

Award for Outstanding Achievement Cosmos at the Castle

cork city community commends cosmos



by Owen Ralph

Ireland is a small island on the surface of a blue planet we call Earth. The Earth is a ball of rock 13,000 km wide that appears to be floating in the empty void of space, but the Earth is in fact hurtling through space at 107,000 km/h on an orbit of some 300 million km diameter around the burning nuclear fireball we call the sun...

Visitors to Cosmos at the Castle are left under no illusion that they represent a minuscule part of the universe. Yet it is the attempt to make astronomy relevant to their everyday lives that makes this new exhibition at the Blackrock Castle Observatory (BCO) so powerful.

Located alongside the River Lee on the outskirts of Cork City, Ireland, Blackrock Castle is a much-loved local landmark. The scene of many weddings and family get-togethers over the years, it also boasts an observatory staffed by researchers from Cork Institute of Technology (CIT). What they got up to behind stone walls remained a mystery to many until last summer when Cosmos at the Castle opened to the public.

A 21st-century attraction with a 16th-century backdrop, this multimedia visitors center has helped reconnect the castle with the people of Cork. It was realized by "narrative architects" Martello Media and exploits one of BCO's key areas of research, highlighting recent discoveries of extreme life forms on Earth and their implications for life in space.

Cosmos at the Castle was created partly to stimulate schoolchildren in their studies. "There is a dearth of young people taking up higher level courses in science, technology and engineering," says Dr Niall Smith, CIT's head of research and the observatory's principal scientist. "Astronomy is about as exciting a medium as there is for showing kids the universe around them."

Yet Smith stresses that the content within Cosmos does not patronize younger audiences, and it is all scientifically accurate. "We decided that we would aim it at the 14-year-old. The little ones don't really understand it all, but they love being in the castle, they love the big graphics and the sound. The older children don't expect to understand everything, because if they do it disappoints them; you need to leave that next level for them to aspire to. As for the adults, the reaction we get from them is it's a shame things weren't packaged like this when they were at school."

Setting the scene are four cinema-sized high definition digital video screens, which visitors

interact with using color-coded touch posts to learn about the key points of cosmology, astronomy and the evolution of life. In the adjoining Spiral of Life exhibit they also see an engaging graphical representation of the common DNA that unites all life on earth.

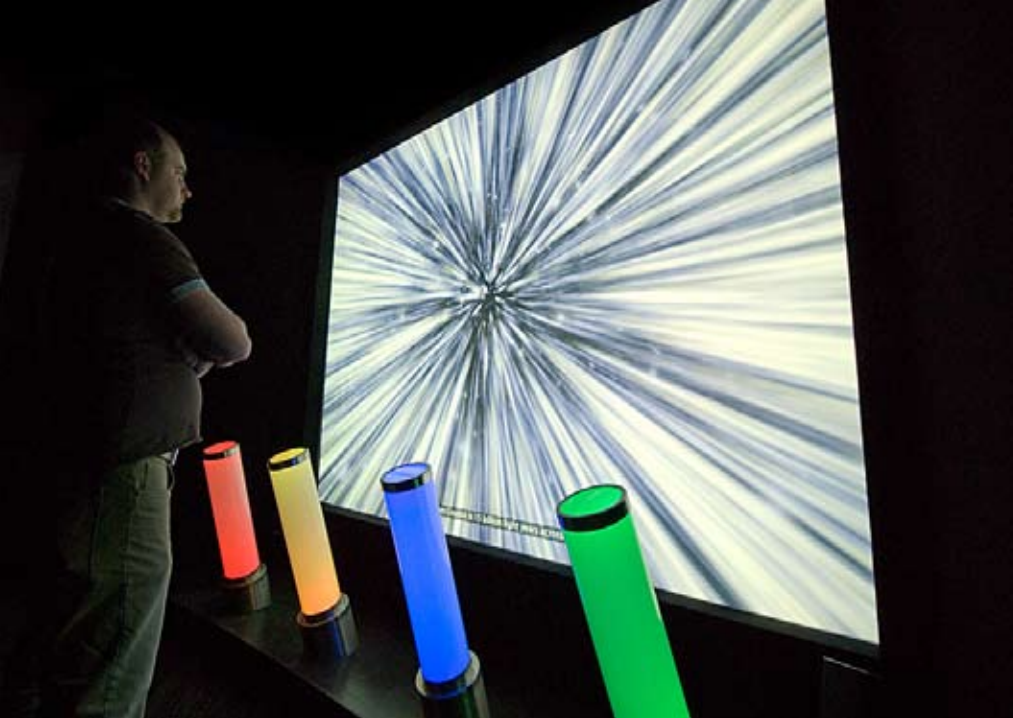
The CIT Room highlights some of the work undertaken in the observatory, and, in the Circular Forum, guests are given an outlet to log their views on the future of space exploration and the philosophical and cultural challenges posed by the possibility of alien life.

The Pan-Galactic Email Station is a nice touch and offers visitors the chance to compose their own message detailing life on Earth, and use the radio telescope on the roof of the observatory to pinpoint and transmit to a planet orbiting a distant star. The BCO website allows guests to monitor for replies in the decades that follow. (Watch your inbox.)

Perhaps the most entertaining element of Cosmos at the Castle is the Comet Chaser



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Space Mission. Seated inside a digital cinema, audiences participate in a simulation of the European Space Agency's Rosetta Mission, tracking and diverting a comet threatening Earth. The material composition and track of the comet is different every time, though the need for a happy ending to the experience dictates that there will never quite be a fatal collision.


Having designed the exhibition, Mark Leslie of Martello Media, based outside Dublin, says he


now realizes, "how well off we are in Ireland for small scientific groups like this. The joy of Cosmos is that it is authentic. Guests can go in there and see guys with beards doing real stuff."

"We wanted to have the researchers working in the same location as the public," adds Dr. Smith, "because it highlights that you don't need to go to NASA to research astronomy, you can actually do it in Cork."

Low on mechanical props, the Cosmos content can be updated with relative ease, but Smith says the multimedia environment presents other challenges. "If you look at some of the technologies we use, such as plasma screens, people have these things now in their homes, so you have to work very hard to keep them interested." Already, they have presented coverage of a space shuttle launch to garner special interest, and the use of 3D technology is being considered as an add-on in the years to come.


Around 8,500 people visited Cosmos at Castle in its first six months, and the attraction's physical size and throughput are not expected to allow significantly more than that. For now, Smith is happy enough with the feedback from guests, but expresses the hope that the facility can become self-financing in around three years, coupled with the Castle Restaurant, which is still being fine-tuned.

Cosmos was recognized by the Thea Awards Committee as achieving "excellence on a limited budget." "I would have loved to have \$5 million to work with," says Mark Leslie, "but what we have proved is that you can do an exciting attraction for much less, and hopefully we have done enough to encourage all the other science centres that may be built around Ireland." 

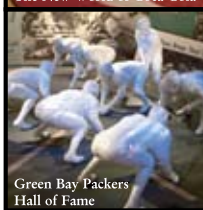


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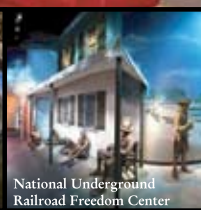
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