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# Opening Moves

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## Subjectivity and Style —or— What Have I Been Doing All These Years

This issue I ask you to bear with me as I engage in a little righteous indignation and artistic defensiveness. See, I get this letter from Tom Oleson (a very nice fellow from California whom I've had the pleasure of meeting a few times). And although Tom is very gentlemanly and a swell person, one of the paragraphs in his otherwise laudatory letter reads as follows:

You say "I am primarily a gamer and...could care less about the subject or historical lesson of a game." It certainly shows! I crave bright colors, the more historical flavor and detail in OOB and maps the better, and the illusion of realism if that's what I have to settle for. With certain exceptions such as *Highway*, and *TSS*, I don't find this in your work. Of course, not only is this your privilege, but my taste may be a minority. I am only sure of this: it is not an insignificant minority! You remind me of Ettore Bugatti, who produced his cars only to suit himself, not his customers. — Tom Oleson

So, after I recover from my short fit of thrashing about on the floor of my office and breaking a few chair legs, I think to myself, Tom has not been looking at much of the stuff I've done over the past couple of years and is reacting to old stuff done under more limited budgets, etc. Or, Tom is not removing his California sunglasses while playing SPI games and therefore has a monochromatic image burned onto his retinas. In an attempt to be objective about his subjective criticism, I make a list of SPI games and rate them against *TSS* and *Highway to the Reich* (the games Tom feels are exceptional examples of colorful flavorful work in my otherwise low-key portfolio). Using Tom's criteria, I assign *TSS* and *Hway to the Reich* relative ratings of "9" in each of the following categories (drawn from his letter):

### MAPS

**Colorfulness:** Bright colors and/or many different shades and tints of color to represent different terrain.

**Historical Flavor:** I assume this to mean putting in names of towns, et al., that have no effect on the game but provide historical reference points for the player and/or showing different types of terrain with different symbology even if they have exactly the same effect in the game.

### COUNTERS

**Colorfulness:** Bright and/or varicolored counters. One hits a problem in games that have only two opposing sides where each side has no logical subdivisions that could justifiably be made a different color. Keep this limit in mind.

**Historical Order of Battle Designations and Flavor:** Full unit designations on the counters and/or the use of silhouettes or the use of exotic operational symbols when called for even if there's no functional difference (for example) between an airborne unit and an infantry unit.

Remember when looking at the following chart, that I've rated *TSS* and *Hway to the Reich* as "9" as a standard of comparison — not because I think that they're the perfect expressions of these characteristics on an absolute level.

Note that where the map is basically a display (such as in *Air War*) I've written "na" (i.e., not applicable) and also where the map is a multi-situation map. An exception is *FireFight* which is drawn from actual terrain. Of course, these ratings are simply my opinions of my own work — and you may rightly be suspicious of my ability to be cold and calculating about it. I *have* made an honest effort, however, and an *informed* effort since I know exactly what and how many ink colors I used, how many symbols, etc., in *all* the games. I've tried not to let the *size* of the game influence my estimate of its characteristics (a problem which I believe Tom is having) nor have I allowed my fondness for the game influence me (for example, I loathe

*Russian Civil War*, but I gave it high ratings based on its obviously lavish use of color and decoration).

**VERY IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS:** Just because a game is highly rated doesn't necessarily mean that I believe it to be an artistic triumph — all we're rating here is whether or not the map and counters are colorful and historically flavorful. I know it's difficult to do, but when you make your own personal evaluation of these characteristics, try not to let your gaming or esthetic sensibilities intrude. Also, some of the games on the list I believe to be *more* colorful and flavorful than the benchmark games — but I've restricted myself to the 0 to 9 scale. The *Outreach* map is perhaps the most dramatically colored map I've ever done (so much so, in fact, that I think it hurts its utility).

Tom makes a remark which I think is beneath his usual style, i.e., that I design maps and counters only to please myself and not the customers. That sort of broad attack is a little unfair and springs from a weakness for hyperbole rather than prudent observation. I indeed have standards and a design philosophy — but since I work in a commercial environment, I *am* sensitive to my audience (that's one of the reasons I'm going on about this whole matter — Tom is a very active, in-

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#### RELATIVE COLOR/FLAVOR INDEX OF RECENT SPI GAMES 1976-77

GAME NAME	MAPS		COUNTERS		OVERALL (Average Rating)
	Color	Hist/ Flavor	Color	Hist/ Flavor	
Terrible Swift Sword	9	9	9	9	9
Highway to the Reich	9	9	9	9	9
Revolt in the East (S&T 56)	4	4	9	7	6
Pz Gruppe Guderian (S&T 57)	7	7	8	9	8
Conquistador (S&T 58)	9	6	9	9	8
Plot to Assassinate (S&T 59)	8	3	9	9	7
Road to Richmond (S&T 60)	9	8	8	9	9
October War (S&T 61)	9	na	7	9	8
South Africa (S&T 62)	9	9	7	9	9
Veracruz (S&T 63)	9	9	9	9	9
Raid (S&T 64)	9	na	7	9	8
Cobra (S&T 65)	9	9	9	9	9
After the Holocaust	9	9	9	4	8
Air War	na	na	8	9	9
BattleFleet Mars	5	7	9	9	8
Canadian Civil War	9	na	9	9	9
Conquerors	6	9	9	9	8
Drive on Stalingrad	6	7	7	9	7
Fulda Gap	9	9	9	9	9
FireFight	9	9	9	9	9
Mighty Fortress	9	5	9	9	8
Minuteman	8	6	9	9	8
Modern Battles II Quad	8	7	9	7	8
Napoleon's Last Battles	9	9	9	9	9
Outreach	9	9	9	6	8
Red Sun Rising	7	7	9	9	8
Russian Civil War	9	8	9	9	9
StarSoldier	6	na	9	9	8
Thirty Years War Quad	7	7	9	9	8
Up Scope	na	na	6	7	7
Wacht Am Rhein	6	9	9	9	8
War Between the States	9	9	8	7	8
War in Europe	9	9	9	7	9
War of the Ring	9	9	9	9	9
Wellington's Victory	9	9	9	9	9

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telligent gamer and I assume his views to be representative of more than his own personal peeves).

It's a very human trait to concentrate on extremes, remember only the very bad or very good, and to overstate the case when criticizing an artist you wish to influence. The very fact that I've designed more maps and counters than all other folk combined leaves me open to (justifiable) criticism in any number of specific cases. The previous statement, by the way, is not braggadoccio, it's a plain truth that I wish to emphasize in order to perhaps broaden Tom's (and other's) perspective on what I do here at Strange People, Incorporated.

Tom (and others) may have misunderstood the remark I made about caring less about "the subject and historical lesson of a game." That was said in an introduction to an article which attempted to analyze, in an academic manner, the difference between history-oriented gamers and play-oriented gamers. Tom takes this out of context and beats me over the head with it. I meant to point out that my tastes in gaming are catholic (with perhaps the exclusion of tactical games) — no particular period in history has my allegiance. Also, I don't consider myself an historian although I have a more than average interest in history. And I'm primarily interested in how well a game *plays* not how well it demonstrates some historical object lesson.

It would be well to point out here *who* is responsible for *what* when it comes to order of battle information and geographic and historical map information. Many people out in gameland (apparently including Tom, who I thought knew better) believe that Redmond A. Simonsen summons the game maps and counter OB's out of the Dark Universe as is his wont and whim. That just ain't so, fellas. The *game designer* and *developer* are responsible for what kind of terrain and what sort of labels get put on the map. Those guys (the *historians*, Tom) do the sketch map from which the final art is done (we literally trace right off the sketch map). So if you think there should be more types of terrain in *War in Europe*, see Tom Walczyk, not the Art Director. Or if you object to the spellings of the place names in same (as one twit did in a fanzine) see Mr. Walczyk, *et al.* rather than your 'umble servant 'ere.

By the same token, whether or not counters have designations (or how accurate they are) is the province of the designer and developer. The only input I have is whether or not such information will *fit* on the counter (they are small things, you know) and how it is arranged. Perhaps four or more years ago, when we had more limited typesetting resources, I would discourage the inclusion of extraneous designations because they were so much work to do by hand (using transfer type). One thing I still do (which may irk you) is eliminate unit *size* designations when all the units are the same size. Makes no sense to me to say "battalion" 1600 times when you've got more important

things to say on that tiny square of cardboard. . . such as historical designations.

In many cases my design options are extremely limited by what the developer/designer hands me as the final map or counter set. I don't have infinite power to change arbitrarily the content and presentation of the game data. There's little one can do with a map for a game like *Frigate* or *Air War*. You can't put historical information on counters for a game like *Patrol* or any game in which the designers (*historians*) have decided to use anonymous "change" style counters.

What I will admit to is that I like game components to be practical and useful. If a game is complex, I encourage the developer to simplify it as much as possible without affecting the simulational/functional aspects. But that's not anything like de-emphasizing the historicity of a game. When it comes to color use, I believe in a harmonious middle-key color scheme. Using bright colors on maps *simply* to use bright colors is childish. If one makes everything bright, then by comparison nothing is bright — it's just garish. Color should be used to separate and emphasize important features — not just to put lipstick on a pretty face that doesn't need it.

As may be the case, Tom perceptively indicates that his taste may be in the minority (however significant). In point of fact, the whole gaming audience is a collection of minorities. There is no one approach that I could use that would satisfy everyone all the time. I get letters screaming for the use of more silhouettes and letters damning the use thereof. I've run Feedback questions on this and other facets of design and the results are almost always debatable. It is my responsibility to attempt to respond to the various desires of my audience. It is my prerogative to establish personal standards and a style that I can conscience. It is my duty to produce work that is commercially viable. The synthesis of these three factors results in the body of work I've accomplished over the past seven years.

There is a saying amongst artists to the effect that "everyone is an Art Director" referring to the frequent experience of Art Directors having everyone, regardless of qualifications, telling them what's good or bad about their work or how it *should* be done. It's often the very same people who decry the purported lapses of *historical* expertise in SPI's (and other publishers) games, who are quick on the trigger when it comes to making sweeping criticisms of an area in which they have no expertise themselves: i.e., graphic art.

Tom is *not* guilty of such presumption in his main thrust simply because he points to a personal craving on a personal basis. He drifts in this direction only when he generalizes his taste to that of a significant minority. As the saying goes, "everyone's entitled. . ."; everyone has a preserve of personal opinion which no one has the right to discount. What *is* subject to discounting is when the unqualified presume to criticize an artist's work as if they were spokesmen for an informed esthetic. This applies not only to

the graphic arts, but to all art forms (including game design).

There is a notable lack of informed criticism in our hobby (to which I spoke in an earlier Opening MOVES). This lack will only be filled by time and the expansion of our domain. The more people and energy that enter the wargaming universe, the more likely it is that critics of real power will appear. When such a day dawns, I don't automatically expect my body of work to be uniformly praised. Every artist, whether he admits to it or not, is well aware of the turkeys he has publicly birthed. The commercial artist also knows that these turkeys will be around to gobble at him for a relative eternity (he can't buy up his bad old canvasses as some egotistical painters do).

I confessed at the start of this column that it was an exercise in artistic defensiveness. I am aware that one never wins such public debates. One inevitably get hooted at in the next wave of letters. Any number of these letters will take a single statement from this column and rant on about it out of context. Others will completely misread it and become indignant themselves. Still others will make valid and incisive judgments about it based upon what I actually *did* say.

One must, however, bite back once in a while if for no other reason than to keep one's morale up. As you might suspect, most of the mail I get is critical. This is true of anyone with any sort of "public" — I don't feel I'm being singled out in the way these things operate. And even though I know intellectually that many of you basically approve of what I do, nevertheless an occasional emotional counterreaction to the negative comments I hear is necessary for me as an artist. In the community of graphic artists, my work speaks for itself and requires no written defense. Other gaming artists accept or reject my work by the degree to which they incorporate it or synthesize it in their own. Nevertheless, when one is subject to written jibes from an essentially non-art audience, one may respond in kind (if one is lucky enough to be an Editor as well as an Art Director).

If you care to, carefully read my Relative Color/Flavor Index in this column and note how much you agree or disagree with it under the criteria previously described (remembering to use the two benchmark games as a standard) and then answer the pertinent feedback questions in this issue (and write to me, of course — I always read everything you send me whether filled with praise or scorn).

Final personal note to Tom Oleson, whose letter inspired this diatribe: Your letter only touched me off, Tom — much of this column is a reaction to other letters that make yours seem a thoughtful song of praise by comparison. Only the fact that I know you to be a man of taste and intelligence provided me with a reasonable basis on which to use your comments as a springboard. All the best to you — and all the readers\*.

— Redmond

\*and Ettore Bugatti, one of my favorite automotive designers.