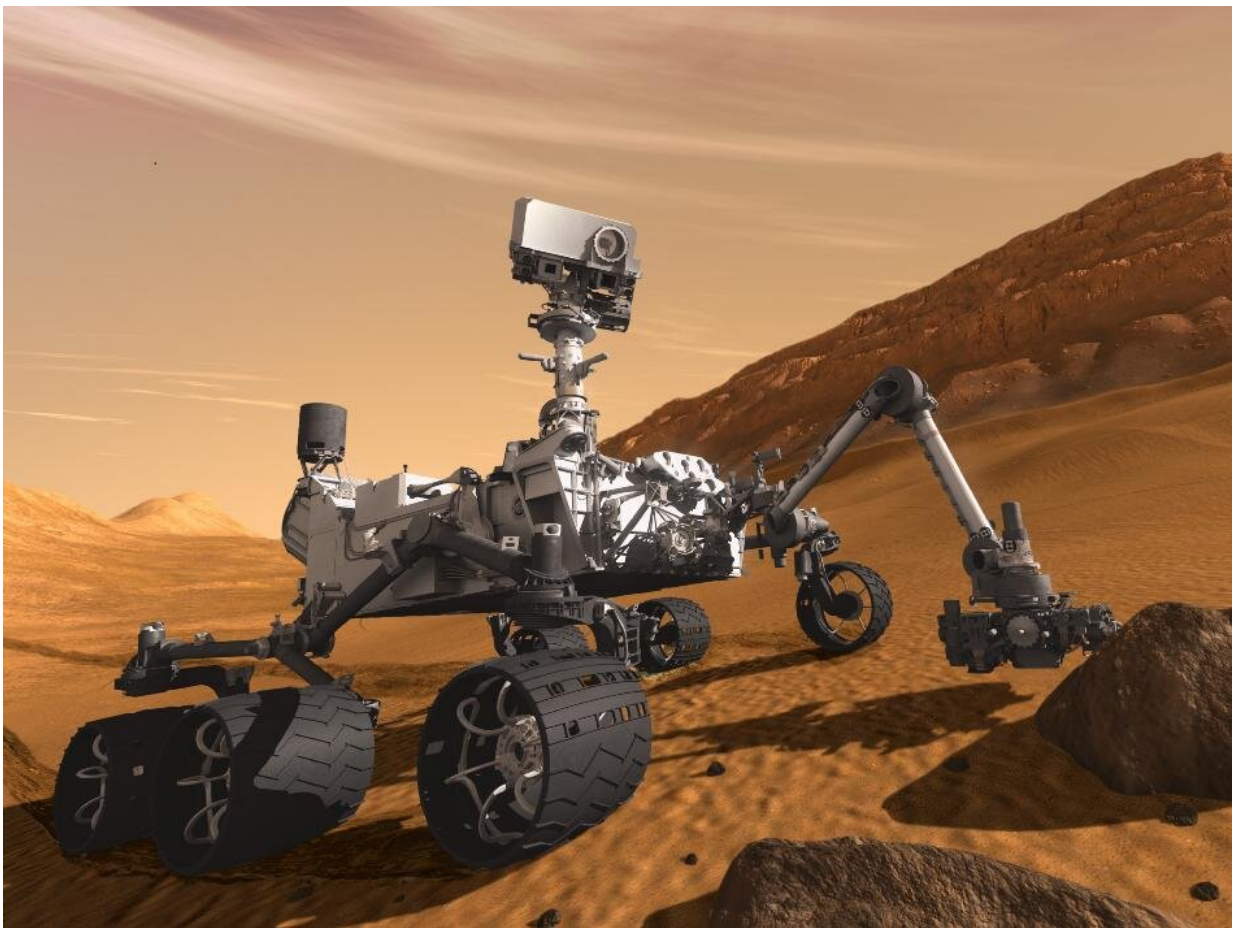


# 'Good Night Oppy': Why this movie about a Martian robot will make you reach for your handkerchief

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Credit: NASA/JPL

Get those Kleenex ready. You'll never again see robots as just lurching, whirring, beeping hunks of metal.

In 2003, the U.S. sent two rovers to explore Mars. The documentary "Good Night Oppy" (streaming now on Amazon Prime Video) revives that epic adventure, doing for gangly interstellar probes what the Oscar-winning 2020 doc "My Octopus Teacher" did for that tentacled sea creature: humanize them.

The two rovers, Spirit and Opportunity, or Oppy, were built to last roughly 92 days. Spirit lasted six years. And Oppy rambled across 28 miles of the red planet for nearly 15 years, driving its way into the hearts of NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory scientists, who reveled in its triumphs and sweated its breakdowns. Think Pixar's "WALL-E" meets "Apollo 13."

USA TODAY spoke with "Oppy" director Ryan White and JPL engineering lead Doug Ellison about how this space adventure is really a love story.

## **The viral NASA tweet that started it all**

Science documentaries don't typically tug at the heartstrings. But White says a 2019 viral tweet from NASA instantly convinced him and his production team that there was a very different story to tell.

Oppy had run into trouble during a Martian storm, so JPL scientists shut down most of its systems to preserve battery life. But doom loomed. The last message JPL received from its robot was, "My battery is low and it's getting dark."

"People who had never heard of this mission suddenly felt they could relate to this little robot who was alone on this planet and in trouble,"

says Ryan. "The emotion that human beings can pour into inanimate objects is what fascinated me."

## **Why it's easy to fall in love with a robot**

How did JPL scientists fall for Oppy? It didn't hurt that the robot was humanoid in some of its qualities: It stood 5-foot-2, had two cameras for eyes, an articulating arm and wheels as legs.

"The robots were designed with engineering constraints, mostly: What equipment can we fit into this small package?" says Ellison, who was part of the rover project team. "But in the end, you wind up with very human qualities. Eyes that see in stereo and with 20/20 vision, like us. There's an arm with a hammer, that looks like what a human geologist would bring on an expedition."

Ellison adds that there was always a moment when JPL scientists working the robots remotely from California would start "mimicking their movements, raising their arm the way the robot would, and that's when you know they've moved to another level of connection."

## **Humans are at the heart of the 'Good Night Oppy' story**

White was worried that the JPL scientists would "no offense to Doug, be dry and academic and emotionally detached, but these people proved me wrong. The humans I got were the biggest embarrassment of riches."

Ellison concedes that "it's strange to form an attachment to a glorified laptop on another planet, but we did have this strange fondness for and nurturing of 400 pounds of metal."

That said, once Oppy died, concluding the mission, Ellison and his JPL team members understood the real attachment. "In the end, it was maybe like when you turn in that first old car of yours," he says. "We realized that the bond wasn't so much to the robot itself, but rather to all these people you bonded with during that experience."

## **Filming on Mars, thanks to Industrial Light & Magic**

A big part of the emotional tug created by "Good Night Oppy" comes thanks to Industrial Light & Magic, the special effects company started by George Lucas when he was making his first "Star Wars" movie. ILM visual effects pros were called in to take real images of Mars provided by Oppy and Spirit and turn those into exceedingly realistic scenes that show Oppy roving around the red planet.

With the hit animated movie "WALL-E" firmly on his mind, White had a directive for the ILM team: "If this is going to look like a cartoon, that's not worth it. It needs to feel like a human crew was there filming these robots on Mars."

As a longtime documentary filmmaker used to working fast, it took patience for White to let ILM work its magic. "But JPL's motto is 'Dare Mighty Things,' so if I'm doing a movie about them, I thought, let's swing for the bleachers. It was just like what NASA does. Each team does what they're best at, and they trust that others will do the same. That worked."

## **'Good Night Oppy' could be the right movie at the right time**

White felt he might have a hit on his hands when in 2020, at the height of the pandemic and presidential elections, he pitched his robot

documentary to distributors.

"Docs are important in the way they hold up a mirror to society, but as a result, they're mostly dark stories," he says. "But I would do this Zoom presentation and often there were tears streaming down the faces of these executives. People are desperate for stories that are hopeful and about the best of humanity."

That is White's wish for anyone curious about "Good Night Oppy." He wants viewers to "come for the [robot](#) adventure" but stay for "the incredible human beings from all walks of life working on a project for the betterment of mankind. These days, that is very rare."

## **What are critics and audiences saying?**

"Good Night Oppy," narrated by Angela Bassett, took the top prize at the 2022 Critics Choice Documentary Awards.

USA TODAY film critic Brian Truitt calls it an "out-of-this-world documentary" and "a crowd-pleasing testament to human ingenuity that rocks a real-life 'WALL-E' vibe." The film has a 100% positive audience score on Rotten Tomatoes.

## **Who's roving around Mars now?**

NASA took up the rover challenge again a few years ago, successfully landing Perseverance on the planet in February 2021. The rover is significantly larger than Spirit and Opportunity, which were constrained in size by their method of delivery. The two older rovers were dropped to the surface of Mars inside cushioned balls, whereas Perseverance lowered itself using rockets.

Perseverance is tasked with further exploring what Oppy already learned: Mars contains past evidence of flowing water with an intimation of some kind of life. The new rover is busy collecting soil samples that could help scientists learn more about the Martian environment prior to its current arid state.

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