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The Critique of Colonialism in *Warhammer 40,000*



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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Theoretical framework	3
Analysed corpus	5
Key markers of British colonial logic	7
Colonial conflict and the logic of superiority	8
The critique of colonialism in <i>Rogue Trader</i>	13
Factions and conceived space	14
The critique of colonialism through companion relationships	18
Conclusion	21
Acknowledgement regarding the use of AI	23
Works cited	23
Ludography	27
Appendix	28

Introduction

Recently, *Warhammer 40,000* has experienced a sudden rise in popularity, largely driven by the successful release of *Space Marine 2* (2024) alongside its feature in an episode of Amazon's *Secret Level* anthology series. This excitement was only boosted by the announcement of a standalone *Warhammer 40,000* show with the involvement of actor Henry Cavill (Ruiz). The enormous sci-fi franchise spanning multiple media platforms is on the brink of mainstream popularity. At first glance, the Universe of *Warhammer 40,000* might only seem like a darker and more extreme twist on other popular sci-fi franchises. While that observation has some ground, a closer inspection reveals the universe's deep cultural roots that go far beyond simple mimicry of other works. At the very heart of this universe lies a deep foundation of colonialism, its mechanisms, and its legacy. This research examines the connection between *Warhammer 40,000* and colonial logic, with a particular focus on English colonialism. Utilising transmedia theory and science fiction studies, it aims to establish *Warhammer 40,000* as a transmedia universe deeply rooted in an expansive colonial context. The present paper first outlines the foundations of English colonial logic before exploring specific parallels, such as the Anglo-Zulu War and a miniature diorama produced for UK Games Day '97, which serve as a clear example of this connection. Additionally, the essay examines *Rogue Trader*, a 2023 video game by Owlcat Games through the lens of spatiality and otherness, highlighting how it critiques the very colonial logic on which the universe is built. The analysis primarily focuses on the gameplay features, companion interactions, and romance. Ultimately, I contend that while *Warhammer* draws heavily from the imperialist mindset, it simultaneously critiques the very systems it portrays, offering a complex reflection on colonialism.

However, before we set out to explore how the universe draws from and criticises colonialism, it is essential to summarise what *Warhammer* is and what it is about. *Warhammer 40,000* started as a miniature wargame where people buy, assemble, and paint miniature soldiers (See Fig. 1) and play simulated tabletop battles, produced by British company Games Workshop in 1987. It quickly became the most popular wargame around the world, spawning many forms of spin-off media such as other wargames, video games, books, and recently even a streaming platform for original shows. Initially, the game mainly provided background literature about its universe in its rulebooks. It was not until 1997, when Games Workshop's publishing division, Black Library, was founded, that they started working out the bulk of the background literature. *Warhammer* literature often deals with absurdly dark, gothic, and dystopian themes. This tone led to the creation of the "grimdark" subgenre of literature. The main army or faction the

literature focuses on, is humanity or as it is referred to in *Warhammer 40,000*, “the Imperium of Man.” It is a galaxy-spanning empire ruled by an eternal God Emperor, who sits in a state between life and death on the throne of Terra. He is the master of mankind, a general of vast armies ranging from the common conscripts of the Imperial Guard to the superhuman soldiers of the Space Marines. Ever since his “death”, the Imperium has been decaying, slowly turning into a rotting carcass of an empire held together by nothing more than ignorance, blind faith, and hatred. Alien species are also represented just as often, and in great detail alongside humanity most of them also draw from a post-colonial background, as perhaps the biggest and most consistent theme of *Warhammer* is failing empires (Baumgartner 36-43).

Theoretical framework

After this short introduction to the history of this wargame, I proceed to map out the theoretical framework required to analyse such a complex fictional universe. Firstly, *Warhammer* is a transmedia setting, as demonstrated through multiple examples before, it uses various media to tell its vast number of stories. A transmedia story expands over various media platforms, with each new text providing a new piece of information to the overall narrative. Ideally, each entry in such a franchise is a self-contained story, so there should be no need to read a plethora of books to enjoy the story of a game, or vice versa. However, reading across the media achieves a deeper understanding and appreciation that drives the reader to consume more of it (Jenkins). Although transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding has its roots in the late 19th – early 20th century mass media culture (Wolf 141) a prominent example of which being *The Wizard of Oz* (Freeman 2364), it has only become a decisive phenomenon in the late 1990s with the appearance of the *Star Wars* movies and the books and video games produced around it, and, as Henry Jenkins (95) demonstrated it, with the release of *The Matrix*. A lot of modern media universes are designed according to this marketing and storytelling logic, like Disney’s Marvel universe, or *The Witcher* franchise to name a few notable examples. The specificity of the *Warhammer* universe lies in the fact that it has a ludic centre, as opposed to other transmedia worlds with generally filmic starting points (Baumgartner 38). This type of storytelling, however, poses a real challenge to academic analysis as multiple literary or ludic sources need to be taken into account to draw specific conclusions. While *Warhammer* lacks a single overarching story, pieces of information about the universe’s factions, events, characters, and history are dispersed across many books, games, and other forms of media. Parallel to that, Games Workshop employs a plethora of writers who, while they consult with one another,

might have differing views on how certain characters should be represented or how certain events exactly unfolded, and are often given a free hand on how they interpret parts of the universe, which may cause inconsistencies about characters or events.

This also brings up the ever-present problem of retroactive continuity or *retconning* for short: the case of later stories changing details or even our entire interpretation of previously established facts in earlier stories (Clover). This is an obvious issue when trying to piece together information about the *Warhammer* universe. One thing might be stated as a fact in one book while that information might be entirely contradicted in another. One more problem with retconning is that it is not always as clear as one might expect whether something is a retcon or a case of an unreliable narrator, making it even more difficult to make solid deductions. Overall, great care should be taken when trying to handle any transmedia narrative, especially of this size, and this essay aims to take all the precautions necessary to avoid any issues transmedia analysis can cause.

A further important aspect of this research is the connection between science fiction media and colonialism. According to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, imperialism and science fiction have a special connection; there is a clear correlation between nations that produce the most science fiction literature and those that attempted to build a colonial empire through imperialistic projects. Science fiction, he argues, fulfils a culture's desire to reflect on its own imperial practices, projecting the colonial logic of its respective nation into a speculative setting (Csicsery-Ronay). Csicsery-Ronay's argument is especially relevant in the context of the *Warhammer 40,000* universe: while the setting displays a diverse variety of colonial logics, a specifically British colonial logic, I argue, makes up the bulk and the foundation of this representation. This is not surprising given the origins of Warhammer as a product of a UK-based company.

Within this transmedia sci-fi universe, my analysis will be informed by Henri Lefebvre's classic triad of space theory, which was originally conceptualised to explain how space is socially produced. Lefebvre argues that space is not merely a physical entity but is constructed with underlying social and cultural dynamics in mind. In the context of video games, the triad of space has been adapted to explore how virtual spaces are produced and experienced (Aarseth and Günzel). The framework outlines three types of space – perceived, conceived, and lived space. The perceived space is the visual representation of the game world, it is the virtual environment the players see and interact with, including but not limited to graphics, in-game

maps, menus, etc. Conceived spaces consist of the rules, mechanics and narratives that define how players interact with the game world. Meanwhile, the lived space is the emotional and psychological response players have while interacting with a game world. This space is produced when the perceived and conceived spaces merge and transform into lived experiences through immersion or emotional connection to the game. However, for the purposes of this research, which will later analyse how gameplay mechanics define player interaction, the most relevant part of the triad is the conceived space. Game designers create systems that dictate how spaces function, like gravity, resource management, item statistics or the consequences of a player's choices on the game's story. These design choices influence players' expectations and how they interact with space.

. When it comes to games with complex colonial themes such as real-time strategy games (e.g. the *Age of Empires* or *Total War* franchise), they tend to naturally lend themselves to representing imperialistic tendencies through conceived space inasmuch as they employ mechanics that reward resource extraction and territorial expansion. Through these mechanics, the players are encouraged to take part in colonial activities through the design of the game reinforcing a narrative of domination. For example, in *Empire: Total War* (2009), the win conditions for the Grand Campaign of Britain require the players to control regions of the world that were historically part of the British Empire, compelling the players to engage in an expansionist narrative (Mukherjee). While real-time strategy games are perhaps the most common genre to employ mechanics revolving around empire-building, the triad of space framework in the context of colonialism can be applied to other genres of video games as well, like the one concerning this research: roleplaying games (Felczak).

Analysed corpus

Even though, as mentioned above, the *Warhammer 40k* universe engages in various media, this paper is limited to the analysis of two specific and distinct media forms in the transmedia storyworld to illustrate its engagement with colonial thinking in general and British imperial logics in particular: a miniature diorama depicting the so-called “Massacre at Big Toof River”, and the video game *Rogue Trader*.

“Massacre at Big Toof River” diorama was created for UK Games Day 97’ a yearly gaming convention sponsored by Games Workshop and was also featured in the 218th issue of *White Dwarf*, Games Workshop’s official wargame magazine (Sharman) (See Fig. 2). This

magazine article will be one of the media the present paper analyses, along with photos taken by attendees of the event (Practical-Purchase-9) and the programme booklet that contained a description of the diorama's events (See Fig. 3). The diorama depicts a battle between two of the most iconic factions of the franchise, providing stark visual imagery that aligns with the thesis of the essay. Besides the imagery, the programme booklet provided for the event gives a very detailed report of the unfolding battle on the diorama. Down to the backgrounds of the participating armies and tactics employed on the battlefield. Despite the challenges posed by the event's lack of documentation, the available information from the magazine, booklet and participants' photos of the diorama provides a unique insight into how the setting reflects colonial themes. It is important to mention that the photos taken for *White Dwarf* and the photos taken by fans at the event of the diorama and the booklet are quite old and low resolution and do not exactly match up. This is a perfect example of the inconsistencies one can encounter while analysing *Warhammer* media. Thus, due to lack of material at this current time it is very difficult to piece together how the armies and terrain were meant to be positioned on the battlefield. However, all pictures are of the official diorama assembled by Games Workshop employees, so while some pictures might differ in their depictions they were most likely assembled with clear intent in mind.

The second media artefact, *Rogue Trader*, is an isometric role-playing game developed and published by Owlcat Games, released in 2023 (Rogue Trader). The studio is well-known for its work on previous video game adaptations of tabletop roleplaying games, such as *Pathfinder*. *Rogue Trader* is based on the tabletop roleplaying game of the same name (Watson et al.), which was originally considered as a source for analysis, alongside *Rogue Trader* books (Hinks), during the early stages of the research. However, after further transmedia analysis these media sources were deemed inadequate for the purposes of this research, as they emphasized the adventurous aspects of being a Rogue Trader, rather than the logistical and colonial ones. Naturally *Rogue Trader* utilises many traditional RPG mechanics, the most important of which being equipment and perk-based progression, relationship values and alliances, companion NPCs and a "karma meter" (see for instance Christiansen, Knoll). However, the game boasts a great number of gameplay features less prevalent in RPG games, of particular importance to this essay is the colony management and expansion system of the game. These features combined compel a strong case for the critique of colonialism in the setting. This analysis focuses on the game's pre-1.3 build with the *Void Shadows* DLC installed, as the game has announced future DLC-s and updates it would be impossible to keep up with them, thus this

essay represents a snapshot in the game's life. The game was also modded with Toybox in order to better understand its inner workings. The mod grants the player access to add any in-game item or perk, freely adjust levels, and most importantly see the in-game code behind dialogues that would otherwise remain hidden. However, the mod makes no changes to the story, gameplay mechanics ensuring the integrity of the game experience and by extension, the study.

Key markers of British colonial logic

As the essay previously established, specifically British colonial logic makes up a big part of the imperial procedures of *Warhammer 40,000*, therefore it is essential to establish the key markers of British colonial logic that are relevant to the game before examining the previously mentioned media forms. British colonial logic is a complex topic with a long history however, we can identify some clear markers that are of relevance to this essay.

British colonial logic is largely based on racial, cultural and/or religious superiority as opposed to for instance Soviet colonisation, where the colonised states perceived themselves as being in a culturally and technologically more developed position than their invaders (Annus). The British often viewed themselves as a “civilising force” believing it was their moral duty to impose their values and culture on the colonised, or in their eyes less civilised people. For instance, it was not an uncommon practice for missionaries to establish schools in colonies for the purpose of transforming the cultures of Africans and Asians. The racial side of this sense of superiority played a key role in the exploitation and subjugation of colonised societies, meanwhile, the religious side played a key role in justifying these acts. Colonisers believed themselves to be bearers of Christianity and believed they had a mission to spread their faith at the expense of local religions (Plange and Alam). Following this notion that some groups are inherently more civilised than others the concept of otherness forms as a way to reinforce these hierarchical ideas. Othering is a process by which colonisers categorise those they perceive to be different, everybody who is not them is the other. This leads to the Other being dehumanized and categorised as inferior and or primitive, even animalistic or child-like in some instances (Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska and Denkovska). The two most prominent forms of dehumanization are animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization. Animalistic dehumanization occurs when others are perceived as lacking qualities that distinguish humans from animals, such as culture, self-control, and intelligence. For example, the simianization of Africans falls under this category of dehumanization (Smith). Animalistic dehumanization also has a

subcategory called demonizing dehumanization, which goes beyond depicting humans as animal-like and portrays them in a monstrous manner. Mechanistically dehumanized people are perceived as lacking traits like warmth and emotions, central components of human nature. They are also more prone to become victims of labour exploitation (Stanley and Kay). Another form of dehumanization relevant to this paper is dehumanization by quantification and statistics. By reducing people to statistics through accounting, individuals are dehumanized into mere numbers, which sanitizes suffering and death. While these forms of dehumanization are not exclusive to British colonial logic, they played a significant role in its rhetoric (Power and Brennan).

In addition to a sense of racial-cultural-religious superiority, exploitative economic practices and structures established during colonial rule were also a key part of colonial practices, especially the British Empire's rule. Colonies often served as suppliers of raw materials, boosting the British economy while diminishing local communities, these relationships were often maintained through coercion and unfair legislation. It is important to note that these economic relationships were entirely profit-driven. While there were ideological justifications for colonialism, as discussed before, it was economic interest that dictated policies even if they transgressed dogma (Plange and Alam). This led to a system of constant expansion and annexation, which was frequently accompanied by military action. Military power was essential for establishing and maintaining order over colonies. The empire frequently employed military force to suppress uprisings and enforce their rule which required great military force and investment (Armies of the East India Company, Boer War). Of course, these are not the only types of colonial logic used by British colonialism; for instance, trusteeship (Jain), divide and rule (Rahman) and forced economic dependence (Starrs, Croke and Muellenbroich) are also significant. However, these are not relevant to the purposes of the present paper and will therefore be omitted.

Colonial conflict and the logic of superiority

Having established the relevant markers of British colonialism, we can now examine how *Warhammer 40,000* mirrors British colonial practices, beginning with the aforementioned tabletop diorama: "Massacre at Big Toof River." The fighting armies depicted in the diorama are the Orks, a xenos race of big green brutish fighters based on classic fantasy orcs with a sci-fi twist, and regiments of the Imperial Guard, one of the most relevant being the Praetorian Guard. At first sight, the latter army is more relevant for the scope of the essay as the regiment

is heavily based on Zulu War-era British soldiers. This striking resemblance immediately becomes obvious when we compare the uniforms of the respective armies, as both wear the exact same style and colour uniforms from the bottom of their boots to their shiny white heads (See Fig. 4). The similarities do not end at visuals, even the way the Praetorian Guard is described as “*grim red-coated soldiers*” is a homage to the nickname of the British army soldiers of the time, aptly named after their scarlet-coloured garments. Their name at first sight might seem like a reference to the bodyguards of the Roman emperor, however, I would argue that it is more likely a reference to the city of Pretoria which is the South African Republic’s administrative capital. Moreover, the city was taken and formerly occupied by British forces during the Boer War in 1900, further tying the fictional regiment to its real-life counterpart. While the reference to the emperor’s guards is certainly relevant, I argue given the previously established ties to red coat regiments makes their name being a reference to the city more likely.

As for the battle depicted on the diorama and its description in the booklet, it closely resembles the initial invasion and two major battles of the Zulu War: The Battle of Isandlwana and The Defence of Rorke’s Drift. This resemblance is almost uncanny to the point it seems like an almost beat-by-beat recreation of the actual battles, down to the employed military tactics, miscalculations of Imperial forces, relative army sizes and outcomes of the battles. In the following section, first, the essay will give a step-by-step account of the actual battle, touching upon the most important events to give context to the following excerpts from the booklet and provide a sense of the depth these resemblances go.

Initially, Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford split his invasion force into three columns, planning on surrounding the Zulus. The right column crossed first near Tugela River after that crossed the left column from another direction, then came the centre column led by Chelmsford himself crossing the Buffalo River at Rorke’s Drift in the process (Zulu War). Here’s the booklet’s description of the initial stages of the Praetorian invasion:

Al' Ter-Ay split the regiment into three columns. The first of these (Force Kaz-Ter) [...] was commanded by Captain Am' Kaz-Ter of Tallarn. The second column (Force Gliene) consisted of Company C of the 24th Praetorians. The third column (Force Ter-Ay) was commanded Al' Ter-Ay himself [...]. Al-Ter-Ay's plan was to use Force Kaz-Ter to smash into the Ork camp in a devastating surprise attack. As the Imperial tanks piled into the Orks, Force Gliene [...] would sweep round the Ork camp, blocking off the Orks' retreat and cutting down those that tried to escape.

By the time that Al' Ter-Ay and the rest of the regiment's slower-moving troops arrived, all that remained would be to mop up. It was not a bad plan, but it relied on the Orks being too weak to fight back effectively against Force Kaz-Ter. (The Praetorian IG Reference)

The similarities in battle tactics immediately become obvious regarding the division of the armies, crossing of rivers. The only major difference is that Chelmsford's role is distributed among the three commanders: Kaz-ter, Al-Ter-Ay and Gliene. Each of their situations resembles a different part of Chelmsford's leadership during the real-life battles. The strength of the enemy forces was not only underestimated by the Praetorians but the British too, as the Zulu proved to be great in number and well-equipped. At the Battle of Isandlwana, Chelmsford established a temporary camp, but did not encircle his wagons at the expense of his defence, the majority of his troops were killed in the battlefield (Zulu War). After the battle Chelmsford's army retreated to Rorke's Drift mission station, where the survivors from Isandlwana stood their ground and successfully defended themselves from the Zulus (Defence of Rorke's Drift). Here the booklet's timeline does not exactly match the timeline of the actual battles; certain situations are mixed up between the first and the second column.

And then, as this torrent of green-skinned destruction smashed Force Kaz-Ter's front, the reeling Guardsmen were hit by an even heavier volume of fire from the rear. [...] The result was a massacre. [...] but when combined with Al'Ter-Ay's fatally flawed plan it lead to a disaster for the 24th Praetorians. It is estimated that within 3 minutes of the trap being sprung Force Kaz-Ter had suffered 85% casualties. (The Praetorian IG Reference)

As we can see the Praetorian soldiers suffered a crushing counterattack just like their British counterparts. The similarities between the real battle and the fictional event continue in the next paragraph:

[...] above the river valley Force Gliene was also under attack... [...] The Orks had appeared from nowhere quickly surrounding the Praetorians and forcing them from their Chimeras. Gliene formed the vehicles into a circle, from behind which the grim red-coated soldiers under his command prepared to sell their lives as dearly as possible. [...] As the Orks swarmed up the hill the Praetorians hit them with volley after volley of tightly controlled lasgun fire, while the multi-lasers of the Chimeras cut bloody swathes through the Ork ranks. [...] Yelling their guttural battle-cries

and with a complete disregard for their own safety that impressed even the battle-hardened warriors from the Hives of Praetoria, the Ork warriors hurled themselves again and again at the rapidly shrinking circle of Guardsmen, until, finally, there were no humans left alive. (The Praetorian IG Reference)

Here we can see the events of the battles were split up between the two columns but aside from a few differences, like the fictional transports were successfully formed into a circle meanwhile the real-life wagons were not. The fictional events are strikingly inspired by the real-life ones, especially the crippling casualty rates and the general outcome of the battle. Rorke's Drift is uniquely represented not just by the textual narrative, but by the way a part of the diorama is assembled. Force Kaz-Ter and its' surrounding terrain is positioned in such a way that it is similarly constructed to descriptions and especially paintings of the Defence of Rorke's Drift (Defence of Rorke's Drift) (See Fig. 5 and 6). Again, the discrepancy between the photos and the description of the diorama needs to be considered, because according to the booklet it was Gilene's last that was more similar to the Defence of Rorke's Drift. Whoever is supposed to hold the line against the Orks, it is evident that this segment of the diorama is based on the events of Rorke's Rift in its depiction of the Praetorians, who are heroes holding out until their last dying breath. It was not just the course and outcomes of the battles that happened similarly, but the entire conclusion of the war. Despite initial successes, at the Battle of Ulundi the Zulu with their king captured by the British, were defeated just like how the Orks were defeated by the 24th Praetorian regiment after the disappearance of their leader (Anderson 6-7, The Praetorian Ig Reference, Zulu War).

While the parallels between the Praetorian guard and the British army might be apparent at first sight, as the reader progresses through the story of the booklet, the connection between the Zulu people and *Warhammer's* depiction of the Orks becomes clearer too. The Orks are depicted as a nomadic group consisting of tribes not too dissimilar from the Zulu family groups and semi-nomadic northern Nguni groups (Zulu). Moreover, both the Zulu people and the Orks mainly relied on melee weapons for warfare, highlighting their supposed technological inferiority. The Zulu did not have enough guns to arm every fighter and did not have any training regarding those firearms, making them ineffective at ranged combat (Zulu War), this is also a trait *Warhammer Orks* possess. Overall, there is a big contrast between the Praetorians and the Orks based on the British logic of superiority. Just like in descriptions and depictions of the battles of the Zulu war, the Orks are represented on the diorama as a never-ending brutal horde of enemies (See Fig. 7), just like the Zulu from the perspective of the British (See Fig. 8)- a

classic colonial trope that contrasts "civilised" forces with "barbaric" others. Meanwhile the Praetorians, much like the British soldiers of the time, are portrayed as noble, disciplined heroes (Anderson 17) holding the line against an overwhelming horde of savage enemies. [OBJ] This is evident in the visual elements of the diorama and the language used in its accompanying description.

This parallel is of course not without its problems in today's context because it perpetuates harmful colonial-era stereotypes by depicting the Orks, a violent and uncivilised, alien race as analogous to the Zulu people. This dehumanizes the Zulu, not only in an animalistic but demonizing way, meanwhile glorifying British imperialism and reducing the violent nature of colonial oppression to a simplified narrative of noble British soldiers fighting a group of savage enemies. The diorama risks encouraging these negative stereotypes about Indigenous people. By today's standards, this depiction is culturally insensitive and reflects outdated views on imperialism.

While the diorama is certainly problematic with its depiction of colonial conflict by using the Orks as an analogue to Zulu people making it seem like the British are perfect, heroic and civilised, this is not exactly the case. The accompanying booklet of the diorama offers a nuanced critique of the British Empire with a grey depiction of the Praetorians. Their home world is described in a very negative way, as an overpopulated, dirty and generally unpleasant place, stricken with gang violence, horrible working conditions and corruption:

Praetoria is a heavily populated Hive World that lies in a system close to the Imperial naval base at Bakka. The overpopulated Hive-Cities of Praetoria are renowned for their squalor and degradation and produce some of the toughest gangers on any of the hive worlds in the Imperium. This vast population work as little more than slave-labour in the huge factory complexes of Praetoria, producing the goods that have made the planet (and its rulers) one of the richest in the Imperium, with a huge fleet of merchant craft that trade all over the Segmentum and beyond. (The Praetorian IG Reference)

The description of the planet possessing a great merchant fleet mirrors Britain with its gigantic fleets (Rahman). This negative description of the planet Praetoria serves as a critique of Britain, highlighting the corruption and horrible working conditions of the time (Engels). While this does not erase the insensitive depiction of the Orks in the diorama, it adds depth by presenting

Praetorians, the analogue of the British Army less of a heroic and civilised army, rather a grey and nuanced group of people.

The critique of colonialism in *Rogue Trader*

Now that we have analysed how the diorama represents and critiques colonial logic, it is time to turn our attention to the second media artefact this paper examines. The video game *Rogue Trader* offers a unique insight into many aspects of the *Warhammer 40,000* universe through its unique narrative and mechanics (*Rogue Trader*). This is all achieved by putting the player in the role of a high-ranking individual within Imperial society, which is rare in most *Warhammer* media. In *Rogue Trader*, the player takes up the mantle of one of the highest-ranking nobles within the Imperium of Man with the same name. Rogue Traders are hereditary nobles granted a sacred document that gives them the utmost power, the Warrant of Trade. This document affirms unprecedented freedom and autonomy within the Imperium. Freedom of trade is a big part of this, allowing them to deal with pirates, mutants and even xenos, which would be otherwise forbidden by Imperial dogma and label the individual a heretic. This document also grants them the right to explore beyond the Imperium's borders, to conquer and colonise newly discovered planets gaining exclusive trade rights with these newly discovered cultures.

Rogue Traders become the rulers of these worlds, letting them have direct control over the world's resources and politics. This naturally leads them to accumulate great amounts of wealth and resources, which they use to gain political, economic and most importantly military power. Many Rogue Traders have personal armies, which they use to conquer and keep order on their planets. This is represented by gameplay features and narrative episodes as well, where you continuously have to put down rebellions through military actions. This overreaching authority granted to them by the Warrant of Trade resembles the power of the East India Company which was created to exploit Southeast Asia and mainly India. The company directly ruled parts of India and had a private army, which was used to suppress the Indians. Even though the company's rule was heavily criticised, as long as the profit was flowing in, the British were inclined to overlook the company's abuse and brutality, which again aligns with the rights granted to Rogue Traders allowing them to transgress dogma for profit (*Armies of the East India Company*).

Factions and conceived space

The influences of British colonial logic can be seen in large parts of *Rogue Trader*'s conceived space. One of the many traditional RPG elements *Rogue Trader* borrowed was equipment-based progression, which means that the player needs to get better and better in-game weapons, armour and other items to successfully progress through the game. Players can get these items through various gameplay mechanics, most of which support a narrative of colonial expansion like the aforementioned trading rights. The connection between these gameplay mechanics and a colonial expansion narrative is not unique to *Rogue Trader*; many games within the same genre carry these colonial undertones (Felczak). In the game, five factions are available to trade with, two of which completely transgress Imperial dogma as they are pirates and smugglers of xenos technology. However, trading with these factions lets the player acquire very powerful and unique items, which they would otherwise miss out on without the transgression of Imperial dogma. A condition for trading with these factions is to gain enough faction reputation with respective factions, gaining their trust so they sell the player better and better items. In order to gain faction reputation and buy items the player needs to sell weapons, armour and other kinds of loot to their representatives, creating a need for conquering. The conceived space of the game continuously pushes the player to conquer and plunder more and more areas and eliminate enemies for additional loot they can sell.

Another system tied to trading, representing the profit-driven side of British colonial logic is the profit factor system. Profit factor replaces a traditional currency system in the game as it does not represent an actual currency, but the relative value of the *Rogue Trader*'s Warrant, the resources and opportunities it can call upon. To purchase items alongside faction reputation the player must also acquire a certain amount of profit factor after which the item can be purchased without spending any of it. Profit factor can also be acquired through a plethora of ways, like dialogue choices, recruiting companions, completing contracts and most importantly through colony projects, another distinctive system of the game.

The colonies are an integral part of both the narrative and the gameplay by offering numerous interaction and advantages through colony projects and choices. Colony projects are a series of investments in infrastructure, policies and governance a player can make to gain items, profit factor, resources, faction reputation and exclusive perks. These perks, just like in-game items give bonuses to the player character and companions, making colony projects which give perks a worthwhile investment. Most colony choices require expenses, mostly resources

but in some instances profit factor or even faction reputation as well. First off, gaining resources can be achieved through multiple ways, by completing colony projects, completing contracts and in most cases setting up extractors on newly discovered planets. This further reinforces the drive for exploration, especially because the map is completely empty when starting the game. The player is forced to take up an expansionist mindset to discover new star systems for resources and even to do the main questline of the game and as mentioned before to gain loot they can sell to factions.

Another interesting facet of the resources is the classification of people as a resource, essentially erasing the identity of people through accounting practices turning them into nothing more than statistics. This is a classic case of dehumanization through turning victims into statistical categories (Power and Brennan). The views of the Imperium on people are emphasized by the description of the resource: “The foundation of any rule are workers and soldiers, a faceless and nameless mass of rank and file. In the eyes of the Imperium, they are merely a resource, easily producable and replacable”. Secondly, faction reputation and profit factor can be both requirements and rewards for certain colony projects, making these systems dependent on each other completely. The game weaves together all these mechanics, from trading through profit factor to colony management creating a gameplay loop that reinforces a narrative of colonisation. The developers incentivise the players to take up the role of a colonising force through the conceived space of the game. This is further supported by an in-game quest titled “A New Ruler”, which requires the player to complete a contract, establish a new colony and complete a colony project of the highest difficulty. This interconnected system and quest ensures that colonisation is not just a narrative element in the game but an unavoidable, essential aspect of the gameplay.

The conceived space is important for the narrative of *Rogue Trader* because this space is not only responsible for the representation of colonial logic but also for its criticism. What achieves this criticism is the game’s conviction system, which is Owlcat’s original spin on the traditional karma meter that can be seen in most other RPGs. During specific dialogues or choices regarding the fate of the protectorate, the player is usually presented with three choices, each belonging to a distinct conviction: *dogmatic*, which is also described as puritan, *iconoclast* and *heretical* which are described as radical. These convictions represent different ideologies, each influencing the story and gameplay in their ways. After choosing one of these dialogue options, the player gains a pre-determined amount of points in the selected conviction. By hitting a determined threshold of points the player can achieve new ranks in their conviction in

the following order: follower, adherent, votary, fanatic and zealot being the highest rank requiring five hundred points. Each conviction rank grants the player a unique buff. Hence players can gain many benefits by hitting specific levels in their chosen conviction, for example gaining access to restricted weapons, armour and perks, or even gaining special dialogue options. However, after reaching the votary rank in a conviction, the player is locked out of advancing the two other convictions beyond the rank of adherent and simultaneously preventing them of access to the benefits of these convictions. It is important to mention that many choices in the game are not tied to any convictions, yet represent the same mentality, meaning that even though some choices do not grant iconoclast conviction points, they can still be classified as such choices. On a further note, the heretical conviction is of no importance for the essay and is disregarded, as it offers no significant insight into the critique of colonialism and can largely be summed up as a series of generic evil choices.

The dogmatic conviction represents an infallible belief in the laws of the Imperium and the Emperor himself and having an unfettered hatred for the enemies of mankind: xenos, heretics and mutants. Choices that perpetuate an imperialistic mindset most often fall under this conviction. For most of the Imperium, this is the default way of thinking. The conceived space of the game reinforces this, as such mentality aligns with how most NPCs act and react to our decisions throughout the story. For example, NPCs react negatively if the player has xenos companions in the party, with some dogmatic companions constantly bantering with the xenos if they are in the same party. This is no wonder as xenos are victims of demonizing dehumanization as they are represented as primitive monsters by Imperial dogma (Stanley and Kay). Moreover, dogmatic conviction choices are further represented as the norm by making them the first in the order of choices presented and by making the majority of the available companions; seven out of the available eleven, usually have at least one rank in dogmatic. It is also important to emphasize the religious role of dogmatic conviction. At higher ranks, the player character assumes a missionary role, and at the zealot rank, the masses even demand the Rogue Trader to be proclaimed a living saint. This reflects the religious side of the logic of superiority (Plange and Alam). Thus, the dogmatic conviction, which represents an imperialistic way of thinking is set up as the default in the *Warhammer* universe through the narrative and conceived space.

The iconoclast conviction serves as the counterweight and critique of dogmatic choices, and the corresponding systems it mimics. Followers of the conviction can be described as believing in human life, freedom and the power of goodwill, a willingness to seek out common

ground and compromise rather than turn to unrelenting destruction. While the dogmatic conviction is presented as the norm for the Imperium, the iconoclast conviction is the underdog. The conceived space of the game makes the unpopular nature of the conviction apparent by the way most NPC-s react to these choices, essentially suggesting that the Rogue Trader is a lunatic. Additionally, iconoclast choices usually come second in dialogue and as opposed to the abundance of dogmatic companions, only three companions have ranks in iconoclast, two of them overlapping with dogmatic companions with higher dogmatic ranks. In terms of the narrative, acting in an iconoclast way with companions results in better, more stable endings for them. However, I argue that the conceived space of the game also sets up the iconoclast conviction as offering advantages that present not only a morally but a mechanically better alternative to dogmatism, criticising the corrupt imperialistic system of the Imperium. It should be noted that these mechanical advantages are not as prominent as to make all other convictions unpickable from a pure gameplay standpoint as this would be antithetical to the very nature of RPG games and the grimdark themes of *Warhammer*. While these advantages are small, they tip the scale towards the iconoclast conviction being a mechanically superior choice.

One of the ways the game critiques colonial logic is interestingly enough the progression system of the game. As previously established, the game incentivises players to take up a coloniser role to get better gear. This does not change but is instead counteracted by items which are locked behind the iconoclast conviction. By making iconoclast companions sparse but iconoclast armour and weapons plenty, the game incentivises the player to become an iconoclast and fully utilise these items. Additionally, the best conviction-bound perks are also all iconoclast, especially the zealot and fanatic ones, making pursuing the conviction even more worthwhile.

Players are also incentivised to take an iconoclast approach by colony projects as well. Some projects are not only locked behind resource expenses and faction reputation, but conviction rank as well. There are three conviction-locked colony projects for both the iconoclast and dogmatic, one of these projects requiring a rank of adherent, meaning they are not mutually exclusive. However, two of these colony projects respectively require a conviction rank of fanatic or higher meaning they are mutually exclusive, so the player needs to make a decision based on the benefits they provide. Here iconoclasm emerges as the more advantageous conviction once again, providing a set of better perks and items. Moreover, to execute one of the iconoclast colony projects other than the conviction rank there are no expenses, meaning the rewards of the colony project are free. The game also provides a short

flavour text for each colony project, emphasizing the narrative significance of the projects. One of the projects for instance is a hospice for out-of-order servitors, lobotomised cyborg slaves who are treated as nothing more than tools by the rest of the Imperium (See Fig. 9). This is the most literal representation of mechanistic dehumanization, as these people are not only perceived to lack emotions, but they are actively turned into unthinking, unfeeling robots whose sole purpose is to work for eternity (Stanley and Kay). By executing this project, the player can actively fight the dehumanisation of these people.

The critique of colonialism through companion relationships

Companions are an integral part of *Rogue Trader*, acting as fighters, advisors, friends and even potential romantic interests thereby blending gameplay and narrative. Each companion offers a unique set of interaction, story and gameplay benefits exclusive to them. Companions are windows to different sides of society, backgrounds and life in the *Warhammer* universe. They show us their slice of life through personal quests not only serving to drive the narrative but to provide mechanical rewards like experience points and in-game items. In terms of game mechanics, some companions provide further advantages for example providing access to exclusive perks which are not available to other companions making them irreplaceable. The mechanical advantage of the advice companions can give during conversations, should also not be overlooked. During dialogue having a certain companion in the party can give us an option to use their unique skills, for example using the reputation of someone to frighten the enemy. Additionally, during colony events, the player can usually decide between three options on how to deal with the current event. These default options each give a different reward in return for losing security, efficiency or complacency on the planet. However, the player can seek the advice of their companions, the options they provide often give the same reward as the default option without the downsides, or these options can give completely new rewards too (See Fig. 10). I argue the game incentivises players to become iconoclast through the unique benefits certain companions provide.

As previously mentioned, seven out of the available companions have at least one rank in the dogmatic conviction. The remaining four companions - Yrliet, Marazhai, Jae and Idira - can all be considered iconoclast through their nature and convictions. Keeping these companions around goes against everything the dogmatic conviction stands for as they either deal with or are themselves “enemies of humanity.” Marazhai and Yrliet both belong to a xenos species called the Eldar, lacking any conviction ranks due to their alien nature. However, they

can still be classified as iconoclast companions due to them being xenos, moreover the player can hand them over to the inquisition – powerful secret police of the Imperium with a prominent role in making sure the subjects of the empire comply with the imperial dogma – gaining dogmatic conviction points in the process. Idira is an unsanctioned psyker, part of a mutant strain of humanity possessing magical powers. While Idira also lacks ranks in the iconoclast conviction, her presence in the Rogue Trader's retinue goes against Imperial law. As an unsanctioned mutant she becomes a victim of otherness, with NPC-s and even other companions seeing her as dangerous and a disgrace to humanity. Additionally, just like the two xenos companions, she too can be handed over to the inquisition for dogmatic points. Finally, Jae is a smuggler specialised in xenos technology, an unspeakable crime by dogmatic standards. Just as the player has the choice to dispose of the previously mentioned companions; she too can be subject to statutory execution at the hands of the player. However, this does not grant any points in the dogmatic conviction. She also possesses an adherent rank in iconoclast with no ranks in other convictions, making her the most iconoclast companion based on the conviction system.

The personal quests of these companions also lead to the accumulation of even more iconoclast points. For example, to keep Idira around, the Rogue Trader has to see the humanity in her and stops her execution by another dogmatic companion, resulting in the player gaining iconoclast points. The benefits these companions provide are substantial as Yrliet, Marazhai and Jae all have exclusive combat-related perks. Idira is not left without a unique feature either, as the Rogue Trader can ask her to tell the future at the beginning of every act. This augury is very vague and cryptic but can still prove beneficial to keen players. Additionally, these four companions offer advice during colony events very frequently offering at the very least better alternatives to the default colony options if not the best advice with the most benefits. Overall, by keeping these companions around, the player forgoes gaining points in the dogmatic conviction, and act in an iconoclast way all for the gameplay benefits they provide. The game is conceived in a way where all these benefits add up to incentivise the player to act in an anti-colonial manner.

Another subtle critique of imperialism can be seen in the previously mentioned companion relationships and potential romances the player can develop with certain companions. Through interacting with them, the player triggers in-game flags, influencing the decisions and ultimately the ending the companions receive. These flags are hidden in the game's code, however with the help of a modification called ToyBox, they can be toggled to

become visible under dialogue choices. Usually, there are two to three paths a companion can be led onto with an additional two paths in case the player decides to romance the companion. Most of the time these paths range from a bad ending to a good one, and the additional romance endings are always a choice between a true romance or a flawed one. The research is only going to focus on two of these romances for the sake of relevance to the topic of colonialism, these being the romance options with Cassia and Yrliet.

Cassia is part of a strain of noble human mutants called navigators; without them interstellar travel would be impossible for humanity. To romance Cassia, the player has to take part in a sweet courtship romance, respecting her boundaries by avoiding any aggressive advances, which is antithetical to the otherwise domination-centric narrative of the *Warhammer* universe. However, this is not the only criticism her romance plot provides. Even being an irreplaceable noble, Cassia is constantly a victim of othering. Due to her mutations, she is feared and looked down on and treated with disgust by the ship's crew making her self-conscious about her looks. To romance Cassia, the *Rogue Trader* has to appreciate and reassure her of her unique beauty. But Cassia falls under another type of dehumanisation as her young age is constantly emphasized by the game, making her seem child-like even though she is very competent. The hidden flags tied to the three distinct paths Cassia can be led onto by the player are: `Cassi_Hatred`, `Cassi_NotMe` and `Cassi_Freedom`. Hatred flags are acquired when the player acts in an unnecessarily cruel way towards her. By leading her onto the Hatred path she starts to hate both herself and her house, a rather sad conclusion to her story. NotMe flags are even more interesting as they are acquired when the *Rogue Trader* does not let Cassia be her own person by speaking and making decisions that are her call. This leads Cassia onto a path of losing her morality and becoming power-seeking. To acquire the best ending for Cassia, the player has to pick options with the Freedom flags, as these are the choices that let her grow into her own person (See Fig. 11). Additionally, if Cassia is on the Hatred or NotMe path, the player can unintentionally end the romance early and even lose access to Cassia as a companion. This is perhaps one of the best representations of the conceived space incentivising anti-colonial logic through the hidden flag names and effects.

The relationship the player can develop with Yrliet can also be regarded as criticism of othering, however, this time it is not only performed by other companions or potentially the player character, but by Yrliet herself. Yrliet represents how it is not only humans who may exhibit traits of imperialist dominance, but xenos as well. Since Yrliet is an alien, the relationship between her and the *Rogue Trader* starts on rocky ground, this time the player too

becomes a victim of Othering. Yrliet's species calls humans Mon'keigh, and views them as aggressive, unintelligent, and uncultured (See Fig. 12). This resembles simianization, a type of dehumanization with a long history intertwined with European and British colonialism, used to portray individuals, particularly Africans, as inferior. To start a romance with Yrliet, the player has to have a desire to understand her culture and dismiss preconceptions about her species forged by imperial dogma. Bold sexual advancements are strictly off-limits in her romance, much like in Cassia's. Yrliet's species considers anything related to sex, even physical touch, a taboo topic so the player is required to respect her boundaries and approach the relationship with sensitivity. These actions accumulate Accordance flags, which are required for the true romance ending with her. By putting aside hateful views humans have on Eldar, Yrliet too can unlearn her preconceived stereotypes of humanity and to even appreciate the player character.

Overall, both of these romances motivate the player to act in an anti-colonial way to reach a satisfying ending with these companions. By requiring the player not to dominate the companions and to take a step back, the player has to fight the preconceived stereotypes of otherness and develop a desire to understand them and let them grow into their own persons, criticising colonialistic logics through and through.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to establish the *Warhammer* transmedia setting as a layered narrative deeply rooted in and critiquing colonial logic, particularly British colonialism. Through the analysis of media such as the diorama titled "Massacre at Big Toof River" and the video game *Rogue Trader*, the essay highlights how colonial themes are at the very core of both the narrative and gameplay, reinforcing narratives of domination and dehumanisation while simultaneously exposing the damage it does.

Parallels between historical colonial events and entities, for instance, the Anglo-Zulu war, and Warhammer's fictional conflicts highlight the franchise's reliance on historical narratives to construct its grimdark universe. However, the nuanced portrayal of factions like the Praetorian Guard alongside mechanics and narratives in *Rogue Trader*, indicates that Warhammer criticises the very systems it mirrors. By contrasting dogmatic and iconoclastic ideologies the game offers players an opportunity to challenge imperialistic ideologies through gameplay choices, colony management and companion relationships.

Ultimately, *Warhammer 40,000* is a unique cultural phenomenon that explores colonisation dynamics while offering a procedural critique of the process. It invites anyone who engages with the hobby to reflect on the implications of these dynamics, in both historical and fictional contexts. The franchise's ability to draw from and reflect on such themes establishes it as a rich ground for further academic research.

Acknowledgement regarding the use of AI

I, Dávid Jakus, hereby declare that I did not use any artificial intelligence tools for the purposes of generating text during the preparation of my research. All AI useage was done ethically, for the purposes of workshopping ideas and finding nodes in literature.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Unpainted *Warhammer* miniatures (Photo taken by the author).

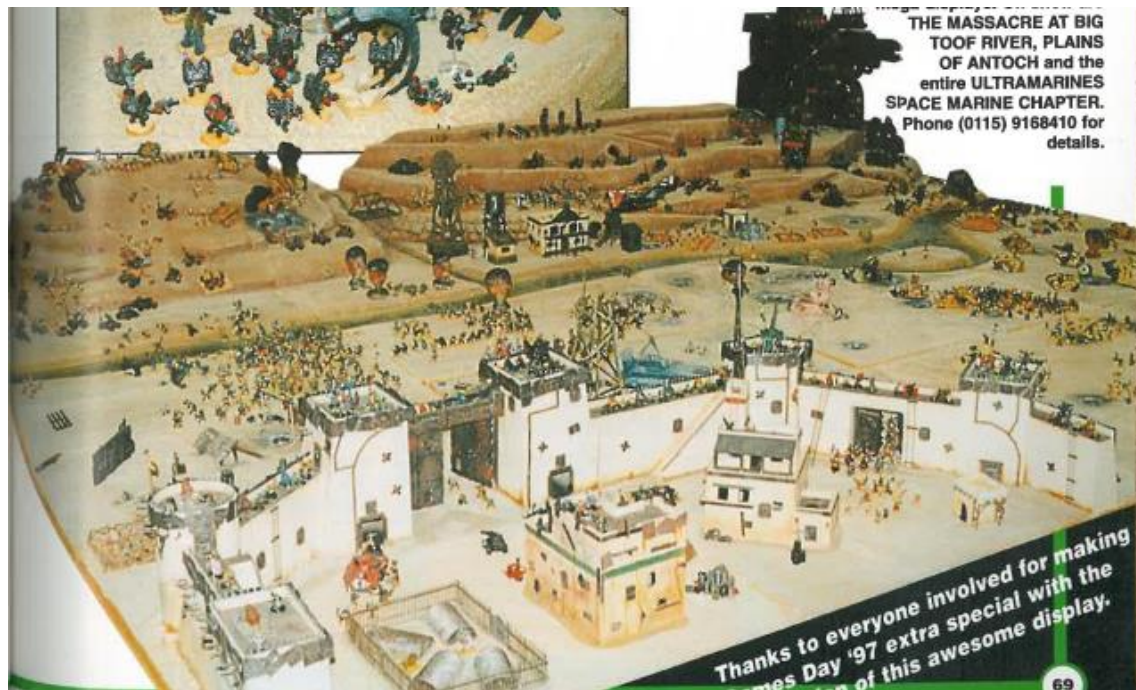


Figure 2. The “Massacre at Big Toof River” diorama (Sharman 69).

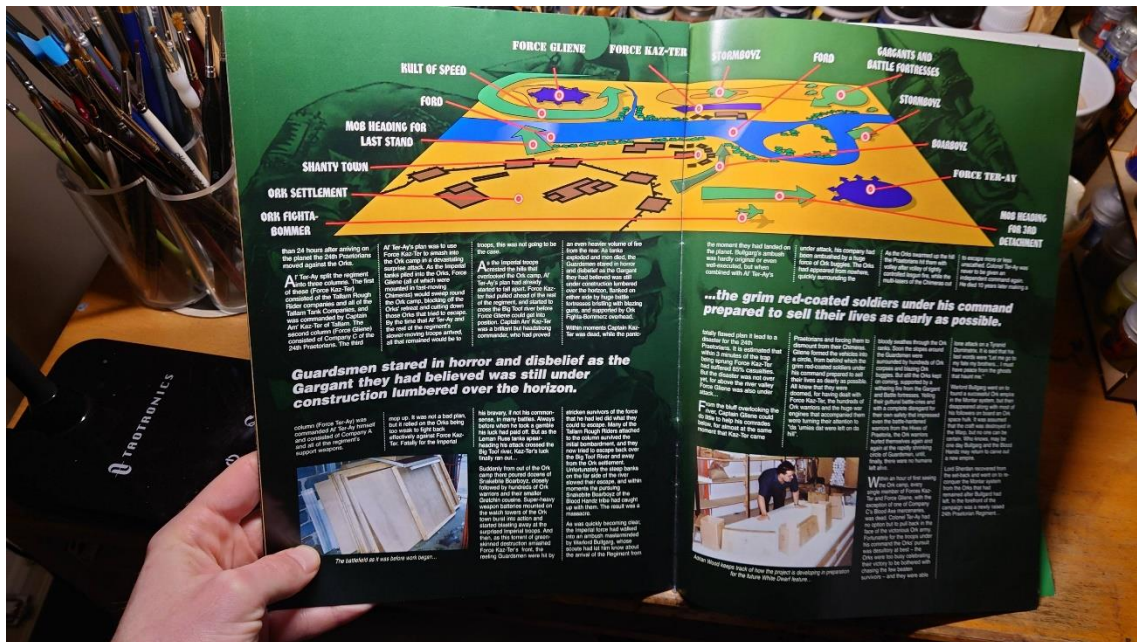


Figure 3. Games Day 97 booklet with the depiction and the description of the background story of the diorama (ReverendRyu).



Figure 4. A Praetorian Guard soldier (Chambers). Note the red uniform and oddly shaped helmet typical of redcoats.



Figure 5. The last stand of the Praetorian Guard (Practical-Purchase-9). Note the similarities with Figure 6 between the soldiers' uniforms and formations, as well as the building in the background.



Figure 6. A painting of the Defence of Rorke's Drift (Neuville and Flameng).



Figure 7. A tide of Orks, as depicted on the diorama (Sharman 65).



Figure 8. A painting of The Battle of Isandlwana (Fripp). Note the heroic depiction of the British army, and the tide of Zulu warriors surrounding them.



Figure 9. The colony project: Compassion for the Silent (Rogue Trader). Note the requirements and the bewilderment of the Imperial faction. This is an example of iconoclast decisions not being popular in the Imperium. Screenshot taken by the author.



Figure 10. An image of the dialogue of a colony event, in the bottom-right corner the companion's advice the player can choose from (Rogue Trader). In this instance Yrliet's advice grants the most perks. Screenshot taken by the author.

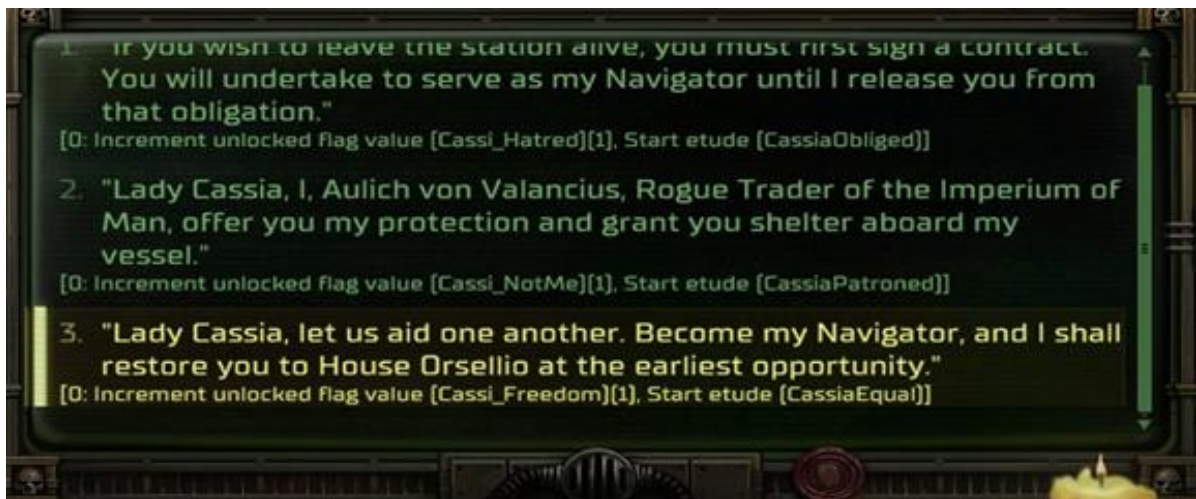


Figure 11. A dialogue with Cassia (Rogue Trader). Note the flag titled "Cassi_Freedom" below the dialogue choice that allows her to exercise her free will. Screenshot taken by the author.



Figure 12. The advice of Yrliet during the same colony event as in Figure 10 (Rogue Trader). Note the fact she deems humanity incompetent, almost child-like, a clear representation of her Othering humans. Screenshot taken by the author.