NETWATCH

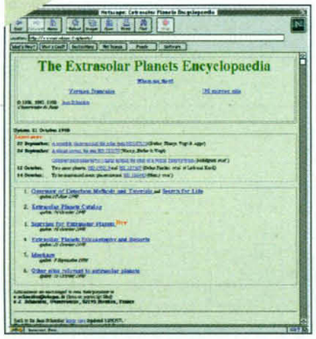
edited by JOCELYN KAISER

SITE VISIT

Atlas of Other Worlds ...

It was headline news in 1995 when astronomers spied the first planet orbiting another star like our sun. But now that the number of confirmed "extrasolar planets" has climbed to 12, each new discovery shines less brightly. Indeed, it's tough to keep tabs on the growing roster of distant bodies—unless one consults the Extrasolar Planets Encyclopaedia, a site maintained by the Paris Observatory.

wwwusr.obspm.fr/planets



This no-nonsense site offers thorough statistics, including locations, likely sizes, and shapes of orbits, for planets and failed stars called brown dwarfs, most of which reveal themselves via slight gravitational tugs on their parent stars. Astronomers will find useful links to the Web sites of all planetary search programs, as well as a bibliography of more than 750 papers related to distant worlds. Visitors can also download tutorials on how astronomers pursue their quarry and the physical properties that may make other planets habitable. The goal is to "create a cooperative spirit among researchers" in this field, says astronomer Jean Schneider, the site's coordinator.

"A lot of people get information about emerging planet discoveries from this site," says planet hunter Steven Vogt of the University of California, Santa Cruz. But he cautions that some of the site's advertised "planets" aren't peer reviewed, and a few have vanished under scientific scrutiny.

NET NEWS

... and a Search for Alien Life

A new grassroots search for E.T. is about to begin. The project, SETI@home, will harness the spare cycles of personal computers (PCs) via the Internet to parse radio signals for signs of intelligence beyond Earth.

SETI@home, an offshoot of SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), will give the public a screen-saver that will collect and analyze small chunks of data from Serendip IV, a piggyback instrument on the Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico (*Science*, 9 August 1996, p. 743). The PCs together will function as a supercomputer to search for signs of intelligent life in "much weaker signals and a variety of patterns that we can't survey now" with other SETI computers, says University of California, Berkeley, astronomer Dan Werthimer, chief scientist for SETI@home. Although 100,000 volunteers have already signed up since the project was announced in 1996, organizers only this year rounded up enough support to get started: Sun Microsystems donated computers, and $50,000 each came from the nonprofit The Planetary Society and from Paramount Pictures, which hopes the search will boost its new flick, *Star Trek: Insurrection*, opening in December.

Jonathan Frakes, the movie's director and co-star, will appear on CNN in late November and switch on the SETI@home data recorder; next April, everyone will get the software. (Sign up at setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu.) But for the project to succeed, it needs to run 2 years. "We need more money," Werthimer says.

HOT PICKS

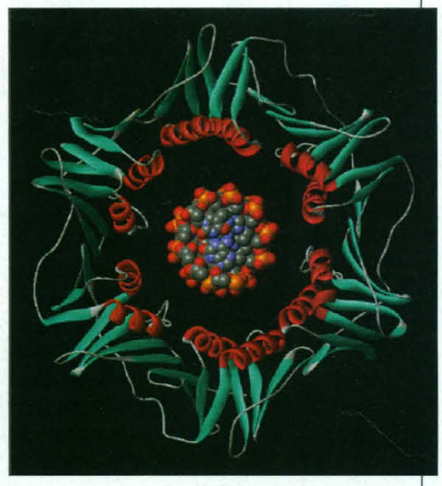
Budding filmmakers. It must feel a bit like Hollywood these days at the online *Molecular Biology of the Cell*, which has been flooded with submissions since the journal started posting peer-reviewed videos this summer. Check out Golgi membranes moving along microtubules this month, or go back to July's issue for video essays on mitosis and other topics. www.molbiolcell.org

Stringing them along. Don't know your shoestring from a heterotic one? This zany Caltech site tries to unknot string theory for the layperson. Listen to audio of gurus explaining this mother of all physics theories, or page through a humorous tutorial. quark.caltech.edu/stringtheory

Reef madness. Take a cruise into the past at Jurassic Reef Park, an image-packed site offering an overview of ancient and modern reefs—how they're created and what they indicate about global climate change. www.uni-stuttgart.de/UNIuser/igps/edu/JRP

IMAGES

Biomolecules Meet the Web



Remember the hours you spent as a student hunched over textbooks, getting familiar with the nooks and crannies that determine a protein's function? These days, students can bring biomolecules to life on the Web. Take the Online Macromolecular Museum,* which features tutorials about molecules like the "sliding DNA clamp" shown here (a subunit of DNA polymerase encircling double-helical DNA). As you click through the tutorials, colors on animated molecules switch on and off, highlighting key structures and amino acids, and links take you to minilessons on ligands like the AIDS drug AZT. You can also grab and turn the molecules or zoom in, which "really adds a kind of investigatory component," says biologist David Marcey at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, whose students helped write the tutorials with Chime, a free software program. Get to more Chime tutorials through an outside link called World Index.

* www.kenyon.edu/depts/bmb/chime/gallery.htm

Science ONLINE

Science's Next Wave this week looks at the twilight zone of contract research in British science—the period between graduation and a permanent job when many scientists are hired on a series of short-term contracts. Employers, unions, career advisers, and young researchers provide a guide to surviving the postdoc treadmill. www.nextwave.org

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