

Former NASA worker: Space exploration is 'destiny'

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As a former NASA flight dynamics officer, Roger Balettie knows it takes only one thing to go wrong during flight re-entry to prompt a disaster like Saturday's tragedy involving the space shuttle Columbia.

Balettie, now a video game producer at Austin-based Inevitable Entertainment Inc., says NASA takes such investigations seriously and will assemble a "fault tree" that examines every possible scenario with the Columbia disaster, not just the most likely scenarios.

"These investigations will be thorough and will take a lot longer than people want it to take," Balettie says.

The disintegration of Columbia over Texas and Louisiana killed all seven astronauts aboard and has prompted investigations by NASA into what went wrong.

Balettie spent 12 years at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, where his responsibilities included evaluation of shuttle flight performance and leadership of the flight dynamics team to compute and supervise trajectory flight planning during shuttle missions and simulations. He was the lead flight dynamics officer for 10 of the 26 shuttle missions he supported.

He started working at the Johnson Space Center three weeks and two days before the Challenger disaster in 1986. After that disaster, everyone was quick to point fingers and jump to conclusions, he says, but NASA continued with its investigation and will do so in the Columbia case.

"The period that followed left an indelible mark on my life as I was able to be a part of the recovery as the entire NASA community came together as a family, solved the problems and returned to space," Balettie writes on his Web site, (<http://space.balettie.com>).

Before joining Inevitable Entertainment, he was a project manager for the University of Texas' Applied Research Laboratories. Early in his career, he developed mission control support software for flight dynamics officers.

These days, Balettie also is vice president and director of online operations for a space advocacy group called the Society of Performers, Artists, Athletes and Celebrities for Space Exploration, or SPAACSE. The group promotes space exploration through celebrity endorsements and public education.

"The awe and wonder of seeing a shuttle launch, watching old Apollo footage or just staring up at the night sky prove to me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that space exploration will be man's last, best destiny," he writes on his Web site.

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