The features marked with a star (*) are based entirely on material taken straight from standard research (and other Official and Therefore Always Correct) literature. Many of the other articles are genuine, too, but we don’t know which ones.

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Where There’s More

There’s always new improbable — it’s not what you expect! — stuff on the Improbable Research blog at IMPROBABLE.COM

Listen to the Improbable Research podcast!

https://www.improbable.com/
category/the-weekly-improbable-research-podcast/

On the Front Cover

Paper airplanes, this year launched in many countries, found their way into the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony.

On the Back Cover

The one paper airplane, in this pandemic year, in the ceremony’s traditional home.

Some Coming Events

The Covid-19 pandemic has introduced excitingly boundless uncertainty as to whether, when, and where public activities will happen in the near future.

See IMPROBABLE.COM for details of these and other events:

November 2020 – January 2020
The Ig Informal Lectures (see online for release dates)
January 11, 2021
Intersci, Edinburgh
January 16, 2021
Arisia, Boston
February 2021
AAAS Annual Meeting
February 22, 2021
Israel Physics Society
September 2021
31st First Annual Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony
Date TBA
Ig Nobel EuroTour
Date TBA
Japan
The 2020 Ig Nobel Prizes, honoring achievements that first make people LAUGH, and then THINK, were awarded on September 17, in a reinvented, high-speed, intercontinental online ceremony spanning six continents. The Covid-19 pandemic kept the ceremony from its traditional home at Harvard University.

This was the 30th First Annual Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony.

The Ig Nobel Prizes were handed to the winners by genuine Nobel laureates. The laureates who helped present the prizes: Eric Maskin (Economics, 2007), Frances Arnold (Chemistry, 2018), Rich Roberts (Physiology or Medicine, 1993), Marty Chalfie, (Chemistry, 2008) Jerome Friedman (Physics, 1990), and Andre Geim (Physics, 2010). [NOTE: Ten years before receiving a Nobel Prize, Andre Geim was awarded an Ig Nobel Prize in physics for using magnets to levitate a frog.]

Each winning team was also given cash — a ten-trillion-dollar bill from Zimbabwe. [This commemorates the 2009 Ig Nobel Prize for Mathematics, which was awarded to Gideon Gono, governor of Zimbabwe’s Reserve Bank, for giving people a simple, everyday way to cope with a wide range of numbers — from very small to very big — by having his bank print bank notes with denominations ranging from one cent ($0.01) to one hundred trillion dollars ($100,000,000,000,000).]
Re-Engineered, for the Pandemic

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, this year’s ceremony had to be re-engineered. It happened entirely online rather than in Harvard University’s Sanders Theatre.

The organizers even invented a new way for a Nobel laureate on one continent to hand an Ig Nobel Prize to a new Ig Nobel Prize winner on a different continent.

This year’s prize was a PDF document that could be printed and assembled to make a six-sided box. Five sides each show a different kind of bug: a flea, a cockroach, a computer bug, a norovirus stomach “bug,” and a Volkswagen beetle. The sixth side is an instruction sheet that describes how to assemble the prize. The PDF was emailed in advance to the Nobel laureates and the new winners.

During each prize presentation, a Nobel laureate held up an assembled prize, said “Congratulations!”, and moved the prize off the side of the video screen. The winners reached off the side of their video screen, seemingly grasped the prize, and brought theirs into view. The ten-trillion-dollar bills were presented that same way.

Quick, sometimes cacophonous musical fanfares (performed by bagpiper Jeremy Bell, accordionist Thomas Michel, the sister team of violist Sylvia Rosenberg and trumpeter Katrina Rosenberg, drummer Kiyoshi Furusawa, trumpeter Dietrich Strause, or multi-instrumentalist Zachariah Hickman) heralded each prize announcement.

^ The 2020 Ig Nobel Prize, in its final form after being sent through the Internet, printed on paper, and assembled. Eric Workman designed this prize, as he has designed all the Ig Nobel Prizes presented during the past two decades.

The six sides of the prize, seen here prior to printing and assembly.
Harvard physics professor Melissa Franklin, in a Zoom call from her attic, began the ceremony with a very non-traditional traditional-theater-safety speech:

If you have come to an event in Sanders Theatre at Harvard University, you know the drill: Please take a moment to identify the nearest exit. Please silence all cell phones, pagers, and other electronic devices. No food is permitted inside the theater, unless the food is inside you. Etcetera.

But this is the year 2020. We are not in Sanders Theatre. The COVID-19 pandemic is keeping each of us in our own home. So do any damn thing you want. DON’T identify the nearest exit. Shout at your cell phone. Eat something. [At this point, Franklin took a big, noisy slurp from a coffee cup.] Next year, or whenever we’re all together back in Sanders Theatre, we will ask you to be a little restrained. But today?...

Get your paper airplanes ready. I said get your paper airplanes ready. The Thirtieth First Annual Ig Nobel Prize ceremony is about to begin!
The Year’s Theme: Bugs
The theme of this year’s ceremony (though not necessarily of any of the prize-winning achievements) was BUGS.

The ceremony included the premiere of “Dream, Little Cockroach,” a mini-opera performed by opera singers, Boston area scientists, and the Nobel laureates. (THE OPERA PLOT: A man dreams that, although he was always a cockroach, he has been transformed into a human being. His family, and then entomologists, and then the entire populace, argue about how to respond. They decide to make him their leader.)

Paper Airplanes Continued to Fly
The Ig Nobel tradition of audience members (and everyone on stage, too) throwing paper airplanes continued, in altered form. People around the world sent in short videos of themselves throwing paper airplanes more or less at the camera. Many of those throws became part of the webcast. The ceremony did keep one toehold in Sanders Theatre, where a single paper airplane throw became a small but uplifting part of this year’s event.

Better Luck Next Year?
Marc Abrahams, master of ceremonies (and editor of the magazine Annals of Improbable Research), closed the ceremony with the traditional closing statement: “If you didn’t win an Ig Nobel Prize tonight — and especially if you did — better luck next year.”

The event was produced by the magazine Annals of Improbable Research (AIR), and co-sponsored by the Harvard-Radcliffe Science Fiction Association and the Harvard-Radcliffe Society of Physics Students.

The ceremony was webcast live for the 26th consecutive year. This year, there were four additional versions, in Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, and British English.

A specially edited recording of the ceremony will be broadcast on public radio’s “Science Friday” program on the day after Thanksgiving.

The new winners will give free public talks—The Ig Informal Lectures—in November and December. Those talks will be webcast. See the Improbable Research website—www.Improbable.com—for the schedule, and to see the recorded video of the Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony.
The webcast’s many parts were scattered across many countries, connected by the Internet. Most of the engineering and announcements happened in the Improbable Research museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As you can see in this image, the museum contains many objects produced or studied by Ig Nobel Prize winners, and also Ig Nobel Prizes from past years. The 2020 ceremony was filled with bugs, and also dogs and cats.

Until this year, the ceremony was funded almost entirely from ticket revenues—from people who journeyed to be part of the audience—be part of the show—at Sanders Theatre.

But this year... no audience, no tickets, no ticket revenues, no funding. The ceremony was organized and built only with a tremendous amount of volunteer effort and time from a large number of people.

If you would like to help The Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony continue, maybe for another 30 years(!) or more, you can, please, donate to the ceremony. And also subscribe to this magazine—the Annals of Improbable Research!

Please donate at our web site, at www.improbable.com/DONATE.