

INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS ADAMS AND STEVE MERETZKY

"SO LONG AND THANKS FOR THE CHIPS, TOO!"

FROM The Famous Computer Café

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With the introduction of personal computers into virtually every facet of our lives, it should come as no surprise that personal computer technology has given rise to a new literary form, interactive fiction. With interactive fiction, the story is programmed into the computer with software so that the "reader" becomes the central character and can change the outcome of the story each time he or she "reads" it. Formerly called "text adventure", the medium now encompasses everything from detective stories to interactive versions of classics like Roy Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451. This week at the Famous Computer Cafe we visited with Doug Adams, author of the science fiction cult classic, Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy. Doug brought with him computer programmer, Steve Maretsky, the other half of the team that put Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy on computer.

TFCC: Tell me, Doug, about the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

Adams: Well, it's something which started off as an idea which entered my head whilst I was lying drunk in a field in Innsbruck fourteen years ago. I turned it into a radio series in England in 1978, which then came over here. I turned into a book, a series of books, including my newest one called So Long And Thanks For All The Fish, the fourth in the series. We've done a TV series. We've turned down the dental floss version, there didn't seem to be enough of a medium there really. There've been various stage versions of it. And there's the movie upcoming. And meanwhile, we now have the interactive version which enables you to get in there and find out what it's all about. And the answer is you don't find out what it's all about, but you have a lot of fun being extremely confused.

TFCC: Steve, how did you two get together?

Maretsky: Well, actually it was Douglas who approached Infocom. He'd been playing our games for a number of years ... well, days. One morning he started playing one and by mid-afternoon he knew he wanted to produce an interactive version of the game with us.

Adams: Actually, I think it was months.

Maretsky: As I said, it was years. So, Douglas approached us and said, "Would you guys be interested in working with me on an interactive version of Hitchhikers?" I think we went off in the corner and thought for five or ten seconds and said, "Sure!" Then the lawyers proceeded to hassle over it for another five or six years, maybe it was a matter of weeks. And then we did it.

TFCC: Did you find certain limitations to programming his ideas and having them come up on the screen, Steve?

Maretsky: Of course, there are limitations but there are a lot less limitations than there are when you're writing a book. Because in a book, everything proceeds linearly from A to B to C and everyone who reads that book has exactly the same experience. But with a program like ours, it's all interactive and things can proceed in all different orders depending on what the player does. The best analogy I've ever heard is imagine what Shakespeare would be like if someone in the audience could decide that Hamlet dies in Act I.

TFCC: That's a good analogy. How does the game work? What can we look forward to when we get it and open it up?

Adams: Well, an important things to stress is that you don't need to know the book to play the game. It's equally difficult for people who've read as not. This is the first game in the history of the world where you actually start from a hangover. Your first job is to cure that. Then after that, the first dozen or so moves are very, very easy. Then it begins to get bizarrely complicated. Your house gets demolished, the Earth gets demolished, so you're having a really bad day. And then all kinds of weird stuff starts to happen and it gets even more complicated. And then it all comes together in a glorious consummation at the end.

TFCC: How would you compare this to the other Infocom games? Are we looking at a heavy-duty game in terms of expertise?

Maretsky: Well, as Douglas pointed out, it does start out really easily. But I think by the time you get toward the latter portions of the program, you're going to find this to be one of the toughest games that we've ever put out. So there's something in it for both the first-time player and the experienced pro at interactive fiction. And as far as the programming of it went, I think it was much the same. It started out gloriously simple and then it got incredibly hairy and complex. And then, by the end, everything came together.

Adams: I came over to Boston and we worked for a while there. And then we were working by electronic mail across the Atlantic. And then the last stages, when a lot of the game was in place but needed some serious pulling together, Steve flew over to England. And I was, at that point, staying in this rather strange hotel down in Devon in the west country. We pounded up and down the beach for a couple of days working. And finally got it all together. In a fit of overexcitement at that point I went and bought part of the hotel which meant it was a very, very expensive bill. So I hope it's going to sell a lot because I've got to pay for my bit of the hotel.

TFCC: Now, you have a trilogy with your Hitchhiker's Guide. Are we going to see a trilogy in this software package?

Adams: Well, the news on that is that the first game only covers really the first half of the first book. So, there's a lot of ground we could cover. It's not a trilogy anymore, it's now a quadrology, because there's a fourth book out .

Maretsky: As far as the games go, I don't think we've really decided whether it's going to be a septology or a nonology. Those details have to be thrashed out yet.

TFCC: Doug, you've been a pretty successful author and now you're getting into the world of software, which is a whole new field. Do you see yourself becoming a software author in more areas than just this book?

Adams: I would be very interested in that. I've really enjoyed working on this and I've become intrigued with computers. I spend far too much time sitting in my room at home with increasingly huge piles of computers trying to get them to talk to each other and play with each other . And I have to justify the amount of time I spend so I may as well turn it into a living. But certainly it's not going to replace writing books.

TFCC: Does writing software offer you more opportunities in creativity than writing books?

Adams: It's very different. What is great, actually, about writing a program like this is that you are actually playing with the reader/player. I mean, I like to think in the case of the Infocom games you're as much a reader as you are a player. It's a cross between a book and a computer game. (And the great news about these games, folks, is you don't have to shoot any aliens !) When you're writing a book, you are to a certain extent playing with the readers' reactions. You're trying to build up a sense of this idea here and you're going to surprise them with how that turns out. With these games, you actually are soliciting an actual response which you then play around with. So the computer knows what responses come and how to deal with that response. As a writer of a book, you can only guess how they've been responding to what you've been writing.

TFCC: That sounds like a different dimension in terms of interacting with your public. Steve, where does this game fit in with the greater scheme of things for Infocom?

Maretsky: We've been so happy with the way this collaboration worked out that you're going to see a lot more collaborations like this one in the future. We're going to continue get well-known authors like Douglas to join with us and write games. I think that's going to help us increase the literacy of our games as they become closer to a type of fiction in their own right.

TFCC: Steve, you're the senior game designer. Do you see that games like this will continue to increase in their popularity? Will you introduce any graphics into your games or do you want to become known as the specialists in the text adventure environment?

Maretsky: Well, the way we at Infocom feel about that is, given the current state of computer graphics, they really don't add anything at all to the play of the game and, in fact, they take away. There's only so much space on a floppy disk and for every graphic you put in, that's less text and less descriptions and less puzzles that you can put in. So, in the near future, you're not going to see us putting out any interactive fiction with graphics in it. In the longer run we're working on all sorts of things and as computers get better and better, what you're going to see is games like ours with better language interfaces and with greater breadth and depth in the plot. They're going to continue to approach fiction and become an art form in their own right.

Adams: I think a lot of the adventure game graphics I've seen are limiting on the imagination. Now there's a famous remark which is very current in England. When some young kid was asked which he preferred - radio or television - and he said he preferred radio. He was asked why and he said, "Well, because the scenery's better." And the great thing about Infocom games is the scenery is so much better than the ones with graphics.

TFCC: Do you think this is going to be real popular in Europe?

Adams: Oh yes. I mean really popular. I mean the Beatles will be a faded memory when this game comes out.

TFCC: Guys, I have really appreciated you being here at The Famous Computer Cafe. Thanks for coming.

[end of interview]