



WFRP2

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Reviewed by James Walkerdine

Introduction

Before I commence my review of WFRP 2nd Edition, it is probably a good idea to explain what I was looking for in the new edition.

I originally bought WFRP in the mid-Eighties, however I didn't get round to playing it until I reached university in the mid-Nineties. To me WFRP has always felt like a medieval/Renaissance version of Call of Cthulhu with a couple of generic fantasy elements thrown into the mix. It has been about horror, insanities, and groups of unsung heroes who struggle against the inexorable forces of chaos. The Warhammer world has changed, however, and I appreciated that any new edition would have to be brought into line with Games Workshop's current setting. I was curious to see whether the designers could bring the game in line, whilst maintaining the old feel.

I also value a good set of simple balanced rules. To me rules are there to ensure everything is fair, to carefully balance success and failure, and to cover the more common situations that can arise in a game. I'm not a great believer in house ruling, so therefore it was important that any changes to the rules felt logical, were consistent, and above all, worked.

In summary, I was looking for a new version of my favourite roleplaying game that captured the old elements whilst at the same time would possess a set of modern rules.

Presentation

Initial impressions of the new rulebook were positive. It is in full colour, hardback and is crammed full of text. Compared to the first edition, however, it is thinner and in places this does show, with some chapters feeling a little too brief. The artwork is impressive although it does illustrate the change of feel within the Warhammer world. Certainly the new cover gives the impression of a far more heroic setting. My only criticism is that some of the art for the careers is so dark that it is hard to properly make it out. With regards to the text, well, the high number of typographical errors has been well documented.

Setting

The setting was always going to be an issue with some WFRP veterans. I too have issues with the current WFB setting, however I realise that in order for WFRP to continue to exist then the two would need to be brought together. My problem, however, is rather than the two settings being brought together, the old WFRP setting has essentially been discarded. I personally would have liked to have seen some bridges being built between the two settings - admittedly this might have been an impossible task.

So what has changed? Well the most noticeable thing to me is it seems to have become

much more heroically dark - it's almost as if things have been purposely exaggerated. Muscle-bound warriors, flashy wizards, coupled with a perhaps excessively dark atmosphere. This difference between editions is perhaps best illustrated by some of the career illustrations. For example, compare the Apprentice Wizard illustrations between editions. The problem is that it feels slightly superficial, almost cartoony, and there is not much depth to this 'new look' world.

The world also seems to be much more magical than in the first edition. Whereas originally magic was relatively hidden from the public eye, now it is more visible, more flamboyant and magic users are much more obvious. In a sense, it's more that the style of magic within the Warhammer world has changed.

However, this is what the current Warhammer world is now like. For those preferring the old style setting, well there is plenty of source material out there.

A chapter by chapter breakdown of the book follows

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This brief chapter provides a quick introduction to roleplaying in the Warhammer world. It commences with a good short story, before providing an introduction to roleplaying for first timers. Finally the chapter ends with a brief text on the Empire. I had issues with this, mainly because the small font that is used made it very uninviting to read.

Chapter 2 - Character Creation

Creating a character is a fun part of any roleplaying game. The first edition worked well because it gave the player a large choice in careers and skills, rather than having a limited set of options. Thankfully this has been carried over to the second edition, and I think this chapter is certainly one of the best in the book.

Character creation is essentially the same as in the first edition. There are differences, notably the loss of some stats, and the fact that the races are now more balanced. I never found that Leadership was used that much in my games so it perhaps is a worthwhile removal. The merging of Initiative and Dexterity into a single Agility stat I am less sure about - though perhaps it is the new name that is used more than anything else. The loss of Cool, however, I do think is a mistake. To me it is equivalent to the San stat in Call of Cthulhu. By losing this, it feels like the horror emphasis is being reduced within the game. There perhaps also should have been some relationship between Toughness and Wounds - perhaps the Toughness Bonus gets added to your Wounds total, or something similar. I find it a bit strange that you can have a very tough character with very few Wounds.

With regards to race balancing, well, Elves were too powerful in the first edition. This has now been addressed, but perhaps in the wrong way. Maybe Elves should be more powerful given what they are, and instead balancing modifiers come into play via other means. Perhaps one or two disadvantages, or the equivalent. The races perhaps now don't feel unique as they once did.

After rolling Characteristics and a career, the chapter then focuses on ways to flesh out your character. This includes ten questions a player should think about, as well as a selection of background tables that can be rolled upon. Compared to most roleplaying games, what is provided here is actually quite good considering the space constraints. I perhaps would have liked more background options, and perhaps modifiers for some of the physical features (for example, penalties for being obese, ugly, etc), but overall I think the book provides a good starting framework.

Finally, I thought the notion of Fortune Points should have been introduced at this point rather than later in the Combat chapter.

Chapter 3 - Careers

The career structure has always been one of the distinguishing characteristics of WFRP. Thankfully this hasn't really changed in the new edition. There is still a large list of basic and advanced careers and a spider's web of career paths linking them together.

A lot of the careers are carried over from the first edition, however some old ones have been dropped and new ones added. In general these careers suit the new setting, which depending on your perspective may be a good or bad thing. I would have liked more non-combat careers, but then additional skills and rules would be needed to model them.

As with the races, the careers have been balanced. Whereas in the first edition you could essentially start in a career with very few options for progression; now all careers are pretty even. Again, I feel that the balancing could have been done using other means, as the careers seem almost too similar now. I personally liked the idea that some careers had lots of development potential, and others didn't. It made a party very heterogeneous, and I think perhaps this has been lost.

A good aspect of the new careers is that character development has been slowed. This was a real problem in the first edition, with characters quickly becoming powerful and then easily overcoming challenges. Thankfully this has now been addressed and frequent career changes should be less common. However, I would have also liked rules that allow a character to stay in one career on a long term basis. I've had players in the past who have been frustrated by the fact that the only way their character can progress is by changing careers, even if they don't actually wish them to. Optional rules could have been added that would allow for continued development within one career but for exponential experience point cost.

Chapter 4 - Skills & Talents

Within the second edition, character abilities have been broken down into Skills and Talents, with the latter representing a character's natural aptitudes. As before, characters can spend experience points and gain more over time. The use of these categories is a good idea and certainly adds to the game. I do have a couple of issues, however.

Some of the Talents seem more like skills than natural abilities, in particular the Specialist Weapon or Arcane Lore talents - a character would spend time learning both of these, so I don't really see why they are talents. The notion of Talents is also made more confusing by the fact that you can gain new ones over time - this doesn't really support the notion of them being natural aptitudes. It seems like these issues arise because, by default, Skills are linked to a Characteristic; skills that can't be easily linked to a Characteristic have as a result been classified as Talents. This perhaps wasn't the most elegant solution, and I think I would have preferred different types of Skill - those that are linked to a stat and those that are not.

Overall there are a fairly large number of Skills and Talents for a character to gain and this can provide a lot of variety. There are fewer than in the first edition (in particular quite a few of the non-combat skills have gone), but enough to cover the majority of situations.

Chapter 5 - Equipment

In a lot of roleplaying games the equipment section tends to be glossed over, typically just being a page of tables or equivalent. Thankfully, the second edition of WFRP has followed on from the first and provides a full detailed chapter on equipment. Overall this covers the key areas (weapons, armour, transport, food, clothing, services, etc) and is certainly sufficient for the majority of games. But if this isn't enough, the equipment list is to be expanded in a future supplement.

My only gripe with this chapter is that it also contains rules embedded within it. For example, rules for drinking are hidden within it, as are rules for illumination. Furthermore there are also additional combat rules (i.e. weapon qualities), that are introduced before the reader has even got to the combat chapter! If I wanted to find rules for drinking, the equipment chapter probably wouldn't be where I would first think to look. In the first edition such rules were separated out into the Gamemaster and Combat chapters respectively. It's a shame a similar approach wasn't taken for the new edition.

That aside, the rules for weapon qualities bring a new dimension to the game, and make weapons more than just a set of different damage ratings.

Chapter 6 - Combat

Although combat doesn't have to be central to a WFRP game, it does tend to be a key ingredient. Consequently a good set of combat rules is essential.

The bulk of the second edition combat rules remain essentially unchanged from the first edition. The same routine of rolling to hit, calculating damage, determining hit location, receiving critical hits, etc., still exists. All this is good as I think it worked well in the first edition. Combat is also more deadly as damage is now, by default, a D10. The main difference, however, is a change in round structure. Within the second edition a player's turn is now broken down into Actions, either one Full Action, or two Half Actions (there are also Free Actions). The rulebook provides a list of the different types of Action, for example to make an attack is a Half Action, running is a Full Action.

I've always viewed the key difference between board game combat and roleplaying combat to be the amount of flexibility that is available. Within a board game what you can do is largely constrained by the rules, usually you have a set of options to pick from. Within a roleplaying game such constraints are removed and a player can essentially try and do whatever he can think of. This perhaps represents my main problem with the new combat rules (in particular the notion of Actions), they are too constraining and play too much like a board game.

As a player I don't want to have to convert what my character intends to do into a set of specific actions. What I want is to be able to simply say "My character intends to do X,Y,Z", this is then negotiated with the GM, rolls are made, and the actions are performed. With the addition of Actions into the second edition, combat has now become very tactical and consequently less flexible - "I will spend my first Half Action moving 6 yards, and my second to attack". A good illustration of this is in the page of combat examples provided within the chapter - just reading these made me lose enthusiasm with the combat system.

The use of Actions also leads to some illogical or inconsistent situations. Some notable ones include: "If an attack only costs a Half Action, why can't I then make two attacks (two Half Actions)?" "My Attack stat is one - I can move (Half Action) and attack once (Half Action). My Attack stat is three - I can still only move (Half Action) and attack once (Half Action). My increased Attack stat only seems to be of benefit when I am standing still" "I can only parry once a round, no matter how good at combat I am. This means a farmhand can parry as many times as a highly trained knight" "My initiative is really low, this means that everyone else will be able to perform a full 10 seconds of actions, before I can even act." "I want to run up to the chair, grab it and use it to wedge shut the door, before stepping to one side. This should all be easily possible in 10 seconds, but wouldn't this come to four Half Actions if I followed the rules? (20 seconds)"

A lot of these problems are caused by the fact that Attacks and Actions try to co-exist. The issue, however, is that the number of Actions you can perform in a round is fixed (i.e., two Half Actions), whereas the number of Attacks a character may have can range from 1 to 3. Three attacks in two Half Actions is always going to require a bit of rule

fiddling!

As a result, I personally prefer the combat rules from the first edition over these new ones. The first edition rules might not have been fantastic, but they allowed for flexibility - which I think is vital.

Chapter 7 - Magic

There is a general feeling that the magic system presented in the first edition was a bit below par, in particular it was felt that the high experience costs hampered magic user characters. I, personally, have never had a problem with the old system for two reasons. Firstly, magic is supposed to be hard to learn, requiring years of study, and secondly, by the time a character has reached level 2, they are probably the most powerful in any adventure party anyway.

For the second edition, the magic system has been given a complete work over. Gone are magic points, instead to be replaced by a spell failure risk - similar to that as used in systems such as Deadlands. Likewise the need to learn each spell has been replaced by the learning of complete spell lists. The basic ideas for the new system, I actually think are very good and help create a fun mechanic with an element of risk thrown in. In some ways, however, it perhaps doesn't go far enough.

I would have liked to have seen increased risk from casting spells. A lot of the Tzeentch curse effects seem very minor, and the chances of rolling on the harsher tables are quite remote. My own experiences of running the game, is that the risk isn't high enough to stop over-casting. Likewise, I actually like the idea of the magic users having to track down grimoires/scrolls/teachers and having to learn spells one at a time. Although this is supported by the notion of Lesser Magic, it's a shame this wasn't extended to include the colour Lores. However, I wouldn't be surprised if such an option is added in the future Realms of Sorcery supplement.

The spells themselves certainly feel different to those included within the first edition rulebook, but again I think this reflects the change in setting. For those who prefer the old type of spells, well, the majority have been converted.

Chapter 8 - Religion and Belief

Religion plays quite a key role within the Warhammer universe and so a breakdown of the more common religions is important, especially as the first edition didn't really go into enough detail. Thankfully, for the second edition this has been addressed and a lot more information about the different deities, religious festivals, cults, etc, has been provided. Overall this is a very thorough chapter that adds a lot of flavour to the Warhammer world. Particular nice touches are the listed acts of contrition and rites of passage. My one quibble is to do with the chapter's structure - I think it would have been better if the section on Gods and the section on Religious Orders were combined. As it stands it feels like there is a degree of repetition between the two.

Chapter 9 - The Game Master

Of course the rulebook wouldn't be complete without a section for the Game Master. As with the first edition, this chapter presents advice and rules for actually creating and running an adventure. It provides a good set of adventure seeds that GM's can expand upon (although The Enemy Within seed seems familiar!), as well as advice on how to develop large campaigns. This chapter also discusses two other important topics, fate points and insanity. Fate points are essentially unchanged from the first edition and the advice on how to handle them is also similar. Insanities on the other hand have been given more of a worldly feel, with names such as 'The Glorious Corruption' being used. One thing I miss from the first edition, is a breakdown of the stages a character goes through when they gain an insanity. As it stands I can easily envision a player making their character totally change their personality in an instant, whereas I feel a slow

gradual change, as supported in the first edition, would work better. This is particularly important as some of the new insanities can essentially force a player to retire his character.

This chapter is also used to provide additional rules, although as mentioned previously I think many of the rules from the equipment section could also have been moved here. One section discusses how a GM can handle magic-using characters within their game, and how to stop the abuse of magic. I have major issues with the notion of Witchsight that has been introduced in this section. If a magic user can see magic auras then it means they will always be able to see who around them is also a magic user. Just imagine trying to play Shadows over Bogenhafen with a party containing a wizard. They would instantly be able to tell that Teugen and Steinhager were magic users - essentially ruining the adventure. I'm not convinced that the idea of Witchsight and its consequences have been fully thought out.

Chapter 10 - The Empire

Obviously to accompany the rules, you also need background material for the world. For the second edition rulebook this has perhaps taken a lesser role with both this chapter and the bestiary chapter seeming a bit sparse on information. However, unlike the first edition, separate supplements are being released to cover these aspects in detail. It does mean you will have to buy these books to be able to play properly.

What this chapter does provide is a brief history of the Empire, its neighbours and its enemies. Many veteran players will find that the setting has changed. A couple of notable points include Bretonnia turning into a country that is heavily influenced by Arthurian legend, Sylvania - a land that is populated by vampires, and an Emperor who is not the weakling that was presented in the first edition.

Clearly there will be some who are not happy with the changes, and I admit that I don't like some of them. However, we now essentially have the luxury of two versions of the Warhammer world to use - the one developed for the original edition, and the one that mirrors Games Workshop's current vision.

Chapter 11 - The Bestiary

One of the best aspects of the original WFRP rulebook was the bestiary - it was large and full of a large range of creatures. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, the bestiary in the second edition is less impressive - there are just ten creatures, and ten animals provided, and essentially no accompanying artwork. Given the upcoming bestiary supplement, this perhaps is less of an issue, except some core creatures are missing. For example, there is a Troll Slayer career within the book, but no stats for Trolls. Likewise, a Vampire Hunter career, but no stats for Vampires. On the other hand, there are stats for ravens and dogs. The lack of such creatures does make it difficult to claim that the rulebook is all you will need to play WFRP!

One problem with the first edition was creature stats and how they compared to the player characteristics. This problem stemmed from the fact that the percentage stat system was geared towards the characters rather than the creatures. This meant that for really powerful creatures, the stat system would fall down and become ridiculous. For example, it was more than feasible for a Dwarf to become as strong as a dragon. Unfortunately the same problem still exists within the second edition, with it still being possible for characters to have stats in the 80's. This gives very little room for powerful creatures to be represented. To me the simplest solution is to not place a cap on stats (i.e. allow them to go over 100).

The bestiary chapter also contains creature careers and a selection of NPC templates. The creature careers are an excellent idea and allow different 'levels' of creature to be developed. The NPC templates are also useful, but why weren't these careers made

available to players? Gambler, pickpocket, beggar and town guard all seem ideal as possible careers for players. In a way it is these types of careers that the second edition is actually missing.

Chapter 12 - Through the Drakwald

Rounding off the book is an introductory adventure. Not only does it help players get a feeling of the world, but it also acts as precursor to the upcoming Paths of the Damned campaign. The adventure is good, although it didn't grip me as much as the Oldenhaller Contract from the first edition, perhaps it lacked a horror element. Interestingly it tries to deal with the Witchsight problem, with one NPC in the adventure having mastered the art of hiding their aura from others. I can see clearly that this will be an art that all magic using NPCs will have learnt!!

Conclusions

It's quite difficult to give an overall opinion about the WFRP second edition. On the one hand there are improvements, but on the other there are new elements that don't work that well. A summary of my main thoughts:

What is good

In general character development has improved, with slower progression and a good selection of careers. The introduction of Talents is a good idea (though a bit buggy in places). The introduction of Weapon Qualities is a very good idea and brings another dimension to weapons. Combat is more lethal. The Naked Dwarf problem has been fixed. On the whole the magic mechanics is an improvement. Tzeentch's curse is a good idea. Good overview of religion in the Empire. It is largely compatible with the first edition (magic perhaps being the only concern). Generally good presentation.

What is bad

The inability to develop a character without changing careers - I think a modern roleplaying system should be able to support this. The Action based combat system - it is too clunky, inflexible and results in too many illogical situations. Great, however, if you want to use miniatures. Not great for narrative based combats. The risk of using magic isn't great enough. There is a danger it will be abused. Spells lores are bought all at once, rather than spells learnt individually. A lot of the spells feel like they have come straight from Warhammer Fantasy Battle. Witchsight has the potential to break adventures - its consequences don't seem to have been fully thought out. The Empire and Bestiary chapters are a bit brief - key creatures are missing. The creature stat scaling issue has not been fully addressed. The setting has become exaggerated heroic dark fantasy, and has lost a bit of depth as a result. There also doesn't seem to be as much fear and horror in the world as there used to be. The idea of Fortune Points supports this heroic feel.

There is no denying that the second edition is a good attempt at modernising WFRP. However, my personal opinion is that it won't go down in history as a fantastic RPG system - to me it's good, but it could have been better and it feels a bit like a wasted opportunity - some bits just don't seem to work that well. The fact that alternative rules have already been produced by fans demonstrates this fact.

I also find that the tone for which WFRP was originally known has sort of been lost in the new edition. The world no longer seems to have that creepy feel, the long shadows, the fear of being out at night on your own. The darkness is now more cosmetic and superficial. Saying that, it is still early days and future supplements may help to bring back the essence of what I see to be WFRP.