

F&M Interview:



The following interview with Joe Balkoski of SPI, designer of the Up Scope! game featured in this issue, was conducted earlier this year by Rodger MacGowan.

F&M: Tell us a little about yourself and your past.

Joe Balkoski: I was born in New York City in 1954 and have lived here ever since. I graduated from Vassar College (yes, that's right!) in 1975, although I spent a semester at Columbia. In a few of my classes was Dave Isby, now one of my fellow workers at SPI. I took up graduate work in history at NYU in the summer of '75. Since I was in need of a bit of money I decided I would drop by the offices of SPI to ask for a job. I was an S&T subscriber and an irregular playtester since I had met Dave, and because SPI was right up Park Avenue from NYU I figured this was pretty convenient. I worked for over a year in SPI's 'back room' while getting an MA. Those were really carefree days. While doing some writing and playtesting I was learning the ins and outs of how to run a stockroom. I had a blast and worked with some great people. Slowly, I moved more and more into R&D. Starting with **Wellington's Victory** and **Minuteman** I began to be assigned as a game developer fairly regularly. This activity grew and grew until I am now totally in R&D, fulfilling the functions of librarian, researcher, designer, and developer while helping to run things with R&D manager Brad Hessel.

F&M: What is your philosophy of game design? Who are your favorite designers? What are your favorite games, and why?

Joe: I guess since I have been in the hobby for so long (I remember playing wargames when I was about five) and since I am miniatures-oriented, my design philosophy is somewhat unusual. In a nutshell, I go for near-absolute accuracy in historical research and design. Play balance never gave me great worries; I always figured that if the design were accurate, the game would all fit together in the end anyway. I used to wonder why Frank Davis was upset that the French lost five out of six playtests of **Wellington's Victory** — after all, they lost the actual battle, and I insisted this was no cause for great concern. Incidentally, **Wellington's Victory** is my favorite game, and Frank Davis my favorite designer. Anyone who wants to learn about Napoleonic tactics in a hurry should play this game before reading any book. I really think it is more effective than the printed word.

F&M: In **Wacht am Rhein** a rules gap has been noted — that is, owing to the fact that US units on the first turn must be attacked to be activated, the German 'best strategy' is to attack as few units as possible. Do you agree? Is this a 'gap in the rules'? Your feelings...

Joe: The point is valid, but I think it is neither a 'rules gap' nor the Germans' best strategy'. In the actual battle, the Germans, to all intents and purposes, did this. Most Americans on the front line on the morning of December 17 had no idea yet that a large-scale offensive was underway, and thus stood precisely

where they were. Some of the best German mechanized formations never moved on December 16. As such, this tactic is an accurate reflection of the opening German strategy in the Bulge. However, I do not think that it is a very wise one. It seems to me that the Germans either break the front during the first four or five turns or they don't break it at all. To pressure the line all along the front immediately and simultaneously is apt to create numerous breakthroughs while at the same time pinning vital US units in areas that cannot be broken (i.e., in the north near Monschau). If the Germans don't attack strongly on December 16, the American reinforcements will soon become overwhelming.

F&M: Would you care to give us a brief history of the design and development of your new game **Atlantic Wall**?

Joe: I don't really have much to say about **Atlantic Wall**, except that Steve Ross and I are confident it will be well received. Both of us would prefer to wait for the game's release before talking about it too much.

F&M: What was your first design? And on what games have you worked as designer or developer?

Joe: My first design was **DMZ**, shortly followed by **Up Scope!** and **Atlantic Wall**. I have been involved in the development of **Wacht am Rhein**, **Vera Cruz**, **Minuteman**, and **Typhoon**.

F&M: What games will you be working on when **Atlantic Wall** is completed? Your ideas and thought concerning these new projects?

Joe: I am already working on **Typhoon**, a **Wacht**-type game on the German drive on Moscow in late 1941. After some initial problems with the system the game is working quite well as of this moment. I am also working on **Battles for the Ardennes**, a new and very playable Bulge game designed by Danny Parker of Miami (who helped me on **Wacht**). Danny did much of the development work himself, so I don't foresee any problems. When I last visited him we had a nice time playing **Sedan '40**, one of the folio games of the Quad.

F&M: How is it working at SPI, and would you recommend a designer's life in wargaming to young, hopeful designers?

Joe: That is a hard question to answer. It certainly is rewarding to be designing wargames. I guess after giving up becoming a baseball player and then failing to become a statistician for the New York Mets, I would have to say that designing wargames was my third goal in life (and one that I figured would be just as out of reach as the first two). And how many people ever come close to getting a job related in any way to their fantasies? In that sense, anyone who works in wargames professionally is incredibly lucky. However, it is brutally hard work, and at times I find myself damning the necessity of working over 40 hours per week consistently. But one gets used to that. In fact, I think I have reached the point where I actually look forward to work. SPI has a nice bunch of people, and many of the friendships go beyond work. (I am especially looking forward to the SPI softball season this spring — look out, Avalon Hill!)

F&M: What are your personal views on the state of the hobby in 1978?

Joe: It is hard to summarize my feelings about the hobby as a whole. However, very generally, it seems to me that we must recognize that our field is relatively small. For such a narrow field, it seems that the amount of infighting, rivalries, and miscellaneous unpleasantness is unnecessarily great. People in our hobby can be very bitter — I know that I was when I had bought **Kriegspiel**. But some of the letters we get at SPI are rather ridiculous. I can't understand people damning us to hell for mistakes, almost taking it personally that they didn't happen to like a game. I also observed this feeling of bitterness at ORIGINS '77, where numerous gamers refused to have anything more to do with SPI because the soda machines on campus didn't work! All in all, I think the hobby should present a more united front to outsiders. Maybe this is an incredibly general statement, but I believe it would attract more people to our hobby.