

Renowned sci-fi writer and computer buff **Douglas Adams** is taking his *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* to Disney and onto the internet. He talks to Ian Burley about life, IT and everything.

Cult figure

We're going to be hearing a lot about Douglas Adams in the coming months.

Author of the cult seventies BBC radio series, book, and eighties television series, *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (THHGG), Adams is in the middle of working with Disney on a big-budget movie version of his satirical science fiction caper, which is scheduled to screen around Christmas 2000.

Adams has also made a foray into computer games with the comic multimedia adventure, *Starship Titanic*. If that wasn't enough, his company, The Digital Village (TDV), recently launched h2g2, the web-based realisation of the multimedia encyclopaedia, the real Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

Adams is strongly associated with science fiction (SF) and computing. Besides THHGG, he wrote several Dr Who stories, and has been a keen advocate of the Apple Mac ever since its introduction in 1984. However, he doesn't pretend to be a SF specialist — even admitting that he finds modern SF difficult to read — and neither is he a computer guru. Above all, he's a writer: 'Writing was what I decided I was going to do when I left university,' he recalled. His talent soon earned him esteemed company: 'I had what appeared to be a break which turned out not to be as good as it might have been. This was spending a year writing scripts with Graham Chapman of [Monty] Python, though not on Python itself. Most of it didn't see the light of day.'

But then Dr Who, followed by THHGG, provided Adams with his real breaks. A characteristic humour permeates most of Adams' work and he reflects that his mother was the major influence. Adams re-read the THHGG books recently: 'The tone of voice right the way through was my mother's — a mixture of my mother's and A.A. Milne,' he said. He considers Disney's version of Winnie the Pooh not to be one of its better efforts. 'They should have made more of its Englishness,' he said.

Adams doesn't worry about how the quintessentially British humour of THHGG will be translated into a Hollywood blockbuster: 'Disney is a huge movie corporation and doesn't just make Walt Disney pictures. Out of the Disney stable over recent years have come not

only Bambi and Winnie the Pooh, but also Pulp Fiction and Con Air. There are no guarantees, but this ship looks like a reasonably good one. The captain looks like a good guy, the crew seems good and the route we've figured looks OK — so let's go for it! But who knows what's going to happen when you're rounding the Horn.'

The movie will inevitably spawn a game, but in the longer term it will be more valuable as a vehicle for Adams' other big project, known as h2g2. 'Our primary objective at the moment is to create this thing called h2g2.com, which just makes a more convenient URL than hitch-hikersguidetothegalaxy.com.'

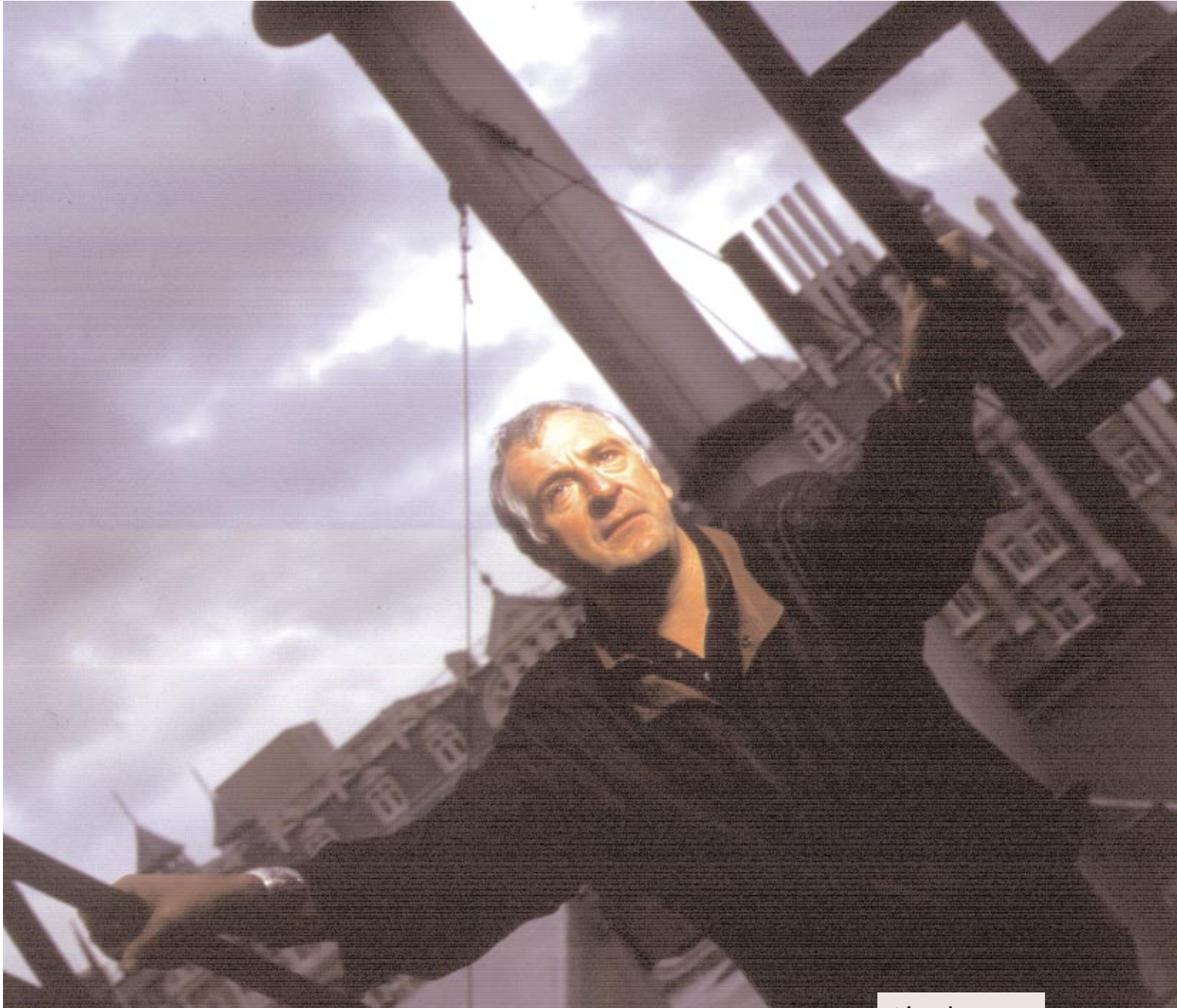
h2g2 is basically a huge web-based database of miscellaneous information donated by internetters. In a sense, it's a step beyond internet newsgroups, and Adams hopes it could be a challenge to conventional printed publishing.

'The curious thing about this was that when I first concocted the idea of the Hitch-Hiker's Guide all those years ago, I wasn't really thinking in terms of a piece of technology. There came a point when I had to describe a piece of technology, but really it was the idea of this narrative device — a way of infiltrating into the story all those other bits which actually fit.'

It was later that Adams' frustrations with the inflexibility of conventional book publishing started to generate some new ideas off the back of THHGG: 'I became quite interested in a guide that became completely collaborative. I guess that when the years rolled by and suddenly we had this thing called the worldwide web, and began to have little devices we could carry around, that the pieces began to fall into place for creating something like that.'

'The interesting thing about doing a collaborative guide online is that you can end up with something that is a fundamentally different model to any guide that has gone before. Because the guides we're used to operate on the constraints of the book publishing model, it essentially means that someone has to go and collect all the data, edit it and collate it, according to a set of criteria that he or she determines, and then publishes all the material... about a year late.'

Clearly, Adams is unimpressed by some of the electronic publishing efforts the web already has to offer: 'I guess one of the problems with the



web at the moment is that most of the people who have been thinking about it come from a background in publishing or desktop publishing.

'Really, what we ought to be doing — and this is what we are trying to step towards — is something that is completely live at all times, that becomes a pool by which people share information. Any piece of information anybody has about anything will get tossed into it. And our job is, first by hand and then by increasing levels of automation, to find ways of putting those little bits of information into the right place in a kind of matrix, so that any piece of information becomes self-finding.'

The possibilities h2g2 offers are not difficult to illustrate: 'I'd like to encourage people to put in the place and date of birth of their grandmothers. If everybody did that, then suddenly we'd have an enormous genealogical database,' he commented.

Waving his latest toy across the room, a Garmin global positioning satellite (GPS)

receiver, Adams underlines the need for the kind of information which h2g2 contributors may not have thought of: 'I've just started to carry this around, so that any time I come up with a piece of information which relates to a particular place, I enter the co-ordinates. Gradually we'll get something completely searchable,' he said.

Starship **Titanic** was a critical success for Adams and his creative team at TDV. There are overtones of *THHG*: an intergalactic space liner carelessly lands on your house, flattening it in the process. You can just imagine her master being a Vogon. The adventure is all about seeking compensation from the cruise line for the disaster, and overcoming all manner of obstacles.

The launch of Starship Titanic coincided rather well with the arrival of James Cameron's epic blockbuster based on the real Titanic. Adams laughs at suggestions that the timing was by design: 'The novelisation of the game was done by our friend Terry Jones. These were two things,

▲ ADAMS' LONG-TIME LOVE OF THE APPLE MAC, HIS TECHNO-COMIC WRITING AND VENTURES INTO ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING HAVE HELPED PLOT A PATH TO HOLLYWOOD FOR THE MAN WHO GAVE US ONE OF THE GREAT CULT SCI-FI ADVENTURES

Photography by Nick Dawe

the game and the novel, which we had a reasonable amount of control over. But even those we couldn't get out at the same time. So the idea that: (a) three years ahead of the time we would have known about this movie, (b) known that it would be the reverse of the huge disaster that everybody was predicting for it, and (c) remotely been able to time it to come out, is just insane. It was pure coincidence.'

Adams actually found himself as co-passenger with Cameron on a less-than-secure vessel during, of all things, a white-water rafting jaunt in the semi-frozen wastes of Alaska last year.

'He turned to me, quite unexpectedly, and said: 'Here we are, two Titanic authors trying to steer this boat past bits of floating ice!'

For 15 years Adams has had a love affair with the Apple Mac. He did get some stick, however, because TDV produced *Starship Titanic* on Windows a year before the Mac version. In TDV's Covent Garden offices there's a straight split between Macs and PCs, with the creative and artistic people staring into PowerBooks and massive monitors plugged into

soon replaced by an Apricot. 'Then the Mac came out, and the first one I saw was at the end of 1983. I was doing some work for Infocom at the time and they had, as developers, been secretly seeded with one and I fell in love with the thing. I then made the mistake of trying to write a book on one. Anybody who remembers using a 128K Mac will recall that it was a very loveable machine. On the other hand, trying to do anything with it would take hours,' he recalled.

The book was *So Long and Thanks for all the Fish*, '... which is why it's such an extraordinarily short book! In the end, I abandoned trying to do it on the computer and finished it on a typewriter.'

He currently owns a 1998-vintage G3 PowerBook, but this time he's not sure he'll rush out and buy the latest model. 'It used to be routine to change whenever possible, because however useful computers were, they weren't good enough. Then suddenly there comes a point when they actually do everything you want.'

On the Mac vs Wintel debate, Adams steers as neutral a course as possible. However, he does wonder why Wintel people get so worked up about the Mac: 'I don't see why there was so much anti-Mac venom from the other side. The Mac didn't represent any sort of threat to the Wintel platform. I'd be very interested to hear a Wintel advocate arguing in favour of the notion that it would be of benefit to Wintel users if the Mac competition was removed. Monopolies tend not to serve their customers very well.'

Wires and cables are a pet hate of Adams and a key reason why, after much experimentation, he's abandoned pocket computers for the time being. 'The people who designed the Newton did a fantastic job of getting all the really hard stuff right and didn't bother with the easy stuff. What Palm did was get the easy stuff right and not the hard stuff.'

Of course, a pocketable device was always the natural medium for *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide*, though Adams admits he got the underlying technology wrong. 'I saw the two as necessarily integrated, the information source and the machine you'd get it on, and didn't realise that the web, when it came, would be like radio — you'd get it on any device.'

With his association with Apple, his techno-comic writing and the new ventures into computer games and electronic publishing, Adams is enveloped in lots of shiny technology. We should see some stunning special effects in the forthcoming movie, too. But he's not ruled by it. The interview proved to me that cutting through all that silicon blur is a man who simply wants IT to help more people enjoy his writing. Now, he hopes, h2g2 will do the same for all.

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PowerMac boxes, while the programmers stick defiantly to their PCs and Windows NT. When I visited TDV for this interview, I spotted a large pile of redundant old PowerMacs in a corner, topped by a potted plant. I later discovered they were waiting to be networked together as a bank of processors dedicated to helping the SETI-shared computation project.

Adams isn't a computer boffin, but he's owned far more hardware than most. Monolithic mainframe-style computers star in *THHGG* — the Earth itself turns out to be one giant computer, for example — and then there was *Deep Thought*, which computed '42' as being the meaning of 'life, the universe and everything'.

However, it took a while for Adams' interest in PCs to ignite: 'I think somebody did actually give me a BBC Micro, but I never really got to grips with it and at that point I wasn't terribly interested. Then I decided I'd better get myself a word processor. I hate to think how much I must have paid for it. It was a good machine, actually — 256K of RAM!' Adams became a regular reader of *PCW* at about that time, while waiting endlessly on the phone for problems with his word processor to be sorted out.

In 1983, Adams went to live in Los Angeles and promptly bought a DEC Rainbow. This was