

# What is Playability?

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The term “Playability” is generally used without elaboration as though everyone knows what it means. They know it when they see it! However, a designer needs to know how to “bake in” playability; like a cake recipe. You know whether a cake is delicious or not, but how does someone create a new cake recipe? If it is all trial and error, then there is not much one can do to help.

Playability is my top goal; everything else depends on it. Playability is a multi-faceted topic, comprised of at least seven attributes:

- **Satisfaction:** Is the overall experience satisfying or is it frustrating?
- **Learning:** Is it easy to understand the game?
- **Efficiency:** Does the player have an efficient handle to meet the challenges presented by the game?
- **Motivation:** Is the player able to see and guide his forces along a pathway to victory?
- **Immersion:** Does the player believe in the game world? Is the historical detail convincing?
- **Emotion:** The involuntary impulse, feelings and reactions.
- **Socialization:** The degree that the game promotes social interaction.

These attributes are reflected in play in several ways:

- **Intrinsic Playability:** Game design implementation. One player wrote about *Terrible Swift Sword*: “I’ve played this more than any other wargame. I have no idea if it is an accurate simulation, and I don’t care! This game is amazing.” That is one kind of playability—call it sheer gamery—getting swept up in the play of the game. This is a necessity of a good game. It derives from a compelling sequence of play narrative; and then not mucking it up too much with exceptions

and interruptions. (A recent example in TLNB would be the addition of the extra steps for Artillery Reaction Fire and CBF. This new step (2A) is definitely an interruption of the flow of the game, but it is balanced by the potential Arty result, making it well worth the effort.)

- **Mechanical Playability:** Are the game mechanics player-friendly? John Prados uses the term “Player Overhead” for this aspect of playability—how much effort is required to play the game—or a given mechanic. The effort must be balanced by the player’s perceived benefit; is it worth the trouble? Not everyone is interested in special HC charges. The game’s components entail an inherent level of friction. Set-ups, too much math and too many die-rolls (“Wristage”) can make the game a slog. After the rules are learned, how often do the players have to reference the rule book? Having to rely on memory for modifiers reduces playability. Can the game be easily played with just the charts and tables? Quick Reference Sheets are the most important tool for improving this aspect of playability. Flow charts and checklists are essential for exceptions to the normal rules.
- **Interactive Playability:** The player interface depends upon *Graphic Systems*. “Given this large burden on the player, 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... The tables and charts should be well-integrated and logically formatted; the terrain symbology should be a development of a consistent approach; the rules should be presented in a systematic, accessible format, etc. ... Wrong design choices can conspire in such a subtle manner that the gamer may not be able to pinpoint *why* the game is troublesome but

he'll be aware that *something* is wrong and is preventing him from getting the most out of the game.”<sup>1</sup> Too many small, crowded, hard to read counters in stacks covering terrain or objectives, with information constantly hidden, make it hard to play.

- **Artistic Playability:** the aesthetics of the graphic art. “Properly used, decoration helps the player to relate his activity in the game to the historical activity being simulated. ... Decoration is information—unnecessary information—which if present in overabundance distracts the player from the truly important, game-play information he must have.”<sup>2</sup> Artsy fonts, low contrast colors, busy art designed to assist immersion also reduce playability.
- **Personal Playability:** The vision, perceptions, and feelings the game evokes. At the early stages of a design I like to sit in a certain nearby park and admire a row of 12 great Oaks, and try to summon the image of the next game, using the feeling and intuition; contemplating the overall player experience I want to impart. As you go along, if a given piece of design clutters up that experience, then you either remove that piece or tear it apart and put it back together.
- **Social Playability:** The intensification of the above when played against an opponent. A long down time (30+ minutes) for the non-moving player is detrimental to a game's enjoyment. The most realistic aspect of the game is the conflict of wills with that opponent sitting across the table from you. At key moments your pulse quickens, you get nervous and make mistakes, and may watch events spiral out of control. That is the historical lesson in a nutshell.

Redmond, as Graphic Systems Designer, seeks to artistically tie-together all the disparate components into a working system. A system is a collection of guiding principles, concepts, rules, and components that interact to function purposefully as a whole.

## DISCUSSION

**Artistic Playability** includes things like the colors chosen, the paper used for maps, and decoration. Colors are used to denote nationality. Colors should harmonize so that units in play present no color clashes.

*Why is Russia brown? Kevin has given an answer but it is mysterious. My feeling is it was a throwback to his old SPI days. Something about Redmond's color choices and the limited printing options are in his blood. So when he decided on Russia's colors it just felt right. The Russians in Napoleon at Bay are also brown ...*

*Color choices are tremendously important to a designer or artist, but people don't get that they are contextual. They think "it's supposed to be green! Why'd you make it brown!?" People who don't work with color may not get it. And yes, people also want to be surprised and delighted. That's our job, even if some folks are bothered that our color choices are "wrong."*

—Christopher Moeller

I agree that following uniform colors makes a lot of sense, especially for those immersed in uniform lore. However, most gamers aren't; these are just the cognoscenti who are writing these things. They know too much.

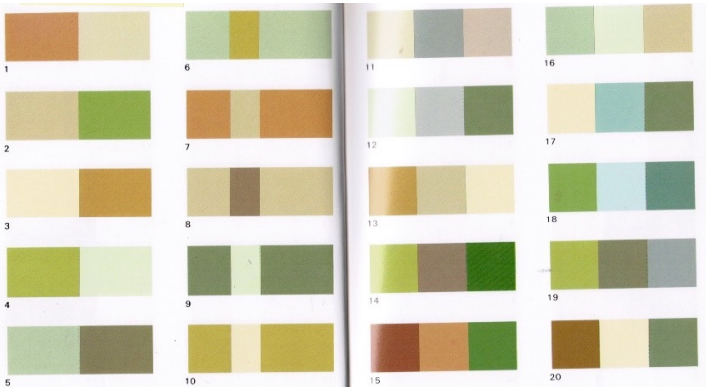
For you and I, for painters and graphic designers, there are powerful subconscious associations connected to different colors. One group of colors, called “Arcadian,” reproduces the colors of nature. Those are the colors we use on the maps.

Now, we want a contrasting color scheme for the counters. Primary, strong colors are the easiest to pick out on the map. Red always stands out.

<sup>1</sup> Redmond Simonsen, in *Wargame Design, Strategy & Tactics Staff Study Nr. 2*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>2</sup> Redmond Simonsen, in *Wargame Design, Strategy & Tactics Staff Study Nr. 2*, p. 48.

Arcadian Colors

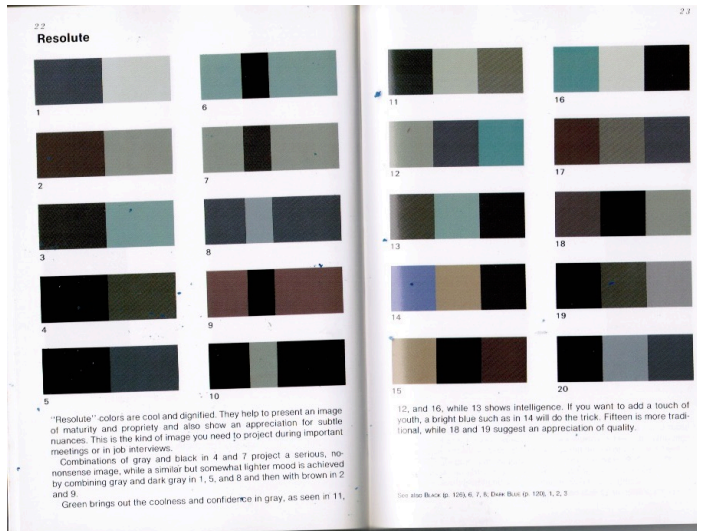


Let's say you are about to paint the Borodino battlefield while the battle is going on. What colors of paint did you bring along? Arcadian colors, plus the colors of armies—metal, leather, muddy uniforms, and of course, blood. Wagons were painted green, to hide in woods.

OSG counters use historical associations, such as metal for Prussia. Bismarck's "Blood and Iron," or panzers of WWII, blood and steel are constantly repeated in German history. For the French, a tint of the actual uniform color subliminally brings associations of the sky or sea. The blue we used for the French line is not

correspond to the uniforms exactly. The Russians were supposed to be a mud color, the 'average' color of the earth after it has been churned up by an army. The color we chose was a slightly darker cousin to PMS 469 — PMS 4695.

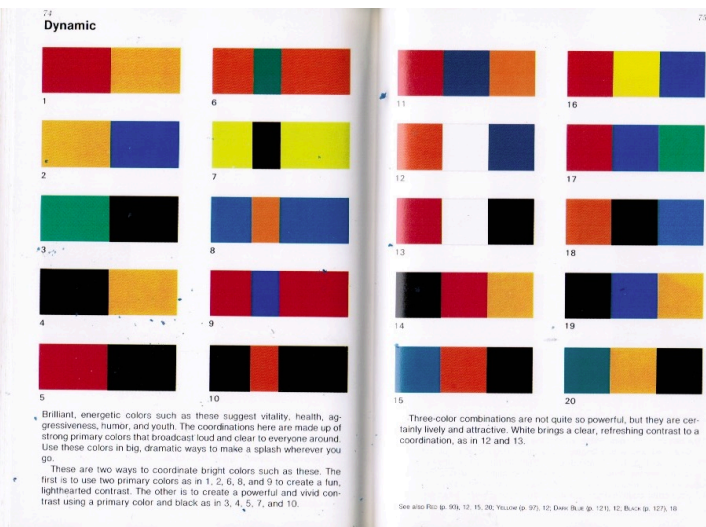
The counters use Dynamic and Resolute Colors—the Polish are the blood. The Saxons are leather. The Rheinbund Germans are from the forest.



Where the troops marched, one would see, from high above, only an amber dust in the summer or thick mud mixed with ice and snow. The men themselves appear as a dark shadow moving across the earth.

Metaphorically, the game is a struggle between the earth and sky. In the *I-Ching*,<sup>3</sup> an army is associated with ground water in the earth. The army arises out of the earth and returns there. During the French occupation of Moscow, a new Russian army virtually rose out of the earth, with 20,000 Cossacks who wreaked such havoc.

**Intrinsic Playability:** John Hill calls it "Design for Effect." I would define it as a high level of abstraction that still produces the desired outcome. But one essential ingredient of Playability is the narrative, so you cannot just make it up! It all has to make sense. All the designer can do to achieve Intrinsic Playability is



as dark as the "Dynamic" blue above, but is reserved for the Imperial Guard. The Dutch use the orange above; Brits and Poles are red. Our Markers are yellow, orange red and gray.

It might interest you to know how we determined the counter colors in our Napoleonic Operational Series of games, since it doesn't

<sup>3</sup> *I-Ching* or Book of Changes, Wilhelm, Ed., Hexagram 7, The Army

draw a shape around the design, and cut off everything not inside that line.

**Mechanical Playability:** This means ease of handling (Heuristics). You don't want to be flipping pages and scanning tables. The Player aids should be like a tryptich, leading the eye to the needed info. OSG's TLNB 4-pager does this. This 4-pager (designed by Brendan Clark) contains most of the info you need to play a turn, along with the Annotated Sequence of Play and the blue Combat Card (with Vohler's Notes to those tables). You can actually play the game with 7 or 8 pages of reference material, plus scenario info. We have provided enough combat tables so that everyone can have one handy. We have standardized the gray card for Turn Record Tracks, and green for weather. French cards are blue and the Coalition vary between tan, ivory, and salmon color. The Reorganization card is always yellow. Weather is on green.

## CONCLUSION

If you have fun with the game and don't notice the interface, that is good systems design. If you get lost looking for things among ill-assorted components, that isn't it!

Some main stream dictionaries do not define 'Playability'; for example, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. That is surprising, because it is an accepted word; but, perhaps understandable, given the fairly lengthy definition it might require, to define the intrinsic qualities of rendering something complex more accessible and easier to understand. It is an art, not a science.

While "Playability" can be defined in terms of the seven attributes listed above, it cannot be measured. There is no easy recipe to combine those attributes and reflect them into a form of general playability. Good design and development involves the assembling and integration of the game components; which, taken as single pieces, can exhibit some degree of playability, but, as a whole, could fail in working together to produce a really playable game. A game after all is a typical non-linear system (with unpredictable behavior), where a slight

change in one component could generate high waves of instability elsewhere. Such factors prevent the designer from foreseeing playability at the beginning of the project or measuring it at the end.

Furthermore, playability often comes at the expense of historicity—the ability of a game to produce plausible outcomes. In theory, a good design is one where these two factors are well balanced and optimized.

With all these limitations, can we still confer Playability a value? It is the Holy Grail for designers and players.