

Gamechangers of 40k: Professionalization and Commodification of Warhammer 40,000

Patrick Prax

Department of Game Design, Uppsala University
Cramérgatan 3
621 67 Visby
+46 76 04 27 398
Patrick.prax@speldesign.uu.se

Björn Sjöblom

Swedish Defence University
Drottning Kristinas väg 37
Stockholm
+46 735 055295
Bjorn.sjoblom@fhs.se

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the process of the commodification and professionalization of the gaming community around *Warhammer 40,000* (Games Workshop, 2020 [1987], hereafter abbreviated 40k and GW respectively). Participation in the 40k community is increasing rapidly, along with the increase in sales and revenue for its parent company, Games Workshop. The competitive community of the game has grown alongside the game with an increase in the number of tournaments and participating players. The growth of the 40k community is also giving rise to a cadre of (semi) professional players, community organizers and media content producers on platforms such as Youtube and Twitch. The professionalization of the 40k community parallels both the development of esports in general and the mediatization of games such as *Magic: The Gathering* (Garfield, 1991) more specifically (see Švelch, 2020). The commodification of this culture here and the professionalization of a small group of players and creators is not in principle different from similar processes in other domains of cultural production like sports – 40k is an analogue game that is not natively tied to a digital domain. While 40k was always a commercial product, with sales of both miniatures and rules, we argue that the latest development represents a process of commodification of its player-driven culture, that is, turning the play of 40k into a commercial asset. The professionalization of a specialist cadre of players and community organizers is one part of this process.

Professionalization and commodification of the 40k community is happening within the same social media ecosystem that characterizes contemporary cultural production. As a case study, examining the 40k community is useful in that it is a relatively small community still in the early phases of professionalization and commodification, and could potentially serve as a testbed for theories related to such processes in larger gaming communities (such as esports or RPGs).

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The study examines various podcasts in which prominent members of the 40k community are discussing their hobby, entrepreneurship and their journeys to becoming professionals, and their relationship to organized play. The main material consists of 28 journalistic interviews in the podcast “40k Game Changers” (described as a podcast consisting of “*conversations with the people who have changed the way we do Warhammer 40k*”), each one around one hour long. All but one of the interviewed persons are male, and they are all from Europe or North America. A smaller set of auxiliary podcasts, also produced by well-known members of the community, has been used as additional data.

Through the accounts in these podcasts, the paper aims at examining the community’s endemic discourses of professionalization and commodification. Scharff (2016) in her widely cited study of entrepreneurial subjectivity has been analyzing how entrepreneurial subjects “*relate to themselves as if they were a business*” (Scharff, 2016: 108) through interviews with “*cultural workers as ideal entrepreneurial subjects*” (Scharff, 2016: 108). This paper builds on her conclusions as a theoretical anchor to investigate how the ways in which participants understand themselves, their work, and their contributions to shared culture are related to the processes of commodification and professionalization of 40k.

The study employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the selected podcasts. Our study uses this widely available published material because of our interest in how the community more broadly relates to the commodification of their culture. The use of podcasts as data allows for an analysis of the discursive formulations such processes, while still being endemic to the community itself (i.e. not elicited by the researcher through interviews). The podcasts have a definitive slant towards enthusiasm for the 40k hobby and community, rather than a more critical journalistic take on the subject.

Preliminary analysis of the data show that many of the participants have gone through a process of professionalization themselves, starting out as hobbyists or community organizers to then turn that engagement into a profession to earn a living through it in some fashion. Their entrepreneurial subjectivities are prominently displayed in their accounts. In relation to this, the participants will often engage in discursive work to maintain that this is an extension of their participation in their community, rather than a break from it.

A central theme in the analysis is that of the community’s relationship with GW.. Special focus here lies on the ways in which participants both discuss and have accelerated or promoted the commodification and corporate control over the game and its culture, and the ways that this interacts with their subjectivities as entrepreneurs and community leaders. For a long time, 40k was played competitively with very little oversight or control from GW, often using alternative rulesets and game formats. In the data the participants are often asserting their independence from the company. However, with the release of the latest version of the game in 2020, a lot of this work by the community has been absorbed by GW, often at the explicit request by community leaders, inducing a significant change in the relationship between players and the company. In this sense, the community has actively engaged in the commodification of play. The “unified ruleset” released with the current edition of the game has consolidated the community in many ways, but at the expense of community control over modes of play.

However, as 40k is an analogue game, the control of how the game is actually played ultimately rests with the players themselves. This means that there is still space for resistance and alternative organization of (competitive) play. While players may have the power to counteract processes of commodification, the professionalized community

leaders in this article hardly work in this direction, instead inserting themselves into an emergent mediatized landscape of 40k as “ideal entrepreneurial subjects”.

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