



EXOPLANET
Q&A*Alien*

PLANETQUEST

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(Music)

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As you probably know, Exoplanets can be pretty weird places.

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Some of them have atmospheres that are torched black or rain made out of molten glass.

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But do their names have to be so weird, too? I mean you have names like HD 20504b and Kepler-12c.

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Why can't they be named after cool stuff, like Supreme Court Justices or members of the Wu-Tang Clan?

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First of all, there are thousands of Exoplanets,

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so coming up with good names for every single one of them would take a really long time.

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But more importantly, these names give astronomers really valuable information about each planet.

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And when you've got thousands of them to sort through, that's pretty helpful.

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A planet name like 'Ghostface' would be cool, but it doesn't tell you a whole lot.

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One of the most common Exoplanet names is the letters 'HD'

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and then a whole string of numbers, and then a lowercase letter.

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The HD in the number are actually the name of the star that the planet orbits.

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Astronomers have massive databases of stars and each one gets a number, so the HD part helps them look up

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the stars location. The letter at the end tells you in what order the planet was discovered,

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so the first one gets a 'b', and then a 'c' and then on down the alphabet.

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When a bunch of Exoplanets orbiting the same star are discovered all at once, though usually, the order based

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on their distance from that star, so the closest one will get a 'b' and then the next one out 'c' and so on.

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Now if later on astronomers find a new planet orbiting the same star,

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it will get the next unused letter, regardless of where it orbits.

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Now you might be wondering, why do the planets start with the letter 'b'? That's because astronomers

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use a capital 'A' to indicate the star in a solar system or the brightest star if there is more than one.

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So in a binary system the brighter star will get a capital 'A', the dimmer star will get a capital 'B'

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and the first planet would get a lowercase 'b'.

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Sometimes, stars with Exoplanets will be named after the mission or the project that discovers them.

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So planets found by the Kepler mission will start with the word 'Kepler'.

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and planets that were found by the CoRot mission, will start with the word 'Corot'.

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There's been a lot of talk in the scientific community about trying to give Exoplanets more interesting names,

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and it's likely that in the future some of the coolest discoveries, say that we find an Exoplanet that we know

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to be a lot like Earth those will finally get names that are easier to remember.

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That's it for this Q&Alien.