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THE STATE AT PLAY: IAIN M. BANKS'S GAMING GALACTIC EMPIRES

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to explore the dynamics of play in three selected science-fiction novels by the contemporary Scottish author Iain M. Banks. Drawing on the typology of literary play designed by the German theoretician Wolfgang Iser, the article focuses particularly on Banks's second novel from the Culture series, *The Player of Games* (1988), concentrating on the ludic dynamics that inform and form these texts in narrative, discursive and thematic terms. Highlighting the author's complex conceptual critique of empire and civilisation and their contested relationship with the individual, the article is especially interested in uncovering the intricacies of power paradigms in the context of Banks's bespoke, ever-ambivalent vision of a cosmic utopia and its counterparts, where the interconnectedness of being and playing is performed on key levels.[1]

Keywords: Iain M. Banks, the Culture, science fiction, play theory, Wolfgang Iser, *The Player of Games*, empire, utopia, games

The late Iain Banks (1954–2013) was a prolific Scottish author of both mainstream and speculative fiction, as well as one of the major proponents of the so-called "space opera" variety of science fiction, vast intergalactic canvas narratives encompassing a multiplicity of worlds and creeds, with ample space for the exploration of a variety of topics ranging from the adaptability of the human and the potentiality of the posthuman to polemics about the ubiquity of warfare and the (im)possibilities of peaceable power structures on a cosmic scale. His science fiction was published under the name Iain M. Banks (featuring his adopted middle name Menzies) and comprises thirteen novels and a collection of short stories. The science-fiction novels set in the Culture, a powerful intergalactic enclave of different species, including a successfully space-evolved humankind and advanced forms of sentient AI, present a spectacular feat of imagination which, despite the futuristic intricacies, reflect in many ways the geopolitical and ethical issues of our own planet, in the tradition of science-fiction classics by Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury,

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Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin. However, Banks's own science-fiction inspiration is rather more playfully inclined, as he cited in an interview with Calum Waddell for the *SFX* magazine in July 2012, recalling writers as diverse as the author, editor and anthologist of British post-war science fiction, Brian Aldiss, and the American master-satirist of classic science-fiction authors such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, John Sladek. Unsurprisingly, given the bonanza of satire and irony that largely defines his style, Banks also cites as profoundly inspirational for his speculative and science fiction the subversive comedy of the Monty Python group (Waddell, n.p.).

Between 1987 and 2012, Banks published nine Culture novels – *Consider Phlebas* (1987), *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *Excession* (1996), *Inversions* (1998), *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012) – and a collection of short stories based in the Culture titled *The State of the Art* (1991). Games and game-playing remain at the helm of many Banks's texts across the board, and his Culture science-fiction series is an arena for a boldly playful yet profound exploration of ethics, the meaning of humanity and the (in)humane, and a sharp probing of many delusive notions of what is and is not civilised. Dichotomies of othering and exclusion that have and still to a large extent do plague current geopolitical discourse are put to scrutiny in Banks's works, writ large on a cosmic scale, and wholesale questioning of authoritative discourses remains a major formative and qualitative element therein. In a retrospective piece for the *Guardian* published in 2017, commemorating thirty years since the publication of Banks's first Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas*, Damien Walter summarises the enduring appeal of Banks's science fiction as follows:

> But for all his mastery of high-octane action sequences, and the sheer invention […], Banks's science fiction […] has lasted because [of] his deft balance of galactic scope with human-scale stories. Stories of loss, grief, rebirth and self-discovery are the core of the best Culture novels. He did not write sci-fi and literary novels – he was a master of storytelling that combined both. (Walter, n.p.)

We might add to Walter's appraisal of Banks's imaginative and narrative virtuosity his expert hand at playing multi-layered textual games, be it intra-, inter-, para- or metatextual, as well as his trademark mischievous sense of humour. While the multivalent role of levity in Banks's texts would solicit an in-depth study of its own, some of the extracts that follow will no doubt showcase this extraordinary quality of his writing, at least in localised glimpses. This article will address the ludic dynamics in three selected Culture novels – the first two, *Consider Phlebas* and *The Player of Games*, and the fourth, *Excession* – drawing on examples from these texts to discuss the multi-layered ethos of play and the strategies of game-playing that largely define them on the narrative, discursive and thematic level.

In general terms, given their intense engagement in diverse polemics yielding searing, often satirical, critique of cultural, racial, gender and political commonplaces, Iain M. Banks's science-fiction novels are essentially ludic, performing a wide variety of textual games that accentuate the dialogic nature of these works. Textual play facilitates sustained negotiation between open-endedness and closure. According to one of the most insightful and consistent theoreticians of literary play, Wolfgang Iser, textual play is defined by

> a continual oscillation between denotation and figuration, and between accommodation and assimilation. This oscillation, or to-and-fro movement, is basic to play, and it permits the coexistence of the mutually exclusive. It also turns the texts into a generative matrix for the production of something new. (Iser 1989, 255)

Displaying distinctly ludic qualities, Banks's Culture novels represent an operatic space that naturally lends itself to the exploration of the strategies of play. The four strategies of play that were identified by the French anthropologist Roger Callois' study of play, *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958), building on the pioneering work of the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga titled *Homo ludens* (1938), were later adapted for literary studies by the German theoretician Wolfgang Iser. They are *agon* (struggle or contest), *alea* (chance), *ilinx* (vertigo or chaos) and *mimicry* (masking or make-believe) – and their intricate combinations pervade Banks's texts on distinct levels, as we shall see.

For Iser, the four categories of play are best understood as "strategies of play" – they "generally mix" in literary works, comprising "the constitutive elements of a text game" (Iser 1993, 263). In brief, Iser defines the four strategies of play as a set of distinctive dynamics: *agon* "is undoubtedly one of the basic games" that must "be played towards a result" (Iser 1993, 260), signifying "a fight or a contest" (Iser 1989, 256). *Alea* "is a pattern of play based on change and the unforeseeable" (Iser 1989, 256) – given free reign, *alea* aims to "intensify difference", "reduc[ing] all play to mere chance" (Iser 1993, 261). *Mimicry* "aims to make difference disappear" and signifies "illusion" as well as transformation and "imitation" (Iser 1993, 262). The last of Iser's play strategies – *ilinx* – constitutes his most radical recasting of Caillois' original that simply denoted a vertigo-inducing play activity. Iser invests this play strategy with "an anarchic tendency" (Iser 1993, 262), whose potential rests in subverting any given structure. These four strategies of play intersperse in intricate ways within Banks's Culture novels, and are at their most radical, perhaps, and certainly at their most pronounced in the novel whose very title explicitly suggests so, namely *The Player of Games*.

Before delving into the detail of this particular text, we need to briefly contextualise Banks's fictional world of the Culture to facilitate the more precise points to be made regarding the strategies of play in *The Player of Games*. In general, the intricate play of simulations and the overt and covert gaming strategies of government and culture which constitute various forms of civilisation are key themes connecting all Banks's science-fiction novels, playing the odds and extremes against one another – be it between the Culture and other interstellar civilisations (often confrontationally called "barbaric") or exploring the elaborate tensions within the Culture itself. The Culture is a borderless, egalitarian, post-scarcity interstellar civilisation essentially managed by autonomous sentient AI called "Minds". Some of these Minds are responsible for entire orbital worlds or intergalactic spacecraft, capable of transporting and caring for billions of inhabitants, while others are former masters of exponentially complex cosmic warfare (some Minds are long retired war veterans in charge of civic transport or diplomatic missions). In addition to these advanced AI entities, the Culture comprises a plethora of humanoid species, including genetically enhanced humans. While the vision of a comfortable existence of humanity in a system run by AI may have seemed truly speculative at the time of publication, it feels much closer to home now that thirty-five years have passed and we find ourselves increasingly more intertwined with a world of algorithms on a daily basis.

The Culture is fully in control of and expertly advancing the process of evolution of both its biological and machine citizens. Patricia Kerslake reflects on the Culture in her book on the concepts and critiques of empire in science fiction as follows, highlighting this utopian society's "absence of elitism" and "ability to change rapidly in response to immediate needs":

> This flexibility is yet another difference between a centralised imperium and a decentralised meta-empire: the former is rigid and constrained, bound by visibly hierarchical methodologies and paradigms, the latter is loosely connected both physically and philosophically, so more able to adapt and thus survive. (Kerslake, 186)

While this readiness to encounter rather than counter change and adapt accordingly is shown as a winning strategy overall, Kerslake's intriguing argument – describing Banks's Culture as a meta-empire, distinct from and superior to the obsolete imperial paradigms of human history – comes perilously close to a wholly utopian estimation. While Banks certainly entertains the reader's imagination eager to transcend both the hackneyed rigmaroles of late capitalism and the bleak auguries of a post-capitalist world order, "offer[ing] us a wholly new form of society", Kerslake claims that he "has also opened a new door into critical literary theory because there is now something beyond the extant, something to inform our thinking in a forward rather than a backward direction" (Kerslake, 187). Similarly, Stefano Gualeni concludes his discussion of fictional games and utopia in *The Player of Games* by upholding the Culture's "capability to continue to change", granting it "therefore the possibility to remain utopian" (Gualeni, 203). One of the classic pragmatic uses of play is the ancillary function of an imaginative "trial run", testing the limits of new ideas or systems in the hope of perfecting the model before implementation in the so-called "real" world. Yet Banks is no social engineer – and neither is he a bona fide utopian.

Alan Jacobs's outline in his article on the ambiguities of utopia in Banks proves instrumental here: "[t]he Culture has no laws, and nothing that we would call a government. All power remains in the hands of the omnipotent and omnibenevolent Minds" (Jacobs, 48). However, this largely symbiotic coexistence of the "omnipotent" and ostensibly "omnibenevolent" AI entities and genetically upgraded humans (as well as other organic life forms that make up the Culture) is a utopian premise that is repeatedly put under scrutiny in moments of crisis, as we shall see. One such snag is the question whether omnipotent entities can remain unreservedly benevolent, or whether there may be limits to omnibenevolence written into this utopian cosmic contract.

We might enquire further still, alongside Gavin Miller in his chapter on play ethic in the Culture novels, as to the implicit critique of this utopianism on Banks's part: "Given that the Culture can stand up to most threats, Banks's science fiction must turn to a central puzzle for Marxist historical models: what exactly does everyone do once the state has withered away? According to Banks, they *play*" (Miller, 56; original emphasis). This playing involves all sorts of possibilities – both the immediately obvious, such as the unlimited pursuit of leisure activities, and the less obvious, such as the play strategies of interstellar diplomacy, highlighting more serious aspects of play. This creative post-scarcity model, then, incites questions as to the legitimacy of its superior ethos as well as its sustainability, not least because the cosmic plenty the Culture provides is sometimes registered to produce a profound sense of boredom in both its human and AI citizens. As Simone Caroti contends in her book-length critical introduction to Banks's Culture series, "[b]ecause the Culture has made life safe and pleasurable on every possible level, the point of both living and gaming is lost; without tangible risk, one loses its flavor because the other does" (77). In the form of an implied critical commentary, Banks's post-scarcity cosmic utopia thus also hearkens back to other, less advanced forms of society, including those that make up our own contemporary world.

The superior ethos of the Culture as an ideal form of civilised society, a highly technologised interstellar utopia, is variously undermined in the series of novels from the very start – the immensely destructive war against the alien Idiran Empire in Banks's first science-fiction novel, *Consider Phlebas* (1987), later resurfaces in critical reminiscence, posing a threat to the Culture eight hundred years later in the plot of *Look to Windward* (2000). The loosely sequential quality of these two novels tenuously related by the events of the Idiran-Culture war and their fateful repercussions is highlighted by the allusive symmetry of the titles, both citing the fourth part of *The Waste Land*, "Death by Water". The Culture's superior ethos, represented by its intellectually and technologically most advanced members, the AI Minds, is perhaps most intricately undermined in *Excession* (1996). The status of the Culture as the consummate apex of socio-political and technological evolution is challenged and ultimately subverted by the enigmatic appearance of a passive, sentient, planet-size "perfect black-body sphere", sparking a concentrated Culture reaction aimed at solving and analysing this "Outside Context Problem" (Banks 1996, 67, 71). Banks imagined the concept of an "Outside Context Problem" as a fateful encounter of technologically mismatched civilisations, on a par with the so-called discovery of the "New World" by the armoured, sword- and harquebus-wielding conquistadors in the late fifteenth century. As Caroti explains: "The description of the nature of an OCP was inspired by the long hours Banks spent playing *Civilisation* on his computer" (Caroti, 136), which shows not only the author's own gaming habit but also his preoccupation with games and playing as constitutive elements of novel writing, on both the narrative and the thematic level. In the novel, "The Excession" is later revealed to be a test emissary from an unknown, far-superior civilisation that judges the Culture not sufficiently advanced to benefit from the enlightenment it has come to offer. As the alien envoy's own log explains in the epilogue to the novel:

> it is my opinion that the reaction to my presence indicates a fundamental unreadiness as yet for such a signal honour lastly in recognition of the foregoing i wish now to be known hereafter as *the excession* (Banks 1996, 464).

A prime example of a Banksian conclusion, the ending offers an explanation with a twist – the identity of the baffling black sphere is at last revealed, but only in a sketch, and, as it is often the case in Banks's science fiction, the epilogue pursues a neat intratextual game of its own, bouncing off the body of the novel we have just read – here, the infinitely superior technological entity decides to adopt the name it has been given by the "fundamentally unready" Culture Minds.

We find another subversive epilogue in Banks's first Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas*. Here, a ship Mind which has been the object of a complex pursuit throughout the novel reappears in a future context and the final exchange we are privy to counters the conclusion of the novel as well as the additional information supplied in the form of several other paratexts which immediately precede the epilogue, not least a Culture history log which claims this Mind does not remember anything from the pointed finale of the original plot. We now learn the ship Mind has nonetheless adopted the main character's name and is able to relate the "long story" of how things came to pass. The finale thus unfolds in a satisfying *da capo al fine*:

> "I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced," she said as she disembarked from the module […]. She was talking to a remote drone which was helping her with her baggage. "I'm Foug. What are you called?"
> "I am the *Bora Horza Gobuchul*," the ship said, through the drone.
> "That's a weird name. How did you end up calling yourself that?"
> The remote drone dipped one front corner slightly, its equivalent of a shrug. "It's a long story …"
> Gimishin Foug shrugged;
> "I like long stories." (Banks 1987, 471)

These subversive epilogues are just one key hallmark of Banks's many ludic narrative strategies. The passage above also exemplifies Banks's deftness at making the Minds, their drones, avatars and other AI come across as relatable to as characters on a human level, simultaneously always marking their essential non-humanness, while also taking time to denote what communication between a human and a drone might look like. The mutual shrug at the end adds to the poignancy of this epilogue encounter, and after the nearly five hundred pages of the novel, we arrive at the hermeneutic moment so well versified by T.S. Eliot in "Little Gidding": "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."

The State of Play in *The Player of Games*

As Paul Kincaid explains in his recent book on Iain M. Banks, the second Culture novel, *The Player of Games*, "engages far more with the ambiguity of the Culture" than the first, which "introduced the Culture through the lens of its enemy", the non-human Idirans (Kincaid, 32). The agonistic basis of what the Culture deems "primitive" or "barbaric" civilisations is rather ingeniously represented by the game-based galactic Empire of Azad and its humanoid inhabitants in *The Player of Games*. The plot revolves around an immensely complex game that constitutes the system of rule in the Empire which had adopted the name of the game, Azad, for its own. The person who wins this elaborate game, played every six years, becomes the Azadian Emperor. The rules are set in such a way that only the privileged can compete at its highest levels, but it is, at least in theory, open to everyone, though we quickly learn about the many barriers, social and gender specifically, which the Azadian players have to negotiate but in effect can only accommodate. The Azadian society is a eugenically engineered, xenophobic colossus of rigid power structures, topped by the military and the ecclesiastical-scholastic factions. While the element of chance is introduced into the system with every season of the game, potentially facilitating change, access to quality education and game-training is restricted to ensure only the privileged proceed to the higher levels – the social hierarchy thus remains effectively unchanged. Intriguing and intimidating in equal measure, the game and the Empire are thus one.

Banks's protagonist, the Culture's most famous professional game player and scholar, Jernau Gurgeh (whose middle name, Morat, translates in the Culture's artificial language, "Marain", as "game player"), is bored of success, finding it difficult to relate to life in any meaningful manner – in the shielded comfort of Culture life, little excites or interests him anymore. This abruptly changes when he is challenged to a public match by a young female Culture player who proceeds to almost beat him at a celebrated game in which no one, including Gurgeh, has excelled at the highest possible level of perfection. With stakes high and his public status as an invincible player in jeopardy, Gurgeh agrees to illicit help from an impish drone associate to ensure yet another victory. Predictably, this isolated lapse of moral judgement backfires badly. Threatening to reveal this unfair win, the drone blackmails him into cooperation with "Special Circumstances", a secret branch of "Contact", the Culture's intelligence agency for interstellar affairs: he is to travel to the distant Empire of Azad to play the most complex game he has ever encountered, on a diplomatic recon mission with covert political consequences.

Before these unfortunate events unfold, Gurgeh is first shown the game board of Azad in his home by a Special Circumstances drone sent to enlist him for the mission, which he originally refuses. He is sworn to secrecy and cannot discuss the mission or even the very existence of Azad and its elaborate game with anyone – this clearly points to the significance of the Empire of Azad for the Culture, and establishes the sense that the Empire, albeit not sufficiently evolved and situated far away in a different part of the galaxy, still poses a potential threat to the Culture, and so it must be studied at best or reckoned with at worst. Even the holographic representation projected into Gurgeh's living room leaves the professional player baffled as to the unprecedented scale and intricacy of the game. Afterwards, forced to accept the mission, he has several years to learn the principles of Azad, tutored by the ship Mind while en route to the distant Empire. As Gualeni notes, "the links between a civilisation, its languages and its games are of particular interest to Gurgeh, whose scholarly work is motivated by a fascination with 'the way a society's games revealed so much about its ethos, its philosophy, its very soul'" (Gualeni, 196 quoting Banks 1995, 30). The game of Azad is played with biotech cards, which ultimately makes it a game of world-making, on three boards suggestively named "The Board of Origin", "The Board of Form" and "The Board of Becoming" – a neat mythopoeic trinity. The name of the Empire, adopted from the eponymous game, translates in the Azadian language as "system" or "entity" of a technological or biological kind, hence rendering the game of Azad an ontological game, where the Empire and the life of its citizens are one with the game. As the ship Mind explains: "'Azad is so complex, so subtle, so flexible and so demanding that it is as precise and comprehensive a model of life as it is possible to construct. Whoever succeeds at the game succeeds in life; the same qualities are required in each to ensure dominance'" (Banks 1995, 76).

More and more absorbed by the game and thrilled to find himself compelled and excited at last, Gurgeh succeeds far beyond the expectations of the Azadians – who try bribes and blackmail to discourage him from making further progress and eventually stage an attempt on his life – and seemingly also beyond the expectations of the Culture coordinators of the mission. As Christopher Palmer remarks, "[Gurgeh] advances victoriously through the levels of the game in the aggressive empire in which he is an alien, which lives by that game as if the whole civilization had been planned by malign disciples of J.H. Huizinga or Clifford Geertz" (Palmer, 85). Palmer's appraisal is worth mentioning here for his apt inclusion of the anthropological angle, pinpointing the agonistic bias of both theoreticians' take on play. Gurgeh reaches the very finale of the game and is eventually poised to play against the Emperor-Regent, who is set to defend and secure his position. What seems like the ultimate game is merely the beginning of uncovering another, far more dangerous game, however, and through its enigmatic narrator, the novel cleverly manipulates the reader alongside the main character, Gurgeh, making the reading experience an elaborate game in its own right. The narrator's mischievous playfulness, or rather unchecked sophistry, is distinct from the very first words of the novel:

> This is the story of a man who went far away for a long time, just to play a game. The man is a game-player called "Gurgeh". The story starts with a battle that is not a battle, and ends with a game that is not a game.
> Me? I'll tell you about me later.
> This is how the story begins. (Banks 1995, 3)

The reader immediately senses that the enigmatic narrator has absolute control over the unfolding narrative, deliberately withholding their identity, while the riddle of implied ironies in the novel's opening clearly highlights the parabolic nature of the story – a kind of cautionary tale, where the meaning of key concepts such as "game" and "battle" is likely to be recast or subverted multiple times. As Gualeni remarks, "*The Player of Games* stands out from the other Culture novels because it addresses, with self-reflexive irony, the limitations and contradictions of utopian thinking in space operas" (Gualeni, 194).

Gurgeh's involvement in the game of Azad is problematised from within and without in equal measure – his very appearance is the subject of persistent Azadian othering, since he is a tall black middle-aged male in a genetically uniform society, and the Azadian media are increasingly keen to lampoon his alienness to the point of calumny. It is crucial to note that Gurgeh's specific physicality is a personal choice as well as genetic heritage, since the Culture enables individuals to freely alter their appearance as well as their gender and other attributes, something we learn Gurgeh has not partaken in, beyond the inclusion of various drug-producing glands to further his game-playing. This marks him out as oddly old-hat and out of sync with the free dynamic diversity of the Culture. Thus, in the context of the Culture, "Gurgeh is a throwback, a barbarian of sorts" (Caroti, 78). He stands apart in much sharper contrast yet in the Azadian society, however, which not only has three genders but which objectifies both the female (reduced to sexual and material possession) and the male (soldiers and retainers) in favour of the third sex, fittingly called the apex – this third gender combines both male and female reproductive organs and seals the individual's socio-political superiority. Unlike the Culture's egalitarian free-for-all, Azad is built on strictly defined gender-social roles, the ranking of which is in turn conscripted to the game. The Empire thus represents, in essence, the dynamics of *agon*, exercising control in all respects, which in turn manifests itself as a key element of the game of Azad. Contest aside, the game also introduces the element of *alea* to the Empire's socio-political structures every six years of the game cycle – however, the more we learn about the actual functioning of the game via Gurgeh, the more we see the corrupt background power-mongering of the elite, who manipulate the game and media coverage for their own gain. As Gurgeh keeps on winning against all odds, this becomes an unprecedented problem for the Empire elite, whose power rests in the citizens' belief that the game is sacred and therefore incorruptible. It follows, for the Azadians, that no foreigner could ever succeed in playing a game so intricate and sacrosanct.

Gurgeh's immersion in the game is initially curtailed by the extreme brutality embraced by the Azadian society, the brunt of which is borne by its weakest members – be it ruthless, motiveless violence on the streets of the Azadian capital, which Gurgeh witnesses on his secret prowl through the city on the eve of a particularly important match, or the decadent perversity exhibited by the ruling class. Through Gurgeh, we witness a private party on a paradise island where the musicians play on prized instruments such as a flute made of "a female's femur removed without anaesthetic" or a string instrument whose eight strings have each been used to strangle someone (Banks 1995, 222); more disturbingly still, the Culture drone who accompanies Gurgeh on the mission shows him a series of classified adult TV channels, access to which corresponds directly to the Azadian hierarchy – ranging from porn featuring sex with other species, prohibited by the Azadian eugenic law, to unwatchable scenes of live snuff involving children and pregnant females. Distressingly, this revelatory episode is later shown to have been part of the Culture's strategy to convince Gurgeh to pursue his current match against a high-ranking Azadian judge which involved a physical wager, another brutal particular of the game of Azad (in this case castration without anaesthetic). Having witnessed the atrocities broadcast by the restricted media, Gurgeh defeats the judge without further qualms about the brutality of the physical forfeit. Once this ethical threshold is crossed, both Gurgeh and the readers are in uncharted waters. As Kincaid notes, the "ambiguous sense that the preservation of civilization necessitates uncivilized behavior is something that recurs throughout Banks's work" (Kincaid, 34). Yet Banks does not treat these apparent "necessities" lightly – the ethos of the novel repeatedly interrogates such truisms, displaying the darker intent of the Culture's diplomatic missions.

Gurgeh trumps all expectations, and in his concerted obsession with the game, proceeds further than anticipated by either the Empire or the Culture's diplomatic Minds, or so we are led to think. In the process, Banks gives us a thrilling portrait of a gameplayer wholly possessed by the game and fundamentally changed by it. Because the Empire of Azad and the eponymous game are one, Gurgeh starts speaking and thinking exclusively in the Azadian language, "Eächic", a natural language which differs from the Culture's artificial language, "Marain", in that it is less refined and therefore channels more emotion and so potentially more violence. This marks a shift in the game-player's personality – exposed to the agonistic brutality of the Azadian system, whose ethics Gurgeh abhors yet needs must embrace to continue playing, we see him become a more ruthless player, obsessed with vanquishing his opponents and caring increasingly less for the consequences. As the Culture drone observes in free indirect speech: “There was a callousness in his play that was new”; “A comparatively innocent and sensitive soul like Gurgeh was bound to pick up some of its underlying ethical framework if he spoke it all the time” (Banks 1996, 246, 247). Winning the game of Azad becomes his sole purpose, and so it seems that the dynamics of *agon*, in line with the politics of any empire – to conquer, divide and rule – will prevail as the leading play strategy overall. The novel, however, has other games in store for Gurgeh and the reader alike.

The final stages of the game are in essence a duel, a game of pure *agon*, with Gurgeh facing the finest local player, Nicosar, the Azadian Emperor-Regent. This, however, is no longer reported in the Azadian media – Gurgeh’s continued success cannot be allowed to be broadcast to the Azadian population for political reasons, as veiled threats of civil unrest brew in the capital Groasnachek and elsewhere in the Empire – grudgingly, Gurgeh agrees to take part in a short propaganda interview in which he relinquishes the game, citing his inadequacy and his awe of the game’s complexity and the Empire’s might. While fake games are being staged and broadcast to the Azadian people, the endgame between Gurgeh and Nicosar unfolds as a semi-private spectacle for a limited audience of the highest echelons of the Azadian elite and security detail. As if the stakes were not high enough, the finale is played on a planet where the “fire season” is shortly due. This adds yet another layer of acute agonism to the proceedings – the Empire’s value system is based on pomp and circumstance, and the players’ prowess is tested against the highest of odds – from physical mutilation to death.

Crucially, the game takes over both players – Gurgeh feels “saturated with the one encompassing idea, like a fever; win, dominate, control: a set of angles defining one desire, the single absolute determination”, rendering “everything outside […] just a setting and a background for the game” (Banks 1995, 272). The game of Azad plays its players – it possesses them, continuing with an awe-inspiring momentum of its own: “what was in front of him was like a single huge organism; the pieces seemed to move with a will that was neither his nor the emperor’s, but something dictated finally by the game itself, an ultimate expression of its essence” (Banks 1995, 272). The finale of the game thus becomes an endgame between the Culture and the Empire and all they stand for: Gurgeh’s game may be an ingenious combination of both, in his opinion, a work of supremely elaborate *techne*, but his moves betray his subtler Culture background just as the emperor’s fierce play betrays his unforgiving, agonistic Azadian mentality. Gurgeh’s eventual win enrages the emperor not because he realises he has been beaten, but because to him the way Gurgeh has played subverts and desecrates the “holy” principle of the game, namely *agon*:

> “Your blind, insipid morality can’t even account for your own success here, and you treat this battle-game like some filthy dance. It is there to be fought and struggled against, and you’ve attempted to seduce it. You’ve perverted it;” (Banks 1995, 281)

This confrontation ultimately comes down to an irreconcilable clash of playing strategies rooted in an incompatible understanding of the game: the emperor’s fierce game of real-life *agon* is pitched against its subtler, though equally engaged counterpart of game-for-game's sake. Gurgeh is playing the game to the full and is possessed by it, but, being a citizen of the Culture, it is ultimately only a game to him, while the emperor is playing in deadly earnest, his game the manifestation of Azad at its most ferocious.

The emperor seemingly has no more cards to play, and Gurgeh plans his return home. However, in a livid attempt to outdo Gurgeh's endgame, revealing the sheer agonistic essence of Nicosar, manifest in his sense of entitlement to control the fate of everyone present, the Emperor-Regent sets the gameboard on fire using strategic cards and orders everyone in the room to be killed by his personal security detail. Gurgeh's drone is momentarily incapacitated and Nicosar attacks Gurgeh with a sword, only for the Culture drone to reveal its covert military range, neutralising Nicosar and saving Gurgeh in its protective field, while the fire planet's spectacular flames burn everything in their path. Gurgeh wakes up injured and clueless in the charred remains of the game premises.

The crucial twist in this final game of Azad is, symptomatically for almost all Culture novels, revealed only post festum, when a Culture ship is about to rescue Gurgeh and the drone from the singed fire planet and the crumbling empire, suddenly devoid of both its elite and its emperor. The drone's revelation shifts the Culture player's sympathies back towards the emperor, as he is finally made privy to the clandestine diplomatic game the Culture had been playing all along: the night before the game finale, the Culture drone told the emperor that Gurgeh was playing for the Culture in a very real sense and if the emperor lost, the Culture would take military action against the Empire and take it over. This threat of raising the stakes from an Azad-contained reality-game to a Culture-controlled reality threatening to overthrow the Empire is, however, yet another cleverly subversive step in the Culture's play strategy to make sure the emperor abandons the rules and discredits the game, thereby ensuring the destruction of the empire from within, without the need for any military Culture action. The Culture's Contact policy is therefore revealed to have been an elaborate game all along, an intervention solely facilitated by, literally, playing and defeating the Empire of Azad at its own existence-defining, sacred game. Combining all four strategies of play, the Culture has tackled the Empire using its best game-player, Gurgeh, in an expert game of *agon*, but while doing so, it has also been playing numerous covert games in the background, employing elaborate *mimicry* schemes to mask its true motives and its true agents (the drone playing the part of the puppeteer, controlling Gurgeh, the front-line pawn), and adding the key element of *ilinx* at crucial points to subvert and shape the power stratagems within the game to make sure it ultimately turned in the favour of the Culture. Such expert manipulation did require Gurgeh's help, but, crucially, could only have been effective without his knowledge. While the Azadian elite have been fixing the games by manipulating *alea*, the element of chance, to beat Gurgeh, and employing various unsavoury strategies of *mimicry* (masking its true motives) and *ilinx* (ferocious subversion) to disqualify him by other means (attempted sex-tape blackmail, media defamation, bribery, and two attempts at assassination) – familiar echoes of political shams and illicit methods of coercion in our own world – the bigger picture ultimately reveals a much more labyrinthine set of games competing on all four levels of play, though overly revealing only the most obvious one, namely the sustained violence of agonistic contest.

Having won the entire season of Azad, Gurgeh finally realises the futility of his efforts and masterful gamesmanship, when it transpires that he has been a mere pawn in a greater Culture game all along – the Culture sought a premise for active involvement in the Empire's politics, ultimately seeking to destroy the game that perpetuates its brutal ruling system and thus, through the ingenious play of the unwitting Gurgeh, aiming at the destruction of the Empire itself. Though the Culture's motives may seem ethical on the surface, and the sheer brutality of Azad seems to play straight into the Culture's hand, we are aware that a more clandestine set of principles is at stake here, namely the unrivalled intergalactic hegemony of the Culture. As a proleptic conversation between Gurgeh and the Culture drone demonstrates earlier: "'It's a mean old Empire, isn't it, drone?' 'Mean enough …. But if it ever tries to fuck with the Culture it'll find out what mean really is'" (Banks 1995, 236).

In the epilogic twist, the Culture drone which accompanied Gurgeh to Azad reveals itself to be the original blackmailer drone and, more importantly still, also the enigmatic narrator of the novel. The ultimate strategy of play overthrowing the authenticity of Gurgeh's story, a masterful stroke of narrative *ilinx*, subverting what we have heretofore taken for granted, is thus revealed at the very end, as is the wont of Banks's subversive conclusions. The mischievous drone writes:

> This is a true story. I was there. When I wasn't, and when I didn't know exactly what was going on – inside Gurgeh's mind, for example – I admit that I have not hesitated to make it up.
> But it's still a true story.
> Would I lie to you? (Banks 1995, 309)

Meanwhile, Gurgeh never discovers the true identity of the drone – the preceding final chapter of the novel is aptly titled "The Passed Pawn". The drone itself is and is not the chief manipulator – though directly manipulate Gurgeh and his story he certainly does – he is also acting on Special Circumstances orders, which are forever beyond our purview. The consequences of the drone's poetic licence which mars the authenticity of Gurgeh's story are perhaps less interesting than the implications of a covert "overlord" strategy of play in place throughout the novel, a strategy manipulating the scope of the narrative, ultimately superseding Gurgeh's and our own working understanding of the Culture and its motives, rendering them somewhat sinister. As an old friend who used to work for Special Circumstances warns Gurgeh at the outset, these Minds are "tricky. Devious. They're gamblers, too, and used to winning"; "Any time I've ever been involved with them they've got things done" (Banks 1995, 22). This old friend is also a drone – evidencing that Banks's critique of the Culture is voiced by both his human and AI characters, but also highlighting the Culture's AI's autonomous self-reflexivity.

As Gurgeh's reflection on his final game of Azad against the Emperor suggests, "[t]he Culture had become the Empire, the Empire the barbarians" (Banks 1995, 276). The imperial model of rule, barely intelligible to Gurgeh's egalitarian Culture mindset, is explained early in the novel by the Special Circumstances drone as being "in short […] all about dominance" (Banks 1995, 74). As Dalene Labuschagne explains in her 2011 article on utopia and irony in *The Player of Games*, throughout the novel, and especially at the end, we are certain of the originally only "dawning realisation that the autonomy offered by such a utopian scheme as offered by the Culture is an illusion – Gurgeh [merely] imagines that he is in control of events" (Labuschagne, 67), while he is being played all along. The dominant player here has been the Culture, cleverly facilitating Gurgeh's "illusion" of freedom and autonomy. The Empire of Azad may be barbaric in its cruel, corrupt system, rendering it morally unjustifiable, yet from the game-player's perspective, the Culture's intervention plan is not based on fair play either, unmasking its Contact policy as an unethical game of means justifying ends. The unsettling anti-climax of the Culture's elaborate strategy is reported at the end of the novel, as Gurgeh talks to his friends: "You know […] I asked the ship yesterday exactly what they did do about the Empire in the end; how they went in to sort it out. It said they didn't even bother. Fell apart all on its own" (Banks 1995, 305). This nonchalant note is chilling, because it implicitly confirms the Azadian Emperor's critique of the Culture and illustrates how Culture principles might be regarded as "perverse" from an external perspective: the Culture was only interested in bringing the Empire down, not in conquering it, thus subverting the traditional principles of an imperial agonistic strategy. While this clearly confirms Kerslake's point that the Culture does not behave like a traditional empire, transcending the pitfalls of pointless warmongering and opting rather for a less invasive method of achieving its security goals, it nonetheless remains rather problematic that the Culture "didn't even bother" to see it through, which questions whether this elaborate clandestine play of intervention can in the end be justified as part of the Culture's famous "good works", that is, helping less advanced and less privileged civilisations get on the "right" track. As a disgruntled narrator-protagonist notes in "A Gift from the Culture", one of the short stories in *The State of the Art* (1991): "Oh the self-satisfied Culture: its imperialism of smugness" (Banks 1991, 13; qtd in Kincaid, 38).

A worrying set of questions remains, then, as it is almost universally the case with Banks's Culture novels:[2] firstly, whether the true motive for the Culture's seemingly selfless intervention in the Empire of Azad was rather to justify the Culture's existence as an impartial upholder of ethics and justice; secondly, whether this "machina ex machina" (Banks 1995, 229) intervention benefited the Azadians in any real sense, and, finally, given this elaborate but potentially futile game of justice, to what extent is the Culture merely another gaming empire, vindicating its elevated existence by playing god to less technologically advanced civilisations?

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[2] For analogies of the Culture's problematic motives see for instance the "Appendices to the Idiran-Culture War" in *Consider Phlebas* which provide a summary of both sides' respective reasons for the war (Banks 1987, 447–67).

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RÉSUMÉ:
STÁT VE HŘE: HAZARD GALAKTICKÝCH IMPÉRIÍ V DÍLE IAINA M. BANKSE

Tento článek se zabývá dynamikou hry ve třech vybraných vědeckofantastických románech současného skotského spisovatele Iaina M. Bankse. Na základě typologie literární hry německého teoretika Wolfganga Isera článek zkoumá především Banksův druhý román z cyklu Kultura, *The Player of Games* (1988)[3] a zaměřuje se na dynamiku hry, která tyto texty spoluutváří jak na úrovni vyprávění, tak na rovině diskursivní a tematické. Zdůrazňuje rovněž autorovu komplexní kritiku impéria a civilizace a jejich sporný vztah k jednotlivci a nastiňuje komplexní mocenská paradigmata v kontextu Banksovy specifické, navýsost ambivalentní vize kosmické utopie a jejích protějšků, kde se bytí a hra významným způsobem navzájem prolínají.

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[3] *Hráč* u nás vyšel poprvé v překladu Pavla Bakiče v r. 2019.