

STAR STRUCK

JPL website goes where no one has gone before

As summer slowly envelops the Northern Hemisphere, many people find themselves spending more time outdoors at night. People sit around the campfire, stroll around the block or just sit on the porch. Inevitably they will partake in a pastime as old as humanity — gazing at the stars.

As our knowledge of the universe has increased, our interpretation of those points of light in the night sky has evolved. Where we once saw gods and beasts populating the darkened heavens, we now see massive, gaseous nuclear furnaces and alien worlds.



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InSites

Much of what we have learned about space comes from the work of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), a collaborative effort between California Institute of Technology and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The organization has a wonderful website at JPL.NASA.gov that is full of interesting information and amazing images of space and the tools we use to explore it.

Driven by fear

JPL started in the 1930s with a few Caltech students playing with rockets. The Army started sponsoring the group in the 1940s to develop missile technology to combat the Nazis' infamous V2 rockets.

After World War II, the Cold War fueled space research, and Russia successfully launched the first satellite, Sputnik, in 1957. Within three months of that historic event, JPL responded by launching America's first satellite, Explorer I. Soon after that, JPL was transferred from the Army to the new space agency, NASA.

Mission changes

Under new management, JPL's focus changed from developing rockets to creating the scientific instruments that would ride them to the stars. Since then, the agency has been involved in many of America's — and the world's — highest-profile space explorations.

You can learn about much of this history on JPL's site. Besides history, there's an entire section devoted to education, with lesson plans for teachers, science projects, competitions, seminars, news releases and even games for kids.

The site has been recently redesigned to make it more visually engaging. The home page features a slide show of full-screen images of rockets, robots, planets, moons and galaxies. To get to the rest of the site, you either can click on a link to display a complete menu or scroll down to view galleries from different sections.

The first section is What's Happening Now, which has four subsections: Featured, News, Videos and Images. You can view the galleries for each subsection by clicking on the corresponding button. Continue scrolling down the page to the other sections: Missions, Explore, Image of the Day, Education and Public Events, and Opportunities. Each section has a similar design, but no two are exactly the same. The buttons and galleries all are intuitive and designed cleanly. An index is at the bottom of the page.

The various sections and subsections have a variety of content available. Some provide articles with accompanying photos or artists' renderings. Many have videos or animations. The videos give you the option of streaming or downloading. I had a lot of problems with buffering while streaming videos, but I can't say if that's the fault of the site or my internet connection.

Lost in space

One of the galleries I found very interesting was Infographics, a collection of more than 75 graphics detailing different JPL projects, instruments and findings on space and the Earth. In addition to looking at the beautifully done existing graphics, you also can download images and resources from the site to create your own. You can upload your graphics to the site as well.

This site can suck you in like a black hole. The images of space exploration and the informative articles will keep you engaged for as long as you can sit in front of a screen. It also has many links to related sites and apps that allow you to extend your journey to infinity and beyond.

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