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One inch equals 6 feet: Neo-tribe definition in “braille scale” armor modeling

What's the fastest way to climb the social ladder? For Wang (2005, p532) it is the “tiered logic” of consumption: “...for those situated lower on the hierarchy, there is no faster way of acquiring social prestige than emulating the lifestyle of those higher up.” In this consumption based scenario, those lower on the social ladder, through the affiliation with consumer brands embraced by those higher up, can embark on an upward trajectory and thus change the perception of their social status. This is lifestyle culture, or “elective sociality” (Maffesoli 1996, p 86), it is one where meaning is situational, less about a goal and more about the act of interacting within social stratifications. It is neo-tribalism.

The neo-tribalism described by Wang (2005) is overt—it starts with marketing strategies aimed at drawing individuals to a specific lifestyle and ultimately manifests itself through a very public display as the targeted individuals buy in. Whether it be through physical artifacts such as clothing and automobiles, or temporal lifestyle choices, such as where you eat or who you hang out with, it is the public recognition of neo-tribal affiliation that motivates individuals hoping to change their social standing. However, what if, there is no marketing campaign promoting the social hierarchy of a specific brand, nor any public recognition of the neo-tribe's existence. Can a neo-tribe be formed against a brand rather than around one, all the while knowing that it will never elevate itself to the apex of the social hierarchy?

I'm going to explore these questions through plastic modeling, a hobby that can trace its origins to the late 1930s when the English company Frog introduced their 'Penguin' line aircraft kits (van Lune 2008; Wikipedia 2014). Early model kits such as Frog's were crude by today's standard, however the basic elements are the same—plastic parts requiring adhesive for assembly, instructions, and decals housed in a box with a (most often) artistic representation of the subject—paint and tools were not included. As the industry expanded through the second half of the 20th Century, so did the number of manufacturers and their offerings. What began with a few airplanes produced by Frog has proliferated to include armor (tanks and ground vehicles), ships, cars, real space, science fiction, figures, and more.

The act of modeling is an individual effort most often performed at home, however, for a social dimension, modelers often belong to local or regional clubs, many of these are under the umbrella of the International Plastic Modelers' Society (IPMS). In the U.S., IPMS is represented by a national organization which is subdivided into regions and chapters (IPMS/USA 2014) where members conduct club meetings and competitions. Outside of modeling clubs, the local hobby shop (LHS in modeling parlance) has been a traditional hangout to both shop and socialize; however, with the transfer of commerce away from the LHS to online retailers, forums and blogs have flourished to replace the disappearing LHS as the social cornerstone of the community. Underlying this is the paradox that while modeling is in its “Golden Age” in terms of quality of kits and accessories, and breadth of subjects, the hobby as a whole is seeing a decline in participation due to changing tastes of younger generations¹.

Traditionally considered the largest political and economic group bound by geography (Evans-Pritchard 2004, p 67), a tribe represents the largest territorial community (Kuper 2004, p 85). In this sense, scale plastic modeling is a tribe within the greater global social construct which in turn transcends physical boundaries to form international online communities. The primary modeling tribe can then be broken down into secondary segments which generally align themselves around subject (airplanes or armor), these are then broken into tertiary segments defined by scale (1/72 or 1/48)² or historical period (World War II or Post-War). With each of these “successive level[s] of segmentation” the modeling “groups become smaller and more cohesive” (Kuper 2004, p 85), each regarding themselves as a separate community.

As a secondary segment, armor modelers are a huge, devoted community that specializes in tanks, armored vehicles, and dioramas. Kits are available in four traditional scales—1/16, 1/35, 1/48, and 1/72 with 1/35 being the scale of choice as it offers the broadest selection of subjects and accessories. In 1/35 scale there are numerous opportunities to make a competition worthy model out-of-the box or kits can be super detailed to no end³. The armor secondary segment is further broken into tertiary segments, each with their own area of interest. While there is some movement between secondary and tertiary segments, most modelers tend to be loyal to their overall primary tribe, in this case armor.

The members of one tertiary segment—1/72 scale—on the other hand, tend to exhibit more loyalty and less propensity to move around. Referred to by its practitioners as Braille Scale (BS), 1/72 armor modelers assemble kits approximately half the size of their 1/35 scaled brother, thus they have less detail. In addition, with fewer manufacturers producing kits, only a fraction of the subjects and detailing choices are available. In armor modeling, 1/35 is clearly the mature, handsome brother who often ignores the 1/72 younger sibling. It is this tension that has inadvertently created the BS “benchmark for membership” (Wang 2005, p 533)—an acknowledgement that 1/72 scale will always be second tier to 1/35. Thus, it can only be expected that for BS modelers hoping to pilfer some of the attention of the larger scale, “there is no faster way of acquiring social prestige than emulating the lifestyle of those higher up” (Wang, 2005). To do so, many BS modelers approach their kits with the same level of construction, detail, and painting as 1/35 scale. Unfortunately, reality of scale wins out and it is virtually impossible for a BS modeler to attain the level of detail and painting found in 1/35 scale⁴. The end result of this tension is a ritual of sorts where the recognition of their inferiority has “no other goal than to strengthen the small group against the large” (Maffesoli 1996, p 93).

In the online BS community, this innate sense of inferiority has expressed itself in the form of a neo-tribe—the Dragon Hater (DH). “Characterized by fluidity, occasional gathering and dispersal”, the neo-tribe's “fluidity” allows individuals to change costumes according to personal tastes (Maffesoli 1996, p 76). In other words, the stability of an armor modeling primary tribe is superseded by the DH neo-tribe's organic composition where individual's collective agreement is central to structure.



One inch equals 6 feet: Neo-tribe definition in “braille scale” armor modeling, *continued*

In order to understand the origin and characteristics of the Dragon Hater and the root of their disenchantment, one must understand the Chinese model manufacturer Dragon. Founded in 1987 (which is new by major manufacturers standards), Dragon has continually expanded their 1/35 scale armor model range to be the most extensive on the market. In addition to the broad subject range, they can count as their accomplishments a number of manufacturing innovations, high level of kit accuracy and detail, and options for each subject. When Dragon started making 1/72 scale armor kits in the late 1990's many of their kits were based on prebuilt die cast—a “model” for guys that don't know how to make a models. In addition, their 1/72 kits also have inconsistent attention to detail and subjects are limited; this is reasonable considering that 1/35 kits hold a much greater market share than 1/72. In fact, many of their 1/72 kits are half the price of the 1/35 models which are twice the size and may have upwards of five times as many parts. In addition, Dragon has shown itself to be predisposed to market kits of WWII German subjects, many of which have been kitted by other manufactures or represent prototypical vehicles. Dragon's marketing strategy is part of a volatile mix from which the DH emerges—predisposed to inferiority due to their inherent relationship to 1/35 scale, the DH feels slighted by Dragon leaving the DH to ask why Dragon doesn't offer them the same level of detail, subjects, and options as their 1/35 scale kits?

Recently, on the armor modeling website Missing-Lynx, which draws a worldwide audience, a perfect example of Dragon bashing occurred. In an innocent thread, Charles raised the question if Dragon will produce a model for the 70th anniversary of D-Day (Fig. 1). From here, Jakob makes the often heard complaint “...it will be German stuff?” (Fig. 2), followed by Andrew commenting about the high price (Fig. 3), and finally Kenneth speculating that it will be a prebuilt (Fig. 4). The only thing missing from this thread are the other two often heard complaints about Dragon—lack of detail, and Dragon styrene tracks⁵. Here, it is clearly seen that once a DH comments, others soon follow, none of which, however, offer solutions. But what is really amazing about the responses to Charles' threads is that the complaints are based on pure speculation about a model Dragon may or may not produce. This is the hater, the individual that is looking for any opening to criticize Dragon, to find fault with their product, and in turn, offer unsolicited opinions as to what Dragon should be making and how. An interesting aspect of this attack is that, objectively looking at the quality of Dragon's kits, they are one of the top three manufacturers of 1/72 armor models, if not the best.

While the example above is specific to Dragon, the DH reflects Maffesoli's (1996) “fluidity” where a hater can move between brands searching for an opening to criticize. Interestingly, DH's rarely take shots at smaller manufacturers whose products are inherently inferior, instead they prefer to aim their commentary at the major players. According to Maffesoli (1996, p 76), this behavior can be seen as the “characteristic of sociality” where an individual can change “costumes...according to their personal tastes”. On one hand the DH is a skilled modeler capable of overcoming what can be gross short comings in a small manufacturer's product, but on the other is outraged by minor shortcomings from manufactures of Dragon's stature. The DH's *raison d'eter* (Maffesoli 1996, p 76) is to be a critical voice against the major manufacturer, it is to avoid taking a defined position or offer solutions and instead form a neo-tribe whose association is against brands rather than around them—it is a goalless existence preoccupied with opposition.

Recently, to build excitement for the upcoming release of their 1/48 scale German Bf-1096, the manufacturer Eduard (2014) created an online “intensive information stream” documentation showcasing behind the scene looks at the manufacturing process. By letting consumers into the design process, Eduard is demonstrating their extreme care and detail in order to create excitement. The novelty of their approach is clearly a hairsplitting of the social hierarchy into market segments (*sensu* Wang 2005, p 533). While it will clearly help create excitement for their kit and differentiate it from competitors comparable ones, the strategy itself is not far removed from the typical model marketing strategy of celebrating a kit's features. This style of marketing lacks emotion, it fails to recognize the aspirational desires of the modeler—purchasing one manufacturer's model over another's of the same subject illustrates a desire to move up the social spiral. In other words, “Not only can I afford the newest, most accurate, and best, I recognize the importance of having the newest, most accurate, and best”.

A strategy such as Eduard's would lack effectiveness in the Braille Scale community because, if a BS modeler wanted the most accurate and best kit for their money, they would simply move up to the secondary segment of 1/35 scale kits. Instead, this approach could ignite a new round of criticism by the DH neo-tribe. So, if one exists to oppose, if a group of modelers are connected by their inherent sense of inferiority, how can an armor model manufacturer market to a group which occupies the lower social strata? Since the neo-tribe identifies through interest and values, a manufacturer can take a tiered participatory design approach when developing new braille scale models. First, the manufacturer solicits subject from their target market; once a subject has been selected, the manufacturer again solicits the target market to determine what details, accessories, and options said kit should include. By undertaking this strategy, the manufacturer essentially has turned the decision making to the consumer, thus illustrating that they are in fact listening to them. One of the byproducts of this would be a self policing within the BS segment—it will be harder for DH to gather steam to complain if they themselves were part of the design process. Manufacturers can undertake another marketing strategy by sponsoring trophies in regional and national competition. Traditionally BS is represented by fewer categories than 1/35 models, thus, by sponsoring BS trophies and not 1/35 ones, a manufacturer sends a clear message to the armor modeling segment of the importance of BS modeling.

Ultimately, by understanding the stratification of a hobby such as plastic modeling, a manufacturer can market kits that not only fulfill the requirements for success (accuracy, detail, and options) but also make emotional connection to their consumer. By engaging their consumers online with nuances details and participatory design, the manufacturer is acknowledging their consumers expertise—“We heard you, so we will do...”. This strategy could shift individuals from being haters to be brand followers, ultimately, it would be a recognition of the tertiary segments inherent worth.



One inch equals 6 feet: Neo-tribe definition in “braille scale” armor modeling, *continued*

Footnotes

Modelers like to blame the decline of younger members in the hobby on video games. I, however, believe it is just the natural change in free time preferences between generations. In addition, I also believe the decline is partially due to the community itself—modelers aren't the hippest bunch of guys you'll ever meet.

Central to the plastic modeling hobby is scale, which is the size of the model in relation to the actual subject and is represented by two numbers delineated by a forward slash “/”. For example, 1/72 scale means that 1” of model equals 72” of real subject, thus, an plane with a 56’ real life length (=672”) would be a 9.3” long (672/72) model. This same plane in 1/32 scale would be 21” long (672/32). As with anything, there are exceptions, however, as an overview for military models based on number of subjects per scale, airplane models are most often found in 1/72, 1/48, 1/32 scales, armor in 1/72 and 1/35, while ships are found in 1/700, 1/350, and 1/144.

Out of Box refers to the act of making a model using nothing more than was provided in the box. This is in contrast to super detailing where a modeler has free reign to add as many or few third party or scratch built details. In competitions, there are often special awards for modelers who assemble a kit “Out of Box”.

Painting a convincing human eye in 1/35 scale is hard, but in 1/72, it is near impossible. There are many details such as wires, rivets, and ammunition that can convincingly be built in 1/35 but are very difficult to achieve scale proportions in 1/72.

Another criticism leveled against Chinese manufacturers is copying, where a Chinese manufacturer bases their model of one previously produced by (most often) a European manufacturer. While there is some truth to this, it isn't necessarily against the law and, in my opinion, these allegations are racist in nature.

The German Bf-109 is possibly the most kitted model aircraft ever—it has been manufactured by some many companies, in so many scale that when a new kits is released, the most common comment is “Not another BF-109”. Knowing this sediment is deep in the modeling community, I image Eduard's information stream is an attempt to downplay the nay sayers.

Figures

1. <http://www.network54.com/Forum/47210/message/1396648885/Will+Dragon+release+a+Normandy+model>
2. <http://www.network54.com/Forum/47210/message/1396649062/if+they%27ll+relese...>
3. <http://www.network54.com/Forum/47210/message/1396706444/Who+cares->
4. <http://www.network54.com/Forum/47210/message/1396714324/Plus.....>

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Resources

- An Example of an individuals' modeling page: <http://panzerserra.blogspot.com.br/search/label/Char%20FCM%20C%20bis%20-%20Super-heavy%20French%20tank%20%20prototype>
- Discussion groups on Missing-Lynx: <http://missing-lynx.com/dg.htm>



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Will Dragon release a Normandy model

April 4 2014 at 6:01 PM

[Charles Martin](#) (Login [nikon3](#))
Missing-Lynx members

1.

Something to ponder. With the 70th anniversary of the Normandy invasion, will Dragon release a new model in conjunction of the anniversary? I certainly hope so, possibly allied figured maybe or more likely a rehash of what has already been released. Charlie

[Return to Index](#)

if they'll release...

April 4 2014 at 6:04 PM

[Jakub Jastrzebski](#) (Login [Hawk86](#))
Missing-Lynx members

2.

Response to [Will Dragon release a Normandy model](#)

...why it will be german stuff? 😊

Jakub

[Return to Index](#)

Who cares?

April 5 2014 at 10:00 AM

[Andrew Smith](#) (Login [Sq.Squarehead](#))
Missing-Lynx members

3.

Response to [Will Dragon release a Normandy model](#)

Even if they did release something (which they no doubt will) I wouldn't be able to afford it until it turns up at a sensible price on eBay!

Plus.....

April 5 2014 at 12:12 PM

[Kenneth Overby](#) (Login [Ken-Overby](#))
Missing-Lynx members

4.

Response to [Who cares?](#)

if they did.....
it would only come out as a "pre-Build" in time for the anniversary,
and the kit (if it comes) would be months to years later.