

y Richard Rouse III

Who Writes These Things, Anyway?

“I don’t believe in art by committee.” - Frank Capra

When Bungie Software released the unique and amusing Weekend Warrior a while back, many on the internet were thrilled at the prospect of being treated to another “Bungie game.” However, when people actually played the game, they realized that though it used cutting edge technology and was entertaining in its own way, Weekend Warrior didn’t really adhere to the extreme violence, extreme carnage, quick reflexes aesthetic that has become Bungie’s trademark. Some said “Huh, that’s weird” and went back to playing Marathon. The more inquisitive, however, may have poked around on the back of the box or perhaps read a bit of the manual, to discover the game was actually created by Brian Greenstone and his company, Pangea Software. Though Bungie may have helped with final play-testing and funding, in essence Brian Greenstone was the author of the game, not Jason Jones, who was the brain behind the Marathon series and all the other Bungie “hits” to date.

Why did consumers perceive Weekend Warrior as another “Bungie game,” and, indeed, why were consumers eager for the next “Bungie game” and not the next “Jason Jones game?” Part is that Bungie wanted to use the trusted Bungie brand name to convince consumers to buy as many copies of the new game as they could, despite the fact that it was all but completely unrelated to what they had come to expect from Bungie games. But Bungie can hardly be faulted for this, since marketing by brand name instead of by designer is a practice as old as the computer gaming industry. Indeed, part of the reason people saw Weekend Warrior as a “Bungie game” is that the entire industry has been successfully selling the public on the notion that companies, not individuals, make games.

### [As Old as Time Itself](#)

The practice of denying humans the authorship of computer games goes all the way back to the very beginning of commercial computer game development, when game designers like Ed Logg (Asteroids, Centipede, Gauntlet), and Dave Theurer (Missile Command, Tempest) slaved away at Atari in complete anonymity for minuscule salaries. It was Atari policy - and every other game developer’s policy - that designers did not receive credit for their work. In

this way, Atari built a following around its brand name instead of around its talented employees. While the employees could quit when someone offered them more pay or better working conditions, the brand name Atari was owned lock, stock, and barrel, and hence Atari could hold on to its popularity even if Ed Logg quit for greener pastures. Since next to no one played games based on who designed them, Atari got to keep its employees around for the lowest wages possible.

Indeed, denying humans authorship goes all the way back - if not farther - to the early days of film industry with which (both justly and unjustly) the computer game industry is so often compared. In the early days of film, stars were denied credit by their producers, who hoped to keep their salaries low by maintaining their anonymity. Over the course of the first decade of film as a popular art, stars managed to demand the right to screen credit and with it the ability to demand higher salaries, for the public was quick to realize it didn't so much want to see the latest Paramount picture, they wanted to see the newest Lillian Gish movie. Along with the stars, the invisible creators of films - the directors, the screenwriters, the cinematographers, and so on - got screen credit as well. It wasn't for many years still that directors such as D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille were able to attract audiences with the presence of their name on the marquee, as audiences came to realize that a director had still more to do with whether a picture was any good or not than a star - let alone a movie studio - did.

arathon 2 and Weekend Warrior are both "Bungie games," but how else are they similar?

### [Pac-Man Needs a New Agent](#)

But computer games don't really have stars - or if they do, they're the virtual kind, such as Mario, Pac-Man, or Tomb Raider's Lara Croft. These wholly-owned properties can be used by companies to their hearts content, without necessarily meaning that the games they're in are any good. (Pac-Man Adventure, anyone?) Hence it's been an even longer time until game designers - such as Sid Meier - have gotten the recognition they deserve and thereby acquired the rights to their names on the boxes of their games. Indeed, many designers who fully deserve to have their names above the titles of their games - such as Jason Jones - still don't. (Part of this is because many designers seem to not really care - since Jones is part owner of Bungie Software I'm sure he could make it Jason Jones' Myth - The Fallen Lords if he so desired - but part of it is still the companies' desire to not make stars out of its talented designers.)

(In a bizarre twist on Sid Meier's "name above the title" status, the official name for Civilization is actually Sid Meier's Civilization. So, when Microprose wanted to do a sequel, it was called Sid Meier's Civilization II, despite the fact that Meier didn't actually design it. Though Meier was apparently involved as a consultant to actual designer Brian Reynolds and approved of the final version of the game, he cannot be considered the author of the sequel (which is a terrific game nonetheless). Meier's name has earned customer recognition, and no doubt Microprose wouldn't want to deprive itself of a handy marketing tool, hence leaving his "name above the title" on a game he didn't make. Perhaps it should have been called Brian Reynold's Sid Meier's Civilization II? But I digress...)

Determining authorship in collaborative media - such as present day computer games - is always a tricky proposition. It's easy to know who wrote a novel such as *The Sound and the Fury*. William Faulkner sat down and wrote every last word in the book. Sure, he didn't draw the cover painting, and he no doubt had friends and confidants - not to mention editors - who helped him refine his work. But still, we have no problem declaring him the author. In the early days of the computer gaming industry, when designers were kept in forced anonymity by their employers, it was similarly easy to declare authorship, since often one person designed the game, programmed it, made all the sound effects, and drew the art. Others may have helped here and there with that bit of code or this piece of art, but in the end one person did the lion's share of the work. This has led to a nostalgic fondness for the bygone era of "one person, one game," and many today look upon that as a golden age never to revisited.

### Capracorn

In his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title*, Frank Capra (if you didn't know, he's the director of *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *It Happened One Night*, and a truck-load more of terrific films) talks at some length of his personal philosophy of "one person, one film," and credits the failure or success of each of his films with the failure or success of his own personal vision and determination to see it through. Of course, Capra wasn't the cinematographer, the art director, and the editor on all his films, nor did he play all of the parts. But it was his efforts that instructed his collaborators in what the film should look and sound like, so that his vision for the film would come through in the final cut.

But surely film is as much, if not more so, a collaborative media as modern computer games. It may never be that another professional, commercial game is almost entirely created by one person, but does this mean that authorship has been diluted to the point where we can not claim any one person is the author of a modern game? I don't think so. The author is the person who, in the end, is responsible for saying yes or no to every element in a given game. This author is the person who, though they may not have come up with the initial idea for the game, refined the design into the state which is finally available to the player. S/he is the person who asks their collaborators for a certain "look" to the graphics, a certain "quality" to the sounds, a certain "vibe" to the music, and most importantly, a certain "feel" to the gameplay. Indeed, the designers who it's easy to establish as the authors of their games are often involved intimately with the programming, doing some portion of it themselves. Certainly some designers who can easily claim authorship for their games do none of the programming themselves, but regardless the author must have an intimate and continuous involvement with the creation of the game. No one who writes a design document - no matter how detailed - and then hands it off to someone else to implement can really be considered the author of a game. The author is there to the bitter end, making sure their vision is followed through.

Of course a good author is never closed to advice, in fact they encourage input from all their collaborators. But in the end, it's the author's decision for what direction to take on the

graphics, the sound, the music, the gameplay. Good collaborators often make all the difference in the author seeing his vision through, but at the same time the author could have found other collaborators to do similar work, while still maintaining his vision of the final product. The author, then, is necessarily the sine qua non: - that without which there is not. Not to say a given game wouldn't exist at all without the designer/leader, but that it would be so different as to in essence be a completely different gaming experience. If we can declare that Frank Capra is the author of *It's a Wonderful Life* - and we most certainly can - we can just as easily claim that Sid Meier is the author of *Civilization* or Brian Greenstone is the author of *Weekend Warrior*.

### Calamitous Committeethink

As in film-making, sometimes computer game authorship is compromised, meaning sometimes there is no one with a consistent, dominating vision to guide the project to completion. Sometimes there are too many interests who think they know what's best for the game, and no single vision comes through in the final version. Often called "committeethink," this method of creating games is not, as Frank Capra observed, something that will lead to very good art. There are the happy exceptions, of course, when no one on a project really knows what's going on and it all comes out rather well at the end. (Otherwise known as dumb luck.) But more often than not, players end up with games that are trying to be too many things at the same time, games that are all over the map as to what sort of experience they're trying to create, and hence games that just aren't very fun, let alone stimulating.

The key thing to take away from all these paranoid ramblings is that without the key person, without a computer game's author, you're left with a game that's more likely to be bad than it is to be good. And for this reason, it's imperative that we as consumers take the initiative to follow designers, not companies. Just as we're not waiting with bated breath for the next "Paramount movie" or "Bantam book," we shouldn't be eager for the next "Bungie game." Suppose in five years, when Jason Jones quits Bungie software to go on his long-dreamed-about mountain bike trip across the Himalayas, we as game fans need to realize that the games at Bungie just won't be the same any more, regardless of the fact that the Bungie brand name may still be on them. The games may be good or they may be bad, we'll have to judge that when the time comes. But without Jones at the helm, they certainly won't be the same.

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Richard Rouse III is a game developer working out of New York City, whose published titles thus-far are 1996's *Odyssey - The Legend of Nemesis* and 1997's *Damage Incorporated*, both published by MacSoft. Richard's currently very happy his radio can receive WSOU (89.5) again, after not being able to do so for unknown reasons. Richard would also like to point out that author recognition is much better in computer gaming than it used to be, and, indeed, it's much much better than it is in the world of board gaming. Call up Milton Bradley and ask them who designed a game like *A Question of Scruples*. They won't tell you. Feedback to this column is (politely) demanded at [paranoid@panix.com](mailto:paranoid@panix.com).