

Startup Enters the Balfour(th) Dimension

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ROBERT BALFOUR takes spreadsheets and databases, the kind of stuff that mostly makes our eyes glaze over, and uses a computer to turn them into delightfully Lilliputian renderings of the real world- renderings that, he says, can bring you the future.

"We're focused on the fourth dimension," says Balfour, one of the owners of Balfour Technologies LLC, a startup firm at Briarcliffe College's technology incubator in Bethpage that's developing software that allows users to better visualize the dynamic relationships of their data over time.

Generally, Balfour says, it's difficult to visualize how things might change in a specific time period by paging through thick folders loaded down with numbers. Which is why his startup is developing technology that combines a strong graphic element with computer modeling programs that allow the picture you see on the computer to change over time in a very real-looking way, depending on variables.

"We're four-D developers and four-D programers," Balfour said.

During a recent visit to the startup, Balfour zoomed in on a computerized simulation of the area surrounding Boston's Logan Airport that was built using satellite photos, on-ground photos and some computer graphics.

By moving a bar on the screen, he showed the program mapping out how a 10-year project to move Boston's central artery underground might affect the airport's construction and modernization program. It showed the construction phases of the project based on such variables as the flow of traffic(including cars, people and planes) and environmental effects such as noise.

The software, he said, allows the airport to explore any number of alternative construction scenarios.

Modeling software is common in planning out such projects, but the use of satellite and other photographs in creating the simulation is something new, said Richard Balfour, the company president and twin brother of Robert, who develops the software.

"It's not an animation," he says. "That's the old way of doing business."

The brothers have been developing real-time simulations for the past two decades.

They began their careers at Grumman Corp., developing a \$50- million state-of-the-art real-time simulation for the aerospace industry that included fighter-type simulated missions for the F-14, which was used to perform real-time analysis and demonstrations.

Six years ago, they left the defense world and took the technology to the transportation industry, working closely with Dowling College's National Aviation and Transportation Center to design and develop a high-end Intermodal Transportation Simulation System, under a multimillion-dollar

federal grant.

Over the past two years, Balfour Technologies has been working on bringing the simulation capability software to people's desktops by using an environment that can operate on any operating system platform.

Industry experts say Balfour is stepping into a fairly well-developed industry. But they say that anything that would make the software more precise would be helpful. The real issue, suggested Campari Knoepffler, a Manhattan-based architect who works with 3-D models, is, "How much would it cost? It's all a matter of economics," he said.

Balfour says his product is unique because it is "highly interactive and responsive." To create the models, he said, the company uses open-graphics language, widely used in the gaming industry.

Now that the software is completed, the company is looking for venture capital to aggressively market its product, targeting such industries as warehousing, management, architecture and engineering, construction, real estate-even history.

Imagine, says Robert Balfour, how the software could map out how New York City evolved from a little fort to today based on historical data and photos. "I like history," he said, adding that such a project is "something I'd like to do for a museum some day."

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