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A spaceship descends with a thunderous roar and deposits a futuristic probe before taking off again. The Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator (EVE) soon activates and begins flying around, scanning the barren surface for signs of life. Scientists today can only dream of having a robotic explorer like EVE from the Disney/Pixar film WALL-E. But some researchers are working on autonomous spacecraft, airships and rovers that can cooperate intelligently while exploring distant worlds. "The orbiter gives you global perspective, the aerial platform a more regional perspective, and that helps determine where to deploy ground assets in a targeted fashion," said Wolfgang Fink, a physicist at Caltech in Pasadena, California. Fink's vision of "tier-scalable reconnaissance" starts with an orbiting spacecraft to make a global survey for... [read full story]

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