

ODE TO REDMOND

By Eric Lee Smith

It is with sadness that I report that Redmond A. Simonsen died Friday, March 11th, 2005.

Redmond - or RAS as his friends called him (pronounced 'Rass,' not Razz, he hated that!) - is, without a doubt, the most important mentor I have ever had in my life. He affected my short game design career greatly, but he has affected my long product development career profoundly. I hardly know where to begin to describe RAS and what his life has meant to me.

RAS was a New Yorker to the bone. He was born in June 1942 and often related that his first memory was of the victory parade in New York for the end of World War 2. RAS grew up in a working class neighborhood in upper Manhattan and lived in the same apartment from birth until he moved to Texas in 1985. Redmond's father, an immigrant from Norway, was a high ironworker and died in a fall while working on a building. Redmond spoke fondly of him as a man who, in spite of his blue-collar job, served on the Board of the local library, and had intellectual interests. Redmond was very close to his mother, also from Norway, and spoke often of her. She worked as a domestic after her husband died, and raised three remarkable children. Late in her life, Redmond bought her a house in Pennsylvania; the first house of her own.

Redmond Simonsen was one of a kind: one of the most intelligent, creative, opinionated, productive, and generous people I have ever known. As the co-founder of Simulations Publications (SPI), he was the creative director and ran the art and editorial departments. But he was so much more than that! He had an engineer's passion for efficiency and logic, combined with an artist's eye for beauty and design. He almost single handedly created the graphic design standards used in an entire industry, the board game industry. But even that is understated. He created such basic concepts as "game designer" as a title and profession, the numbering system used to number the spaces in board wargames, the rules structure still used by most wargames to this day, and literally dozens of "graphic systems" for game boards. He was also an accomplished and highly innovative game designer in his own right, especially in the area of science fiction games. But there is more!

I met Redmond when I was 21 years old, and I am now 48. I went to SPI on Friday nights to attend the playtesting sessions open to the public. I was a fan before I got there, one of literally dozens of young men who would simply show up at SPI to play games and hang out with the SPI game designers. A startling number of us volunteers got a chance to design games for SPI, due in large measure to Redmond's eye for talent. I "earned" the opportunity to design my first game for SPI within a year of showing up at the door. In reality, Redmond and his partner Jim Dunnigan, thought an inexperienced kid from Dallas, Texas, without a game credit to his name, had potential and gave me a shot. It worked too, and not just for me, but for literally dozens of us.

SPI was such an amazing place, it was like a frat house for game geeks, with dozens of games in various stages of completion going on at any time, magazines in constant production, arguments in the halls, playtesters in nooks working on

the latest game, new people being trained, game designers pounding out manuscripts on crude typewriters, the smell of coffee constantly brewing, the Xerox machine coping and breaking down daily, the odor of a rubber cement and Berol markers coming from the art department, the typesetting crew cranking away all day and virtually all night, a constant hubbub of activity. But it was not chaotic; it was systematic. And Redmond was always there, in his office, his "lair," which he seldom left and which was as chaotic as Redmond was systematic.

It is hard to describe the massive productivity of Redmond and Jim's creative unit at SPI, but this should give some evidence. In the days before computers and desktop publishing, Redmond created "systems" and insisted that we game designers and editors learn them and use them, the result being that a group of fifteen people, all young and many under 20, could turn out eighteen magazine issues, including twelve board games in those issues, plus over a dozen other board games, two role playing games, and two newsletters, all in one year. Later, when I entered the world of software publishing, I was shocked by how crude it was, how slow and inefficient the process was. To this day, after working with over 20 development shops, I have still never encountered a firm that could compare to the sheer productivity of Redmond's SPI. In the course of a little over ten years, RAS and his team published over three hundred games, hundreds more magazines, and remade and reinvented a whole industry. I learned so many things there that I continue to use everyday in my professional life, that I simply don't know where I'd be if I had not had my SPI training and experience.

Redmond's intellect was a powerful, nuanced, complex, and overwhelming force. To be on the opposite side of an argument with Redmond was a nearly impossible place to survive. He loved a good argument and thrived on discussing a whole universe of topics: science, photography, art, game design, publishing, type (yes, type), politics, history, science fiction, computers, mathematics, graphic design, New York, music, technology, ballet, cooking, cognac, college, psychology, medicine, and more, a literally endless list. How do I know this, because I discussed all these topics and more with him. Redmond is without a doubt the most autodidactic person I have ever known. He explained to me once that he was born quite premature, weighing less than two pounds, and spent his early months of life in an incubator with little prospect of living. Yet, he pulled through. He said he attributed his will and intellect to that struggle for life. I believe it.

RAS could be intimidating. He had a temper, used it frequently, and didn't suffer fools gladly. His mind worked so fast that he had a hard time waiting for other people to catch up, get to the point, or just say it. There were legends of RAS throwing phone books at game designers who broke his patience. However, he also had a deep, deep appreciation for other people and their ideas, regardless of who the person was. I will never forget a scene I witnessed once; Justin Leites, a young playtester, was in Redmond's office reporting on the playtest of a science fiction game. Justin was a great tester, but he was giving feedback such as, "It stinks," and RAS was trying to get him to explain, give details. Justin would say, "I dunno, it just stinks," and RAS would try again. Finally RAS was on the verge of losing his temper and said, "Justin you don't understand! You are a kid, I am a 45 year old adult. I am treating you as a professional. Do you understand that? Professionals do not treat thirteen year olds as peers. You will be lucky to be listened to as seriously as I am listening to you today when you are 25." I will never forget it. Justin listened, got the message, and gave RAS the detailed feedback that was needed.

Redmond went to Cooper Union, the most elite art school and the only college or university in America to offer free tuition to all students. I was perhaps luckier than other young game designers, and got more of Redmond's attention, because I went to art school also. The fact that I was studying photography also interested RAS, because he was a serious photographer. After I graduated, and while working at SPI, my younger brother Clayton moved to New York to go to NYU. He lived with me in my hovel... er, loft... in downtown Brooklyn. I had the dream job of my youth, working for Redmond Simonsen and Jim Dunnigan's SPI, but I was paid little. It was enough, but there were few luxuries in my life, such as meals out. But once a week, and for over two years, Clayton and I went out every Friday night with Redmond for dinner. At the end of Friday night playtesting, usually around midnight, RAS, Clayton, and I would walk the five blocks from SPI to a restaurant on 21st and Third Avenue, and Redmond would treat us to a great steak dinner. Redmond loved steak, medium rare, with a little salt, a good salad, and a cognac to finish. Dinner and conversation lasted until nearly two in the morning, sometimes three, with our talks ranging over the whole world of topics. This weekly ritual is my fondest memory of Redmond and nearly brings me to tears as I think about it.

Redmond was like that. He was remarkably generous with his time, with nary a thing expected in return. RAS was a private man and lived a quiet life outside his work. After SPI, Redmond moved to the suburbs of Dallas, Texas to join a technology startup. He never learned to drive, but lived near a large strip mall, creating a kind of "virtual Upper West Side" for himself (like I said, a true New Yorker). RAS was self-employed almost his whole life, an entrepreneur to his core, or, as he once put it, "I am too peculiar by now to be employed by anyone but myself." In Dallas, I saw him once or twice a year when I would visit my family. He came to Thanksgiving with my family several times and showed great kindness to my mother. My father was an art director and he and Redmond got along great. In 1991, RAS attended a really wild costume party my parents threw and video taped the whole affair. He then edited the tape, with all the attention to detail RAS was capable of, and gave finished copies to my parents, my two brothers, and myself. It is one of our family's most prized possessions.

I will close with a favorite RAS story that few people know. When SPI closed in 1982 there was a spontaneous party, an "Irish Wake" we called it, at Flanagan's on 23rd and Madison. Over fifty SPI alumni attended, people from every era of the company's life, men and women, game designers and staff, and many traveled long distances. We drank beer. We told stories. We danced. Here's the RAS story. Are you ready? Redmond dances EXACTLY like Elvis Presley. No kidding! Next time you catch "Jailhouse Rock" on late night cable, check out the title number's dance sequence. That could be RAS sliding down that pole and dancing with those cons. I asked him about it later, and he admitted he had a black leather jacket in high school and was a big Elvis fan at the time. It showed!

I am going to miss you RAS, you and your brother both left us too soon. But there is one mystery at least that might be cleared up. Perhaps now we can all find out what your middle name is, what the "A" in RAS means. You would never tell anyone, claimed it was "deeply ethnic" and "not something to be shared." At least you will not know that I know, once I know, if and when I know. In my imagination, I can hear a discussion with you about this topic starting right now - gotta go.

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