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Playing in a Giant Sandbox

At Dig This, grown-ups pay to bulldoze, dig and move rocks

By STEPHANIE SIMON

August 2, 2008; Page W4

Steamboat Springs, Colo.

A few years ago, Ed Mumm bought a piece of property in this stunning ski town and rented an excavator to clear the land.

Scooping dirt by the ton, tossing boulders like pebbles, Mr. Mumm had an epiphany: This was fun. And then another: People might pay to do this.

Three years and \$500,000 later, Mr. Mumm, 42 years old, spends his days draping orange vests around wealthy thrill-seekers at Dig This, which he bills as the first, and only, heavy-equipment playground in the U.S.

Operating an excavator typically seen at construction sites, WSJ's Stephanie Simon scoops dirt and tosses boulders. She reports on how people are paying Dig This, a Steamboat Springs, Colo., company, hundreds of dollars to do just that.

On a 10-acre plot of dirt, framed by distant mountains, Mr. Mumm guides his guests to a fleet of Tonka toys come to life -- a skid-steer loader, a 115-horsepower excavator and Caterpillar's D5G bulldozer, 10 tons of glinting muscle.

"I wanted to create a place where people could come and play -- relive their sandbox days, but for real," Mr. Mumm says.

Play time isn't cheap: Hoisting, digging and razing costs \$280 to \$650, depending on the machine and the number of hours spent aboard. Even at those prices, Mr. Mumm doesn't expect to turn a profit for at least another year -- he's had about 90 paying customers so far. But he feels confident that he's tapped into an underserved corner of the American psyche.

His customers have ranged from corporate chief executives to an 84-year-old woman. Many find it tough to say why it's such a thrill to play with rocks. "I'm giggly when you ask about it," says Hank Edwards, a recent customer.

Mr. Edwards's wife, D.J., bought him a day at Dig This for his 60th birthday. ("Because he was older than dirt," she says.) Mr. Edwards was no stranger to construction sites; he used to make his living building houses. Still, it was a shock to experience the power and size of the Caterpillar 315CL Hydraulic Excavator.

[Ed Mumm, right, and client Jamie Jenny.]
Matt Slaby for The Wall Street Journal
Ed Mumm, right, and client Jamie Jenny.

"I'd never driven anything like that," he says. "It's just off the scale."

Dig This instructors open with a safety briefing and then guide customers through a series of exercises designed to stretch different skills.

Excavator operators dig a ditch, then pick up rocks the size of prize-winning pumpkins. Bulldozer drivers push a 1-ton boulder -- as big as a small buffalo -- around an obstacle course of traffic cones. They also build an 8-foot ramp, drive up it and teeter on the top for a breathless moment before crashing down the other side. "If you like it, you can do it again," Mr. Mumm says.

Mr. Mumm says that he stuck to machines that run on tracks -- not wheels -- because their top speed is lumbering. "We can outrun them," he says. Even so, instructors stand way off to the side, offering advice via a two-way radio tucked into each customer's fluorescent safety vest. The six instructors come from a variety of backgrounds; some worked in construction and others taught snowboarding.

They say most drivers get their bearings within the first 20 minutes. It's not easy. The joystick controls require a gentle touch and infinite patience. A degree in geometry wouldn't hurt, either. The dozer blade, for instance, can be moved up or down, left or right -- but also tilted any number of ways. To dig a smooth trench or nudge a jagged boulder across rough terrain, you have to calculate the best angle and keep maneuvering the blade just so.

[A toy excavator is used as an instructional tool at Dig This]
Matt Slaby for The Wall Street Journal
A toy excavator is used as an instructional tool at Dig This

"You're humbled by it," Mr. Edwards says. "You think, 'Oh, pah, digging a trench -- that's pretty simple.' It's not."

Mr. Mumm also sets up competitive team-building exercises for corporate clients. The Marquette Group, an ad agency in Peoria, Ill., recently sent 32 managers through the course in hard hats to help foster team spirit. "Everyone got into this thing full-choke," says Chris Cummings, the CEO.

Mr. Mumm advertises the Dig This experience as "empowering," with a side order of adrenaline.

It took him awhile to get others to buy into that vision. After years of running a fence-building business and raising reindeer on the side, Mr. Mumm, originally from New

Zealand, was in a position to make a substantial investment in machinery. But insurers were leery of the project. So many turned him down that Mr. Mumm was on the verge of giving up. Finally he found a company willing to sell him general liability insurance for participants, plus insurance on the equipment, for \$15,000 a year. No one has been injured since he opened last fall.

As business expands, Mr. Mumm hopes to sell franchises. He'd also like to add more equipment -- a dump truck, maybe. He's even dreaming about creating a save-your-marriage course, with a licensed counselor coaching couples through exercises that require good communication.

For now, he's sticking to teaching the Walter Mittys of the world how to dig trenches.

When I tried Dig This for myself, I found climbing into the excavator a rush, just as Mr. Mumm promised -- though for me, it was a rush of panic. The 315CL is, in a word, huge. It weighs nearly 37,000 pounds. And the claw looks enormous as it swings back and forth, metal teeth bared like a hungry T-Rex.

It's noisy in the cab: There was the thrum of the engine, the thunk of the claw, the thump-thump-bang of the hydraulics bouncing as I maneuvered the joystick controls with more frenzy than finesse. It's frustrating, too; time and again, I would proudly scoop an enormous load of dirt, only to have the claw get stuck under the weight.

I couldn't help but notice that the guy next to me dug a perfect trench, 8 feet long, smooth and even. I made a couple of gashes in the soil.

[A client works the excavator]
Matt Slaby for The Wall Street Journal
A client works the excavator

But then we moved to the rock challenge, and by some quirk of hand-eye coordination, I could do this: I could clasp a rock in the claw, swivel the excavator and dump it right where I wanted it to go (or, close enough). It was so much fun, I found myself wishing for a bigger pile of rocks.

As I climbed out of the cab, feeling flush with accomplishment, I thought of how I'd describe the morning to my kids. My gash in the soil, I decided, was rightly more of a canyon. And the rocks? In retrospect, more like boulders.

Jim Gill, a Caterpillar dealer in Hayden, Colo., who sold Mr. Mumm some of his machines, had warned me this might happen. Initially skeptical of Mr. Mumm's idea, he caught some of Mr. Mumm's enthusiasm for the project when he began to envision how a couple of hours moving dirt might seem to "some guy in a three-piece suit working 60 floors above Wall Street." While it would be a thrill to make noise and kick up dust, Mr. Gill figured the real fun would be in retelling the adventure around the water cooler.

"What started out as a 30,000-pound tractor," he predicted, "will become 100,000 pounds on the flight back to New York."

Write to Stephanie Simon at stephanie.simon@wsj.com