The Simonsen Way

Redmond's principles, prejudices, and graphic production standards, in his own words. Sources include chapters in Wargame Design *(Hippocrene Books, 1977), various* MOVES *magazine editorials, interviews and other writings.*

When I first began designing wargames, not much had been done in the way of systematizing the interface between the rules and the actual play of the game. Before I became professionally involved, one of my hobbies was to take an existing game and build a graphic system for it.

I've always considered myself to be more technologically oriented than most artists and I suppose this inclination shows in my work. Games are after all, paper machines. With proper engineering they should reduce the amount of work that the player must perform. Deciding how much to support the play of the game must be based upon the complexity of the game, benefit of the system, the effort required to execute the system and its commercial feasibility.

If Looks Could Kill Dept.
There's one thing every wargamer can do to improve the box-cover art on his copy of *Anzio:* spray it with three or four coats of white paint and do it over. Don't let the fact that you may not be a professional artist stop you – it didn't stop Avalon Hill.

One of the sure things in life, along with death and taxes, is the sheer mind-bending awfulness of the box-art in question. Avalon Hill has graced its packages with losing designs before this (e.g., *PanzerBlitz, Battle of the Bulge*) but without a doubt this latest abortion is a shining triumph of vulgarity without peer. Not only

are the colors ghastly, the design crude and the treatment heavy-handed, but the "concept" is so irrelevant as to be laughable. Whatever possessed AH to use Mussolini as the primary image will forever be beyond our understanding. (Historical Aside to Avalon Hill: Mussolini was out of power almost two months before the Allies invaded.)

Of course you can't tell a game by its cover, but you can and do sell a game by its cover. AH will never know the full sales potential of this not-so-bad game because its package will be such a negative influence. Accompanying this article is a rough sketch of an alternate cover for *ANZIO*. It is simply an "off-the-top-of-my-head" idea. But the elements of impact and clean design are there. Wouldn't you rather look at that than at the original *Anzio* cover every time you take the game out to play? Wouldn't someone new to wargaming rather buy a game that looks like that as opposed to one with a sloppy portrait of Mussolini inanely conforming to a dubious map of Italy? Really!

Alas, once one opens the horrible box all his visual trials are not over! The map board has to have been drawn with only one possible implement: a banana dipped in diesel-oil. French curves, mapping pens and draftsmen's tapes do exist, Avalon Hill! Really! Other hints: select your map and counter colors in a room with the lights on so you'll be able to see that distinguishably different colors are possible with four-color process. Also, when you say "terrain-changes never coincide with hex-sides" let your mapmaker in on it.

Of course, the Order of Appearance cards are visual delights and models of graphic organization (Ho Ho!). After several thousand years of reading left-to-right, Western Man is presented with the *Anzio* Turn Record Chart (TRC) cleverly designed to read right-to-left just to keep us on our toes – and what history fan wouldn't be charmed by the backward swastikas on said TRC.

We don't actually expect The Avalon Hill Company to commission Andrew Wyeth to execute their box-art or employ professional cartographers for their map-work. We just expect a little sensitivity, a little common-sense, organization and a little taste.

Graphics & Physical Systems Design

"I designed a little solitaire dungeon-crawling game *[Death Maze]* in which one drew a map of the dungeon on graph paper. Redmond suggested instead that we print little room and corridor illustrations on cardboard counters, then draw the counters out of a cup to generate the dungeon. The suggestion was simple, graphically appealing – and brilliant. It, more than my contribution, made the game successful." — Greg Costikyan

The more graphic engineering the artist can build into the game equipment and rules, the easier and more enjoyable becomes the play of the game.

Examples of this are: the Production Spiral used in SPI's *War in Europe* game system; Turn-Record Tracks with built in information on special events; Phase Records that are themselves diagrams of a complex sequence of play (such as in SPI's *Fast Carriers*); game maps with the set-up printed directly on them; integrated combat results tables (with terrain effects built in). A good physical system is characterized by its organization of game information to such an extent that the presentation actually accomplishes some of the "work" of using the raw information. It is possible (and often is the case) that a game is well-designed graphically, but no serious attempt at physical system design is evident. When a designer attempts to aid the player by providing him with a graphic device, of any sort, he must be careful that the neat little system he comes up with doesn't actually add complexity to the game system. Things to be avoided are:

1. Excessive use of abbreviations

2. Too many markers operating on a single register (sometimes a pencil and paper is better)

3. Systems that are so cramped by lack of space that they become difficult to use

4. Systems that are larger than the playing map or that take longer to set up than the game itself, and

5. Any system that takes longer to operate than the maneuver portion of the game-turn.

There is no easy formula for developing graphic systems that aid play. Most of the really good ones are stunningly obvious — once you see them in operation. Much of the success one will have depends upon being able to project oneself into the position of the player who will have to deal with the finished game. Whenever possible, the graphic designer should actually play the final version of the game using the test components. Unfortunately, this is sometimes difficult to do since games take a lot of time to learn and play — and the artist doesn't have a lot of time in a commercial environment.

The better the graphic design, the more likely it will not be noticed. Since, in game design, the overriding mission of the graphic designer is to communicate the

substance of the game to the user, heavy-handed or flashy images that call attention to themselves (rather than their message) are actually detrimental. The type in which this book is set is a simple example of this: each letter is well designed and crafted — and yet, when strung into organized arrangements (i.e., words) the individual letters become invisible. If the typeface was eccentric or exotic in design it would be hard to read and would detract from the message rather than convey it.

Signal to Noise Ratio
The challenge to the graphic designer is clear: make the information the player uses clear, organized, accessible, and pleasing to look at for long periods of time.
To use a military metaphor, the player is an unspecialized demolitions man defusing a complex bomb and receiving instructions on how to do so via a radio. The game is the bomb, the game designer is on the other end of the radio and the artwork is the radio.

If the radio is faulty, the unclear signal may break the concentration of the demolitions man (with unpleasant results). Now the qualities of a good radio are fairly obvious: good signal-to-noise ratio; adequate range; reliability; and good design of human factors (ease of handling, etc.).

Metaphorically, these qualities translate fairly well into the qualities of good graphic design in games — what is not so clear, however, is exactly what constitutes a good signal-to-noise ratio in graphics or just what value to place on "reliability" (which translates as consistency of format). And although the gamer is not vaporized when faulty graphics causes him to "detonate" the game he's playing, the fact that it has indeed turned out to be a "bomb" is certainly unpleasant.

Virtually every gamer has had the experience of struggling through what might be an otherwise good game, hampered by the fact that the organization and design of the components prevents him from easily understanding what he is about — and thereby losing concentration and interest in the game.

Many non-artists have difficulty in separating that which looks good from that which works well. The two are not mutually exclusive — but neither are they necessarily mutually inclusive. I am an advocate of form-following-function.

It is sometimes difficult to separate poor (or good) graphic design factors from poor (or good) game design factors. There is a great deal of feedback between the two. Of course, no matter how good the graphics and physical system, they cannot turn a weak game design into a strong one (although they can sometimes cosmetically hide an inadequate game design, at least for a while). But the reverse is possible: bad graphics and poor physical systems can ruin a good game.

Game Maps

The best possible combination is a well-designed physical system which has an overlay of just the right amount of mood enhancing decoration. Usually, the more complex the game system, the less decorated it should be. When counters carry several different values and symbols; when the terrain is highly varied, when the mechanics of play are very involved, it is then that decorative effects should be kept to the bare minimum.

There are some elements of decoration that I am dogmatically opposed to. First on my list of such elements is the placement on maps of extensive terrain that has no effect on play whatsoever. Second on the list are orders of battle that go strictly by historical designation without giving the player the option to ignore the designation and set up the game and the reinforcements purely by unit type and value.

The graphic designer (who should of course be basically familiar with the game) can often draw out of the developer/designer important pieces of information that can be successfully integrated into the map design. What follows is a partial list of such questions:

1. Can the basic set-up be printed on the map using unit-pictures or codes?

2. Can the victory conditions be expressed on the map by coding the cities or sites that may be the objectives?

3. Would it be useful to code entry and exit hexes or reinforcement sites?

4. Are there any seasonal/weather changes that can be displayed on the map without interfering with the basic terrain?

5. Are there any rules, other than victory conditions, that make some terrain feature or site important enough to warrant a graphic emphasis?

6. If the game involves the production of units, are there any values or devices that can be built into the map to aid the player?

7. If the sketch map indicates more than one terrain feature in a hex, which takes precedence (and can the map be rationalized so that there is only one feature per hex)?

8. Are there any superfluous terrain features on the map or are there any redundant features that can be eliminated to clarify the actual, operative terrain analysis?

9. What are the effects of the various features? Is there a natural hierarchy that can be expressed graphically?

10. Are there any games in print which use a similar or identical terrain system? How well does that prior system serve the present need?

Other questions will suggest themselves in specific design situations — there is no magic formula for creating a map that is not only pleasant to look at but which, more importantly, serves and supports the game system.

The graphic designer has available to him a range of choices as to how to convey a given type of terrain or map element. These divide into categories which I'll now list in order of their recognition value (i.e., the ease with which the average person senses the presence and meaning of the graphic element).

1. Color and tone

2. Shape and pattern

3. Symbol

4. Typography and outline

5. Position

Shapes are allied to patterns and texture as carriers of information. The organic, puffy edge of a patch of forest clues the eye very quickly. The splashy form of slopes and ridges and the irregularity of land masses are other examples of how the shape of large terrain features help to identify them for the gamer. Symbols can be thought of as smaller, more organized shapes. In game map design, symbols are most often used to characterize a "point" feature — something that resides in a single hex or location. Such things as cities, resource centers, industrial sites, forts, railheads, airfields, and ports are examples of terrain features that can successfully be represented by the use of symbols.

Game Map Symbology

Symbols are usually pictographic, i.e., they actually look like stylized versions of the feature they represent — or they are simple drawings of objects associated with the feature being represented — for example, a resource center might be represented with a pick and shovel symbol. Non-pictographic symbols are used when the feature being represented has no obvious object with which it is well associated or when the number of other symbols on the map calls for the use of abstract symbols to avoid confusion. Stars, for example, might be used to denote capital cities or arrows to indicate invasion hexes.

By changing the color and/or size of the symbols, more variations can be achieved if truly necessary. Symbols can be combined with each other to form ideographs that convey more complex messages than any one symbol could. For example, a map shows three types of installations (ports, fortifications, and airfields) each of which must be characterized as being "major" or "minor" and also be identifiable as to which player possesses them originally. One could use twelve different symbols, but a better solution is to use a symbol in a circle to indicate a "major" installation and a different color to show ownership. This way by using only one more symbol (in conjunction with three basic installation symbols) and one color change one creates a simple system that is easy for the player to remember and easy for the eye to spot on the map.

When using symbols, the designer must remain conscious of the fact that too many symbols, or symbols that lack recognition value, may actually confuse the player rather than convey the information.

Moreover, symbols suffer from their trait of being obscured by the counters occupying the hexes containing the site being symbolized. This, incidentally, is an important consideration regardless of terrain treatment — how much will the counters affect the visibility of the playing surface?

One solution (which I often use) is to fill the hex with the feature so that even when it's occupied, the terrain is still visible around the edges of the playing pieces. This gives the map a somewhat more abstract appearance — but I feel that the sacrifice of naturalism is worth the additional utility gained by this technique.

1. The number of different symbols should be kept to a functional minimum. Don't make arbitrary distinctions between items that, in the game, are treated identically. For example, if all fuel resource sites are operatively the same, don't show petroleum sites as little oil wells and coal sites as little picks and shovels. Instead, use a common symbol that evokes the "fuel" concept rather than the irrelevant fuel type.

2. To be effective, symbols must be simple and well designed. A complex, cluttered symbol does not contribute to player information retrieval. Most symbols are best treated in silhouette form.

3. The symbol should be evocative of the basic concept of the thing for which it stands. The test of a good symbol is how well it is understood without recourse to a key or legend. Whenever the artist is doubtful of the recognition value of his symbology he should show them to an associate without telling him what mean, and ask that person to quickly interpret the symbology.

4. The symbol should reproduce well in the map environment. Even if the symbol is effective in isolation, unless it works in the context of the map, it can be a bad symbol. Also, when several symbols are used, they must all work well together. They should have a consistency of style and approach that makes them into a total system.

The "perfect" game map surface would combine the characteristics of both mounted and unmounted maps: it would be rigid; one I continuous piece without splits; fold to compact size yet opens perfectly flat; have a homogenous cross-section; and be truly durable. As yet there no such perfect surface that can be made cheaply enough to be commercially viable. There is some promise though in the new plastic laminates that are coming into the stream as replacements for paper in certain applications. Until some designer (I hope it is I) comes up a better solution, the gamer will have to cope with the less than perfect surface for this all-important component.

The designer should never lose sight of the fact that most gamers are deeply influenced by the game map: a good map goes a long way towards creating a positive impression of the game. Since the map is the most constantly used component, it should be the most effective in doing its job of providing the basic environment for the game.

Game Counters

Given the limits of the process, the graphic designer must strive to produce the most useful counter image. Counters should be designed with an information hierarchy in mind. This is simply a categorization of items to be displayed on the counter according to their relative impor-tance:

1. Who owns the counter?

2. What type of counter is it?

3. What is the primary value(s) of the counter?

4. What historical or functional information not included in the above categories is necessary for the play of the game?

5. What historical information not included in the categories above is desirable to display on the counter even though the information is not functionally necessary?

Another basic question that the designer must answer is: what is the information load of the counter and is it appropriate to the game system? Traditionally, the designer attempts to put as much useful information as possible on the counter face. It may be possible, however, to eliminate some information as redundant. It may also be possible — and desirable in specific games — to pull the information from the counter and place it on a data sheet separate from the playing pieces.

As a general rule, the more tactical the game, the more information will be displayed on counter; the more strategic, the less information. If, however, a game becomes very tactical an information threshold is passed which demands that data be removed from the counter (as in the example of the air games [where much is done on a player's "control panel" that is separate from the game's counters]). One might say that the extremes in scale result in very simple counters and the middlegrounds produce most variation and problems.

Rules & The Case System
Let's face it: rules are not exactly light reading — the number of concepts and procedures to be explained in detail can hardly be dealt with in a few easy paragraphs of colloquial English. The closest analog to a set of rules would be a set of computer program instructions.

The rules are means to an end — and they must be highly organized and efficient means to serve the complexity of wargame play.

Rules writing is inescapably technical writing — not literature. Its object is unequivocal communication — not entertainment. The entertaining part is supposed to be the play of the game.

One must be honest about the limitations of the rules generation process — to create flawless rules on the first go-round is virtually impossible unless the game is so simple as to be irrelevant. Beyond simple typos and plain oversight, there will

always be the possibility of alternate interpretation of given statements — because the player is not a computer: he's a thinking human who brings his own background and mindset to the reading of the rules.

My favorite fantasy (regarding rules) is to have a master file of hex-grid wargame rules that would cover every possible situation that could occur in a game. These master cases would be precisely and lucidly written and organized into a data retrieval / word processing system so that entire blocks of rules could be called up electronically by keying in a string of code numbers.

The developer would then add whatever minimal necessary names and dates and the whole body of rules would be automatically typeset. Every case would have a master reference number and a computer program would make sure that every case number that needed cross-indexing would get it.

It would be a boon to editors and gamers alike to have such a system working for them. The clarity and preciseness of the rules would take a quantum leap forward and the flexibility of development in game systems would increase mightily. Game testing could proceed with more finished sets of rules. Annoying minor typos could be forever banished. Laborious typesetting tasks and long production times could be reduced. Ah, the millennium would arrive for rules compulsives such as I.