

## FIELD REPORT:

## SPI'S FRIDAY-NIGHT FOLLIES

by Phil Kosnett

*Prolific Phil offers you a window into the wonderland of SPI's Friday Night Volunteer Playtest Sessions. Those of our readers that have an image of The Company as an ivory tower organization of thoughtful academics would be best advised to read no further if they wish to maintain that comforting illusion. Incidentally, those of us mentioned in the piece should pay no mind to the tongue-in-cheek ad hominem remarks therein. ("Thirtyish!" Do I really look "thirtyish?" How could that be! I mean, I am "thirtyish," but do I look "thirtyish." I ask you, friends — "late-twentyish" maybe, but "thirtyish?"). Without further ado, the report by the, ah, teenagerish Kosnett.*

—RAS

Friday, December 19, 1975 — a day that will live in apathy. In New York, a garbage strike has just ended and the Christmas decorations are out; the city looks a little nicer than usual. It is cold, but it hasn't begun to snow yet. A generally mediocre day. At 5:10 PM: I enter the aging office building at 44 East 23rd and take a very slow elevator to the ninth floor. I am at SPI.

The door to the SPI playtest "lounge" is open as always. There are four guys there already. At the beat-up poker table in the center of the room, Marty Goldberger (approximately 30, glasses, gray sweatshirt) is teaching Casino to a guy who refuses to give his name (and who looks remarkably like Rasputin) and Mark Edwards (15, long blond hair, roach clip around his neck). They aren't playing for money, which is too bad for Goldberger; he's killing them. More people float in and head for the coffee machine, the soft drink machine, the water cooler, or one of the shoddy sofas. The playtest lounge is painted a queasy yellow; there are posters and cartoons on the walls.

More people float in. David Waxtel, a regular tester and truly excellent gamer, sits in the corner and stares at my tape recorder. Eric Goldberg, a part-time employee with very long hair, wearing a WHO t-shirt, walks in and grabs somebody to whom he wants to talk. Eric challenges my right to use a tape recorder, is told why I'm carrying it, and leaves with the other guy. I take a walk through the back of SPI toward the computer room. There are boxes stacked all over the halls, papers on the floor. People rush back and forth, trying to wrap up the week's work before they go home. I go back to the rapidly filling lounge. People are kibitzing the Casino game, which is breaking up as the conversation picks up. In five minutes the topic of conversation switches through the U-Boat war, Gunther Prien, the Royal Oak, war movies, the bombing of

Henderson Field, kamikazes in wargames, the American pilot who crashed the *Mikuma* at Midway, *Midway*, a playtester's union, *M\*A\*S\*H\* Goes to Morocco*, Bicentennial quarters, the origin of the term "gringo," the Mexican War, Polk vs. Hitler, and who knows what else.

Richard Berg, about 35, Gene-Shallit-like mustache, large, comes into the playtest lounge and we talk for a minute. Finkelstein asks why I'm writing this article. I explain, "It's for people in, say, Arizona who'll never get up here, so they'll know they aren't missing much."

A guy with a huge beard, who says he's named Mark Willner, comes up. He says he's a student in Arizona and he's been telling his friends that for years.

Ron Finkelstein gets to talking about German artillery, then breaks off abruptly when Linda Mosca walks by. He stares after her, asks, "Who was *that*?" and spends the next minutes talking about her. The PA says something incomprehensible; Willner yells toward the back for it to be repeated in English. Three more guys walk in, including a teenager wearing a Marine camouflage jacket. At 5:50, Fred Georgian, the first friendly face I've seen all night, walks in. Fred works at SPI, is about 24 (though he looks 17), is very lean, unpretentious. I comment that he is not wearing an SPI t-shirt.

I spot Greg Costikyan coming in the door. He's I think about 16, a part-time R&D worker. He's looking for people to play *Supercharge*. There are now thirteen people in the lounge (it's 6:00) and he grabs Finkelstein and me. We tromp through the xerox room (stacked to the ceiling with boxfuls of computer records), through the library (stacked to the ceiling with books on politics, war and even *football*) and into playtest room #2. Each playtest room contains two long tables and a varying mixture of damaged and undamaged chairs. The tables are invariably stacked with maps, counters, books, counter sheets, rules and empty Dr. Pepper cans. Everything but dice. The table in the back is just getting started with two games of *Revolt in the East*. Greg sits down and starts talking us into *Supercharge*. "Ignore these little red and black lines; they're nonexistent. The counters are there, but they're hopelessly outdated, so you'll have to make up new ones. The green area near El Alamein is a dry swamp; ignore that, too. And shut up with the tape recorder!"

Greg, Ron and I get to talking about the *Mod Quad* games and agree that the rigid,

must-attack ZOC rule is absurd. Incidentally, is it pronounced ZOCK or Z-O-C? Greg solves the problem: just say Zone of Control. Greg mentions that the modern period games are dropping in popularity; pre-20th Century are all the rage. We talk for a while about a game I'm designing (*Angola*), then Greg leaves for a game of *Russian Civil War* in the library. Ron leaves for some unknown reason, so I pick up the recorder and head out to the hall in search of targets of opportunity.

A good one: Jim Dunnigan and Kevin Zucker. Jim, in brown jacket, wrinkled gray jeans, unshined loafers, and steel-rimmed glasses, is staring in deep concentration at feedback result sheets. Kevin, tall, blond, shaggy, looks up and smiles; I had finally gotten around to doing this article. Jim takes in the recorder and me, then turns to Kevin. "Did you know about this?" Tom Walczyk, another shaggy guy, about 23, comes down the hall like the Pied Piper, half a dozen playtesters following. They go into room #1, where several *Thirty Years War Quads* are laid out. I head for room #3, passing the bulletin board. Like most bulletin boards, the SPI bulletin board is totally disorganized, full of cartoons, magazine articles, and assorted trivia. Opposite the bulletin board is another, containing photos of all the SPI gang, as well as the SPUK crew and Shazam. (More on Shazam later.) Posters cover the walls: cover sheets, a Roman debauch captioned as an SPI game orgy, a drawing of Trafalgar. On Dave Isby's office door there is a Union Jack; on Howie Barasch's wall a STAR TREK poster. In room #3 two people are examining the full *War in the West* map, which takes up the entire room. In room #4, six guys are getting ready to play the Gettysburg Campaign Game; it, too, takes up most of the room. In room #2, Kip Allen is explaining the *Revolt in the East* rules to four teenagers. Ron Finkelstein, who has been studiously writing out his counters while I've been floating around, gives me a look, so I sit down to make up my counters. But Kevin comes in, tells me I have two articles in the latest *Moves*, and invites me into the art department to look over the galleys. I again leave Ron, head back, look them over, then spend half an hour talking to Redmond Simonsen, thirtyish, red-brown hair, medium build, whom I hadn't met before. Don't worry; I won't bore you with a play-by-play [*Geel! and I though it was interesting — RAS*]. When I return to room #2, I find Costikyan setting up my counters, apologize, take over. I happen to put the recorder (which I had left on the table) on rewind and replay, and it comes out with:

"Dennis Moore, Dennis Moore, galloping through the sword! Dennis Moore, Dennis Moore, on his horse Concorde! He steals from the r-i-i-ch and g-i-i-ves to the p-o-o-o-r, Mister Moore, Mister Moore, Mister Moore!"

Greg Costikyan may be a loyal *Monty Python* fan, but he cannot sing. Anyway, Greg next suggests we play with an experimental Italian Defection rule, whereby they switch sides and attack the Germans. Ron and I continue to set up, while chatting with his friend, Paul Morales. (Tonight they aren't throwing out kibitzers. Sometimes they get nasty and chuck out everybody not actually playing.) Suddenly, a bloodcurdling scream comes from somewhere deep in the bowels of SPI. Nobody bothers to investigate; there's at least one every Friday. Minor problem: while setting up his Axis units, Ron notices that two are stacked together, a rules violation. We drag Greg in, who easily corrects it, but worries that no other playtester had ever noticed. "We could have a problem there," he shouts over his shoulder as he heads for room #1, where another *Supercharge* is in progress.

Ron says that he gave a pint of blood earlier in the day, then had three very strong screwdrivers, and he is very drunk. I concur. He also wants to know if Linda Mosca is married. [*She is — LM*]. As usual, there are no dice around, so we spend five minutes looking for a die. Somebody playing *East Front Revolt* mentions that the Yugoslavs are revolting, so I say, "They certainly are!" An old and bad joke: I think I've been hanging around with Fred Georgian too long. While we finally start the game (amazingly, it's only 7:15) Mark Edwards at the *East Revolt* table suggests we collaborate on a *Sorcerer* article. We figure that out while I'm moving up my artillery.

After several turns, in which we establish that the game is both balanced and exciting, we go through the weekly change-for-the-drink-machine scramble. I have forgotten my quarters, and nobody is willing to part with theirs (quite understandably). Finally, Steve Bettum comes up with change for a dollar and I grab a Dr. Pepper.

I was planning sort of a play-by-play, but you know what it sounds like when you're playing a game, so why bother? Waste of space, right? Mark Edwards announces that he has not smoked a joint for several months, and the entire room gets involved in a debate over the relative merits of tobacco and marijuana. Ben Grossman, who, I think, is playing the British in room #1, comes in and tells me I'm doing everything wrong by trying to flank the Axis line instead of power through it. He adds that I took the Meteira Ridge on the first turn, something never before done in playtesting, and what happened historically. Goodness!

Greg comes back, says to increase the strength of all British armor by one. This is in the middle of the game, mind you. I ask why, and he says, "Because the other players

just said it's impossible to — wait — oh, hold it!" He runs out, comes back a minute and says not to change it. I seem to be flanking Ron, who wails that, "I'd retreat if I could, but I can't so I shan't." The mouser, Shazam, comes into the room. This is the first time I've seen him up front; usually he stays near his bed in the stock room where he can go into action against any rodents attacking the chipboard. Shazam is a sleek, white domestic shorthair, a very pretty cat. He bumps everybody's legs and leaves. Jim Dunnigan comes in and orders me to circulate, saying that I'm missing some great conversation in the library. I head for the library, but spot Dave Isby first. He's standing in the doorway of the "Vault," the secret library of really important stuff, reading a magazine. He explains the Vault: "I've been in charge of this all along, since its inception. But I don't have time to keep it up, so people are going to come in who are going to redo the library. The library is sort of like China; it always defeats its invaders, people who attempt to impose some sort of outside order on it. So it has retained its necessary and artistic format" — total anarchy — "but Dunnigan has threatened to bring in a professional librarian to finally defeat the library." His eyes grow misty. "Like I said, I'm looking forward to it, because I'm the only one who knows where stuff is in here, which I don't like, because naturally if someone wants something I have to stop whatever I'm doing and find it, and if something is missing, naturally I get yelled at." I happen to know the origin of Dave Isby's British accent, but I'm sworn to secrecy. I also know the true story about his participation at El Alamein and I know why he always wears a British tanker's beret, and I even know the origin of the bulletin board photo which shows him sitting on a British "Honey" tank. But I'm not allowed to tell. Too bad. We chat about how we both hate chits, how twenty-sided dice allow results from one 1 to 100, and about how SPI became erroneously marked as deadbeat by the only big die company in the country. Eventually I float into the library.

Two tables of *Russian Civil War* are going strong. Fred Georgian is reading a copy of the *AH General*. It is a xerox copy, thereby showing that he is both traitorous and cheap. Back in room #2, where I have again left Ron waiting patiently, Jim Riley, a part-timer playing the German in the other game, is pointing out how much better than Ron he's doing. At the *Revolt in the East*, one guy has just walked half the NATO army into the Baltic because he doesn't know what water means. He's 14, with braces and relatively short hair, and is too ashamed to give his name. Mark Edwards notes that the Greeks and Turks are on the same side, "assuming they haven't killed each other."

I run into Isby again in the hall, and he starts to tell the chronology of his days at SPI, including the time he was fired and the time he quit. He then veers into a tale about Bob Champer, who no longer works at SPI:

"He came in and out so often we had a revolving door. This guy's exploits — he was a legend in himself. He was like, uh, I'd say his greatest feat was once in the back room. He got into a petty dispute with the supervisor, and threatened to dive out the window if he came near him. So the guy naturally came near him, and so Champer jumps out the window. We're on the ninth floor here. No Champer. He goes out the window. And there is no Champer, no sign of Champer. And the guy says, 'Oh my god; he's just sick enough to have done it.' And this guy tiptoes to the window, deathly pale. And he looks over, and hears a loud scream, 'Eeyyaahh!' And there is Champer, literally hanging there by his fingernails. Not his hands, his fingers! Nine stories up! And in the back, everyone's screaming, 'Stomp on his fingers! And he asked everyone to be nice to him, and they all said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah!' and Champer pulled himself up."

In room #3, Ed Curran and Tom Walczyk are painstakingly drawing ports on *War in the West*. They complain that I come when they're being dull; I just missed a discussion of the white slave trade. In room #1, Riley is in trouble; in room #2, they're talking about the evils of Communism. One of the *Thirty Years Quad* players is losing to a kid a third his age, so he naturally blames it on luck. In the library, the *Russian Civil Wars* drag on. In room #4, the Gettysburg thing is in progress, with dozens of massive stacks. In room #3, Tom, Richard Berg, Mark Burden and I are trying to work out a scenario starting with the German invasion of the Rhineland. Or the invasion of Denmark: seven German to two Danish units, over in half a turn with an overrun. Jim Dunnigan walks in, smoking a smelly, cheap cigar [*actually, they just smell cheap — RAS*]. I return to room #2, where we decide bagpipes were used to urge the British on — away from the bagpipes.

Costikyan sang the *Ballad of Dennis Moore* before, and I've been humming the *Lumberjack Song* all evening. The *Spam Song* should be coming along soon. (Don't worry; I won't write it out.) But about now the entire room bursts into a nonspontaneous rendition of the *Spam Song*. Even people who *work* here. This place is just *lousy* with Pythoners. And if you think that's weird, you should have seen the guy at the piano in the corner. Greg walks in and hands me airpower — on turn six. Great time to introduce it. Ron's southern flank has crumbled (I have actually managed to get in some playing) and in the north he's being routed, his rearguard swallowed up. So we'll fill out the playtest report sheet (necessary if you want to be "paid") and go home.

On the way out at 10:30, we pass the poker game. Every Friday night the locals have a penny-ante poker game. I pet Shazam, who is lying on the front counter, say goodnight to Fred, who replies, "Goodnight, Fred.", discuss some article ideas, and head out to look for a cab. See what you're missing, Arizona? ●●