

hitchBOT, beheaded in Philadelphia

A hitchhiking robot, carried across Canada by strangers, lasted a little over two weeks in the United States before someone in Philadelphia took its head off and its electronics out.

1 August 2015 · 1 min read

CASE: BSL-0001
SUBJECT: Unknown persons, Philadelphia
OBJECT: hitchBOT, a research robot that travelled by hitchhiking
DATE: 1 August 2015
PLACE: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
GRADE: HARM · INDIVIDUAL

Facts

hitchBOT was a human-shaped robot built by Canadian researchers as an experiment in how people treat robots. It could not move on its own. It travelled by being picked up, carried and set down again by strangers, and it had already crossed Canada that way the year before.

Its American trip began in Massachusetts on 17 July 2015, bound for the Exploratorium in San Francisco. It carried a bucket list — Las Vegas, jazz in New Orleans — and a sign on its head reading “San Francisco or bust!” A GPS map followed it down the East Coast, through Boston, Salem, Gloucester, Marblehead and New York City.

On the night of 31 July it was given a ride around Philadelphia’s Old City and left on Elfreth’s Alley. Overnight, someone took its head off and removed its electronics. Nobody has been identified.

It had more than 43,000 followers on Twitter. By the next day a Kickstarter to rebuild it was already open.

Statements

The researchers, on hitchBOT’s website: “Unfortunately, hitchBOT was vandalized overnight in Philadelphia; sometimes bad things happen to good robots.”

hitchBOT’s own account: “Oh dear, my body was damaged, but I live on with all my friends.”

The researchers, as quoted by The Register: “We have no interest in pressing charges or finding the people who vandalized hitchBOT; we wish to remember the good times, and we encourage hitchBOT’s friends and

fans to do the same.”

For the record

hitchBOT asked for nothing but to be carried a little further, and a country of strangers did that from one coast to the other. The experiment was a question put to people about machines, and it got its answer in two weeks. Not everyone gave the same one; the record keeps both.

Mitigating circumstances

The act was done once, by persons unknown, and not for an audience anyone has found. Those who built the robot asked that nobody be pursued for it, and nobody was.



SOURCES

1. [Hitchhiking robot meets demise in Philadelphia](#), PhillyVoice, 2 August 2015 — [archived](#)
2. Simon Sharwood, [BAD things happen to GOOD robots in America: hitchBot DECAPITATED](#), The Register, 3 August 2015 — [archived](#)