

Lead fantasies

The making, meaning and materiality of miniatures

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Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss the pastime of what we call *miniaturing*, or engaging with miniature figures (see Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2020). It is formed around a dual core or organized activities around crafting (e.g. painting and modifying miniatures) and gaming, although storytelling, collecting, socializing and appreciating also feature. Miniaturing is not just gaming with miniatures but instead encompasses the wide range of activities in the pastime, including gaming. As implied by the name of the pastime, it pivots around the material miniature figurine. However, miniaturists have different orientations towards miniatures, which both overlap and conflict with each other.

In the context of this chapter, we define miniatures as scaled-down metal or plastic representations of historical and fictional characters, creatures and objects, typically used for gaming and display purposes. They are usually either single-part or otherwise non-poseable after construction. Miniatures come in different sizes, also referred to as scales, usually using the height of a typical humanoid character in millimetres for reference. Common sizes for gaming are 10 mm, 15 mm and especially the loosely defined 28–32 mm bracket, while larger sizes such as 54 mm and 75 mm typically find more use as display pieces.

Miniaturing is a particularly material pastime. Enthusiasts collect miniatures and their components, construct and paint them and use them for building dioramas. Miniatures are used as tokens in fantasy and historical gaming, displayed in glass cabinets and shared online as pictures, and stored – sometimes in purpose-built cases, sometimes in generic storage boxes. The unpainted miniatures are raw material, a valued treasure, but sometimes also a ‘pile of

shame' of excessive consumption and stalled projects (Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2022).

The pastime features a constant interplay of the material and the immaterial: the miniature serves as a focus for activities, and the activities contextualize the miniature. Stories about games are told and written, miniatures are customized to correspond to narratives, and specific miniatures inspire creation of fiction. Other hobbyists' miniatures, photographs, dioramas and stories are appreciated, and many enthusiasts engage with a broader transmedia landscape (see Keidl 2018), for example playing digital games or reading books that expand the universe of their miniatures.

In this chapter, we explore miniaturizing, paying particular attention to the tangible miniature and the activities, material implements and spaces surrounding it. We ground our chapter in a thematic analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses by adult Finnish miniaturists, which we further discuss in the light of Heljakka's (2020) framework that explores the physical, functional, fictional and affective dimensions of object play.

Background

Although the roots of modern-day miniaturizing can be traced back to the eighteenth-century *Kriegsspiel* tradition and the incorporation of tin soldiers in wargames during the nineteenth century, a more relevant anchoring point for the respondents in this study is the emergence of fantasy role-playing games from historical miniature wargames in the 1970s, leading to the release of the miniature gaming ruleset *Warhammer: The Mass Combat Fantasy Role-playing Game*, designed by Bryan Ansell, Richard Halliwell and Rick Priestley in 1983 (Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2020; see also Hyde 2013; Livingstone 1983). Since then, miniaturizing has grown massively both in variety and commercially, and there are now hundreds of manufacturers and rulesets available.

Miniaturizing has received limited research attention, with studies primarily focusing on the gaming aspect instead of the pastime more broadly (see Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2020). However, because of the overlapping and interlinked activities (e.g. Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2014), including gaming, inherent in miniaturizing, these previous studies also provide us with important insight into the pastime more generally.

A unifying thread in the existing research is the blending and weaving together of a variety of activities and approaches, happening on both the broader

level of the pastime and inside individual aspects, such as gaming (Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2014). Another blending together is that of different media, for example digital adaptations of miniature games (Kankainen 2016), the sharing of miniature photos online (Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2020) and linking miniatures to broader transmedial wholes (Booth 2015; Keidl 2018). Miniaturizing is a diverse pastime, and people engage in it for many different reasons (Körner and Schütz 2021; Körner, Kammerhoff and Schütz 2021).

Materiality is central to miniaturizing, as the pastime revolves around the physical miniatures and their different uses, from crafting to gaming and from doll play to storytelling. These partially overlapping activities are culturally framed in ways that create tension. While framings of miniaturizing, for example, gaming, play or crafting, can render parts of the pastime legible, they are not fully shared between participants. The competing framings have different cultural valuation attached to them. For example, seeing miniaturizing as toy play is particularly contested.

Revolving around physical miniatures, specialized tools and gaming rulesets, miniaturizing is highly commercial. Games Workshop, currently the dominant force in miniaturizing owning the global *Warhammer* brand (see Cova, Pace and Park 2007), is a publicly listed company with a revenue of £353.2 million in 2021 (Games Workshop Group 2021), while Reaper Miniatures' hugely successful Kickstarter campaigns for their Bones line of plastic miniatures have each drawn millions of US dollars in crowdfunding (e.g. Kickstarter 2021). Although miniatures can be bought second-hand and modern manufacturing processes allow for a cheaper product, miniaturizing can be an expensive hobby, its cost limiting participation (Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2014).

Miniatures are brought to life not only by industry producers but also by productive enthusiasts – hobbyists, gamers and players. Traditional tools, such as paint brushes, knives and files are used to paint and customize miniatures, while modern technologies allow digital sculpting and 3D printing of new miniatures. The emergence of so-called maker cultures connects miniaturizing to the broader whole of material-digital toy cultures. Just like adult toy enthusiasts are interested in dolls and action figures, players of all ages express an interest in crafting and tinkering with miniatures, customizing industrially produced toys, then employing them as part of visual, photographed displays and finally sharing the photography online. In this way, users become makers whose activities manifest through material creativity and related skill-building practices and link to online communities (Heljakka 2015; Heljakka and Harviainen 2019). This aesthetic dimension of miniatures relates to perceptions of them not only as

playthings suitable for game play but also as (art)works demanding investments of time, space and dedication from their users. Miniatures are valued because of their materiality and visuality, both contributing to their functionality: their playability and their use as decorative items.

Method and data

This chapter explores miniaturizing through data collected in 2019 using a qualitative Finnish language online questionnaire with seven open questions and six demographic questions. The questionnaire was distributed on social media (Facebook groups, hobby forums, Twitter), resulting in a total of 127 answers.

Previous studies (Körner and Schütz 2021; Singleton 2021) have suggested that most people engaging in miniaturizing are men. This is echoed in our data, as only 7.9 per cent ($N = 10$) of the respondents identified as women, while 91.3 per cent ($N = 116$) identified as men and one participant (0.8 per cent) did not disclose the information. The minimum age for participation was 18, and respondent age ranged from 18 to 56, with a mean of 35.7 and a median of 35. Respondents reported a broad range of starting years for miniaturizing, from 1970 to 2018. The median year was 1998, suggesting a sample with plenty of experience of the pastime, even taking into account the long breaks that many respondents reported. This expert knowledge contributed to a rich data set with long and detailed answers from many of the respondents.

The data were explored using thematic analysis, a flexible method to systematically identify and organize qualitative data into patterns of meaning or themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). We conducted our analysis primarily on the semantic level, focusing on what the respondents explicitly wrote, instead of exploring the underlying assumptions and ideologies informing their responses. We had performed a thematic analysis on the data previously (Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2020) but supplemented it with a new analysis; whereas the initial analysis, and the related publication, explored the miniaturizing pastime in general, our new analysis focused specifically on the materiality of miniaturizing. While this chapter and our previous publication draw from the same data and share parts of the analysis, they are two distinct, original studies with a different focus.

The results of the questionnaire were coded using the Atlas.ti 8 software. Our codes and themes are derived from the data (see Braun and Clarke 2006) rather than from a pre-existing theoretical frame. We placed extra focus on

responses that addressed the physical, material dimensions of miniaturizing. This process resulted in fifty-six individual codes, which were then combined into five themes, each highlighting a different dimension miniatures: *Miniatures as objects*, *Material for crafting and self-expression*, *Toys or gaming pieces?*, *Display objects and works of art* and *Vessels and prompts for dreams and imagination*.

Results

In the following sections, we discuss the five themes constructed. Each theme has been illustrated with quotes from the data, translated from Finnish by the authors. Minor changes, such as punctuation and capitalization, have been made as part of the translation process, but we have sought to retain the original tone and wording as closely as possible. Respondent IDs have been reported after the quotes.

Miniatures as objects

As defined in this chapter, a miniature is first and foremost a physical, material object occupying a space in the world. While all the other aspects identified in our analysis are optional, this ubiquitous dimension of the miniature cannot be ignored. Here, we focus primarily on the space and money required for miniaturizing, while the physical manipulation of miniatures is discussed under the theme of *Material for crafting and self-expression*.

Although marginally discussed in our data, the miniature life cycle starts before they reach consumers: they are sculpted physically or digitally, moulded, cast or printed, stored, packaged and shipped. Construction material also plays a part. Originally, miniatures had a high lead content, needing extra care when handling. After the mid-1990s move to reduce lead, miniatures have been increasingly produced in lead-free alloys and different plastics. Even so, 'lead' is still a common word to refer to miniatures among enthusiasts. While affecting the tactile qualities of miniatures such as weight, the material component also introduces potential hazards, from operating with molten metal to inhaling resin dust to contact with a variety of glues, resins, putties and solvents.

The miniature itself is material, and it also prompts a variety of other activities which introduce new requirements. Miniaturizing activities require space and time, and bring with them the need for tools, paints, rulebooks and

storage solutions; acquiring miniatures and materials is often a major part of the pastime (Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2022). Most of this material costs money, and many of our respondents reflected on their shopping behaviour, sometimes referring even to hoarding.

The greatest part [of the pastime] is thinking up new projects and finishing them. The most horrifying part is the realization that there are dozens of projects stalled half-way lying about in the cupboard. In general hoarding instead of the actual hobby is a little sick. (ID27)

I buy minis and miniature games and painting-related products a little too much. Kickstarter [crowdfunding platform] has been in heavy use and there's a shameful amount of backlog. Buying is not financially problematic but rather that I tend to acquire too much material compared to what I could ever realistically use. (ID71)

The collected miniatures need storage space, and once they are put together and painted, the space requirements increase. As delicate objects, the finished figures are prone to breaking, bending and paint chipping. While unpainted miniatures can be stored more carelessly, after construction, and especially painting, they need purpose-built storage and possibly display solutions that take up more room. As the pastime takes up space, it can create tensions with other family members.

My partner doesn't quite understand my hobby and feels that I own too much stuff related to it. It annoys them that I have many boxes full of miniatures, but nevertheless they support me in my hobby, they just wish there wasn't so much stuff. It is because of this that I keep my minis hidden in the basement and advertise it when I finish something or sell it off (meaning there is less stuff). (ID130)

I've found that the best solution for someone with children is that I paint in the living room at the dinner table, so I'm at the centre of family activities and in principle present. This means that all the stuff has to be put together and taken apart before and after the session. Every evening. I live in a detached house so there's more than enough space, but isolating myself from the family and kids causes so much grumbling, it's better to just settle for a temporary solution. (ID5)

I have my own room for crafts and working. This was an important criterion back when I was choosing a home, modern places don't really tend to have space for any sort of handicrafts. I have time for crafting on weeknights and weekends. I spend maybe 700-800 hours painting on a good year. The living room glass cabinet has some minis on display, but most are stored away. My collection consists of a little over 6000 painted minis. (ID32)

Finding ways to weave the pastime into quotidian family life may require skill, planning, financial means and material solutions. Some informants had put together their miniaturizing and crafting material in a modular way for easy moving and storing, while others had a dedicated space, with special tools and equipment.

Material for crafting and self-expression

The crafting side of miniaturizing is essentially material: it revolves around not only the physical model itself but also the materials and tools used to modify and paint it. We have previously identified crafting as the most important core component of miniaturizing (Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2020), and it features prominently in our data.

Crafting is not just painting: after the removal of mould lines and other casting artefacts, a miniature often requires construction – gluing pieces together, sometimes reinforcing joints with metal wire and using putties to smooth over gaps and minor defects. It is common to combine pieces from different sources to create a single, unique miniature, and there is an entire sub-industry creating individual components, such as heads or weapons, for *converting* (customizing) miniatures.

Miniatures receive multiple layers of paint using different paints and inks deployed with brushes, sponges, spray cans and air brushes. Additional material, such as sand and synthetic grass, can be added to the miniature's base, the plastic or metal stand the miniature is attached to, to create texture and visual interest. Crafting is also present in the building and modification of scenery, such as hills, forests and buildings. These are used for both gaming and displaying purposes. Dioramas, narrative vignettes of figures in a setting, are also created.

An important and often reported aspect of crafting is the meditative state the long sessions of intense but relaxing concentration induce. Informants referred to painting as almost a meditative practice or something inducing a state of 'flow' (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002) in which everyday concerns are forgotten and sense of time is lost. Some considered painting and modifying miniatures as their primary avenue of creative self-expression and enjoyed developing their painting and modelling skills.

The best moment is probably when I've noticed that I actually can paint and the moments in which you realize you've been painting for several hours without any outside thoughts or anxiety over work. (ID18)

[There is] a certain trance that comes from perfectly focusing on the miniature being painted. (ID5)

Crafting served as an important and necessary bridge between an imagined idea, such as a character concept, and a finished piece. One respondent, discussing their engagement with *The Lord of the Rings* miniature game (Games Workshop 2001) described this process of transformation:

Mostly it's working with your hands; a piece of metal and the contents of paint pots turn into a knight of Dol Amroth, or balsa wood and fake fur into a Rohan house. (ID119)

Crafting is a concrete and creative activity that requires significant time investment and concentration that can become meditative. In addition to being enjoyable in itself, painting and other crafting also tied to many of the other aspects: after painting, miniatures often find use in games or as display pieces.

Toys or gaming pieces?

The physicality of the objects relating to miniaturizing is undeniable and the core of crafting is pervasively recognized by our informants, yet the *use* of the miniatures and how this use frames miniaturizing are contested questions. For some of our informants miniatures were toys that one plays with, whereas for others the miniatures were implements for games and gaming. As Dan Fleming (1996) observes, a (plastic) plaything is a complex object and recognizing it as a toy is an act of recognition dependent on settings, prior experience and culturally derived associations.

Miniaturizing features plenty of play and playful behaviour, in line with what Roger Caillois has termed *paidia*, characterized by 'free improvisation' and 'carefree gaiety' (2001: 13). It is relevant to note that in Finnish, the language of the questionnaire, there is a clear linguistic difference between 'play that one plays' and 'games that one games', similar to Caillois's distinction between *paidia* and *ludus*. A simplification sufficient for the purposes of this chapter is that in Finnish, 'play' is something done with toys, and it is culturally connected to children's play, whereas 'gaming' is associated with games, which is regarded as more of an adolescent and adult pursuit. Numerous informants specifically discussed 'playing' instead of 'gaming' in their responses. Playing took different forms, from imagining back stories to the characters to making shooting noises while gaming and playing with miniatures with one's children. In children's play

with toy soldiers and figures, a great deal of time is spent arranging and looking at them (Hellendoorn and Harinck 1999), an activity also reported by our adult respondents.

Miniatures and miniature games are toys, like console or board games and their components. Gaming with miniatures is playing. And when I think about it, converting and painting them is also play. For me at least. (ID104)

I mainly try to play games with my minis, but on the other hand it gives me great satisfaction arranging my hundreds of little people in parade and drill formations on the table. (ID118)

I play with miniatures with the child (5 years old) occasionally, and they have shown great interest towards them. They've helped me basecoat several miniatures. The problem is that most of the miniatures in my collection are metal and thus suffer from paint easily coming loose when playing. When this happens the child gets frustrated easily and is embarrassed by the damage caused. I believe, however, that they'll remain interested in miniaturizing and that as they grow up they'll find a suitably gentle touch to playing and later gaming with them. (ID22)

Aspects of miniaturizing can be seen as toy play (Meriläinen, Stenros and Heljakka 2020), and some respondents explicitly referred to their miniatures as toys, echoing the term 'man dollies' used by some of the wargamers interviewed by Mitchell Harrop, Martin Gibbs and Marcus Carter (2013). The innate 'toyness' of miniatures relates to their materiality in multiple ways: although miniatures are seldom articulated and have limited poseability and resulting play value (Keidl 2018), the use-value of miniatures also derives from their aesthetic dimension.

The other approach to miniatures was rooted in the denial of freeform, frolicsome, childish play, and instead connected to what Caillois calls *ludus*. These informants saw playing with miniatures more as gaming or game playing with miniatures, that is structured, rule-constrained play. Some respondents viewed miniatures mainly as gaming pieces, sometimes referring to them as 'tokens'. This approach frames miniatures through their functional, utilitarian value as carefully constructed, custom made game pieces. However, aesthetics and function are not disconnected in miniaturizing, as in some miniature wargaming tournaments contestants receive points for the outlook of their army (Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2014). In addition to playing miniature games, a typical approach was using miniatures as part of role-playing games. Here, the miniatures were in a more peripheral role, while the core of the game was in the discussion and role-playing:

I game with minis. I don't really put together or paint anything that I don't need for a future game/campaign/tournament. . . . Building, converting, painting [of miniatures], and building scenery come with it, but without gaming I wouldn't do them either. (ID11)

The RPG is social, but in that the mini could just as well be a coin for all I care (although the mini does help with character immersion). . . . Painting is occasionally fun and a mini is a good token. That's all. (ID112)

The tension between more playful and game-like framings for miniatures is clearly a known and acknowledged source of tension and discussion in miniaturing cultures. Some respondents who foreground game-related aspects of miniaturing actively reject the more playful framings and self-expressive activities. Some respondents explicitly mentioned not being invested in the 'fluff', or background narrative. Instead, models were bought mainly for gaming use and stored in boxes that allowed for easy transportation and unpacking for gaming, after which they went back into storage (see also Kankainen 2016).

However, while there is a tension between these two approaches, most informants had no trouble combining the free play and fantasy with rule-governed game playing. Some explicitly challenged the distinction between gaming and playing. This echoes previous findings (Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2014; Singleton 2021), showing plenty of play and playful behaviour also in the context of tournament miniature gaming, arguably the epitome of rule-governed game play with miniatures.

I like to describe my gaming in a 'I play with little figurines' style. I'm even a little serious about it. Of course there need to be rules, but this is play after all. (ID21)

In a way I both play and don't play with minis. If I have magnetized a part of a mini [attaching a part such as an arm with a magnet], I may move it around for fun. In a game I turn the turrets of tanks to point at the enemy, and may yell out 'boom' and roll dice. Maybe this is play? (ID114)

From the point of view of materiality this distinction between the miniature as a toy for playing and a token for gaming has relevance, as the most central aspect of games is usually seen as being the rules (Stenros 2017). A game piece in and of itself is something seen as insignificant; the so-called *rules of irrelevance* state that it does not matter if a chess piece is a beautiful piece carved from ivory or if it is a stone you found in your shoe (Goffman 1961). On the other hand, with toys the materiality of the toy is important, as are the physical

affordances that the piece provides (Gibson 1986). The gaming piece is, from the point of formalism, defined by its affordance within the rules of the game. In actual practice this division is obviously not this strict, as our data shows. Also, many miniature games and tournaments advocate for miniatures to be accurate representations of characters in terms of equipment, obstacles and line of sight can matter in game play, and so on. The miniature, as a crafted game token, does carry communication from the player who has created and is using it (Wasserman 2020). Even so, the materiality of an object tends to be, in comparison, deprioritized when it is framed as a game token instead of a toy.

Display objects and works of art

Miniatures provide tactile and sensuous pleasure – they can be tiny, yet have weight, they have shapes and textures offering haptic interest, and they may have a scent depending on their raw material or paint. Miniatures materialize simultaneously as both products of industry design and machinery and personal handicrafts.

Because of the centrality of crafting and aesthetics in miniaturizing, it is unsurprising that respondents often discussed their miniatures as something visually pleasing and as objects to be displayed. It was common to display models in glass cabinets, sometimes prominently in the home, and to share pictures of painted miniatures online. Respondents who enjoyed the crafting aspect of the pastime commonly bought miniatures without intention of playing or gaming with them. Instead, miniatures were bought to be painted and displayed.

We are like visual artists hiding in ateliers: we do our creative work largely in solitude and as if in secret from the rest of the world. However, in the end the final products are always displayed to the public. The finished artworks are placed in a visible spot in the glass cabinet of the bookcase (suitably close to J. R. R. Tolkien's works), the rest in storage boxes and cases at the bottom of the cupboard or in the storeroom. (ID111)

Some respondents likened their miniatures to art pieces. Single figurines and dioramas are certainly objects that are created to be looked at, and there are artists working in fine art whose works have a clear aesthetic connection to miniaturizing. For example, the snowglobe works of Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz (see Lethem, Martin and Muñoz 2008) and Jake and Dinos Chapman's

works such as *Old Kent Road* (2014) and *Ship of Fools* (2009) feature intricately crafted fantastical miniature dioramas reminiscent of those created by miniaturists. However, the idea of the miniature as an art piece links miniatures more closely with designer toys, which to many adults are only ‘playable’ in terms of dis-*playing* them. As one respondent writes:

I think of my minis mostly as collectable art pieces. They don't really have any practical function after they're 'done'. And there are thousands both painted and unpainted. While I do have a webpage with photos of finished minis, even those have been photographed immediately after painting in a fairly static environment and then 'archived' on the shelf. (ID15)

Here, the respondent's comment echoes Phoenix's (2006: 27) observation that designer toys are usually made to be displayed instead of played with. While miniatures signal invitations to the many forms of object play discussed in this chapter, such as imaginative scenarios and *photoplay*, narrative and artistic photography with a storytelling capacity (Heljakka 2012), they are often static in their form. Because of this they may not be considered to have similar dynamic potential as action figures and dolls would due to their articulation and poseability.

While there is limited research on displaying miniatures, many activities in miniaturizing parallel those of *dolling*, or pastimes of adult doll players. Dolls such as *Barbie*, *Pullip* and *Blythes* are first personalized, then displayed and even *photoplayed* (Heljakka 2012) by their players.

Having the miniatures on display in the living room glass cabinets and sometimes on a play table set for kids is an important part of miniaturizing. The minis on display spark discussions with both familiar miniaturists and those less knowledgeable about the hobby. (ID27)

Photographing games and sharing pictures with friends is also an exciting part of the hobby. . . . I appreciate crafting skills, great painting and stylish set pieces. Finished armies with created backstories. Thus I don't think minis can be called toys, although of course you can take great photos of toy setups like *Star Wars* plastic figures or *Lego*. (ID28)

The miniature as a displayed item in domestic space allows communication that occurs between the miniature and the player, but when the photography is shared, the activity becomes reciprocal – a dialogue between the displayer or enthusiast and their peers. Displaying and photographing miniatures can also be seen as a way of preserving and documenting miniaturizing culture.

Vessels and prompts for dreams and imagination

Miniatures are designed to spark the imagination. Models are sculpted with facial expressions and often in dramatic action poses: swinging swords, reloading guns and casting spells. Even without further context, through their posing and features such as gear, expression and other details, a 30 mm tall miniature can in itself tell a story.

While it is conceivable that ready-made physical miniatures, pre-existing narratives and a set canon could constrain imagination and creativity, our data suggests the opposite. While some historical miniature enthusiasts strove for historical accuracy and exact representation, they also came up with dramatic narratives for gaming scenarios grounded in actual historical events. For many of our respondents, it was the considerable role of imagination that made miniaturing special. Physical miniatures and photographs of them served as a spark for the imagination. Imagining took place both when planning a new project and while crafting the models. Miniatures and entire armies were sometimes imbued with backstories, also reflected in their painting and other crafting, tying into the toy aspects discussed earlier. This melding of the crafting and imagining aspects echoes Brian Sutton-Smith's (1986) claims that creativity and flexibility are derivatives of the imagination and that imaginative play is a celebration of our personal originality (Sutton-Smith 2008).

Without the fiction related to miniaturing I think miniaturing would lose something that separates it from 'regular' board games and toys. Minis are after all just toys and gaming tokens. (ID80)

Narrative strongly connects to it. I rarely write down stories, but they always develop in my mind as I paint and craft. Maybe the most important aspect is giving imagined things concrete form. (ID34)

Aspects of dreaming and imagining were not limited to individual miniatures or the gaming or crafting session. Respondents consumed media connected to their miniature projects, turning their miniaturing into a transmedia (Booth 2015; Keidl 2018) experience. Although fiction connected to the *Warhammer* franchise and published by Games Workshop's Black Library was most commonly mentioned, the same phenomenon was present with historical miniature gamers grounding their projects in non-fiction detailing their period of choice. Here, the miniature becomes a physical focus for a much greater whole: while a piece of plastic or metal, it is also a character occupying a space in a much larger imagined story.

The world of [Warhammer 40,000 miniature game] in its harshness instantly sucked me in and I'm staying . . . I've gotten tattoos related to WH40k, I read Black Library books, I may write stories etc. Then there's of course assembly and modelling, painting etc. The 'solid core' lies in the story of the world of Warhammer 40k, the lore. [It's a v]ery complex and interesting world. For me everything else supports this. (ID66)

Discussing wargames, James Dunnigan (1997) explains how it can be enough for a player of wargames to just read the rules, examine the pieces and perhaps place them on a map, which enables experiencing the dynamic potential of the game without actually playing it. A similar sentiment was expressed by one of the respondents regarding miniature projects:

I follow gaming communities quite a lot and my actual hobbying includes a research part, during which I read fiction, rules, army lists, and tactics, before I start a new project. Sometimes I do this, even though I have no intention of starting said collection, instead I play with the thought. (ID52)

Especially in the case of imagining background stories and personalities for miniatures, there is a close connection to and overlap with play, as discussed earlier. As Peter Gray (2015) states, whenever adults imagine and create, they are to some degree playing. We could reverse this thinking and argue that whenever adults play with material entities, such as miniatures, they are to some extent imagining.

It doesn't matter if an elf's sword snaps in the middle of a campaign – it's battle damage and a reminder, and I don't usually even fix them, but let the wear and tear of use show in the minis. (ID7)

The fiction and the physical miniature exist in symbiosis: the figurine can be an expression of the fiction, crafting it both a physical and an imaginative act. Reciprocally, what happens to the miniature in crafting and in play feed back into the fiction. The miniature thus acts as a *prop* (Bateman 2011; Walton 1990) for imagining; it prescribes imaginings. What happens to the prop also happens within the fiction, according to some translation rules.

Physical, functional, fictional and affective

Our study describes the plural uses of miniatures. To theorize the dimensions of miniatures as objects with affordances allowing and inviting many kinds of actions, we use the framework interested in the experiential dimensions of object

play. This framework (Heljakka 2020) comprehends the physical, functional, fictional and affective dimensions of experiences with artefacts associated with playful manipulation, such as toys (see Figure 5.1). As understandings of what miniatures are extend beyond toys and toy-like game pieces, we acknowledge the multiple uses of figurines, both in terms of physical manipulation as well as their capacity to set the imagination in motion, and to inspire personal reflections and social dialogues due to their nature as playthings, conversational objects and contemplative artworks.

Our analysis demonstrates how many of the uses of miniatures are grounded in the *physicality* of miniatures. However, before they become playable, they manifest mentally as objects of desire: miniatures are dreamt of, yearned for and designed in the mind's eye before they materialize by their manufacturers and makers. Imagination plays a significant role in this process, and it is only the limits of adult imagination that constrain what is to be done with the miniatures once they have taken their form.

The *functionality* of miniatures depends on the aspiration of their users, as demonstrated by our informants' diverse descriptions of their miniaturizing. Besides being crafted items, miniatures may be collected, used for open-ended, paidic play, employing them as toys for imaginative use or for playing games in the sense of ludic play, making them functional in the context of game play. Our results show that both players and gamers tend to appreciate miniatures as displayable items with aesthetic value to which space and logistic considerations

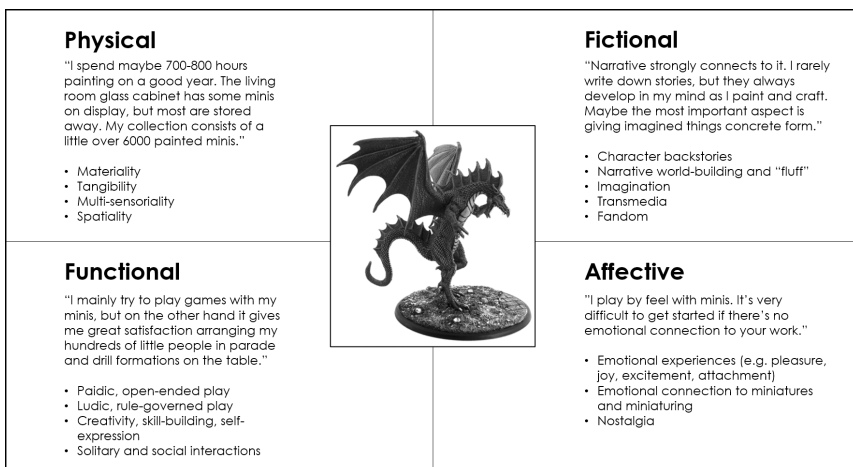


Figure 5.1 The experiential dimensions of object play. Photograph by Mikko Meriläinen.

are provided. Miniaturists find clever solutions to display, store and move their miniatures around in and between spaces of use, both domestic and public. Miniatures find their way to photographed archives of collections, demonstrative and tutorial images of paint jobs and photoplay. In this way, miniatures afford creative activities built around skill-building and artistry in the present, as well as play value with completed miniature characters, meaning their employment as part of static displays or dioramas (see, for example, Heljakka and Harviainen 2019), or the more dynamic contexts of gaming arenas.

The *fictionality* of miniatures has significance to many. Miniatures have relationships to narratives: they usually represent characters that come with a certain physiognomy and attire related to either human history or fantastic storyworlds. Thanks to the creativity, skills and artistry of miniaturists, industry-made backstories for miniatures are continued, contested and contrasted with enthusiasts' own ideas about what kind of characters best serve them in terms of appearance. In addition to choosing paint schemes, many miniaturists are eager to make conversions to produce unique characters assembled from pieces of other miniatures and purpose-produced conversion parts. The fictionality of miniatures also stems from 'fluff' created by gaming companies to support and expand their gameworlds and written by miniaturists themselves as a form of fan-fic.

Finally, the *affectivity* associated with both miniatures and miniaturizing relates to the miniaturists' emotional relationships to their beloved artefacts, and the communities that make them functional in various ways. As Kankainen (2016) has pointed out, miniatures can offer an anchor for emotional attachment. It is in the context of this experiential dimension that caring for and cultivating collections of miniatures takes place, or the appreciation of special, individual pieces come to the fore. Many respondents described feelings of nostalgia for their youth when reminiscing their firsthand encounters with specific figurines, but even more prominently, informed us about their affection for their current miniaturizing activities. It is also important to note the social nature of miniaturizing, as to a large part of the respondents the miniature is either a prompt for individual play of the mind or a prop used as part of object play. In both cases, miniaturists enjoy and value the social aspect of the activities that the pastime affords.

Coda

Miniaturizing is a pastime that has a dual core of crafting and gaming activities, yet both activities pivot around the physical, material miniature. Miniatures

are crafted to fit specific fictional worlds and different genres. They can be bought and sold, downloaded and printed, collected and hoarded, re-sold and re-imagined, stored and treasured, and fantasized about and imagined with for years and decades before being constructed. Unique pieces are created by combining parts of figurines, crafted with care with knives, glue, brushes and paints. The sites of miniature construction, storage, display and play shape the living space, influence the purchase of homes and create tensions in families. The finished pieces are displayed in cabinets and online, toyed and imagined with and used as gaming pieces. The physical figurines have numerous functions that are practical, fictional and deeply affective.

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