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Emma Rekate

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A Billion-Dollar Flight Ticket

The Race for Recreational Space Exploration and Experiences

Written by Emma Rekate

Illustrated by Susan Robinson-Cloete

It seems to be a new trend among the richest people in the world to take flight and become an astronaut. There are no prerequisites to launch into space, except for the fact that you need to have at least 30 million dollars lying around, waiting to be spent. One may think that this steep price point will provide the highest luxury experience of flight and may even take you to the moon. But no. For 30 million dollars, you get to experience weightlessness in space for a whopping four minutes, with a total flight time being about an hour and a half.

Jeffery Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk are the three billionaires at the center of the new recreational space travel movement. Each one has started their own companies for space technology, however, Branson's Virgin Galactic and Bezos' Blue Origin are much more directed towards tourism and exploration for everyday, but quite wealthy, people. On the other hand, Musk's SpaceX often collaborates with NASA on scientific projects.

While people all over the world share a similar childhood dream of becoming an astronaut and floating through space, most conclude early on that it probably will not happen. The new space race for billionaires is making that dream a reality for a very, very small percentage. The exclusivity due to its sky-high prices has sparked much debate amongst everyday people, scientists, humanitarians, and even politicians. Much of the discussion around this topic is grounded in how large sums of money, such as the amounts being spent by billionaires to go into space recreationally, should be redistributed and funneled into funding for more pressing issues like education, poverty, homelessness, hunger, or climate change.

This push to get everyday people into space is just one of the major shifts in the big-picture goals of space exploration. According to NASA, the main objectives of scientific exploration are to "[search] for signs of life, understand the structure, origin, and evolution of the solar system, [and] understand the future of our planet." However, recent developments indicate that those goals may be changing — whether that is a positive or negative occurrence is up to you to decide. The shift in objectives has been focused heavily on danger prevention, dealing with consequences of past actions, and recreational and monetary benefits.

In terms of prevention, it seems that of late, a major threat in the next century could be the impact of asteroids hurtling toward the Earth. But fear not, NASA has measures built in place. On November 24th, 2021 SpaceX launched NASA's Double Asteroid Redirection Test Missile (DART). The purpose of this unprecedented experiment is to test the effectiveness of DART in changing the path of an asteroid by crashing into it. This mission is a prime example of the new direction that is being taken. While exploration and advancing technology continue to be prominent,

scientists have realized there is work to be done in keeping our very own planet Earth safe.

In addition to projects such as DART, scientists and astronomers are now having to deal with the consequences of human actions. It is a well-known fact that there is lots of debris currently floating around in our solar system, and much of it is due to humans. The International Space Station (ISS) is always in a position of high alert. Unlike a rocket, it stays in orbit, with the assistance of some thrusters, making it quite difficult to quickly move out of the way of debris paths. In early November 2021, the ISS had a close encounter with debris from a 2007 Chinese anti-satellite missile test. The satellite had become decommissioned in 2002 but remained in orbit until it was blown up, creating over 3,000 pieces of space debris of varying sizes. Luckily, the route of certain debris was seen by the ISS' radar and proper adjustments were made, minimizing the threat. Though there was no harm done to the ISS, they will not always be so lucky. For instance, in May 2021, a piece of fast-moving space debris hit the ISS and punctured a hole in one of the robotic arms. Only slight damage was done, however, both of these events should be taken as warnings to people that human

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actions in space can lead to serious consequences.

Even though it would be amazing to fulfill our childhood dreams of becoming an astronaut and get the opportunity to go to space, what is its cost? In the coming months, Michael Strahan, a former National Football League (NFL) player and the co-host of Good Morning America, was selected as one of the next passengers on a Blue Origin flight. Who knows who will be the next lucky chosen ones.

The competition for attention between recreational space travel news, novel information about our expanding universe, and consequences of human activity in space will become increasingly higher stakes. It is much more interesting to hear about billionaires or famous people jetting into orbit than to worry about when the next piece of debris might hit Earth. As technology advances and the new recreational space travel race continues, major issues such as threatening debris or asteroids on a collision-path with Earth will continue to arise and make the world question: what should our money, resources, and efforts be directed towards? ●●●

