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Spore is More: Build Your Own Alien at Home

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By [Seth Shostak](#)

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A image promoting the new video game Spore. (Image credit: Electronic Arts)

"It's just a video game!" I hear you say. Well, sure, it is. And "StarTrek" was just a television show, too.

Except that it wasn't. The starship Enterprise sailed an impressive track from weekly entertainment to cult program, to lucrative franchise, to archetypal embodiment of our dreams for the future.

Spore may follow in its wake. The new title from powerhouse video game developer Electronic Arts, hitting the shelves and download sites this week, is an example of art imitating science. The game is the brainchild of Will Wright, the fellow who designed such hot entertainment properties as Sim City and Sim Earth. These games allowed players to do what Julius Caesar had in mind: namely, run a city or build an empire (without the danger of being knifed in the Forum).

In Spore, you create life forms that compete for survival in a sort of "DNA economy," and seek to extend their influence from a single planet to the galactic realm. One of its more appealing functions — building complex critters that appear in the game — is accomplished in Spore's Creature Creator. This software accessory gives you the parts and power to quickly design your own aliens, starting with a basic body form and adding appendages, facial features and various skin textures and colors. Even serious scientists can quickly become enamored of this interactive Mr. Alien Potato Head. Here at the [SETI Institute](#), Frank Drake, Jill Tarter and this author have enthusiastically cobbled together our own pet sentients. Will Wright says that his conception of Spore was significantly inspired by the astrobiology work we are doing here (more below).

This is all good fun, and preliminary indications suggest that EA's creation could soon be the rage of young gamers everywhere. But Spore may, like "Star Trek," have significant spin-offs.

That's because something seems to happen to kids between the ages of 8 and 12. Many of them develop a compelling interest in some subject — be it dinosaurs, history, art, astronomy or even human culture. These interests are durable. If you ask biologists how long they've been interested in biology, they'll tell you "forever," but they usually mean since they were 11 (or thereabouts).

Why this happens is unclear. Maybe nature has found that having "experts" among the population has survival value for the species. That could be just pop physiology claptrap, but irrespective of the actual reason, prepubescent kids are like potting soil, waiting for something exciting to grow.

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I asked Frank Drake how he became interested in science. "As a kid, I bicycled to Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry every week," he said. "It was just endlessly interesting, and before long I was building Tesla coils and crystal sets."

A small toy hooked SETI Institute astrobiologist Mark Showalter: "When I was ten, I got a small prism as a present. Breaking up sunlight into a spectrum? That turned me on to science."

Peter Backus, a SETI colleague, credits his father for his fascination with the cosmos. "He would take me on fishing trips, and point out the constellations."

For me, it was movies: sci-fi films that were cheesier than an extra-large pizza margherita. There wasn't much real science in these potboilers, but that was beside the point. They hooked me emotionally. That was the key. Facts, methods, the relevant mathematics? All that stuff I could learn later.

When you're young, it's the inspiration that counts — the emotional appeal.

Spore may be just a video game to most adults — another hi-tech distraction for the kids. Maybe parents will be happy that it doesn't involve wasting bad guys or stealing cars. But its true import might only become apparent down the road. Twenty years from now, if you ask the folks in the labs, the domes and the field sites how they got there, they might just answer, "Well, it was because of a game I played as a kid?"

About Spore's creator

Will Wright has frequently visited the SETI Institute, and says he drew inspiration for the new game from its various research programs. In particular, the Institute's [Carl Sagan Center](#) has over 60 scientists investigating such topics as the possibility of life on Mars (both now and in the past), other solar system habitats such as the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, and how life got started on Earth.

Because of the close relationship of the SETI Institute and Spore's visionary creator, the Institute is offering a special "green membership" to those wishing to become part of its research efforts by joining Team SETI. Additional information on membership can

be found [here](#).

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Seth Shostak is an astronomer at the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute in Mountain View, California, who places a high priority on communicating science to the public. In addition to his many academic papers, Seth has published hundreds of popular science articles, and not just for Space.com; he makes regular contributions to NBC News MACH, for example. Seth has also co-authored a college textbook on astrobiology and written three popular science books on SETI, including "Confessions of an Alien Hunter" (National Geographic, 2009). In addition, Seth hosts the SETI Institute's weekly radio show, "Big Picture Science."



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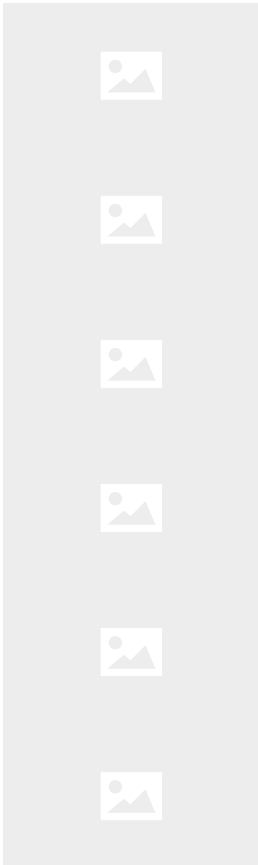


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