

F&M INTERVIEW

KEVIN ZUCKER

The Improbable Wizzard of OSG

by Rodger MacGowan

There are still those who see wargamers as a bunch of kids with slightly twisted minds, living in a fantasy world, imagining themselves junior field-marshals at best, emulating Hitler's or Vardar's storm troopers at worst. Kevin Zucker is living proof to the contrary. For long he has been in the forefront of the ever quickening movement which is transforming wargaming from an adolescent hobby into a serious art form and historical discipline. A deep concern for humanity, not glorification of war, has led him and his friends to wargame design. He is a Magister Ludi, and the day may come when he will realize his own vision of the Glass Bead Game...

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Rodger B. MacGowan: Kevin, please tell us about yourself and what you have done in the past.

Kevin S. Zucker: I went to school in California and studied History and Philosophy. When I came to New York I studied piano with Beveredge Webster at Juilliard and Composition at the Manhattan School. My dilettantism at least provided me with an overview of the humanities, and I saw the identical mechanism lying just below the surface of all the arts. Perhaps, as Roland Barthes maintains, "theater and cinema are, like written discourse, expressions of a representational, geometrical kind." The idea of geometry provides the necessary structural link between what we are doing in the games and what artistic creation is about, and I think wargames can be seen as theoretical literature.

RBM: How did OSG come about?

KSZ: Studies Group began in 1977 — a time of revolutionary advances in what might be called, not "state of the art" but "general design viewpoint." We began to feel ourselves at the edge of a new kind of game, still largely unrealized today. That it is not already realized is due to the framework within which we had to work, which made no allowance for ground-breaking on the new theories. Thus, for designers such as Jay Nelson, Terry Hardy, Frank Davis, Mark Herman, Tom Wälczyk, and Joe Balkoski,

their first game in the new mold was over budget and uncompleted, and their last effort for SPI.

RBM: You, your designers, and your staff are ex-employees of SPI. Can you give us an idea as to why you left and how you feel about the period you spent there? Are you fulfilling your desires more at OSG than you were at SPI?

KSZ: Dave Isby has addressed this issue in *Wargame Design* #2. Let me just say that the breakup of the SPI staff is a real tragedy for wargaming. No group will ever equal the insight they gained. They shared a vision in common which cannot be realized by any one or two of them working in isolation. If wargaming is the shell, they had a clout to smash it open and reveal what lies beyond it — and maybe blow a few minds.

Studies Group began as a series of informal meetings at Jay's old loft on the lower east side or in some Third Avenue Deli. The purpose was to preserve the group, or at least salvage some part of it intact. We thought that by cutting overhead and putting designers to work on clerical duties we could make a go of it.

RBM: You started OSG from scratch. What were your initial hopes for the company and are you happy about your progress?

KSZ: We knew there were probably 2,000 *grogards* who would appreciate right away what we were doing, and buy games from us in the first year. That is an assumption which has largely been borne out. The surprise was *in how* or, more specifically, *where* they have bought those games — in stores. Because we must sell our games at up to 60% discounts to get them there, and because we must box them to get distributors to take them, our income has been slashed from the projections by 50%. Our originally planned staff of five or six was long cut to two or three who could get paid. In the long run we shall sell many more games in the stores — our games have a proven "shelf life" longer than SPI's — and so our second year should be easier on the poor staff members.

We have produced five full-sized and two vest-pocket games in our first year, and I think everyone is pleased with the results. As long as the gamers accept delays to ensure long-lasting value, we shall eventually reach a point where we can forget schedules almost entirely, and get down to quiet craftsmanship.

RBM: *Who is OSG?*

KSZ: Everyone here is an experienced ex-SPI staff member. Currently present on a daily basis are Brent Nosworthy (Marketing and Sales, and a Napoleonic expert), Larry Catalano (Art Director), Mike Davis (Shipping and Processing Manager, our only non-designer and Frank's brother), Tom Walczyk (Chief of R&D), Ed Curran (Finance and Planning, many-years' partner of Tom), Tony Merridy (modern warfare expert), Dave Collins (Circulation Manager, Customer Service, and Junior R&D Staffer). Regular consultants, most of whom have OSG designs underway, include J.A. Nelson (utility designer-developer and moral superior), Dave Isby (designer and theoretician, spokesman, and occasional legal trick), Richard Berg (lawyer of record and gossip), Mark Herman (operations consultant), and John Prados (intelligence expert).

RBM: *Why are you based in New York City? Isn't the overhead much higher than in a smaller town or state?*

KSZ: Although California often seems like our greatest base of enthusiastic support, New York is the place where so many diverse creative people find themselves. And not only the designers, but the graphic arts are centered here — the photographic, lithographic, and manufacturing means are here most experienced, here the standards are highest and the quality of production finest. Here are research centers, sources of alternative creative outlets, *et cetera*. The greatest hardship of being in New York is not overhead but the cost of living. I am very happy that wargaming has provided a living for a select group of us; but the fringes of survival are a strange place in which to reside for so long.

RBM: *Why did you choose Napoleon at Bay as your first game? Weren't you taking a big chance trying to start off with a Napoleonic title? How well has the game done in the marketplace?*

KSZ: We did **Napoleon at Bay** because it was "up my sleeve" at the time — it had been germinating ever since **Napoleon's Last Battles** and was ready to be written out. It was a gamble, but it was what we had — and I knew it was sound. It has received only one letter of disappointment, and I am very pleased that it has been so highly rated by the gamers. Sales have been hurt by the lack of hard packaging; a boxed edition is forthcoming.

RBM: *Why Panzerkrieg? Knowing that it had been published earlier as Rand's Von Manstein, did you have any fears of it failing? How has it done and what kind of response has it received?*

KSZ: We chose **Panzerkrieg** and **Napoleon at Leipzig** because a survey at ORIGINS '78 showed they would have a wider appeal. In fact, they have been our best sellers. **Rommel & Tunisia** was already begun by Jay before ORIGINS.

RBM: *What games are you working on now and what games are on the drawing boards for the future?*

KSZ: Now we are working on a fantasy game, a modern era game, a World War I game, and a Civil War game, to round out the line. My design time has been absorbed in **Bonaparte in Italy** and the introductory Napoleon game **Battles of the Hundred Days**, which is going out to all subscribers to the complete series. My dream is to go on vacation and design the entire series...

RBM: *What games have you worked on in your years in the hobby?*

KSZ: That would be, in number, between 75 and 100 titles. My published designs are few in number, and most of my contributions have been in presentation of concepts. I think **War in Europe** was my best work, but many others, in some ways larger games such as **Terrible Swift Sword**, **Wellington's Victory**, and **Highway to the Reich** did not contain anything actually written by me.

RBM: *Which designers impress you the most? Have you been influenced by any particular designer?*

KSZ: I have been privileged to see the best designers in the industry at work, and have learned some of the basic elements of their success. The most high-powered designers I consider to be Dave Isby, Frank Davis, and Tom Walczyk. The work of Irad Hardy and Davis had a great impact on the *Campaigns of Napoleon*. I work best as a team with Jay Nelson — designing a game with him is like reading Chinese fortunes...


RBM: *In your advertisements you mention often your great concern for graphics in terms of your games. Please elaborate on this and how it might affect your games.*

KSZ: A well composed picture is a whole contained under a single point of view, in which the parts work together to one end and form by their mutual correspondence a unit as real as that of the members of the body of an animal; so that a piece of painting made up of a large number of figures thrown at random onto the canvas, with neither proportion, intelligence, nor unity, no more deserves to be called a true composition than scattered studies of legs, nose, and eyes on the same cartoon deserve to be called a portrait or even a human figure. — Diderot.

Like everyone who enjoys wargaming, I have a strong graphic sense, I am very visually oriented. I was fortunate to receive some very serious graphic training at the elbow of Redmond Simonsen, and this is a great asset in my game design work. To design components sometimes requires re-designing the game, and I can avoid inconsistencies by evolving physical and conceptual systems simultaneously. Understanding the needs of both designer and art director gives me a great opportunity, as production manager, to mediate sometimes contradictory aims in every game produced by OSG.

RBM: *What would you like to see the hobby do in relation to OSG that it is not doing now?*

KSZ: I should like to see the game players do more speculative thinking about the game designs they receive, and I should like to see the reviewers do less of that and more playing. I want the games to come alive for the players and, in the process of play, to answer all questions of interpretation and phrasing, to demonstrate the harmony of the voices — to involve both hemispheres of the brain, analytical and intuitive, in their appreciation. The work must sometimes be performed to be understood.



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