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LIS 585

February 10, 2016

Adaptations, Audiences, and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams. What do individuals think of when they hear this title? Younger audiences perhaps think of the more recent 2005 film. Many people think of the "increasingly inaccurately named trilogy of five" books published from 1979 to 1992. The common trend of "the book was better" may lead most individuals to assume that the novels are the original work from which all other versions of the tale originate. However, the original story of *Hitchhiker's* was written for yet another medium: radio. While *Hitchhiker's* has been adapted for several different media—radio, book, video game, comic book, record, play, TV series, website, and film (Anderson, 2005)—this essay focuses on the story of the first radio series, which is present in radio, the first novel, the TV series, and the film. For a list of publication and release dates of relevant media, see the Appendix.

Because of the various ways in which *Hitchhiker's* has been produced, there are a great deal of different "knowing audiences." A knowing audience is one who understands that the work which they are consuming is an adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006). *Hitchhiker's* presents a conundrum here; because Adams wrote each successive adaptation (Gaiman, 2009), each of which has varying popularity, different knowing audiences emerge. Do audiences who know the extent of Adams's involvement with the different versions have a different understanding of the authenticity of each text? This essay will begin with an examination of adaptation theory and its application to the *Hitchhiker's* franchise. Through an examination of the different versions of the

story throughout time and how they interact, I will draw a conclusion about the different levels of knowing audiences that exist.

### **Adaptation Theory and *Hitchhiker's***

The key element of the dictionary meaning of "to adapt" is "to make suitable" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 7). Fans of a work may want to see a film which follows its novel line for line, and they often engage in "fidelity criticism" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 6), or comparing how close the adaptation is to the original. However, an adapted work must be suitable for the new medium which it is presented in. Moving from one medium to another, especially if the work moves from a medium of telling to one of showing (Hutcheon, 2006), can be difficult.

On the other hand, it may be easier for a work to move from one medium from telling to another. *Hitchhiker's* first embodiment was a radio series (1978), a telling medium. It was then adapted into the novel (1979), which made the largest international impact (Osmond, 2005). This movement from airwaves to the page—from one medium of telling to another—was therefore a successful one. For example, one of the most iconic symbols *from Hitchhiker's*, towels,<sup>1</sup> appears for the first time in the novel, not in the radio series. Had the novel been received poorly, I believe that towels would not have achieved the cult status they hold to this day.

*Hitchhiker's* did not stop there, instead moving into a showing medium. The adaptations of the radio series into the TV series (1981) and the film (2005) support Hutcheon's statement of

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1. "A towel [the Guide] says, is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have...any man who can hitch the length and breadth of the Galaxy...and still know where his towel is, is clearly a man to be reckoned with" (Adams, 2009, p. 21).

"negative terms of loss" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 37). In order to achieve what Adams had presented in the radio series and novel, the cost would have been astronomical; the pilot episode cost over £120,000 with subsequent episodes costing around £40,000 (Gaiman, 2009, p. 91) as is. What can be described in a radio play or book cannot be so easily adapted onto the screen. Even the film, which had a budget of about \$50 million (Box Office Mojo), made certain changes to elements that were perhaps best left in the telling, imaginative media.

The example I have in mind is that of the character of Zaphod Beeblebrox. In the radio play, Adams gives him an extra head and an extra arm as a throwaway line (Gaiman, 2009, p. 87). This can easily be transferred to the novel, as a description of Zaphod on the page is easy.<sup>2</sup> However, giving Mark Wing-Davey an extra head on screen for the TV series presented all kinds of problems; the animatronic head looked fake and depleted the budget more than Wing-Davey (Gaiman, 2009, p. 89). While some may say that the strange-looking extra head adds to the charm of the show, it may also have detracted from the effect that the crew was attempting to achieve. Despite the larger budget of the film, a less effective solution was found; Sam Rockwell looked completely normal as Zaphod, except when the second face popped up from his neck, throwing back Rockwell's head.

Despite the difficulties of adapting the radio series to television, Adams found that transferring the material offered new opportunities for creativity. "The medium dictates the style of the show...it's the points where you go against the grain that you come up with the best bits" (Adams, as cited in Gaiman, 2009, p. 86). Adams seemed unconcerned with potential attacks on

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2. "He only had the two arms and the one head and he called himself Phil..." (Adams, 2009, p. 74).

the adaptation, such as those listed by Hutcheon: "violation," "perversion," and "betrayal" being some choice words (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 2). Instead, his views on adaptations fit more with the idea of hybridity: relocating ideas stimulates new creativity (Sanders, 2006, p. 17). Sanders also notes that "it is usually at the very point of infidelity [of the adaptation to the source text] that the most creative acts of adaptation and appropriation take place" (p. 20). Sanders and Adams are on the same page here.

Two of Cartmell and Whelehan's three categories of adaptation—transposition, commentary, and analogue (Cartmell & Whelehan, as cited in Sanders, 2006, p. 20) can be applied to *Hitchhiker's*. Because the adaptations were written by Adams himself, he does not comment on prior versions. Transposition, or the moving of a story from one genre or form to another, occurs and has been discussed above. Analogue, on the other hand, is different; while a work may present the ability to enjoy a work independently of knowledge of its source text, a deeper understanding of the work is gained when the source text is known (Sanders, 2006, p. 22).

In *Hitchhiker's*, analogue takes place for only some of the adaptations. Listening to the radio play before reading the first novel does not give the reader a deeper understanding of the story—unless the changed ending of the book is considered. However, listening to or reading *Hitchhiker's* before watching the TV series would allow the viewer to supply their own narrative to supplement the narration on screen. This is perhaps even truer for the film, the plot structure of which differs greatly from the radio series, TV series, and novel. However, the film contains a few inside jokes understandable to fans alone. For example, when Zaphod and Ford Prefect meet on screen for the first time, Zaphod calls Ford "Ix," which is explained in a footnote (Adams, 2009, p. 34). Without this previous knowledge, Zaphod's brief comment is lost on the viewer.

### **Audiences and *Hitchhiker's***

Fans of Adams's work who are aware that his was the mind that created and wrote all the versions of *Hitchhiker's* perhaps do not view works subsequent to the radio series as "perversions," except perhaps the film. While, like the other adaptations, Adams wrote it (or at least, he conceptualized much of it before his death) and changed the story to suit the medium, the tone is different, rounding out with a happy love story instead of an uncertain future. While this is disappointing to some fans, a Hollywood executive had warned them that they weren't "going to make a \$90 million cult movie" (as cited in Osmond, 2005). While the knowing audience of *Hitchhiker's* desired a more cynical ending, certain things had to change for a larger-budget film.

The concept of the knowing audience is an interesting one when it comes to *Hitchhiker's*. While the two kinds of audiences described by Hutcheon (2006)—knowing and unknowing—exist for *Hitchhiker's*, different levels of knowing audiences exist. Let us begin with the film. Depending on what other versions of the story have been consumed, audience members will take away different elements from the film. Those who have listened to the radio series and read the books will compare the action on-screen to that which they have previously been exposed through the "telling" media (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 121). However, those who have watched the TV series will make different sorts of comparisons. Actors, costumes, and sets will be compared between the two media, and certain nods which the film makes to the TV series will be picked up

on.<sup>3</sup> As Hutcheon points out, "differently knowing audiences bring different information to their interpretations of adaptations" (p 125).

Having two visual versions of *Hitchhiker's* presents an interesting conundrum with the idea that a visual adaptation changes perceptions of the original work (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 121). Suppose that an individual has consumed all four versions; when this individual returns to reread the book, do they see Martin Freeman or Simon Jones as Arthur Dent? Is Marvin a clunky grey robot, or a sleek white one? Two visual versions of each concept from *Hitchhiker's* now colonize the knowing audience's imagination.

Then there is the matter of the story. Each version of *Hitchhiker's* has the same beginning: after Arthur Dent watches his house get demolished, Ford Prefect rescues him from the Earth's destruction by hitching a lift on a Vogon ship. Shortly after, the pair ends up on the *Heart of Gold* spaceship with Trillian and Zaphod Beeblebrox. However, after this point, the different versions start to veer from each other. For other franchises, an individual might keep one version in their head as "canon," or the one true story which was penned by the creator. For example, fans of the *Harry Potter* franchise see the books by J.K. Rowling as the true version, while the films are derived.

What is the true plot of *Hitchhiker's*? While all versions after the radio series are derivations, all were created by Adams. Are towels not canonical because they were not in the original radio series? Any *Hitchhiker's* fan will tell you "no," so where is the line drawn? Because the film is the most different from the other versions and was made after Adams's death,

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3. For example, in a scene from the film, Arthur Dent walks past the TV version of the robot Marvin.

perhaps it is the non-canonical work. However, story elements that many find problematic with the film were ideas that came from Adams (Osmond, 2005). I am guilty of falling into this trap; initially, I was disappointed with the film because of its changes from the other media, but after discovering that Adams was caused these changes, I found myself not minding as much.

Regardless of an audience's view on the film, they are stuck with three or more versions of the story. Hutcheon states that "for unknowing audiences, adaptations have a way of upending sacrosanct elements like priority and originality" (p. 122). I would argue that in the case of *Hitchhiker's*, this is true for the knowing audience as well. Because each version of the story was written by Adams, fully knowing audiences can enjoy each version equally, without worrying about which version was "the original," and therefore the most authentic. If less is known about the different adaptations and Adams's involvement, another knowing audience is created that potentially is simultaneously unknowing.

### **Conclusion**

The various adaptations of *Hitchhiker's* and how they were created present many interesting questions. In this essay, I hope to have answered how different kinds of knowing audiences regard the different reworked adaptations of *Hitchhiker's*. Regardless of which version is the "true" one, fans will probably prefer whichever version they experienced first. Because they know the prior text, they "feel its presence shadowing" other versions of the story (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 6). With Adams as the creative genius behind each of the works, whether they are in a showing or telling media, each is uniquely original and uniquely *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Appendix: Versions of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

This is a list of different versions of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, including all the radio series' and novels.

1978 [March-April]: Radio Series (Primary Phase)

1978 [December]: Radio Series (Secondary Phase, part 1)

1979 [May]: Record (of the radio series)

1979 [October]: Novel (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*)

1980 [January]: Novel (*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*)

1980 [January]: Radio Series (Secondary Phase, part 2)

1980: Record (of the radio series)

1981 [January-February]: TV Series

1982: Novel (*Life, the Universe and Everything*)

1984: Computer game

1984 [November]: Novel (*So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*)

1986: Short story ("Young Zaphod Plays It Safe")

1992: Novel (*Mostly Harmless*)

2001 [May]: Douglas Adams dies

2004-2005: Radio series (Tertiary, Quandary, and Quintessential Phases)

2005 [April]: Film

2009 [October]: Novel (*And Another Thing...* by Eoin Colfer)



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