.”

Popular television shows are giving the public a costly misimpression about forensic science, according to real-life forensic experts. Speaking at a conference in Washington, several forensic scientists lamented the “CSI Effect,” named for the CBS drama *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and its two spin-offs. Because of those shows, relatives of crime victims respond in sur-

prise and frustration when test results take months to obtain or when investigators can't solve a case. Prosecutors have been requesting more tests than needed, which has created a massive backlog at forensic laboratories, while defense attorneys fear that juries will misinterpret scientific evidence. Scientists also fear that criminals will learn what not to do by picking up trade secrets from these shows. But not all the news is bad: enrollment in university forensic science courses is apparently shooting through the roof.

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One of the obvious unspoken truths of the computer age is that most people don't read the license agreements that come with new software—and with good reason: these licenses tend to be long, complex, and written in legalese. As a kind of experiment, a company called PC Pitstop recently wrote the following language into one of its license agreements: "A special consideration which may include financial compensation will be awarded to a limited number of authorize licensee [*sic*] to read this section of the license agreement and contact PC Pitstop" by e-mail. More than 3,000 people downloaded the software over the next four months before one person finally wrote in to ask about the "special consideration." He was paid \$1,000.

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Fidgeting can help reduce obesity. A recent study from the Mayo Clinic showed a significant difference between obese and lean people in the

amount of low-grade activity they perform, such as fidgeting and stretching. Fidgety individuals can burn an extra 350 calories a day—keeping off 10 to 30 pounds a year.

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Many have argued that the availability of hundreds of channels of international satellite television will contribute to cultural homogeneity or at least to cultural tolerance. Preliminary evidence of this theory's incorrectness can be found in a recent article in *Der Spiegel* discussing the "honor killings" of a half-dozen Muslim women in Berlin. According to the article, satellite TV makes it easier for religious Muslim families in Europe to keep to themselves and stick to their own ways. Many of these families, the article says, live in an "insular and ultra-religious world" that is "out of public view, often hidden in inner-city apartments where the most influential links to the outside world are satellite dishes that receive Turkish and Arabic television and the local mosque."

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Biosphere 2 has been put up for sale. The three-acre glass-enclosed structure was the scene of a notorious experiment to recreate Earth's linked ecosystems indoors in the early 1990s. Later, Columbia University managed the site for several years and used it for environmental research; more recently it has served as a tourist attraction. Now, though, the giant Arizona greenhouse's owners are hoping it will sell—and suggesting that the site

might become a health spa, a storm tracking facility, a winery, a biotech lab, or a working dude ranch.

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Several companies believe there is a growing market of lonely individuals who will appreciate the comforts of fake friendship. A company called Artificial Life, for instance, has developed virtual girlfriend technology in the form of "Vivienne," a three-dimensional figurine who can flirt, translate six languages, and, one assumes, never get a headache, all through your cell phone. The company plans to follow up with virtual boyfriends for women, and even same-sex partners for gay and lesbian consumers.

Meanwhile, Japanese toymakers have been producing robotic toys intended for the country's elderly. Mechanical dolls with names such as Yumel and Primopuel can talk, sleep, and offer companionship to a graying public whose flesh-and-blood children have left the nest. The dolls can be programmed to go to sleep and wake up at the same time as their owners, chant comforting mantras, and offer stilted answers to basic questions.

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University of Idaho professor David Atkinson spent eighteen years of his life developing an instrument that would measure the winds on Saturn's largest moon. It was one of several experiments launched aboard Huygens, a European probe, back in

1997. But when the probe reached its destination last January, someone at the European Space Agency forgot to turn on the device needed to receive the signals from Atkinson's experiment. Almost all of the experiment's data were lost.

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Several months ago, online retailer Amazon.com debuted an Internet search engine, A9.com, which combines Google's search results with Amazon's ability to search through the text of thousands of books. Now the search engine has added a novel Yellow Pages feature that brings up not just addresses and phone numbers, but also pictures of the building you searched for. It also allows you to take a virtual tour up and down the street you were searching for. So much for the era of "placelessness" the Internet was supposed to usher in.

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On January 31, 2005, the tiny rural town of Mink, Louisiana was wired for telephone service for the first time. Phone service to the remote fifteen-home community, underwritten by a tax on other Louisiana phone customers, was inaugurated by a phone call from the governor. Internet wags congratulated the town for "finally joining the nineteenth century." One Mink resident told the Associated Press that "it wasn't fifteen minutes after that phone was in before a telemarketer called me."