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(Chris )
Today on the Writing Worlds podcast, we have the huge honour of being joined by the brilliant Adrian Tchaikovsky. Adrian is a fantasy and sci-fi writer who's won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Children of Time, a Hugo Award for the Children of Time series. Adrian has also scooped British Science Fiction Association and British Fantasy Awards and has a background in dungeon mastering for role-playing games.

0:00:26
(Chris )
So it's fair to say he knows a wee bit about worldbuilding. Adrian, hello and welcome. Hi, thanks for having me on the show. It's great to have you here, and also here today is my regular co-host, Emily Inkpen.

0:00:40
(Chris )
Hello, Emily.

0:00:41
(Emily )
Hello, Adrian. We're going to look at your approaches and techniques when it comes to world building and this will no doubt spark inspiration in our listeners or just satiate curiosity whether they're writers or readers or whatever and so of course we'll also be playing a couple of games along the way but first I'd like to ask about what role place or world plays in your narratives. Do worlds inspire stories that you place characters in, or do you build worlds around your characters

0:01:14
(Emily )
and stories?

0:01:15
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I mean, honestly, the world is the entire thing. I appreciate that I'm obliged to have characters and plot and things in order to make some sort of comprehensible narrative. But I am always writing about a world and I'm always writing as an exercise in finding the best way to demonstrate that place and that sort of level of invention to my readership. So when I work on a project, I always start with the world and I put a lot of thought into how it all fits together. And out of that, the characters and the plot will organically arise, or at least this is the ideal process. So that when I do write,

0:01:55
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
everything is coming from that same place, everything fits very naturally and fits with

0:02:00
(Emily )
each other, which also saves me a lot of time on the second draft, honestly. I was reading recently about Shroud, I haven't read it yet, but the fact that it's a whole planet in darkness with this alien species and obviously that is such a strong concept for a world and yeah, it makes a lot of sense. You couldn't really just take characters and then put them in it and discover the world as they go when the world is dark.

0:02:26
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yes, and I mean, I think Shroud is one of, certainly for my science fiction work, it's one of the settings I've had to work hardest on because it's so different to Earth or to anything that I'd worked with before.

0:02:40
(Speaker 8)
Yeah.

0:02:41
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Now, we normally try and find a theme for each of our Writing Worlds episodes. And most of the questions today, most of our discussions are going to concern the concept of time in worldbuilding. We'll try to see whether time is indeed a big ball of wibbly wobbly timey wimey stuff, as it was described in a Stephen Moffat Doctor Who script? Or is there something more that we can say about it in the context of worlds and stories? And I want to start I think, we're going to start with the concept of what we call deep time.

0:03:14
(Emily )
Yeah, so the concept of deep time, sometimes referred to as geological time, suggests the same physical place thousands of years apart. So in effect, many different worlds that time has made unrecognizable. And as a writer, how do you go about incorporating the concept of deep time into your stories and narratives?

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(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
A lot of the time I'm actually working, I mean, I'm a very, I'm very keen on paleontology and history and evolution and especially sort of speculative evolution of like how might it gone have gone differently. So I mean I have a whole book, Doors of Eden, which is basically about that. And it's the idea that it's almost a butterfly effect thing. You only need to make a small change sufficiently far back and you can get a completely different

0:03:59
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
world out of it. With, I mean in that case, sort of different dominant species, all of that sort of thing. I mean it's always for me a fascinating thought experiment to think through how a different kind of, the logic of a different kind of world, what a different sort of species would come to value, the mistakes they would make that we didn't, the mistakes that we make that they would find easy to avoid, that kind of thing. I mean, obviously you can do this at a variety of different sort of time scales, but there's

0:04:31
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
something to do with just working through millions of years and the enormous changes you can see over that kind of time period. It's something that isn't looked at a lot in genre fiction, I think. We tend to work more on a historical scale, especially in fantasy. And even if you're looking at enormous time periods in science fiction, the time period tends to be elided by the fact that since then to now, in those however many million years,

0:05:05
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
kind of nothing has happened. The planet just sat there full of ruins waiting for humans to discover it or something like that. So the idea of actually having that ongoing time and having the changes brought by that time frame written into the book and written on the landscape and things like that is rare. It is always fun to see. I mean, weirdly enough, there's a very good fantasy example of where that kind of time is used, which is the Malazan books have this enormously long

0:05:34
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
timeframe that Erickson gives them. And there's a lot of stuff that's kind of going on in prehistory that still has those kind of echoes and effects in the present day of the series. I suppose one of the challenges for a writer, though, when we're talking about thousands, millions of years, that deep time that Emily referred to,

0:05:53
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
is that we as the species within this span of time have our, by comparison, very short little span, three school years and 10. How do you cope with that, the fleeting nature of the individual characters, I guess, against that sort of span of time?

0:06:12
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I mean, there are a couple of fairly common devices that I've deployed and that I've certainly seen in other books. I mean, either you just have the narrator, basically, you just have a kind of omniscient narrator who can step outside of that and just give you a narrative of the passage of

0:06:29
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
time. And I mean, this is something that Stapleton relies on for his sort of last and first men and stuff like that. And it's certainly what a lot of children of time relies on. Alternatively, of course, you have a character who isn't subject to the passing of time in the same way. So you have your god-like

0:06:46
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
AI or your incredibly long-lived alien or your, for that matter, your character who is going in and out of suspension, like Halston Mason in Children of Time, who gets to see, if not the continuous flow of time, at least a sort of a punctuated stepping through it where you can see each time you re-enter the narrative, everything has changed and you get to kind of piece together what it is that's happened and what's gone wrong.

0:07:11
(Emily )
Or like the genetic memory in the spiders, Portia and her counterparts, where it's sort of passed down genetically. I love that concept. It's so cool. The idea of inheriting all of the memories of previous generations. I's so cool. The idea of inheriting all of the memories of previous generations. I mean, busy.

0:07:26
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yes, I kind of, I always thought that was supposed to be kind of the big lie in the book. I mean, it was it was narratively very convenient, but was kind of scientifically nonsense. And then recently people have kind of done it with snails and been able to take memories from one snail and give them to another snail in a way that it can obviously demonstrate that it's kind of the learning of whatever has transferred.

0:07:50
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
So, actually that turns out to be rather more scientific than I realized when I was writing it.

0:07:55
(Emily )
You know, there's a thing with butterflies as well, and it's like every third generation they migrate around the world. But of course, for previous generations, they haven't. I'm sure this is a thing, monarch butterflies or something. And every third generation,

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(Emily )
they migrate and nest in the same trees, obviously.

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(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
So there's obviously some mechanism of informational transfer going down the generations.

0:08:21
(Speaker 14)
So yeah.

0:08:22
(Emily )
Yeah, like, it just blows my mind.

0:08:24
(Chris )
Yeah. It's that concept of a priori knowledge, isn't it? That some people believe that we have hardwired knowledge as humans, but yeah, it's fascinating, isn't it? We'll look up the butterfly thing, Emily, and if it seems to be real, we'll keep it in.

0:08:40
(Emily )
I'm pretty sure I didn't dream it. I am pretty sure I didn't dream it, I am pretty sure, but if I did, yeah. Well you know, as a writer of speculative fiction, making shit up like that is, you know, it's very much in your wheelhouse. I mean this is why I can't be sure, I can't, I can't guarantee because it is the kind of thing I would make up, but it's always insects isn't it? Snails, butterflies, you do spiders.

0:09:08
(Chris )
They were here before we came and they'll be here after we've gone.

0:09:10
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I mean we pretend we can say that snails are moluscs and as far from insects as we are but yes.

0:09:16
(Emily )
Sorry mini beasts. I haven't done much of this since primary school you know you can tell.

0:09:23
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
They were never called mini beastsbeasts in my day, but yes. So, Adrian, I want to ask about the concept of time and geographical or astronomical distance. And I suppose in some ways they're almost interchangeable, aren't they, in the world of sci-fi? It ceases to become about how far away something is, it's how long it takes to get there, I

0:09:52
(Chris )
guess.

0:09:53
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yes, although you can play some very interesting games with that, and obviously it also depends on how scientific you're being, because if you start to invent wormholes and hyperspace and faster-than- light travel, then that particular relationship between space and time breaks down quite quickly. Yeah, yeah. I mean, you've described a little bit about this already, but one of the biggest obstacles, should you not find the snakes and ladders or wormholes or whatever we want to call it in space

0:10:25
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
for you to make travel easier, is that you have to get around the aging of characters. And so, I mean, can you tell us some of the ways in which you've overcome that in your writing? I have generally gone for variant on suspended animation. So we do that in Children of Time, we do it in Walking to Old Brown a little. I believe, even though that's a much shorter

0:10:54
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
journey, we do it in a fairly unpleasant way in Alien Clay. But that, and I've got to say, I mean, I know there's been, there is genuine research into this and thus far, it doesn't seem to be a thing that is remotely possible in a way because humans don't work that way. So in, in alien clay, I posit the idea that you basically end up desiccating people down to something that isn't really alive,

0:11:17
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
but that you can kind of rehydrate at the far end of the journey. Because it's basically, it's all about just cost-effectiveness and not being terribly bothered about whether the people survive the journey.

0:11:29
(Emily )
It's like a raisin or a shiitake mushroom.

0:11:32
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
That's been my go-to because it allows you to preserve an individual character. And obviously, you get the waking, the repeated waking up in Children of Time is very much the structure of the narrative from the human point of view. One thing I haven't done yet, but which I definitely intend to do at some point, is a proper generation ship, which is also another very favourite sort of sci-fi standby, which is the idea that, all right, well, you don't

survive the time, your distant descendant will arrive at the planet. It's a setup that is so phenomenally fraught

0:12:07
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
with how things go wrong. And, you know, science fiction has explored plenty of those options, and like I say, I'm sure I can find an interesting spin on it when I come to do it myself. Beyond that, you've got Avarana Kern in Children of Time, who survives that time frame by basically uploading her consciousness, or something that kind of purports to be her consciousness into an artificial matrix that doesn't need to worry about time. And there are various other options in that. In Children of Strife, which is coming out next year,

0:12:39
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I explore a rather different but equivalent process. There are some ideas I'm kicking about that I haven't yet brought to the table. Things like, so why do we age and die? Comes down to we are reliant on a fluid medium for our chemical reactions because everything wears out if for no other reason, because the Brownian

0:13:06
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
motion of the fluids inside us will eventually erode everything. And so everything has to be repaired, and the more you repair something, the less you're able to repair it. And then obviously it starts to fall apart. If you could somehow do away with the need to be full of water and just desiccate down to something that was still in some way able to

0:13:25
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
function, you could live forever, theoretically, as long as you didn't get damp. There's also the... So, lobsters kind of live forever. In that they are swimming in telomerase, which means that they repair their genetic code, which is the key thing extremely well and what kills you know barring external action what will eventually kill a lobster is the shock of molting as it gets because that becomes more and more problematic the bigger it gets and they just otherwise they will just continue to grow so in going back to doors of eden again indoors of

0:14:00
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
eden i have um trilobites that that have this function to them and that have evolved piecemeal molting and therefore they basically just get enormous and become kind of intelligent just through accumulated experience and eventually you end up with these kind of city-sized space-going trilobites just gadding about the universe having fun and being millions of years old.

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(Emily )
At what age do they just think, you know what, planet life, I'm done with it, what's up there?

0:14:32
(Speaker 13)
At what age?

0:14:33
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yes, I mean, we don't meet, presumably there are still ground-bound ones, but obviously you hit structural issues on a planet, even eventually within a sea that you don't necessarily have in space because in space you don't have gravity acting on you in any appreciable way. So presumably eventually it's not so much what age but what size. Yeah that's true, I mean if you get big

0:14:56
(Emily )
enough and tall enough gravity just stops acting on you right? You just drift. If you get, yes, if you get out of the gravity well. Yeah. Yes. Okay, I've got images.

0:15:08
(Chris )
As someone who is six foot five going on six foot six, I have this problem in small rooms, quite a lot of doorways. But I've not yet taken space as a solution to it. Now, bringing that very serious answer down to a level of silliness, I think is a good way of taking us into our first game.

0:15:30
(Chris )
One of the key skills of worldbuilding is the ability to name things. And so this is called the name game. I'm going to challenge each of you to come up with the name of a couple of things. And you may not use names that have already been used or derivatives of those. So we'll be looking out for words like Gilgamesh and Enkidu, which I think would be a derivative thereof.

0:15:59
(Chris )
So Adrian, your challenge, and we'll give you a minute or so once I've given you this to think about it, is I'd like you to come up with the name of a mission designed to terraform and colonise a planet. So it's a human mission, and the name of the mission

0:16:17
(Chris )
or project could also be the name of the resulting planet. As a side order, I'd also like the name of the resulting planet. As a side order, I'd also like the name of the lead ship in the

flotilla carrying the first colonists to this newly prepped planet. Points will be deducted for already used names, as I've said, but added for flourish, complexity and consistency. And Adrian, while you're thinking of that one, Emily, so your world of the Dex Legacy, the world of SP714, is a colonised world.

0:16:51
(Chris )
It's colonised by people known as the Ancestors. Literally, I think a mission just like the one Adrian's going to be thinking about from Earth. So I'd like you to think of a code name that the ancestors in the Dex Legacy might have used for this mission and what might have been the name of the lead seed ship in the Armada carrying the would-be SP-714ians to this world.

0:17:19
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Okey-dokey. So, Adrian Tchaikovsky, how have you got on with the challenge? Okay, well, as we are talking about reforming a planet, quite possibly a planet in this – let's just theorise in this case that we're doing my usual take of terribly unpleasant humans and the planet already has some manner of inhabitants that are going to be cleansed from it in order to make it human-appropriate. The mission is Jaguar Sun.

0:17:56
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
This is the first world of the Mayan, Mayan long-count, which was destroyed by a rain of jaguars. A rain of jaguars? Yes, so we're assuming that they're going to be involving some sort of biological cleansing method. And the lead ship they will call Ocelotl, which is my best shot at the Mayan name for jaguar as far as my rather cursory researches have revealed.

0:18:24
(Chris )
Never seem to be quite enough vowels in Mayan names, do they? So we have the mission, Jaguar Sun,

0:18:32
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
and the ship, the lead ship, Ocelotl.

0:18:35
(Speaker 12)
Ocelotl.

0:18:36
(Chris )
Ocelotl.

0:18:37
(Emily )
That's a great name for a ship.

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(Chris )
That is fantastic, isn't it? There is a cat called an ocelot, isn't there?

0:18:43
(Emily )
Yes, that's the IA. Interesting. That's what I thought it was about, with like jaguars and ocelots.

0:18:48
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
An ocelot is like a little cat. Yes, it is. I'm assuming it's from the same linguistic root. Yeah, yeah, yeah, that makes sense. It's a bit like alligator comes from Spanish for the lizard. Yeah,

0:19:07
(Emily )
well it's amazing when you like when you actually translate these things that how unoriginal names are.

0:19:09
(Chris )
We're really just rehashing stuff aren't we?

0:19:14
(Emily )
All the time. I found out about there's a type of bird in Australia that is called the go away bird and I can't wait for many many generations down the line to be translating whatever that becomes over time and find out that it's just called

0:19:31
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
the go away bird. It's only so grand. Your challenge was pretty similar. What have

0:19:41
(Emily )
you called your idea of planting and sort of growing and so I think I would call the mission mission germinate. It's really basic. Well maybe you know if they were being you know if they wanted to include numbers which actually you know SP714 being the planets I mean they weren't a particularly romantic lot they didn't you know they weren't particularly, which is why their planets were numbered and lettered. And then I'm thinking that the ship, the seed ship, I was sort of looking at growing things. I was sort of looking at creating and going

0:20:36
(Emily )
forth and the word abound is quite nice because it sort of suggests going forth and bounding into the yonder. And so yeah, the ship would be called the Abound and that's one of three. I didn't name the other two, but the other two would be sort of related, I think. And yes, so this is exciting

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(Emily )
because now I've got more specifics that I can add into my books as though I needed that.

0:20:59
(Chris )
Feel free to use these.

0:21:02
(Chris )
Please mention the Writing Worlds podcast if you do so.

0:21:05
(Emily )
Absolutely, yes.

0:21:06
(Chris )
Fantastic. Well, I mean, that's pretty... I was slightly worried when you said the thought of growing and I was worried you were going to call your ship the rhubarb or something like that,

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(Chris )
but I'm glad you went with the Abound.

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(Emily )
It'd be more like a courgette. I still have PTSD from growing too many courgettes. Yeah. a courgette. I still have PTSD from growing too many courgettes.

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(Chris )
And so listeners, that is the name game. Think about derivations, think about examples and you can use from the history of Earth and build some names around it as Emily and Adrian have done. So back to the questions and I think

0:21:43
(Chris )
you've got the next one Emily.

0:21:44
(Emily )
Yes I do. So time allows scope for geographical worlds to come into being but time can be particularly damaging to artificial worlds like spaceships and the Gilgamesh in Children of Time is very old and sort of falling apart and in this example we see that time can add tension to a plot, especially when it's running out. So are there other ways in which time in and of itself

0:22:09
(Emily )
can represent the peril in a story?

0:22:13
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yeah, I mean, there's the very traditional fantasy one of there is some sort of prophecy or some event that we know is going to happen at a certain point and you need to do all of your hero things in order to be ready for it. I mean, it's a bit well-worn as things go, but it's a good way of having time be literally of the essence. You can also work with cycles, and this is especially interesting when you go

0:22:40
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
into alien worlds. So on Earth, we have cycles. You obviously have, you know, there is a lunar cycle and there is a daily cycle and there is a yearly cycle, all of which have, once you start looking at the way the solar system works, you see all of those, how those cycles work. What we also have is there is a cycle of the sun,

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(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
so solar activity, which I think at its peak is not enormously problematic for us, but you can kind of see how it might. You have something like Heliconia by Aldous, where you have a long year for a planet in a binary system. So it goes from enormously hot to enormously cold, but over a very long period of time. And the life on the planet has sort of evolved to shift phases with the world. I've played with similar things.

0:23:25
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I had a short story called Goblin Autumn a while back with the idea that the planet had a similar kind of very, very long year cycle. And as you hit each year, a different kind of, different species, sort of their eggs hatch out and suddenly you've got these things.

0:23:43
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I mean, but the main characters that are dealing with it, why have we got these goblin things everywhere? Where are they coming from? And they work out, you know, this is not some sort of attack or anything. This is just their time and the world is getting colder.

0:23:56
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
We're entering this autumn period, our own civilization, which obviously they bought up, built up just in this one long cycle, is inevitably doomed and will hit the goblin period. And then even the goblins will go and you'll have this winter period where you've got these other things

0:24:09
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
that they only really have these fossilized bones of. And eventually you'll swing around. But of course, by the time it gets back to them in however many thousands or millions of years, the actual culture they've got can't survive unless they somehow find a way of preserving it. So you get, especially when you have humans running into living on other planets,

0:24:26
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
you might have cycles that you have no clue about until you've been there for generations and then suddenly everything is changing. I mean, again, it's an idea I got kicking about to deal with in a future project. But you can have all of these,

0:24:41
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
you can have intermittent volcanic or geological cycles that are very regular and predictable, but because they're sort of 10,000 years apart, you have no idea it's going to happen until it starts happening. And these big cycles, this kind of cosmic clock that is completely out of scale with the experience of the characters, can add a lot of, you can have a lot of fun with it on a world building level, because of, the characters will start off having no idea what's going on.

0:25:07
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
And especially if they're not necessarily scientifically or technically sophisticated, it will look like an attack, it will look like a curse. Quite possibly there are factions taking advantage of it that make it look like it's their fault, when in fact they're really just being opportunists, it can be very muddy and you can be, you know, the big revelation of the book is actually, no, this is just the thing that the world is doing and you have to live with it. And best example of this in the market currently has got to be, I think, fifth season, I think, Jameson? Where I know that's one

0:25:37
(Emily )
of the big, yeah, the big cycle of what's going on is on that kind of level. Yeah, yeah. So using enormous scales of time to affect the here and now. Yeah. As opposed to condensing it into like a few hours.

0:25:49
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yes, because we like to think, I mean humans have always liked to think that the world is set up at a scale that we can appreciate. There's this fascinating kind of outrage when people are inventing microscopes and things for the first time. Because the idea that there is this enormously complex detailed world existing at a scale that the human eye cannot perceive is actively offensive to people who feel that, well no, the world has been made for us to appreciate. I obviously, I often deal with science fiction about the idea that

0:26:22
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
the universe is very big and people are very small. I mean that is one of the modes that scientific, that science fiction traditionally works in. And this idea of actually, yeah, the universe is not conveniently at a scale for us to appreciate. We have evolved to appreciate as much of the universe as we needed to do, but there are vast amounts of it that are simply beyond our comprehension. Whether we can't sense in that band, or we can't sense in that band or we can't exist in that

0:26:45
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
time frame or any of these reasons means that the universe can suddenly blindside you.

0:26:50
(Emily )
So like, you know, we can't see that colour or we can't see that, you know, hear that sound or, you know, there's so much that's beyond us. But then, but then you get people saying I don't believe in it as though it's optional, but we know it exists.

0:27:03
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yes, we know what happens to people like that in these books.

0:27:07
(Emily )
Yeah, conveniently.

0:27:09
(Chris )
Indeed.

0:27:11
(Emily )
Or not conveniently, as the case may be. Not for them. They always get in the way.

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(Chris )
Not convenient for them. We could probably incorporate that into would you rather.

0:27:18
(Emily )
Yeah, I think so, yeah. And do they deserve it?

0:27:22
(Chris )
Yeah. So, Adrian, we often think of worlds as being old, that concept of deep time. And of those living on them as having grown up and their species kind of enmeshed themselves into the fabric of a world. But when we're talking about colonisation,

0:27:41
(Chris )
that is not the case. And Emily, in your world of SP714, colonisation was actually relatively recent, for example. So, Adrian, what are the ways in which writers can use the concept

0:27:55
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
of a species not yet enmeshed in a world, not yet comfortable within it, to create engaging stories? ADRIAN Really, the thought experiment there is you need to work at precisely how it does work. I mean this is something I've explored in a variety of different ways. I think that science fiction historically has a tendency to assume it's going to be much, much easier than it is. In that a lot of science fiction has us as our own worst enemies, so that you, you know,

0:28:26
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
you colonise a planet, you lose your technological sophistication, you kind of become sort of primitives, and then maybe the, I mean, there's, oh good Lord, there's a classical Doctor Who story called The Face of Evil, where there's a planetary sort of mission which has fallen into barbarism. This is actually, this is the first, my first experience of this idea of the post-tech

0:28:50
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
sort of society. You've got the tribe called the Seva Team, which is where the companion Leela comes from. And it's a corruption of the Survey Team, which I remember just being completely blown away by when I was a kid.

0:29:04
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)

It was my first experience of that kind of setup. And there, the problem is actually it's the old AI from their ship, which has been corrupted and is sort of screwing them over. What we don't necessarily think of in science fiction is actually, even if a planet looks Earth-like, even if you think you can terraform it, and it doesn't start off Earth-like, but you've got the tech to turn it into something Earth-like, even if you think you can terraform it, and it doesn't

0:29:25
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
start off Earth-like, but you've got the tech to turn it into something Earth-like, that's such a complex process. There are so many moving parts. So in Children of Memory, you have a planet where they basically have a very good stab at trying to terraform it. But the tiniest of problems just get worse and worse over the generations until it all

0:29:43
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
completely falls apart. You know, all of this sort of complex biological checks and balances they put in to make the ecosystem work don't quite work. But I mean, again, on the subject of time, they don't quite work over a period of centuries. It's not like they go, you know, suddenly the harvests fail the next year. It's just like, no, they're just the harvests are slightly less good each time. And the insects that you put in to keep check

0:30:08
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
on the insects aren't quite working. And so all of your ecosystems are getting slightly out of balance with each year that goes by. But it can take a long time for that to fall apart. That's the terrifying thing. It's, you know's making a spaceship to last a thousand years, making a planet to last a million years. How do you know it's done? Because the Earth isn't stable. We will enter even without screwing it up ourselves.

0:30:32
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
We're going to enter periods, if we're around for long enough, when the Earth or the sun or whatever are doing things that don't work for us. Again, on time. There's no such thing as forever. The other thing, of course, you get is you can have a lot of fun with alien biology. There is the Dragon of Herod, also Beowulf's children. It's actually a genuinely lovely example of alien biology.

0:30:55
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
And the biology, in fact, was devised for them by Stewart and Cohen, who go on to do the Science of the Discworld books. And there you've got, they turn up, there is this phenomenally problematic predator. So they find, fine, we will just kill it. We're the local one that has this territory, we will just basically kill it. It's actually extremely, even for high tech humans, it poses quite a challenge and then

0:31:16
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
they kill it. And then they find out that all of these little things in the area that they thought, yeah, these just these little guys, what are they problem? They're all the, those are all the young that are being kind of kept in a neotenous state by the presence of the adult. And they all just grow up

0:31:32
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
and suddenly the whole place is lousy with them because, and then they will, you know, but naturally they would compete until one of them's left. But that's a problem for the humans because they're all incredibly dangerous. And the alien biology in that, which is, you know, frankly, Stuart and Co were extremely good at doing sci-fi, good sci-fi aliens.

0:31:53
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
And in fact, literally wrote the book on it. That's a really nice setup for just how alien biology can buy you. Well, literally.

Yeah.

0:32:02
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
And then we've got, I do the expert systems brother, where when you get to the backstory of what went on in the past, you find humans go there, it looks like a really good prospect, except that everything just triggers the immune system. You're instantly allergic to basically everything. And you can't live, you can't live, you can't, you can't even sort of have children normally

0:32:27
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
because everything dies.

0:32:29
(Chris )
Good Lord.

0:32:30
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
With the least exposure. So they end up having to re-engineer humans to live with the ecosystem. And it has a lot of interesting knock-on effects that when you see from the point of view of the main character, it's just like,

0:32:42
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)

that's just the world they live in. And they have to uncover all of this through all of this, this, you know, after becoming a bit of an outcast because they lose this inherent effect. So they are suddenly unable to eat anything because it makes them sick

0:32:58
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
and touching anything makes them, immediately brings them out on a rash and all of this sort of thing, because they effectively like the planet is rejecting them. But at the same time, the predators, which are particularly, there are a lot of nasty predators on this planet that would normally be a problem, won't go anywhere near him because he is unnatural to them. He doesn't register

0:33:19
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
as anything they can eat.

0:33:20
(Emily )
So it's almost like the planet's immune system is attacking the human.

0:33:25
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yeah, except I mean there's no hint of a kind of like a Gaia hypothesis sort of thing. No, no, no. It's just the idea that the way the biochemistry is set up on this planet is just inimical to the way that Earth biochemistry works, purely on a very, very low level. And I know, I mean this is also I think Kim Stanley Robinson has written something similar with the idea you hit a planet and act,

0:33:48
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
but the planet, the planet is full of prions, which are non-biological sort of chemicals that basically screw over the human brain. And so they've gone all the way there and there's nothing you could have, no way you could have known.

0:33:59
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
And you get there and you literally cannot live on this planet and you're never going to be able to.

0:34:06
(Emily )
And then you're marooned and then the question is how do you get off?

0:34:08
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)

Yes, this is the other problem with it. No one makes a generation ship with a return trip in mind.

0:34:17
(Emily )
Or a plan B.

0:34:18
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Also, it's another amazing book in this general line is Emma Newman's Planetfall. Which is so weird. I mean, because they get to the planet and there's stuff on the planet and there's indication there's just someone came and built this thing on the planet that no one quite knows what it is, but actually the rest of the planet is really problematic and inhospitable. And that's also a fascinating book.

0:34:42
(Emily )
Yeah, I mean, you see a lot of getting to a planet and there being evidence of sort of intelligent life that we would recognize in terms of buildings and ruins and things like that. And it's like, oh, someone was here before. But the fact that you can get to an alien planet and the stuff that is hostile to you or causing problems is stuff that is very present, not necessarily intelligent

0:35:05
(Emily )
or intentionally attacking, but just there and therefore making it impossible. And yeah, I mean, I guess that with the world being set up the way it is, Earth, we've grown up here, we've evolved here.

0:35:18
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
There's never going to be anywhere more hospitable to us than Earth, even if a lot of things on Earth are going to kill you, this is still absolutely the best and only place in the universe for us to thrive.

0:35:28
(Chris )
And we should never complain about hay fever ever again.

0:35:31
(Emily )
No, we can complain about hay fever. Just, you know, it could always be worse.

0:35:37
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
We can complain about anything.

0:35:38
(Speaker 8)
Exactly.

0:35:39
(Chris )
We bloody well can. We should.

0:35:42
(Chris )
Now, it's time to play the game of not so much life and death as death and death.

0:35:48
(Speaker 8)
Yeah.

0:35:49
(Chris )
In our imaginary worlds, not everyone is able to pop home for tea and shortbread at the end of a mission.

0:35:55
(Chris )
Some of our characters don't make it, do they, Emily?

0:35:58
(Emily )
No, there's always a red shirt or two, or even a main character who doesn't make it sometimes at very key moments in the narrative.

Yep.

Indeed.

0:36:07
(Chris )
So this game pits two unpleasant ends faced by characters in your stories or those by other writers against each other and asks, would you rather? Points as always will be awarded for style, detail, flourishes and reasoning in your choices.

0:36:27
(Chris )
So Emily, I'm going to come to you in a moment, but Adrian, as our guest, you get to horrify and disgust us first.

0:36:34
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
What have you got for us today? Okay, I mean, I brought along a choice of two.

0:36:39
(Chris )
Oh, perfect.

0:36:40
(Speaker 11)
There's the long one.

0:36:41
(Emily )
Oh, serve them both up.

0:36:41
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yeah, yeah, yeah. Serve them both up. They're the long one and the short one, and you can choose which one you want to go through. The long one is from Children of Time, where a character who gets separated from the rest of the human crew basically ends up in a spider zoo because the spiders don't recognise that she's in any way sapient, and lives out her entire life of decades as an exhibit, basically. And there's this suggestion that just right towards the end of her life, she gets the idea that she can kind of gesticulate in ways that the spiders will recognize as language,

0:37:15
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
but then she dies. And that's kind of a nightmare in one way. The other way, which is considerably quicker, is there's a character in one of the Shadows of the Apt books who really annoys a kind of a coral-related species. And so they sort of encrust him over with coral, just grow coral over him very rapidly, which is obviously quick, but it's obviously also extremely unpleasant when it's happening.

0:37:47
(Chris)
I do like that.

0:37:48
(Emily )
I was wondering if you were going to do the spider zoo one. I was wondering.

0:37:52
(Chris )
You mentioned it.

0:37:53
(Speaker 9)
I did.

0:37:54
(Chris )
As a tribute, Adrian, to the effect that that had on Emily.

0:37:59
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
She did mention that to me over a pint the other day.

0:38:02
(Emily )
I was like, I wonder, I wonder if that's going to be one of them.

0:38:09
(Chris )
So you know, old news I'm afraid, Adriana.

0:38:13
(Chris )
We'll do the corral. It's brilliant.

0:38:20
(Chris )
And Emily, which one are you going to bring to this fairly unpleasant party?

0:38:26
(Emily )
Okay, so in my world, in season two of The Dex Legacy there is a scientist called Harold Athalosha and he works in Devik's lab, biological lab, and he and his team are investigating biological weapons basically and they've come across in the ancestral seed data records of a horrible contagion called the Black Death. And they're experimenting with this. When there is a exposure, the contagion gets out, his entire team are infected and that area of the lab is cordoned off.

0:39:00
(Emily )
And the scientists are sort of just left in there to go through the symptoms, record the symptoms and die without any medical intervention at all, just under observation, sort of like a zoo I guess but you know I mean they are just dying of the black death and nobody really knows what's going to happen next so it's all very interesting on a scientific level. The levels of sympathy, we did this in audio drama which was particularly...

0:39:27
(Speaker 6)
Yeah, yeah.

0:39:28
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
The levels of sympathy shown by the character Devik when this poor sod was trying to explain some of the symptoms but couldn't speak because of the symptoms.

0:39:39
(Emily )
Swelling and coughing up blood. Devik was going, write it down Harold, write it down. Yeah, it's all very interesting but write it down. Yeah, so that's the death. It took a week and a half for the longest one to finally die. Yeah, so, I'm going to, so Adrian, you get to choose first. I think I'm gonna go with the coral one because I think it's just so novel. Is that your personal choice or the one you think?

0:40:12
(Chris )
No, no, no, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not part of this.

0:40:15
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I will vote for the two of the two that I put in. Okay.

0:40:18
(Emily )
Oh, you want to do the coral one? Yeah, so I'm gonna pick, I'm gonna pick.

0:40:22
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
That makes two more distinct ones as well. I'm gonna pick, I'm gonna pick, being encased in coral versus...

0:40:25
(Emily )
Yeah, I guess the other ones are observation based, aren't they?

0:40:29
(Chris )
So coral versus bubonic plague, which is not often a choice you'll often be given in life. I mean, Adrian, give us your thoughts.

0:40:40
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I mean, I think, I mean, maybe this is just the kind of the narrative writer in me, but I feel

that I would rather the bubonic plague, because at that point, it is absolutely horrible. But you under those circumstances, you're kind of you're, you're being noble by kind of, you know, not spreading it and you're, you're, you're recording something for posterity. So you're kind of your death is serving a purpose I guess.

0:41:08
(Speaker 4)
Yeah.

0:41:09
(Emily )
Whereas the coral is just you've pissed a plant off.

0:41:14
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
The coral is yes, you've made some very poor life choices.

0:41:18
(Emily )
I mean how poor does it have to be? I mean are they wearing boots while they stamp on it or are the characters really sensitive?

0:41:26
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I mean, it's actually, the character this happens to is the villain.

0:41:30
(Emily )
Okay, okay.

0:41:31
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
And they're one of those villains who I don't like, and therefore they get this rather horrible end rather than getting a dignified end. Well, it's poor old Harold who got the bubonic plague was a unassuming you know

0:41:46
(Emily )
quite a nice bloke I think. But they named it after him, Athelotius disease. They did. So it would be Tchaikovsky's disease wouldn't it?

0:41:55
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
You see, there you go, you've got a legacy. It's not to like. So Emily, over to you then. A week or so of bubonic plague or being kind of encased in coral? So, Adrian, how long is this going

to take to actually finish you off? Oh, well, the coral thing was very quick. It was a matter of seconds. So, you know, it was, I think it's described as obviously being fairly agonizing.

0:42:26
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
You're kind of left with that kind of, going out of the audience. You're left with that kind of agonized, contorted statue, all sort of grown over with coral. But I think that's really, that is a horror that's more for the observer

0:42:39
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
than for the person it's happened to, in a way. Yes, you are there as a warning to not piss off the

0:42:48
(Emily )
local wildlife. I mean I actually don't mind this one because if you become coral you are then going to become part of this ecosystem and presumably there's a lot of life. I mean in our world the coral reefs support abundant life, right? So arguably, I mean I take it the coral reefs support abundant life, right? So arguably, I mean, I take it these coral reefs aren't shitty to everybody and everything. Surely there's abundant life around them?

0:43:13
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Well, this is so in this particular set up, people live inside the coral. It's a city that is made of coral, but you've got this particular kind of cast of people who maintain it. And they're very, very quiet and very, very polite.

0:43:25
(Emily )
And yeah, they'd have to be.

0:43:27
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
If what I think what this guy does to trigger them, he basically smashes a door up to get to someone. And that's all it takes. That's you. You then cross the line and they just come and deal with them.

0:43:37
(Chris )
Don't don't piss off the coral.

0:43:39
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yeah, I like this coral. Oh yeah, I mean like I say, it's not a very nice character that it happens to. It's entirely sort of just within the narrative.

0:43:48
(Emily )
I really like this coral. Okay, but then you become, it's sort of like part of the ship, part of the crew sort of scenario. I kind of quite like, I don't mind that. I don't hate it because, you know, and if you knew it was, or if you could feel it coming, could you strike a pose? Yes if you've got sufficient muscular control to hold it while it's happening I suppose. You know like do a night fever or something I can't I actually I'm down with the coral especially as I'd probably deserve

0:44:20
(Emily )
it if I was being covered in the coral I would probably really piss them off and I can get behind that you know like I like I can get behind that, it's my own silly fault. I've brought this on myself. Exactly. And then I get to be nutritious for something, potentially I would be preserved for people to see and if I'm really smart about it I would have practiced a pose ahead of time should this eventuality arise. So you know what I'm down with the coral I'm

0:44:49
(Chris )
going coral. So we have a tie. We do. Adrian has gone for a week of bubonic plague, Emily's gone for a couple of seconds of being encased in coral. And an eternity. An eternity of coral monuments to her stupidity. There'd be a plaque, she deserved this paint. She deserved a little sign hung around her neck saying do not and we will think up some points add them to a leaderboard and at the end of the series we would declare a winner a best demise and prizes will be awarded so I think we should try to calm down after that bloodbath with another couple of quite short questions.

0:45:49
(Emily )
Okay, yeah, sure. In Kern's world in your Children of Time series, it's a terraformed world, which instantly suggests thousands of years of work to make it happen. Although the evolutionary process is sort of artificially enhanced. And it's fair to say that the process doesn't play out quite as intended. But can created or designed worlds make for good stories if the terraforming does go to plan?

0:46:16
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
I mean, given the I mean, I reckon you can have a good story any any way you want. I mean, you know, the ideal standard is it's basically an Earth away from Earth. And I think at that point, if that's all you're doing with it, then you kind of think, well, why bother at that point to do it? So I think the going wrong, all the differences are really where the fun comes in and where your story seed often is. But, of course, you aren't necessarily trying to get something that's exactly Earth-like.

0:46:53
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
You don't even necessarily need to be terraforming a world purely for living on. So you could create really quite wild, where You could have a world that is there for really extreme holidays, for example, where a lot of wild stuff. You could have a world where you've got an enormously fast acting, sort of hyper accelerated biology that gives you a vast amount of fossil fuel reserves, if you were weirdly retro about your space opera. I think it's when you start to think about more purpose-made planets, possibly avoiding

0:47:29
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
the kind of the Magrathea territory of the Hitchhiker's Guide.

0:47:32
(Emily )
That's what I was thinking there.

0:47:36
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
There are a variety of reasons you could make a planet. And the other thing, of course, is what if we, as humans, discover a terraformed planet that has been terraformed for another species? So it's doing a lot of things that we wouldn't necessarily want, but that is natural for that particular species. Which again, it could be instantly there, or it could be something that, ah yes, we didn't know that every 400 years this world completely floods because that species has this sort of aquatic life stage they need

0:48:05
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
to cater for, that kind of thing. So I think if it's a perfect world for humans and it's just doing that, it seems unlikely to be a major part of the story because at that point it's just Earth. And if you want a different Earth where there are different people and so forth, then that's one way of doing it. But it's not in itself going to be contributing a huge amount to the story.

0:48:26
(Speaker 4)
Yeah.

0:48:27
(Emily )
It becomes a stage, an alternative stage, where things play out, as opposed to the stage being a character in and of itself. Like, more like a spaceship, I guess. The spaceship can become a character, but a terraformed planet can become a character, I guess.

0:48:40
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
It can be the antagonist. I mean actually having said that of course, you have one person's

idea of what the perfect planet is. And possibly you have some sort of system in place to ensure that it doesn't ever deviate from that and then maybe that becomes your problem because you need to change. You need to be different but you have some system that's obstinately trying to keep it in a particular state.

0:49:02
(Emily )
Yeah. Yeah, can you imagine the kind of asshole who would be able to afford custom terraformed planet and then generations later, they're still living with the decisions that this person-

0:49:12
(Chris )
On Musk world.

0:49:14
(Speaker 5)
Yeah, exactly.

0:49:15
(Emily )
That this guy or this woman was decided to, decided was the ideal world, but everybody else is like, really? Yeah. That's a really interesting idea.

0:49:26
(Chris )
There's quite a lot of possibilities there, aren't there? Yeah. So last question for me, Adrian. Your worlds are sometimes seen through non-human eyes. Is it a mistake for writers to only see their worlds, landscapes and atmospheres through the filter

0:49:43
(Chris )
of being human, do you think? landscapes and atmospheres through the extra interesting thing to write about, because obviously that perspective is in and of itself a piece of scientific interest. But it's difficult because this is very much a thing I do a great deal, but it's horses for courses as it's whether it's a thing that you like writing, because it's quite an intensive writing exercise to take yourself out of a human's perspective. And I guess even our opinions of the worlds that you create, that you describe through the eyes of another species, we view them through a human filter,

0:50:31
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
through our being human, which we can't really change or help. Yeah, yeah. And I guess they tell us things about our humanity, don't they? Which I guess is what sci-fi or all fiction really is all

0:50:46
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
about, isn't it? Yes, I mean, I've got to say, I do also kind of like doing it just because I like doing it for its own sake. I kind of feel that we sometimes we are strong armed into feeling we have to say that yes, obviously, it's all about the human condition and such and such tropes. But actually, you know, speculative for speculative sake is also good.

0:51:06
(Speaker 4)
Yeah.

0:51:07
(Chris )
And fun.

0:51:08
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Yeah. Well, this is the thing and it's also, you know, it's also it's what we do. And we're absolutely nothing preventing us talking about the human condition at the same time. But it doesn't all have to be deeply symbolic. It can just be weird for the hell of it, you

0:51:22
(Emily )
know. and just be weird for the hell of it, you know? Yeah. Takes the pressure off, doesn't it? It does. You're not writing it saying, but what am I saying about this?

0:51:28
(Chris )
But that's why we play role-playing games, isn't it? It's that, you know, this is just fun. Well, talking of just fun and the stoic fun

0:51:37
(Chris )
that we often describe this show as embodying.

0:51:42
(Emily )
Well, that's why we have the games, because otherwise it could get very serious and just stay serious.

0:51:47
(Chris )
Yeah, we'll start talking about deep time and a priori knowledge. It's like a really bad pub chat, isn't it? Or a really good pub chat. Or a really good pub chat, actually. It depends. Adrian, thank you so much for joining us and for being such an enthusiastic player of our

stoically fun and rather silly games. It's been an absolute pleasure, thank you. Well in the unlikely eventuality that our listeners don't know all about you already,

0:52:16
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
how can they find you, buy your books and see what you're up to? So if you go onto adriancharkowski.com there is a complete list of all the books on there, which as there are quite a few books, even if you do know me, there are probably some books there you've not heard of. And other than that, my social media of choice is Blue Sky, where I am at aptshadow.bsky.social. Excellent.

0:52:39
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
Brilliant. As always, we will put these clickable, into the show notes of this podcast.

0:52:47
(Emily )
And we're coming up to festival season. Where can people catch up with you up and down the country?

0:52:52
(Adrian Tchaikovsky)
So I will be at the World Fantasy Convention. I'm also at BulgarCon in Bulgaria this year, which is my kind of major sort of overseas trip. And beyond that, the next easiest place to catch me is probably Easter Con in Birmingham next year.

0:53:10
(Emily )
Brilliant.

0:53:11
(Chris )
Excellent. Excellent. And I'm sure all of that will appear on your social media and on your website as well. Well, Adrian Tchaikovsky, thank you so much for joining us on the Writing World's podcast

0:53:22
(Chris )
today. I've been Chris Gregory.

0:53:25
(Emily )
I've been Emily Inkpen. I've been Emily Inkpen. And thank you for listening, everyone.