

How To Novelize a Game

BY WILLIAM C. DIETZ

Warning! The following article includes material related to work for hire, commercial tie-ins, and frank depictions of authors writing books in a craven effort to make money. If you find the notion of doing it for money to be offensive, or are repulsed by the unnatural coupling of literature with electronic and other games, then you should douse this publication with gasoline and burn it in the driveway! Otherwise read on.

The *Locus* Bestseller list includes five categories of Science Fiction and Fantasy: “Hardcovers,” “Paperbacks,” “Trade Paperbacks,” “Media-Related,” and a category called “Gaming Related,” down in the right hand corner of the page. In the March 2005 issue *Forgotten Realms: The Two Swords*, by R. A. Salvatore occupied first place, and had an Amazon ranking of 999, while *Forgotten Realms: The Lone Drow*, also by R. A. Salvatore came in second with an Amazon ranking of 17, 568, and Eric Nylund’s *HALO: First Strike* was in third place and had an Amazon rating of 14,683. And that’s after sitting on the *Locus* list for 12 months. (*All stats as of 12:00 PST 3-24-05.*)

So, what’s the point? Game related novels sell very well, and for those of us who aren’t adverse to making a buck or two while we wait for our break-out literary effort to hit the New York Times best seller list, they represent a nice opportunity. One which *you*, as a published author, may be able to cash in on.

First, a word about my credentials. I have written more than 25 novels all of which have strong action-adventure themes. That’s relevant because the games I was hired to novelize were what gamers refer to as First Person Shooters, meaning electronic games in which the player sees everything through the main character’s point of view. As for the shooting part, well, that speaks for itself. I wrote three novellas based on the STAR WARS/Dark Forces games, including *Soldier For The Empire*, *Rebel Agent*, and *Jedi Knight*.) All for a consortium consisting of Dark Horse Comics, what is now Penguin-Putnam, and

LucasArts. These were hardcovers believe it or not, packed with full-page color illustrations by top flight artists, AND printed on slick paper.

More recently (April 2003) I wrote *HALO: The Flood*, based on the game HALO from Bunjie/Microsoft, and published by DEL REY. As of this writing it has been on the *Locus* Bestseller list for the last 16-months.

So, how does one get to write a tie-in? In most cases the people who novelize games are invited to do so based on the type of novels they have written in the past and previous novelizations (if any). That means that a novelization will most likely come looking for you via your agent, publisher, or someone you happen to know. But that shouldn’t stop you from thinking up ways to market yourself to the gaming industry.

Once you have been contacted, and some sort of deal is under discussion, keep the following things in mind: All novelizations are what is referred to as “work for hire,” meaning that once you complete the book, it becomes the property of the people who hired you. That includes subsidiary rights if any. In most cases you or your agent will be dealing with both a publisher who paid for the right to publish tie-in novels, and the company that designed the game, which will take a percentage of the money generated.

In most cases the deal will consist of a set figure, half of which will be paid up front in the form of an advance, and half of which will be due upon delivery of a final (approved) manuscript. Occasionally, but not often, you may have the option of accepting a lower fee with a small royalty on the back end. If so, listen to what your agent tells you, Google the sucker to see what game players say about the property (they’re the ones who would potentially buy the book), check sales figures for previous tie-ins, drop by the local game store and ask the long-haired guy in the weird T-shirt what he thinks, or throw some chicken entrails and hire a Shaman to read them. Whatever you do research the game’s popu-

larity-because the decision could make a big difference to your bottom line.

Another thing to consider is the turnaround time involved. For some reason novelizations typically arrive with a very short deadline. I had ten weeks to write *HALO: The Flood*. That raises the following concerns...

1. Are you a fast writer? If so, that’s a plus.
2. What else are you committed to? Missing one publisher’s deadline in order make another publisher’s deadline is not a good way to build a career.
3. And, what about your family? Are they willing to make a commitment to the craziness as well?

And, last but certainly not least, there’s the matter of access. Once the deal has been negotiated, and a deadline has been agreed upon, you will have to work closely with game designers and related staff in order to succeed. That means weekly if not daily contact. There are two main models.

The first model, and by far the best from the writer’s point of view, is to be located in the same city as the game designers which means you can meet with them face-to-face and communicate via telephone and email. For example, thanks to the fact that the HALO team is located in Redmond, Washington, and I live nearby, it was possible to meet with the team face-to-face. That was a big advantage.

The second model is to work remotely, using telephone, email, overnight delivery, and fax in order to communicate. When I was hired to write the Dark Forces novels my editor and I were invited to the Lucas Ranch north of San Francisco for an initial meeting, but the rest of my interaction with the LucasArts Licensing Department was at a distance. The initial meeting was extremely valuable however (not to men-

tion a lot of fun!)-and I strongly recommend that you insist on one. (Expenses paid of course.)

Once terms have been established, or even as they are being established assuming that you're pretty sure that you will agree to the deal, start playing the game. *I can't emphasize that enough.* Remember, the people that you will be working for (the game designers more than the publisher) are fanatics. They created the game and typically eat, sleep, and are married to it. Naturally interlopers such as yourself are going to be judged by how well they know the game, the degree to which they appreciate its intricacies, and how cool they are perceived to be. If you're fortunate, somebody on the team will turn out to be one of your fans, and will say as much. That goes a long way towards establishing your credibility with everyone else.

So play the game a lot, pause to take copious notes, and take time to think about the story that didn't reach the screen, because that is what most clients are looking for, and ultimately that is what can make a novelization more than a reverse engineered screenplay. The key is to tell the story that never made it to the screen (in the case of an electronic game.)

There may be a client out there who wants nothing more than a straight word-for-word regurgitation of their game but most come looking for something more. They want the writer to adhere to the rules of their universe, which are often contained in an extremely thick binder (or on a CD), and to remain true to the game's storyline (assuming there is one), but they're generally after something more as well. They're looking for you to enhance the game experience by developing the main characters more fully, to take advantage of the intervals between action sequences to provide back story, insert interesting sub-plots and open up parallel stories.

How much of that sort of thing they will allow varies by company and team, but one thing is for sure, you can't sell ideas you don't have! So play the game, create as many scenarios as you can, and build a formal presentation. Does that sound like work? Well, it is, but writing something that is based on a game, but includes original material that you like, is a heck of a lot more fun than simply feeding the same stuff back to the design team.

Chances are that there will be some

back and forth during subsequent days resulting in give and take on both sides. The most significant problem that writers are likely to run into during this stage is a tendency on the part of game designers to push back where new ideas are concerned, to throw up road blocks based on understandings known only to the group mind, and an understandable desire to protect the next game. All one can do is negotiate through it, take good notes, and deliver regular memos of understanding that will serve to document what everyone agreed to should disagreements arise.

It's also a good idea to make sure that you receive a copy of everything that could conceivably be of assistance to you. That includes copies of the "bible," previous novelizations if any, tie-in publications of all sorts, DVDs, loose artwork or anything else that you can lay your hands on. Odds are that it will offer inspiration, help you describe what things/people/creatures look like, and generally keep your head in the game.

Once all the pieces are in place, and everyone is in at least temporary agreement, sit down and write the book. The game constitutes your outline and should provide you with a solid beginning, middle, and end. Your task is to honor that in a way that does justice to the game playing experience, while bringing additional depth to the story, so that even the most jaded player comes away feeling that he or she not only had a good time reading the book, but know all sorts of things about the characters and story line they didn't know before, thereby encouraging them to play the game again, buy other tie-ins, and most importantly of all be first in line for the next iteration of the game!

Of course all of that effort won't necessarily prevent Amazon reviews like this one by a reader named M. J. Lane. (One of 83 reviews.) "I cannot believe this hack (Dietz) wrote a novel that precisely mirrors the game. I guess if M\$ dangles enough money in front of a writer and says "put this one dimensional story into a novel format" any writer would do it. I was 60 pages into the book and hoping that Dietz would figure out a way to put in SOMETHING that would make this book interesting. But 60 pages of mind numbing was my "puke point" and I gave up. This book was so bad it was the first time I ever considered sending a book back to Amazon and de-

manding a refund. Unfortunately I spilled wine all over it." (All misspellings are the exclusive property of M. J. Lane.)

Nice, huh? But then there's this...Part of an Amazon review by a reader named Christian Wheeler. "Another strong aspect of the novel is how Dietz explores the Covenant side of the conflict through the eyes of a lowly Grunt, Yayap. We see more of their hierarchy (with hints of what we would learn in Halo 2 about the Covenant's ruling order) and learn more about the individual races, such as the Grunts, Elites, Hunter, and Jackals. The lead Covenant Elite featured in the novel, Orna'Fulsamee, may also be the same Elite who takes on the mantle of the Arbiter in Halo 2. There's also more info on the Covenant's history and their motivations in their war with humanity. The UNSC Marines, often little more than cannon fodder in the game, are also fleshed out a lot more. We learn more about Foe-Hammer (always heard but never seen in the game) and other Marines, plus we gain some more insight into Captain Jacob Keyes. Dietz' writing style is sparse, with just enough descriptive detail to give the reader a good sense of time and place. Weapons and combat tactics are adequately described, and the author has a good sense of action..."

Naturally I think the second reviewer has it right...but the first one certainly nailed all of the things that can go wrong.

As for what can go right, well there's the money I mentioned earlier, plus more books with your name on them, plus more "hits" on the Internet, plus what could be some new business relationships, plus the possibility of some new readers, (Yes, I have reason to believe that least five or six people read *HALO: The Flood* and went on to purchase other William C. Dietz books!) Good luck out there-and may the gamers be with you. ■

William C. Dietz is the author of more than twenty science fiction novels. His novels include Legion of the Damned, Deathday, and Earthrise. He and his wife reside in the Seattle area.

