

NASA and Microsoft Allow Earthlings to Become Martians

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Mars fans who sign up to participate in activities on NASA's new "Be a Martian" Web site can choose to be represented to other participants by one of the robot-animal avatar illustrations offered on the site, such as this one. Image credit: NASA - JPL

(PhysOrg.com) -- NASA and Microsoft Corp. of Redmond, Wash., have collaborated to create a Web site where Internet users can have fun while advancing their knowledge of Mars.

Drawing on observations from NASA's Mars missions, the "Be a Martian" [Web site](#) will enable the public to participate as citizen scientists to improve Martian maps, take part in research tasks, and assist Mars science teams studying data about the Red Planet.

"We're at a point in history where everyone can be an explorer," said Doug McCuiston, director of the Mars Exploration Program at NASA

Headquarters in Washington. "With so much data coming back from Mars missions that are accessible by all, exploring Mars has become a shared human endeavor. People worldwide can expand the specialized efforts of a few hundred Mars mission team members and make authentic contributions of their own."

Participants will be able to explore details of the solar system's grandest canyon, which resides on Mars. Users can call up images in the Valles Marineris canyon before moving on to chart the entire Red Planet. The collaboration of thousands of participants could assist scientists in producing far better maps, enabling smoother zoom-in views and easier interpretation of Martian surface changes.

By counting craters, the public also may help scientists determine the relative ages of small regions on Mars. In the past, counting Martian craters has posed a challenge because of the vast numbers involved. By contributing, Web site users will win game points assigned to a robotic animal avatar they select.

With a common goal of inspiring digital-age workforce development and life-long learning in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, NASA and Microsoft unveiled the Web site at the Microsoft Professional Developers Conference in Los Angeles this week. The site also beckons software developers to win prizes for creating tools that provide access to and analysis of hundreds of thousands of Mars images for online, classroom and Mars mission team use.

"Industry leaders like NASA and Microsoft have a social responsibility as well as a vested interest in advancing science and technology education," said Walid Abu-Hadba, corporate vice president of the Developer and Platform Evangelism Group at Microsoft. "We are excited to be working with NASA to provide new opportunities to engage with Mars mission data, and to help spark interest and excitement

among the next generation of scientists and technologists."

To encourage more public participation, the site also provides a virtual town hall forum where users can expand their knowledge by proposing Mars questions and voting on which are the most interesting to the community. Online talks by Mars experts will address some of the submitted questions. Other features include interactive tools for viewing Martian regions and movies about people who study Mars in diverse ways.

"Mars exploration inspires people of all ages, and we are especially eager to encourage young people to explore Mars for themselves," said Charles Elachi, director of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif. "We are delighted to be involved in providing the creative opportunity for future explorers to contribute to our understanding of Mars."

"The beauty of this type of experience is that it not only teaches people about [Mars](#) and the work NASA is doing there, but it also engages large groups of people to help solve real challenges that computers cannot solve by themselves," said Marc Mercuri, director of business innovation in the Developer and Platform Evangelism Group at [Microsoft](#).

More information: To enroll as a virtual Martian citizen and start exploring, visit beamartian.jpl.nasa.gov .

Provided by JPL/NASA ([news](#) : [web](#))

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