Game Design: Where Do We Go From Here?

by James. F. Dunnigan

During 1972 SPI published eighteen different games. Ten of these games were, design wise, derived from previous game systems. Eight of the 1972 games were substantially new systems. The following list shows where the "derived" game designs came from and what unique features were contained in the new game systems.

DERIVED GAME DESIGNS

Borodino - from *Napoleon at Waterloo (basic)*

La Grande Armee - from *Leipzig*

Marne - from *1918* (with substantial revision)

Soldiers - from *Grunt* and *Grenadier*

Moscow Campaign - from *Kursk*

Breakout and Pursuit - from *Kursk*

Wilderness Campaign - from *Franco-Prussian War*

Armageddon - from *Renaissance of Infantry*

1812 - hex version - from *Leipzig*

Battle of Stalingrad - from *Kursk*

NEW GAME SYSTEMS

Combat Command – although similiar to *PanzerBlitz, Combat Command* created what was basically a new system for modern tactical games. A different scale and different combat rules (not to mention a new CRT) were some of the major changes from *PanzerBlitz*.

Flying Circus – this one is very obviously a new system. A system for simulating plane-to-plane air combat.

Winter War – a game system specifically tailored to deal with the peculiar conditions and events of the Russo-Finnish war. A system not likely to be used anywhere else.

1812 (area version) – a pragmatic approach for campaigns in periods where planning and operations were not quite as precise as they are today. Well suited to the 1812 campaign. Use of the matrix CRT option. The basic idea is to use large movement areas and more sophisticated movement rules.

Franco-Prussian War – the prime innovation here was hidden movement and limited intelligence. The rules for these two elements of the game are quite extensive. Therefore, the rest of the game is quite simple (few units, primarily).

Red Star/White Star – another game similar to *PanzerBlitz* in appearance, but quite different in its construction. A new system was used for computing combat values and, once again (as in *Combat Command*) the entire combat procedure was revamped.

American Revolution – another area movement game, but substantially different from the *1812* (area) game. A different combat system and victory point system. Special rules for some of the strange things that went on during the revolution.

Year of the Rat – could be described as the bastard descendant of *Kursk, Franco-Prussian War* and numerous other games. However, it does stand by itself and works quite well to re-create modern warfare, airpower and air-mobile operations.

That was the year that was. That was what we did. Now, the question is, why did we do it that way? We did the games we did in 1972 mainly because they were the ones we *could* do. Some of the titles were chosen because there was an indicated interest in that particular subject. But it wasn't until the end of 1972 that we were capable of taking on just about any subject we cared to take on. At that point (starting with *S&T* 36) we turned the decision-making (on what game subjects to do) over to the people who play the games.

This left us, primarily, with the job of doing the best we can with the "game" itself. To handle this assignment properly we first had to define what a "good" game was.

That's what the rest of this article is all about.

Early in 1972 we developed a more thorough method of having players evaluate games. This method has become known as "Playback." During 1972 we "playbacked" 23 different games. On each game we obtained a 1-9 rating on ten aspects of a game's quality. The best way to show you where we are going in game design is to show you what we found. The following is a summary of the 23 playbacks we did in 1972. They are listed in order of how high their overall rating was. The first number is the original "playback" rating, and the number in parentheses is that game's rating in the latest "1-9" ratings as published regularly in *S&T*.

We use a 1-9 scale on all these ratings. 1 = poor, 9 = excellent, with the usual gradations in between. We have found that anything rated 7 or above is "good" (above average). Anything below 6 (poor) is below average. Now you know what we mean when we refer to something as "good" or "poor." Consider everything else a 6, average.

1-*Flying Circus*-7.47 (5.81) did very good on rules and counters as well as ease of play, completeness, balance, length, set-up and complexity. The rest was average.

2-*Diplomacy*-7.47 (7.02) good on map, ease of play, balance, set-up and complexity. Poor on length and realism.

3-*PanzerBlitz*-7.41 (7.43) good on map, rules, counters, completeness, length and complexity. The rest was average.

4-*Borodino*-7.23 (7.06) good on map, rules, counters, ease of play, completeness and length. The rest average.

5-*France 1940*-7.17 (7.15) good on map, rules, counters, ease of play, completeness and length. The rest average.

6-*Kursk*-7.15 (6.47) good on counters, ease of play, balance, length and realism. The rest average.

7-*Napoleon at Waterloo (basic)*-7.10 (5.88) good on counters, ease of play, completeness, length and set up. Poor on complexity and realism.

8-*Battle of Stalingrad*-7.10 (6.64) good on rules, counters, completeness, length, complexity and realism. The rest average.

9-*Grenadier*-7.03 (6.61) good on counters, balance, length, complexity and realism. Poor on the map.

10-*Barbarossa*-7.01 (6.50) good on rules, counters, ease of play, completeness, length and set up. Poor on map.

11-*Combat Command*-6.92 (6.35) good on counters, completeness, length and set-up. Poor on map.

12-*Phalanx*-6.90 (6.45) good on counters, balance, length and complexity. The rest average.

13-*Battle of Moscow*-6.79 (5.88) good on length, poor on map, counters.

14-*Battle of the Bulge*-6.72 (6.53) good on map, counters and ease of play. Poor on realism.

15-*1918*-6.70 (5.84) good on counters, completeness. The rest average.

16-*Dunkirk*-6.66 (no rating) good on balance, poor on map, counters, length and set-up.

17-*USN*-6.57 (5.90) good on map, counters, realism. Poor on ease of play, length and set-up.

18-*Dark Ages*-6.50 (5.85) good on counters, length. The rest average.

19-*Lost Battles*-6.46 (5.53) good on counters. The rest average.

20-*Luftwaffe*-6.30 (6.00) good on map, counters. Poor on balance, length and realism.

21-*Origins of World War II*-6.16 (5.86) good on ease of play, completeness, length and set-up. Poor on map, complexity and realism.

22-*Grunt*-5.83 (5.54) poor on map, completeness, balance and complexity.

23-*1914*-5.81 (5.54) good on map, counters and realism. Poor on ease of play, length, set-up and complexity.

That's one way of looking at the results. We can look at it another way, on the basis of which games come out best and worst in each category. Games with numbers 1, 2, or 3 next to them indicate the three best or worst in each class. Games in parentheses are games that, while rated second or third "worst," actually received a "6" (or "average") rating.

PHYSICAL QUALITY AND LAYOUT OF MAPSHEET

Above average: 1-France '40, 2-PanzerBlitz, 3-Battle of the Bulge, Diplomacy, USN, 1914, Luftwaffe, Borodino.

Below average: 1-Dunkirk, 2-Barbarossa, 3-Grunt, Battle of Moscow, Combat Command, Origins of World War II, Grenadier.

PHYSICAL QUALITY AND LAYOUT OF THE RULES FOLDER

Above average: 1-Flying Circus, 2-Borodino, 3-PanzerBlitz, France '40, Barbarossa, Battle of Stalingrad.

Below Average: (1-Grunt), (2-Dunkirk), (3-Dark Ages).

PHYSICAL QUALITY AND LAYOUT OF THE UNIT COUNTERS

Above Average: 1-PanzerBlitz, 2-France '40, 3-Battle of the Bulge, Kursk, Lost Battles, Flying Circus, Combat Command, USN, 1914, Barbarossa, Luftwaffe, 1918, Battle of Stalingrad, Napoleon at Waterloo, Borodino, Grenadier, Phalanx, Dark Ages.

Below Average: 1-Battle of Moscow, 2-Dunkirk, (3-Diplomacy).

EASE OF PLAY

Above Average: 1-Napoleon at Waterloo, 2-Flying Circus, 3-Diplomacy, Kursk, Origins of World War II, France '40, Barbarossa, Borodino, Battle of the Bulge.

Below Average: 1-1914, 2-USN, (3-Grunt).

COMPLETENESS OF THE GAME'S RULES

Above Average: 1-Flying Circus, 2-France '40, 3-Borodino, Barbarossa, 1918, Battle of Stalingrad, Napoleon at Waterloo, PanzerBlitz, Kursk, Combat Command, Origins of World War II.

Below Average: 1-Grunt, (2-1914), (3-Diplomacy).

GAME BALANCE

Above Average: 1-Flying Circus, 2-Diplomacy, 3-Kursk, Dunkirk, Grenadier, Phalanx.

Below Average: 1-Luftwaffe, 2-Grunt, (3-Lost Battles).

GAME LENGTH

Above Average: 1-Napoleon at Waterloo, 2-Flying Circus, 3-PanzerBlitz, Kursk, Battle of Moscow, Combat Command, Origins of World War II, France '40, Barbarossa, Battle of Stalingrad, Borodino, Grenadier, Phalanx, Dark Ages.

SET-UP TIME

Above Average: 1-Diplomacy, 2-Napoleon at Waterloo, 3-Flying Circus, Combat Command, Origins of World War II, Barbarossa.

Below Average: 1-1914, 2-USN, 3-Dunkirk.

GAME COMPLEXITY

Above Average: 1-PanzerBlitz, 2-Diplomacy, 3-Flying Circus, Battle of Stalingrad, Grenadier, Phalanx.

Below Average: 1-Origins of World War II, 2-Napoleon at Waterloo, 3-Grunt, 1914.

REALISM

Above Average: 1-USN, 2-Grenadier, 3-1914, Kursk, Battle of Stalingrad.

Below Average: 1-Origins of World War II, 2-Diplomacy, 3-Luftwaffe, Battle of the Bulge.

Well, that's all the data. Now, the question is, what to do with it? This data can be interpreted any number of ways. For what it's worth, the following is my interpretation. The only thing that gives this particular interpretation any significance is that it will be used to determine what will happen in game design at SPI during 1973.

Our basic problem in interpreting this material is that we are simultaneously dealing with two separate "correct solutions." These two solutions often contradict each other. Put more bluntly, we may either take those games which, overall, came out on top or we may take as "correct" those aspects of various games which came out on top. *PanzerBlitz* is the most popular game around at the moment. Yet a detailed analysis of the game will show that it is very much the sum of its parts.

Let us begin with the topic itself. Tactical level warfare in Russia during 1943-45. Rather untraveled territory and certainly an area which excites considerable interest. Taking the same game (in all respects), but using another historical setting would probably have hurt *PanzerBlitz's* ratings. Next, consider the physical finish of the game. The components were designed by Redmond Simonsen, who is clearly recognized as the best game components designer in the business. The map, rules and counters all receive very high ratings. And then there is also the game box (unrated) which also contributes to a very attractive package. The completeness of the rules, the length of the games and the complexity level were all rated above average, the remaining aspects of the gamer were "average." What this shows is that there a number of important variables for which we have no "rating." My estimate of their order of importance is: 1-Scale of the game, 2-Historical topic, 3-Quality of packaging (with Avalon Hill bookcase and mounted board being the most popular). In any particular game these three variables may shift around a bit, but they are always, I feel, the "big three."

There are still other factors. There is the "time" factor. The amount of time a game has been available for sale also has a bearing on its "popularity." In time, all games "age." It's not so much a matter of people getting used to them (although this is a factor). More importantly, there is the "obsolescence" factor. Other games come along that have better features and are simply "better." Also, as an historical period falls from favor (they do, in a cyclical fashion), this decline will pull the game's overall popularity down with it (the opposite is also true sometimes, as a period comes back into favor).

All the above show that there is no cut and dried method for "predicting" which elements will be needed for the "perfect" game. There are, however, numerous "indicators" capable of pointing the way towards a superior game. Much has been learned from the Playback results.

Let's start with the physical aspects of the game. The counters, map and rules must all be clearly and logically laid out. The map should have things like the CRT and time record track on it. But not too much should be on the map. Scenarios or set-up charts are not a good idea for the mapsheet. Starting in 1973 we are using hex sheets which have a standard numbered hex system on them. We are also using a "standard" numbering system for game rules. Each set of rules will have a "table of contents" at the beginning showing what is in the rules and where it is. The manner in which rules are put together is a subject unto itself. We are also working on a mounted playing surface. We constantly experiment with new color and layout schemes for our unit counters. You can expect to see visible changes in the physical aspects of our games in the next year.

More importantly, there are the actual "play" aspects of games. First (in our Playback surveys) is "Ease of Play." This is important, very important. But by itself it will not save a game. Moreover, "Ease of Play" is the end result of many other elements in a game. Such things as the number of units, the movement and combat procedure, the victory conditions and other lesser factors result in "Ease of Play," or the lack of it. We now, as a matter of habit, consider all of the above factors when designing and developing a game. You can be sure that a perfect or near perfect game will have "Ease of Play" as one of its major assets.

Next there is "Completeness" (of the game's rules). Game rules are usually incomplete because the people producing the rules lose the ability to look at their rules "fresh." They begin to add important things to their rules which don't get into print. All this is very obvious. The solution is equally obvious. You've got to have a lot of people read (and nitpick) the rules before they are printed. This requires a lot of work and is easy to put off in the rush to complete the game. But it is essential, and if these "readings" are done enough a very "complete" set of rules will result. We learned this lesson the hard way. And we'll probably continue to re-learn it. Reading and re-reading a "finished" set of rules is an easy thing to overlook.

Game balance can be achieved in three ways. First, you can take the original situation, play it out as much as possible, and then determine what "above average" performance is for both sides. That's probably the hardest and least accurate way to do it. Unfortunately, this method must be used, to a greater or lesser extent, in all games. The second method is the "scenario" method. You take the basic situation and simply accept the "historical" conditions of victory. You then develop a number of scenarios based upon the "what if?" concept. Since the playing abilities of people differ greatly, two people can find which of these scenarios provides them with a balanced game. In some cases the historical situation is truly hopeless (*France '40, for* example). You then MUST use this method. The third method involves the use of multi-player games. When using more than two players the weaker players have a natural tendency to gang up on the stronger. Games such as these are very much "self balancing." Not perfectly so, but enough. Although you now have three methods spelled out, there is still considerable work needed to make any of them work.

"Set-Up Time" for a game is another frequently overlooked (and under-rated) aspect of a game's design. No matter how good a game is, it will suffer considerably if it takes too long to get the damn thing together. An essentially simple game should, of course, have easy Set-Up. But there are ways. Clear orders of battle, in chart form as much as possible. Not everybody is crazy about starting positions printed on the map, but often they are essential to easy Set-Up in games that require exact historical placement. The worst enemy of easy Set-Up is too many units, and too many different units.

Game complexity can go both ways. Players instinctively use this term for both "simple" and "complicated" games. This element is a strange combination of realism and playability. In effect, the "grey area" between playability and realism is what the "complexity" element is all about. A game must have a certain amount of "complexity" in order to appear "real." It's not an easy concept to grasp. Yet it's an essential part of producing a good game.

The "Realism" of a game is dependent upon *fraud*. You must convince the player that the game is real. This doesn't mean that the game IS real, merely that you've convinced the players. Sometimes you achieve actual realism and player conviction. But often you have only one of the two. Or neither. Realism is dependent not only upon the skill of the designer, but also upon his scruples. A designer who is a compentent historian, as well as an honest person, can produce a realistic game. Some of the time. An easy way out is to make a complicated game that covers enough bases to appear realistic. The trick is to design a simple yet realistic game so that people can play it and use it. Realism is the payoff. And there's no "by the book" method of achieving it.

Such are the lessons of 1972. We learned some. And lost some. We found a few answers. And a lot more questions. In *MOVES* 13 there'll be another article like this. I hope you find what happens between this article and that one of interest. I know we at SPI will.