Valve’s Gabe Newell is sending a gnome to space

Gabe Newell, president of Valve, the video game company behind the *Half-Life* series and game marketplace Steam, is thanking the country of New Zealand for its hospitality by launching a gnome into space with aerospace company Rocket Lab in mid-November. Newell decided to stay in New Zealand at the start of the pandemic and is donating a dollar to the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit at Starship Children’s Hospital for every viewer who watches the satellite launch livestream or the online recording within 24 hours of launch.

This soon-to-be astronaut gnome is actually a 150mm tall model of “Garden Gnome” or “Gnome Chompski,” an item that first appeared in *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* but achieved meme status following the speedruns and travelogues (like this charmingly detailed one written by former games journalist Tom Francis) that popped up around it. The gnome was likely a reference to an older prank involving photographing stolen garden gnomes “traveling” around the world, which gained further popularity when it was seemingly referenced in *Amélie* and when it served as the basis for Travelocity’s “Where is my gnome” viral ad campaign.

[embedded content]

Chompski’s gone on to appear in Valve’s own *Left 4 Dead 2*, DLC for *Dying Light* and more recently *Half-Life: Alyx*, but this upcoming real-life rocket launch is a fitting homage to the “Little Rocket Man’’ achievement associated with the gnome from *Episode Two*. The achievement can only be unlocked if a player carries the gnome from the opening chapter of the game and places it in a rocket ship near the end — a task that’s difficult because the player has to set the gnome down to complete *Half-Life’s* environmental puzzles and combat

scenarios.



The gnome inside Rocket Lab's rocket
Image: Valve

This launch-ready version of the gnome is co-designed by special effects and prop house Weta Workshop and made from titanium. Rocket Lab hopes to use it "to test and qualify a novel 3D printing technique that could be employed for future spacecraft components".

The gnome will be attached to the inside of Rocket Lab's Kick Stage, the final stage of Rocket Lab's Electron rocket that allows more accurate placement of satellites in orbit. Once all of the rocket's payload is dropped, the Kick Stage is able to reignite its engine to initiate deorbit. This mission is not quite the sequel fans might have imagined for Chompski after setting him down in *Episode Two,* though; the gnome will burn up alongside Kick Stage as both reenter the Earth's atmosphere. Rocket Lab explains Kick Stage in the video below:

[embedded content]

Gnome Chompski will be accompanied by 29 other satellites at Rocket Lab’s November 16th launch from the southern tip of the Mahia Peninsula. The small satellites loaded on the Kick Stage of the company’s Electron rocket span a wide range of uses from satellites focused on communications and maritime surveillance to New Zealand’s first student-developed satellite, the Waka Āmiorangi Aotearoa APSS-1.

While sending a gnome to space comes off about as silly as the SpaceX launch of a Tesla Roadster, Newell’s addition of a charity element — even though he could just donate a sum of money rather than requiring people to watch — at least makes the stunt more meaningful than pure marketing. Interested fans should follow Rocket Lab’s socials for updates on specific launch timing heading into the 14-day launch window that starts on November 16th NZT (6AM ET/3AM PT on the 15th). The launch itself will be livestreamed on Rocket Lab’s site.

https://www.theverge.com/2020/11/2/21546596/valve-gabe-newell-gnome-space-new-zealand-rocket-labs