



DANIEL GUIDERA

Seven Best of the Web

Who are behind some of the best personal astronomy-oriented pages on the Internet? | **By Stuart J. Goldman**

IT'S VERY EASY TO MAKE A WEB PAGE. Your Internet service provider probably has ready-made templates for you to fill out that will create an instant page, or instructions on how to put basic information about yourself — or your pet — on the World Wide Web. While this level of Internet publishing is simple, to go beyond and create a good page, one that people will really want to look at, takes time and effort. And keeping the page interesting takes even more effort.

Commercial Internet sites look impressive because they generally have a team of people working on them — who, of course, are being paid to do so. They update pages, add features, and attempt to keep you enthralled enough to return frequently. There are a few indi-

vidual Webmasters who have produced Internet resources nearly on the same level as commercial ventures. Their home-grown pages may not match the dazzle of professionally designed sites, but they have nevertheless remained fresh, sometimes on a weekly basis, for upward of five years.

The following pages highlight seven such individuals. Each decided to make a stand on the Internet as a volunteer effort. I have no doubt that these sites will still be around in another five years.

Cosmic Voyage

A relative newcomer to creating a Web page, William D. Ferris explains that his site — founded in December 1999 — was intended to display his sketches of

the planets and deep-sky objects. Since then he's developed a well-designed resource (thanks in part to the book *HTML for Dummies*) for amateur astronomers of all levels. He offers advice on optics, seasonal observing guides, astrophotography hints, and a glossary. "I started out to prepare a simple meal," he explains, "and before I knew it, there was this smorgasbord."

Fine points of development: "The biggest challenge was settling on an organizational structure for the site. I wanted to make Cosmic Voyage rich in content, easy to navigate, fast to load, visually interesting, and relatively easy to update. I think I've succeeded, for the most part." His wife bought him the cosmic-voyage.net domain for his birthday.

Cosmic Voyage: www.cosmic-voyage.net



DESIGNER: William D. Ferris
AGE: 39
OCCUPATION: Television producer/director
LOCATION: Flagstaff, Arizona



Future plans: A telescope buyer's guide for parents looking for the right telescope for a child; a searchable database for deep-sky objects.

Interesting feedback: "There was a person who sent me several e-mails asking for information about UFOs. Cosmic Voyage didn't prove very useful in that endeavor."

Favorite astronomical Web site: Students for the Exploration and Development of Space (www.seds.org).

Favorite nonastronomical site: CBS Sportsline.com. "I cannot get enough good sports journalism."

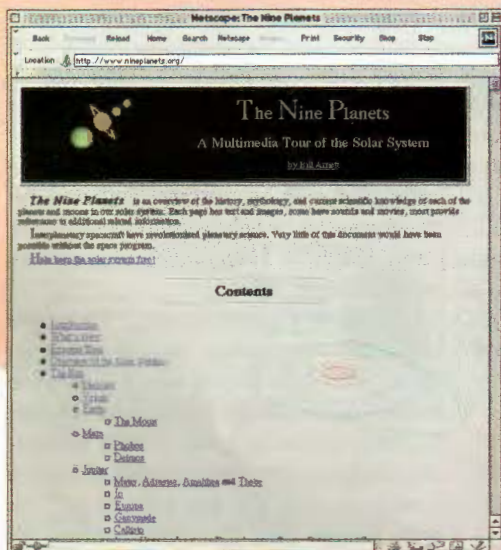
The Nine Planets

The venerable Nine Planets site has been a revered Internet reference since 1994, often found on various "best of" compi-

lations. William A. Arnett began the project as an experiment to teach himself HTML programming. "It was a lot of time and effort," Arnett explains, "but it was great fun! I learned a lot about HTML and the Web and I learned a lot about the solar system. It rekindled my interest in amateur astronomy, too. I bought my first telescope shortly thereafter. Now I'm a director of my local club and have my own backyard observatory." Alas, he laments, "My hopes of it becoming a giant online encyclopedia have been overwhelmed by the flood of commercial trash." Arnett keeps his guide to the solar system continually updated with current findings, pictures, and other data.

Fine points of development: "Fixing broken links is a drag."

The Nine Planets: www.nineplanets.org



DESIGNER: William A. Arnett
AGE: 50
OCCUPATION: Software engineer (retired)
LOCATION: Redwood City, California



Future plans: Adding a page for minor planet 433 Eros; fixing more broken links.

Interesting feedback: "I enjoy the many thoughtful questions I get from kids — and their parents. Especially the ones whose only proper answer is: We just don't know, but we have a chance of figuring it out if we can get funding for more research." Of course, having such a well-examined site for children doing reports about the planets, Arnett gets his share of solar-system-related homework questions, to which he responds with his own URL. Then there was the visitor who replied: "You are a god!"

Favorite astronomical Web sites: Astronomy Picture of the Day (<http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/astropix.html>) and The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Moon (www.shallowky.com/moon/hitchhiker.html).

Favorite nonastronomical site: Dilbert Comic Strip Archive (www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert/archive).

Izzy's Skylog

The man otherwise known as Izzy launched his Skylog in July 1995. Ken White's goal was to eliminate what he perceived as a lack of astronomical sites geared toward the beginner. The tradition continues with monthly updates of sky events, a highlighted constellation, detailed discussions about a featured celestial object, some astronomical images taken by amateurs, and Izzy's own astronomy software for beginners. White also spends two to three hours a week answering e-mail and includes a few exchanges each month on the site. So who's Izzy? A beloved pet who gave approval to

Qué Tal in the Current Skies:



Izzy's Skylog: <http://darkstar.swsc.k12.ar.us/~izzy/>



DESIGNER: Ken White
 AGE: 57
 OCCUPATION: School district's
 Information
 Systems Technician
 LOCATION: Texarkana, Arkansas



many of the early stages of the site.

Fine points of development: "I found working with the graphics the most challenging. In the early days I couldn't find what I wanted, so I was forced to make my own from old black-and-white artwork and doing coloring in a paint program. Nowadays, it's considerably easier to come up with background, buttons, and the like."

Future plans: Expand the monthly sky calendar; add tutorials for choosing a telescope.

Interesting feedback: "A couple in Texas wanted help in planning their wedding at their Moonrise Ranch to coincide with a sunset and full Moon. Then there was the couple who were expecting a child and wanted to name it after the brightest star of the sky. Coincidentally, the baby was

due when Sirius was high in the winter night's sky. I never knew if they actually chose the name or not."

Favorite nonastronomical sites: Online music stores.

Qué Tal in the Current Skies

Bob Riddle started Qué Tal in August 1994 as an online version of a monthly newsletter while serving as planetarium director of the Kansas City, Missouri, school district. It has since developed into a beginner-friendly resource for astronomical observing. It includes monthly viewing information about the Sun, Moon, and planets, as well as astro-activities, news, and an e-mail newsletter.

Fine points of development: Riddle spends about 5 to 10 hours a week updating the site and writing for the next month. "Originally it was more time-consuming and difficult as I used to start with the print version . . . then re-do it into the Web version. Now I work with a template and essentially cut and paste."

Future plans: Add an annual viewing calendar and post other articles that have been written but not yet formatted for the Web.

Interesting feedback: "A back-and-forth 'discussion' about my 'An Eggs-citing Equinox' article. The person apparently missed the point and wanted to argue about balancing an egg. I didn't!"

Favorite astronomical Web sites: Science @NASA's Thursday's Classroom (www.thursdaysclassroom.com) and Heavens Above (www.heavens-above.com).

Favorite nonastronomical site: Topozone (www.topozone.com).

www.currentsky.com

DESIGNER: Bob Riddle
 AGE: 52
 OCCUPATION: Training Specialist,
 Challenger Center for
 Space Science Education
 LOCATION: Lee's Summit, Missouri



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— Dennis di Cicco

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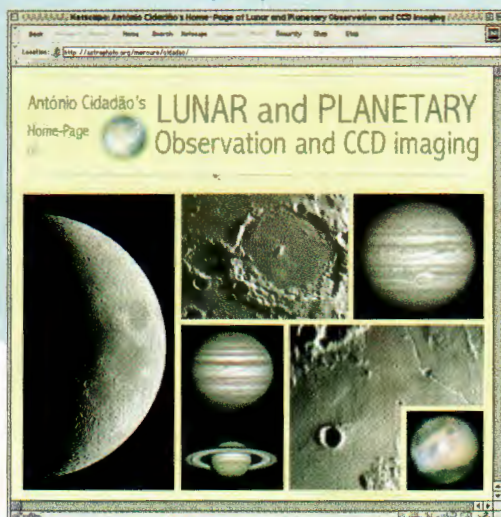
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Home Page of Lunar and Planetary Observation and CCD Imaging: www.astrosurf.org/cidadao/



DESIGNER: António Cidadão
AGE: 42
OCCUPATION: Assistant Professor of Histology and Embryology at the Lisbon Faculty of Medicine
LOCATION: Oeiras, Portugal



Home Page of Lunar and Planetary Observation and CCD Imaging

Wanting to share his hobby of celestial imaging with others, António Cidadão started out uploading his pictures to various Internet repositories. In June 1999 he created his own Web site on a service with limited disk space. At its current site at Astrosurf.org, his page of images and animations has room to grow. Besides creating mesmerizing time-lapse movies of the Moon, Jupiter, and Saturn (among other objects), he's using an inexpensive Webcam to make an atlas of the entire Moon. He also provides details about producing three-dimensional views of celestial objects (have your red-and-blue glasses ready). After a planetary apparition is over, expect some new intriguing pictures to be added to his site.

Fine points of development: "I tried to maintain the HTML design as basic as possible."

Future plans: "I hope to complete the list of near-side craters in the Moon-light atlas. As a long-term project, I'd like to build an online handbook on planetary observation and imaging."

Interesting feedback: "Very nice comments about the lunation animation"; another visitor thought the site should just be in Portuguese — "Why bother to put it in English?"

Favorite astronomical Web sites: Astronomy Picture of the Day and *Sky & Telescope* (www.skypub.com).

Favorite nonastronomical site: The National Library of Medicine (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/).

The Cosmic Mirror

Daniel Fischer spends about 20 hours a week looking through Web sites and scores of e-mails to assemble a Web-based newspaper of space information. The bulletin's beginnings were humble, he explains, but it has developed over the years. Although the articles remain picture-free, the pages are nonetheless well designed and easy to navigate. As you check back week to week, you may have to keep reminding yourself that this is produced by one person. Fischer stresses the permanence of his efforts: "Everything ever published will remain available, under the same address, forever — this sets the Cosmic Mirror apart from many other Web sites."

Fine points of development: He taught himself basic Web programming in October 1996 from an online tutorial. The rest he's picked up by looking at the HTML of other Web pages.

Future plans: Expanding the index to include all Cosmic Mirror issues.

Interesting feedback: From one reader, "Your Web site is for me a bible!"

Favorite astronomical Web sites: Florida Today's Space Online (www.flatoday.com/space/today/) and Spaceflight Now (www.spaceflightnow.com).

Favorite nonastronomical site: "http://de.news.yahoo.com/9/ for all the bizarre things happening on our planet, and www.zeit.de/inhalt/ for some serious news analysis." (Both sites are in German.)

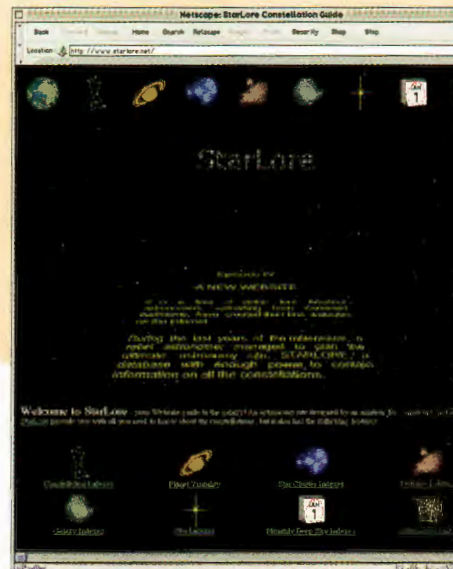
The Cosmic Mirror: www.geocities.com/skyweek/mirror/



DESIGNER: Daniel Fischer
AGE: 36
OCCUPATION: Science writer
LOCATION: Königswinter, Germany



StarLore: www.starlore.net



StarLore

Richard J. Bartlett explains his mission statement as trying "to uphold and abide by the ideals of Carl Sagan by popularizing astronomy as much as possible, by helping amateur astronomers at all levels of expertise without — hopefully — getting bogged down in all the techie stuff." His site, launched in August 1998, offers a constellation guide, planet-viewing information, and a growing list of stars and deep-sky objects to look for with the naked eye, binoculars, or a telescope. "I enjoy both Web design and astronomy — so StarLore is a double whammy labor of love."

Fine points of development: "There is, of course, an ongoing challenge: the more I work on StarLore, the more I want to improve it; the more I want to improve it, the more work is involved."

Future plans: Layout and design consistency among the pages; flashier opening page; planet information; daily calendar; a glossary; and more. Thus, more work.

Interesting feedback: "There was one young man from South America named Rigel who wanted to know about his namesake star. He wrote me a great thank-you e-mail to say I had given him a sense of identity because I found out the meaning of the name and its origins."

Favorite astronomical Web sites: The Nine Planets and Universe Today (www.universetoday.com).

Favorite nonastronomical site: "I don't actually have one right now. I do sometimes visit TheForce.net, which is a Star Wars fan site."

DESIGNER: Richard J. Bartlett

AGE: 29

OCCUPATION: Production planner,
prospective Web designer

LOCATION: Luton, United Kingdom



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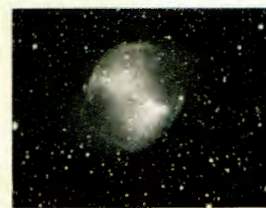


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The NGC891 & M27 images were 10 minute images using a C11 & an Mx916.

All images were taken using the patented S.T.A.R. 2000 Software.



The Comet Lee image was a 10 minute exposure with an Mx5.



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