Kodu Update Lets Kids Explore Mars

August 7, 2012

SEATTLE (RPRN) 08/07/12 — On Nov. 26, 2011, the Mars rover Curiosity was launched from Cape Canaveral, a trip that will have taken more than eight months before Curiosity lands on the surface of the Red Planet.

With excitement peaking in the days before the landing, Microsoft and NASA are using the event as an opportunity to enable youngsters to learn computational skills and explore the Martian terrain by using Kodu: Mars Edition.

Developed in cooperation with NASA's Mars Public Engagement Program, led by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), and Microsoft Research's FUSE Labs, Kodu: Mars Edition

lets children create games for the PC or Xbox using a simple, visual programming language. The aim of the collaboration is to create compelling learning experiences that develop students' competency in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), along with 21st-century skills.

"With the landing of Curiosity in August," says Scott Fintel, a technical producer for Microsoft, "along with Kodu being worked on by the Games Division within Microsoft, we found a way to make compelling educational experiences for kids line up perfectly for the landing."

That landing, by the way, scheduled for 10:31 p.m. PDT on Aug. 5, can be viewed live on Xbox LIVE.

Kodu: Mars Edition, available for free download, is being unveiled during a Curiosity Landing educator conference in Pasadena, Calif., on Aug. 3 at JPL. The release enables school kids in the fifth through eighth grades to program a Mars rover, explore the planet, or play one of three professionally developed game levels.

The Martian adventure introduces new objects and new programming elements into the Kodu environment via the game levels and enables students to develop skills similar to those of real NASA rover drivers:

- **Search and Explore Mars:** Students will determine the most efficient set of commands to navigate a rover across terrain using scientific data.
- **Under the Rover's Hood:** Students will program how the rover will move and act autonomously, as well as run trials to evaluate and refine their programming.
- **Mars Mission Simulation:** Students will design a simulated Martian environment and program a rover to explore Mars autonomously.

These were precisely the sort of playful learning exercises envisioned when Kodu was being researched and developed by FUSE Labs.

As you might expect, it took teamwork by many people to align this Kodu update with the Curiosity landing. Of particular note are Pat Yongpradit, a computer-science teacher from Silver Spring, Md., who wrote the curriculum and worked with the JPL's curriculum advisers, and Stephen Coy of FUSE Labs, who was instrumental in getting the code up and running.

All that effort will be well worth it if students are encouraged to take greater interest in science, technology, engineering and math.

"We were able to combine everything that makes Kodu great—implement new characters and objects, create new actions for the rover, and build three fantastic, fun levels," Fintel says. "With the cooperation of educational experts both actively teaching and working with NASA, we created something that teachers can use in the classroom and effectively help kids learn about Mars, rovers, geology, and computer programming—critical skills necessary for continued exploration of our solar system and other important STEM careers. "

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http://blogs.technet.com/b/inside_microsoft_research/archive/2012/08/03/kodu-update-lets-kids-explore-mars.aspx

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