SIMULATION DISTRIBUTION ALTERNATIVES: AUTHOR/USER CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Distributing and supporting simulations has been a challenge since the first simulation authors gave decks of cards to interested colleagues and told them to call if they had any problems. As the number of users increased and programs became more complex, numerous methods were used to provide access and support. These methods appear to have coalesced to three major alternatives with variations. The panel will focus upon these alternatives delineating the strengths and weaknesses of each from the perspective of both authors and users.

Simulation Distribution Alternatives: Author/User Considerations

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A successful simulation experience from the author(s)-user's perspective includes timely receipt of the simulation, trouble-free installation of programs, error free running of the simulation and quick and accurate solutions to operating questions and any software errors that occur. In addition, the authors(s) would like a reasonable return for their work. These criteria will guide the discussion of the alternative distribution methods.

Simulation distribution currently takes one of there general forms. The simulation is distributed by major publishers, by small independent publishers or by the author(s) using some type of licensing agreement. Simulation support is also provided in one of three configurations. The support may be provided by the publisher. The support may be provided by the simulation author(s). The simulation support may be provided by the publisher and the author(s) with the publisher handling the general issues and the author(s) handling the more complex issues. Support is generally free but may be provided for some type of fee.

After a short introduction delineating the issues, the panel will address distribution via major publishers, the most common method of simulation distribution. The benefits of this method for both the author(s) and the users will be discussed. This will be followed by the disadvantages of this method for both parties. The discussion will be reinforced by personal experience of the panel members and of the audience during the ensuing discussion.

While the physical distribution of a simulation is relatively straight forward, there are several dimensions of support to consider. Support may be needed for installing a simulation, for running a simulation, for interpreting the

results of a simulation run and for software problems that occur during a simulation run. Support may consist of answering procedural questions regarding simulation installation and operation. Support may also consist of interpreting and answering questions about the "rules" of the simulation. Finally support may consist of locating and exterminating bugs reported by users and providing the updated, debugged software to users. The panel will discuss the feasibility of the publisher or the author(s) providing each type of support and the relative effectiveness of each party providing each type of support.

The panel will next address distribution via small independent publishers. This form of distribution was somewhat popular in early simulation history and then waned due partly to the consolidation that took place in the publishing industry. There is some indication that it may be making a comeback. Issues discussed will include the benefits and costs for the author(s) of using a small independent publisher vs. a major publisher. For example, major publishers are able to provide significantly more promotion for a simulation (if they choose to do so) that may result in more sales. Each sale may yield a smaller royalty to the author(s) than is provided by the small independent publisher. Benefits and costs to users will also be addressed including timely support. Most support is likely to rest with the author(s) when using a small independent publisher.

Distribution via direct licensing from the author(s) has been a little used form of distribution to date. *Markstrat* has appeared to use this method successfully while also working with a major publisher to distribute its manuals. There is an annual licensing fee that is paid by the school. Manuals are purchased by players, thus the license is an additional cost above the cost of manuals that is borne by the school. The success of a licensing arrangement appears to be dependent upon users agreeing to follow the law and purchasing a license to use the software. It also requires the simulation to possess some significant advantages over competing simulations to compel users to pay a license fee when competitors do not charge a fee.

A new licensing arrangement has been developed that licenses the software to each team playing the simulation and thus does not require an outlay by the school. All costs are borne directly by the teams thus freeing the administrator from worrying about licensing issues. The player's manuals are distributed in PDF format over the Internet with the cost included in the license fee. The panel will focus upon this licensing arrangement in its comparison of distribution methods. This method places all of the distribution work directly upon the author(s). The author(s) have better knowledge of their users and thus are able to provide updates more efficiently. The author(s) also receive all of the proceeds from the license fees less the expenses of distributing via the Internet and credit card processing charges.

Support using a licensing method falls directly upon the author(s). Some support can be provided via FAQ's on the Internet. Support can also be provided via email (this also works for the above two methods) which removes national boundary problems except in cases where there is a language barrier.

By illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of the above three methods of distribution, the panel hopes to familiarize both authors and users with the choices available to distribute and receive simulations. Most people are familiar with simulations distributed by major publishers. However fewer are familiar with small independent publishers and very few are familiar with licensing simulations. Each method offers both opportunities and obstacles to authors and users.