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MAHDI: Super Mars-io

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It's usually three or four in the morning when the mundane becomes profound and the profound becomes mind-blowing. While using my time mindlessly clicking through cyberspace thanks to Stumbleupon.com last Thursday, I happened upon a quote that not only made me stumble, but trip up on my own feet and keel over onto the insignificance of...well, being online at three in the morning.

“Look again at that dot...that's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines...every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar', every 'supreme leader,' every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.”

Carl Sagan's words catapulted me into an existential black hole. I stared at my thermos of lukewarm coffee and the swarm of words stared beadily up at me from my international relations textbook. Humanity's insatiable appetite for new intellectual conquest began with worldly exploration and has now graduated to exploration of our galaxy. James Bond had it right: the world is not enough. Well, this world at the very least. But what, if anything, lies beyond our beloved speck of dust on the vast couch of the universe?

A description of the Mars 500 mission could be the opening line of a terrible joke. A crew of six men from France, China, Russia and an Italian-Colombian hybrid walk into a simulation of a voyage to Mars, located in Moscow, Russia. The facility, called the Institute of Biomedical Problems, houses the contraption resembling a jungle gym that will facilitate the experiment. I will leave you to devise a punch line, but a realization that elicits less amusement is that this hypothetical space odyssey is costing 15 million dollars. In a more optimistic vein, the endeavor is being administered by an unconventional trio, namely the European Space Agency, Russia and China. Unable to collaborate quite as closely on issues concerning our home planet, it seems appropriate that this unlikely combination succeeds in matters of outer space.

257 days in, and the astronauts have finally “landed” on Mars. The Daily Mail articulated the premise of the project perfectly – while this simulation replicates a successful landing on Mars, there is a whole team standing right outside the door in case anything goes awry. Nevertheless, the meaningful contribution this study will have on space exploration is not in the destination, but rather in the journey. What would 257 days in confinement do both psychologically and physically to anyone willing to spend a little under a year of his or her life in a floating capsule? Bizarrely, the volunteers have turned to video games such as Guitar Hero and Nintendo Wii for amusement and mobility. Intuition would tell you that a hypothetical absence of Earth's gravitational pull would infer an absence of effective advertising space, but the gaming market has certainly exceeded itself. The experiment being primarily behavioral exudes “Big Brother” – for \$97,000 each you are left with a weekly shower and constant scrutiny as you angrily stab guitar buttons to aged Rolling Stones hits and yell flabbergasted at the Wii Fit as it insists that you have no concept of human balance. Clearly an exercise in mental stimulation for six men in their 30s. Particularly pathetic when travelling into the deep abyss of childhood, one reminisces of a time when Super Mario was the jewel of Nintendo's crown. At least that was a time of gaming stimulation and my first encounter with primitive conflict resolution and the importance of chasing a star blazing in vibrant technicolor. But I digress. Where planetary exploration is concerned, there seem to be many monetary and equipment-related barriers before we can physically have men on Mars. Next step, women on Venus, perhaps? I

dread to imagine what would happen if a myriad of women volunteers were trapped in a spacecraft simulation for 520 days, designated one shower a week.

Forgoing personal hygiene and enduring hundreds of days in confinement seem small prices to pay for a more informed approach to space discovery. It's astounding to realize that just decades ago, the concept of any sort of journey beyond our stratosphere was deemed fantastical. The images of humanity saddling the moon, or soaring amidst the Milky Way, were reserved for the silver screen. Now more than ever, this experiment is an example not only of the imminent synthesis of space and human curiosity, but how the economic and political differences of nations recede to unite our collective imagination as it meanders uninhibited into the unknown.

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