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Battlefield Ames

Tim Paluch
Iowa State University

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The Quest for Interstellar Supremacy Begins at Mayhem

story by Tim Paluch

Things looked grim for this small band of Space Marines. They were scattered on the road heading east out of the city, and Necron forces had them seemingly surrounded. One squad was directly in front of them, and another was well within shooting range, camped out behind a house to their right. The rumble of a passing tank could be heard in the distance, along with the sound of a far-off firefight.

The air smelled of vengeance, perhaps from an earlier battle in which Space Marine forces wiped out an unsuspecting and overpowered Necron clan on the other side of town. But the tables have turned now, and in a barrage of heavy-weapon fire and explosions, Necron soldiers finally attacked. When the smoke cleared, it became apparent the barrage had been one-sided. The mangled carcasses of the Space Marines lay silent on the road. The Necron forces moved on, hunting out another adversary in the never-ending battle for interplanetary domination.

It is the 41st Millennium, a time when the fires of war burn brightly in every galaxy. Space Marines, biologically engineered superhumans, battle alongside the vast and powerful armies of the Imperial Guard to defend the fate of humankind against the constant onslaught of merciless alien invaders, be it the ruthless Tyranids, the inhumane Necron, the malicious Dark Eldar pirates or the savage and beastly Orks.

The architects of these battles are not generals of foreign armies, nor are they power-thirsty alien warlords bent on conquering the universe. They are, in fact, mere mortals who gather weekly at Mayhem Collectibles, 2532 Lincoln Way, for "Games Workshop Night," an event that draws members of all ages and armies of all races for a night of relaxing tabletop game playing. Well, as relaxed as one can be waging war in a struggle to save humanity, which is the basic plot of "Warhammer 40K," by far the most popular of the games played these nights.

By 6 on Tuesday nights at Mayhem, what will become the elaborate battlefields of Warhammer 40K are being brought up from the basement. Large 4-by-6 foot tables covered in green felt and large boxes filled with terrain and scenery are carried up the stairs. Carts full of board games and books and card games are cleared out of one side of the store, crammed together on the other side to make room for the tables of war.

The game itself is an immensely complicated one of military strategy and design. Warhammer 40K players buy, assemble and paint their armies of 28-millimeter miniatures. The game is created anew every time it is played, with infinite possibilities when players set up for battle. Competitors assemble their armies, create a scenario and set up the battlefield on the large table.

From there, players commandeer the intricately painted game pieces — squads of troops, devastating artillery and futuristic machines — against other players. Armed with only their armies, six-sided dice, tape measures for measuring move distances, a massive 288-page rulebook and active imaginations, players duke it out until one adversary is vanquished from the field of war.

The games can go for hours. This is not your father's "Risk" or an "Axis and Allies"-style strategy game. This isn't one of those, "Got an hour? Let's play a board game"-type of game. This is a, "Got an afternoon to spare? Let's get a game started"-type of game, where assembling and painting your own unique army is almost as important as knowing the rules.

On the surface, Warhammer 40,000 could be just another game, another excuse for video game junkies, sci-fi addicts and Star Trekkies to set up shop in a comic book store and create their own fantasy worlds with fellow social hobbits.

But "40K," as veterans of the game call it, is more than just escape-from-reality in a box. It is elaborate, complex and downright consuming. For some it is a just a pastime, something to do on the weekends. For others it is more...
than a hobby or a game; it can be an all-out obsession. Either way, for everyone who plays, it is a time for like-minded warriors to get together for a night of violence, war and good ol’ fashioned male bonding.

**Masters of War**

"Outside of a Star Trek convention, there’s not much place for somewhat nerdy guys to get together and talk once in a while," says Matt Swanson, freshman in mechanical engineering, who has been playing the game for about a year. He’s sitting on a faded blue recliner in his dorm room. On the floor to his right are four cans of paint and the white cardboard box Swanson paints his pieces on. Paint is splashed in an unintentionally abstract pattern on the top of the box. Only the “this up” of the “this side up” is legible. Three imposing Tyranid warriors — gigantic alien beasts — are standing on the edge of the box, freshly painted for a friend of Swanson’s, placed strategically in a row. It is easy to imagine them looking out upon the room. It is easy to forget they don’t have real eyes.

Swanson says held place himself “somewhere in-between” on the scale of hardcore players. “I mean, I’m not a totally dedicated Warhammer player; it’s not my entire life,” he says. “But I’m not exactly someone who just plays every once in a while.”

Since he began playing about a year ago, Swanson has attended just about every Warhammer 40K convention. He says when he first started going, he stayed silent in the back, but after a couple of games he started developing relationships with fellow players, and their common bond turned into friendships.

“It’s not so much the game as it is a whole bunch of people with common interests getting together and talking,” Swanson says. “A lot of it is the game, but a lot of it is really just guys getting together and having fun.”

Other players boast about Swanson’s impressive Imperial Guard army. Swanson admits it’s “pretty good.” He considers himself “severely overprotective” of his miniatures, something that becomes obvious when you see them stored. When not in battle, the army is in a large tackle box. Dozens of individual pieces are wrapped in Kleenex or surrounded by cotton balls. “If I’m missing an arm from one of my guys, I almost have a coronary,” he says, his voice lacking an expected hint of sarcasm or overstatement. He is serious.

40K isn’t cheap. Players will cough up $5 to $10 per miniature, and $20 or $30 for tanks and other vehicles. Swanson grabs a calculator when asked how much he’s spent on his armies. After 10 seconds and some serious number crunching, Swanson and his calculator estimate he’s spent between $900 and $1,000.

Matt Saathoff is more precise when asked the same question. He doesn’t need a calculator. He keeps a running tab of his purchases on his computer. In a spreadsheet, of course. Since he started playing three years ago, he’s spent exactly $974.36 on his two armies – Eldar and Tau.

"Well, humanity is in danger, besieged by warping them, creating the Imperium of Man." With a reminiscing chuckle, Saathoff tells the tale of the longest game he’s been a part of – a six-hour marathon of a game in his neighbor’s basement. “When you play, you lose all concept of time,” he says.

Baldus also chuckles, but his is more of an “I-x-yed-you-he-was-hardcore” kind of chuckle.

**In the far future, there is only war**

The universe is a vastly different place in the year 40,000 A.D. Long before, man traveled to planets in far-off galaxies, colonizing and settling them, creating the Imperium of Man. Now, humanity is in danger, besieged by countless alien armies battling them and each other for survival and domination across the battlefields of different worlds.
Mayhem. Players do not see a felt-covered table. They see a deserted town on a far-away planet. Necron forces, controlled by Swanson, are in hot pursuit of the Eldar (Saathoff), Space Marines (Baldus) and two other armies. Swanson created a scenario for the game, and the players have been using it all night. Several armies converge on an ancient artifact in the center of a town, but it turns out to be a trap set by Necron forces. Now they must get out of the city. First one to escape wins.

It's a typical Tuesday night at Mayhem. Seven tables are set up, and battles are being waged on all but one. All are playing Warhammer 40K. The cries of war can be heard across the room.

"I also have a unit in reserve."
"The two blast cannons!"
"Roll the die."

Swanson’s Necron forces are faring well tonight. Baldus and the Space Marines managed to make it out of the city unscathed, but Saathoff suffered a quick defeat at the hands of Necron forces. Saathoff is visibly upset by his rather embarrassing early exit, mumbling under his breath. But he quickly regroups, and the group sets up for another game.

A community of warriors

"We don't sell games. We sell a hobby," says Jeremy Verock, promotions manager for Games Workshop, the largest tabletop wargame company in the world and creator of Warhammer 40,000. "It's socializing, getting together and having fun. It's constructive." It's apparent from talking to Verock that the game's creators are just as involved in the games as those who buy it. He signs his e-mails "hard luck Dwarf general."

Since its inception in 1986, Warhammer 40,000 has had a slow and steady growth. It was never an overnight fad, and Verock doesn't expect it to be the next hot Christmas present anytime soon.

The game is played all around the world, and Games Workshop has stores on every continent except Africa. He says most players are male, ages 14-25 (although there are both older and younger players) with an affinity for imagination. He says there are a lot of crossover interests — Star Wars, Star Trek and pretty much anything sci-fi.

"People always ask me, 'What's your biggest competition?' Well, girls and cars and alcohol are our biggest competitors," he says. "When males find these three things, they leave games like this behind. Maybe they come back and start the hobby up later, maybe they don't."

Those who stick with the game enjoy it for different reasons. Some players just like to paint. Some really like the tactical and strategy side of the game.

To Matt Swanson, the painting and assembling of the characters is almost as enjoyable as the game itself. He's been into models since the eighth grade, when he made an aircraft carrier from scratch out of balsa wood. He takes painting very seriously. It takes him about 35 to 40 minutes per miniature to paint, with the larger, more detailed ones taking up an hour or longer.

"But I can pump out a tank in 20 minutes," he says.

"When I don't have other things to do, I'll paint," he says. "If I want to get something done quick by next week, like an extra squad of guys, then I'd sit down for two days straight over the weekend and just paint."

Matt Saathoff says he's "not much of a painter." A self-described "war buff," he enjoys the strategy of 40K. "You can't show up, throw some guys on the board and say 'kill.' There's a lot more to it than that. There's a lot of strategy that goes into it."

These guys may or may not fit the stereotypes of the wargame player. Who's to say? But they don't care either way. At Tuesdays at Mayhem, and every weekend at comic book stores around the globe, Warhammer 40K players meet to fight the death on mock-killing fields. Regardless of their lives outside those battlefields, they are generals and warriors on the table, surrounded by friends who just happen to be their enemies in the year 40,000.

"It's competitive, but it's a game, and it's a bit silly actually," Verock says. "At the end of the day, you're moving inch-tall men around on a table."

Tim Paluch is a junior in journalism and mass communication, and writer for Ethos. He is also opinion editor of the Iowa State Daily.