F & M INTERVIEW

STEPHEN NEWBERG

of Simulations Canada

by Rodger MacGowan

Who of us garners has not tinkered with a game design or two of his own and, in some fanciful moment, dreamed of becoming a full-time game producer? Stephen Newberg is one of the few with the courage to pursue this dream in earnest — and to be successful. With his description of the Odyssee of his Simulations Canada *in* F&M *#16 he has struck a responsive chord in many readers, showing them what had been ahead of them had they tried. Here is a chance to learn how things have been going since and to hear more about the man behind it all.*

F&M: Stephen, for the benefit of those who missed your "Ups and Downs of Game Designing" in *F&M* #16, will you once more tell us the story of your life?

Stephen Newberg: Let's see; grew up, went to school, to university, to the Navy, to Canada, lived happily ever after. My education concentrated on such subjects as geology, physics, electronics, and history. I love gaming, good music of the folk, rock, jazz, and classical types, reading anything (preferably non-fiction), history, and my lady — in reverse sequence of priority.

F&M: How did you first become interested in wargaming?

SN: I got hooked on **PanzerBlitz** while I was in the Navy.

F&M: And what made you decide to go into business forming your own game company?

SN: That is a long story, told in *F&M #16*. The short of it is that if I had not tried it, I think I would have hated myself for the rest of my life. I *had* to find out whether I could make it work.

F&M: Any regrets?

SN: Though things were rough at times, none.

F&M: I take it sailing has been smoother after the first two years?

SN: Somewhat. At least we have been able to stick to our schedule.

F&M: What are your plans for the future?

SN: I intend to keep Simulations Canada a fairly small, high quality producer. We shall continue to concentrate on direct-mail sales because they are the best deal for the gamer. For those who just will not order by mail, we are now also selling through hobby shops. I can see us eventually hiring a couple more people of high ability and, with them, build up to a maximum of six games per year. For the present, we'll stick to our three in-house designs per year and the fourth outside design we have recently added.

F&M: Now that you have your feet on the ground, have you not been tempted to build your Simulations Canada up into a gaming empire, a Canadian Avalon Hill or SPI?

SN: Not really. For two reasons. First, to expand the company rapidly would require the sacrifice of principles such as product quality and price that I would rather adhere to. Second, I now spend about a third of my time just keeping the company running, and I do not want that proportion to increase.

F&M: Does Simulations Canada have a design philosophy?

SN: Sort of. The trends in the gaming industry have been toward opposite ends of the spectrum: very big games and very small ones. I tend to think many garners would prefer to see things more in the middle, games of reasonable scope and moderate complexity. That is what we have been producing, and we hope to continue in this fashion. I also want us to provide a balance of subjects and complexity levels within that basic scope. Hence, of our three yearly in-house games, one is fairly easy and more a game than a simulation, one is a more accurate simulation and of greater complexity, and the third is intermediate. As to subjects, we want to include games from all historical periods, although modern titles are easier to sell.

F&M: Since in your choice of subjects you are guided more by your own ideas of what is desirable than by "what sells," is your aversion to very big and very small games more than just a hunch about garners' preferences?

SN: Yes, although this is subjective. Most of the "mini games" aim to be fun games that can be played quickly. Seldom do they attempt to make historically valid points. Many are quite successful, even though their low price usually means a low production standard. My personal complaint is that, in becoming small and cheap, they have lost interest. After playing one I tend to forget what it was all about. Like economy cars, they all feel the same. The very big games, on the other hand, have room for a great amount of realistic detail. However, in providing this detail the designer tends to fragment the player's point of view. For instance, in a two-player **Terrible Swift Sword** each player must simultaneously make the decisions of the commander of a field army, a corps, a division, a brigade, and a regiment. Army and corps can be mixed fairly well, but when becoming embroiled in placement, maneuver, and combat of individual regiments the player finds it hard to maintain a point of view. Just who *is* he? I feel that one of the major points of a simulation is to put the player in the shoes of some historical personality and present him with the latter's choices of action. Shaping a game in this fashion the designer can show a moment in history and give the player perspective. In the large, multi-level designs this perspective is lost. I am not contending such games have no place. The historical point of view can be restored if they are played by teams, as has become increasingly fashionable — but two competent teams are not easily gathered. In a sense, it is just not my style to design on multiple levels.

F&M: What can you tell us about your newest games?

SN: We have just released **Assault on Tobruk** and **Dark Stars. Tobruk** is a low-complexity game depicting Rommel's capture of that fortress on 20 June 1942. What fascinated me was that Tobruk, having held out for months the year before, this time fell in a day. **Dark Stars** is our first science-fiction game. I wanted it to be a "hard" SF type of game, with solid basis in modern astrophysics (we badly bent nature in only one of the four drive systems). The result is a fairly complex and long game of interstellar empire building.

F&M: What about the next slate of games?

SN: Next spring we shall release **Divine Wind** and **Jihad!. Divine Wind** is a one-map strategic study of World War II in the Pacific. The player's level, presented in detail, is that of strategic planner for an entire nation at war. Most operational and tactical matters have been abstracted. Thus, players will be concerned with getting their forces to specific areas to accomplish their tasks and with providing the logistic back-up, but not with such matters as sending up CAP for individual carriers. **Jihad!** covers the first 100 years of Islamic expansion after the death of the Prophet. The game is grand-strategic in scope and fairly easy to play. Further down the road we have a game on the Inchon-Seoul operation in the Korean War and another on the War of 1812 in North America.

F&M: Would you care to comment on the perpetual debate between designers and reviewers?

SN: Hard question, especially since I do both. I think in the long run I have to side with the reviewer's right to call them as he sees them. Critical comment is the basis of improvement in any art form, and game design is in many ways a form of art. Two things are needed for criticism to be beneficial, however. First, the critic must be competent and informed. In most arts the critics have at least some minimum of experience. In wargaming this is all too often not the case. A poorly done review hurts everyone, and publishers should see to it that such reviews don't see print. Second, some forum should be available to the artist for reply. But such replies must also be responsible. I think we are beginning to see encouraging progress on both counts.

F&M: As you know, this is what *F&M* has been working for from its inception. In this context, what are your views of the hobby press? Have they given Simulations Canada a fair shake?

SN: No "Third World" company receives a fair shake from the hobby press, and I get the feeling none ever will. Simulations Canada has got a better shake than most, and for that I am grateful and happy. It means we shall survive and put out more games. But in general, only major companies get major reviews, and there is something basically wrong with that.

F&M: A magazine should print what its readers are most interested in, and the greatest interest *is* in major games from the big companies, simply because of their reputation and availability. But *F&M* is among the few who have printed major reviews of games such as **Sharpsburg** and **Korsun Pocket,** from small and new companies. But apart from this quite common complaint, do you have a major gripe with the hobby?

SN: No major gripe, just a worry. Too many wargamers I know do nothing but wargaming for recreation. Wargaming is a great diversion, and an educational one at that, but no entertainment should be allowed to become the center of one's life. And I have a minor gripe: the industry's trend toward flashy packaging as a sales boost and at the expense of the contents.

F&M: Do you refer to everyone switching to boxed games?

SN: This is part of it. A boxed game costs more to purchase, and this money could have been spent instead on research, development, or quality of components — or to give the gamer a better bargain. Nevertheless, our **Dark Stars** and **Assault on Tobruk** will be available boxed in U. S. stores. They will cost two dollars more than the ziploc versions, but since many people seem to want it this way, we'll give it a try. We also intend to work back through our line and bring out boxed versions of the earlier games. Our direct-mail operation will stay with ziplocs, at the lesser price, but we are changing the format to a 9-by-12 inch size less susceptible to damage in the mail.

F&M: Apart from the question of boxing, how important **do you** think is the physical appearance of a game, its graphics and physical systems?

SN: Graphics can make or break you and, apart from appearance, physical systems can do much to reduce a **player's** work load. Unfortunately, these are not simple matters, made even more difficult in that, in a small company, they involve outside parties such as the camera house and the printers.

F&M: How do you view the industry outside Simulations Canada today?

SN: In general, industry seems to have reached a point where the big three or four companies are producing games very much alike in scope, quality, and content. The smaller companies also largely follow this trend, simply because the garners seem to demand it, but their games nevertheless often have a more personal stamp. Of course, if they make their games too different, they risk to go under. Many do.

F&M: How do you think the hobby can improve?

SN: Decrease the number of title: produced per year and increase their quality. It's great to have games on every subject — but only if they are well done.

F&M: Does that mean a need for better development?

SN: Developers are a breed too often ignored. They have to take a design and turn it into a game without compromising historical validity. At this time I think most of the best developers are no longer active in the field, and the best job is now done by those designers who change hats and develop their own games.

F&M: With your **Raketny Kreyser,** SSN, and **Quebec Libre** you have produced games that postulate future historical events. There has been some controversy on this subject: are such games historically "valid" or science fiction? Are they immoral? Would you care to comment?

SN: I think a future-oriented game can be valid and useful if dealing with a short span of prediction. It can show possible lines of action, possible effects, and the probable consequences of differing strategies. But the factual basis must be very firm and the scenarios open and with short time limits so that unanticipated events will not destroy the validity of the model. Otherwise you have science fiction. Are such models immoral? Not in themselves if they show what can happen, what can be avoided, how a better outcome can be secured. However, this does not alter the fact that the model could be used for purposes which the designer might consider immoral. I think the designer must decide whether the risk outweighs the advantages. I personally would never again design a tactical-level near-future game, as such a game is easily turned into a training aid, but I might design an operational-or strategic-level game on the same subject because such games show the global effect while being all but useless for military purposes. Designs dealing exclusively with political and economic events, such as **Quebec Libre, I** believe to be useful — and much more fun to design and play! I wish more gainers would get into politics-oriented games.

F&M: What really fascinates you most about designing and playing wargames?

SN: I enjoy the work of detailed study of a topic. Not only historical ones, but they are particularly gratifying because you learn about men, about mankind in general. Design and development is like puzzle solving, a mental exercise in which you devise a mechanic to perform a function, the parameters having been determined by your research. As for playing, I *play* purely for fun. Wargames are a complex mental exercise which I enjoy. **I** prefer to win, but don't mind if I don't. I also *study* games, putting out the pieces and half a dozen reference books trying to gain a better understanding through use of the game as an analog.

F&M: Knowing what you know now about getting Simulations Canada started, would you do it all over again?

SN: If you had asked that question a year ago, I might have answered, "no." But things have been looking up since.

F&M: May they continue to do so!