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WVU, Datacaster to produce interactive maps

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West Virginia University's GeoVirtual Lab and technology business Datacaster Corp. are hoping to meld research into a product for real-world consumption.

It's called reality computing, and it is a high-tech system similar to Google Earth maps, but better, said David Levine, a West Virginia entrepreneur and chief executive officer of Datacaster.

"Things will be developing on this type of platform," he said Tuesday. "And we want to be that platform ... It has definitely got legs."

Levine, along with GeoVirtual Lab, announced the partnership during the 2007 WVU Industries of the Future-West Virginia Day at the state Capitol.

The system takes multiple lists of data and compiles them to produce a three-dimensional, interactive, highly detailed map. The maps show what terrain looks like at particular locations, but also nearby businesses and even the nonvisible, such as sewer systems and soil properties.

The technology is designed for the nonexpert, said Vic Baker, co-director of the GeoVirtual laboratory, which conducted the research for the product.

Along with the detail, users will be able to access the information from virtually anywhere, thanks to wireless devices, Levine said.

A commercial version of the high-tech system will be available in October 2007. Datacaster will have two offices, one for product development and engineering at the WVU Business Incubator in Morgantown and another in Martinsburg to handle sales and business development.

The target industries include utilities, natural resources, municipalities and agriculture, Levine said.

WVU's GeoVirtual lab's efforts are funded heavily through grants from the National Science Foundation and the West Virginia Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research's (WVEPSCoR) Research Challenge Fund. WVU has received about \$1.6 million over five years for the GeoVirtual Lab project, said WVEPSCoR director Paul Hill.

"This partnership is the fifth new startup company to result from research conducted through our Research Challenge Fund grants," Hill said in a news release.

"One of the goals in the Vision 2015 strategic plan is to advance the research and innovation developed with grant funds to full commercialization - just as WVU and Datacaster are doing."

Bruce Sparks, director of technology transfer at WVU, facilitated this meeting of the business and research academic minds.

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"I could see what was going to commercialize the research, but I needed to find someone to speak their [the researchers'] language," Sparks said. "I needed someone to take it out of the researchers' hands and take it to the business side, someone to create that link."

Levine, who has developed high-tech products before, seemed like the perfect business complement to the GeoVirtual Lab's research, he said.

Levine's goal this year is to fully launch the product and make it ready for businesses. The next five years will include expansion to the consumer market, allowing people to find out virtually everything about their surrounding area, including restaurants, shops or possible love matches.

"People are going to use these capabilities to come together in new ways," he said. "It will be a social network, allowing you to realize how we are all connected."

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