

Some Observations on Credit Assignment

Chris Crawford

One of the minor issues in all of the entertainment industries is the manner in which the creator's name is presented to the public in the work. A product creates an intangible asset: fame. The financial value of this asset lies in the tendency of customers to buy more products associated with a name that they recognize and respect. To whom should this asset accrue? Most of us would answer, "To the author, of course!" but in practice it does not work out that way.

Publishers want a piece of this pie for themselves. Moreover, the greater the fame of the designer, the stronger his negotiating position. Thus, publishers have strong economic incentives to minimize the author's credit and maximize their own. They are in an excellent position to act on these incentives. After all, the publisher controls the design of the package and the advertising. The result is that few game designers get the credit they deserve. This is not a new problem. The various entertainment industries are all partnerships between creative people and businesspeople, and the same economic forces play in other entertainment industries. The other industries have the advantage of experience over our industry, and they have worked out solutions to some of these problems. Perhaps their compromises can provide a benchmark for our own industry.

I thought it would be interesting to compare the behavior of computer game publishers with that of other publishers. So I sat down with a variety of products and made some measurements. I measured the size of the type in which the author's name appears on the front cover of the product. (If the author's name didn't appear, I entered a value of zero.) I also measured the size of the type in which the publisher's name appears on the front cover of the product. (Again, I entered a value of zero if no publisher's name appeared on the cover.) I then averaged the values I measured from ten different products and divided the average author's name size by the average publisher's name size. The resulting ratio gives us an idea of how much recognition authors get, independent of the individual artistic considerations for each package. Generally speak-

WORKS AND DAYS 43/44, Vol. 22, Nos. 1&2, 2004

ing, authors would like to see this ratio very large, while publishers would like to see it very small. I did this experiment for four categories of entertainment products: books, compact disks, videotapes, and computer games. The results:

Category	Ratio
Books	4.00
Compact Disks	1.36
Videotapes	1.14
Computer Games	0.75

Now, there are a lot of special considerations to toss into this stew. For example, book publishers seldom put their names on the front cover; they make their mark on the spine of the book. This is why the value for books is so high. The compact disks I used were all classical, and I measured the size of the performer's names, not those of the composers, even though the composer is arguably the name that people most recognize. Finally, the selection of computer games was eclectic; no two products came from the same publisher. I also excluded any products from before 1985; in the early days, publishers didn't put the author's name on the package at all. What conclusions can we draw from this data? I wouldn't squeeze this small amount of data too hard, but I think that the pattern is clear: we authors of computer games do not get as much recognition as our compatriots in other entertainment fields. What can we do about it? Well, we could sit around and hope that publishers will freely bestow a greater place for our names on the packaging. Or we can start to demand it in contract negotiations. I personally hope that we can avoid specifications of this nature; I would rather see our industry informally (stochastically?) establish industry conventions that are comparable with those we see in these other industries.

Credit Assignment Revisited

Chris Crawford

Two years ago I published an article in the *Journal* presenting a survey I had carried out regarding author credits on game packaging. I attempted to quantify the amount of author credit that we receive by measuring the size of the author's name on the front of the package. By "size," I actually mean the height of the type in which the author's name is printed. To make it more fair, I also measured the size of the publisher's name. This allowed me to calculate a ratio of the author's size to the publisher's size. That ratio is a quick and dirty index of just how much credit we authors receive.

The ratio, averaged over ten computer games, came out to 0.75. That is, the average computer game box prints the author's name in type that is 3/4 the size of the publisher's name. How good is that? Well, I carried out similar measurements for books, compact disks, and videotapes, obtaining ratios of 4.0, 1.36, and 1.14 respectively. In other words, artists in those other fields receive better recognition than computer game designers. That's not good.

So, how have things changed in the last two years? Have they gotten better or worse? Your roving reporter wandered into several software outlets in search of the answer. I went down the shelves, pulling boxes and measuring the size of the author's name and the publisher's name on each. I compiled a list of some three dozen different games, from all the major publishers, and the results are not heartening. The overall ratio has gone down to 0.53!

Here is the breakdown by publisher of the average ratios. Remember, a large value is good, and a small value is bad for authors:

<u>Publisher</u>	<u>Ratio</u>
Electronic Arts	.90
Mindscape	.79
Origin Systems	.41
Activision	.28
Broderbund	.20
Cinemaware	.16
Accolade	.04
Epyx	.00

Now, there are a number of special factors to complicate our considerations. For example, some publishers put their logo on the front of the box. Electronic Arts, for example, has a large logo, and their corporate name is printed in small type. I didn't measure the logo, I measured the type size. Thus, EA's ratios are better than they deserve to be. Mindscape has a similar arrangement.

Then there's Cinemaware. Cinemaware presents big, bold author credits. Unfortunately, Cinemaware dilutes the value of author credits by packing the credit list with lots of Cinemaware employees, including Bob and Phyllis Jacob, the owners of the company. The real authors are buried in the pile of other names.

Epyx and Accolade possess appallingly low ratios. This is because they seldom if ever include author credits on the front of their boxes. There were some author credits buried in the fine print on the back of the box, but that doesn't count in this survey.

Several major publishers, most notably Microprose and Sierra OnLine, are not included in this survey. They rely on internally developed software, and so do not provide author credit. I thought it unfair to include them.

Need for Remedies

This may strike some readers as much ado about nothing. After all, some might reason, financial considerations must remain para-

mount when so many developers must struggle to make a living. Worrying about credit assignment is just glorified ego-tripping.

This is short-sighted reasoning. Look at it this way: the goodwill that a superior game creates in the minds of consumers is an asset. It is an intangible asset, but a valuable one, for it will be a major factor in the consumers' decision to purchase future games. To whom should that asset accrue? Right now, the publishers arrogate most of that asset to themselves, and authors acquiesce to the arrogation.