

Why Warhammer Matters

Dr Mike Ryder, Dr Thomas Arnold & Michael Dunn

We don't know about you, but we think Warhammer is cool.

Games Workshop (GW) – the company behind Warhammer and its futuristic counterpart Warhammer 40k – is now worth in the region of £3.56 billion. The global phenomenon has grown from a small operation working out of a flat in London to become the world's leading miniature maker, and an outstanding publisher of science fiction and fantasy, with many of its authors featuring in the New York Times list of bestsellers. In more recent years it has also licensed a whole range of popular video games including the *Dawn of War* series, *Vermintide*, and the very well received *Space Marine II*. GW has even signed a deal with Amazon to produce a TV series based on its IP.

And yet, for some reason, it is still an area hugely under-represented within the world of academia. Whether this is because the subject is still considered 'niche', or even just due to intellectual snobbishness, it is hard to say. Either way, it is something that we were keen to address. This is why in early 2024 we decided to join forces to host Warhammer Conference: the world's first academic conference dedicated to all things Warhammer. Our aim was to test the water to see what (if any) demand there might be for 'Academic Warhammer', and what forms such an area of study might take.

The response was absolutely phenomenal.

As the first event of its kind, we would have been more than happy with a dozen academics sat chatting about their favourite hobby for a few days. As it turned out, we were delighted to host almost 60 talks in total, together with keynote presentations from Black Library author Victoria Hayward and none other than John Blanche, arguably one of the most influential science fiction / fantasy (SFF) artists alive today. We really couldn't have asked for more!

Our joy at the overwhelming response was only intensified by the sheer diversity of talks presented at this inaugural event. We heard discourses by historians, physicists, statisticians, philosophers and religious studies scholars looking at various aspects of the 40k universe and what it tells us about our modern world. We also had a wonderful representation from the game studies community, with some presentations on Warhammer as a form of play, and miniaturising-as-mindfulness.

Perhaps most surprising of all, we also had talks from colleagues sharing how they have used Warhammer as a way to help treat military veterans with PTSD. We even had a talk from a former prisoner talking about how he used Warhammer as a way to cope with the trauma of incarceration, and to aid his rehabilitation.

And this was just the tip of the iceberg.

So why Warhammer? Why now?

As an organising committee (together with our colleague Philipp Schroegel) we have all been long-time fans of Warhammer, including its Fantasy, Age of Sigmar, and, of course, 40k incarnations. While we all work in slightly different areas, we have a shared interest in the philosophical underpinnings of the various Warhammer universes, and how they can be used as a sandbox for complex real-world philosophical problems.

Reading Warhammer has been a great pleasure of ours for many years. Given that philosophy, and indeed, so much of academia more broadly, is all about reflection, we had each started to reflect on this particular proclivity, together with our friends who had also enjoyed it. Two of the key questions that really started us on this academic journey were:

- What ideas make Warhammer so appealing (or troubling)?
- What ideas make Warhammer and Warhammer 40k such interesting worlds?

These questions led us towards several fascinating areas of enquiry regarding the underlying anthropological, political and metaphysical assumptions of the narrative; theological questions about the status of deities; psychoanalytic questions about the nature of demons and possession; and also literary questions about excess and hyperbole (which abound in the literature), as well as questions crossing game studies and narratology, such as how something can be a narrative and a setting at the same time.

Essentially, we wanted to know how much philosophy, political science, and science and technology studies could we get out of this hobby of ours? And what would that give us? Turns out, quite a lot. It is sometimes said that thinking about the things you enjoy takes the fun out of the activity. In this case, the opposite is true: bringing a whole range of academic perspectives to bear on it makes the world of Warhammer and 40K even more interesting, simply because these specialised perspectives allow us to discover even more about the fictional universe(s).

Building on these initial questions, we also believe that we can try to understand ourselves and our life-world better through Warhammer. If we follow Wilhelm Dilthey's characterisation of the humanities as engaged in understanding cultural phenomena or practices, creative products and through them, ourselves, then the academic approach to Warhammer is a classic case of humanities scholarship and research – even extended into new fields like game studies or science and technology studies.

While this might sound very strange given the fact that Warhammer is essentially an overblown background of a game involving toy soldiers, as academics we have always used reflection-on and analysis-of cultural products and practices to understand ourselves better. In fiction we imagine (read, hear, play out) different possibilities of life, ethics, policies, trajectories of history or metaphysics. Fictional universes are mirrors, playing-fields, and the results of their times; the fact that and how we engage with them can tell us a lot about our current societies. Looking at Warhammer through this lens, it can appear as a realm into which we can escape (for sundry reasons), or it may also serve as an extreme thought-experiment; but it also gives us a case study to tackle questions of business and distribution, the social and ideological dynamics of the fandom, the corporate engagement with gender and queer themes, and the invention of new genres of art – as well as the appropriation of pre-existing themes.

As scholars, we also think philosophy ought to get out more. Our experience doing public philosophy and other forms of engagement have taught us that sometimes it is easier to engage people's philosophical curiosity by avoiding reality. Climate change, politics, gender – all important matters, and all fraught with problematic assumptions and faulty patterns of reasoning – and, hence, philosophically interesting.

However, as we know, discussions around such matters tend to become highly emotional (and irrational) since they often pertain to people's personal identity as well as genuine lived experience. Now, we know that Warhammer-related discussions can get very heated as well, but at the same time, Warhammer is fiction and an extreme one at that (and a huge one too). But this makes it perfect as an exhibition piece: you can show how to approach issues (even existential ones) philosophically and scientifically, that is, systematically and methodically – without the burden of real life, and in manner detached from or even alien to conventional human ethical-moral frameworks. For the public, it serves a pedagogical function, for academia, one of public relations.

Using Warhammer to think about the real world: a gruesome example.

To help us unpack this argument, let us consider the case of fictional 'deathworlds' and how we can apply scholarship to Warhammer and what we get out of it.¹ Deathworlds include the many cemetery worlds depicted in 40k, and the Realm of Death as it appears in the fantasy equivalent, Age

¹ Not to be confused with canonical Death Worlds such as Catachan.

of Sigmar. Both of these fictional deathworlds function as powerful narrative spaces and plot devices, made even more immersive given that they can also be played on the tabletop and in videogames.

As academics, we might use these deathworlds as ways to understand and apply complex concepts, such as Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019): quite literally, the politics of death. By applying "necropolitical" theory to the deathworlds of Age of Sigmar and Warhammer 40k, we might shed new light on the impact and implications of global genocides, and the way that so many people are given to apathetic ignorance in what Byung-Chul Han (2021) describes as the destructive death drive. The techno-theocracy of Warhammer, most aptly explored in the famous tagline "in the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war," also underscores the important role of religion as well as secular belief structures in these brutal (game)worlds. Meanwhile, religious in-game crusades mimic how apocalyptic narratives and messianic motives come to be instrumentalized as a warmongering method in creating socio-political pariahs.

There can be no escaping the fact that we face numerous, competing crises on a planetary scale, most of which have necropolitical implications. Not least in the way crises such as climate change and extremism serve to further exacerbate already existing and well ingrained forms of discrimination. The post-apocalyptic environmentalism that both taints and radically inspires our moment of modernity suggests that many of us exist after the apocalypse that continues to intensify. So what then do dystopian dreams of a post-post-post-apocalypse where death is ubiquitous have to tell audiences? Do we enjoy spending time in hyperviolent fantastical worlds to cement the certainty that it can always be worse, or is there a fetishistic fantasy at play? As the promise of billionaire playboy space colonialism emerges as a prophetic vision rooted in nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialism and resource extraction, perhaps cautionary tales in the form of playable interactions within aforementioned deathworlds are more important than ever.

Time to take Warhammer seriously

There are so many different areas of study that can be applied to Warhammer that we simply cannot hope to list, even a small fraction in a short essay such as this belies how expansive the diversity of the topics truly is. If you are interested in any of the topics discussed in this article, we would strongly encourage you to consider ways that you might bring Warhammer into your research, and even your teaching. The talks from the first Warhammer Conference are already available to view on our YouTube channel [@WarhammerConference](#), and you are more than welcome to share and use them as an entry point to this hopefully emerging field. Certainly, there's a lot of inspiration to be found there. From the benefits of Warhammer as a teaching tool for young people, to the ways it can be used to think about political theory and complex philosophy, such as the work of Martin Heidegger and his critique of technology, 'Die Frage nach der Technik' (1954).

The question emerges then: where next?

Given the sheer volume of positive feedback we've received from academics and interested members of the public alike, a second conference is definitely something we are keen to pursue. Additionally, we are also dedicated to further publishing opportunities to put Warhammer firmly on the academic map. If you have any ideas or suggestions for where we might take this next, do please get in touch with us. As we saw from the conference, collaboration around a topic as well loved as Warhammer, can truly bear fruit across disciplinary fields.

As for those fans who fear academic interest in Warhammer as corruption or heresy, we can only present two thoughts. Firstly, scholarly approaches are simply an offer to better understand certain aspects of the hobby as well as the real world: we are not forcing anyone to accept a particular perspective, a jargon, or a world-view. Secondly – and this is the beauty of academia – we are all beholden to our respective subjects and methods, meaning that we happily take divergent opinions into consideration, if they are well-argued for and thematically relevant. We are not, after all, the Ecclesiarchy.

We would just like to close this editorial, then, by saying a big 'thank you' to all of the amazing researchers who contributed to the inaugural Warhammer Conference, and for proving

without doubt that Warhammer is a worthy area of academic study. We would also like to thank the editors at *Sci Phi Journal* for inviting us to contribute this essay, and, most importantly, to you, the readers, for reading what we have to say. We hope this may be the first of many academic forays into the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40k.

References

Han, Byung-Chul. 2021. *Capitalism and the Death Drive*. London: Polity.

Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Durham: Duke University Press.

Useful links

- Conference website: www.warhammer-conference.com
- Academic archive: <https://warhammer-conference.com/academic-archive/>
- YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/@warhammerconference

About the authors

Dr Mike Ryder is Lecturer in Marketing at Lancaster University

Dr Thomas Arnold is Assistant Professor at the Philosophical Seminar, Heidelberg University

Michael Dunn is a Research Associate at the Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies (CAPAS), Heidelberg University