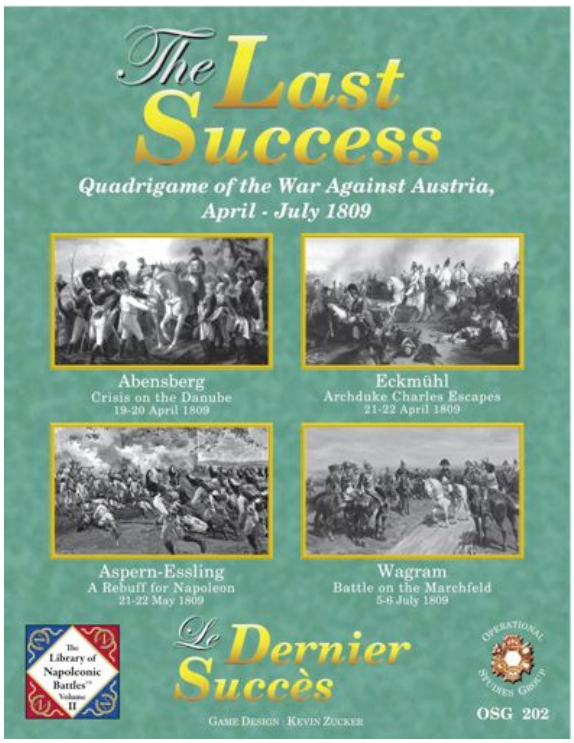
THE LAST SUCCESS from OSG

Clarity and Utility
What I learned from Redmond…



By Kevin Zucker with Dave Demko

Working shoulder to shoulder with the late Redmond A. Simonsen (RAS), SPI's Art Director, we laid-out pages on illustration board using rubber cement and x-acto knives. Color was limited. Although the technology lacked the flexibility of the digital graphics of today, our goals as graphic designers remain the same.

Redmond's idea held that a wargame was a "paper time machine" where the different parts of the machine work together to create the effect of simulating events with a specified level of detail and focus.

Our three maps for *The Last Success,* large and subdued, emphasize the roads, cities, and rivers. The counters stand out as spots of color. When your eye takes in the whole map, it's easy to see the current shape of the campaign.

RAS's emphasis on wargame graphics that fill their role as part of the time machine is often forgotten, in favor of graphics that look spiffy to somebody flipping through the components or looking at blown-up samples on a web site. But wargames can obviously evoke a strong esthetic response while still being usable.

ELEMENTS OF SYSTEMS DESIGN

Being pretty is not enough. While *The Last Success* was in playtesting, it also went through a complete graphic systems design. We wanted the map, counters, charts, and rules to work together and compliment each other as a system. If Redmond created a hierarchy of components, it might look like the following:

1. The Game Box. *"You can't tell a book by its cover, but you can and do sell a book by its cover." —RAS*

The cover is generally the first thing anybody will see. Marketing geniuses realize that the cover comes to stand-in for the product itself in many people's minds.

2. The Counters. We spend hours looking at the map, but our actions involve the counters: deciding where to place them, moving them, creating columns, lines, reserves, *et al.* Counters must provide more information at a glance than even the map *(see more on Counters, below).*

3. The Map. Players will look at and study the map for the entire duration of the game, for hours on end, so it must be easy on the eye. The maps for *The Last Success* were designed to lead the eye to important places. A map should jump out and say, *"play me!"* The first exposure to the game may be a *kibitzer* who happens to stop by when two people are playing. In this case the map becomes the first thing he sees, not the cover. The map is a better selling point, but the absolute best is seeing two players engaged in an interesting battle. It's easy to sell a game if it's fun *(see "Maps," below).*

4. The Tables. In terms of the handling priority, players will consult the Sequence of Play and the Terrain Effects on Movement the most, followed by the Combat Results Tables and the Terrain Effects on Combat. *The Weather Effects* will be consulted several times, but the Turn Record only rarely. The Casualty Tracks and the Reorganization Displays will grow in importance from turn to turn.

5. The Rules Folders. Necessarily, the rules will be consulted almost every turn. OSG tries to put some graphic relief on every page *(see "Game Folders," below).* Folks will spend a lot of time with the scenario information. We have tried to

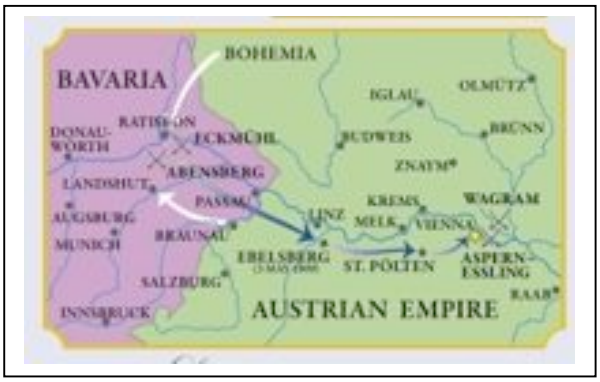
present this in the most useful form. We like to supplement the game components with a pdf that uses unit pictures to illustrate the set-ups, available for free download. Time spent referencing the rules should decrease with experience.

6. Playing Cards are consulted every turn but usually for quick reference.

The components of *The Last Success* were designed to fit together harmoniously, so that they can be used without getting in the way (the "fiddle factor"). The less you notice them, the better they're doing their job.

The designer Danny Parker once wrote, quoting a Buddhist sutra, "Do each thing so that no trace of the self remains." Well, that is the goal. As Redmond himself put it, "The better the graphic design, the more likely it will *not be noticed.* Since, in game design, the overriding mission of the graphic designer is to communicate the substance of the game to the user, heavy-handed or flashy images that call attention to themselves (rather than their message) are actually detrimental."

With that as our prime directive, then, our physical systems designers went about to create a product that would gain Redmond's (perhaps stinting) approval.



I. THE GAME BOX

The Front cover illustrations set the tone for everything that follows. On the box back, it is probably best when possible to include a picture of the game components. However, given our production lead times, this is not possible for OSG as the box goes into production first. Instead, we simply list the components and illustrate with a theater map to show where our battles took place and how they relate to the overall course of the war.

II. THE COUNTERS

Colors have their own symbolism. There are those who believe that the color of the counter should reflect the uniform color. Probably everyone's uniforms were brown after a few weeks on campaign.

There are many problems with using uniform colors for game pieces. The most important one, from the angle of utility, is the fact that exact uniform colors could confuse the players. French cavalry could be blue, green, or red; Prussians white, orange, blue, green or red. The French and Prussian infantry uniforms were almost exactly the same! Such colors would not be able to tell you which were enemy units and which friendly.

HEIRARCHY OF INFORMATION

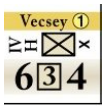
Given the limits of the process, the graphic designer must strive to produce the most useful counter image. Counters should be designed with an information hierarchy in mind. This is simply a categorization of items to be displayed on the counter according to their relative importance:

1. Who owns the counter?
2. What type of counter is it?
3. What is the primary value(s) of the counter?
4. What historical or functional information not included in the above categories is necessary for the play of the game?
5. What historical information not included in the categories above is desirable to display on the counter even though the information is not functionally necessary?

Another basic question that the designer must answer is: what is the information load of the counter and is it appropriate to the game system? Traditionally, the designer attempts to put as much useful information as possible on the counter face. —*RAS*

Redmond's ideas are utilitarian and they work. RAS was the first writer on graphic design in wargaming *(If Looks Could Kill).* He wrote the first practical manual for wargame graphics. His principles are capable of unlimited permutation. On the other hand, Redmond had his own personal style, a signature of his personality, tending ever so slightly toward asceticism. One can apply the above principles without imitating Redmond's style. *The Last Success* style is about half-way between the very spare style of RAS and fully-fledged uniform style, complete with pelisse and buttons.

The Last Success counters include 14 different data points, starting with number 1 in the list above. They have reached a maximum where trying to include anything else would reduce their utility and might cause difficulties for the player.



Let's compare the counters in two quadrigames, *Napoleon at War (SPI, 1975, left)* and *The Last Success (center).* RAS's minimalist counters contain five pieces of data each, four of which are necessary for play: ownership/nationality, unit type, combat strength, and movement allowance. The designation is strictly informational. The information hierarchy is three tiers deep: First comes ownership/nationality, shown by color. Next come type, strength, and MA at pretty much the same level of prominence. The designation is in small type. Each counter uses only black plus one color.

The Last Success counters are colorful and more highly decorated. But the colors are functional, showing ownership/nationality, higher formation, and the Initiative box, which indicates the battle the counter belongs in. On the leader counters *(above right),* color shows side/nationality, command/formation, and whether the leader is a Commander. The combat units and vedettes have the following data: side/nationality, unit type, combat strength, movement allowance, initiative, higher formation, division (sometimes), number of vedettes (sometimes), unit leader's name, and size/echelon. All of this information is necessary for play except for size/echelon and unit leader's name. Higher formation is shown twice, by the colored stripe and by letters or numbers in the designation; the stripe is higher up the information hierarchy and easier to scan for. The backs of units and leaders either show the same kinds of information or show side/nationality only. So what Edward Tufte calls the data-ink ratio on these counters is very high. Almost all of the ink conveys necessary or at least historically interesting data. The only decorational ink is in the national flag symbols and the leaders' portraits.

The information hierarchy begins with ownership/nationality first. Formation, unit type, and ratings are the second tier, and then everything else. We need to know the first-tier info every time we use a unit, while division membership matters only for stacking. The most prominent features on the counters are the ones we need to scan for and use most often.

The markers have more decoration and a lower data-ink ratio, since each provides only one piece of data (front and back).

So the seemingly more decorated *The Last Success* counters actually adhere to Redmond's principles: 1) Use colors, typography, and symbols to convey information. 2) Follow an information hierarchy that conforms to how the players use that information during play. 3) Include decoration for historical flavor so long as it doesn't interfere with the data's clarity.

While the counters from these two games may look different, they both actualize RAS's design guidelines. The visual representation of the multinational, polyglot composition of Napoleon's troops at Abensberg is not strictly necessary for play, but effective in conveying a bit of history. For reasons of playability, however, we would not sacrifice a necessary element for something merely cool.

In *The Last Success*, there is one Guard cavalry brigade that has vedettes from France and Poland. Perhaps that was working against the prime directive. Since it is only one brigade, though, it will not take up too much mental space, and passes into the kind of cool category.

It all comes down to the prime directive: Don't leave any doubt about the provenance of a unit. If you do that, most gamers will not persevere. There are many games that people admire but do not play. The best advertising you can get in our small world is for one enthusiastic player to introduce your game to another player.

III. THE MAPS

Here is a checklist that Redmond wrote—in his inimitable style—reminding the designer to show the reinforcement entry hexes, and maintain the hierarchy of importance (so that the most important terrain is the most visible).

REDMOND ON MAPS

1. Can the basic set-up be printed on the map using unit-pictures or codes?
2. Can the victory conditions be expressed on the map by coding the cities or sites that may be the objectives?
3. Would it be useful to code entry and exit hexes or reinforcement sites?
4. Are there any seasonal/weather changes that can be displayed on the map without interfering with the basic terrain?
5. Are there any rules, other than victory conditions, that make some terrain feature or site important enough to warrant a graphic emphasis?
6. If the game involves the production of units, are there any values or devices that can be built into the map to aid the player?
7. If the sketch map indicates more than one terrain feature in a hex, which takes precedence (and can the map be rationalized so that there is only one feature per hex)?
8. Are there any superfluous terrain features on the map or are there any redundant features that can be eliminated to clarify the actual, operative terrain analysis?
9. What are the effects of the various features? Is there a natural hierarchy that can be expressed graphically?
10. Are there any games in print which use a similar or identical terrain system? How well does that prior system serve the present need?

One thing Redmond fought against was decoration for its own sake, and we have upheld this principle as well in *The Last Success:* form follows function.

Is there a natural hierarchy that can be expressed graphically? The maps lead your eye to the important places. Roads and rivers stand out from across the room. You learn about the strategy of the campaign even by a quick glance at the map. Having a hierarchy of terrain means that the important points shine out, not an overall sameness.

MAP SYMBOLOGY

The graphic designer must make the proper choice of colors and symbology to create a map which will have high utility for the player and yet be pleasing to the eye.

The graphic designer has available to him a range of choices as to how to convey a given type of terrain or map element. These divide into categories which I'll now list in order of their recognition value (i.e., the ease with which the average person senses the presence and meaning of the graphic element).

1. Color and tone
2. Shape and pattern
3. Symbol
4. Typography and outline
5. Position

What this means is that those elements most essential to the interpretation of the map should be represented by change of field color—since humans with normal eyesight most easily recognize differences in color.

There are limits to the application of color. *The more colorful a map is the harder it is to read in an overall sense: the patchwork quilt of a multi-colored map can be confusing to the eye and tiresome to look at for long periods of time.*

This is an important principle of Redmond's design style that cannot be overstated.

Pure, bright or very strong colors have loud, unbearable effects when they stand unrelieved over large areas adjacent to each other, but extraordinary effect can be achieved when they are used sparingly on or between muted background tones.

I've chosen to print almost all SPI maps on a paper-color called Sandstone—this color automatically harmonizes the ink colors printed on it and also reduces the glare problem. Incidentally, it's a basic principle of mine that no map should ever have a white field. The most common mistake in the use of color on wargame maps is to make the colors too harsh and bright and to surround them with large expanses of white paper.

The similarities between the maps in *The Last Success* and *Napoleon's Last Battles* are striking. The NLB maps are good-looking and functional, and the same goes for the TLS maps.

Looking back over the list of OSG games, the only problem I can recall are the *swash* town names in *1806: Rossbach Avenged.* Compare that with the typographic and cartographic correctness of the town names in *The Habit of Victory*. Roman type has greater legibility. The easiest font to read on any related map might be the font used for the *Struggle of Nations* map.

When it comes to harmonizing the colors on a game map, we have to understand the way our eyes and brain interpret color information. Our eyes evolved to work well in the natural environment with blue, green, and earth tones perceived as harmonious. We do not use red to depict woods (unless in October). Our eyes grow tired of looking at maps with a lot of red on them. The Human eye evolved in nature, and is designed to see the colors of nature best; when it sees too much red, it creates stress. We use the actual colors of nature to represent natural terrain. Our colors automatically harmonize the map.

If we use the colors provided by nature to depict natural phenomena, the maps will automatically be easy on the eye, and in addition the coloring will immediately inform us of what type of terrain we are looking at. There will be no need for a terrain key (except for the color blind).

Edward Tufte says about this: "What palette of colors should we choose to represent and illuminate information? A grand strategy is to use colors found in nature, especially those on the lighter side, such as blues, yellows, and grays of sky and shadow. Nature's colors are familiar and coherent, possessing a widely accepted harmony to the human eye—and their source has a certain definitive authority."

We should strive to make our maps appear similar to how the earth looks from a few thousand feet above the ground, in a simplified way that clarifies the terrain relationships.

One aspect of map design that Redmond doesn't speak about, a very deep discussion, is how you translate a normal topographic map into a hex map. This means you have to reduce 360° of reality down to ***one*** hex type and ***six*** hexside types per location. As you can imagine, such a reduction entails a huge amount of abstraction.

If you take a walk on a Napoleonic battlefield, no matter how hard you look, you cannot tell the exact line where a forest starts. There are no lines in nature. Yet we have only lines and colors to depict it. There is no rule for that; it requires judgment, and understanding of the effects of terrain.

For instance, the effect of woods was different for Prussian troops than it was for the French in 1806. The Prussians fought in the open and when they entered the woods, their unit cohesion was gone. The French were trained to move through the woods with ease. For *1806 Rossbach* we tried making woods a hexside type rather than a hex terrain.

We applied these processes to all aspects of *The Last Success*. The art direction is intended to be evocative of Napoleonic warfare. The rules and charts are not cluttered with secondary or tertiary little bits with everything just "thrown in" and covered by a die roll. There is a strong focus. Everything flows together into a coherent narrative/whole.

One objection to *The Last Success* maps is the use of dotted lines to render the trails. No one has yet developed a simple graphic that gives the feel of tracks from 10,000 feet. You have to capture the thin strands of parallel wagon ruts, which sometimes come together and sometimes go awry. If lots of wagons cut the intersections then you see them becoming a big mess—the effect you might get with a stretched-out piece of steel-wool, inked, and stamped onto the map. In

a case like that, using a dotted line is simpler. This is an aspect of design that is still evolving.

The period feel of old maps can also convey a sense of the era. When the first color maps started to be produced in the early 20th century, their use of color was very schematic: a blob of green for the woods, brown hash-marks for the escarpment. It may not evoke woods, but it does evoke the research materials we consulted. Simplification is a necessary part of development.

IV. THE PLAYER AIDS

Here there is plenty of room for improvement. Mark Hinkle showed us how with *Sun of Austerlitz*. In *The Last Success* the Turn Record Cards are o.k., but the Initial Set-ups needed more work. We will probably reprint these with GIANT page numbers at the bottom and add illustrations to each one for distinctiveness.

V. THE RULES FOLDERS

When I first came to work at SPI in the mid-70's there was a sign hanging on the wall of my office. It was put there by my predecessor as Managing Editor. It comes from Antoine de Saint-Exupery: *"A writer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."*

Following this dictum, we reworked the rules to reduce them to the minimum. Each rule is honed-down so that there is nothing left to take away. Unavoidably players may have to read and re-read some rules many times, and brevity is the key to clarity.

The Historical narrative in *The Last Success* is divided into four sections, providing the political background, a description of the armies and their leaders, the approach to battle, and the fighting on the day of battle. This fulfills several functions:

1. It explains the importance of each battle, what each side was trying to achieve and what was known of the enemy prior to the battles.
2. It provides the information from which our games were derived, our understanding of the situation and the results of our research.
3. It helps the player understand the game better, to make sense of sometimes obscure rules and to help him answer any questions about the rules and set-ups (and that saves us the staff time of answering questions).

VI. THE CARDS

We introduced cards to provide the special kind of uncertainty that is a signature theme of Napoleonic military history. The lack of knowledge about the enemy's whereabouts was a key element in the unfolding of every Napoleonic campaign. Sometimes information you relied upon turned out to be false. Napoleon evolved his *Batallion Carée* formation so that he could maneuver without having to know the enemy's exact location. This formation gave him a decided advantage over his opponents with their linear formations, vulnerable to flank attacks.

The cards provide more than a hidden reinforcement schedule. They present small rules that do not have to be remembered. Many cards in *The Last Success* allow you to break the normal rules of the game.

Graphically, *The Last Success* cards have the following elements:

1. The Front face, indicating the player/ ownership.
2. The Card Title and Card Number
3. Illustration (if any)
4. Card Type and Icon
5. Movement Allowance
6. VPs gained or lost for play
7. Quantity in Deck
8. The Text of the Instructions
9. Footer, including unique i.d.

In effect, the cards are special rules taken out of the rules folder. The information—Movement, Victory, and Event—are all related to create a vivid picture of a special occurrence.

CONCLUSION

We have employed a lifetime of practice to evolve our techniques in Graphic Systems Design to insure that *The Last Success* and the other *Library of Napoleonic Battles* games will be played for many years to come.