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Abstract

Iain Banks' *Complicity* (1993) features a fictional 'world-builder' game called *Despot* that actively watches and emulates the player. This fictional game emerges as part of the Scottish Fantastic, a literary tradition that explores split selves and divided identities. *Despot* plays into this literary tradition as it creates a violent ludic other for the otherwise passive protagonist that plays it. Yet as a closer examination of *Despot* reveals, the game does not 'uncover' or 'mirror' the protagonist's latent violence so much as it refracts it through its procedural logic. *Despot* prophetically predicts and critiques the rise of the quantified self within games, as features like morality meters, achievements, reputation systems and Elo ratings all 'watch' and create ludic versions of the player. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist leaves *Despot* running and returns to find a radically altered version of the game. Without the protagonist's interference, his empire has crumbled and been reclaimed by nature. Through this, Banks also provides a lens through which the quantified self can be subverted and repurposed in ways not limited by the cultural logics that produced it.

Keywords

Quantified self; Scottish fantastic; *Despot*; *Complicity*; Iain Banks; interactive narrative

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Players of contemporary games are surrounded by doubles. Morality meters, reputation systems, matchmaking ranks and achievements are all different ways of taking player data and recreating what Barry Atkins calls a "textual self" (Atkins, 2003, p. 147). While players of these games are enmeshed in a cacophony of ludic others, it would be a mistake to treat this as unique to games. These doubled selves are a larger extension of a broader cultural logic known as the *quantified self*, which promises "self-knowledge through numbers" (Wolf & Kelly, 2009).

The connection between these mechanics and the quantified self has been observed in past game studies scholarship (Egliston, 2020; Kou & Gui, 2018; Sarian, 2024). The rise of these games (and their cultural implications) is prophetically outlined decades prior in Iain Banks' 1993 novel *Complicity.* Here the passive, supposedly peaceful and

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reform minded protagonist Cameron Colley discovers a dark double, a violent ludic self that emerges through a 'world-builder' game called *Despot*.

Despot is what Gualeni and Fassone would describe as a fictional game, or an imaginary game as part of a fictional world. Because they are not real, fictional games are "underspecified" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 21) and can use their inherent vagueness for literary effect. These literary effects include their ability to "reflect (and influence)" characters and to also "infiltrate their reality" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 8). This can be seen in *Despot,* which does not merely *reflect* Colley's dark tendencies but instead *refracts* his repressed anger at a post-Thatcher United Kingdom. By doing this, *Despot* distorts his anger into a dark ludic double that amplifies this latent authoritarian violence. Through this, *Despot* contains a critique for an emerging gaming landscape replete with ludic doubles. Yet it also displays a way that such games can be subverted, when Colley accidentally turns himself from a 'despot' within the game to a mere participant. *Despot* represents a rich metaphor, critiquing gaming trends while also displaying a way that games like *Despot* can be creatively subverted and repurposed. Banks writes as part of the Scottish Fantastic, a literary genre that focuses on divided selves, fractured egos and doubled others. A good example of the Scottish fantastic's focus on fractured identities can be found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Kincaid (2013) argues that this genre serves as a uniting theme for Banks' literary work (pp. 23–24). The fictional game *Despot* generates its own double for Cameron Colley, a double which helps to generate the political violence that later instigates much of the action within *Complicity*.

Past research

Both the novel *Complicity* and its fictional game *Despot* have been discussed primarily in relationship with the book's discussion of neoliberalism. This is particularly the case in Hutchinson's discussion of the novel, which takes place as part of a broader discussion of post-Thatcher and Reagan fiction in his book *Reaganism, Thatcherism, and the Social Novel* (2008). *Complicity* is set in post-Thatcher United Kingdom where collective action has been defeated. In the wake of this political landscape, left-wing individuals are caught in a malaise. The novel explores the conflict between a pacifistic but ineffective peaceful reformism, and a philosophy of retributive individual violence. The novel does not take a stance on which approach is superior, with Braidwood (2011, p. 52) arguing that this reflects a conflict within the author's own mind. *Despot* reflects this conflict within the protagonist's mind, as the otherwise passive reformer creates a despotic double through his gameplay.

The book's protagonist, Cameron Colley, finds himself in a state of passive compliance. He is a left-wing journalist who occasionally publishes incendiary pieces against the British establishment. Despite this Colley does little to resist capitalism in his daily life, with Cairns (2002, p. 46) arguing that Colley's socialist philosophy is

"a cynical stance that allows him to stand outside of the values of his friends but makes no real demands on the way he lives". Colley deals with this environment by engaging in consumerist excess, redirecting his energy into alcohol, cigarettes, and videogames. Indeed, much of the literary analysis of *Despot* views it as an extension of Colley's addictive vices, which along with his other vices represents his passive compliance with consumer capitalism (Hutchinson, 2008, pp. 43-47; Cairns, 2002, pp. 46–49). Hutchinson (2008, p. 45) argues that *Despot* allows Colley to "abandon the role of the passive liberal" and that the game reveals a "desire to wield power irresponsibly". Cairns (2002, pp. 46-49) goes further, arguing that *Despot* effectively trains Colley into accepting the logic of the system he exists within. This article builds upon this observation, examining how *Despot* effectively foreshadows an emerging gaming landscape which uses the quantified self to refract, rather than reflect, their players.

Barry Atkins extensively discusses *Despot* in his book titled *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* (2003). He argues that *Despot* represents an archetype for a kind of game that can "disturb in our age of increasing technological surveillance" which renders the player into a "textual subject" (2003, pp. 146–147). He invokes the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his discussion, arguing that *Despot* represents an 'object gazing back' (2003, p. 146). Here he is subtly referring to Lacan's discussion of Hans Holbein the Younger's painting titled *The Ambassador*, where an anamorphic skull looks back at a viewer as they walk past the painting up (or down) a staircase. Lacan (1973/1977, p. 88) argues that the phenomenon of an object "looking back" generates a drive for a more holistic view of the self. It is this disruption of the self that Atkins believes that games like *Despot* represents.

A closer examination of *Despot* unsettles Atkins' reading of the fictional game. Rather than disturbing surveillance, *Despot* reinforces authoritarian modes of engagement. Outlining this requires an understanding of games like *Despot* as fundamentally refractory.

Refractory games

Games like *Despot* are best understood as part of a subset of games that create what Atkins (2003, p. 147) calls a "textual self". Elo ratings, scores, kill/death ratios, morality meters and reputation systems are all different methods of using player data to create a ludic other. Elsewhere, I have argued that these mechanics are intrinsically tied into the quantified self, and that the very act of translating player input into a quantified self alters the way players can retroactively interpret their data (Sarian, 2024).

The metaphor of water refracting light helps to illustrate this point. Water refracts light passing through it, such that what we see below the surface is askew. This re-

fraction is a two-way process, where what is seen from below the water is also distorted. Any media that quantifies user data engages in this two-way refraction; *Despot* and its relationship with Colley is no different. Not only does the under-water world looks askew from above water, the reverse is true as well. Colley's view of himself within *Despot* is distorted, and the game 'sees' him distortedly simultaneously.

This is best understood through Brock and Shepherd's (2016) notion of the *procedural enthymeme*. Enthymemes are unstated assumptions. For example, the sentence "Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal" carries the enthymeme that "All men are mortal". They argue that this is integral to how code persuades, as accepting the 'conclusion' of a code operation implicitly involves accepting the 'enthymemes' underpinning the code's processes. Because all attempts at quantifying data carry cultural and ideological assumptions regarding how data should be classified, and what it means, this means that any attempt to 'quantify' the self has a refractory element to it. This is something that Crawford, Lingel and Karppi (2015) explore in their paper on fitness trackers and weight measurements, as any attempt to quantify 'fitness' or 'health' requires ideological assumptions about what constitutes 'fitness' and 'health'. These assumptions are all hidden within the procedural 'enthymeme' of code, and it is through this enthymeme that code refracts user input into a quantified double.

Understood through this lens, *Despot* is a game that does not mirror Colley, but instead refracts his violent latencies. While Colley appears peaceful, his underlying propensity for violence is foreshadowed throughout the novel, such as his 'consensual non-consent' rape scene with a married woman (Banks, 1993, pp. 125–129). Elements of the game, such as the 'Despotic Power Level' (Banks, 1993, 134) all act to encourage a particular mode of engagement, only to then present his data and output as a mirroring of his character. This reflects a tendency for fictional games to "*play their players*" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 141), it is this playing of Colley that becomes clearer through a deeper understanding of *Despot*.

Despot

Despot is a "world-builder" (Banks, 1993, p. 53) game that "looks back" at the player and attempts to emulate them. The game is like *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox, 2012), *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Meier, 1991) and the 4X genre more generally. Players move in civilisational stages and epochs as they expand their territory while governing their internal state. Gualeni and Fassone (2023,p. 81) have noted a tendency for fictional games that act as a "synecdoche" of their society to often "resemble real games", a trend that can be seen in *Despot*'s resemblance to the 4X genre. Yet in contrast to those games, *Despot* has a special quality that similar real games argua-

bly can also do, but that the fictional game exaggerates through its "underspecification" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 23). Here is how the game is described within the book by Colley:

> *Despot* is interactive, *Despot* will go on building your world for you even if you leave it alone because it actually *watches* you; it learns from your playing style, it *knows* you, it will actually try its little damnedest to *become* you. (Banks, 1993, p. 53)

The implication, outlined in this quote, is that whatever society the player creates reflects who they are. While other games in this genre could be interpreted as also doing this, the fictional "underspecification" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 23) of *Despot* allows it to exacerbate this element of the relationship that players have with world-builder games. While Colley expresses a political philosophy of peaceful reformism, within *Despot* Colley becomes an authoritarian despot. If Colley's description of *Despot*—as a ludic mirror—is to be taken at face value, then by implication Colley also believes that the society and person he generates within *Despot* is also who he 'truly' is. Colley's relationship with *Despot* then reflects a fracturing, between his peaceful persona and the authoritarian violence he embraces within the game.

In practice, no game can fully 'mirror' a player as the very act of playing a game involves a compromise with the procedural logic of its system. Most people who play videogames would never fire a gun at another human, but do so routinely within the procedural logic of first-person shooters. This is something Mukherjee (2015, p. 156) observes within the game of *Doom* (id Software, 1993), arguing that "the player in *Doom* does not have the choice not to kill the monsters that appear in the game". Mukherjee goes on to argue that player interaction with games generates a process of "becoming" that comprises a distinct identity from both the player and the game (2015, pp. 168–172). Here too Colley has no choice but to play as an authoritarian ruler in *Despot*, with the Colley–*Despot* interaction generating a ludic double—one that is comfortable with authoritarian violence.

Examining *Despot* as a game undermines Colley's belief that it genuinely reflects who he is. Instead, it is better to describe what *Despot* does as a refraction of the player. All of the gameplay described within the book points to a game that encourages authoritarian modes of engagement, reflecting a tendency for fictional games to act as an embodiment of the dominant values of their setting (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, pp. 59–68). The game tracks a statistic called the 'Despotic Power Level' (Banks, 1993, p. 134), and success is measured by how high a player can make that number. Colley describes how he fights off barbarians, weakens the nobility and the church by tempting them into hedonistic excess to encourage a rising 'merchant class', and sending 'secret police' to bust drug dealers before using those drug dealers to control his subordinates (Banks, 1993, p. 55). Much like Mukherjee's (2015) analysis of *Doom*, Colley has no choice but to become a dictator in *Despot*. The difference is that Colley genuinely believes that this fictional game 'mirrors' who he truly is, allowing

the game to present the despotic dictator he becomes in the game as a 'mirror' of the player.

Cairns (2002), in his analysis of *Despot*, argues that the game effectively trains Colley to accept the dominant logic of the society he exists within. He argues that "Colley becomes dominator of society, his strategies mirroring those that he objects to in the real world around him while revealing how much he is shaped by them" (2002, p. 49). He goes on to argue that *Despot* effectively serves to subtly indoctrinate Colley into accepting the reality of the society he exists within (2002, p. 50). Within the text, Colley is depicted as someone consumed by vice and excess, partaking in activities like adultery, drinking and smoking. Here within *Despot,* he employs those same tools as a form of authoritarian control.

The actual gameplay described is one where the player chooses a point of view, then rules a society from that perspective. The player can, for example, become a tribal chieftain and then build their way up to become an emperor. At any time they can 'shift' perspectives, although they effectively lose whatever progress they made with their current ruler.

Later in the novel Colley accidentally leaves *Despot* running. *Despot* continues to run as a real-time game when left turned on, even if the player is not engaging with it. Because the game supposedly 'mirrors' the player, a game left running in the absence of a player presents a representational ego-death. In Colley's absence, a new society emerges. Colley's civilisation has collapsed. The countryside has "either become desert or marsh or returned to forest" and "all the temples – all *my* temples – are ruined, dark and abandoned" (Banks, 1993, p. 261). Colley goes on to remark that:

> The worst of it is there's no head man, no Despot, no me. I can look at all this but I can't *do* anything about it, not on this scale. To start playing again I'd have to trade this omniscient but omni-potent view for that of…God knows, some tribal warrior, village elder, a mayor or a bandit chief. (Banks, 1993, p. 262)

He goes on to observe that "I guess a radical Green or Deep Ecologist would think it's a pretty cool result" (Banks, 1993, p. 262).

The resulting society is neither good nor bad. Problems are observed, such as the rise of bandits, but nature has reclaimed the wasteland and many of the barbarians that likely fed off the profits of his civilisation have retreated. The greatest threat for Colley is the erosion of the 'textual self' that the game had constructed for him, the despotic ruler who had temples erected in his honour. Instead, Colley must contend with the possibility that he instead will be a mere participant, an equal co-player in a simulation that he cannot fully dominate.

Despite all this, Colley does not 'grow' as a person from this interaction. Instead of Colley engaging in what Meades (2015) would call "counterplay", it is more accurate to say that the author is the one engineering the plot to subvert *Despot*. This strategy, of counterplay through 'accidental' means in the plot, is a possibility that Gualeni and Fassone (2023) observe in portrayals of fictional games. The message of the 'Deep Ecology' outcome is for the reader, rather than the fictional player.

Hutchinson (2008, p. 46) argues that this Deep Ecology outcome "demands of Colley the responsibility of a participant rather than the irresponsibility of a spectator (or a fantasist or despot)". Hutchinson goes on to argue that Colley's despair in the face of playing as a mere 'village elder' or 'mayor' reflects a deeper abandonment of a politics requiring "collective participation and responsibility" (2008, p. 46). More than anything, Colley's response reflects an internalisation of the overriding individualist logic of the neoliberal society he otherwise rails against, something that *Despot* had partially ingrained into him.

A prophetic critique, and an alternative approach

Despot effectively predicts and critiques an incoming gaming landscape replete with what Jenning's (2022) calls the "authoritarian Hero's Journey", and the rise of quantified self tools—achievements, matchmaking rankings, morality meters—that allow players to self-regulate according to a logic that Han (2017, p. 5) disparagingly describes as "auto-exploitation". While the use of a quantified self in games existed at the time of *Complicity*'s publication, such as in *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Garriott, 1985) and *Alter Ego* (Activision, 1986), the novel also prophesises the increasing use of ludic 'doubles' in the form of Elo matchmaking ratings, kill/death ratios, morality meters and achievements.

Jennings' (2022) "authoritarian Hero's Journey" refers to a trend in games like the *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) to present the protagonist as a single elite hero, charged with saving the world and making big choices that determine the outcome of entire nations and even galaxies. She argues that this trend tends to highlight the unique, meritocratic importance of the protagonist at the expense of incompetent bureaucracies (2022, pp. 329–332). She argues that these games carry an authoritarian message and connects it to the rise of the 'NPC' meme, where people on social media depict their political opponents as nonplayer characters who are incapable of independent thought (2022, pp. 337–338). Similarly, Han (2017, p. 5) criticises the quantified self for encouraging individuals to internalise the logic of neoliberal capitalism, arguing that it creates a relationship of "auto-exploitation" to an arbitrary external number.

A good point of comparison here is the similarly named computer roleplaying game *Tyranny* (Obsidian, 2016). Like *Despot*, *Tyranny* puts the player in the role of a 'Fatebinder', a travelling judge who wields the authority of a tyrannical figure named

Kyros. The aesthetics here are similar. The player has despotic/tyrannical authority and the power to make rulings and adjudicate conflicts however they wish. Like *Despot*, *Tyranny* also constructs a 'textual self' of the player by collecting their data. A quantified self profile of the player is created which numerically tracks how the player is viewed by the different characters and organisations within the game. Because *Despot* is a fictional game, it does not need to function. This means that *Despot* can leverage its "underspecification" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 23) to highlight trends within *Tyranny* that might not otherwise be clear.

Both *Despot* and *Tyranny* train the player to think in a way that reflects hegemonic discourses. Both the fictional game *Despot* and the real game *Tyranny* give the player authoritarian, fate of the world agency while tracking them using quantified self tools. Yet both games also carry the potential for ways of playing them that undermine both the way they are supposed to be played and which counter-act the dominant discourses contained within them.

This is seen in the 'Deep Ecology' outcome that Colley receives in *Despot.* A different approach exists within *Tyranny*. Towards the end of the game, the player is evaluated by their authoritarian boss and mentor, Tunon the Adjudicator. Tunon is depicted within the game as authoritarian, and as frequently making decisions that are politically expedient rather than just. If the player's reputation meter with Tunon is high enough, Tunon will conclude that the player is not only a good judge, but is worthy even of his service. While a dominant (Hall, 1973) decoding of this event situates this event as a 'reward' for correctly raising the right meter to a game winning position, a more negotiated decoding can reframe it as an attack on the player's authority. If the player receives the approval of a person diegetically depicted as tyrannical, then the player can potentially take that as a criticism of their own authoritarian 'fate of the world' agency.

What both the 'Tunon approves of the player' outcome in *Tyranny* and the 'Deep Ecology' outcome of *Despot* represent are what Schulzke (2020, pp. 124-126) calls a "Multiple Voices" approach to morality meters in videogames. In *Tyranny* the player's data is represented by a contradictory mix of conflicting viewpoints and opinions, as different characters approve, disapprove, or have mixed responses to the player-character. In *Despot* the player is reduced to the level of participant rather than ruler, forced to contend and negotiate with alternative perspectives. Schulzke argues that this 'Multiple Voices' approach to videogame morality represents a form of moral engagement that more accurately represents the level of agency that most people experience in real life, as people are primarily judge through the way they interact horizontally with different people and institutions (2020, pp. 124-126). Because of its fictional nature, *Despot*'s 'Deep Ecology' outcome effectively works as an exaggeration of this latent discourse found deep within *Tyranny*, highlighting it in a way that may not otherwise be clear.

Conclusion

Iain Banks' book *Complicity* was published in 1993, its fictional game *Despot* foreshadowing the landscape of games that would gradually develop over the coming decades. These are games which heavily rely on the cultural metaphor of the quantified self, employing morality meters, reputation systems and matchmaking rankings to create what Atkins (2003) calls "textual selves" of the player. It both critiques these systems, while also pointing to an alternative way they can be employed to break with dominant modes of discourse.

Colley believes the game to be a mirror, reflecting who he is as a person. Yet a closer analysis of the game reveals that it does not mirror the player, but it instead *refracts* them. This reflects the broader procedural logic of games with similar mechanics, as they train players to use their data to engage in a mode of 'auto-exploitation' that Han (2017) considers intrinsic to the quantified self. It also reflects what Jennings (2022) calls the "authoritarian Hero's Journey", as a 'fate of the world' level of agency reflects a broader authoritarian ideology. All of this is internalised by Colley as he in turn adopts the violence and individualistic framework that *Despot* requires to maximise his 'Despotic Power Level' (Banks, 1993, p. 134).

Yet the 'Deep Ecology' outcome of the game also represents a way that the same ludic mechanics can be reoriented against the cultural logic that spawned *Despot*. By rejecting the politics of authoritarianism and instead encouraging a playstyle that would make Colley an equal participant in a world comprised of what Schulzke (2020) calls 'Multiple Voices', games that follow in *Despot*'s footsteps can reorient the quantified self away from the cultural logic that spawned it. Colley falls into a trap that leaves him caught between passive compliance and authoritarian violence. But an alternative exists, and similar games with a 'Deep Ecology' philosophy can reintroduce collective participation as a mode of political engagement. The fictional nature of *Despot* allows it to present exaggerated 'Deep Ecology' outcomes that can be read, and potentially designed, into real games that otherwise still need to function and acquire capital and customers in a commodified games industry. Through this the 'textual selves' of games can encourage players to potentially view themselves as equals, rather than as despots.

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