

Warhammer 40K for Dummies

Space

Space is big. The galaxy contains countless millions of worlds, many of which have been colonised over the millennia by humans. Others contain various alien races, most of which are hostile. War has been raging across the galaxy ever since.

Travel and ships

Travel between the stars takes a long time. It's impossible to travel beyond the speed of light, so getting between different star systems can take years, decades or more. Space ships tend to be very large, often several miles in length and reside permanently in space. Entire generations of people have grown up, lived and died on board without ever leaving the confines of the ship. To reach planet surfaces, smaller shuttlecraft are used.

The Warp

To get around the long distance travel problem, humans found a way to open gateways in space to another dimension, known as the Warp. It is from here that daemons and other monsters come from, but it also provides a useful if ~~utterly dangerous~~ slightly risky means of getting around quickly. By travelling through the Warp a ship can reach the next star system in under a week.

The Emperor and the Imperium

Many thousands of years ago, before the stars had been reached, humankind lost its way. Tribes and nations declared war upon each other in a bid for domination. Eventually a single person stepped forward and uniting humans under his own banner, and then went on to conquer the galaxy. He became the Emperor, but after a massive treason and battle in which half of his sons turned against him, the Emperor was slain. Since then, he has been kept in a life support device on Terra called the Golden Throne. This grants the Emperor immortality but it comes at a price – for the last ten thousand years his lifeforce has been sustained by the sacrifice of a thousand psykers every single day. He is considered to be divine by humanity who now call him the God-Emperor.

His realm is the Imperium – a united organisation of all humankind – countless trillions of people upon millions of worlds. However, whilst its ideals may be grand, in practice it is a monstrosity, a bureaucratic and theocratic nightmare filled with corruption and greed.

For the purposes of Imperial bureaucracy, the galaxy is divided into a feudal structure with five “segmentum”. These are divided further into numerous sectors containing thousands of worlds. These are then divided even further into subsectors and even sub-sub sectors, all the way down to individual world level. Each level is ruled over by a governor who pays tribute to the one above him and so on.

Psykers

Some individuals are able to channel the power of warp energy through their own minds, granting them immense but unstable psychic power. Drawing upon the power of the warp in this way can draw the attention of dangerous warp entities upon the unfortunate psyker. Anyone displaying psychic power in this way is instantly regarded with suspicion and fear. However, psykers are also required for various tasks such as controlling travel through the warp and cross-system communication. Psykers that are not killed

straight away are taken aboard the Black Ships for assessment and training. Here, their skills are judged, with many being sent to the telepathic choirs that send messages across the Imperium. Most of the rest are sacrificed to the Emperor. A few psykers who show extraordinary will and control over their powers are branded and are referred to as “Sanctioned”. Despite this license to live, most people are still suspicious of them and many sanctioned psykers are bound in chains. Untrained or undeclared psykers are known as “Unsanctioned” and are considered to be dangerous heretics to be hunted down and destroyed.

Factions of the Imperium

The Imperium is huge and several factions and groupings within it have gained great power. Whilst all are nominally on the same side, there are frequent disputes and rivalries between them.

The Administratum

The governing and bureaucratic force of the Imperium – its countless billions of clerks and politicians keep everything running as smoothly as possible.

The Ecclesiarchy

The clerics of the Ecclesiarchy ensure that all Imperial citizens are following correct and authorised versions of the Imperial Creed – the prayers of worship to the God-Emperor. Whilst some regional variations are tolerated, anyone not toeing the party line is considered to be a heretic. Clerics are a mixed bunch – some remain in their temples leading prayers and worship. Others spread out across the galaxy preaching to the fallen or even waging holy war with oversized weaponry.

The Inquisition

The most feared of all Imperial groups, the Inquisition watch over the populace, hiding in the shadows and looking out for anyone who might have turned heretic in some way – whether through dealing with aliens or daemons, displaying unusual mutation or psychic power or simply denying the divinity of the God-Emperor. The Inquisition is divided into three main groups called Ordos. Ordo Xenos specialise in hunting down aliens and those who deal with them. Ordo Malleus focuses on daemons, and Ordo Hereticus looks for psykers and other heretics. An Inquisitor has ultimate authority over everyone, even governors and expects complete cooperation when conducting investigations. Inquisitors usually have a retinue made up of specialists from various other factions. These people are called acolytes.

If an Inquisitor believes that a whole world has become too corrupted to be saved, they have the authority to call Exterminatus. This is the act of destroying every living thing on the planet surface, a means of purging and renewing for future re-colonisation. There are several methods for conducting an Exterminatus - however many inquisitors prefer to use devices such as virus bombs, which annihilate all living organisms while leaving structures and resources intact for future re-colonisation.

The Adeptus Astartes

Genetically engineered super-soldiers known as space marines. These are the Imperium’s most holy and powerful warriors known for their power armour and general indestructibility. They are divided into various chapters and rarely involve themselves in Imperial business that doesn’t involve warfare.

The Adepta Sororitas

An all-female order of warriors that was created during an ancient war when a directive was issued to the Ecclesiarchy forbidding the use of men-at-arms. The Order works directly for the Ecclesiarchy and are frequently referred to as the Sisters of Battle. They are known for their immense fanaticism and eagerness to charge headlong into battle.

The Imperial Guard

The regular soldiery of the Imperium. Regiments are provided by each of the planets as a form of tithe to the Imperium. Often provided with only basic armour and weapons they are expected to go up against the worst of the Imperium's enemies. Command by the generals and warmasters is frequently callous – with countless billions of soldiers available to requisition, commanders are generally happy to sacrifice large amounts of troops to gain a small amount of ground.

Many soldiers are regular recruits from worlds where serving in the Guard is considered to be an honour. However, many others are conscripts, forced into service so that the planet can fulfil its tithe requirements. Some worlds manage send their criminals as an alternative to prisons – these penal conscripts are distinguishable by the explosive collars they wear to deter escape.

All Imperial Guard regiments are assigned a Commissar. This is a political officer whose job is to ensure loyalty and morale – often with a bullet to the head of cowards.

The Imperial Navy

The Navy provides an essential service across the galaxy. Their warships carry assorted heavy weaponry, including the Exterminatus weapon. They can fight ship-to-ship battles in space as well as provide ground support in the form of orbital strikes. When not fighting, they also serve as troop carriers, transporting forces and equipment around the galaxy.

The Planetary Defence Force (PDF)

Most planets will also have their own defence force. These troops are more of a local militia but depending on the amount of investment they can provide a reasonable first line of defence should the planet get attacked.

The Adeptus Arbites

Inter-stellar law enforcement. Planetary law enforcement is handled by each individual planet's government. The Arbites are the higher-level, more like the FBI. They have a pretty high amount of power and are usually able to act as judge, jury and executioner when required.

The Adeptus Mechanicus

Not strictly part of the Imperium, but very much allied with it, the tech-priests of the Mechanicum follow a slightly different religion – that of the Omnissiah (the machine god). In the 41st Millennium, technology is not very well understood by the masses and is regarded with reverence. Everything technical is believed to have a 'machine spirit' and so the legions of tech-priests cast prayers and litanies to the machine spirits so that the technology may function as intended. The tech-priests themselves usually seek enlightenment by becoming one with the machine. Regarding the flesh of their bodies as weak, they seek to replace as much of themselves as they can with mechanical parts in order to get closer to the machine god.

Rogue Traders

Not all ships belong to the Navy. Many are civilian based. Space travel is strictly controlled by the Imperium, and few ships are granted any freedom to travel beyond that which is necessary for their duty. Rogue traders are the exception. Granted a license for free travel, these people are free to roam and explore the galaxy as they see fit, even outside of Imperial space.

Hive Worlds

Planetary societies vary massively depending on the function, government and population of the planet. Some planets are known as hive worlds. These are primary urban worlds, where the people live in one or more continent-spanning cities. As well as spreading across the land, these cities also spread upwards with spires poking through the clouds, and downwards into the planet's crust. These cities are called hives, as they resemble ant hills in shape (and function). Billions and billions of people live here, from the fabulously wealthy in the spires to the almost feral-like gangs in the underhive.

Some Enemies of the Imperium

Chaos – The Great Enemy

From the depths of the Warp come the horrors of chaos – mainly in the form of corruption that can turn even the most pious imperial cleric to the foul and heretical worship of the four Chaos Gods (also known as the Ruinous Powers). Worship of the Gods varies from one to the next – followers and cultists of Khorne believe in spreading blood, death and destruction, whilst followers of Tzeentch tend to be more sneaky and manipulative. Followers of Nurgle spread disease and followers of Slaanesh will do anything for pleasure. The Warp can also spawn daemons – horrific and powerful monstrosities of the Chaos Gods.

Tyranids and Genestealers

Numerous insect-like aliens that want to devour all living matter – they are known for their rapid-evolution by absorbing the DNA of those they consume. Travelling on giant hive ships, a planet which they have targeted is generally doomed. An off-shoot of tyranids is genestealers – creatures which breed with humans in order to spread tyranid DNA. A half-human/half-genestealer is called a hybrid. After several generations, genestealer hybrids are practically indistinguishable from normal humans. Colonies and cults of hybrids can be found on some Imperial worlds, where they are quietly working to prepare the planet for tyranid invasion. The pure-blood genestealer who founded the cult is called the Patriarch.

Orks

A green fanatically warlike race whose sole purpose of existence is to fight everything in sight. Ork society is generally based upon size. The biggest ork is generally nominated the leader and is known as the Warboss. Orks like nothing more than to fight humans and use a completely ramshackle assortment of weapons to do so. Most ork equipment seems to work only because the orks believe it will. Ork

vehicles follow the same theory. Many ork vehicles are painted red because everyone knows that red vehicles go faster.

Eldar

Tall, thin and mysterious aliens who are known for their stealthy abilities, advanced technology and immense psychic powers. Of all the xenos races, the Eldar are the ones most likely to talk before shooting. They are completely sneaky though and should not be trusted. There is an offshoot called the Dark Eldar who are pledged to Slaanesh and spend their days spreading sadistic pain and suffering upon all they encounter.