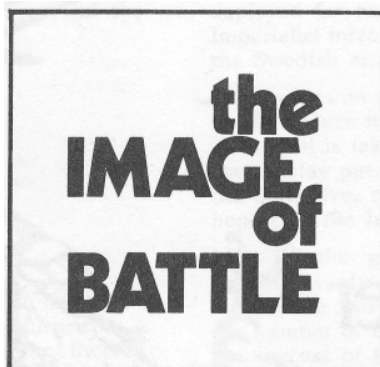


I confess I was surprised when GDW's **Avalanche** won 'Best Graphics' at Origins '77. Perhaps one contributing factor is that the three SPI games nominated in effect divided the votes for the same 'graphic system' among them. For instance, they all use the 'ones, tens, hundreds' track and marker system to record accumulated points. On the other hand, their rendering of terrain and their unit symbology are quite varied.

Of the three, the best-looking terrain map is in **Terrible Swift Sword**. Even the most minute symbology clearly displays intent. The one complaint about the **TSS** map I have heard concerns the line-of-sight determination methods, the limitations of which appears in **Firefight**. The same problem was solved in a different way in **Wellington's Victory**, and while the system is successful and workable from a utilitarian standpoint, from a visual point of view any contrast on the map was ruled-out by the requirements of the resultant terrain treatment. The effect is an unrelieved vastness of yellows and tans, more evocative of the Sahara than of Belgium. The map for **War in Europe**, because of its size, is obviously the most ambitious effort. But as in other areas of the game, the map and its use are full of ambiguities. And though every effort was made to produce a good-looking map (I myself stayed late at the office to do an accurate coastline) the color-coding of terrain produced a bad color-distribution, with the result that in several sections, particularly the often-used France and Germany sections, there is almost no color at all, besides brown.

Production short-cuts were also necessary in the **WIE** counter-mix, which did not allow for unit designations. And those designations are an important historical seasoning, whose absence can often ruin a game's eventual chance of success. The counters for **WV**, though they carry extensive information and full unit designations, lack the accustomed unit-type symbology, and have no unit size symbol at all, being the first of several SPI games without them. The graphic solutions employed in the **TSS** counters make them the best of the group. They convey all necessary information without sacrificing historical flavor, and their handling is particularly salutary in light of the fact that it is the result of a two-day battle between the two most hard headed and intractable characters this side of the Hudson (namely Redmond Simonsen and Richard Berg).

In its supporting materials, **War in Europe** surpasses all the other nominees hands-down. In fact, **WIE** might have won, it seems to me, on the strength of its



Production Spiral alone, not to mention the numerous Scenario tracks and other aids on its fifteen square feet of chart sheets.

It might have won; but what about the game that did win? **Avalanche** has terrible problems in its rules which indicate incomplete development. But there is nothing wrong with its graphics. Its physical components emphasize decorative rather than systems elements. It has glossy counters in a wide variety of colors (even red), and all units have their designations, type, and size symbols intact and shown in the way we have come to expect. The ancillary charts are very workmanlike, straightforward, translations of a developer's working copy; again nothing special from a pure design standpoint. The maps too emphasize decorative elements, and are very pleasant to look at. There is much more detail shown about the terrain than is actually necessary for game play (or which could have been abstracted without game-effect) — this detailed terrain information is the map-equivalent of unit designations. It's interesting to see the exact arrangement of little buildings in the towns, and to see how deep the ocean is offshore, and to know the exact location of ancient ruins, etc.

Apparently it is this type of decorative information which the players respond to. Clearly, the fact that a game works does not mean **anything** to them if they cannot relate the workings of the game to events in history. This is the same message which game players have been sending out for years, particularly through the SPI Feedback survey system, and I think it's rather remarkable that SPI's Simonsen, who personally couldn't care less about relating the game to history, has stubbornly adopted an 'eat your spinach' attitude, in giving them 'only' the best graphic system with which to play the game.

The graphic designer has got to remember that the primary value derived from the

wargame for a majority of wargamers is other than game playing! They want the game to be a moveable-quantifying illustration of military history. And in order to 'game' history, this group can use all the historical information they can get, whether it be presented on the map, counters, rules, or accompanying historical materials. This is a compelling reason for graphically providing information which may not be pertinent to game play. It is of much greater importance than as mere mood-enhancement or window dressing for those who actually 'play' the game against an opponent.

Thus, the old 'realism vs. playability' controversy has not been hitting squarely on the problem. What's wanted is not so much 'realism' as 'information,' which can be provided in the game components without impairing playability. By providing first in priority an accurate map and order of battle, and secondly a game-board and playing pieces, **Avalanche's** graphics insure its usefulness as an information medium outside of its 'gaming' problems, and open it up to an interface with actual places and events in history. Because the SPI games nominated provide a much more closed 'game-systems' environment, the average gamer finds them less suited to his purpose. To this fact, the Charlie Awards amply attest. • •

