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## UFO UpDates Mailing List

## Using The Net To Search For Aliens

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From: Gerry Lovell <ed@farshore.force9.co.uk>
Date: Thu, 27 Aug 1998 18:19:30 +0100
Fwd Date: Fri, 28 Aug 1998 02:08:36 -0400
Subject: Using The Net To Search For Aliens


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Special to CNET News.com
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Header: Using the Net to search for aliens

There is good news for interstellar explorers.

The search for intelligent alien life somewhere in the cosmos is
about to get a lot easier--almost as easy as getting email from
E.T. All you need is a home computer and an Internet link.

Scientists at the University of California at Berkeley have
devised a project to involve ordinary people around the world in
the hunt for alien intelligence. Using home computers and the
Net, they hope to build a gigantic global "brain" to analyze
interstellar radio signals for signs of life.

The old clunker you once played "Space Invaders" on could be the
computer that finally downloads hard evidence of real
extraterrestrials.

"We might get a million people involved in this project," said
Dan Werthimer, an astronomer at Berkeley's Space Sciences
Laboratory who is helping to run the project. "Everybody is
curious, everybody wants to know if there is life out there.
This is a neat way of letting them participate in the hunt."

Long a staple of big budget science fiction movies, the search
for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI for short) has usually
been depicted as a job for professionals--starship captains,
dedicated radio-astronomers, or renegade FBI agents cracking a
government conspiracy.

SETI@home aims to change all that. By using "distributed
computing," a new way of linking individual computers over the
Internet, virtually anyone with a desktop PC can begin hunting
for aliens.

"Distributed computing is one of the Holy Grails of computer
science," said project director David Anderson, a computer
scientist. "If it works, it could be 100 times faster than the
fastest current supercomputer."

SETI@home scientists stress that the project is not yet up and
running and it will take at least six more months before they
are able to begin work.

Once ready, it will start using the Internet to parcel out to
individual home computers chunks of raw data obtained from the
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Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico, the largest "ear" to space that mankind has ever built. Arecibo's huge dish scans the skies looking for radio waves that might have been produced by alien intelligence.

"We've been leaking television shows and radio programs into space for decades," Werthimer said. "Maybe somebody out there is doing the same, either sending out signals on purpose, or just leaking them the way we are."

The huge volume of radio data that must be analyzed has long been one of the main stumbling blocks for SETI projects. Even with fast new supercomputers able to complete as many as 200 billion operations per second, the number crunch has been a slow grind that leaves scientists frustrated.

That is where distributed computing comes in. Made possible by the rapid growth of the Internet, it allows scientists to break down large computing problems and distribute them through networks of smaller computers. Each solves its own small part of the puzzle, then feeds its answers back into the main computer to build an overview.

Distributed computing has been used in earlier projects including efforts to crack encryption codes and to figure out large prime numbers. But SETI@home will use it for a something that everyone can appreciate--resolving one of the biggest mysteries of the universe.

"We are confident that Earth's civilization is not the only one," said Bulgarian astronomer Veselka Radeva, who has signed up for SETI@home. "It is only a question of time to understand where and who are the other intelligent creatures in the universe."

Project managers say about 120,000 people have already registered for SETI@home, ranging from a 12-year-old in the Philippines to Silicon Valley computer professionals. One of them, one day, may be lucky enough to retrieve Arecibo signals that indicate life exists in the stars.

"They won't know right away if their clunker was the one that found the extraterrestrial," Werthimer said, noting that the data would have to be rechecked and reanalyzed at project headquarters in Berkeley. "But after the checks, and if we confirm it again, they will definitely get the credit for the discovery."

For that chance, project participants will not be asked to do much. Once the project is running, they will be able to visit the SETI@home Web site and download an analysis program and their first chunk of radio data from Arecibo.

Their PCs will then begin searching through space in their free time. Appearing as a common screensaver, the SETI program will kick in when the computer is idle and will not affect its normal operations.

"It will all happen automatically. You won't even know it is working on it," Werthimer said. When the computer finishes combing over its first block of data, it will connect back with the main project computer in Berkeley, send the data back, and get a new data package to work on.

"Everybody gets a little part of the sky, their own little bit of the information," he said. "There are 400 billion stars in our galaxy...we need all the computing power we can get."

Werthimer's project casts a much broader net than a similar operation run by the SETI Institute, a privately funded group based in Mountain View, California, which is also using radio data to hunt for alien life. While the institute concentrates on a targeted search of some 1,000 nearby Sun-like stars considered likely candidates for alien intelligence, SETI@home will take a broader look.

Like the SETI Institute, which was forced to turn to private funds after Congress canceled a similar space search mounted by NASA in 1992, SETI@home still needs money--an estimated $200,000 before the project even gets rolling, primarily to pay for the expensive magnetic tapes used to record the incoming radio data

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at Arecibo.

But the key to success will be the participation of tens of
thousands of E.T. buffs who are willing to use their personal
computers for something other than email. "I'm optimistic on
life on the universe. It would just be bizarre if we were the
only ones," Werthimer said. "It might be that there is a
galactic community out there and they are all talking to each
other...but we humans are just learning how."

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