Stellarium 0.13

View the infinite glory of the night sky through your computer monitor. Now **Ben Everard** has another reason not to go outside.

If you haven't used *Stellarium* before, you're in for a treat. It creates a skymap of stars, planets, comets, and most other astronomical phenomena. If, like us, you live in a city, and the night sky is washed out by a sheen of light pollution that only a few of the brightest stars can break through, then *Stellarium* gives you the chance to see what the sky should look like. If, on the other hand, you're lucky enough to live somewhere with a dark sky, *Stellarium* provides the tools to learn the different stars and constellations. If you already know the constellations, then it gives you the chance to view past and future astrological events from any position.

When you start *Stellarium*, it takes over your screen and provides an OpenGL-rendered view of the sky at the current time. You can set the location to anywhere you want on earth, or you can set off on a virtual tour of the galaxy and see the night sky from the surface of other planets, moons and stars without needing a NASA-sized budget.

If a real-time rendering of the sky isn't exciting enough for you, you can speed it up and watch the stars move at super-speed, or start a meteor shower to add a little graphical delight. There are options to tweak just about every aspect of the scene, including which astrological objects appear and how bright they are, what projection is used to compress the universe onto a 2D screen, and the amount of twinkle the stars have. This might sound like pointless clutter, but as you play with the settings, you get a feel for how the real physical objects and effects interact to create the night sky.

Aside from the graphical rendering, *Stellarium* also has a great user interface, which manages to be both powerful and unobtrusive. Unobtrusive in this context means that it both stays out of the way and gives the whole screen to the sky map, and that it works well in low-light conditions so that it won't ruin your night vision if you use it in the dark. This makes it perfect for running on a laptop outside on a clear night. You can also get *Stellarium Mobile* for Android and iOS devices (a port by the original author of *Stellarium*), but this isn't free software.

A view of the heavens from the surface of the moon.

Stellarium can show you the position of the stars – and constellation artwork – at any time of day or night.

Planets in your pocket

Version 0.13 comes with lots of new graphical wizardry, though none of it changes the basic way *Stellarium* works. Comets and meteors are now a bit prettier, and there are new plugins to help with field of view and time settings. If you're hoping to be the next Bear Grylls, then you may find the new plugin with navigational stars useful. It should also hog fewer resources now, so is a useful upgrade for people running older hardware. All in all, it's a gradual – though not particularly exciting – improvement on the previous version.

Don't be put off by the low version number: *Stellarium* is a great, stable application that's been around since 2001, and has been widely used for much of the past 13 years. It's fascinating as a curiosity, but you can also delve deeper and use it as a tool to learn more about the universe and our place in it. Be careful though: it will make you want to buy a telescope, travel to the desert and stare at the white-flecked darkness above.

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Web
www.stellarium.org
Developer Stellarium development team
Licence GPL

LINUX VOICE VERDICT

Even the least astronomically-inclined person is likely to have fun with *Stellarium*. It's wonderful.

★★★★★