

Wargames as Realistic Tabletop Simulations of Fictional Events: The Case of Warhammer Games

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Introduction

Up to today, scholars have mainly looked at literature and stories when they wanted to speak about fiction, and how fiction can represent or mirror what we consider as real. Yet literature is not the only field that allows developing a reflection about fictional elements. Academic debates are currently exploring other kinds of mediums and phenomena, such as movies, mathematical axioms or games, to get a better understanding of what fiction is and how it may be defined (Caïra 25). Videogames, in particular, provide a new and fascinating perspective on fiction and its effects upon what can be called real.¹ If videogames may be designed to represent some aspects of reality—many first-person shooter videogames take place in a historical setup, WWII for instance, and usually try to be as accurate and “realistic” as possible—, they may also offer something more than literature, or at least different from it, especially as the interactive nature of videogaming is all about creating an impression of immersion² into a fictional world. For instance, a reader

¹ Surprisingly, although the term real is often used by game studies scholars, it is rarely extensively defined and, most of the time, only refers to what belongs to the real world. For instance, Aarseth (“Doors and perception” 36) simply quoted Phillip K. Dick’s definition: “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.” (1-26). While I will provide different examples of what can be qualified as real in games, the purpose of this paper is not to work on a proper definition of the concept. To improve readability, I will however use Peirce’s distinction between fiction and reality as a working definition: “A fiction is something whose character depends upon what we think about it; a reality is what it is whatever we may think about it.” (46) In the context of a wargame, a miniature therefore both can represent a fictional entity and constitutes something real, as most of its properties do not depend on what we may think about it (shape, colours, size, etc.) and thus can be publicly observed and collectively agreed upon by players.

² The term “immersion” is also difficult to define, especially as it can be physical, sensorial, psychological, or emotional depending on what game designers intend to achieve, and on the type of game. As McMahan (67)

cannot interact with the characters in a book, speak to them nor prevent them from dying when they are in a bad spot. A videogame player, on the contrary, has some powers over the fictional world although limited by the possibilities offered by the game. This fictional world feels more real since the player can interact with it. “Traditional games” or non-digital games, for that matter, do not often have realistic ambitions, but still offer a way of transposing fictional elements into reality. A dragon toy is not a real dragon since it is a fictional creature, but surely can feel like a real dragon to the kid playing with it. A simple stick can become a magic broom to a player endowed with enough imagination. In the case of videogames however, the major difference lies in that the player can actually see a photorealistic living dragon or ride a magic broom.

Hence, videogames, especially in the fields of game studies and literary theory, have been more and more analysed to question the links between fiction and reality. Schaeffer, notably, argued that videogames should be considered as proper works of fiction, since they share something characteristic of any type of fiction, which is the creation of a fictional universe implying an “aesthetic attention”³ from the player (315). According to Schaeffer, the genesis of fiction can be found in play and roleplay, through what he calls “feintise ludique” (“ludic feint”). Such mechanisms invite us to enter an imaginative universe (11) by “suspending reality” (176), without making us believe that this universe is actually real (156). Thus the analysis of videogames should be fruitful when trying to understand how fiction works and how the fictional may be distinguished from the real. Videogames could offer a new and “hybrid” form of fiction, between traditional games (which imply a competitive and agonistic spirit) and works of fiction, which according to Schaeffer are usually separated.

If Schaeffer elaborated the valuable idea according to which fictional behaviour starts first and foremost with the act of playing, most his work engaged with videogames only and gave very little if any attention to other types of games. As will

pointed out, this concept remains “excessively vague” and may refer to very different things, as will be seen in this paper. However, as the author highlights, one of the most accepted definitions of immersion up to now is still the one from Murray. For the purpose of this article which also deals with the concepts of real and of simulation – two concepts Murray also builds on-, I will therefore follow her definition of immersion as “the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place [...], the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus” (99), which heavily relies on “a careful regulation of the boundaries between the imaginary and the real” (119). For a more detailed account on immersion in literature and electronic media, see Ryan (89-175).

³ All translations by the author, unless otherwise noted.

be explained below, such exclusive focus on videogames shows some limitations so far as the understanding of the connections between fiction and reality is concerned, especially as it tends to contribute to the “digital fallacy” observed in game studies, that is, to the dominance of digital games in this field of research (Stenros and Waern). Besides, this approach tends to nurture the dominant yet wrong idea that only videogames, compared to more traditional games, truly invite us to enter a fictional world. Yet, while a player may not feel immersed in a fictional world when playing chess, nor would he or she, probably, when playing *Pac-Man* or *Tetris*.

In this paper, I argue that, on the contrary, all types of games should be taken into account, with their specificities and differences, when examining questions related to the duality between fiction and reality. At least three reasons allow supporting this idea. First, videogames are not only composed of real and fictional elements, but also involve virtual elements, which even further complicate the ontological enquiry on this topic. In fact, as explained by Aarseth, even if videogames are made of these three ontological layers, “the category of fiction is problematic” (“Doors and perception” 36) when applied to videogame contents. In that sense, a simulated dragon with which a player can interact in a videogame is not real, but is not fictional either. This dragon is simulated, that is to say, virtual, which makes even more difficult to think about the relation between what is fictional and what is real. Conversely, traditional games allow putting aside the question of the virtual, so as to focus only on the relation between reality and fiction.

Secondly, defining what exactly can be considered as “real” in a videogame is a hard task. A labyrinth in a videogame can be virtual in a “physical sense” and real in a “conceptual sense” (42). However, associating physicality with virtuality and conceptuality with reality challenges our common conception of what is real. A virtual labyrinth in a videogame is obviously a real labyrinth, as real as a labyrinth drawn on paper or a labyrinth made of vegetation. Yet the virtual/real dichotomy complicates the research on game ontology,⁴ a difficulty that fails to come up in the study of traditional games. When playing chess in the “real world,” the board and pieces are real both in the physical sense and in the conceptual sense. Their tangibility, the fact

⁴ According to Aarseth (“Define real” 56) game ontologies are “ontologies in the 3rd, computer-science sense: They describe what games are (and what they are made of): the fundamental building blocks and their relations. [...] a game ontology can also address the philosophical questions of being and existence, such as the relationship between, real, virtual and fictional phenomena in games.” This paper follows the author’s recommendation according to which the task of game ontologies is “to model game differences, to show how the things we call games can be different from each other in a number of different ways” (53).

that they can be touched or broken, is what makes them real, at least according to the common meaning of the term. A chess piece may represent, symbolize or stand for a fictional entity, like a king or a queen, but a chess piece is in itself a real entity. And although some traditional games do not necessarily require physical or tangible game elements—even chess can sometimes be played without them—, this only implies that the digital fallacy often leads us to build a game ontology which does not fully account for the diversity of games nor for how, more specifically, each type of game orchestrates the relation between real and fiction.

Finally, videogames differ from traditional games because their rules are mandatory (nomologic statements), whereas the rules of the latter are more flexible (deontic statements) since they are not programmed (Leconte 16). Hence, coming back to the dragon mentioned earlier in the document, while it is possible to interact with such fictional creature in a videogame, interactive options often remain limited by the program. In general, the player can only either talk to him or fight against him and take his loot. On the contrary, in a roleplaying game such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, the interactions with a fictional dragon may seem “poorer” at first glance, yet players have usually more freedom; they can choose to fight with him, surely, but they can also choose to be friends with him, to recruit him, to fly on his back, among countless other options. Those choices will have consequences on the progression of the game (as opposed to roleplaying in a videogame) and the interactions with the fictional world will only be bounded by the players’ imagination.

Thus, while I acknowledge the value of looking at videogames to define fiction in an innovative way, I however suggest here that more traditional games — or non-digital games — also involve a strong fictional behaviour and can be seen as fictional representations. Although often overlooked in favour of videogames, traditional games are worth studying insofar as they may provide promising contributions to the definition of fiction. Moreover, we still lack more in-depth research on the topic to fully grasp how exactly fiction and rules interact with one another to form a game, or in other words, how the game’s fictional world influences the way it is played, and vice-versa, outside the context of videogames.

To address this gap, I propose a different way of looking at the ontology of game elements, and in particular, at the distinction between what is real and what is fictional in games. For that purpose, I will discuss a specific type of games, one that has mainly been neglected by game studies (Carter et al. 3-8) even though it has

been highly popular for the past thirty years: the tabletop wargames, Warhammer's franchise. On the one hand, Warhammer games, and more generally wargames, use real game elements (in the sense of physical and tangible) such as miniatures (usually dozens of them in a single game) and "terrain pieces" to reproduce a battle between two or more armies. On the other hand, and this time unlike traditional wargames which are usually set in a faithful historic background, Warhammer games take place in fictional worlds built by an extremely rich and abundant fantasy and science-fiction literature constituted of hundreds of different novels, novellas, and stories. As a consequence, the relation between real game elements (both in the physical and conceptual sense) and fictional entities should be studied more easily in this game, even though its specificities still need to be thoroughly examined so as to avoid any excessive generalization.

Through the case of Warhammer, I will address the following questions: how can a fictional battle become a real one? What are the mechanisms of translation between the fictional universe and what is really happening on the table? To what extent can this relation between fictional and real elements in wargames be also found in other types of games? To answer these questions, I will mainly build my argument on Juul's game ontology framework. While the literature on traditional games (Huizinga or Caillois for instance) may provide valuable insights into the case presented here, this scholarship, for the most part, does not engage with the notions of real, fictional and realism, so many concepts which are at the core of my argument. Besides, the purpose of Juul's framework is precisely to analyse how the emergence of videogames modifies the classic game model in many ways (53), thereby serving the study of some specificities of non-traditional games such as miniature wargames.

This paper will first briefly present what wargaming is and how such games can represent or simulate fictional events, before attempting to characterize more precisely which elements can be called fictional or real within those games, according to Juul's lens. Lastly, I will explain how the physicality and tangibility of game elements allow players to feel immersed inside a fictional world and how in that sense, those games can be described as realistic.

Wargames as a simulation of a fictional world

A brief history of wargames

Although some wargames can now also be played on computers⁵, tabletop games remain common in the practices of players' communities. For the purpose of this paper, I will only focus on such games not only because the experience is quite different, but also because this gaming practice is favoured by most Warhammer players (Carter et al. 21-23). Today, wargames are still considered as "traditional games," a relatively vague expression referring to the fact that they are non-digital and follow a lasting tradition of military simulation games. Overall, it is fair to say that many games, digital or non-digital, have to do with war or battle.⁶ Chess or Go for instance could be viewed as wargames to some extent, in the sense that they simulate a military battle. However, these simulations are only abstract, and even though chess stands as a direct ancestor of wargames, I chose to follow Dunningan's definition and define wargames by their need to offer a realistic simulation: "in some cases, they are extremely realistic, realistic to the point where some of the wargames are actually used for professional purposes (primarily the military, but also business and teaching)" (Dunningan 13). To achieve these realistic simulations of a military conflict, most of wargames use a map, terrain elements, playing pieces to represent military units and a set of rules which indicate how the game is played and how units should behave on the battlefield. Realism, understood here as an attempt to "preserve the laws of nature of the real world and describing a fictional setting in detail" (Garthoff 1), indeed constitutes a central feature of these simulations, and yet, for obvious reasons, can never be fully achieved. While wargames put a great emphasis on realism, the playability and simplicity of the game can sometimes be favoured over the proper, detailed simulation of historical or fictional settings (Schoorman 447). Moreover, wargames can be used as communication tools (Goria 141) and convey a specific vision, thesis or dogma; the latter in turn may end-up producing a biased representation of reality, especially when those games are portraying historical or military events.

⁵ Most tabletop games, from chess to Warhammer, can be played on computer through the use of simulators such as *Tabletop Simulator*.

⁶ From a cultural point of view, Huizinga (150-175) was the first to notice the long-lasting connection between games and war. As pointed out in this article, a game can be related to war without necessarily being a wargame. At the same time, a wargame does not necessarily always simulate a military conflict or event since it can represent other types of war, such as an economic conflict between companies.

If wargames can be defined as a realistic simulation of a military conflict, their purpose evolved significantly since their creation. Wargame as a form of military training was born in Prussia in the end of the 18th century and then widely adopted by officers, but the first non-military wargaming club was not founded before 1873, with the emergence of the University Kriegspiel Club, at Oxford University in England (Peterson 255). Around the same time, in 1881, the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson started to use toy soldiers to represent military units in a wargame. For this reason, he is now considered as the inventor of miniature wargaming (269), a specific subgenre of wargames on which I will later focus my analysis. In 1913, the English writer H. G. Wells published *Little Wars*, the first rulebook for miniature wargaming. While wargaming was still mainly a tool to train officers for real military events, the goal of Wells, who was notorious for being pacifist, was on the contrary to channel military impulses through play. If wargaming at the time had to be as realistic and historically accurate as possible in order to properly prepare troops for future military events, writers such as Stevenson and Wells started to introduce some elements of fictionalization into wargaming. For instance, Stevenson staged the battles he played in imaginary countries, while Wells also narrated the imaginary “Battle of Hook’s Farm” in his book, as illustrated in the following excerpt: “suddenly your author changes. He changes into what perhaps he might have been – under different circumstances. [...] Now for a while you listen to General H.G.W., of the Blue army” (22-23). In that sense, although their miniatures and associated rules were still models for the military units and warfare of this times (infantry, cavalry, artillery for instance), wargaming, from its designers’ perspective, was no longer an attempt to simulate a historical battle such as those from the Napoleonic wars or the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.

The fictional worlds of Warhammer

Almost a century later, wargaming faced a second turning point, in 1983, when a British company named Games Workshop released a miniature wargame called *Warhammer* (also known as *Warhammer Fantasy*). Up until this point, players would use almost any model for any game. A wargame was only a set of rules, and a player could use the same models across wargames, even though rules could change drastically from one game to another. Yet, the introduction on the market of *Warhammer* in 1983 did not match such playing habits as the miniatures were

commercialised using proprietary models. Consequently, a player had to use models manufactured by Games Workshop in order to play *Warhammer*, and no other company was allowed to reproduce these models without facing a lawsuit. Furthermore, and more importantly for the understanding of the specificities of this new game at the time, *Warhammer* was set in a medieval fantasy background. Though inspired by obvious historical and cultural influences as relayed by Tolkien's books or *Dungeons and Dragons* for instance, *Warhammer* developed a unique and original fictional world where battles could rage between dozens of different factions. The models and units necessary to play the game belonged to the fictional world of *Warhammer*, and depicted fictional characters and armies. Furthermore, Games Workshop later introduced a new fictional world with their new wargame called *Warhammer 40,000* (in 1987) set in a dystopian and science-fiction background and using a different game system. *Warhammer 40,000* and *Warhammer Fantasy* (replaced in 2015 by *Warhammer Age of Sigmar*) used two different game systems and were set in two distinct fictional worlds: a player owning an army of Space marines could not play against an army of Wood Elves, both because of rules and from a fictional point of view, because they did not belong to the same universe.

In spite of their differences, these two games among other things have in common the fact that their respective settings, the history and events happening in the fictional world and the characters which shape it, are built out of a rich and vast fictional literature. *Warhammer*⁷ fiction has indeed been described in hundreds of novels, novellas, short stories and comic books. Since 1983, the official and affiliated publishing company of Games Workshop, Black Library, published more than 150 novels for *Warhammer Fantasy* and more than 500 novels and anthologies of short stories for *Warhammer 40,000*.⁸ Those books provide and develop canonical information about the geography and history of *Warhammer* worlds, their societies and their inhabitants' ways of life, or the stories of their battles, factions and heroes. When a new miniature or army is released for the game, new books are usually published at the same time to explain how those new protagonists are related to the fictional world to which they belong. This means that instead of simulating a real and historical battle of our world, *Warhammer* players have the opportunity to simulate

⁷ I will from now on use the term "Warhammer" to refer to the two main game systems and universes created by Games Workshop, *Warhammer Fantasy* (or *Age of Sigmar*) and *Warhammer 40,000*, unless specifically indicated.

⁸ Source: Black Library catalog.

fictional events that happened according to the history of these fictional worlds. The Battle of Terra, which took place in 014.M31 between the forces of Horus and the Imperium of Man, is for instance one of the most known event which happened in the world of Warhammer 40,000. Thus, from the perspective of the game system of rules and how a game is actually played, Warhammer games are very similar to historic or more traditional miniature wargames. However, instead of looking at history books to compose the background of their battles, Warhammer players look at works of fiction with the objective of simulating or reproducing events that happened in those specific fictional worlds.

Simulating a fictional world

As previously indicated, wargames involve realistic simulations, most of the time of a military conflict. One may wonder how such realistic simulations translate to a fictional universe and what it actually means to realistically simulate something fictional, something that, by definition, did not really happen. One element to answer this question lies in the fact that a realistic simulation does not exclude fictional behaviour. This statement clearly departs from what Caillois (41) said about fiction and the sentiment of “as if” in games, which to him cannot coexist with rules. For instance, according to Caillois, children could only play chess “for real”, or act “as if” they were playing chess, but not both. Yet, as Juul (13) pointed out, this division is “contradicted by most modern board games and video games.” In fact, any kind of wargame, whether set in a historical or fantasy background, involves a fictional behaviour, in the sense that wargames invite the players to ask themselves what would have happened if things had not gone the way they did. According to Schaeffer, the fundamental mechanism underlying fiction is indeed the “ludic feint”, in which readers or players “do-as-if” (11) they were immersed in a fictional universe. Following Dunningan, wargames may even go further, in the sense that, as much as all kind of simulation games, they allow players to both “experience history” and non-historical events. Playing a wargame therefore not only requires to do “as if” the rules of reality were suspended (Schaeffer 175-76) for a moment, but also supposes to raise the “what if” question: what would be the consequences if one event occurred slightly differently? This is for instance what Dunningan discusses in the following extract as he wonders what would have happened if General Custer had taken his Gatling guns at the battle of Little Big Horn in 1876:

This experience consists of the gamer being able to massage information in order to see what different shapes the information is capable of taking. The essence of a simulation game is that it allows, within well-defined limits, a great deal of variety in an otherwise strictly predetermined historical event. This is the popular “what if?” element in the games.

As highlighted in the quotation above, the essence of a simulation game lies not only in the experience *per se* of the historical or fictional events but also in the experimentation within these worlds. This experimentation is led by the players within the boundaries of realism, i.e. keeping some degree of accuracy and consistency with the sources depicting those events.

While more historically-driven wargames are experimenting with something that really happened—the battle of Little Big Horn for instance in the above-mentioned case—, wargames like Warhammer built on a fantasy or science-fiction world are experimenting with fictional events. Warhammer players are hence experimenting within fictional worlds; at the same time, these worlds are themselves already an experimentation of something real. The fictional world of Warhammer 40,000, for instance, is first and foremost an answer to the question: *what if* humanity lived up until the “grim and dark” future of the 42nd millennium and under the constant threat of hostile aliens? This answer is detailed at length in the five hundred or more Warhammer 40,000 novels. Yet, in spite of abundant and consistent details across those books, this world remains fictional and can only be imagined by reading the Warhammer literature. On the other hand, playing provides a different experience or feeling of immersion in those worlds than through reading alone. It often “feels” more real because players are allowed to experiment with the fictional content and (re)create alternative stories, characters or events that do not originally belong to those fictional worlds. In the following section, I will try to explain how Warhammer games can provide this feeling of immersion and show how those fictional worlds can be represented on a table.

How to realistically simulate fictional events

Rules as an immersive tool into a fictional world

I previously argued that Warhammer games are both a way to experience (the process of living through an event) and a way to experiment (the process of trying new ways of doing something) with fiction. If fictions “differ in the way in which they allow accessing the universe, and in that sense by the aspectuality of the

represented universe” (Schaeffer 243), Warhammer games thus 1) differ from traditional wargames in the sense that they simulate and experiment with a fictional world and 2) do not operate a movement from something real to something fictional (as literature would for instance), but from something fictional (the canonical story of Warhammer universes) to something real (the game elements on the table). In the case of Warhammer, the realism of the simulation hence does not rely on the ability of fictional components to represent something real, but on the ability of real components to represent something fictional. How can this be achieved and what does realism mean in a game like Warhammer?

In order to play a miniature wargame, players first need to know the rules of the game. While knowledge of the historical or fictional theme of the game is usually not required to be able to play, a basic understanding of the rules is obviously necessary. Juul (55-197) even stated that rules are what determines any specific game, whereas its fictional world is only an optional background:

[...] rules are designed to be objective, obligatory, unambiguous, and generally above discussion. With fictions in games, we find the opposite to be true: a strong part of the attraction of fiction in games is that it is highly subjective, optional, ambiguous, and generally evocative and subject to discussion. Rules and fiction are attractive for opposite reasons. (121)

Even though specifically referring to videogames, Juul’s statement seems, at first glance, to also hold for any kind of games. Rules of chess, for instance, are obligatory and unambiguous. If those rules are changed, then players are no longer playing chess, but another game. Besides, the “background” of chess is completely optional or subjective. According to Juul (57), the “representation fiction of chess,” that is to say their shapes and colours, has indeed no consequence on the way the game is played. Chess pieces can represent a large variety of abstract or iconic items, without any impact on the game itself as long as the rules are followed. In the case of Warhammer games, this statement remains true to some extent. In a competitive game of Warhammer, such as those held at tournaments or in more casual settings, referring to the fictional world is in fact not really important. For instance, a player using an army of “Eldars” in Warhammer 40,000 is not forbidden to play against another player using the same army, even though those two armies are, according to the fictional world, supposed to belong to the same faction and thus be allies. Players are free to imagine any rationale to justify the conflict between two

allied armies, as long as they do not break the rules. They are allowed to “fill in any gaps in the fictional world” (121), but not to change the rules.

Yet rules are also what makes a fictional world feel real, and highly contribute to the feeling of realism provided by a simulation game like Warhammer. Firstly, rules are not fictional but real game components. According to Juul (196), this allows explaining why videogames can be called “half-real,” that is, made of real rules and fictional worlds. Rules in videogames are indeed more stable than rules in traditional games since players cannot change or circumvent them easily. However, they remain “objective, obligatory, unambiguous, and generally above discussion” (121) in competitive games of Warhammer, as only Games Workshop edicts rules for their games, publishes and regularly updates them if necessary. These rules remain as real as videogame rules in spite the fact that they are written in books and not encoded into a computer program.

Secondly, rules are what allows “transposing” fictional elements on the table. Instead of simply imagining, for instance, that a hero slayed a unit of skeletons ready to attack him, a player has to follow the rules on how a melee encounter happens in *Age of Sigmar*. The player will compare the respective characteristics of those units according to the rules (number of wounds, number of attacks, ability to prevent an attack, movement, bravery, etc.), will throw dices and will carry on different actions accordingly to determine the outcome of the fight. In this scenario, rules allow transforming a fictional encounter into a real sequence of actions on the table. In that sense, they are not only something real, but they also allow something fictional to be simulated in the real world, and hence contribute to the realism of the simulation.

Faithfulness to the fictional world

Juul’s framework provides valuable insights as to what contributes to the realism of a simulation, in the sense of experiencing a fictional world and being immersed in it. At the same time, while rules are indeed what defines a specific game, the fictional worlds of Warhammer games cannot be reduced to subjective and ambiguous features of the game, and even less so to an optional background. As previously described, the fictional worlds of Warhammer games are indeed mostly narrated in

novels.⁹ Players usually refer to this fictional content as the “lore” or the “fluff” of these universes, the background or context in which those games are taking place. Even though detailed knowledge about the lore is not necessary to play the game, the example of the previously mentioned encounter seems nonetheless to indicate that rules must remain coherent with what the players know of the fictional world. Let us take the example of Teclis, a fictional character pictured as a mighty wizard, to illustrate this point. This character is one of the most powerful wizards that ever lived in the *Age of Sigmar* universe, since he is the god of Light. The game designers gave him some rules accordingly: he is for instance able to “autocast” up to four spells, it is to say without rolling dices, while other wizards in the game can usually only cast one or two spells. After the introduction of Teclis as a playable miniature, many players complained that he was “game-breaking” due to this ability, in other words too powerful to allow a balanced game. At the same time, Teclis’ rules were written so that they remained coherent with the fictional lore of the *Age of Sigmar* universe. In this case, the rule-fiction consistency also contributes to the realism of the simulation, or in other words to the alignment of the simulation with the sources providing information on the fictional world, even though this world is set in a fantastic or science-fiction background.

Furthermore, outside competitive games, some Warhammer players might choose to remain as consistent as possible with the lore, to the point where rules do not matter all that much after all. In fact, competitive games are only a specific way of playing Warhammer, or for that matter miniature wargames, and while some players may enjoy a balanced and competitive setting without being constrained by what is or should be true according to the fictional background, others prefer to simulate fictional events without being excessively constrained by the rules. Games Workshop refers to the first type as the “matched play” and to the second one as the “narrative play”. In *Age of Sigmar*, the narrative play is described as followed in the 2020 *General’s Handbook* published by the game designers:

Narrative play games can be based on a story from a ^{TIV}~~ISEP~~ Warhammer Age of Sigmar publication or something you have devised yourself after reading about the Mortal Realms. There are endless ways to then build that story into your games. Armies might be modified to better reflect the plot, specific scenery might

⁹ This content can also be accessed through paper or online articles produced by Games Workshop, fan-made encyclopaedias⁹, animations or videos. The web encyclopaedia <https://wh40k.lexicanum.com/> for instance, currently contains more than 31000 articles on the fictional world of Warhammer 40,000.

play a part in recreating the landscape, 'house rules' might be invented, and paint schemes might be developed to reflect the forces involved. (45)

In a narrative play game, the realism of the simulation lies in the consistency with the fictional source over a strict respect of the official rules of the game. For instance, although the rules stipulate that both players need to have an army of the same power (calculated by a system of points) in order to balance the game, nothing prevents players of a narrative play game of Warhammer from using two armies of different sizes and power if this helps to better reflect the fictional battle they want to simulate or the balance of power in the battlefield as described in a novel. Ultimately, the result of the battle will be decided by choices made by the players and dice throws, but to immerse themselves and “experience” a fictional world, players will put aside the competitive aspect of the game and attempt to stay as close as possible to the events as described in the lore. Thus, like for many traditional games, the experience of playing Warhammer games is usually not entirely based on competitive play or narrative play, but a mix of both, depending on what the players want to achieve. And even though they are not videogames, they still appear to have the same hybrid status described by Schaeffer (315), at the intersection of the competitive spirit specific to games and the aesthetic attention specific to works of fiction.

Playing in a real environment

Realism in a game of Warhammer

The realistic aspect of wargames simulations lies in the balance between consistency with the rules and consistency with the fictional world. Juul's framework—which sets videogames in between real rules and fictional world—and Schaeffer's framework—which describes videogames as being inbetween games and works of fiction—are therefore useful when applied to Warhammer games to discuss how those games manage to realistically simulate a fictional universe. Yet both these frameworks, in spite of their effectiveness, first refer to videogames or games which take place in a virtual environment. In such context, the term “simulation” often describes computer programs, either used for ludic or for scientific purposes. The videogame ontology developed by Aarseth even use “simulated” and “virtual” as synonyms (“Doors and perception” 42). Nonetheless, wargames, including Warhammer games, follow a lasting tradition of military simulations

happening in a real environment instead of a “virtual” one, as explained above. As a result, the battle or conflict being simulated by a wargame is not real, but not virtual either, at least in the sense of something simulated by a computer. And yet, the game elements or pieces used in Warhammer games (miniatures, terrains, dices, etc.) are real components used to simulate fictional entities. For instance, if players decide to put a labyrinth on the table—to take up the example used by Aarseth (“Doors and perception” 42)—, this labyrinth will be real in a conceptual sense and in a physical sense, even though its purpose is to represent a fictional labyrinth such as the “Noctis Labyrinth” of planet Mars in Warhammer 40,000.

While all games seem to involve rules, and optionally a fictional world, the use of real game pieces is the true distinctive element of Warhammer games, especially as the miniatures play a predominant part in the realism of the simulation. The fact that Warhammers models are painted (most of the time by the players themselves) is indeed at the core of the “miniaturing hobby” (Meriläinen et al. 8). Players usually try to achieve a realistic result, either by remaining consistent with the iconographic canon of those fictional worlds (“Orks” should have a green skin, for instance) or by accurately reproducing lights, shadows and details on a 3D physical miniature model. While the painting of the models is usually a way to improve the overall realism of the battle unfolding on the table, I will not here discuss the realism of these miniatures from an aesthetic perspective but will rather focus on how the use of physical and tangible elements contributes to realism, alongside the faithfulness to the rules and to the fictional world.

The tangibility and the physicality of representation

From a physical point of view, wargames and Warhammer games differ from other types of board games also using non-virtual game models. Chess, for instance, is also a game using different kinds of real pieces. Each type of pieces has specific rules and thus needs to be easily recognizable on the board: as long as players know that a specific piece is a tower and not another piece, the game can be played. The fact that the tower piece does not really look like a real tower, or that it is taller than the king is only secondary as long as each piece remains recognizable. Likewise, in a game of *Monopoly*, what the token (a battleship, a race car, etc.) of each player represents does not matter *per se* as long as everyone knows which token represents which player. Along these lines, the goal of chess is not to realistically

simulate a battle, nor is the goal of *Monopoly* to realistically simulate real-estate trading. This allows those games to be played with almost any kind of pieces or tokens. Warhammer games, on the opposite, need to be played with specific models in most cases. From a competitive point of view, a specific height and a specific base size is attributed to each model by the rules. The height of the miniature allows players to determine its “line of sight,” i.e. what the figurine can see and shoot on the battlefield, and the base size (25 mm or 32 mm for instance) is used to determine if the figurine can engage against another unit and the reach of its weapons. While some aspects of the miniature are purely ornamental and do not impact how the game is played, the physical size of the miniature has relevance and players are not allowed to use any miniature they want to represent a specific unit in the game. Furthermore, from a narrative point of view, players usually will try to play with an army as visually accurate and consistent as possible with the fictional world. Paradoxically, players won’t use a figurine “as if” it was another one, to replace or stand for it. Even though some miniatures can be “converted” and customized by players (Meriläinen *et al.* 13), the goal remains in most cases to create a “mimetic fandom” replica of a specific character to pursue an ontological bridging of fiction and reality (Hills). Even though small adjustments are often allowed, the physical aspect of each figurine is therefore of great importance to perform as realist a simulation as possible while remaining consistent with the rules and with the fictional world.

Theoretically a virtual simulation could be able to render the physical and visual aspect of any real miniature, yet the very tangible manipulation of the figurines highly contributes to the feeling of reality experienced by the players and allows them to transpose fictional entities into the real world, which explains why Warhammer games are still mainly played on a table. Carter and his colleagues for instance looked at the role of physical dices used in a game to determine the outcome of a fight between two units and showed that Warhammer players are looking for a specific experience that computational tools cannot provide:

The physicality of the loudness and chaoticness of rolling large numbers of dice simulates the chaos of war in a tangible way, an effect pronounced by the tangibility of the dice, the imagined representation of dice as being embodiments of fictional undertakings and the situational representation of dice as occurring next to these events. As a physical tool, they do this in a fashion difficult to emulate with a virtual application. (21)

Following their analysis, I argued in this paper that the tangibility of the elements in the game, the physical dimension of playing, and the ability to manipulate dices as well as the terrain pieces or the miniatures themselves, greatly reduce the ontological barrier between players and the fictional world and therefore contribute to the players' feeling of immersion and the realism of the simulation. The miniatures are obviously not shooting real bullets nor casting real fireballs, but their materiality allows them to be moved or removed, grabbed, and arranged on the battlefield "as if" the players were actually acting upon the fictional events at their will.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at contributing to the ontology of games by specifying the relation between real and fictional elements in games. Whereas the academic field of game studies usually looks at videogames, I considered non-digital games, and specifically wargames, to address this question. Wargames indeed offer something unique to this study, as they were initially explicitly built and played to realistically simulate military conflicts. If nowadays wargames are mainly played for recreational purposes, games such as those belonging to the Warhammer franchise have kept the intention of realistically simulating military events, even though those events are entirely fictional. I thus tried to determine how those fictional events are transposed into a real environment, and how this simulation can be considered as realistic. To do so, I first built on the theoretical framework proposed by Juul and looked at how rules contribute to this realism, especially by giving instructions to the players to help the transposition of fictional entities and actions on the table. At the same time, I showed that these rules alone do not allow for the realism of the simulation in the cases of games such as Warhammer and must remain coherent with the associated fictional world of the game to create an impression of reality. In the case studied here, I showed in particular that this experience is mediated by the consistency with the lore or the original and canonical fictional source. The realism of the simulation therefore relies as much on the consistency with the rules than on the consistency with the fictional world in which the simulated events are taking place. Contrarily to Caillois' argument, my analysis therefore demonstrated that rules and fiction surely can coexist in a game such as Warhammer. In the same line, unlike what Juul's work suggested, the essential/optional and the objective/subjective dichotomies are not adapted to properly characterize rules and fiction, as traditional games also involve a

strong fictional behaviour and setting. In the case of Warhammer, rules and fiction are not “attractive for opposite reasons” (121), but on the contrary, for a same reason which is to allow players to simulate in more detail a battle on the tabletop.

What truly makes a simulation realistic, and what distinguishes simulations happening in a real environment from simulations taking place in virtual environments such as videogames, is however the use of real game elements, and the interactions allowed by physical, tangible and handleable pieces. But unlike chess for instance, the consistency of visual and physical properties of Warhammer miniatures with the rules and fictional world of the game directly supports the building and sustaining of a sense of realism associated with the simulation. The entanglement between tangible miniatures, the rules and the lore shapes a specific relation between what is real and what is fictional in a game. Such entanglement allows players to both transpose and experience a fictional event in the real world, as well as to interact and experiment with the fictional material through the use of real game components. The analysis of the case study presented in this paper therefore aligns with recent efforts to develop a game ontology but also calls for the consideration of other types of games to better understand what the concept of realism truly means in such settings. In fact, although videogames constitute particularly intriguing forms of games, this does not mean that they are necessarily better suited to immerse players into a specific fictional world. While videogames use specific game design, tools and mechanisms to create a sense of immersion and allow for a different game experience, so do other types of games such as pen and paper role-playing games, or miniatures wargames. All the more, this article suggests that studying games such as Warhammer is a fruitful avenue to better grasp how fiction and reality can be bridged through games, and even more so when those last are built out of a vast and rich literature. If it is indeed not unusual for a fictional world originally depicted in literature to constitute a basis for a game, further research, both in game studies and in literacy theory, could uncover the specificities of a fictional material, such as novels for instance, written with the implicit purpose of being adapted in games and adopted by players.

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