

CASES:

SPI Staff Seminar on Game Rules

This is an edited-down transcript of one of the many group therapy sessions held here at the game farm. In this one, the inmates wonder and whine about rules format. Note that this session took place before the results of the MOVES 26 Feedback were known (see Opening Moves). The cast of characters in this consciousness-deadening session are: RICH Berg, STEVE Bettum, HOWIE Barasch, FRANK Davis, FRED Georgian, DAVE Isby, JIM Dunnigan, KEVIN Zucker, JAY Nelson, KIP Allen, TOM Walczyk, TERRY Hardy, GREG Costikyan, and REDMOND Simonsen.

Frank: I'm hoping everyone will contribute since we have a record attendance here. The first thing that comes to my attention on the subject of rules is the fact that, unlike other components of games, such as the design and the art work (of which the public immediately recognizes the quality according to their own tastes), the appreciation of rules works in the opposite manner: the better the rules are, the *less* they are appreciated by the public. We have the phenomenon of the best rules are the rules that sort of disappear. I assembled my own thoughts into three basic categories, which are style of rules, the content of rules and the concepts concerning the rules. Concept is really the philosophy and the whole problem of what we're trying to do with rules. The easiest thing to get at first is the style of rules. I don't know if everyone here remembers, but last March, Redmond prepared a 13-page manuscript on physical format standards for turning rules in to the Art Department. Most of us lost ours, but I found a copy and retyped it and had new copies made and they're sitting on this table. Redmond also added two new things that I'd like to go over what they cover in general. I want each developer to take a copy and try and keep track of it. The general manuscript format covers General Rules, Primary Rules, Secondary Rules, examples of play and procedure, charts and tables, explanation of combat results, scenario lay-out, reinforcement schedules, sequence of play, terms and terminology and how to prepare a counter mix manifest. Most of these are rather important segments in composing a set of rules or designing a set of rules. What Redmond has done is put down in a very clear fashion, that actually follows the SPI rules book format, the basic requirements of passing muster as far as the Art Department is concerned with your rules. A lot of things in there will seem picayune. There are rules dealing with how long a General Rule should be, how long a Secondary Rule should be, what types of rules are capitalized, what things are underlined. There are several reasons why we

should try to conform to these standards which I'll go into towards the end. Before I do that, I'd like to explain a couple of other things. The things that are so far not covered by this style sheet are a style for how to do errata. We basically have a format for that and anyone who wants should look in *MOVES II*. Redmond designed the original format, but I think the original has been lost on that, too. There is an example of the format to follow and as we decided a few weeks ago, the game developers have to be responsible for doing any errata for these games. Ideally, let's say within two months after the game is published. Since we're all going to be doing this now, we should be following the same format.

Another thing we need a style sheet for is for the playtest maps and what I call, for want of a better term, a gazetteer. What it is is essentially a list of places and geographical features. This is something the Art Department has been trying to get us to hand in along with our final playtest maps. What I'm requesting from the Art Department is that they give us the same kind of style sheet for both the playtest map and the gazetteer, standard terrain, nomenclature, etc. You'd just give what ever recommendations you have in terms of preference. For instance, I believe that you [RAS] have a preference for modern [English] spelling over ancient or foreign names. Also, we need a style sheet for a summary sheet. A summary sheet is something just started really, *Russian Civil War* is the first game that's going to use it. That summary sheet was devised basically by reproducing intact the most important rules from the game. We don't know how effective that's going to be; we don't know whether we should be using a different format for the summary sheet. We also don't know how much, in terms of charts and tables, to incorporate and part of this is going to be solved by feedback when we get the results from the *Russian Civil War*. We'll probably be able to draw up a format for summary sheets in the future. I know that is one of the things that Jim would like to see in more games; particularly in the \$12 games and the more complicated games.

The Art Director is the person to be consulted on any matters concerning the style or physical format of the rules. In particular, things like counter mixes and scenarios are subject to a lot of variation and how it is to be presented. Anytime you're going to deviate from something in the style sheet, you should check with Redmond as soon as possible. He can advise you exactly how he wants it presented and this saves you from doing it over.

Redmond: It saves us from doing it over.

Frank: This is part of the cost of the rules. Very many times, things are done one way by the developer and done another way by the Art Department and I've tried myself to go and talk to Kevin about how he's going to present the Combat Results Table so I can type it up for them in that format in advance. It's got to be typed once anyhow and, rather than having it typed twice. The last thing I have to cover concerning the style sheet is some feelings I have about the case system that we use and what its advantages and disadvantages are. In talking about this I have to bring into account the other companies' games and what they're doing. Right now, no other company is using as sophisticated a numbering system as we do. Quite a few people seem to appreciate a simpler rules format and we've never really discussed [the pros and cons]. Redmond is responsible for this rules format. I think it was around the *Destruction of Army Group Center* or sometime in early 1973. We've only been using this case system for two years and I feel that we have not done enough feedback to find out whether the people feel that it's the best way to present the rules. Personally, I've listed some advantages and disadvantages and I've also been reading letters and reading quite a few other publishers' games...

Jim: Have you looked at the Playback in *MOVES*? Our games get a higher completeness level than anyone else.

Frank: I was going to refer to those rules in a minute. The basic advantage I see and the basic reason Redmond has put an introduction into the style sheet of why we should be using it are consistency. This is so the reader knows basically what to expect. So that every set of rules doesn't look completely different to him and there's definitely an advantage to that. Another disadvantage is location of rules. The case numbering system allows people both here and the consumers to quickly find whatever rules they are looking for.

Rich: I'm curious as to how many people actually use the index.

Frank: It depends. If you're using one of these 32-page rules folders...

Dave: I do.

Rich: I'd be interested to feedback that out. In some of these games, it's necessary, but the *Blue & Gray* games have like two or three pages of rules and nobody ever looks at the index.

Jim: In the *Blue & Gray* games, I've used the index. That's how I found out that the

stacking rules were placed in the movement section. That's a case of what they won't find in the index.

Frank: Along with this location, in fact, this is a format that automatically gives [a structure] for the developer. Most people have not tried to develop a game on their own before they started to work here. I find that it's a very easy process to follow Redmond's format. So, in terms of internal advantages for the staff, I think it's a big plus for our case numbering system. Another advantage is cross-referencing rules. It allows us to cross-reference rules very specifically. We can get down to the exact minor case or secondary case, whereas other companies, when they do cross-index rules, they will say, "see artillery" or see "10.0" and then if you're looking for a specific thing, you have to search throughout a paragraph. The final thing I have is clarity of form. I tend to think that's just matter of fact that I've been using that format for two years and it's very easy for me [and our customers] to find what I want in an SPI rules folder.

Kevin: Another advantage to this case numbering system is that if you're doing a game that is similar to some other games, you can look at that other game's rules outline and look at the rules case by case and see if there's anything in there which you can use one way or the other.

Frank: I make reference to the other rules folders as often as possible and, like you say, I hope everyone else is doing that. It certainly saves time and money. I did put down some possible disadvantages which come from the not-so-silent-minority and get a lot of complaints as to the length, the wordiness and the formality of our rules. Howie may have something to say about this. Our rules are written in quite a "sterner" fashion than a lot of other companies'. Actually, our rules are almost too intimidating to be considered game rules. When you begin reading some of them, it seems like you're contracting to become an indentured servant to a game. I don't know. The point is we never experimented with using a simpler format.

Jim: I think there's one critical point you're overlooking. The other companies, mainly Avalon Hill, GDW and everybody else—the type of rules that they use that are popular, are only popular with the *experienced* gamer. These are the guys who don't need rules and, of course, for the games like GDW games or John Hill games, they're not *getting* rules. They're getting a general outline—which is all they need or want.

Howie: I disagree. Avalon Hill's made it with their flimsy rules all these years. But still, people got into Avalon Hill.

Jim: Yes, but Avalon Hill does not have the popularity among the casual gamers that we have.

Howie: But people can pick up an Avalon Hill game and play. I was brought up on Avalon Hill games.

Kevin: Did you pick up a copy of Avalon Hill rules on your *own* with nobody to explain it?

Howie: Yes.

Jay: Yes, people picked up Avalon Hill games and just sat down and played. But were they playing correctly?

Rich: The new GDW games, *Port Arthur* and *Tsushima*... GDW has a habit of writing rules very explanatorily, rather than legalistically. I read through them and I write notes in the margin. There are quite a number of rules, especially in *Tsushima* which I know that if a new person picked up the game, they wouldn't know *what* the hell they were talking about, which I simply know because I assume certain things that the game designer has also assumed. That's what happens and the main problem with rules that are loosely written, or written in a rather offhand fashion, is that the designer makes assumptions that you cannot assume that the player is going to make. That's why you have legalistically written rules like we have. We try not to have any assumptions in the rules because invariably we know that the players make the wrong assumptions.

Howie: I disagree completely. I advocate shorter rules and simpler rules, basically because our rules are the most complete set of rules you can find. I think that people look at [these] rules where everything is contained in the rules and they're turned off. Jay brought up the point of how do we know that people are playing by the rules. They look at it, they make a judgment and say, "yeah, that's the way it should be, but..." I've walked in on my own playtesters and wondered where they're getting these rules from.

Rich: What I said is not mutually exclusive to what you said.

Frank: My basic point in bringing it up is exactly the opposite of what we're discussing and I do not advocate that we decide on one course or the other [on the spot] and then stick to it. What I'm advocating is possibly, as we did in *Strike Force*, to prepare a rules folder which is less formalistic and feedback it the same way we're doing this summary sheet for *Russian Civil War*. In my own opinion, I tend to prefer the way we're doing it, but I question seriously whether the expense is warranted; whether there is enough appreciation out there, whether the people are really that interested in getting it in this rigid format.

Kevin: Okay, Frank, I have a question to ask. The games that we're producing are reaching more people than GDW, for instance...

Jim: Or even Avalon Hill.

Frank: I think that has a lot to do with the fact that we publish a magazine with a game in it, where the others just publish games.

Rich: We'll be able to right away see how it works because the *Conquistador* game, which is going to be completely different as

far as the rules as anything that we've done; it will have rules that will have to be written from scratch because we will have a new system. I'm going to try to do it along a simplistic narrative fashion and we'll see how it works.

Kevin: There's one spurious thing that you're introducing here. That's the concept of simple rules. You don't have simple rules if you don't have a simple game. It doesn't make a game any simpler to produce the rules in some other format. We're reaching so many people that we're reaching a number of people that want to know the answers and have to have it all spelled out for them. You know that. They think that we're the oracle here. They ask us silly questions that can easily be reasoned out and what we're trying to do here is to reduce the number of game questions that we're getting per day. We want to produce a complete set of rules for anybody who needs to have the rules that complete. It they don't need them to be that complete, as Hardy says, they can take the game and play it with *Bastogne* rules. They can do anything that they want with it!

Redmond: I might interject something here and that is that if you are of the bent of Howard, that is to say you just want generalities, you can simply read the General Rules and if people are rigorous enough about writing their General Rules, the General Rules would be enough for your really ace gamer (or your really sloppy gamer) to play the game. He'd be able to read the General Rules and get the gist of what's going on and play games from the General Rules.

Kevin: I think that Game Designers' Workshop limits their audience in one way by the simple fact that you've got to be a person who wants to take a game and reason everything out; you cannot be a person who has to have everything written down. I think that they limit their audience in that respect.

Jay: I'd like to take issue about the comment that was made about simple rules and complex games. You can have very complex rules for a very simple game and vice versa. For example, the Finnish rules for *War in the East* are needlessly complex and needlessly long. They could have been much simpler rules, but they were written in a specific way.

Redmond: You could have *eliminated* the Finnish units, that would have been the simplest rules of all.

Jay: Yes, but that's exactly what you said.

Redmond: That's a facet of design, not a facet of rules format. That's a fault of an improperly developed set of rules. The rules have all these minute little cases to force you to do something that could have been forced upon a player much more simply.

Jay: That's exactly what I'm talking about.

Terry: How about the "Non-Loyal Roman Syndrome?" Using a multi-syllabic word when a one-syllable word will do.

Frank: I was just asking Redmond if he knew how the *War in the East* rules do in feedback?

Rich: The reverse of the coin is also true. I don't want to use this as a perfect example of writing rules, but *Bataille de la Moskowa*, which is a relatively complex tactical game has a simple set of rules. They may not be *well written*, but the rules are quite simple, they're easy to understand. There's not a rule in that game that would be above a maximum of moderate complexity level and yet the game is complex because the rules do things that make the game complex.

Frank: I've played that game more than you and the more I play, the more I find that's been omitted. It's similar to *Third Reich*. By the third time I played that game, I found that 30% of the necessary information was nowhere in the rules.

Rich: But *Third Reich* is overrated.

Frank: I'm just saying that *Third Reich* has a lot there [and that] *Third Reich* has an organization problem.

Rich: The designer and developer had no experience in writing rules; it's obvious from the way he's done them. The holes you simply fill in by yourself. What I'm saying is that the rules for the game are simple. They need not be that much more complex to fill in the holes.

Redmond: We have two or perhaps three different [topics] now. You're not talking about rules format and style, you're talking about actual development and design of a specific system. If you have a complex system which has a lot of material to be explained, your rules are going to be lengthy regardless of what format is used: if you use a discursive, informal style, it's going to be long. You'll have to blab for a long time. If you use the legalistic case numbered form, there are a lot of slot A's and tab B's in your system, your rules are going to be long, there's no two ways about it. Unless you just want an incomplete set of rules [such as] "use any reasonable method of supply."

Rich: I think a lot of players confuse length with complexity anyway. If the rules are 24 pages long they figure they can't play.

Redmond: That is an independent problem from a game whose rules are needlessly complex because of improper writing. If the writer is a poor writer and doesn't know how to get to the point quickly enough and decisively enough and precisely enough, then the rules will be verbose; they'll just run off at the mouth saying the same thing four or five times in different ways because the guy can't express himself properly.

Kip: I think a case in point of what Redmond is talking about is *Sixth Fleet*. I sat down last month and tried to play that game several times and going over the rules I noticed that, for example, you mentioned that Zones of Control force combat, you mentioned it in movement, you mentioned it in combat and you mentioned it in Zones of Control. This is

just a flat statement, "Zones of Control force combat." You mentioned that at least in three different places.

Kevin: Frank has a different style. Frank's style is always complete, but not necessarily concise.

Kip: That's not exactly what I'm talking about. What I'm saying is that this is a factor of the complexity level.

Frank: Wait a minute. It doesn't affect the complexity level, just the length. It's no more complex to read the same rule three different times.

Kip: I disagree entirely.

Frank: Not if it's stated the same way.

Jay: The rules folder is a product of the design and development process; it's a reflection of that. For example, the decision to be very complex with the Finnish situation resulted in the Finnish rules in *War in the East* for whatever reason. The fact that *Sixth Fleet* really is *Napoleon at Waterloo* just sort of turned around and reversed backwards a couple of times meant that it requires a complex rules folder.

Kip: I don't think that it did require a complex rules folder.

Redmond: It's moot as to whether *Sixth Fleet* really is a complex game or not; that's beside the point as far as how rules are written. It would seem to me that you have the question: is the system you're writing about complex and if it is complex, what is the most concise and precise way to inform the player of what the system is. If the writer is an inept writer (or semi-"ept" or whatever the word is) then you'll run off for hundreds and hundreds of words on a single point and not really express it clearly. You can say something that's relatively complex in a hundred words, and you can say something that's relatively simple in a thousand words. But that doesn't have anything to do with whether you put it in numbered paragraphs or whether you put it in running columns of type; it has absolutely nothing to do with that.

Tom: I think it's more frightening to someone who isn't familiar with the system, if you number them all, because it looks like a legal contract.

Redmond: In almost all games, paragraphs are denoted in some way or another. It's either rule #1 paragraph A or 1.1. So you're really talking about...

Tom: But I think people are frightened by the length and just by the appearance.

Kevin: What do you mean "frightened"?

Kip: I've lost sales at the front desk that way. People have taken one look at the size of the rules book and not bought it.

Howie: People buy the games because they want to get into it right away. They don't want to spend three or four hours reading and deciphering rules, they want to play the

game. How are you going to play the game? You have to read the rules first. If the rules are very, very long, the guy cannot enjoy the game. That's the problem.

Kevin: But if the rules are not complete, the guy cannot enjoy the game.

Steve: That's not true. All Avalon Hill game rules are incomplete.

Rich: That's why Avalon Hill has the basic game for people who just want to sit down and play. The game is an absolute flat-out turkey at that level, but they get their people into the game.

Kevin: It's my opinion that nobody can play an Avalon Hill game unless they have had word of mouth instruction from someone else.

Frank: The whole reason why I try so hard to write a complete set of rules is, my first ten years in wargaming was sitting around with Avalon Hill games setting them up and by the first or second turn, reaching a problem that was nowhere answered in the rules. I think that by that time I knew that I couldn't get a reply out of them because it took months. At that time I didn't have the experience to do historical research myself and would give up. But I'd never give up completely, I'd take out the game about two months later and try and play again.

Jim: You never *play* an AH game the way they're supposed to be played. I discovered [this] in the Army with a bunch of other guys who knew nothing about the game. They were sitting in an EM club and we managed to play *Tactics II* for about two months [and to] play wrong. We got *D-Day* and were playing *that* wrong. I know because eventually we psych'd out the errors. Some of them we don't know to this day. The conclusion that I've come to with all the things I've seen is that most people who really play the games, any game whether it be *Monopoly* or *Parcheesie* or *Life*, or a wargame, have to have enough brains to reinvent the game. If they can get a set up and a vague idea of how you move the pieces, they will invent the rest of it themselves. We are trying to appeal to a wide audience. We all know about the lawyers, the guys nobody likes to play. To a certain extent, we write our rules to try and suppress these [characters], but it doesn't work. We all remember the *Kingmaker* game. The rules everybody liked the most were the first version of the rules. They're so vague that anybody could interpret them any way. It was more fun that way. Avalon Hill is going to irradiate it to death.

Rich: Actually, they haven't.

Jim: There is something to be said for vagueness. We have made this big investment in trying to cover all the holes and like Frank has said we don't know if it works. We do get high marks for completeness on the playback; there's that. On the other hand, on the basis of Avalon Hill's own statistical ratings of the games from their own subscribers, the more people think a

game is incomplete, the more *realistic* they think it is. There is a significant correlation there within 1%.

Frank: This is part of the reason why I introduced the whole thing by saying the better the rules the less they are appreciated. We still have people who feel *USN* contains the ultimate truth in there somewhere.

Kevin: What it is is that if there are an infinite number of gaps, then there is an infinite amount of information that can be plugged in by the player. Therefore, it's infinitely realistic.

Rich: It's probably the most played complex game ever.

Tom: If the player can sympathize with the problems that the rules are having. This is a complex thing, and I can see why they have trouble playing.

Rich: The problem here also is that to play the game you have to have sort of a player schizophrenia. You've got to do two diverting things at once.

Frank: Here's a good standard that I just thought of that would help all companies if they applied it. The problem with a game like *USN* is that very few people will volunteer to answer game questions because the questions are not answered in the rules. And a person has to redesign the game to answer a game question. What I'm saying is if most game questions can be answered in the rules, the rules are somewhat in good shape. If most game questions cannot be answered by one of us here who has a lot of experience, by looking through the rules, then the rules are in very bad shape.

Howie: I wonder how many questions there are correlating with a number of game sales. If 20,000 *USN*'s were sold, we're not going to get 20,000 game questions, we're going to get 10 or 20.

Jim: I asked the question in, I think, the *General* feedback about the percentage of people who wrote in for questions. It was less than 10% who ever bothered to write in. We gave them about five options: you flip a coin, you agree among yourselves, you ignore it completely whatever that meant. A very small percentage, less than 10% answered that they wrote away, which reinforces my original contention that the rules are somewhat irrelevant.

Frank: You personally are one of the strongest advocates for very well developed, very complete rules.

Jim: It's a gut feeling; going completely by instinct. I believe that there is a germ of truth that there's salvation in complete rules.

Frank: I think it's basically that you just want to be able to play the game like a year after they're published.

Terry: That's the gospel according to St. James.

Jay: What Jim said about a rules folder is that for players to play a game, they have to

literally redesign it. That's exactly what a rules folder should aid the player to do—to make sure that what happens on the map is what the designer conceives as happening and that, alternately, when you sit down with a rules folder you come up with what the designer intended.

Jim: This is a basic question that we don't often ask about the rules. What are the rules supposed to do? Are they supposed to give all the rules for the game, are they supposed to teach the game? Now, different people take different approaches. Avalon Hill is trying with their programmed learning approach. So they're obviously saying, "we're trying to teach you the rules." We're sort of completists; we're trying to display all the rules. At the same time, Redmond and I will go back and say maybe we should put the set up here or the set up there as a means of getting people into the game. I don't know if we've ever really come eye to eye on just what we're trying to do. But I've always gone at it from the viewpoint of a player. I'm not into the rules as much as other people around here are. I think in terms of what do I do first. The first thing I want to do, as a historian, is set the game up. To me, that shows a lot about what the game is going to do. Like *Battle of the Bulge*, I know from reading vaguely that the 5th Panzer Army went in that direction so I set them up I say, "well, they're going to move in that direction, so I guess the movement rules should make that possible." We don't always do that.

Rich: I disagree. I think you get more out of the play sequence. The first thing that I look at in a game and I think the most important section in the rules is the sequence of play. It is the most basic section in a game. Inevitably, it tells you every major rule in the game that has to be covered. It also gives you the course of play. The Reinforcement Phase, the Movement Phase, Artillery Phase, etc., etc. You just read through the column and you know what the general course of play is. That is why with a simpler game or an *S&T* game where you might be getting players who have never seen a wargame; you might then write out a descriptive narrative introductory type of thing so that they know what they're getting into. But in a complex game like *Terrible Swift Sword* or *War in the West*, that's a wasted paragraph. I don't think that there's anybody going to read that.

Frank: I want to tie up this part of the discussion. I wanted to cover some other things. A lot of this will be covered again if we do talk about content. My own observation here is that I think one thing that would be helpful would be a short paragraph somewhere in our rules folder, preferably at the beginning, explaining the essence of our style of rules. In other words, one of the reasons I think it's intimidating is that people are hit with something that doesn't look like the game rules to any other game and they have no introduction as to why it's done so rigidly. I think a person should be told at the beginning that a wargame is complex and that it requires more organization in terms of

the rules than any other adult game. That's one of the opinions here. I think the problem is going to continue. I do cover the same subject again in content.

Redmond: One footnote on what you just said is that once upon a time, that paragraph was standard in the rules and it just eroded because people began leaving it out: "The rules are organized in this fashion—explanation." If you want to get a quick appreciation of the rules, simply read the general rules and then comb back after setting up the game to read the specific rules. It's a matter of erosion, of everybody keeping their eye on the ball.

Rich: I think especially in the *S&T* games and the simpler games where people buy the first time out.

Frank: I also think that we have at least two streams of opinion here as to what rules should do. Probably, our audience is similarly divided and the only thing we can do is some more research as to whether we need two different types of rules or just what's going on. We have been using a set format. It's been working pretty well for two years and we just have to read the letters. The second part of the discussion is on the content of the rules, which, for lack of imagination, I've divided into strategy and tactics. The first part of this as far as strategy of rules writing, goes right along with what we've just been discussing. The first thing here is to identify the audience. I have here that basically the observation is that the younger kids tend to hate detailed rules and they don't play by them anyhow. They're the most imaginative. If they see a little rules folder, I don't know whether they read the General Rules or what they read...

Terry: Where'd you get that idea from?

Frank: A good example of that is the invention of the A-Bomb in *Operation Olympic*. I walked in [to the playtest session] once and two different games were playing with the atomic bomb on the first turn.

Rich: The younger players tend just to flip through the rules to just get the headlines and then they play with what they feel should have been in there in the first place.

Redmond: One of the reasons why we cannot do that is that if you have a multi-scenario game, which most of our games are, you're going to be scaring people to death if you show them six scenarios.

Rich: I set up the *Port Arthur* game before I even opened up the rules book. Not so much that I was anxious to get into it, which I was, but it's easier to read the rules if you've got the game sitting in front of you.

Jay: The conceptual leap, that's what's difficult. To make that conceptual leap from the rules folder to the activity that the player's responsible for on the map. That's the conceptual leap that's so difficult to make and that's what stops people from playing the game.

Redmond: To make people feel secure with a game, you have to tell them as much as possible. You can't be general. It's going to make them more insecure if you're general.

Jay: I'm not suggesting that the ultimate aim of a rules folder is not necessarily to be the most complete rules or the most vague rules, but to be the most helpful in aiding a player to make that leap from the rules to what happens on the map; to be able to sit down with somebody else and have the units interact.

Howie: You're talking about going directly into the game and proceeding from there?

Jay: I'm saying that the rules should aid the player in doing that.

Kevin: The rules should do that, but they shouldn't stop there. They should continue and be complete.

Frank: Part of what Jay says is in the other part of this discussion on the content of rules. I was concerned with the format here and what Jim brought up is just the kind of thing I was saying needs to be feedbacked and experimented with. A simple change that we could effect is to put how to set up and play the game at the beginning of the rules rather than at the end, which is where I mainly put it just because I basically follow the format that Redmond gave me and that was the last thing that I saw.

Redmond: If people were more creative with the General Course of Player you would have that effect. You would have a narrative introduction to what the game plays like at the beginning of the game. It's just a matter of laziness that we don't do that. They just go, "blah, blah, blah;" they spend about fifty words saying, "blah, blah." The same old thing over and over again instead of actually introducing the players to the game.

Rich: The only trouble with General Course of Play is... I just got through working on *Terrible Swift Sword*. Now, I didn't write a General Course of Play in the rules for that. The main reason is that I don't think anybody who is going to purchase *Terrible Swift Sword* [is ignorant of] what the general course of a wargame is. I am loathe to spend any space, which is very dear in my rules, telling people something that they already know.

Redmond: Well, they don't already know. If you wrote it correctly, it would be something that they didn't already know. I understand that *Terrible Swift Sword* apparently is different enough from your standard old out-of-the-box wargame to require a good capsulization of what play is like in this game.

Terry: The younger players that I run up against in the games that I've played look in the rules for all the little things.

Rich: That's because they haven't looked the first time.

Redmond: What Tom just said (*soto voce*) is very to the point. That is, it depends upon the

particular game and how those particular people perceive that game. If it's a game that's similar to games that they've played before, they're going to ignore the rules. If it's a game that's boggling like some very intense tactical game, they're going to have to read the rules: they have no choice. If they have any competitiveness at all, they're going to look for those things that are going to give them the edge against the other turkeys who are not paying as much attention. They spring it on them half way through the game.

Kevin: Really, there's a problem that the rules have to be as long as they are. I think that that's one thing that we've been trying to deal with with the Folio games. I think that we could've done a better job than we did, but it does make it possible for a player to skip the bulk of the rules. Once he's read that folder one time, if he wants to start a new game that does happen to be in that system, he doesn't have to read four pages of rules; he only has to read like one or two.

Rich: My experience with the Folio games is that the Folio game system is the most restrictive, constricting thing that the designer and developer have ever come across. The perfect example of that was *Blue & Gray II*. We had at least two or three games in *Blue & Gray II* that had nothing to do with any of the rules that were in the *Blue & Gray I* basic Folios. We had rivers that had to have fords that couldn't because we had ferries. All sorts of wierdo things. In conjunction with this is the number of letters that have come in specifically on the *Blue & Gray* games, saying, "This is silly, did you do this simply because it was in the rules and why does this rule have to apply to this game." You've got to watch it with that type of rule. You can get so restrictive, you get a game that bears no resemblance to any history. You come out and simply say it's a quasi-historical game, but we never come out and say that.

Redmond: You're not talking about rules, Richard, you're talking about a design concept.

Rich: I'm talking about rules content.

Redmond: No, you're talking about the conceptual thrust that these games will be basically this system and will remain within that system so that the learning problem is reduced for the player. Then the rules themselves that are actually written as a part of these games are something else.

Kevin: We only have that problem in one game, just *Blue & Gray II*. Because in *Blue & Gray I* the Standard Rules were decided upon on the spot by the four designers of the four games. Now, *Blue & Gray II*, if you could have used another rules folder, which we could not, you could determine which sections have to be different.

Howie: A lot of people here... We've discussed this before about putting in bold special rules. What kind of Zones of Control, what type of combat system.

Jim: That's basically the summary sheet incorporated into the rules themselves.

Kevin: That takes, number one, writing these things succinctly and in order to do that you have to be able to recognize what they are.

Redmond: That system actually is asleep, so to speak within the system that we now have. It's a matter of when a person wrote the rules [did] they take full advantage of the mechanical format of the rules? They could [then] express those things in terms of headlines, etc. Just as a newspaper does. In fact, it's no big invention, that case and general rules system. I just stole it from newspaper writing and military writing manuals. If people would use the primary case title to express the basic thrust of the rules, you would have (in bold) a sentence outline of the entire major section for every rule. That's what people *should* do instead of coming up with idiotic titles like "Prohibitions." I see more and more of that and I'm getting sicker and sicker of that.

Howie: Who sets the standard? I write rules by following Frank's examples.

Redmond: I keep on saying these things to everybody and everyone says, "well, that's nice." How many times do I have to say it?

Dave: You need subtitles to write and organize. A lot of this stuff is getting it into a framework, I find. You've got to do it yourself, writing the rules. If you have a Zone of Control rule floating around the movement section, then it could be a lovely Zone of Control rule, but it breaks the chain of thought in the supposed logical development. While it's supposed to be like a beautiful outline, you go to your "I," your "Ia," and you can get a general idea by reading all the big I's and II's then the A's then the 1's.

Frank: I think the problem was that this was not available for many reasons. This is not used. If this was used, there should be no organization problems. I think what Redmond pointed out is skipping down to what I call tactics. I think it's worth noting. Whenever you write the heading of a rule it does no good to make it as general as possible because the purpose of these main sections is so that people can note them in the Table of Contents. If they locate a section that says "Inhibitions and Prohibitions," it could mean anything to them.

Terry: I invented that phrase. What the hell's wrong with "inhibitions and prohibitions?"

Redmond: The title should be independent of anything else. It should say, "blah, blah, blah" concerning this!

Frank: Have you ever read a headline that said, "Inhibitions and Prohibitions?"

Tom: When the title said, "Man killed," it doesn't say again underneath, "Man killed with knife."

Redmond: You have a major section that says, "Movement," then you have a subsection that says, "Inhibitions and Prohibitions," that says almost zilch.

Frank: Another example is when you get special restrictions. All you have to do is insert into your subheadings the topic of the major case. Actually, Special Restrictions should never be used as a primary case. You will begin with something like "exceptions" when you come to special restrictions. I've only lately noticed that creeping in and all I'm saying is that it's going to be harder for people who do rely on the rules index to find what they're looking for. It's easier for us to write that way, but we're doing a disservice to the whole format.

Redmond: If you really wanted to be restrictive, you would say that the titles of primary cases, that is to say, cases that are numbered to the first decimal point, should be [a complete] sentence. You know how hard it is to write a sentence outline?

Jim: That's what you had to do for penance in Catholic schools.

Redmond: If those things were written as sentence titles, and those sentences were in bold, you would have, in effect, headline summaries of the rules in sentence form that would be, perhaps, forty sentences. If you think you're capable of writing beautiful and precise and non-misleading sentences like that, go ahead.

Jay: For example in *Arnhem*, "Which Bridges May be Blown?"

Redmond: That's fine.

Jay: It doesn't really tell you anything.

Redmond: It certainly does! It tells you that that case deals with blowing bridges. It's better than saying, "Which Bridges," which some of these people were doing in some of these other rules.

Frank: It's better than saying, "Special Rules." Then you put everything on blowing bridges under Special Rules.

Jay: Obviously. It's better than that. But it's still not a sentence by sentence outline.

Redmond: No, but you could write [such] a sentence.

Frank: I was still referring to verifying the audience. I said that in my opinion, the younger kids don't like the lengthy rules. I don't know what we're going to do about that. If we get more younger kids, we're going to have to write rules for Howie. On the other hand, the older guys, in my opinion, are divided into two categories. There's a group who appreciates lengthy, detailed rules and there is a group of grognards who think we're harrassing them with our rules. The point of all this is that we can't please everyone. I personally feel that we should be aiming our rules to what I call the "intelligent novice." We cannot write rules for an eight-year-old kid who, when you use a term like "contiguous" is going to say, "Well, forget it! I'm going to play a Rand game."

Kip: Frank, there are two points that Redmond has made to me several times. One he implied, not actually said, that we are

writing for the lowest common denominator; who is the dumbest guy who is going to play our games. The second point that Redmond has brought up several times, is that anything that can happen in a wargame will happen.

Frank: I agree with Redmond. All I'm saying is that no matter how good a rules editor you are, you will never write successfully for the lowest common denominator.

Redmond: The lowest common denominator in the sense that you have to assume a certain [higher than average] level of intelligence if you're going to be dealing with someone who's going to play a wargame.

Rich: The more clear the rules are, the better. If you use terms that are unknown to 97% of the people, you're in trouble. If you start writing the rules in which you use words that are not complex and, therefore, do not carry a certain preciseness, you are going to get drivell.

Greg: What we need is not a new rules format, what we need is to write rules precisely and in Anglo-Saxon English.

Redmond: It's almost an iron-clad rule of English that the more specific a term is, the more syllables the word has.

Greg: That's true, but there's a limit beyond...

Redmond: Why do you think scientific language is so complex?

Kevin: The reason we use the specialized terms, is because after we define the term,... we have to be able to have one word, one specific word to refer to a very complicated concept. It's better than using a two sentence description of the concept. You have to have specialized terms.

Kip: Once, during playtesting, I used the term "Rigid Semi-Active Zone of Control."

Frank: You can't use that without defining it.

Kevin: That is a term that is only applied to more generalized writing than we're talking about.

Redmond: We're talking about jargon, which is specific game terms which get carried over from game to game and become part of the woodwork of rules writing. We're talking about a phrase or a word that is almost always defined in any independent set of rules and then it is used jargonally throughout the rules and is referring to that relatively complicated concept. There's no way around having special terms.

Greg: If you're doing something like defining Zones of Control, I think it's perfectly permissible to use the term Zone of Control, rather than 'those six hexagons immediately surrounding a unit.' I also think that it's kind of a waste to use seven different multi-syllabic words in an example.

Redmond: What exactly are you talking about? Are you talking about a long common word?

Steve: "Contiguous," that's a good one.

Rich: What would you say instead of contiguous?

Greg: "Next to."

Rich: That doesn't mean that.

Frank: "Contiguous" is a more exact term; it's actually simpler, it's going to use less words.

Rich: If you say "next to," you're going to run into all sorts of problems.

Frank: My point was that we have to come to a basic decision as to who we're going to write rules for. I agree with Redmond that we should be writing for the widest possible audience. The reason why I said an "intelligent novice," is that one, I disagree with Howie. I don't think at all that our rules should be aimed mainly for people with experience in play. I think we have a large turnover in the number of subscribers to the magazine; I think we're always interested in attracting new people into the hobby; and I think it's entirely wrong to cater to people who have experience anywhere near what we have here.

Howie: I never said that.

Steve: Yes, you did, Howie. You implied that.

Frank: That's specifically why I use the word "novice." I'm talking about someone whose maybe played one other game. Someone who's played *Napoleon at Waterloo*, any of the Quads, that type of level.

Kevin: Our rules are not, at this point, directed at the intelligent novice. You cannot be a novice and play any number of our games.

Steve: There should be a warning to the effect on the box. At least for the retail sales. The guy who picks up *USN* is cooked; he'll never pick up another wargame, if that's his first.

Redmond: That's why we put the complexity rating on the box.

Tom: But that's meaningless without anything to compare it to.

Redmond: It's compared to games that almost everybody knows, like *Monopoly*.

Frank: Kevin, you and I were in agreement on the old Avalon Hill games. Are you saying our rules are as difficult to play a game with as the early Avalon Hill games? Do you think a novice has a fair chance with one of our Quad Games?

Kevin: I think that a novice could reason it out. But it would be a difficult task if he had never played another game to play *Fast Carriers*.

Frank: I think it's worse than you say. I think that they might have trouble with a Quad Game. What we're going to do about that has more to do with tactics. Personally, I feel one of the problems about that is why we can't take someone who is really new and

show him to play is that we don't include enough examples of play. I think we can pour words down their ears forever and they still won't know how to play unless we give them examples. We have to identify the audience. We have to write for the widest possible audience and we have to realize that we're not going to have everyone understanding our rules no matter how good we get.

Kevin: I think that one of the reasons for having *Strike Force* was to circumvent that problem for novices who could never understand games. I think that, in effect, what you have to do is something like a *Strike Force*-esque basic game to every game. It's not a matter of complexity; it's a matter of conceptualization, as Jay said, there's this leap you have to make, between the words, the map and the pieces and actually playing.

Frank: We have some ideas in mind about trying to solve that problem. I know there's one idea to create some type of manual giving specific examples of play from one game after another. There's some kind of idea to create some type of manual where you take them through examples of movement through terrain, there's another example where you take them through several forms of combat.

Howie: We did that with *Strike Force* and people said it was more confusing than the game.

Frank: I happened to read a letter in support of Redmond saying that we have to write for the lowest common denominator. I read a letter from a Junior High School teacher who used *Strike Force* to introduce his class [to wargaming] and he says that the rules were fine, except that he had to make several clarifications to the people verbally. So the rules themselves still are not clear enough in *Strike Force*.

Redmond: Was he more specific?

Frank: No, he was not specific. Most people writing in are not specific. The point is this, wargames are complex. We've got a long way to go to simplify it for everybody. We'll never be able to teach everyone. There's a lot of other psychological reasons that people cannot understand something that is obviously simple to us. The main reason is that there is motivation for learning this. The same reason that you take arithmetic and you go into schools where they teach them simple arithmetic problems and some kids won't catch on. One of the reasons for that is, that some of the kids say, "why should I learn that?" Most of the people who never played a wargame before ask why do you go to all the trouble, why do you spend hours doing it? You can't convince them that it's a worthwhile pursuit. That's one of the reasons why we cannot produce rules that *anyone* could pick up and understand and play the game themselves... They have a built-in resistance. The second thing I have under the strategy of rules writing is reconnaissance. This is an important point, and I think the first step in improving your rules or to improving the

quality of your rules is to familiarize yourself with poor rules. This is something that Kevin and I must have had a lot of experience with. I feel that whatever success I have as a rules writer is due to the fact that I could never play other games. I came across what I thought were constantly atrocious rules. I can play games like *Monopoly* and *Clue* and *Sorry* even though their rules are very spotty. But wargames are more complex and the rules were not up to the level of the game. I went over these rules so many times that I have a real good idea of what is missing in terms of a body of rules because of all these times I could never play the game. That's like a built-in danger zone. When I see so many people come in and say this is a game—like, Jim always comes in with a simple design and says this is a "simple" game. To me this says this is a person who cannot identify complicated concepts and/or complicated rules.

Jim: That's your job.

Frank: My recommendations for learning to develop some discriminating ability in terms of rules is to do a lot of reading and studying of rules of other publishers. I read many rules by different publishers and most of the other people who are on the R&D staff for some amount of time tend to keep a careful eye on what the other companies are doing. One of the benefits from this is that you see the other companies' mistakes; you see what kind of progress they're making. When and if they surpass us I will be the first to let you know. They haven't done it yet. I was going to point out when we were talking about the other companies and their format—one of the reasons why they can get by with an informal format is that they steal our rules and then they take those rules and leave the legalistic framework away from it. They couldn't do that if they didn't have our rules to take it from. Rand goes to ridiculous extremes where they steal a lot of the concepts and then try and change the terms so they look "original."

Rich: They will never use a concept or a term or words that either we or Avalon Hill use. It's a form of corporate paranoia.

Frank: GDW uses almost exactly the same language as we do. All they delete is the hierarchy of structure. I'm saying that works nice, especially for people like us who are familiar with rules; it's a relief for us to read rules like that. But they're using our rules as a base and that's why they can get away with it, so we're still a step ahead of them.

Kevin: At one point when I was not working for SPI, I was talking to the people at Avalon Hill about rewriting their *Afrika Korps* rules. They were interested in having me do that. I did a portion of it and sent it to them and what happened was that they weren't willing to pay me what I wanted to be paid. It's obvious that they had an interest in cleaning up their rules, but it's not worth very much to them.

Frank: Avalon Hill has gone to some pains this year to rewrite [many of] their old rules. I don't know what they're paying for them...

Kevin: They're done in-house.

Kip: I noticed that in *Third Reich*, they went to a case system.

Rich: Rule 22.433. That's ridiculous.

Kip: I found those rules easier to understand than *Stalingrad*. At least I had a framework in my mind where I could say, "oh, yeah, in section 3.8."

Jim: But those rules don't say anything. Like Rules of Mechanics.

Kip: At least I knew where to find rules on how many BRP's you get for conquering a country or what happens to the Vichy French forces and things like that.

Howie: Correct me if I'm wrong, Kip, but weren't there a lot of index omissions?

Kip: Tremendous. It was a disaster of rules writing. But it was a tremendous departure from their old style like in *Stalingrad*. I think it's a move more towards our variety of rules writing. I think it's a hell of a lot better.

Redmond: I don't think that they *deliberately* adopted our terminology. By sheer weight, it was forced down their throat.

Frank: I have a couple of more points here about basic background in developing the various rules. A second thing I found advantageous is answering game rules questions (which I did for over a year). That is what put me in touch with what level our audience is on. I did find an incredible amount of questions that are answered in the rules. The point is that they don't understand or don't *read* the rules. But working on game questions is an enlightening experience in terms of writing rules. We'll all have to do it now because we're all going to get the game questions on the games that we developed and then we're going to do the errata sheets.

Redmond: The classic question was, "who is the Enemy Player?"

Kevin: When *Fast Carriers* first came out, there was one letter in which this guy discovered the Pearl Harbor scenario, he had just received it and was writing the same day. He was demanding, imploring us, using the strongest possible language, insisting that we immediately answer his question about the Pearl Harbor scenario and make the proper, obviously required adjustments in the victory level. The question is why did he think he was not capable of making the same adjustments?

Rich: People write letters asking if they can change their move.

Redmond: You have any number of personalities out there. You have personalities that are either going to religiously follow the rules or they're going to throw them out.

Rich: That's the type of player that can't make a decision. He can't simply say, "well, this isn't working; let's change it." He would

never *think* of changing it; nobody has told him. This is it, it's on a printed piece of paper.

Frank: I think that's not exactly the issue. I think certain people are angry when they pay for a game that we advertise as being complete and tested and then we make the kind of bloopers like making the Japanese lose every time in Pearl Harbor. I think they have a right to be annoyed and express their dissatisfaction. I realize that people can change the rules by themselves, but they just want to let us know that we're still not on the ball.

Redmond: It's a matter of magnitude there, too. If you have a game that has so many holes in the rules that they're literally incomplete, then you're not giving the player a game. You're giving him a set of components. If there are one or two things missing in the rules that can be obviously interpolated by thinking a little bit, that's something else.

Jim: Keep this in mind. There's a very close correlation between how people feel about a game in terms of overall acceptability and the quality of its rules. Games with bad rules are not going to last long. They invariably go down a year or so later.

Frank: *USN* does not have good rules and it's lasted a long time.

Jim: I always thought that *USN* had technically correct rules. [Although] there were holes and things were not there.

Tom: Technically correct, but incomplete.

Jim: Yes. At the time those were one of the better sets of rules that we had done. There were games where the rules were really screwed up. Like *Fall of Rome*.

Frank: Good rules don't necessarily help a game.

Redmond: That's a matter of degree, Frank. If you have horrendous rules, you have no game.

Richard: Well, the obvious example is *Hitler's Last Gamble*, where the game is unplayable as written.

Redmond: It goes without saying that you can have perfect rules, [but] if the gestalt is baloney, then who cares about it?

Kevin: It needs to be pointed out that of all *S&T* issue games published before issue #32, *USN* is the only one still in print.

Tom: One of the reasons I think is that people are aware of the Pacific war.

Redmond: You can use that electronic analogy again that if the signal to noise ratio is crummy, you're not going to get the signal. In a way, it speaks to what Howie was positing before, the old Avalon Hill game. One of the advantages of the old Avalon Hill games is that they're all the same. You could read the rules and understand it because you already played it five times before.

Jay: Even in a type of major error, that game went out to 30,000 people, of which 10,000 actually got down to playing. Out of that 10,000, how many letters do you get?

Frank: I think it's ridiculous to discount any small bloopers that are easily taken care of.

Redmond: That is a problem that we haven't talked about too much; that is where you have a very different game system that uses different mechanics, where is the typical player? I'm talking about your ongoing player. How much in a rut is he so far as the manner in which he approaches a game.. Does he expect, emotionally, every game to be alike?

Kevin: I'd like to give an example. If you are listening to a piece of music, you tend to organize that as a series of repetitions. If you hear a little phrase, the first thing your mind does whether you're aware of it or not, is that it expects a literal repetition. In music, you generally get a literal repetition; that's what you expect. If a piece of music was nothing more than the same thing repeated over and over again, you'd get rapidly bored with it. There's an expectation of variation that you have to have, but it has to be a variation that you can intellectually recognize the initial thing that you're starting out with.

Redmond: What that more or less says is that when you have a virginal game system you have to be all that much more careful with the rules that you write to describe that game system. If you slough off too much of the burden of developing and designing the game onto the player, he's going to follow preconceptions and you'll lose the intent of the design. So what are we doing? Do we want the player to play the game essentially the way the designer intended the game to be played or do we want the player to do anything he feels like with the game and completely ignore the design of the game? Those are two extremes. Do we want to perfectly convey the intent or do we just have a sort of amorphous set of components [and] general suggestions as to what you should do with them.

Howie: Those are two extremes. You don't have to say, "here they are, do what you want with them"

Kevin: I think that what we have to do is to determine an intent, determine a design decision and development decision and if we want to show a certain thing in a game a certain way, we want to have very specific intent there for anybody who wants it. Now, if they want to take it and do something else with it, then that's fine.

Redmond: This brings to mind a discussion I had with Jim about a month ago that it would be nice if you could actually say that with each game there was a sentence that says, "the intention of this rule is..."

Jim: That's the game designer's notes.

Redmond: Yeah, more or less. [But the reason to explicitly state] the intention of this rule is that this should happen and this

should happen" is so that when the developer is developing rules, he would know what the intention of the design was and when a player is reading the rules, that sentence, in effect, warns him why the rule's going to be the way it is. If he sees the intention of the rule [then] anything that deviates from that intention he'll pay attention to, and perceive that something's going on.

Steve: I'd like to know how much it would cost to take an ordinary game and develop it two different ways that we've discussed here tonight and then enclose a feedback system.

Jim: What you're going to have is the "Hawthorne Effect." You're going to have a lot of people who have bought our games before and they're going to see a new format and the general result of something like that is that everybody will say, "Oh, it's better." You actually have to do it over a series of games, more than just one game. Now, the one thing I would think of doing along those lines is letting the developer or designers go about it, so to speak. Try something different. It's going to require a lot of work. The only monitoring that will be done on it is simply by the other people to see if it's understandable and not completely going off the deep end. That isn't going to cost us any more and at least it's going to get more and different types of rules into circulation. I think we are getting a little staring-at-our-navel sort of thing. I realize that we're not doing what we'd like to do as well as it could be done. But at the same time I do feel that there is always a requirement for basic research.

Kevin: I'd like to express my opinion. I'm not in any doubt as to the superiority of what we now use and I don't really think that we need experimentation.

Jim: Obviously, we disagree.

Kevin: I think that's why we're here, to talk about it.

Frank: I think we can start to investigate it. We're not going to get results that we can swear by. I think we could start to evaluate our rules and how they stack up against the other companies by paying a little more attention to the *MOVES* feedback and the playback and possibly asking people to rate one set of rules or rules format against the other.

Redmond: Mostly, we get good ratings in the *MOVES* playback.

Jim: There is one thing about *MOVES* playback. I have the thing now to be keypunched where we can assign other values other than the ones given in the playback. For example, how colorful the counters are. We lay out the counters and the people say this is best, this is average and this is least colorful. Different approaches to the rules, how screwed up the rules are. We then run it through the correlation analysis.

Redmond: I was thinking of doing a test on that by doing a game on glossy paper and

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the XI Corps or not. But his initial decision will be which portion of the Confederate line to attack. The Confederate right is dangling, but diverting troops to this area can take time and there is plenty of space to indulge in tactical retreats. There is no Attack Effectiveness Rule here; rather an accumulative morale rule is used. So, early in the game the Confederate Player may be willing to take chances on having to counter-attack at very low odds. Furthermore, exchanges will become the *bete noir* of the Northern Player, as he will quickly, and agonizingly, learn. The Confederate Player just cannot be left with a sizeable force in the east. So a decision must be made whether to hit the Confederate right and go for the exit hex or to try to split the Confederate center, isolating his forces. The latter is a bit harder to accomplish, given the terrain, but can produce better results in the long run.

Units must not be exited *too* quickly, even if this option presents itself. These units cannot be returned and only serve to give the Confederate Player an opportunity for a last-second counter-attack, which could easily turn the tide. As for the west, the Union Player will simply have to watch and see what develops.

Given two even Players, the game should be quite close; it is usually the Player who has the best position on the last few Turns who emerges the victor.

As for the *Grand Chancellorsville Option*, the Union Player must quickly decide what he wishes to do with his troops. Bank's and Scott's Fords seem obvious crossing places, but these can quickly—and easily—become death traps as units will find it hard to cross against an alert Confederate Player. Units that *do* cross oftentimes get cut off and chopped up. But it *is* the fastest way to hit the Confederates. If he can cross and hold, the Union corps sweeping in from the west should be able to close in on the South—if his command control doesn't leave his units dangling in the breeze.

The Confederate Player is simply resigned to plugging up the holes as they occur, unless the Union Player is foolish enough to allow him to cross the river in force. If the Union Player decides to make a direct frontal assault across the Rappahannock, he may find himself in for another Fredericksburg. In addition, the Union forces are somewhat split at the beginning. If the Confederate Player can isolate portions of the Union Army and concentrate at that location, a decisive victory may emerge quite early. The two brigades which begin the game at Wilderness Church can be used to disrupt Union Corps; Stuart's cavalry can then be used to disrupt Union movements west of Salem Church after the first day. Stuart's cavalry can be quite valuable, and often the Union Player will have to divert needed troops just to chase after them, as their increased movement capabilities make them quite a threat in terms of cutting off troops, fords, etc. In all, the *GC Option* is a grueling contest between two quite different armies.

CASES: Seminar [continued from page 17]

seeing what ridiculous effect it has on any game.

Jim: You also have the effect that people don't always say what they want to say or say what they mean. Using the information which we do have, we do have the raw data, but analyzing it takes a lot of work and right now, unfortunately, I'm the only one who's doing anything with it. With the new computer it will be easier to do these things and we can get other people to do it. But we have to get people to say, "I want to fool around with the data."

Redmond: If you have a program to do a correlation analysis for you, then you do it. But if you have to sit down there with a hand held calculator and tediously work out a correlation...

Jim: There's a lot of work yet to be done.

Redmond: If the data becomes organized as you collect it, then the use of that data by everyone becomes more feasible.

Frank: One of the key things I found in terms of this is that really we are on the verge of dark days with the economy and all because the ratings have definitely dropped. There's like a revolution of expectations out there and it's a question of how we're going to meet that; how much money we're going to spend to meet that because the ratings are dropping regardless of how good the rules are.

Kevin: The ratings will drop as the circulation increases. I just believe that's the way it is because you have a proportionately smaller hard core group.

Jim: You cannot constantly outdo yourself. The ratings will eventually decline or at least level off.

Kevin: One would expect it to be around 5.0 on a scale of 1 to 10.

Jim: Now, some of the games we've done, like *Invasion: America...* The big thing that turned the ratings is the Folio approach. We could have kept the ratings up just like Conflict kept their ratings up.

Frank: What I'm saying is that there is a marked increase in the quality of the rules in *S&T* over the last two years and it has not helped the ratings one iota in terms of the games. The games are slowly declining.

Redmond: Consider the games are better.

Frank: I don't know how you can classify that. Are you talking about the design?

Redmond: You mean to say that we've been doing this for five years and haven't gotten any better at making games?

Jim: I think all things being equal, better rules will help. There's a small percentage of people who do not like the Folio games no matter what, even if they like to play them; they're going to rate them low. They feel they're being gypped. We asked the question in *S&T 54* about if you said you don't like the

[Folio-sized games] in the magazine. We gave them nine choices. One of the biggest ones they said was "I want more historical material. I don't like losing eight pages to rules." And the game is simply not physically big enough. That was the explanation. If the game was not big enough, they don't like the game. Which is one reason why GDW does well. They simply give you more game. Look at *War in the East*, look at *Drang Nach Osten*. Jesus, you can't play *Drang Nach Osten*, even if you do play it, there's a basic flaw in the movement rate.

Frank: You're expressing the same thing I'm expressing. I'm saying that the overall rating and the overall sales of the game is almost completely independent from the quality of the rules.

Jim: The rules are a small contributor to the overall rating of the game.

Frank: Right. So that's a strong incentive for us to lower our standards and probably save money.

Jim: It's not a question of lowering standards, it's a question of shifting resources. I'm not just playing with semantics here. We only have a limited amount of resources. If you have 500 man hours put into a game, how many of those hours are you going to spend on rules, how many hours on playtesting, how many hours are you going to spend on research. You can obviously shift the allocation from one category to another, and so far we've spent most of our hours on rules writing. All I'm saying is that maybe we should shift the emphasis somewhere else. Not that it's going to save us any money, we're [simply] trying to get more bang per buck.

Mech War Tactical Doctrine

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instead. Besides spreading out, it is a good idea to have more than one unit designated for each task. Fire missions in particular should have a couple of units allocated to each target, if practical. Of course, the higher the command control level, the greater the problem you have. If the level is three or more, the whole plan of operations has to be kept very simple. With a high command control level, a complex plan with many small groups engaged in fancy maneuvers is doomed. The whole business is a pain, but curse it as you will, command control is one of the game's best features.

Fortunately, no one will ever completely figure out *Mech War '77*. It cannot be reduced to a formula for making the best moves. Nothing destroys the challenge and fun of a game like the discovery that there is a certain way of playing that guarantees success. As in real life, some things work well most of the time, but there are plenty of exceptions. This is a game that will remain interesting for a long time to come.