

Extract from INFINITE GAME OF THRONES by Ian Cheng

This text originally appears in the book *The Machine Stops*, Halmos, New York. 2014. www.halmos.us.com

Perhaps the most intimate crisis we face today is the limits of human consciousness to really grasp nonhuman scaled complexity. What is nonhuman scaled complexity? Strangelove. Y2K. The sprawling codebase of Microsoft Windows. The Amazon rainforest. Climate change. Big data. Antiterrorism. Cancer. The unknown unknownness of an expanding universe. A dynamic something composed of such vast interconnectivity and such deep causal chains that it cannot be metabolized by humans as a comprehensible whole. Too much to hold in the head. Impervious to narrativization. We come into contact with complexity at its edges, aware of its hovering influence on our lives. But we cannot predict our influence upon it, nor fully measure our dependence on its ongoing stability. What if it breaks? Gets sick? Crashes? Loses balance? Metamorphs into something? Doesn't need us? Is better without us? How can we even know?

The conscious mind panics. It rationalizes that complexity itself is irrational. It procrastinates. It paves over complexity, gives it a name, draws up a cartoon version from which to control it at a distance. More illegible behavior ensues. The mind senses its own left-brained failure pattern, feels hopeless, dies a little. Medicates. It begs for a new master: a god, a boss, a script, a set of values, a community, an idea, a perspective. No one answers. It pauses to watch in awe. It accepts its own death, and waits.

I once asked my uncle, an emergency room physician, if he pretended to escape being human in order to effectively manage all the blood, panic, suffering, and death around him. He rolled his eyes back into his skull, mimed a trance-like state, and dropped this koan on me: "Don't hate the player, hate the game...And hate the game inside the player."

What is the game? The ecosystem of influences that structures a player's behavior. Some influences are legible and at scale with human spacetime. James P. Carse calls games played at this level "finite games." Games with clear resolution. Goals, winners, losers, titles, judges. Play to win. But most influences are imperceptible too slow, too fast, too big, too small, too abstract, too complex, too unknown for humans to grasp or consciously value. Games played at this level demand that the player simply play to keep playing. If the game approaches resolution, the rules must change to keep play alive. Nothing is certain for the player except that the game is still in play. What Carse calls "infinite games." Outside and inside, micro and macro, at every scale of reality, we touch the shape of infinite games only to derive from them all-too-human finite games.

What is the game inside the player? An infinite game hallucinating that it is a finite game. What we expediently call the mind is really our very own nonhuman scaled complexity growing inside us. But one with a public relations department that underrates its own complexity, cartoons itself, talks back with the metrics, rules, and certainty that only a finite game can promise. An "I" who fights to preserve the past and future coherence of itself for a social network of other "I"s. An "I" in denial of the illegible ocean of intelligence from which "I" grows out of. An "I" that feels hacked, possessed, brainwashed when the mind trances out into an internet addiction hole, loses control, or finds itself in situations it cannot explain. An "I" not responsible to that in the world which is truly uncertain or unknown.

But what if we could peel back this evolutionary hallucination, this celebrity "I", and reacquaint ourselves with the underlying complexity inside us? What could be growing in that illegible land? A whole cast of sibling "I"s, waiting for legitimacy, attention, voice, socialization? What if we could modulate the rise and fall of multiple finite games on the playing field of our mind's root level infinite game? What if we could confront the complexity and uncertainty of the external world with a matching complex muscle?

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