

NSSEC Rice U Status Report – May 2020

Patricia H. Reiff, Rice University

- **Communication: work on determining next iClip underway**

HMNS is creating a new planetarium show on exoplanets and the possibility for life on other planets. We are working with them to create a clip that would be useful in their show but can stand on its own to distribute free under our iClips project. At present it appears the clip that is highest rated is the helicopter from Mars2020 mission making a flight across the landing area.

- **Education: “Astronomy for Teachers” ASTR503 finished**

The class has completed successfully, and the students did well on their final exam. The final grades for the sever students taking it for a grade were: one A+, two A’s; two A-’s; and two B’s. The class for the fall will the be “Physics of Ham Radio” and will include many space weather topics.

- **Education: International Astronomy Olympiad**

Graduate student Franklyn Pacheco submitted a paper outlining our experiences in the IAO 2019 and received the Master of Science Teaching degree at the virtual 2020 Rice Commencement. We decided NOT to participate in the IAO in 2020 because of Coronavirus concerns. The schools were not in session so the preliminary testing would be difficult, and the competition being in Italy in September does not seem to be a safe trip. We will reconsider for 2021. (Paper available on request).

- **Education: Stellarium and other online training for planetarians and teachers**

Dr. Reiff is hosting free online Zoom training for Stellarium, Space Update, and Space Weather for teachers and also for planetarium educators. So far 77 planetarians and 16 teachers have signed up for one or more trainings, and 50 have participated so far. The website for information and archiving is here: <http://space.rice.edu/nssec/training/>. We only did one each planetarium and teacher training in May, because we started up our Zoom planetarium shows and events.

- **Communication: “Launch America” Watch Party**

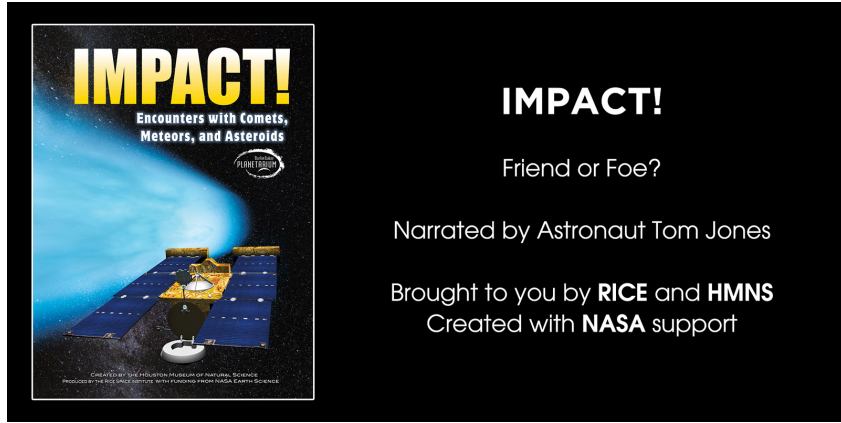
Dr. Reiff hosted a Zoom watch party for both attempts of the SpaceX launch (May 27 and May 30), with over 200 visitors participating in each (over 100 computers simultaneously connected, with an average of 2+ users



per computer.) The total number of participants who registered for the two events was 423 (384 families).

- **Communication: Free Zoom Planetarium shows**

Dr. Reiff is continuing the free online Zoom showings of planetarium shows. The first show was “Force 5” on April 22 (26 signed up, 18 participated). The procedures were updated for the second show “Earth’s Wild Ride”, which had 156 signups (and had a maximum 96 simultaneous connections,



but some users had children). In May we showed: “Dinosaur Prophecy” May 6 (97 registrations); “Impact!” May 13 (170 registrations); “We Choose Space” May 20 (122 registrations) and “Great Planet Adventures” May 27 (115 registrations) . More info here: <http://space.rice.edu/nssec/shows.html> . Signups are through Eventbrite so that we can keep metrics and ensure that the Zoom meetings are not oversubscribed.

A draft writeup of the best Zoom streaming procedures is attached.

Streaming subtitled videos (including fulldome planetarium shows) via Zoom

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Abstract. We have been exploring ways to keep our planetarium shows in the public eye. We have done tests of streaming planetarium shows via Zoom using various formats. We use [“MediaShow”](#) as our streaming software, since it allows multilanguage subtitles on demand, and has excellent show control, invisible to the viewers. Developed under NASA cooperative agreement, it is available for a free 30-day trial from [ePlanetarium.com](#). We have now shown a number of shows and have an established procedure for excellent quality at even modest download speeds, making an “immersive-like” feel to the viewers.

Background The power of a fulldome planetarium show is in the visitor’s peripheral vision, which brings the visitor into the action without using 3D glasses or VR headsets. A typical planetarium is a hemispherical dome (with a flat or tilted horizon, as desired) that the visitors sit under. Most pre-rendered planetarium shows are designed for “unidirectional seating”, which means that the action has a preferred look direction, and all the chairs are aligned theater style facing “forward” with the planetarium operator typically in the back, and virtually all new planetarium construction is that orientation (as opposed to “in the round” for star-only shows). Visitors typically face forward, but sound and visual cues let them know that action may come from the side or from the back, and they turn their heads appropriately. This kinetic action and use of peripheral vision is what makes planetariums unique as a teaching venue, and we have shown that it leads to better content retention [Zimmerman et al., 2010].

Making planetarium shows “accessible” includes providing closed captions for the hearing impaired (and ensuring the narration adequately explains the action for the blind). We now can provide multi-language subtitles for demand using our show display software “MediaShow”. Creating a second language subtitle file is far less trouble than translating and voicing a dubbed version of the shows. We have many dubbed and subtitled shows available: see our YouTube Channel <https://www.youtube.com/user/eplanetarium/playlists>.

Planetarium Show Formats

Fisheye Most planetarium shows are distributed in “fisheye” format to large theaters, and planetarium professions are used to that format. The horizon maps to the outer circle and the zenith is in the center, with the front horizon at the bottom edge, the back horizon at the top edge, and the left and right horizons on the left and right edges, respectively. However, someone watching a show online gets confused by the format, since the “sweet area” (the part in front of the visitor in the dome) is relatively small and at the bottom (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Fulldome fisheye frame from the show “Earth’s Wild Ride”. Altitude/azimuth lines at ten degree spacing are shown in white with the forward horizon on the bottom edge and the Zenith in the center. Planetarium visitors will be looking primarily at the “sweet area” (bottom center), concentrating on the grasshopper eating the leaf, and only with their peripheral vision will they see the bird approaching. This view is not ideal for showing on flatscreens, since it overemphasizes the part of the image behind the viewer.

Warped With the advent of inexpensive mirror-based projection systems [Bourke, 2004], a new format was developed to allow the image to be projected onto a mirror which then fills the dome using the reflection. We distribute all of our planetarium shows in the “Pre-warped” format, for ease of use (Figure 2). These can even be rented on demand [fulldomeondemand.com]. This projection technique has many advantages in portable systems: 1. More pixels are projected – 2.8 Megapixels rather than a full 1080 circle (0.9 Megapixels). 2. The pixels are more concentrated in the “sweet area” (straight forward). 3. The “sweet area” is nearly flat so that the same setup can be used to project non-fulldome content in the lower central portion without needing distortion.

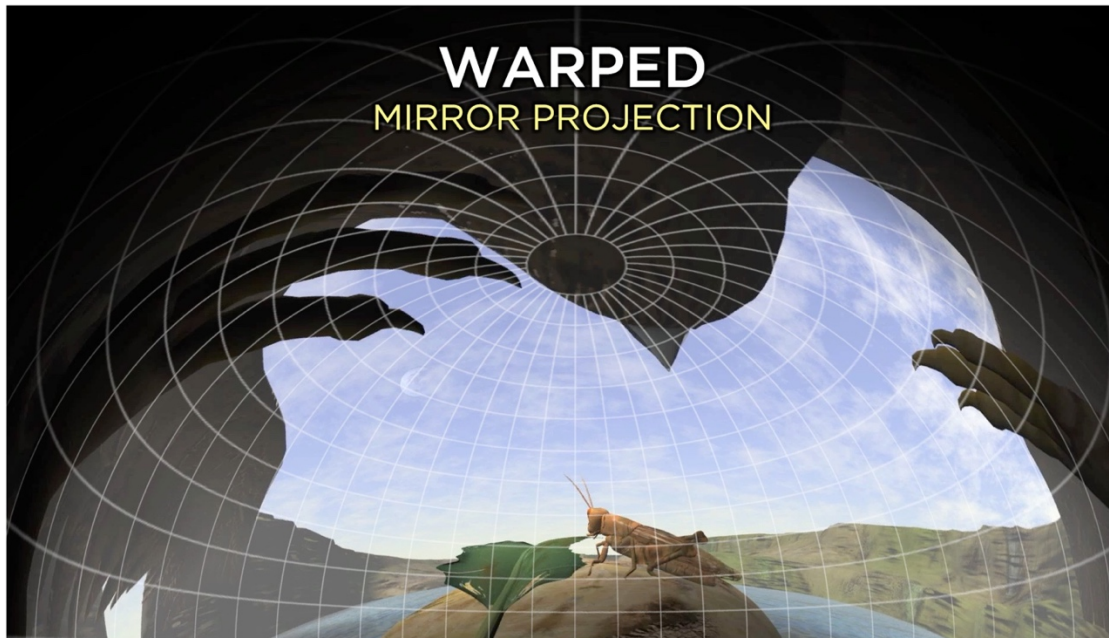


Figure 2. “Warped” version of the same frame as Figure 1, again with the altitude/azimuth lines at ten degree spacing shown. The sweet area is much more emphasized at the lower edge. The periphery is at the top and sides. This version would essentially fill the dome if bounced off a mirror, so again does overestimate the peripheral information.

Both of these standard formats fill (or in the case of the mirror, nearly fill) the dome, so can be a bit confusing for someone watching on a flatscreen. Since they include more information than is necessary, the “sweet area” is a smaller fraction of the total view.

VR Headset A VR headset has a much smaller field of view and relies on the user turning their heads in order to see the entire action. A typical field of view of a VR headset is only 110 degrees left to right (and is in a 16:9 ratio so about 60 degrees up and down). That gives better resolution to the “sweet area” but the peripheral information is completely gone until the user turns their head. In the case of many planetarium shows, a VR user won’t know that action is approaching until it is “too late”. In this case, a VR field of view (Figure 3) does not show the bird until the bird is upon the grasshopper, several frames later, unless the user just happens to be looking up.

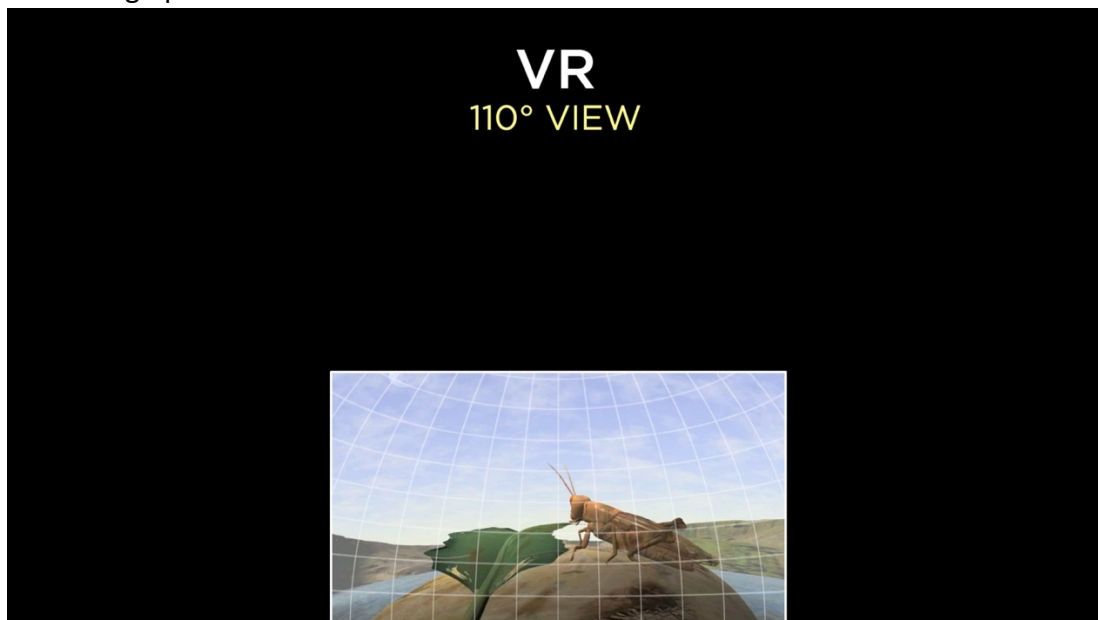


Figure 3. Field of view of a typical VR headset for the same frame as Figures 1 and 2. The viewer will be concentrating on the grasshopper eating the leaf and will have no peripheral vision to inform them that the bird is coming until it is too late.

After testing various options, we find that a “cropped warped” format (Figure 4) gives the best illusion of immersion in a Zoom platform. This takes a “warped” (for mirror) show, 1920x1080 pixels, and crops it to 1280x720, removing the highest distortions at the top and sides. This gives a full 180 degree field of view along the horizon, and the compression allows even some of the vertical view to remain. This is the version we use for our DVD and YouTube versions of our shows (<http://www.Youtube.com/user/eplanetarium>).

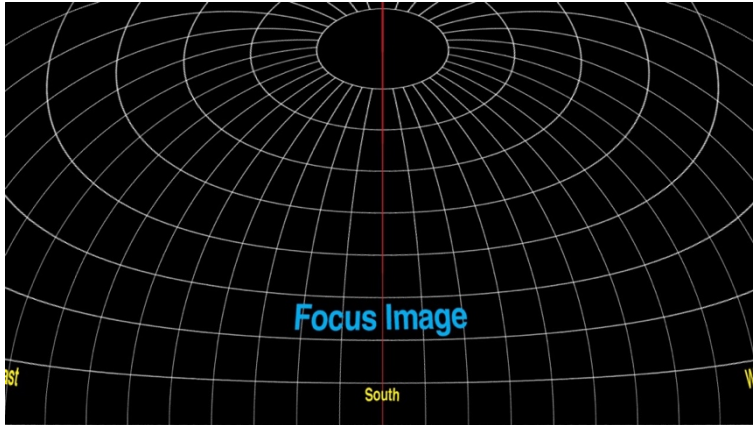


Figure 4. Cropped warped format showing the projected field of view (altitude / azimuth grid with ten degree lines). The “front bottom center” portion is almost not distorted at all, but the top edge allows a wide view of objects near the zenith, impossible in a normal wide screen video format. The effective max width is 180 degrees (along the bottom) and 111 degrees vertically (along the center line).

The cropped warped format allows the viewer to be able to see peripherally the action coming from the back or over the top, as in this bird descending on the grasshopper (which always elicits a gasp from the users in a dome). Note we have been using this format for years (including a DVD that was taken on the ISS by Takao Doi in 2008).

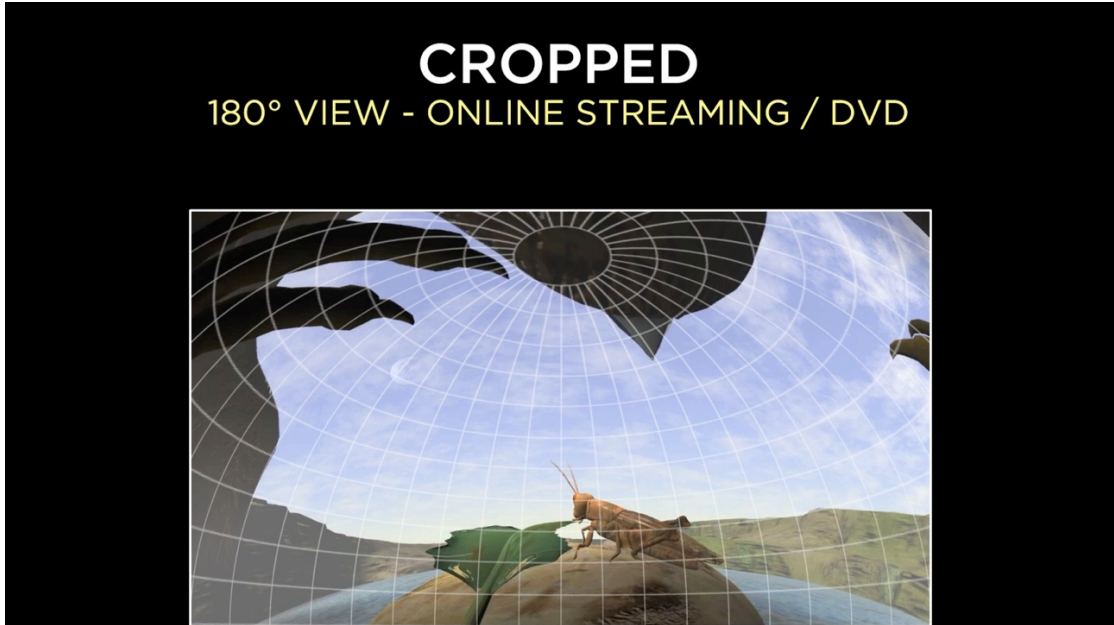


Figure 5. Same frame as (1, 2, and 3) but now in the “cropped warped” format. This is a good compromise between the warped view and the VR view. The peripheral view is active but the visual emphasis is on the “sweet area” of the grasshopper.

For the second show, we did extensive testing, trying different pixel sizes of the show, different show quality, and various upstream servers and downstream “users”. We found the fastest serving was from Rice University (which has a much faster upload speed). We then found that the received quality was still jerky if the receiver’s internet was not fast. We then explored ways to reduce the sending rate to maximize quality.

We experimented with various options and found the best combination of quality and frame rate was this, which we used for the very successful showing of “Earth’s Wild Ride” on Weds April 29.

1. The show pixel size used to stream was 1280x720, but it was re-created at a lower data rate (3-5 MBs) so that the final show file size was about 650 MB (not 1.6 GB for 9 MBs)
2. MediaShow Pro was used to show the show so that subtitles could be used, again if the users audio was poor (and in fact, one user was not able get his audio to work).
3. MediaShow Pro was set up to project the show onto an 800x600 window. This means that the actual projected image was 800x450, better than the preview size of 640x360. This setup with this pixel rate showed smoothly on all kinds of receiving platforms, including smart phones. Using a Mac for the server, you can place the subtitles to be shown in the dark space below the show. On a Windows version of MediaShow, the subtitles are actually on the video window so when the shared space is selected with Zoom, only the actual video will be shared (800x450).
4. Zoom was set up with “advanced options” to only show a portion of a screen, and to use “computer sound” and “optimize for video”.
5. The Rice University Zoom license was used so that up to 300 users could participate at once. (If we have more users, we can use YouTube Live to also simulcast the stream but we would not be able to capture metrics of users nor easily respond to their questions).
6. All incoming users went first to a “waiting room” and were admitted one at a time. All visitors were muted and could not unmute themselves until the Q&A. They were able to ask questions and make comments via the “chat” window during the event. We asked them to “Raise their hand” in the “participant” window to be called on for an audio question.

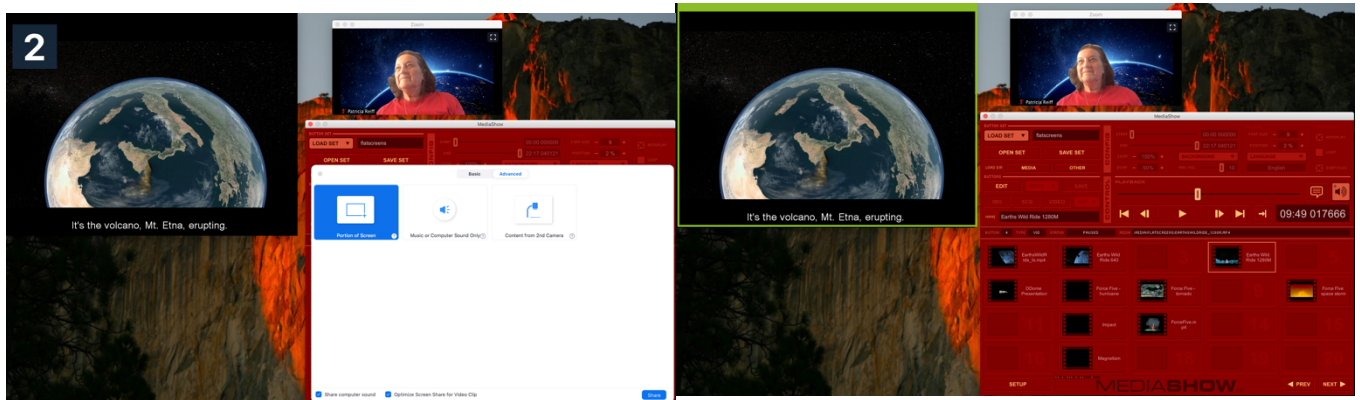


Figure 6. left: Screen shot of setting up advanced Zoom options; right: Zoom in progress using MediaShow Pro on a Mac with subtitles below the shared window (outlined in green)

For the second show using these setups (“Earth’s Wild Ride”), 166 people signed up. The maximum users online at any given time, however, was 96. (Generally, if people don’t have to pay for a ticket, they often don’t show up. So we could safely allow 350-400 “tickets” and still keep the maximum users below 300). Many users made great comments (sic): “So far, everything is smooth. FiOS over WiFi”; “looks good on wifi and android phone”; “This is really

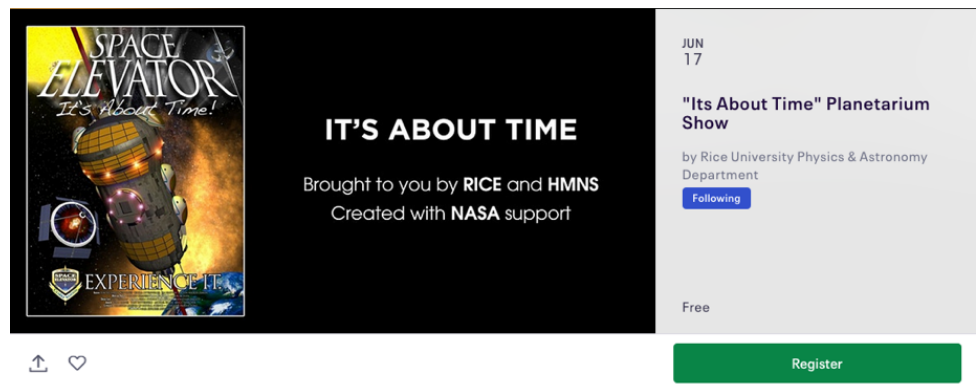
cool”; “Wow. The distortion effect there was really cool.” “I can’t wait for the next show!” “I like this because we don’t just learn about one thing, we learn a lot of things” “Awesome! Would love to see it in the dome!”

Ticketing and Advertising

Given that very successful second show, we have continued weekly shows and posted a calendar show page: <http://space.rice.edu/nssec/shows.html>. In May we showed: “Dinosaur Prophecy” May 6 (97 registrations); “Impact!” May 13 (170 registrations); “We Choose Space” May 20 (122 registrations); “Great Planet Adventures” May 27 (115 registrations) and streamed a watch party for the SpaceX mission (420 registrations). In June we have scheduled “Magnetism”, “Apollo and Beyond”, “It’s About Time” and “Impact Earth”. We use Eventbrite to handle registrations so that we do not exceed the Zoom room limit, and so that we can manage users and create a cadre of “users”. Now, when we post a new Eventbrite, we immediately get signups from previous users before we even advertise, because they have “subscribed” to use via Eventbrite and get immediate notices of new events (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Sample Eventbrite show listing.

For our shows, tickets are free, but we added a “donate” option so that the participants can choose to donate any amount. So far, a reasonable fraction have chosen to donate, which helps us defray expenses (Figure 8). Eventbrite does allow paid tickets as well.



It's about Time is a planetarium show about using a space elevator to go to an amazing time telescope. Streamed with Q&A from the producers

About this Event

Journey into Space! Some day our children may travel to orbit in a Space Elevator. Some day we may use a Time Telescope to watch the Big Bang, the birth and death of a star, or an explosion on the Sun. Explore these wonderful inventions from the "science future" as you discover the many clocks that keep time in the Universe! Hosted by HMNS VP Carolyn Summers and Rice Professor Patricia Reiff, this is a show for all ages, and children are especially invited to ask questions.

IT'S ABOUT TIME, created by the [Burke Baker Planetarium](#) at the Houston Museum of Natural Science and funded partially by NASA, takes you up from the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro to an orbiting geosynchronous space station. As the Earth gets smaller below you,

Date And Time

Wed, June 17, 2020
6:00 PM - 7:15 PM CDT
[Add to Calendar](#)

Location

Online Event

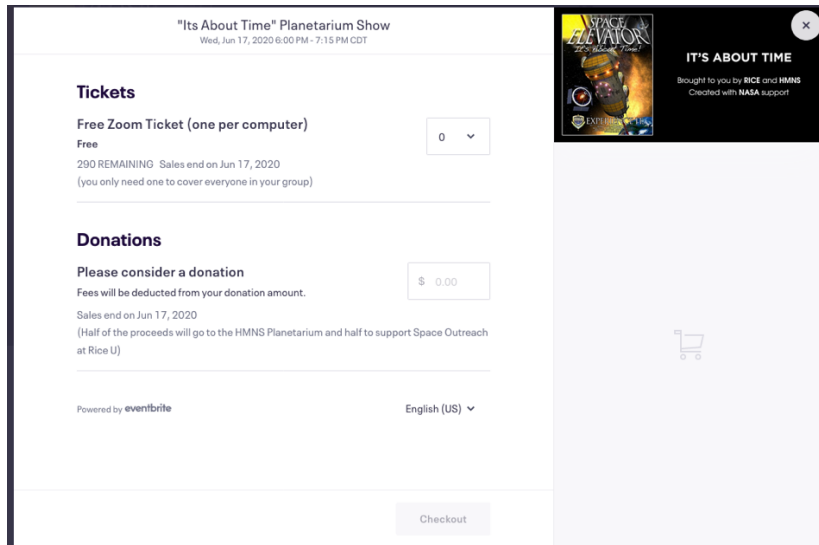


Figure 8. Sample Eventbrite ticket sales page.

Repeat Customers

The most sincere form of flattery is the number of repeat customers we have. Of the 906 “tickets” that have been “purchased” for the shows, the total number of unique emails is 406. So, on average, each person has registered for about 2+ events. (We have not yet merged with the 423 tickets and 360 users for our launch watch party but again there are many overlaps). More importantly, many are now are “following” us on Eventbrite and will sign up within minutes of us posting a new show, before we send out any notices to our email listservers. Having a consistent weekly time is helpful to keep a group of returning “customers”.

Watch Party

We also hosted a “Watch Party” for the SpaceX launch (twice, because the first was scrubbed because of weather). Because we were just sending the stream, we did not reduce the size of the viewing window. In both the first and second attempts, we had over 100 simultaneous computers connected, with each on average having about 1.5 children. Again, it worked very well. Most of the visitors kept their video stream off during the launch until we asked for a “group photo” which many happily joined (Figure 9). It was an unqualified success.



Conclusions

Zoom is an effective way to preview/stream a planetarium show. The participants all gave their thanks in the zoom chat (and their smiling faces). The repeat customers are a documented way that demonstrates the effectiveness of the shows. We can send out a survey later when we have more shows under our belt.

Acknowledgments

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References

(TBD)