

Digital Darwin answers questions on new app

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People have wanted to ask questions of Charles Darwin ever since "On the Origin of Species" was published in 1859.

Now, 157 years later, you have a chance to speak with the famous 19th century biologist, with one caveat: It's a theatrical version of the man who first described evolutionary biology.

The Charles Darwin Synthetic Interview exhibit, formerly stationed at the Carnegie Science Center in Pittsburgh, John Pollock, the Duquesne University biology professor who created the exhibit, has had it transformed into an [app](#).

The app by the same name represents a full version of the popular exhibit that fielded 126,000 [questions](#) in just its first months at the science center, where it remained for about six years.

The app and exhibit feature actor Randy Kovitz - who starred in "The Fault in Our Stars," "Dawn of the Dead" and "Concussion" - as Darwin. He is dressed as the English scientist and answers 199 questions about his explorations, his childhood and family and the scientific principle of evolution, which continues to spur spirited discussion.

A mirror behind the synthetic Darwin provides commentary from religious, philosophical and scientific experts about the man and his science.

The full app costs \$9.99 for the full 4 { hours of content, with a free

version available in which Darwin answers 24 of the most popular questions asked at the science center. The most popular was, "Where were you born?" The answer is Shrewsbury, England.

The app can be downloaded from the App Store, Google Play and Amazon Appstore, Pollock said.

The app earned a Parents' Choice award as a "fascinating and bordering on eerie (but in a good way)" presentation that "lets viewers select questions to ask the pioneering scientist, including his thoughts about "the public response to his discovery."

"The app will best serve classrooms, libraries and all those fascinated by the life, explorations and contributions of Charles Darwin," the Parents' Choice publication says.

"John's strength is that he's a detailed science guy with a visual sense and a good way to convey science to the public," said Dennis Bateman, the science center director of exhibits. "I think it added a great layer of depth to the exhibit and the conversational approach was the kind of thing we were looking for to reach the average visitor."

Pollock, who holds a Ph.D. in biophysics, said the project uses synthetic interview technology developed at Carnegie Mellon University. The questions were based on a survey of 1,000 people in Pittsburgh about what they would ask Darwin if they could. About half didn't even know who he was.

David Lampe, a Duquesne biologist, helped script the synthetic Darwin's answers to 199 key questions, based on Darwin's journal entries and writings. The project received funding through the National Institutes of Health and the Templeton Foundation. It was incorporated into the Pittsburgh Public Schools curriculum in 2009.

"My main goal is getting good information to people and getting them thinking," Pollock said.

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