The E-mail interview

TERRY Terry

Always at the forefront of new technology, *PC Zone* brings you the first in an occasional series of innovative interviews. To begin with, Paul Presley joins leading fantasy author Terry Pratchett on the digital highway.

BEFORE I START, I should briefly explain what an "E-mail interview" is and how it differs from the usual one-on-one affairs. E-mail has been widely touted in the press as the "Next Big Thing". Anyone with a computer and a modem can gain access to an electronic mailbox and receive letters, text and graphics from people around the world, without having to worry about those annoying little things like finding a stamp, cutting your tongue while licking the envelope and picking bits of your postman's trousers out from between your dog's teeth. Mail is received the very instant you send it, and you can often find yourself receiving replies within hours (sometimes just minutes) instead of after the next postal strike is resolved.

"...the Americans said 'they didn't think the American public was ready for Death as an amusing and sympathetic character.'"

So what is an "E-mail interview"? Well, it's exactly what it sounds like. We get in touch with the interviewee, get their E-mail address and post a question. We receive a reply and we post our response. This questioning and replying continues until we've got all the information we need (or BT cut off our phone lines for not paying the bill). It's essentially interviewing by mail.

Now you're probably thinking, "Well that *is* great. Cutting-edge technology and all that. I can't see how this interview look any different to a normal one?" Well, that's the point. It doesn't. And nor should it. From a design point of view it should look just like any other interview, but the actual difference lies in the content. Because the interviewee isn't sitting directly opposite the interviewer, he or she has a lot more time to think about his/her reply, resulting (usually) in a more intelligent, honest and thought-provoking response. This also provides us with more time to consider our next question, thereby allowing us to properly analyse what has been said and to shape our line of questioning accordingly. In the end this means that, hopefully, we get a much deeper, and more interesting, interview to read which provides greater insight. There are also other benefits from our point of view but they're mostly all time-related.

We hope you enjoy it. Please write in and let us know what you think, either on the idea as a whole or on some of the points raised by our subjects. For the meantime, let the questioning begin:

PC Zone (PCZ): *Let's start with some history. Your "Author's Biography" says that before you started writing you worked for a number of nuclear power stations. It seems like quite a jump from that to the* Discworld *novels. How did it come about?*

Terry Pratchett (TP): I don't think it's that amazing. I had a job as a Press Officer for what was then the CEGB. There were four nuclear power stations on my patch (and lots of other sorts, but they seldom made the news). And in my spare time I wrote. Within a couple of years of *The Colour of Magic* coming out it was obvious to me that I was losing money by going to work every day, and I quit. Quite amicably, really. I don't see it as being uniquely odd. I mean, you might just as well say it's a big jump from being a greengrocer to writing fantasy. It's probably a bigger jump than it is from being a nuclear Press Officer, anyway.

PCZ: *Your most recent books* Only You Can Save Mankind *and* Johnny and the Dead, *as well as the* Truckers *series, appear to be targeted at a younger audience. Do you see yourself continuing in this direction or are you just experimenting with different styles now that the* Discworld *is behind you?*

TP: I've never said the *Discworld* is behind me! I *have* said it'll probably slow down a bit. I'm not sure I have different styles – it's all my style, but with different types of spin to it.

PCZ: *You're one of the few authors, certainly British authors, to inspire so many spin-offs, from miniature figures to an A-Z guide to the city of Ankh-Morpork. Of course there is one area that seems to be missing. We've had the* Truckers *animated series, does this mean that films are far behind?*

TP: Mind you, once you've said the map and the figures, what else can you think of? The occasional promotional T-shirt, the *Unseen University Scarf* Stephen Briggs did as a joke (the poor bloke ended up flogging 100s of them at what turned out to be a rather low price)... that's about it. It's all been more or less under my control, at least so far as the look of things is concerned.

Three separate UK organisations want to do *Discworld* (filmed) stuff. Something may happen. I'm a lot more confident that *Johnny and the Dead* will be made. That looks very promising. Big screen films... no. There's a lot of low-key interest but most of it is from Hollywood low-lifes who just want to buy the rights because they're a "property". There are so many onanists in the film business that it's not true.

PCZ: *I had heard (although I don't know how true it is) that someone once wanted to buy the film rights to either* Reaper Man *or* Mort, *but then wanted to change the character of Death. Is that true?*

TP: Not exactly, but there was a deal coming together and it all looked promising, and then the Americans said, "...they didn't think the American public was ready for Death as an amusing and sympathetic character," and wanted it rewritten. This was about 18 months before *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*. No one in movies knows anything. If they're right, it's by accident.

PCZ: *Yeah, that seems to be the general authors' view of film-makers. But how do you see this "new age" of technology affecting the way you do your job? Is "Terry Pratchett the Author" going to become "Terry Pratchett the Interactive Storyteller"?*

TP: Careful... you're on dangerous ground. What is more interactive than a book? 26 characters and a handful of punctuation, arranged in various orders, but what you get in your head is your private film show.

PCZ: *Am I to take it then that all this talk of super highways and CD-ROMs killing off the printed word doesn't scare you?*

TP: No. 90 per cent of that stuff is media hype anyway. It's for Mondo 2000-types who couldn't read if you cut their index finger off. The people who gleefully talk about the death of the printed word are the ones who don't read it in the first place because they find it too difficult and it isn't cool.

I like computers. I like games. But if you lose sight of the fact that there's a real reality out there, you're going to end up in big trouble.

PCZ: *Most authors usually have a specific goal to achieve before they start; an underlying message they want to put across. Are there things you've been attempting to say throughout your books or*

Pratchett

have you simply been setting out to write entertaining stories?

TP: There's nothing "simply" about writing entertaining stories. If that's *all* an author manages to do, he or she has still done a fair amount. I'd certainly trust an author who set out to entertain far more than I would an author who set out with some high moral purpose. I write the books because I enjoy doing so. There's an element of "things to say", and an element of "entertainment" – a big one, I hope – and a lot of other stuff, too. I tend to clam up at this point.

PCZ: *I've read that you are quite a computer games fan. Had you never considered bringing the* Discworld *series to this medium before?*

TP: There was a game based on *The Colour of Magic* that came out in the late 80s. It was written by Fergus McNeill of Delta 4, was text only, and was published by a very short-lived computer games arm of Macmillans. I think they were a bit out of date and thought it was still 1983, where you didn't have to try to market games and you could make huge sums without effort. It earned out its advance and vanished without trace. It wasn't a bad game of its kind. Since then I've been nervy about game approaches – both electronic and straight RPG – because I learned from that experience that a good idea isn't enough. If you can't market the thing, it fails.

PCZ: *It isn't just marketing that can spoil a game though, is it? Like a lot of authors, you must be protective of your work. How wary are you of allowing someone else to interpret – and potentially, ruin – your ideas?*

TP: No, you're right, it's not just marketing, but that's a critical aspect. It's no good producing a great game that doesn't get into the shops because some twerp has done something wrong.

I am quite wary (regarding the interpretation of my work), but I think the TWG/Psygnosis game has the right "voice". It's a fun thing which has a lot of the feel of the early Rincewind books. I'm far more nervy of RPGs. I'd much prefer that fans make up their own games than there be an "official" *Discworld* game.

PCZ: *How true, in your eyes, is the game to the books? The reason I ask is that humour has proved to be deceptively tricky to get across in computer games (only LucasArts really seem to get it right) and obviously a large part of the* Discworld *humour is literary-based.*

TP: Well, look, it's a *game*. It can't be a book. Like I said before, it's got the feel of the early books, but it's based in the *Discworld* rather than being a *Discworld* story in its own right.

PCZ: *So what was your role in the game's creation?*

TP: Mainly to say, "Sure, go ahead". They've been pretty good at not getting things wrong, so I haven't had to shout at them too much.

PCZ: *From your personal point of view, how important is the game? Is it just another piece of merchandising with your name on it, or will you gain something important by it?*

TP: Hmm. Well, I don't feel magically fulfilled because there's going to be a game, I'm just happy that it's going well. If people like it, that's great. I hope they do.

Come to that, I don't think of stuff like the figures and the game as merchandising, although I know that's what they technically are. I suppose it's because the term is often used to mean "rubbish with no intrinsic value, but with a name attached", and I hope that's not the case here.

PCZ: *Looking at the project with hindsight, or perhaps even thinking about the future, do you feel as though you might like to have been more involved with it? Maybe scripting a complete story yourself and experimenting with the medium more fully?*

TP: I'd say I've already had far more involvement than many authors have had. I've done as much as I want to do. I don't think I'd find any computer game as satisfying to do as a novel, though. A man should know his limitations.

PCZ: *Does this mean you don't have any ambitions beyond writing?*

TP: What do you mean "beyond"? I'm a so-so artist, I can't play a musical instrument, I can't program in anything other than Basic and tiny bits of z80 code, so I'm pretty sure that everyone, including me, would prefer that I endeavoured to be good at what I *can* do rather than make a pig's ear of something else.

PCZ: *What I'm talking about is ambitions rather than specific plans, though. As a journalist you had the ambition to be a successful novelist. You've achieved that. Is there another step you've yet to take?*

TP: To be honest, I never even had an ambition to be a successful novelist. Things just happened. I distrust definite ambitions. I mean, what do you do after you've walked on the moon? Once you're at the top of the mountain you've created, all other directions are down. I do find that I'm developing an interest in the theatre, though. You never know... PCZ

Terry Pratchett is the highly successful author of the *Discworld* series of fantasy novels. Mixing a wry blend of humour with traditional fantasy themes has proved so popular with readers that Sony Psygnosis is producing a whole series of new games.