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MEDIA TIE-INS, YES OR NO?

A Dialog Between William C. Dietz and Norman Spinrad

William: This is the first column in a series of columns focused on tie-in novels.

During the series I plan to address the tie-in market, the various sub-categories of tie-in work, and the fine points of writing tie-in novels.

But first there's the question of whether one should even consider work for hire—which in the eyes of some constitutes hackery in the first degree. So given the fact that I've already committed that unnatural act, and am encouraging others to do so, I invited Norman Spinrad to give the other side. Let's get started.

Back in the late 1800's the railroad barons thought they were in the railroad business until trucks came along, then the barons discovered they were in the transportation business, and many of them went broke. By the same token I maintain that authors who believe they're in the literature business are mistaken. Because the truth is that they're in the entertainment business and therefore in competition with Heinlein's proverbial six-pack of beer, movies, TV, video games and much more.

With that in mind I believe there are at least five good reasons to write tie-ins. The first is to build an author's brand, meaning the name or names under which their work is published, because like it or not most readers purchase books written by authors they're familiar with. So if an author writes a STAR WARS novel that sells 50,000 copies, that's 50,000 additional impressions they wouldn't have had other-

wise, plus an opportunity to join the list of authors those individuals routinely scan for.

That brings us to reason number two. Having written books tied into the STAR WARS universe, the HALO games, the HITMAN games, and most recently RESISTANCE, FALL OF MAN, I know from personal experience that readers, often young readers, make the jump from HALO: *The Flood* to my original military science fiction novels. How many? That's hard to quantify. But I'll take all the help I can get!

The opportunity to form lasting relationships with new publishers is the third reason to seek out and accept tie-in work. There's no such thing as having too many publishers! Plus editors continually change jobs which means the individual who hires an author to write a tie-in may be in a position to buy their original fiction later on. And, since human beings tend to hire people they already know, a preexisting relationship could make an important dif-

ference.

The fourth reason to write a tie-in is the chance to participate in a universe of someone else's making. Perhaps the author is a huge Buffy fan, a died in the wool Trek fanatic, or somebody who has seen every episode of *Murder She Wrote*. I love first person shooters, so playing HALO, and being allowed to elaborate on that universe was a lot of fun.

Last, but certainly not least, is money. I plan to drill down on that part of the equation in columns yet to come, but suffice it to say that while almost all of my original books have earned out, none have come close to HALO: *The Flood*. It has sold well over 500,000 copies at this point. And yes, the royalties continue to come in five years after it was published!

HALO was an outlier of course, since many tie-ins net a few thousand dollars, with no royalties. And while I'm aware that the book's financial success was pri-

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marily due to the game's popularity, I also know I brought everything I could to the project, and didn't mess it up. Which, as Steve Perry once said to me, is the worst thing a tie-in writer can do.

Okay, Norman, those are the arguments for.... Shoot 'em down!



Norman

Well Bill, novelists are *not* in the entertainment business in the sense you mean. We are not competing for Joe's beer money—try to get drunk by reading a novel or passing a few hours reading a beer can. What we are competing with, to the extent that it is a null-sum game, are other people's novels. And so free-standing novels are competing with tie-ins. And since film, TV, and to some extent game tie-ins, are promoted by multimillion dollar advertising budgets for the entertainment items they are tied into as well as pr in the form of the items themselves where even a relative flop is reached by millions of viewers, it's hopelessly one-sided, as witness what you see on the racks in the "SF" sections of bookstores. The tie-ins are driving the stand alone novels out, indeed have come close to doing it already, a cultural and literary disaster.

Far be it for me to diss any writers for trying to keep their economic heads above water by whatever means necessary in these dire times, tie-ins included, porn included, journalism included. But speaking as someone who has written episodic television and feature films, let me tell you *that's* where the money is, not the tie-ins to them, and for much less work too. 24 pages of a script for *Werewolf* earned me more money than what you can get for any tie-in novel save maybe a fictionalization of a blockbuster feature film hit. THE DOOMSDAY MACHINE, a 48 page TV script for Star Trek has over the years probably earned me more money than even that. And of course, tie-ins do not earn

you full royalties; on the lower end maybe no royalties at all.

And with the occasional exception, tie-ins do not build much readership for the author's other novels, if they build anything, it's readership for the next tie-in the same series written by whoever. And indeed they can even hurt. Writers who begin to build their careers on tie-ins generally find that they are typed as tie-in writers, not to be trusted too far with anything else, all too similar to the problem SF writers in general have in finding good publication for mainstream novels. And what with BookScan and order-to-net, I know of one very successful writer of tie-ins who had to have the best free-standing SF novel he had ever written, a near masterpiece, published by a small press because if done by his tie-in publisher, the drop in numbers would have damaged the orders for the next tie-in.

That's my money argument, but as you can see from the above, it segues into literary matters too. Writing in some franchise universe where the setting, characters, and sometimes the story itself are handed to you like a TV series bible, is not exactly the best way to develop your skills in world-building, character creation or story creation, worse still in series situations where your main characters cannot die or really evolve from episode to episode. Been there, done that, with TV, and to a lesser extent with features.

Finally, while I've even sometimes enjoyed such TV work, and find no shame in doing honest work for money and doing the best job of it I know how, I have never deluded myself into believing that it's on the same level of literary adventure and evolutionary growth, let alone literary freedom, as a writer as my own entirely self-created stuff.

So write tie-ins for your economic well-being if the deal is a good one. But don't con yourself.

You're not writing them to compete for Joe's beer money.

You're writing them to earn your own.



William

Well said. I agree that tie-ins take up physical rack space, are driven by marketing budgets most of us can only dream of, and that authors can be typed.

But even though those arguments have merit I would argue that they are more about the past than the future. An increasing number of consumers order their books over the Internet rather than enter a traditional brick and mortar store. A reality that renders the traditional concept of rack space meaningless. There is an infinite amount of virtual rack space now, which means there's plenty of room for *all* books, including back lists and tie-ins. Which is good, because according to *Publisher's Weekly* 3,000 books are published every day in the United States, and even the biggest chain stores don't have shelf space for any but a small percentage of them.

No, what authors need to focus on these days isn't so much shelf space as mind share. Meaning the extent to which their name, or brand in marketing lingo, comes to mind when a reader thinks of books, science fiction, fantasy, and so forth. And the time honored way to increase mind share is via total number of exposures to a particular brand which is why companies run the same ads over-and-over until you could throw up. But we ignore such realities at our peril. So tie-in novels are an excellent way to harness the big budgets you referred to and use them to strengthen our individual brands. Which by the way, is the primary reason why authors who want to be commercially successful, should use the same name they normally write under for their tie-in books.

Earlier you said that "...with the occasional exception, tie-ins do not build much relationship for the author's other novels..."

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Indeed, after publishing more than twenty of my own free-standing novels, I still groan when I'm introduced to someone, and they say "Oh yeah, Norman Spinrad, the guy who wrote *The Doomsday Machine*." – N.S.

and I disagree. It's subjective mind you, since I don't think either one of us have hard data to support our perspectives, but I am of the opinion that by writing tie-ins I have not only won additional readers but I've been the occasional beneficiary of brand extension. Some proof of which can be seen in online chatter when game players will refer to me "As the guy who wrote *Hitman: The Enemy Within*, *Halo: The Flood*, and the *Legion* books." The latter being original fiction.

But let's talk about the nature of tie-in work for a moment. You said that, "...Writing in some franchise universe where the setting, characters, and sometimes the story itself are handed to you like a TV series bible, is not exactly the best way to develop your skills in world-building, character creation or story creation..."

Fair enough. There are limits on what one can do where tie-ins are concerned. Novelizations can be quite restrictive. But on the other hand, a tie-in novel, like the one I am currently writing for *Del Rey* and *Insomniac* (Sony's game division), can be an absolute blast! True, I had to get my plot, new characters, and other elements approved, but they're still mine. And, rather than work by myself all day the way I normally do, I'm presently part of a very welcoming team where there's lots of give and take.

The game designers have given me the opportunity to play in their sand box, I've been able to give them ideas (albeit minor ones) that will be incorporated into the next game, and meanwhile I'm working with and contributing stuff (including characters) to their cutting-edge ad agency that's busy putting together an ARG (Alternate Reality Game) Campaign complete with rabbit holes and other arcane stuff that I'm trying to stay abreast of. And it's a helluva lot of fun!

Do I want to give up writing original novels? No, of course not. But the choice isn't either or. We can do both.

Norman

Well in one way you're right; chain bookstore and independent bookstore rackspace are no longer the whole enchilada and will become less and less so thanks to Amazon and online booksellers like it. Novelists are really competing for *total* "rackspace" including online rackspace, meaning "listspace" on the publishers' annual lists. Until ebooks entirely replace paperbacks, it costs publishers money to print them, not to mention advances, and

their budgets, whatever they are, remain finite. So the tie-ins are still competing with the free-standing novels for that, and the tie-ins still have the same advertising, publicity, and marketing advantages. From what you say, advertising maybe in the form of "product placement" in the games, films, and TV shows, even more so.

I suppose that to some extent, the tie-ins may give the writers thereof a little "brand extension" (a term and a concept I find loathsome) for their own names, but since the game and media companies are calling the advertising and PR shots, and since it is in their economic interest to have the brand extension apply to *their* series brands—the game, the film, the toys,

the merchandise—not to the writers of the tie-in episodes, that's the way they promote and will continue to do so.

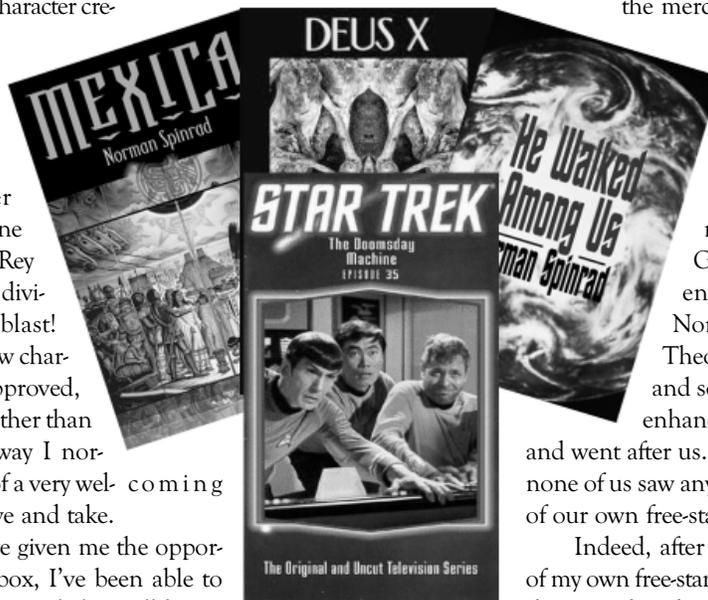
It's a bit like writing scripts for episodic TV shows. In the case of the original *Star Trek*, for example, Gene Roddenberry was wise enough to realize that having Norman Spinrad, Harlan Ellison, Theodore Sturgeon, Robert Bloch, and so forth writing episodes would enhance the credibility of the show, and went after us. We made a lot of money, but none of us saw any dramatic increase in the sales of our own free-standing books.

Indeed, after publishing more than twenty of my own free-standing novels, I still groan when I'm introduced to someone, and they say "Oh yeah, Norman Spinrad, the guy who wrote *The Doomsday Machine*."

As for the pleasures you describe, well I can understand that, being a novelist who also writes scripts, only less so. As a novelist, you're sitting there by yourself writing the book, it's lonely, it's solipsistic, it's not at all social. As a script writer, you're involved in social and creative interaction with a team, it's a collaborative artform. Sometimes this is fun, sometimes it's a real nightmare.

But the biggest thrill (when it isn't a king-sized bummer) is one which tie-in writers can never enjoy—seeing the end result up there on the screen. When I saw my episode of *Werewolf*, it was a wonderful delight. Nothing of consequence had been changed or altered from what I saw and heard in my own head when I was writing the script, but the director had actually *enhanced* it! Needless to say this is not what usually happens, but it is a possibility. With a tie-in, it can't be.

As for giving the game designers ideas for their next games, this isn't work for hire, this is work for nothing. Or are they



paying you for it? Same thing for working with the advertising agencies. In TV work, if this happened, the Writers Guild would be holding them upside down and squeezing money out of their pockets and into yours.

Which pockets the media conglomerates seem to be generally picking. In terms of time spent, including the conferences and dealing with the requirements and suggestions of the pin-heads upstairs, it's as much work writing a tie-in as writing a free-standing novel. So why should the royalty rates be less?

Another point from screenwriting: feature film writing is unequivocally work for hire, but write a successful movie script (90 pages standard) and the residuals come pouring in year after year. I know a few screenwriters (admittedly lazy or blocked) who have in effect been able to retire on the ongoing proceeds of one feature film. Is there a tie-in writer able to do this off one book?

Like screenwriters, you guys are doing work for hire. Like screenwriters, who have one, you guys need a union, a strong one able to secure and enforce a Minimum Basic Agreement. Given that both groups are largely employed by the same media conglomerates, maybe this is not beyond the realm of possibility.



William

I certainly agree that those who, like yourself, have an opportunity to write screenplays should do so. However, based on what I've heard selling a screenplay is even more difficult than publishing a first novel. But, thanks to your input, I'll jump on the first opportunity that comes along. Although it's my understanding that your experience with *Werewolf* is the exception rather than the rule. Screenplays are pretty much of a team sport these days. Still, I see your anecdote as support for my thesis that work for hire can be satisfying.

One last thought before I run out of column inches. Fundamental to all of the arguments you put forward is the notion that original or "free-standing" novels are in some way pure and therefore superior to work for hire. Never mind the fact that Michelangelo's work inside the Sistine Chapel fresco amounts to a tie-in to the Bible which is still pulling in pretty good numbers. (49,820 on amazon.com today.)

The truth is that what we authors get paid to do is to retell, repackage, and re-spin stories that have already been told one way or another, while adding our individual thoughts, flavorings, and touches. A process that takes existing plots and makes them worth rereading again. That means everything we do is not only tied to all of the storytellers who came before, but all of

those presently at work, and those yet to come! So let's keep it real. The notion that our stand-alone novels stand-alone ignores a glaring truth. Everything we write is tied to everything that has been written and will be written. And that's fine with me. But the last word in *this* discourse belongs to you!



Norman

Well, Michelangelo, and by extension all the European artists prior to the Renaissance and even a bit beyond, were constrained to make their livings doing Church Art—Bible tie-ins as it were—because that was their only economic option, like it or not, and many of them didn't.

They did not have artistic freedom.

When it become possible for artists to follow their own stars and survive and they did, you had a continuous explosion of artistic creativity that still goes on. Whatever the artform, artistic freedom is the life's blood of creativity.

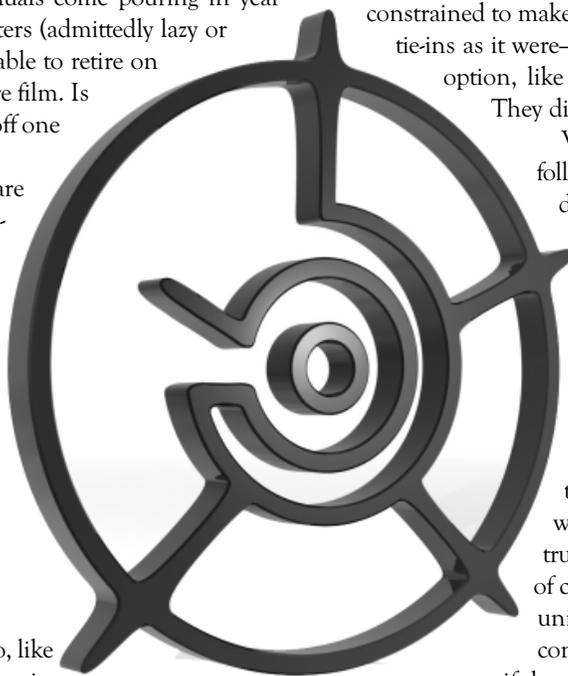
It is true that writers may draw upon and make reference to all the works that have gone before, but that does not at all mean that all we can do is retell, repackage, and re-spin stories that have been told before. Least of all, writers of science fiction, who if they are true to their calling, start with the blankest of canvases, and are free to create, worlds, universes, cultures, states of being and consciousness, the very laws of mass and energy if they so choose.

And even if one chooses to retell some pre-told tale, it's one thing to draw upon ten thousand years of world myth, history, and literature, and quite another to be bound by the series bible of a TV series, video game, or the script of a feature film.

The former is a vast resource that limits no one's creative freedom.

The latter can only be a constraint.

[bio and pics?](#)



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