THREE OF A KIND
Trio of 'super-Earths'
spotted.

www.nature.com/news/

ESO

SNAPSHOT

Out of the ovary

A human egg is caught on camera as it emerges from a woman's ovary. It is one in a series of the clearest ever images of the ovulation process and was accidentally snapped by surgeon Jacques Donnez, of the Catholic University of Louvain in Brussels, as he performed a hysterectomy. The yellowish egg (about the size of this dot ·) is seen exiting a red, fluid-filled follicle on the surface of the 45-year-old woman's ovary.

Ovulation took a full 15 minutes — much slower than the sudden 'explosive' process suggested by some theories. Although human ovulation has never been seen in such detail before, it is a process that occurs at least once a month in fertile women. On release, an oocyte travels along a fallopian tube to the uterus.

These rare images, which appeared in *New Scientist* magazine last week, will be published in the journal *Fertility and Sterility* (J.-C. Lousse and J. Donnez doi:10.1016/j.fertnstert.2007.12.049).

J. DONNEZ, J.-C. LOUSSE/ELSEVIER

Astronomical wordplay keeps them guessing

Huge Applet, Unsearchable Terrestrials! This anagram could hold the clue to an important extrasolar planet discovery. When astronomer Gregory Laughlin of the University of California at Santa Cruz posted it on his blog last month, readers immediately leapt on the puzzle, and speculation about the hidden message is rife (<http://oklo.org/?p=279>).

The tradition goes back centuries. Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei embedded his discovery of Saturn and of the phases of Venus in anagrams; Dutch astronomer Christopher

Huygens used the same trick to describe his recognition of Saturn's rings (see 'Planetary games'). The device enabled them to stake a claim to a discovery while they slogged through the months of tough observational work needed to confirm the initial idea. Only then would the solution be revealed.

Astronomical historian Owen Gingerich of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, says Laughlin is doing the same thing. "It is just as it was for Galileo: a way of

guaranteeing a statement of priority," Gingerich says. "But at the same time, in case he's wrong he doesn't need to decode the anagram."

Laughlin says he's not so much staking a claim as trying to write an interesting blog and draw attention to a golden age of astronomy, when getting scooped by one's peers was a real possibility. "The book of nature is open for anyone to read if they can decode the message," he says.

Gingerich says astronomy is still competitive, especially in the search for planets outside the Solar System. "There have been some serious scraps in this business," he says, adding, "I haven't heard of a biologist putting out an anagram."

Laughlin is keeping mum about the actual discovery while he runs numerical computer models that could confirm it. He's not even sure how noteworthy it will be, given how quickly astronomers are discovering extrasolar planets, which now number close to 300.

Just this month, astronomers announced the discovery of a planet only three times the mass of Earth. There was little reaction in the popular press, nothing like the fuss when the first Jupiter-sized planets were discovered a decade ago. "Now it's kind of old hat to find another one," Gingerich says.

Eric Hand

NASA/PL

Planetary games

Galileo Galilei, ~1610, on Venus (pictured)

Anagram: *Haec immatura a me iam frustra leguntur oy* (These immature ones have already been read in vain by me.)

Solution: *Cynthiae figuras aemulatur Mater Amorum* (The Mother of Loves [Venus] imitates the figures of Cynthia [the Moon].)

Christopher Huygens, 1656, on Saturn

Anagram: *aaaaaaaccccddeeeehiiii
iiiiiImnnnnnnnnnnnoooppprrstt
ttttuuuu*

Solution: *Annulo cingitur, tenui, plano, nusquam*

*cohaerente, ad
eclipticam inclinato*
(It is surrounded
by a thin flat ring,
nowhere touching,
and inclined to the
ecliptic.)

Gregory Laughlin, 2008, on an extrasolar planetary discovery

Anagram: *Huge Applet, Unsearchable Terrestrials!*

Solution: to be revealed ...