

# Making and Playing Azad at Loncon 3: The Theory and Practice of Designing an Impossible Game

Azad, as depicted in *The Player of Games* (Banks, 1988) is an impossible game: it takes decades to learn how to play, and at least several days to play each game. In a society that revolves around Azad play, this is not a problem, but it does lead to difficulties when trying to play Azad, or Azad-influenced games, purely for enjoyment and/or insight into Banks, here on Earth. There is another difficulty, in that, as with every fictional game, the author's goals in creating it were more to serve narrative needs than ludic ones. The full rules have never been set down; all we have are fragments of rules, introduced as necessary to advance the story.

This chapter explores both these problems and contradictions, and various ways they might be solved, if not to recreate Azad wholesale, but at least to give us a chance to interact with something Azad-like in a way other than simply reading about it. It also forms both a record of, and an expansion of, the Azad Games track at the World Science Fiction Convention 2014 (aka Loncon 3), which itself discussed these issues and worked towards solutions (see MacCallum-Stewart, this volume).

This chapter also includes three different approaches to solving the inherent contradictions, and even impossibilities, implicit in creating and playing a game inspired by Azad.

## Using Game Design Practice to Understand Literature

Almost any artistic design practice must involve research, into techniques and methods. In the case of a design that is consciously inspired by other cultural products, i.e. if it is intended to produce a transmedia product itself, further research is necessary. This commonly involves a focused reading, viewing, or playing of the inspirational artefact, taking extensive notes: a process that is essentially the same as the well-known humanities research technique of close reading. In a game design context, Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum argue that close reading can be used both to analyse artefacts and to reverse-engineer design processes, making the technique useful to theorists and practitioners alike: “the close reading now becomes a process of using the experience to reverse-engineer the mechanisms and dynamics of the design” (2011).

Given the aforementioned differences between a non-existent game used as part of the narrative in a work of fiction, and a fully playable game, creating Azad is not quite reverse-engineering a game design process, but the inspired-engineering of a brand new game design. The insights it can potentially offer into *The Player of Games* come in the form of “critical artistic encounters that change the way we think about things around us” (Sullivan, 2006), in this case acting as new modes of thinking about both Banks's original, inspirational artefact, and about the wider ideas he explored, of play, games, empire, rebellion, culture (and Culture), language, war, diplomacy, philosophical premises, the ethics of intervention, and the relationship between all of the above. As an example, could playing one of the games in this chapter grant the player an insight, however partial, into Gurgeh's mindset when he describes the final game with Nicosar: “they carried out the most exquisitely textured exchange of mood and feeling through those pieces which they moved and were moved by; a song, a dance, a perfect poem”? Certainly it would be a victory condition for any artist to have their creation inspire such extreme emotion!

Thus the three games here all have different design goals, described in more detail in the “Design Notes” section of each game. All are strongly inspired by *The Player of Games*, with the Special Circumstances game also drawing inspiration from other Culture novels. Two offer an experience something like that of playing Azad (the game) itself; the other, an experience more like that of being an SC agent interacting with the Empire of Azad.

It is also noteworthy that Banks’s ruminations on games and play, as found in the novel in the form of Gurgeh’s dialogues, thoughts, and lectures, also form a theoretical corpus of work that parallels, and in some cases even predicts, major areas of research interest within the Game Studies and Play Studies disciplines. As an example, the following sequence dovetails seamlessly with the concept of “the rhetoric of play as chance” (Sutton-Smith, 1997): “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 most intellectually and aesthetically satisfying games.” (Banks, 1988). Exploring these parallels between Banks’s fiction and established Game Studies theory would be a fruitful research project in itself, if one that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

## **Game I: Azad (Mornington Planet Edition)**

This is a write-up of the rules of Azad, as played at Loncon 3. It forms a somewhat participatory spectator sport and improv acting game, suitable for performance anywhere there is a large open space that can be marked out with territories. Guidance is given regarding player roles, audience participation, judges, in-game currency, etc.

Pre-game preparation info includes: guidance for a card-making exercise, where participants write down moral premises on one side and characters on the other; consideration of players’ own moral premises; and optional minigames to allow players to gain resources and other advantages before play.

### **Design Notes**

The intention here was to try to capture the feel of Azad, at least from the perspective of a somewhat confused observer, or a player drawn into the game half-unwittingly. The players are roleplaying, storytelling, and improvising, in the role of gameplayers, but whether they are actually playing a game is arguable, and beyond the scope of this work.

The game itself is purposely incomplete and modifiable. Some ground rules should be decided in advance by the game organiser. Minor rules can be invented in play by the players and/or the Adjudicator.

Improv acting skills are useful, given that, like its main non-Banksian inspiration, Mornington Crescent (Brooke-Taylor, et al., 2001), this is at least as much of an improv acting exercise as it is a game. There will inevitably be a tension between each player’s desire to win, and the “Yes, and...” concept of improv, whereby the expectation is that one does not contradict the narrative statements of other participants, but instead agrees with and adds to them.

This game design strives to balance these two needs: players should aim, mostly, to “Yes, and...”, i.e. not contradict rules or concepts that other players introduce, but instead, build on those new ideas and enhance them. However, Azad is a wargame, and some conflict is inevitable even in this variation. It is both acceptable and encouraged to make war on your fellow players, destroying their dreams of Empire. Further, each player has a once-per-game

veto power, in the form of a bell pepper (see: The Veto, p. XX). This is the one way in which you can contradict an explicit rules statement or concept that another player has devised.

## Equipment/Resources Required

*[[[ Layout: This section could be a sidebar / box text ]]]*

Playing area: a large hall or outdoors space

Masking tape (perhaps chalk, rope, or bunting for outdoors)

Scissors (for cutting the tape/rope)

Grapes, approx. 5 per person (representing currency), plus another 20 per person as a bank

Apples, approx. 6 per person (representing infantry), plus another 10 or so as a bank

Oranges, approx. 5 per person (representing cavalry), plus another 10 or so as a bank

Bananas, approx. 4 per person (representing artillery), plus another 10 or so as a bank

Bell peppers, 1 per person (used for the Veto; see p. XX)

Lego stashes: approx. 1.5 stashes per person, each stash consisting of approx. 250 assorted bricks; each stash can be sealed in a ziplock pouch or dice bag, or just piled in the relevant territory

A tall and impressive hat, black

Black clothes (preferably robes)

## Preparation

Set out the play space by marking out territories. We found that masking tape worked well. Each territory should be somewhat irregular in shape and size, but large enough to comfortably contain a person (typical internal area around 1 square metre).

Add pieces of furniture or other objects, each of them large enough to fill most of a given territory. Participants should agree on the special effects of any such piece of terrain, if any. For example, a chair might represent a mountain, which would be slow to move through but offer defensive advantages to anyone fortifying their units in it. A cake might represent a city, with the controller of the city being permitted to take one slice per turn to either eat, or use to bribe or trade with other players.

Divide the Lego stashes around the playing area, with no more than one in any territory, and an approximately even number of territories between each stash and the nearest other stash. These should not be too near players – aim to avoid stashes being adjacent to players. In game terms, each Lego stash represents a manufacturing plant.

Each player starts around the edge of the playing area, in a territory, with the players being as evenly distributed as possible around the circumference.

## Roles

**Adjudicator.** The importance of this role cannot be overemphasised. The adjudicator should be dressed as impressively as is practicable, certainly in the tall hat and at the very least all in black, so as to clearly set them aside from all other participants. The adjudicator's job is to resolve disputes, give any problem deep but swift consideration, interpret the game's rules in a final and decisive manner, and sanction any rebellious or inharmonious players by whatever means they deem necessary, up to and including permanent exclusion from the game. The adjudicator's decision is final.

**Players.** The game works well with around 8 to 10 players. Each is given grapes, apples, oranges, bananas, and a pepper, as described above (see p. XX). Apples, oranges, and bananas are all placed in the player's starting territory.

**Commentators.** One or two participants should take on the role of commentators, in a sports journalist or TV show presenter style. Their job is to interview players, adjudicator, and spectators to ensure that everyone is both excited and somewhat confused. They interpret the events of the game in as grandiose and pretentious a manner as they choose.

**Spectators.** Any number of people can spectate. For the full Azad (MPE) experience, you will need a reasonable-sized audience that includes some Lego fans, for spectator participation.

### **Option: Add Pre-Game Activity of 'Premises'**

*'Premises' pre-game designed by Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Jude Roberts for LonCon 3.*

For this pre-game activity, gather the following, perhaps a few days before the planned Mornington Azad game:

- 1) a group of Banks fans
- 2) a large stack of blank white cards, at least 3-4 per player in the main game
- 3) writing implements

Each participant takes a few cards. On one side of each card, write the name of a character from a Culture novel (human, humanoid, drone, or Mind). On the other, write a pithy, one-sentence description of that character's philosophical premises, favourite aphorism, or general approach to the challenges of existence.

### **Option: Other Pre-Games**

Azad is described as being preceded by other games. Victory in these allows for a slight advantage in the main Azad (MPE) game – perhaps a few extra grapes, or an orange, apple, or banana.

Any Eurogames or strategy games could work for this, whether commercial off-the-shelf games or fan projects. Perhaps the most Azad-relevant options here are card games, and/or games that have some kind of elemental theme or symbolism.

### **General Gameplay**

Play happens more-or-less simultaneously, rather than in turns, so as to maintain pace and entertainment value for both players and spectators.

### **Movement**

As a player, you can expand into unoccupied territories with your units (apples, oranges, and/or bananas) as follows:

- 1) Move one or more units from a territory they occupy, into an adjacent, unoccupied territory.
- 2) You may pick up and move several units at once, but you must put them down and let go of them before picking them up again to move into a further territory.
- 3) Each territory you occupy after the initial one earns you a grape, from the bank.

- 4) Any time you voluntarily empty a territory you have previously occupied, you must forfeit a grape.

You may also move units freely into other territories you already occupy, even if it is not adjacent, so long as you walk a route solely composed of your territories to do so. That is, you may not move through an unoccupied territory, or one occupied by an opponent, in this way; you can only do so by expansion (see above) or by battling (see below) respectively.

## **Battling**

If you move some of your units into a province adjacent to some enemy units, either you or your opponent can declare a battle.

Total up the Battle Strength of each force involved as follows:

1 for each infantry, cavalry, or artillery unit

+2 Combined Arms bonus for every set of one infantry plus one cavalry plus one artillery

+2 Support bonus for each artillery unit you have that is adjacent to either of the battling provinces

+2 Tactical Advantage bonus if any of the following conditions apply:

(a) all your units are infantry, and all your opponent's units are cavalry

(b) all your units are cavalry, and all your opponent's units are artillery

(c) all your units are artillery, and all your opponent's units are infantry

Any relevant bonuses caused by new rules a player may invent (see Inventing Rules Mid-Game, below).

The player with the higher Battle Strength destroys the losing force entirely. In the event of a draw, both forces are destroyed.

The winner also removes one unit of their own as a casualty (winner's choice as to which one). If the winner's Battle Strength was twice the loser's, or more, the winner does not have to remove a casualty.

Once units have been removed the winner may, of course, move some or all units into the newly vacant territory using the standard rules for Moving (above).

## **Reinforcements**

A player may at any time exchange 3 grapes for an infantry, 4 for a cavalry, or 5 for an artillery unit, to be placed in a territory they control.

## **Manufacturing Plants**

A player who is able to take control of a manufacturing plant should immediately recruit a spectator to be the Plant Manager. Player and Plant Manager discuss what the plant should build: a tank? a bomber? a giant robot? There are no particular limits here other than the Lego pieces available and the plausibility of the design. The new unit's functions, once it is built, should be determined by the Inventing New Rules Mid-Game rules (below); if its new rules are vetoed (see below), it functions instead as a standard infantry, cavalry or artillery unit (whichever seems most appropriate). It will only be available for use once built, and must use most of the pieces in the Lego stash.

## **Inventing Rules Mid-Game**

Players are encouraged to invent new rules during the game, largely for purposes of style and entertainment rather than purely for strategic advantage. As a rule of thumb, no more than one new rule should be invented by any given player during their turn, though opposing players could also potentially come up with a new rule each, too. It's imperative that these add to the game rather than bogging it down in minutiae, unless the latter is entertaining.

A new rule should be proposed with confidence and authority, for example, "Well, according to the MacLeod-Kalashnikov Variation, an apple can transform into an orange, once per turn, in a swamp that is adjacent to a manufacturing plant." Ideally this should be loud enough that all participants can hear it clearly. The proposing player should then pause for a couple of seconds to allow for a veto (see below), then carry out the move.

## **The Veto**

A player may use their bell pepper to veto a new rule invented by another player, immediately after that rule has been invented (or, when the vetoing player first becomes aware of the existence of the new rule, if that is not immediately after invention). It is reasonable to ask for a few extra seconds to decide whether to veto a new rule or not, but even this power of extension should be used only sparingly, as the first priority should be to keep the game moving.

The pepper is handed to the Adjudicator, with the word "Veto".

Note that each player receives only one pepper (and thus veto) per game. Use it wisely.

It is theoretically possible to trade your pepper with another player, as part of a deal.

The Adjudicator may suggest a tweak to a new rule, or potentially even veto it entirely (without involving any bell peppers) if the suggester of the new rule is not willing to work towards a compromise.

Variant: A player wishing to veto a new rule hands the pepper to the player whose rule is being vetoed, instead of to the Adjudicator. That player may later spend it (or trade it).

## **Winning the Game**

The winner is the surviving player, after all others' forces are destroyed. If desired, a cabal may be considered joint winners.

## **Game II: Special Circumstances Tabletop RPG**

### **Design Notes**

The author ran this game three times at the World Science Fiction Convention 2014 in London. It uses the Dramasystem game engine; more information, including free game system reference downloads, can be found here:

<http://site.pelgranepress.com/index.php/dramasystem-srd/>

Dramasystem is designed to emulate the story beats, conflicted characters, and emotionally complex interpersonal relationships found in great drama, from Shakespeare to *The Sopranos*. The main focus of the system is exactly these dramatic relationships, with little

emphasis on what the game regards as 'procedural' matters such as fighting or sneaking, in contrast to most tabletop RPGs.

As part of the design process for the scenario, I re-read *Player of Games* and the other Culture novels, looking for themes, modes of storytelling, and potential game focuses. A traditional SF TTRPG would largely ignore character other than in terms of numerically codifying each character's skills and attributes, and would instead concentrate on the hardware and the science, potentially allowing for a rich but usually tactically and procedurally heavy skirmish wargame in which the players' spacecraft was not merely a GCU, but a GCU of a particular classification and with player-specified engines, armaments, effectors and other tools, shields, etc. There would be little concern or no for characters' motivations and personalities, though with an assumption, perhaps sometimes true, that roleplayers would largely just provide those aspects themselves. I did consider that approach, and made notes about the often quite scant technical references mentioned in Banks -- how fast could a given starship travel, etc. There is potentially an enjoyable game in that approach, for those who want hard SF skirmishing, but it would have seemed to lose what, to me, was the main focus of Banks's Culture SF: the characters in general, and the human characters (as distinct from Minds or Drones) in particular. (It's worth noting that while there are one or two Minds and Drones who have significant dramatic arcs and interpersonal relationships within the Culture canon, they are portrayed both as rarities, and as supporting characters rather than the main focus of the drama.) Human characters, with their futuristic but still human needs, drives, and often messy, complex pasts, were what interested me, and what seemed to interest Banks, at least in my reading. Very few of them obsessed themselves with science fictional hardware; all were obsessed with finding function and leisure in a post-scarcity society (the latter, often in the form of elaborate games); many were haunted by their past mistakes, their nemeses or ex-lovers or those they had hurt.

This all seemed best supported by Dramasystem, so I designed, accordingly, what the Dramasystem creators call a "series pitch", essentially a Games Master's guide to running Dramasystem games within a specific setting. The remainder of the chapter follows that format. I include some specific information about the setting, with the general circumstances being primarily inspired by the empire of Azad in *The Player of Games*, both because the somewhat limited, constrained setting of a few Special Circumstances agents working distantly from the main resources of the Culture allows for a manageable one-off game, and to fit in with the Azad theme of Loncon 14's games track.

As is usually the case for DramaSystem, this series pitch is open-ended, with the intention that the players have more narrative agency and input into specifics of the background and scenario than in most tabletop RPGs.

## **Special Circumstances: Lakkar Cell**

### **Nutshell**

A Special Circumstances cell inserted into the mighty but cruel Lakkar Empire works to either destroy it, take it over, create a peaceful revolution, or perhaps leave it as it is, on behalf of the Culture.

### **Characters (all panhuman)**

Ambassador/Diplomat (is there formal contact between the Lakkar Empire and the Culture? If so, this role will be a formal one, and some or all of the other characters may have cover identities as the ambassador's staff; if not, all the characters will have been altered to resemble locals, and given local cover identities, and this role will be that of unofficial liaison specialist, and unknown to the authorities of the Empire)

Mercenary (working for the Culture, brought in due to specialist knowledge and experience of the specific tech level and societal level of the Lakkar Empire, since "Utopia spawns few warriors")

Local Recruit (similar to Mercenary, above, but has been part of the cell for less time)

Handler (of the mercenary or local recruit; a Culture native and full Special Circumstances agent brought in to train, advise, pay, command, and otherwise liaise with the non-Culture character)

Doctor (brought in primarily to offer key members of the Empire bribes in the form of anti-aging treatments and similar)

Spy / Field Agent {full-blown Special Circumstances ninja type)

Strategist (possibly the closest thing to an overall commander, but still, this is the Culture... nobody is giving, or taking orders)

Attache (from Quietus, Numina, or Restoria, if appropriate to the specific setting)

**Note: Why No Drones?** "There is a saying that we provide the machines with an end, and they provide us with the means." (Banks, 1989) There are no PC drones or Minds, because despite their human levels of sentience, drones do not generally have emotional needs that are fulfilled by humans. A drone might have a dramatic and emotional connection to one or two humans, but not to enough members of the player group to render them a suitable PC. Drones, at least as presented by Banks, are also unlikely to have dramatic poles.

### **Background Prompts**

The Lakkar Empire is notoriously cruel, and powerful, hence the Culture's interest. What is the specific nature of that cruelty? Is it directed towards its own citizens, or other species, or the dead, or some combination?

What specific game or pastime, that the Imperial citizens do, is especially abhorrent?

Is the Empire a significant threat to the Culture in terms of technology and capacity to wage war, or is the intervention purely ideological?

What ancient, alien supertechnology lurks somewhere in the Empire, perhaps posing a huge threat if it is rediscovered or reawakened? *N.B. This background prompt is sufficiently complex and pivotal that it's worth having an in-depth discussion between players and GM before play starts, and perhaps revisiting that discussion at the end of the session in which the players first encounter the supertechnology.*

Why is the Lakkar Cell so isolated? How far away must your Ship remain, to be undetected?

What contingency plans do you have worked out for dire emergencies, whereby the Ship can swoop in and effect a rescue, at the cost of completely blowing all cover stories?

Do you have drone and/or knife missile support, or just some well-hidden, high-tech gadgets?

How long has Contact been active here – is there any kind of support network? Perhaps a corporate or family empire?

### **Character Connections**

All will have some shared background: you have been working in the Lakkar Cell for at least several months, distant from help from the rest of the Culture. You will each also have at least a couple of shared past events with one or more other PCs -- earlier missions that went wrong or bloody, love affairs that ended badly, etc. These connections will be emotional, not obligation-based: "Neither of us owes the Culture anything. You know that... Owing and being obliged and having duties and responsibilities and everything like that... that's what these people have to worry about... But not me, not us. You do what you want to do, the ship does what it wants to do. I do what I want to do. All's well. Let's just leave each other alone, yes?" (Banks, 1989).

### **Supporting Cast**

The Emperor or Empress

Generals

Spymasters and spies

Rogue Culture or ex-Culture elements (perhaps this is just another cell, from a competing faction within Special Circumstances or within another branch of Contact)

### **Culture Technology Overview**

#### *Weapons*

Note that any of the following items will be supplied in versions gene-locked to the owners, or at least to the members of the player group, and incorporating self-destruct mechanisms in the event of being operated by unauthorised personnel. It is possible that another Culture human could persuade the weapon's brain to avoid initiating self-destruction, but probably not to let unauthorised personnel operate it.

**Lasers:** aka CREWS (Coherent Radiation Emission Weapon Systems). These can shift frequency, so as to bypass many countermeasures and/or fire invisibly to the naked eye. They typically fire thousands of pulses per second. Available in rifle, pistol, or smaller or larger forms, with most portable versions having similar power levels but the larger ones having more shots before reload, more easy to operate controls, and improved accuracy.

**Plasma weapons:** Pistol, cannon, or larger forms. Even a peace-rated, pistol-sized one can down a non-military starship a couple of tech levels below Culture, so these are highly effective against all possible targets that are part of the Lakkar Empire. Variable firepower; shot at maximum, a plasma weapon will need several seconds to recharge. Field generators on-board the gun allow for arching or other curved shots.

**Micro armaments systems rifle** -- 10 weapon subsystems, presumably including laser, plasma, and various projectile modes. Also incorporates a guard/sentry system, allowing for autonomous use controlled by its 0.7 brain. Defensive subsystems include a reactive shield and presumably other mechanisms such as chaff launchers and ECM. Full IFF (Identify Friend or Foe) capability, with various levels of autonomy vs override: anything from a full manual override, effectively switching the system off, to selecting certain specific people and

identifying them in advance using the weapon's sensors, to having the brain make a best guesstimate as to whether to fire on each target or withhold a shot. Onboard antigravity system built into the harness. Needs a certified expert to use it (field agent or mercenary, or possibly handler or strategist depending on their precise background and specialisms).

Microhowitzer. This is a portable of similar size to an antique squad support weapon, capable of offering full artillery support. Also includes a direct fire mode. Various shell options from flechettes, signalling devices, chaff/decoy launch, or EMP projectile, to high-explosive, micronuke, or armour-piercing rounds.

Neural stunner -- stuns combatants for anything from several minutes to hours, depending on range, proximity to the beam, and user setting. Can be defeated by body armour of similar tech level or above.

Chaff grenades disrupt vision, scanners, trackers, guidance systems, etc. As ever these are close to 100% effective against lower tech level devices, probably better than 50% effective against equivalent tech, and barely effective at all against superior tech.

Micronukes in thrown/placed grenade format, or as shells for the microhowitzer. Note that the thrown version is likely to destroy the user, or at least do severe damage to her suit.

Antimatter batteries mean never running out of power, though heavy or overpowered use of a weapon may reduce its capabilities for a while, and damage will degrade it very rapidly (though generally maintaining maximum safety for the user).

## *Transport*

General Contact Unit –

Module – size of a large house, and can potentially be used as one and/or disguised as one. Can transport itself and contents from a planet's surface to orbit and beyond, with some limited interplanetary flight. Will be atomised (even a war module) by a direct hit from a warhead of similar tech level, but will resist lower tech damage very effectively, even a sustained attack. Could potentially be fitted with a warp unit (q.v.).

Capsule – Similar to the module, but around the size of a van. Optimised for atmospheric flight or short bursts of use in space, but can make a surface-to-ship transfer at a pinch. Could potentially be fitted with a warp unit (q.v.).

Suit – For one person; steered by gyros; uses radar for detection; protects against a certain level of energy-based violence, but will get burned up and useless eventually; may be sentient or semi-sentient (0.6 to 1.0 brain) depending on user preference.

Warp unit – human-portable or drone-portable FTL (faster than light) travel; only good for a few minutes' subjective use, but this could get the user to a nearby solar system. As ever it cannot be used close to planetary masses.

Warp engine – Full, sustained FTL capability for a starship. Can't be used near planetary masses. Uses grid energy, and could potentially (particularly in a military vessel) be used destructively, though likely at the cost of the starship in a vessel not specifically dedicated to grid energy bombardment use. 50 light years per hour is typical for a fast Culture ship.

Mass anomaly detector – this is necessary in ships to ensure safe warp travel. A suit-portable version is also available. It will rarely need to be actively referred to in-game, since every warp unit or warp engine comes with one, but it might be damaged during combat as a plot point, vastly increasing the risks involved with warp travel.

Displacers – can teleport objects or people. Generally ship-based. For maximum accuracy and safety, the teleportee would need to have a homing device. Most commonly a spherical volume of several metres' diameter (as selected by the controlling Mind) will be transported.

Gravitic or reaction engines -- used for manoeuvre / landing, or as the main manoeuvring engine for modules and capsules.

Antigravity (ag) – human-portable in the form of a belt or as an add-on to a suit or weapons system. This is true anti-gravity, and so doesn't function to resist the artificial gravity created by the spinning of a space station or small orbital habitat, only real gravity caused by mass.

### *Communications*

In space -- up to 20,000 light years, in realtime, if expecting a specific signal and looking out for it. This would be a very secure communication, but would need to be set up (by the two parties knowing each other's position at that time) in advance. Less secure comms could work up to perhaps a thousand light years in real-time, after a short delay establishing the connection.

### *Artificial Intelligence*

A *drone* of more or less Culture human capabilities is referred to as a 1.0; more advanced drones have capabilities almost indistinguishable from magic when using effectors etc.

A *knife missile* is 0.7 human and can rapidly (instantaneously, from the perspective of a baseline human) kill a large number of people or destroy other targets.

*Minds* exist in 4D space, giving them both mental and sensory capabilities beyond human comprehension. A Mind can surveil down to an atomic level from the next star system if enabled with Special Circumstances levels of tech. A Mind, detected by almost any means, probably detected the detection.

One way to begin to comprehend the mental prowess of a mind is to compare a good human chess player to the best 21<sup>st</sup> century chess-playing AI. The AI will win due to its sheer computing power allowing it to consider every viable tactic and strategy, countering the opponent's every possible move and creating novel, inhuman, seemingly impossible

manoeuvres. Likewise, a Mind will out-think almost any human in almost any situation. A very dedicated (in the sense of specialised) and exceptional human might devise a novel strategy that would allow a momentary advantage over a Mind, but even this is unlikely. From a GM's perspective, it's better to leave the Minds out of most adventuring; they can be used to help establish backstory, and perhaps to effect a last-minute rescue or other intervention, but their involvement in day-to-day gaming activity has a danger of rendering the player-characters' activities irrelevant.

### *Misc.*

Effectors – these can manipulate physical objects; create force-fields to protect, hold or destroy; produce various energetic effects across multiple wavelengths, e.g. for computer hacking or for disabling electronic devices; be used as weapons (they form the main armaments of most ships); etc., across ranges of up to light years, or even hundreds of light years for less energy-intensive effects. Effectors are not human-portable, and the more advanced uses of them require a Mind for control, though a drone could use effectors of more limited range and power.

Soligram – drones or Minds can create a solid hologram-like image, capable of interacting with the physical world as an effective disguise or other solid illusion.

Memoryform – can look like a pendant, ring, false tooth, etc.; can become bomb, gun, teleport homer, communicator, etc. when tapped or struck a certain way, when it gets wet, etc.

### *Culture Panhumans*

Genofixing grants a wide variety of benefits over baseline humans, including:

- rapid adaptation to changing gravitic conditions, day/night cycles, etc.
- significantly more efficient and effective eyesight, stamina, healing, sex, etc. than human normal
- drug glands to allow all kinds of temporary performance enhancements or pleasures
- longevity, but not immortality (at least, not without extra treatments)

### **Themes**

**The Great Game** – How do you find yourselves drawn in to the Empire's favourite amusement?

**Archaeotech** – Something huge and dangerous is reawakening, or being reactivated. How does it have the potential to Change Everything, Forever? How do you deal with it?

**UnMothballed** – An ancient, vast, but low- to mid-tech transportation system must be repaired, restarted, and used, to get you to somewhere exotic, or as part of your escape plan, or for use as a crude but massive weapon.

**Going Native** – One of you has been corrupted / seduced by the Empire. Even speaking a non-Marain language for long enough to start thinking in it, can alter a Culture

person's personality (the Marain language was designed so as to be egalitarian, liberal, etc.).

**Wheels Within Wheels** – Special Circumstances always has multiple back-up plans, as well as hidden agendas on many levels. Are they secretly hoping you will fail, and that your failure will catalyse something that turns the situation to their advantage?

### **Complications**

**They're Onto Us.** The Empire's counterspying operation launches a raid on your base. Do you flee, or fight, or try to negotiate?

**A Clash of Conscience.** A relative or close friend of one of the local recruit player-characters has disappeared, and is believed to be held by the Empire's secret police. Few leave such an experience alive, and none unchanged. Do you attempt a rescue, though doing so will certainly compromise your main mission to a greater or lesser extent?

**Regicide?** A communication comes in from your ship. It's been decided that the Emperor/Empress must be killed as soon as possible, for the sake of interstellar harmony. Do you all comply? How?

### **Culture Ship Names**

For Very Large Values of Two

Not Even Sorry

Well, I Do Now

Still In Beta

Punch Liner

Statistically Improbable

Technically Wrong, Actually Right

Somewhat Limited Infinity

Irrational Actor

### **Culture Names**

Culture names take the following format (Banks, 1994).

(Star System name)-hyphenated-(Plate/Orbital/Planet name, with a -sa suffix) (given name)  
(chosen name) (family name) dam (estate/house name)

For example, a person from the Vipail orbital in the Bezant star system, given the Dynock name at birth, a member of the Ske family, brought up in the Garidy estate, and having chosen the name Zogar as an adult, would be Bezant-Vipailsa Dynock Zogar Ske dam Garidy, usually Dynock Ske for short.

For most purposes, players can just pick a given name and chosen name, though particularly enthusiastic Culture fans may wish to work out their characters' full names.

### **Lakkar Names**

For the games at Loncon, these were drawn from the 'Martian' names list in The Story Games Names Project (Morningstar, 2008). If this is not available, a list of suitably atmospheric names should be prepared in advance.

## Game III: One-Night Strategic Azad

This boardgame ruleset uses Looney Pyramids and six-sided dice (both chosen for ease of availability), along with a downloadable A3 play map, to give an ‘Azad-lite’ experience: a game of territorial control, conquest, fortress-building, concealed assets, and elemental transformation, that can be played in 2-3 hours.

### Design Notes

Almost every game designer seems to have played a lot of *Risk* (Lamorisse, 1959) in their formative years, and harboured a desire, ever since, to improve it. This game is my contribution to that tradition, if a contribution that is very much influenced by contemporary game design trends.

It seems, too, like every games enthusiast who reads *The Player of Games* has one of two reactions: either they spend an inordinate number of sleepless nights trying to work out how one could make the game happen for real, in some limited way, as the ultimate *Risk* variant; or they dismiss the attempt as impossible. And then, quite possibly, try anyway.

How, though, can this game enhance our understanding of the original novel, or of the worlds, civilisations, and cultures of that world? Play and games are a significant part of culture, whether in our own world, as explored by Huizinga (1938), Sutton-Smith (1986), and others, or in Banks’s fictional worlds, with games and play forming either major plot elements or subplots in almost all of his fiction. Banks makes exactly this point repeatedly in *The Player of Games*. Perhaps the most significant theme of the novel is the inextricable intertwining of the game, culture, and Empire known as Azad, and the opposition of the Culture’s culture and gameplaying style, which are equally inextricable.

“Bermoiya had spent a hundred years learning and playing Azad, and he’d sat in on courts of every level for half that time. He’d seen many violent outbursts by just-sentenced criminals, and watched – and even taken part in – games containing moves of great suddenness and ferocity. Nevertheless, the alien’s next few moves contrived to be on a level more barbarous and wild than anything Bermoiya had witnessed, in either context. Without the experience of the courts, he felt he might have physically reeled.” (Banks, 1988)

Of the three games presented here, One-Night Strategic Azad is the only one that is designed to be pure, unmitigated competition. There is no roleplay or theatricality here, just the marshalling of forces and the destruction of one’s foe. I have attempted to capture something of the subtlety and variety of strategies that Banks presents the fictional game as possessing, though as ever, a perfect simulation of the original is impossible. In particular, the use of the Looney Pyramids (Looney Labs, 1986) playing pieces allows for a visually and ludically elegant game mechanic of transforming playing pieces, similar to those seen in the novel. Transforming playing pieces seem to be unique to the game of Azad, at least for what is otherwise a fairly straight area control wargame. With four unique types of playing piece (Attacker, Defender, Observer and Philosopher), both the elemental themes and the combined arms strategies of the game depicted in the book are mirrored. The pyramidal shape of the main playing pieces also echoes our first visual description of the Azad game

setup, though it is the hills that are pyramidal there: “the hills were not solid, but rather stacked, tapering levels of the same bewildering meta-pattern, creating linked, multi-layered pyramids over the fantastic landscape” (Banks, 1988).

ONS Azad is also very much designed to have fidelity to Banks’s aforementioned description of the most intellectually and aesthetically pleasing games, being based on “the interaction of certain fairly simple rules, and chance” (Banks, 1988). Chance, here, takes the form of a conventional deck of playing cards, but with an element of strategic skill inherent even in the card play, since players select cards from a hand, and are aware of which cards make up the deck (Brathwaite & Schreiber, 2008). According to Brathwaite & Schreiber, imperfect information, as found in ONS Azad in the forms of the transformations of the playing pieces, and the imperfect knowledge of the opponent’s hand of cards and ‘stash’ of cards, can be treated as a form of chance for most purposes, at least by players, though again there is clearly an element of strategic skill here too.

The design goals for ONS Azad, then, were to give a feeling of the visceral clash-of-civilisations and head-to-head competition depicted in the fictional game, but make it playable in the aforementioned one night – perhaps an hour or two for experienced players – rather than the several days of a “real” game of Azad. And, of course, this is my take on Risk; Banksian Risk, though, a game not just of battle and conquest, but of individual and cultural transformation.

### **Components Required**

Deck of 54 standard playing cards, including two jokers.

A3 map board (found at [INSERT URL]).

6 x Rainbow Stashes of Looney Pyramids (each Rainbow Stash has 15 Looney Pyramids, made up of 3 sizes and 5 colours).

Playing pieces to represent **grunts**, the least valuable units in the game. Counters, tiddlywinks, or game pieces from other games would work fine for this. You will need around 30 of each of two colours, preferably red and blue.

Playing pieces to represent in-game resources. A decent quantity (ten or so) of regular six-sided dice could be used for this, as they are not rolled during the game. Alternatively you could use miniatures or tokens from a different game, or make up a quantity of cardboard or clay resources. The resources required are: barracks, fortresses, universities, and temples. If using dice, simply place the die on the relevant territory with a 1 uppermost for a barracks, 2 for a fortress, 3 for a university or 4 for a temple. To represent an upgraded resource, place the token or die on a coin. You will also need some way to show ownership of a resource – perhaps a red or blue token on the resource, or resource pieces in the appropriate colours.

### **Setup**

Each player chooses a player colour.

Each player assembles three **major pieces** – two for herself, and one for her opponent.

Each **major piece** assembled in this way is composed of four **sub-pieces**, assembled into a ‘tower’ style shape, made as follows:

- The **lower core** is made of a **pawn** (the smallest size of Looney Pyramid), of a colour chosen by the assembling player (the five colours of Looney Pyramid each have different in-game properties).
- On top of that is the **upper core**, made of a **drone** (the medium-sized Looney Pyramid), of a colour chosen by the assembling player.
- On top of that is the **shell**, made of a **queen** (the largest size of Looney Pyramid). The shell is always black in colour, so as to conceal the cores.
- On top of the **shell** is the **marker**, made of a **pawn** in the player’s colour.

Next, each player assembles three **minor pieces** – two for herself, and one for her opponent.

Each **minor piece** assembled in this way is composed of three **sub-pieces**, assembled into a ‘tower’ style shape, made as follows:

- The **lower core** is made of a **pawn** (the smallest size of Looney Pyramid), of a colour chosen by the assembling player (the five colours of Looney Pyramid each have different in-game properties).
- On top of that is the **upper core**, made of a **drone** (the medium-sized Looney Pyramid). The upper core of a minor piece is always black in colour, so as to conceal the lower core.
- On top of the **upper core** is the **marker**, made of a **pawn** in the player’s colour.

Once each player is in possession of her assembled **pieces** (both from herself and her opponent), she should place them in her **reserve** space on the gameboard. Ideally, at this point, a third party should rearrange the positioning of those ten pieces, without disassembling or altering the **sub-pieces** in any way. This ensures that each player has some idea of what half their pieces are, but not which pieces are which.

Note: It is possible later in the game to **recruit** further game pieces, some of which may be assembled differently from the pieces in the starting setup (see *Recruitment*, p. XX). It is also possible to **recruit** grunts, generally very cheaply in terms of resources.

Shuffle the cards, deal six face down to each player to form a hand, and place the remaining cards face down to form a draw deck.

Determine who is to be the first player as follows: each player counts up the total value of their starting hand of six cards, counting face cards and the ace as 10. The player with the lower total takes the first turn. If there is a severe disparity in value

between the two totals (the higher total is at least 9 more than the lower total), the player with the lower total may discard cards, starting with their lowest card, one at a time, face-up to the discard pile, drawing a replacement each time, until the disparity is no longer severe.

### Pieces and Sub-Pieces

The **marker** has no game function other than to mark the piece it sits upon, showing both players who owns it.

Whichever piece is immediately underneath the marker, indicates the current value and powers of the piece (see below). This is the piece that is **in play**. Any pieces currently below or inside the in play piece, are not in play; their powers and values cannot be accessed until the piece **transforms** (see below).

*Table I: Powers and Values of Pieces*

Colour	Black Soldier	Red Attacker	Green Defender	Blue Observer	Yellow Philosopher
<b>Queen</b>	Strength 2	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a
<b>Drone</b>	Strength 3	Strength 4 (2 as casualty)	Strength 2 (4 as casualty)	Strength N/a. Once during each of your opponent's turns, you may play one card as part of a battle in this province.	Strength 1. You may have +1 card in your <b>stash</b> . If this piece is <b>destroyed</b> for any reason, your opponent immediately draws a card.
<b>Pawn*</b>	Strength 4	Strength 4 (2 as casualty), Ranged (may add its strength to a combat up to 2 provinces away)	Strength 3 (6 as casualty)	Strength N/a. Once during each of your opponent's turns, you may play one or two cards as part of a battle in this or an adjacent province.	Strength 1 You may have +1 card in your <b>stash</b> . You draw one extra card from the draw deck at the end of each turn. If this piece is <b>destroyed</b> for any reason, your opponent gets a bonus turn, immediately after the current turn; after the bonus turn is over, play continues as normal.

\*N.B. this applies only if the pawn is the now exposed **lower core** of a piece; a pawn used as a **marker** has no game effects other than marking the ownership of the piece.

### Grunts

Grunts are ordinary soldiers, and have 1 Strength each.

### Taking a Turn

You may perform the following activities on your turn, in this order:

- Recruit more pieces. First, count up the number of territories you currently control (by having one or more pieces or grunts in them). For every full three territories, you have 1 Recruitment Point (RP). You always have a minimum of 3 RPs at this stage. You may play Hearts cards to gain more RPs (see *Table II: Card Effects*). You also gain +2 RPs per Upgraded Temple (see p. XX). You recruit units by taking them from the general reserve and placing them in any territories you control; it costs 1 RP per grunt, or 2 RPs per **minor piece**, or 3 RPs per **major piece**.
- Attack with one or more pieces, one or more times (see *Combat*, p. XX).
- Move into adjacent, empty territories, one or more times, so long as you have enough pieces or grunts to do so without leaving any of your own territories unoccupied.
- **Build** or **turn over** one or more **resources** (see *Resources*, p. XX) by playing Diamonds cards to do so.
- Free move: once per turn, you may move one or more pieces and/or one or more grunts from one territory you control into another territory you control. This is the only time you can leave one of your territories unoccupied, if you so choose.
- Draw one card (or more than one, if you are permitted to do so due to having pieces that allow this).

You may also play cards during your turn (see *Cards and Card Play*, p. XX).

### Transformation

When a piece is transformed, usually by card play (see below), the following sequence of events occurs:

- 1) Remove and hold onto the **marker**
- 2) Remove the sub-piece that was immediately beneath the **marker**, to reveal the next sub-piece – either removing a Queen (**shell**) to reveal a Drone (**upper core**), or removing a Drone (**upper core**) to reveal a Pawn (**lower core**).
- 3) Replace the **marker** atop the new uppermost sub-piece.

### Cards and Card Play

You draw one card from the draw deck at the end of your turn.

During your turn, you may play up to two cards from your hand, at an appropriate time (depending on the card).

Each blue (Observer) piece may allow you to play an additional card during each turn (both yours and your opponent’s); see *Table I: Powers and Values of Pieces*.

One or both of these two cards may be played face down in front of you in your **stash**, to take effect later (the equivalent of “depositing the card with an Adjudicator” in *The Player of Games*; in effect, the card represents a mine, ambush, trap, or similar setup). Write a brief note, and place it under the card, when you do so, to specify which province you have played it in, and when it will come into effect. For example, you play a Five of Clubs card face down, and write “add 5 to any future combat I am involved in, in province 17” or “add 5 to any combat in which I am defending, in province 17” or similar. You may be as detailed and specific as you like. A card played from your stash does not count towards your limit of a maximum of two cards played per turn (though placing a card in your stash, does count). You may only have a maximum of one card in your stash at any time, though if you have one or more Philosopher pieces on the table this number will be increased; see *Table I: Powers and Values of Pieces*.

*Note: the above are the only two ways in which you may play a card during your opponent’s turn – either via a blue Observer piece, or from your stash when the condition is met.*

After cards have been played, place them face up next to the draw deck to form a discard pile.

*Table II: Card Effects*

<b>Value/Suit</b>	<b>Hearts (Propaganda)</b>	<b>Spades (Dig In!)</b>	<b>Clubs (Charge!)</b>	<b>Diamonds (Resources)</b>
<b>2-9</b>	<b>Recruit*</b> pieces up to the card value, <i>or</i> <b>demoralise*#</b> pieces up to the card value, <i>or</i> <b>blind*#</b> pieces up to the card value, <i>or</i> <b>turn over*#</b> to your side pieces of up to one-half the value on the card (rounded down).	In combat, <b>ignore*#†</b> up to the card value in <b>casualties</b> .	<b>Add*#†</b> the value on the card to your combat result, <i>or</i> <b>destroy*#</b> pieces of up to one-half the value on the card (rounded down).	<b>Turn over*</b> a resource up to the value on the card in a province you control, <i>or</i> <b>build</b> a resource up to one-half the value on the card (rounded down).
<b>Jack</b>	Choose one <b>soldier</b> piece of your opponent’s and <b>transform*#</b> it.	Choose one of your <b>soldier</b> pieces and <b>transform*#</b> it.	Choose one of your <b>soldier</b> pieces and <b>transform*#</b> it.	If you have an <b>observer</b> in the same province or adjacent to one of your opponent’s <b>philosophers</b> ,

				<b>reveal*</b> a random card from your opponent's hand.
<b>Queen</b>	<b>Turn over*</b> to your side any one of your opponent's resources that is within 3 provinces of one of your <b>philosophers</b> .	<b>Cancel*##†</b> the entire effect of one card, as your opponent plays it. If you place this card in your stash, you can play it at any time during your opponent's turn, without any particular condition needing to be fulfilled.	You <b>reveal</b> and <b>destroy*</b> one of the cards from your opponent's stash; your opponent draws one card from the draw pile.	Your opponent must <b>reveal</b> and <b>destroy*</b> one of the cards from your stash; you draw three cards from the draw pile.
<b>King</b>	When one of your opponent's pieces would be destroyed in battle, move it to an adjacent province, <b>turn</b> it <b>over</b> to your side, and <b>transform*##†</b> it, instead.	When one of your pieces would be destroyed in battle, move it to an adjacent province and <b>transform*##†</b> it instead.	You may <b>destroy*##</b> an opponent's <b>observer</b> , so long as it is in the same province or adjacent to one of your <b>attackers</b> or <b>soldiers</b> .	If you have an <b>observer</b> in the same province or adjacent to one of your opponent's <b>philosophers</b> , <b>reveal*</b> a random card from your opponent's stash, along with the associated conditions.
<b>Ace</b>	Choose one piece of your opponent's and <b>transform*##</b> it, so long as it is in the same province or adjacent to one of your <b>philosophers</b> .	Choose one of your <b>soldier</b> or <b>defender</b> pieces and <b>transform*##</b> it.	Choose one of your <b>soldier</b> or <b>attacker</b> pieces and <b>transform*##</b> it.	Choose one of your <b>observer</b> or <b>philosopher</b> pieces and <b>transform*##</b> it.
<b>Joker</b>	Choose one piece (yours or your opponent's) and <b>transform*##†</b> it.			

\* May be played on your turn.

# May be played from your stash on your opponent's turn.

† May be played using a blue Observer piece on your opponent's turn.

## Recruitment

In the Recruitment phase of each turn,

## Resources

The following resources can be built, using Diamonds cards. Costs are listed in brackets after the name of each resource.

*Barracks* (1): +1 to the Strength of every Attacker in this province.

*Fortress* (1): +1 to the Strength of every Defender in this province.

*University* (2): +2 to the Strength of every Observer in this province.

*Temple* (2): +2 to the Strength of every Philosopher in this province.

*Upgraded Barracks* (3, plus a Barracks): +1 to the Strength of every Attacker in this province and every adjacent province.

*Upgraded Fortress* (3, plus a Fortress): +1 to the Strength of every Defender in this province and every adjacent province.

*Upgraded University* (4, plus a University): +2 to the Strength of every Observer in this province and every adjacent province; up to once per turn, when one of your units would be **destroyed** in this province, you may **transform** it instead.

*Upgraded Temple* (4, plus a Temple): +2 to the Strength of every Philosopher in this province and every adjacent province; you gain +2 Recruitment Points (RPs) per turn.

## Combat

If you have one or more units adjacent to a province containing one or more enemy units, you may declare an attack on that province. Any number of your adjacent units can be involved in the attack, so long as they have not been involved in an attack earlier this turn. Total up the Strength of all the involved units on the attacking side, adding up to one combat card (if played; note that it will count towards your maximum of two cards played per turn). Total up the Strength of all the defending units, including a combat card if it is permitted to play one (and if one is played). The side with the higher Strength wins the combat, causing Casualties equal to double the difference between the two totals. The loser must remove at least as many Strength points in casualties as this number.

## Combat Results and Status Effects

**Add:** Add the card value to your combat result (see Combat, p. XX).

**Blind:** A blinded piece may not attack, and has its Strength reduced by 1 (to a minimum of 1). On the owning player's turn, it moves to an adjacent territory, determined randomly from all the possibilities. At the end of the owning player's turn, it recovers.

**Cancel:** Cancel a card as it is played. It is discarded with no effect.

**Demoralise:** A demoralised piece may not move or attack, and has its Strength halved (rounded down). At the end of the owning player's turn, it recovers.

**Destroy:** Remove the **marker**. Place the **piece** in the general reserve (including any **sub-pieces** currently making up the **piece**). For a grunt, just remove the grunt to the general reserve. For a card, place it in the discard pile.

**Ignore:**

**Recruit:** See *Recruitment* (p.XX).

**Reveal:** Turn a face-down card over, so that both players can see it.

**Transform:** See *Transformation* (p.XX).

**Turn Over:** For a piece: remove the opponent's **marker**, and replace it with a **marker** in your colour. For a grunt: remove the grunt and replace it with one of your own. For a resource: mark it in your colour, or replace it with a resource in your colour.

## **Glossary**

**Core:** The central one or two **sub-pieces** of a **piece**. Usually made up of an **inner core** (in the form of a **pawn**) and an **outer core** (in the form of a **drone**).

**Marker:** The **pawn** that sits as the topmost **sub-piece** of every **piece** in play. It has no game effects other than to show which player owns the piece.