



The Planet Helpline

By Peter Wells

Ring ring, ring ring, ring ring...

(Warm and friendly Scottish voice comes on the line. There is a veneer of corporate-trained keyword concern overlaid upon the merest suspicion of profound indifference. Somebody listening with particular assiduousness might just discern the furtive, crinkling rustle of a packet of crisps being teased open. It is all of course an illusion, the message was recorded sometime in the mid-1990s)

'Hello. This is the Planet Helpline. Thank you for calling us, your call is important to us. In order to assist our response to your inquiry, if you have a touchtone telephone please select from the following options.' Obviously, shouted the unspoken message, if you do not have a touchtone telephone you are a planet of no significance located in an obscure corner of the galaxy with no market potential.

'Press one if you have a faulty part or component and you are still within the warranty period. You should remember that the warranty is valid only for the first five billion years, and even then only assuming that regular servicing has been carried out by an approved service provider (any omnipotent being such as God). You will be expected to provide proof of purchase.'

'Press two if you have a complaint about service support, hardware upgrades or new software. When the planet was dispatched to you it was provided with a full operating system, atmosphere, oceans, etc. along with applications such as fauna, flora and germs that only live underneath the toenails of rugby players. However, inadequate maintenance can reduce the quality of the planetary experience.'

'Press three if you have been fiddling about with the planet so much that you really have no idea how to get it back to the original condition. Our interactive diagnostic team are trained to provide sympathetic support during this difficult time – though frankly you have no chance of fixing it.'

'Press four if you have already forgotten the first three options and need to hear them again.'

'Press five if you would like to speak directly to one of our operatives due to an emergency. Please note that an emergency means serious product malfunction beyond normal operating parameters, and may be identified by consulting your owners handbook. Significant indications include raining frogs,

plagues of locusts, and people sunbathing in Wales in September. Please note that if you evolved in such a bizarre way as to be unable to press any buttons, we cannot be held liable for planetary malfunctions.'

'All calls are answered in a queue system. Please be patient as all our operatives are busy at the moment. Your call is important to us...'

(Keys in number five)

(Enter sound of Greensleeves or The Blue Danube...put on hold for approximately 1 billion years.)

'Thank you for your patience, your call is important to us...'

(Enter sound of Greensleeves or The Blue Danube...put on hold for approximately another 1 billion years until a connection to East Kilbride is finally made.)

'Hello, my name is Karen and I am your customer services assistant. In the unlikely event that your planet is still habitable after being put on hold for 2 billion years and thereby suffering the worst ravages of all that you can throw at it, I am here to help you. For your security and for staff training purposes, calls may be monitored.'

'Oh, hello. About time, I was planning on going out with me mates down the local micro-brewery, but I've blown it. I expect the building is now just a particularly interesting form of sedimentary rock. Anyway, look, I got this plant of off you and its gone all funny.'

'I'm afraid you have to be more specific sir.'

'Well, you know, uncomfortably hot, water around the ankles, ice-caps fallen off, atmosphere an interesting shade of yellow somewhere between an over-ripe banana and an especially repugnant skin complaint, completely run out of dolphins, that sort of thing. I got this planet in good faith, was promised dominion over the animals and the fish and stuff and now look, it's knackered.'

'Well sir, did you exhaust your supply of non-renewable resources?'

'Yes, but...'

'Did you dig holes in your planet and then bung up those holes with rubbish?'

'Yes, well...'

'Did you harness available solar power?'

'Well, now I was going to, it was definitely on the list of things to do but I got distracted by the invention of the DVD...'

'I'm afraid sir that you'll have to get another planet. Oh, but I'm forgetting...you didn't invent inter-stellar travel either did you?'

'Well no, but...'

'I'm sorry sir, but the End of Life Planet Directive is clear on this point. You are responsible for the disposal of the planet from now on. Good bye sir.'

'Hello? Hello?'

(Meanwhile, in a call centre near to Alpha Centuri...(turn left on the third roundabout into East Kilbride, keep going for several million light years, you can't miss it))

'Oh well. Better tell Mavis to close the Earth account.'