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Ad: Potential R&D Person
Ex: David James Ritchie
Re: Working in R&D at SPI

October, 1980

Well...good news and bad news.

First the bad news. This is a form letter. I know exactly how it feels to inquire about a job and receive a form letter answer — I have one at home from SPI myself, circa 1977.

Now the *good* news. If you are *really* talented, if you *really* want to design games, and if both you and we believe that you would work well at SPI, then the odds are very good that you can get a job on the SPI R&D Staff. It may not be easy, and it may take some time (10 months on the average to "tool-up" and train a staffer). But we are *always* in need of good people, and the "only" thing that you have to do is show us that you're one such.

What People "in R&D" Have to Do

Basically, a staffer is assigned a project, given a number of hours in which to complete that project, and assigned a deadline by which the project must be completed. The requirements are to complete the project on time, within the mandated number of hours, and to do a "good job" (i.e., achieve critical acclaim in the eyes of the gaming hobby — our customers).

You *must* be able to work independently. No one is going to stand over you, telling you what to do. This is not to say that you will be going it alone; *au contraire.* For one thing, the combined game design experience of the people in R&D at SPI literally totals in the decades, and the wisdom (?) born of that experience is accessible for the asking, as is a hell of a lot of creative input. (Informal bull sessions are sometimes more productive than formal R&D meetings.)

For another thing, there is the input of the playtesters. A game is a relatively complex system, and to make sure that it is working properly, good solid testing is a necessity. SPI has an established playtesting system which operates on a weekly basis, year-round. Properly utilized, the system can usually spot most of the flaws in a game. *But* (and this is a big but), it is ultimately up to the individual in charge of a project to properly utilize the playtesting system, and to make use of the experience of the R&D Staff to solve any thorny problems.

Everyone gets stuck sometimes, and everyone needs the outside perspective that is provided by testing. You *have* to be able to work cooperatively, under pressure, with others who are bright and creative (and, possibly, egotistical). You have to be able to do that, and at the same time, maintain your independence, because it is *your* responsibility to carry through your project.

In our experience, giving creative individuals free rein is the best way to publish good games. Good games produced by committee or on an assembly line are rare. So, if you can imagine having direct responsibility for your own work, and you can imagine working in a publishing environment replete with deadlines, and if this doesn't make you nervous...then your imagination is probably not vivid enough for you to be much of a game designer. But if you are not essentially comfortable with the notion, then you would not enjoy working at SPI.

There are some additional requirements. You must be able to perform competent historical research and analysis. Most of us were historians before we came to SPI. Those who weren't, are now. Not every game requires historical research *per se* (about 50% of our games are now Science Fiction or Fantasy), but one must still be able to visualize (or imagine) the key dynamics present in a given simulation in order to design a game about them, and the ability to accomplish historical analysis is extremely helpful.

You must be able to write well. SPI has a well-deserved reputation for "good" rules. That is no accident. It is the culmination of lots of hard work. For most people, rules writing is the hardest part of game design work, because it is the most mechanical, the least glamorous, and the most exhaustive (and exhausting) part of the process. Rules writing requires a powerful sense of language and command of logic. It is basically a form of technical writing, and has been compared to computer programming and legal contract formulation. Actually, it's harder than either — whereas the programmer only has to get the computer to understand, and the lawyer is deliberately trying to confuse everybody, the rules have to be as complete as possible, flirting with the arcane, while striving for the universal understanding. No mean feat!

You must be capable of handling a fair share of the "non-R&D" aspects of game publishing. SPI is not a big organization, and there are a lot of other things besides researching and designing games that are involved in keeping things running smoothly. These include the writing of articles for *S&T, MOVES* and *Ares,* proofing and copyediting, taking phone calls, processing feedback results, working with the computer, answering games questions,

marketing, advertising, etc. The R&D Staff includes some of the best people at SPI, and it is often necessary for them to step in to plug holes and/or solve problems. You have to be ready and willing to do so.

How to Get a Job in R&D at SPI

Basically, we have to get to know each other. We need people who can do the work, do it well, on time, consistently, and imaginatively. And they have to be able to work with a singular group of people (us). We have a responsibility — to our customers, to the hobby at large, and to ourselves — to recruit competent, compatible people. SPI simply cannot affort too much of the "hire and fire" pattern of recruiting, as it is practised by larger companies. We are a relatively small outfit, with maybe 45 people working here, with a "cadre" of only 25 or so full-timers. The turbulence engendered by hiring people sight unseen, training them, and then inevitably losing the third or more who discover that they really don't want to work at SPI would show up in everything we do, both R&D and non-R&D.

Traditionally, the best way for a person to get to know SPI and *vice-versa* has been through the auspices of our playtest system. If you live in the New York area, try to arrange your schedule so that you can make it down here on Friday nights, 6:00 pm to whenever, on a regular basis. You can actually get involved in an ongoing project, and both of us can get to see how you relate to the people here and get some idea of what you can do.

We can get an even better idea of what you can do if you can show us. Have you ever designed a game on your own? If so, then your chances of getting a job here are a *lot* better. Send us a complete copy of your game (typed rules, legibly drawn map-sheet, and counter-pieces). It must be in near-finished form, with the rules presented in SPI format preferably (see enclosure). This will give us the best possible chance to gauge your research ability, rules writing capacity, and general design skill. Mail the game to us marked "Independent Game Design." (*Don't* mail us your only copy, because things do get lost here, and we cannot guarantee your game won't join them.) We will look the game over, and if it looks good, try to play it — if it works well, you'll be hearing from us. Maybe with a job offer. Maybe with a free-lance assignment. Maybe even to inquire about publishing your game.

If you decide to do a game to satisfy this requirement, don't worry about selecting a topical subject that will appeal to a lot of people "automatically." Just select a topic that you know well and feel comfortable with, or are interested in learning about, that you feel will make a good game. After you've worked at SPI for a while and have established yourself, you can always sell your good but obscure game to some "third world" publisher where the necessity of publishing "broad appeal" games to justify large print runs is not so keenly felt as at SPI.

If you have never designed a game, and are leery of attempting to do so on your own, there is still reason to hope, if you are otherwise qualified. You would have to convince us, however, that your command of English is excellent, and that you are good at formulating rules. Here is a test; take any one of the following games and rewrite the rules in SPI format (see enclosure), staying as close as possible to the original design intentions as evident in the published rules and components, but filling in any gaps and resolving any contradictions that are present. Make any revisions in the components that are absolutely required, but do not make any more changes than necessary, and provide cogent

explanations of all game components in the rules (including the original ones). Include a list of all changes and additions you have made, Case by Case, with an explanation of the rationale behind them. The games are *Afrika Korps* (AH), *Waterloo* (AH), *Stalingrad* (AH), *1942* (GDW), *Burma* (GDW), *1940* (GDW), *Ogre* (MC), *Melee* (MC), *Demons* (SPI), *Wreck of the BSM Pandora* (SPI), or *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR). All rewrites should be sent to my attention.

No matter whether you submit a game, or just a rules rewrite, we would also like to see any historical or other expository writing that you have done.

Salary, Benefits and Other Job Qualifications

Depending on past gaming/work experience, an R&D trainee starts here at a salary of anywhere from $8500 to $10,000. There is a three to six month period during which we (you and I) decide whether you really want to and really can work at SPI, and train you to work with us as a professional game designer/developer. During this time span, you receive only your basic salary (no paid days off, no health or life insurance coverage). You are expected to pass through this trial period with flying colors, of course, and to move up quickly in responsibility, performance, and salary. Assuming you started at the bottom, your progression in skill and the concomitant salary raises should get you to regular Staff level ($19,000) within two years. Further raises would depend on significant managerial or non-R&D work.

Once you achieve full-time status, you accrue Leave Days at the rate of one paid day off per each nine days worked (26 Leave Days/year). These Leave Days are expended for *all* paid days off — legal holidays, sick days, vacation days, etc. — thus giving you the flexibility to choose whether or not you will take off each and every legal holiday, or work some of them and save the Leave Days for some other time instead. In addition, there is a fully company-funded health insurance plan (Blue Cross/Major Medical) that covers you and any dependents, as well as $5,000 of life insurance coverage.

Working at SPI is Not a Picnic...

...not, at least, on the days when we don't have company parties. A job at SPI is a lot of work, and often it is hard work. The hours are long, particularly as deadlines approach and last-minute details seem to appear out of nowhere and multiply like rabbits with an abundant food supply. I would be kidding you if I said you were in for a standard, predictable 40 hours a week. On the other hand, if you want to design games, SPI is a great place to do it. The people are sharp and good to work with; the hours, if long, are flexible. The pay is adequate, and it comes every week.

If you think you have what it takes (not that we're exactly sure ourselves what "it" is), and if you're willing to start at the bottom and spend a few years in SPI's "School for Simulation Game Designers," and if you're willing to take a big chance...then it's worth it.

Hope to be hearing from you,

David James Ritchie
R&D Manager