



## The Chair

From *The If Machine* by Peter Worley



*Imagine a room with many windows, brightly lit by the sun, with an object in it, much like the one pictured above. During the day a man walks in and sees the object. He thinks, 'Ah, somewhere to sit down', and he sits and rests for a time because he has been on his feet for most of the day. After a while he looks at his watch and hurries out of the room. Later that day, a dog comes into the room. The dog sees the object and sits under it to get some shade from the sun - for it is a hot day. The dog stays there for a while, panting, then it trots off.*

*So, the man thought the object was something to sit on and the dog thought it was shelter from the sun.*

**Question:** What is this object? Something to sit on or something to shelter under? Or is it something else? Why?

*Later that night, when nobody else is around, an alien spaceship lands and out of it come some aliens that are zooming around the galaxy collecting objects from different planets. From this planet they collect the object pictured above. They take it back to the ship and then, in a blink, the ship silently vanishes back into outer space at light speed. On board the ship the aliens study the object, trying to work out what it is. They have no idea.*

**Question:** If the aliens do not know what the object is, then what is it? Why?

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*These particular Aliens are different from humans but in some ways similar: they have heads and arms and legs, but they have two arms on each side and three legs. They only have one head, but it is bigger and squarer than a human head. They discover that the object they took fits on their heads perfectly and they decide that it must be a hat. They gaze at themselves and think they look magnificent with the new hat placed on their heads. When they return to their planet, Zargon, all the other aliens are very impressed with the new alien headgear. The alien that took the object in the first place, Zarboog, then has an idea. Zarboog has thousands of the 'hats' made to sell them to other aliens.*

**Question:** What is the object now? A chair, a shelter, a hat, or something else? Why?

*Hundreds of years pass. Humans have now mastered interstellar space flight. By this time, chairs have no legs and float around so that people don't have to get out of them. One day, humans arrive at the planet Zargon. They make contact with the aliens, become friends and learn their language. When the time comes for them to leave, the aliens present them with a parting gift: one of their still very fashionable hats! The humans are delighted and zoom back to Earth with the alien gift. When they return to Earth they announce they have made alien contact and they hand over the gift to a space museum. It is placed in a special display case and underneath the object is written 'Zargonian hat'.*

**Question:** Is the object a Zargonian hat? Why or why not?

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*Back on Zargon, the original object brought back by Zarboog has been passed down to Zarboog's offspring and now occupies pride of place in Zarboog's great, great grandson's house, Zarboog III. It is very valuable and is heavily protected with alarms. One night there is a burglary and the object is stolen. The thieves fly off into space with the stolen object but with the Zargonian-police right behind them. There is a space battle and the thieves' spaceship is destroyed. The object flies through space and lands on a passing asteroid upside down. It is carried off into deep space and lost. The asteroid floats through space for ten years, then hundreds of years, then thousands of years, then millions of years and, finally, billions of years. There are no longer any Zargonians or humans left; they have all long since perished.*

**Question:** What is the object now that there are no humans or Zargonians (or anyone else) to see it or use it? Why?

*When the object fell to the asteroid, it landed upside down. Underneath, clearly written at the time of its manufacture on Earth, it says, 'CHAIR'.*

**Question:** Does this mean that the object was just a chair all along? Why or why not?

**Taking it further:** What would happen if it turned out that we had not designed the object in the first place, but had copied it from something left by other aliens or had simply used it

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after it had been left behind on Earth? Would that mean that it was not really a chair? Write your ideas below.

**Taking it even further:** What would happen if it turned out that the object was not designed by *anyone*, but instead the object was formed by a strange explosion that happened before humans existed? If the object wasn't designed, but dogs still used it as shelter, humans still sat on it, and Zargonians wore it as a hat, what would the object be? Why?

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