# IMAGE of BATTLE

## by Kevin Zucker

## Part2: THE LIMITS OF ART

**Image of Battle is a study of wargame graphics and physical systems. Kevin Zucker is an employee of SPI and has worked closely with Redmond Simonsen in the Graphics Department of SPI.**

The physical system available to the wargame designer is the single greatest limiting factor on his design. And given the economics of manufacturing, there is little which can be done to change this situation. But the graphic designer can help the game designer to get around these limitations, providing new ways of using the same paper and cardboard components of the last 20 years, so that those same components can remain compatible with the latest ideas in wargame design.

The physical components of a wargame set the absolute limits within which the game must function. That is, it must be able to express all that it has to say, and its subtleties must be hidden behind the transparent fact of die-cut pieces, game map, charts, rules and die: that's it. The fact that the components are a known quantity every time you open the box is itself a glaring limitation. The German Player knows exactly how many Army Groups are waiting in England on D-Day, unlike Rommel who thought there were two, instead of one. Absolute knowledge of the terrain is also accorded the players, since it is necessary to visually code this information unambiguously. In no campaign in history was that kind of knowledge available. Similarly, there is complete predictability in the laws of physics: every time you move the 21st Panzer Division down the coast road from Agedabia, it arrives in Derna on the same turn. If not, there is an equally apparent fact of physical representation to account for it. Game designers have always been faced with these limitations on their art; the best of them have come to terms with them as best they could, the worst have failed even to see them as such.

Some of these facts of life will always be with us, but others have, in due course, been removed as obstacles or may yet be made more palatable. Meanwhile, new and innovative designs place greater demands on the graphic designer.

As I have stressed before in this space, there are two equally important aspects to his task: first, to make the components work more rationally together as a game, resolving annoying ambiguities in their use and inter-relationship, and second, to allow them more realistically to reflect the historical attributes of their real life counterparts.

An example of the first would be the graphic decision to force rivers to conform to hexsides: this solution to a problem in game mechanics tends to take away from the accurate portrayal of reality. Avalon Hill's **D-Day** was the first game to use this method, although it was abandoned by AH in succeeding titles. Significantly, it was re-introduced to wargaming by Simonsen. Today it is used pretty consistently by everybody, yet it remains a limiting distortion requiring a laborious process of careful alignment which must be thoroughly examined to be certain no geographical relationships have been altered. For instance, a road paralleling a river might wind up crossing and recrossing it when the river is conformed to the zigzagging hex sides.' The road, too, can be moved, but inevitably false relationships result. The trick is to hide these where they won't show. But suddenly, our 'simple' rendering of terrain has become more than meets the eye. It is now a compromise which tends to impel the ebb and flow of the game in certain directions. In a well-designed game, only the designer will know what and where these 'fudged' factors are, but other times we may never realize why a potentially good game goes bad on us. The answer, as often as not, is graphic.

An example of the second aspect of the graphic designer's task would be the introduction of the 'reduced strength' side of the 'untried unit' system, has become a standard feature in SPI games. These methods add a whole new dimension to the games by allowing the strength of units to become variable, as in actuality they are, instead of constant.

If he cannot devise a new graphic system for every new game design, the graphic designer must at least keep new design developments from impeding or over-complicating gaming-usage. One simple way he can do this is by setting rigid guidelines as to which graphic elements a designer may incorporate into his game, and which novelties are forbidden, and then enforcing those guidelines, being prepared to reject or alter those systems which embody infractions. This may be particularly attractive in the case of low budget projects. But it will inevitably affect the quality of the games, if not the entire creative atmosphere among his associates.

The example in my mind is SPI's 'Quadri-Game/Folio Game' phenomenon. In theory, the four 'different' games are supposed to be accomplished within the budget of a single standard-sized game. Therefore, aside from the necessity on the part of the designers to stick closely to the basic game design, for logistical reasons the raw manuscript material which the graphic designer receives may have to be further homogenized in order to give it all a single treatment. To attempt an analogy, a carton of eggs is homogenous with respect to egg size because they must fit into like compartments. To devise a special carton for every new random assortment would be, well, perverse. In the Quadri-Games, since the charts and tables must be common to all four games, the terrain types must also be standardized (though they need not all be present in all four games). Once a compromise is reached regarding what the charts and tables will be like, there is not much room for maneuver left to the individual game designer. To save time, that is, the components are designed **before** the game.

Indeed, up until the last two years the components for nearly every SPI game (like the box covers) were pre-determined and conformed, in large part, to a 'standardized' design. Think of the well-worn blue and brown maps from those games. In those days the games were simpler, the rules far less extensive, and the game designers had their hands full without considering the possibilities of a more complex terrain analysis. It was only with the introduction of the third color into the Quadri-Game maps that the game designers became alive to those possibilities, and ultimately came to demand greater subtlety and wider ranges of distinctions between terrain.

The result of increased coloration was a big boost for the 'state of the art' which could not have occurred if the standardization of map format prevalent in the industry had been adhered to. Such graphic design strictures would have drastically affected game design innovation; **TSS, Firefight,** and the wave of big games could never have been done.

Thus new methods in graphic design were developed just at the time they were needed by designers ready to expand the scope of their vision. But if the graphic designer is not on the ball at all times to implement those new methods, he places the efforts of the game designers, the product in your hands, in jeopardy.