

Fictional Games and Utopia: The Case of Azad

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Abstract

'Fictional games' are playful activities and ludic artefacts that were conceptualised to be part of fictional worlds. These games cannot – or at least were not originally meant to – be actually played. This interdisciplinary article discusses fictional games, focusing on those appearing in works of sf. Its objective is that of exploring how fictional games can function as utopian devices. Drawing on game studies, utopian studies, and sf studies, the first half of the article introduces the notion of fictional games and provides an initial articulation of their utopian potential. The second half focuses, instead, on the analysis of one (science-)fictional game in particular: the game of *Azad*, described in Iain M. Banks's 1988 sf novel *The Player of Games*. This analysis is instrumental in clarifying the utopian qualities that are inherent in the activity of play such as its being uncertain and contingent. By presenting relationships of power through a game (and, finally, *as a game*), utopian fictional games such as *Azad* serve as a reminder that every socio-political situation – even the most dystopian ones – is ultimately indeterminate, and retains the possibility of change.

Introduction

Broadly speaking, sf can be described as a genre of fiction whose worlds, when compared with the world the authors actually inhabit, have undergone considerable scientific and technological advancements. Within their great variety of themes and media forms, the only trait that can perhaps be recognised as common to all works of sf is their aspiration to stimulate their recipients to imagine hypothetical scenarios and alternative possibilities of being (see Williams 198; Bould and Miéville 245; Suvin xviii).

Approaching sf as an imaginative gateway that allows us to speculate on the possible consequences of future political and technological developments dates back to the 'golden age' of classic sf. In the 1930s, for example, H. G. Wells described his task as a writer of 'fantastic stories' as helping the reader 'play the game properly' – that is, to 'domesticate the impossible hypothesis' on the basis of a set of plausible assumptions (Bould and Miéville 236). Darko Suvin's pioneering work in sf criticism formalised this perspective by defining sf as 'the literature of *cognitive estrangement*' (15)¹.

¹ Suvin's idea of estrangement relies on a cultural tradition that was first articulated by the Russian Formalists in the context of literature, through – for example – Viktor Shklovsky's idea that a sense of unfamiliarity and uncertainty could be elicited through aesthetic experience (Crawford 1984). In explaining his ideas for 'a theatre for the scientific age' (1964, 64), Bertolt Brecht similarly included the aspiration of 'distancing' the audience from familiar beliefs and values to encourage them to see things (including themselves) from new perspectives.

-- End of page 187--

Suvin advanced the claim that in order to be culturally relevant, sf needs to be characterised by a degree of *novum* (i.e. aspects of the narrative world that are new and unfamiliar to the reader). According to Suvin, the *novum* in sf literature is typically found in the narrative presentation of a scientifically plausible alternate reality, ‘one that possesses a *different historical time* corresponding to different human relationships and sociocultural norms’ (88). These alternate realities’ specific mode of existence is described as a ‘feedback oscillation that moves now from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality to the narratively actualised *novum* in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from those novelties to the author’s reality in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained’ (88). The socio-cultural relevance of sf is therefore not found in its often-bizarre settings, ray-guns, hyperdrives or mysterious alien civilisations, but rather, in the words of Suvin’s editor, Gerry Canavan, in ‘its vision of a radically different social order that, in the end, is always a critique of our own very flawed one, alongside the dream of our flawed order supersession’ (Canavan xxiii-xxiv). Accordingly, Suvin proposed an understanding of utopian literature as a sub-genre of sf literature ‘in which human relationships are described as more desirable and better organised than they are in the author’s actual community’ (59).

In line with this scholarly tradition, my essay focuses on the utopian and transformative aspects of (science-)fictional games as components of wider utopian fictional projects. With ‘fictional games’, I refer to games that were created as part of fictional worlds and that are not possible – or at least were not originally possible – to play in the actual world. This article’s particular focus is fictional games presented in works of sf (i.e. science-fictional games).

The first half of this article illustrates how (science-)fictional games can contribute to sf works’ attempts at social commentary and criticism. The second half of the article concentrates on one (science-)fictional game: *Azad*, as described in Iain M. Banks’s 1988 sf novel *The Player of Games*. Focusing on a specific (science-)fictional game allowed for a detailed and grounded elaboration on how fictional games can stimulate readers’ adoption of fresh and unfamiliar perspectives. Finally, the concluding section offers an analysis of *Azad* that is specifically used to discuss characteristic traits of the activity of play such as uncertainty and contingency that can be leveraged as components of utopian fiction.

-- End of page 188--

Fictional Games in Science Fiction

With ‘fictional games’ I refer to playful activities and ludic artefacts that exist within fictional worlds. These games are meant to trigger the imagination, and cannot be – or at least were not originally meant to be – actually played. There are, however, several examples of fictional games that were devised as thematic features within a larger work of fiction that were later commercially developed to be playable in the actual world. Having to appeal to a wide audience, the games that manage to cross the boundaries between being elements of a work of fiction and actually playable artefacts are often characterised by a limited amount of material components and a high degree of similarity to popular folk games. For example, this is the case

with *Fizzbin* (a Poker-inspired bluff-based card game that made its fictional appearance in the original *Star Trek* [US 1966-] and became commercially available in 1976), or *Triad* (*Battlestar Galactica*'s science-fictional variation on Poker, made into a playable card game by ANOVOS production in 2012). There are also instances in which more complicated fictional games, for example games that feature the use of advanced technological features or even magic (such as sentient pawns), that were simplified and adapted into actual games and sports. The real-life version of *Quidditch* (a team sport that aspiring wizards play in the *Harry Potter* franchise and that involves magical elements such as flying broomsticks and enchanted balls) is often referred to as *Muggle Quidditch* to distinguish it from the fictional game from which it originated.

The majority of fictional games play ancillary roles within fictional worlds, contributing to the fictional background as thematic elements. They typically make fleeting appearances in the respective works of fiction, and are not crucial to the development of its narrative. These games belong to the fictional background and largely fulfil the purpose of making the fictional world in question feel vibrant and interconnected. Examples of this common use of fictional games include *Dejarik* (also known as *HoloChess*) in *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (see Figure 1; Lucas US 1977); the game of *Damage*² in the novel *Consider Phlebas* (Banks 2012a), *Kepesh-Yakshi*, a (non-playable) chess-like fictional game within the digital gameworld of *Mass Effect 3* (see Figure 2; BioWare 2012); the game *Stars and Comets*, which appears in several novels by Andre Norton; *Tri-Dimensional Chess* and the already-mentioned *Fizzbin* in the original *Star Trek* television series. As already hinted, and as was the case in the examples above, fictional games of this type tend to be technologically enhanced variants of classic games such as chess or poker.

-- End of page 189 --

² *Damage* is a fictional card game that is structurally similar to poker. In *Damage*, players use credits as well as 'Lives' to bet on their hands of cards. Each time a player loses a showdown, one of their Lives is lost. These Lives are actual individuals brought to the table by each player, as well as the player him/herself. In *Consider Phlebas*, we learn that Lives are either slaves or people in desperate need of money who agree to risk being killed in a game in exchange for credits. Another feature of *Damage* is that all the players are linked into a machine that allows each of them to project emotions onto the others. The strength of these emotions depends on how strong the projecting player is and on how many other players are projecting similar emotions onto a given target. Through these emotional links, the players can induce their opponents to underestimate or overestimate their chances of winning, elicit reckless decisions, and even convince them to commit suicide. Spectators can use a similar technology to 'tune' their emotional states into the players' inner turmoil and thoughts, which is described in the book as a popular activity, although it is addictive and hazardous to mental health. The game, the book clarifies, is illegal on almost all civilised worlds.



Star Wars: Episode IV- A New Hope. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2019

The reliance of these fictional games on well-established actually-existing games is perhaps better understood as a deliberate decision not to encumber the work of sf with cognitively demanding details, rather than a lack of originality on the author's part. Additionally, by referencing experiences that are part of the audience's shared, lived background, the use of these fictional games quickly and intuitively clarifies that the context of a certain fictional situation is unserious and likely related to leisure.

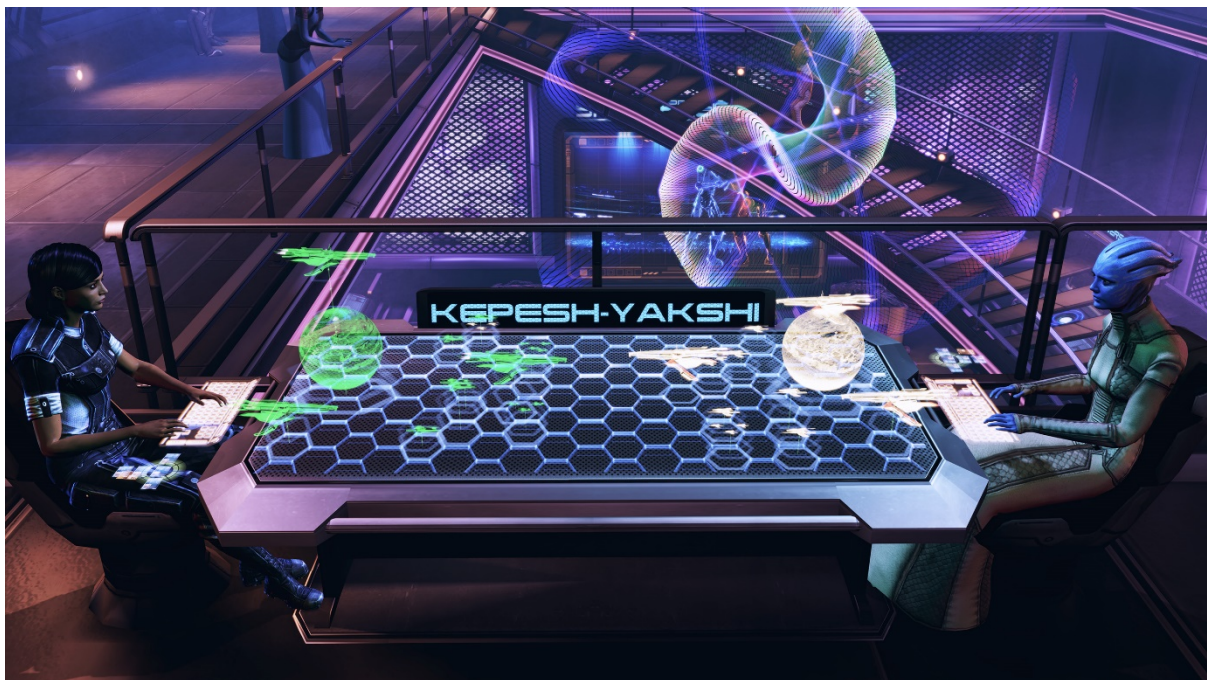
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Furthermore, these fictional games' similarity to classical games might be understood as an expressive strategy meant to emphasise the fact that the fictional society in which those games are played attributes importance to ideas and aspirations similar to those underpinning our actual societies.

Brecht's notion of 'the apparatus' might help elucidate this point. On several occasions, Brecht argued that all forms of expression implicitly reproduce the assumptions underlying the socio-technical 'apparatus' in which they are produced. He specifically used the notion of the apparatus to explain how artistic production under capitalism is inescapably tied to capitalism's modes of production (Brecht 34–35; Burling in Bould & Miéville 50). Likewise, we can understand games as expressive forms that reflect (and are reflected upon) their ideological and socio-technical apparatus (see Friedman 1999; 2005; Bogost; Pedercini; Möring and Leino). This phenomenon also partly explains why it is difficult for us to imagine games (regardless of their fictional or actual constitution) that are not characterised by activities related to an attitude of instrumental rationality such as the accumulation of resources, the quantification of performance, and the optimisation of certain outputs of the game system.

When a work of fiction presents a society playing games that resemble those played in one's own, one is thus implicitly encouraged to assume that the fictional society is underpinned by analogous values, aspirations and socio-economic relationships. To contextualise this idea with a practical example, one can interpret the rules and criteria for success in chess as a testament to our actual society's orientation toward individualism and the competitive, instrumental use of resources and rational faculties. Accordingly, one is invited to imagine the fictional societies embracing variations of chess as also being undergirded by a feudal-capitalist socio-economic system or, at the very least, as attaching importance to individual success and the instrumental use of one's cognitive faculties. On those premises, it is reasonable to expect such a fictional society to be hierarchically stratified and to hold the notion of efficiency in high regard. Any assumption pertaining to games and playful activities as stand-ins for larger cultural tropes, however, also needs to be understood as contextual. On understanding chess as the epitome of rational instrumentality, for example, H.J.R. Murray noted that chess had meant different things in different contexts before exemplifying the intellectual game, and was used allegorically for a variety of rhetorical purposes.³

-- End of page 191 --



Mass Effect 3. BioWare, 2012.

For Suvin and those who were influenced by him, such as Fredric Jameson and Raymond Williams, the utopian potential of a work of sf relies simultaneously on the correspondences and on the differences between the world presented in the fiction and the one that we share as biological creatures (see Suvin 88; Williams 198; Farca 120). It is in this sense that the first category of fictional games can be understood as taking part in the utopian program of a work

³ In the case of contemporary sf, the reliance of modern chess on instrumental rationality has come to epitomise the dominant values of capitalist societies. This is far from being a neutral representation of a society's orientation: one can imagine different societal structures or values being typified by different kinds of games that may privilege, for example, post-colonial or indigenous points of view (see LaPensée).

of fiction: they contribute to the ‘feedback oscillation’ between the familiar and the unfamiliar that is central to the experience of fiction and its transformative effects.

Not all fictional games, however, serve these secondary thematic functions. Some of them are of primary significance to the work (or works) of fiction of which they are part. This is often a consequence of the role these fictional games play in their respective fictional societies (see Barr 129–32). In dystopian sf works, for example, fictional games characteristically function as tools of social control and misdirection. This is especially the case when the games are paired with pervasive communication technologies, as in the configuration of televised ‘game shows’.

-- End of page 192 --

Therefore, when compared with the ‘background’ fictional games in the first category, the games in this second group stand out as generally harder to associate with notions like freedom and playfulness. Novels such as *Solar Lottery*, *The Running Man*, and *The Hunger Games* can be considered exemplary of this second type of fictional game⁴.



The Running Man. Republic Pictures, 2004.

In this second category, fictional games are typically designed to be persuasive and pervasive: they serve the purpose of spreading and re-affirming the values and aspirations of the hegemony under which they are played.

⁴ *The Game-Players of Titan* and *The Maze Runner* are other notable sf works that feature fictional games of this second type. It might be important to observe, here, that all the examples offered for this second category of fictional games are literary works (or movies and television series derived from them). It was a deliberate choice to exclude interactive sf works such as sf board games, hybrid games, digital games, and interactive narratives from this discussion because such interactive works are experientially (and existentially) encountered as worlds instead of mere fictions (Gualeni 2015; 2016; Gualeni and Vella). Although they inevitably feature aspects of fiction, playable games and interactive narratives do not ask us to imagine submitting to an arbitrary system of rules and possibilities; instead, they effectively put us – the players – in the position of acting and performing under specific limitations and criteria for success (see also Sicart 63–67). Their capability to engage, estrange, and transform us does not rely so much on imagination and empirical projection as on perception and action (see Gualeni 2015; 2016; Kunzelman).

In accordance with the theoretical stances on utopia outlined in the introduction, a fictional game can be considered utopian when it aims to transform the socio-political relations in the world where the game itself is played.

-- End of page 193 --

In other words, to be deemed utopian, a fictional game must be explicitly devised as having a transformative function (whether ideological or directly socio-political) in the fictional world in question. *Syndrome*, the counter-hegemonic fictional board game described by Philip K. Dick in his 1959 short story 'War Game' can be cited as an example of a utopian fictional game. Within this narrative world, *Syndrome* is a *Monopoly*-inspired game designed by the economically exploited Ganymedeans to be played on Earth, the home of their oppressors. As playable propaganda, *Syndrome* rewards non-colonial and non-consumeristic player behaviours, and leads – as the finale of the story suggests – to a shift in the Terrans' capitalist mindset. A similar case is present in Ken MacLeod's 2011 novel *The Restoration Game*, in which the protagonist creates a multiplayer online digital game that becomes the ideological and organizational linchpin of a popular rebellion.

The proposed division between fictional games that have secondary roles within fictional worlds and fictional games that are, instead, deeply ingrained in the functioning of a fictional society is obviously arbitrary, and the line between the two categories is often unclear. While this categorisation may be considered problematic in the same way as Suvin's similar distinction between culturally relevant and culturally irrelevant fiction, I consider it useful in introducing and understanding *Azad*, the specific fictional game that is the focus of the second half of this article.

The Game of *Azad*

The Player of Games is part of 'the Culture series', a sequence of ten loosely related sf books written by Iain M. Banks between 1987 and 2012. The shared background of these books is 'the Culture', a functioning anarchist, utopian, post-scarcity, galaxy-spanning society of pan-humans, non-human species, and advanced artificial intelligences that is often discussed by literary critics as 'a sprawling, inter-galactic left-libertarian thought experiment' (Suderman). *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 (see Labuschagne).

As noted, games are frequent occurrences in the Culture series books, mostly functioning as explicit, ready-made symbols; they are presented as structured systems of rules designed to replicate certain ideas and ways of living (Cobley 26; Slocombe 136; Caroti 64; Kincaid 17). The *Azad* game fits this bill perfectly: it is the only game in the series that can be considered a utopian game (i.e. a fictional device meant to influence societies and power structures).

-- End of page 194 --

This is due both to its central relevance within the narrative of *The Player of Games* and its role in avowing and maintaining the status quo of the dystopian hegemonic scenario described in the book.

The novel's protagonist is Jernau Morat Gurgeh, a games scholar and professional player who is recruited by the Culture's 'Special Circumstances' branch to infiltrate a gaming event planned to take place two years later in the distant, space-faring Empire of Azad. *The Player of Games* presents Gurgeh as one of the most brilliant and accomplished players in the entire Culture; a civilisation in which games play an important role, as testified by their frequent occurrence in the eponymous series. In those novels, games and sports feature as sources of discomfort and uncertainty for space-faring societies that managed to eradicate both from all other aspects of existence. The hedonistic take on utopia upheld by the Culture is often described in the series as a product of scientific and technological advancements, and as a work of 'the Minds' – artificial, conscious superintelligences that constitute the logistical and the interstellar civilisation's political backbone. Blackmailed by his recruiters and a victim of the existential tedium that plagues many in the Culture (see Kincaid 32, 42, 48), Gurgeh decides to accept the job. His two-year outbound journey to the Empire of Azad is spent learning the game that he will play in the tournament.

Banks deliberately obfuscates the rules and processes governing the game of *Azad*, but leaves tantalising clues about its setup and functioning throughout the novel (MacCallum-Stewart 128). *The Player of Games* presents the game of *Azad* as a staggeringly complex and nuanced turn-based military strategy board game that also features several elements of chance. Banks describes *Azad* as having a preliminary phase comprising a few mini-games in which players develop their resources for the main part of the game and make decisions concerning their strategic and political orientations. These simpler, preparatory games are played entirely with special cards and dice. The main phase of *Azad*, in contrast, takes place on enormous three-dimensional boards of various shapes and sizes. The boards are described as 'at least twenty metres to a side' and can be walked on when players need to move their pieces (Banks *The Player of Games* 75). *Azad* can be played with two or more players, depending on the situation and the phase of the tournament, and can give rise to temporary in-game alliances that usually reflect the shared interests of certain factions of Azadian society.

As is evident from its name, the game of *Azad* is intricately connected to the political functioning of the eponymous empire.

-- End of page 195 --

The reader is informed that the word 'Azad' has a multitude of meanings in the Eächic language used on the home planet of the Empire of Azad, all generally relating to complex, interconnected systems and mechanisms, and that the term is also applied to entities such as animals, plants, and machines. Although the study of games and the study of philosophy are sharply differentiated in the Culture, the links between a civilization, 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' (30). The game was 'developed over several thousand years, reaching its present form about eight hundred years ago, around the same time as the institutionalization of the species' still

extant religion. [...] [It] is used as an absolutely integral part of the power-system of the empire. Put in the crudest possible terms, whoever wins the game becomes emperor' (76). It is therefore not surprising that the game functions like a model of the social reality of Azad, in which 'whoever succeeds at the game succeeds in life; the same qualities are required in each to ensure dominance' (ibid.).

It is important to add that the game is played with a variety of pieces that represent in-game resources and military units. Some of these pieces are genetically engineered constructs called 'biotechs' that are particularly difficult to master because they may change and mature during the game, depending on how they are used. During his two years of ludic and linguistic preparation, the artificial intelligence who is training Gurgeh encourages him to sleep while holding some of the more important biotechs, as that will make him understand them better in the context of play.

The Game of *Azad* and Utopia

As outlined in the previous section, the game of *Azad* assumes a correspondence between its system of rules and the functioning of the political system of which the game is part. Accordingly, Azadians who perform well in the official tournaments (held at regular intervals that are reminiscent of present-day political elections) take up institutional roles with levels of importance that correspond with their tournament performance. Notwithstanding its political structure matching that of a game, the Empire of Azad's social organisation is neither playful nor free: *The Player of Games* is not set in an anarchistic or liberal society, but rather in a totalitarian one. The main ideological paradigm underpinning both the empire and the game is therefore that of instrumental rationality, which is particularly conspicuous in the gameplay's focus on activities such as resource management, territorial control, and military tactics.

-- End of page 196 --

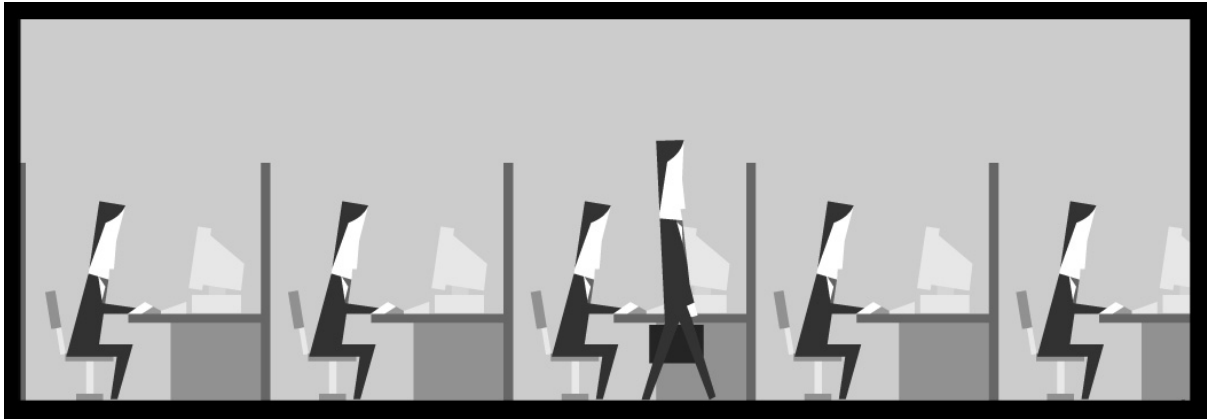
Banks's space opera, like Dick's *Solar Lottery*, uses a game as a device to justify and maintain hegemonic power in a fictional society. The transgression of the boundary between the artificiality of a ludic structure and the reality of social organisation constitutes the most striking aspect of the *novum* in both books. In this particular aspect, *The Player of Games* and *Solar Lottery* have an obvious predecessor in Jorge Luis Borges' 1941 short story 'The Babylon Lottery' (1962). In *Solar Lottery*, absolute power wears the mask of chance. In *The Player of Games*, power is solely distributed within 'an economically privileged class retaining its advantages, through – usually – a judicious use of oppression and skilled manipulation' (74). Members of the Empire of Azad's ruling classes maintain their status through their in-game performance, which is ensured by a social system that grants them higher-quality education and mentorship. Their privileged position in society is further protected by a planet-wide programme of genetic manipulation aimed at suppressing the intelligence (and, consequently, the in-game performance) of the rest of the population. This programme includes selective birth control and sterilisation, area-specific starvation, and mass deportation (80).

Against this dark background, Banks introduces an original utopian aspect that sets *The Player of Games* apart from the dystopianism of both *Solar Lottery* and ‘The Babylon Lottery’. In his novel, Banks shows that understanding relationships of power through a game (and, finally, *as a game*) can reveal their fragility and contingency. Indeed, the aspects of interaction and uncertainty that define many fictional games, including *Azad*, can be understood as particularly interesting tools for stimulating utopian thought in works of fiction: If a player can challenge and subvert the empire’s assumptions and ideologies within the game, it is possible for the whole system to collapse and be overcome. *The Player of Games* can be thus termed a ‘critical dystopia’ – a work of fiction that, despite its oppressive socio-technical dystopia, still features a possibility, however remote, for change (see Baccolini & Moylan; Baccolini). The interaction and uncertainty in the game of *Azad* offer precisely that glimmer of hope – the faint possibility of overturning dystopia from within.

A similarly utopian understanding of interactions as empowering, transformative tools (for the individual as well as the society in which a game is played) can be recognised as the conceptual foundation for the current consideration of games as valuable components of social processes such as education and propaganda (see Bogost; Flanagan). This understanding also resonates with the study and design of digital and non-digital games as tools to promote personal and social transformation (see Gualeni & Vella).

-- End of page 197 --

Conversely, games that aspire to convey a dystopian perspective on socio-political situations tend to rely on interactive situations where players find themselves facing a precarious situation in a disempowered state (Farca 78). This is not only true at the level of the in-game narrative of dystopian games, where players typically take on fictional roles of oppressed and disenfranchised individuals or groups, but also in the kinds of interactions afforded to them. As a central part of their rhetoric, dystopian games that recall ‘dystopias of resignation’ offer the opportunities or resources necessary to change in-game characters’ circumstances; however, player interaction is often futile and merely pushes the game toward its deterministically tragic conclusion (Moylan 181; Farca 78, 116). These kinds of design decisions put players in the condition of actively experiencing the inescapability of certain socio-economic situations. Examples of this almost anti-utopian use of interactivity can be identified in digital games such as *Every Day the Same Dream* (Molleindustria 2009; see Figure 4) and *Cart Life* (Hofmeier 2010).



Every Day the Same Dream. Molleindustria, 2009.

Another design strategy that is often leveraged in these games is that of making the players active participants in creating or perpetuating the problems that make those gameworlds dystopian (see Schultzke 2014, 324-330). This design intention typically materializes in games as constraints and goals that mirror the problems that the dystopia in question is designed to express. An example of this strategy consists in forcing the player into violent behaviours within gameworlds pervaded by violence, or hoarding behaviours in game situations defined by scarcity of resources (ibid.). This design purpose can be pursued further by putting players in the insufferable role of social actors against whom the players would ideally side (for example high school shooting murderers, Nazi officers, whale harpooners, or evil corporations). Games of this kind are thus meant to shock, irritate, and provide simplified insights into the motives and the modus operandi of forces within society that can be considered dystopian from the implied point of view of the player. Examples of design strategy can be recognized in the interactive dystopias disclosed by *The McDonald's Videogame* (Molleindustria 2005), by *Harpooned: Japanese Cetacean Research Simulator* (O'Kane 2008), and by the WWII-themed tabletop game *Train* by Brenda Romero (2009). As previously mentioned, interactively experiencing games of this kind makes the recipient more likely 'to see empirical reality for what it is, and may be inclined to work towards Utopia in real life' (Farca 120). In this sense, dystopian games function both as a warning and as an incentive to action.

-- End of page 198 --

Returning to the present focus on fictional games in works of sf, the main structural difference between the game of *Azad* and Dick's and Borges's lotteries is that *Azad* is not exclusively a game of chance. Although randomness is an important component of *Azad*, Banks's fictional game requires its players to understand and interpret dynamic situations and to respond in ways that allow them to pursue strategic objectives. *The Player of Games* describes the game of *Azad* as an interactive system that is so complex, subtle, and flexible that it is as precise and comprehensive a model of life as it is possible to construct (76). The players are thus not simply taking part in a ludic activity defined by aspects of chance and strategic thinking; rather, they are effectively proposing competing political claims that are implied in their in-game interactions. As the book explains, the game of *Azad*

is used not so much to determine which person will rule, but which tendency within the empire's ruling class will have the upper hand, which branch of economic theory will be followed, which creeds will be recognised within the religious apparatus, and which political policies will be followed. (ibid.)

Discussing the possibility to express and manipulate ideological positions through the activity of play, I find it important to mention the work of game scholar Mary Flanagan. In her 2009 book *Critical Play*, Flanagan lists and discusses a number of ways to play games (and play *with* games) that can incite critical and subversive attitudes in players. Among these approaches, the idea that players can decide to act according to their own beliefs and inclinations, disputing the values and objectives imposed on them by a game's rules and affordances, is of particular interest. Also relevant for the scope of the present article is the practice of 'unplaying', which consists in configuring unanticipated and often absurd in-game scenarios. The games' objective resistance to players' subversive intentions is of central importance in Flanagan's work, as it demonstrates how games are often (implicitly) designed to enforce and uphold norms and existing power structures.

-- End of page 199 --

Examining *The Player of Games* through Flanagan's critical perspectives, the aspects of chance and indeterminacy that characterise the game of *Azad* can be understood as elements of fragility in Azad's political structure. Given the correspondence between the game and the empire, Banks's novel presents the uncertainty inherent in the game and player behaviour as a potential threat to the stability of Azad's socio-political status quo. The game's utopian function thus consists in showing that power relationships are ultimately indeterminate, and are potentially subject to change even in the most dystopian and oppressive scenarios. In other words, because of its elements of chance and indeterminacy (which is also reflected in how the game is presented in the novel), *Azad* stimulates the readers' political imagination, which is likely to make them more receptive to social change in their actual life.

As already discussed, game studies have often tackled the critical implications of gameplay and the player's ability to subvert the game's political or cultural assumptions. From this perspective, a double meaning can be attributed to the game of *Azad*. On the one hand, it can be understood as a 'complicit political' game (Schrank 2014, 113) – a utopian projection of the aspirations of the ruling class. On the other hand, the way in which Gurgeh decides to play the game configures a new kind of political programme in which the Azadian ruling class's aspirations are criticised and subverted.

Indeterminacy as a Utopian Device in *The Player of Games*

Many types of indeterminacy can exist in games. The most common are those introduced by aspects of randomness, unexpectedness, and ambiguity (see Costikyan 2013). In games as well as fictional games, these features are generally encountered in three non-mutually exclusive ways. First, they can be experienced as deliberate components of a game's formal or technical setup. Second, indeterminacy can emerge from players' interpretations of what the game means and how they are supposed to act within it. And finally, these qualities can occur due to

unanticipated malfunctions of the game – either as technical problems or as parts of the game’s design not being fully resolved (see Gualeni 2019).

Critical, even utopian uses of indeterminacy in games are not exclusive to sf or even to fiction in general. Modernist artistic practices systematically embraced aspects of chance, nonsense, and uncertainty to stimulate reflections on the arbitrariness and contingency of the status quo, and to facilitate the imagination of alternative socio-political configurations.

-- End of page 200 --

Of the modernist avant-gardes, the currents of Dada, Surrealism, and Situationism perhaps most obviously embraced chance and interactivity in artistic production as expressive ways to oppose instrumental rationality, the dominant paradigm of Western thought (see Debord; Laxton). In addition to having the explicit intention to ‘militate against means/end rationality’ (Laxton 4), these movements’ playfulness and reliance on indeterminacy also worked to expose established social canons as always possible to put into question. Several groups in these movements that shared leftist, anti-war, and anti-capitalist political positions systematically adopted playfulness and the use of games as part of their insubordinate and utopian artistic strategies. In Surrealism in particular, play featured not only as a technique to stimulate free association and unstructured creativity (e.g. through activities such as the *Exquisite Corpse* or *The Game of Illot-Mollo*), but also manifested itself as playable installations and surrealist variations of toys and pastimes (Gooding and Brotchie; Flanagan 88–94). In its interactive, participatory mode of engagement, the Surrealists’ use of games in the context of artistic production challenged the traditional understanding of authorship. This strategy therefore also problematised the separation between the producer and the consumer of art, which Surrealists saw as echoing feudal/capitalist relationships of production, and therefore as an aspect of culture that the avant-gardes should aspire to overcome.

There are many such parallels between the rhetorical use of games in utopian fiction and modernist artistic practices. The following passage from *The Player of Games*, in which Gurgeh gives his account of the philosophical importance of indeterminacy, helps highlight these correspondences:

All reality is a game. Physics at its most fundamental, the very fabric of our universe, results directly from the interaction of certain fairly simple rules, and chance; the same description may be applied to the best, most elegant and both intellectually and aesthetically satisfying games. By being unknowable, by resulting from events which, at the sub-atomic level, cannot be fully predicted, the future remains malleable, and retains the possibility of change, the hope of coming to prevail; victory, to use an unfashionable word. In this, the future is a game; time is one of the rules. [...] The very first-rank games acknowledge the element of chance, even if they rightly restrict raw luck. (41)

Unlike the artists participating in currents such as Dada, Surrealism, and Situationism, Gurgeh already lives in a socialist utopia: a post-scarcity civilisation that is kept economically viable and politically stable by technological means. Artificial, conscious super-intelligences called ‘the Minds’ are at the core of the Culture’s strategic and logistical operations.

-- End of page 201 --

The politically prominent role played by the Minds' machine network in the Culture, together with its aspirations for functional efficiency and political stability, have often led sf critics and literary scholars to speculate about the reasons why the Culture did not opt at any point to get rid of its 'flesh sentient' members (i.e. pan-humans as well as non-human species). Is it not the case that their expulsion would be the most stable and cost-effective way to rationally run an interstellar civilization? After all, the unpredictability and the irrationality of biological creatures (both inside and outside the Culture) are often directly responsible for the complications and the conflicts around which each book in Banks's series revolves.

One could argue that getting rid of the biological sentients would contradict principles such as inclusiveness and non-discrimination on which the Culture is founded, but one also needs to consider that those values and orientations might change over the millennia. In my view, it is particularly interesting to explore the presence and the permanence of biological sentients (and biological life in general) in the Culture in relation to aspects of the Minds' characters that make them more similar to ancient Greek gods than to rational supercomputers (see also *Excession* 219–220). *The Player of Games*, *Excession*, and *The Hydrogen Sonata* exemplify Culture novels in which the Minds are presented as having unique personality traits, specific interests, quirks, and dispositions. In Banks's books, the Minds continuously express what could be considered genuine curiosity and even existential care towards the affairs of sentient biological beings (both inside and outside the Culture). From this perspective, the continued presence of biological sentients in the Culture can be justified as one of the 'noble goals' of the pan-galactic civilization rather than an obstacle to its political stability and resource efficiency. Biological sentient beings would thereby constitute inherent sources of meaning and uncertainty for the Minds.

This seemingly holds true throughout the Culture series, where humanoids are featured both as creatures capable of creative and surprising new approaches to complex problems (e.g. Gurgeh in *The Player of Games* and Fal 'Ngeestra in *Consider Phlebas*) and as elements of disequilibrium and amusement for the Minds in what would otherwise be a wholly predictable existence. Biological sentients might thus be what keeps the Culture interesting for the Minds in the same way complexity and indeterminacy are the aspects of games that motivate Gurgeh's enthusiasm as both a scholar and a player (*The Player of Games* 21). After all, *The Player of Games* describes the Minds as 'tricky. Devious. They're gamblers, too; and used to winning' (22).

-- End of page 202 --

The unpredictability of biological sentient beings might thus be traits that are evolutionarily essential to the Culture, much like its general fascination with games. In Banks's utopian civilisation, indeterminacy features as a desirable resource that can be harnessed to keep the Culture's future malleable, preserve its possibility of change, and permit it to keep nurturing – at least to a degree – utopian aspirations.

In taking this stance, my utopian understanding of the Culture is diametrically opposed to that of Dalene Labuschagne. In her 2011 article "Deconstructing Utopia in Science Fiction," Labuschagne questions the characterization of the Culture as a utopian society. Using the

method of literary deconstruction, she focuses on how the Culture imposes its political views on neighbouring galactic civilizations by means of systematically (and often subtly) limiting their possibilities to express free will. Antithetically, and in line with Brown's (2001) critical reading of the Culture's political modus operandi, I propose to understand the Culture as a utopian civilization precisely because it does not seek to eradicate uncertainty and deviant behaviour. The Culture does indeed often intervene in the development of other civilizations, but these interventions are not presented as deterministic or as relying on perfect knowledge. The Minds in the Culture novels are not omnipotent beings: They are frequently wrong and often disagree with one another, to the point that Kincaid argues that the Culture is a critical utopia not by virtue of its organized structure, but precisely because of its lack of structure and its fundamental individualism (Kincaid 2007, 145). The Culture's manipulative interventions also occasionally fail: *Look to Windward* (2012d) and *Excession* (2012c) are notable examples of both the Culture's fallibility and lack of internal consistency. The Minds, besides, are not presented in the Culture novels (especially in the last novels) as operating with complete information, but rather as being imaginative and thirsty for new knowledge. In *The Player of Games*, they are explicitly characterized as "gamblers." In this sense, I can understand the ambiguities and contradictions within the Culture (and also their fascination for games) as "possibility spaces" in which the Culture's utopian aspirations can reflect onto themselves and re-assess its own possibilities and incongruities. As already mentioned, those 'spaces' afford a utopian project the capability to continue to change, and – as already said – the possibility to remain utopian.

Conclusion

Within the academic field of game studies, the aspirations of games and digital games to elicit transformations – both at the individual and the social scale – have been discussed and analysed from a number of perspectives. Currently, the most visible among them focus on

-- End of page 203 --

- the specific ways in which games can mount claims and function as tools for persuasion (see Bogost; Flanagan);
- the games' simulative capabilities, a perspective from which gameworlds are approached as thought experiments: fictional contexts in which new possibilities and alternative courses of action could be tested and toyed with (Gualeni 2015; Gualeni & Vella);
- the games' aesthetic presentation and the ways in which it specifically invites utopian attitudes (Farca; Abraham);
- and the contingency of games' rules and boundaries, and their possibility to be misplayed, modified, and redesigned by players, who can thus subvert the games' original ideological contents and orientations (Aarseth; Flanagan).

Works of sf also frequently present information, values, and ideologies that are aimed at changing society into a better version of itself. This utopian disposition is often considered the defining characteristic of sf as an expressive genre (Canavan in Suvin xxiv). Given this commonality between games and works of sf, it is intuitive that there could be many fruitful

connections and analogies between the academic fields of game studies and sf studies. Until the present day, however, most of the work pursued at the intersections between those disciplines concentrated on utopia and utopianism as interactively experienced in games (see Farca; Kłosiński), or on the ways sf themes and tropes are mediated and further developed as interactive gameworlds (see Barr; Tringham).

Unlike existing works at the intersection between game studies and sf, this article has been focused on the transformative potential of fictional games, that is playful activities and ludic artefacts that were conceptualised as part of fictional worlds and could not – or at least could not originally – be played in the actual world. With a specific focus on fictional games encountered in works of sf, I pursued that purpose in an interdisciplinary fashion by combining and building upon academic perspectives such as game studies, philosophy of technology, utopian studies, and sf studies.

After defining what fictional games are, this article distinguished two categories thereof. The first group was that of fictional games that serve as thematic components in works of (science) fiction and help conveying basic assumptions about the values and drives of the civilisation in which they are played. The second category comprised fictional games with a central role in the (science-)fictional world in question, and typically feature as tools of control and misdirection within a dystopian hegemony. Both categories were discussed as generally contributing to the emergence of utopia in a work of fiction.

-- End of page 204 --

In the second category in particular, indeterminacy was recognised as having a crucial utopian function: that of revealing the instability and contingency that ultimately define any situation. In other words, the fictional games in the second category reveal a ‘possibility space’ (or the ‘play’) where hope can germinate even in the most repressive and dystopian conditions. By introducing interactivity and chance as possibilities for things to be other than what they are, these games turn dystopian works into critical dystopias (see Baccolini; Farca). In conclusion, to identify the utopian potential of fictional games, this article leveraged a positive, playful, and generative approach to the notion of ‘indeterminacy’ – one that does not resonate with notions such as arbitrariness and meaninglessness.

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