

# Abstract Principles of 40k

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## INTRODUCTION

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I like 40k. This is attested to by the hundreds of games I've played over many years, and by the countless hours I've spent painting and converting miniatures, and by the unknowable amount of words and days I've spent talking about it with other people online. I say this not to demand that you listen to what I say because I'm some sort of authority figure, but only to give context to the reason I've written this essay. To try and explain what I'm hoping to achieve.

40k is a complicated game, and this creates innumerable barriers to being able to talk about what the game is, and why we're playing it, and why a player should make a certain choice rather than another. Without a common understanding (or even a common definition of certain words), a lot gets said about "what" people are doing, without the ability to communicate the "why" that they're doing it. Why should a player bring a certain kind of army list, or make certain decisions on the table? Even basic concepts are somehow strangely elusive and incommensurable.

What this essay is, is a way to bring some basic understanding to this entire mess. To provide some definitions of words, and hammer out a common language in the very least. My purpose here isn't to try and come up with a bunch of things I think are true and to try and force everyone to accept my idiosyncrasies. Instead, as much as I am able, I am trying to let the game itself tell us what the game is. To build reasonable and logical arguments just to describe what things are so that we can talk about the "whys" and the "shoulds" later. To be able to clear out sentiment and vague mysticism, and allow us to discuss things without being forced to make gut checks before we agree to listen to what others have to say.

This isn't a treatise on the basics of playing the game within the game itself. It's not a tactical manual teaching the principles of force concentration, focusing on missions, playing to the

"meta", or building strong combinations of units. Others (well, and myself) have already written extensively on these topics, and as the game itself changes over time, their writings become more or (usually) less relevant. My point isn't to talk about concrete tips and tricks, but to make something more timeless and more useful. It is an essay about what 40k itself actually is.

As I said, I've played a lot of 40k, and have spent a lot of time talking about it. The intended audience of this essay is other people like myself. I use a lot of jargon and shorthand that the less experienced might find confusing, for which I apologize in advance. This also determines where I'm approaching this essay from. Rather than starting with a friendly "what is 40k?" section, I'm starting at a more detailed level and working my way backwards (the section on luck and skill will be particularly dense for those who don't have an intimate understanding of the game), as the people who are already well versed in the concepts are the people most likely to be talking (or trying to talk) about them. It is an exercise in making sense of what we already know, rather than teaching from a blank slate.

I thank you in advance for reading this ponderous work, and hope this helps you to communicate with others about the game. Perhaps it will even get you to re-evaluate what you are doing in 40k, and why you are doing it, and become a better person or a better players as a result, but such lofty hopes may well be beyond the scope of this simple examination into the game we all love.

I would also like to thank the people from DakkaDakka.com, without which my endless arguing, mind-changing, ranting and raving would have found poor purchase, and without being challenged by others, the ideas less developed.

## TYPES OF 40k PLAYER

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One of the main problems people have when discussing 40k is that different people are looking for different things from the game. After all, it's going to be difficult for two people to talk about some part of the game when one person considers it a "bug" and the other a "feature". For the sake of setting down a common communication platform, I divide 40k players into four main types:

### Winners

For this group of players, success is a binary state, and that success is determined by exactly one thing - winning. The point of the game, possibly the ONLY point of the game is to win it. It is easy for the other player groups to revile this group because it produces behavior antithetical to their way of playing, but such behavior is perfectly congruent with the way the game is supposed to be played for these players. They will rules lawyer to advantage because it can help them win, and if you aren't able to argue well enough why my interpretation of the rules is wrong, then you SHOULD lose. Likewise, if I bring the strongest list in the game, and you don't, you should lose more often, and complaining about my list is just a cover-up for the fact that you brought a weaker list.

Winners have a strange relationship with dice - they don't want the game to be based on the luck of the dice, because they don't want to lose just because someone got lucky (or they got unlucky), but at the same time want to be able to come back from behind with a little luck if it means they can pull out a win. Also, this group doesn't want there to be serious game balance. Part of the fun is to come up with stronger and stronger combinations of units to give them that edge. If every army were roughly as powerful, then you wouldn't get to use your peak brainpower to come up with secret combinations that others didn't know about that would allow you to crush your opponents. List building is a skill, after all, and not everyone is as skilled as others.

It is, in a way, the purest, most black and white way to look at the game. People's complaints about pretty much anything tend to be irrelevant. Who cares if I use a spam list if it gets me the win? Why are you letting fluff get in the way of you winning? I'll take the victory, but I'll also likely think less of you for not being as clever as me, or not "wanting" it as much.

### Strategizers

Success for Strategizers is also binary, and is also determined by who wins games, but the point of the game isn't the win - that's merely a means to an end. The end is to have a game that pits player skill against player skill, and shows who is best.

This group thinks that 40k should be like a sport, where everyone is started out with a completely equal playing field, and when all other variables are controlled for, it will be the best player that wins. The one with the most skill. These are the people who are most likely to show up to tournaments, and most likely to believe that the results of tournaments are infallible data.

Strategizers believe that luck is an insignificant factor in 40k, and that it doesn't have much to do with the result of any given game. After all, if I roll poorly, I can always use my player skill to mitigate the damage that the dice has done, and a game of 40k involves hundreds of die rolls, so really luck is a controlled variable anyways. Meanwhile, this group is driven insane by the fact that 40k is a very imbalanced game, because there will constantly be people (mostly Winners) who will keep on bringing more-powerful lists which makes it so that players don't start out with an even playing field (as such, the winner might not be the most skilled, but the one with the most overpowered list), or, almost as bad, people who show up with weaker lists, which undermines the ability to test player skill (they could always claim they lost only because they had a weaker list). List

building should not be a skill, and players should be able to show up with more or less any combination of units and still have an equal chance of winning (providing they're as skilled as their opponent).

## **Competers**

For Competers, success in 40k isn't a binary state, and who wins or loses a game isn't strictly relevant to who succeeds. What's important to Competers is the competition itself. It's playing a game with a serious chance of losing, but playing to the peak of your abilities to overcome that adversity. The game, in brief, should be a challenge.

This player type is likely to also be the same kind of person who, when they beat a video game, goes back and plays it again on a harder difficulty level, or when they finish a 1,000 piece puzzle, goes out and buys a 2,000 piece one with no edge pieces. They are the kind of person who would run a marathon with 100-pound weights attached to their legs and then, when they finished in the middle of the pack feel pretty good about themselves, because look how many people they beat who weren't running with weights. They are the kind of person who would think more highly of a person who tied a game who had the most disadvantages than they would the other player who was playing the game on "easy mode" even if they got the same result.

Like Winners, Competers have a love-hate relationship with dice. On the one hand, bad die rolls ratchet up the challenge level for whoever rolls them, and gives them an incentive to play harder. On the other a Competer may well have delicately balanced things to provide a specific level of challenge that may be ruined by how the dice roll. Competers also love that the game is imbalanced, as it gives them a deep, rich field of options to work with. I can't see how to make the strongest list of a weak army style or from a weak codex if all armies are roughly equal in strength. I'd be stuck with the brute, crass, and much more boring points handicap (likely a Strategizer invention), and the game would be much more shallow if what pieces I took didn't matter.

List building is a skill, except unlike Winners, the point isn't to make the strongest list, but to make the list that most accurately achieves your objectives, whatever those are. That said, they likely grow weary quickly of those people who bring strong lists and when they win, pass it off as player skill when it was the list, moreso than the skill, that was really responsible. The same is true for players who are lucky. Real skill is determined by how hard something was to achieve, not how many times you achieved it. It's why body-builders lift increasingly heavier weights.

## **Players**

In a way, this group is sort of a catch-all for the remainders. Like Competers, success in 40k is not a binary state, but it takes things even further by placing a low or non-emphasis on player skill. If winning and skill aren't what's important, then what is? Well, that's sort of up to the player.

Most likely, the way to determine if a game or a player has been successful is if they had fun. That can take many forms. For some, it could be zany things happening in a game, while for others it is a chance to display well-painted models in beautiful terrain and have the opportunity to actually do something with them. 40k could be purely a social call - something to do while chatting with friends, or it could be a sandbox for doing minor game design (coming up with interesting new missions, and seeing if they worked well or not). In a way, there are as many ways to determine who the best Player is as there are Players.

Unlike the above types, Players tend to outright embrace the fact that 40k is a dice game, as that random element is almost required to keep things interesting, or to come up with the best stories. Dice, in this case, are as necessary to 40k as they are to D&D or any other role-playing game. Meanwhile, they tend to be rather indifferent to list building and game balance, as neither of these things are required for the game to be fun, and problems can always be house-ruled away whenever they become inconvenient.

Players might roll their eyes at Strategizers for trying to debase such a rich and wonderful game into nothing more than chess with different miniatures, and are often outright hostile towards Winners, who tend to do things in a way that the Player would consider boring, and resent how they try and push their shallow, narrow interpretation of the game on others. "If it's not the strongest at something, it's not worth taking" is the antithesis of everything that the game should be about.

## LUCK AND SKILL

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One of the biggest difficulties 40k players have when talking to one another is that people have a myriad understanding of what the words "luck" and "skill" mean with regard to 40k. Both of these words can be broken down and explained in a systematic way to provide for a common definition. These definitions can come from the game itself, rather than our preconceived definitions that are forced onto the game after the fact. To begin with, let's look at luck.

### Luck

For the purpose of this theory, luck is a catchword for all of the parts of the game over which a player has no control. In a tournament, this includes the order in which you play people, the list they bring, the terrain setup, etc. Of course, luck also refers to the results of individual die rolls, whether it be for mission or first turn, or for whether a plasma gun penetrated armor on a vehicle. Players have no power over this, and can't, through any amount of planning, skill, or force of will simply dictate the results.

In any game of 40k, your ability to win is going to be based on destroying (or in some other way neutralizing) your opponent's units. After all, you can not win a kill point game without killing units, and you can not win an objectives game without removing your opponent's units from the objectives. In any given event in a game, luck (especially die rolls) is going to be the determining factor of if you destroy an opponent's unit or not. The game was purposely designed in such a way that you can not ever see an opponent's unit destroyed without dice determining if they were destroyed or not. Unlike chess, which allows you to destroy your opponent's units with movement alone, 40k is solely dependent, then, on how you roll the dice.

You can do things to lengthen the odds of failure, or shorten the odds of success, but you can't remove dice as the primary mechanic of the game,

and thus can not remove luck from its core.

### Skill

Just as luck is the overarching idea of uncontrollable variables, so is skill the the idea that represents all controllable variables. Skill includes such things as building a powerful list, and using them to their maximum effectiveness on the table.

Given that luck is the primary mover in the game, skill's role is entirely devoted to manipulating luck. Its role is predominantly to shorten your own odds of success, while lengthening the odds that your opponent succeeds. For example, if you move a plasma gun that was out of range of any target in such a way where they are now in range of the target, the odds that you successfully destroy that particular target with a plasma gun is shortened from a 0% chance of success to something much better. Likewise, if you move one of your units out of LOS of all your opponent's weapons, the odds that your opponent will be able to destroy that unit just lengthened from whatever it was before down to 0% (barring other circumstances like barrage or deepstriking).

Remember, that this also counts list-building skill. If you have a vehicle, and your opponent does not bring anything with a high enough strength to damage it, then the odds that the vehicle remains on the table the entire game are incredibly short. Likewise, the more you have on the table, the more power you have over changing the odds. You can not exploit the bad luck of your opponent if you have no surviving units on the board, nor can you mitigate his good luck.

### The Effect of Luck

Better players may be able to get more odds-bending power out of their units, and thus can do more with less, but while how much power a player can squeeze out of hit units may go up, it

can never exceed the maximum power, which is the aggregate of all the units left on the table. After all, if someone has half their army blown off the table turn 1, they have half the potential power of their opponent. They can still win the game if, for example, they are able to get 100% out of their 50% while their opponent is only able to get 10% out of their 100%, but the maximum possible has still been determined by the luck of how hit, wounding, cover, armor penetration, leadership, etc. rolls go.

More obviously, there are several individual die rolls, over which no player has control, that can be very key rolls, and not just if one critical shot managed to destroy its target or not. This includes things such as which player goes first, and when the game ends. Most people can recall a game in which one person would have won a game, except the roll to continue ended the game one turn too early, or one turn too late.

This is very important to note: all luck is not equal. Who you get paired up with in the first round of a tournament might have a massive impact on how far you go, and, as mentioned, certain die rolls like who goes first, when the game ends, and possibly that last plasma gun shot you get against your opponent's last model on an objective will have a MUCH bigger impact on the result of the game than other die rolls. Some people like to claim that die rolls can be controlled for because you roll so many dice, but the law of large numbers doesn't apply here. Firstly because the numbers aren't actually large (a couple of hundred die rolls spread over a variety of different circumstances), and secondly because the number of die rolls that are really critical could well be very, very small indeed (I've had games that were so close that literally a single die roll determined the winner. How is that for "large numbers"?)

### **The Effect of Skill**

Skill allows you to change the odds of luck in an attempt to control the effect of luck. If a vehicle is destroyed or not is determined by luck (after all, if you can't roll a single successful hit against a vehicle, you will never destroy it), but you can

make the odds of a vehicle destruction result go up with skill (such as moving several plasma guns into range of the vehicle, compared to only shooting a single one at it). Thus skill is able to make the results of any particular outcome more likely. Said another way, skill allows a player to play the odds better.

A better player, then, would be able to more exactly move the odds in whatever direction he so desires. In the end, though, it's not that more skill makes the "best" result happen, rather more skill makes the "desired" result more likely.

If skill has no impact on luck itself, and luck has an impact on the game, then what impact does skill have on the game? In the end, while skill will not make results more favorable over the course of a game, skill will increase the chances that you have more relatively positive results. Luck is still the determiner, but a player can make more rolls where the end result is more likely favorable results. In short, player skill makes luck kinder.

### **Relative Skill**

As a player's skill improves, they are able to make the battlefield more and more accurately reflect the odds they want to play. It also affects the odds that they want to play in the first place. Poorer players will tend to make decisions that, if successful, will have less strategic gain, and if they fail, will have more grave strategic consequences (much less their ability to fix odds one way or another in future turns).

This means that if you were able to completely control for the uncontrollable variables (luck), the only determiner of the game would be the relative skill of the two players. The better player would gain more from success, and lose less from failure. Of course, if you had two players who played at exactly equal skill level for any given game, AND all other variables were controlled for, the end result would always be a draw. The likelihood of victory, then would be determined by the relative skill inequality of the two players. The more one player played better relative to the other, the more likely it would be that they won the game.

But this relative skill between the two players is not, in fact, the only determiner of outcome, because there is this whole set of uncontrolled variables which also have an impact on the game. As mentioned, if the players are of very different skill level, the relative skill of the two players makes a big difference on the outcome. As such, when you have a gross disparity of player skills, player skill has an increasing impact on who wins a game relative to the uncontrolled variables (the chance a die rolls any given number being fixed).

Remember, it's the relative impact of relative skill that's important here. Take, for example, two players who were perfectly equal in skill. They had the same list, playing on a symmetrical board, playing the same odds just as successfully. In this case, the only determiner of who wins the game would be luck. If one player only rolled 6's and the other player only rolled 1's, there is a 100% chance that the lucky player would win. Likewise, if both players were equal in skill, the result of who won could be determined by just a single die roll.

If you control for one factor, it becomes less important to the outcome as the other factors. Likewise, as you control for all controllable factors, then controllable factors become less important to the outcome of the game as uncontrollable factors. As player skill approaches perfectly equal in any given game, the impact of skill on who won or lost is less. To put it another way, the closer you are in skill level to your opponent, the more that the outcome of the game is determined by luck.

### **Skill Advancement**

If luck is the prime determiner of games, then, the only way to improve your chances of winning at all are to become better than your opponent. The wider you can force the skill gap, the more skill will be a determiner of the outcome compared to luck.

The problem with skill advancement, however, is that it has diminishing return. The more that you can lengthen or shorten the odds of a particular

event occurring, the more difficult it is to continue to lengthen or shorten those odds. If you really want a vehicle dead, the shortening of the odds by bringing in 1 plasma gun where there was once zero is enormous. This is comparatively easy to do. However, if you're already a skilled player, and already have 20 plasma guns in range, being that little bit extra skilled so that you have 21 present isn't actually increasing the odds of a dead vehicle by very much.

Furthermore, just shortening the odds of any particular event happening is not actually necessarily the sign of a better player. In the above example, the better player would likely apply 10 plasma guns to two vehicles rather than 20 onto just one. In this case, the person who shoots all 20 at a single vehicle is suffering from overkill. While the short player is insignificantly more likely to kill the vehicle they shot at, for one dead vehicle, the "risky" player is still very likely to have 2 dead vehicles as the end result of their shooting.

As such, skill advancement doesn't really allow you to shorten or lengthen odds further (although it does this too), so much as it allows you to shorten them to exactly how short you want them, and lengthen them to the extent that you want them lengthened more exactly. As you get better in skill, the more likely that you are actually playing the the odds that you want to play.

In the end, though, you're not, over all, getting "better" odds, you are just getting more "accurate" playing of odds. This gets harder to get better at the better you get. Furthermore, it doesn't have any bearing on the actual effect of the die rolls (only shortness and length do, and even then, it's not an actual predictor).

What, then does the impact of playing exactly the odds you intended to have on the actual results of any given event or the game as a whole? None whatsoever. This means that luck is an independent variable of skill (which we already knew). It also means that the effect of more skill decreases absolutely the more skilled you get, as well as decreasing relative to that of your opponent.



## **The Effect of Skill Advancement and Luck**

If skill allows you to play odds better, and if the better you get, the less getting better allows you to play the odds better, this means that the better you get, the closer you get in skill level to your opponent. As the closer you get in skill level to your opponent, the less skill matters, and as the higher your skill level gets, the less difference there becomes in skill level, we can conclude that the end result of increasing your skill level is to lessen the impact of skill on your games, and to increase the role that luck plays in determining the outcome of your games.

## **The Effect of Luck and Skill**

All of this means that the more one advances in skill at playing 40k, the less they will see their games determined by their increase in skill, and the more that they will see their games determined by luck. So what use does skill have at all?

40k is often compared incorrectly to other games. It's not like chess (which isn't based on random elements), and it's not like poker (where you get dealt cards, but you're not required to play them if everyone else folds), and it's not like candyland (which is completely random). The best analogy for 40k is blackjack - a game where the random element determines who wins and who loses, but better players will win more games (or more luck events, in the case of 40k) over time than will players playing worse odds. In the case of blackjack, though, the game is so simple that the best odds a player could play are well-known.

The problem, though, is that there ARE no "correct" odds to play in 40k, and if there are, they're impossible to calculate and constantly shifting over the course of the game as things move and are destroyed. There are some principles that are well established (like "bring anti-tank weapons and shoot them at tanks"), but the more detailed you get, and the smaller differentiations you're making (running a 50.0001% chance rather than a mere 50% chance that something happens), the more it all becomes guesswork.

This is for two main reasons. The first, as mentioned, is that 40k has a very coarse random mechanic based on six-sided die. Tiny changes in the odds you play (out to many decimal places, say) hardly matter when your unit has a 2/3rd chance of hitting and a 1/3rd chance of doing absolutely nothing. Likewise, there is a great deal of coarseness built into the game itself. If you have 5 plasma guns, you can't fire 3.45 of them at one target and 2.55 of them at another. You have a coarse, discrete set to deal with.

The second is because tiny differences in skill are only seen over appropriately large data sets. If you were 1% "better" than your opponent (which doesn't make sense since we're talking about playing imprecise odds in a dice game - what does "better" even really mean?), you would only be able to determine this if you played 201 games of 40k (with the same lists and same terrain and same mission, etc.), and noticed that your record was 100-101. As such, the idea of playing a tournament of a handful of games to decide who is best is flat absurd. And that's before we consider that the results can easily be poisoned by the coarse mechanic of die rolls. Even at a large number of games, you're still testing for who is consistently luckier, rather than who is consistently higher skilled. Especially since the accuracy with which one plays odds does not change the fact that it's the dice that ultimately decide.

But even if you decided to use huge sample sizes, you would still run into a serious problem. The better you and your opponent get, and the smaller and more refined of odds you play, the larger and larger the data set has to get for you to be able to see the impact. Between two very good players that are able to play odds down to the 10,000ths, you may well need to have them play 10,000 games to see who is the better player. Of course, because this is also relative skill, in this case you would need to play 100,000,000 games to actually see the difference because you're really trying to see where one player played the 10,000ths and the other player only managed a 9,999.

As such, the point at which player skill fades into the sample size is shockingly quickly. For example, if you play three games against someone, they could easily be three times worse than you and still pull out an overall draw. Things are just too coarse, both in data creation (6-sided random events) and in measurement (inability to capture fine changes without lots of data points) to be able to measure the difference in player skill.

## **Conclusion**

Because die rolls are the ultimate determiner of the success of events (and thus, the game), skill is defined as manipulating the odds that something will happen. Because it becomes more difficult to set these odds with greater precision, and the effect of increasingly smaller changes is itself increasingly small, it becomes more and more difficult to see the effects of skill on the outcome of a game. This is especially true as both players become more skilled (skill becoming a controlled variable), and the orders of magnitude problem quickly surpasses both the coarseness and absolute impact of luck, as well as the ability to determine player skill by empirical means.

As such, we can conclude that once a player reaches a certain level of basic proficiency, success is more determined by being lucky than good, that player skill plays an indirect, and sometimes indeterminate effect on the outcome of a game, and that 40k isn't a game that in any way accurately tests player skill.

Put another way, 40k is a dice game, not a strategy game.

## GAME BALANCE

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When talking about game balance in 40k (or lack thereof), what is generally meant by balance is equality.

To say it another way, if you take two players and put them down in front of a game, and control for all the other variables (like player skill, for example), a perfectly-balanced game will always end in a draw, or in an equal win:loss ratio for both players. In a perfectly-balanced game, the game itself does not bias one player towards victory or another towards defeat. When a game is correctly balanced, balance becomes a control variable, and can thus be ignored, leaving the determiner of the outcome of a game up to other factors (once again, like player skill).

There are two main ways that games achieve equality, and thus balance. The first is to make it so that all game pieces (or combinations thereof) are the same. When one plays Go, for example, all of your pieces are colored beads, and they all do the same thing. In Monopoly, it doesn't matter if you pick the shoe or the iron as your playing piece - all pieces have the same effect on the game (it's just a matter of aesthetic). The second way to create equality is with symmetry. In Chess, for example, a pawn and a queen are of unequal utility (unlike the shoe and the iron), but the game is still balanced because both players have exactly the same number of the same pieces deployed on the table in exactly the same way.

This equality, however, creates a problem. Any balanced game can either have diversity, or it can have meaningful player choices, but not both at the same time. The only way to make a game both deep and varied at the same time is by creating a game that is imbalanced.

To demonstrate this, let's start with a few examples.

### Rock Paper Scissors

Rock, Paper, Scissors (hereafter RPS), is an example of a game that creates equality through lack of diversity. Let's say, for the sake of simplicity, that RPS was played by making a choice three times (once for three different rounds), and then the game was decided by both players revealing their three choices simultaneously. Assuming that players don't have inside information about their opponents, the best way to play the game is to pick one of each of the three choices and randomly assign them to the three rounds.

The reason for this is because the benefits gained by doubling up on any one choice (say, rock-rock-paper) do not outweigh the weaknesses of not having one of each choice. An easy way to illuminate this is to assume for a moment that one player is cheating, and can see the other person's choices before making their own. If both players play rock-paper-scissors, then the cheating player will align his rock against scissors, scissors against paper, and paper against rock - he will win all 3 rounds. If he doubles up on rock excluding scissors, then the best he can hope for is winning 2 rounds and losing one (rock against scissors, paper against rock, and rock against paper, for example). At absolute best, specializing will create the same odds of winning fairly as diversity (rock against paper, rock against scissors, and rock against rock), but more likely it just makes things worse.

If 40k were like RPS, you would basically have to take one of everything to have the strongest list. If you didn't take any anti-aircraft weapons so that you could instead take more anti-infantry weapons, then it would be like omitting scissors to play rock twice. If your opponent showed up with an even mix, you would have more anti-infantry than you need (so, too much), while your opponents aircraft could destroy your army unmolested.

This, of course, would ruin diversity. It would render list-building to nothing more than plugging in specialized units into designated slots. Hydras, for example, would be a guardsman's "rock" to fliers' "scissors", so every guard player would start by plugging a hydra into their list to fill that role. Once all the roles were filled, all guard lists would look more or less the same - each making sure that they have the same bases covered.

So on the one hand, RPS creates balance by forcing symmetry. It does it on the other hand by taking away meaningful player choice. If the one-of-each list was the best list, then any other lists are necessarily just worse lists with different themes. But if you had better and worse lists, then you'd have player choice, but you wouldn't have a balanced game anymore (the game would bias victory towards the person with the stronger list).

## **Chess**

Chess is an obvious example of balance through symmetry. You don't get to make any meaningful decisions about which pieces you're going to bring, or how to set them up. The game is made as shallow as possible so as to control for everything except for the exactly one way in which the game allows the players to exercise player skill (moving the pieces). Furthermore, Chess is a clear example of a lack of diversity, as both players bring the same pieces.

This is not to say that Chess has no way for players to make meaningful choices, of course, but the enforced symmetry does drastically reduce the variety of inroads. So much, so, that Chess, in the end, sort of just boils down to memorization (which moves counter which moves with the highest chance of success), which is why computers can be taught to play Chess better than human beings.

## **40k**

Interestingly enough, you can also see an example of this principle at work in 40k when you look at tournament play. In a 40k tournament, the point of

the game is to win, which means that you're going to be showing up with the strongest list possible. If everyone showed up with the strongest list, then, necessarily, everyone would show up with the same list. Of course, there is some disagreement on what the strongest list is, so there are inevitably a small number of lists instead of just one.

But the end effect is the same. By pursuing actions that (intentionally or otherwise) lead to equality, diversity is ruined. So is player choice of army, as anything but the best army is just a worse army. Of course, if the point is to test player skill, then you WANT things like list strength to be controlled for, which means that everybody showing up with the same list is a good thing, and both real diversity and real player choice are bad, because they will bias the outcome of a game based on list strength, rather than solely on player skill.

Of course, 40k permits players to choose to play the game with symmetry as well. There is no rule against both players deciding to play the same list, and set up the board with symmetrical terrain, and require both players to deploy symmetrically. Same pieces, same board, same deployment, just like Chess.

## **Imbalance and 40k**

In order for player decisions to have meaning and for 40k to have depth, 40k needs to be an imbalanced game. For player decisions to be meaningful, those decisions must have a meaningful impact on the outcome of a game, and different power levels of units and combinations of units are required to make said meaningful impact.

This is something that most 40k players understand intuitively. In a balanced game, a player could show up with any combination of units and (assuming player skill, luck, etc. were the same) they would have an equal chance of winning as a person bringing any other combination of units. I could show up with an army of nothing but cultists brandishing pistols and knives, and you could show up to a game with nothing but heavy tanks festooned with machine guns and flamethrowers, and we'd both have an

equal chance of winning.

Is that what 40k players want? No. We think that the cultist player SHOULD LOSE to the tank player, and that a balanced game here would be a worse game. Not only would it feel unintuitive and wrong for the cultist player to win, but it would be painfully obvious that a player's choice in what units they brought to the table wouldn't matter any more than picking the shoe or the iron in Monopoly. In order for those decisions to have meaning, they need to have an impact on the outcome of the game (as in, the tank player should win), and the impact on the outcome of the game requires different power levels. A combination of units that's just cultists has to be weaker than a combination of units that's just tanks and flamethrowers in order for the decision to take an army of cultists or an army of tanks (or any combination of anything) to have meaning. Stronger and weaker combinations biasing one player towards victory is the very definition of an imbalanced game.

One could argue that different armies would still play in different ways even if they had equal chances of success. We run into the same problem as above, though, as it means that any random style would be just as likely to win the same as any random combination of units would be just as likely to win. Either sitting back and killing stuff with heavy weapons or rushing forward on bikes and killing stuff with special weapons needs to have a difference in power level, or else it will have the same impact on the game as the iron vs. shoe choice, which is to say that it's a meaningless choice. You wouldn't actually HAVE different armies if the armies were equal. They would be different only in aesthetic.

But if we strip away these meaningful player choices (and thus make the game shallower) that doesn't mean there are NO decisions for a player to make. For example, a Chess player can still choose which pieces to move in which order. It does still make the game shallower, though. And to what end? Balancing the game by controlling for other variables like depth would make the game more determined by those things you're not

controlling for. Strategizers would be quick to note that a more balanced game would mean that a game would be more influenced by player skill, and would be more of a strategy game. But we already know from the last chapter that 40k isn't a strategy game, given that player skill is just manipulating odds. Do we really want a game that is shallow just to allow a certain group of players to play more precise odds than they could before?

No. The reason that you have a game with such staggering complexity (compare the rules of 40k to the rules of Chess) is so that you can have a game that's deep, and have plenty of inroads for meaningful player decisions. 40k isn't meant to be Yahtzee with miniatures. If someone wanted to play Yahtzee, then they could just play Yahtzee - it would be much cheaper and easier. Alternately, no matter how imbalanced the game is, two players can always make the game balanced by making it symmetrical. There's no reason to take so much away from everybody else just to achieve an end that players are already capable of creating.

If one complained that "I want to be able to have an equal chance at winning with a different army, rather than a mirror match", then we run right back into the problem that armies that have the same chance of winning aren't actually different. They just look different on the outside. Hardly worth ruining 40k over.

## Conclusion

People are drawn to 40k for its depth and wealth of meaningful player decisions. Players like that they're able to choose which pieces they put on the table, and how they put them down on it (unlike Chess). People like to come up with combinations, and have that diversity be meaningful. Even hardcore Strategizers are drawn to 40k for this reason (otherwise, they'd just play Chess).

This depth, though, comes in direct proportion to how imbalanced 40k is. Put another way, 40k needs imbalance to be 40k.

We can argue about how much imbalance there should be ("I think that every army should have

two "different" armies of equal power level, instead of each army having its own unique power level", for example), but we must all come to the discussion understanding that 40k is imbalanced and should be imbalanced. Otherwise it would just be Chess, Monopoly, or Go with different looking pieces.

It is the specific ways in which 40k is imbalanced that makes it different than those other games. It's what makes 40k 40k.

## LIST BUILDING

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Fun is, of course, an extremely subjective thing, and so is having fun in 40k. That subjectivity, however, doesn't mean that there aren't common points that many people consider fun. As discussed in the last chapter, one of the things that binds together every 40k player is the idiosyncrasies of 40k - it's peculiar imbalances, rules, and rule interactions. After all, a person could play basically any miniatures game with 40k miniatures, but people choose play 40k with them (and sometimes use third party miniatures to play 40k, rather than the other way around).

Put another way, 40k is fun because of the depth of the game - all those little things, and the ways they interact with each other, and the way they're different. It is complex, which gives us space to explore things and use our intellect, and, in combination with all the little changes that happen over time to the game itself (new codices, etc.), keeps the game fresh. Even if you play the game a hundred times in a row against someone, there's still different terrain, unit combinations, die rolls, special rules, etc. that will make the next game as different from the previous game as from the first.

A 40k player isn't required to make use of this depth to the absolute maximum every game, of course, but this common factor does mean that any player by their actions should not take away their opponent's ability to take advantage of as much of this depth as they want. Making the game more shallow for someone else is against the point of playing 40k in the first place. If you want a game that is as shallow as Yahtzee or Chess, then go play Yahtzee or Chess. Don't hamper your opponent's ability to get more depth out of the game.

40k gives us the freedom to combine different things in meaningful and interesting ways, but it also gives us the freedom to destroy our opponent's ability to do the same. One of the most important things in 40k, then, is to not prevent your opponent from getting to do things in the way

that they want to.

The place where this starts is where a game of 40k itself starts - in the creation of army lists. It is possible to fix with good game play a list that was made badly, but an army list should ideally support, rather than hinder the game experience for both players. Before understanding what makes a good list, I will start with some things that are commonly referred to as bad lists, but aren't.

### List Tailoring

The biggest problem when talking about list tailoring is a lack of common definition for the term "list tailoring" itself, so allow me to provide one. You are making your list tailored whenever you give ANY thought WHATSOEVER to what the list is going to actually be played against.

If you are going to a tournament and you know that there will be a lot of MSU spam and you do ANYTHING with that piece of information (like, say, throw in some missile launchers or autocannons), you are list tailoring. If you know that there are a bunch of marine armies at your local store, and you use this information to have any impact on your list, you are list tailoring. If you know that you're going to play a game against a foot guard commander next game and that information has any impact on your list, you are list tailoring. We're talking about the whole spectrum here, from looking at your opponent's list and then making one to beat him to the knowledge that a certain army got a new codex recently, so you'll probably face off more against them.

Any list that isn't made inside of a pure hypothetical world, but rather uses any amount of information about real players and real armies you're actually likely to face off against is at least a partially tailored list.

If, then, basically all lists are tailored lists, then it's really a matter of HOW tailored do you make your

list. It's just negotiating the proverbial price now. If your stance is that some list tailoring is okay, and some list tailoring isn't, you're probably being a huge hypocrite.

But what's more important here is the effect of list tailoring. The effects, of course, are based on what the person does with this information, whether making a list that is stronger than an opponent's (because you can provide hard counters to the units you know he's bringing), or a list that is weaker (your opponent is a new player and you want to cut them some slack), or you can use list tailoring to try and as exactly as possible match the strength of your opponent's list. In any case, most list tailoring is really just a matter of adjusting list strength relative to your opponent.

But that makes list tailoring not a bad thing, per se. List tailoring doesn't allow you to do something that you couldn't have done before, it just makes it easier to do what you were wanting to do more accurately. It's what you choose to do with the extra information (and power) that is good or bad.

### **Spam Lists**

Spam lists are lists that bring lots of duplicates of a few kinds of units, rather than a more one-of-each approach to list building. There are many people who disapprove of spam lists, mostly because spam lists tend to be very strong lists. That is because most spam lists will pick the strongest unit in the codex and then bring as many copies of that unit as they can, and then they will move on to the next strongest unit and do likewise until the list is complete.

Once again, though, list strength in and of itself is neither a good or bad thing. Why is it necessarily bad if a person brings a strong list? This is often used as part of the complaint against 40k tournaments having lots of lists that look the same and spam the same few units, but once again that's the players choosing to have list strengths be roughly equal to each other (and if everyone is bringing lots of the same units, that task is easier), not anything wrong with 40k itself.

Aesthetically speaking, some people don't like spam lists (which is their opinion), and some don't think it fits with the background of 40k (which is wrong, as there are plenty of examples of armies that look more or less uniform). On the other side, some players like having the clean, simple, and regimented feel that comes from running spam lists, and like how they look on the table top (especially with horde armies). In any case, though, this is an aesthetic choice.

With spam lists, list tailoring, or any other way to more accurately make stronger or weaker lists, it's not the ability to make things exactly how you want them that's the problem (in fact, it's just a refinement of the freedom that makes 40k worth playing in the first place), but how players choose to use that power that is important.

### **Bad Lists**

As mentioned, a bad list is one wherein your opponent doesn't get to play the game in the way they want to play it. That is to say that your opponent's number of meaningful choices have been reduced (remembering that choices are only meaningful if they have an impact on the outcome of the game).

The most common way in which player choices are negated is when stuff is killed on the table top. Yes, it's a wargame and the point is to kill your opponent's army, but herein lies the problem. Let's say that I choose to include a unit in my army that is only useful in close combat. Let's also say that my opponent kills off the unit before it can get into its first assault. That unit in this game did nothing. The choice to bring it in the first place meaningless. Not to say that it did nothing - my opponent may have had to waste bullets on it, for example - but those things it did could have been done by ANY unit I would have chosen, so the choice to make a close combat unit is still invalidated.

As such, the desire of a player to "Kill my opponent's army before he makes it into close combat" is just as wrong as the idea that someone should be able to "Get into close combat and stay



there without my opponent ever getting to fire a shot." If you have built an army like this that exists to negate, in whole or part, portions of your opponent's army, then you are building a bad list.

This is the only place where list strength can get you in trouble. If your list is so strong relative to your opponent that you can nearly guarantee that your opponent won't really get to participate in the game, then you're building a list that's too strong. If you're constantly shutting down your opponent's ability to do stuff, it means you're going to have to make changes to the kinds of lists you field. Will it mean that you're less likely to win games?

Probably, but if the only point was to win as many games as possible, then you shouldn't play 40k at all, but instead just play several hundred rounds of rock-paper-scissors with your opponent instead. Even if what you want to do is win at 40k, you have to want to win WITH DEPTH, or else what you want is just to win, not to win at 40k. It would be better if you played some other game, and your opponent's found someone else to play 40k with, so they could actually play 40k.

## Gunlines

There are many ways to write a bad 40k list, but by far the most common way is by creating gunlines. Gunlines are armies that rely mostly on long-range shooting to do damage, and make very little use of the movement phase, whether it's having a static army with just a few small, fast, objective grabbers, or whether the whole army moves, but not very far (mech gunlines jostling vehicles around small distances to get better lanes of fire), or the limiting factor is time (the whole army moves, but not until the end of the game).

It's plain to see why gunlines are bad. As much as possible, they try to make it so that assault never, ever happens. They also try as much as possible to keep opponents' short-range shooting from doing anything either. They will likely also have other things like weapons with interceptor to cancel out the usefulness of deepstrikers, or ignores-cover weapons to cut those rules out of the game as well.

What gunlines do is two things. Firstly, they

prevent their opponent's decisions from having meaning (choosing deepstrikers, close combat units, etc.), and secondly they make the game much, much more shallow (cutting out the rules for close combat, cutting out the rules for the movement phase, etc.). What a gunline does is to just sit there, using as few rules as possible and just rolling dice to see how much of their opponent's stuff is left standing. This is the opposite of 40k. If a person wanted to just sit there and roll dice, they should feel free to start playing Yahtzee, rather than taking a deep game and ruining it by making it so shallow.

The worst part is that gunlines breed more gunlines. This is because gunlines exist to shut down anything but long-range shooting, which means if an opponent wants to be able to DO anything in a game, the only parts of their army that will be able to do said anything will be long-range shooters themselves. Thus if a person wants to do more, they will add more of the part that does anything, which means adding in more long-range shooting. This might not be true were it not for the fatal pairing of gunlines and list strength. Both for systemic reasons (those who hit hardest fastest gain a big advantage that snowballs over the course of the game), and for particular reasons (40k's "you go, I go", the rules for wound allocation and terrain, etc.), gunlines also happen to be the strongest form of army. This means that even if you try to counter gunlines with speed, say, you are still going to be playing a weaker list against a stronger list, and a gunline player can easily use this advantage to force you back into the mould.

This is a case of list strength giving a player power, and then the player using that power irresponsibly to force their opponents into a shallow game. It's not a matter of the gunline player "setting up a puzzle and letting their opponent solve it". It's a matter of the gunline player debasing their opponent's decisions while looking for the easiest way to win the game. It's not to say that there might be some theoretical way to play a list that's both a gunline and a good list, but practically, I've never seen anything even remotely close. If you like gunlines, then

unfortunately you like a way of playing 40k that makes games less like 40k. Perhaps another game would suit you better - one that doesn't suffer from being reduced to Yahtzee with miniatures.

## **Good Lists**

What makes a good list, then? A good list is one in which you take advantage of as much depth of the game as you want to without also spoiling your opponent's ability to get as much depth out of the game as they want to.

There are several ways of making a good list. One way is to add in more diversity to your list. This could mean bringing more different kinds of units yourself (some tanks, some infantry, some bikes, etc.) if you want more depth, or at least having units that do damage in different kinds of ways. Having an army of all long-range shooting creates problems, but if you have a list that does some of its killing in close combat, some with short range shooting, and some with long-range, then you're unlikely to have too much of any one kind of damage being dealt to be able to completely shut down your opponent.

Another big way of handling this is to bias your army towards units that don't have the ability to prevent your opponent from doing stuff. For example, drop those move-shoot-move units (that can hide behind line-of-sight blocking terrain, use the movement phase, shoot them, then move again behind cover, leaving their opponents unable to use shooting back against them or even charge), or barrage units that can attack at distance without being targeted. Instead, you can add in more units that are assault oriented. Assault units don't prevent your opponent from getting to shoot guns, as it usually takes a few turns to get into close combat, and your opponent can always shoot you in between attacking one unit and then another. Using faster units that need to get in close (rather than fast units that use their speed to always stay just out of range of their opponents while still being able to shoot back, which is bad) can also help this.

There are also other little ways. One of which is

using units that have more randomness, like bringing hit-and-kill-or-whiff-badly kinds of units. Another way is to just dial down the power of your lists, so that any mistakes you do make are writ smaller. Bring in units that increase your challenge level, or allow you to compete more to the best of your abilities without ruining things.

On top of this, too, there are non-list ways to help enforce depth, like playing missions that discourage just sitting around, and are more complex than just seeing who can kill the most stuff and then saunter onto objectives (unlike the 40k book missions). Bringing in more line-of-sight blocking terrain to disrupt gunlines, or playing in campaigns with comp restrictions. All of this is out of the scope of list building, though.

## **Conflicts of Depth**

All of this so far has been under the assumption that the main difference is in overall list strength and that both players are making lists that can take all comers. But there is a complexity that needs to be added - not only looking at things by strength, but also by type.

Say, for example, that a player only wants to take advantage of the depth of the game provided by the rules for infantry models, and doesn't want anything to do with vehicles. As such, they make an army list without vehicles, which is fine. But let's say that they then go on to not include any anti-tank weapons either. If you showed up with a mechanized army, and your opponent had nothing but small arms and flamethrowers, then the fact that you brought vehicles basically renders your opponent's army completely unable to do anything. A mech list may not shut down options against a player who brings a diversity of weapon types, but it is a bad list against this particular opponent.

Of course, the things above would help solve this problem (if you brought a hybrid list with some infantry and some vehicles, or if your opponent brought more diverse firepower). At the top, though, it was stated that a good list was one that allowed a player to play the depth that they want

without screwing up their opponents. In this case, there is a conflict between the players, much like between a gunline and anything that isn't a gunline. Both players could even bring very weak lists and still have this kind of conflict. It's rare that this kind of conflict is this stark (outside of gunlines), but it's still present.

Like in any other conflict between parties that have a great degree of freedom, there just isn't a substitute for communication. If both players agree on a framework of a specific depth of the game, then many of the problems can be averted. If both players, for example, want to play a super shallow Yahtzee with miniatures, then the lack of depth imposed on one player by the other won't matter, because both players are comfortable with the level of depth. The same is true for other conflicts. 40k being a social game, it naturally will include the kinds of conflicts and means of resolution that come up between people in other activities.

This necessity can be pre-empted, though, by being conscious of the kind of game experience you are providing in the first place. If you don't bring a list that forces the game to be shallow, you're unlikely to create problems of making the game too shallow for your opponents. It's the purpose to writing good lists in the first place.

## WHAT IS 40k?

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So far, there has been a lot written about what 40k is not. It's not a game conducive to winning being your only criteria for success. It's not a strategy game, or a real test of player skill. It's not a game where the game experience of your opponent is irrelevant. It's not Chess, Go, or Rock Paper Scissors. So what, then, is 40k?

### Faux Strategy

There is a class of games that 40k is similar to: the successor to book-end games. Avalon Hill made a lot of these in the 1980's and 1990's, and there's been a steady stream coming out of the Spiel Des Jahres for a couple of decades now. 40k is similar to games like Settlers of Catan, or Dominion on the one hand, or like Illuminati/Munchkin or anything Fantasy Flight is making on the other.

On the surface, these games look like strategy games because there is input for player choice, and a winner at the end. They're not really strategy games, of course, because there's no direct transmission between player choice and success or failure, and a person can make all the correct decisions and still lose, or make "bad" decisions and still win. Often what distinguishes players over the game is their mode of play. One tries the "chapel strategy" in Dominion, or plays an "aggro" deck in M:TG. It's the style of play and the way they attempt to win that's important, and is what really differentiates. Often these games (40k included) will have options that are incredibly strong, but also rely heavily on luck, so either win big or lose big.

In these games, it's the player input itself that is the purpose of the game. The way one sets up combos and links them together and tries to execute them. 40k is a clear example of this, what with its open-ended list building, and having different kinds of units that are of different power levels and play out in different ways. In a way, the only reason there is a winner, and that combinations have certain chances of success is to

distinguish it from being a straight-up sandbox game.

There are some key benefits to this kind of game (which is one of the reasons they're becoming ever-increasingly popular). Probably the biggest benefit is that you don't know who is going to win straight away. If you put me up against Kasparov, for example, I'm going to lose 100 out of 100 chess games I play against him. If there was a skill discrepancy with my local gaming group, the game would quickly fizzle out once we all found out who would beat who and you knew the result of the game before you even played it. There are some people that are willing to put up with years of losing a game before they can finally start to win, but that's a pretty tiny minority of people. Most people will just stop playing a game where the only point is to win, and they only ever lose.

Games like 40k, where skill is improving odds of success, strike a nice middle ground. On the one hand, serious players can still try to make tiny improvements in their game, but on the other hand, those improvements cease to really matter as you get more skilled, so you don't become more and more likely to more comprehensively crush new players the longer you play. On the other hand, new players can start out and with a little bit of help can get to a place where they're winning some of their games instead of it being a lop-sided slaughter where they don't really even get to do anything because they're killed too quickly. They still get to access 40k's depth, even against better players than themselves. People who want to win become slightly more likely to win, and people who just want to play the game still get to actually play the game.

The ability to cement this diversity together is what prevents 40k from becoming a stale strategy game that eventually nobody plays because they can just play chess, and it makes it so that new players aren't driven away en-masse, while at the same time being an actual game to provide some

formal structure and collective purpose for people who just want to screw around and have fun (because sandbox games can get boring without at least the pretense of an objective).

## **Role-Playing Game**

For some reason, most 40k players seem to miss this comparison, but it's pretty obvious once you see it. Models in 40k represent individual, possibly unique characters. They play in a 2-D environment that helps determine what they can and cannot do. Each model has a statline, including things like strength, dexterity (weapon skill), constitution (toughness), and wisdom (leadership), and they will be called on frequently to make die rolls based on those numbers to see what the result of their actions is. They also have equipment, and some can upgrade to take better equipment for a cost. Some can even take extra feats, talents, and proficiencies (like Eldar exach abilities, or the entire special rules section), and some can even cast spells (psychic powers). As the game plays out, things happen that affect them, and they make decisions and roll dice to see what happens. If you take a step back, building a 40k army as a whole is sort of like building a character for an RPG.

Literally the only thing missing is a GM (which 40k doesn't prohibit you from including), but otherwise 40k can easily be seen as a multi-character-per-person up-scaled version of D&D. Or, well, Dark Heresy rather.

When people take this framework and use it to only fight a battle to see who killed who and who is left standing, it debases the game in a similar way to how a dungeon crawl in D&D does. You're just rolling dice and killing stuff - sometimes in interesting ways, certainly - but we all know that dungeon crawling is one of the worst ways to play an RPG. In a way, most 40k games actually played are little better than grinding or gold farming in an MMORPG.

There is one very important similarity between RPGs and 40k, that is that the combination of all the complexity combined with die rolling causes crazy stuff to happen. I've played many a game of

40k myself, and I have dozens of stories I could tell of zany things happening, and anyone who has played RPGs enough likewise has a big pile of memories of quirks, goofiness, and outright bizarre situations with crazy endings. No one has stories about playing Go ("...and then I put one little white pebble here, and then another one there"), or Blackjack, or Cribbage. 40k, on the other hand, has endless stories of artillery accidentally landing where it shouldn't, or a lone guardsman bayoneting a whole squad of chaos marines, or an aircraft exploding in mid-air and everyone miraculously surviving unhurt.

The 40k rulebook itself heavily stresses that one of the main points of playing 40k is to "forge a narrative", which clearly its rules are designed to promote. The more that players treat the game like an RPG, the more like an RPG the game itself becomes, with all the attending benefits.

## **Beer & Pretzels**

40k notoriously describes itself as being a "beer and pretzels" game. That is, it's a game designed to facilitate having a fun time with friends. A social activity.

Put another way, 40k is designed to be a conduit through which adults can play. Graduate theses, books, and endless articles have been written about the importance of play to adults. Semi-structured, fun, social activities are a necessary component to a healthy brain and a happy life. We all need time to let our creativity out, and to engage in problem solving, and exploring, and building relationships by doing activities with others. Time to learn and just have fun. One could say that this is the entire point of playing games with others in the first place, but it certainly is the overarching purpose for 40k.

Everything from poor game balance letting us explore "what works" and "what doesn't" in an ever-changing set of circumstances, to wonky die rolls forcing us to be clever and use problem solving skills, to talking with other players to determine what kind of game you want to play and getting things set up. It's all for the purpose of

getting in some adult play time.

It's not to say you can't get this from other games, of course. Other games are also full, rich, and deep, and you can even get a social experience from a shallow game like Chess, but 40k seems to accept this task with gusto. Not only the game itself, but all of the things surrounding the game. There is the whole hobby aspect of the game that encourages us to hone skills and to be creative, and then to show off our work to everyone else. There is the fluff and literature side as well, and you're encouraged to make up a backstory to your army, and write battle reports that tell the story of the game to others, make fan art and fan fiction. Really get immersed in it all. Play.

### **Playing 40k**

And from this profound understanding of 40k, we can make the final step to the mystical tautology. 40k is a game, and the purpose of game is play. 40k is different from other games, so you're looking to 40k for all of those things that make the play experience the way it is (different from other games). In the end, the reason that a person plays 40k is to play 40k.

So, how do you play (problem solve, explore, be creative, etc.) while you're playing (moving pieces and rolling dice) 40k? Most of this is pretty intuitive. Open-ended list building and showing up with painted models before the game is a big part, as is sharing the experience afterward, but the play that happens in the game should come about with the playing of the game, which it largely does in 40k. If something of yours gets blown up, then you're given a challenge for how to achieve what you want without that killed unit (assuming, of course, you still can solve the problem and haven't, say, been nearly tabled). The differences in lists presents challenges, as does the discrepancy of power level between units and combinations of units. Probably the biggest inducer to play is the randomness of the die rolls themselves, causing players to think about new things in different ways than they had planned, and causing strange things to happen that pique our creativity.

Bringing a list that makes all of this more likely to happen helps, as does the way you move things on the table and the choices you make about the dice you're going to roll. You can play the game to take more advantage of its depth.

But the other side, as mentioned in the previous section, is also true. It is possible for you to bring a list and play it in such a way where it shuts down your opponent's options. It shuts down your opponent's ability to explore and create. To do things differently and to problem solve in interesting ways. It is possible to reduce the amount of play that your opponent gets from the game to little more than putting models down and then being forced to pick them back up again. To reduce their options to just rolling a few dice and watching as they game progresses along an easily-predictable route. It is possible for you to make a game of 40k the opposite of play for the person that you're playing with. It is possible to make 40k boring.

Which is exactly the opposite of the entire point of unpacking your minis and throwing down a game of 40k in the first place. Trying to prevent your opponent from getting to play the game (do stuff) while they're playing the game is the worst possible kind of behavior you can express, and the more you do it, the worse of a 40k player you are.

This explains a lot of the anger and annoyance that some players can get towards others, and why WAAC ("win at all costs") is considered a dirty word and an insult. It turns out that in a competitive game, it becomes easier to win the more you prevent your opponent from being able to do anything. It becomes easier to win when you show up with a gunline and remove half your opponent's army on the first turn before they even get to use it, and then much of the rest on turn 2, as it does when you just try and pick the strongest army possible. It becomes easier to win when you move-shoot-move by moving out from behind line of sight, shoot a bunch of weapons, and then disappear again, leaving your opponent not able to do anything. It becomes easier to win when you run a mech gunline and when your opponent closes towards you, you form up in a C-shape and

annihilate your opponent while slowly backing up. It becomes the easiest to win when you use the fewest rules as possible (so you're not playing the game as much by not taking advantage of as many rules), and when you prevent your opponent from getting to play (stop him from doing much of anything, if possible).

It is not impossible to play the game for the purpose of winning while also refusing to shut down your opponent's ability to play while playing 40k. Challenger personalities do it all the time. Without having a certain ethic, though, the desire to win fundamentally encourages you to stop playing the game and to affront the person you're playing with with the same.

If a person needs to stop trying to win in order to start playing 40k, then they need to stop trying to win, or stop playing (or, rather trying and failing to play) 40k.

Everything else, from talking about list power and player skill, to talking about game balance and die rolls is subservient to this basic principle. The whole point of talking about these things in the context of 40k is to talk about them in the context of 40k, not in the context of a debased 40k-like game that doesn't have the purpose of playing 40k as the purpose of playing 40k. There is no point in trying to make 40k into a game that it's not, or at least don't pretend that you're not making a new, slightly different game from the one you're purporting to talk about.

### **Good 40k Players**

And so we come to the end of what this entire essay is about. In the section on luck and skill, we learned that the purpose of player skill is to play the odds as accurately as you can. In the section on game balance, the conclusion was that imbalance is good because it gives you tools to play things in a specific way, and allows you to, as explained in the list building section, play an army with exactly the power level you want, which helps you play odds exactly the way you want. Along this whole set of ideas, there has been the idea that bringing weak or strong lists, or playing long or short odds

is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. Strength in this case is what gives you the power to do exactly what you want to do.

The power is there, but the responsibility ultimately rests in the player. The player can choose to prevent their opponents from ever getting into close combat, as best as he is able. The player can make choices in favor of making it more likely that they will win, even if it sacrifices both player's ability to have fun and play the game. This power only more or less clearly demonstrates the quality of a player's character, nothing less.

As such, what separates a good player from a bad player in the context of 40k isn't who wins the most games. Indeed, if a person is winning a big majority of the games they play, it's very likely that they're a very bad 40k player. No, a good player is a person who plays 40k the best, as it's intended to be played, and for its own sake, or for the sake of improving the lives of the people playing. Bad players, in turn, progressively have other, different priorities than playing 40k. Something other than making 40k a play experience in the particular way 40k creates a playing experience.

Most 40k players, of course, will be somewhere in between these two, having a sense of playing 40k, rather than some other game on the one hand, and bringing in foreign ideas of the value of the game (like winning, being a test of player skill, etc.) on the other. That does not abscond personal responsibility for making a worse gaming experience, nor does it imply that only some people are "worthy" to play the game. It just is. It can also, though, be an inspiration for us to be better players, and, as such, to be a source for good in action.





## APPENDICES

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The following concepts have come up in talking about 40k, but I didn't have a good way to fit them into the flow of the essay. These were already addressed indirectly in the main text, but I felt it might be helpful to address a few ideas more specifically.

### Appendix 1 - List Building as a Skill

I just wanted to make an extra note about the idea that list building is a skill. People correctly say that it takes skill to come up with new combinations of units which are strong, but it's more than that. On the one hand, it takes VERY little skill to copy a netlist from the internet. On the other, it takes a lot more skill to design a decently-powerful foot guard list. It takes a LOT more skill to design a fluffy 1ksons list and still get it to win a decent number of games.

Furthermore, it's not some crass mini-game. Some people (myself included) actually like making lists, and really take advantage of the creativity it offers. If you don't like making lists, or if you want to just copy a netlist, fine, but that doesn't mean that some people aren't enjoying it.

And it actually has a place in the greater scheme of things as well. If I feel like I'm winning too much compared to the people around me, then I SHOULD be able to have creativity in what units I bring to the table so that I can self-regulate and bring a more challenging list to counter having less challenging opponents.

Being able to craft exactly the list you want with exactly the units you want to play the exact way you want to at exactly the power level you want is absolutely most definitely a skill.

It's nearly an art form.

### Appendix 2 - Points Don't Balance

Some people have stated that the purpose of having units have a points value is to balance the game. Is it?

If GW really intended for this to be true, then we wouldn't have unit size or number restrictions, and we wouldn't have a force organization chart, and we wouldn't have the codex system.

Furthermore, the rulebook itself doesn't even promise that equal point armies are equal in quality - the only explicit purpose to the points limit that they mention is that it will determine how long it takes to play the game.

Even if the point of points was to be one small part in making armies of equal power, then it's still made a mockery of by the rest of it. If I show up to a 1,000 point game with nothing but grots, am I likely to win? No. Does that mean that grots are too expensive, points-wise? No. It's also a bad system because of synergy and being able to take things in combination with each other. For a basic example, markerlights are a lot less useful in an army full of kroot than they are in an army full of broadsides or riptides, yet GW is stuck giving markerlights a single points cost, and the players either overpay or underpay depending on what other units they take.

And you can find this everywhere in the game, from the cost of orders rolled into a CCS being very different whether you're playing foot or mech guard, to the cost of an icarus lascannon being set despite how many airplanes your opponents bring, to how the cost of things are complicated by allies (did they price azrael's 4++ with regard to what he could do with all of the units he could ally with? Highly unlikely).

Pricing something based not on its own qualities, but also based on every possible combination of units is insane, and that insanity only increases by an order of magnitude once we start talking about allies. In reality, they make a good guess about how much something would cost, and then it's the

players who find combinations that GW didn't think about that make a unit worth more or less than its points cost.

Points only start to work as a balancer the more that things are controlled for. If you're talking about units within a single codex, and that have a limited number or limited combinations (you must take a certain unit to unlock others, etc.), then they start to work better. As it is, GW is going in the opposite direction, which is why points costs, even if they were accurate, are doing a progressively worse and worse job of acting as a balancer.

### **Appendix 3 - That Unit is Worthless!**

This comes up a lot in conversations. Something being weak or downright worthless, and that's a bad thing.

Grots, for example, do have a place in an ork list. So do pyrovores in a tyrannid list, despite being "so weak no one should take them". There are no units in the entire game where there is no reason whatsoever to take them.

Reasons to take something are limited only by a person's creativity. I could take a low-power unit because I like the models. I could take one because I like the fluff. I could take one because I like how it jives with my play style. There's no end of reasons. People who say that there is no reason to take something are either lying, or are in desperate need of a little creativity, but in either case, it's the PEOPLE not the game that's at fault here.

What people are really saying behind these complaints is that a person should be able to take what they want AND WIN. That's a big difference, and it's also a much more narrow definition of what we're talking about, here. Plus, it seems more than a little strange. If a noob takes a bunch of heavy bolters and doesn't have enough anti-tank, and is sick of losing games, we tell him "well tough, get some anti-tank", but when a noob takes a bunch of pyrovores and doesn't have enough of other things, and is sick of losing games, we're supposed to say "Yeah, it's not your fault, 40k is a broken game".

A person building a low-power list should lose games more frequently against stronger lists. That's how 40k should work. The only way to get around this is to make it so that there ARE no low-power lists, which is how we get to the "all armies are the same" and "player choice is meaningless" things.

Also, people seem to be falling into the all-or-nothing camp. If a unit isn't quite as strong as another unit that does the same thing, then it's worthless. If you include even one low-power unit in your army, then you're just going to lose, because your list is worthless. It's almost like people are forgetting that we play a dice game, and that it's a game that has no player skill whatsoever. 40k isn't a game where you show up with your lists and by looking at the strength of them, see who wins without actually playing. Weaker lists beat stronger lists all the time thanks to good luck and better player skill.

And that's a good thing.

If you take off your "winning is the only thing that matter" goggles for a moment, why does it matter that any unit isn't as good as other units in a codex? Because some units are stronger than others, player skill no longer matters? Because some units are stronger than others, 40k is no longer a game whose outcome is determined by die rolls?

### **Appendix 4 - Alternative Player Types**

I also wanted to take a moment to talk about another way of characterising 40k players other than the one presented in the essay. This uses the lens of the Bartle method.

Killers - There are certainly these kinds of players in 40k. It's not just a desire to remove your opponent's pieces from the board - this is a wargame after all - but rather the desire to hurt the player. Proper griefing. These players will likely demand that you allow use of their expansion rule sets (especially if you're not taking advantage of them yourself), and will find ways to abuse

loopholes in rule interactions, and then denigrate everyone else as fluff-bunnies or casual-play-Nazis if anyone complains (they denigrate players off the table as well as on). They exist to win the game, but moreover to win as comprehensive as possible. To prevent you from doing as much as possible, and to just sit there complacently while he rolls dice and removes your miniatures from the table. You are there just to make him look good. These kinds of players are the scourge of many game and online community, and 40k is no more immune to their trolling than others.

Of course, the opposite side, that of "helpers" also exists plenty. One doesn't have to go further than a 40k forum to see people giving advice to others, and not just for their own benefit (appearing to look smart), but out of a genuine desire to be helpful.

Achievers - This comprises the bulk of "serious" 40k players. The point is to rack up as many wins as possible, with or without qualifications (such as winning while starting on a level playing field with their opponent). This type naturally has a love-hate relationship with 40k. The game offers a lot of chances to achieve things, but then seemingly purposely thwarts them with game imbalance and the random mechanic of the die rolls sometimes making things not work for them (failing to achieve a win just because of a few bad die rolls, for example).

They will also tend to search in vain for meaning from ranking methods like tournaments, or some other way of quantifying their increase in player skill. Unfortunately, 40k is very badly set up for this kind of player to find long-term fulfillment. Give it three months or three years, eventually this kind of player will flame out, likely an an apocalyptic blast of nerdrage over how "broken" 40k is in the process.

Socializers - Like with most games, the barrier of exclusion is pretty high with 40k. The game is a social game, which means, rather by definition, socializers are going to like 40k. Plus, there's all those internet forums and chat rooms where you get to talk about stuff. 40k is rich with material to converse about.

Explorers - 40k is a magical candyland for explorers. There is a HUGE number of units and options, and there are practically infinite number of ways in which you can combine it all. Endless finding out what works and what doesn't, and how well things work compared to other things, and different styles and modes and options. The best part is that the game slowly changes over time, which means even if it could, somehow, become stale, it doesn't because you get to re-think about things and re-work stuff over time. They are the most in-sync with the purpose of the game.

The only problem explorers will have is when other players do things to destroy their ability to explore and do things, and try things out.

I'd also like to make a passing note about the player styles in the essay. The way it is written is similar to the "five stages of a hunter" (clearly this must have been rattling around in the back of my mind when I wrote this). What is interesting is that among hunters, it is seen as a progression. If we applied it to 40k, then there would be the assumption that a person grows out of just wanting to win games, and then grows out of wanting to win the most prestigious games, etc. I've seen a very faint following to this idea, but it's not very wide-spread. Perhaps because 40k hasn't been around long enough (or because there aren't many people who are both hunters and hang out on 40k forums, perhaps).