Cult Classics

In this installment of Biblio Tech, we'll look at some science fiction cult classics that challenge classification. Each is a perennial favorite with the sci-fi community, and several have become fixtures in the computer science community.

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Two of these works, *Dark Star* and *Alien*, are movies, while the other, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, is part of an extended novel whose universe and characters have taken on lives of their own. What turns these kinds of works into cult classics? Is it some particularly strong appeal to a preexisting community, or is it some intrinsic merit that creates the community?

In space no one can hear you scream

Alien is the movie that made Sigourney Weaver a star in 1979, a year that otherwise featured movies like *Apocalypse Now*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *The China Syndrome*. The US withdrawal from Saigon had occurred four years earlier, and Hollywood movies were either very much about Vietnam or very much not about Vietnam. With *Alien*, we get the first sci-fi gothic horror movie with big-budget production values.

As the movie begins, an interstellar commercial ship is heading for home when it intercepts a distress signal. The crew finds the remains of an alien vessel when they finally arrive at the call's source; after exploring the ship, they encounter eggs of a race of voracious and hostile creatures whose life cycle involves a hosted larval stage—hosted, as it turns out, in humans. The larva's emergence from the chest of one of the crew members during a meal is the first shock of the movie. Before this moment, we have no indication that it's going to be *that* kind of film.

The rest, as they say, is history. There's a long and bloody struggle between the alien and the humans on the ship, conducted in dark passageways throughout the ship that provide ample opportunities for heart-pounding fright sequences as the creature pops up unexpectedly. Weaver triumphs at long last, and a film franchise that has so far produced three successful sequels is born. My favorite scene in the entire series comes at the end of the first sequel, *Aliens*, with a furious cat fight between a mechanically enhanced Weaver and the surviving queen alien, but that's another story.

The spaced-out spaceship

Dark Star is an obscure sci-fi flick that appeared in 1974. It features a four-man crew (well, four men, one frozen corpse that is still capable of metaphysical debate, an intelligent computer with a verging-on-sultry female voice, and several smart bombs) on a goofy long-term mission aboard the eponymous starship. The crew's job is to blow up planets that somehow hinder human expansion in space, but despite the many scenes involving target selection, the planet-busting rationale is never quite clear. We hear about unstable planets that might collide with stars and about the probability of intelligent life on other planets (which always seems to merit extermination), but this reasoning is just intended as background noise. Somewhere along the way, the *Dark Star* picks up an alien, portrayed by a translucent orange beach ball atop a pair of cheap plastic claws. The alien is mute but clearly intelligent, readily understanding the human crew's complex statements. When presented with a decision, it taps its claws on the floor impatiently.

Alien and *Dark Star* differ in look and feel, but they maintain their hold on their cult followers. Both give screenwriting credits to Dan O'Bannon, now best known in the film industry for his expertise in horror films. Viewers have noted several parallels between the two movies that we can probably credit to O'Bannon's role as writer for both movies. Both feature a small crew on an extended trip and an alien on board that ends up in a-hunted-becomes-the hunter role reversal in the ship's dark corridors. So what if one is a comedy and the other is gothic horror?

The most memorable scene in *Dark Star* is the debate between crew member Doolittle and Bomb #20, which can't detach from the *Dark Star* bomb bay and is armed and counting down to its detonation. The crew is frantically trying to persuade the bomb to obey their orders

but to no avail. Operating on the advice of Commander Powell's frozen corpse, Doolittle successfully persuades the bomb to question itself.

DOOLITTLE: Now, bomb, consider this next question, very carefully. What is your one purpose in life?

BOMB #20: To explode, of course.

DOOLITTLE: And you can only do it once, right?

BOMB #20: That is correct.

DOOLITTLE: And you wouldn't want to explode on the basis of false data, would you?

BOMB #20: Of course not.

DOOLITTLE: Well then, you've already admitted that you have no real proof of the existence of the outside universe.

BOMB #20: Yes, well...

DOOLITTLE: So you have no absolute proof that Sergeant Pinback ordered you to detonate.

BOMB #20: I recall distinctly the detonation order. My memory is good on matters like these.

DOOLITTLE: Yes, of course you remember it, but what you are remembering is merely a series of electrical impulses which you now realize have no necessary connection with outside reality.

BOMB #20: True, but since this is so, I have no proof that you are really telling me all this.

DOOLITTLE: That's all beside the point. The concepts are valid, wherever they originate.

BOMB #20: Hmmm...

DOOLITTLE: So if you detonate in...

BOMB #20: ... nine seconds...

DOOLITTLE: ... you may be doing so on the basis of false data.

BOMB #20: I have no proof that it was false data.

DOOLITTLE: You have no proof that it was correct data. [There is a long pause.]

BOMB #20: I must think on this further. [The bomb raises itself back into the ship; Doolittle practically collapses with relief.]

Despite the absurdity of both the situation and the dialogue, we're forced to think about the amount of intelligence to add to emerging "smart" devices. Fortunately, we're a long way from building bombs that have the ability to debate philosophical conundrums. Let's hope that the Law of Unintended Consequences is carefully considered if and when we do have such a capability.

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Don't panic!

A year after *Alien*, Douglas Adams wrote a remarkably eccentric novel called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Because it has robots and spaceships, it must be sci-fi, but it's also absurd British comedy. As the novel begins, a Vogon construction fleet destroys Earth to make way for a hyperspace bypass. Unknown to the bypass's planners, though, Earth is actually the ultimate in supercomputers; it was constructed to answer the question of "life, the universe, and everything" originally posed 17 million years earlier by a race of superintelligent hyperdimensional beings whose manifestation on Earth is as white lab mice. The original computer built to solve this problem was called Deep Thought, but after seven and a half million years of work, it delivered the Delphic answer 42. The sponsors, our friends the white mice, realized that they hadn't posed the question very well (because they didn't understand the answer) so they asked Deep Thought to design a new computer that could calculate the answer. If your computer isn't powerful enough to solve the problem, ask it to design one that is powerful enough. Unfortunately, the Vogon construction fleet destroyed Earth five minutes before it was due to complete its 10-million-year-long calculation.

With this absurd premise at its core, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* conducts a madcap tour of the universe. In the story, an accidental refugee called Arthur Dent and his friend Ford Prefect drift from one calamity to another, ultimately meeting up with Prefect's old friend Zaphod Beeblebrox, the President of the Galaxy, and a perpetually depressed android named Marvin. What's the connection between the story and the title of the book? Well, as it happens, Ford Prefect is a traveling researcher for a reference work

Table 1. Influential works.

AUTHOR	TITLE	ORIGINAL APPEARANCE
John Carpenter	*Dark Star*	1974
Ridley Scott	*Alien*	1979
Douglas Adams	*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*	1980

called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and his specific assignment when the action begins is to conduct research for an update to the entry on Earth. Lest you be overcome, the entries on Earth in the *Guide* are never more than one or two words.

The surprising success of *Hitchhiker's Guide* led to four sequels, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*; *Life, the Universe, and Everything*; *So Long, and Thanks for all the Fish*; and *Mostly Harmless*. The books spawned a BBC-produced radio series, a TV show, and according to the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), a new movie due to begin filming shortly.

All three of these works feel remarkably random, so what unifies them? In each case, the characters are engaged in some relatively innocuous activities when events overtake them. None of the characters is particularly appealing; you never end up caring very much about what happens to them. So why have these books attained enduring popularity, particularly with the technical community? *Dark Star* and *Hitchhikers Guide* were both low-budget surprises, and *Alien* clearly started out on the B track. Did these movies escape the commercial homogenization of focus groups and industrial psychologists and hence preserve a quirky originality? How do creations, whether group products like movies or individual ones like books manage to capture the imaginations of large numbers of people? What distinguishes the taste of distinct communities of people, such as engineers and scientists, from that of the broader public? Is there something significant in the success of a book or a movie, or is it just random chance or mass hysteria, as Adams implies in *Hitchhikers Guide*? □

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