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# Every Picture Tells a Story

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## Part 3: Image of Battle

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### 'A book by its Cover'

With a clear edge in design, editorial, and graphic know-how, and despite the momentum resulting from a long period of critical success, SPI's opportunity to eclipse Avalon Hill as the pre-eminent wargame publisher has now passed. A period of retrenchment will bring fewer attempts at the 'impossible' (quality in quantity), and a de-emphasis on R & D efforts which, since sometime last year, have suffered in favor of 'marketing'. And beyond the many factors contributing to that ultimate failure, the bottom line is that SPI failed to outspell AH in the retail market.

Surely the primary thorn in SPI's retail side has been its packaging. The SPI package has been revised, augmented, and redesigned in an effort to avoid the expense of the proven 'hardbox'. The result is a compromise between the needs of a limited-quantity mail-order package and an appealing off-the-shelf 'mover' which really suits neither application: the flat, plastic box.

Of course, the numerous compartments in the plastic box are undeniably of the highest utility (so long as you don't tip the box on its side — let's face it, the compartment covers haven't a prayer of staying on and the box cover is no such thing unless you secure it with one of those annoying plastic bands — an art in itself — while the blasted 'cover sheet' is slipping around underneath). However, for the purposes of mail order business, the simple zip-lock plastic envelope is more to the point, since no one buying by mail will be affected in his purchasing decision by appearance, and what's more, it's cheaper. As for its appearance, the box itself discourages the browsing, retail customer, because it violates the time-worn principles of 'heft' and bulk.

The proliferation of the different and duplicate packaging styles is confusing to the customer and costly to produce and maintain for SPI. However, now that SPI is so deeply committed to the plastic box, corporate inertia keeps it around — (and draining resources). It simply should have been eliminated when experience proved it a failure.

But what are the qualities of a 'good' retail package? Obviously, there is more involved than the construction of the box. Heft and bulk are important, but visual attractiveness and description (pictorial or written) are even more so. 'You can and do sell a book by its cover', to quote a column way back in **S&T** 18, written by my buddy Redmond (who by chance, designed book covers before he came to SPI). And the way you do that is by expressing the content of the item on the shelf in an immediate and unmistakable way. Here again, the SPI plastic box fails. The game packages are all so visually similar, when sitting next to each other on the shelf, that you have to look closely to distinguish, say, a Napoleonic title from a contemporary tactical game. (Try this yourself — line up a few game boxes against a shelf and step back; or better yet, visit your retail dealer and scan the SPI rack from the main aisle. Interestingly, the larger the display, the more bleak and intimidating it becomes.)

The element of the package which is first in importance is the illustration. In the case of SPI, this is most often a very dark photograph or 'photographic' painting, reproduced in black and white, with a single color used invariably around the border and generally also 'behind' the illustration in a flat-tint or duotone. Where such existing illustrations have been unavailable (primarily in the science fiction and fantasy games), the result has been more successful. But with these exceptions, the general darkness of the many covers gives them an oppressive similarity when viewed as a group. Also, since the 'illos' are taken from books, being originally intended for simpler purposes and created for other reasons, they lack the punch and impact which specially designed covers can have.

Secondly, how is that illustration arranged? The SPI cover sheet is pre-designed; that is, each one is similar in essentials. Generally, but not always, the illustration is confined within a 'fancy' border. The typeface for title and subtitle may be chosen from among about half a dozen different faces. Size and placement of title is the most varied and distinguishing element of all, but the title is always placed in deference to the illustration. (Some book covers, for instance, are designed exclusively of type, without any kind of illustration. You will never see an SPI game where type is the most important element of the design.) Secondary type is invariably of the same style and in the same location from box to box. This facilitates production and checking procedures, of course, but contributes to the similarity among the covers.

Thirdly, what happens after the illustration attracts you and induces you to pick up the package? In this case, not much. The cover sheet, not being an integral part of the package, is isolated from the other package elements. There is nothing on the side of the box at all, and most of the package back is blank. The back flap certainly provides an accurate description of the components and what they're all about, but doesn't go very far in amplifying the mood which the cover has attempted to create. Again, those back panels are not only visually arranged identically, but they describe game system and component variables which can be common to the most dissimilar of historical periods (i.e. '800 backprinted counters;' double impulse movement') and side-step the establishment of the unique mood of a given title. The end result is a sterility of image, the indistinguishability of individual product identity, but a conversely high corporate identity. And the impression created of the games themselves is that they are a vast array of extremely similar things; an undifferentiated, monolithic *oeuvre* wherein the names themselves are the only perceptible differences between them. (And this notion may even be reinforced when a knowledgeable player takes a few home.)

But is it reasonable to demand so much from a package? Is it fair to expect a simple, mute image to sell such a complicated product? The answer is yes. The package is the first and loudest statement of the character and intent of the product. The writing inside can never totally overcome that initial impression made in the mind of the player, for better or worse, when he **first** lays eyes on the box. And if, consciously or otherwise, that impression is negative, the writing inside may never even have the chance to persuade him otherside — he'll **never** read it.

Of all game components, the cover is the **only one** which has no game function; but if you will recall our previous discussion in this column, the cover has a very great importance to the player in that it is the first stage of mood enhancement, which the rules and components attempt to further. The historical information which can be conveyed in an illustration, to paraphrase the ancient sage, is worth a thousand general rules. And the supporting copy on the cover can support the illustration in mood enhancement: clearly the intention of the standard 'time is...' tag is to put the player back at the historical moment, and the little **vignette** on the back of AH's **PanzerBlitz** box is fashioned with the same end in mind.