FOR THE PAST 11 YEARS, SCIENCE AND THE U.S. NATIONAL SCIENCE Foundation (NSF) have joined forces to celebrate the old axiom: A picture is worth a thousand words. The International Science & Engineering Visualization Challenge honors the long tradition of using illustration to communicate the complexities of science, engineering, and technology to students and the public.

We asked contestants to provide visualizations that illustrate powerful scientific concepts, offering prizes in the traditional categories of illustration, posters & graphics, and photography, as well as in newer ones: games & apps and video. We were delighted by this year’s responses: 227 submissions from 12 countries, including entries from 17 U.S. states and Canadian territories. The best of the submissions are both beautiful and captivating, able to excite popular interest in subjects normally treated with academic rigor.

This year’s top entries feature Earth and planets sitting at the focus of multiple streams of energy driven by the sun, a game that allows thousands of users to collaborate in mapping neurons, wearable energy storage to power future electronic clothing, and other compelling science and technology. These and more winners are featured on the following pages and at http://scim.ag/VisChall2013 and www.nsf.gov/news/scivis.

Tarri Joyner of NSF organized this year's challenge. Garvin Grullón of Science’s Art Department designed this special section, and Mark Peplow, a science journalist in Cambridge, U.K., wrote the text.

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