

## Alan Smithee: Where Are You When I Need You? (or, "A Software Engineer Goes to the Movies")

As a software engineer, I often find myself "on the road," consulting at a customer site. Inevitably, I find myself stuck in a hotel in a strange town, often for several days at a time. Being a fun-loving, thrill-seeking, typical software engineer, I make an effort to find the REALLY fun spots: an electronics store, a bookstore—and, in many cases, a video store or movie theater.

When seeing a movie, I have rather unique criteria: I want the movie to be either really good, or REALLY bad. I don't mean bad as in within 15 minutes you can't remember the title or plot. I mean BAD as in "I'll remember this movie forever. I'll joke for years about it with anybody who had the misfortune to see it also. I'll brag about how horrible it was to all of my friends."

As I was recently watching yet another contender for the dubious honor of REALLY BAD movie, I realized that several of these terrible films I have watched over the decades shared a common trait—they were directed by "Alan Smithee."

I thought it odd that anybody who could make so many "memorable" movies didn't seem to start doing better as a director over the years. As soon as the movie was over, I started searching various Internet movie databases for enlightenment. I found out that Alan Smithee is well-known for his ability to make stinkers. In fact, that's ALL that he makes.

It seems that Alan Smithee (or Allen Smithee – the name varies) is not a real person. To quote from the Internet Movie Database (IMDB)¹:

The Directors Guild contract generally does not permit a director to remove her/his name from films ... striving for decades to establish the director as the "author" of a film, and part of getting the credit for the successes is taking the blame for the failures. The only exceptions they make are cases in which a film was clearly taken away from a director and recruit heavily against her/his wishes in ways that completely altered the film. Directors are required to appeal to the Guild in such cases. If the appeal is successful, their name is replaced by Alan Smithee. So if you notice a film directed by Alan Smithee, it is certain it is not what its director intended, and likely that it is not any good.

Wow ... what a great deal! A director can work for several years on a movie, and if he or she decides that somebody else has messed up their "artistic vision," they can have their name removed from the credits.

Imagine, fellow software engineers, that if you are associated with a colossal failure, and the failure is not because of what you have done but because of what others have done to you, you can have your name removed. Imagine if the following problems could be exempted from your responsibility:

- Totally lacking, too much, or poor quality upper-level management.
- Funding cuts.
- · Requirements changes that you weren't consulted on.
- Key personnel removed in the middle of the project.
- No requirements at all.

Do the best you can, and submit an appeal to a board of fellow software engineers. If the appeal is upheld, your name would be removed from the project, and a pseudonym used instead<sup>2</sup>!

By the same token, some movie stars, for various reasons, have decided not to take credit for success! Kathleen Turner provided the voice of Jessica Rabbit in "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" back in 1988. She elected to be unlisted in the credits. However, neither I nor any other software engineers I know have had the problem of being associated with a colossal success, yet wishing to remain anonymous.

I don't think my suggestion of adapting pseudonyms for managing software will be received seriously. Maybe we don't need them. Back in the early '70s—when I was a programmer at Strategic Air Command Headquarters—I remember that my project manager had the following posted on his office wall:

## THE FIVE PHASES OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT

- 1. Initial enthusiasm
- 2. Inevitable problems
- 3. Search for someone to blame
- 4. Punishment of those who are innocent
- 5. Praise and reward for the non-participants

The project manager in question had been on the job for more than 20 years, and the copy he had posted was very weathered and worn. Obviously, the semi-humorous idea was not new, even then.

According to both the IMDB and the authors of the semiparody book, "Directed by Allen Smithee<sup>4</sup>," the use of the pseudonym started in 1969.

Come to think of it, maybe Hollywood got the idea from us.

-David A. Cook, Ph.D.

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## Notes

- 1. See <www.imdb.com/name/nm0000647/>. While formally discontinued by the DGA in 2000, Alan Smithee seems to live on
- 2. I am not suggesting any particular name AT THIS TIME. One of the reviewers jokingly suggested calling such a project a "Dave Cook." I immediately suggested his name instead. Feel free to e-mail me with a similar suggestion, and I'll add YOU to the list of potential names.
- 3. She only provided the speaking voice. Amy Irving provided the singing voice.
- See <www.upress.umn.edu/Books/B/braddock\_directed. html>.

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