

Space 'selfies': Where no cellphone photo has gone before

July 18 2013, by Colin Campbell, The Seattle Times

For some people, Instagram just doesn't cut it.

The photo-sharing social network is notorious for "selfies" - photos taken of oneself, usually with a [cellphone](#) at arm's length, often in front of well-known backgrounds like the Eiffel Tower.

Nearly 16,000 people have paid \$29 apiece for a more celestial shot - a "Space Selfie," in which an orbiting [space telescope](#) will photograph its own external screen displaying the buyer's picture, with the Earth in the background.

The photos are part of a \$1.5 million Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign by Planetary Resources, a Bellevue, Wash., company backed by a group of billionaires to pursue [space exploration](#) and asteroid mining for precious minerals.

The campaign was to end in June but has been extended through Friday. Contributions at higher levels bring other rewards:

For \$250, participants can aim the telescope themselves for five minutes and take pictures of [celestial objects](#) they choose, and the top 10 benefactors will have their names and a message etched on the company's [spacecraft](#).

The satellite telescope, called the ARKYD 100 and slated to launch in 2015, will serve as a sort of "robotic prospector," for future mining

missions, said Planetary Resources President Chris Lewicki, a former NASA flight director.

Lewicki said the monthlong campaign, one of Kickstarter's biggest, came out of public excitement in the company's mission to explore [space](#) and harness untapped resources.

"We've had so many people express interest in becoming more involved," he said. "We didn't know quite what we could do with it."

Eventually, he said, the idea for the campaign emerged as a way to marry the company's goal of publicly sharing its research and the public's desire to get involved.

"It's a little more low-brow than maybe people are used to for space exploration," Lewicki acknowledged. But the idea of a "selfie" was easy to grasp and made that involvement interactive, he said.

While \$1.5 million isn't much in the context of space travel, Lewicki said, the campaign has raised awareness and interest in Planetary Resources' plans down the road.

The ARKYD 100 will collect data for about three years until fast-developing technology renders the telescope outdated, Lewicki said. Later models of the ARKYD will be designed to do the actual mining of space resources.

Contributor Libby Norcross calls herself a "space fanatic" and said it was a "no-brainer" to get involved with the ARKYD Kickstarter.

Norcross works at the Challenger Learning Center at Heartland Community College in Normal, Ill. As a flight director, she takes kids on simulated field trips to space.

She said selling "Space Selfies" was "a genius way to hook people in," though she supported it more for the mission's educational value.

"It's a fantastic project," she said. "When this project came along, I thought, 'My gosh, a publicly accessible space telescope - I think that's so cool.' "

"Who doesn't want a picture of themselves in space?" she said. "Maybe I'll put it on the signature of my email."

Kevin Sexton, a video producer in Ontario, Canada, said getting a "Space Selfie" will be a "fun add-on," but donating to the campaign was about more than just the picture.

"What's important is that space science, and science in general, continues to find ways to get public support," he wrote in an email. "Our capacity to explore and understand our world and beyond is ultimately humanity's greatest endeavor."

Planetary Resources, which was started in 2009, was founded by entrepreneur and aerospace engineer Eric Anderson and Peter Diamandis, chairman and chief executive of the X Prize Foundation.

It boasts billionaire financiers like Hollywood director James Cameron, Google Chief Executive Larry Page and Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt, and recent investor and Virgin Group Chairman Richard Branson.

It's one of the many recent startups involved in what Lewicki calls a "second space race," among private firms instead of governments, as technology gets better and less expensive.

Other private space programs include SpaceX, a Hawthorne,

Calif.-based space-travel company founded by former PayPal entrepreneur Elon Musk; Stratolaunch Systems, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's air-launching project; and Blue Origin, founded by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and intended to make space travel more widely affordable for the public.

Planetary Resources currently employs 40, but Lewicki expects that will grow soon.

And as Diamandis notes in a video on the company's website, technological advances mean "small teams are now able to do what only governments and large corporations were able to do before."

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