
Lost in the Warp

Tabletop Roleplaying Game Fanart as Culture Creation
through Complex Collaboration and Intervention

Introductions



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**How our tabletop RPG
group accidentally co-
created a Warhammer
40K meta-fandom**

Warhammer 40K and Dark Heresy

Warhammer 40,000 ("40k") is a British tabletop wargame published by Games Workshop. Played with painted miniatures battling over modelled terrain, it is the most popular game of its type in the world (icv2.com)



Dark Heresy is a tabletop roleplaying game, whose second edition is published by Fantasy Flight Games, licensing the grimdark IP of 40k. Gameplay involves no miniatures and is more akin to *Dungeons and Dragons* than a wargame.

Gene seed progenitors: Imperial fists, Dark angels

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in: [G. Characters](#), [Ork](#), [Ork Characters](#)

Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka



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"I'm Warlord Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka an' I speak wiv da word of da godz. I'm da prophet of da WAAAGH! an' whole worlds burn in my boot printz."

— Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka

Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka (usually shortened to **Ghazghkull Thraka**) is an [Ork warlord](#) of the [Goff klan](#) and a mighty prophet of the [WAAAGH!](#). He



Art by John Blanc

40K as Pandemic-era Global Franchise

Games Workshop sales surge as hobbies take off during lockdowns

Company sold £187m of games, figurines and paints in six months to end of November, up £38m on year before



Games Workshop's online sales were up 87%, while shops were forced to close for long periods due to Covid lockdowns. Photograph: Owen Humphreys/PA

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fanart by Phoebe Herring

Our *Dark Heresy* Game

- Player group of games academics, who play varied tabletop RPGS together
- In no way a 40k fan group, and many unfamiliar with its lore and tropes
- Forced to pick up online play by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic shortly after the campaign began
- Ché as GM ran the games
- Each player created their own character
- Phoebe digitally painted fanart using professional concept art techniques and posted it online, on a personal Instagram account.



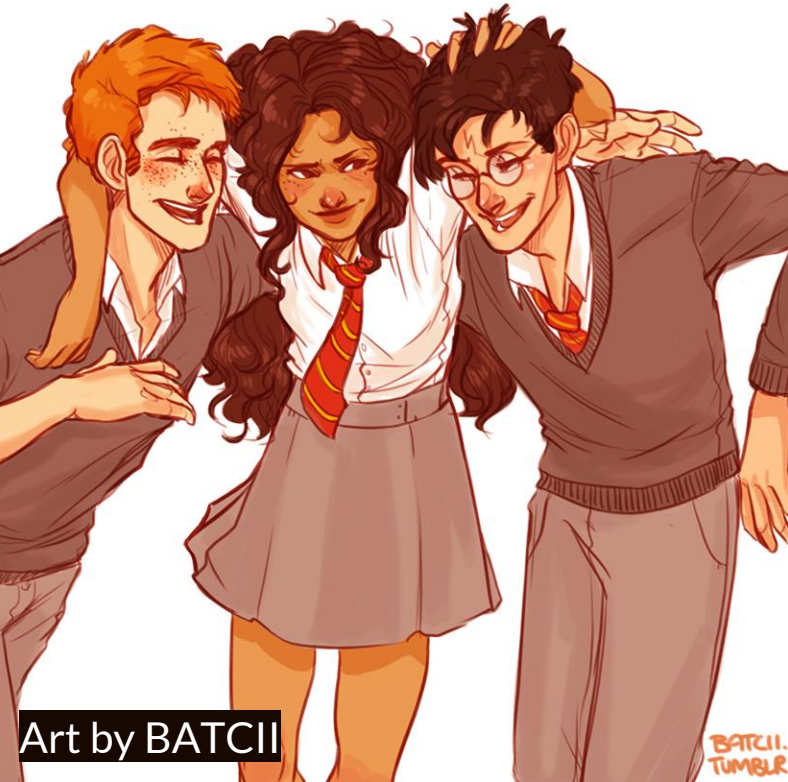
Fanart

“Fanart is the practice of creating artwork inspired by or derived from a piece of media.” (Seymour 2018: 99)

The work is interpreted from a point of reference, such as recognisable elements of a popular character, with the artist assuming that the viewer will recognise the image. In this way, authorial intent is an important element. (Seymour 2018)

By developing their own style through bringing their real-life cultural experience to their work, fanartists influence the larger community and create culture. (Manifold 2009)

GOLDEN.

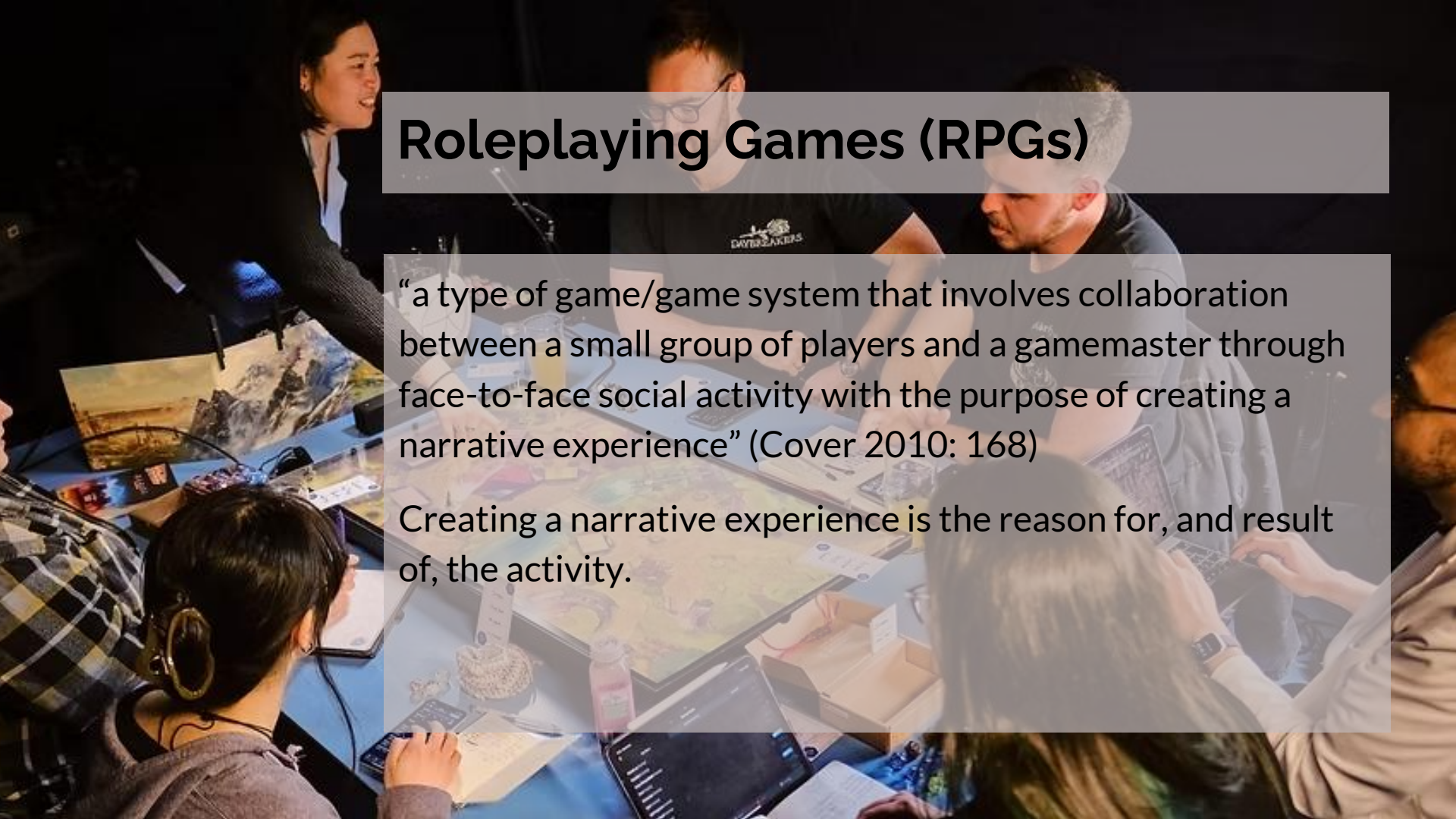


Art by BATCII

Homage, Collaboration & Intervention

- **Homage:** Direct reflection.
- **Collaboration:** Adding details without altering canon. May transform, but with no intention to reflect on the original.
- **Intervention:** Deliberate intervention to address a gap or perceived shortcoming.

(Seymour 2018)

A group of people are gathered around a table, engaged in a tabletop roleplaying game. The table is covered with a large, colorful map or game board. Various game components are visible, including dice, cards, and a small figurine. The players are looking at the map and talking to each other. One player in the foreground is wearing a headset. The background is dark, and the lighting is focused on the table.

Roleplaying Games (RPGs)

“a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience” (Cover 2010: 168)

Creating a narrative experience is the reason for, and result of, the activity.

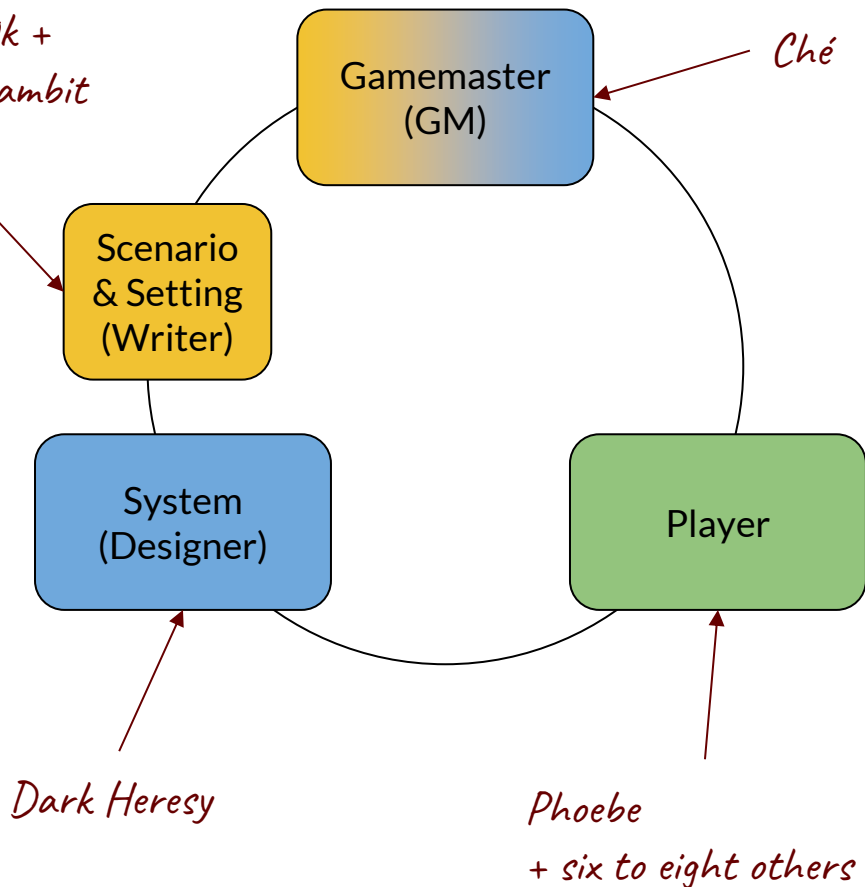
RPG Play

The system may include a setting and/or scenario(s) to provide fiction to play in/through.

These may instead come from a separate scenario or the GM.

The play of an RPG is the result of these relationships, each acting on the action and story.

*Warhammer 40k +
The Apostasy Gambit*



Fanart depicts only the fictional layer, but this fiction is built out of the rules of the RPG system



fanart by Phoebe Herring

Cyclical Reposting

Instagram posts were republished on forums, reddit, tumblr, youtube, pinterest and other platforms by fans

Audience assumption was often that there was an underlying canon, in podcast or 'Actual Play' form

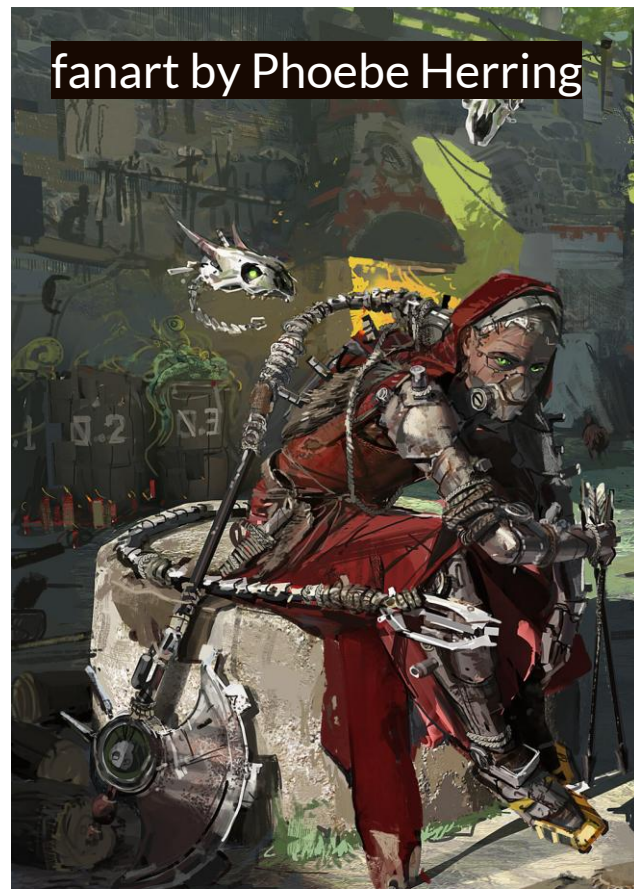
johkaan 298 w

Is there a podcast? AP? Would love to follow, amazing art!!



1 like Reply ...

fanart by Phoebe Herring



Fans on Reddit and Tumblr responded differently to the fanart



much as the entire

Planet (alien plant in the

ade Runner

Apocalypse World

Some characters reappeared in a subsequent group game - an *Apocalypse World* campaign.

Players collaborated to build a world setting, settling on a planet-enveloping forest.

The online following attempted to read *Apocalypse World* as a canon-compliant corner of the 40k setting.



coco_minis 263 w

I want to see if I'm right with what happened. They reach their objective. Eyepatch is gonna blow it sky high, and tech priest realizes this. While he's disarming eyepatch of his grenade, the twin sister (psyker from your past posts?) has a communion with something in the obelisk, followed by tech priest trying to communicate?



8 likes Reply

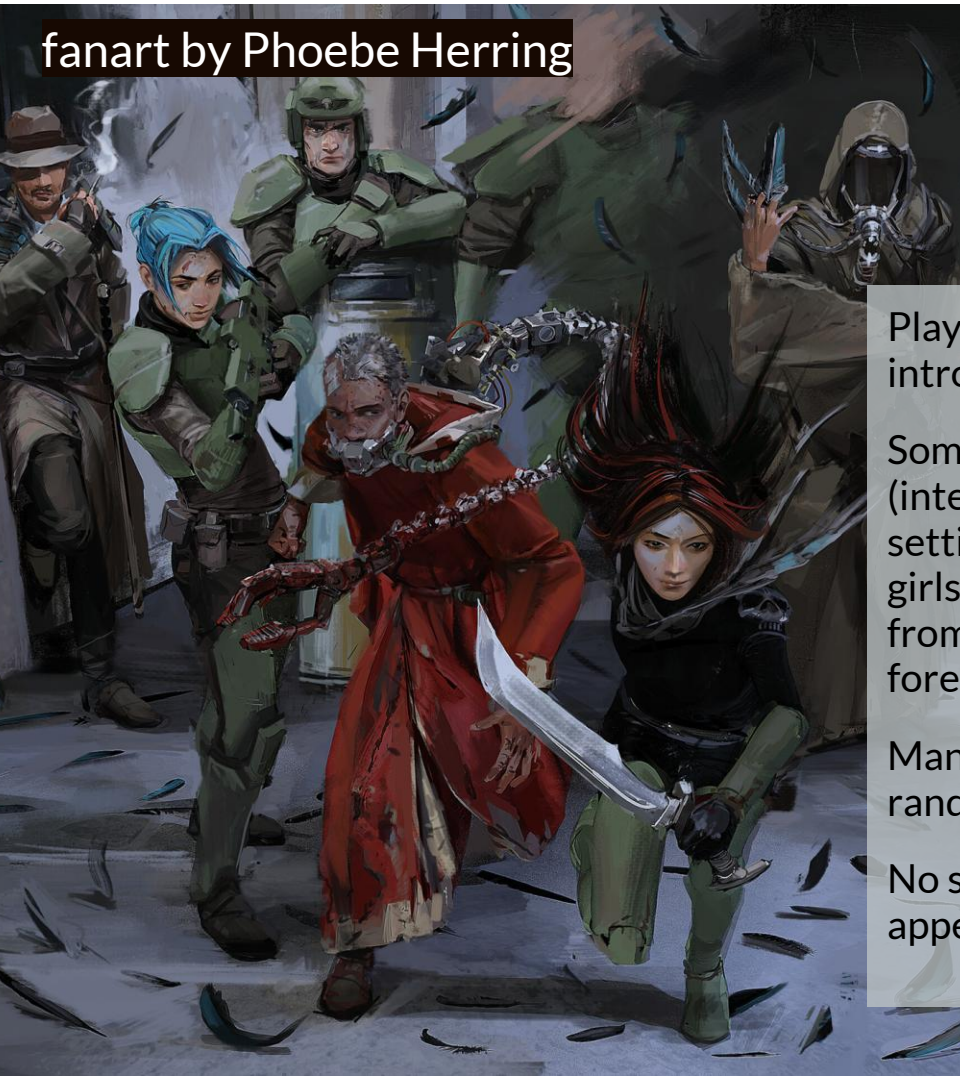
fanart by Phoebe Herring

fanart by Phoebe Herring

Increasingly, elements of Cornish landscape appeared in the fanart, either in combination with or displacing the 40k tropes of gothic cathedrals and muddy battlefields



fanart by Phoebe Herring



Player authorship

Players unfamiliar with 40k had built characters introducing tropes from other media

Some character concepts were actively adversarial (interventionist in Seymour's framing) to the 40k setting, built by players who dislike its aesthetic: anime girls, samurai detectives, characters directly lifted from psychedelic album cover artwork, matrons of forest communes

Many visual designs of characters were the result of randomised dicerolls.

No space marines, orks, tyranids, tau or eldar appeared.

These influences did not prevent audiences from perceiving the characters as being part of 40K

The 40K universe as a massive co-created setting has housed a wild variety of character archetypes ripped from music subcultures, comics, political satire and sports fandom across its 39 year history

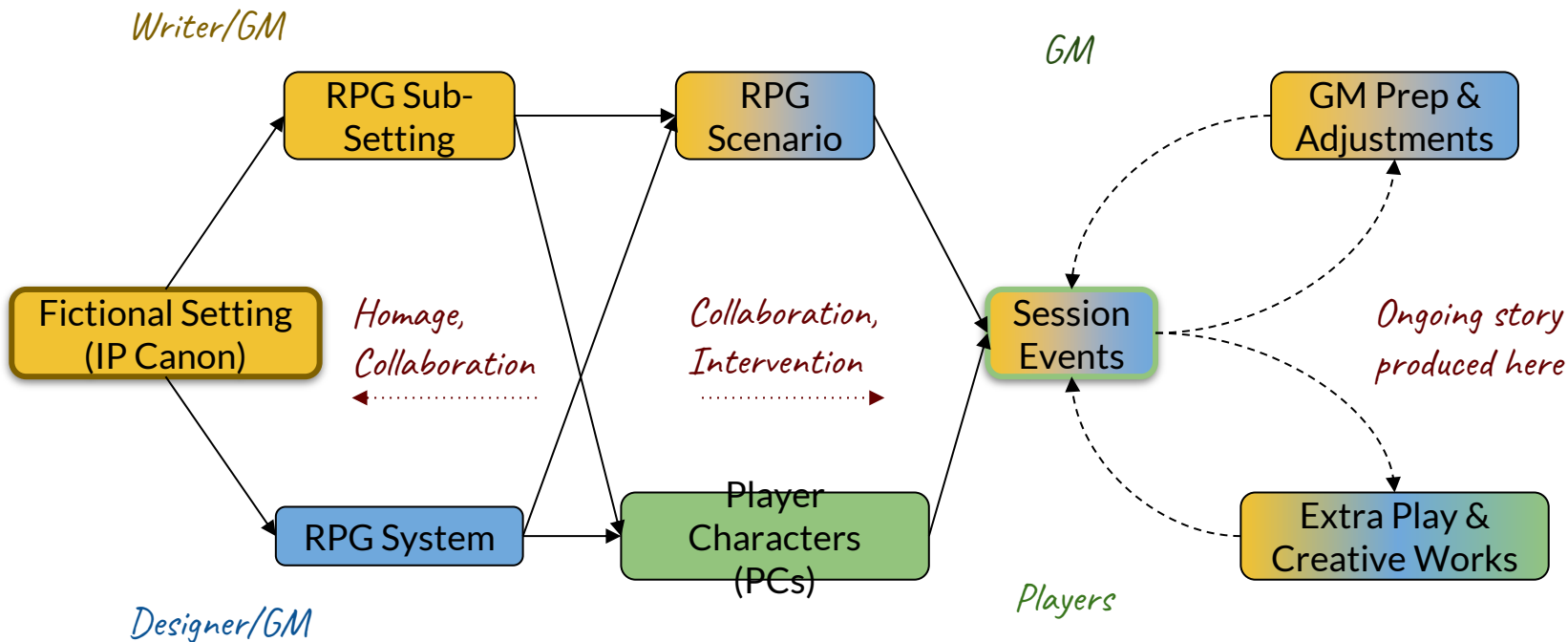
Perhaps the disjointed nature of the player-built designs, built adversarially to the superheroic 2020-era aesthetic of the game, helped them to appeal *more* strongly to a slice of the audience that enjoys the human-level messiness of the setting

“the works of fanartists were judged by members of the fandom as having value, not only insofar as they bore resemblance to canonical models, but also insofar as they evidenced the makers’ distinctive styles and expanded – without altogether disregarding – the parameters of the fandom.” (Manifold 2009: 17)

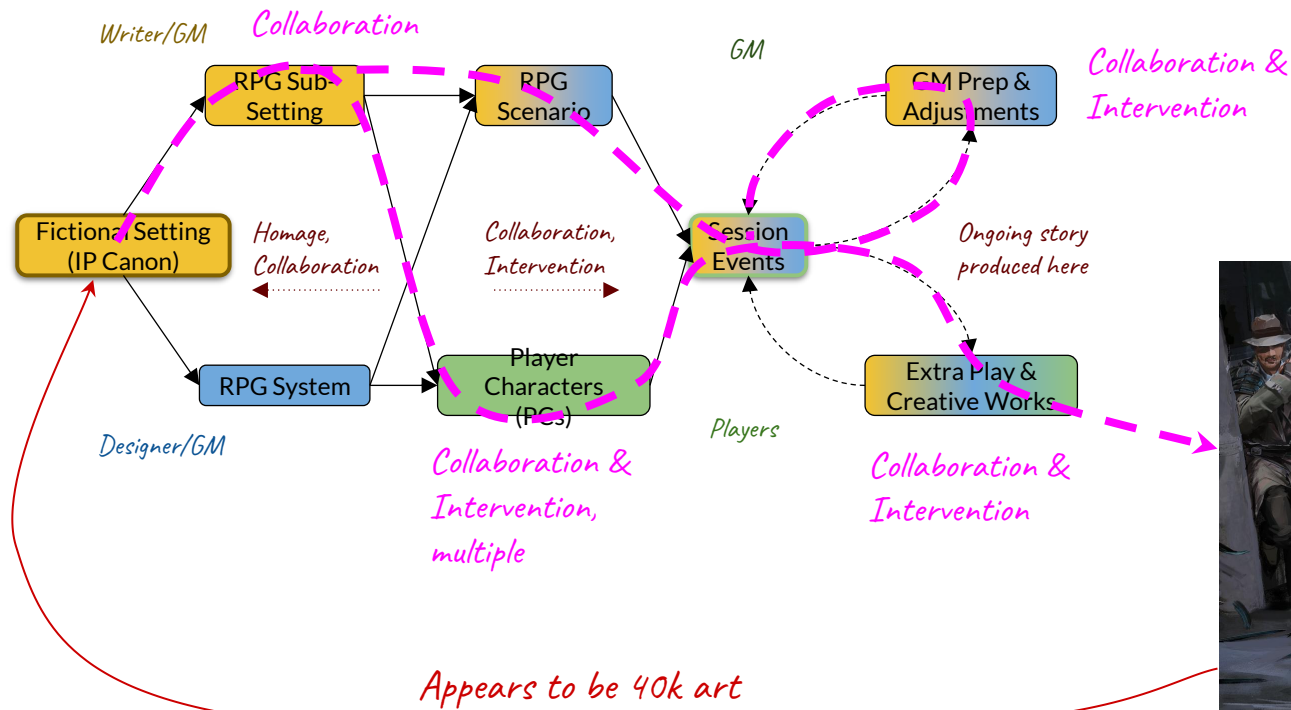
Art by John Blanche



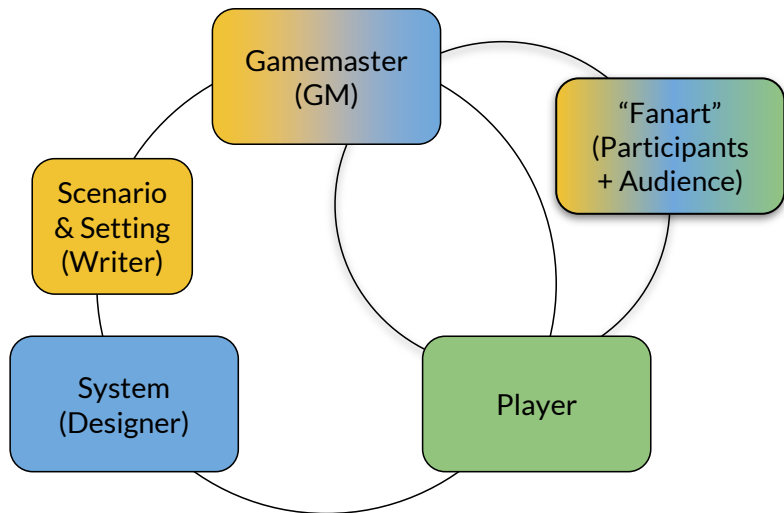
Collaboration & Intervention in RPGs



Collaboration & Intervention in RPGs



RPG Fanart & the “Extra Layer”



Further from the IP Canon, the work appears closer to fanart, especially “above” or “beyond” the session events.

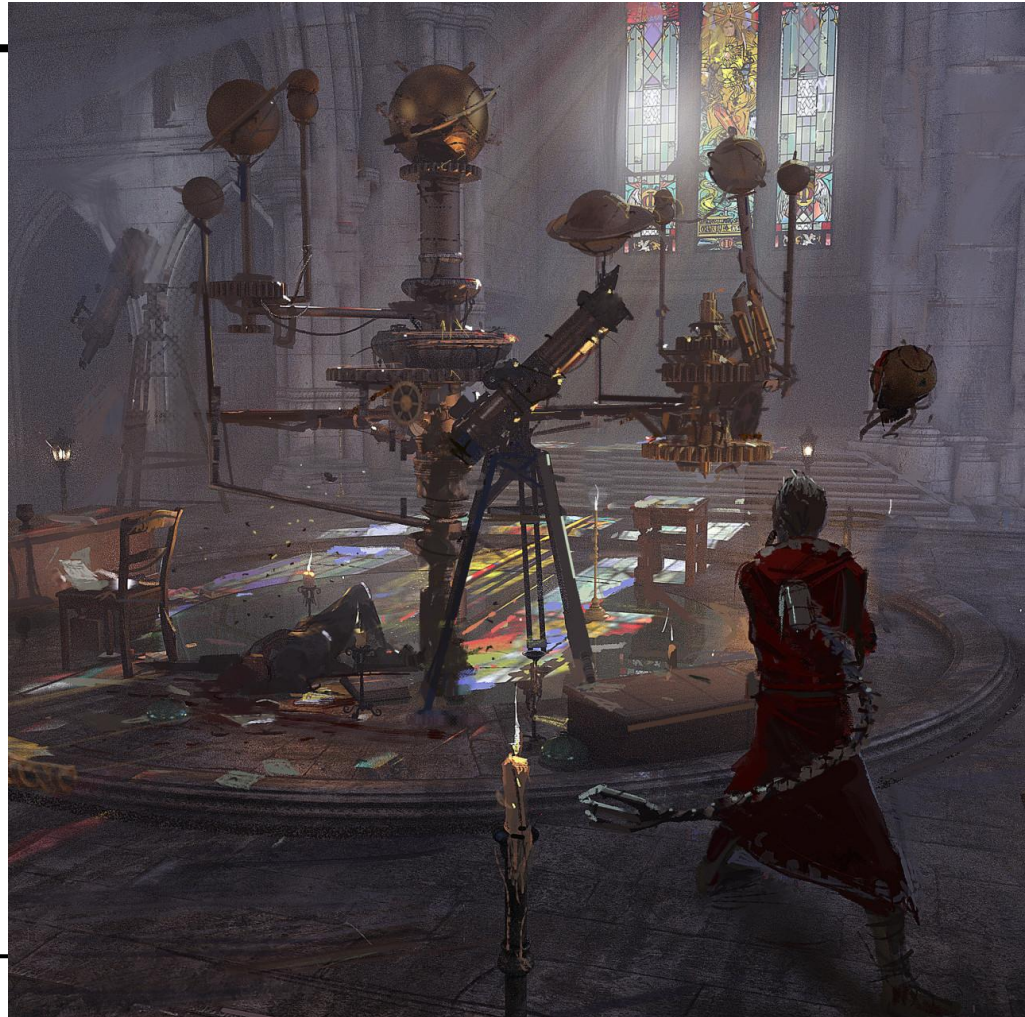
These works impact the “micro-culture” of the RPG, influencing other participants and ongoing play.

There can be friction in the continuity interpreted/presented between the sessions and “fanart”, also influencing ongoing play.

Unlike in Actual Play media, we were playing to entertain ourselves, not fans.

Players in the group had different levels of awareness of the online fandom - many were completely oblivious. Only Phoebe was aware of the full extent of the meta-fandom

A desire for cinematic moments drove some GM and player decisions, but other group members continued to introduce moments that were at odds with sci-fi or action tropes, and with the 40k setting itself.



fanart by Phoebe Herring

The end of the campaign was translated differently into fanart, cutting some player character resolutions in favour of a digestible story for the online following

Audiences lost interest when the topics of the fanart changed, and when the group moved on to a non 40k campaign.

The fanart had become a part of an online community of 40k content creators who were putting significant resource into brand, audience and social media management. In some cases, as in the short film *Astartes* (Pedersen, 2018) - works were purchased by Games Workshop

Provocations

Fandom studies often focus on pseudonymous shipping communities, by contrast we found our campaign fanart situated in a competitive entrepreneurial fandom space often using real names where IP was exploited to drive traffic to content creators or people aspiring to work with Games Workshop, in a framework of platform capitalism.

Fanart is a selective or curatable performance of play as opposed to actual play/streaming/etc.

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Any Questions?

Notes - Quotes from Thesis

"Some players were more invested than others in their characters and the system/setting. Some engaged with the system and/or setting better than others, often this correlated with whether they were fans of Warhammer 40,000. I created a custom race/class for one player to engage them better, as their interest in the setting was almost exclusively related to a particular fictional species. I also created custom talents suited to each PC to encourage character engagement – this seemed quite successful, as the players seemed to feel like they were receiving tailored content based on their choices. I observed their playstyles and areas of interest (using social cues as well, like my knowledge of their interests outside of the game) and tried to play into them. I also created a lot of patched-together/custom content for character advancement, like unique progression schemes and rules tweaks. There was a lot of catering to players, and I feel like it paid off.

Relatedly, I offered extra story and engagement between sessions, usually via group or private messages with the players, providing extra off-screen story details or some character choices. Some players very much enjoyed these extra opportunities for engagement (maybe Specialists/Character Actors, to use Laws' (2002) typology) where some largely ignored them. One player engaged more with discussion and analysis of the systems mechanics, rather than details about their character's story. Notably, one player began to generate a lot of art of their character, and the fictional circumstances, perhaps due to their preexisting interest in the setting and engagement with the additional content between sessions.

Stig is a notable character from this campaign who had broad impact – he appeared in future games and generated art and reflections well beyond the lifespan of this campaign. Related to the previous paragraph, it seemed that Stig's player became very attached to him, in a way that is perhaps one of the goals and unique strengths of RPGs – something that GMs should encourage?

Because this campaign was run primarily using prewritten adventure books, I experienced some struggles with "keeping hold" of the story. There were numerous inconsistencies in the books themselves – plot threads that were mentioned and not explained, characters that were inconsistently described, elements that were alluded to in one section but then never materialised, etc. This inconsistency made it very difficult to make definitive statements about elements of the story – I found it hard to be sure when the information in the book was reliable, and if I could overrule it without that causing a problem with a later part of the plot or similar. Relatedly, I would also sometimes introduce inconsistencies, for example due to forgetting a detail. When these elements combined, it led to some rough and/or slow sequences of trying to work out story details in order to answer a player's simple question about a character's whereabouts, for example. It was good practice for me, having rarely run long-form prewritten content before, but I didn't like not having freedom with the story.

Related to the above – where possible, I would insert content of my own creation, to replace, expand on, or run parallel to, content from the books. These sequences and characters tended to be amongst the most well received, and certainly led to some memorable moments. A notable example is the PC's Inquisitor (fictional boss) – fleshing out her personality and details helped the campaign find an identity and some core themes (the party was very strange, so she had to be from a radical faction, for example, meaning we would deal with themes of skirting heresy and conflict between the radical and the orthodox). With her defined, I could then create an antagonistic rival who would interfere with the party, and another character who could act as a middle-ground, potential ally. The encounters and conflicts with these three characters were some of the most memorable sequences of the campaign, and they weren't from the books." (Wilbraham 2025: Appendix: GMPD - 255-6)

Notes - A Fresh Take on 40k

From abstract:

A fresh cultural artefact emerged from the relationship between the licensed adventure, the players' very varied relationships to the famously 'grimdark' original IP, the aesthetic of the paintings themselves – more influenced by cinematic concept art techniques than by the established visual culture surrounding Warhammer 40,000 – and interaction from an audience invested in the glimpses of narrative implied by the fanart.

“In order to become noticed in the fandom, each fanartist must bring something new from her real-life cultural experience to the group. It is this that gives unique style to her fanart expressions.” (Manifold 2009: 14)

“Thus mass media conveyed images from culture-specific stories seep into culturally diverse and geographically remote local communities, and elements of local culture or personal taste and experience enter into the global fandom. There is a trans-cultural exchange of styles – an invigorating mix of imagery and ideas. To paraphrase Sennett (2008: 40), fanart images become pictures of possibility for the fanartist, members of the fandom, and the real communities to which fans belong.” (Manifold 2009: 15)

“the works of fanartists were judged by members of the fandom as having value, not only insofar as they bore resemblance to canonical models, but also insofar as they evidenced the makers' distinctive styles and expanded – without altogether disregarding – the parameters of the fandom.” (Manifold 2009: 17)
