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HOUSTON CHRONICLE ARCHIVES

Paper: Houston Chronicle

Date: WED 07/21/1999

Section: A

Page: 27

Edition: 3 STAR

Planetarium flies you to the moon / Museum's show plays among the stars by using virtual reality

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Staff

Houstonians had an opportunity to travel into space on Tuesday without leaving the comforts of a reclining chair.

They were the first public audience for the Houston Museum of Natural Science's new planetarium show Destination: Moon, which was produced in celebration of the 30th anniversary of man's first lunar walk.

While the airing of planetarium shows is nothing new, this presentation was the first actually produced by a planetarium, said Carolyn Summer, the museum's director of astronomy.

The \$100,000 production, shown in the museum's Burke Baker Planetarium, was financed by the Johnson Space Center, the Lunar and Planetary Institute in Clear Lake and Rice University.

Using a \$300,000 computer system, Destination: Moon transports viewers through time, taking them back to the Big Bang creation of the universe and forward to time when cities dot the lunar landscape. Images of Apollo astronauts working and playing on the moon are projected in such a lifelike way that the audience feels as if they are participating in the activities themselves, museum officials say.

"It is virtual reality. The computers allow the distribution of the information in the same way the eye would see it," Summer said.

The only other planetarium in the country that sports a dome like Houston's is in Chicago, Summer said.

"It was built in this way to turn the sky into a digital experience," she said of the Burke Baker dome.

Will Reynolds, president of Lunar Cities Foundation, was invited as a special guest to the premiere of Destination: Moon. Reynolds, a space and lunar activist, founded Lunar Cities to promote settlement of the moon.

He said that it should be possible to go back to the moon and make it both a livable and a profitable place.

"The last time we went to the moon was in 1972, and since then we have abandoned it," Reynolds said.

He said that the moon should be opened to both public and private sectors as part of a broad and

diverse initiative.

Reynolds said that the efforts that would be made to settle the moon will also improve our way of living on Earth.

The possibility of living on the moon will bring legal and ethical questions that the society will have to answer, he said.

"We need to establish property rights and pose questions like who will own the moon?" he said.

Reynolds said that this idea goes against the tendency of United Nation's treaties that consider the moon and all celestial bodies to be owned by mankind.

"The United States did not sign that treaty. We will need new treaties," Reynolds said.

Destination: Moon is the first in a line of films the museum plans to produce, Summer said. The next production, Powers of Time, will open in January.

"It will include images from NASA and will show the Earth today, yesterday and tomorrow," she said.

Next summer a production called The Ice World will premiere.

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