INFINITE GAME OF THRONES
by Ian Cheng

Science fiction and anthropology share a very human habit: they overrate the historical mutations of hardware and underrate the evolutionary mutations in software. For all the visionary sets, gadgets, fashion, and atmosphere in *Blade Runner*, Harrison Ford's Decker ultimately operates with the mindset of a 20th century gumshoe detective. And for all the strange artifacts and architectures we unearth, the story of ancient humans is the story of our contemporary conscious mind projected into less technological more deathful times.

So what about the software— the inner stuff that animates the organisms of its era, and changes as the world changes?

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In *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1978), Julian Jaynes hypothesizes that humans were not always "conscious." Ancient humans as recent as 3000 years ago did not possess the meta-reflection and deliberate narrativizing of possible futures that we experience today. They had no abstraction called the self, no private mindspace, no recourse to mental metaphors for thinking of time as a sequence of places. When ancient humans encountered a new problem, they experienced right-brain vocal hallucinations— explicit expressions of implicit right-brain problem solving— which were interpreted as the voice of gods. Full of personality and moods, the voices commanded man into reaction against the unknown. To hear was to obey. Entire civilizations organized around this mindset. Like a banal cloud of chatter hovering over ancient social life, god voices supplied the kind of reassuring stress relief that only comes when one has a master. Jaynes calls this non-conscious human the bicameral man.

Over time, civilizations sustained by bicamerality began to collapse from the strain of cultural and environmental change. Vocal hallucinations failed to resolve the cognitive dissonance triggered by natural catastrophes, encounters with foreign refugees with their own set of god voices and urgencies, and the metaphoric thinking born out of the technology of written narrative. The scale and suddenness of change introduced complexities into daily life that could only be met with a babel of confusion, leading to death and even greater stress among those who survived. In its place evolved new conceptual metaphors for interpreting and responding to chaos. Narrativized planning, deception, and empathy became life-savers codified into the personality of institutions. The right-brain voices grew silent, usurped by the left-brain ego voice of "I" . What we now call consciousness is the emergent result of this psychosocial evolution. What we call schizophrenia is the last vestige of the bicameral mind.

Like the boldest of science fictions, Jaynes' theory demands to be metabolized regardless of its factual accuracy. The imaginative leap he takes is to consider that ancient humans operated on a completely alien 'software' in the head, despite being physiologically identical with our bodies today. We anthropomorphize toys, animals, corporations, but most of all we anthropomorphize humans, our own species. We imagine our current mental experience as the horizon of possible intelligent organization, past and future. But Jaynes makes us alien to ourselves again. Same body, profoundly new management.

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If our current form of consciousness evolved as an adaptation to disruptive environmental and cultural change, what kind of inner operating system will regulate future human behavior? What disruptions will shape the next breakdown and alien leap in cognitive evolution? And to what degree will humans self-stimulate this evolution in order to better thrive within their own era?

Perhaps the most intimate crisis we face today is the limits of human consciousness to really grasp non-human scaled complexity. What is non-human scaled complexity? Strangelove. Y2K. The sprawling codebase of Microsoft Windows. The Amazon rainforest. Climate change. Big data. Anti-terrorism. 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.

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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 space-time. 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 imperceivable -- 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 non-human 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?

Let's call this the Infinite Game of Thrones (IGOT) software patch.

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In *Game of Thrones*, George R. R. Martin does a remarkable thing. He first depicts the rivalry of noble families competing in the grandest of finite games: securing the throne. He then depicts the winning family's ongoing attempt to manage the kingdom, an impossible task of Obama-level entanglement, an infinite game that can never be won, only kept in play as long as possible. In swift succession, we witness family after family rise and fall in power. Momentary control crashing into prolapsed instability. In the end we are left with a perverse, almost alien feeling: that this complex ecosystem— with its non-human scale cast of hundreds, diverse histories and cultures, and deep causal plot chains— actually feels graspable, thinkable.

What is IGOT? A speculative mindset that is not playing to win the same goal of coherent selfhood over and over. It is not playing to preserve a static and refined "I". It is playing to keep playing within a dynamic world by being its own dynamic ecosystem. It is a mind that accepts its own underlying complexity, however difficult to recognize, and weaponizes this feature— stockpiling an inventory of mental models, personalities, habit sets, finite game scripts. It is a mind that can maintain perspective of its infinite game nature, its ocean of conscious and unconscious fertility, all the while devising finite games to concretely meet the moment. Dealing with non-human complexity by becoming non-human. Dealing with human complexity by becoming more human than human. Ego pausing to go bicameral. It is a mind that can weather the nausea of entering and exiting finite games at will. One that can endure the pain of uncertainty and anomie that awaits it after every victory. This is a mind that can switch between one finite game to another with minimal loss of energy, and perhaps even gains in energy. Metabolizing chaos. Is this biologically possible? Is this thermodynamically possible? I don't know. But what it would mean is a human being with the ultimate evolutionary hack: the ability to wrangle entropy, and absorb and benefit from the randomness and uncertainty of the external world.

Perhaps we start from the outside. Can culture fake it till the mind makes it? Culture socializes the problem of cognitive evolution's slow multi-generational pace, distributing the burden of inner game change onto the evolution of shared forms. Some have already arrived in disguise. Antifragility. Crash-only software. Tulpas. Muscle confusion. Trance mask theater. Mindfulness practice. Insight porn. Duchamp quitting the job. Cosmos. Taken together, these motifs approximate a kind of neurological gym. One for stimulating quick game shifts of the mind, rehearsing episodes of scriptlessness, giving deliberate incoherence of selfhood a sense of psychosocial legitimacy, divorcing fear from uncertainty, metabolizing uncertainty into energy, sustaining a feeling of awe and curiosity in the face of the unknown. The effects of the neuro gym cannot yet be fully felt or embodied, but begin the work of alienating us from our current overrated finite game version of human consciousness. What concrete forms still need to be invented in order to grow IGOT software in the brain? There are no winning answers, only emergent ones indistinguishable from absolute perversion.