

Falling in love with “Red Dwarf” - by Lee Russell



It was around 2003 or 2004 when I fell in love with the British sci-fi comedy show “Red Dwarf”.

I had been somewhat aware of the series when it launched in 1988 but the external model shots looked so unrealistic that I didn't bother to try it... what a mistake! My epiphany came late one night after a long session of distance-studying for a degree with the Open University. Feeling very tired and just looking for something to relax with before going to bed, I was suddenly confronted with one of the funniest comedy scenes I had ever seen.

That scene was in the *Season VIII episode ‘Back in the Red, part 2’*. I tuned in just at the moment that Rimmer was using a hammer to test the anaesthetic that he'd applied to his nether regions.

I didn't know the character or the back story that had brought him to that moment, but Chris Barrie's wonderful acting sucked me in – I was laughing out loud and had suddenly become ‘a Dwarfier’. With one exception, I have loved every series of Red Dwarf, and in this blog I'll be reflecting on what has made me come to love it so much over the 12 series that have been broadcast to date.



For anyone who hasn't seen Red Dwarf (and if you haven't, get out there and find a copy now – seriously), the story begins with three of the series' main characters who have either survived, or are descended from, a radiation accident that occurred three million years ago and killed all of the rest of the crew of the Jupiter Mining Corp ship ‘Red Dwarf’. The main plot lines revolve around the quirks, antagonisms and peculiar situations that these main cast characters find themselves in.

Despite Chris Barrie having the leading role, for me the most significant character is Craig Charles' wonderfully anti-establishment Dave Lister.

Third Technician Lister, who escaped death through being locked inside a (time) stasis chamber, slowly comes to realise that he is probably the last remaining human alive. He is very likely the only human in the part of deep space that the Red Dwarf is now in. The beer-swilling, curry munching Lister is not a good ambassador for humanity. He's a space bum with very few goals beyond a flawed plan to settle down on Fiji with the love of his life, Kristine Kochanski (now dead). In the early seasons he is tormented by the rule-book following, petty minded holo-version of his former supervisor, Rimmer. Lister patiently ignores all of Rimmer's autocratic drives and as the shows progress the two settle into a state of mutual understanding and tolerance.



Second Technician Arnold Rimmer (Craig Barrie) died in the radiation accident (that he caused – I won't spoiler zone that or the significance of gazpacho soup, watch the shows to find out more) and has been resurrected as a hologram by the ship's AI. Rimmer is a deeply flawed character who desperately wants to prove himself by becoming an officer like his brothers but is destined to be a buffoon.

Although not an officer on ‘Red Dwarf’, he still out-ranks Lister. Rimmer uses every inch of that power to try to control Lister through petty ship's rules. The contrast in the two characters sets up many of the comic moments throughout the series.

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Cat is the third regular character.

He is a bipedal, human looking creature and the last in a line of felines who evolved from Lister's original cat.

This cat, *felix sapiens*, is not overly smart but very vain about both his looks and sexual attractiveness.



The fourth main character is the sanitation mechanoid **Kryten**, who doesn't appear until episode 1 of series 2 (called 'Kryten').



Originally played by David Ross in that episode, his introduction to the plot-line is certainly funny, but it is Robert Llewellyn's subsequent performances that really defined Kryten. Over time Lister encourages Kryten to 'break his programming' and evolve into an independent entity. Often pompous, Kryten does evolve and comes to embody many of the other character's flaws alongside a deep-rooted sense of 'rightness'. He becomes the Red Dwarf science expert, is sometimes careless, sometimes rude, continuously insults Rimmer, and is ultimately very human.

The growing ties of shared history and their struggle to simply tolerate each other defines these four characters and is regularly thrown into sharp relief by a wonderful supporting cast.

No single blog can do justice to all of the humour created by Doug Naylor (Rob Grant and Doug Naylor), and I doubt that it is possible to make you laugh now by simply trying to re-tell some of the "funny bits". Instead I'm going to select my favourite shows from eleven of the twelve series and shine a light on some of the magic that they created. So here we go! ...

Getting the overall comedic tone right was essential **in Series 1**. It was really hard to choose a best episode from a such a high-quality beginning, but the one I return to more often than most is '**Confidence and Paranoia**'. Lister has been looking around Kristine Kochanski's quarters for her hologram disc when Rimmer reveals that they have not been decontaminated. Lister falls ill with a mutated pneumonia virus that causes his feverish hallucinations to manifest in solid form – this is sci fi comedy not a Hard SF prediction of the future, just go with it! His illness causes it to rain fish in his sleeping quarters, the Mayor of Warsaw from 1546 appears and then spontaneously combusts, and then two guests materialise in the drive room: these are the embodiment of Lister's Confidence and Paranoia. Lister's Confidence exhibits everything he associates with confidence; he is a garishly tanned, gaudily-dressed extrovert who calls Lister "the King." By contrast, Lister's Paranoia has the opposite personality, and is a contrary voice that constantly undermines Confidence.



Rimmer warns Lister that these guests are dangerous symptoms of his illness, but Lister continues to spend a lot of time with Confidence and they eventually work out where Rimmer will have hidden Kochanski's disc.

Confidence then murders Paranoia just before he and Lister go outside to get the disc. In an act of suicidal over-confidence, Confidence ends up killing himself before Lister returns with the disc... which turns out to hold a second copy of Rimmer! This is a great episode with a lot of laughs.

My **Season 2** choice is the episode '**Queeg**'. Holly seems to have been making a lot of mistakes and the crew are losing faith in his ability to run the ship safely. When Lister is nearly killed in an accident a new face appears on the monitor screen replacing Holly. He introduces himself as Queeg 500, the Red Dwarf back-up computer. Queeg says that, due to gross negligence, he will replace Holly, who is then demoted to night watchman. The crew are initially pleased with Queeg's efficiency and intelligence, but then he starts to force

unwelcome tasks on them. Queeg takes over Rimmer's hologram and forces him to take early morning exercise, continuing even after Rimmer has passed out. Lister and Cat are forced to clean the ship in return for food. The crew come to realise how good Holly was towards them and make a plan to get rid of Queeg... which works... and then Holly reveals that he was Queeg all along and wanted to teach them a lesson:

Holly: "We are talking jape of the decade. We are talking April, May, June, July and August fool. That's right. I am Queeg."

Lister, The Cat, Rimmer: "What?"

Holly: "Queeg never existed. It was me all along."

Lister, The Cat, Rimmer: "What?"

Holly: "Wheeze of the week, mate."

The Cat: "It was a joke?"

Holly: "Going round in circles for 14 months. Getting my information from the Junior Color Encyclopedia of Space. The respect you have for me is awesome, innit?"

Lister: "So you mean you staged the whole thing?"

Holly: [in Queeg's voice] "That's right, suckers."

Holly: [in his voice] "And the moral of the story is, 'Appreciate what you've got', because basically I'm fantastic."

The episode I've chosen from **Season 3** is '**Marooned**'. This is a set-piece between Lister and Rimmer, who find themselves trapped together when Star Bug crashes. They have very limited supplies and can only hope to be rescued by Kryten and Cat before Lister runs out of food or freezes to death. We hear a lot of their back stories while they are waiting, all of which leads up to a comedy finale. After Rimmer's life savings and books have been burnt he refuses to have his collection of military figures go into the fire, pointing out that Lister could burn his guitar instead. Lister pretends to agree and Rimmer leaves the room for that tender moment... and instead Lister cuts out a guitar shape from Rimmer's prized camphor wood chest... and when Rimmer finds that out...!

Series 4 is full of wonderful moments, but the one I've chosen is "**DNA**". The crew find a ship that includes some technology to change a person's form by re-writing their DNA code. Cat accidentally turns Lister into a chicken and Kryten is turned into a human who struggles with his new emotions and drives, resulting in an explicitly embarrassing 'double-polaroid'. When they are returning Kryten to human form they first test the DNA re-writer on Lister's tray of mutton curry...

and accidentally create a mutton vindaloo beast! A further transformation of Lister goes wrong when he asks to be changed into "man plus" so he can fight the beast... before he finally works out that it can be killed with lager...

Lister: "Of course, lager! The only thing that can kill a vindaloo!"



By **Season 5** the Red Dwarf team are really hitting their stride. All of the episodes are crammed full with fun and it was an effort to single out '**Holoship**'. This is very much a Rimmer episode: Red Dwarf encounters a holographic ship (called 'the Enlightenment') that is capable of faster-than-light travel and crewed by a team of elite-intellectual scientist-holograms... as Kryten says, "*...Holocreus are legendarily arrogant. They despise stupidity wherever they see it, and they see it everywhere.*"

On board the Enlightenment Rimmer can touch (has 'an effective physical form') and enjoys the added bonus of a ship's regulation that says the crew must have sex twice a day. He falls in love with Commander Nirvanah Crane and comes to feel that the Enlightenment is where he belongs. He tries and fails to cheat in the test to join the holoship, only to discover that Cdr Crane has given up her place for him! Rimmer then goes back on

his earlier statement that career always comes before love. He resigns his new commission and returns to Red Dwarf, so that Cdr Crane can be re-instated on the Enlightenment. Seeing Rimmer struggle to fit in while enjoying the holoship's regulations is a joy, and Craig Barrie carries off the moment wonderfully when he resigns at the end.

I felt that the writing was starting to flag a bit by **Season 6**. Don't get me wrong, the comedy is still good, but it must have been hard to continue from the high points of season 5. My favourite here is '**Psirens**': the idea is that Red Dwarf encounters an asteroid field full of derelict ships that have been lured to their doom by telepathic creatures who show them their hearts' desires. These creatures are the eponymous 'psirens', ugly, insectoid creatures who telepathically conceal their true appearance. The psirens try to lure the Cat onto an asteroid with a message from women claiming to need mass insemination, and Lister with images of Kristine Kochanski. When Star Bug eventually crashes Lister ends up outside and kissing what he thinks is one of the lusts from his adolescence, Pete Tranter's sister (we're never told anything else about Pete). He just about makes it back inside, only for a second Lister to arrive claiming he is the real deal.



Kryten lets the second Lister onboard and then tests them at gunpoint to determine who is the psiren. The psiren is wounded but escapes, creating the space for a chase and comedic showdown between Kryten and the psiren pretending to be his creator, Professor Mamet (who he is programmed to obey). Very creative and very funny, this one is recommended.

Now we reach **Series 7** and the writing takes a new direction with the accidental addition to the crew of a parallel universe version of Kristine Kochanski (played by Chloë Annett) in episode 3 ('Ouroboros'). However, my favourite episode is the series opener, '**Tikka to Ride**'. Lister discovers that their curry supplies have been lost and hatches a plan with one of Kryten's spare heads to travel back in time and stock up. The plan involves deactivating Kryten's Guilt chip and many problems follow when the mechanoid no longer receives error guidance on his behaviour. The crew end up in Dallas, Texas on 22nd November 1963, within the Texas School Book Depository, just as Lee Harvey Oswald is about to shoot President Kennedy. They inadvertently change the past when they knock Oswald out of the window and prevent Kennedy's assassination. Travelling forward in time by three years they discover that this has had terrible consequences and the city is now a wasteland. Kryten cooks them some meat that Cat & Lister confuse with chicken, before he makes one of my favourite comic-reveals in all of the shows:

[Lister, Kryten, Rimmer and Cat sitting around a large open fire. Rimmer is fiddling with the Time Drive while Lister and Cat tuck into hefty chunks of meat]

Rimmer: "It's hopeless, I can't fix it. We're trapped..." – drops the time drive down by the edge of the fire

Cat: "Chicken's good."

Lister: "Yeah, really good."

Kryten: "That's not chicken, sir."

Cat: "Oh, what is it?"

Kryten: "It's that man we found."

<Lister and Cat suddenly stop chewing, their mouthfuls of meat turning to poison...>

"Well, it seemed such a waste to leave him lying there when he'd barbecue so beautifully."

Rimmer: <sniggers quietly>

“Did I do wrong? I didn’t get any error commands...”

<Lister and Cat let their half-chewed mouthfuls dribble out in disgust>

“Obviously I thought about it, because without my guilt chip or moral imperatives, I have nothing to guide me. But it seemed to me that if humanoids eat chicken then obviously they’d eat their own species; otherwise they’d just be picking on the chicken.”

Rimmer <highly amused>: “One minute you’re down, the next you’re right back up again.”

Lister: “I said I was enjoying that!”

Cat <absolutely horrified>: “I knew it didn’t smell right! Oh my god...”

Lister: “I’m a cannibal!”

<Unexpectedly, blips suddenly issue forth from the Time Drive down by the fire. It’s obviously ‘thawed out’>

Rimmer: “Look!”

Cat: “Right, let’s get out of here! I badly need to floss a piece of roasted dead person out of my teeth!”

Season 8 brings me back to the start of this blog, with the marvellous ‘**Back in the Red, part 2**’ – I’m not going to say any more about that one – just watch it! Now!

I’m also not going to say anything about the **Season 9**: ‘Back to Earth’ episodes. Ten years had passed before these 3 episodes were broadcast in 2009. I did not enjoy them and have nothing good to say about them: sorry ‘Doug Naylor’, but they stink... unlike...

Season 10 which saw both the writing and acting back to ‘firing on all thrusters’. We had to wait three years after the rubbish of ‘Back to Earth’, but these shows were worth it.

I love all 6 episodes but “**Lemons**” really stands out for me. What’s not to like about the crew being sent back in time to AD 23 Britain by a badly aligned, Swedish flat-pack “rejuvenation shower”, where they end up walking across the globe in search of lemons to make a simple battery, and meet a figure they mistake for Jesus Christ, on whom they perform emergency surgery?



The high quality continued into **Season 11** with 6 really engaging episodes. The crew are still lost in deep space, with all the problems that presents. But my best moments are in episode 5, ‘**Krysis**’, when Kryten goes into a mid-life crisis, gives up mopping and takes up extreme sports like bungee jumping in the elevator shafts. He replaces his usual body with a red DX-87 shell, which can spin his body round, has twin exhausts and sub-woofers.



The crew try to help Kryten out of his crisis by looking for an inferior mechanoid on another wreck, to show him how far he has come. However, what they actually find is Butler, a 3000 series mechanoid who seems much better at everything than Kryten... the interplay that follows between the 2 mechanoids is very funny, before the show ends with Kryten talking to The Universe.

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... and lastly we come to **Series 12**, which was broadcast in 2017. Six more fun episodes, all lovingly made for our enjoyment! For me this series doesn't quite meet the highs of series 11, but it is still extremely good.

The top spot goes to '**Siliconia**', where Lister, Cat and Rimmer get to experience life as mechanoids, and Kryten is nearly seduced into becoming a MILF!



So that's Red Dwarf to date: twelve seasons, 73 episodes, with just 3 that don't hit the mark in the entire run. To quote Mr Rimmer: "Marvellous!"

There's more from Lee Russell at www.russellweb.org.uk and  @LeeJ_Russell

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