

Robert Baumgartner

### »In the Grim Darkness of the Far Future there is only War«. WARHAMMER 40,000, Transmedial Ludology, and the Issues of Change and Stasis in Transmedial Storyworlds

2015

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16489>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Baumgartner, Robert: »In the Grim Darkness of the Far Future there is only War«. WARHAMMER 40,000, Transmedial Ludology, and the Issues of Change and Stasis in Transmedial Storyworlds. In: *IMAGE. Zeitschrift für interdisziplinäre Bildwissenschaft*. Themenheft zu Heft 22, Jg. 11 (2015), Nr. 2, S. 36–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16489>.

#### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

[http://www.gib.uni-tuebingen.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=111&Itemid=157&menutem=miArchive&showIssue=75](http://www.gib.uni-tuebingen.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=111&Itemid=157&menutem=miArchive&showIssue=75)

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a Deposit License (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual, and limited right for using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute, or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the conditions of use stated above.

Robert Baumgartner

**»In the Grim Darkness of the Far Future there is only War«.  
*Warhammer 40,000*, Transmedial Ludology, and the Issues of Change and Stasis in Transmedial Storyworlds**

**Abstract**

*Warhammer 40,000* (or *Warhammer 40k*) is a science fantasy tabletop war game set in a dystopian vision of the 41st millennium, with a xenophobic and fascist galaxy-spanning »Imperium of Man« fighting in numerous never-ending wars against various inhuman opponents, among them transdimensional demons, ancient robots and swarms of planet-eating bugs. Since its release in 1987, the game has become one of the most successful tabletop brands and has given birth to numerous spinoffs in the form of (more than 120) novels, pen-and-paper role-playing games, comics, and video games. This article acts as an introduction to the complex structure of this particular transmedial franchise, but also explores the consequences of a ludic »mother ship« for further transmedial extensions: as players experience the world by simulative means, they gain a unique »empirical« approach to the facts of the world, which will influence their further dealings with other elements of the storyworld, be it a game, a novel, or a comic. Using a ludological approach, the article then attempts to find the common structural elements shared between the games of the *Warhammer 40,000* brand, thus opening the way for further explorations from the perspective of a transmedial ludology. Further-

more, it sheds light on the franchise's attempts to advance its storyline with the collective help of fans and players of the original tabletop war game ›mother ship«, in the process revealing a conflict between the conception of the transmedial storyworld as (mostly) static setting, on the one hand, and as dynamic storyline, on the other.

## 1. Introduction to a ›Grimdark« Future

It is the 41st Millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor of Mankind has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the vast Imperium of Man for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day so that he may never truly die. Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the Warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds [...]. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat to humanity from aliens, heretics, mutants—and far, far worse. To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods. (FANTASY FLIGHT GAMES 2009: 12)

This quote, taken from the rulebook of the pen-and-paper role-playing game *Warhammer 40,000. Rogue Trader* (2009), serves as a concise introduction to one of the most extensive—and yet most underexplored—transmedial storyworlds around: since its inception in 1987 as a tabletop war game, the *Warhammer 40,000* (shortened *Warhammer 40k* or *WH40K*) franchise has not only become one of the most successful tabletop brands but also gave birth to numerous ›satellites« (cf. JENKINS 2009) in the form of interdependent novels, pen-and-paper role-playing games, comics, best-selling video games,<sup>1</sup> and a massive community of fan fiction writers and artists.<sup>2</sup> The tabletop ›mother ship« (cf. JENKINS 2009) and its complex medial hybridity between ludic rule-based gameplay (termed ›crunch« by players) and narrative ›fluff« is of great interest to both scholars of game studies and narratologists, whereas each of the transmedial branch products would be worthy of investigation in its own right. However, the little existing research that is concerned with *Warhammer 40,000* mostly focuses on design aspects of the original war game: the works of Clim J. de Boer and Maarten H. Lamers (cf. DE BOER/LAMERS 2004) or Steve Hinske and Marc Langheinrich (cf. HINSKE/LANGHEINRICH 2009) use *Warhammer 40,000* as a more or less interchangeable example of a tabletop war game system; their interest lies in the possible augmentation of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Warhammer Dawn of War* (I, 2004/II, 2009), *Warhammer 40,000. Space Marine* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> The most popular online repository for fan fiction, *fanfiction.net*, holds more than 3,200 *Warhammer 40,000* fan stories. Cf. <https://www.fanfiction.net/game/Warhammer/> [accessed March 30, 2015].

non-digital tabletop games with digital tools and thus implicitly excludes most narrative aspects of the game—including the potential conveyance of meaning by iconic or indexical means. However, as the works of Saskia Bakker and colleagues (cf. BAKKER et al. 2007) demonstrated, even a small change in the design of miniatures from abstract to more iconic forms can significantly alter the ways in which players contextualize the relation of these miniatures to each other and understand the game (cf. BAKKER et al. 2007: 163f.). The works of Markus Carter, Martin Gibbs, and Mitchell Harrop (cf. CARTER/GIBBS/HARROP 2013; 2014) acknowledge this fact: their analysis of the possible enjoyment of the tabletop game is not limited to the basic game rules and play pieces, but also examines the possible enjoyment gained from the visual design of miniatures and (tabletop) battlefields, as well as the elaborate narratives about the fictional characters, armies, and locations that are represented by the painted plastic and metal objects.

However, these inquisitive ludological investigations have not been accompanied by narratological approaches—despite the variety of narrative styles, genres, and tropes employed not just in the tabletop war game itself, but in the creation of a complex transmedial universe whose specific ethos has inspired the widely used online neologism ›grimdark‹ (referring to extremely bleak, dark, and nihilistic fictional settings and situations).<sup>3</sup> It is my hypothesis that this hesitation can be explained by two central factors: first, the fact that the narrative of *Warhammer 40,000* is deeply rooted in genre literature, primarily ›soft‹ science fiction and heroic fantasy—genres that are still strongly associated with triviality and cannot offer an institutional support network for interested scholars in the humanities. Second, the fact that a large proportion of the narrative content of the transmedial ›storyworld‹ of *Warhammer 40,000* is closely linked to various games (tabletop war games, pen-and-paper role-playing games, video games of various genres). The main way of fully ›unlocking‹ this content is by playing and analyzing these games—an undertaking that not only takes a lot of time but also requires individuals to be competent gamers as well as trained game studies scholars. However, these harsh requirements are offset by the richness of a transmedial franchise that is not only extremely complicated but also strongly based on a ludic component, both in its ›mother ship‹ and its transmedial extensions: as players experience the world by simulative means, they gain a unique ›empirical‹ approach to the facts of the world, which will influence their further dealings with other elements of the storyworld, be it a game, a novel, or a comic. For this reason, the present article is not just intended as an introduction to the transmedial franchise and its unexplored narrative aspects but also as a case study for the productive combination of narratological and ludological approaches in the study of transmedial research objects.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/grimdark> [accessed March 30, 2015].

## 2. Origin. A Tabletop War Game »Mother Ship«

The setting depicts the society of the 41st Millennium (i.e., 39.000 years in the future) as a totalitarian empire that is teetering on the brink of collapse: from the outside, it is challenged by numerous powerful alien species, like the demonic forces of Chaos, planet-eating swarms of insectoid monsters called Tyranids, or the Necrons, ancient mechanoids that have risen from their eon-spanning slumber to reclaim their lost empire. From within, the regressive Imperium is threatened by bureaucratic incompetence, superstition, rebellion, mutation, and subversive Chaos cults. Life is cheap: soldiers die by the billions, whole worlds are swallowed by cosmic storms or ripped apart by demonic forces, and imperial citizens spend their short lives toiling away for the glory of the comatose Emperor—who, before being mortally wounded by his traitorous son in a galactic civil war, attempted to unify mankind in a technologically as well as socially progressive secular civilization. Now, his corpse-like body is venerated as a god by a giant church apparatus (the Ecclesiarchy) and presides over an empire that only survived the ten millennia of his absence as a calcified husk strife with cruelty, ignorance, and religious fervor. However, the game also suggests that a more open and permissive empire might long have fallen to the numerous enemies of mankind: when even sophisticated AIs are easily corrupted by powerful Chaos Gods created and sustained by the collective subconscious, a society tends to get more distrustful of technology.

With most of the conflicts in the setting being fought by irreconcilable factions and ideologies, peace negotiations are unusual events and mostly only temporal breaks that allow the negotiating sides to attack a third faction. The origin of this bleak and nihilistic future, where futuristic technology clashes with archaic beliefs, where »there is only war« (the mantra and »ethos« of *Warhammer 40,000*, cf. FANTASY FLIGHT GAMES 2009: 12) can be traced back to the rulebook of a niche game called *Rogue Trader* (1987). A hybrid of different tabletop game genres, *Rogue Trader* provided both complex rules for small- and medium-scale war games fought with small (28mm scale) plastic/lead miniatures and a rich futuristic setting that established the narrative background for the various involved factions. The British developing company Games Workshop originally envisioned *Rogue Trader/Warhammer 40,000* as a less expensive<sup>4</sup> and more humoristic science fiction version of their established fantasy war game *Warhammer* (cf. HOARE 2011), but the demand of players for a game that could be played at larger tournaments as well as the positive feedback to the darker elements of the settings led to the development of the *Warhammer 40,000* that we know today.

Players of the tabletop game choose one of the numerous factions—either due to its mechanical characteristics, its narrative background, its visu-

---

<sup>4</sup> The game was designed for the use of »proxies«, i.e., improvised miniatures that did not have an iconic relation to the referred fictional character, such as sugar cubes as stand-ins for fearsome super soldiers.

al aesthetic, or a combination of these factors (cf. HARROP/CARTER/GIBBS 2014: 5). They then start assembling their army out of the 20 to 40 different units that are included in the ›codex‹ (a 50+-page document combining a mechanical unit and army list with narrative descriptions and characterization) of their faction. Players then purchase miniatures representing individual infantrymen, tanks, or larger units like bipedal war machines, artillery units, or massive demons—with the cost of unassembled and unpainted tanks usually hovering around 60 US\$ and that of even larger models going up to 100 US\$, fielding a whole army can be seen as a considerable investment. Players then paint and modify the miniatures to their individual liking or based on narrative ›fluff‹—another investment, as many players report that painting an army usable for tournaments usually takes up to 100 hours (cf. CARTER/GIBBS/HARROP 2014: 136).

Each miniature or group of miniatures has specific characteristics that define its options and value in battle. An example: a ›Khorne Berserker‹, narratively characterized as a bloodthirsty warrior driven into a rage by his chaos god, receive the following special characteristics: ›Fearless, Furious Charge, Rage, Counter Attack, [...] two weapon attacks‹<sup>5</sup>—even without grasping the exact mechanical consequences of each rule, players can see that Khorne Berserkers are best used as brutal melee fighters (which is affirmed by the design of their miniatures: every unit wears heavy armor and a horned helmet while wielding a massive axe). Each of the ›stats‹ (i.e., mechanical characteristics) influences the gameplay itself: units with better statistics are more effective, but also have a higher point value (which limits the size of armies), thus making them more expensive to field. For a match involving two or more players, each player will select models from his or her own collection matching a previously agreed upon point value. The battle is then fought on a table space of 6" by 4" (1.82m x 1.22m) that is often decorated with elaborate set pieces and terrain, representing the fictional landscapes of the 41st millennium as much as mechanically relevant topography that defines cover, movement rates, and height levels.

Although the rulebooks and codices usually dedicate a third of their pages to the narrative background and characterization of units and factions (mixing fictional diaries, bureaucratic reports, hagiographies, or songs with evocative images that blend medieval church paintings, romanticist, and Heavy Metal imagery), it has to be noted that this elaborate narrative universe is barely present in the gameplay itself: its ludic pleasures lie, among others (like the painting of miniatures and social interaction with other players, cf. CARTER/GIBBS/HARROP 2014: 123), in the proper planning and execution of strategic actions that will decimate the opponent's army and ensure victory. The fictional universe or ›fluff‹—a term that emphasizes the ornamental character of its referent—is used as inspiration for custom army designs or match environments, but is not functionalized in the gameplay itself: players do not

---

<sup>5</sup> [http://1d4chan.org/wiki/Warhammer\\_40,000/Tactics/Chaos\\_Space\\_Marines%287E%29#Elites](http://1d4chan.org/wiki/Warhammer_40,000/Tactics/Chaos_Space_Marines%287E%29#Elites) [accessed March 30, 2015].

need to know why their Space Marine army is fighting the mysterious Eldar on an icy moon, but the studies of Carter and colleagues among tournament players indicate that the coherent integration of tabletop matches in the narrative framework of the storyworld can function as another source of enjoyment offered by the pastime (cf. CARTER/GIBBS/HARROP 2014: 139).

### 3. Charting a Transmedial Universe

#### 3.1 The Storyworld of the 41st Millennium. Narrative Media

In the decades following its original release, *Warhammer 40,000* did not only turn into one of the most successful tabletop brands but also became one of the most expansive transmedial franchises in Western popular culture—both from the perspective of transmedial narratology and from that of an as-of-yet unestablished transmedial ludology.

Let us start, then, with an examination of the well-established concept of the (narrative) storyworld—i.e., a framework that contains the ›existents‹, events, and settings which mark stories among various narrative media as referring to the same fictional world (cf. RYAN 2014: 25). While the rulebook for the first edition of *Warhammer 40,000* had outlined the storyworld of the 41st millennium in broad strokes, the rulebooks for the following editions expanded the world massively, both in breadth (more factions, more units, more sectors of the galaxy) and depth (more nuances and groups within various factions, more historical details). Separately published supplements and expansions not only provided players with more options to customize their armies and battles but also included more background information and new regiments that were tuned to the theme of the expansion (urban warfare, planetary invasions, fortifications, etc.). Between new rulebooks and expansions, more details were gradually added in the form of maps, short stories, and artworks in Games Workshop's own magazines *White Dwarf* (1977– ) or *Inferno!* (1997–2004) as well as in established gaming periodicals like *Citadel Journal* (1985–2002).

Soon after the release of the first edition, Games Workshop also started publishing novels set in the *Warhammer 40,000* universe. They depict many of the important events in the 10 millennia following the great civil war that brought the human Imperium to the verge of ruin. While many novels stay close to the most well-known elements of the setting (transhuman elite troops/battle monks called Space Marines fighting an assortment of aliens or heretics), others shed light on the life and experience of marginalized or otherized factions and individuals:

The *Ciaphas Cain* series follows the exploits of an Imperial commissar (a role similar to a Soviet politcommissar) who survives in the grim darkness of future battlefields despite suicidal orders, overwhelming adversaries, and a lack of resources by skill, cowardice, and sheer luck.

The *Gaunt's Ghosts* series depicts the life of a unit of regular Imperial guardsmen (one of the weakest units in the tabletop game, whose powerless laser rifle is nicknamed »flashlight« by players) who do their best to survive their role as cannon fodder in the fight against immortal robots and demonic monstrosities.

The *Night Lords* series of novels is dedicated to a legion of Chaos Space Marines, i.e., a faction of corrupted super soldiers on an eternal crusade against civilization; the novels discuss their motives in some detail, attempting to humanize a faction that is usually depicted as unapologetically amoral.

The *Path of the Eldar* sheds light on the ways of the mysterious Eldar species, whose unpredictable actions are shown to be dictated by ancient prophecies and eon-spanning plans to save their dwindling numbers from extinction.

*Ravenor* features the heavily disabled psyker<sup>6</sup> Gideon Ravenor, who, despite being bound to a life support chair, is still sent out into the battlefields of the future with a retinue of (more or less) loyal allies.

Today, the company's publishing branch Black Library provides more than 120 *Warhammer 40,000* novels and novellas, all of which are considered »canon« (i.e., authentic contributions to the storyworld). Events of novellas are referenced in the rulebooks and popular characters from the novels have been offered as miniatures for the tabletop war game.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Games Workshop authorized the creation of numerous *Warhammer 40,000* comics and graphic novels, which were published in various British comic magazines and, from 1998 to 2004, in *Warhammer Monthly*, a monthly comic anthology. These comics and graphic novels use their medial potential to enrich the storyworld, by either expanding on the dark gothic imagery of the rulebook illustrations or by experimenting with visual styles adapted from other genres (e.g., the anarchic British *2000 A.D.* comic anthology [1977– ] known for the character Judge Dredd, 1990s super hero comics, Japanese manga) or romanticist painting.

The cinematic adaptation of *Warhammer 40,000* seemed to be the next step in the transmedial handbook, but despite numerous attempts (such as the mediocre CGI DVD release *Ultramarines. A Warhammer 40,000 Movie* [2010]<sup>8</sup>), a successful globally-released film with the *Warhammer 40,000* license seems to remain far out of reach.

---

<sup>6</sup> An individual with psychic abilities.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <http://www.solegends.com/citblack/> [last accessed March 30, 2015].

<sup>8</sup> With a 38% rating on [rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/ultramarines_a_warhammer_40000_movie/) (cf. [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/ultramarines\\_a\\_warhammer\\_40000\\_movie/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/ultramarines_a_warhammer_40000_movie/) [accessed March 30, 2015]).



### 3.2 A Case Study in Transmedial Ludology. The *Warhammer 40,000* Games

The fact that the *Warhammer 40,000* universe has also been extended by numerous games might not be surprising to attentive observers of transmedial franchises (cf. JENKINS 2003; 2004; 2006). Many of these ludic satellites are following in the footsteps of the original tabletop war game: while the games *Epic Armageddon* (1988– ) and *Battlefleet Gothic* (1999–2013) extend the frame of conflicts from company-scaled clashes to mass combat between regiments or even massive space battles between fleets, *Necromunda* (1995– ), *Space Hulk* (1989– ), and *Inquisitor* (2001– ) explore small-scale combat like gang fights in dystopian mega cities or even duels between powerful individuals. Like the main game, each specialist game has its own rulebook(s) with rules and narrative background information (again in various narrative styles) on aspects of the setting that were previously only roughly outlined, but not fully explored. At the same time, this information is added to the »mythos« and »topos« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2004: n.pag.) of the storyworld and is referenced in new editions of the main game's rulebooks and novels.

Even more information is added by the transmedial integration of a gaming genre that puts an even stronger emphasis on narrative aspects: during the past decade, the gaming company Fantasy Flight Games has published several successful pen-and-paper role-playing games that allow players to explore more aspects of the fictional universe by assuming the roles of Space Marines (in *Deathwatch* [2010]), agents of the Holy Imperial Inquisition (in *Dark Heresy* [2008]), privateering merchant princes (in *Rogue Trader* [2009]), or even corrupted champions of Chaos (in *Black Crusade* [2011]). As with many modern pen-and-paper role-playing games, these games still feature rule-defined combat between characters, but also require players to integrate themselves into the narrative world of the fictional setting in order to solve social challenges—the story is no longer ornamental, but becomes a core element of the game. To this end, the games feature voluminous rulebooks that dedicate even more pages to elaborate explanations of the social and spatial structure of a previously unknown part of the fictional universe than they spend on the combat rules, inventory data, and character building information that make up the »war gaming« parts of these games.<sup>9</sup>

This transmedial enrichment continues in the numerous *Warhammer 40,000* video games that have been published during the past 20 years: they, too, feature visceral combat in all its forms as a central gameplay element—be it in the form of planetary conquest in the real-time strategy series *Dawn Of War* (2004–2010), or personal combat in the first- or third-person shooters *Fire Warrior* (2003), *Space Marine* (2010), and *Kill Team* (2011). These games, too, use their specific mediality (cf., e.g., JUUL 2005; THON 2007a; 2007b) to contribute to the fictional universe: by mixing cinematic visuals and tradition-

---

<sup>9</sup> The core rulebook of *Rogue Trader* spends more than 200 of its 400 pages on narrative descriptions of the universe, its mechanics, and the places and people in a specific new sector of space designed for the game (cf. FANTASY FLIGHT GAMES 2009).

al narration with partially or fully explorable virtual worlds and challenging rule-based interaction, they manage to offer players new insights into the world of *Warhammer 40,000*. Their stories do not only elaborate on existing organizations and locations but also introduce new elements such as various previously unmentioned planets, the new Space Marine chapter of the »Blood Ravens« (now featured in several novels), and individual characters (like the Ork Warlord and fan-favorite Gorgutz 'Ead 'Unter). However, specific medial characteristics of video games, such as the potential for nonlinear and multiperspectivic storytelling (cf. DEGLER 2009: 555), can complicate the integration of these new elements into the main storyworld: the *Dawn of War* games *Dark Crusade* (2006), *Soulstorm* (2008), and *Dawn of War II. Retribution* (2011) allow players to choose their protagonists among various factions in these games' singleplayer campaigns. With the main goal of all these games being the termination of all opposing sides, this results in as many endings as there are factions. But in *Warhammer 40,000*, as in most transmedial franchises, there is only one officially recognized »canon«—i.e., only one version of events that will be regarded as (fictionally) factual. In the case of *Dark Crusade* (and its nine different endings), Games Workshop decided on a canonical ending that nullified the eight other outcomes. It declared the Space Marines, the storyworld's trademark faction, the winners of the battle for planet Kronus—however, to players that led other factions to victory after hours of interactive engagement, »their« victory will have seemed just as »real.«<sup>10</sup>

### 3.3 Simulative Contributions

While the application of established concepts of transmedial narratology (e.g., KLAstrup/TOSCA 2004; RYAN 2014) to the analysis of those elements of various game media that can be identified as »narrative«—either in the narrow sense as referring to the use of oral and, to some degree, textual sign systems (cf. GENETTE 1994: 15) or more broadly as referring to the use of audiovisual and spatial sign systems—can produce positive results, its use for the analysis of ludic/simulative elements that are fundamental parts of the specific mediality of games in general and video games in particular is strictly limited. As described by game studies scholars such as Gonzalo Frasca (cf. FRASCA 2003) or Jan-Noël Thon (cf. THON 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2009), (video) games can convey meaning by various means: Thon lists narrative and ludic immersion as just two ways (together with spatial and social immersion, cf. THON 2006: 126ff.) in which games can engage players. Despite not explicitly »narrating«, the medial elements involved in spatial, ludic or social immersion still use their own sign systems to convey information to players—who will use this information not only to make sense of the game's rules but also of the game's world as a fictional place.

---

<sup>10</sup> For details about the canonical ending, cf. [http://warhammer40k.wikia.com/wiki/Dawn\\_of\\_War\\_-\\_Dark\\_Crusade](http://warhammer40k.wikia.com/wiki/Dawn_of_War_-_Dark_Crusade) [accessed March 30, 2015].

I will elaborate this thesis by taking a look at the ludic structure of the various *Warhammer 40,000* games: the original *Warhammer 40,000* tabletop war game as well as the various *Warhammer 40,000* video games can be described as ›ludic‹ games (cf. CAILLOIS 2001: 13)—i.e., structured play activities that are based on strict rules, which might be as simple as (virtual) gravity and as complex as the social etiquette of alien nobility. These rules govern every possible action within the »magic circle« (HUIZINGA 1955: 10) of the game—be it the 6" by 4" area of a table or the virtual representations of fictional worlds or galaxies on the screen—and, thus, provide objects and characters with specific features that can be identified by repeated exposition: some objects might have more mass than others, some characters might be faster or harder to vanquish. The original tabletop war game makes this explicit in the ›stats blocks‹ and point values of units: players know with empirical certainty that a Khorne Berserker will almost always defeat an Imperial Guardsman in single combat—because they know the rules that govern the world and can ascertain their validity every time they play the game. This way of establishing empirical world rules is particularly interesting because it might influence the way individuals discover a transmedial universe: it is likely that individuals who start out as players of the tabletop war game will utilize the empirical ›facts‹—i.e., the relative strength and strictly-defined characteristics of units from the game—as the basis for their expectation of all other media products that represent the same transmedial universe. This is especially relevant when such individuals are confronted with other ›satellite‹ games of the universe, such as the real-time strategy series *Dawn of War* or the first-person shooter *Fire Warrior*: they will judge such satellites not only by their narrative fidelity to the »mythos«, »topos«, and »ethos« (KLAstrup/TOSCA 2004: n.pag.) of the universe as established by the *Warhammer 40,000* rulebooks but also by their adherence to the empirical facts and balances of the gameplay itself. From this perspective, *Dawn of War* was positively received by many players of the tabletop war game, because, despite slight alterations due to a different scale of battles, it mostly maintained the balance of power of the original game: the units of the Eldar faction were still mobile and fragile, Orks were still based on a concept of overwhelming melee charges—and an Imperial Guardsman was still helpless against a charging Khorne Berserker.

In contrast, *Fire Warrior* was heavily criticized for the mechanical infidelity to its ludic ›mother ship‹: featuring a Tau Fire Warrior (i.e., the standard infantry unit of the Tau faction with just slightly better stats than an Imperial Guardsman) as its protagonist, it tasked the player and, as such, the humble infantryman with taking on Imperial Guardsmen, insane cultists, and eventually even Chaos Space Marines—corrupted super soldiers with centuries of combat experience and unholy weapons at their disposal—and had him kill dozens if not hundreds of those elite soldiers without (too) much trouble. While the game did not explicitly infringe on the topos, mythos, or ethos of the *Warhammer* universe, then, it still disappointed players by breaking with

facts that they had—to some degree—experienced firsthand while playing the ›mother ship‹.<sup>11</sup>

And while many players were easily able to tell if a game was diverging from the simulative facts of the universe, they had more significant problems with properly verbalizing this divergence—for many, something simply ›felt‹ strange or wrong. This fall-back on emotional expressions should not be understood as a failing of players, but as a hint at phenomena that are hard to articulate, despite being virtually omnipresent in the activity of structured play—and the key to understanding the distinct contribution of games for transmedial franchises.

Scholars unacquainted with the discipline of game studies might face serious challenges when asked to explain the aforementioned linguistic vagueness, not to mention the task of exploring the specific ludic structures that ›create‹ the emotional quality of various games. However, the discipline of game studies can offer assistance: the fall-back to emotional responses in conversations about gameplay experiences can be attributed to the specific way in which simulative facts are acquired. Players are faced with a seemingly interactive environment that demands their attention in similar ways to the real world: judging distances, direction, and speed of numerous objects, recognizing patterns, and adapting their own reactions, they are involved in a psychomotoric feedback loop that circumvents the more sophisticated cognitive activities that are associated with narrative interpretations in favor of fast motoric (re)actions (cf. THON 2008: 27f). The second point, i.e., the search for the specific ludic structures involved in creating the emotional quality of various games is an ongoing project in the field of game studies and has not yet produced a comprehensive, uncontested theory, which is why I use an improvised list of ludic structures broadly based on the ideas of Roger Caillois (cf. CAILLOIS 2001).

Looking at the breathtaking extent of the various game genres and involved media in the *Warhammer 40,000* ›gameworld‹ (a term meant to refer to the ludic analogue of a primarily narrative storyworld), the search for shared mechanical characteristics between games that feature duels between individuals, platoon-sized battles, and fleet-scaled space combat may seem rather likely to prove futile. Excluding the narrative aspects, at first sight, the only commonalities appear to be certain visual characteristics (gothic and cyberpunk imagery with a plethora of skulls) and the paramedial *Warhammer 40,000* brand on the packaging. However, on closer inspection, one can find several structural-mechanical similarities, as well:

- Agency: Players control one or several units with specific characteristics; these units are mobile and able to interact with other units, either by moving in immediate proximity or by distance. The interaction of

---

<sup>11</sup> A discussion thread on the *Warhammer 40,000* fan forum *Dakkadakka* lists more mechanical problems such as different weapon characteristics or tactical behavior patterns of enemies. Cf. <http://www.dakkadakka.com/dakkaforum/posts/list/587577.page> [accessed March 30, 2015].

units of different sides is influenced both by their characteristics and random chance and eventually results in the removal of one or both involved units from the roster of controllable units.

- Space: Units are influenced by their spatial position on a two or three-dimensional playing field; their characteristics are positively or negatively modified according to their position. Proximity and distance thus result in significantly changed statistical relations. Movement and positioning are tactically/ludically relevant.
- Time: All games use varying means (real-time, turn-based) to simulate the passing of time. Many but not all ludic goals are time-based (i.e., have to be completed in a certain period of time), thus forcing units to move and interact with each other. In order to win, both sides will need to move their entities in such ways that ensure favorable interaction results for their units (i.e., the removal of hostile units from the playing field).
- Victory and Defeat: Victory is achieved when a) one side has no remaining units on the playing field, b) time runs out and one side has a significant advantage in active units (quality or quantity), or c) a tactical goal has been achieved. Due to the way interactions work, a) and b) naturally result in a high percentage of lost units for one or both sides; although c) might theoretically be achieved without losses to either side, the topography of the playing field usually make the interaction of units an unavoidable prerequisite for its completion.

We can see that these characteristics—shared between the original tabletop war game, *Dawn of War*, *Rogue Trader*, *Necromunda*, *Battlefleet Gothic*, *Fire Warrior*, and other *Warhammer 40,000* games—produce games that favor aggressive movement and intense close-quarter battles with a high loss ratio for all involved sides; the addition of randomized events (powerful weapons overheating and exploding, certain units going berserk and being lost to player control) adds unpredictability and can change the odds of battle. The ludic elements of these games seem to share a common »procedural rhetoric« (BOGOST 2008: 125) that conveys the impression of a stressful and dynamic gameplay experience that forces players to use all available options—including the sacrifice of individual units—to achieve their goals and win a costly victory. This fits very well with the established topos, mythos, and ethos of the narrative storyworld of the *Warhammer 40,000* universe, where millions of soldiers are thrown into the endless meat grinder of galaxy-wide wars on a daily basis. As such, players of the games can gain an understanding of the »grimdark« world of the 41st millennium without ever being confronted with an explicit story presented in text.

That is not to say that these shared characteristics form the full ludic inventory of the *Warhammer 40,000* universe. As with the game adaptation *Tales of the Borderlands* (2014), which transforms the world of the vicious and anarchic first-person shooter *Borderlands* (2010) into the background for

a dialogue-based comedic adventure game, it might very well be possible to adapt other aspects of the extensive *Warhammer 40,000* universe into games that are still recognizably part of the whole and ›feel‹ like *Warhammer 40,000*. In fact, the well-received pen-and-paper role-playing games *Rogue Trader* and *Inquisition* do not only provide players with the aforementioned ludic mechanics of unit combat but also feature dialogue-based challenges that task players with negotiating with Imperial officials, gang leaders, decadent nobles, or even aliens—while still being considered adequately ›*Warhammer 40,000*-esque‹ due to the fact that these negotiations can have horrible ludic and narrative results for players (such as the player characters being hunted by the private army of an offended noble, being branded as heretics, or nuked from orbit).

The presented hypothesis—i.e., that (video) games provide significant media specific contributions to recipients' understanding of transmedial storyworlds—entails consequences for the future relationship between transmedia and game studies: if transmedia scholars accept that they can understand the contribution of a medium in the center of contemporary transmedia franchises (cf. KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2004) only in full by applying the methodologies and insights of game studies, the integration of at least the basic theories and approaches of game studies into the growing toolbox of transmedia(l) studies becomes a *sine qua non*.

#### 4. Collective Participation and the Specter of Change

The transmedial franchise of *Warhammer 40,000* provides another fascinating case study for an issue that affects most transmedial franchises to various degrees: the dichotomous nature of the storyworld between static setting and dynamic storyline (cf. JENKINS 2007).

As roughly outlined on the previous pages, the whole topos, mythos, and ethos of *Warhammer 40,000* revolves around the concept of an eternal stalemate: during the 28 years of its existence, more than a thousand years have passed in the *Warhammer 40,000* universe—and war still rages on, without any side gaining a substantial advantage against its opponents. Games Workshop, the developing studio of the game, has done its best to safeguard this *status quo*, despite numerous threats, many of them inherent to any expanding narrative: as the fictional universe grows and more events, locations, and characters are introduced, the narrative tends to gain a life of its own. The different novels, comics, and short stories depict new conflicts and wars that are not always resolved in a way that maintains the carefully safeguarded *status quo* of an Imperium that is barely holding up on various fronts; most saliently, the successful novel series of the Black Library (e.g., *Ghaunt's Ghosts* or *Ciaphas Cain*) tend to escalate the threats to their Imperial heroes until the represented conflicts affect planets, systems, and galactic

sectors. And, although many stories usually end with a relatively balanced outcome (for example, an old artifact that empowered a Chaos invasion army is destroyed in a brutal battle that nullifies its prior ›imbancing« effects), this process still leaves scars—on the intradiegetic characters and locations as well as on the narrative canon itself. Due to the integration of most events into canon, the individually small changes and consequences of small-scale conflicts eventually add up to the picture of an empire that is no longer able to reliably generate the necessary resources and troops to maintain its army. An example: The repeated and exact documentation of the limited size of every Space Marine Chapter (1000 marines per chapter, 1000 chapters in all) was not a problem—until almost every novel featured the demise of whole platoons or companies of these super soldiers for reasons of plot development. The same happens with the constant raiding or even destruction of planets and whole sectors: many important parts of the fictional universe have been devastated without a chance for short- or medium-term restoration, bringing the Imperium ever closer to its doom.

This problem was intensified by another specific feature of *Warhammer 40,000*: the war game gained popularity for its irregularly scheduled global campaigns, which saw thousands of players participating in special matches, battling for the control of fictional fronts in the *Warhammer 40,000* universe. The results of registered matches between individual opponents were added together and were used to determine the campaign's outcome—and with it the face of the storyworld in future editions. This opportunity for fans to directly affect the future position of their preferred faction in the fictional universe turned out to be very attractive and global campaigns were eagerly anticipated by players all around the world. Global campaigns launched before 2003 were focused on small segments of the fictional universe (i.e., the struggle for an individual planet) and heavily predetermined by the event rules, so their possible consequences would be limited. This changed with the most recent great global campaign, called the 13th Black Crusade: its battlefield was the region around the so-called Eye of Terror, a giant portal to the malicious dimension of the ›Warp«. As the gateway for a potentially endless invasion force from another dimension, this region is not only a central node for various narrations (almost everybody who enters and leaves the Warp does so through the Eye of Terror), but also of central importance for the balance of power in the *Warhammer 40,000* universe: as long as the forces of the Imperium still control the fortress world of Cadia and its surroundings, the demonic forces of Chaos are held at bay.

During the next eight weeks, more than 40,000 players (separated into two teams) submitted more than a quarter of a million game results on the campaign website, each and every battle minimally influencing the overall result. The campaign's outcome was a massive blow for the Imperium—and for the writers of Games Workshop: due to unexpected global collaboration and success of Chaos players, many sectors and planets around the Eye were lost, only Cadia, the sectors' main fortress world, stayed under Imperial con-

trol. This led to a problem: the massive loss of men, territory, and resources dealt a brutal blow to the Imperium and made it more and more difficult to maintain the fictional balance of power. The extensive documentation of all armies, resources, and events—usually a strength of the setting—now acted as a massive obstacle to maintain the *status quo*: if the ›factual‹ 13th Black Crusade was to be implemented, many established regiments were to be wiped out, resulting in an avalanche of further changes.

With the results published on the campaign website and the pressure to integrate them in the *Warhammer 40,000* canon mounting, Games Workshop was in an unfortunate predicament. For the time being, the designers decided to postpone the implementation: the apocalyptic events and system-threatening consequences of the 13th Black Crusade were not integrated into the history of the 41st millennium—yet. But even without them, the threats to the *status quo* had become too large to ignore. During the past 10 years, the new rulebooks have subtly hinted that the transmedial universe of *Warhammer 40,000* is facing a prophesied ›Time of Ending‹. With the mysterious Necrons waking from their million-years-sleep on their tomb-worlds, the life-sustaining ›Golden Throne‹ of the Emperor finally failing, and a giant extra-galactic Tyranid invasion fleet approaching, the 13th Black Crusade becomes just one apocalyptic rider among many.

It is now increasingly likely that the storyworld of *Warhammer 40,000* will sooner or later follow the example set by its co-existing ›cousin‹ *Warhammer Fantasy*, which, in its 8th edition, officially entered an apocalyptic age. A global campaign similar to the 13th Black Crusade was supposed to usher in a new balance of power in favor of Chaos—but the designers' plans were disrupted because Chaos players were utterly defeated. Still, Games Workshop continued with the realization of an apocalyptic age that saw the death of almost all known characters, the destruction of several factions, and the unexpected fusion of others—until a chaos rift destroyed the whole planet and killed every one that had survived the plagues, the impact of magical asteroids, and gods fighting openly in the mortal world. However, transmedial worlds have a certain immortality of their own—the last book ended with a mysterious figure floating in the void starting the creation of a new world.

Thus, the apocalypse of *Warhammer Fantasy* paved the way for the reboot of a storyworld that had become overly complicated and unwelcoming to newcomers—a description that could very well be applied to *Warhammer 40,000*, as well. Further observation of the background information contained in rulebooks—which, in the 7th edition (2015), also continue to point in the direction of galactic doom—might provide a fascinating case study of the narrative strategies that designers employ to prepare the reboot of a transmedial franchise.



## References

- BAKKER, SASKIA; DEBBY VORSTENBOSCH; ELISE VAN DEN HOVEN; GERARD HOLLEMANS; TOM BERGMAN: Tangible Interaction in Tabletop Games. Studying Iconic and Symbolic Play Pieces. In: INAKAGE, MASA; NEWTON LEE; MANFRED TSCHELIGI; REGINA BERNHAUPT; STÉPHANE NATKIN (eds.): *Proceedings of the International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology*. New York [ACM Press] 2007, pp. 163–170
- BOGOST, IAN: The Rhetoric of Video Games. In: SALEN, KATIE (ed.): *The Ecology of Games. Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*. Cambridge, MA [MIT Press] 2008, pp. 117–140
- CAILLOIS, ROGER: *Man, Play and Games*. Chicago [U of Illinois P] 2001
- CARTER, MARKUS; MARTIN GIBBS; MITCHELL HARROP: Drafting an Army. The Playful Pastime of Warhammer 40,000. In: *Games and Culture*, 9(2), 2014, pp. 122–147
- CARTER, MARKUS; MITCHELL HARROP; MARTIN GIBBS: The Roll of the Dice in Warhammer 40,000. In: MÄYRÄ, FRANS; KATRIINA HELJAKKA; ANU SEISTO (eds.): *ToDIGRA. Physical and Digital in Games and Play*. Pittsburgh [ETC Press] 2013. <http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/20/75> [accessed March 30, 2015]
- DE BOER, CLIM J.; MAARTEN H. LAMERS: Electronic Augmentation of Traditional Board Games. In: RAUTERBERG, MATTHIAS (ed.): *Entertainment Computing. ICEC 2004*. Berlin [Springer] 2004, pp. 441–444
- DEGLER, FRANK: A Willing Suspension of Misbelief. Fiktionsverträge in Computerspiel und Literatur. In: ANZ, THOMAS; HEINRICH KAULEN (eds.): *Literatur als Spiel. Evolutionsbiologische, ästhetische und pädagogische Konzepte*. Berlin [De Gruyter] 2009, pp. 543–560
- FANTASY FLIGHT GAMES: *Rogue Trader Core Rulebook*. Roseville [Fantasy Flight Games] 2009
- FRASCA, GONZALO: Simulation versus Narrative. Introduction to Ludology. In: WOLF, MARK J.P.; BERNARD PERRON (eds.): *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York [Routledge] 2003, pp. 221–235
- GENETTE, GÉRARD: *Die Erzählung*. München [Fink] 1994
- HARROP, MITCHELL; MARKUS CARTER; MARTIN GIBBS: Everyone's a Winner at Warhammer 40,000 (or, at Least Not a Loser). In: *DiGRA '13. Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference*. <http://marcuscarter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/harrop-warhammer.pdf> [accessed March 30, 2015]
- HINSKE, STEVE; MARC LANGHEINRICH: W41K. Digitally Augmenting Traditional Game Environments. In: VILLAR, NICOLAS; SHAHRAM IZADI; MIKE FRASER; STEVE BENFORD (eds.): *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Tangible and Embedded Interaction*. New York [ACM PRESS] 2009, pp. 99–106

- HOARE, ANDY: Rick Priestly Interview. In: *Tales from the Maelstrom*, September 25, 2011. <http://talesfromthemaelstrom.blogspot.com.au/2011/09/rick-priestley-interview.html> [accessed March 30, 2015]
- HUIZINGA, JOHAN: *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston [Beacon] 1955
- JENKINS, HENRY: Transmedia Storytelling. Moving Characters from Books to Films to Video Games Can Make Them Stronger and More Compelling. In: *MIT Technology Review*, 2003. <http://www.technologyreview.com/news/401760/transmedia-storytelling/> [accessed March 30, 2015]
- JENKINS, HENRY: Game Design as Narrative Architecture. In: WARDRIP-FRUIIN, NOAH; PAT HARRIGAN (eds.): *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, MA [MIT Press] 2004, pp. 118–130
- JENKINS, HENRY: *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York [New York UP] 2006
- JENKINS, HENRY: Transmedia Storytelling 101. In: *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, March 22, 2007. [http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html) [accessed March 30, 2015]
- JENKINS, HENRY: The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn. Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling. In: *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, December 12, 2009. [http://henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the\\_revenge\\_of\\_the\\_origami\\_uni.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html) [accessed March 30, 2015]
- JUUL, JESPER: *Half-Real. Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge [MIT Press] 2005
- KLASTRUP, LISBETH; SUSANA TOSCA: Transmedial Worlds. Rethinking Cyberworld Design. 2004. [http://www.itu.dk/people/klastrup/klastruptosca\\_transworlds.pdf](http://www.itu.dk/people/klastrup/klastruptosca_transworlds.pdf) [accessed August 30, 2013]
- RYAN, MARIE-LAURE: Story/Worlds/Media. Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology. In: RYAN, MARIE-LAURE; JAN-NOËL THON (eds.): *Storyworlds Across Media. Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Lincoln [U of Nebraska P] 2014, pp. 25–49
- THON, JAN-NOËL: Immersion revisited. Varianten von Immersion im Computerspiel des 21. Jahrhunderts. In: HISSNAUER, CHRISTIAN; ANDREAS JAHN-SUDMANN (eds.): *Medien – Zeit – Zeichen. Beiträge des 19. Film- und Fernsehwissenschaftlichen Kolloquiums*. Marburg [Schüren] 2006, pp. 125–132
- THON, JAN-NOËL: Simulation vs. Narration. Zur Darstellung fiktionaler Welten in neueren Computerspielen. In: BECKER, ANDREAS R.; DOREEN HARTMANN; DON C. LOREY; ANDREA NOLTE (eds.): *Medien – Diskurse – Deutungen. Beiträge des 20. Film- und Fernsehwissenschaftlichen Kolloquiums*. Marburg [Schüren] 2007a, pp. 68–76
- THON, JAN-NOËL: Unendliche Weiten? Schauplätze, fiktionale Welten und soziale Räume heutiger Computerspiele. In: BARTELS, KLAUS; JAN-NOËL THON (eds.): *Computer/Spiel/Räume. Materialien zur Einführung in die Computer Game Studies*. Hamburg [IMK] 2007b, pp. 29–60

Robert Baumgartner: »In the Grim Darkness of the Far Future there is only War«

- THON, JAN-NOËL: Immersion Revisited. On the Value of a Contested Concept.  
In: LEINO, OLLI; HANNA WIRMAN; AMYRIS FERNANDEZ (eds.): *Extending Experiences. Structure, Analysis and Design of Computer Game Player Experience*. Rovaniemi [Lapland UP] 2008, pp. 29–43
- THON, JAN-NOËL: Computer Games, Fictional Worlds, and Transmedia Storytelling. A Narratological Perspective. In: SAGENG, JOHN R. (ed.): *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*. Oslo [U of Oslo] 2009, pp. 1–6