

A
CULTURE
NOVEL

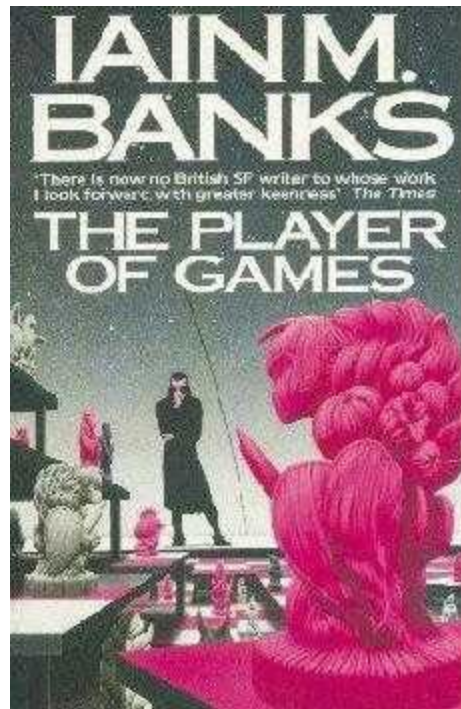
IAIN M. BANKS

THE PLAYER OF GAMES

The Player of Games

The Culture Book 02

Iain M. Banks



The Culture - a human/machine symbiotic society - has thrown up many great Game Players, and one of the greatest is Gurgeh. Jernau Morat Gurgeh. *The Player of Games*. Master of every board, computer and strategy.

Bored with success, Gurgeh travels to the Empire of Azad, cruel and incredibly wealthy, to try their fabulous game ... a game so complex, so like life itself, that the winner becomes emperor. Mocked, blackmailed, almost murdered, Gurgeh accepts the game, and with it the challenge of his life - and very possibly his death.

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1. Culture Plate

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.

Dust drifted with each footstep. He limped across the desert, following the suited figure in front. The gun was quiet in his hands. They must be nearly there; the noise of distant surf boomed through the helmet soundfield. They were approaching a tall dune, from which they ought to be able to see the coast. Somehow he had survived; he had not expected to.

It was bright and hot and dry outside, but inside the suit he was shielded from the sun and the baking air; cosseted and cool. One edge of the helmet visor was dark, where it had taken a hit, and the right leg flexed awkwardly, also damaged, making him limp, but otherwise he'd been lucky. The last time they'd been attacked had been a kilometre back, and now they were nearly out of range.

The flight of missiles cleared the nearest ridge in a glittering arc. He saw them late because of the damaged visor. He thought the missiles had already started firing, but it was only the sunlight reflecting on their sleek bodies. The flight dipped and swung together, like a flock of birds.

When they did start firing it was signalled by strobing red pulses of light. He raised his gun to fire back; the other suited figures in the group had already started firing. Some dived to the dusty desert floor, others dropped to one knee. He was the only one standing.

The missiles swerved again, turning all at once and then splitting up to take different directions. Dust puffed around his feet as shots fell close. He tried to aim at one of the small machines, but they moved startlingly quickly, and the gun felt large and awkward in his hands. His suit chimed over the distant noise of firing and the shouts of the other people; lights winked inside the helmet, detailing the damage. The suit shook and his right leg went suddenly numb.

'Wake up, Gurgeh!' Yay laughed, alongside him. She swivelled on one knee as two of the small missiles swung suddenly at their section of the group, sensing that was where it was weakest. Gurgeh saw the machines coming, but the gun sang wildly in his hands, and seemed always to be aiming at where the missiles had just been. The two machines darted for the space between him and Yay. One of the missiles flashed once and disintegrated; Yay shouted, exulting. The other missile swung between them; she lashed out with her foot, trying to kick it. Gurgeh turned awkwardly to fire at it, accidentally scattering fire over Yay's suit as he did so. He heard her cry out and then curse. She staggered, but brought the gun round; fountains of dust burst around the second missile as it turned to face them again, its red pulses lighting up his suit and filling his visor with darkness. He felt numb from the neck down and crumpled to the ground. It went black and very quiet.

'You are dead,' a crisp little voice told him.

He lay on the unseen desert floor. He could hear distant, muffled noises, sense vibrations from the ground. He heard his own heart beat, and the ebb and flow of his breath. He tried to hold his breathing and slow his heart, but he was paralysed, imprisoned, without control.

His nose itched. It was impossible to scratch it. *What am I doing here?* he asked himself.

Sensation returned. People were talking, and he was staring through the visor at the flattened desert dust a centimetre in front of his nose. Before he could move, somebody pulled him up by one arm.

He unlatched his helmet. Yay Meristinoux, also bare-headed, stood looking at him and shaking her head. Her hands were on her hips, her gun swung from one wrist. 'You were terrible,' she said, though not unkindly. She had the face of a beautiful child, but the slow, deep voice was knowing and roguish; a low-slung voice.

The others sat around on the rocks and dust, talking. A few were heading back to the club house. Yay picked up Gurgeh's gun and presented it to him. He scratched his nose, then shook his head, refusing to take the weapon.

'Yay,' he told her, 'this is for children.'

She paused, slung her gun over one shoulder, and shrugged (and the muzzles of both guns swung in the sunlight, glinting momentarily, and he saw the speeding line of missiles again, and was dizzy for a second).

'So?' she said. 'It isn't boring. You said you were bored; I thought you might enjoy a shoot.'

He dusted himself down and turned back towards the club house. Yay walked alongside. Recovery drones drifted past them, collecting the components of the destructed machines.

'It's infantile, Yay. Why fritter your time away with this nonsense?' They stopped at the top of the dune. The low club house lay a hundred metres away, between them and the golden sand and snow-white surf. The sea was bright under the high sun.

'Don't be so pompous,' she told him. Her short brown hair moved in the same wind which blew the tops from the falling waves and sent the resulting spray curling back out to sea. She stooped to where some pieces of a shattered missile lay half buried in the dune, picked them up, blew sand grains off the shining surfaces, and turned the components over in her hands. 'I enjoy it,' she said. 'I enjoy the sort of games you like, but... I enjoy this too.' She looked puzzled. '*This* is a game. Don't you get *any* pleasure from this sort of thing?'

'No. And neither will you, after a while.'

She shrugged easily. 'Till then, then.' She handed him the parts of the disintegrated machine. He inspected them while a group of young men passed, heading for the firing ranges.

'Mr Gurgeh?' One of the young males stopped, looking at Gurgeh quizzically. A fleeting expression of annoyance passed across the older man's face, to be replaced by the amused tolerance Yay had seen before in such situations. 'Jernau *Morat* Gurgeh?' the young man said, still not quite sure.

'Guilty.' Gurgeh smiled gracefully and - Yay saw - straightened his back fractionally, drawing himself up a little. The younger man's face lit up. He executed a quick, formal bow. Gurgeh and Yay exchanged glances.

'An *honour* to meet you, Mr Gurgeh,' the young man said, smiling widely. 'My name's Shuro...I'm...' He laughed. 'I follow all your games; I have a complete set of your theoretical works on file...'

Gurgeh nodded. 'How comprehensive of you.'

'Really. I'd be honoured if, any time you're here, you'd play me at... well, anything. Deploy is probably my best game; I play off three points, but-'

'Whereas my handicap, regrettably, is lack of time,' Gurgeh said. 'But, certainly, if the chance ever arises, I shall be happy to play you.' He gave a hint of a nod to the younger man. 'A pleasure to have met you.'

The young man flushed and backed off, smiling. 'The pleasure's all mine, Mr Gurgeh.... Goodbye... goodbye.' He smiled awkwardly, then turned and walked off to join his companions.

Yay watched him go. 'You enjoy all that stuff, don't you, Gurgeh?' she grinned.

'Not at all,' he said briskly. 'It's annoying.'

Yay continued to watch the young man walking away, looking him up and down as he tramped off through the sand. She sighed.

'But what about you?' Gurgeh looked with distaste at the pieces of missile in his hands. 'Do you enjoy all this... destruction?'

'It's hardly destruction,' Yay drawled. 'The missiles are explosively dismantled, not destroyed. I can put one of those things back together in half an hour.'

'So it's false.'

'What isn't?'

'Intellectual achievement. The exercise of skill. Human feeling.'

Yay's mouth twisted in irony. She said, 'I can see we have a long way to go before we understand each other, Gurgeh.'

'Then let me help you.'

'Be your protégée?'

'Yes.'

Yay looked away, to where the rollers fell against the golden beach, and then back again. As the wind blew and the surf pounded, she reached slowly behind her head and brought the suit's helmet over, clicking it into place. He was left staring at the reflection of his own face in her visor. He ran one hand through the black locks of his hair.

Yay flicked her visor up. 'I'll see you, Gurgeh. Chamlis and I are coming round to your place the day after tomorrow, aren't we?'

'If you want.'

'I want.' She winked at him and walked back down the slope of sand. He watched her go. She handed his gun to a recovery drone as it passed her, loaded with glittering metallic debris.

Gurgeh stood for a moment, holding the bits of wrecked machine. Then he let the fragments drop back to the barren sand.

He could smell the earth and the trees around the shallow lake beneath the balcony. It was a cloudy night and very dark, just a hint of glow directly above, where the clouds were lit by the shining Plates of the Orbital's distant daylight side. Waves lapped in the darkness, loud slappings against the hulls of unseen boats. Lights twinkled round the edges of the lake, where low college buildings were set amongst the trees. The party was a presence at his back, something unseen, surging like the sound and smell of thunder from the faculty building; music and laughter and the scents of perfumes and food and exotic, unidentifiable fumes.

The rush of *Sharp Blue* surrounded him, invaded him. The fragrances on the warm night air, spilling from the line of opened doors behind, carried on the tide of noise the people made, became like separate strands of air, fibres unravelling from a rope, each with its own distinct colour and presence. The fibres became like packets of soil, something to be rubbed between his fingers; absorbed, identified.

There: that red-black scent of roasted meat; blood-quickening, salivatory; tempting and vaguely disagreeable at the same time as separate parts of his brain assessed the odour. The animal root smelled fuel; protein-rich food; the mid-brain trunk registered dead, incinerated cells... while the canopy of forebrain ignored both signals, because it knew his belly was full, and the roast meat cultivated.

He could detect the sea, too; a brine smell from ten or more kilometres away over the plain and the shallow downs, another threaded connection, like the net and web of rivers and canals that linked the dark lake to the restless, flowing ocean beyond the fragrant grasslands and the scented forests.

Sharp Blue was a game-player's secretion, a product of standard genofixed Culture glands sitting in Gurgeh's lower skull, beneath the ancient, animal-evolved lower reaches of his brain. The panoply of internally manufactured drugs the vast majority of Culture individuals were capable of choosing