
THE PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE:
WARHAMMER
EDITED BY IOANNIS COSTAS BATLLE, PHD

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WARHAMMER

IOANNIS COSTAS BATLLE, PHD

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# 1

# UNBOXING WARHAMMER

**IOANNIS COSTAS BATLLE, PHD**

We all have a small collection of emotionally profound memories.
A first kiss.
A trip to a dream destination.
A significant personal achievement.
Discovering Warhammer.

Sounds odd, right? How could Warhammer (a constellation of tabletop wargames, toy miniatures, and novels) *possibly* leave an emotional imprint as deep as the other three? Like most soul-stirring experiences, there is no straightforward answer. What is clear is Warhammer already has, and continues to, captivate millions of fans' imaginations across the globe.

Warhammer is made by British company Games Workshop. Founded in 1975, Games Workshop has blossomed into arguably the world's most successful wargaming company and largest miniatures manufacturer. They make two flagship large scale games (the dystopian science fiction *Warhammer 40,000* and fantasy-based *Age of Sigmar*), multiple smaller scale skirmish games set within those flagship universes (e.g., *Kill Team, Warcry*), and numerous specialist games including *Blood Bowl* (American fantasy football), *The Old*

*World* (medieval rank-and-flank), and the Lord of the Rings-themed *Middle Earth*. To play these games you need a set of miniatures (selected from a catalogue of thousands) Games Workshop design and sell. These exquisitely detailed models range from armoured super humans and world-conquering robots through to devious ratmen and haughty elves.

Beyond selling wargames and miniatures, Games Workshop ensures fans can infuse these products with a soul. Hobbyists assemble and paint their miniatures, creatively bringing them to life. Simultaneously, *Black Library*, the company's publishing wing, has released hundreds of novels knitting a rich tapestry of the games' sprawling universes, convoluted histories, and belligerent characters. Additionally, fans can experience the tabletop games they love from the immersive perspective that only licensed video games can offer.

What exactly, then, is Warhammer? It depends on who you ask. I'd say it is a brand, a hobby, and a set of worlds filled to the brim with satire, grimdarkness, and warring factions. This is part of Warhammer's appeal: *you* pick what parts of the vast landscape *you* want to enjoy!

However, 'having choice' does not explain why Warhammer can have such an emotional impact on us. In fact, research has shown too much choice harms our psychological wellbeing[1]. So why are more children and adults increasingly spending their time and money on toy soldiers? How has Warhammer – a seemingly mundane activity – become firmly rooted in people's lives? What is driving the gradual shift from 'eccentric and niche' to 'mainstream' hobby?

The *Psychgeist of Pop Culture: Warhammer* reveals why there is more to Warhammer than meets the eye. Through a collection of twelve essays, this book gathers international Warhammer scholars and fans to unravel Warhammer's thriving cultural and social relevance. Aimed at inquisitive newcomers and seasoned veterans alike, each chapter is written using concepts from sociology, psychology, and beyond. Expect to learn how Warhammer stimulates fans' lives, what lies behind common miniature collecting and painting worries, what the intricacies of playing Warhammer on the tabletop are, why

Warhammer 40,000 lore is profound, and how relationships between Warhammer communities and Games Workshop have evolved.

The authors and I hope this book helps you understand Warhammer's emotional significance in new and exciting ways. The beauty of this emotional imprint is it cannot be explained in a single, straightforward way. It is unique to you and your life... just like that first kiss. Therefore, whether you're a gamer, painter, lore-buff, or curious bystander, choose the parts of this book you want to savour, or feast on them all!

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# WARHAMMER 40,000 IS SERIOUS LEISURE

## THE POINT(S) OF AN ARMY

**MARTIN GIBBS, PHD, MITCHELL HARROP, PHD, AND MARCUS CARTER, PHD**

Arcanacon 40k (Arc40k) is an annual Warhammer 40,000 (W40k) tournament that has been held in Melbourne Australia since 1998. It is the largest – and some would say, most prestigious – W40k tournament in the region. Over a scorching hot summer weekend in 2012, we joined players from across Australia and New Zealand in two sweltering high school gymnasiums in inner city Melbourne for the tournament. Amidst the heat, sweat and stink, 146 players vied for tournament honours. The 'parade of armies' showcased players' modelling and painting abilities. Battles were won and lost over six tournament rounds. Heavy metal music blaring over the high school PA signalled the start and end of combat. Tournament organizers presided over the barely controlled mayhem of the player briefing sessions from tables laden with racks of skulls – the tournament trophies – and loudly encouraged players to join them in shouting-out the tournament mantra: *"Play for Fun, Paint your Damn Army, Don't be a Prick!"*.

To participate in Arc40k, contestants must make an army list and submit it for approval from the organizers prior to the tournament. The list specifies the exact units the players will assemble into an army for the tournament (Following common usage amongst partici-

pants, we are using 'army list' to refer to both the written list and the collection of miniatures it represents). Players will spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours planning and preparing their lists. This will often involve assembling dozens of models and painting them, researching army capacities and costs, as well as delving into the extensive lore and backstories of the W40k fictional universe. In most cases, this investment in preparation and planning will vastly exceed the time spent playing the game on the tabletop. Understanding the thought and effort that go into making a tournament army list can provide valuable insights into W40k and help us understand why people play and engage with Games Workshop products.

In this chapter, we share what we learned from the Arc40k tournament. To understand participants' experiences and motivations to play W40k and similar tabletop miniature games, we attended and observed the tournament, collected rules and other documents, and interviewed contestants, tournament officials, and other visitors before, during, and after the event. Our research revealed that the time and effort spent constructing an army list is a crucial part of enjoying W40k and similar games.

Creating army lists is a central and indispensable element of miniature tabletop wargames like W40k. It involves many different activities and practices, highlights what people enjoy about tabletop miniature wargaming, and explains why they are motivated to invest considerable work, time, and money to play a game! We discovered four key areas that were important to players when they made their army lists for the Arc40k tournament: the army's *performance* on the table; modelling and painting miniatures (often called '*the hobby*'); their existing miniature *collection* and the time, cost and skills needed to prepare new miniatures; and finally, the narrative themes and backstories in an army's 'fluff' and *lore*.

These four elements are all important parts of the W40k leisure experience we have called a 'pastime'. Pastimes are leisure time activities that are regularly engaged in for relaxation and enjoyment, encompassing various related practices occurring across multiple times, locations and situations. Understanding W40k as a pastime

helps us understand the leisure activities and practices involved, and how W40k sustains serious engagement from players. In the following section we introduce some important sociological concepts to demonstrate why tabletop miniature wargames are a 'pastime' (a type of 'serious' leisure).

## Pastimes and serious leisure

For sociologists, 'leisure' describes the time and activities people use for relaxation, enjoyment, and personal development. Leisure time is free time away from work, other obligations, and essential daily tasks such as washing, eating and sleeping. Leisure includes a wide range of activities, from passive ones like sunbathing, reading and watching television to more active pursuits such as gardening, playing amateur sports and travel. However, leisure is defined less by the activities involved and more by people's attitudes and approach to those activities. Eating can be purely for sustenance, or it can be a leisurely, gastronomic journey. Gardening can be a relaxing pursuit for some people; for others it is work and their source of employment. Leisure activities are intrinsically motivated, discretionary and engaged in by choice.

The connection between leisure and well-being is well recognised. Leisure provides opportunities to relax and rejuvenate, socialise, and pursue personal goals and interests. It can be an important source of meaning, providing people with purpose, values, and self-worth[1]. Leisure activities are often social. Participating in leisure activities with others can foster community cohesion, support socialization, and reinforce cultural norms and values[2]. Leisure is often associated with well-being, personal development and strong social relationships.

Leisure activities are highly varied. The *Serious Leisure Perspective* developed by sociologist Robert Stebbins differentiates between 'casual' and 'serious' leisure[3]. 'Casual' leisure involves activities that are immediately enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding. They are often short-lived and do not require special skills or training.

Relaxing with a book, walking the dog, or dining out with friends are all forms of casual leisure. 'Serious' leisure, on the other hand, requires personal effort, skill, and time commitment. Involvement in serious leisure can have a career-like quality. People will invest substantial time and effort to develop their ability, skills and knowledge in the pursuit of serious leisure. Amateur astronomy, organized sports, coin collecting, and volunteering at an animal shelter are all examples of serious leisure. People often derive deep satisfaction and personal fulfilment from serious leisure, and participation can be an important aspect of a person's identity.

Our research has shown that games like W40k can be described as 'pastimes'[4]. Pastimes are a form of serious leisure. While pastimes are similar to hobbies in the Serious Leisure Framework, we prefer the term pastime to hobby because the word *"hobby"* has a particular meaning within the W40k community as we will see below. Pastimes are activities people do regularly for relaxation and enjoyment during their leisure time. They involve an array of distinct, but associated activities which can be enjoyed separately, but are often pursued together. Pastimes involve effort and engagement over time, and often include developing specific skills, knowledge and expertise. Participation requires commitment, dedication and work. Yet pastimes are often pursued for pleasure, relaxation and personal fulfillment. Looking at W40k as a pastime helps us see there is more to W40k than merely playing a game. Exploring the process of army list construction highlights the extensive time, effort and resources players invest in the W40k pastime. In the next section we introduce army list construction in W40k and provide background on the Arc40k tournament.

**Army lists in Warhammer 40,000**

Every army in W40k has a unique identity with thematically related units and associated play styles. For example, Space Marines use small numbers of heavily armoured infantry units that are tough, stubborn and hard to shift. Ork armies tend to fight as hordes with

masses of cheap units that deal substantial damage if they get close but are easily eliminated from range. A point system is used to balance the power of these armies while maintaining their diversity. A unit of five Space Marines equipped with formidable terminator armour and autocannons might be worth 210 points, while the unit of 20 unarmoured Ork Boyz rushing across the table to hack at them with their 'choppas' might only cost 170 points. Point costs are assigned to each unit depending on their strengthens and abilities. This kind of point system is a common mechanism for balancing armies in tabletop miniature games.

Players build army lists from units up to an agreed maximum point cost. Players put considerable thought and effort into optimising their army lists to squeeze the best (as they see it) overall selection of units into their army. 2,000 points is a standard amount often used for tournaments and competitions. The army point cost at Arc40k was 1,200 points. The smaller army size was designed to make the tournament battles faster and easier to complete within the time allowed, helping reduce time pressures and promoting a more relaxed experience for players.

There were other limitations imposed on army construction by the fifth edition rules (at the time of writing, Warhammer 40,000 in its 10$^{th}$ Edition). Each army needed a leader, or 'warlord' unit, and at least two but no more than six 'troop' units. Selection of other units was limited to three units of each type, the types being 'elite', 'fast attack', and 'heavy support'. While these W40k rules have changed over time and become more flexible, the overall process for creating armies has remained consistent. Our discussion of army list building applies to all editions of W40k and to similar games published by Games Workshop and other companies.

In 2012, Arc40k involved 146 competitors, fighting 6 battles over a blistering hot Australian summer weekend. The competition was decided by a final score determined by four categories. *Generalship ('play for fun')* awarded points for winning battles and achieving other tactical objectives such as eliminating the enemy warlord. *Sportsmanship ('don't be that guy')* points were awarded by a player's opponent at

the end of each battle using a descriptive scale of playing styles to rate the player's behaviour at the table. Fair and generous play was rewarded, while overly competitive or toxic behaviour was penalised. *Painting ('paint your army')* was awarded for artistry and skill used to assemble and paint the models in the army. All armies were expected to be painted to a minimum standard. Poorly painted armies were penalised, while having a unified army theme or clearly distinguished unit was rewarded. *Composition* or 'comp' *('forged for fun')* points were used to encourage players to bring 'fair' armies that were enjoyable to *fight against*. W40k has many special units and rule that can be combined to make overly powerful or 'cheesy' armies that are annoying to fight against.

The tournament scoring was designed to promote an enjoyable weekend of friendly combat rather than winning through army optimization and ruthless competition. This philosophy was highlighted in the tournament rules by the organizers: *"We believe that games and missions should be fun and memorable, first and second, and the importance of winning should come a distant third".*

**Drafting an army**

For many players, creating their army list for Arc40k was an incremental process that unfolded over the weeks and months prior to the tournament. Preparing their models, playtesting their lists, crunching numbers, and discussions with friends pleasantly occupied many participants' time and attention in the months leading up to the tournament. Understanding this journey and the work involved in preparing an army list for competition can help us understand players' engagement with W40k and similar games.

We identified four themes that capture the reasons and rationales participants used to explain and justify their decisions when creating their army list for Arc40k. When constructing an army list players considered the likely *performance* of the army list in battle; the craft work and artistry of *the hobby*; their existing *collection* of miniatures; and the army's *lore* and narrative backstories. In the following

sections we will unpack each of these themes to show the diverse activities and decisions involved in army list construction and how they extend pleasurable engagement with W40k across times, locations, and contexts.

**Performance**

The participants in our study put considerable thought and effort into how their army would perform competitively. They suggested that doing well in in the tournament's six rounds of battle, not necessarily winning, was their primary goal and key to enjoying the tournament. In addition, they recognised that winning battles was not enough to get a good overall score for the tournament. It was also important to have an army that was good to fight *against* and conformed to community norms for the tournament.

Participants used a variety of approaches to design armies that could perform well on the tabletop. Some, like Alberto, applied informal personal rules, or heuristics. He used a *"sixty-thirty-ten"* rule-of-thumb to make armies that were dependable, yet interesting to play: *"600 points on reliable things, 300 points on less reliable things and 10% is just something completely off-the-wall"*. Miguel emphasized having enough *"anti-tank"* and *"anti-infantry"* firepower to counter his opponent's units. Damien, the tournament winner, designed his army to maximize volume of fire for its ranged attacks. Others considered the likely mission scenarios for each battle and built flexible armies that could score objectives in different situations.

The rules of W40k are dynamic, with frequent adjustments to 'balance' the relative strength of armies and units. For many tournament participants, awareness and understanding of the current W40k 'meta' was important. The W40k meta refers to the trends and fashions in army design and unit choices. It also includes popular opinion about the relative strengths of armies and units under the current version of the rules. When designing their army lists, many players consulted online resources to understand the current meta,

which was both a source of inspiration and a way to anticipate the opponents they would face.

While most players did some online research, none volunteered they had copied an 'internet list' for the tournament. Players like Fred simply *"go online to see what's out and about"*. Others, like Omar, *"spend a lot of time online, on forums reading tactics [and] asking for advice"* to research *"what most people will bring to the tournament... so you build your army to counter the trends"*. Some players deliberately bucked online trends. Damien, the tournament winner said, *"I look at wargaming forums and see what other people are doing with whatever codex I am working on, and um, generally avoid it"*. Probability analysis of the performance of units – 'math-hammer' – was also often used to predict a unit's likely performance.

While winning battles was certainly important to players at the tournament, the desire to win was downplayed by most players. Many expressed concerns about how their army would be judged in the 'comp' (composition) scoring and went to some effort to bring an army that was not overpowered or 'cheesy'. Alberto, a judge at Arc40k and a 16-year W40k veteran, discussed the importance of comp score systems when making an army list: *"you tailor your list to a tournament. You look at the comp score system; at how they're going to score it"*.

The tournament rules and scoring system worked to promote values beyond the celebration of victory. While victory in battle did matter, other values, such as those associated with good sportsmanship, were vigorously promoted and were the established norm at the tournament. These values were reflected in the shape of participants' armies. Ideally, they worked to create well-performing army lists that did not appear to be 'cheesy', 'spammy' or 'overpowered'. Most players cared how their army would be perceived by others and how it reflected on their own character. They wanted to conform to community norms and to avoid being judged as 'that guy' who 'tries too hard' to win at the expense of others' enjoyment[5]. An important part of this approach was designing an army that was strong on the table while still being was fun to fight against. Arthur suggested that an army should be:

> "*Fun for your opponent. Which I think is very important, because you do not want your opponent to sit the whole game going: 'oh god, this is a terrible game, I am not enjoying this at all.'*"

Tournament winner Damien agreed: *"I would never take a list I thought wasn't going to be fun to play against."* Although, he did not compromise on the battle-winning strengths of his list, *"I took an army I thought, which was fair and would give my opponents a good game, but I was aware it was definitely an army that could win games in its own right."*

Some experienced players said they liked to challenge themselves by taking lists that were 'technical' and difficult to play. Alberto decided to *"take a softer army to be the better player on the day rather than being someone who crunches the numbers"*. Richard, who brought an army of Space Marine bikers said *"I tend to migrate towards more difficult armies to play. [...] You've got to work with them to get the most out of them and I find that quite rewarding"*. Bringing an army list with a reputation as weak or difficult to play was a source of pride for some participants.

Finally, many players optimised their armies before the tournament. They described various ways they 'tinkered with' and 'fine-tuned' their army list in the days and weeks before submitting it for approval from the tournament organizers. Johnny played with friends and *"just tweak[ed] it a little bit"* after each battle. Others spent time at their local hobby store or gaming club playing *"as many armies as you could and see what worked and what struggled"*. For these players, the iterative process of playtesting and refining their army lists in the lead-up to the tournament was a significant undertaking, but it was also a major source of their enjoyment of the W40k pastime.

## The hobby

W40k miniatures are made from plastic (and sometimes resin or metal) parts that need to be assembled before playing with them. There are also strong community pressures to paint them before

using them. Modelling and painting miniatures in W40k and similar games is often called 'the hobby' (see Chapter 12 in this volume). It is used to describe the craft work associated with *"assembling, painting, making, and modifying miniatures"*[6]. A hobby is an activity done for pleasure with dedication and commitment over an extended period. Crafting an army might occupy someone for hundreds of hours. A well-painted army might require several hours of dedicated work to prepare and paint *each* miniature. Engaging in a hobby is a form of serious leisure[7]. It is associated with skill development, personal enrichment, and is a source of satisfaction for participants. The frequent use of 'the hobby' amongst players to describe the crafting and artistic aspects of the W40k pastime suggests the perseverance and skills involved, as well as the satisfaction players get from preparing an army for the tabletop.

Most players took pride in the aesthetic appearance of their armies. The hobby was important even for players like Omar, who said that painting *"sometimes feels like a chore"*, but he still put considerable effort and thought into crafting a *"cohesive"* and aesthetically pleasing army: *"cohesive, like all in a uniform. I think even if they're not spectacularly painted, they still look good if they're in uniform"*.

The look and style of models, and their potential for being painted, influenced players' army choices. Some preferred painting the armour and uniforms of human armies while others gravitated towards painting alien monsters. Even the winner of the '*Generalship*' award (for gaining the most battle points) did not neglect the aesthetic qualities of their army and he included a large Monolith model in his Necron army *"because the idea of having a centre piece model to aesthetically make the army more unified... the overall look of the army is something I put a lot of time thinking about."*

*The Players' Choice Award* was given to the most aesthetically pleasing army determined by popular vote of attendees. A handful of participants focused their efforts on winning this award when preparing their armies. Arc40k gave them the opportunity to display their painting and modelling skills, experiment with novel techniques, and 'kit-bash' creative model conversions. The winner of the

*Players' Choice Award*, Alistair, used the tournament as an opportunity to try out advanced and challenging painting techniques, which influenced his army choice. Alistair selected the units for his army based on their aesthetic qualities and crafting potential: *"I pick models that I think I will enjoy [painting], then write a list to make sure they're in them"*. While a priority, Alistair confirmed he made sure his army was still competitive in battles, *"I do put my list on the web to get feedback"*.

Preparing miniatures for the tabletop is labour-intensive. Every participant we spoke to had unfinished W40k hobby projects. Models that had been purchased but remained unassembled, unpainted and unfinished were commonly referred to as the 'pile of shame'[8] (see Chapter 3 in this volume). Some participants used their entry to Arc40k as an opportunity and motivation to finish outstanding crafting projects. Other participants saw it as an opportunity for new projects, to start a new army, or to add new units to their collection.

## Collection

A player's history of collecting W40k miniatures was a significant material resource for building their Arc40k army list. All participants at Arc40k were collectors of W40k miniatures. Some of these collections were small and focused on a single army. Others were extensive and the result of many years of engagement in the pastime. Even those who did not identify as 'collectors' had substantial collections of miniatures.

Building a collection of assembled and painted miniatures for tournaments and competitions is an expensive, time-consuming and labour-intensive process. When designing their army list for Arc40k, players contemplated the tabletop-ready models already in their collection, alongside the investment in money, time, and effort needed to purchase, assemble and paint new models. Some competitors assembled their army list completely from their pre-existing collections. At the other extreme, a few players created completely new armies for the tournament. Damien, the overall tournament winner, built a new Necron army from scratch for the tournament.

Most prepared some new models to enhance their existing collection. Tom already had a large collection of Ork miniatures but wanted a new modelling challenge. He wanted to add something novel and unconventional to his army that would be fun to play and would look cool on the table. He decided to prepare 40 new Stormboyz jump pack infantry models with rocket packs belching customised flames and smoke for the tournament. The project was ambitious, and he was unable to finish it in time for Arc40k despite making a massive effort. Rather than see this as a failure, Tom gave it a positive spin as an 'investment'.

Budgetary constraints were a concern for some participants. Only official Games Workshop models were considered legal for the tournament and – everyone we spoke to agreed – Games Workshop miniatures are expensive. In 2012 we estimated that *an army* (1,200 points) suitable for Arc40k was likely to cost Australian players somewhere upward of $600 (US) to purchase, assemble and paint. In 2024, it costs around $100 (US) to purchase *200-300 points* of Games Workshop miniatures[9] plus the additional costs of paints and other materials. Peter, a married father, was very conscious of the time and cost needed to produce a W40k army:

> "*There are a lot of nice armies, but they're mostly metals and that costs more, so I never go for those armies, I go for armies where I can primarily buy the plastic kits and make modifications to make all the choices. It's not a matter of, 'Oh, I just like those ones' and buy them. You've got to look at the cost, that's definitely a factor.*"

Participants saw their collection of W40k models as an investment and a valuable resource for their ongoing engagement with the pastime. When making their army lists, participants weighed their hopes and ambitions for the list against the available resources of time, budget and their existing collection of models. All participants had miniature collections they had assembled over time, usually at significant expense and through labour-intensive crafting practices. For most, these collections represent years of engagement in the

W40k hobby. The substantial cost, time, and effort required to prepare miniatures to the standards required to compete with them was a major determinant on the army lists players took to the tournament.

## Lore

> *"... in the grim dark future there is only war."*
> (Rogue Trader)

The W40k universe has a rich and extensive history of lore, mythology and backstories. All official rulebooks include detailed background information about the game's premise and setting. Games Workshop's publishing wing, the Black Library, has published hundreds of W40k novels and other books. These publications detail the W40k universe and the history of its inhabitants, their social and miliary organizations, its heroes, villains, and other characters. These narrative elements are often referred to as 'lore' or 'fluff'. They establish the game's overall tone and premise: a dystopian, future '*Imperium of Man*' holding back the forces of chaos and fighting alien threats to humanity across the galaxy. The lore plays a crucial role in creating a unique identity for each army faction, establishing its history, culture, leaders, and battle tactics.

Every army faction in W40k has an identity built from a specific mix of fantasy and science fiction *ludic tropes*. In literature studies, a trope is a recurring theme, motif, or rhetorical device often used in narratives and storytelling to convey familiar ideas and concepts. *Ludic tropes* are combinations of familiar literary clichés and game mechanics that go together to create particular styles of play. For example, the Eldar (Aeldari) have many tropes associated with fantasy elves. They are graceful yet fragile combatants who use mystical magics. The army's special rules favour hit and run tactics and allow the player to manipulate dice rolls with 'fate dice'. As discussed previously, Orks are presented as a brutal barbaric horde in

their lore and background, and this is matched by special rules that support this style of play. An army faction's identity is established by combining its fluff and special rules into recognisable ludic tropes (see Chapter 9 in this volume).

An army faction's identity and associated ludic tropes were central to its appeal for participants at Arc40k and was a major influence on their army choices. It shaped participant's history of collecting W40k models, which in turn influenced their army list designs. There is a close connection between taste and identity; we express who we are and our social positions through our personal preferences and choices[10]. Army choice is an identity marker within the tabletop wargaming community. In the context of the Arc40k tournament, most participants identified with their armies when describing themselves. For example, *"I'm a Necron player"* or *"I play Space Wolves"* would be typical comments. From our conversations with players, it was clear that their choice of army faction was heavily influenced by the army's identity and how well its ludic tropes meshed with the player's personal preferences and tastes. Army choice gives players an identity and a place of belonging within the W40k community.

Beyond the overall appeal of an army faction's identity, the impact of fluff on army list design varied amongst Arc40k participants. Some players were less concerned with the lore, claiming it was not a significant influence on their army list. One player suggested that army theme or fluff was more important *"in the painting stage, not so much the list writing stage."* Others disagreed. They looked to the lore for inspiration. For Karl – who played the Ultramarines chapter of the Imperial Space Marines – the Black Library stories and novels were an important reference point for his army design: *"I read all the black library and 40k books [...] because I'm big on background and fluff. So, I try to reflect that through the armies, so they always have a theme behind them"*. It is no coincidence that many of the W40k novels from the Black Library featured Ultramarines as protagonists.

Barry wanted his Ork army to look different to other Ork armies for the Player's Choice awards and decided to subvert the expected

green flesh tones typically used for Orks and painted them with pink complexions instead. He justified his decision using W40k lore: *"They are meant to be spawned from fungus. And my logic is, there's white mushrooms, they're a fungus, so they should be able to have white Orks. So that's why they are pink coloured"*. However, most participants followed conventions and painted their armies the way 'they should be painted' using colour schemes and iconography based on their appearance in official Games Workshop materials.

Finally, at the tournament there was a strong emphasis on having a 'fair' or 'balanced' army list. Many participants felt that a powerful army without a supporting theme or lore would be scored more harshly than a coherent list aligned with the game's narrative elements. Fluff was often used to justify army list selections and to protect 'comp' (army composition) points in the scoring.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored how players prepare for a W40k tournament to gain a deeper understanding of how and why people chose to devote their leisure time to miniature wargaming. Our focus on army list building for the tournament – what participants did and why they did it – has help us see the diverse range of activities involved in playing W40k. We have suggested W40k can be understood as a form of serious leisure we have called a pastime. A pastime is a collection of discretionary activities that serve to occupy one's time and thoughts pleasantly. Choosing which of these activities you pursue is one of the reasons why serious leisure pastimes are so attractive and enjoyable.

Participants at Arc40k selectively engaged with the aspects of W40k they found most enjoyable and fulfilling. Many enjoyed the hobby aspects of the pastime and focused on *modelling and painting miniatures.* Some found pleasure in the *lore, backstories and narrative fluff* of the W40k universe. The *tactical cut and thrust of battle on the tabletop* was the main attraction for others. People's history of *collecting miniatures* was also important. Participants at Arc40k selec-

tively engaged in the W40k pastime, picking and choosing from its various associated activities to create their own personalized and enriching leisure activities.

W40k players take the game 'seriously'. They are willing to devote considerable time, effort, perseverance and money to the W40k pastime. Despite the costs, W40k is an attractive pastime for players. Our findings suggest that the attraction is multifaceted. The W40k pastime offers multiple forms of engagement, extending beyond the fun and enjoyment of playing the game on the tabletop (see Chapter 11 in this volume). Engagement also includes the artisan and artistic skills of 'the hobby', the pleasures of collecting models, and the deep and extensive library of lore and fiction of the W40k universe.

Having a pastime can be enormously beneficial for us. Participating in W40k (or similar games) offers significant opportunities for social connection. Pastimes are often associated with positive social relationships, personal development and well-being. Pastimes are also a source of meaning and provide people with purpose, values, and self-worth. That's why they can be deeply satisfying and an important source of personal fulfilment. As we have suggested throughout this chapter, participation in tabletop wargaming pastimes like W40k enriches our lives by providing a variety of pleasurable ways for us to pass the time.

3

# "MORE IS MORE"?

## RECONSIDERING THE PILE OF SHAME

**MIKKO MERILÄINEN, PHD, KATRIINA HELJAKKA, PHD, AND JAAKKO STENROS, PHD**

*"How can less be more? It's impossible! More is more."*
-Yngwie Malmsteen

Warhammer is very much a material, physical hobby, and collecting is an essential part of it. Like all *miniaturing* hobbies, Warhammer as a pastime has a dual core. On the one hand it is about playing the fantasy miniature wargames (e.g., *Warhammer 40,000*), on the other hand it is very much about buying, building, painting, converting, collecting, displaying, and storing miniatures[1]. Over the course of their hobbying, Warhammer enthusiasts commonly accumulate a wide range of material from paints and paintbrushes to rulebooks, dice, terrain pieces, and fiction about the different settings of the franchise. It is not uncommon for a miniature collector to amass hundreds or even thousands of miniatures, as they build up different armies, source out of production miniatures, and get involved in a range of miniature games.

Accumulating all these miniatures and the assorted paraphernalia introduces a complication: they are physical objects that take up space. However, rather than just everyday physical objects, they are often much more. Miniatures can be valued not just as beautiful

game tokens, but as collectibles, nostalgic childhood items, or works of skill, craft, and art – they are not simply defined by their practical function like, say, a cardboard box. It follows that care is often taken to store them carefully or have them on display for admiration. There is even a small subindustry that has evolved around carrying cases, display shelves, and other storage solutions.

In this chapter, we focus not on the gameplay, but on the creative activities centring on the miniature. Specifically, we explore a particular phenomenon in Warhammer and other miniaturing known as the *pile of shame*: the accumulation of surplus unpainted miniatures and unfinished projects. While the phenomenon is familiar to many Warhammer players and miniature collectors, and is commonly joked about in the hobby, what is it all about? Why do people collect more miniatures than they have time or energy to paint? Is there actual shame in the pile of shame? We answer these questions based on our previous research into miniaturing and the closely related hobby of toy collecting.

## Digging into the pile of shame

The phenomenon of hobby excess is a common occurrence in diverse hobbies: while miniaturists have the pile of shame, board gamers have the *shelf of shame*, digital game players have the *backlog*, and handcrafters such as knitters and crocheters have the *stash*[2,3,4]. In material terms, there is a very simple dynamic that feeds the phenomenon: buying materials for any hobby takes very little time compared to the time it takes to complete them. Buying a ball of yarn or a new board game is far quicker than knitting a jumper or actually playing the game. Even if the materials are expensive, since the crafting and completing phase is very work intensive, modest shopping can result in an amount of materials that can take years to find concrete use. Until that time, these materials will sit unused in storage, sometimes literally in a pile.

The pile of shame phenomenon is a common trope and source of humour for Warhammer enthusiasts. A cursory online search brings

up an abundance of YouTube videos, blog posts, and memes on how to deal with the pile of unpainted grey plastic miniatures or just making fun of a shared hobby experience. When Games Workshop launched their Contrast Paints range in 2019 – a paint formula specifically intended to speed up the miniature painting process – even they lovingly played with the trope, spoofing the *Fifty Shades of Grey* books and films with their *50 Shelves of Grey* video advertisement[5].

For all the memes about the pile of shame, there are some genuine material and psychological issues to consider. Miniatures are often expensive and can take up a lot of space, and it follows that their excess accumulation can feel like wasted money as well as the miniatures requiring not-inconsiderable effort to store. For hobbyists living together with non-hobbyists, there can be strain on personal relationships if miniatures intrude on communal spaces or take up shared finances. Psychologically, the pile of shame can indeed invoke shame and a variety of negative feelings: there may be 'collector's guilt' – buyer's remorse and regret over losing self-control after overspending or impulse buying. Equally, the pile of shame may itself be a reminder of failed or stalled projects, sometimes internalised as feelings of personal failure[6].

Though the pile of shame phenomenon is well known, recognised, and sometimes regretted, why do Warhammer players keep building up excessive collections of miniatures? Why do they keep falling into a cycle which potentially turns something fun into a source of stress? To explain this phenomenon, we turn next to toy and play scholar Katriina Heljakka's work exploring *play experience theory*[7]. The theory explains how and why we enjoy playing with toys, and originally comes from the world of adults' toy collecting which, incidentally, miniaturing is often seen and (more or less jokingly) labelled as.

## The wow, flow, and glow of miniatures

Play experience theory indicates that our experiences with toys are shaped by four dimensions: physical (e.g., materiality), functional

(e.g., play patterns), fictional (e.g., associated storytelling), and affective (e.g., emotional attachment). These four dimensions can be further analysed through a continuum including the stages of 'wow', 'flow', and 'glow'[8]. As a player encounters a toy, there is a progression from the 'wow' of promised potential to the 'flow' of inspiration and satisfaction to the 'glow' of attached value and its potential fading. The theory is a good fit for charting the experience of the miniature collector and helps us understand how the pile of shame accumulates. Next, we will look at the progression of 'wow', 'flow', and 'glow' in relation to the pile of shame.

**Wow: The promise and novelty of something new**

'Wow' refers to an experience we can likely all relate to – the experience of something making us go 'wow', sparking immediate interest and provoking a strong sense of being enthralled. Companies such as Games Workshop seek to elicit this reaction in their current and potential customers in a variety of ways, including displaying massive dioramas in Warhammer store windows and Warhammer World in Nottingham or showcasing new miniatures and games in *White Dwarf* (Games Workshop's hobby magazine). It is also clearly visible in the build-up to new releases, as cinematic trailers and hints and teases of what might be coming up steer hobbyists towards the 'wow' of the reveal.

The power of the 'wow' factor is the promise of fun before any new project even begins. Warhammer is a transmedia franchise, meaning that it tells its story across different forms of media[9]. Thus, a new project is often not only the promise of new models to paint and express oneself – although that in itself can be a major driver of inspiration. It can also be a prompt to dive into a wealth of inspiration and storytelling in related books, comics, and video games as well as bringing with it the strategies and tactics of the gaming dimension of the hobby[10]. Starting a new army may even represent a shift in the player's identity in relation to the game: rather than being a Space Marine player defending the galaxy with cybernetically engineered

super-soldiers, they are now a Tyranid player, commanding an unrelenting horde that ravenously seeks to consume all life forms. This change can perhaps lead them to occupy a new role in their gaming group or in broader online gaming communities.

The gathering of materials for building, converting, and painting miniatures is about imagination, dreaming, and *fantasy*. At that point anything and everything is possible; each miniature and bit a starting point full of potential – even regular household trash can be inspirationally used to convert miniatures or craft terrain. Furthermore, fantasy is not only about the finished products at the end of crafting. It is also about the wonderful meditative and transformative process, as well as the hobbyist mastering a skill. Fun times lie ahead!

In consumer behaviour, this fantasising typically materialises as buying things: miniatures, source materials, rulebooks, themed terrain and dice, and new paints. All of these provide and feed into inspiration, even if not all of them are strictly necessary for the new project. In material terms, a Combat Patrol (i.e., starter set) for a *Warhammer 40,000* army contains approximately 20–40 miniatures depending on the faction. However, this is only a small starter force that allows for very limited play. Players looking to invest into playing the game, or for example buying a full army second-hand, will typically amass much larger forces consisting of several units of different specialist troops, war machines, and special character models. It is also important to note that something does not have to be new as such to spark a 'wow' experience. Instead, the experience can also come about through nostalgia or (re)discovering old miniatures, such as in the case of the Oldhammer subgenre of Warhammer[11].

As we have seen, the 'wow' factor is central to the creation of the pile of shame. Somewhat tragically, we assume that many of the models in a hobbyist's pile once made them go 'wow' but were eventually left aside. Whether because of running out of time or interest, moving house, or a new edition of the game rendering an army obsolete, a project can stall for any number of reasons. When these dreams remain unattained, weighed down by the hoard of plastic and metal, they become tainted by shame and their assumed play value

diluted. However, the magic might not all be gone; as time passes, old projects are often rediscovered and reignited or recycled into new ones, turning the pile of shame into a pile of potential.

**Flow: Turning dreams into reality**

Flow is a frequently used concept in game scholarship that originates in the writings of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi[12]. It is a state of mind in which a person experiences a highly rewarding state of doing[13]. Centrally, a common feature of a flow experience is losing track of time while being immersed in the activity – being fully engrossed in what one is doing in play. In previous research concerning material play experiences, flow is associated with the enjoyment gained in interaction with playable objects, such as toys, games, or playful environments. When discussing their experiences of painting miniatures, it is common for hobbyists to refer to it as a deeply engrossing, almost meditative practice often juxtaposed with the stresses of everyday work and family commitments[14].

In the context of the dimensions of play experience theory, flow needs action. It could be described as something that occurs when the object is fulfilling its call – to tempt the player to engage with it. Flow can then be seen as an active dialogue between the miniaturist and their material, whether it is picking the models with just the right visual fit, finding the perfect colour scheme or basing style and executing it, or coming up with an army that strikes a satisfying balance between aesthetics, narrative, and playability. In all of these, the hobbyist's creativity and imagination come together with their physical material (e.g., the miniature). The play dimension of Warhammer is much more than just playing the game.

A state of flow can be a double-edged sword in the miniaturing hobby. While experiences of being 'in the zone' can be very good for a miniaturist's well-being, in time it can become more and more difficult to reach this state, leading to frustration and hobby burnout[15]. Consequently, turning dreams into reality requires investments regarding time, space, material resources, and the right mindset for

the activity. A lack or loss of any one of these and the project can quickly grind to a halt. This suggests that one can never be forced to play, only invited to this activity. The experience of play, like miniaturing, is voluntary and intrinsically motivated, a self-chosen activity guided by personal hopes, dreams, aspirations, and goals.

Therefore, we can see how 'flow' contributes to understanding the pile of shame phenomenon. Whilst the 'wow' stage captures the excitement of embarking on a new hobby project, the 'flow' stage involves putting that excitement into practice. This is where 'flow' can be interrupted for a range of reasons (like job or family commitments), or the sheer amount of work Warhammer can be. For what is essentially a game, it requires cleaning and painting the miniatures, learning complex rules, and transporting models to a friend's house for hours of gaming. Unfortunately, flow can be fragile. Once interrupted it can be very difficult to regain... until perhaps an entirely new project idea enthuses the hobbyist, there is a new 'wow', and the cycle starts again. And if not, 'flow' leads to the next stage of the experience – 'glow', which we will look at next.

**Glow: The finished project**

'Glow' is what the players add as value to an object – such as a toy – in their activities. According to research conducted within toy cultures, 'glow' is the culmination of the 'wow' - 'flow' - 'glow' lifecycle of a playable object. This includes visible marks on the toy due to playing with it, the lingering afterglow once engagement or playing with the toy has ended, or the satisfaction of concluding a project. Alongside experiences related to achievement and pride, 'glow' also refers to the physical alterations visible in the objects, linking the actions of the player with the consequences of these actions in the material toy.

Similarly to the customisation and personalisation of dolls and action figures, the 'glow' in Warhammer miniatures can be understood as 'added value'. It is the individuality and authenticity gained through the hobbyist's creative endeavours, making a model your

own instead of simply owning it. For example, a miniature may be imbued with 'glow' when painted, but also when its paint chips and a part of the armour breaks off. This transformation miniatures undergo is a key focus of the pastime[16]. Furthermore, the stories created in the various battles and campaigns when playing with miniatures contribute to their 'glow'. Every Warhammer player has celebrated miniatures in their collections (the lowly sergeant who once punched out a dreaded daemon prince) and infamous ones (the bioengineered killing machine that is incapable of hitting a target).

The 'glow' attained can be compared to what philosopher Walter Benjamin calls an object's *aura*. While this quality originally referred to the uniqueness of artworks in fine arts[17], for Warhammer, *aura* can be understood in relation to having a collection of miniatures. This is because collections – which include many pieces altered through creative actions, such as a fully painted Warhammer army – cast a more powerful 'glow'. By giving projects time, space, skills, and affection, miniaturists ensure that the 'glow' of their miniatures multiplies.

The pile of shame process begins with an experience of 'wow'. While 'flow' refers to the actions of dealing with the pile of shame, 'glow' can be seen as an antithesis to the pile. It is the pride of completion and seeing not just the results of one's planning and hard work, but also of perseverance. It is no coincidence that when we talk about painting miniatures, we talk about doing it 'lovingly' or 'painstakingly'.

## "Ooh shiny!" Passion, consumerism, and excess

To a miniaturist, their unpainted miniatures may amount to a pile of shame. However, to the company selling those products, every piece of the pile represents money in the bank. Although we can frame the Warhammer pastime in different ways (toy play, art, gaming, or modelling to name a few examples), at its heart it is a commercial endeavour. Games Workshop is a publicly traded company; their

mission is to sell as many miniatures and Warhammer-related products to consumers as possible.

While Games Workshop may highlight other facets of the hobby by providing painting tutorials (helping with the 'flow') and showcasing beautifully painted models and armies (reminding us about 'glow'), they are nevertheless creating 'wow' again and again, increasing sales. Games Workshop have been remarkably successful in this, demonstrated by their growing profits and enduring status as one of the largest tabletop gaming companies in the world. While their name might suggest otherwise, the company first and foremost produces *miniatures*. Games and other transmedia serve this goal. This is not a secret or a value judgment, but explicitly stated by the company to its investors when describing its business model:

> *We have a simple strategy at Games Workshop. We make the best fantasy miniatures in the world, to engage and inspire our customers, and to sell our products globally at a profit. ... The more fun and enjoyable we make our games, the more customers we attract and retain, and the more miniatures our customers want to buy. This in turn allows us to reinvest in making more and more exciting miniatures and games, which creates a virtuous circle for all*[18].

As evidenced by the company's jokes about the pile of shame phenomenon, Games Workshop are aware that their customer base tends to buy miniatures in excess. In fact, the company regularly plays into this by introducing artificial scarcity. Limited production runs especially tap into the 'wow' factor and the hoarding mentality of many hobbyists: 'it's new and shiny; get it before it's gone, regardless of whether you need it!'. Hobbyists may complain about these practices and seemingly ever rising prices – and they do[19] – but the approach has proven to be financially lucrative. Whether this is indeed a 'virtuous circle for all', as Games Workshop describe it, is debatable; their artificial scarcity practices have also alienated previous fans[20].

A key reason why Games Workshop is so successful at selling

miniatures is that there is no limit to the size of an army as a hobby project. While for gaming purposes players will select miniatures based on an agreed points value from the full collection of models they own, a *Warhammer 40,000* army is not a neat, self-contained whole. It is an amorphous thing that can build up during years of miniaturing. You can always buy new models to expand your existing army to enable new configurations and strategies, or simply for the sheer enjoyment of having a very large army. Essentially, you can stay in the 'flow' phase for years.

Once an army is complete, or complete enough for the time being, you can both enjoy the 'glow' and start a new army for a different faction and new opportunities. The new 'wow' is often right around the corner, if not closer. This essentially means that it is up to the player to set their limits on procuring miniatures. Compare this to board games, for example, in which there is typically no need or incentive to buy multiple copies of the same game and additional purchases are limited to perhaps some game aids and expansions, which sets a natural limit on spending. In Warhammer, the 'wow' just keeps on coming and you are encouraged to keep on going: more is more.

Although it is often overlooked, buying miniatures is a major part of miniaturing. We're not saying that buying miniatures is *just* a prerequisite to the hobby. The very act of buying miniatures is often an enjoyable activity both in *itself* and as part of a project's planning and execution. It all counts as experiencing 'wow'. You browse websites and catalogues, hunt for bargains and low shipping rates, hopefully romp through online auction sites, boot sales, and conventional bring and buys, enjoy tearing open plastic shrink wrapping, and feel excited at the clatter of plastic sprues.

Warhammer, and the broader miniaturing pastime, is a good example of individuals' passion and capitalist logic coming together to push hobbyists towards excessive consumption. However, this is not automatically to the latter's detriment, and what is excessive is also debatable, as we will discuss in our concluding section. Even with the jokes about 'plastic crack', memes, and shared guilty looks

between miniaturists, from a personal sustainability point of view the pile of shame is rarely an actual source of shame. Rather, it becomes a resource for interaction and engagement with the material for play it provides – and that leads to experiences of 'flow'. While there may be buyer's remorse and problems due to the pile taking up too much physical space, the pile of shame is more often than not a source of future 'glow' and a pile of pride.

This is because the accumulation of a pile of shame can itself be the hallmark of a miniaturist. It signals attachment to the hobby and helps bond with other hobbyists that recognise the phenomenon. It can even be the source of 'humblebragging': woe is me, what to do with all these lovely, expensive miniatures! Instead of a fringe issue, the pile of shame is central to miniaturing. A feature rather than a bug. Due to this, it is pertinent to recall that the pile of shame is also a privilege not all Warhammer enthusiasts enjoy. Although there is a second-hand market for miniatures, Warhammer is not a particularly cheap hobby: at the time of writing a *Warhammer 40,000* Combat Patrol starter set costs 130 Euros, or 168 USD. This is not a trivial amount of money, especially once you add in costs for paints, paintbrushes, and other tools. For better or worse, many hobbyists simply cannot accumulate many miniatures they do not have immediate use for. Instead, purchases need to be carefully considered and excess miniatures may need to be sold off in favour of more current projects. Ironically, there may be shame in not having a pile of shame.

Home 3D printing is becoming more and more common, and time will tell whether eventually in the future a monumental shift to digital miniatures will also shake the pile of shame. On one hand, a shift to digital models eliminates some of the more practical issues of the pile of shame, such as the need for physical storage space. On the other, the low cost and huge selection of digital miniatures can provide plenty of 'wow' experiences. Combined with the easy purchasing of digital goods, this can rapidly build up a digital pile of shame, not even printed, let alone painted. As evidenced by the huge number of video games sitting unplayed in players' digital libraries,

in a world of constant sales and huge hard drives, digital products are even easier to hoard than physical ones.

While Games Workshop miniatures are digitally sculpted, the company has for the time being chosen to stick firmly with the plastic figurine business. For most hobbyists, 3D printing is still a much more complicated process than buying your physical miniatures from the local gaming store or having them delivered to your home, enlarging the gap between 'wow' and 'flow'. From an ecological and material point of view, buying and selling 3D printable models of miniatures that need not be printed until they are used, might be an enticing possibility. For the manufacturer, however, it means that a consumer only needs to buy a product once, setting a spending limit as discussed above. There is also the issue of piracy: digital models are much easier to create perfect copies of than physical ones.

**A library of unpainted miniatures**

In an ideal situation, miniaturing is a smooth cycle of 'wow' to 'flow' to 'glow', from inspiration to joyous creation to cherished objects marked by the passage of time. Of course, things are rarely this simple. Not only does one's interest wane from time to time, but as a miniaturist you are also subjected to a continuous onslaught of new and limited 'wow' minis to stock up on. Even for a very conscientious consumer, any one of a million different, mundane things can break this cycle. It is through these cracks between the 'wow', 'flow' and 'glow' phases that miniatures fall through to land in the pile of shame (Figure 1). A beautiful, intricately detailed model just always feels too intimidating to paint and never progresses from 'wow' to 'flow'. Only one final unit needs to be painted to finish an army, but the game edition changes, the army no longer works as intended, the magic of 'flow' wanes, and the unit goes in the pile. And so on, and so forth.

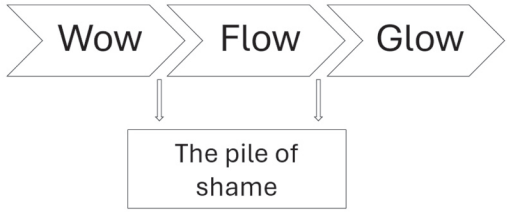



*Figure 1. The pile of shame and the 'wow-flow-glow' cycle.*

However, Warhammer, and miniaturing in general, is a cyclical hobby by nature. Projects start, stop, and change as hobbyists gain and lose interest, old rulesets and armies are retired and new ones introduced. As a recent example, the release of *Warhammer: The Old World* in early 2024 gave players an opportunity to revive armies that had largely been rendered obsolete in 2015, when the *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* gaming system and rule sets were terminated. In many cases this likely brought back to the painting table miniatures that had languished in the pile of shame for a decade or more. Were those models shameful excess, or a pile of potential simply waiting for the right time?

As this book demonstrates – and as any miniaturist knows – the miniaturing hobby is about many things. It is about playing games, spending time with friends, and immersing into a transmedia story world. Yet at its core it is about collecting, crafting, and playing with miniatures. As such it is related to other pastimes that have a 'fantasising phase' and a 'carrying out phase'. In this, miniaturing is similar to board gaming or knitting, but also to amassing a library of unread books. While the pile of shame has sometimes been reframed as a pile of opportunity, perhaps likening it to a library is an even more accurate comparison. In a library, the books already serve a purpose by existing, not only when they are being read.

Essayist and statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb has coined the term *antilibrary* to refer to the books on our shelves we have not read. He writes:

> *Read books are far less valuable than unread ones. The library should contain as much of what you do not know as your financial means, mortgage rates, and the currently tight real-estate market allow you to put there. You will accumulate more knowledge and more books as you grow older, and the growing number of unread books on the shelves will look at you menacingly. Indeed, the more you know, the larger the rows of unread books*[21].

Taleb sees the antilibrary as a testament to what we do not yet know and a monument for humility. If we approach the miniatures in a pile of shame in an analogous fashion, we can see them as the necessary and varied, eclectic and serendipitous, excessive and improbable building blocks of Warhammer visions yet unseen. Obviously, many of them will never be used by the current owner, but we cannot know in advance which are the ones that fit projects we have yet to conceive. That is the beauty of the pile.

It might be a little excessive to state that a painted miniature is less valuable than an unpainted one, and indeed hobbyists' self-deprecating pile of shame jokes suggest the opposite. However, it cannot be denied that a painted miniature does lose some of its potential as it is finished. As part of a project, as part of a unit, as a named character (cultivated through activities in a state of 'flow') it becomes *something* (casting a 'glow') yet simultaneously loses its potential for being *anything* (channelling 'wow'). Far enough down the road, any miniature will find a use, if only as cut-up base decoration, a statue, or possibly the first model a budding miniaturist covers with overly thick paint.

Unless personal finances necessitate it, getting rid of old miniatures does not really make sense. Fashions come and go, and sooner or later everything old is new again. More importantly, we cannot know which piece will spark the next weird and wonderful miniaturing project... or which will rekindle interest in an abandoned project and usher in a secondary 'wow', coined in theory as the *double-wow*[22]. The challenge then becomes one of space and means: storing all the miniatures and assorted bits and pieces that could

potentially be used in the future is often inconvenient. Most of us will never be rich enough to buy all the miniatures we would want anyway (nor would it make sense from an ecological sustainability point of view). That pile of potential, anti-army, unpainted plastic fantasy goes against sense. It is not efficient, useful, sensible, or practical. Yet fantasising does not have to be sensible. It is playful – and there is no shame in that.

4

# THE ROLE OF DICE IN WARHAMMER 40,000

## WHY PLAYERS STILL PREFER PHYSICAL DICE

**MARCUS CARTER, PHD, RYAN STANTON, MITCHELL HARROP, PHD, AND MARTIN GIBBS, PHD**

Since the birth of *Warhammer 40,000* (W40k) over forty years ago, digital games have overtaken physical board games in popularity. Whilst the board game industry is worth $13 billion a year, the widespread cultural adoption and acceptance of digital games generates an astonishing $200 billion annually. This explosion in popularity over the last 25 years has not just changed how people enjoy their leisure time – it has even influenced how game designers and researchers think about what counts as a 'good game' or a 'good gaming experience'. From the beginning of the 21st century, academic researchers have focused more on computer games than physical, tabletop board games[1]. In the face of the world-dominating presence of video games, there exists a small village of indomitable non-digital gamers who hold out against the digital invaders: Warhammer tabletop players are chief amongst them.

Games like W40k have resisted the siren call of digital games, reminding us that playing with physical, tangible figures matters. While video games like *Dawn of War, Space Marine* or *Total War: Warhammer* have achieved varying levels of critical and commercial success for their attempts to translate the W40k setting into the format of digital games, W40k remains popular today as a non-digital

game. This tangibility brings with it work and difficulties – the labour of modelling and painting, the cost of models, paintbrushes, glue (and not to mention dedicated shelving space) – which seem like reasons *not* to play. To give up on the non-digital experience and log in online. But the tabletop game has remained the core of W40k.

Why is this the case? Given we only have 24 hours a day, why would we choose to spend our limited leisure time on non-digital games? We interviewed thirty-six people at *Arcanacon* – Australia's largest competitive W40k tournament – to find out. This chapter will help us understand why W40k still appeals to players despite the digital games market's tireless competition for our attention. We will explore why the physical aspects of W40k – particularly, dice rolling – are so important to enjoy playing the game. For instance, though playing W40k sometimes involves rolling *a lot* of dice (50 or 60!), players flat out refuse to use digital dice rolling apps. In our collective years of playing, we have *never* met a player who actively used these applications!

In the following sections we will share the different ways that dice, as physical tools, impact the play experience in ways that a virtual application could not satisfactorily mimic. We show that the physicality of these dice plays an important, enhancing role in the experience of W40k... and help explain why all our funny rituals and 'inefficient' practices when we play are actually why we play at all.

## The digital fallacy and dice

Examining the non-digital aspects of W40k matters for multiple reasons. Often, game designers and game researchers focus almost exclusively on digital games when thinking about good game design. They assume that the 'superior' digital games have evolved from the 'inferior' non-digital ones, and therefore, that digital games are just *better* than non-digital ones. Games studies researchers Jaakko Stenros and Annika Waern refer to this (problematic) dominance of digital games in game discourse as the *digital fallacy*[2].

People who fall prey to the digital fallacy often forget tabletop

games have had an essential, fundamental influence on developing modern digital games[3]. Stewart Woods, whose research focuses on Eurogames (a genre of board game like *Settlers of Catan*, *Carcassonne* or *Ticket to Ride*), argues that the rise of the digital fallacy is possibly due to an incorrect perception that non-digital games are in decline[4]. The economic and cultural reality of gaming nowadays illustrates that tabletop games in the modern era are not just an established game form that has resisted obsolescence, but one continuing to grow.

Take, for example, a word usually used to describe non-digital games: 'traditional'. It implies 'not modern'. However, the latest version of W40k was released in 2023, and the spinoff game *Kill Team* (focused on small scale skirmishes) released an updated edition in 2021. Similarly, the widely popular Eurogame board game genre only emerged in the past two decades and continues to grow in popularity. These 'traditional' games are *all* 'modern'! Therefore, we need think carefully about non-digital games to avoid marginalizing them as outdated... which in turn results in less innovation. Instead, if we recognize non-digital games as something different, but equal, we may unlock exciting new opportunities for greater non-digital play.

Game researchers play an important role in standing up to the digital fallacy juggernaut. Through journals like *Analog Game Studies,* books like *Material Games*[5] or scholars like Melissa Rogerson[6], some game researchers continue to investigate the cultures of play and design which non-digital games foster. In turn, this helps game designers continue to develop and refine tabletop games we enjoy playing. The alternative – perpetuating the digital fallacy by reinforcing the implicit assumption that 'traditional' non-digital tabletop games are inferior or unequal to modern digital games – can negatively affect our gaming experience.

Inspired by faulty digital fallacy thinking, lots of *Warhammer 40,000* game design research focuses on digitally augmenting it. This means replacing as much of the game as possible with RFID chips or Augmented Reality. Dice are particularly vulnerable here because research often categorises the computation of in-game events (using

dice or other counters) as being "tedious"[7] and prone to game-ruining mistakes ('did I roll 53 or 54 dice?'). Therefore, this type of research suggests that game mechanics "suitable for computer augmentation are the ones that are information-related"[8].

This way of thinking, which subsequently flows into how game designers think about game design, assumes that the *only* advantage of non-digital games is their increased capacity for social interaction. However, 'social interaction' is not *just* about players physically spending time together; it is also about the craft and tangibility of the game. As we will demonstrate, dice are an *essential* computational tool. What players do with them reveals how their use, rather than being 'tedious', is core to the appeal and fun of playing *Warhammer*.

**Dice matter: An example of W40K play**

To highlight the importance of dice rolling we will use the example of a typical clash between two units in a W40k game. A squad of 20 Ork Boyz (powerful, muscular greenskins who love to fight) are facing off against a troop of 10 Space Marines, stoically clad in their resplendent power-armour. In this scenario, the Ork player has decided to charge his Boyz at the Space Marines to fight in melee combat. The outcome, as we will show, is overwhelmingly determined by the roll of 6-sided dice.

After moving and shooting, the Ork Boyz player declares that his twenty-model unit (19 Ork Boyz and a Boss Nob) will attempt to charge their opponent's nearby squad of Space Marines. However, before any dice are rolled to see whether the Ork Boyz can reach their target, the Space Marines decide to fire at the green tide of muscle charging at them. This shooting ('Overwatch') allows the 10-model troop to shoot their 8 boltguns, a missile launcher, and the sargeant's pistol at the Orkz. All in all, the Space Marines fire 18 shots. To determine if this volley of shots hits any of the charging Orkz, the Space Marine player rolls 18 dice (one per shot): 16 blue boltgun shots, a red pistol shot and a white dice from the missile launcher. Using different colored dice is common practice since each of the

three types of guns has different strength and rules. Using different dice colours means all can be rolled at once.

The Space Marine player rolls their 18-Overwatch-dice, picking out the dice showing failures – in this case anything less than a 6. Only 2 dice remain – they have 'hit' the Orkz twice. The player then re-rolls these two to determine if these two shots that 'hit' can 'wound' the Orkz. This time, they need to roll a 4+ (a 4, 5, or 6). Both shots successfully wound! Now, the dice are passed to the Ork player who rolls a 'save throw', needing a 6+ to 'save' two Boyz in the unit. These both fail (rolling a 1 and 5), indicating they have died: two Ork Boyz are removed from the table. The Space Marines have little time to celebrate - the remaining 18 Ork models continue to charge at them. To determine if the charge is successful, the Ork Boyz player rolls two dice (2D6) and adds the result shown, needing a total of 9 or higher to cross the nine-inch gap between units. Success! They rolled a 10 and so the Ork Boyz pile in and attack first – a benefit of making their charge.

The surviving 18 Ork Boyz strike. They have 3 close combat attacks each and an additional attack because they're charging: 72 (yes, 72!) dice are collected and rolled at once, covering the table in dice. Needing a roll of 4+ to hit, roughly three dozen dice pass the threshold – a number further reduced to just 13 after re-rolls for wounds (Space Marines are tough). Finally, the dice are handed to the Space Marine player, who rolls saving throws on 13 of their dice to determine how many Space Marines survive the brutal assault. 6 dice fail, meaning 6 wounds. The player removes three Marines from the battlefield, as each Marine can take two wounds before it is 'killed'.

Once the Orkz have finished attacking, the Marines fight back. Each Marine has 1 close combat attack, while the Sergeant has 3, and so the player selects 6 blue dice and 3 black dice. They need a 4+ to hit the Orkz – 4 blue dice successfully hit and a further 3 cause wounds. The Ork player rolls these three dice for saves but only saves one. 2 more Orkz are removed from the table. The combat for these two units – at least for this phase of battle – ends.

In the example we have just described, 72 dice are required to

determine the outcome of the first round of this combat (18 Ork Boyz striking at the hardy Space Marines). 72 dice is *a lot* of dice; approximately enough to fill two cupped hands. Additionally, every combat requires these dice to be rolled up to three times (to find out if the shots hit, if they wound, and if they are saved). This 'arduous' process takes up a significant portion of the time a player spends playing W40k.

Finding space to roll these dice can also be frustrating; stray dice may knock over models or be lost underfoot. At the peak of a battle, where each turn may involve rolling literally hundreds of dice, this 'laborious' computational process can slow down the game. Further, humans are fallible (and sometimes dishonest). They often make mistakes counting dice (potentially on purpose) that have huge impact on the outcomes of in-game actions. No wonder numerous smartphone applications and computer programs have been designed to remove the 'laborious' process of rolling dice to compress the entire encounter we outlined above into a couple of simple button presses. However, in our research of W40k tournaments and in our collective years of playing we have *never* met a player who actively used these applications. Why?

Our research[9] revealed that the physicality of these dice powerfully enhances our experiences of playing W40k. In the following section we will share the different ways that dice, as physical tools, impact on the play experience in ways that a virtual application could not satisfactorily mimic. We will then use these examples to demonstrate why making a specific 'laborious' in-game process digital doesn't automatically make said game 'better'. Instead, what improves a game is exploring the relationship between various design choices and the player's experience. This, in turn, can help us understand how physical and digital games can continue to grow and develop.

## The role of the dice

Our research shows there are three key ways in which dice impact the player experience of W40k players: through their *tangibility*, their role as a *representational object*, and through enabling *shared experiences*. We'll demonstrate the importance of each of these in turn by combining interview quotes with our analysis of common player practices.

## Dice and tangibility

Dice are tangible, meaning they are something physical that can be touched. Recall the Ork Boyz and their flurry of attacks against the Space Marine troops. To resolve these 72 attacks, 72 dice are used *at once*. The sheer volume of 72 dice replicates the volume of attacks in a meaningful, tangible and relatable way. The player's clumsy interaction with this overflowing handful of dice reinforces perceptions of the power of a particular action in the game.

Similarly, the Space Marine player used specific colors for each shot to roll all their dice at once despite the different weapon strengths. The colors turned the imaginary action – the different weapons used – into something tangible. This common (nearly universal) practice ensures this tangibility is still present in the gaming experience, even if rolling different weapon attacks separately is easier. Imagine what would happen if players replaced this dice rolling with a smartphone application... they'd lose the meaningful feedback the tangibility of dice give them!

A typical Orkz unit (which deploy hundreds of weaker troops) may have 3 attacks per turn in close combat. A unit can have up to 30 Boyz, who each get an additional attack if they charged. It is therefore typical to roll over 100 dice in a single attack. One of the players we interviewed called Brendan (interviewee names in this chapter are all pseudonyms, used to protect participant confidentiality), whose Ork armies featured many of this type of unit said,

> *"It's just ridiculous how much dice you can roll. Like if I can hit with a full squad of Boyz and they get all their attacks, I think it's upwards of 100 dice or die or whatever it is. So to me that's a lot of fun."*

For this player, the comically large volume of attacks (though they are weaker) is also a source of amusement and enjoyment; something translated and made real through the tangibility of the dice.

This tangibility is extremely valuable to players. Even though players in W40k tournaments need to finish games in a timely manner to keep the tournament on schedule (counting and rolling dozens of dice is slow), they *still* prefer physical dice over more 'efficient' dice roller apps. Physical dice rolling is so important that players choose to 'speed up' tangible ways of playing ('speed rolling' or using multiple coloured dice) instead of relying on digital solutions.

## Dice as representational objects

For some people, dice are not part of playing a tabletop game – they are often considered simple tools for calculating the outcome of in-game events. However, we noticed several ways in which dice are more than just a computational tool; they act as physical representations of what is happening within the game. This is integral to people's play experience. We identified three ways dice act as *representational objects*: they represent fictional game actions (*imaginative representation*), the relationship between players and dice (*situational representation*), and noise in-game units make (*audible representation*).

***Imaginative representation***

W40k players show the importance of dice when they 'speed roll'. Whilst, technically, the rules say you should pick out the *successful* dice (to use them for the next role), players tend to do the opposite. 'Speed rolling' – which is common best practice – involves picking out the *unsuccessful* dice first and discarding them. Since only the *successful* dice remain, they can quickly be gathered and rolled again[10].

This means that each die that is rolled to 'wound' was also a die which had successfully rolled a 'hit', as if the die were the bullet itself. I (Marcus) played into this when I used my Necron army. They are a race of robotic warriors with a unique 'Reanimation Protocols' rule (think of *The Terminator* saying 'I'll be back' as it reanimates back to 'life'). In previous W40k editions (at the time of writing, *Warhammer 40,000* is currently in its 10th edition ), at the end of a Necron player's turn, I could roll dice to see if any 'killed' units self-repaired and rejoined the battle. I would save the specific dice that had failed – representing a 'kill' – so the very same dice that had 'killed' my Necrons would be the ones rolled to bring them back. Doing so connected the two gameplay moments... and satisfied my flawed understanding of how statistics work: the same dice couldn't fail twice, surely?

There are other reasons for speed rolling. Hamish explained that by picking out the unsuccessful dice rather than the successful dice, "*if you were to be making a mistake, then you would have taken away an attack of yours, not giving yourself an extra attack, so that's a fairer way of doing it*". This means the practices surrounding dice rolling have developed in a way which prioritizes accountability and minimises the potential impact of human fallibilities. Many competitive tournaments also allow players to score each other on 'sportmanship'; auditing an opponents' actions is part of this. Kyle, one of the players in our research, described why good dice practices are important when asked about sportsmanship scoring:

> "*Yeah, you know, were they friendly? Did they introduce themselves? Did they talk me through their* [army] *list? Did they let me know things? You know. Did they let me look at dice before they removed them, those sorts of things. Did I have fun? All those sorts of things.*"

Dice act as *imaginative representations* of the game by creating a strong link between the fictional actions of an attack and the physical dice. The dice aren't just tools for complex calculations; rolling them is a meaningful part of the game experience because we imagine

them as physical representations of the actions they resolve. Each die becomes a bullet, with the roll showing how the bullet performs. Misses are set aside, while hits are re-rolled to check for wounds. Dice that both hit and wound are then passed to the defending player, who rolls to see if their units withstand the attack represented by those dice. Through being a physical representation of an in-game action, the fictional conflict becomes embodied in our own realm through tangible interaction with the dice, enhancing the player experience.

***Situational representation***

In observing players we noticed many meaningful relationships between players and dice: this relationship is an example of 'situational representation'. Players' strategies in their dice rolling – to minimize the impact of human fallibilities – reinforce the way in which dice become tangible representations of in-game actions that are difficult to digitize.

Some players, for instance, had preferred surfaces where to roll their dice. Again, 72 dice is *a lot* of dice; when rolled they take up *a lot* of space. However, rather than rolling in a contained box next to the tabletop, dice were almost *always* rolled on the tabletop itself, in flat areas as far from troops as possible. Players also had attachments to *their* dice: while sharing dice may speed up the process, it is not always commonly practiced. Similarly, while some rulebooks suggest removing unnecessary rolls where the outcome is certain to save time[11], in our research we did not see a widespread adoption of this practice. Once again, 'efficiency' was not the priority for players. What mattered were the connections players have to *their* dice, even if it means rolling over 100 dice close to character models! When asked why they always rolled on the tabletop, Bailey told us "*it'd have to be a very special circumstance where there wasn't space on the table to roll that many dice*". Rolling dice away from 'the action' was inconceivable... despite us observing numerous occasions where stray dice were missed, or they hit and moved the static figurines, further disrupting play.

What further indicates the meaningful representational relation-

ship between player and die is *where* on the tabletop players choose to roll. Where practically possible, if a unit was shooting at another unit, the players would almost certainly roll those dice *between* two units. The dice would fill the gulf between units like the fictional volley of shots would. This practice can have 'unintended causalities' (stray dice frequently knock over the units they are being intentionally rolled by). However, this physical reality is often playfully reappropriated – players will usually remove those models ('real' casualties of the dice) when calculating damage before removing any others. After all, they were actually hit!

Rolling dice near units doesn't only happen when they shoot at each other. Players act similarly when their units are in close combat, as Jonah said: "*I try generally to roll as close to the combat as I can if there is space*." By rolling dice near the units engaged in close combat, players expressed the meaningful relationship between in-game attacks and the dice in terms of the practicality of rolling the dice as near as possible to the action:

> *"Because that way, your results are right next to the battle and it makes it a lot clearer both to me and the opponent, so you can see what's happened. And the same thing goes whenever you roll movement for a character. I always try and do it as close to the character as I can just for a matter of clarity, just in case you do get distracted by something else in the room and it's there next to your characters and you're aware what's going on."*

Whilst many players enjoy rolling on the tabletop, not everyone chooses to. Many streamers, YouTubers or online Warhammer content creator do it in a contained box or dice tray. The tray is often situated under a camera so that viewers can see and experience the role for themselves. While these circumstances lead to different ways of experiencing the game, they once again highlight the importance of the dice to both the engagement and enjoyment of Warhammer play.

***Audible representation***

The third way dice acted as *representational objects* surprised us.

Our research revealed something about why players use dice that we had not expected: the noise dice make when rolled. Have you ever rolled 100 dice in one go? It creates a cacophony of clattering sounds, not unlike the clash of two units fighting! Now, compare it to rolling 2 or 3 dice from an elite sniper unit. The concentrated attention on one or two short-lived noises puncturing the stillness of a battlefield make the fictional much more real.

This 'audible representation' of the game experience would be lost using a smartphone application. In our research of W40k tournaments, we experienced how the background noise of chatting and laughter in tournament halls was permeated by the sound of dice rolls. It was an important immersive element of the tournament, representing the carnage going on around each player.

**Dice as shared experiences**

We have already explored the role of dice as *tangible* and as *representational objects*. The third reason why dice matter is they enable *shared experiences*. If the physical, tangible nature of dice rolls were not meaningful to the play of Warhammer, players would just use simpler methods. Rather than having to collect and count out 100 dice (it can take some time), a player could roll 50 dice twice or extrapolate based on the statistics of large dice rolls (for example, using 10 die, representing 10 attacks each). We never observed a player doing this.

We suspect that that participating in dice-related computations is a fun shared experience for players. Nathan captures the 'fun' of dice rolls well:

> *"For me, actually rolling the dice, actually doing the math, and counting out the ones – [its] not really that much math – but... that's a big part of what came to be the game for me. Like as much as it is moving my models around and thinking tactically it's also about rolling the dice and seeing what happens. It's a bit of an experience between the two of youse because you're both looking over, seeing what the dice rolled, working out what it*

*meant, constantly adjusting your strategy. But if it's just kind of like, you press a button [in an app] and 'oh that's the number' and you're kind of like, 'Aww, okay'".*

While rolling of large numbers of dice could be conceived as being arduous or time-consuming – most players we spoke to agreed – there was still a clear benefit. By involving players in the computational process, the experience becomes more meaningful both socially and tactically. Dice are rolled together: one player watches while the other does their rolling. Consequently, dice enable *shared experiences* as players work together to determine the results of game events.

Often these shared experiences can be humorous, particularly when a player rolls a hilariously unsuccessful turn. In a recent battle, I (Ryan) had my Necron army (Yes, two of us authors are Necron players. Coincidence? Probably not – great minds think alike) narrowly lose a battle to the usually squishy Imperial Guardsmen. To win the game required control of a key objective in the centre of the map. I was confident given I had a formidable unit – leader of the Necron Army, Szarekh, The Silent King – firing dozens of shots into a squad of human infantry on same objective. Unfortunately, a combination poor rolling on my part, and god-tier-statistical-anomaly-level armour saving rolls from my opponent (almost a half dozen sixes out of the dozen dice on a pivotal shot), meant that the guardsmen held onto the objective and won the game by two points. I was *very* frustrated... yet this experience cemented the legacy of the guardsmen who held the line against an almighty siege. Since then, this narrative has become a recurring reference in multiple battles. Those guardsmen are framed as having an indomitable strength whenever their rolls perform well: "That won't hurt me. These men survived an assault from the Silent King!"

W40k players were not only hesitant to use digital apps for dice rolls; they were equally unsure about W40k using of physical dice rolling contraptions which help manage large numbers of dice. As Connor explained:

Connor: "*I'd never use a machine because that's half the fun, you do it yourself. But sometimes I am tempted to build myself a dice tower. Just to help so you don't have to actually roll a lot of dice.*"

Harrop (Interviewer): "To make sure they don't go everywhere?"

Connor: "*Yeah. But [I] never really* [got around to] *making a model myself because it takes too much of the personality out of it. Which I find is a lot about Warhammer. It's personality, it's doing it yourself with your opponent.*"

The non-digital aspect of tabletop *Warhammer 40,000* is a key element which attracts players. For those of us who spend our days tied to a computer, a non-digital hobby can be a welcome relief. However, as we have shown throughout this chapter, resisting digital applications is not *just* about what players may lose (tangibility, representational objects, and shared experiences). There are many question marks about *what is added*. What all these examples tell us is that players are not luddites with an aversion for computing technologies; instead, it illustrates players significantly value the action of rolling dice itself.

## Conclusion

Game designers often think of dice as mere computational tools, something that can be efficiently digitised. *Warhammer 40,000* players intuitively know this is not true. This (faulty) logic – one which falls prey to the 'digital fallacy' we discussed at the start of the chapter[12] – overlooks how important the tangibility of tabletop games are to their experience and appeal. In the stories of W40k dice rolling we have shared, we suspect you will have thought of other ways that your practices with dice mean more than just math (see chapter 6 in this volume).

The use of physical dice in Warhammer games highlight the important roles non-digital elements can play in how we experience a game. While some research has positioned the dice rolling in non-digital games as tedious and suitable for simplification and digitisa-

tion[13], W40k players resist this sentiment. The physicality, loudness and bedlam of rolling large numbers of dice tangibly simulates the chaos of war. The way dice are embodiments of fictional undertakings makes the static tabletop come alive. As a physical tool, they do this in a fashion difficult to emulate by any virtual application.

Of course, dice are not the only non-digital element to enhance our experience playing Warhammer. In his research into *Blood Bowl*, Ville Kankainen compared the experience playing the physical game and its digital adaptation[14]. He found that "although most of the interviewees said that they mainly play *Blood Bowl* digitally [for its ease of play online], they still stated that they enjoy playing the material version of the game more". This could be because players develop more emotional attachments to *Blood Bowl* miniatures than, say, chess pieces. This attachment inspires imagination and a deeper sense of loss when a miniature 'dies'. Finnish games researcher Mikko Meriläinen and colleagues also discuss how materiality and physicality are central to miniaturing in Warhammer games. They said our imagination is what makes a miniature special [15] because "the miniature acts as a *prop* for imagining". Said differently, through the process of crafting and playing with a miniature, we feed our imagination of what the miniature is or can become[16].

These are games of physical matter... and that matters!

# 5

# GAMES WORKSHOP AND THE PERILS OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

**MIKE RYDER, PHD**

As fans, our relationship with Games Workshop is quite different to the relationship we have with many other companies, such as those selling baked beans or cans of soda. This is because with Warhammer, we don't just buy it – we *live* it. It has the power to shape who we are; it forms a fundamental part of our identity as fans. Take my own hobby experience as an example... I have invested *years* of my life reading, painting, making and collecting various elements of the Games Workshop Hobby™ such that Warhammer has become a major part of who I am today.[1] I have literally lived and breathed the adventures of the Tanith First depicted in the Gaunt's Ghosts novels. I have spent hours developing a history for my Raptors Space Marine Chapter and painting up my beloved tank regiment. I even at one time built my own custom Ork Mega Fortress!

What this means for me as a fan is that – for better or for worse – I feel deeply connected to Games Workshop in a way that I am not connected with many other brands. I simply do not care about other brands in the same way that I care about the company that has been with me through the many highs and lows of the last 20 years of my adult life. This relationship goes beyond merely feeling *connected* to

Games Workshop. I actually feel a level of *ownership* over the company and the products that it makes to the point that when Games Workshop does something I don't like, it can sometimes feel quite personal. Of course, as a fairly rational human being, I can understand that Games Workshop is a business and has to take decisions that are best for the business. Yet, at the same time, I could not help feeling cross when the Old World was destroyed, or how the launch of the new line of 'better' Primaris Space Marines was handled...

In days gone by, I might have shared my feelings with a group of friends over a cup of coffee. I may have even taken my views to a local club or gaming store. But nowadays, things aren't so simple. This is because our communities are no longer limited by how many people we know, or where we happen to live. Rather, we can share our Warhammer-related opinions with literally *anyone* who will listen, no matter where they are around the world – all through the power of the internet.

Unfortunately, this can be a problem. Not just for fans of Warhammer, but for society as a whole. The same things that make online communities great places to meet like-minded people and share ideas can also lead to the spread of misinformation and can become breeding grounds for animosity and bad feelings.

In this chapter, I will share with you some key insights into the power of online communities and how they work in the world today. In doing so I will draw lessons from Games Workshop's often troubled relationship with social media, including what went wrong in 2006, and how it was able to turn its fortunes around. In doing so, I will explore how online communities can fundamentally change the way we experience and engage with our favourite brands – including Warhammer – and some of the major challenges that lurk on the horizon. Buckle in, activate your Gellar field, and prepare to dive into the perilous world of online communities...

**Online communities and the world wide web**

The story of online communities starts way back in the early days of the internet (1990s), in what was known affectionately as Web 1.0. This was a time when internet technology was still relatively new and people were coming to terms with what the web was, and how it could be used. During the era of Web 1.0, the flow of information was very much one way. A website would contain information and that information would be presented for the user to read and digest. This static, one-way process placed power in the hands of website owners who had complete control over what their users could read and consume.

However, things changed quite dramatically with the emergence of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s, as the web evolved into a platform where users themselves could also create content and interact directly online[2,3]. This was a major shift in how the web worked. No longer were website owners the sole purveyors of content. In the world of Web 2.0, users *become a part of the product*, whether through liking and sharing a post, leaving a comment, or writing a review. In this way, users today are no longer merely passive 'consumers' of content; we have been transformed into digital *prosumers*. We *produce* content and *consume* the same thing we create[4].

The birth of Web 2.0 heralded a massive shift in the way consumers could interact online. No longer was the web just a place to find information, but rather also to share, collaborate and create as part of an online community of users. Early virtual communities were described by American writer Howard Rheingold in 2000 as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace"[5]. Virtual communities, therefore, are about people, communication, and relationships.

Fast forward several decades and professor of marketing Tracey Tuten built on the emphasis on communication and relationships by suggesting online communities can be defined as possessing seven

broad characteristics: presence; social objects; behaviour standards; groups and sub-cultures; participation; social capital; and strong and weak ties[6]. While we're going to look at each of these in turn to better understand what it means to be part of an online community of Warhammer fans, it is useful to remember that some of these characteristics are open to debate. Nevertheless, they are a good starting point to help us make sense of what a Warhammer online community can be.

## Warhammer fandom in the world of Web 2.0

To be a member of a Warhammer online community is to have a **presence** in a particular online space. This may be a social media group (such as a Facebook group, or Subreddit), or it may be an online forum (Warseer was a particular favourite of mine for a while). In this way, your membership is defined by the fact that you log in to said site and read the content there in a specific online location.

As part of your group membership, you may have certain **social objects** associated with your membership. This may be a username, an avatar or a signature underneath your posts. More practically perhaps, most members of Warhammer-related communities will likely be in possession of some of the 'social objects' associated with collecting Warhammer. This may include any number model miniatures (painted or unpainted!). It may also include related rulebooks, novels and video games. Your ownership or access to these objects is in a sense what brings you to the community in the first place and therefore grants you access to the space where you may be able to join with others who also share similar social objects.

Within the group there will of course be certain **behavioural standards** that members will be expected to adhere to. Normally, these are enforced by some sort of moderator or admin. But they can also be enforced by fellow members. Within said group, there will also be various **sub-groups and sub-cultures**. These may be related to the armies people collect, or the way people prefer to play the game. For example, in Warhammer communities, you will often find

a tension between the 'Win At All Costs' (WAAC) players and the more narrative-focused players who prefer 'fluffy' armies that are more in line with the way the faction is described in the lore.

Moving beyond these concepts we then come to **participation**. While some communities can grow into tens or even hundreds of thousands of members, many of these members may not post at all and may be what we call 'lurkers' – people who read without contributing. This isn't to say they are not a part of the community, but rather, that their participation within the community is different to others.

Furthermore, some members may have access to more **social capital** than others. Social capital is hard to define, but we might think of it as being the power, prestige and status that different members are able to draw upon. This capital may be granted to those who have contributed to the community in some way, or who have built up a certain number of posts. It may even be that certain members have donated to the community project, and so gain some form of recognition to thank them for their contribution.

Finally, we come to the **ties that bind the community together**. As with any other form of community, some members will feel more strongly affiliated towards it than others. This may be due to the time they have spent in the community, or perhaps the friendships they have formed while they have been there. It may also be related to some sort of experience in the past, or any one of the many factors already listed above.

## The power and perils of online communities

Being a part of an online community offers many benefits to the people who join. These include the shared experience of being a part of an online collective, the interaction between members, and the ability to share knowledge. But there can also be many benefits to business. If done well, online communities can be a great way to build brand awareness and gain customer feedback. They can also be a resource for user-generated content, a place where customers can

share product knowledge with others, and, sometimes, a space to engage in co-creation.

All of this sounds great in principle. However, things don't always work out as planned. Indeed, these benefits can very quickly become drawbacks when fans *don't* agree with the direction of the business. As researchers Cova and White said: "consumer-producers can also generate communities that may oppose or contest the management of their favourite brands"[7]. Which is exactly what happened to Games Workshop in the early 2000s, and the company is still dealing with the repercussions of these issues to this day...

For many years (1990s to early 2000s), Warhammer had something of an image problem. This wasn't an image problem caused by the company, or even the games themselves, but rather, with the perception society had about the sorts of people who would play Warhammer and frequent local gaming stores. In part, it was a 'geek culture' culture problem. Before the likes of *The Big Bang Theory* and a big-budget Hollywood productions about Dungeons and Dragons (2023), being a geek was not 'mainstream' or cool. The complete opposite in fact. So much so that the stereotypical Warhammer fan was often thought to be a bit like the comic book guy in *The Simpsons*.

Of course, this stereotype – like most stereotypes – was *somewhat* based in reality. During this time, the hobby was predominantly male, and some may say also quite beardy, with a core following of passionate, vocal fans, many of whom had a very specific vision of how the hobby should be. Typically, they would express their views on the official Games Workshop forums; a place where fans could gather as part of a growing online community. As a frequent visitor to the Games Workshop forums myself in the early to mid-2000s, it was evident at the time just how much negativity there was circulating around the Warhammer hobby. The sorts of people posting on Games Workshop's official forums tended to talk about the hobby in a negative light – whether that be a certain rule they didn't like, a particular model, or even a general dislike towards the way Games Workshop ran its operation.

The growing strength of these online communities turned into a

problem for Games Workshop. The more popular the company became, the more time (and money) was required to manage the forums and moderate the behaviour of a certain section of fans. There was also a sense that the sheer amount of negativity was actively damaging the brand. In 2006, Games Workshop decided that enough was enough: they took the drastic decision to close their official forums and cut themselves off from their core fan community[8]. As you can imagine, fans reacted furiously. Suddenly, and without warning, Warhammer enthusiasts had nowhere they could go to talk about their favourite hobby. Nowhere they could be **present** online and **participate** in a collective **group** dynamic. It was the equivalent of closing down your favourite coffee shop from one day to the next and telling fans that their years of loyalty no longer mattered.

In hindsight, this move came at the worst time possible for Games Workshop. 2006 marked the start of the social media revolution with Facebook and Twitter opening their doors to the public. So, not only did Games Workshop close your favourite coffee shop, but they closed it down just as two brand new chains decided to open next door. With no place to interact with their favourite brand, Games Workshop fans had to find other homes on the internet. These homes were far away from the watchful eye of the official Games Workshop forums; spaces where they could say what they liked about Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000, and where their bad feeling and animosity could fester... just as Grandfather Nurgle would have wanted.

### The big turnaround

What went wrong for Games Workshop? A great many things, really – some of which could be foreseen, some of which, maybe less so. You certainly don't need to be a marketing expert to realise that ignoring your fans and shutting down their online communities is a bad move!

It took Games Workshop the best part of a decade to realise the error of its ways and reconnect with its fans. The change started,

primarily, with the appointment of Kevin Roundtree as new CEO in 2015.[9] Roundtree brought in a number of important changes for the company, including a brand-new community website www.warhammer-community.com. It launched in 2016 and embraced many of the fundamental characteristics of online communities I described earlier in the chapter. The company also re-launched its social media presence and employed a new team of people to engage with fans and create content for its online platforms. These changes were generally welcomed by the fans. While the company had buried its head in the sand for the best part of a decade, the new approach led to a certain amount of cautious optimism[10].

These new communications channels coincided with some other significant changes in Games Workshop's business practices. These included new product lines to make the hobby more accessible to new players, as well as vastly expanded licensing and merchandising operations. In the years that followed Games Workshop also formed a partnership with Hachette magazine partworks to introduce new players to the hobby and give customers a convenient way to build up their collections over time[11,12].

These changes made a remarkable difference to the business. Prior to Roundtree's takeover, the share price of Games Workshop Group PLC (GAW:LSE) never exceeded £900. But from the end of 2016 the share price started to rise year on year such that now, at the time of writing (November 2024) the share price stands at £13,870. That is more than *fifteen* times the value it ever reached in the period between incorporation in 1991, and when Roundtree took over in 2015[13].

As impressive as all these post-2015 changes were, perhaps most remarkable of all has been the way that the company transitioned from not speaking to fans at all in 2006, to taking online communities and communication seriously. Games Workshop have been praised in the UK's national press for being a winner at communication[14], celebrated for how it shrugged off the Covid-19 pandemic[15], and eulogised in terms of how the company represents the 'best of Britain'[16]. Of course, not all this success can be put down to Roundtree. Some

might well argue (and I'd agree with them) that Games Workshop has long been a 'sleeping giant' of the industry. It always had a great product – it was just a case of knowing what to do with it.

These changes Games Workshop underwent did not happen in a vacuum. Society's perception of 'geek culture' has changed a great deal in the quarter century since Game Workshop first listed on the London Stock Exchange in 1994. 'Geeky' hobbies and interests are no longer as uncool as they once were. The rise of comic book action movies, like the Marvel Cinematic Universe, have certainly helped shape a new culture of nerdy self-expression, alongside the emergence of TV programmes that celebrate geekiness and fandom in all its many forms (e.g., Big Bang Theory). The continued influence of the internet has also clearly helped bring about the normalisation of geek culture. It has opened Warhammer and its many online communities to new audiences across the globe. This has coincided with the rise of video games as *the* mainstream entertainment medium of the age, which has allowed Warhammer to reach a whole new audience of potential fans.

**Things GW has done well…**

One of the biggest changes of the Roundtree era has been how Games Workshop has started to take control of its own narrative. It is no longer responding to issues in a reactive way, but rather now is taking a *proactive* approach to marketing and communications with its many fans. It has also learned lessons about the importance of online communities, and how they can be harnessed as a force for good.

Games Workshop also – crucially – regained its sense of humour.

For many years during Games Workshop's very own Age of Strife, the internet was full of rumours, leaks and speculation around new products and what the company might be doing next. Typically, these leaks tended to consist of a set of blurry photographs of models and the contents pages of new rule books. While such leaks were mana to keen hobbyists desperate for news about their favourite brand, they

caused reputational damage to Games Workshop. These leaks also led to a lot of wild speculation and much chat about 'broken promises' when things didn't quite turn out as some fans might have hoped.

With the launch of the new Warhammer Community website in 2016, Games Workshop created a new community **presence** online. In doing so, it started to take ownership of its release schedule by posting previews of new products coming up on the horizon. Instead of burying its head in the sand (as it had in years gone by), the company openly responded to the leaks, offering up its own product images that far surpassed anything that might have been found elsewhere online. See for example, this post from 19th January 2021:

> "*The dread potato camera has long been the bane of Warhammer fans everywhere. Wherever it strikes, you'll find poorly rendered pics of an out-of-focus future. As you may have seen in the wild places of the internet, it's found and snapped its latest victims...*
>
> *Luckily for you, the Warhammer Community team is on hand. We've used a non-starch-powered photographic device to get you some non-terrible pics of these awesome new miniatures*"[17].

This new, proactive, *humorous* approach has generally been a hit with fans. New model leaks are far less common, and the Warhammer Community website has become the main place where fans can find the latest news and reveals. The company even now publishes release calendars to give fans an indication of what is being worked on, and which factions can expect major new releases each year, enhancing fans' relationship with their **social objects**.

Beyond the realm of news and rumours, the company has also taken great steps to open itself up to hobbyists of all backgrounds. Its product range is more diverse than ever, reflecting a broad spectrum of body types and ethnicities, giving **social capital** to previously under-represented groups. The company has also noticeably sought out influencers from diverse backgrounds in a hope of reaching a

wider array of fans on social media with hobby-related content. Crucially, the Warhammer hobby is also now open to *girls*! Though clearly there's still a lot of work to do (see chapter 10 for more details).

Overall, changes have been received positively within the fan community. The rise in Games Workshop's share price is testament to market confidence in the long-term sustainability of the business. However, many threats still loom large on the horizon...

## Ongoing challenges

While Games Workshop has clearly learnt some important lessons about online communities, still demons of the Warp threaten the company's image and risk turning the community to Chaos. Chief among these challenges is the battle against discontent and ill feeling among a small but very vocal group of fans. These 'fans' do not believe that the hobby is for everyone and proactively work against the inclusive message of the brand. Indeed, some of these so-called 'fans' have even been found to post discriminatory or even in some cases *extreme* views that are not acceptable in any context. In response to these toxic individuals, Games Workshop's stance on **behavioural standards** has been clear: "The Imperium is driven by hate; Warhammer is not"[18,19].

Many of these challenges are societal issues that go far beyond Games Workshop's power to control them. While Games Workshop can take steps to exclude misogynists, racists and homophobes from its events and its stores, some of these people will still find online communities where they can spread their hate. Female gamers in particular have been on the receiving end of nasty attacks from trolls who feel uncomfortable having female members join the community.

While Games Workshop has done what it can to support female gamers, putting them front and centre of its campaigns and sending products to female influencers, some of the most powerful interactions in this space have come from the fans themselves. This includes the fan-originated Twitter campaign #facesofwarhammer that was

started by a group of female hobbyists in 2022 to show that Warhammer is for everyone, and not just a select group of gate-keeping (male) nerds[20].

Regrettably, these problems will not go away overnight. Social media, and the online communities we can access through it, very much remain a double-edged sword. On the one hand it offers great opportunities to reach a fantastic range of people to share content and collaborate with in new and innovative ways. Yet, at the same time, these same benefits can also be a major drawback as the tools and philosophy of Web 2.0 also give voice to those whose hateful, divisive and exclusionary views go against the type of society many of us seek to live in.

What can we do about the dark sides of online communities? Well, there's no easy answer. Certainly, I'm not sure there is much more Games Workshop can practically do, or even be expected to do, as a company that ultimately makes and sells model miniatures. However, it does need to remain vigilant. The only way the company will remain successful is if it continues to expand its reach and expand its community as far and wide as possible. Therefore, as much as it may seem counter to business principles to run campaigns against hate speech and trolling (and in so doing draw attention to it), the company needs to be watchful for negative and discriminatory content – the sorts of which may taint the community and risk creating a rift far greater than anything described in the Warhammer lore.

## Whose universe is it anyway?

Throughout this chapter we have seen that online communities can be a powerful thing. They give people a place to gather online and connect over a shared interest. Yet at the same time, the open, anonymous and often unregulated nature of online interactions means they can be easily contaminated with animosity and bad feelings. They can also be overwhelmed with fake information and conspiracy unless they are carefully moderated.

This is all especially true with something like Warhammer, as the participatory nature of the hobby means that fans tend to feel very strongly about it. As I described at the start of the chapter, Warhammer is not just something you *buy* – it is something you *do*. And as such, it can create some very strong connections with the people who enjoy it. While the strength of fans' devotion is one of the main reasons why Games Workshop has been so successful as a business, this same strength of fan feeling can also be a major burden. Upset the fans too much and you risk the whole business model collapsing completely. This, therefore, raises a couple of interesting questions:

- Who *really* owns the Warhammer 40,000 Intellectual Property? (Or any Intellectual Property for that matter?)
- What is the true value of that Intellectual Property?

I'm not asking about Intellectual Property (IP) in a legal sense. However, there is a certain abstract 'ownership' to creative IP that moves beyond the legal and enters the realm of philosophy. This is because while Games Workshop may own the legal rights to the Warhammer 40,000 universe, the company has no control whatsoever over how I – as a reader, as a gamer, as a fan – interpret that universe in the realm of my own head.

Just as how I can build and paint a box of Space Marines in whatever way I like when I get home, I can also imagine the events of the Horus Heresy in whatever way I see fit. This is why there is a degree of deliberate ambiguity built into the way Warhammer universes have been created: part of the fun is to create your own small section of the universe that is unique to you. This means there is a process by which texts (or in this case, fictional universes) come alive when they come into contact with fans. To draw on some classic literary theory: an author has no control over what happens when you pick up a book and decide to read! This isn't just an issue Games Workshop faces. It's just as much a problem for the Marvel Cinematic Universe,

DC Universe, Dungeons & Dragons, Lego – you name it! That's just how reading works.

In a way then, the challenge that Games Workshop faces with its fans is as much an issue of the relationship between authors, readers and texts as it is an issue with the internet and the world of online communities. Social media just makes these problems ten times worse, as it means we can all now talk about it in as many online communities as we want to! Is there a solution? Probably not. At least in the short term. Many of the issues I've described in this chapter are very much issues of personal and collective responsibility. While we can each take responsibility for our own actions, as members of the Warhammer fan community, we also need to be alert to the dangers of online communities getting out of control. As we know, the Warp works in strange ways. Just like the Emperor himself, Games Workshop needs to stand as the shining beacon to guide our way through the Warp and steer us clear of the alure of Chaos.

6

# PRODUCTIVE MAYHEM

## RITUAL WORLD-BUILDING IN BLOOD BOWL

**BENEDICT E. SINGLETON, PHD**

"What are these dice?!" my opponent exclaims as another model is removed. He's enduring what is called (in Swedish at least) 'a dicing'. My team – 'halflings' (think Tolkien's hobbits supported by ents) – are playing his 'ogres' (large, powerful, but slow-witted humanoids, aided by tiny creatures). Within this unfortunate 'dicing', we conjure up a vivid imaginary world – ogres on several occasions forget to play and stand there dribbling; treemen take root and cannot move anymore and, my personal highlight, a gang of five halflings decide enough is enough and get together to murder an ogre. Although my rival has not made many mistakes at all, I, on the other hand, have managed to fail almost no dice rolls. In such circumstances, he can do little but laugh.

We're playing Blood Bowl, a Games Workshop board game inspired by American Football, where teams comprising metal or plastic miniature players compete to score touch downs and generate carnage. It is a gorgeous Swedish summer evening in which four hirsute, white, middle-aged men sit out under an awning, with those of us not driving periodically supping beer. On one board, my halflings are fending off my opponent's ogres. On the other, snotlings (diminutive goblin creatures) are taking on gnomes (who bear a

strong resemblance to the popular garden decorations). Whilst there are more people in the garden (the host's trampoline is popular), for the men playing Blood Bowl, focus is very much on the game, its puzzles, the surreal events being imagined, and the dice.

This microcosm embodies one of the features of Blood Bowl (and indeed many other tabletop games): the way players can explore different social worlds. During our play that evening we physically moved little (perhaps taking root like a treeman) but were extremely active – we created a shared space to play, somehow separate from much of what went on around us. In this space, our imaginations can run wild, drawing on in-game events and the figurines ("goose goes HONK" I exclaim as I examine a 'gnome beastmaster' modelled with a particular feathered friend). This activity, *worldbuilding*, is the subject of this chapter. This is the creative work that playing Blood Bowl or any other game requires: generating a distinct social space. Some of this is obvious, players model and paint figures for pleasure and immersion. However, there is another aspect, the performance of *ritual*. In this chapter, I argue that ritual actions contribute heavily to the enjoyment of Blood Bowl and many other games. My goal is to highlight important social aspects of gaming that may be overlooked when we focus on rules and models.

## What is Blood Bowl?

Firstly, Blood Bowl does not actually involve a bowl filled with blood, that would be horrible. It is a tabletop "collectable strategy game"[1] by Games Workshop that combines fantasy fiction and American Football, although one doesn't need to care for either to enjoy the game. Inspired originally by the 1980s popularity of American Football in the UK, the first edition blended the rules for Warhammer Fantasy Battles with scoring touch downs. The games fictional background ('the fluff') reflects this. It is set in an alternative version of Games Workshop's Warhammer World, with the difference being the existence of the god Nuffle (a pun on the real world's NFL).

In this universe, obsessive worship of Nuffle and his sacred game,

Blood Bowl, has prevented the different fantasy races (elves, dwarfs, beastmen, trolls, etc.) from descending into endless conflict (as they have in the 'proper' Warhammer Fantasy World – see Chapter 13). It is a relatively light-hearted setting. Blood Bowl's fluff displays a fondness for surreal (sometimes dark) humour. This contributes to the game's atmosphere, with rules for pieces with abnormally low intelligence, uncontrollable aggression, drunkenness, and for hitting an opposing player with a chainsaw. Likewise, not all pieces are equal. Elves are fast, agile and athletic; dwarfs are tough and slow; and halflings are shit. While there are mechanisms for game balance the game is deliberately stacked against some teams.

A typical game of Blood Bowl takes about 2-3 hours and involves a relatively small number of figures, with the number of pieces on each 'team' usually capped at 16. However, many 'coaches' (the term for the human players of the Blood Bowl game) collect extra figures to represent themselves, cheerleaders and other thematic elements (as well as having multiple teams). It thus presents many opportunities for different forms of 'miniaturing'[2] (See chapter 12 in this volume).

In terms of how the game works, the games original designer[3] has summed it up well:

> *Blood Bowl is what I would call a push-your-luck game. By that I mean you can stop taking actions at any time or ... take a risk and carry on until you run out of actions or mess one up!*

Fundamental to Blood Bowl since its third edition in 1994 is the introduction of the 'turnover' – simply put, if a dice roll fails then one's turn ends (there are of course exceptions). Uncertainty is built into the choices players make. Blood Bowl presents players with a series of puzzles within a complex game with many rule interactions. Success can come down to pure luck... however, the best players are extremely skilled at calculating the odds of different actions and maintaining their concentration to avoid mistakes. Such players find themselves winning regularly. For less skilled players like me, interest is maintained by the ever-present possibility of an upset (I treasure

my unbeaten record against one Swedish international player, who is *much* better at Blood Bowl than me).

Luck and discussion of luck is common at Blood Bowl tournaments. People recount memorable moments, where they dared to push their luck or were struck by extreme misfortune. Stopping by at one tournament, a friend excitedly explained to me a successful scoring play, going through each and every dice roll that allowed his 'ghoul' to score. However, too much luck can be problematic, particularly when it appears to only be benefitting one player. When I 'diced' my friend's ogres I made conciliatory noises and readily admitted my fortune. In another game, where I found myself at the wrong end of the dice my opponent found himself apologising with every success!

Despite, or perhaps because of this integral uncertainty, Blood Bowl is a popular tournament game. Blood Bowl has only sporadically been supported by Games Workshop throughout its history, with fans filling the gap. Similarly, taking advantage of this, other model manufacturers have produced fantasy football figures. Indeed, for over a decade NAF ('Nuffle Amorical Football', a humorous reference to the real-world's NFL, but also playing on the English slang word *naff* – in poor taste), an independent Blood Bowl players' organisation, disseminated the most up-to-date rules for free.

Nowadays, Games Workshop have returned to Blood Bowl, publishing new editions and teams. Thus, there are a plethora of options for playing pieces within the fantasy football miniatures market. The upshot of this is that while Games Workshop do periodically run Blood Bowl events, much of the Blood Bowl tournament scene remains separate to the originators' control. This contrasts with many other games (Games Workshop or otherwise) that largely live or die by official support [4;5]. Indeed, when I look online it seems that some fans actively avoid Games Workshop products, preferring those of other miniature makers.

## A whole new world – the rituals of tabletop gaming

In this chapter, I am concerned with *worldbuilding*: the creative work that Blood Bowl players engage in. This is a key part of any play[6,7]. Basically, I am interpreting Blood Bowl player actions as creating a space (building a world) somewhat separate from ordinary life. Many of these actions are *rituals* – "embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment"[8]. What this means is a type of often patterned and symbolic behaviour that represents cultural beliefs and values[9]. Rituals can mean big, grand events like weddings, coronations or rugby club initiation ceremonies, but also actions on a smaller scale. For example, think of how most conversations begin with a greeting ("Hi", "Yo", "All right?", "Oi!") and end with a farewell ("Bye", "Turrah a bit", "do one!").

These interaction rituals are how people everywhere organise themselves socially, managing group behaviour and generating emotional energy[10;11,12]. We give our social lives order and symbolic meaning through ritual action. We also often can recognise it automatically – a person leaving a conversation abruptly without performing the proper interaction rituals (saying goodbye) may annoy or confuse us! In any case, we often notice such moments and comment on them – indicating an awareness of rituals and their proper performance.

## Keying a magic circle

Blood Bowl tournaments are great places for the aspiring ritual spotter. The tournaments I have joined range hugely in size, from a small six-person tournament in Turku, Finland to the NAF World Cup in Dornbirn, Austria which comprised 1,432 participants plus various model manufacturers and organisers. However, they all began with some sort of ceremony. At smaller tournaments there's just a quick hello from the organisers. At the NAF world cup, by contrast, there were bands, videos and official welcomes from local politicians. Similarly, all tournaments had some sort of closing ceremony, be it the

low-key handing over of a modest prize or an elaborate ceremony with trophies.

Other features also marked out the tournament as somewhat separate from ordinary life – people would need to register, sometimes receiving welcome packs with commemorative dice or figures. Within the wider tournament space, each tournament I attended revolved around multiple tables upon which Blood Bowls (game boards) were oriented so opponents faced one another lengthwise. Larger venues also had bar facilities. When not playing or going to games, people would usually chat amiably with fellow players often about the game.

In my experience, people's behaviour at tournaments was distinct from ordinary and daily life. It was not uncommon for players to wear clothing indicating their member of the Blood Bowl community or their own player groups. Likewise, at many tournaments my opponents would provide gifts, such as dice, (alcoholic) drinks or models.

A typical game of Blood Bowl begins with a series of dice rolls, which determine the conditions under which the game takes place. For example, if the weather is determined to be a blizzard, then players are more likely to slip over and passing becomes challenging. The players also roll (or toss a coin) to determine who will attack first. Then, when the players have set up their teams, further rolls are made to determine the various 'kick-off' events. These decide where the ball piece will start the game. It is also an opportunity for various random events to occur, ranging from relative minor things like changing weather or the defending team redeploying players, to the crowd invading the pitch to attack players or the referee! Once this is resolved, the ball then bounces. After this, the standard procedure is that the players shake hands, wish each other luck and the game is understood to have begun in earnest. Likewise, at the game's conclusion, players would usually shake hands again, symbolically ending the contest.

I interpret many of this first set of rituals as functional: they are directly concerned with organising the space within which the game can take place. Much of the value of this is pragmatic – after all one

can hardly have a tournament unless one has demarcated a space within which it is to be played. Likewise, competition and indeed individual games require the players involved to coordinate with one another. While many of the activities that occur (giving gifts at meeting or opening ceremonies) are not purely practical – they do not facilitate the game directly – they do facilitate the creation of a social space within which play can take place. In game studies literature this is called 'the magic circle'[13].

Basically, for a game to exist it must be separated from other social spaces[14]. When we play Blood Bowl (and other tabletop games) we act as if there is a separate social world. To move into this different mode of being we need to 'key' the situation (as in getting into the same musical key)[15]. Tournament rituals can be understood as part of keying with players becoming attuned to a particular social context. Consequently, keying is integral to any worldbuilding process.

Keying isn't purely limited to the beginning and end of games and tournaments. Many of these rituals emerge around dice rolling. When I surveyed Blood Bowl players about their own dice-rolling rituals, the majority (roughly 60%) claimed to have one. Even more interestingly, when I asked those same people whether they were aware of *other people's* dice-rolling rituals, only a small minority (about 12%) had *never* noticed any. Whilst Blood Bowl players have different reasons for why their practices varied, my analysis[16] suggests they can be loosely categorised into two sub-types of keying: I call these *thematic* and *competitive* ritual behaviours. I will look at these in the next section.

## Performing thematic rituals: Playing in Nuffle's realm

What I call thematic behaviour are activities (some of which are rituals) that match the themes of Blood Bowl and the tournament setting. Basically, I mean the sorts of things that people do to roleplay as a Blood Bowl coach, i.e. act as a trainer of a sports team in the Blood Bowl world. In doing this, players may draw upon the background writing in the Blood Bowl universe (the lore). At other times, they

may be creative in terms of how they dress or the accoutrements they have with them.

To perform thematic rituals, some players would utilise specific dice or clothes to match their team and would name each individual miniature. Other players would wear uniforms broadcasting their affiliation to various groups of fellow players. This was particularly prominent at team tournaments where groups of players band together, each playing a game each round to generate a collective score for their team. An experience at my first tournament epitomised this. At EuroBowl 2016 (the European Championships of Blood Bowl), me and my friends found ourselves taking on a team with a distinct style. The team consisted of three players in clown costumes whose attire and attitude was reflected in their play. All three had elected to use markedly weaker teams and their approach to the game was less than serious (although not unskilful!).

Other tournament participants also bring themes into their preferred way of playing the game. Thus, for example, one survey respondent stated "I talk to my players like I am the coach there" while another stated they berate players and give them pep talks. Others spoke of voicing appeals to or cursing Nuffle, the Blood Bowl god. Another stated "since I play skaven [ratmen], I bring cheese to the game as snack". Further examples recorded included "all models not playing in the team must face the board to cheer on the team" and "before the first kick-off and match start I do line up my team in a way that they seem to run to the pitch from the sidelines." I also witnessed players acting thematically. In Blood Bowl if a piece is pushed off the board an automatic injury roll is made. The thematic reason for this is that bloodthirsty fans are tearing a player apart! In one game, my opponent requested that his friend be the one to make this roll. In doing this, my opponent was distinguishing between things that were his fault (such as an ordinary injury) in contrast to those of 'the crowd'.

For some players, sticking to a theme takes precedence over seeking victory. In one game, I found myself rapidly going from a situation of strength to one of increasing crisis. I had been building

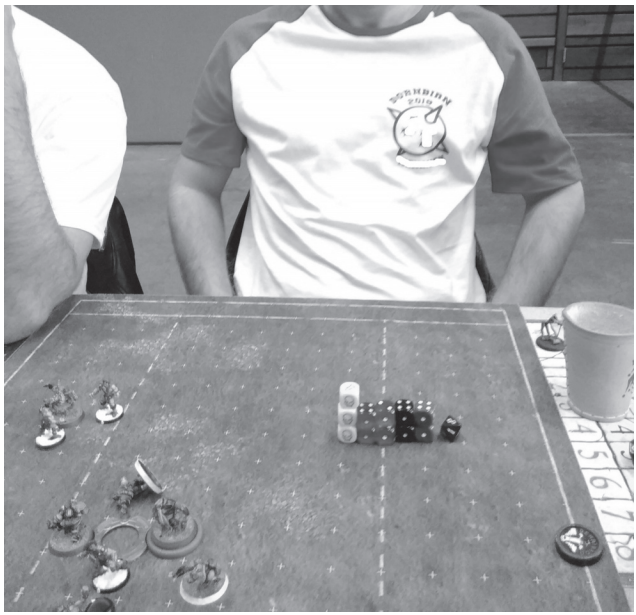
nicely, consciously avoiding scoring too quickly to reduce the likelihood of my opponent equalising in the first half. Unfortunately, my strategy was forced to change by an abrupt swing of luck, when my opponent removed several of my pieces. This was concerning because most teams need sufficient pieces to offer any sort of defence or attack. I was forced to score and we set up again. Surprisingly, for the rest of the half, my opponent did not seek to score and instead concentrated on removing more pieces. The dynamic in the second half remained the same: instead of scoring, my rival continued to methodically remove my remaining players. The match finished 1-1. Afterwards, I asked him why he hadn't tried to capitalise on his strong position and win. He felt that it was appropriate for his team (Nurgle – devotees of the Chaos God of pestilence and rot) to focus on "causing casualties". It was thus "more Nurgle" to enjoy hurting my team rather than pursuing victory.

In sum, through thematic behaviour (including rituals) Blood Bowl players perform and communicate their membership of the playing group and community. In doing this they draw upon a shared set of material and symbolic resources including clothing, models, rules and the game's fluff. This helps to create a magic circle between participants [17]. Both me and my opponent above knew what it meant to be "more Nurgle" when playing. Thus, together, Blood Bowl players key a space for social interaction and creativity.

**Performing competitive rituals: Making things fair**

Not all Blood Bowl players are content to just play thematically or in an entertaining way. Some are focused on winning games and tournaments. This was reflected in some of their ritual actions. Numerous survey respondents would talk about "training," "threatening" or "punishing" dice that roll badly[18]. I remember one of my opponents who had an enormous collection of dice. Whenever any of them rolled a one (normally the worst possible result) he would replace it with another, eventually cycling through his entire set. Many players seemed to be attentive to how different dice were rolling at different

times – even I have sometimes found it hard not to switch dice after a bad roll! Other practices seemed to be about gaining a competitive advantage and unnerving their opponents. For example, during a tense game, my opponent (Figure 1) set up his dice so that they all faced me, displaying a wall of 1s (the worst possible result).



These rituals were not just about gaining advantage. For a third of the Blood Bowl players I surveyed, these dice-related rituals were about ensuring that nothing interfered with a 'pure' test of skill. This included being particular about dice and dice rolling. One of my opponents took this to an extreme. He had commissioned special dice from a backgammon manufacturer and used a 'dice tower' (a tool for randomising dice-rolling). He requested that his opponents used the same dice as him and was attentive to my rolling technique – requesting I shake the dice cup more. When I enquired about this, he explained he previously had bad experiences with cheats and needed to ensure the game was as fair as possible "to help him sleep at night". This reflected a common concern for an honest competition within the tournament community.

While players may moan about Blood Bowl's randomness, it is also part of the game's appeal. Apart from the already mentioned possibility of causing an upset, taking risks and manipulating odds are skills needed to play the game. Like skydivers and extreme sports enthusiasts, Blood Bowl players practice 'edgework' –times where one voluntarily courts higher-than-usual risks or bad outcomes. This tests one's mastery and cultivates feelings of skill and control[19,20]. Generally, at Blood Bowl tournaments, while fun play is considered positive, people are engaged seriously and intensely with each game (hence the desire for fairness) and will consciously take risks. People will mutter things akin to "nothing ventured, nothing gained" highlighting their awareness of the riskiness of a particular chosen course of action.

Similarly, risk-taking is often appreciated. Players may complement one another in post-game discussions on their ability to spot and/or solve the game's puzzles or exclaim when a particularly risky solution is identified. For example, in one game, my opponent repeatedly complemented me for making unexpectedly aggressive high-risk moves. For me, and I suspect many others, it seems that part of the enjoyment of Blood Bowl is the edgework it involves – pushing one's luck further than usual and to the limit. Playing Blood Bowl entails acquiring the ability to see opportunities and evaluate the risk and rewards during game situations. This may involve preparatory work, like building teams or practicing). To a certain extent, in common with psychological explanations of ritual behaviour and endorsed by some of the players, some rituals (in-game, but also in the form of 'lucky' clothing and the like) can be interpreted as part of reaching the appropriate mental space for performing edgework. On the other hand, rituals aimed at unnerving an opponent are similar; they are intended to actively interfere with an opponent's judgement regarding risks.

Edgework should not be confused with recklessness. Edgeworkers like extreme sports enthusiasts take risks but seek to remain in control. To do otherwise is to invite catastrophe. This highlights of the variability of rituals. Many people have limits about how much

risk they want to take. Indeed, a skilled player will ruthlessly punish unnecessary risks. Some of the activities I observed indicated a concern with going too far into dangerous places; they are attempts to control uncertainty. For some this is practical –one player I encountered had a list of instructions, reminders and mantras attached to his wrist. Other activities appear as magical rituals endeavouring to ensure good luck. This suggests the possibility that players interpret dice rolls as influenced by rituals. If this is the case, then it is inevitable that players will develop techniques for doing this as part of their edgework. Much of this is reminiscent of other research on sport and its inherent uncertainty [21] and several survey respondents interpreted their ritual activity as a psychological technique for control. Thus, I see many ritual activities as efforts to ensure that just the right amount of uncertainty is present for players enjoy themselves.

However, I believe such rituals also have sociological functions: they key a particular context as being different from others, in turn making the tournament a magic circle. For the tournament to work, players need a narrative of a fair contest. One of the ways that this is maintained is through the rules of the game and the tournament itself. However, the randomness of Blood Bowl challenges the idea of an open competition – the best player in the world could just roll ones all day. I interpret some player ritual actions as efforts to manage this truth. By performing rituals around dice rolling, Blood Bowl players 'get in the zone' for play. This can have both psychological and roleplaying elements, which contribute to building a competitive world.

## Conclusion: Performing game spaces

Blood Bowl players, like many tabletop gamers, are preoccupied with worldbuilding. While some of this is material (painting miniatures in particular ways), it also involves social and ritual activity. I interpret these rituals as tools for immersion into and cooperative control of a distinct creative and competitive game space: a magic circle. These

rituals – just like saying 'hello' or 'goodbye' in conversations – help maintain the rules of the social context and maintain tolerable levels of uncertainty. Players actively control their immersion, keying (through ritual) to ensure they maintain their own level of fun[22].

This immersion is not without price – Blood Bowl tournaments can be intense experiences, often tiring and stressful. The rules lend themselves both to leaps of imagination (of outrageous sporting plays and ludicrous violence) but also to calculated risk-taking – edgework. One of the challenges of many tournaments is playing 3-4 games in a single day (often over multiple days). This is an exhausting experience, which often left me feeling drained. However, this is part of the appeal – the emotion and social bonding inside the magic circle forms part of the buzz for me and likely many other participants[23,24].

I would thus argue that Blood Bowl, like many other games, is much more than just a set of figures and a set of official rules. It is the process of building a world, within which human participants collaborate to create situations affording them opportunities for creativity and pleasure. These rules differ wherever Blood Bowl is played, but in the tournaments I have participated in there has always been some effort to ensure that the games are in some sense fair and balanced. This includes the institution of specific rules but also manifests in player efforts to rationalise and manage the swings of luck inherent to the game. This is visible in the ritual activity ongoing around Blood Bowl.

There are various rituals for keying tournaments to form a magic circle; a distinct social space that is unlike other social spaces in your life. Indeed, at the micro-level rituals also key the playing time and space for each game, creating a magic circle within the tournament magic circle. Still other rituals contribute to maintaining the world but in less obvious ways. I identified two types. *Thematic rituals* take advantage of (and perpetuate) the creativity of a social world. These may involve creatively drawing upon the fictional Blood Bowl world, like when players play in a 'fluffy' or thematic way, or through links to the figures themselves (players roleplaying as 'coaches' of a fantasy football team). Alternatively, what I've called *competitive rituals* help

maintain the competitive space itself, particularly through managing uncertainty. I interpret the performers of this type of ritual as maintaining a social space where skill will determine the result. Such rituals, as for extreme sport enthusiasts, have a role in seeking to control (or make one think that one can control) the uncontrollable. The satisfaction stemming from this comes from the pleasure of calculated risk-raking... it is the edgework that gives some people such a rush!

Online, I have often seen the rules sets that Games Workshop create criticised for being unclear and inadequate to ensure a clean contest. I would argue this misses much of the appeal for participants of Blood Bowl – players actively enjoy immersing themselves in this surreal parodic version of the Warhammer world. Likewise, fans enjoy the opportunities the game rules provide. Uncertainty is integral to this. Whilst this should not absolve anyone of poor rules writing, it does highlight that the extent to which rules are good or bad is a matter of taste. After all, the rules of chess are about as tight as possible, creating a true contest of skill. However, neither myself nor I suspect many of my tournament opponents in Blood Bowl are as drawn to chess as we are to Blood Bowl.

Indeed, the fact that I know that I am not good at chess makes me unlikely to enter a tournament, whereas the fact that I am not good at Blood Bowl does not diminish my enjoyment of playing in competitive settings (I like Blood Bowl in all its forms). As such, it is perhaps better to judge a game by the possibilities it provides for pleasurable (ritual) social interaction. In some cases, a poorly written game is a bad game. However, in other games, such things provide opportunities for creativity. Blood Bowl is by no means a terribly written game (although the various Games Workshop FAQs highlight errors in this regard). Yet Blood Bowl epitomises what makes many tabletop miniature games popular: a potent cocktail combining an in-depth theme, fun rules and vibrant social scene. A cocktail that is surprisingly addictive, at least to a certain type of middle-aged man.

7

# SPACE MARINES

## THE SUPER- AND SUB-HUMAN IN WARHAMMER 40,000

**RYAN L. JOHNSON, PHD**

*"They shall be my finest warriors, these men who give of themselves to me. Like clay I shall mould them, and in the furnace of war forge them. They will be of iron will and steely muscle. In great armour shall I clad them and with the mightiest guns will they be armed. They will be untouched by plague or disease, no sickness will blight them. They will have tactics, strategies and machines so that no foe can best them in battle. They are my bulwark against the Terror. They are the Defenders of Humanity. They are my Space Marines... and they shall know no fear."* -The Emperor of Mankind[1]

Standing at nearly eight feet tall, with superhuman strength, speed, tactical intelligence, and durability, it is no surprise that the Space Marines are nicknamed the Angels of Death. Warrior monks trained exclusively for battle in all-male enclaves, the Space Marines are so mighty that one alone is said to be enough to turn the tide of a common battle. A full 'chapter' of one thousand Marines is more than enough to conquer any planetary system. Whether or not these are exaggerations, one thing is clear: they are figures of mind-numbing power who drop from the sky, butcher foes with chainswords (a chainsaw on a sword hilt) and explosive, self-guided,

.75-caliber bullets. Capable of shrugging off wounds that would shred an entire squad of normal humans to pieces, Space Marines secure their objective and wordlessly move on to the next battlefield and enemy.

Between their overwhelming strength, expressed almost exclusively through spectacular violence, and their exclusive 'no-girls-allowed' status, the Space Marines of Warhammer 40,000 (or W40k) embody the stereotypical adolescent male power fantasy. However, a closer look at the makeup of the Angels of Death shows something much more interesting going on. The Marines are in part the physical embodiments of martial majesty, so far beyond and above common humanity that they become 'sublime'. But their might on the battlefield also hides a monstrous, boundary-shattering subhumanity, called the 'grotesque'.

Looking at Space Marines through the lens of these artistic terms (the 'sublime' and 'grotesque'), and investigating how they blend subhuman and superhuman traits, shows us that there is much more to the Emperor's finest warriors than mere fantasy. This matters for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the rich intellectual and artistic complexity of the W40k universe as a science-fiction setting. Secondly, and more importantly, exploring how the sublime and grotesque come together in Space Marines will give us a way to question the relationships between power and humanity. How much of what makes you 'human' would you sacrifice to become more powerful?

Before exploring the Marines, I will first introduce what the basic principles of the superhuman sublime and the subhuman grotesque are. Then, pulling primarily from the lore of player guides, along with occasional references to novels, I will demonstrate how Space Marines threaten humanity with their over-awing sublimity, as well as with their inhumanly grotesque construction. I will conclude by briefly considering how Space Marines affect our understanding of concepts like 'power' and 'humanity'.

## Horror and awe: The grotesque and the sublime

### One side of the coin: The sublime

Some things are beautiful, majestic, grandiose, or otherwise awe-inspiring: the Grand Canyon, the Great Wall of China, or a 10-mile-long spaceship made of Gothic churches. But what happens when we see things, natural or artificial, that go beyond simple beauty? Or what if, instead of being visually pleasing, the art or thing is inconceivably grand and overawing in its horror and monstrosity? It is here that we enter the realms of the grotesque and sublime, artistic concepts best viewed as two sides of the same coin.

The sublime—referring to extreme quality or greatness—takes an idea like beauty (or majesty, or grandeur, or similar) and extends it to its greatest extreme. One of the earliest sources to deal with the concept was the 1st century CE Roman-era Greek work of literary criticism *On the Sublime*, written by an unknown figure commonly called Longinus. Longinus describes the sublime as instilling in people such passion and emotion that they succumb to the art and lose their sense of reason[2]. In more concrete terms, an Olympian or professional athlete is 'beautiful' in their ability to push the human body to its greatest limits. If a Space Marine were real, his ability to lift boulders and sprint for days without tiring, amongst other things, would be so ridiculous that it would haywire people's brains and completely erase any understanding of 'athletics' (and the associated beauty) as it relates to being human.

While Longinus provides some of the earliest commentary on the aesthetic sublime, most modern discussion of the concept derives from 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant who, among many other works, wrote *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* in 1764. Kant distinguished between the sublime and the beautiful. For him, the sublime was often associated with terror and fear of an object that was either infinitely grandiose, well-beyond the rational ordered universe, or simply so overwhelming that it

threatens the human consciousness[3],[4]. The sublime is not just more than human, it is so superhuman that it becomes scary. For an idea of what that means, imagine seeing a 2000-pound demigod of war casually striding through the battlefield or shoulder-charging *through* a speeding enemy vehicle without breaking a sweat. What would it do to your psyche?![5].

Given how powerful fear is as an emotion, it makes sense that Kant paid special attention to its place in combining fear with beauty to create the sublime. Think of viewing a raging forest fire, or an erupting volcano. There is something beautiful in the flames, but they also contain a destructive power that can totally erase petty humans and their creations. In art and literature, however, the sublime also contains an element of pleasure. This could be because the audience knows it is safe from the overwhelming object -which is always restricted to the canvas or the page (or, now, the screen) – and/or because the mind takes pleasure in 'translating' the superhuman into something semi-comprehensible[6]. The demons and Chaos-tainted Marines of W40k may be terrifying, but they can't reach out of the page to hurt anyone. Equally, they can eventually be understood as metaphorical manifestations of social fears (e.g., rage, disease), so in a way the horrifying becomes pleasant.

In science fiction literature and media, the sublime can become even more powerful when terror stops being 'pleasant' and leads to existential dread. Dread is a feeling of uncertainty and creeping fear that comes from sensing something is going wrong with the world that you cannot fully see or understand. This version of the sublime feels like a direct threat to the character facing it, to the point that it can even affect the reader (though they remain physically safe). So, while Nurgle, the Chaos god of decay and corruption, may not exist and cannot actually infect the reader, the forces of pestilence and rot that he represents are definitely real. A Nurgle-esque plague can lay the world to waste in moments: how 'safe' is the reader when a random mutation of the flu or coronavirus could wipe out the city they are sitting in with no warning?

Just as this more extreme version of science fiction sublime

makes the reader feel more vulnerable, it also requires greater effort to (potentially) resolve. The sci-fi sublime threatens the individual mind, confronting it with something so unimaginably vast and overpowering that mere humanity cannot stand against it[7]. In the face of the overawing magnificence of the sublime, no human achievement or sense of self-worth, no matter how great, can compare. For example, what does humanity *mean* in comparison to the galaxy-spanning domains of the Necron? Necrons conquered the stars and death itself millions of years before the first anthropoids crawled from the primordial ooze on Earth. They regularly reawaken in tombs *underneath* human colonies and civilizations. From this perspective, how can humans process that they are simultaneously *not* the protagonists of reality (as most literature and art suppose) *and* also are portrayed as vermin to be exterminated? Whilst the reader is physically safe from the monsters, they are still exposed to the troubling ideas. How secure are our own assumptions about humanity and its place in the grand scheme of things, after all? How important are we, really? This is the power the sublime has to overawe us: it forces us to question our existence.

**The other side of the coin: The grotesque**

While the sublime can cause a sense of terror in the reader/viewer, it is closely linked with the grotesque. The grotesque is typically more physical than the often-abstract sublime. Where the sublime is overwhelming in its majesty, like the superhuman Space Marines, the grotesque overwhelms by being unnaturally deformed and defying logical order. A good example of this are the male-female-lobster-duck-*et cetera* hybrids called Daemonettes that serve the Chaos god Slaanesh. Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin described the grotesque as part of the carnival tradition, which involved mocking social norms and rules[8,9]. This is still seen in festivals like Carnival in Rio de Janeiro or Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Like Bakhtin's carnival, these celebrations feature exaggerated masks

and designs meant to be hideous and comedic; they celebrate sex and generally upend the normal order of everyday life.

Whilst the grotesque originally had a humorous element (the goal was to ridicule), over time, it started to lose these pleasant or comic attributes[10]. Consider Frankenstein's monster, the sci-fi brain-in-a-jar villain, or even gargoyles: the grotesque mixes the human form (or other natural forms) with non-human ones, such as animals, vegetables, or electronic parts. It can even make these parts themselves similarly unnatural or deformed[11]. Essentially, if something can be described with the phrase 'that should not be like that', it is probably part of the grotesque.

Perhaps the most defining quality of the grotesque is that it makes us question our understanding of the world. For example, if we understand 'human' as having two arms and two legs, what happens when someone has a metal arm, or has a limb transplanted from another person. How much is left of 'you' when part of 'you' is 'something or someone else'? While prosthetics and transplants no longer inspire the grotesque terror they once did, what happens to the same person when they replace a lost limb with a tentacle? Can a human that is part octopus still be 'human'? The boundaries of what we consider 'normal' or 'possible' break down in such a way that our world stops being reliable. In turn, we may struggle to live in this changed world. That is why "the grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death"[12]. It is the fear of things that should be separate and distinct mashed together and given unnatural life. Just like the chunks of corpses making up Frankenstein's monster... or making a Space Marine.

**One coin, two sides: The sublime and the grotesque**

Remember, the sublime and the grotesque are two sides of the same coin. They both work to attack what we understand as 'humanity'. French author Victor Hugo felt that the two concepts were interrelated and inextricable[13]. The sublime works at an abstract and superhuman level, while the grotesque lives in the world of the physical

and subhuman. Much of the sublime is based on something existing beyond the limits and rules of mere physicality, such that it is essentially formless. When this formlessness becomes physical, it comes in the form of bodies violating natural boundaries: demons, monsters, and any number of strange, unthinkable physiques. No wonder it is distressing. In turn, this grotesqueness then creates the (joyful) terror of Kant's sublime[14].

To understand the interplay between the sublime and the grotesque, think of the Warp in W40k. It is a realm made of emotions made manifest. The Warp is the source of magical powers which gathers all intelligent thought across the universe. Humanity is small and insignificant in comparison! Yet this vast dimension can take physical form as a screaming demon of rage, complete with bat wings, goat hooves, flaming sword, and similar Satanic imagery. The individual demon threatens humanity in two ways: physically (for obvious reasons), and abstractly (the demon represents the idea of anger and its destructive potential over entire civilizations). Therefore, the grotesque can be said to be a part of the sublime. In science fiction, what one generation sees as grotesque, such as transplants or prosthetics, becomes first accepted, then commonplace, and finally gains potential to grow into sublimity. This is what happened to Cyborg, the machine-man superhero from DC Comics, who a few decades before would have been a monster[15].

To sum up, while the sublime and grotesque are not always present together, they both cause the reader/viewer to question their understanding of reality and/or what it means to be human. The sublime, or superhuman, is so grand and amazing that it makes mere humanity seem pointless in comparison. The grotesque, or subhuman, is so physical and unnatural in its composition that the normal order and any understanding suddenly lacks meaning. Not only are both present in the universe of W40K; they are both visible in the body of the Space Marines.

**The Imperium of Man: The history of the Space Marines**

While the grotesque and the sublime may not have been major features of the first *Warhammer 40,000* game published in 1987, exaggeration has always been central to the franchise. The original *Warhammer 40,000* game (then subtitled *Rogue Trader*) was intended for roleplaying, with some minor wargame elements included. The background and setting were imagined as a distantly futuristic science-fiction analogue of the fantasy game that had gained success in 1983, simply called *Warhammer* (later often called *Warhammer Fantasy*). Human knights were elevated to sublime heights as the Space Marines, while Tolkien-inspired Orcs became lunatic, gun-toting, grotesquely physical Orks. Each of the rulebooks, codices, and supplements for the game provided background information for each army. They detailed the lives and deeds of certain heroic individuals, explained the origins of a particular custom, and elaborated on the mythology and cosmology of a given race.

This additional material – called 'flavor text', 'lore', or 'fluff' by the player community – did not alter how the game was played, but it did enrich the world in which the battles occurred. It is here, in the lore, where plastic miniatures became figures of grotesque superhumanity (or sublime subhumanity). Over the course of several decades, dozens of authors, fans-cum-creators, and similar contributors have created a blended network of background stories for the players and fans. In turn, these have since expanded to include many board and video games, multiple role-playing games, and numerous audio-dramas. Nevertheless, throughout this chaotic morass of lore, the superhuman exploits and subhuman origins of the Space Marines have remained a favorite subject of writers, both official and unofficial.

The first Space Marines were created by the psychic being known only as the Emperor of Mankind in the dark days of the 30$^{th}$ millennium. Humanity, which had spread throughout the stars 5,000 years before, had lost the power to communicate with the world of its birth. It become isolated and weak. As alien species and monsters from the hellscape of the Warp preyed on the millions of human worlds, the

Emperor revealed himself for the first time in his tens of thousands of years of life. Quickly, he united a barbaric Terra under his rule and the rest of the solar system afterwards. The Emperor – a perfect man and example of what humans might become through eons of evolution - used his own genetic sequence to engineer twenty sons to serve as generals and lead his armies across the stars to unite all of humanity.

These sons were his Primarchs. From the biological material of each of these figures he would create a legion of genetically engineered super-soldiers. Each separate band would inherit the unique characteristics of its Primarch 'father'. For example, the Raven Guard gained a physically improbable skill at stealth and a pale, haggard appearance from their Primarch Corvus Corax. After the Emperor and his armies reunited humanity only to (ironically) split into civil war, ten millennia went by. During these millennia, the Adeptus Astartes (the formal name for the Space Marines) formed the elite bulwark of the Imperium of Man. They defended it against alien menace, daemon predation from the Warp, or the attacks of the traitorous Chaos Marines who betrayed humanity in the 30th millennia[16].

Every unit, or chapter, of Marines has its own legends and traditions. Although all bear certain similarities in training, equipment, and combat doctrine, there is still much diversity in terms of organization, norms, and philosophy. Nevertheless, both the means by which an individual Astartes is created, and the reaction of other humans to them, remain constant throughout most of the W40K lore. And it is in their very creation that the true nature of the post-human warriors can be seen. The full details of the manufacturing of a Space Marine are especially indicative of their monstrous nature. Here the superhuman men also display their inhumanity, and the sublime becomes grotesque.

**Angels of Death: Space Marines as superhuman**

The Space Marines of the W40k universe are, by their very design, sublime, superhuman figures. Being specifically created to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the strongest alien monsters makes them both human and something inherently other. They are clearly human, but just as clearly are beyond and above any idea of what it means to be 'human'. After all, what is the value of a normal solider compared to a living war-machine who exists to carve through hordes of howling Orks and conquer an entire planet on his own? To reach this level of overwhelming might, training begins early in a young boy's life. As preteens, the strongest young men of a planet are tested in (mostly lethal) battles against the elements, deadly creatures, and even one another. If they survive these challenges, each young man is then tested for genetic and spiritual purity before beginning the transformation into an Adeptus Astartes.

When the transformation process is complete, the young man will emerge many times larger, stronger, and more powerful than a human. Reflexes are pushed beyond the human limit despite the new Astartes being, at minimum, well over two meters tall and weighing anywhere between 500 and 1000 kg. This transformation from boy to super-soldier begins to mix the sublime (the awe-inspiring size and power) with the grotesque (a human that is not human). And that is before he is placed in gigantic power-armor, which further enhances his strength and physical stature[17]! It is no wonder that most people are immediately intimidated when they see a Space Marine. Their ferocious majesty is so overpowering that human allies succumb to a diagnosable condition called 'transhuman dread':

> *"The sight of an Adeptus Astartes was one thing: taller and broader than a man could ever be, armoured like a demigod. The singularity of purpose was self-evident. An Adeptus Astartes was designed to fight and kill anything that didn't annihilate it first. If you saw an Adeptus Astartes, you knew you were in trouble. The appearance alone cowed you with fear. But to see one move. Apparently that was the real thing. Nothing*

> *human-shaped should be so fast, so lithe, so powerful, especially not anything in excess of two metres tall and carrying more armour than four normal men could lift. The sight of an Adeptus Astartes was one thing, but the moving fact of one was quite another...It froze a man, stuck him to the ground, caused his mind to lock up, made him lose control of bladder and bowel. Something huge and warlike gave pause: something huge and warlike and moving with the speed of a striking snake, that was when you knew that gods moved amongst men, and that there existed a scale of strength and speed beyond anything mortal, and that you were about to die."*[18]

The Astartes are literal giants among men, towering over them in ancient, intentionally intimidating power armor decorated with skulls and religious iconography. By bodily presence alone, a Space Marine is a direct threat to the physical wellbeing of any humans nearby. This separates Marines from allies, regardless of the allies' allegiance. But as a champion of humanity, the Marine must be human, which he paradoxically cannot be. Instead, he represents a potential peak of human evolution and development, raised from mortal man into demigod through the skill of other people. We can see Kant's 'sublime' at play here: the mind can intellectually comprehend what it sees, but the actual presence of a Space Marine still threatens the basic understanding of 'humanity'. An Adeptus Astartes is innately hostile to the basic value of humanity: what can a single, regular person be worth next to one of these warriors?

If both Space Marines and unmodified people are considered human, despite their vast differences, then the idea of 'human' has to be stretched so broadly that it stops applying to any real *homo sapiens*. A normal man or woman is dwarfed by one of the Angels of Death, both literally and figuratively. The very concept of 'normalcy' becomes moot! If a Space Marines' physical presence is not enough to make him overwhelmingly sublime, however, the reactions to him at least show the awe in which Imperial soldiers (and real-world fans) hold him. And this same awe can just as easily be linked to his grotesqueness.

**Abhor the mutant: Space Marines as subhuman**

Chosen from the strongest human stock, trained and conditioned by humans, altered and enhanced by human science performed by human hands, a Space Marine both is and is not human. Instead, he may better be called post-human: a more advanced example of what his original race may yet become. One augmented and altered to overcome the physical limitations and degradations of the human form. This augmentation moves the terror of the Astartes from the sublimely abstract—making humanity meaningless given Space Marines' overarching power—to the grotesquely concrete—making humanity meaningless by mashing parts together and calling them 'men'. The biology and creation of an Astartes is worth exploring because it is here that the grotesque truly reaches its highest levels. The grotesque takes what appears to be a heroic demigod of war and reveals it to be a cannibalistic chimera – powerful in spite of, or even because of, its monstrosity. In turn, this troubles what it means to be 'powerful': where do you draw the line between hero and monster?

Space Marines are incredibly physically imposing. Whilst they are enhanced to be exemplars of might and strength, Marines can go further beyond their 'biological normality'. Mutations in genetic legacies since the time of the Emperor have changed Space Marines of specific chapters or lineage, making them (even more?) subhuman grotesqueries. The Blood Angels chapter, for example, are the sons of the winged Primarch Sanguinius. Somehow their gene-seeds, the specialized organs from which a Primarch's genetic material is implanted into a Marine, became corrupted and exposed the Blood Angels to a kind of berserker vampirism[19,20]. The source of their more-than-human power is also the source of their less-than-human monstrosity. This thirst for blood means the Space Marines in question literally yearn for the plasma of their foes. By destroying them and drinking their life-juices they gain increased power... at the expense of a loss of control[21].

Whereas the Blood Angels hide their nature beneath a normal facade, the Space Wolves chapter's appearance shows hints of the

true monster lurking beneath the surface. In addition to the standard gene-seed organs, the Space Wolves have a unique implantation called the Canis Helix. This makes a super-soldier aspirant into one of the most powerful Space Marines, but in the process may kill him or worse. The Helix contains many genes which cannot be incorporated by a human system, causing the aspiring Space Wolf to resemble his namesake in physical form. If he is strong and fortunate, his body transformation will be mild: he becomes extremely hairy, his canines lengthen into fangs as he ages, and his sense of smell and hearing become almost wolf-like. If he is unlucky, he becomes an unthinking, savage superhuman lycanthrope held in chains to be unleashed on the worst of foes.

Whether a Space-faring Viking berserker or shaggy wolf-man in tattered power armor, the Space Wolf is the very pinnacle of monstrosity in service to the Imperium[22]. Importantly, the Space Wolf also shows how the power of a post-human Space Marine can be extended to such extremes that it becomes the unthinking, slavering brutality of a werewolf. Literally, a post-human monster. It is impossible to tell where the Marine stops being a human and becomes wolfish, or vampiric, or indeed how much of that grotesque intermixing serves as the source of his power. In fact, like the Blood Angels, the source of the Space Wolf's curse is also the source of his power. He is only made superhuman by becoming subhuman. This apparently incompatible sense of metamorphosis is the very basis of the grotesque. If a human, especially one meant to be the greatest of champions, simultaneously looks like a monster... then the universe must be a horrifying place indeed. In this context, how can we know what counts as 'humanity'?

The grotesque nature of the Space Marines exists as more than just a quirk possessed by some chapters. The creation of every Astartes involves mixing human and non-human parts in a way that makes each post-human warrior subhuman. Once chosen for initiation, a young man begins the process of becoming one of the Emperor's Angels of Death. Over the course of months and years, he is implanted with up to 19 specialized organs, grown from the gene-seed

of the Primarchs and enhanced with nanoscopic machines. While there is a great deal of physical training and ideological indoctrination to accompany the surgeries, it is the physical organs themselves and their effect on the former human that most exemplify the grotesque[23].

The various organs implanted into the Space Marine are all pseudo-mystic bio-mechanical creations which act on his genetic structure, turning him from a human into something else. One of the main aspects of humanity is our physical makeup: two eyes (not five); two lungs (not three, although a person who has lost a lung in an accident is still human because they only ever had a maximum of two). To have an extra lung, heart, and stomach makes the Astartes into something that is, by definition, inhuman. It is an abhorrent combination of wholes, part human and part genetic chimera, into something clearly subhuman, yet also sublime in its power. And this concern over identity is exacerbated further by the even more exotic features of Astartes' biology.

Over the course of his transformation, a neophyte Space Marine will receive a second, smaller heart to help power his newly enlarged frame. He will also get a third lung (enabling him to breathe in poisonous atmospheres and underwater), a second stomach (which draws nutrients out of inedible material and neutralizes poisons), and a gland in his brain that stimulates bone growth (causing his ribcage to fuse into a solid protective plate). Furthermore, he will receive a Larraman's Organ which creates special blood cells to assist with healing. Wounds as large as a severed limb will clot in moments and permit the warrior to keep fighting without concern for shock or blood loss. Since the Space Marine is impervious to most wounds, he is also given special offensive capabilities in the form of the Betcher's Glands. These twin organs allow a Marine to spit a blinding poison that works on contact, and which is acidic enough to eat through strong iron bars over the course of a few hours. Finally, one of the most unique organs to be inserted into the aspiring Astartes is the Omophagea[24]. Placed in the spinal cord, where it effectively becomes a part of the Marine's brain, the small organ is designed to

> "*...absorb genetic material generated in animal tissue as a function of memory. This endows the Space Marine with an unusual survival trait...If a Space Marine eats part of a creature, he will absorb some of the memories of that creature*"[25].

All these organs serve to make the young initiate into something decidedly non-human. With the inclusion of the Larriman's Organ, a Space Marine loses many of the normal concerns of mortality, as he is immune to wounds that would kill a regular woman or man. This includes being completely skinned alive so that the surgeons may implant a Black Carapace, which connects the Marine's nervous system to his power armor. This process is usually completed while the young Marine is awake so he may prove his ability to withstand pain (just in case the W40k universe wasn't extreme enough already). The Black Carapace links the Astartes to his armor in a way that cannot be duplicated by other factions that use similar power armor but who are not human-machine hybrids. They must merely wear their suits rather than merging with them like a second skin.

The capacity to heal nearly any injury – which itself is unnatural – has been inserted into the body of a human being. Doing so forever combines the two in ways that cannot exist according to a rational, ordered universe. The Betcher's Glands also combine humanity with the features of a spitting serpent. Yet snake venom is not corrosive. This increases the Marine's grotesque physiology exponentially: not only do they have an 'unnatural' snake-like trait; that trait is made even more horrifying by making the venom corrosive, and therefore doubly unnatural. Finally, the Omophagea turns the nominally human Space Marine into a zombie-like monster which cannibalizes the flesh of sentient creatures (Orks, Eldar, other Space Marines, or regular humans) to gain information. Cannibalism is widely regarded as a gross violation of natural laws and social norms. No wonder it is often a feature of the grotesque, both carnivalesque and terror-inducing. How much more disturbing is it when the cannibal is two meters tall, impervious to any wounds, and technically a 'good guy?'

The Space Marines are like Frankenstein's monster: made of a

mixture of unnatural, irrational organs put into their bodies. They violate the laws and boundaries of a rational, ordered, and natural world. To be 'a human creature' means you share common characteristics with most of humanity. The hybrid creature that emerges from the Astartes initiation process is very different from what we would consider 'human'... which means that the supposed pinnacles of human might and evolution may not even be human at all.

**And they shall know no fear: Conclusion**

The warrior-monks of the Adeptus Astartes are so powerful that they inspire existential dread in their own allies. Yet, to the real-world fans of the Warhammer 40K universe, they are equally unnatural and grotesque. It is their monstrous hybridity that allows for their sublime might. Even if the mind can comprehend their abilities, their very existence threatens the stability and coherence of humanity. The aesthetic principles of the sublime and the grotesque coexist in the Space Marines, just as they do in the great works which Longinus, Kant, and others wrote.

Using the sublime and grotesque lenses to investigate the lore of the W40k universe brings a fascinating new element to the Space Marines. The warriors of the Adeptus Astartes are not just entertaining military science fiction, but artistic ways of reflecting on humanity. What is the value of power so over-extended that it becomes terrifying? How monstrous is a creature whose subhuman, grotesque creation gives him the might to defend ordinary people? Is a regular human, be they an Imperial citizen or a real-world reader, more or less than a Space Marine? Looking at the warriors in these terms makes them infinitely more complex than they might initially seem: they are not simply cool warriors who destroy their enemies with chainswords and explosive bolter shells. They are a threat to the humanity of both their in-universe allies *and* their real-world readers. In turn, this helps us and all other readers explore our own understanding of humanity. How much would you be willing to give in exchange for power?

8

# GODS AND DAEMONS

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN WARHAMMER 40,000

**TARA B. M. SMITH, PHD**

Religion is everywhere in the Warhammer 40,000 (W40k) universe. Whether through gameplay, lore, or community discussions, religious imagery permeates the setting in overt and subtle ways. For example, in the reveal trailer for *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine II* (2021) we first see a human soldier, attacked by animalistic aliens, taking refuge behind towering gothic architecture[1]. This soldier, much like the viewer, then watches in awe as gigantic super soldiers equipped in armour that is equal parts futuristic and that of a crusading knight descend from the heavens, choral music swelling as they launch into combat. In the frenetic fighting that follows, we are shown a close-up of a haloed statue (itself part gothic angel, part Space Marine) as it is spattered with blood. As the battle ends, the surviving human soldiers line the central thoroughfare, kneeling to the Space Marines, the soldier we saw initially whispering "His Angels" as they pass. Are these Catholic references merely stylistic choices, or do they serve a deeper purpose?

Warhammer 40,000's religious imagery is more than just world-building. It actively shapes how we engage with the game, its lore, and its community. Catholic, occult, and mythological elements do more than set the atmosphere; they fuel creative storytelling, debate,

and reflection on faith, power, and mythology. This chapter draws on the same interview data used in my broader research project on Warhammer 40K and religion, conducted during my time as a Postdoctoral Fellow of Spirituality and the Arts at Harvard Divinity School. It builds on my analysis in *Miniature Mindfulness: Finding Spiritual Flow with Warhammer 40,000 Figurines*[2]. Even if you're not religious, the grandeur and mythic weight of these themes contribute to powerful, larger-than-life experiences, which is what makes Warhammer so immersive[3].

Religion in W40k is not static. In this chapter I will explore how religious themes impact on fans' shaping their own lore, storytelling, roleplaying, and worldbuilding. The chapter is based on my research looking at how religion appears in W40k's lore and how players experience and reinterpret religious themes. By carefully analysing both in-game materials, such as *Black Library* books (published by Games Workshop's fiction arm) and *Codexes* (army-specific rule and lore supplements), as well as online discussions and interviews with W40k players and painters, we can appreciate the complex ways people engage with religious symbolism. These personal insights reveal how players internalise, challenge, or creatively expand upon the game's religious themes.

I will begin the chapter by introducing online debates around the nature of gods and faith in W40k, before moving into an analysis of Chaos and Christian themes through both lore examples and player perspectives. Finally, I will examine how players incorporate religious themes into their own storytelling and wargaming experiences. While I primarily focus on Christian and occult elements, the wider Warhammer universe is full of fictionalised religions that make it rich and complex. Whether you are a long-time fan or new to these religious themes, my chapter will help you realise how Warhammer's religious imagery enhances both your worldbuilding and enjoyment of the franchise.

**What is religion?**

Trying to come up with a universal definition of religion is somewhat of a fool's errand. There is no single definition of what a religion is that doesn't inevitably exclude many traditions. Religion can focus on symbols (crosses, halos, the Imperial Aquila), sacred texts (Bible, Quran or the *Lectitio Divinitatus*), deities (Zeus, the Emperor of Mankind), or religious experiences (prayer, meditation, divine visions or the *Litany of Hate* recited by Space Marines before battle).

In this chapter, I define religion more loosely as a set of beliefs, rituals, or mythologies— based on both imagination and real-world traditions—that shape how people understand the world around them. This definition fits the W40k universe because it draws on religion in an expansive and interactive way more than in just a historical or theological one. This breadth invites fans and players to fill in gaps, explore, connect and reinterpret religious themes. However, players are not creating religion themselves. Rather, the game's religious themes *enhance* players' immersion, influencing their storytelling, roleplaying, and worldbuilding. Therefore, religion in W40k supports fans to create their own lore as the games they play progress, morph and shape.

The loose definition of religion I've shared becomes even more complex when applied to games where religious elements are often treated as purely symbolic (and, therefore, stripped of their original spiritual meaning). If a W40k player offers a sacrifice in the name of the Blood God Khorne, are they *truly* invoking a daemon, or do they offer a sacrifice without even noticing the religious significance? Some players treat these in-game elements as immersive worldbuilding while others use them to reflect on real-world beliefs, history, and spirituality. Iconography and images of daemons, for example, are popularly found in many online and tabletop games but are disconnected from their religious histories by most secular or mainstream players.

**How is religion thought about and discussed in the Warhammer 40,000 community?**

To understand why W40k fans debate religion, it helps to first look at the setting itself. W40k is built around a deeply religious dystopia, where the Imperium of Man worships the Emperor as a god (even though he rejected religion during his lifetime). This contradiction fuels endless fan discussions about whether the Emperor is truly divine. At the same time, Chaos Gods, miracles, and religious rituals exist in the lore, but their reality is often questioned. These debates, about what counts as 'real' religion in the Warhammer universe, are central to fan engagement, shaping how players interpret faith, power, and mythology in the game's world.

Online forums and YouTube creators frequently debate religion in W40k (sometimes with a sense of discomfort or reluctance to fully embrace W40K's religious themes!). This community often overemphasises the secular role of religion within the W40k universe, almost as if they were embarrassed of the religious elements of the lore. For example, popular Loretuber Arbitor Ian argues that W40K's gods do not count as 'real' gods because they are neither benevolent nor beyond human explanation. His argument reflects a common tendency to define divinity in rigid terms, often through a secular lens[4].

Arbitor Ian's perspective (which is commonly expressed by other community members) raises a larger question—what makes a god? It's not that simple to define. Religious belief often centres on ritual, faith, and power structures rather than metaphysical absolutes. For instance, in Ancient Rome, emperors were worshipped as gods, not because they were omnipotent, but because they held supreme authority and were central to civic and religious life.

This tension between secular and religious interpretations isn't limited to content creators like Arbitor Ian. It also plays out in the way W40k fans discuss faith, gods, and belief in online forums. In my research – I analysed discussions on the r/40klore subreddit over a one-month period in 2023 – I found 23 different posts which used the

word 'religion'. After analysing how 'religion' was discussed in these posts, I discovered the two most common themes were faith (7 posts) and the nature of God (5 posts). The remaining posts focused on mythology, worship, and the social role of religion in the Warhammer universe.

These Reddit discussions show how players negotiate Warhammer's religious themes, either by embracing their significance or reframing them through secular or philosophical lenses. Researchers from the Groningen University and KU Leuven describe online discussions like those on Reddit about religion as 'pop theology'[5]. That is, religion in games sparks reflection and debate[6]. As we will see through two examples, in the W40k community, Warhammer's religious themes do more than shape the lore. They encourage fans to wrestle with questions of belief, power, and meaning, even beyond the game itself.

Our first example focuses on a popular r/40klore thread with over 400 comments debating whether the Emperor is truly divine or simply an extraordinary human. Fans examined his rejection of worship, his god-like power, and whether his rule ultimately harmed humanity. Some viewed his story as a cautionary tale of hubris, comparing it to biblical narratives like the Tower of Babel or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. One commenter argued that the *Horus Heresy* (a brutal civil war where half of the Emperor's sons – Primarchs – turned on him) is largely told from the perspective of fallen Primarchs, much like *Paradise Lost* is shaped by Satan's point of view:

> "... Don't read HH [Horus Heresy] and only listen to the excuses of the fallen"[7].

Others framed the Emperor as an example of flawed leadership, with one user stating:

> "It is a cautionary tale, of someone trying to kill God or supersede creation like 'the Tower of Babel' story"[8].

These discussions highlight how W40k's religious themes go beyond simple worldbuilding—they encourage philosophical reflection on power, divinity, and human fallibility. Fans actively drew comparisons between the game's lore and real-world religious traditions.

A related discussion explored faith in the Imperium through two Imperial scholars, Kyril Sindermann and Hari Harr. In the lore, these characters debate the role of faith in relation to one of the Imperium's first saints, Euphrati Keeler, whose faith (or latent psychic ability) grants her seemingly divine powers. Sindermann, a self-described sceptic, acknowledges that in times of powerlessness, "we look for meaning and a source of strength". Initially dismissing religion as an oppressive force, he later concedes that Keeler "might be right" – that faith, regardless of its metaphysical truth, provides real strength and purpose for those who embrace it. His final advice, "go out into the world and find out the truth for yourself", captures W40k's core tension between scepticism and belief. This mirrors real-world discussions on whether faith is a source of strength or a means of control.

This in-story debate gave fans a platform to question how a seemingly secular society could come to worship the Emperor despite knowing he isn't a god. One user pointed out how the Emperor already embodies god-like traits: "He's wearing golden armor, a flaming sword, doesn't speak but projects his words into your mind..."[9]. Others redditors reinforced this, citing two Black Library novels (*Prince of Crows* and *Mechanicum*), which describe the Emperor as a "sun incarnated in human skin" and a divine figure whose mere presence has miraculous effects. A further poster highlighted how religious iconography is deeply embedded in the Imperium, from the Astartes being called 'angels' to the golden robes of the Custodes (the Emperor's elite bodyguards).

These discussions show that Warhammer's religious themes don't just shape its lore; they spark deeper engagement with questions of faith, power, and belief in both the game world and real life. Next,

we're going to explore the first of two major religious themes in Warhammer 40,000.

### Chaos, Satanism, and heavy metal music

One of the most prominent themes in player discussions about W40k's religious imagery is chaos, satanism, and heavy metal aesthetics. This has little to do with Warhammer fans authentically worshiping Chaos and more about these themes shaping the game's broader aesthetic and storytelling appeal. W40k's use of religious imagery is not just about faith and devotion—it also embraces darker themes, repurposing religious symbols for dramatic effect rather than spiritual devotion. Understanding how these elements shape W40k's mythos helps explain why players are drawn to Chaos. They are not necessarily attracted to its religious significance, but often find alluring Chaos' striking visuals, transgressive themes, and the sense of rebellion it embodies!

The connection between Chaos and heavy metal culture is significantly influences how W40k players engage with the game's darker religious imagery. Metal music in the 1980s, particularly heavy metal, thrash, and black metal, often incorporated satanic and occult imagery. Sometimes it did so for shock value and others because musicians were genuinely inspired by those themes. John Blanche's iconic W40k artwork, filled with gothic, surreal, and nightmarish imagery, mirrors this aesthetic and would not be out of place on album covers for bands like Black Sabbath, Dio, or Mercyful Fate.

While heavy metal helped define Chaos' aesthetic excess, W40k's early years were also influenced by punk's rebellious, anti-authoritarian ethos, particularly in *Rogue Trader* (1987). This is evident in the anarchic nature of Chaos, which opposes both the Imperium's rigid religious control and the bureaucratic oppression of the game's setting. Just as punk rejected societal norms, Chaos in W40k represents a force of absolute freedom—though at a destructive cost.

One of the most striking examples of this Warhammer and heavy metal connection is W40k's 1988 collaboration with death metal band

Bolt Thrower. Bryan Ansell, then head of Games Workshop and a key figure in Warhammer's early development, approved the use of Warhammer imagery for Bolt Thrower's album *Realm of Chaos*. In turn, the band created Warhammer-themed songs, further cementing the franchise's ties to the extreme metal aesthetic[10].

This fusion of heavy metal's rebellious, dark aesthetic with W40k's lore helped solidify Chaos as one of the most visually and thematically striking factions in the game. The over-the-top metal aesthetic is a big reason why many players are drawn into the hobby and what fuels their engagement and enjoyment. Painters and players who collect the Chaos faction tend to like the models' darker looks. However, this doesn't mean they believe in Satanism or the occult. While W40k's religious and esoteric influences are largely about style and storytelling, they are also a way for players to explore themes of belief, power, and morality in a fictional setting. Similarly, W40k's creator, Rick Priestley, has acknowledged that early lore was inspired by occult works and groups like the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley, and the *Book of Abramelin*. However, these influences were filtered through contemporary popular culture, science fiction, and fantasy literature, shaping W40k's worldbuilding rather than serving as direct ideological foundations[11].

Though W40k tends to describe Chaos-aligned factions as primarily destructive and morally devoid, many players enjoy having ethical discussions about these armies. However, just as the game's lore presents a range of perspectives on organised religions like Christianity, deeper narratives—especially in Black Library novels—reveal moral complexity within Chaos followers as well. A good example is Argel Tal, a Captain of the Word Bearers Chaos Space Marine Legion, who is possessed by a daemon known as Raum. Rather than fully subjugating Argel Tal, the pair form a largely symbiotic relationship, in which Argel Tal continues to struggle with his conscience and values:

> "Just because we are soldiers in a warzone, it is no less murder if we slaughter unarmed civilians. The context is irrelevant... How many

> times have I told you I wished this Truth [the existence of Chaos] *wasn't* true? But it is. It is true – *the* Truth – and we face it. We will not live a lie"[12].

As Argal Tal shows, even in W40k's darkest factions there is room for nuance and depth. Chaos factions, which include armies that represent horror, tragedy, and destruction, attracted players for different reasons. When I asked about the appeal of the grimdark aesthetic, Rosie felt that there's just "something special about Chaos", particularly liking Khorne (the Blood God, full of rage and a thirst for war) simply because "he's cool". Connor, by contrast, was attracted to the Chaos faction because he loves horror elements, including the "weird art" and HP Lovecraft-inspired themes.

Players I interviewed also reflected on how Warhammer's themes connected with their own experiences. Victor liked the W40k universe because of its raw, unforgiving nature—it strips away modern complexities and constraints, forcing individuals to rely on their own abilities to survive. He compared this to zombie and vampire movies, which shake viewers out of their ordinary reality and challenge them to think about survival in extreme circumstances. In W40k, he saw a world where action mattered more than bureaucracy, where fighting for your life replaced people's mundane day-to-day struggles.

Despite this appeal, enjoying the lore rarely translates into a desire to live in the W40k universe. Compared to other fandoms and science fiction universes (like *Star Trek*, for example), when I asked Victor about living somewhere in the Warhammer 40,000 landscape, he quickly replied, "Hell no, I ain't gonna go there". His response reflects a common sentiment among fans. While the darkness and grittiness of the setting can be compelling, the brutal, feudal nature of W40k makes it an undesirable place to live.

Not all players who are drawn to Chaos align with its darker themes. As a kid, Freddie was fascinated by different religions, including Satanism, because it felt like the opposite of his Christian upbringing. Freddie went to church and youth camps but never really

connected with Christianity. While he wasn't interested in joining a Satanic group, he was intrigued by the idea of a religion that revered the devil instead of fearing him. W40k novels inject ambiguity into the Warhammer lore by blurring the lines between 'good guys' (supposedly, the Imperium) and 'bad' ones (supposedly, Chaos) A character who struggles with this ambiguity and receives sympathy (at least from some) is another Chaos Space Marine Word Bearer, Lorgar Aurelian.

Lorgar, one of the Emperor's 20 sons, was unlike his brothers. He was deeply devout and worshipped the Emperor (his father) as a god long before the Imperium accepted religious faith. For this, he was harshly reprimanded. To punish Lorgar for slowing down the Imperium's expansion with his religious devotion, the Emperor ordered the Ultramarines (led by one of Lorgar's brothers) to destroy Monarchia, the holiest city of Lorgar's people. Forced to witness its annihilation, Lorgar was publicly humiliated and left questioning everything he believed in[13].

Desperate for answers, he began searching for deeper truths beyond the Emperor's vision of the galaxy. Guided by his closest advisors, Lorgar explored forbidden knowledge which led him to Chaos. During this journey, he experienced a divine revelation—unlike the Emperor, the Chaos Gods actually spoke to him. He came to believe that Chaos, not the Emperor, was the true divine force of the universe and led his Legion, the Word Bearers, into the service of the Dark Gods.

This moral complexity appealed to a miniature painter I spoke to for my research, Felix, because he liked to think about "these darker powers that exist beyond our ability to understand". This complexity —particularly how different laws govern different realities—makes playing Chaos so compelling. Sure, Chaos is framed as the ultimate evil in Imperium propaganda, but its followers often have more going on than just mindless destruction. Some, like Argel Tal, struggle with what they've become, while others, like Lorgar, turn to Chaos because they believe it is the better choice for humanity's survival.

Moral ambiguity is part of what makes Chaos such an exciting

faction to play—not just because of its deep lore, but because its over-the-top aesthetic is ridiculously fun. Chaos is loud, dramatic, and full of spiked armour, flaming skulls, and heavy metal album-cover energy. It represents rebellion in both narrative and style. For some players, it's about engaging with big questions of faith, corruption, and power. For others, it's just about playing the faction that looks the most badass. And that's what makes W40k so immersive—not just as a setting, but as a game where players get to shape and interpret its world in their own way.

### Christian motifs, symbols, and aesthetics

While W40k's Chaos factions embrace themes of excess, corruption, and destruction, the second major religious influence in the game is not limited to darkness. Many of Warhammer 40,000's most iconic factions, such as the Black Templars and the Sisters of Battle, draw heavily from the Catholic tradition. These factions reframe faith as a source of strength, devotion, and discipline, creating a striking contrast with Chaos while still aligning with W40k's dramatic aesthetic. You can recognise themes from Catholicism, medieval Christianity, and others in the Ecclesiarchy (a galactic theocracy resembling the Catholic Church), the worship of the Emperor as a divine figure, and the Inquisition's persecution of heresy.

The Sisters of Battle (clad in cathedral-like armour and religious chanting) and the Black Templars (modelled after real-world crusaders) embody Catholic themes. Taking religion out of its real-life setting and putting it through the 'Nuns in Space' filter makes religion more dramatic and engaging! Beyond that, science fiction settings allow religious themes to be explored without the usual political and cultural baggage, making them more accessible to a wider audience. For example, a Reddit poster reflected how W40k made the Catholic Church more interesting:

> "...The Ecclesiarchy and saints exist in real life, such as in the Catholic Church with its many local saints that has specialities to

> help you with. Such as Saint Dymphna who is the patroness to those who suffer with nervous and mental afflictions. Sounds boring? Well swap her with Saint Celestine of the Sabbat Worlds and it becomes interesting"[14].

Other people I interviewed spoke about Catholic and Christian themes within the lore often in relation to their experiences of religion. On one end of the spectrum, religion was viewed as a narrative device. Chris felt religion within the lore was important "to show the good and the bad of it", because it makes the story telling more interesting. In the middle of the spectrum, John referred to W40k as "Catholics in space". He connected with the gothic iconography and imagery which reminded him of his childhood memories of going to church. It rekindled his fascination with the more macabre elements of Catholicism, like the fact there were "people buried in the floor of the church". Though no longer identifying as Catholic, John's early experiences with religion have shaped his relationship with W40k's lore.

On the other end of the spectrum is Connor, a self-identified practicing Mormon. He liked "being religious and playing Warhammer", which is why he covered his models with Mormon symbols and imagery. For example, he described being inspired by the angel Moroni, a Mormon angel often seen blowing a trumpet on the tops of Latter-day Saint temples, while painting and modelling. For Connor, painting a model meant "organizing the plastic, much like, how we're taught, God has organized the universe and stuff". This in turn makes him careful and deliberate, feeling a sort of responsibility in what he is crafting as well as helping him think about God.

Organised religion within *W40k* lore, just like we saw with how players view religion, is depicted across a spectrum. Just as some hobbyists, like Connor, embrace Warhammer's religious themes as a meaningful way to reflect on faith, others see W40k's portrayal of religion as deeply cynical or even satirical. Whilst each person can, and should, interpret the role of religion in W40k for themselves, Rick

Priestley (W40k's creator) confirmed that the original driver behind Warhammer 40,000 lore was irony[15].

An early important reference point for the Horus Heresy, a key civil war in W40k, was John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton's poem depicts the fall of humankind, Satan tempting Adam and Eve, and an angelic war, all themes that clearly influenced the Horus Heresy's drama. But W40k's religious themes were never meant to be taken at face value. Priestley has stated that the Imperium of Man is a satire not just of organised religion, but of totalitarianism in all its forms. The Imperium is a theocracy, but it is also a brutal authoritarian state, where blind faith and bureaucratic oppression go hand in hand.

Priestley wanted to convey irony through an 'eternal moral dilemma', a setting so bleak that players are forced to question what they might be willing to do to survive. To achieve this, he studied how the early Christian church developed, particularly its schisms, heresies, and factional conflicts. The W40k universe reflects these tensions, showing how religious institutions can become tools of control as well as sources of meaning. The Ecclesiarchy, the Imperium's dominant religious institution, embodies this contradiction. It preaches unwavering devotion to the Emperor but is also fanatical, persecuting anyone who refuses to embrace its rigid dogma. This portrayal is often seen as a critique of organised religion, particularly the more authoritarian aspects of the Catholic Church during its most turbulent history.

While Warhammer 40,000 often presents religious themes through satire or critique, it also includes moments where faith and devotion are depicted with sincerity and reverence. These moments, though less frequent, highlight the tension in the game's world-building. Religious conviction can be both a tool of oppression and a source of virtue.

A good example is the story of Asavan Tortellius, an Ecclesiarchy priest who lives in a monastery atop an Imperator Battle Titan, a walking fortress of war. When the Titan is suddenly besieged by Orks, most of its inhabitants are slaughtered. Asavan and the

remaining survivors flee to a hive city below, where he encounters a starving woman. As she weeps, he assures her that he is a priest sent by the God-Emperor to help, and they share a simple meal together in the ruins of her home. For the first time in his life, Asavan finds himself ministering to someone truly in need, realising that "so many of his sermons had been to fellow clerics and machine-altered skitarii that a weeping woman praising the Emperor was quite beyond his experience". His faith is genuine, yet it exists within a system that often prioritises ritual over real compassion.

This moment encapsulates a key tension in W40k's portrayal of religion. Asavan embodies Christian virtues like offering food to the hungry, comforting the suffering, yet his story also underscores a deeper cynicism about the Ecclesiarchy. His belief is sincere, but it operates within a structure that is often corrupt and self-serving. This duality, where religion is both a force for compassion and an instrument of control, is a recurring theme in W40k's world-building.

## 'Playing' with religion

Regardless of whether Warhammer 40,000 fans are drawn to Chaos or Catholic symbolism, one of the key ways players relate to these religious themes is through storytelling and roleplaying. By creating personal narratives—whether through custom lore, character backgrounds, or in-game rituals—players deepen their connection to the game. These narratives enhance immersion and gameplay by making battles more than just about strategy. This section looks at how player creativity brings religious themes into gaming experiences, from tabletop roleplay to online discussions.

Victor, one of my interviewees, described creating a custom Space Marines Blood Angels chapter. The Blood Angels faction suffer from a genetic flaw called the 'Red Thirst' which causes them to struggle with a vampiric bloodlust. In more extreme cases, this 'Red Thirst' becomes the 'Black Rage', pushing Blood Angels into madness and fury as they think they are reliving the death of their Primarch, Sanguinius. Chaplains act as both spiritual guides and battlefield

overseers, ensuring that warriors affected by the Black Rage can still fight with purpose rather than losing themselves completely. Victor leaned into this lore by creating an overzealous cohort led by a priest-like Chaplain who would prevent his troops from raging out of control. In doing so, Victor expanded on the existing religious themes within the faction and reinforced his own narrative interpretation of the game.

The religiously influenced lore that players create for their individual armies and models makes the gameplay more immersive. Victor explained that "having this type of lore really helps you to unravel a bit more about what and why you do [things]—you need to have some background and create stories for your games to be more narrative, rather than just saying, 'Okay, we played, I won, that's it—mark my score on the board'". Since the Warhammer 40,000 universe is so expansive, fans often adapt and expand upon its existing stories, shaping their own narratives within the setting.

Connor, for instance, enjoys the grimdark tone of W40k but also feels the need to reshape parts of it to suit his perspective. He describes how, while he loves dark and unsettling fiction—including horror and H. P. Lovecraft's works—he also looks for something deeper within the setting. Warhammer 40,000 presents Space Marines as having lost all connection to ordinary humans, but for Connor, this extreme detachment feels incomplete. "Hold on, there's got to be some sort of hope. And there's got to be some sort of connection. Otherwise, what's the point?" He 'retcons' parts of the lore to make it more nuanced by keeping the darkness while also imagining moments of human connection and purpose. This process makes the setting more personally meaningful, giving him a sense of adventure within the vast and evolving universe.

Victor recounted a further example of 'playing with religion'. A friend of his –a soldier who plays with the Imperial Guard faction (an army of humans backed by artillery gunfire) – often uses military phrases and commands when playing with his units. As this group of friends play game after game, certain stories begin accompanying specific models. Some miniatures never seem to get hit by a bullet, or

inversely, can never seem to hit any targets. Collectively, the group 'explained' these funny anecdotes using religion: one model may have been blessed whilst another is cursed.

The lore players create for their individual models, including religious ideas, makes the gameplay more immersive. This storytelling process mirrors how myths and religious traditions take shape: through shared narratives that shape meaning and identity over time. Even when players aren't explicitly thinking about religious themes, the act of building lore, assigning symbolic importance to in-game events, and shaping narratives around characters reflects the same impulse that drives religious storytelling. The vastness of the Warhammer universe allows players to fill in gaps, creating their own interpretations and narratives, much like how religious traditions evolve through mythmaking and reinterpretation.

## Conclusion

Warhammer 40,000 provides a sandbox where players encounter religious narratives in ways that are playful, critical, or deeply personal. Whilst it is fine to simply enjoy the aesthetic appeal of religious imagery without engaging with deeper meaning, it is useful to recognise how these spiritual and symbolic themes enhance our immersion in the W40k universe. Religion in popular culture is not static—it evolves, taking on new meanings depending on how people interact with it.

Chaos in Warhammer 40,000 is more than just a force of destruction. It is a narrative space where characters confront deep philosophical and theological tensions about faith, power, and human nature. So heavily inspired by a heavy music aesthetic, players are drawn into an over-the-top and outlandish style. As part of this aesthetic, the Chaos factions and characters within the lore struggle with corruption and belief. This allows W40k's religious imagery to simultaneously be satirical *and* a source of connection, inviting players to explore these tensions. Equally, Catholic imagery and religious symbolism spark debate across online forums like r/40klore on

Reddit. While Warhammer often parodies organised religion, Black Library authors also depict moments of genuine piety. This complicates the simplistic assumption that faith in the Warhammer 40,000 universe is purely satirical.

Throughout this chapter I have shown the variety of ways players experience and interpret Warhammer's religious themes. Some engage with them through worldbuilding and discussion, while others use them as a means of reflecting on real-world beliefs. Mythmaking and storytelling occur organically and naturally during play, allowing people to craft their own ideas on religion, both in discussions and on the battlefield. Ultimately, Warhammer 40,000 is more than just a game. It is a medium through which players explore questions of faith, meaning, and morality, both within its grimdark universe and in the real world.

9

# STORY AND GAMEPLAY CONFLICTS IN AGE OF SIGMAR

## ARE THEY A BUG OR A FEATURE?

**AASA TIMONEN**

In 2007, game developer Clint Hocking wrote a fascinating review about how the video game *BioShock (2007)* used gameplay and storytelling. Hocking's main concern was about how *BioShock* seemed to have two opposing structures - ludic structure (the gameplay itself) and narrative structure (a story you are playing through)[1]. In *BioShock,* the player is encouraged to embrace the underlying philosophy of the fictional city of Rapture to progress in the game, but also to quite literally betray this philosophy to help the revolutionary Atlas to defeat Rapture[2].

According to Hocking, changing the incentive (i.e., you should help Atlas) to a directive (i.e., your only option is to help Atlas) creates a conflict between story and game, or *ludonarrative dissonance.* Hocking's idea of ludonarrative dissonance - the conflict between story expectations and narrative realities - was meant as a critique, pointing to the dissonance as an element that tarnishes an otherwise well-made game. Other writers have defended ludonarrative dissonance as a story-telling tool[3], pulling the player out from the story to perhaps witness the game from a different perspective. Ludonarrative dissonance is not only limited to digital games – it is very present (for better or worse) in *Warhammer*.

One of the advantages of *Warhammer* is that there are no 'goodies' or 'baddies' per se; different factions have different motivations, making 'good' and 'bad' more subjective. Whilst some are worse than others, if you were to transport your average Warhammer faction into any other setting, they would probably be the bad guys. This is a masterstroke because it means that conflicts between factions that are ostensibly on the 'same side' don't break the ludonarrative of the game, and Games Workshop doesn't sell a wargame where one faction wages 'justified' war. However, as the narratives of *Warhammer* games have gotten more detailed and granular, there have been more attempts to tie that backstory to the game mechanics as well, with varied results.

*Age of Sigmar,* a continuation of *Warhammer Fantasy* that was released in 2015, struggles with how it depicts its world through gameplay. Is it even possible - or necessary - for the narrative fiction, game mechanics, and gameplay to be in harmony with each other? Does ludonarrative matter in a game with a loose narrative structure, such as wargames like *Age of Sigmar*? Can the dissonance act as a way to tell a story of its own? In this chapter, I will delve into various examples of ludonarrative in the current rules of *Age of Sigmar,* and how they either replicate or ignore ideas or themes from the narrative that is presented in the *transmedia* of *Age of Sigmar.* By looking into how these two seemingly separate sides of the game interact with each other, we can learn more about how these games are designed, how the backstory influences the game (sometimes in surprising or unseen ways), and deepen our understanding for how *Age of Sigmar* was designed.

## Mortal Realms of Age of Sigmar - a transmedia universe

*Warhammer's* story is not told in one place; it's spread over different media platforms, which add to the story from different perspectives. This strategy of world-building is called *transmedia storytelling*[4]. Pioneered by scholar Henry Jenkins, he described it as a process where important parts of the story get shared across multiple forms

of media to create a coherent entertainment industry. Warhammer is a very good and successful example of this strategy: besides the rulebooks and army books, there's an extensive library of novels published by Black Library, a series of original animated shows on the *Warhammer TV* subscription service, comic books, video games, and tabletop role-playing games. You can dive into the worlds of *Warhammer* by entering through any of these transmedia products.

Transmedia is used to map, characterize, and deepen fans' involvement with the core media product.[5] In the case of *Warhammer,* that core product is one of the mainline games, such as *Age of Sigmar*. For example, rule books and army books are usually thin on lore and backstory details because they provide more of an overall look into the world and various factions in it. In contrast, a novel about a character in *Age of Sigmar* has the extra space for explore inner thoughts, different perspectives, and additional background information.

Transmedia universes are very common and are an important part of how media is consumed these days. This is evident in the success of media franchises such as *Star Wars,* which has used this tactic successfully for the last 40 years[6]. The quality of these expansions is often beside the point - they are still part of the larger transmedia universe. But, just as often it is the fans of these products that choose what is the most relevant material in the transmedia by engaging with certain transmedia products more than others. There is a certain feedback loop in the system, where fan-favorite characters might reappear in additional transmedia stories after originating in different ones. But when this happens, issues might arise about how these characters work in another context.

Characters in narrative stories can do almost anything the author wishes they can do, within the verisimilitude of the world. In a game, there are mechanics, rules, and issues of game balance to follow. The mighty duardin Gotrek Gurnisson, a recurring character in the *Age of Sigmar* transmedia, can be bested and killed in-game, without it affecting the transmedia version of the character. Henry Jenkins called transmedia worlds "coherent and unified", but as transmedia worlds grow into transmedia universes, this can become a hindrance.

As different productions overlap and create conflicting narratives by multiple writers working in different productions, the results are rarely what anyone would call unified[7].

Transmedia and ludonarrative dissonance are not strangers to each other, and sometimes the different mediums cause this dissonance to be more easily noticed. Scholar Robert Baumgartner has discussed transmedial ludology; that is, the relationship between transmedia and game experiences[8]. Baumgartner argues that players have a unique way of experiencing the story by engaging with the game itself, and this in-game interaction influences how they deal with the larger storyworld. When you play a game, you experience the story and world from first-hand experience by interacting with the world through your in-game avatar. In this way, the players familiarize themselves with the world, and can then recognize shared elements in the transmedia, like locations, characters, and fictional cultural tropes.

In *Age of Sigmar* (and *Warhammer* in general), how different units and characters are valued and given rules can tell us about how they might be perceived in the transmedia. By knowing how troll-like troggoths work on the tabletop, the player also can gauge how characters in a novel might react to facing one as well. Games can thus use gameplay to teach the player about the world. But when you attempt to do the inverse – try to use your backstory information to get information about how units in the game would act – problems arise. In the next section, I will explore how this conflict between story and game mechanics is present in the *Age of Sigmar* faction Stormcast Eternals. I'll share a part of what the transmedia says about Stormcasts and contrast that with their in-game appearances.

## Missing mechanics

The Stormcast Eternals are an army of paladin-like warriors, clad in impressive armor and who teleport via lightning strikes to deliver their god Sigmar's wrath to whatever enemy threatens his people. Stormcast Eternals gained their title by being made immortal; when-

ever they die, their soul is sent back to their home realm of Azyr where they are 'reforged' back to life and returned to the battlefield once more. Originally, the flaws of this process were rarely mentioned in game-related texts (like army books), but since the Stormcasts' introduction in 2015, more information about these flaws has been revealed and explored in the transmedia. Every time a Stormcast is reforged, they lose a little bit of their humanity in the process. This can be something like forgetting their name or losing the ability to have dreams, but it can go as far as turning the Stormcasts into automatons of war who have little thought for anything else. A major theme in the *Age of Sigmar* is the dehumanizing nature of war, and Stormcast Eternals, the most visible faction of the game, are steeped in this theme. This symbiosis of theme and character has been explored in the transmedia as well by multiple different authors from multiple different angles.

In author Josh Reynold's novel, *The Soul Wars* (2018), the main character (Balthas Arum) is looking for a cure to the flaws of Stormcast reforging. During the story, he joins a war party to capture or destroy a wayward Stormcast soul which has aligned with the undead legions attacking a major city beholden to the god Sigmar:

> "*But they would not stop. Again and again, they tried to drag you back. They took those you loved from you, and then, when that was not enough, they sought to take all memory of them. To leave you empty, save for the storm*[9]*.*"

Similarly, recurring Stormcast character Neave Blacktalon – who originated in the game as a named character and later starred in two novels and an original animated series – is often in conflict with her loss of memories due to the multiple times she has been reforged. Transmedia characters, like Neave, tend to appear in different works across various media platforms, but they are subject to the same need for coherence and consistency[10]. While many game characters act as a representation of the player in the process of playing a game, they can also be fictional pieces in a narrative world.

As we can see with Neave, transmedia storytelling is characterized by relationships between texts and storytelling between multiple different platforms[11]. In Neave's case, her amnesia gives room to explore entirely different facets of her character in different media formats. Reforging works as a narrative mechanic in the transmedia itself, allowing for more freedom. In the animated show *Blacktalon* (2023), the visions of her many deaths drive her to discover who she was before becoming Stormcast. In the similarly named novel *Blacktalon* (2023), Neave's loss of memory and agency is played as a queer tragedy, where she has forgotten a relationship she used to have with her teammate Shakana:

> *"And, of course, there was no reason for the mirror to show them both the same vision unless it was something they shared. Or, rather, had shared. Because Neave had lost that memory, and Shakana hadn't, and that was its own kind of pain."* [12]

Most recently, the Stormcasts' spiritual degradation has been discussed in the lore updates of the 4th edition of the game, released in July 2024. In issue 502 of *White Dwarf* (Games Workshop's monthly magazine), background writer Leila Appleton delves into the existence of those Stormcasts whose soul has almost completely withered away. Appleton compares them to a broken weapon that has been patched up so many times that little of the original remains, a Ship of Theseus in human form. They are accompanied by human servants known as Memorians, who remind the Stormcasts of their humanity and connections.

> "*The [production] team were also forced to think about what quantifies such humanity and how someone losing it might seek to keep it within their grasp. This led to the conception of the Memorian Order... They remind their Reclusians of a disintegrating past, allowing their masters to hold onto the grains of such recollections for as long as they can*[13]."

As established by the lore of game books and extensive trans-

media of the *Age of Sigmar,* the flaws of reforging are a major element of the Stormcast Eternals faction. From the game's launch in 2015 to the *White Dwarf* entry in 2024, this aspect has grown in importance as the game and story have progressed. It applies a steep cost to their immortality, and due to the knowledge of this flaw, some Stormcasts are afraid of dying precisely because they fear what the reforging will take away from them. It is the key element in making these immortal superhumans' inner lives and struggles meaningful and complicated.

And it is almost completely absent from the rules of the game.

Looking at the Stormcast Eternals faction rules, their 'battle traits' - shared rules between all units in any Stormcast army - only deal with their celestial nature, giving rules that relate to their lighting-borne assaults, how they can be reinforced through teleportation, and their resolve as warriors. Surprisingly, reforging and its flaws are not issues players choosing Stormcast Eternals as their army need to think about. Baumgartner (whose ideas I introduced earlier in the chapter) seems to be correct: the narrative universe of *Warhammer* is barely present in the gameplay itself; the ludic pleasure lies more in carrying out strategic actions.

Fictional universes of games are often referred to as 'fluff', a term that highlights the ornamental nature of itself[14]. Fluff is a common way to describe things that are without flavor or substance, only there to serve a purpose. In a game, players appreciate knowing the history of conflict between their factions to better frame the engagement in their game[15]. It is used as inspiration for painting or building armies but rarely goes any further. However, there may be more to the term 'fluff' and its perceived ornament nature than we realize. Have you ever tried to sleep on a pillow without any fluff? I would say that 'fluff' carries more than ornamental meanings as it is what gives the game purpose, shape, and function[16]. Without the lore, what would *Warhammer* even be? Yet in this case, Baumgartner is correct – the lore of the game does not influence the gameplay rules, and the mechanics of reforging are absent from the game. It remains outside the functions of the game – at least in this regard. There are, however,

examples where the transmedia influence is more visible on the tabletop as well.

## Chaotic gameplay

The Stormcast Eternals were created to fight against the ever-encroaching forces of Chaos. Chaos is one of the constants in the wider *Warhammer* transmedia universe, a force that is present in every game set in those universes in one way or another. The five gods of Chaos - Khorne, Tzeentch, Nurgle, Slaanesh, and the nascent Great Horned Rat - are an existential threat to everyone, a group of cosmic Lovecraftian deities who represent strong base feelings and universal constants brought to their extreme. The forces of Chaos are formed out of their mortal worshippers, as well as daemonic servants beholden to their god's will. In *Age of Sigmar*, these forces have been split into six different factions: The Blades of Khorne, Disciples of Tzeentch, Maggotkin of Nurgle, Hedonites of Slaanesh, Skaven (followers of the Great Horned Rat), and the Slaves to Darkness (who are not dedicated to one god in this pantheon but worship them all in a broader sense).

The different Chaos armies offer an opportunity to investigate how the characteristics of each of these gods are reflected in both the narrative surrounding their chosen factions, as well as their rules. The Blades of Khorne worship (unsurprisingly) Khorne, the Chaos God of Blood and War. Khorne is an old god, whose tenet is simple: "Blood for the blood god, skulls for the skull throne". Khorne is the god of blood and war, and the only way to please Khorne is to spill blood and claim skulls. Therefore, the Blades of Khorne ravage the lands of the Mortal Realms in giant migratory armies, always seeking more blood to be spilled and more skulls to be taken. However, Khorne is not particularly interested in whose blood or skulls are being taken; as the in-universe saying goes, "Khorne cares not from whence the blood flows." This means the Blades of Khorne are not bothered by careful swordplay or acts of masterful combat, but by the all-around carnage of war. Even a massive difference in numbers does

not sway the followers of the Blood God from attacking - they might die, but the bloodletting will please their patron either way.

This philosophy of war is explored in the transmedia as well. In Noah Van Nguyen's 2023 novel *Godeater's Son*, a disenfranchised native warrior Heldanar Fall starts to build a revolutionary army, attracting other downcast people who worship Khorne. One of them is Kaddarar, a Blood Warrior of Khorne who decides to become Heldanar's mentor on his path to glory. During the story, Kaddarar tries multiple times to kill Heldanar, urging him to kill her in return:

> *"I worship the death of gods. That is Chaos. That is Godeater, who will take all skulls before the realms die... Your final trial. To prove if you are a skull - or a skull-taker...Because the time will come when I kill you, or you kill me. That is the measure of our lives, Godeater's Son - those we kill, and those who kill us*[17]*."*

Media scholars Lisbeth Klastrup and Susanne Tosca argue that transmedia can expand on three common elements that act as guidelines to the world. These are 'mythos' (the stories within the world), 'topos' (the setting in a specific time and place), and 'ethos' (the obvious and implied ethics of the world)[18]. *Godeater's Son* draws on these three concepts: It creates a new name and way to worship Khorne - Godeater, a nihilistic ending of all things (mythos). It takes place in the Realm of Aqshy's Great Parch, a planet-sized landmass of arid deserts (topos). The text also mentions some key events that have happened, giving the reader a sense of when the story takes place. Through exploring both Khorne's dogmatic beliefs, Heldanar's cultural values, and the colonial structures of the Sigmar's worshippers, the novel established the implicit ethics of the world (ethos).

In the tabletop game, the philosophy and dogma of Khorne's followers is eloquently presented in the Blades of Khorne battle trait, *Blood Tithe:*

> *"You start the battle with 0 blood tithe points. Earn 1 blood tithe point each time a unit (friendly or enemy) is destroyed*[19]*."*

Blood tithe is then used during the game to gain further abilities, as Khorne rewards his subject's violent tendencies. The philosophy of Khorne is explicit in how their army functions, as the gameplay of the Blades of Khorne is all about this push and pull in losses and gains. Most Blades of Khorne's units have low armor values but strong attack characteristics, meaning their attacks are fierce and might destroy enemy units outright, but they might die in the process as well. The narrative structure of Khorne's philosophy is in harmony with the ludic structure of the army.

Blades of Khorne maintain strong narrative ties to their gameplay, which is also featured in their transmedia appearances. In some ways, the existence of a ludonarrative dissonance implies that there is also ludonarrative harmony where there is a sync between gameplay and narrative aspects, building a consistent experience[20]. Blades of Khorne exist in this space of ludonarrative harmony, where their ideologies and nature are part of their gameplay experience as well. That is not to say Stormcast Eternals are completely without similar attributes, but the missing mechanics for reforging feel more major due to how much importance the narrative gives to the cost of reforging. Chaos in the narrative of *Warhammer* has always been messy, unpredictable, and, well, chaotic. This is such an integral part of their army that it can be detrimental to their success in the game, yet remains a natural part of the experience of playing Chaos.

## Conclusion

It seems that ludonarrative – the intersection between gameplay and story – affects armies in *Age of Sigmar* to varying degrees. In some cases, gameplay and narrative are in harmony (e.g., Blades of Khorne); in others, there is notable dissonance (e.g., Stormcast Eternals). This desire for some armies to forgo their narrative downsides might come outside the design studio. For instance, I have argued that currently (2025), *Age of Sigmar* is more of a competitive game than one predicated on telling stories[21]. If there is no story to be experienced, can there be dissonance in the game's narrative? Yet, maybe,

this is the only way to reach harmony. According to game designer and scholar Frédéric Seraphine, games cannot reach harmony if game developers are trying to tell a story[22]. This doesn't mean that game developers shouldn't create games with rich stories for players to experience; he argues game developers should abandon the idea of being the *sole* author of the game's story.

In games like *Age of Sigmar,* players are the authors of the 'story' that emerges from their gameplay. They follow the consistent rules of the game and the actions players take during the game cannot be taken back[23]; there is no 'save-scumming' in tabletop wargames. The scale of *Age of Sigmar* also erases the 'avatar bias' common to video games, where the player identifies with the game character and reads their avatar's choices as their choices[24]. Perhaps *Age of Sigmar's* mix of narrative flexibility, rules, and freedom is just right for ludonarrative harmony.

Yet the issue of Stormcast reforging remains. Is there a way to graft that back into the game, and use the narrative freedom of *Age of Sigmar* to explore the cost of reforging in the mechanics as well? Possibly, even probably. But I also would ask, can the missing mechanics itself be part of the narrative? Can ludonarrative dissonance be good? Seraphine raises this point too, noting that there is an emotional potential in ludonarrative dissonance itself[25]. How could the absence of reforging in the game rules be emotionally potent? In the build-up towards *Age of Sigmar's* 4th edition, the marketing tagline was "Sigmar Lied". This was expanded upon in the trailer for the *Skaventide* box set, where a member of the Ruination Chamber Stormcasts remarks on the cost of reforging:

> *"Sigmar lied. He never told us the true cost of this honor. Soon, all that will remain is an echo, lost to the storm. But until that day, I fight*[26]*."*

The absence of reforging in the game could be intentional when looking from this angle. The cost of reforging is something that is acknowledged in-universe, but very little is being done for it, because it's not a bug, it's a feature. And so, the player takes the role of Sigmar,

moving his immortal soldiers across the battlefield, and regardless of losses, the play pieces stay the same for that one purpose they were made for: fighting, and dying. The emotional potential of ludonarrative dissonance is found in the meta-game of wargaming itself:

*"Suffering is a physical law, a transitive property, migrating like heat through metal. The hurt done to me, I inflict upon others.* ***They puts it down; I picks it up***[27]*."*

10

# HITTING LIKE A GIRL

## THE BATTLE FOR REPRESENTATION ON THE TABLETOP

**ARNE CAMPBELL**

Warhammer 40,000 is one of the biggest and most influential tabletop games in the world. It throws players into a dark, futuristic universe full of endless war, religious fanaticism, and powerful warriors. The game features 24 playable factions, ranging from the iconic Space Marines (genetically enhanced super-soldiers) and Orks (warlike greenskins) through to the Aldeari (space elves) and Tyranids (aliens from the film *Alien*). Warhammer 40,000 represents these factions in depth by creating a rich and detailed setting... except when it comes to gender representation. Most playable armies are made up of men. When women (or feminine-like) characters appear, they are either pushed to the sidelines or shown in extreme, stylized ways.

This chapter looks at how Warhammer 40,000 builds a world where masculinity dominates and reinforces traditional gender roles. In a setting where male characters are the norm, female and feminine figures often feel like exceptions—outliers who need a special reason to exist in the hyper-masculine universe. Two 'outlier' factions stand out: the Sisters of Battle and the Daemons of Slaanesh. These armies feature the most non-male or feminine-like figures in the game, yet their portrayals are shaped by specific gender stereotypes.

The Sisters of Battle, an all-female army of warrior-nuns, are represented through themes of religious devotion and purity, while the Daemons of Slaanesh—chaotic beings that mix male and female traits—are wrapped up in ideas of seduction, excess, and transgression.

By looking at the Sisters of Battle and Daemons of Slaanesh through their lore and backstories, how their miniatures are visually designed, and their gameplay mechanics, this chapter will explore how these two factions simultaneously challenge and reinforce the game's gender dynamics. Through this, we'll see how female and feminine figures in Warhammer 40,000 are often treated as rare exceptions—interesting, but not truly part of the game's larger stories of war, power, and survival. Doing so will not only highlight the ways gender shapes the game's universe but also reveal how Warhammer 40,000, as a franchise built on layers of historical, mythological, and sci-fi influences, weaves gender into its broader themes.

Understanding these dynamics adds depth to the game's world, shaping the way we see its stories and characters. At the same time, the marginalization of femininity and female characters has a real impact on who feels welcome in the Warhammer community. When women and other marginalized players don't see themselves reflected in the game's stories and armies, it can send the message—intended or not—that Warhammer isn't for them. Examining these patterns not only helps us understand the game's world but also why its fanbase has developed the way it has.

## Lore: Chastity, chaos, and the role of women in the grimdark future

The stories of the 41st millennium, spanning novels, short stories, codexes, films, TV series, and even death metal albums from the late 1980s, extend Warhammer 40,000's gender representation beyond how miniatures are visually designed. With its vast and varied storytelling, the Warhammer 40,000 universe creates a rich yet often contradictory mythos, where themes of gender, power, and morality

appear repeatedly. Many Black Library authors (Black Library is Games Workshop's publishing wing) have acknowledged that inconsistencies in the lore are not mistakes but a deliberate part of the franchise's design, allowing fans to enjoy different perspectives and interpretations. However, even within this chaotic storytelling framework, patterns emerge... particularly in how femininity is portrayed. Women in Warhammer 40,000 are often cast in roles that conform to long-standing stereotypes. They are depicted either as paragons of virtue and purity, or as dangerous and corrupting influences.

These stereotypes build upon the broader tendency within Warhammer 40,000's setting to prioritize masculine power and marginalize or restrict female-like figures. While women are not entirely absent from the universe, their presence is often shaped by rigid archetypes, especially within the Sisters of Battle and the Daemons of Slaanesh. Though these groups stand out within the male-dominated landscape of Warhammer 40,000, the ways they are framed reinforce problematic ideas about gender. Their portrayals in the lore strongly reflect the Madonna-Whore complex – a long-standing cultural trope categorizing women as either the pure, virtuous, and self-sacrificing 'Madonna' or the seductive, immoral, and destructive 'Whore'[1].

The Sisters of Battle are represented as a 'Madonna': the embodiment of religious devotion, moral purity, and unwavering faith. As the militant arm of the Ecclesiarchy, they are fiercely committed to upholding the Imperial Creed and eradicating heresy. Clad in power armor and wielding boltguns, they are formidable warriors, yet their narrative identity is deeply tied to their submission to the will of the Emperor. Their strength comes not from personal ambition or autonomy but from their role as enforcers of a rigid, male-dominated hierarchy. The Emperor, an almost god-like male figure, serves as their ultimate authority. Their devotion to him defines their existence. While they are among the most powerful female figures in Warhammer 40,000, they are only permitted this power because they wield it in service of patriarchal structures[2].

This devotion also ties into a broader theme of self-sacrifice. The

Sisters are frequently depicted as martyrs, willing to endure immense suffering to prove their faith and righteousness. Many of their most dramatic moments in Warhammer 40,000's lore revolves around acts of extreme sacrifice. These include throwing themselves into hopeless battles, enduring torture, or willingly dying for the Emperor's cause. While such sacrifices reinforce the Sister's lore, it also plays into the idea that female power is acceptable only when it is framed as self-denial, suffering, and service to a higher (male) authority. Rather than being leaders in their own right, their agency is consistently tied to their ability to uphold the status quo of the Imperium.

On the other side of the spectrum, the Daemons of Slaanesh embody the opposite 'Whore' archetype – unrestrained pleasure, indulgence, and transgression. Slaanesh, the Chaos God of excess, was birthed from the unchecked hedonism of the Eldar (space elves) and represents the ultimate rejection of the Imperium's strict moral order. The daemons and mortal followers of Slaanesh embrace sensation, fluidity, and transformation, directly opposing the disciplined, rigid purity of the Sisters of Battle. However, their portrayal leans heavily into historical fears about sexuality, particularly female sexuality. Slaanesh's forces are depicted as seductive and manipulative, using temptation to corrupt their enemies. Their power is rarely framed as liberating or self-affirming; instead, it is almost always positioned as a destructive force that leads to ruin[3].

The Imperium's interactions with Slaanesh's followers are often framed as battles between virtue and vice, where forces like the Sisters of Battle must resist the corrupting pull of excess. This reinforces the idea that femininity, when not strictly controlled, becomes dangerous and destructive. Instead of existing as complex characters, Slaaneshi cultists are typically portrayed as existential threats, embodying the binary of purity versus corruption. This dynamic is especially evident in *The Horusian Wars: Incarnation* by John French, where a group of Sisters of Battle confronts a Slaanesh cult. The novel frames the Sisters' struggle as both physical and spiritual – a test of their discipline and faith[4]. Similarly, across Warhammer 40,000 lore, Slaanesh's followers are depicted as seducing and

corrupting Imperial citizens, reinforcing the notion that unrestrained female desire is a force that must be contained.

The tension between the Sisters and the Daemons of Slaanesh highlights Warhammer 40,000's broader discomfort with female autonomy. The Sisters are only allowed power when they suppress their individuality and dedicate themselves to serving a patriarchal order, while Slaanesh's followers, who reject such restrictions, are demonized as corrupting forces that must be eradicated. This dynamic plays into real-world anxieties about female agency, reinforcing the idea that women must either conform to strict moral expectations or be cast as dangerous and out of control[5].

Ultimately, both the Sisters of Battle and the Daemons of Slaanesh serve to reinforce a worldview in which women's identities are shaped by their relationship to male authority, morality, and control. The Sisters are empowered because they uphold the Imperium's rigid, patriarchal order, while Slaanesh's followers are condemned because they challenge it. This binary leaves little room for female characters to exist outside of these extremes, limiting their potential for complexity and development.

These representations are not unique to Warhammer 40,000; they reflect broader cultural patterns that have long shaped how women are portrayed in media[6]. From religious texts and classic literature to modern films and video games, the division between the 'pure' and 'fallen' woman is a recurring trope. Warhammer 40,000, despite its vast and varied storytelling, continues to lean on these familiar archetypes rather than offering more nuanced depictions of gender.

As the franchise evolves, there is potential for more diverse and complex representations of women within its universe. While the Sisters of Battle and the Daemons of Slaanesh remain central to Warhammer 40,000's gender dynamics, future stories could explore female characters who exist outside of these rigid binaries. For instance, they could be leaders, warriors, and villains who are not solely defined by their relationship to purity or corruption. By moving beyond the Madonna-Whore dichotomy, Warhammer

40,000 could create a richer, more inclusive universe that reflects the full spectrum of gender identities and experiences. These patterns in the lore don't just exist in stories—they shape the way Warhammer 40,000 looks and feels on the tabletop. The miniatures that bring this universe to life reflect the same gendered themes, reinforcing who belongs in the 41st millennium and who remains on the fringes.

## Models: Sculpting gender on the battlefield

What Warhammer 40,000 looks like plays a huge role in shaping how people see the game's world, especially when it comes to gender. Miniatures are the main way players interact with the universe. They set the tone for what feels 'normal' in this setting. From models' size and armor to their roles in battle, the way these figures are designed leans heavily toward a masculine default, distorting and pushing female representation to the sidelines. Though the game's lore gives reasons for why things are the way they are, the models themselves make these ideas feel real. That's why looking at Warhammer 40,000's visual choices is a powerful way to examine how women are either left out or portrayed in narrow, stereotypical ways.

One of the most obvious things about Warhammer 40,000's miniatures is how overwhelmingly male-coded they are. 'Coding' refers to the way media (e.g., television, novels) subtly hint at a character's identity (their gender, sexuality, or personality) without directly stating it. Coding happens through looks, actions, or story details. Most factions—like the Space Marines, Orks, and many alien species—are either explicitly male or designed in a way that leans toward masculinity. Space Marines, the most famous and recognizable army in the game are all male, which is justified in the lore by saying that their gene-seed implants only work on men (for more on Space Marines see chapter 6 in this volume). This explanation makes the lack of women in one of the most iconic factions seem like an unavoidable fact rather than a choice made by the designers[7].

When female-coded miniatures do appear, they tend to stick to very

specific roles that reinforce traditional ideas about gender. The Sisters of Battle, the most well-known female faction, are meant to be counterparts to the Space Marines, but they're clearly different in design. Instead of the bulky, heavily armored look of the Space Marines, Sisters' miniatures are sculpted with slimmer figures, more form-fitting armor, and exaggerated feminine features such as high-heeled boots and sculpted breastplates. Their whole aesthetic is wrapped up in religious imagery, emphasizing their role as warrior-nuns who are totally devoted to their faith. This design reinforces the idea that female strength is only acceptable when it's tied to devotion and sacrifice, whereas Space Marines are defined by genetic superiority and personal heroism[8].

The way the Sisters of Battle are portrayed isn't just about how they look; it also carries a deeper meaning. Their design fits into a long history of depicting women as either sacred or sinful, creating a dynamic where female power is only respected when it comes through strict moral or religious devotion. On the other hand, the few female-coded Chaos miniatures – like the daemons of Slaanesh – tend to be designed with exaggerated sensuality, leaning into themes of excess and corruption. Their designs often feature lithe, barely clothed bodies, elongated claws, and unnervingly alluring poses. They blend beauty with monstrosity to evoke both temptation and danger. The contrast between how the female-coded Sisters of Battle and the Daemons of Slaanesh are represented on the tabletop echoes the 'Madonna-Whore' stereotype also in the lore. Women are either seen as pure and untouchable (the Madonna) or dangerous and morally compromised (the Whore)[9].

Beyond specific factions, Warhammer 40,000's miniatures show a general bias toward masculinity. Regular human soldiers, like those in the Astra Militarum, are almost always sculpted as male, even though the lore says there are mixed-gender regiments. The fact that female soldiers are so rare in the actual miniatures range sends the message that military power is mainly a male trait. This bias is also reflected in the game's marketing. Box art, rulebooks, and promotional materials mostly feature male models, reinforcing the idea that

male representation is standard while female representation is an exception.

This lack of female representation has real effects on who plays the game and how welcoming it feels. Studies on gender in gaming show that seeing characters who look like you makes a *big* difference in whether you feel like you belong[10]. Warhammer 40,000's limited selection of female miniatures suggests that the game is primarily made for a male audience. This is reinforced by the history of tabletop gaming as a male-dominated space, where female players have often been met with skepticism or even outright hostility[11].

Fortunately, Games Workshop has become aware of these problems and has attempted to diversify gender representation in recent years. Newer releases have included more female models, like Astra Militarum officers or Rogue Trader characters, as well as redesigning Sisters of Battle figures to include a wider range of body types and combat poses. However, these changes are still relatively small, and the overall design philosophy of the game continues to prioritize male-dominated factions with a hyper-masculine aesthetic. Even in the newer model ranges, female characters often remain secondary or token additions rather than fully integrated parts of their factions.

The impact of this male-heavy representation isn't just limited to the physical models themselves—it extends to the entire Warhammer 40,000 experience. As we saw in the previous section, the artwork, stories, and background lore all reinforce the way models are sculpted: men dominate the battlefield while women appear only in specific, pre-approved roles. This affects how the game is perceived by players and can indicate that female participation is either unusual or even unwelcome. Such gender imbalance isn't unique to Warhammer 40,000; it is also noticeable across broader trends in sci-fi and fantasy media.

Many Warhammer 40,000 design choices reflect common tropes seen in other franchises: male warriors are the default, while female warriors must have an explicit justification to exist. In contrast to other sci-fi universes that have worked to expand gender representation (such as Wyrd Miniatures' *Malifaux*) Warhammer 40,000

remains relatively rigid in its portrayal of gender roles. While other franchises have embraced more diverse character designs and narratives, Warhammer 40,000's miniatures and lore still lean heavily into traditional, male-dominated power structures.

As the tabletop gaming community grows and becomes more diverse, Games Workshop is increasingly under pressure to address representation issues more directly. Some fans have called for female Space Marines, arguing that the in-universe lore could be adapted to make this possible. Others suggest expanding the range of female characters in other factions, ensuring that women are represented in a wider variety of roles across the Imperium, Chaos, and Xenos factions alike. These discussions highlight the tension between tradition and progress in Warhammer 40,000. While some players resist changes to established lore, others argue that evolving representation would make the game richer and more inclusive.

At the end of the day, gender representation in Warhammer 40,000's miniatures is not just about looks: it reflects deeper ideas about who belongs in this universe. The overwhelming focus on male characters, along with the problematic and often stereotypical ways women are portrayed, reinforces a narrow and exclusionary vision of the game's world. While the lore gives in-universe reasons for these choices, the miniatures themselves show how these ideas are built into the franchise. As Warhammer 40,000 moves forward, how it handles miniature design will play a big role in determining whether the game can break free from its old gender biases and create a more inclusive and expansive vision of the 41st millennium. The way Warhammer 40,000's miniatures shape gender representation doesn't stop at how they look—it extends into how they play. The game's mechanics reinforce the same ideas found in its models, determining not just who is represented, but how power is expressed on the battlefield.

## Gameplay: The mechanics of power in Warhammer 40,000

While Warhammer 40,000 has expanded into books, video games, and even animated series, at its core, it remains a tabletop wargame. Everything else, whether it's the Black Library novels or the Dawn of War video games, ultimately connects back to the miniatures game[12,13]. This makes the game's mechanics a crucial part of understanding how Warhammer 40,000 represents gender.

In games – both digital and analog – gender representation is often shaped through character designs and storylines. However, game mechanics (the rules that determine how players interact with the game's world), also play a big role in shaping ideas about gender. The way a game structures its mechanics can reinforce, challenge, or ignore gender norms entirely. Older tabletop role-playing games, for example, sometimes built gender biases directly into their rules. Early editions of *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* assigned female characters a 'Beauty' score instead of 'Charisma', linking their persuasion skills to their appearance rather than their personal strength or leadership[14]. Some editions even imposed limits on female characters' Strength stats while boosting 'Dexterity' or 'Constitution', reinforcing stereotypes that framed women as weaker but more agile[15]. Similarly, the board game *Talisman*[16] gave female characters the lowest possible 'Strength' scores, making them significantly less effective in combat[17]. These mechanics weren't just numbers on a character sheet; they sent a clear message about who was expected to be powerful and who wasn't.

Compared to those older games, Warhammer 40,000 takes a different approach. It doesn't impose any direct mechanical differences between male and female units. Regardless of whether a unit is visually designed as male or female, the core mechanics remain the same: moving, shooting, fighting, and sometimes using psychic powers. There are no stat penalties for female-coded characters, no bonuses for being male. This means that, on the surface, Warhammer 40,000 avoids the explicit gender-based stat discrimination seen in earlier games.

However, while the game doesn't penalize female-coded characters mechanically, it also doesn't go out of its way to challenge the masculine-dominated nature of wargaming. Most factions remain overwhelmingly male, especially Warhammer 40,000's flagship army (depicted as humanity's ultimate warriors): the Space Marines. Their all-male status is deeply ingrained in both the lore and the models, reinforcing the idea that the most powerful and prestigious military force in the setting is exclusively male. This means that, even without direct mechanical discrimination, the game still presents a world where male-coded power dominates.

The Daemons of Slaanesh break away from this male-coding trend by introducing a form of gender fluidity into Warhammer 40,000. As I described in the lore section, Slaanesh, the Chaos God of excess, pleasure, and transgression, is described as an androgynous being. Its daemonic followers reflect this ambiguity. Slaaneshi Daemons are designed to be seductive, agile, and deceptive, rather than physically imposing. Their playstyle reinforces this theme (for more on how narrative and gameplay converge, see chapter 9). Slaaneshi units are fast, elusive, and rely on psychological warfare rather than brute force.

Abilities like 'Mesmerising Form' and 'The Eternal Dance' impose penalties on enemies' attacks, creating an effect similar to how earlier games used the 'Beauty' score to influence male characters[18]. However, unlike those older mechanics, which explicitly linked beauty to female characters, Slaanesh's abilities affect all enemies equally, regardless of gender. This removes some of the problematic gender bias found in older games which reinforced harmful tropes about gender nonconforming people 'tricking' others into sexual activity. Consequently, Slaanesh are a more inclusive (if still heavily stylized) representation of androgyny and gender fluidity[19].

Despite this positive representation, Slaanesh still leans into well-worn gendered tropes. Instead of being defined by raw strength like Space Marines or Orks, Slaaneshi Daemons rely on seduction, agility, and manipulation—traits historically coded as feminine. This rein-

forces the idea that masculine power is about dominance and brute force, while feminine-coded power is about deception and finesse. Similar patterns can be found in digital games like *Silent Hill* and *Tomb Raider*, where female or feminized figures are often both empowered and constrained by genre conventions[20.21].

While the Daemons of Slaanesh blur gender lines in Warhammer 40,000, the Sisters of Battle are the only all-female military force in the game. They have a unique position within Warhammer's gender dynamics because they explicitly represent militarized femininity. Their religious devotion to the God-Emperor is reflected in their game mechanics. The 'Acts of Faith' and 'Miracle Dice' systems allow them to perform extraordinary feats in battle, representing divine intervention and their unwavering zeal[22]. This makes them a powerful faction, mechanically on par with the game's traditionally male-coded forces. In contrast to historical tabletop games that mechanically weakened female characters, the Sisters of Battle stand as an exception—an all-female army that is just as strong as its male counterparts.

However, the Sister's role in the Warhammer universe still reinforces certain patriarchal structures. The Sisters of Battle are defined not by supernatural abilities but by their strict rejection of them. They are known for their fanatical persecution of psykers—individuals with psychic powers—mirroring real-world inquisitorial movements that often targeted women accused of witchcraft[23]. This aligns them with historical narratives in which powerful women are seen as threats that must be controlled or eradicated[24]. In this way, the Sisters of Battle present a paradox: they are a rare example of an all-female military force in the game, yet their role in the lore reinforces the broader patriarchal order of Warhammer 40,000.

Ultimately, though Warhammer 40,000 avoids the explicit gender-based stat modifiers found in older games, it still reflects broader (problematic) cultural ideas about gender and power. The Sisters of Battle challenge traditional gender roles by being just as formidable as male-coded factions, but their lore aligns them with rigid structures of control rather than true liberation. Meanwhile, the

Daemons of Slaanesh offer a vision of gender fluidity, but one that still relies on familiar feminine-coded tropes of seduction and manipulation.

These game design choices matter because they shape how players engage with the game and its universe. While Warhammer 40,000 has made progress in avoiding the overt gender biases of older tabletop games, it still reflects many of the same cultural narratives that have long shaped ideas about masculinity and femininity in gaming. Understanding these patterns allows us to see how gender operates in the games we play—and, more importantly, how they might evolve in the future.

## Conclusion: The objective at the centre of the table

Warhammer 40,000's approach to gender reflects a larger struggle within the world of gaming: how to move beyond outdated stereotypes while maintaining a setting built on decades of tradition. The Sisters of Battle and the Daemons of Slaanesh offer the most visible examples of non-male or feminine-coded representation in the game, but both factions are shaped by extreme archetypes. These archetypes appear across the lore, the way miniatures are visually designed, and the armies' in-game special rules.

The Sisters of Battle embody a militarized femininity rooted in religious devotion and purity, reinforcing a vision of female power that is defined by a male perspective. Meanwhile, the Daemons of Slaanesh challenge traditional masculinity by emphasizing speed, agility, and psychological warfare over brute strength—but in doing so, they fall into long-standing stereotypes that associate femininity with seduction and manipulation. Both factions' portrayals reveal a deeper discomfort with female autonomy and sexuality, relying on exaggerated tropes rather than fully realized, complex characters.

Despite these gender representation problems, it is important to recognize that Games Workshop has made progress in recent years. The 2019 reimagining of the Sisters of Battle model line and the introduction of female Stormcast Eternals in *Age of Sigmar* (Games Work-

shop's other core gaming system) mark meaningful steps toward broader representation. These changes have increased the visibility of female characters in Warhammer, helping to expand the player base and shift the franchise's narrative focus. Compared to other miniature wargames, where female representation is often hypersexualized, Games Workshop's approach is more restrained and progressive.

However, there is still room for improvement. Warhammer 40,000 continues to frame female and feminine-coded figures as exceptions rather than fully integrated parts of its universe. If Games Workshop continues to push beyond restrictive stereotypes and introduce a more diverse range of female characters, it can create a richer, more welcoming experience for all players. This is not just about fairness. It's about storytelling. Expanding the ways in which power, gender, and identity are represented can make the Warhammer universe even more compelling, allowing more players to see themselves reflected in its vast, war-torn future.

## 11

# MYTHBUSTERS AND ICEBERGS

## WHY YOU LEARN MORE FROM WARHAMMER THAN YOU REALISE

**IOANNIS COSTAS BATLLE, PHD**

On this episode of MythBusters...

*MythBusters* (Beyond Television Productions) is one of my favourite TV shows of all time. In each episode, the hosts would take popular myths – can a car engine run on Coca Cola? – and put them to the test. When a myth was proven to be fake (no, car engines cannot run on Coca Cola), they would proudly proclaim 'myth busted!'. In this chapter, we are going to swap engineering for social science to put a myth about learning and Warhammer under a metaphorical microscope:

> '*Doing Warhammer is a waste of time because you won't learn anything useful from it*'.

If I had a penny for every time I came across this myth, I would not be writing this chapter. I would be painting miniatures on a sundeck in the Bahamas. It's a shame I haven't found a way to monetise this myth; it is expressed in so many subtle ways that the revenue streams would be endless. For example, next time you're at a party, when people share their hobbies involve woodwork or learning a new language, chime in saying you paint and play with miniature

soldiers. Unless there's another Warhammer enthusiast in the room, you'll see the myth in action!

The problem with this myth is that it nudges us to downplay the extraordinary amount of Warhammer-related learning we do. That's why we're going to bust it by shinning a light on the wonderful, yet often unrecognised, learning opportunities Warhammer offers. In doing so, we'll see that that we learn *a lot* more from doing Warhammer than we realise... and why this learning significantly enriches our lives. Since humans are innately curious creatures with a natural love of learning, any time we learn something we want to learn about, we feed our souls. That's why Warhammer-related learning is not 'useless'; it is 'useful for' **enjoying life and flourishing as a human being.**

We will tackle the Warhammer learning myth in three steps. First, I'll introduce what learning is and question what it can be useful for. Our main antagonist then comes into frame: the Learning Hierarchy and how it imposes blinkers on what we think learning can be 'useful for'. Finally, the third step focuses on the antidote to the Learning Hierarchy – the Learning Iceberg. Looking at Warhammer through the lens of the Learning Iceberg will reveal an abundance of learning hiding in plain sight that, once seen, we cannot un-see!

## What is learning and what is it useful for?

### What is learning?

The first step to bust the myth that we don't learn anything useful from Warhammer is to figure out what learning is. It seems easy: we all have experience of learning something, whether at school or university, when doing hobbies, or whilst spending time with friends and family. This diversity of learning experiences is neatly captured by the expression 'you learn something new every day'. Learning, therefore, can happen anywhere, anytime. However, if learning can

happen anywhere or anytime... could you learn without realising you are learning?

As a kid, I unconsciously learned that if you are caught in a shoot-out on the street you should hide behind an open car door. Nobody explicitly taught me this; I've never been on a gun course or even fired a weapon. I simply watched action movies where people exchanged shots whilst shielded behind their car doors. Seems plausible, right? Turns out it is a complete and utter myth (except for the obvious caveat that this does not apply to bullet-proof car doors). *MythBusters* – I told you I loved the show – confirmed a bullet will easily pierce a car door and exit through the opposing one.

My point is I *unconsciously* learned something from action films. It took a *MythBusters* episode to first make that unconscious learning conscious (I realised I had *assumed* car doors were bullet proof) and then to notice what I had unconsciously learned from movies was wrong! Considering this, defining learning may no longer seem so simple. What counts as learning if it can happen anyplace, anytime, whether we realise it or not, and it may be right or wrong?

For Danish learning expert Knud Illeris, learning is any process that permanently changes you or your life not caused exclusively by biological development or ageing[1]. Whilst watching action films permanently changed my view of shoot-outs (until that learning was permanently replaced by new learning[2] via *MythBusters*), I did not learn to grow into a toddler when I was a baby. I just grew. Though Knud Illeris certainly helps us start to figure out what learning is, we need more specifics.

Learning is defined by several characteristics[3]. At the heart of these is that learning is both inevitable and ubiquitous: it is part of being alive. It is impossible to 'not learn'. Therefore, learning can be disadvantageous, like misunderstanding a Warhammer gaming rule. Learning can also be unconscious and unintentional (remember car doors and shoot-outs!) *and* conscious and intentional (e.g., following a miniature painting tutorial). Because of this, learning is interactional: it happens as we navigate different contexts daily (friends, home, school, work, the internet, Warhammer stores...). Finally, learning

can be a process (making progress over time – learn*ing* an army's rules) and a product (the resulting change from the process – having learn*ed* an army's rules).

The essence of these characteristics is that learning infiltrates every aspect of our lives, and therefore, all parts of our Warhammer journeys. Whether we are trying a new gaming system (like *Warhammer 40,000*), exploring what faction to collect (it is a truth universally acknowledged that Wood Elves are clearly superior to Bretonnian knights), experimenting how to apply painting techniques to our models, or debating a character's lore online ('Magnus did nothing wrong!'), we are *continually learning*. This is the main take-away from myth busting step one. Learning can happen anytime, anyplace, and whether we realise it or not.

Despite learning being defined as an extremely broad process, for many people (like maybe our parents or work colleagues) Warhammer-related learning may seem useless. Warhammer fans are often on the receiving end of sneers and jokes – however light-hearted – that people who learn woodwork or a new language rarely suffer. Nobody smirks at someone who is learning to make a cabinet from scratch! This tells us not all learning is equal. For some reason, Warhammer has been placed towards the bottom of what I will call the Learning Hierarchy... and therefore, it can be considered a waste of time. Exploring what the Learning Hierarchy is and how it works is step two of myth busting.

**What is learning useful for?**

The Learning Hierarchy refers to how valuable or useful society thinks certain learning can be[4]. Look at schools: maths, science and the national language tend to be king relative to 'lesser' subjects like art, music, and physical education. Is learning maths inherently more valuable than learning music? Well, it depends. Maths is certainly likelier than music to help you unlock a well-paying and stable job. However, no maths conference has blown thousands of people's minds like AC/DC concerts have!

Saying learning maths is better than learning music is no different to suggesting apples are a better fruit than oranges. Implying some learning is *superior* to other learning is totally at odds with the definitions of learning we looked at. *All* forms of learning and content have value because that value changes from one context to another. If you don't believe me, try using the 'superior' fruit (apples) in the context of making 'lowly' orange juice. I guarantee oranges are more suited to the task... just like apples make for a better apple pie than oranges!

It is easy to get tangled in society's Learning Hierarchy web. When we cast judgements about whether certain learning is more valuable than other learning, we usually forget two crucial words: 'for what?'. Learning maths is more important than learning music *for what*? For finding jobs, maybe. But probably not for expressing oneself creatively. This, in turn, leads us to a more philosophical question: is learning that helps us secure a job better than learning which allows us to express ourselves creatively? Again, the answer to this question is relative – it depends on many factors unique to each person. The problem is we tend to think narrowly about what learning is 'useful for'. We implicitly assume that 'useful' (the 'for what?') refers to making money or getting a job[5,6].

Such a narrow way of thinking reduces the incredibly broad value of learning to the equation 'learning = a means to an end'. Use*ful* learning increases your chances of employment and making money; use*less* learning (like the kind involved in painting and playing with miniature toy soldiers) decreases your chances of financial growth[7]. This reasoning fuels the Learning Hierarchy; it stokes the flames of the myth that 'doing Warhammer is a waste of time because you won't learn anything useful from it'.

Understanding what the Learning Hierarchy is (learning = a means to an end) completes step two of myth busting. We will now combine it with step one (learning can happen anywhere, anytime, with or without us realising) to move onto step three: challenging the Learning Hierarchy. We are going to re-frame what Warhammer learning is 'useful for' in relation to how we defined what learning is.

Remember none of the definitions we explored discriminate between worthy or unworthy topics to learn about. None say that learning *needs* to have practical value. They certainly do not claim learning is only 'useful' if it somehow contributes to the economy! Warhammer-related learning certainly can be practical and can help you make money... but it doesn't *have* to do either to matter.

Learning expert Etienne Wenger emphatically encourages us to discard the Learning Hierarchy's blinkers[8]. He asks, "what if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that – given a chance – we are quite good at it?". In other words, what is learning Warhammer 'useful for'?

> To enjoy life and flourish as a human being.

This perspective – in line with the definitions of learning discussed in myth busting step one – views learning as an end in itself. Learning for the sake of learning is rewarding because learning is a core part of what it *means* to be human. As Psychologists Christopher Niemiec and Richard Ryan put it, people are innately curious and have a natural love of learning[9]. Consider how happy small children get when they learn something for the first time, whether it is stacking cubes, climbing onto an obstacle, or writing their name. Their joy does not come from learning a 'useful' skill for the labour market. They are ecstatic simply because they *learned something*. Learning is a celebration of being human.

Therefore, the point of learning whilst doing Warhammer is... to learn whilst doing Warhammer. Warhammer-related learning is 'useful' *to enjoy life and flourish as a human being*. To appreciate how much we learn when doing Warhammer – step three of myth busting – we first need to talk about the Learning Iceberg.

**The Learning Iceberg**

The Learning Iceberg[10] is the antidote to the Learning Hierarchy's blinkers. It is a tool that will widen our gaze about what counts as learning. Think of it like a flashlight capable of revealing all the unrecognised Warhammer learning we do. The iceberg takes the enormity of what learning is (a process that can happen anytime, anyplace, whether you realise it or not) and chunks it into three overlapping categories. These categories, called 'learning contexts', are *formal*, *non-formal*, and *informal*[11].

Every possible Warhammer learning experience (learning to navigate complex rules interactions, why stripping paint off plastic models with acetone doesn't quite work, or why Space Marines are not necessarily 'the good guys') can be classified either as *formal*, *non-formal*, or *informal* learning. Since there are infinite Warhammer learning experiences, there is no point trying to list them all – it would make for a rather dull reimagining of Michael Ende's Neverending Story. Instead, we are going to use the three learning contexts as colour filters. Depending on whether we look at a landscape through a red, blue, or yellow colour filter, we see different things. Some features come into sharper focus whilst others blend into the background. The same is true about learning and Warhammer.

If you look at the iceberg below (Figure 1)[12], you can see *formal* learning is represented by the narrow tip of the iceberg. *Non-formal* learning is the broader visible body beneath the tip, but above the water's surface. Finally, informal learning is the gigantic base, hidden beneath the sea. Though distinct, the three learning contexts are not mutually exclusive. They are part of a continuum, like flavours. A dish can have varying degrees of sweetness (e.g., formal learning), but that doesn't stop said dish from also being salty (e.g., non-formal) or acidic (e.g., informal). Let's unpack each of the three learning contexts from top to bottom.

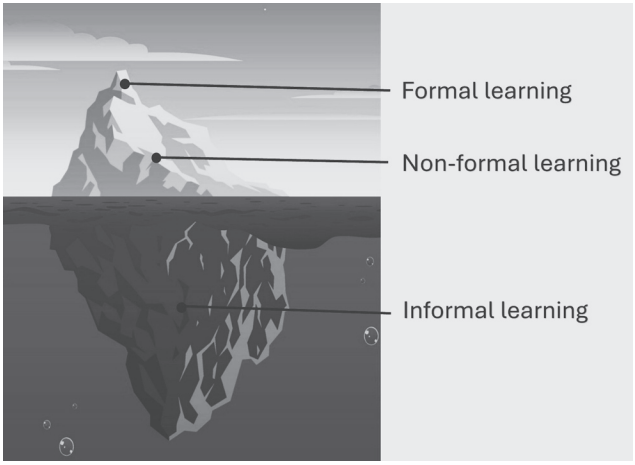



*Figure 1: The learning iceberg*

Formal learning – the tip of the iceberg – aims to *intentionally* teach someone something. It is provided by an education or training organisation which will give you a certificate or diploma to demonstrate what you have learned. Schools, colleges and universities are examples of formal learning contexts. However, as far as I know, there are no Warhammer-related formal learning contexts dedicated to systematically teaching Warhammer by following a Warhammer curriculum. There is no Warhammer school, Warhammer degree, nor Warhammer apprenticeship. While Warhammer content has sometimes been used in formal learning contexts (like exploring resource management[13]), the focus is less on 'learning Warhammer' and more on 'using Warhammer as a vehicle to learn another subject' (e.g., resource management). The tip of the Warhammer learning iceberg is mostly barren. This is significant for two reasons.

Firstly, the Learning Hierarchy considers formal learning the most important type of learning. It is easy to see why: to prove to a potential employer that you successfully learned art history or plumbing, you can show them official paperwork (a certificate). The lack of Warhammer formal learning immediately devalues it as a subject. If it is not formally taught and recognised, how useful or valuable can it be?

This way of thinking is compounded by a second point: formal learning is the most visible type of learning even though it is the *least frequently occurring*. If you were to calculate what percentage of your life you spent at school or university, it would be minuscule compared to the time you spend learning beyond formal contexts. We *over*value formal learning contexts because they are easy to recognise: they are delivered by an education organisation, which often has a dedicated building, and we graduate with tangible proof of what we learned (a certificate). Therefore, we *under*value non-formal and informal learning contexts because they are harder to see... even though that's where we do most of our learning. Time to switch colour filters!

Non-formal learning extends beneath the iceberg's tip but remains above the water level. Like formal learning, it aims to *intentionally* teach someone something. However, non-formal learning is *not* necessarily provided by an education organisation, *nor* is it *necessarily* recognised with a certificate or diploma. Music lessons, sports clubs, cooking classes, developing skills at work, or museum tours all count as non-formal learning. Warhammer is full of non-formal learning opportunities: Warhammer Alliance (after-school Warhammer clubs), painting workshops hosted by professional painters, receiving tournament coaching, or simply being taught how to play *Warhammer 40,000* by a friend.

Non-formal learning remains visible on the iceberg because there is an intention to learn something from someone. This someone could be a teacher in the more traditional sense but does not have to be. Dutch educational theorist Gert Biesta describes teachers as people who create possibilities for 'students' to find their place in the world[14]. Therefore, a 'teacher' does not need to be a topic expert nor have a teaching qualification[15]. My friend Mike taught me how to play *BloodBowl* (see chapter 6 in this volume) and he is neither an expert nor a certified teacher. Immediately, we can see why non-formal learning is often *under*valued relative to formal learning. You may be taught by someone unqualified, with no expertise, and you will often be unable to officially prove (with a certificate) what you

learned. Under these chaotic circumstances, how can you trust what you have learned? Where's the quality control?!

If you felt uncomfortable about these quality control issues, you are probably caught in the Learning Hierarchy's web. Viewing learning as a means to an end (like getting a job) makes us think that learning only counts if it is standardised, systematic, and measurable – traits often linked to formal learning. The learning iceberg breaks this hypnotising spell by nudging us to look at learning through different coloured filters. Remember how one of the nine characteristics of learning says we learn across the range of contexts we navigate daily[16]? Many of these are non-formal learning contexts! However, we tend to *under*value non-formal contexts because we do not think of going to Warhammer club, basketball training, or band practice 'to learn'. We go 'to play' Warhammer, basketball, or music. Fortunately, this is not a problem: play is one of the best ways humans learn[17].

Beneath non-formal learning, shrouded under the sea, is the gargantuan base of the iceberg: informal learning. Unlike formal and non-formal learning, informal learning is generally *unintentional*, *unplanned*, and *unconscious*. Most of the learning we do, both in Warhammer and life, is informal. You're simply not aware of much of it. I unconsciously learned car doors could shield me from gunshots. My daughter has unconsciously learned pink is a girl's colour because every toy advert targeting her is plastered in pink. Neither her nor I intended nor planned to learn these things. They just happened. This is why the first of the nine learning characteristics we saw earlier in the chapter is that it is impossible to 'not learn'.

Informal Warhammer learning is extremely broad. Without realising, you learn social skills, like how to solve in-game disagreements with an opponent. You improve your grasp of language by debating rule interpretations ('if an aura affects all allies, is the model issuing the aura an ally of itself?'). You forge your worldviews ('corporations like Games Workshop should publicly credit their artists' works'). You make assumptions about masculinity and femininity from unexpected sources, such as *Warhammer 40,000* lore and miniatures (discussed in more detail in chapter 10 in this volume). You do all of this

and more... mostly without knowing you're doing it. Just like breathing.

How often are you aware of your breathing? Almost never – yet you do it all the time. Does this mean breathing doesn't matter because we aren't conscious of it? Of course not. Informal learning is the same. Which explains why informal learning is grossly undervalued: it's nigh-on impossible to be aware of something you do unconsciously. To be clear, I am not suggesting we should try to make all unconscious learning conscious; that is as futile as asking you to pay attention to every breath you take. My point is that informal learning is ubiquitous. It is the learning context where, by far, we do most of our learning. Therefore, it plays a big role in who we become as people.

The Learning Iceberg allows us to toggle between the colour filters of formal, non-formal, and informal learning to recognise hidden and undervalued learning. It is the penultimate piece of the myth busting puzzle; the tool we'll use to re-frame what Warhammer learning is 'useful for'. That is what we are going to do in the final section of the chapter.

## Recognising hidden non-formal and informal Warhammer learning

The myth that 'doing Warhammer is a waste of time because you won't learn anything useful from it' does not hold up to scrutiny. By looking beneath the easily visible tip of the iceberg we uncover an abundance of Warhammer-related learning that is useful for enjoying life and flourishing as a human being. Through a range of Warhammer non-formal and informal learning examples, we're going to see we learn many 'useful' things to feed our innate curiosity and thirst to learn. Consequently, learning Warhammer is *not* a waste of time: the copious amounts we learn directly feed our souls and shape who we become. Learning does not get more useful than that.

**The middle of the iceberg: Non-formal Warhammer learning**

Non-formal Warhammer learning happens when you intentionally learn something from someone that is rarely recognised with a certificate. We'll focus on three types of examples: learning *directly* from another Warhammer enthusiast, learning *indirectly* from other Warhammer fans, and how Warhammer non-formal learning contexts can meet our needs as learners.

Most of the intentional Warhammer-related learning we do comes *directly* from being taught by another Warhammer enthusiast. Whilst this person could be an expert, they don't have to be. We previously listed examples such as receiving tournament coaching, attending painting workshops, or being taught by a friend how to play a new gaming system. We can add to this an endless list of non-formal learning: sculpting, magnetising miniatures, airbrushing, stripping paint from models, improving your army list building, developing tactics against different armies, problem-solving how to defeat a level on a video game, or gaining a deeper understanding of key characters' motivations in *Warhammer 40,000* lore.

Warhammer non-formal learning can also be *indirect*, where we purposefully learn something from unintentional teachers. Museums like Warhammer World in Nottingham (UK) showcase the history and range of Warhammer miniatures. Gaming conventions, such as AdeptiCon in the US or the UK Games Expo, display the latest gaming and hobby innovations. Painting competitions, like Golden Demon or Monte San Savino, seek to inspire creative and spectacular ways of painting miniatures. Lastly, participating in Warhammer tournaments, regardless of the gaming system, will teach you masses about different armies and tactics. However, we rarely think of going to museums, gaming conventions, painting competitions, or tournaments specifically 'to learn'. We go to 'enjoy them' in the same way I attended basketball practice 'to play'. In doing so, it is easy to forget that a key part of the enjoyment *is that we are learning*! We are satisfying our 'innate curiosity' and 'natural love of learning'[18] about subjects that bring joy to our lives.

The value of Warhammer non-formal learning is not just about recognising direct and indirect learning opportunities, non-formal learning can also help meet our needs as learners. To start, the content and pace is usually tailored to the learner[19]. When I have taught friends to airbrush, I adapt my instructions and explanation style to their preferred ways of learning. Doing this generates a further benefit: ensuring learning is contextual instead of acontextual. Contextual learning refers to learning something (like ratios) in a way that is relevant to your life (e.g., they will help you understand how to mix paints and generate colours). Acontextual learning (often linked to formal learning, like schools[20]) teach ratios in a way that is totally divorced from your life interests.

A final strength of non-formal learning contexts is that relationships tend to be much less hierarchical compared to formal contexts[21]. In school, college or university, there is often a clear division between the teacher and the student. In non-formal learning contexts, that gap is smaller and blurrier. There's more room for closer relationships which often result in people feeling a greater sense of belonging[22]. Furthermore, the Warhammer learning landscape is so vast that nobody is an expert in everything. In my circle of friends, I am probably one of the better painters, but worse at magnetising models. Learning from each other leads to healthy, trusting relationships where the 'teacher' and 'student' roles are in constant flux.

Taken together, Warhammer non-formal learning is not a waste of time. Whether we are learning directly or indirectly from others, our innate human thirst to learn is being satisfied. Additionally, we enjoy this learning process even more because non-formal learning often has more egalitarian relationships and is tailored to our needs as learners. We are not so different from the toddler who is taught to stack blocks!

**The base of the iceberg: Informal Warhammer learning**

Informal learning is like breathing: mostly unplanned, spontaneous and unconscious. Just like the iceberg hidden beneath the sea, it is trickier to recognise... but not impossible. All we need to do is change our perspective by slipping into our scuba diving kit and leaping into the water. To make visible this hidden informal Warhammer learning, we will dissect informal learning into three types: self-directed, incidental, and unconscious[23].

Self-directed informal learning is when you consciously teach yourself something. It is the equivalent of purposefully focusing on your breathing. We do this when we scour the internet for tutorials on painting techniques, seek tips on how to build effective army lists, figure out how to calculate dice roll probabilities, or excavate through Reddit forums to understand the lore of our favourite characters. It also involves trial and error: testing out different units, kit-bashing or modifying our miniatures, building terrain out of household junk, or writing the lore for characters you've made up. Anything Warhammer-related where you are purposefully trying to learn by practicing, testing or reading counts as self-directed learning. You are using Warhammer to figure out, on your own terms, *what* you want to learn and *how* you want to learn it[24]. Just because you are teaching yourself does not make the learning any less valuable than being in formal or non-formal learning contexts.

Further descending the base of the iceberg we reach incidental learning: learning we do whilst being involved in another task. It happens when our focus is less about 'learning something' (that is self-directed learning) and more about solving a problem. When I bought my first airbrush, it kept clogging. After doing some research, I eventually found the solution had to do with air pressure. Success! However, I was so focused on figuring out the clogging issue that I failed to realise how much incidental learning I had accumulated. I learned how to take apart an airbrush; what each component does; how an airbrush and compressor function. I didn't plan to learn this, nor was I immediately conscious of what I learned. That's what

makes this learning so easy to dismiss. Without realising, you could gain new knowledge, enhance your creativity, or develop relationship skills[25]. Next time you solve a Warhammer-related problem, however small, ask yourself: what did I learn? You'll be surprised – it is often more than you think!

Stretching into the depths of the sea, beneath incidental learning, is the real base of the iceberg: unconscious learning. It happens daily and without us being aware. This is where you subtly learn – without realising – that car doors are bullet proof. Have you considered how much you learn about language, its limits, and the intentions of those using it when you debate rule interpretations? What about how negotiating in-game conflicts with opponents shapes your views of people as either inherently trustworthy or cheats? How has buying Games Workshop products influenced your relationship with consumerism – do you start a new army each year because you genuinely want to, or because the company's 'new year, new army' mantra has seeped into your unconscious? Do you realise your views on gender and sexuality are partly shaped, or reinforced, by Warhammer miniatures and lore?

I am aware that asking the above questions makes me come across as a conspiracy theorist. Informal learning sounds suspiciously like advertising which targets your subconscious... and everyone knows that doesn't *actually* work! Unfortunately, I am sorry to say, it does affect you[26] - just like my daughter unconsciously learned pink is a girl's colour. Unconscious learning shapes who you are and how you see the world without you being aware of the process. Whilst some life experiences may jolt you into consciously questioning some of this learning – like *MythBusters* did for me with car doors and guns – you cannot control the majority of what you learn informally. Just like you cannot control most of your breathing. Yet we learn anyway. This is why putting yourself in Warhammer-related environments where you are likely to subconsciously learn transferable skills and attributes that you consider positive (collaboration, innovative thinking, reflection[27]) is not a waste of time. You are soaking in learning that will help you flourish as a human being.

Therefore, informal Warhammer-related learning is not a waste of time. Through self-directed learning, you are fuelled by your innate curiosity to learn things you want to learn about. Warhammer informal learning also has an impact on who you become. The subtle learning you acquire, either through incidental or unconscious learning, helps to shape your world views. Just because we aren't aware of this learning does not mean it doesn't exist. The Warhammer environments you spend time in (physical or online) will influence the unconscious learning you do.

**Conclusion: Myth… busted?**

In true *MythBusters* fashion, we first need to re-state the myth we're tackling and summarise our findings before judging whether it has been busted.

> '*Doing Warhammer is a waste of time because you won't learn anything useful from it*'.

Despite learning being an extraordinarily broad process (it can happen anywhere, anytime, even without you realising), the Learning Hierarchy has firmly put blinkers on us. This tunnel vision forces us to see learning as a means to an end that is only useful for making money or getting a job. However, learning expert Etienne Wenger reminded us that learning is "both life sustaining and inevitable". Humans are innately curious and therefore love to learn. Which means learning is 'useful for' something much broader than a means to an end: to enjoy life and flourish as a human being. To fully discard our blinkers, we reframed how we view Warhammer-related learning using the Learning Iceberg. By toggling between three overlapping learning contexts (formal, non-formal, and informal) as if they were colour filters, we revealed an extraordinary amount of Warhammer learning hiding in plain sight. Which means we can confidently say…

Myth busted!

Warhammer is overflowing with wonderful learning opportunities. However, if we define learning narrowly, these hidden possibilities will remain invisible forever. We should not downplay how much we learn whilst enjoying Warhammer, nor how important this learning is. Your reward for doing Warhammer is to feed your innate human curiosity and thirst to learn. It is a celebration of being human. How can that be a waste of time?!

Next time you think you might be wasting your time doing Warhammer, or are accused of being unproductive by painting and playing with toy soldiers... think of the Learning Iceberg. Draw on the colour filters of formal, non-formal and informal learning to remind yourself how you are continually accumulating knowledge, skills and experiences that **you** are passionate about. It is no worse – and no better, either – than any other pursuit, like learning a language or doing woodwork. Regardless of what activity you do, remember to channel your inner toddler: learning is 'useful for' enjoying life and flourishing as a human being.

12

# BEYOND BURNOUT

## FINDING FLOW IN MINIATURE PAINTING

**CERI LAWRENCE**

Making and painting miniatures for tabletop battles is one of the most recognisable aspects of Warhammer. There are countless YouTube channels, Instagram accounts, Reddit forums and Discord channels dedicated to teaching painting techniques and showcasing incredible paint jobs. Warhammer is so popular that even people not involved in the hobby at all are likely to recognise models that belong to a Warhammer universe!

Why is building, and, more importantly, painting miniatures, such an important part of Warhammer? Some people are display painters, pouring hundreds of hours into painting a single model. Others paint miniatures as quickly as they can so they can play at tournaments (which normally require models to have at least 3 different colours on them). Somewhere in the middle are those who simply enjoy painting miniatures and collecting an army. Despite their different reasons for painting models, these hobbyists often agree on one thing: the mental health benefits of painting miniatures.

In this chapter I will use the psychological concept of *flow* to discuss the impact painting miniatures can have on mental health. Using examples hobbyists have shared on social media, we will explore the positives of flow, how it works, and what being in a

'positive flow state' means for miniature painters. This will also help us understand how a combination of flow with the concept of *passion* within a hobby can work together to motivate and inspire positive wellbeing. However, not all that glitters is gold. Flow has a dark side; one which, when combined with passion, can turn into an obsession that can lead to *burnout*. Therefore, we will also examine what burnout is, how it works, why it is such a prevalent concern amongst Warhammer painters, and what - if anything - can be done when it strikes.

**What is flow and how is it connected to miniature painting?**

Many miniature painters will be familiar with that feeling of losing themselves entirely to painting. You start thinking you'll just finish off that one Ork... and before you know it there's a horde of them drying and it's nighttime! This immersive experience is referred to as flow.

The term flow is often attributed to the Hungarian-American psychologist Csikszentmihalyi. It describes the feeling of *"being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies... Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost"*[1]. While Csikszentmihalyi's research sheds light on flow, the concept itself is quite ancient, reminiscent of the state of Samadhi in meditation (known for its deep focus)[2]. Essentially, it's that moment when you are so engrossed in what you are doing that everything else fades away; all that exists is you and the task before you.

When you're in a state of flow, you want to continue participating in an activity - simply put, the joy of painting a model drives you to repeat the process. This is because the combination of enjoyment and being in flow can be subconsciously considered a psychological reward. However, reaching flow often depends on having a pre-existing interest in the activity, making it a subjective experience for each person.

Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes that entering a flow state is often automatic and spontaneous:

> "*You know exactly what you want to do from one moment to the other and you get immediate feedback. You know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and the sense of time disappears, you forget yourself, and you feel part of something larger. And once the conditions are present, what you are doing becomes worth doing for its own sake*"[3].

The *conditions* Csikszentmihalyi refers to are the essential circumstances needed to develop a state of flow whilst participating in an activity. In the case of painting Warhammer, you need just the right amount of challenge relative to your painting skill level. If the challenge is too hard it can generate anxiety or frustration; too low begets boredom and apathy. A high challenge level works best with a high skill level and vice versa to foster flow. This is why a beginner to the hobby can find the same level of satisfaction as an expert even if they are completing subjectively simpler builds.

When challenge and skill meet perfectly the state of flow achieved can create a sense of positive mental well-being and a general feeling of being *in the zone*[4]. Whilst there is some debate about how to describe what 'being in the flow' means, many academics[3,5] would generally agree that it involves six aspects:

1. Your complete and intense focused involvement in an activity.
2. The merging of a task (like painting) and your consciousness as one.
3. Losing a sense of self and anxieties.
4. Having a sense of control over the task and actions you are involved in.
5. Losing your perception of time.
6. Flow is a reward in and of itself.

We can see how these six aspects of flow come to life when people pursue general artistic and crafting activities, such as painting Warhammer miniatures. Engaging in artistic activities like miniature painting typically brings about a rewarding experience that promotes

happiness. Flow emerges through involvement in the activity[6], motivating individuals to keep coming back[7] because creative tasks nurture mental wellness and provide relaxation[8]. When creating, you develop a sense of control: you are shaping your own world. Painting miniatures allows you to personally express yourself, enabling your army to reflect your style. This personal touch is a key part of the process[9] since many people consider painting miniatures distinct from gameplay in the Warhammer universe.

Artistic activities are particularly known for supporting flow[9,10], which in turn can lead to a positive impact on mental well-being. Quite simply, you do something you enjoy which makes you feel good. Part of this feeling comes from the therapeutic effects of being deeply immersed in a project that calms your thoughts and grants you complete creative control[11]. Likewise, finding flow in a creative pursuit has been shown to lead to improved performance in that activity – e.g., becoming a better miniature painter[12].

This notion of flow isn't limited to model painting—it can apply to any meaningful activity or hobby. Research shows that the key factor in achieving flow is the significance and value the activity holds for the individual[10]. Ultimately, it's not about the activity itself but rather the meaning it brings to those engaging in it[13].

**How flow impacts on mental wellbeing**

'Good' mental well-being is subjective and unique to every individual. It is characterised as a state of feeling good about yourself, coping with day-to-day stresses, being able to learn effectively, building resilience, and being able to participate in activities[14]. Good mental wellbeing is a dynamic process that affects our thoughts, feelings and actions and varies throughout life. It is about caring for your mind and body, building healthy relationships, and finding meaning and purpose.

Mental well-being can be significantly enhanced by entering a state of flow during an activity. There are several reasons why this happens. You experience stress reduction when, after a bad day, you

can sit down to paint and enter a 'flow state' where you are so engrossed in the activity that worries and anxieties fade away. This can lower overall stress levels. Furthermore, completing a task (like a painting project) can boost self-esteem. If a million and one things are running around your brain, being able to quieten everything and focus only on that one model in your hands is a skill that brings about a sense of calm and well-being, even if only for the duration of the paint session. This, additionally, can release dopamine – the 'feel-good hormone' that elevates mood and allows you to be fully present in the moment – which cultivates mindfulness and improves emotional regulation.

Building something out of nothing has a positive impact on mental health and well-being[15] because the enjoyment we derive from an activity stems more from the intrinsic process itself than the final outcome. While there's certainly a sense of satisfaction that accompanies completing a task to a high standard, what truly captivates many people (enhancing their motivation to tackle challenges and pursue goals) is the journey. Flow is most effectively achieved when individuals engage in activities they enjoy[16], consequently, if someone can reach flow while model painting, it could lead to increased mental well-being[3]. This is neatly captured by a Warhammer enthusiast on Reddit: "*There is something deeply, deeply satisfying about seeing an army assembled and painted and knowing that a non-trivial amount of my effort went into that.*"[17].

**What is passion and why is it needed for flow?**

We have already seen that flow relies on the merging of skill level and task difficulty, but that is also at its strongest when there is a pre-existing interest in the activity being completed. The stronger your interest in painting Warhammer, the more likely flow can be achieved[5].

One of the best words that describes this deep interest and enjoyment in making and painting miniatures is *passion*. Passion refers to having a strong desire to engage in a meaningful activity

and spend a considerable amount of time pursuing it[18]. This, in turn, has been shown through studies within the field that an activity a person is passionate about can become a key part of someone's identity[19]. When an activity becomes a defining part of you, it turns into a way of identifying yourself to others: "I'm a painter" or "I'm a gamer".

For Canadian professor of psychology R. J. Vallerand, passion matters because it satisfies our basic human needs for controlling an activity, it connects us to others who share our passion, and it makes us feel we are 'competent' at a task. Professor Vallerand suggests two types of passion exist: harmonious and obsessive[20].

Having harmonious passion for a particular subject or activity means that you not only derive enjoyment and satisfaction from it but that you also maintain a sense of control over your involvement. This balance allows you to integrate that passion seamlessly into your daily life without letting it overwhelm other responsibilities or obligations. Such a form of passion is closely associated with the psychological concept of flow[19, 21].

When you engage deeply and passionately in activities that resonate with your core values and interests, it creates a conducive environment for experiencing a state of flow. This state of heightened concentration and enjoyment can significantly enhance your overall sense of well-being[12, 20]. Furthermore, harmonious passion promotes a healthy openness to experiences. It empowers you with a sense of autonomy over the activity - you can dive into miniature painting wholeheartedly yet recognize when it's time to step back. This ability to pause and disengage when necessary is crucial for maintaining a balance in life, preventing burnout, and ensuring that your passion continues to bring joy rather than stress. Nurturing this type of passion is essential for fostering both personal growth and emotional stability[17].

However, passion is a double-edged sword. While harmonious passion can lead to fulfilment, it can also give rise to obsessive passion, which can transform what used to be enjoyment into a source of anxiety and obsession. I will explore this darker side of

passion and 'dark flow' next – and how both can ultimately bring about *burnout*.

## Dark flow and obsessive passion

The concept of 'dark flow'[23] helps us to understand how a positive state of deep engagement and productivity can turn detrimental to our mental wellbeing. This in turn will guide our understanding of how this can lead to burnout, and what can therefore be done to identify and prevent it. Csikszentmihalyi himself expressed that flow is not always positive[22]. Flow can feel *great*: getting so lost in painting that by the time you resurface, it's five hours later and you're covered in Nuln Oil...

...and there lies its deceptiveness.

After you've experienced it once, you need it again. To begin with, it can happen easily and naturally: you 'get into the zone' and emerge with half an army painted and hand-cramp. Suddenly, one day, you start to struggle. Since hobby escapism and flow can be all-consuming[23], what happens when things go wrong? You can chase the high of your first experiences, but repeating what worked before no longer provides the same results.

Flow is a natural response to enjoying an activity but is something that happens spontaneously - it can't be forced. It can become harder and more frustrating each time to achieve flow if you're actively chasing it, which in turn can then block it completely. A vicious cycle ensues. While dark flow may initially appear to be a positive state of deep engagement, it can also be a precursor to burnout if not managed carefully.

Since passion and flow are two-way streets, if we're not careful, obsessive passion can cause unexpected difficulties when we're working on painting projects. Obsessive passion is defined by a strong and unwavering commitment to a favoured activity, resulting in an undeniable compulsion to participate regardless of other responsibilities[19, 24]. Whilst falling into the zone and losing all sense of time and space can be a positive feeling, it can also cause a conflict

between the activity and other aspects of life[22]. Since flow possesses addiction-like qualities[25], conflict can occur when the necessary, day-to-day activities (including things you do not want to think about) are put aside in favour of miniature painting. This is a further way flow and passion intersect: whilst having harmonious passion for an activity is good, the darker side of obsessive passion may, for some, be lurking around the corner.

This intense drive to engage in activities like painting miniatures means that if you're not actively doing it, you're consumed by thoughts of it, worrying about it, or obsessing over it. The strength of this addiction can be overwhelming, as another Redditor expressed: "*I'd rather be painting than sleeping most nights and I can't pay attention to anything without building a kit*"[26].

Important aspects of life are often neglected in favour of this obsession, and the time spent painting becomes tainted by guilt of neglecting such responsibilities. This creates a situation where the enjoyment of the activity is severely compromised, yet thoughts of it intrusively invade any attempt to engage in any other pursuits. The Warhammer community often recognizes this reality, with one user noting "*Sometimes the obsession isn't at all healthy...you're not enjoying and instead feeling compelled.*"[27]. It's clear that for many this kind of obsession not only impacts personal enjoyment but also affects overall well-being.

Obsessive passion does not only affect miniature painters. Whilst we are looking at it from the creative viewpoint, it has also been extensively researched in athletes, healthcare workers and educators[25]. If harmonious passion is about having a good relationship with your activity that doesn't get in the way of other parts of your life[20], then obsessive passion is when things become uncontrollable. Your engagement with the activity is to the detriment of everything else in your life[28].

## Burnout

> "For those who seek perfection, there can be no rest on this side of the grave" -Adeptus Mechanicus

So far, we have seen how finding flow and having a passion for a creative task (like miniature painting) is good for mental well-being and 'getting into the zone'. If this is the case, then *why* do so many Warhammer hobbyists frequently experience burnout, the bane of a mini-painter's life? Where do these feelings come from?

Burnout is defined as intense feelings of frustration, emotional exhaustion, and a loss of interest in something previously favoured[24]. We discussed initially how flow requires a balance of skill and challenge, and that if one or the other is too high or low it can foster negative emotions such as boredom, anxiety or frustration. In these less positive phases, the enjoyment of the task is impacted and can block the ability to find flow and thereby destroy motivation for the activity. Without any positive feelings around the task to encourage participation, the task becomes a symbol of anxiety, distress and shame[13].

That's not to say that all burnout is a result of this imbalance. Whilst this may be a more common source for those new to miniature painting, for the veterans of the hobby, there are many other factors that can come into play. Burnout is a common issue, and not one that has a single direct cause, or, as we shall see, one easy cure.

Miniature painting is not always a calming hobby due to its high costs, which include paints, primers, kits, and models. When this typically enjoyable activity becomes expensive or unaffordable, it adds to the stress of rising living expenses. Additionally, feelings of regret can arise when spending money on new supplies or miniatures, making it difficult to focus and find a state of flow while painting (See Chapter 3, Meriläinen, for more on this concept).

Creative burnout can start when you get fully immersed in a

project but then drive yourself to exhaustion with it[29]. Whilst having a passion for an activity is positive and can lead to flow, there really can be too much of a good thing! Obsessive passion forces intrusive thoughts about an activity into our minds all the time, meaning there is no way to replenish well-being when not engaging in the activity[19]. If this happens over a prolonged period, we can even reach the point of depression. Depression can remove all desire to engage in the activity and abandon miniatures and painting entirely[30]: *"I literally have zero will anymore. I'm thinking of selling off everything and maybe just avoiding the hobby as a whole..."*[31].

The compulsion to continue an activity despite a lack of enjoyment[27] creates a paradox: continued engagement without intrinsic reward. This disconnect diminishes the activity's meaning, mirroring the sentiment; *"I just couldn't get over this, and what once was my favourite way to relax became a source of stress"*[32]. Obsessive thinking about the activity while detached from its inherent joy, coupled with a diminished sense of accomplishment, can negatively impact well-being, potentially leading to depression and ultimately extinguishing any desire to engage at all.

## You can't just run away when things aren't going well: Burnt out and lighting up again

Flow is found when an activity has relevance and meaning - if you enjoy doing an activity chances are you can find flow whilst engaged in it. However, if that thing you loved has become a source of stress and you've gone into burnout, what to do? Sometimes it is possible to power through burnout... but it is neither easy nor enjoyable, and in reality rarely works!

Let's return to the link between obsessive passion and flow: you are passionate about your hobby (painting miniatures), but it has now taken over the rest of your life. It is no longer enjoyable. Your harmonious passion has become obsessive and you've fallen into burnout. In this scenario, obsessive passion for painting could be regarded as a compensatory mechanism and similar to an addic-

tion[23]. You are chasing the buzz of finding flow in painting, but it's getting harder and harder to attain each time. It can also grow worse the longer the situation goes on[33] because the obsession makes decompressing outside of the activity much harder to achieve[19].

What can we do about burnout when we're experiencing it? Whilst there isn't a consensus on how to *cure* burnout per se[34] there are ways to reduce the problem and bring back enjoyment. Though these approaches have mostly been researched in the fields of sports science or medical students, the methods are equally applicable to Warhammer hobbyists who have lost their joy. Here are five suggested steps: 1) recognise the warning signs of burnout, 2) make changes, 3) pursue another passion, 4) explore different miniatures or gaming systems, and 5) take a step back to consider the bigger picture[25]. These are not sequential and can be dipped in and out of as needed. We will look at each one in turn.

### 1. Recognise the warning signs of burnout

Recognising when things are becoming problematic can sometimes be half the battle. Though it can be challenging to identify the key signs of burnout, especially when you're deeply engaged in painting miniatures, here are some key indicators to watch for.

- Dread. You start to feel a sense of dread or obligation when thinking about painting miniatures, and the thought of sitting down and starting stops being appealing.
- Loss of joy. It no longer brings enjoyment, relaxation or accomplishment and rather feels like a slog.
- Frustration. It becomes easier to get irritated with painting, and you can become overly critical of what you create.
- Neglect and withdrawal. Avoiding social events related to Warhammer (online or in person), whilst simultaneously

neglecting other aspects of your life in favour of painting miniatures.

If you notice any of these signs, consider trying the following options to help address the situation.

2. **Make changes within the Warhammer hobby**

Sometimes making a change is as good as a rest. A simple change in colour schemes, painting different unit types, or exploring a new faction and its variations can provide a much-needed diversion. Noting the warning signs of burnout (suggestion 1) halfway through a batch of Primaris Ultramarines and switching to painting a unit of Adepta Sororitas can give you a break from monotonous colour schemes. Lengthy painting marathons are also rarely required unless it is a primary source of income. Even for the most die-hard hobbyists, spending hundreds of hours painting the same colour scheme for a whole faction can be too much. A different project, different army, and different factions may all be easy ways to add a new flavour to the hobby and reinvigorate the enjoyment. Equally, forgoing painting entirely for a while in favour of another aspect also works: read Warhammer novels, immerse yourself in video games, or play on the tabletop.

This method of burnout recovery has been widely discussed on online forums and can equally be used pre-emptively to avoid burnout before it takes root. It allows continued engagement in the world of Warhammer whilst also providing that much-needed break:

> *"Tomb Kings are one of the most monotonous armies you could choose, really. If you want to stick with them try revolving back and forth between blocks of basic skellies and interesting character/chariot/monsters to break things up a bit. To ease yourself back in try building or converting a new unit that inspires you."*[35]

> *"I started working on terrain instead of models and it helps"*[36]

*"I get mad burnout from time to time. Find the best thing for me is to switch out to another project for a few days"*[37].

### 3. Pursue another passion

This suggestion is similar to the previous one but focuses on activities outside of Warhammer. The idea of turning to something else is also prevalent in forums discussing Warhammer burnout:

"*If you aren't having fun just walk away from the hobby and do something else instead. And if you have to ask people to help you make it fun again it's a very clear sign you should ... move on*"[38]

However, 'doing something else' can be easier said than done. We've discussed at length the difficulties with obsessive passion being all-consuming – simply stepping away from that passion can be hard to do. Whilst having a second passion is highly recommended[25] it isn't something that can be forced. Research into burnout has shown that a new perspective can be supportive as it is very easy to become so buried by the problem that it is impossible to see the wood for the trees[29]. Taking the time to set some boundaries with yourself and at least limit the time spent painting – if leaving the hobby altogether for a period is too daunting – can be useful.

### 4. Explore other miniatures, gaming systems

Some people may prefer to explore other miniature ranges or gaming systems, withdrawing (temporarily or permanently) from Warhammer yet continuing to paint in other game types. Attendance at conventions or events may be a possible means by which one can reignite their interest. What matters is finding an activity that is similar enough to scratch the itch, whilst also being different enough to be novel and allow the achievement of flow again[39].

This approach of gently removing the stressor of the hobby away from the hobby has anecdotally shown results, although the scientific

basis for it remains an area requiring further research. What is known, though, is that having a second passion to partake in can significantly support burnout prevention or recovery[24]. You can enjoy painting *and* terrain building. You can collect Ultramarines *and* Sisters of Battle. You can play tabletop *and* video games.

5. **Step back and consider the bigger picture**

Sometimes, it is worth taking a step back from the microcosm of what is being painted and viewing everything as a whole. Look at your successes and achievements - no matter how big or small. It could be the quantity that you've built up; the quality; the complexity; there will always be something that you can celebrate and use as a reminder that this hobby can bring more than just stress. Asking yourself the following questions could bring about some interesting insights:

- Reassess the goals that brought you into painting miniatures in the first place. Have you achieved these and is it worth setting new ones? Alternatively, was your original plan a little too ambitious, and, if simplified, could it bring you a lot more enjoyment?
- Remind yourself of what brought you into Warhammer painting to begin with and what you enjoyed. What has now changed? Is there a way of recapturing that initial spark?

**Conclusion**

Flow is a powerful state that can be achieved through creative hobbies such as painting, modelling, and building. While it often brings joy and fulfilment, it can also become addictive when intertwined with a hobby you are passionate about. Obsessive passion has the potential to disrupt an activity you love by transforming it into an obsession, leading to burnout. In extreme cases, this can spill over

into other areas of your life, reminding us of the delicate balance needed to sustain our passions.

If you typically find yourself in a flow state while painting Warhammer miniatures, and it generally enhances your life, it's crucial to recognize when that flow begins to fade. Simply going through the motions won't usually help. If you notice tapping into flow becomes increasingly challenging, it might be time to pause and reevaluate. Consider whether your beloved hobby is morphing into an obsession, the level of difficult has become too challenging, or if burnout is setting in.

Recognizing that both flow and burnout are deeply personal experiences, there is no universal reason why some individuals are more prone to one or the other. Yet, by following the steps we've discussed, you can use the concept of flow to manage burnout and reconnect with your passion. Start by recognizing the warning signs of burnout, then make necessary adjustments, explore other interests, try different miniatures or gaming systems, and finally, step back to gain perspective on the bigger picture. As one of my favourite posts on Reddit said, "*Take a break. Enjoy other things for a bit. Warhammer will always be here. It's not a hobby if it's not a hobby*"[40].

13

# THE OLD WORLD RETURNS

## REFLECTION, RESTORATION, AND NOSTALGIA IN OLDHAMMER

**IAN WILLIAMS, PHD & SAMUEL TOBIN, PHD**

Tucked away in the countless communities of *Warhammer* fandom, amidst the local wargaming groups, Inquisimunda pages, Instagram gawkers, and power-gaming tournaments, a curious hobbyist will find the Oldhammer[1] community. Oldhammer haunts are to modern day tabletop gaming what vinyl record enthusiasts are to music streaming platforms: places where pictures of half-forgotten *Warhammer* miniatures and even more forgotten nuggets of retconned lore are traded with enthusiasm. If you want to get your hands on long out-of-print miniatures, paints, and hobby tools from the 1980s and 1990s, these communities are the place to do it. Games Workshop, started in the 1970s and arguably at its creative peak in the 1980s, has a long history to mine and the Oldhammer community are the miners.

Oldhammer is not just old(er) *Warhammer* (by *Warhammer* we mean the full catalog of Games Workshop's games, including *Warhammer 40k, Necromunda, Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay,* and many more). It is a way of doing *Warhammer* which seeks to recover materials (e.g., miniatures), techniques, and attitudes of craft and play from the past. It seeks to create an alternative to what Games Workshop currently offers. However, what does this mean? Oldhammer is

now a common term amongst the *Warhammer* faithful, meaning some combination of a) older people painting b) older miniatures in c) older styles while maintaining a level of d) grumpiness about the state of wargaming in the 21st century. Oldhammer is about *both* mourning and celebrating, but in the deepest senses of those words. It is a community of people who do not wish to forget but, at the same time, do not insist that remembering the past should prevent us from moving forwards.

In short, Oldhammer is a little weird, insular, and cranky, even as it is sort of cool – it alternates between being a mark of respect and a pejorative. Then again, Oldhammer has a specific, if fuzzy, meaning, one which is tied up in nostalgia but not necessarily reactionary. This is because Oldhammer is less about focusing on the past (the 'good old days') and is more about going sideways. So what are Oldhammerers nostalgic for? And does Oldhammer offer a truly different way of doing *Warhammer* than what Games Workshop currently encourages? Exploring these questions will help *Warhammer* fans understand both the complex role nostalgia plays in the hobby and the powerful possibilities it can offer us.

## What is old about Oldhammer?

First, what even is Oldhammer? Oldhammer as an online community started to form around 2012 with the beginnings of blogs and websites such as Oldhammer Forum, Old-Hammer, The Leadpile, and Realm of Chaos 80s. Whilst the term 'Oldhammer' was used and recognized by some before 2012 (it appeared in early posts and some of the names of the sites themselves), we use 2012 as the starting point for our chapter. To be clear, for us Oldhammer refers to both a movement *and* community, not merely old or older ways of doing *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40k*.

When was the old in Oldhammer? 1988? 1982? 1990? Blogger Peter Rodway[2] calls Oldhammer "the period between your 11th birthday and when sex became more important than your toy soldiers." As amusing as Peter's definition is, it is limited: it assumes that those

salad days took place in the late 80s. This is not always the case for Oldhammerers, particularly those who were too young to have played with these rules or miniatures (e.g., people born in the 90s or 2000s). A different way of defining the 'old' in Oldhammer focuses on remembering the period before Games Workshop became a publicly listed company (with shareholders) in 1994; a period when miniatures were still mostly made of metal. A final way to try and figure out what counts as 'old' is to look at the different editions of *Warhammer*.

Which edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* is Oldhammer? Probably 3rd, but maybe 1st or 2nd. Depending on who you ask, it might be 4th or 5th. Definitely not 7th. What about *40k*? Definitely 1st, but also maybe 2nd. It is less important to settle on a specific edition than to imagine Oldhammer as *a mode of doing*, or the tools you use for an activity. This mode of doing attaches neatly to the physical world: once, miniatures were made of metal; now they are made of plastic or resin. The 'doing' which Oldhammerers are interested in comes from the time and place when they were metal. The first step to understanding Oldhammer is that Oldhammerers like metal miniatures very much. This interest focuses more on a *when* than a *what*. The *what* ( the material: metal) matters more to the Oldhammerer as a mark of *when* it was produced than for the ways in which metal miniatures themselves impact painting or modeling.

The 'old' in Oldhammer is that time (the *when*) before Games Workshop became obsessed with shareholder value and still focused on wild experimentation in their games but it is *experienced* through the retrieval of old metal miniatures and the use of flip-top paints. A good way to understand this is the consistent tale Oldhammerers tell about the history of Games Workshop and *Warhammer*. Games Workshop now is quite different from what Games Workshop was in the past. In itself, this is barely worthy of comment as we all know it. What is interesting is that Oldhammers have paid very close attention to how Games Workshop evolved over 40 years *in relation to* the political and economic history of the UK. Why does this matter? The story of Games Workshop is the story of neoliberal Britain, one of a

country (and world) privatizing public goods and an intense focus on shareholder value.

Games Workshop began to first flourish during the early to mid 1980s, when it was run by a visionary workshop of metalheads, punk rockers, and ex-hippies. This continued until 1994, when Games Workshop went public on the UK stock exchange. The era of weird experimentation in the *Warhammer* games slowly disappeared as the weirdos left and the businesspeople came in. Bit by bit, the stranger edges of *Warhammer* were filed off and the metal miniatures were replaced by plastic, a shift in production which mirrors Games Workshop's shift in management. What miniatures are made of (and how they are made) *matters*.

There is a noticeable (and material!) difference in the miniatures from pre-1994 Warhammer when compared to the miniatures from the 1980s. Whilst the latter were more often cast in metal, the former moved in a different direction both in terms of technology and materials. As Games Workshop accrued more capital, they began to invest in both CAD (computer-aided design) and plastics. The move from lead-based pewter to plastic reflects the cheaper per-miniature cost for plastics at mass production levels[3], an increase in production necessitated by Games Workshop's move to the stock exchange. In a very real sense, then, Oldhammer's anti-corporate discourse cannot be separated from the materiality of the miniatures since the shift in form and production is linked to Games Workshop's corporate shift. Oldhammerers are correct: the lead miniature is, in its fundamental material makeup, a less corporate product than the contemporary plastic miniature.

So, what makes Oldhammer 'old'? Is it about starting *Warhammer* as an 80s kid? Maybe about enjoying *Warhammer* miniatures and techniques before Games Workshop changed in 1994? Or is it about whether you play earlier editions of *Warhammer*? What interests us is not which of these is a 'better' way to define Oldhammer. Instead, we are interested in how the Oldhammer community talks about the ways in which Warhammer's past – the *old* in Oldhammer – matters to them and what 'doing' Oldhammer in practice means. Deciding

what counts as old for Oldhammer creates boundaries which help to separate Oldhammer from other ways of doing Warhammer. This matters because it helps people identify as a member of a specific community .

To create a an Oldhammer community there is an obvious value in separating a 'pure' Warhammer experience (played by Oldhammerers) from what that community sees as a corporatized and sterile post-1994 Warhammer experience. Games researcher Nicholas Taylor noticed this also happens with LEGO. What counts as LEGO and who decides is debated by LEGO community members who have different practices and experiences of LEGO's materiality[4]. Oldhammer isn't historical wargaming, where real battles are simulated and replayed... but Oldhammer *is* gaming and hobby that attempts to play with its own past.

Oldhammer, therefore, is memory wargaming; it is memory work[5]. Communities use memory to understand themselves as a group with a shared past, shared attitude towards that past and an understanding of how that past can be recalled into the present. Enthusiast Zhu Bajiee describes it on an Oldhammer forum: "Oldhammer is going back to the origins of Warhammer, finding what is good and interesting there and returning it to the present"[6]. Oldhammer looks to the past of Warhammer for possibilities for how to think about and enjoy miniatures now.

## Oldhammer, two nostalgias, and Hauntology

Nostalgia is something of a taboo topic. The imagined good old days were not simple and were, on balance, more racist, sexist, and homophobic than the current day. Because of this, it can be tough to defend the idea that maybe some things were better in general (though this may have been the case for a select few). But what exactly is nostalgia? Why does it have a role in wargaming? And, even more importantly, why is it an important part of Oldhammer?

Artist and theorist Svetlana Boym offers a more nuanced approach to nostalgia. She believes there are two forms of nostalgia:

restorative and reflective[7]. *Restorative nostalgia* is what we tend to popularly think of as nostalgia. It aims to restore the past at the expense of the present. In Oldhammer terms, this restoration of a lost golden age might involve stopping the production of computer-designed, plastic miniatures and instead return to hand-crafted metal sculpts. *Reflective nostalgia* is different. It is melancholy and lingers on what was lost, looking for what might be constructively brought forward to the present while leaving the rest behind. For example, what ways of doing *Warhammer* from the 80s and 90s can we apply to the modern-day hobby?

Boym's framework is a spectrum. She claims that though any time you feel nostalgia you lean toward restorative or reflective, no matter how heavily you lean it is never completely one or the other. This is a useful way of thinking about nostalgia, for *Warhammer* or any other cultural product. The same people who mine Games Workshop's past for better ways of engaging with their hobby can also sometimes be angry about its disappearance. We believe, after observing Oldhammer for years, that it trends toward reflective nostalgia (what is lost and could be brought forwards) even though the anger and frustration of restorative nostalgia is also present in Oldhammerers.

Cultural theorist Mark Fisher offers a view on time-related politics which pairs nicely with Boym's. Boym writes about types of nostalgia; Fisher helps us understand why we are nostalgic for the 1980s and 1990s in this particular moment. He writes about *hauntology*, the way that the present seems stuck and cannot move past older cultural expressions to imagine anything new. Hauntology, in short, arises from culture's inability "to grasp and articulate the present" and mourns "the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialized"[8]. As an example, he explores why so many new musical genres arose during the 1970s-90s, most of them sounding completely different from what came before, only to disappear by the 2000s, replaced by an endless sea of similar sounding, radio friendly pop music.

While Mark Fisher is sometimes dismissed as a mere nostalgic (there's that word as pejorative again), he is careful to clarify that

what we are nostalgic for are lost conditions which, before their dismantling, allowed for the possibility for new things to be made. The haunting of the present by past visions of the future, developed as they were in the waning days of (imperfect) social democracy, creates a stuckness in the present. We repeatedly return to the past to envision the future because, under current conditions, there is no future. A good example of this happened during the 2024 Super Bowl. A commercial for a bright new AI-driven future was paired with Tom Tom Club's 'Genius of Love', a song from 1981. The stabbing synths and Afro-fusion drums sounded, and still sound, like the future because the future which was promised in that sonic arrangement never arrived.

So, what are Oldhammerers nostalgic for? Examined with Boym and Fisher in mind, Oldhammerers' understanding of a 'right' and 'wrong' *Warhammer* maps to the ways financialization and technology foreclosed on certain aspects of Games Workshop's wildly imaginative early days. Instead of looking like a bunch of cranky old people, Oldhammerers look a lot like people nostalgic for a tumultuous, creatively vivid period when the weird and wonderful early Games Workshop could arise out of nothing and change gaming forever. They *interpret* this analysis through their hobby, but this should not be surprising. All of us do this. We all interpret our politics, feelings, and desires through cultural expressions and memories.

What Oldhammer longs for is not the simple hoarding of old miniatures or endless repetition of old games. Rather, it *longs for the conditions of possibility which allowed for such games to exist in the first place*. It longs for a future. Indeed, through material practices of painting, conversion, and play, Oldhammerers are marching down the alternate path of a non-corporate Warhammer which they believe was prematurely closed off. In the absence of that move to corporatization, they imagine a different Warhammer. Something which is still cast in pewter rather than plastic and when the games had overly complicated but endlessly innovative rules. Oldhammerers become participants in and aware of a haunting by the once was but never to be.

Oldhammer is, to repeat the earlier quote by an Oldhammerer, "finding what is good and interesting there and returning it to the present." This is exactly what Boym's reflective nostalgia is about: reflecting on what parts of the past can be brought (and integrated) into the present. Given the wide ranging technical, economic, and aesthetic changes which Games Workshop and the hobby as a whole have undergone, we doubt that Oldhammerers think that there can be a glorious return to 'the good old days' (Boym's restorative nostalgia). It is, instead, seemingly about lingering in past aesthetics and tech before inevitably, consciously returning to the present.

It is important to note that for Oldhammer this lingering, longing and interpretation of feelings is not just discourse and online grumbling about scale and power creep. This longing comes from a set of material practices and craft centered on the miniatures which are the bases of the Warhammer, old and new. In play, modeling, and painting, Oldhammerers engage in remembrance and craft at the same time. They connect and recall past times and possibilities into the present through attitudes, techniques and styles of play, collecting and craft. This recall is not just mental but social and of the body and of the hand. When an Oldhammerer holds an old wargaming miniature or plays a game from 1987 they (we!) feel this encapsulated time: they sense that when this miniature was made other futures were possible. In handling, painting, and playing with miniatures at the table Oldhammers don't just reflect or remember; they actively engage with the past and possibility. Old paint techniques or schemes, early edition's rules, and miniatures long since redesigned and upscaled are returned to life by active, critical engagement.

## *Age of Sigmar*: When Games Workshop killed the past

Having explored what Oldhammer is through the lenses of nostalgia and hauntology, we now focus on the powerful role Oldhammer has played (and continues to) in *Warhammer*. Oldhammerers have an uneasy relationship to *Warhammer's* past. So does Games Workshop. In 2015, *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*, Games Workshop's first game, was

killed. After a hasty and much maligned closing campaign called the End Times, it was replaced by a high fantasy game called *Age of Sigmar*. This series of events confirmed older *Warhammer* hobbyists' worst fears. Games Workshop was, at the time, in trouble. The company's stock was buoyed by a bubble related to its *Lord of the Rings* movie tie-in games. Those games did quite well after their release in 2001, but interest inevitably faded. When it did, Games Workshop reinvented itself as a trademark troll, going after everything from fan sites to authors using the term 'space marine', even though the term predates the release of *Warhammer 40,000*.

This reached its peak in the Chapterhouse lawsuit. Chapterhouse was a small miniatures company whose business model was to plug holes in Games Workshop's existing catalog. Games Workshop had an issue here. Primarily, its games printed rules for units and heroes which it didn't make miniatures for. The most obvious idea at the time was to convert your own by cobbling together various bits from other miniatures. Chapterhouse offered an alternative: sculpt the missing miniature. Combined with Chapterhouse's (and other similar producers) ability to offer bits like custom Space Marine shoulder pads, a small but thriving trade in such miniatures and bits circulated in hobbyist communities.

Games Workshop saw Chapterhouse's model as a direct threat to its trademarks. They sued and, for the most part, lost. As it turned out, arguing in front of an American judge that particular slopes of shoulderpads and the centuries old iron cross symbol are trademarkable didn't find much purchase. Games Workshop won on some counts, lost on most, and Chapterhouse went bankrupt under the weight of legal fees. From Games Workshop's standpoint, the damage was done. A great many of the aesthetics they used for their models were, from that point, fair game for independent miniatures studios.

The outcome of the Chapterhouse lawsuit is the seed of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle's* demise. *Age of Sigmar* was born to rectify Games Workshop's lost ability to trademark its more generic miniature range. Unlike its sci-fi sibling, *Warhammer 40,000,* which contained quite a number of trademarkable terms and styles,

*Warhammer Fantasy Battle's* Tolkien-slash-Moorcock-informed world contained few. It's easier to trademark Tyranids (think space bugs in sci-fi films, like *Alien*) than Elves or Dwarves. Trademarks matter because they allow companies to attempt to control intellectual property (for example images or names) and in doing so stop others from profiting from the same intellectual property. With the post-Chapterhouse reality and written court proceedings in mind, two things happened. The first was that Games Workshop stopped writing rules for anything without a miniature. This created a small but noticeable winnowing of possibility across all its game lines: players were discouraged from converting their own miniatures or writing their own background. These were two things were actively encouraged in *Warhammer's* early years and they represented a core part of the hobby for Oldhammerers.

The second, more seismic shift was the death of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* and its replacement with *Age of Sigmar* (see Chapter 9 in this volume). *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* was already a low seller compared to *Warhammer 40,000*. The Chapterhouse fallout simply sealed its fate, as whatever couldn't be trademarked, or at least branded so thoroughly that no one would think of things like Space Marines in any other way, was excised. *Age of Sigmar* provided a more trademarkable replacement. Can't trademark Elves and Orcs? Turn them into Aelves and Orruks. The miniatures also became more complex, meaning the gaudier, metal miniatures were fully phased out in favor of plastic. The fictional *Age of Sigmar* world became a mixture of *Planescape* and *World of Warcraft*.

*Age of Sigmar* was precisely the type of fantasy which Oldhammerers and merely older *Warhammer* fans hated. The outcry was immediate and pointed – even though it was independent of whether *Age of Sigmar* was (and is) a good game with good miniatures on its own merits. But. *Age of Sigmar* was *wrong*. The miniatures were too fancy, too plastic, and the bases were (horrors) *round*. The shape of these bases is not incidental to Oldhammerer's nostalgia. Bases in *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* were square to allow players to form groups of them into ranked rectangles of troops, a type of miniatures

wargaming called 'rank and flank', while *Age of Sigmar* is a looser, skirmish-adjacent style. The base is foundational for *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* focused Oldhammers as its shape insists on specific ways of making, playing, and seeing miniatures. The end of the square base, like end of metal miniatures, became a dividing line for Oldhammers to point to and start to work from.

It is a surprise, then, that Games Workshop brought *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* back in the form of *Warhammer: The Old World* in early 2024, and even more surprising that it exists alongside *Age of Sigmar*. *The Old World* operates with certain restrictions: not all factions have ongoing support and new miniatures releases will continue to be limited in scope and number. The game's setting takes place centuries before that of older, fuller editions. Still, it is back. But why? After all, Games Workshop worked hard to get away from the difficult-to-trademark complexities of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* and *Age of Sigmar* did. and continues to sell well. The answer is Oldhammer.

It is tough to ignore just how vivid Oldhammer communities are and the strength of their (mostly reflective and partially restorative) nostalgia. Further, in the wake of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle's* demise, interest in the movement spiked: forums were more active, Facebook interest group numbers swelled, and third-party knockoffs proliferated. While Games Workshop keeps its internal logic under lock and key, a fact we can attest to as qualitative researchers trying to score interviews, it is obvious that its marketing team closely monitors wargaming trends. With the high traffic on Oldhammer sites in mind, Games Workshop wondered how to get back into the rank and flank, older aesthetic market which they had willingly abandoned. Seeing movements like Oldhammer, Games Workshop was presented with a market research goldmine: thoughtful critique from hyper-engaged consumers. Nostalgia is a powerful force when it comes to consumer preferences. But how to use that energy?

Games Workshop corporate can't capture all of Oldhammer's energy, a fact we can easily see in the use of models and model names which are now retroactively out of step with GW naming conventions: Elves become 'Aelves' Space Marines become Adeptus Astartes,

etc. Beyond trademarkable names there are attitudes, especially those bound up in Oldhammer as a critique of Games Workshop, that the company can't quite enclose... even if pseudo-parodic marketing like the 'James Workshop' promos attempts to capture such critiques. Part of the allure of Oldhammer is implicitly (and at times explicitly) a critique of not just current Games Workshop but of a whole mode of hobby and game consumption. Oldhammer questions meta-chasing, forced obsolescence of specific miniatures, armies, and of ways of playing and thinking about miniatures. Also the tone of Oldhammer communities is markedly different from that of *Old World* communities, with Oldhammerers barely discussing game rules while *Old World* communities talk more about list building and tournament play.

It is worth dwelling on these differences for a moment. It is easy to think of Oldhammer *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* as being all about craft, while the new *Old World* as being all about play, meta, and gaming. Whilst Oldhammerers (from the start of Oldhammer to the most recent discussions surrounding the Old World's return) *do* privilege miniatures over rules and over competitive play in particular, make no mistake. Oldhammerers play games too. It is just much more likely going to be a game using some earlier edition (or a mix of several). Even the name *Old World* is laden with meaning related to the different, yet similar, ways of engaging with *Warhammer*.

In the Oldhammerer's reckoning, the Old World (unitalicized) is a fictional place, the setting for battles and crafting projects. For those enamored of Games Workshop's attempted return to its roots, it is both that and a title. *The Old World* as title signifies something complicated and complicating: it can only be old if there is something new, and the new is *Age of Sigmar*. The Old World was blown up once, in 2015, to make room for the new and it is imperative that we know it is now old. For the Oldhammerer, it never went away. Instead, it lingered on as a reflection of a past, offering ongoing lessons. For the *Old World* aficionado, it is restored, supplanting and replacing past editions. If that sounds like Boym's nostalgia framework, it should.

## Conclusion

Our intent here is not to claim that *The Old World* is bad and Oldhammer is good. But they are different and this difference maps to the reflective-restorative spectrum. Not all nostalgia is bad, but that does not mean that all nostalgia is good. Rather, nostalgia is complex. It can serve as a retreat from the present moment which eventually leads to anger as it dawns on people that the past can never return. But it can also be useful, if bittersweet, as we find things our culture discarded long ago which still work. And it is often both things at once, something which makes us sad and happy all at once. Nostalgia is never simple and neither is Oldhammer.

The nostalgia on offer, whatever its flavor, derives from and interacts with the corporate-fictional behemoth of *Warhammer*. Of course, Games Workshop would take notice of these weirdos keeping the torch lit for their old miniatures and games. Oldhammer was and is a tiny part of a huge community of hobbyists and players. The goal was not to capture Oldhammerers as a specific group of would-be-consumers but to capture the past that Oldhammer was responding to and to sell that back to the larger mainstream market. But Games Workshop has always done this. It did this when it took a small sidebar on the Badab War in *Rogue Trader* and turned it into a multi-book campaign with bespoke characters. It will continue to do this as it releases more and more novels and gaming supplements set in the Horus Heresy. And it will do it at some unforeseen date with some forgotten piece of lore or art nestled in a mostly forgotten book or White Dwarf article from 1988. Will it be reflective or restorative when we engage with it? It will be both.

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# ABOUT THE EDITOR

**Ioannis Costas Batlle**

Ioannis Costas Batlle, PhD is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education and the Director of the Centre for Qualitative Research at the University of Bath (UK). He explores young people's out-of-school learning experiences using a combination of education theory, sociology and psychology. He has worked with charities, youth groups, youth sport, and early school leavers, and currently teaches courses about young people, interventions, deviance, and qualitative research. Ioannis has been a keen Warhammer fan since discovering Wood Elves at the age of 12. In 2021, he painted miniatures for 27 consecutive hours just to see how long he could last.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Arne Campbell** is an independent researcher based in Bergen, Norway. He mainly explores expressions of masculinity within gaming culture, and wrote his Master's thesis on the topic of gender representations in Warhammer 40,000. He fell in love with Warhammer at the age of seven when he saw a Tau Crisis suit on display at his local hobby store. Thankfully he grew out of liking Tau and is now an ardent Drukhari fanboy. He uses writing about Warhammer 40,000 as an excuse to not paint his ever-growing pile of shame.

**Dr Marcus Carter, PhD** is a Professor in Human Computer Interaction at The University of Sydney, and author of over 100 peer-reviewed articles on games and play. His recent books include Treacherous Play (MIT Press, 2022), Fantasies of Virtual Reality (MIT Press, 2024) and Fifty Years of Dungeons and Dragons (MIT Press, 2024). He once sorely over-estimated his modelling skills when he ordered a box of 2,000 watch batteries, with the ambition of re-wiring his Necron army with glowing LEDs. His fondest Warhammer memories always revolve around against-the-odds resurrections of entire squads of Necron Warriors.

**Martin Gibbs, PhD** is a Professor of Human-Computer Interaction in the School of Computing and Information Systems at the University of Melbourne. His research interests lie at the intersection of Science Technology Studies (STS) and Human Computer Interaction (HCI). His recent research has focused on the study of death, ritualisation

and interactive technologies with an interest in how game designers and players use games to commemorate and memorialize the dead. He is an author of the recent books Death and Digital Media (2018, Routledge) and Digital Domesticities (2020, Oxford). His pile of shame is 20 Grey Knight Terminators, primed but never painted...

**Mitchell Harrop, PhD** is an honorary research fellow in the schools of Historical and Philosophical Studies at The University of Melbourne. His research interests include digital games, digital humanities and historical mapping. Dr Harrop is the curious outside observer when it comes to Warhammer, much preferring to be at the table across the way in control of one quiet Dungeons and Dragons character instead of a thousand screaming orcs.

**Katriina Heljakka, DA, PhD** is a researcher of toys, play, and playful learning, visual artist, curator, author, and designer of toys, games, and playful interventions. She holds a Doctor of Arts from Aalto University, Finland and a PhD from the University of Turku. She acts as an expert in toy design, toy cultures, and life-wide play and is currently researching technologically driven play and play in work, leisure, and learning at the School of Economics at the University of Turku. For her, Warhammer miniatures are obviously toys.

**Ryan L. Johnson, PhD** is a scholar of popular culture and media, including science fiction, comic books, and anime. He calls himself a "Professional Nerd." When not writing about superheroes and action-adventure stories, he teaches Humanities courses at Dallas College, plays role-playing games, and hangs out with his dog. While never having the time or patience to play the miniatures, he has been reading Warhammer lore since the early 2010s, and has gotten several of his friends hooked on grimdark awesomeness.

**Ceri Lawrence** is a specialist occupational therapist working in neuro-rehab for the Royal Berkshire Foundation Trust, with a keen interest in mental health. She has a Master's degree from Brunel

University, where she completed a dissertation on the mental health and well-being benefits of the hobby of scale modelling for war veterans. This dissertation was later slimmed down and published in the British Journal of Occupational Therapy. In her spare time, she enjoys all things Sci-fi and High Fantasy, particularly making models and costumes within these genres. Ceri isn't much of one for gameplay but enjoys the creative side of Warhammer, particularly miniature painting and terrain building from the Middle Earth sets.

**Mikko Meriläinen, PhD** is an Academy Research Fellow at Tampere University, Finland. His research focuses on the intersections of gaming and other areas of everyday life, and in his previous work he has addressed especially young people's participation in gaming cultures. He is currently studying men and masculinities in gaming from a reparative perspective. Mikko has been painting and collecting miniatures for almost 30 years, starting with Warhammer Fantasy Battle at the age of 14.

**Mike Ryder, PhD** is a lecturer in Marketing at Lancaster University (UK), where he teaches digital marketing, advertising and social media. As a self-confessed Warhammer nerd, Mike loves to bring Warhammer into his day job. He has published research on the role of super soldiers in Warhammer 40,000, and regularly talks about Games Workshop in his teaching on social media. He is also co-founder of the world's first Warhammer Conference, where academics of all disciplines can come together and share their love of all things Warhammer. His website is www.mjryder.net.

**Benedict E. Singleton, PhD** is a senior lecturer at the School of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg. Originally trained in social anthropology and development studies, he has diverse research interests and experiences. He has conducted fieldwork in eight different countries and published research on Faroese whaling, Touch rugby, Nature-Based Integration, Family carers, fieldwork practice, environmental conflicts, scientific collaborations with

indigenous and local knowledge holders and, of course, Blood Bowl. Having played many Games Workshop games in the 90s, a chance encounter with the competitive Blood Bowl scene rekindled his interest. Encountering the joyful madness of Blood Bowl tournaments stimulated his desire to analyse what occurred sociologically leading to the research upon which his chapter is based. As a bearded man, he is naturally drawn to dwarf factions in all gaming. As such, "the stunties" remain his first love on the Blood Bowl pitch.

**Tara B. M. Smith, PhD** is an interdisciplinary scholar specializing in science fiction, literature, religion, and popular culture. In 2024, she was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions, researching religious themes in Warhammer 40,000. She is currently co-principal investigator on a project exploring the role of religion in the mental sustainability of long-term astronauts. Her PhD (2022) examined how science fiction promotes social change. When not researching, she enjoys uncovering new religions in Warhammer lore.

**Ryan Stanton** is a PhD student at the University of Sydney. His research is the first large scale analysis of gaming podcasts – both focused on digital, and non-digital games – and how the audiences of these podcasts are constructed and interact with these shows. Prior to this, he has also studied the fan communities of Actual Play podcast, The Adventure Zone, the results of which have been published in Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds. A more recent convert to Warhammer, he is a Necron fanatic who loves leading the charge with his prized possession, The Silent King.

**Jaakko Stenros, PhD** is a University Lecturer in Game Studies working at the Game Research Lab, Tampere University. He has published eleven books and a hundred articles and reports, and has taught game studies for well over a decade. Stenros studies play and games, his research interests include norm-defying play, game rules, queer play, role-playing games, miniaturing, and playfulness. He has

also collaborated with artists and designers to create ludic experiences and has curated many exhibitions at the Finnish Museum of Games. Stenros actually prefers studying Warhammer to playing it.

**Aasa Timonen** is a writer and a researcher in the Game Research Lab, Tampere University. Her work is concerned with the world-building of Warhammer, how transmedia is used in building the storyworlds and how players navigate in the transmedia universes. She has been playing Warhammer for over 20 years, and shows no signs of stopping. Her favourite aspect of Warhammer is theorizing, be it about rules, potential paint schemes or future model purchases. Her writing can be found in https://medium.com/@aasa.timonen4.

**Samuel Tobin, PhD** is a professor of communications media at Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts (USA). He is cofounder and coordinator of the Game Design major there. He is the author of Portable Play, the Nintendo Ds in Everyday Life. He researches quotidian play and how people interact with and talk about games. He thinks Space Hulk is the apogee of the form.

**Ian Williams, PhD** is in the Department of Communication at UNC-Chapel Hill (USA). He studies the relationship between craft and mass production, particularly in analog games. His academic work has been published in journals such as Games and Culture and Cultural Politics. Prior to entering academia, he was a freelance labor, games, and sports reporter at Jacobin, VICE, The Guardian, and others. He is primarily a Warhammer Fantasy Battle and Age of Sigmar player, which often makes him feel lonely.

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