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Fun And Learning With Space

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HARRISONBURG - David Slykhuis beams when describing how half a Pringles can is the perfect fit for building a satellite dish. The cylindrical chip containers are handy tools for a project in Slykhuis' transmedia book that weaves an upcoming NASA mission into the storyline.

But students aren't popping the tops just for fun.

"It needs not just to be cool, it needs to teach science, too," said Slykhuis, a professor of science education at James Madison University. "We're sneaking in the science."

Eighth-grade science students in Harrisonburg City Schools are using the book - which includes text along with quick-response codes that launch websites and videos - as part of their course curriculum.

Troy Cline, senior technology integration specialist at NASA, visited classes at Thomas Harrison Middle School on Monday to speak with students about the agency's magnetospheric multiscale mission. NASA will launch four spacecraft in 2014 to study the physics of magnetic reconnection.

"After the mission launches, you mostly focus on the science of what the data is," Cline said. "Now is our window of opportunity to focus on the engineering and technology."

On Monday, students were tasked with determining the best configuration of solar panels to provide the needed energy. They created and tested simple geometric objects with a 3-D printer.

Slykhuis and Cline met at a technology conference about a

year ago. That's where the idea hatched to create a cross-platform storytelling book that incorporated a NASA mission.

Students at Skyline Middle School worked through the book earlier this year.

"I call that the alpha test and this is the beta test," Slykhuis said. "We're seeing if this book really works."

The next step is a NASA review, Slykhuis said. If the book gets the agency's stamp of approval, it would become available on NASA's website, where teachers nationwide could pick up the lessons.

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