

WORDS FOR HIRE

Game Tie-ins

BY WILLIAM C. DIETZ

Over the course of the next three columns I plan to drill down on the business end of work-for-hire by examining the way gaming companies view tie-in novels, the way TV/Film companies approach them, and the important role publishers play in the process. That includes why companies commission tie-ins, what they look for in writers, and how the selection process works.

In order to obtain background information for this column I interviewed Sony Senior Producer Frank Simon, who works with Insomniac Games. A group known for best selling games like *Resistance: The Fall of Man 1 & 2*, *Ratchet & Clank*, and *Spyro the Dragon*.

I also interviewed Franchise Development Director Frank O'Connor who works for Bungie, which continues to partner with Microsoft, the company that owns the Halo franchise/intellectual property.*

More on the interviews in a moment. First let's take a look at some market statistics: According to data provided by the NPD Group, which specializes in providing consumer and retail marketing research data, the total market for video game consoles and portables (PC games are measured separately) topped \$11.82 billion in the U.S. alone through September '08. A 26% increase over the same time period last year. Total 2007 sales reached \$18.82 billion vs. \$12.5 billion in 2006.

According to NPD's consumer panel (2.5 million consumers, with an average of 40K surveyed per week on various topics), 25% of Americans "...play video games daily or at least several times per week," while close to 31% game one time per week or less often, but still play video games. All of which points to a healthy and growing market for not only the games themselves, but related tie-in items including books. That's in marked contrast to a *declining* tie-in market where the TV and Film industries are concerned. A phenomena I plan to address in my next column.

I asked Simon and O'Connor a series of nearly identical questions regarding the process by which tie-in projects come into being and the results were interesting. When asked if the Insomniac/Sony team was thinking about tie-in books while working on the first *Resistance* game Simon said, "Yes, defi-

nitely. It was discussed at the beginning of the process. But it was never discussed what the tie-ins would be. It's not only a way of generating additional revenue," Simon added, "but how to get the message out to the players. If you build quality tie-in items, they can lead new buyers to the game."

Does that mean Simon believes that tie-ins can bring customers to the company's products—as well as working the other way around? Yes, it does...a counter intuitive philosophy that makes the process of commissioning tie-in novels and choosing authors to write them that much more important.

When I asked O'Connor if the Bungie/Microsoft team was thinking about tie-ins while creating the first Halo game he answered this way: "It wasn't even a tertiary thought honestly.... The launch of Halo involved a console launch as well, so with that to deal with, the team was entirely focused on the game."

He went on to say, "When we make those decisions (commissioning a tie-in) it is to satisfy the fans first." By which O'Connor means that Halo fans *demand* certain kinds of tie-in items which the company felt an obligation to produce in order to please them. However, "The books have been so successful," O'Connor adds, "that they are quite profitable in and of themselves."



Halo 3 screenshot. (Bungie/Microsoft)



Resistance 2 screenshot. (Insomniac/Sony)

Having written one of those books I can attest to that. HALO fans are so hungry for HALO related tie-in books that my novelization of the second game sold more than 500,000 copies. Again, that's a *novelization* rather than new novel, which means that half-a-million people were willing to read a narrative of a game most of them had already played.

Still, like Simon, O'Connor insists that tie-ins are about more than money. "Believe it or not revenue is kind of a secondary consideration," he says. "An example would be Kotobukiya. They are a high-end Japanese toy manufacturer that produces sculpture rather than playful action figures. They make so few, and the margins are so tight, that we do it to service the market. That translates to trying to please customers who want Halo stuff. Especially high-end Halo stuff."

When asked to describe the payoff from tie-ins Simon puts it this way. "I would say the first criteria is are the people who are working on the project enjoying the process? Is it cool? We need to be fiscally responsible," he adds, "but it's rarely a problem. That's usually the least concern."

Taken together the responses from both men convey a very important point about gaming related tie-in projects. Ultimately tie-in writers are dealing with teams of people who don't look at the universe in "take the money and run" terms. They want to make money, yes, but they are also focused on producing "cool" stuff. And that includes ancillary materials like tie-in novels. So if you agree to write one be warned.... Your ideas will be judged according to what a group of people think is "cool" rather than an opinion rendered by a single editor. So in order to succeed it's necessary to immerse yourself in the game, become a member of the creative team to whatever extent that's possible, and participate in a consensus style of management that may seem foreign to those used to working in a word-cave by themselves.

Given how much they care about what they're doing, it isn't too surprising that when companies like Bungie/Microsoft and Insomniac/Sony go shopping for a publisher they're looking for more than a quick buck. O'Connor indicated that the primary criteria for choosing a publisher can be summed up as, "Are you at the top of your game in a particular market? That's why we're with Tor. (Tor is Bungie/Microsoft's current publisher.) The sit down meetings we have them are truly collaborative."

And Simon responded to the question by saying, "We traditionally look for partners. We're not looking for someone to take the ball and run. We're looking for someone to partner with." To which he added that initiative is a good thing, but it's imperative to retain overall creative control, lest bad things happen.

So if that's the way publishers are chosen, how about tie-in writers themselves? Are they chosen by the publishers? Or do the gaming companies play a role? O'Connor had this to say: "No, it's a joint choice. We look at a list of suitable people."

When asked to define "we" O'Connor replied that, "It's a small core group within Bungie/Microsoft. You're unlikely to be talking to more than two Bungie, or two Microsoft people at any given time."

Simon gave a similar answer. "The team was (referring to a recently commissioned novel) actively involved in the decision. We put together a list of people that we thought would be good—and asked Del Rey for their opinion. It came down to a consensus decision between Insomniac/Sony and Del Rey."

What I found interesting about these comments was the fact that gaming companies often approach publishers with a list of preferred tie-in writers and participate in making the final decision. So what are they looking for? O'Connor's response was brief and to the point. "Availability and suitability. Is their writing good, would it fit, and can we get them quickly?"

Simon responded by asking, "What have they written? What kind of expertise do they have? How easy is it to work with them? You don't know going in—but you find out quickly! That's where you rely on the publisher. They work with the authors so they know. They (the authors) have to be flexible, opinionated when they need to be opinionated, but always for a good reason."

In other words when a licensor sits down with a publisher to discuss which writer they want to work with the reputation each one of us has knowingly or unknowingly established becomes quite important. Simply put if you're pleasant to deal with, willing to work as part of a team, and capable of meeting what are often short deadlines then game related offers are more likely to come your way. And, given the fact that the game market continues to expand, there will be more and more opportunities to go around. Remember to be cool though.... There's no substitute for that!

My next column will focus on TV/Film licensors, their perspective on tie-ins, and market trends. If you would like to provide feedback regarding my column, or make suggestions regarding future columns, please send them to bill@williamcdietz.com.

* Disclosure: William C. Dietz has written tie-ins for both Bungie/Microsoft and Insomniac/Sony through Del Rey.

