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# Issue 20 (2024)

## **articles**

The Subject of Games. Cartesian Anxiety in Game Cultures, Game Studies, and  
Gameplay

by Gerald Voorhees, 1

Pirating Platform Studies. The Historical Impact of Latin American Clone Consoles,  
1973-1994

by Phillip Penix-Tadsen, 35

Gamification. A Conceptual Critique to Move Forwards

by Lobna Hassan, 88

Role-Playing Games in the Classroom. Engaging Students with Ethics, Religion, and  
Games as Explorations of Society

by Christine Tomlinson, 114

## **reports**

Understanding Modern Views on the Middle Ages Through Research-led Learning. A  
Teaching Report

by Philipp Frey and Joana Hansen, 153

## **IASGAR PhD day reports**

"Fear the Old Blood." *Bloodborne*, Christian Concepts of Communion, and Theological Reflection

by Ed Watson, 169

Blessed Are the Geek. Christian Gaming Content Creators and Digital Discipleship

by Sophia Rosenberg, 179

Fanatical Alien Monsters. *Halo* and Religion in Fan-Forum Discourse

by Emma Milerud Sundström, 189

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

by Tara B. M. Smith, 201

## **reviews**

*Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling: The Dynamic Game Character* (2023) by Joleen Blom. A Book Review

by Gia Coturri Sorenson, 212

## **“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, gameenvironments

201

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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 post-doctoral 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.

202

*40K* players interact and understand the gods and religions present within their gameenvironments. 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 gameenvironments 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 gameenvironment 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* (Griep 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.







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.



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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