The Den of Geek interview: Graham Linehan

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After a false start with the critically lambasted Alexei Sayle comedy Paris, Graham Linehan and writing partner Arthur Matthews shot to stratospheric success in the UK TV comedy scene with the hugely popular 'Ted & Ralph' characters in the BBC's Fast Show, going onto galactic domination by writing three series of the now-legendary Father Ted.

Linehan afterwards collaborated with Dylan Moran and others in the cult comedy Black Books, and teamed up again with Matthews for the off-beat sketch show Big Train.

Currently writing the third series of the hugely popular IT Crowd, Graham graciously took the time for a quick chat with DoG…

Father Ted, Black Books and The IT Crowd all suggest that you have more than a sneaking admiration for timewasters. Are you naturally industrious yourself?

[laughing] One thing that struck us as funny in Ted is the idea that priests have nothing to do. It's not true, but we thought it's a funny thing to say. We loved the idea that they get up at midday and play scrabble…maybe not scrabble, but the most mindless games they can think of. That probably reflected to some extent what it's like being a writer – most of the time you're sitting about doing nothing and then there are sudden flurries of activity. Except for them, they didn't have the flurries of activity. So yeah, I guess that all three of the shows you've mentioned are, in an odd way, about the writing life.

There seems to be a strand of fatalism as well, as if there's no point anyone trying to do anything…is that a comedy staple, or perhaps something particularly from the Irish sense of humour?

I love Larry David's take on things in Seinfeld, which is that you shouldn't try to help people because it'll always put you into new situations which are unpleasant. You shouldn't do favours for anyone, you shouldn't be charitable…all this stuff is terribly negative and terribly unpleasant to say, but for comedy purposes, it's perfect. I always try and have people have bright ideas that they think will improve their lives, and the truth is that nothing improves your life – it just gets worse in a different way.

You criticised the first series of The IT Crowd for being a little too confrontational, and toned that down in series two. Is there a new direction again for the third series?

No, I just want to go further along the road we started off on in series 2, in the sense that I want to make sure the characters feel like it's them against the world. Conflict is entertaining and it's the stuff of drama – or comedy – but too much conflict, or conflict that's at too high a pitch can get annoying. There is one thing…I wanted to see if I could make Jen suddenly get a little bit ambitious, and have her think about getting upstairs and getting on with her life in terms of getting ahead.

But having said that, I've written two episodes and that hasn't reared its head yet [laughs].

It's weird; you have all these things you want to do, but when you actually sit down to write, the situation and the comedy takes over. For instance, the episode in the theatre [opening series two]…it doesn't do anything new with the characters. It's just the same characters having an adventure. That was the most successful one in the last series, and it's the one I'd like to try and emulate for the rest of it.

Every time I try and build a narrative into the show…like in the first series, I tried to have a will-they won't they plot-line that the Big Bang Theory is doing very well at the moment, but I couldn't do it. I just didn't have the skill; it made me impatient. Also, I cringe when I write anything lovey-dovey. I know it makes me sound like a sixteen year-old, but I just…I just can't pull it off, really.

Why do you think British comedy is in such a bad state at the moment?

I disagree that it's in such a bad state. At the moment you've got Peep Show, The Thick Of It and…I couldn't mention my own show, but hopefully someone else would…but those three–no, two – shows, for a start, are absolutely excellent. Two excellent shows on the go at any stage in history is pretty good.

People tend to group together their favourite sitcoms and feel that they all took place in one spot named 'the past', but in fact all these sitcoms are spread over a long period of time, and all the terrible sitcoms that were on have been justifiably forgotten. So because we remember the good ones and not the bad ones, we tend to think of the current state as beyond repair, when in fact it's just as good as it always was.

So those that say the nineties was the golden age of comedy are romanticising a bit?

Oh God, I don't know…maybe the nineties was particularly good. I guess since I started writing comedy I stopped thinking of it in that way. Because I'm involved in doing it, I just…let me put it this way: if I thought that, then what would I do? [laughs] I'd have to take up something else, and this is all I really know how to do at the moment.

Do you still feel in the shadow of the phenomenal success of Father Ted, which seems to be the new Fawlty Towers?

That's very nice of you to say…yeah, but it's a friendly kind of shadow. It's not like the shadow of a gravestone, it's the shadow of…I dunno, a big BAFTA! [laughs] Ted is so fondly remembered, I'll probably have it on my gravestone. I don't really mind, because we were firing on all cylinders, I was working with Arthur and we were both so incredibly excited at the ideas that the other person was coming out with. It's a time in your life that if you could replicate it, you would, but it's very difficult to say 'Well let's just do that again'. So I don't have any kind of feeling of resentment at Ted. It does kind of urge me to do better all the time. The good thing about it is that other people see it as a great, enjoyable show, whereas I watch it and I see all the mistakes. I always feel like I haven't yet got it right, and I want to get it right. Completely.

You'd never do a revisionist edit though?

Oh God, no. The idea of sitting down through a load of Ted dailies and going through them…that'd just drive me mad.

Ted naturally ended at series 3 with the death of Dermot Morgan, but it's been suggested that you have a notion to kill all your series after series 3. Is that true?

Three is a good number. If you look at –again- Seinfeld, after series 5, maybe, it really goes off the rails. I can't remember how many seasons there were in Seinfeld, I think something like nine, but the last three seasons are just insane. The actors…it looks like Elaine, it looks like George, but they're kind of not them.

It seems to me like the first series of The IT Crowd, in a way, in the sense that because the story-lines aren't together enough, everyone is over- compensating. I'm not saying that every episode in the first series was like that, but there are a few that definitely were, because we were kind of winging it.

I think it's a good thing to get out of something before people start getting sick of it. The thing about Ted was, you'd hear people saying 'Did you see Ted last night?' 'Oh yeah, it was great'. What I don't want people to say is 'Did you see Ted last night?' 'Oh. No. No I didn't'. 'Did you tape it?'. 'Oh no, I forgot'.

That's what happens when you have a show like Friends, going on and on and on and on, until it becomes almost like a channel in itself. It's on a loop. And you think 'Is this series one?'. 'Well, she's pregnant, must be series -'. It has no sense of continuity, and it's just gone so far away from what it originally was that it loses a bit of its charm. And we thought that the charm of Ted was the one thing that it had going for it.

Are you involved at all in the American version of Father Ted? Have you seen any of it?

They don't really contact us at all. They think they can just transplant it, lock stock and barrel….change a couple of things and stick it in an island off Boston – I think that was the last one – and it'll work. It amazes me that people in TV still think like that. People who are actually in the business

think that that will work.

I was reading your blog post with advice on potential American producers who might like to have a second stab at transferring The IT Crowd, where you said that they shouldn't try and re-cast Richmond, and so forth, but rather generate a new character from a good comedian or comedy actor. That's rather an old-style music-hall approach…

I don't really mean so much getting an actor and writing around them, but getting some good writers and working to their strengths. What I really wanted for The IT Crowd in America…I would have just shut up completely if they had just let me pick the writers. If they'd let me propose someone like Dimitri Martin, and people like that…but they have all these guys on contract and they have to use them. So that conversation's a non-starter.

Your IT Crowd skit on the anti-piracy short propaganda films is very popular. I know you like it yourself, since you've posted a YouTube of it in your own blog..

That's the...ah, what's the bloody word? Incestuous. The incestuous world of TV, where I'm actually posting a link to my own show on my own site.

And you've also posted a link on how to get around DVD region-coding – what's your attitude to DVD piracy? There are many comments on your blog from people grateful to be able to enjoy The IT Crowd via Bittorrent etc when they had no other access to it – people in Canada and the US, when the show was first run.

Well, exactly. It makes me very angry, because these are all people who would buy the show if they could, and they're still not able to. For whatever bullshit economic reasons, the consumer is the one in the end who misses out. It drives me nuts. So if people who for whatever reason can't get the show want to Bittorrent it, I'm happy for them to.

I feel that shows like Ted and The IT Crowd are very much more enjoyable watching with friends around a telly. I'm very proud of the menu designs and stuff that we do. It's just such a desirable thing, the DVD, that I just feel that people will buy it. But if people want to Bittorrent it when they can't get it, that's fine with me.

Do you speak German well enough to make a judgement on the German version of The IT Crowd?

[laughs] I don't think you'd need to speak German. Did you see their Richmond?

No, I've not seen it.

The thing about Richmond is that the only reason he's in it is that I had this idea for a character who's a goth, but he could be anything. He could be like an Emo kid or something like that. But they always seem to take it lock stock and barrel, copy it literally.

The way I wanted to see The IT Crowd work in America is actually the Big Bang Theory, you know? I've only seen two episodes [of The Big Bang Theory] so far, but I loved it, some really great lines in it. It's not perfect at the moment but I think it'll get better and better. It's going to be one of the big shows – might be the next Friends or something. And that even has the Will-They Won't-They plotline that I was trying to put into The IT Crowd. So watching it, I felt a huge admiration for the show, but also really annoyed that people didn't see that that's what The [US] IT Crowd could have been. It just frustrated me a little bit.

All you needed to do was take some of the plotlines that I wrote – some of the ones that definitely worked, like the theatre, for instance…more or less verbatim! – but around that, you can change anything you want. You can create a will-they won't-they plotline…but they don't see past the actual DVD they have of the show. They don't have the imagination to sort the problems out.

Your site indicates you're something of a geek yourself. Are you tempted to do more geeky jokes in The IT Crowd, but fear they'll go over the head of the average audience member?

Yeah, I always try and put ideas in that have what I call penetration...like in Father Ted, something like the idea of the Irish successes at the Eurovision Song Contest was an idea that had penetration into an English audience. With computers, it's a very weird thing. You can talk about Facebook and people kind of understand what you mean. Most people will understand what you mean, but there will be some people who don't, who aren't interested in computers and who just won't know what you're talking about, or be interested in it. And I want to get them on board as well. So the trick is just to try and keep it on a level where you're not alienating the knowledgeable people or the people who don't know anything. So that's what I'm trying to do at the moment – walk the line, as Johnny Cash said. Although it's not as exciting a line.

You've said that you don't particularly like writing very dark stuff, yet you contributed to Jam, which has got to be amongst the darkest comedy of the last ten years…?

Jam wouldn't be my favourite thing of Chris's, and it was the one where I didn't really feel like we were contributing a lot. Its mood was so grim that I just found it difficult to join in. I think that Chris [Morris] was just interested in tying people in moral knots – giving them a moral problem and then just twisting it so they have to do something awful to get out of the first moral problem. Although this is a secondary impulse for him, he's also interested in pushing buttons that haven't been pushed in comedy in people; making them laugh in a way that they're not used to.

Personally I just want to make people laugh. When I started into The IT Crowd, I realised 'I could just go back to trying to do a big-city comedy'. I was trying to do different things, and work in different ways, but in the end I just thought 'Why don't I do something I just really enjoy?'. Something that I know I'm reasonably good at doing.

Some people change and adapt and become…too restless to stay at any one thing, whereas I don't really see the need to grow and change as important as some. I like the idea of getting better at what I do, but don't necessarily feel that need to re-invent the wheel.

You've made a bit of a departure now, in adapting The Restraint Of Beasts. What drew you to that project?

Funny enough, no – that's a left-over credit that someone put up at the IMDB and it won't get off. I wrote a few drafts years ago and then I got off the project because I wasn't feeling it. So I'm not really involved in that anymore.

Would you be interested in doing movies?

I tried for a while. I wrote a few scripts, but I think I was really too immature to know how to construct a script properly. Also, I didn't really have anyone to turn to to ask how to do it. Now, because I know he's a fan of the show, I could probably turn to someone like Richard Curtis and ask him about structure and stuff, but at the time. All the people we were hanging around with…we knew people like Peter Baynham and Steve Coogan, but they were as much in the dark as us about stuff at that stage. So basically I was flying blind – I made all my mistakes and then I got a bit annoyed with the whole process, so I thought I'd do TV again. So it wasn't for want

of trying that I didn't write films.

People who have achieved your level of success are generally behind a bit of a social firewall, but you have a lot of interactivity with many fans –and some critics – via the comments at your website. Do you enjoy that kind of feedback?

Well yeah, it's nice for the most part, but it's beginning to bite into my writing time, so now I have a thing where I open up a comments page every Friday, so anyone with anything to say can say it there. I also feel that focuses people's minds so they don't just write blather. They send me links and really interesting comments that they've had time to think about. The internet is too immediate in a lot of ways, so you get a lot of time-wasting blather, but when people think about something and really take their time with it, they really write some great things.

But also I did also have really unpleasant people writing into me as well, who were just using it as a chance to say something nasty, so that was kind of horrible for a while. The brilliant thing about it is that there was this kind of idea that if we all just listen to these comedy geniuses then we'll just go away and write a better show, but the process of writing is so fluid and so uncontrollable that that kind of criticism doesn't really do anything at all. Also, it's all 20/20 hindsight.

The other thing is that when you're writing stuff you don't want your mind to be full of critical…'Oh well you shouldn't do this, because people don't like it'. You'd never write a thing.

Going back to where I started, are you the sort of person that needs to be three hours before deadline before you can really get geared up?

Funny you say that, because it's now two or three days before my deadline, and I haven't written two pages of the next script! So 'yes' is definitely the answer to that one. It just seems to be the way I work, so I'm just trying to live with it. You spend a lot of time really really thinking that it's all over, and that you can't write. It's so hard to sit down and...for me it is. Everything that you write on a first draft is just proof that you're shit. First drafts are always shit, but you have to write them so that you can write a second draft. But writing a first draft…every word that comes out of your mind just makes you groan. It's just painful. But if you force yourself…as I say, I've got three days to hand in a first draft of the next episode, and because we've only got three days, I've got no choice. I'll have to write this terrible, awful thing [laughs].

Now that you write on your own, who acts as filter and feedback? Where do you get that feedback from?

At the moment I'm getting it from Robert Popper, who I'm sure you know. I just love Robert – he's great. He used to be an exec as well. He used to work as commissioner. So he's got a popular eye on what an audience wil think. At the same time he's got a very great and unique sense of humour, so he's a brilliant person to show it to,

You were talking of doubts before– were you knocked back by the critical reception of Paris?

Well we weren't knocked back – we knew that it was going to get badly reviewed. We had this little tiny bit of hope in us – 'Maybe we were wrong, maybe it's good, maybe it's just us'. It went out and we couldn't read anything for six weeks, because everyone was just savaging it. It was really painful for us, because I still stand by those scripts. If you look at those scripts, written down, you'd understand why people made it.

But we did miscast it. Much as I love Alexei, he was wrong for the part because we wrote a shouty character and Alexei was known for being shouty, and so it was just…God, too much. It was just one of those things. One good thing that came out of it, though, was when we saw what happened when you release control a little bit, we realised that we couldn't ever release control again. Especially on Ted, because it was an Irish thing – the stakes were so much higher, because we wanted to be able to go back to Ireland at some point [laughs]. We knew it just had to be really good, so we just devoted ourselves to being a pain in the arse, and decided after [Paris] to make sure that everything was right.

Can I wind up by asking you for a recommendation for a computer game, as you seem to be fond of gaming?

Apparently it hasn't sold well, but the Orange Box…that's amazing. I think that if people are interested in the idea of how writing can be excellent in a game, then they've got to play Portal. The writing in Portal is just amazing, and I don't think I've ever said that about a game before.

Graham Linehan, thank you very much!

[We caught up with Graham a few months later to find out how series 3 of The IT Crowd was progressing...]

The IT Crowd will be back on UK screens in late autumn. In the meantime, catch up with Graham on his blog, Why That's Delightful! Our glowing review of the Father Ted DVD collection is here.