

The Significance of True Line of Sight in Warhammer 40,000

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a probe into using tabletop miniatures to think about objects, perception, bodies, and gameplay. Like Carter, Gibbs and Harrop's (2013, 2014a, 2014b) groundbreaking work on the game, I focus on Warhammer 40,000 (hereafter W40k) and its many editions. W40K is a tabletop wargame, played with armies, vehicles, and terrain typically fashioned, modeled and painted by the players. This paper is about "true line of sight" (TLOS), one of a "layer of rules" (Priestly and Lamshead 2016) that determines which miniatures on the tabletop can see and therefore attack the other. TLOS is crucial to W40K game play but it is also a curious concept through which we can explore complex relations of bodies in play.

A MODEL'S EYE VIEW

TLOS means that for players to shoot at each other's troops (there are exceptions for artillery and the like) they must be able to draw a line from those miniatures' heads (or weapons in some cases) to the bodies of their would-be-targets. Terrain which provides both setting and barriers to vision and movement, is crucial for how TLOS functions in W40k. As the rulebook for the 2015 seventh edition of the game states: "True line of sight makes the game feel much more cinematic and puts you in the heart of the fighting - existentially, if not physically. There's nothing like getting a model's eye view to bring a game to life."

Manipulating and debating TLOS is a large part of W40k play. Because TLOS "takes the models and terrain positions at face value" (Games Workshop 2014) the size, shape and pose of these miniature bodies becomes important. A crouching robot is less vulnerable to being shot at, but also less able to shoot. A gesticulating mutant exposes itself to more lines of sight and thus more fire than one modeled with limbs close to the body. The rule of TLOS in this way impacts not only play at the game table, but decisions made at the hobbyist's workbench. Carter et al.'s (2014) description of W40k as being a series of interlinked activities is useful here. TLOS guides W40k-ers modeling and terrain building. These are not activities we typically think of as part of game play, but they are crucial to it. Building miniatures is not a peripheral pleasure but an activity central to one of the core rules of the game, TLOS.

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To understand TLOS we need to understand what a miniature is and can be. In W40k these miniatures are 32mm (more or less), scaled science fiction aliens and super soldiers. They are manufactured by the company out of polystyrene, metals or resin and sold in kits. They are also scratch-built by some hobbyists, sometimes by combining pieces from different figures, sculpted by hand or 3D printed. Whether bought or (re)made, these figures are painted¹ (typically as part of a force or collection) and then perhaps, but not always², finally used in a game.

When we use our miniature troops in a game we need to determine what they can see. Often players must bend over the table, craning their necks to look through and past their miniatures' heads. Bending low over the table to check TLOS is an act of bodily connection across game space, an act as intimate and fraught as it is in our relation to digital avatars (see Ndalianis 2012 and Apperley and Clemmens 2017). Checking TLOS is an act of perceptual and bodily empathy more than it is one of immersion. What we do when we hunch low and look/see like a miniature is a kind of intercorporeal technique (Crossley 1995) across radically different scales and kinds of bodies (Apperley 2013).

This technique invokes a range of technical modes of vision and control. The player, one eye closed and peering through the miniature-as-sighting instrument and also as miniature person, is in this hunched pose part surveyor (with a cockeyed legalized and territorializing vision), part jeweler with loop handling a valued miniature wonder, part billiard player or golfer lining up an angle of play, and, of course part gunfighter, sniper, soldier with a laser scope³.

Vision in wargaming is always a precursor to violence; indeed in the fantastical and sci-fi settings of these games, vision may be actively and actually weaponized through eye beams and weaponized crania. TLOS has no real meaning without the rules governing shooting and resolution of damage which follow its implementation. TLOS is always geared towards the potential destruction (that is removal from the game space) of an opponent's models and the impact this has on the game state. But it is also at the same time about moving from the perspective of the player-as-general, if only for a moment, to that of a miniature, a troop, a space orc, a model, a painting, a fiction, another kind of body. At the core of wargaming is the act of looking at these figures, be it with the naked eye, or through a lens to magnify them when painting, or a camera to photograph them for displaying one's craft⁴. TLOS allows the miniatures to look along with the player, to move from looked *at* to looked *with* and *through*. By tracing these lines of sight, we can see how the miniature, in W40k and beyond, is a complex thing, one which deserves the kind of attention our field has paid thus far mostly to its digital cousins.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Some hire professional painters.

² How many W40K miniatures ever see combat? We shouldn't overlook the people who paint and model but rarely, if ever, play a game.

³ The advent of laser pointers has allowed a no less "cinematic" workaround for the difficult postures of TLOS (Priestly and Lamshead 2016).

⁴ See Heljakka's 2013 on the gaze and the pleasures of looking at and photographing toys.