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"Blood for the Blood God!" Engaging with Gods and Religion in the *Warhammer 40K* Universe

Tara B. M. Smith

Abstract

In the tabletop miniature wargame of *Warhammer 40,000 (40K)*, religion is everywhere. Whether participants choose to play as a techpriest, a battle nun Adepta Sororitas or a Chaos Daemon, they are engaging with the religious themes of the Games Workshop franchise. This report gives an update on my current research project at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School where I am investigating the religious lore of *40K*, how painters/players navigate these themes and whether they experience flow while painting.

Keywords: Warhammer, Tabletop, Miniatures, Flow, gamevironments

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IASGAR PhD Day Report: Introduction by Gregory Price Grieve

The 2nd Annual Summer Graduate Workshop hosted by UNCG's Network for Cultural Study of Video Gaming and the International Academy for Study of Gaming and Religion, titled *Videogaming and Cultural Values*, was held on 27 and 28 July 2023. Tailored for early-stage researchers and doctoral students, the workshop focused on media-centered approaches, perspectives from game developers and publishers, and insights from gamers. Participants engaged in discussions and debates on theoretical frameworks for exploring the intersection of religion, culture, and video gaming. Due to their outstanding quality, select presentations from the workshop have been chosen for publication in this issue as *Emerging Voices in the Field*.

Introduction

In August 2023 I started a Postdoctoral Fellowship within the Transcendence Initiative at the Harvard Divinity School in Boston. This fellowship on Spirituality and the Arts is based within the Center for the Study of World Religions. It is a one-year postdoctoral position that includes research stays in two of three of the partnering institutions: the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice, Italy and the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, Amsterdam, Netherlands (with the third being Warburg Institute in the UK, which I did not visit). My project focuses on religion and the tabletop *Warhammer* game 40,000 (40K). For this project, I am interviewing a cohort of painters/players about religion within the game both in terms of important themes and their reactions to them, but I have also been interested in the potential for them reaching meditative or transcendental flow states while painting. While 40K is a game mostly played on the tabletop, players often spend hours painting detailed and intricate miniature figurines. I am now halfway through this project and will offer give some context for the project and some initial findings.

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40K players interact and understand the gods and religions present within their gamevironments. This includes miniature wargaming, model hobbying, video games, engaging with lore and instructional content in a variety of mediums, and interacting with other players (both online and offline). The aim of this project is to develop new knowledge and understanding in these relationships. This project is interested in how players engage with the religious elements present within their gamevironments across different mediums, and the relationship if any between their own world belief systems and the lore and reality of 40K. Warhammer as a site of study provides rich research material across multiple engagements. Player engagements are not siloed into a single interaction with the universe – but rather 40K supports multiple ways of

experiencing the game and playing. For example, someone might buy a model which is devoted to the Chaos God Khorne, paint it, play it in a battle, read about the character's arc and lore in 40K literature and then discuss that with people on online forums or at in-person tournaments. Religion is being played, engaged, and interacted with, in addition, the players own belief systems could be challenged by the clear satanic, Catholic, cultic or atheistic overtones within the lore. The field of religion and gaming has to date largely focused on video gaming, despite the growing popularity and complexity of miniature and tabletop games. In addition, by focusing on the religious manifestation or development in a single game, the depth of the gamevironment and the unique experience of the player is overly simplified. By contrast, this study aims to explore a more realistic picture of players and how they engage with 40K in the context of religion.

40K is a miniature wargame produced by Games Workshop. First appearing in 1987, 40K entered its 9th Edition as of July 2020. According to hobby magazine ICv2 (Griepp 2022), 40K is the highest selling miniature wargame in the world. While it is difficult to estimate the number of players, the Warhammer website Goonhammer (Jones and Kelling 2022) estimates that there are 3.5-5 million players globally, with less than a percent of these being competitive players. While a large proportion of these players interact with Warhammer by engaging with the miniatures directly (either by buying, painting, playing battles or all of the above) many also engage with the lore from both Games Workshops' publishing division Black Library and fan material, by playing Warhammer video games, and by communicating on subreddits and other forums.

40K is set 40,000 years into the future of humanity, and like most science fiction settings is replete with aliens, mutated humanoids, androids, faster-than-light space

travel, technologically advanced weapons and similar concepts. The *Warhammer* universe is comprised of complex and detailed mythologies, multiple religions, and numerous gods that the inhabitants of the universe believe in and interact with. Four of the most prominent of these gods are of the Chaos gods which consist of Khorne (The Blood God), Nurgle (The Plague Lord), Slaanesh (The Dark Prince) and Tzeentch (The Changer of Ways). These gods, according to the lore, are the dark reflections of mortal emotions. These gods exist within an alternate dimension known as the Warp from which they engage, interfere, corrupt, and meddle in mortal affairs.

The reference to typical Catholic iconography, practices, orthodoxy, ritual, and the critique of organised religion would serve as rich scholarly material for the project. For example, in the video game Warhammer 40,000: Darktide (2022) you can play as a Zealot Preacher whose abilities and powers include such Catholic inspired nomenclature as "Swift Exorcism," "Chastise The Wicked," and "Martyrdom." Similarly, the trailer for the upcoming video game Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine II (2024) is laden with Christian iconography and messaging (GameStop 2021). The trailer depicts regular soldiers fighting H. R. Giger-esque aliens against a backdrop of Gothic cathedrals and halo adorned statutes, who are rescued by transhuman super-soldiers that descend from the heavens accompanied by choral music and are subsequently referred to as angels. Even someone unfamiliar with the 40K universe would recognise the clear religious symbolism. While these themes are of course fascinating and should be included in the scope of this study, the project has expanded to include other interesting questions that focus on the players themselves and their own connections with religion and gods, rather than merely a list of religious themes present within the universe itself.

Research Questions

- 1. Do 40K players and painters experience a meditative flow state during the painting of miniatures?
- 2. What types of sacred experience, meaning-making and othering occurs for the players themselves within the universe?
- 3. What are the religious elements within the universe and how are the problematic elements of the lore understood by people within and outside the community?

Argument

The argument of this research is that new meanings of religious experience and religion are being formed with players in their community and through the act of painting.

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Methodology and Evidence

While gameplay is a large part of engaging with *Warhammer* and religion, players often spend hours painting the models in deep concentration. This experience itself shares many similarities with academic work on meditative practices and flow states that represent additional dimensions of religious and spiritual player experience (see Soutter and Hitchens 2016, Seger and Potts 2012 for academic research on gaming and flow state). Flow can be defined as a state of pleasure had when engaging in a task with great focus (Keller and Bless 2008). Flow state can be found in many different practices from periods of intense engaging work at your job to religious practices like Islamic prayer (Newberg et al. 2015).

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Csikszentmihalyi (1990) from his studies on flow stated that this particular state of mind involves both immersion but also importantly a sense of not feeling your own body; experiences not unfamiliar to religious practitioners doing meditation, out of body experiences and repeated rituals. While this has been applied in video games theories, little work has been done on this flow state during activities like miniature painting. The painting of miniatures is very detailed and intricate, are on average one inch tall and take two to three hours to paint (although this can vary considerably). Flow as a concept is not always positive. As Soderman notes in his work Against Flow, flow can almost act as a way to cope in an overly stressful and capitalist society, and may cause people to overlook this existence and isolate individuals further (Soderman 2021, 212). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) hoped that flow could be harnessed in a positive way. Soderman's critique is that "flow seems to sustain the dominant reality" rather than really disrupt society (Soderman 2021, 212). In interviews with painters, while occasionally escapism is an important quality of flow, more importantly it offers a chance to slow down and harness creativity in a rich and vibrant universe of lore. Additionally, the hobby reduces isolation due to the very social aspect of it. Most games are played in person, with other people, at the one of many Games Workshop shops around the world and models are posted on supportive Facebook groups for critique and compliments. Soderman's contextualisation of flow theory as a response to Marxism and socialism is helpful, as it reminds us that flow is not completely innocent. However, even if it has been heavily co-opted by corporation wellness programs, the context of painting 40K miniatures in a very rich community, even if it is often done alone, I believe mitigates some of the negative aspects of flow. It exists within a social hobby.

I am interested in what painters think while painting and whether they feel relaxed or meditative while doing so. The study has recruited 12 participants from *Warhammer*

Facebook pages, asking for participants that paint at least two hours a week. Over a six-month period, participants were interviewed three times. Before the interview, they were asked to keep a painting journal in which they would write their feelings and experiences of painting. The reflective diary is then referred to during the interviews. In the long-form interviews, I have based my questions around Csikszentmihalyi's factors for determining flow state as described in his 1988 work, which includes six factors. Factors include questions on whether the participant felt intense concentration, a merging of action and awareness, no feelings of self-conscious and similar questions. These will be measured including some additional questions as posited by Seger like "unusual physical sensations" or "a sense of time distortion" (Seger 2012, 109). Additional questions will be included for individuals who are religious to see if painting is similar or different to religious rituals and contemplation.

Finally, I am interested in how irony is incorporated into the *40K* universe. The lore of *40K* was originally created to be over-exaggerated and point out just how bad a theocratic dictatorship could be. As *Warhammer* co-creator Rick Priestley states in an interview, "the background to *40K* was always intended to be ironic" (Priestly cited in Duffy 2015). The God Emperor, this dictator, and the Ecclesiarchy that promotes the religion in his name, were never meant to be idolised. However, as time as passed, new players do not always see these characters as ironic and instead valorise elements of him. This has resulted in a small section of the internet creating memes with Trump's face superimposed on Games Workshop official art of The God Emperor. This is something I hope to pursue further.

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Significance

There is currently a gap in knowledge and understanding on religion and gaming as it relates to tabletop games. These games however are becoming increasingly popular and involve intricate gameplay that is important to the players. Religion is an important component to the 40K universe. The topic of religion and video games has seen an influx of academic papers and chapters in recent years (Radde-Antweiler 2018, 207). There is, however, less scholarship on religion and tabletop games like Warhammer, despite their increase in popularity and social relevance. In addition, the field of religion and gaming tends to focus more on a narratological perspective (McNeely 2020, 87) and specific case studies (Radde-Antweiler 2018, 207). While such studies are important, works that incorporate sociological research are needed within this space. In addition, using methodologies that both enable recognition of the complex environment that are actor-centered – that are not just limited to the gameplay itself – are significant in the field of religion and gaming (Radde-Antweiler 2018, 210).

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Initial Findings

The research I have done so far is focus on interviews with my participants. The main focus of these interviews is whether they experience flow, what that has done for their mental health, how they incorporate that into their day and also how painting connects with other parts of their experiences with 40K. I have also been interested in how they deal with the religious and more negative aspects of the universe. So far, both within the journals and the interviews, all participants have experienced flow states that measure up well with Csikszentmihalyi's criteria. I have also noted that painting seems to decrease anxiety, help destress and overall seems to improve mental health. In addition, the hobby itself, including the community elements and

the many sites of engagement (Reddit, YouTube, the Black Library books, video games, etc.) take up a large part of the participants lives and again, mostly in a positive way. This is something I hope to explore further. I have also been conducting online analysis of Reddit sub-forums to find out what parts of religion are interesting to players and more generally how the lore interacts with the painting and how that interacts with the gameplay.

Conclusion

I am now part way through my study and am now having trouble reducing my findings to specific articles because it is all so connected. I feel very grateful that my participants have been so generous with their time and look forward to conducting my final interviews next week and working through the material (which is so far over 100.000 words of interview transcripts).

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