



Visit to a Namesake

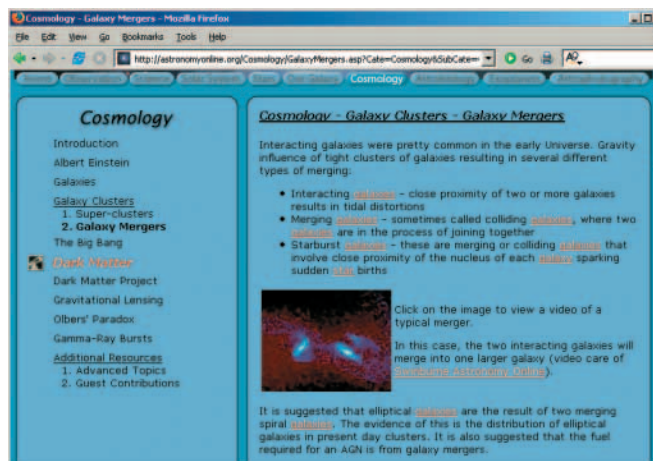
WHEN I HEARD about a website that has the same name as the column I've written for more than a decade, I had to check it out. Although I was generally impressed with AstronomyOnline.org when I first looked at it more than a year ago, I had reservations. I told author Ricky Leon Murphy of Pacifica, California, about some errors and misinterpretations I discovered, and he graciously thanked me and tweaked his online encyclopedia of astronomy.

This labor of astronomical love has its strengths and weaknesses.

Last April the site was nominated for a Webby Award (www.webbyawards.com), an "online Oscar," in the category Best Science Website of 2006. It was up against big names like the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and the National Geographic Society. Murphy's site didn't win (the honor went to National Geographic's Genographic Project); the site is good but hardly the best of the Internet.

I recently revisited the site and found that Murphy and his wife, Chanthirar, have added pages and launched new features, including a blog and a calendar of celestial events. I haven't examined every page, but it still looks like a mixed bag. It offers the basics of astrophysics and amateur observing, but much of the site lacks polish.

Several topics — such as black holes and the Mars meteorite ALH 84001 — have long articles complete with references. Elsewhere, a few "guest contributors" have provided articles (explaining Olbers' Paradox, for example). However, the skygazing sections and some of the basic tutorials need cleaning up. Articles are marred by grammar and spelling errors (for example, "William Bell" for astro book publisher



READ AND LEARN The sections about astrophysics and cosmology feature comprehensive essays that are well worth a look.



WEBBY WORTHY? An attractive design makes AstronomyOnline.org inviting to explore, but the devil is in the details.

Willmann-Bell) as well as repetition and inaccuracies.

Among the corrections I offered in 2005 was an explanation of how his discussion of Iridium satellite sunglints was wrong because he said that a flare looks just like a fireball. While an Iridium flare can appear similar to the trail of meteor *in a photograph*, to the naked eye there is no perceived "trailing" — it simply looks as if a star suddenly brightens and fades. I'm left with the impression that Murphy hasn't actually seen one.

Elsewhere, his warnings about viewing a solar eclipse were overly draconian when I first visited the site; he essentially warned that you should *never* look at one — even during totality. Updates now provide sensible information on how to view all types of eclipses. Nevertheless, contrary to the revision, you should still use filters when observing an annular solar eclipse.

The Murphys have many nice photographs throughout the site, and many are gathered into a Gallery section (along with some cat photos). On the other hand, the representative images of comets — Hale-Bopp and Hyakutake — are uninspiring blobs, a disservice to these spectacles!

I don't want to be overly negative. AstronomyOnline.org is a noble effort, and I don't envy Ricky for his self-appointed task to keep everything updated, but the Murphys could use a little more input from the community. Fixing errors is a pain but educational. That's what I would expect from the best of the Internet. *

Visit associate editor STUART GOLDMAN's blog on SkyTonight.com for more astronomy online.