

Shadow War Armageddon might be the perfect fun hammer game.

Chapter Approved podcast Episode 13, April 25, 2017

You're listening to Chapter Approved, and I'm your host, Tibbs!

This week, I want to talk about something really exciting going on in my gaming group. In fact it seems to be taking the hobby world by storm right now.

Shadow War Armageddon has everyone scrambling to put together a kill team, and there's a chance we might actually get to play a game at some point!

In case you're not too familiar with it yet, Shadow War Armageddon is a standalone boxed game, chock full of brand-new terrain that works perfectly with the Sector Mechanicus pieces like promethium relay pipes, haemotrope reactors and the like. The terrain is intended to be both modular and much more vertical than we're used to seeing in 40K. Think lots of platforms, ladders, walkways and gantries and you're on the right track. If this sounds familiar, you're probably old and remember Necromunda. In fact, this is almost the exact ruleset from that game, with only minor updates. And that, my friends, is a very good thing.

The box comes with space marine scouts and ork boyz kill teams, both from the existing model ranges so nothing new there. It's nice to get little starter forces if you don't collect those armies, and seriously who doesn't need more scouts or boyz if you do. I don't know why I'm bothering to mention the box contents, though, since it sold out in record

time with no reprint, apparently. Of course, they said that about Space Hulk before and that turned out to be not very true, so maybe some day... But, the book is on preorder and will be out soon, so everyone can enjoy this game. And enjoy it, you should. It looks fantastic.

It's possible Shadow War might be the best funhammer game to come out in years. Blood Bowl is up there, but this one is 40K so it automatically gets a leg up in my book. So what is it about this game that's so energizing to old geezers and new players alike? I think it's a few things, all working together to create a sort of perfect storm.

First, it's skirmish-level so it's easy to get into. Most teams run from as little as three to 15 individual fighters, plus specialist models here and there. These days I don't really have the money to think about buying and collecting an entirely new army, with all the heavy investing of time and money that comes with that. In this game, you don't have to! That means you can entertain every wild idea you had for a side project you knew you'd never do. Or you could test out a painting scheme or style that's really different from your usual fare if you want a little break. In my case that means lots of drybrushing and washes, but I'll get to that later.

You can also afford to spend a lot of time and energy modeling each fighter, adding the sort of character you're used to seeing in roleplaying games. The game, by the rules, requires you to build them WYSIWYG, but I doubt most casual groups will hold fellow members to that with the sheer amount of kit you can add to each model. Since you can add extra equipment, buy new guns, etc. it might be a good idea to mess with magnets or use a weak superglue so you can make changes later. That's kind of a fun thing in and of itself.

For some modelers, the thought of building, say, a Tau pathfinder with a rail rifle, laser sight, photo visor and extra ammo is really appealing and might be something they've wanted to do for ages. Now they have a reason to do it besides just looking cool. Of course, characters CAN die so maybe don't get too attached?

Some people are just excited to use their existing models models or army in a fresh, new way. Maybe there's a unit or model you love but usually don't bother adding to your 40K army. Could be underpowered or you just don't have room in the allotted points. Or maybe you want an excuse to use all your extra leftover bits to create a few special-ops style models that will work for both regular games of 40K and Shadow War. There are some factions that work really well for this. Oh, most of the 40K factions are represented here in one form or another. Marines, for example, are mostly scouts but they can bring in power armor and even terminator armor on a game-by-game basis.

Most of the kill teams are based on the standard troops from the army, but not all. Chances are pretty good that if you do play them, you'll have what you need, though. Maybe not everyone has the right weapon loadouts but that's half the fun of Shadow War. Giving the 'wrong' weapon to a trooper can be a really fun kitbash to accomplish. Or even just a set of weapons that would be impossible or simply goofy in 40K.

The decision to use standard 40K models in this game, instead of the gangs from Necromunda, was a pretty brilliant move for GW. They've been cashing in on this with deals and bundles for troops and the various 'specialists' for the factions. Since you really only need one box, typically, it's quite cheap to get into the game. And then, surprise surprise, it's pretty easy to start a new army that might ally with your other 40K stuff, or use the troops to form the seed of a brand new

project. Smart marketing for GW, and lots of fun for us! I've heard a few new players sort of groan about the fact you need to really invest in a lot of stuff to play a proper 40K game these days, so this would be perfect for someone who's interested but wants to get stuck in with their shiny new models right away.

Of course, using standard 40K models means they didn't use this opportunity to update the old Necromunda gangs, which brings me to my next point.

People. Loved. Necromunda. I shouldn't even make this past-tense because people are still playing it, or using variant house-rules like Inquisimunda, to this very day. Many of these players haven't seemed to mind not updating the models because they either already have them or like kit-bashing their own. Lots of folks, myself included, have very fond memories of Necromunda from back in the day. That and Blood Bowl were the two specialist games that got the most play for me, so I was excited about this release from day one. There's just something very personal about it.

Shadow War brings RPG elements to 40K in a way that Kill Team never could. Campaigns are the standard mode, not shoehorned in as an afterthought. The missions are designed to pit the teams against each other, whilst also giving you an opportunity to grow and advance your loot and fighters little by little. It looks like there's some decent variety, and you could think of these like Maelstrom missions in the sense you're trying to achieve a certain goal. The difference is the results will have lasting effects, even in very small-scale games.

You only 'buy' your team with traditional points once in the beginning. After that, you can trade weapons and equipment, buy more, recruit new

fighters and all that between games. You can also get permanent bonuses from hard-learned experiences or penalties from grievous injuries. It's a very cool way to play, and it means achieving that one objective could be the key to getting some vital fresh blood in your team to replace your losses, or give you the opportunity to recruit a devastating specialist and exact revenge on a hated rival. Sometimes, in this game, dead means really dead. There are special rules for what happens when you lose your leader. It all adds up to a really dynamic campaign, with no special fiddling around with extra story modes unless you want to. Really, the stories sort of write themselves, though.

Each new game creates fun situations and micro narratives, so rivalries and 'stories for the grandkids' can and do come from every single game played. I don't really recall ever having a boring game of Necromunda. The sense of tension and threat is real, because every dice roll matters. You really feel the loss of every single member of your team.

That tight-knit strategic, narrative focus packed into a fast-playing game that's based around campaigns has the potential to make this the perfect game for casual-hardcore gamers. Add the upgrading, rearming and recruiting elements of the after-game and you've got a recipe for a very rewarding experience. This is a game I can see myself playing for years, if my buddies stay into it. I hope it's not a fad, because I'm really digging everything I've seen about it so far. The fact we can pack multiple games in an evening or get together for a quick game sure doesn't hurt.

The accessibility of skirmish games has been noted by tons of game companies. It seems like they're popping up all over the place, including GW's own Kill Team ruleset for 40K. I think people are realizing there's a lot of tactical gameplay and fun, cinematic storylines you can cram

into a smaller scale, all while taking much less time to play, and less commitment to collect and build your forces, as noted earlier. There will always be a place for big, epic battles, but people just seem into the small scale stuff sometimes. It's certainly a refreshing break, anyway.

Games that take about as long as a serious board game seem much more suitable for people in my gaming group. Lots of us have family and work commitments like crazy. Building a list, packing a big-old army and all the stuff you need to play and hauling it to your buddy's house, then actually setting up and playing a 3-hour game can eat an entire weekend day, and is almost impossible to pull off on a weeknight when people have to wake up early or put the kids to bed. By contrast, grabbing a persistent team and bringing just that, and maybe one book, for a quick one-hour gaming session seems infinitely more doable. The fact there's no list-building means you can pull off the rare "Hey man, I've got a couple free hours. Can anyone play a quick game?"

And that growing team truly is one of the most appealing things about Shadow War. You get attached to them. The focus on roleplaying-style progression makes it really feel like this is MY team. I love creating models that have a sense of personality, and then trying to push them into different specialties with skills and stat line boosts. Like right now I have the really stealthy model, even though they don't have the special rules to back it up yet. YET. The fact your team changes from one mission to the next is really cool, and will make for nice organic growth that fuels a sense of achievement that I think is quite different from painting an army or winning a tournament. I've already seen social posts about people recruiting a new member and getting super excited to create the model to go with it. That fresh blood really feels like it.

I tend to approach every game like it's a roleplaying game, and the

potential for storytelling in Shadow War is too good to pass up. We've all had those epic moments in games that somehow become an inside joke that still seems funny months later, or a rivalry born of bitter engagements over years. This game, with its shorter playtime and the very nature of named individual fighters encourages those kinds of connections.

Again, it's almost the perfect game for gamers like me who are looking for something that's sort of fun and quick but still hardcore in its own way. I can easily imagine a fun weekend with a few buddies getting together and running a full campaign in just a couple of days. In fact, I've already shifted most of my hobby production and focus to the gang and some terrain to do just such a thing.

My idea is to finally get around to that Genestealer Cult I've been thinking about. I've started bashing together models from the Deathwatch Overkill box with some chaos cultists to build some variety. I bought the Genestealer Cults codex and reread the original fluff from the RT-era Compilation book to inspire me, and it certainly got the gears turning. I favor a sort of mix of the detailed older fluff with the streamlined newer stuff, like specific cults with their own gang colors and marking. The scheme and story of the Pauper Princes spoke to me with their communist overtones. I love the idea of a cult being very self-righteous about their rebellion. Hell, the imperium is a terrible place and civilians have good reason to rise up. I set about looking up civilians that formed fighting forces in our recent history.

After running into the Home Army, from World War II in Poland, I knew I was on to something. I collected a set of Polish names and ran them through a bullshitter to make them a little less on-the-nose. I decided I'd like a mix of men and women, and some different ethnicities

as well. This is the very definition of a motley group of average citizens who couldn't take it anymore. I love the idea that they're extremely tight-knit like a real family, almost clannish and all comrades at heart after busting their asses in the trenches together. At least, that's how they see themselves. In reality they're enthralled to the cult, hypnotized and brainwashed. This is very old-fluff where you could even have non-hybrids who were blood-related to the strain, and were under the hypnotic spell of the stealers. I love the old family picture of the proud parents of a purestrain genestealer, seating uncomfortably between them and posing for a nice picture. There was a little animated thing on Warhammer TV this time around that showed how the cult sees the babies as little innocent children that must be protected, and there's a brief flash of a tiny genestealer with big claws and fangs.

It's a neat idea, and in their mind they really believe they're fighting the good fight, protecting their own kinsmen from tyranny and oppression. My kill team includes a married couple as well as a father-daughter duo. As the gang changes and grows I'm sure the connections will only deepen.

The cult also gives me the chance to do some things with my painting style that I don't normally mess with. Having paint space marines for so long, I haven't been able to really drybrush in years. I get to a little bit with my Skitaari, but still not very much. The genestealer models are different, though. They're not military. Their equipment was probably dirty and worn before they even started fighting. That means I can get sloppy and dirty. I'm going heavy on drybrushing and washes. Part of this is to save some time, but also I actually like the way it looks. I want the colors to run together a little bit. When you look up pictures of urban fighters in world war 2, everything has the same sort of drab, dusty look

to it. That's kind of what I'm shooting for here. The Pauper Princes use a pretty bright red and a sort of creamy off-white, so I'm going for that, but then dirtied way up. A deeper, browner red and a filthy, stained bone-white along with some neutral grays and browns.

One nice thing about painting for Shadow War is not having to worry about sticking with a very narrow color palette. Feel like picking out that trinket in shiny brass? Go for it! Want to paint a little sash tied around that ladies arm bright yellow? Fuck it. Why not? In fact, these little details will only enhance the uniqueness of each model and make them easier to identify while you're playing.

So go crazy with an airbrush if you like. Play around with weathering. Whatever you want to do, it should be easy to pull off on just a dozen models so why not have a good time with it.

Coming up with a theme like this makes it all feel much more interesting than a generic game of 40K or even Kill Team. Yes, I love to create back stories for my models, but usually not in so much detail. If one of these characters dies, it will bite much more keenly than just pulling members of a tactical squad off the table.

In addition to the models, I've also been really thinking about terrain for these games. The theme I have worked out for my 40K table (which doesn't exist yet) is all about a burned village and old ruins. Shadow War has a strong focus on vertical elements, and the idea is to represent the sprawl of a hive city. In my case, I want to retain these vertical elements but create a sort of shanty town slum, with remnants of old industry taken over by the poor and desperate masses. We're talking tin-roof and plastic tarp, trash piles, empty silos and machinery, and squalid hovels. This should be fun to make, and more importantly should be

great for getting ladders, bridges and the like into the game to add to the madness of it. I'll also be basing my Shadow War models differently than my usual as I don't plan to mix and match them.

Hopefully soon I'll be able to get some games in, but I've already been really encouraged by what I've heard online. People seem to be enjoying it for all the reasons I'm excited about. Hopefully soon I'll be telling you how our gaming group is getting on with it.

Now, there's something else really exciting going on in the community and I feel like I need to mention it... I've seen a ton of chatter about 8th Edition 40K, but not much of it has focused on funhammer or casual gamers like myself.

By now everyone's seen the recent FAQ and posts on Warhammer Community about the new iteration of 40K. It's got me excited because they're finally bringing in the Age of Sigmar-style three ways to play. Straight up just-for-fun and narrative games for people like myself, and matched play games like those you normally play for competitive types. Splitting the three categories out means they can make adjustments to each one without upsetting the two, and I love that idea.

Basically, by making a category for narrative games they're able to have a special set of rules and a 'looser' point structure for people who care less about having a perfectly matched game, and more about having a good time. That's basically my style in a nutshell. I'm not saying I'll never play with the more complex rules system, but everything I've seen so far makes me think I'll enjoy the other two modes much better.

I think the division in the community is a real one, and I've felt a bit like I was being pushed into a more and more well-defined and complex ruleset as the designers and tournament organizers tried to balance the

game out. I'm not saying balance is bad, but the power creep as each army tried to get ahead of the rest was a bit silly sometimes. As long as each faction still has a unique flavor, I'm down for just about any kind of change.

Having played for ages, I also remember some of these things from way back in 2nd Edition, like armor save modifiers and movement characteristics. I think they help make things feel a little more unique, since Orks shouldn't be as fast as Eldar, for instance, so I want to see more about that.

Mostly, I want to see how campaigns or narrative games work. If the whole game runs much faster, as they say it does, again this will help alleviate some of the issues we've had trying to squeeze games into our busy schedule.

As far as I'm concerned, I've loved everything GW has done over the last couple years. It's great to see the timeline moving forward and forecasting some of the changes Gathering Storm set up. The new galactic map with a massive warp rift looks terrible, for starters. Speaking of starters...

They mentioned a new boxed set which means new models! Dark Vengeance has been great for kit bashers, as have the other boxes that came before. Even though they're often faction-specific, they're almost always worth buying! I've purchased all but I think two of the boxes for 40K over the years. How can you turn down such a great deal. There's even been talk of a brand-new faction available at launch. It's not clear if that means in the box, or just alongside, nor whether it's truly new like Hrud or something like the Death Guard update that we know is coming, though that's rumored to be later on this year. Just getting new models is

always fun, but getting NEW new models is even better. Some people have been sharing around a leaked pic of some marines that look a little bigger, so maybe that really is happening?

Change is coming, whether we like it or not. Yes, this new ruleset will invalidate codexes, but I think a lot of us realize this really needs to happen to move on. Anything less is just a patch to shore up a system that's collapsing under its own weight. While it's never fun to consider reinvesting, if it means the sorts of changes they've been talking about already I'm more than happy to make the transition. I would love it if they went full Age of Sigmar with the rules, but that doesn't seem to be the case. It's more like the mini-codex rules of days past, with real army books coming later on. Now that GW owns their own soft back print shop somewhere, though, they can produce books faster and cheaper than ever. Age of Sigmar has also showed us that, and I do think that's something we can probably expect.

I guess that's about all I've got to say on the topic today, so I'll cut it off a little early and leave you with this thought for the day: If a job's worth doing, it's worth dying for!