



WFRP2

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Reviewed by Wim van Gruisen

Personal Information

WFRP1 was, after a few choose-your-own-adventure books (the Bloodsword series - if anyone has the concluding part and wants to get rid of it, I'm interested), my first real roleplaying game. I bought the book in 1988, in a second-hand bookshop, spent the summer holiday in Luxemburg, reading it from cover to cover, then re-reading it several times more and being spellbound. When I returned home, I gathered some friends and tried it out - The Oldenhaller Contract was my first RPG session. Since then I've played and run a lot of games, but have always come back to Warhammer. WFRP is the only experience I have with the Warhammer world; I don't play WFB or other GW games, and haven't read any Black Library books.

Last year I participated in the playtest and was one of the most vocal people on the board). Subsequently, I was one of the people who wrote and published the Liber Fanatica, the first fan-written support for the new game. My involvement in that project was probably why John Foody invited me to write this review of the game. My long experience of WFRP1 makes it impossible to review WFRP2 as a standalone work, so in the rest of the text you will find many comparisons with WFRP1.

When the WFRP1 rulebook was published, the game was still looking for a voice of its own; that voice was found with the supplements, especially with the TEW campaign. My hope for WFRP2 was that the new game would continue from there, from the whole body of reference built up in those supplements and by the work of the WFRP community, instead of re-inventing the wheel.

WFRP2

The book looks stunning. A comparison with WFRP1 shows the progress that has been made in publishing technologies in the last twenty years. A full colour book, lavishly decorated with illustrations and filled to the brim with text. A smaller font than in WFRP1 and less white space seems to make the whole book fit in some 250 pages, where the old book needed over a hundred more. A better quality paper, which allows for thinner pages, complements the effect, making the new book a lot less massive than the first edition.

WFRP2 puts more stress on combat than the first edition. The cover shows a combat situation, the introductory story shows how a group of adventurers rolls from one combat into the other, many careers stress combat, and the combat system itself has become more tactical than in WFRP1. This seems to have been a deliberate design decision - in the playtest forum, one member of the design team explained: "Without combat, how can you have a grim world of perilous adventure?" Think about that - how on earth did we get a grim and perilous world in WFRP1, where combat was not so present?

The new system looks good. The system is recognizably the old system, but streamlined and with snags taken out. WFRP now only uses d10 and d100 rolls. While I have problems with a few details (especially with the new magic system), on the whole this is a big improvement on the old system. The same is not necessarily true of the background, however. Since that background comes forward in many of the rules, the new world of Warhammer forces itself into your game.

Chapter 1 is the usual "What is an RPG?" chapter and begins with an introductory story. WFRP2 is set in The Empire after an invasion of Chaos hordes, and by Sigmar, you shall know it! The story shows an adventuring party in the destroyed city of Wolfenburg, which first gets into a fight with Chaos beastmen. After the party kills those monsters, they get attacked by a group of Skaven. This is where the story ends, but the text picks the narrative up, using it as an example of an RPG session. The PCs also kill the ratmen and we leave the example learning that they are about to walk into an ambush. A grim and perilous world indeed. This chapter for me sets the very wrong tone of what WFRP is about.

Chapter 2 handles character creation. As in WFRP1, we can choose to have a Human, Dwarf, Elf or Halfling PC, but non-Human races have been significantly toned down (or toned up, in the case of Halflings) from first edition, making them more equal to Humans in terms of Characteristics. For those who still want to play non-Human races the book gives tips about non-Human psychology and how to roleplay those races. This is a welcome addition, which is also handy for the GM who wants to portray convincing non-Human NPCs.

The characteristics profile has been redesigned, with only eight main characteristics now: Weapon Skill, Ballistic Skill, Strength, Toughness, Agility, Intelligence, Will Power and Fellowship. Some old characteristics have been merged (Agility is comprised of the old Initiative and Dexterity, for instance), others (Move and Wounds) demoted to "secondary characteristics". Those that are left are more equally important than in the old system, and they are all d100 based. It is probably a shock to those used WFRP1, but the streamlining works well in practice. Starting values for these characteristics are determined by rolling $2d10+20$. This is the score for Humans, while the difference with non-Humans is a +10 or -10 difference on the basic score for certain characteristics. Then there is Shallya's Mercy (which, Shallya being a Human goddess, strangely enough also works for non-Human characters); if one of your characteristic scores is not to your liking, you can replace it with a flat 31 (+10 or -10 for the relevant non-human).

There are also eight secondary characteristics: Attacks, Wounds, Strength Bonus, Agility Bonus, Move, Magic, Fate Points and Insanity Points. Where the main characteristics form one uniform and neat whole, these secondary characteristics are a mish-mash. Some can be advanced and others not, some are derived from the main characteristics, others determined by rolling a dice, while still others get a beginning starting value, and for some of them a score needs to be kept; together they don't look like they belong together in one group.

There are no more career classes. Starting careers are now rolled on one large table, where players have little possibility of steering the process. As in WFRP1, the character immediately gains all the skills of the starting career and one free advance. The rulebook gives an option of rolling twice and picking one career, or picking one career without rolling, but I miss the guidance that career classes gave.

To round off the character, the chapter gives us ten questions to bring the character to life, which force the player to think a little about the character's history and personality. Finally, there are background tables, which determine a character's hair and eye colour, height and weight, first name and other important data.

Chapter 3 is about careers. Careers are the means by which characters develop throughout a Warhammer campaign, and this mechanic, one of the most characteristic and interesting features of the system, has fortunately been kept for the second edition. A career determines which skills a character can learn, which characteristics he can develop and, when he has done all that, to which other career he can grow. This system makes it possible to grow, with a few career hops, from a lowly Rat Catcher to a distinguished Scholar or Noble Lord.

This chapter gives us the rules about character progression through the career system, and the list of basic and advanced careers. For each career we get a short description, a sketch of what I guess is a typical representative of that career, a characteristic advancement scheme, talents and skills for that career, and lists of career entries and exits.

The selection of careers needs commenting upon. A first thing that people playing WFRP1 notice is that quite a number of WFRP1 careers have vanished. There are no more Hypnotists, Raconteurs, Seers or Alchemist's Apprentices. In total some thirty basic and advanced careers from WFRP1 do not appear in the second edition. Some of them have been amassed in "container careers"; Herdsmen, Rustlers and other outdoor folk are now gathered in the new Peasant career, and the beloved Gamblers, Raconteurs and Bawds are now generic Rogues, while a lot of former academic careers are now grouped together in the Burgher career. The exception is the warrior career class, of which almost no career is lost, even though there is not so much difference between Soldier, Mercenary and Marine, for instance.

The lost careers have been replaced with new ones. A number of these are rather peculiar. I have the suspicion they were taken from other, battle-oriented, GW games - the Kislevite Kossar, for example, appeared in a White Dwarf as a type of soldier in the Kislevite WFB army list. Early playtest documents also contained Sister of Sigmar and Wardancer careers, but these have been replaced by half a dozen non-combat basic careers like Bone Picker or Barber Surgeon. However, all together the number of combat-oriented careers has increased significantly (according to one poster at the BI forums, two thirds of all WFRP2 careers are combat-oriented, while this was just one third in WFRP1). I guess that the world has become more grim and perilous.

Despite this, there is a wide choice in character careers, especially in the advanced section, where we can now find interesting careers like Master Thief and Politician. The Wizard and Priest careers, while still following upon each other, have now been renamed. Instead of a bland Fourth Level Wizard career, we now get Journeyman Wizards, Wizard Lords, High Priests, and so on.

One thing that should be mentioned is the new political correctness with regard to basic careers. Where the WFRP1 basic careers varied widely in terms of advances, skills and trappings, WFRP2 careers have been moulded to a template. Every career now has about nine advances and twelve skills. There are no weak or strong careers anymore. This has probably been done to make sure that players would start at equal footing, but it takes away a lot of the charm of the old edition.

Chapter 4 deals with skills and talents. Each skill is coupled to a main characteristic, and to pass a test, one has to roll a d100, rolling lower than the skill's characteristic. Dependent on the difficulty of the task, one can get a bonus, which can be set anywhere between -30 and +30.

Until now I just mentioned skills, but we actually have both skills and talents now. Skills can be tested against, while talents give advantages to characters. They seem new, but were already present in WFRP1, disguised as skills. Think of old skills like Night Vision, Very Strong or Luck - they have become talents in WFRP2. And they have increased

significantly in number. This is partly because a number of talents are there to correct faults in the system. For instance, Dwarfs have Resistance to Magic, a talent that gives them +10 Will Power when they try to resist magic. Instead of this, they could have received +10 to Will Power in the first place, but (Will Power mainly being the characteristic that fuels magic) this would not fit that race. I still haven't decided whether this is a neat feature or just a series of patches.

A number of these talents are especially for animals. For instance, Perception tests are made against Intelligence. Since animals are generally more perceptive than intelligent, there is a special talent, Keen Senses, which gives +20 on Perception tests. The talent cannot be found in careers or for races; only animals can get it. It would have been nice if those talents had been marked "only suitable for animals" or something like that - that would make it easier to avoid them when creating custom NPCs or careers.

The skills themselves are divided into basic and advanced skills. Anyone can use basic skills, even if he doesn't have that skill. He just tests against half value. Advanced skills can only be used by characters who have those skills. Skills are stackable; you can get a skill a second or third time in order to get a +10 or +20 on skill tests. This is done by getting to a second and third career with that skill, and buying it every time. One cannot buy skills a second or third time in the same career, alas. It would have been nice to be able to create experienced thieves, mercenaries, and so on, without having to move them to other careers.

The combination of basic skills, advanced skills and talents works well. Where WFRP1 had about a separate resolution mechanic for every skill, we now have a nice, clear, uniform system that works in the same way for all skills and talents. It is a definite improvement.

Chapter 5, the equipment guide, starts with an elaborate arms and armour list that mentions different weapons and their characteristics. This is in preparation for the combat chapter, which follows. After that we get a lot more categories, each one well filled with items. We also get rules related to the categories. Rules for starvation are mentioned with the food category, and nearby we find rules for drunkenness as well. While nice, I would have preferred all these rules together, instead of spread out throughout the book. That would make it easier to find them all. Other than that, this is a very complete chapter. Special attention should be given to the slang, colloquialisms, and so on (a Gold Crown is called a 'Karl' in everyday language, after the guy whose head is on most of them), which detail helps to make the world more believable.

Chapter 6 deals with combat. We get a more tactical system now than the rather freeform one of WFRP1. The base mechanic is still the same, though; roll a d100 against Weapon Skill or Ballistics Skill, and if you make that roll, roll a die (d10 now) for damage, adding your Strength Bonus and subtracting opponent's Toughness Bonus and his armour if he has it. If you roll a natural 10 you may do more damage; make another roll against WS or BS and if that one also succeeds, roll another d10 and add it to the damage.

Damage is subtracted from Wounds. When Wounds reach zero, the character isn't dead yet, but further damage will lead to critical hits, which can lead to nasty wounds and mutilations, hacked off limbs and death.

Each round a character can choose between about twenty actions, basic and advanced, some of which take half a round and some of which the whole round. A character can perform either two half round actions or one whole round one. The only restriction is that a character can only perform one attack action or one spell casting action in a round. Likewise, a character can make only one parry action and one dodge action per round. Even a character with an Attack Characteristic of three can only perform one attack action per round, but one of those actions, the Swift Attack action allows to attack as

many times as your Attack Characteristic.

Add to this the different qualities of weapons and we get a very tactical system. A game within the game. Combat is also the section of the game that has raised most questions on the Internet forums. How well it works I cannot say - my group is still using the WFRP1 system, which we feel comfortable with.

There is some discussion about Fate Points and Fortune Points. Well known by experienced WFRP1 players, Fate Points are an exhaustible source of "extra lives". When you suffer so much damage that you would have died, you can spend a Fate Point to come through the episode alive after all, although probably damaged. Fortune Points are new. They are a renewable resource which allow players to let their characters do cool things - mainly during combat. Each morning they get replenished, up to the PC's Fate Points score.

I like the concept of Fortune Points. They make Fate Points more than just an "extra lives" stat, but something that actually has a role during play. Fortune Points also show that PCs are indeed more blessed by the gods than normal people, in ways other than those extra lives. The concept is cool. The actual mechanics, however, are a bit disappointing. There are clear delineations of when and how they can be used (mainly in combat) where a more freeform approach would have been better. Further, the points get replenished at the start of each new day - calculating players may thus find that, if they still have Fortune Points left at the end of the day, they can get into some hazardous action, as any points spent will be replenished very soon. There should be better solutions. If your game sessions tend to end with a climax, a better option would be to refresh Fortune Points at the beginning of each session, so that at the end of a session, during the climax, players are free to spend any Fortune Points there and then. During the run-up to that climax, they might then want to keep the points rather than spending them.

Combat and damage belong together, so damage is the next part of this chapter. We get rules for fire, suffocation, all kinds of diseases (with names like The Galloping Trots). This is where I would have expected rules for starvation and effects of alcohol as well, instead of in chapter 5.

Chapter 7 deals with magic. Magic in WFRP1 was rather uninspired, very costly in terms of Experience Points and generally considered one of the weak points of the game. It is clear that the designers wanted to change all that, and they succeeded. From what I have seen on the forums people are enthusiastic about the new system. However, I see a number of snags in there.

Magic in the Warhammer World is powered by the Winds of Magic, Chaotic energies which come in eight colours. Humans have Colleges of Magic, each College specialising in one colour and the magic it brings. The Human mind cannot grasp more than one colour and thus Human Wizards have to specialise. Halflings and Dwarfs cannot use magic at all, while Elves can handle the stuff much easier - but rules for Elf magicians will only appear in a forthcoming supplement. Next to this, the Gods grant their followers - Initiates and Priests - their own kind of magic, which is weaker than Wizards' magic. Again, this is only true for Human gods - the non-Human pantheons apparently don't.

A magic user has to select a lore to specialise in. At the start of his career he can learn one category of Petty Magic - either Arcane (for Wizard Apprentices), Divine (for Priests) or Hedge (for Hedge Wizards). This is a talent which, when acquired, immediately gives a Wizard access to a number of spells. At his next step in the career path, when the character becomes a Wizard or Anointed Priest, he can learn the Arcane or Divine Lore talent for his college or deity. This talent grants access to another ten or six spells respectively.

Each spell has a Casting Time (indicating how long the spell takes, measured in combat rounds) and a Casting Number. A character can roll a number of d10 equal to his Magic Characteristic, or fewer if he wants to, and try to roll equal to or higher than the spell's Casting Number. This is not without danger, however; if two or more dice give the same result, Tzeentch's Curse is triggered, which results in unpleasant side-effects of magic, which range from milk turning sour to Daemons appearing and attacking the mage. If the roll turns up all ones, the spell fails automatically and the character can gain an Insanity Point. Instead of Tzeentch's Curse, Priests run the risk of triggering the Wrath of the Gods, which works similarly.

There are a few ways to gain bonuses to the Casting roll and so increase the chance of casting a spell successfully. One is to spend half an action channelling magic; this involves a d100 roll under Will Power. If the roll succeeds, the Wizard gets a bonus equal to his Magic Characteristic. The other way is to use an ingredient. These ingredients are spell-specific and give a bonus between +1 and +3.

I quite like the principle by which the use of magic is limited. This is not done by artificial means like magic points, 'fire-and-forget' mechanisms or anything like that. Instead, each use of magic is dangerous and characters risk gaining Insanity Points or triggering Tzeentch's Curse. Each time the Wizard wants to cast a spell, he must consider whether it is worth the risk. Nice idea. However, in practice I feel it doesn't work like that. Tzeentch's Curse sounds dangerous, but only becomes so when triples or quadruples are rolled. The effects for doubles are more annoying than dangerous. Further, I liked the idea that the more dice you use, the more danger you run, but the "all ones" fumble rule negates that idea. If you roll many dice you run the risk of triggering Tzeentch's Curse, if you roll few, you run the risk of gaining Insanity Points.

Another thing is that Wizards of different colleges, and Priests of different gods, tend to become rather stereotypical. Meet a Wizard of the Bright College and it is easy to predict which spells he can cast - all wizards of that College get access to the same spells, because they have bought the same talents. According to the book, wizards of each College even change in appearance to become more like the stereotypical Wizard of that College. This is a wonderful thing for a battle game, but in a roleplaying game stereotypical characters are rather boring.

A third problem is the use of the dice. The basic mechanism of WFRP2 is to roll a d100 under a Characteristic or Characteristic-derived target number. In combat you roll a d100 under Weapon Skill or Ballistic Skill, and then a d10 to see the damage. When casting spells, however, the d100 roll is optional at best; instead you roll a number of d10 and add the results, trying to roll over a target number. During the playtest the designers explained that this was "because magic should not be boring and predictable." If that was the design instructions, I don't think that using a bell curve mechanic is the right way to accomplish that. Besides, according to this argument the designers consider normal task resolution and combat to be boring and predictable. If that is the case, I think that something has gone wrong with the design objectives.

Fourthly, we have spell lists with rigid and inflexible spells. These were in vogue twenty years ago, but RPGs have developed since then and more interesting systems have appeared now. Moreover, the spells themselves are rather bland and uninteresting. There are several variations on basic forms, and some spells are ludicrous or ineffective. The Petty Magic (Hedge) spell Ill Fortune is a minor curse which gives a -1 to -4 modifier to the target's d100 rolls, a modifier which is next to useless. And do we really need more than ten different variants of the magic missile, and almost as many healing spells? Couldn't we have had a few generic versions of those as lesser spells, and more varied ones in the colour spell lists?

All in all, the concept of how magic should work in WFRP2 was very interesting. The way that it was actually worked out, however, could have been much better.

One last, small, miss concerns the layout. It would have been neat if all spells for a lore could have fitted on one page. In that case, a simple copy of one page per lore would give players all the spells of their Wizards at their fingertips.

Chapter 8, about religion, is one of the more outstanding chapters in the book. It describes the Human gods of the Warhammer World (or at least those venerated in The Empire), but it does more than that. The chapter opens with a description of folklore, where rites of passage (birthdays, marriage and such) and yearly celebrations and festivals are described. This is very good stuff, giving people a view of the everyday life of someone living in the Warhammer setting.

Next there is a description of each Human god, explaining what they stand for and how they are believed to interact with their followers. This section, which looks a lot like the one in the first edition rulebook, is followed by descriptions of the organisations and customs of the cults of the different gods. Again, this is good stuff and very usable in a roleplaying campaign.

Non-Human deities get short shrift, though, with less than a page reserved for the gods of the Elves, Dwarfs and Halflings together. The gods and cults of Chaos get slightly more space with just one full page, which ends the chapter.

The biggest shock to WFRP1 players is the discontinuity between the two versions. This is most obvious in the treatment of the Old Faith, which seems to have disappeared. That there is no mention of gods like Stromfels and Haendryk (the god of Merchants) is not so shocking, since in WFRP1 they were only introduced in supplements. However, it seems like Ranald, the god of Thieves and Tricksters, has taken over some of the aspects of Haendryk, which is rather strange. Khaine, the god of Murder, has also left the Human pantheon and now only appears in the Elven one (in the playtest documents Khaine was described as being an aspect of Khorne, but fortunately the playtesters managed to convince the designers to leave this issue unresolved). A WFRP campaign where religion plays an important part will have to make some major adjustments in its setting to incorporate the new religious landscape, or just ignore it and carry on with WFRP1 religion.

Chapter 9 is the Game Master's guide. Pretty much the basic fare for roleplaying games, neither extremely good or bad. This chapter also outlines two elements specific to WFRP: Fate Points and insanity. As for the first, Fate Points work as they did in WFRP1. They get explained better, though, and the book gives more, and needed, support to GMs new to the game.

The second WFRP element, insanity, gets a good overhaul. The mechanism works the same; terrifying moments give a character Insanity Points, and once he has gathered enough of them, he runs the risk of getting an insanity. The insanities themselves, though, have changed. In WFRP1 insanities were named by their clinical names and got a short description. WFRP2 insanities have names like Blasphemous Rage or Knives of Memory. All the insanities have quite an impact on the character and the way he behaves in society. In some cases this has quite some influence on the scenario.

Chapter 10 presents the setting. The game is set in The Empire, the most powerful nation in a renaissance-like, Europe-like continent with mad gods and monsters. This chapter describes The Empire, its history, politics, and the enemies that threaten it, then finishes with a brief overview of the other nations of the Old World (a.k.a. Warhammer Europe). What is mainly missing here are suggestions for roleplaying adventures and roleplaying hooks, things that were present in WFRP1. Some other mistakes are made; it

is for instance inexcusable that Marienburg, the greatest port city in the Old World, is hardly even mentioned here, and neither is the Wasteland. And while a two-page map of the Old World is provided, it is laid out pretty badly, with most of the important information, and most of The Empire (the default setting) falling away in the seam between the two pages. Some strange artefacts can be found on (hardly legible) smaller maps set in the main map. In the map of Middenland, for instance, right to the south of Middenheim you can see something called The Emperor's Hammer, which is the name of an inn close to a battlefield in the WFB Storm of Chaos campaign and not, as the map suggests, a town or village (thanks to Tom Hallyar for pointing that out).

Just like in other sections, this part of the WFRP2 background differs from the old version, which can hinder your campaign if you decide on switching.

Chapter 11, the Bestiary, is nowhere near as complete as the bestiary in WFRP1. Only barely sufficient for an RPG, this chapter's main function is to make the buyer aware that he should buy the Bestiary supplement as well if he wants to use monsters or do more than just very basic wilderness adventures.

A nice touch are 'monster careers', the Brute, Sneak and Chief, which have characteristic advance schemes and skills and talents, can be added to any monster in order to differentiate them.

Another nice touch are profiles of common inhabitants of the Old World; beggars, gamblers, sell-swords, town guards and seven more. They're easy to use and can quickly be inserted in a scenario. With WFRP1 we had to wait till the supplements (The Enemy Within and Power behind the Throne) for such lists. However, entries for those lists were smaller and more complete, and copies could easily be kept nearby for consultation. Now we need two and a half pages for just eleven profiles - far too few for proper use.

The final chapter is an adventure entitled Through the Drakwald. This is the kind of adventure where the actions of the PCs have hardly any effect on the scenario; they may just as well sit by the side and eat popcorn, for that won't change much of what will be happening. The less said about it, the better.

The book closes with Chris Pramas' Designer's Notes, an index (yay!), templates that can be used for magic spells during miniature combat, a rather boring character sheet that cannot be used to record the loss or gaining of Wounds, Insanity Points and Fortune Points, and an advertisement for other GW products. This shows a final layout flaw; the templates are printed on the back of one of the index pages, so that they cannot be cut out without destroying the index. I cannot help but wonder why those templates were not put on one leaf with the advertisement; would people really rather damage the index than the advertisement for this?

In conclusion, my opinion is that WFRP2 is an improvement over WFRP1. Mechanics have been updated and streamlined, faults with the first edition have been removed. It is not all positive, however. Discontinuities with the WFRP1 background and the stress on grim and perilous combat are annoying or worse. Magic is based on an interesting idea, but the actual mechanics have holes in them. The chapter on religion is great, but the bestiary and the chapter that describes the setting leave GMs wanting to get the source book supplements for these subjects. The introductory adventure is weak, but that should not be a great problem for Warpstone readers, who can find enough good to great adventures to replace it with.

One final mention of sloppy design is that the book is not self-contained or complete. We have Troll Slayers and Giant Slayers, but the bestiary doesn't contain Trolls or Giants. We have Vampire Hunters, but no Vampires. Characters, like Seamen and Marines, can come from "the great port of Marienburg" and even have knowledge of that place and the

surrounding Wasteland, but those places don't even get two lines of description in the rulebook. The designers promised that the rulebook would be complete, but it isn't. You will need supplements. And, as a lot of people already remarked, it is likely that one of the best supplements is already on your bookshelf: your copy of WFRP1.