

Douglas Adams

Starburst: Would it be true to say *Hitchhiker* appeals to certain limited groups such as students and professional people?



It all started one fateful day in March 1978, when Douglas Adams' now legendary science fiction comedy, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, was first broadcast on BBC radio and picked up a cult following.

The fourth book in the Hitchhiker Series, entitled *So Long, and thanks for all the Fish*, has recently been published, and the stories have been adapted into a TV series, a stage show, two records, and now a computer game.

Written and designed by Adams, in partnership with computer programmer Steve Meretzky, the *Hitchhiker* game is described as 'interactive fiction', featuring detailed text descriptions on the screen instead of the usual graphics.

Roger Birchall recently talked to author Douglas Adams about his writing... and Hitchhiking fun and games...

Douglas Adams: Maybe. When I actually meet people at signing sessions and so on, I've always been surprised at the extraordinary range who turn up. But obviously there are a lot of college people there.

There are a lot of traditional science fiction ideas and themes in *Hitchhiker*, as well as humour. Are you familiar with a wide range of science fiction literature?

No. I certainly wasn't intending to parody science fiction as such. I'm not really very keen on science fiction. I've got tons and tons of SF books, largely because people keep on giving them to me. I've read about the first fifteen pages of most of them. My girlfriend actually reads more science fiction. I've read the sort of obvious things... some Asimov and some Clarke, the stuff most people have read.

Was *Hitchhiker* accepted by the BBC because of its humour, or because of the great interest in science fiction that *Star Wars* had revived?

I think it was around the end of 1976 when I first presented the idea to the BBC, and it eventually came out in March 1978 about two weeks after *Star Wars* opened over here, and everyone said, 'The BBC are jumping on the *Star Wars*' bandwagon.' I couldn't believe people thought that in two

weeks the BBC had said, 'let's do something like *Star Wars*'. I wanted to do science fiction, and the BBC bought it largely because it was a comedy, and they liked some sketches I'd written.

I thought the *Hitchhiker* TV series worked very well considering it was adapted from a radio show. Were you happy with how it turned out?
I didn't like the TV series so much actually. I think we could have done quite a bit better, but there were various people pulling in different directions. We'd had a very good time doing the radio show, and it wasn't the same.

The TV show was well cast, with most of the same actors who'd played the characters on the radio, I believe.
Yes. Simon Jones played Arthur, and I'd written the part for him in the first place. Mark Wing-Davy was Zaphod. Steven Moore played the voice of Marvin. But there was a change in Ford Prefect; this is just one of the things about the acting profession. Before the director was ready to start casting, the guy who played Ford on the radio, Jeff Gillan, had just been offered a part in a West End stage show, and he basically had to decide between a bird in the hand and two in the bush. He very sensibly went off to do the stage show, because at that time he wasn't even sure if he *would* be cast in the TV series.

A *Hitchhiker* feature film has been on the cards now for ages it seems. ... (laughs) Oh, I know! Tell me about it!

What stage is that at, if any?
They're about to renew the option in two days' time. They're still looking for a director. I've had enough of writing that script. I've done several different versions. They've got another writer who's going through my versions at the moment, trying to come up with one that makes the whole thing work, then they're going to give it back to me again.

What input will you have with regard to the film?
Well, I will have a lot of say; but say doesn't necessarily translate into listen.

The *Hitchhiker* phenomenon has taken off in America in the same way *Doctor Who* has. Do you think it reaches a similar audience?
Well, there's an overlap. I think there are a lot of people *Hitchhiker* would appeal to, and *Doctor Who* wouldn't, and vice-versa obviously.

"The next thing I do will be nothing to do with Hitchhiker. I think that will be good for me because it will be nice to sit down and think 'right where do I start?' rather than 'where did I get to?'"

Don't you think *Doctor Who* is popular in the States because it is looked upon as being 'typically English'?
Yeah, and it struck me as rather ironic that after it had been taken up by the Americans, largely because it was so English and therefore different from anything they had, immediately the production staff, I thought, started pandering to the American audience and



Marvin the robot from the TV series of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

ignored the fact that what they'd first gone for was its Englishness.

***Hitchhiker* is now popular all over the world. Do you think the humour still works in the same way when translated into other languages?**
One of the problems with the TV show as far as putting it on foreign countries' networks is that there is so much text on the screen that it's not simply a question of dubbing voices. But I believe the show has now been out on German TV, as I notice there has been a sudden upsurge of sales of the book in Germany. I don't know, it's written with so much a view to the actual language that I think it probably struggles along in different translations. I'm not sufficiently good a linguist to say what the other translations are like.

Do you think the books might not be appreciated by some cultures because of the political satire they contain?
There is no reason why any European country wouldn't enjoy them I think, always assuming the basic 'thing' can be translated in the first place.

Your latest book, *So Long, and thanks for all the Fish*, seems more 'adult' in tone than the others. Was there a reason for this?

It's difficult to do a series of books, as I've been doing, without running the risk of lapsing into self-mimicry. After a while, the tone of voice can take over, whereas in the first place the tone of voice is forged out of the way in which you are working on the ideas. So I was very consciously trying to do something different. There is an argument that if I was trying to do something different then why didn't I do something completely outside the field of *Hitchhiker*? Maybe that's a fair argument. The next thing I do will be nothing to do with *Hitchhiker*. I think that's going to be good for me because it will be nice to sit down and think 'right, where do I start?', rather than 'where did I get to?'

Do you think each book is mostly read by the same people who bought the first one?

Could be. This latest book certainly seems to be selling faster than the last one (*Life, the Universe, and Everything*). My favourite is the second one (*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*), but then some of my favourite bits are in the third one. The latest one was an experiment which, if I were tackling it again, I would do in a slightly different way. It's funny, I've had a lot of people say to me it's their favourite book since the ➤

► first one, which has surprised me to be honest. There is one major common factor between the first and the fourth one which is that they both have a substantial amount of action taking place on Earth, and I think that's something which a certain proportion of the audience responds to. There are slightly more immediate and identifiable things to get hold of!

Do you think the game will appeal more to Hitchhiker fans or computer fans, or are they generally the same?

There are a lot of overlaps. Curiously enough, there have been a number of people who have either written to me, or Infocom saying, 'because I'm a fan of Hitchhiker I went and bought the computer game, and I think I might go and

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get a computer now to play it on'. So obviously there were people who were buying it because it was Hitchhiker, and didn't have an interest in computer games before.

But then also I was told of one guy who had got the game because it was an Infocom game, and really liked it but was having a bit of difficulty with one part, and a friend of his suggested he should check out that detail in the book, and he said 'What book?'! So again, there are

obviously overlaps with people either end for whom the other end is new.

Will this 'all text', as opposed to graphics, type of game be the future of the home entertainment computer market?

I don't think they are necessarily mutually exclusive. I certainly find the text adventure games more interesting because they stimulate the imagination much more. So I think it is more interesting to pursue the direction of this type of game.

Is there an 'ultimate goal' in Hitchhiker, as there is with most computer games?

Yes, to get to the end. In fact, the object of the game is discover what the hell the game is!

That's pretty unconventional.

Yes, and I don't know how many people know this, but you can actually ask other characters in the game what they think the object of the game is.

How can a player discover this is possible in the first place?

There are quite a few things put into the game which are absolutely not essential to it, but at some stage you might happen to stumble across just by chance. It's nice to put those kind of things in. There's no sense that every person who plays it has to be steered to finding every single bit of the game. It's quite nice when somebody tries something completely off-the-wall and suddenly finds they get a response to it.

I believe at one point you have to argue with the game, and at another, it ignores you.

Yes. There's a point where it lies to you as well.

I'm sure the computer game will be popular with Hitchhiker fans. What is your opinion of the fan following your work has attracted?

I get a bit of feedback asking why don't I take more interest in the fan clubs. But I find it very unnerving to think there is a fan club for something I do.

Do you feel flattered by it all?

Yes, but also slightly unnerved. It's not something which I think is good for somebody to take too seriously, so that's why I can't really get involved with it.

A Hitchhiker towel is the latest bit of spin-off merchandise on the market.



Considering the connection with the stories, I'm surprised there wasn't an "official" one available before.

The towels were first manufactured, for fun, by a company who made towels for Marks & Spencers. They just made six on spec. to see if M & S would be interested, and they weren't because they 'don't do merchandising'.

The towels sat on a shelf for years, and then this friend of mine tracked one down and thought 'why don't we try and manufacture them?'. So I said 'Yeah, great'. But I've not really pursued the merchandise thing very strenuously because I'm basically a writer, I'm not in the T-shirt business. On the other hand, if someone comes along with something and it's a nice idea I say 'fine', but it would have to be something reasonably good. The one thing I wanted to do ages ago was a towel, but everybody said 'oh, it won't sell'. But I wasn't really worried, I was told 'the book won't sell', I was told 'the record won't sell', particularly by the BBC. The towels are now selling terribly well.

Do you have any connections with the BBC these days?

No.

You were Script Editor on *Doctor Who* for a year when Graham Williams was producing the show. . .

He and I actually left together.

You wrote a few *Doctor Who* stories during the Tom Baker era, such as *Shada*, which was never filmed completely due to a BBC strike, and *The Pirate Planet*, which contained more comedy than usual for the series. Can you comment on these?

Shada wasn't that great. It's only acquired a notoriety because it wasn't made. It's much more alive in people's imaginations because of that. It had some nice bits in it, but it was certainly wildly over-long at six parts. It had a lot of padding in it. Whereas *The Pirate Planet*, a script I really liked, would have been much better at six parts. Because it had to be cut so heavily to get it down to size, an awful lot of good stuff really went out of the window. *The Pirate Planet* shouldn't have been so overtly funny or jokey as it was. I wrote it with a lot of humour in it, but the point is when you do that, it very often gets played to the hilt. I felt there was too much feeling of 'oh, the script's got humour in it, therefore we've got to wheel out the funny voices and silly walks', which I don't think does it a service. ■

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Are you going to be involved with any other computer games?

I'm brewing up a new game with Infocom at the moment, but nothing to do with

Hitchhiker.

Will you be writing any more science fiction or comedy books?

My next book will certainly be humorous in one way or another.

But not science fiction?

Well, I never intend to write science fiction anyway. It's largely that I end up exaggerating so much that it ends up as science fiction.



Above: Douglas Adams (left) with his co-creator of the computerized *Hitchhiker* game - Steve Meretzky. Below: One of the dentrassi, inflight caterers to the *Vogan Space Craft*, and left also from the TV series of the *Hitchhiker's Guide* - the two-headed *Zaphod Beeblebrox* (Mark Wing Davey).

