rake's Corner
by R.L. Drake

Publisher Do's and Don'ts

Publishing games is a risky business to be in (what business isn't?). Releasing a great game won't necessarily guarantee that the game sell a million copies. Successful companies throughout the years have learned what it takes to make it in the game publishing business so I decided to ask some successful companies what they thought their keys to success were and have summed up some of the findings (well, with some of my opinions on the matter mixed in) below.

1) Start that advertising campaign early.

All too often publishers wait until the last minute to get the all-important advertising campaign going. Usually publishers have to place ads, send demos to distributors and magazines, etc., months in advance of the actual release. It's good to plan ahead, and get the hype going. Of course, one of the major problems in doing this is that the game will often be delayed for months and the publisher ends up paying for advertising on a soon-to-be released product. That's why it's essential that marketing people stay in close contact with the developers of the game so they can plan accordingly.

Once a product ships, make sure you send press releases and copies of the game to magazines, user groups, writers, etc. Follow up with calls asking for a review in a magazine (Take the political route, for example, "When will the review of our product appear in your magazine?") Remember, any mention of your product in any magazine is free advertising!

2) Start developing PowerMac games now, not later.

Now is the time to start developing PowerMac games. Yes, the market is small now but it's good to get your feet wet now. If you're not developing PowerMac games now, you'll be left in the dust. Companies like Domark, Bungie, and Graphic Simulations are taking the lead in this area, and in order to remain innovative and competitive it's essential to begin moving toward where the market will be growing in the future.

If the game is portable and popular enough, think about porting it to DOS.

3) Get rid of the copy protection, once and for all.

I've noticed one thing lately. If a game is copy protected, especially if it's a hideous manual look-up, you end up not playing the game very often. Why? Well, first, because half the time you don't know where you placed the manual and second, you're just too lazy to get up to try to find it.

"Hey, I'm in the mood for, a forget it, I don't know where that stupid manual is. What the heck, I think I'll go play something not copy-protected." At least those silly code-wheels seem to be disappearing quickly.

4) Make a regular sized box.

Make a box that stacks on the shelf nicely. Not only must it stack well on the store's shelf, but also in the customer's closet. Let me tell you, I've seen some weird and stupid odd-shaped boxes in my lifetime. The game itself, the graphics, and the gameplay is what attracts me to a game, not a with a box that needs 10 minutes of intensive labor to open just to find the disks.

5) Don't give out release dates.

"It's coming out October 1st. Really!" WRONG. Don't ever, ever give a specific release date. If you miss the release date, customers will begin to whine and complain about how unreliable your company is. Instead, tell the customer it will ship "in the Fall" or "in the 4th

Quarter."

6) Fix those bugs, fast!

If a game isn't relatively bug-free, don't release it. In general, customers expect bug-free games and nothing can kill a game's success more than a game that crashes every five minutes. If the game has bugs, release a bug fix ASAP. Also, it's a good idea to release betas of bug fixes and get their feedback on the bug fix.

7) Maintain good customer support.

Having a presence on all major online services is a must these days. Having just a an 800 customer-support number these days just doesn't cut it. Online services are a fabulous way to get feedback on games, answer questions, etc.

8) Develop new original titles, not sequel, after sequel, after sequel.

Sequels can be a dangerous thing. Ever watch Rocky 5? You get my point. Releasing sequels to games that add just a few features here and there for the sake of making more money of a once popular game can make a company un-innovative and boring. I mean, how many sequels of Spectre do we need?

9) Get on the CD-ROM bandwagon!

CD-ROM's are hot, and it's almost gotten to the point that if you're not releasing a game on CD-ROM, you're missing out big time. There doesn't necessarily have to be 500 MB on a CD-ROM in order for it to do well. Take Domark's Flying Nightmares. The CD-ROM version of the game has sold about 2 to 1 compared to the disk based version and the only difference between the two is a small QuickTime movie on the CD-ROM version. Sure, there will be a few people here and there who will complain that the CD-ROM version only takes up 30 MB's on the CD-ROM, but that's 30 MB that they'll have free on their hard drive. One last thing, don't charge more for the CD-ROM version. It's cheaper to produce your product on CD-ROM, so why charge the customer 10 bucks more for the CD-ROM version?

10) Release a demo, but never release a self-running demo!

Demos are great! Release a demo at all costs! However, avoid releasing a self-running demo like the plague. Almost no one likes to sit there and watch someone else having all the fun. Customers want to play the game, get a feel for it, and if they like it, they'll buy a copy. More free advertising!