

One-on-One with Mark Herman

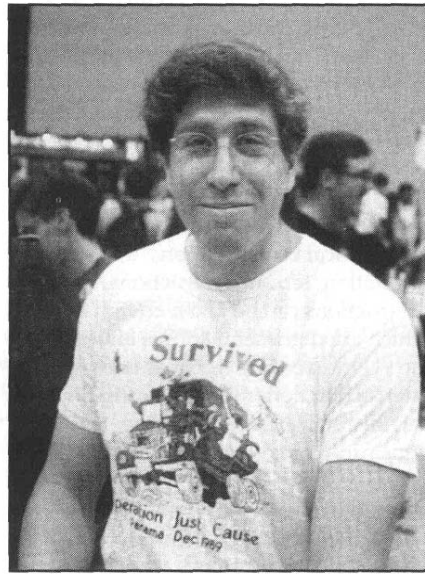
BY JOHN J. VANORE

As a game designer he started at SPI, New York, in 1977. He was one of the founders of Victory Games Inc. Recently Mark designed **The Great Battles of Alexander** and **SPQR** for GMT. And at Origins'92 he was inducted into the CSR Awards' *Hall of Fame*.

On a brisk March morning, I visited noted game designer Mark Herman in his office in Crystal City, a high-tech corporate district in Northern Virginia. From his 11th floor office, he commands a view of the Potomac River, as well as many of the monuments which make up the Washington, D.C. skyline. We spent the next hour discussing Mark's background in game design and his thoughts on the present and future of wargaming. Herewith the results of that discussion.

JJV: Mark, let's start with the basic interview question for all designers. How did you get your start in wargame design?

MH: I've been gaming since I was twelve, but my real start came at the first *Origins* national game convention (Baltimore, Maryland 1975). I went up to the SPI (Simulations Publications, Inc.) booth and asked how I could become a game designer, which got me a big chuckle from all the people there. I remember Kevin Zucker was one of them, and he said to talk to this guy named Howie Barasch. Howie told me the way to start was to show up on Friday nights for the big, open



playtesting sessions. 'After we get to know you, maybe you'll write some articles for *Moves* magazine, and that's how you start the process.' I started showing up on Friday nights, and the first thing I tested was Howie's *Huertgen Forest* (SPI, 1976).

JJV: That was one of the games from SPI's *Westwall* quad, wasn't it?

MH: Yeah, and it didn't work. Howie didn't know how to fix it, so I sat down, played it out, suggested what he needed to do to fix it, wrote out about four rules, and those rules went verbatim into the game. That told the guys at SPI that maybe I had my head plugged in, and then I was invited to come to training sessions for the Research & Development staff. (Jim) Dunnigan, (Redmond) Simonsen, and Irad Hardy, who was the head of R&D then, would basically lecture the staff on their views on how to design games. They actually charged - people could pay money to come to these. I was there for nothing, and Rich Berg and Greg Costikyan were the only people paying to attend. We would sit

there on Wednesday nights and listen while Dunnigan lectured on what games were all about and how you designed them. Quite frankly, that was really where I got started. Ultimately, when I got out of college, I was working as a tree expert in the summer of 1976 and I called Howie Barasch, who told me the receptionist job at SPI had just become available. Which, by the way, was a \$5200 a year salary. The reason I took the job was because if you sold games over the counter, you had to be knowledgeable about games. And the way they (SPI) were organized, the receptionist in reality was the lowest job on the R&D staff. The agreement was that I could go to R&D meetings on Tuesday, and I took the job. These were the days of the monster games, and *Highway to the Reich* (SPI, 1977) was going belly up. It was late, it wasn't happening, and Jay Nelson - the other guy who was laughing back at the SPI booth at *Origins* - also had all these *S&T* games to design on schedule. Now the *S&T* games were on a very strict production timeline, because of the magazine schedule, so I volunteered to help Jay out, and that's how I got the *October War* (SPI, 1977) project (Mark's first design credit). Within another month I was no longer the receptionist - I was on the R&D staff full time.

JJV: Every so often, in someone's reminiscences, one hears of an amorphous "SPI Experience" - the atmosphere of working there. Do you have any particularly vivid memories?

MH: In a nutshell, the SPI experience was Jim Dunnigan's philosophy. That's all it was. Jim's a very good friend and a great designer, but he did something that no other company president ever did. He believed in the concept of apprenticeship. He acknowledged that the economics of the company revolved around cheap labor. Jim realized the fact

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that it was going to be very hard for someone to stay here for his career. This was a place where you came in, you did your thing, and at some point you moved on to another job. Jim expected that. And I'll tell you, when I did *Battle for Jerusalem* (SPI, 1977) with him - I did a lot of games with him, and they were all learning experiences - but in this one, he taught me what the word 'deadline' meant. He said, "If you don't cross this line with this product on this date, you're dead." He would fire people. Dunnigan had this process where he brought in very young people to work on the games, he would bring in the public to test the games, but he insisted that the designers had to be in touch with their games. He viewed it very much as an art. We had a lot of people there, working very cheap, but there was always the dynamic interaction going on. We had a lot of talented people there. Rich Berg, Kevin Zucker, Irad Hardy, Brad Hessel, Frank Davis - the list goes on. That creative interchange made for a really neat environment. So that was the SPI Experience for me.

JJV: You talk about Dunnigan's philosophy of game design as an art. On the flip side, the design-as-science side, did he also infuse a lot of the statistics-heavy operational research into the design process and apprentice training back then?

MH: No question about it. The thing I got from Jim - which I think he did better than anybody else, and I always try to emulate this - is how he would look at a situation and analyze it for its underlying dynamics. That was part of the Operational Research number-crunching. He would focus on two or three elements that he thought were key dynamics of the situation, and everything would be made to work within those dynamics. Every numerical part had to work within that framework, and he had a way of keeping the messages clear. His games didn't tend to wander off into lots of minutia - detail for detail's sake was not there. Everything was made to work within a very coherent design, and that's something I definitely learned from him. I learned how to look at the data, and see what it

was really telling me. I learned how to explode old myths by taking that approach. To carry this forward to GMT, in *The Great Battles of Alexander* game, when I looked at the situation, I decided that command was a key factor that had been missed in earlier designs. Plus the tactical systems. The reason the Macedonians were beating everyone - fighting larger armies and consistently winning - is that they had a true combined arms view of the world. They had the tactical system to beat the other guy's tactical system, and they had the command system to effectively employ their tactics. *Alexander* is a classic example of how I employed Dunnigan's philosophy.

JJV: Obviously, Jim Dunnigan had a major impact on you during the formative years. Did anyone else have nearly so strong an influence on your design style?

MH: The only other big influence has been the experience of being a father. With the change in my lifestyle, I now design games differently. I set a time limit on how long the game is going to take to play. In a sense, I'm trying to design so that people who have real lives can sit down and play these games. But to go back to your original question, no other individual springs to mind. Collectively, everybody at SPI had some impact on me. I'd look at a designer and borrow some techniques; from the negative aspect, I'd also see something and say to myself, "I'm never going to work like that!"

JJV: We won't mention any names here. Let's move on. You decide on a conflict as a topic for a simulation, then you distill it to its essence of two or three key elements. Then what?

MH: Actually, before I decide on those elements, I read and try to accumulate raw data. But one thing I never do is look at another game on the same topic at any time during the design process. It screws up my thinking.

JJV: You try to block out any preconceived notions of how it's been done before?

MH: Right, it may mess me up that way. I look to see what's going on in a battle, and I draw flow charts to understand the situation. From that analysis, I can see the dynamics coming out of the data. ; That's where I feel I keep a fresh perspective. The other thing I do is try to push the state of the art. I look at the mechanics of game design and keep asking myself if there is a better way to present a situation. That comes across in some small ways, too. I may use a different Combat Results Table to present different dynamics of a style of combat.

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JJV: My favorite design of yours is still *Gulf Strike* (Victory Games, 1983). Did you see that as pushing the state of the art at the time?

MH: It certainly did at the time. When I looked at the dynamics of modern warfare for that design, I found that other games showing land, air and sea combat portrayed them all as discrete events. You'd have a land phase, and an air phase, and a naval phase, along with a mechanism to link them all together. But what I saw in the dynamics of modern warfare is that the combinations are important. I may want to use a certain sequencing of air or naval strikes, or some combination that couldn't be represented in an existing game system. So, in the sequence of play for *Gulf Strike*, I allowed the player to move any piece on the board at any time in any order, and that was the trick. I think it succeeded, given that *Gulf Strike* is probably one of my best sellers.

JJV: It was received well enough to support two update kits.

MH: Right, and I'd like to do something else along those lines someday. Overall, it was a really satisfying design.

JJV: While we're on the subject of your personal preferences, what would you consider your favorite, or most satisfying design?

MH: I'm very satisfied with *Mechwar 2* (SPI, 1979) from my pre-Victory days - that was from the time when I was really hitting my stride. They used to have a

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saying at SPI that it took you six games to figure out how to do it, but you had to be good enough to survive the first six. I've always liked *October War* (SPI, 1977). I had a bad spate then working with Frank Davis. A lot of those games didn't really come out well. After SPI, I was very satisfied with *Gulf Strike*, and particularly so with *Pacific War* (Victory, 1985). It's the first game in my whole life that really came together just the way I wanted it to. And I've been very satisfied with the three most recent games I've done - *Flashpoint: Golan* (Victory), *Peloponnesian War* (TAHGC), and *The Great Battles of Alexander* for GMT Games. They've really made me happy.

JJV: It appears you've been doing a lot of ancients work lately. Is this just a phase, or do you have some long-standing interest in the area?

MH: Actually, my degree from college was in Ancient History.

JJV: Which is why you can pronounce all those obscure names better than anyone else.

MH: I'm not sure if I do, but nobody seems to know any better, so no one calls me on my pronunciation. But back when I got to SPI, everybody seemed to have an area of expertise, and at that time, it was very chic to be a Napoleonic designer. If you were doing Napoleonic designs, you were somebody. There was a distinct pecking order of what was important. When I got there, I definitely had a feel for ancients. In fact, the first thing I ever put my hands on was *The Conquerors* (SPI, 1977) with Rich Berg. It's kind of funny, given that he and I are teamed up on these ancients games for GMT. I did some playtesting and tried to help him; I guess if I had helped him less, the game would have been more successful (chuckle of self-effacing laughter). But when I got there, I identified early on that modern games were just coming on line, and only Dunnigan was doing them. I came to the conclusion that you can only do Napoleon so many times, at least in terms of a career. I read everything in the SPI library on modern warfare - technical

pubs, doctrine, what have you. In the space of a month, I knew more about the subject than anyone else on the staff. So it came to be that my two niches were the ancient and the modern eras. And, over the past sixteen years, I've done everything in between. The *Pacific War* was always something I've been interested in, and now I'll be getting more into the *American Civil War* for GMT. I've always wanted to do a strategic *Civil War* game, and now I'll get the chance.

JJV: Let's fast-forward from SPI into the Victory days.

MH: It was a fantastic experience! For once in my life, I really was where I wanted to be. Long-term economics and having a family made me realize it wasn't going to last forever, but it was great while it lasted. Just think about the talent that walked in the door when SPI shut down and we started *Victory*. It was like having an elite unit, and I was honored to be able to lead those guys. We tried to learn from what SPI had done wrong, and also to go beyond. One big problem at SPI was that they didn't pay attention to the business side once Dunnigan was gone. Dunnigan was plugged into the business side, and he was always working it.

JJV: That much should have been clear to anyone who read "Outgoing Mail" in Strategy & Tactics on a regular basis.

MH: After Jim left, they brought in a business consultant who was better in theory than in practice, and the place went to hell in a hand basket in a hurry. So, learning from the SPI experience, I was determined to pay close attention to the business aspects. Regardless of what people think of me as a game designer, I know for a fact that I am one of the best business game designers around. I was trained in a business family, and learned a lot from my father. So gaming was just another business. What I really brought to *Victory* was this business sense, the ideas on how to make sure we sold the stuff and stayed in business. Another plus at *Victory* was that I had the most amazing editorial and art staff. One last thing I did at *Victory* was an insistence that, on every Wednesday, all the staff

members played each other's games. That in-house testing was critical in our quality control process. I felt that the designers needed to play other games, and we got a lot more out of that testing than from bringing in outsiders.

JJV: How did you hook up with GMT?

MH: Blame it on Rich Berg. We're very good friends, our wives even get along, but we never worked together much professionally. Back when he started up Simulations Design Inc., he mentioned to me that he wanted a *Great Battles of the American Civil War* for the ancient period. I always wanted to fix *Phalanx* (SPI, 1971), and I wanted to do Alexander the Great, so I agreed to do it for SDI, and signed a contract to do the game. Well, when SDI hooked up with GMT, he in essence sold my contract to Gene Billingsley. At the time, I didn't know Gene Billingsley. So Rich Berg basically sold me to GMT like an indentured servant! But I still work with Rich a lot, and I'm really looking forward to this strategic ACW venture. It looks like a collaborative venture involving me, Rich, Gene and Rodger.

JJV: And you don't foresee any problems with the long-distance design coordination?

MH: Not at all. Look at *Alexander*. We had the designer in Washington, the developer in New York, the map artist in Florida, the publisher in Hanford, and the art director in Santa Monica, California. We did it all electronically, and the first time I saw the game was when it was released at *Origins*. And I was very pleased with the way it came out. The only time any of us were collocated was when I was in New York for business, and Rich and I got together to play a few scenarios. Other than that, it was an amazing long distance electronic experience.

JJV: You've mentioned the strategic Civil War game several times so far. Can you tell us what other game projects you have in the hopper, both firm plans as well as ideas off on the horizon?

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MH: I've always wanted to do an American Revolution game and a Punic Wars game, and I'll do those at some point. In fact, I've got the Punic War game on the Victory production schedule, and it will be based on the *Peloponnesian War* system. I would like to do a whole series on the evolution of tactical systems - following up on *Alexander* and *SPQR* to the Crusades and Byzantium. I want to work on more strategic games, with the Civil War being the first.

JJV: This tactical series sounds something like a 1990's version of the old PRESTAGS (SPI, 1975), showing a progression of warfare over a multi-game series. Is that fairly accurate?

MH: Yes, in that sense. I have always been very interested in the evolution of tactics and strategy, and I'm fascinated in the things that have changed and the things that have stayed constant. So this game series will really let me explore that. Hopefully the public will want to explore it with me.

JJV: Last question. Everyone has an opinion here, so let me get yours. What's your outlook for the wargame hobby: decline, equilibrium, or growth?

MH: I thought the original decline occurred because of the inadequacies of our educational system and the declining ability to read in the late 70s and early 80s. We had a massive brain drain then. Secondly, we had new media coming into play - computers, primarily. I think we're in a period now where kids of people who play games will pick up the hobby. We're going to get fresh blood not from people who are totally unacquainted with games, but from a generation-to-generation passing of the baton.

JJV: Your kids, my kids...

MH: Exactly. My daughter plays wargames. She's eight years old and she asks me, on her own, if we can play a game. I guess I brainwashed her before she knew she was being brainwashed, but now she wants to play out of her

own desire.

JJV: But are boardgames a dying medium, to be replaced by computers?

MH: So far, boardgames have done a few things that computers are incapable of doing. Computer games are lousy opponents, always have been. In a game, you may have 32 or 64 or even 100K worth of computerized enemy reactions to the human moves. By comparison, the human brain is probably working with a couple billion kilobytes of capability, so I sort of feel sorry for people who can't beat the computer. Unless, of course, the game is rigged or the human player faces such a numerical disadvantage that it would keep him from winning. Otherwise, all other things being equal, a human should be able to hose the computer time after time. Another element is the progress we're seeing in telecommuni-

cations. I think that, eventually, two humans will still play the game, but it will be played out over time, using the computer as a referee through phone lines and modems. That's my guess on how wargames will evolve.

JJV: Even now, as you lambaste the capabilities of computer games, aren't you working on a computer version of Peloponnesian War? Is that essentially a computer version of your Victory Games title from last year?

MH: Yes, and where I think it will be different as a computer game is that, in the board game, you actually play both sides, and that aspect will carry over into the computer format. So the Artificial Intelligence function is the human player, not computer code. I'm not relying on this fairly stupid box to handle those functions. Another thing computers don't do very well is handle the Input-Output functions. If you look at a game board with the pieces laid out, assuming you're not a klutz, you can pick up your pieces and move them, and combat is a brief process. For example, in *Alexander*, once you've got the game system down, it takes about 15 seconds to figure out a shock combat. Move your pieces, roll the die, and look up the result. With a computer, the interface is a much more tedious process. The interface with manual games is still much better, although I expect that will change with time. The last point I want to make here is that strategy games on the computer are really just vertical board games. They even have squares or hexes for moving around the board. Why can't they use arrows, for instance, or other symbols? Because they're relying so heavily on board games, that's why. So computer games are slower, they don't play as well, and they're not as pretty. Until those things change, board wargames will have an advantage. Over time, I think we'll grow and prosper, but with a changing medium.

JJV: On that note, I'll close my questioning. Thanks for your time, Mark.

MH: It's been fun. Thanks, John.

