



Piercing the Shadows

A personal interpretation of the Inquisitor gaming ethos

by Derek Gillespie

RABBLE ROUSING

I'm going to climb on my soapbox once more for a little while, if no-one minds? (n.b. Last time, I know a few people did. I suspect that more people might this time...). As some of you may know, I have the pleasure of distracting myself from the day-job by casting my eyes over Internet forums and making sure that no-one's misbehaving. Along the way, I get exposed to many, many ideas – new character backgrounds, the latest incarnation of a character's statistics, plans for the modelling and painting of a character, battle reports, rules queries, background (how I hate the word, “fluff”, but use it if you must) enquiries regarding the Warhammer 40,000 universe, amongst a multitude of others.

What I'd like to talk about for the next few pages could be considered to touch upon all of the aforementioned, and many other facets of Inquisitor as a game. My desire to put finger to keyboard once again and witter on has come from several incidents online over the last few months, some of which have been resolved in a more satisfactory way than others. What I'd like to look at is something of key importance – the ethos of Inquisitor as a game. Where does it fit in alongside the other 40K-set games? Why is Inquisitor the way it is, and what makes it so enjoyable? How do I get the best out of Inquisitor? Considering that the niche in which Inquisitor sits is going to be potentially muddled further after the 2007 release of Dark Heresy, the 41st millennium-set roleplay game (see <http://www.40krp.com> for more!), I think these are pertinent questions.

Everything that follows is purely personal opinion, and please, if you don't agree with me (and many won't!), then the Specialist Games forum or The Conclave are where you'll find me for feedback.

GREY AROUND THE EDGES

“Shades of grey” is a phrase that you constantly hear bandied about when people are describing the world of the Inquisition – where choices are made that are too convoluted to be seen in stark terms, and hard bargains may have to be made which, in the doing, appear to contradict the tenets of the Imperial creed. How apt then that the role of Inquisitor in the 40K game catalogue is also slightly unclear and murky – lurking in the shadows and never quite firming up just what it is.

The phrase that you'll also hear used is, “narrative wargame”. What exactly is a “narrative wargame”, though? Trouble arises because it appears that Inquisitor wants to sit in between two camps – tabletop wargaming, where the aim (for most people) is to beat the opposing player, and roleplay (of whatever form) where you're looking to tell a story, and all these little models aren't really necessary. You might hear gamers tell you they're a “wargamer” or a “roleplayer”. Some people are both, but it's pretty unlikely that some will describe themselves as a “narrative wargamer”. For reference, just to set out my stall, I was always a wargamer before I came to Inquisitor.

So then, a “narrative wargame”. In my opinion, this means, first and foremost, that Inquisitor is about telling a story. “Narrative” is vastly more important than “wargame” when it comes to the



crunch, so much so that a better descriptor of what Inquisitor is might be something like, “narrative visualiser”. Now, I'll be the first to admit that's not catchy, but it is more to the point.

Inquisitor games are not about the winning, but about the story that unfolds. The desire to win is, perhaps, detrimental to a good game. A game of Inquisitor is a cooperative effort between two or more people, who are attempting to enact on a tabletop the most exciting, thrilling or nerve-jangling episodes from the stories of their characters, which are given form in the models that make up the respective warbands taking part in the game. The other player isn't an “opponent”, he's a colleague – the co-writer of your little adventure! But what kind of adventures does Inquisitor do best? What situations lend themselves to Inquisitor? Well, what do you like?

“PLEASE SIR, I LIKE TANKS! AND TITANS!”

Oh dear. Now listen, there's excellent vehicle rules available for Inquisitor that have recently appeared in Fanatic Online, but really, the game's not about tanks. If you want to have one on the tabletop as a one off, then that could be very cool indeed (and all kudos to you if you make one in 54mm scale). But if you feel the need to make rules for them, as if you're going to drive your Baneblade onto the tabletop and start firing a mega-battlécannon at the opponent, then you should probably play 40K. Off you go...

As for the Titans, we have Epic for that sort of thing. Go to the back of the class.

Now, before I move on and leave people seething with rage behind me, let me just say that there's a difference between using these things as inspiration, and wanting to “use” one regularly. A Titan could actually be setting for an excellent game, or could provide character inspiration – a Princeps separated from the



Mind-Impulse link for too long, losing his grasp of reality? Maybe the rest of his warband are titan crew, shepherding and guarding the increasingly delusional Princeps? Likewise, a tank could be a fine objective for a scenario – there's absolutely nothing wrong with presenting the players with the occasional adversary that it's impossible to take down by “conventional” means, and requires a bit of thinking out-of-the-box. You can't get through the tank armour with an autogun, but can you lure it down a side street and into a booby trapped area? Can you get on top of the thing and ram that melta bomb through an open top hatch? You (hopefully) get the idea.

“I HAVE A PENCHANT FOR VIOLENT PERSONS, ARMED TO THE TEETH”

Well, there's nothing wrong with this – I'm sure many Inquisitors find it incredibly useful to keep a few vicious killers on the payroll. However, there are some players who have been drawn to Inquisitor because it offers the opportunity to use a warband of four killing machines, armed to the eyeballs and with statistics to shame a Space Marine. And remember, this is “okay”, because “there's nothing in the rules to say I can't”. Well, yes, technically. But how do you feel about the inclusion of a non-combatant? What if a scribe, or an astropath, or a dock worker, or a street child, or an administratum accountant had to join the warband?

Inquisitor warbands are extremely likely to include some individuals whom the Inquisitor keeps at hand because they have skills related to civilian and investigative life, and not the battlefield. The dedicated Inquisitor player will see these characters as just as viable modelling projects and gaming “pieces” as a mercenary gunslinger, bounty hunter or Imperial Guard veteran. Sometimes, the sad truth is, these people get caught up in the thick of things, and others have to carry them along, even if it means that the warband has the overall combat effectiveness lessened. Sometimes, these “hangers-on” even do something heroic!

If you're having trouble stomaching that idea, and much prefer the muscled brute in the corner with the chain axe, then maybe you're going to find your concept of an Inquisitor warband is at odds with other people's. This isn't to say that these players necessarily have any less of a desire to tell stories, or that they enjoy the 40K background any less – it's just that they probably like a slightly different slant on things than Inquisitor players. They crave guns and explosions as the aim of a game, not as a side-show, distraction, or violent punctuation. They want The Dirty Dozen, Sharpe's Rifles or The Last Chancers.

In my mind, they want Kill Team. I always used to point players who were slightly missing the aim of Inquisitor towards that other stalwart of the Specialist Games, Necromunda, but that's

not quite right. Necromunda is a slightly different beast, whereas Kill Team is probably exactly what they need. Thanks to the bountiful goodness of the powers-that-be in the studio, Kill Team is an official “supplement” to regular 40K (see pages 214 – 227 of the 40K rulebook) that lets you take a dedicated team of killers against hordes of opposing “grunts”, and is an ideal opportunity to model up some wonderfully characterful 28mm figures. It also lets you ignore anyone that might be classed as a non-combatant, and is probably the best outlet for any players that want to use Space Marines, Eldar Aspect Warriors, Ork Boyz, Tau Fire Warriors, Tyranid gribbilies etc. etc. in games of Inquisitor. In a game where the greatest challenge for a player or gamesmaster can be to control the delicate balance of chaos versus order in a given situation, warbands composed solely of killing machines cause a not-always-welcome descent into the former.

“BUT WHY SHOULDN'T I USE A FIRE WARRIOR?”

I was going to use the word “can't” in that title, but the great proviso obviously applies here, as it does to everything in Inquisitor – if everyone you're playing with agrees, you can do anything you like. That's the beauty. However, let me try to explain why most people curl up in horror at the thought of most 40K troop types appearing in our games.

There is a line of text on the front cover of the Inquisitor rulebook – it says, “The Battle For the Emperor's Soul”. That's the sub-text of the game, and it should focus you towards the main players in our drama and political intrigue – humans. The Inquisitors of the Ordos are the heroes and villains, accompanied by, working with, and moving through the innumerable masses of mankind. Yes, aliens like the Eldar and super-humans like the Space Marines will occasionally find themselves embroiled in this hidden world, but their involvement is going to be minor – they simply aren't as much use as comparatively “normal” human in most situations an Inquisitor finds him or herself in. Inquisitor concentrates on shadowy ideological wars fought in back alleys, rural communities, disused factories, the depths of hives, the gardens of the rich, across spire-tops and in orbiting space stations or satellites. It does not focus on the most militant activities of Inquisitors, wielding fire and brimstone as hosts of Grey Knights or Adepta Sororitas sweep across battlefields. Leave that to games of Warhammer 40,000 – Inquisitor deals with the really interesting stuff. The focus on the unexplored areas of the Imperium and, by extension, humanity in the 41st millennium is what makes Inquisitor both so unique, and so enjoyable.

Be honest – why do you want to use a Fire Warrior, or a Howling Banshee, or a Farseer, or an Ork Nob? If it's because you like them in 40K battles, then I suggest you go back to Kill Team. If it's just because you think you want a better gun than anyone else



(cue one Pulse Rifle), or because you think you need the best psyker around ("Hello, here's my version of Mind War"), then you're still thinking of things in 40K terms, where the aim is to beat the opponent. If you genuinely want one of these because of the background involved (and I mean the deep, underlying background, not, "I like the image of a squad of them charging the enemy as heavy munitions explode in the background"), then you might be onto something.

To quote the esteemed Eoin "Lord Inquisitor" Whelan, from a thread in the SG forum, Inquisitor is about creating characters, not replicating troop types. That's why we use the loose term, "character archetype". If you want a Fire Warrior, why not prove your interest in the Tau runs deeper than a big gun? Are you willing to look into playing a Water Caste diplomat? A Gue'vesa auxiliary? A Rogue Trader who makes frequent runs into forbidden Tau space? All of these characters have a good basis for personality, motivations, fears and loves – they have the potential for depth, and show you're willing to do more than point the biggest gun at the opponent and pull the trigger.

If you consider all of this and still think that a Stealth Battlesuit or an Ultramarine Tyrannic War veteran is best for you, then I point you once again towards Kill Team or 40K. By all means, show me your lovingly-converted 54mm model for these wonders, but please don't ask to use it regularly in a game...

BIG. BOLD. BEAUTIFUL. BEST.

I'll admit, even while writing an article that I think might stir some people up, I am tentative to write the next section. This is for two reasons – firstly, it's probably a whole article in and of itself if I put my mind to it and, secondly, because it's really going to annoy some people. Probably best that I just say it then explain myself. Here goes...

Inquisitor should be played with 54mm models. Using 40K models isn't on.

Ducks for cover

Let me explain myself. For lots of people who advocate the use of 54mm (or "big") models, it's hard to explain exactly why 54mm is correct. I have heard even the most articulate and experienced of gamers struggle to justify themselves, and resort to saying things like; "it just feels right". I can sympathise – once you try it, it does just feel right. This is the way the game was meant to be played. Not with 28mm models, designed for squad level combats, but with sumptuously detailed models – extra-detailed models, for extra-detailed rules.

I understand entirely the arguments behind using 28mm figures – many gamers have hundreds of them, and they have scenery that fits properly alongside them. Using 28mm figures lets them get started quickly, and means they don't have to spend lots of money to get started on a new game (not a massively valid argument in my view, as the outlay for a three- or four-character warband is significant less than that for 1500 points of 40K miniatures).

I could argue the case based upon the quality of the 54mm range, but that's self-evident and, based upon the number of people using 28mm figures, maybe not as persuasive as I'd have thought. I also accept that the relatively recent reduction in the figure ranges for the Specialist Games means that the Inquisitor range is, sadly, no longer as comprehensive as it once was, though it still offers a lot of opportunity.

Allow me to offer another, more substantial reason why 54mm is the way to go for the novice Inquisitor player. Staying away from the 40K ranges help you to stay away from 40K troop types. If you're already fighting a desperate battle with your temptation to avoid having an Ork Boy as your Inquisitor character, then think how much harder the temptation will press upon you if you can easily get a model of one! At least, at 54mm, you'd have to go quite a long way to get a good looking Ork. At 28mm, it's easy – there are hundreds of the things available! Of course, the temptation to start including bigger things, like tanks, looms large once again. Likewise, people start thinking that meeting Eldar Pheonix Lords, or a C'Tan, is a "good idea". Yes, yes, I know, it's allegedly a cool idea, and it does follow the previously stated concept that the occasional foe that can't be defeated by conventional means is an interesting trick, but really – keep reminding yourself that the focus should be on humans, fighting humans, in the shadows.

Now, take a 54mm Catachan (helpfully provided by one "Toothpick" Murke), and a 54mm Space Marine (hello, Artemis), and put them next to one another. Good God, look at that! The Marine's a giant! The poor Catachan barely reaches the middle of the Marine's chest, and the Marine's leaning forward! That Astartes bolter is larger than Murke's torso! Artemis's head is almost the same size as Murke's thigh! Herein lies one of the greatest strengths of the 54mm models – they show you things as they "really" are. It helps to bring home the difficulties of remaining covert if you have a Space Marine in your warband. Can you imagine sneaking into a crowded bar with that hulking man-monster following you? Roughly the same thing applies to Kroot too – in a society that is taught to hate the alien, it's even harder to get away with hanging around with one when the alien in question towers above any and every human you're ever likely to see. You don't really get a sense of that at 28mm either!

And, besides all that, it just feels right. Go on, try it...

IT'S ALL ABOUT BETTERING ONESELF...

Well, that's quite a bit covered, but there's a single 40K game that hasn't really been touched upon yet – the one which many people see as “closest” to Inquisitor. That game is Necromunda. When people first come to Inquisitor, especially those with prior knowledge of the Specialist Games range, they tend to assume that Inquisitor is simply an extra-detailed version of Necromunda. Indeed, many people I know have used Necromunda as an inspiration for Inquisitor games or campaigns (for an example of such, you can download the “Hivequake in Newpitt” article from the SG Website), and some people have made very literal translations of the Inquisitor games system to Necromunda, or vice versa. These people, I believe, are somewhat missing the extra depth that Inquisitor has.

I'm not attempting to belittle Necromunda here – before the release of Inquisitor, it was my favourite Specialist Game by a long, long way – but it's basically about lining up two or more gangs, and shooting one another to pieces, until the opponent(s) bottle(s) out. So far, so Kill Team? Well, no – as I'm sure all Necromunda players would testify, the area in which Necromunda excels is in campaigns, with the wonderful progressive campaign system allowing a gang to grow with increasing skill, injury and equipment levels. While the running of an Arbitrator Campaign allows a degree of narrative element to be introduced, Necromunda campaigns are about maximising the killing potential of your gang through fairly frequent characteristic increases, skill attainments and equipment upgrades. This is great fun in a Necromunda setting, but might not be best suited for Inquisitor.

“Why not, you big kill-joy?”, I hear you cry? Well, The Inquisitor campaign, to work properly, should be an intensely narrative event. Just like the games tell stories, the campaign is all about letting a story unfold. In my view, an Inquisitor campaign should be one long detective story, with characters piecing together puzzles and leading the story towards a conclusion. Trouble is, lots of players come to Inquisitor, hear there's a “campaign” going on, and picture Necromunda. In other words, they picture character advancement, and quickly. I think this is detrimental – if the players think that by doing certain things during a game, they're going to get a certain skill or statistic advancement, then they tend to lose sight of the spirit of the game for the thrill of writing a new word or number on the character sheet. Now, everybody likes to think that characters will gradually change

over the course of a campaign, and if the injuries can easily rack up, then it's comforting to think there's the chance of improving at things too. GMs should take note of what characters do, and consider recognising achievement with bonuses, statistic increases and skills as they feel appropriate, but to have a rigid framework in place can encourage the wrong sort of behaviour.

There is a loose framework for Inquisitor campaigns provided in Exterminatus Volume 1 (Inquisitor Annual 2002) that I would encourage you to look at and adapt to your needs. In some ways, the pressure is on a GM to ensure his or her campaign has the players too hooked on investigative duties to really care how the characters are advancing, making any advancements a pleasant surprise rather than a sought-after goal. I think that everyone, GM and player alike, who is suited to Inquisitor should be willing to try a proper narrative campaign – with comparatively minimal “gaming advances” – at least once. If both the GM and players aren't really interested in doing this, then maybe it's easier if you play Necromunda, where a proper framework is in place for this kind of thing. If one of the two parties is keen but the other is not, then the onus is on that party to persuade the doubter, and introduce them to the wonders of the narrative campaign!

EXIT, STAGE LEFT (MIND THE ROTTEN FRUIT)

Another little rant off my chest, then? I know that there are some people reading who are now cursing my name, but I hope that, if you're reading this as someone who's new to Inquisitor, or considering getting involved for the first time, you may have some idea of whether or not this game's really for you. I see a lot of newcomers presenting what they think is genuinely a stunning character concept, only for a pile of furious Inquisitor players to tear it to shreds because they've just suggested that yet another Eldar Warlock is coincidentally wandering the galaxy on his own. Cue one argument as the two camps butt heads over what is in “the spirit of the game” – I'm sure more than one potential player has been deterred from trying Inquisitor as a result, despite the attempts of others to encourage them through the process.

If reading this helps anyone to change their ideas about what makes a good Inquisitor gaming experience, or makes them realise that there are more suitable gaming avenues open to them, then I'm a happy man. As I said way back on the first page, if you disagree with me then pop onto the SG forums or The Conclave and let me know your views. I guarantee you won't be alone – all of the regulars will have torn this to pieces by the time you get there, but please feel free to join in!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Derek Gillespie is an absolute menace who bothers the otherwise-far-too-busy Savant Hall with articles for publication in this fine online magazine. Andy even agrees to publish some of them just to keep him quiet.

Besides this badgering, Derek keeps an eye on Inquisitor-related business on the SG forums and, by virtue of annoying both Andy and Gav in Rules Reviews, has his name on the Inquisitor rulebook. Which is quite, quite ridiculous...