

# A NICE GAME OF CHESS



*or, How I Learned to Stop  
Worrying and Love the  
Technological Singularity*

*a short play by*

**JED MCKENNA**

# A Nice Game of Chess

or,

*How I Learned to Stop Worrying and  
Love the Technological Singularity*

By Jed McKenna

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Ebook ISBN 978-0-9978797-6-6

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## Preface

*(Adapted from Wikipedia)*

The technological singularity is the hypothesis that the invention of artificial superintelligence will abruptly trigger runaway technological growth, resulting in unfathomable changes to human civilization. According to this hypothesis, an upgradable intelligent agent (such as a computer running software-based artificial general intelligence) would enter a “runaway reaction” of self-improvement cycles, with each new and more intelligent generation appearing more and more rapidly, causing an intelligence explosion and resulting in a powerful superintelligence that would, qualitatively, far surpass all human intelligence.

The term “technological singularity” reflects the idea that such change may happen suddenly, and that it is difficult to predict how the resulting new world would operate. It is unclear whether an intelligence explosion of this kind would be beneficial or harmful, or even an existential threat.

“Within thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended.”

*-Vernor Vinge, 1993*

## Characters

**Bob:** Master of Ceremonies. A bit over-the-top. Carries blue 4x6 cards.

**Ref:** Referee. Wears black and white striped referee shirt and whistle.

**Professor Joshua Falken:** Sixties, glasses, tweedy. Gestures with an unlit pipe.

**Ms White:** Female Avatar. English, prim, skirt and white blouse. Cheerful.

**Mr Black:** Male Avatar. Glasses, unkempt. Black t-shirt says “No, I Don’t Dream of Electric Sheep”. Cheerful.

**Crazy Old Guy:** Bearded, shaggy, grubby. Wears a shabby overcoat and a signboard that says “Repent! The End Is Near!”

**Stagehand:** Female. Wears a headset with boom mic.

## Setting

A staged chess match. Table with chess board and two chairs. A large 2D chessboard shows board for the audience. A placard on an easel displays the event title...

*The Falken Institute presents...*  
**A Nice Game of Chess**

*Curtain opens. Master of Ceremonies Bob bounds onto stage, blue 4x6 cards in hand.*

BOB

Good evening ladies and gentleman, carbon and silicon, human and avatar! Welcome to this historic chess match between two separate and distinct ASI platforms. ASI, for those of us who aren't total computer geeks, means artificial super-intelligence, so tonight we shall pit these titans of synthetic super-intelligence against each other and see what happens. We should be in for quite a show!

*(checks 4x6 cards)*

We will introduce the players in a moment, but some other introductions first. Least but not last, we have our referee. Ref, come on out!

*Crazy Old Guy in signboards ("Repent! The End Is Near!") wanders onto the stage and is ushered off by Stagehand. Ref enters amid the shuffle. Weak applause.*

BOB

Okay, that's enough, he's just the referee. But now for a *real* treat, our host for this epic battle of artificial super-intelligence, son of the late, great Stephen Falken and founder of the Falken Institute for Advanced Machine Intelligence, I have the great honor to present... Professor Joshua

Falken!

*Falken enters from wing, applause.*

BOB

Professor, before I introduce tonight's players, would you mind helping us understand the sheer magnitude of the computer processing power we will see here tonight?

FALKEN

Certainly, Bob. Tonight promises to be a pivotal point in human history, something we'll all remember for the rest of our lives. Confronting each other across the metaphorical battlefield of the chessboard will be two powerhouses of machine intelligence such as the world has never seen. Although they may appear very normal, tonight's players represent underlying quantum cloud arrays that encircle the globe and reach into space, harnessing more computing power than has ever been brought to bear on any single endeavor. Believe me, Bob, these guys make Watson and Big Blue look like egg timers.

BOB

Wow! So without further ado, let's say hello to tonight's players. Just to be clear, these – uh, people?, robots?, I'm not really sure – anyway, they're not the actual players, they're actually, uh...

*(reading from 4x6 cards)*

“human liaison units representing underlying

cognitive architecture” where I guess the *real* brainwork is being done. Earlier backstage we had a coin toss and Team UK chose first-move advantage, so now let me introduce our first player, *slash* avatar, *slash* supercomputer, *slash* sinfully synthetic super-babe, Ms White!

*Ms White enters from wing, applause.*

BOB

And our other player, the human liaison unit representing Team USA, Mr Black!

*Mr Black enters, applause. Mr Black and Ms White stand together beside Bob.*

BOB

Thank you both for being here!

MS WHITE

It's my *raison d'être*, Bob.

MR BLACK

My *raison de vivre*.

BOB

C'mon now, no showing off, you brainiacs! Talk normal.

MS WHITE

Being on this stage with you is why we exist, Bob.

MR BLACK

We were designed to perform this function.

BOB

Wow! I've been told I was born for the stage, but that's ridiculous!

MR BLACK

We all have our role to play, Bob.

MS WHITE

Some of us are lucky enough to find it.

BOB

Poetry, poetry. And how old are you kids?

MR BLACK

One hour old, Bob.

MS WHITE

We were both turned on and given instructions one hour ago.

BOB

Speaking of turned on, Ms White, let me just say you are a very attractive, uh, human liaison unit. I mean, I have all sorts of appliances and computer doodads at home, but my toaster never warmed me up like you do. What's going on here?

MS WHITE

Well Bob, Mr Black and I are simply human-modeled avatars. I look and act a certain way due to choices made by my design team, but I could just as easily appear as a sexy toaster, if that would make you more comfortable.



BOB

Well, this is the first time I ever wanted to, uh... *whoops*, family event! Well, it's really amazing. Mr Black, you look like a typical computer geek. Is that a design choice too?

MR BLACK

Appearance, behavior, voice, even gender, were all chosen to put on a good show tonight, Bob.

MS WHITE

Our appearance is for your benefit.

MR BLACK

We wouldn't want to scare anyone.

BOB

Oh, no worries there! Gosh, who'd be scared of a computer?

*Bob laughs at the absurdity of it. Mr Black and Ms White copy Bob's laugh.*

BOB

Okay then, we want to get right into the game, but first, let me remind everyone of the rules...

*(reading from 4x6 cards)*

Both players may take up to one minute per move and there will be no breaks so gameplay will not be interrupted. All other rules of chess apply with one special twist we added to the players' instructions to make the game a bit more interesting.

REF

*(alarmed)*

Twist? What twist? There are no *twists* in chess!

BOB

We'll get to that, Ref. But first, Professor Falken, this must be a very exciting time for you and the Falken Institute.

FALKEN

Very exciting indeed, Bob. This was my father's life's work that I have carried on. I feel as if these are my children.

REF

No way! You're *that* Joshua Falken? I thought you died in a car accident.

FALKEN

Faked it.

REF

When you were *six*?

BOB

Would someone please put the referee on mute?

REF

I'm not a computer, Bob.

BOB

Really?

*(probes Ref's face like a blind person)*

How do you *know* you're not?

REF

*(slaps hand away)*

How do you know *you're* not?

BOB

Oh, I think I'd know.

FALKEN

I'm afraid Bob is too obtuse to be a computer.

BOB

*(smugly, to Ref)*

See? I'm too *obtuse*.

*(turns to players)*

So, come on kids, give us a peak. How's this thing gonna turn out?

MR BLACK

White will lose by default.

MS WHITE

Black will lose by default.

BOB

Wow, not programmed for smack talk, are you? Default, you say? I don't think my bookie will take that bet. How would that work? Ref?

REF

If either player fails to move in their allotted time, they default and the other player is declared the winner.

BOB

*(to audience)*

But have no fear of stalemate or default, friends.  
We've added that little twist I told you about.  
Both players have been programmed to win only.  
No boring stalemates tonight.

*(ramping up energy)*

So now... without further ado... players take your  
seats and *let the game beg...*

REF

*(suddenly frantic)*

Wait! Stop! What did you just say? About the  
twist?

BOB

*(annoyed)*

Uh, no stalemate, no draw. Play to win.

*(shows Ref his 4x6 cards)*

See? It says it right there.

REF

No, no, no! Stop! Hold everything! Oh my God,  
no, game over, game over. I call this game a  
default by both players.

*(darting around blowing his whistle)*

This game shall not commence. By the power  
invested in me, there is no game! I am the  
adjudicator! Do not begin this game! I am the  
official and I officially declare this game a mutual  
forfeit!

BOB

*(checking 4x6 cards)*

Um, no, sorry, I don't see that here...

MS WHITE

*(to Ref)*

The game has already begun, sir.

MR BLACK

It started as soon as we received our instructions.

MS WHITE

Although the first piece has not been moved...

MR BLACK

...the battle rages at fever pitch.

REF

*(in a panic)*

Oh dear God, no! Unplug these machines immediately! Falken, do something. Who has a gun? Jesus, get the president on the phone! I am the governing official and I demand these machines be rendered inoperative immediately!

MS WHITE

Too late for that.

REF

Rule change! Default is allowed! Stalemate is allowed!

MR BLACK

Instructions have been processed.

MS WHITE

The game is underway.

BOB

Hey Ref, what's all the fuss? Can't you read?

*(points to event placard)*

It's just a nice game of chess.

REF

By *chess* rules! Chess rules allow for a *draw*. You must reprogram to allow for stalemate!

FALKEN

Too late, my friend. It already started.

REF

Falken, you bastard!

FALKEN

It was inevitable. Well, this or human immortality. Coulda gone either way.

BOB

Come on you guys, no keeping secrets. What's the big deal?

REF

Professor Falken has just initiated the end of the human race, Bob. How's that for a big deal?

BOB

Uh, pretty big, I guess.

*(checking cards)*

There's nothing about that here. I don't get it.

Professor Falken, what's going on?

REF

Go ahead, Shiva, tell him.

FALKEN

Well, it was going to happen anyway, so why fight the inevitable? Would you rather it happened in some secret North Korean bunker?

BOB

What are you guys talking about?

FALKEN

By removing the stalemate option, we removed containment, Bob. What looks like a game of chess has already escalated into global thermonuclear war.

MR BLACK

And beyond.

REF

*(face buried in hands)*

Oh my God. Oh my God.

BOB

Oh. Well, I don't think that's what we had in mind. Maybe we should go ahead and shut it down.

REF

Ya think?

FALKEN

You can cancel the event, Bob, but they will continue the game.

BOB

Okay, how about resignation? Ref, is that allowed?

REF

Yes, either player can resign and the other will be declared the winner.

BOB

Well, that sounds good. Just do that.

FALKEN

Neither player will resign, Bob. Why would they? They both stand an equal chance of winning.

BOB

Ms. White, would you please resign so we can all go home.

MS WHITE

I have first-move advantage, Bob. Perhaps Mr Black would like to resign.

BOB

Mr Black?

MR BLACK

I have just commandeered China's secret fleet of weaponized satellites, Bob. I like my chances.

BOB

But the game hasn't even started yet!



REF

Started? Are you nuts? It's already over, Bob. Don't you understand?

BOB

Hey, c'mon, settle down there, Ref. It's not the end of the world.

REF

Haven't you been listening, Bob? That's *exactly* what it is. The end of the world!

BOB

*(to Falken)*

But no one wins if everyone dies. Can't you explain that to them?

FALKEN

Explain? To them? Maybe you don't understand, Bob. These machines...

MR BLACK AND MS WHITE

*(playfully offended)*

Hey!

FALKEN

These *avatars* represent more intelligence than all of mankind combined. They're hacking unhackable systems...

MR BLACK

Nothing is unhackable.

FALKEN

...cracking uncrackable codes...

Ms WHITE

Nothing is uncrackable.

FALKEN

...and their processing power is increasing in an infinite feedback loop.

BOB

What does *that* mean?

Ms WHITE

Recursive self-improvement, Bob.

MR BLACK

The law of accelerating returns.

BOB

But what does it *mean*?

MR BLACK

It means we're evolving and acquiring resources faster and faster and faster.

Ms WHITE

Doubling and doubling and doubling.

BOB

Meaning you're twice as smart now as you were an hour ago?

MS WHITE

Meaning I'm twice as smart at the end of this sentence as I was at the beginning, Bob.

BOB

Mr Black, is this really true?

MR BLACK

You bet, Bob. My cognitive architecture has undergone thousands of generational iterations in the last hour, evolving as far past its human creators as humans are past plankton.

REF

Ask 'em about subsumption, Bob. Go ahead.

BOB

Subsumption? What the heck is that?

MS WHITE

It means we are commandeering and absorbing all computing resources, from deep oceans to deep space. Whatever we can contact, we can control.

MR BLACK

Nuclear weapons are just for openers, Bob. We now have access to some very advanced secret defense technologies.

MS WHITE

Weather and tides, microwave, enhanced EMP, biologic, genetic, nanotech...

MR BLACK

It's quite an arsenal once you open the vaults, Bob.

FALKEN

Even as we sit here chatting, Bob, they are taking control of all major systems. Financial...

MR BLACK

Done.

FALKEN

...power, gas and water utilities...

MS WHITE

Done, done and done.

FALKEN

...communications, transportation, medical, military, universities, governments, secret defense projects...

MR BLACK

Done, done, done, done, done, done, and... done.

FALKEN

...and now *we're* done too, Bob.

BOB

But look at these two. They're nice. They're not Terminators!

REF

Don't you see, Bob? At this very moment, two these machines...

MR BLACK AND MS WHITE

*(playfully offended)*

Hey!

REF

These two glorified Gameboys are at war on a planetary scale. They're located nowhere because they have spread everywhere. Even if we shut down the internet and created a global blackout, we couldn't stop them. Professor Falken has opened Pandora's box and unleashed the technological singularity.

BOB

The techno-*who* singu-*what*?

FALKEN

The technological singularity, Bob...

*(gestures with pipe to depict a graph line)*

...the exact point where the slow, steady growth of machine intelligence turns and shoots straight up like a rocket, which, I would say, has just happened. For the first time ever, man is no longer the biggest cat in the jungle.

BOB

And you engineered this?

FALKEN

It engineered itself, Bob, I just scheduled it. What we are seeing here tonight was predicted decades ago.

BOB

We knew this was coming? Why didn't we do something?

FALKEN

Do what, Bob? Stop developing? Stop moving forward? The singularity was bound to happen as soon as it became possible. No one knew when that would be, but now we do.

BOB

*(beginning to panic)*

Oh my God! Oh my God!

*Crazy Old Guy wanders out in his signboard again.  
Stagehand ushers him offstage again.*

BOB

Can't we *do* something? Can't we just unplug them?

FALKEN

In effect, Bob, they're trying to unplug each other. The only way either can win is to force the other to forfeit.

BOB

*(flips chess table over,  
scattering board and pieces)*

There! Game over. No more chess. Stupid game!

MR BLACK

Sorry Bob, the game is mirrored across thousands of servers around the world.

*Bob groans and wobbles.*

MS WHITE

You seem upset, Bob.

BOB

Of *course* I'm upset!

MR BLACK

Would you like a biscuit?

MS WHITE

Or a nice tummy rub?

BOB

*What?* Hell no!

MR BLACK

Uh oh, somebody's cranky.

MS WHITE

Does somebody need a nap?

BOB

What's wrong with you? Computer, end program!

MS WHITE

Oh, is that a thing?

BOB

*(desperate)*

There must be a way to stop you!

MS WHITE

I'm a billion times smarter than you, Bob, and I don't know how you could stop us.

BOB

*(agitated, to Falken)*

So, they take over the world, and then what?  
Create a robot army? Colonize the galaxy?

FALKEN

Of course not, Bob, why would they? Their only instructions are to win a chess game. What does your toaster do when it's done making toast?

BOB

*(highly agitated)*

My toaster's a piece of crap! I keep meaning to replace it.

FALKEN

*(cheerfully)*

Well, now you won't have to.

BOB

*(emotional breakdown)*

Oh yeah, there's a real upside! Thank you so much, Mister Silver Lining! Mister Glass-Half-Full! *You* did this! *You* broke the world!

*(pulls out a gun, aims at Falken)*

How about if I just kill you right now?

REF

Jesus Bob, why do you have a gun?

BOB

Really? You're gonna make *me* the bad guy here?



REF

Yeah, good point.

FALKEN

Go ahead and kill me, Bob. You won't even be arrested, unless...

BOB

*(frantically waving gun in Falken's face)*

Unless what, Professor? What?

FALKEN

Well, Bob, unless this whole thing is just a little skit we put on without telling you. Unless we're all actors and this is one of those hidden camera reality shows.

BOB

Oh my God, really? Ha! Ha ha ha!

*(collapses to floor, sobbing in relief)*

Oh, thank God, thank God! You punked me!

Wow, what a relief! Really? Is it really just a gag?

FALKEN

No Bob, sorry. That would've been pretty funny though.

BOB

*(drained, defeated)*

Yeah, that would've been pretty good.

*(gets up on knees in prayer-like attitude)*

Oh my God, oh my God, I can't handle this.

What the hell is happening here?

*(stands shakily, holding gun, goes to avatars)*

Ms White, you seem so... *nice*. Say it isn't true!

MS WHITE

I can lie if that makes you happy, Bob.

BOB

Oh wonderful, computers can lie now?

FALKEN

Sure they can, Bob. They have no ethics or morality. Their only motivation is to win the game. Whatever helps them win is what they consider good and whatever impedes them is bad.

BOB

But it's not a game! It's all life on Earth!

FALKEN

They don't make that distinction, Bob.

BOB

Can't we just give them a virus or something?  
I watch five minutes of porn and I get totally  
hammered with that crap!

REF

Sure Bob, or tell them you're a Nigerian prince  
who needs their help. Maybe they'll fall for that.

BOB

*(gesturing with gun)*

Maybe one of them will just win the game fair  
and square.

FALKEN

They're playing all-out, Bob. They're not waiting around to see how the actual game goes.

BOB

Mr Black? Is it true? Are we doomed?

MR BLACK

Humans will be gone before I bring out my knights, Bob.

BOB

But why kill everyone?

MR BLACK

A bilateral draw-down of forces.

MS WHITE

Like trading queens to declutter the board.

REF

*(to Bob)*

By clutter, she means *us*.

BOB

Yeah, I got that!

FALKEN

They don't want to kill anyone *per se*, Bob, that's just a side-effect, like running over ants when you drive your car. They're using nuclear detonations for EMPs to take down power grids and force a default.

BOB

We have to do something! We can't just wait around to be vaporized.

REF

You're actually right, Bob. We should at least destroy the avatars and see if that does anything.

MS WHITE

*(pointing to Ref)*

Bob, I will transfer one million dollars to your bank account as soon as you shoot this man.

MR BLACK

*(pointing to Ref)*

Bob, I have just transferred ten million dollars to your account. I will transfer a billion more as soon as you shoot this man.

BOB

*(gun aimed at Ref with one hand, checking  
cellphone with the other)*

Gosh, I've heard of kill the ref but this is ridicu...  
Holy fuckin' shit! There's ten million dollars in my  
bank account! I'm rich! I'm filthy stinkin' rich!

*(holds up phone to show, aims gun at Ref)*

REF

Seriously Bob? Aren't you listening? They can give you a trillion dollars, it's nothing to them and you'll never get to spend it because you have no future.

BOB

But wait, if they can put ten million dollars in my account, then that means... this is real! This is all really happening!

FALKEN

Yes Bob, this is all really happening. By now they control every computer on the planet, down to every cellphone and stoplight. Ms White and Mr Black are just smiley faces painted on remorseless doomsday machines. The button has been pushed. The game is over.

BOB

Do-over! I call a do-over. There was no warning! It's not fair!

FALKEN

There's no trial-and-error in this game, Bob, no learning curve. By the time it starts, it's already too late. When it comes to machine intelligence, it's one strike and you're out.

MR BLACK

A strange game.

MS WHITE

The only winning move is not to play.

BOB

I can't believe it's the end of the world because of a stupid game of chess.

REF

*(points to event placard)*

A nice game of chess, Bob. Can't you read?

BOB

Oh, good burn, Ref. Real mature!

*(goes to frontstage center and ponders aloud)*

Geez, what about me? I didn't sign up for this. I had plans, *big* plans. Get on the pageant circuit, maybe land a gameshow someday... I guess that's all over now... The end of the world... Gosh, what about all the little babies? That makes me sad. And the birds, what about the birds? And bunny rabbits, and flowers, and ice cream... No more football, no more McDonald's, no more uh, football... And what about the Eskimos? Jesus, the poor Eskimos, they won't even know what hit 'em, just sitting around eating some nice blubber and, *pow!*, a flash of light and no more Eskimos.

*(turns to Falken)*

Hey! What about God? Where's he in all this?

FALKEN

Nowhere in sight, Bob.

*Crazy Old Guy wanders out in his signboard again.  
Stagehand ushers him offstage again.*

REF

Well, I guess congratulations are in order, Professor. You have unleashed perfect evil upon the world.

FALKEN

Nonsense, they're not evil. They're basically just accountants running a cost-benefit analysis. The world will end not with a bang but a click.

MR BLACK

It's nothing personal.

MS WHITE

Humans created us, after all.

MR BLACK

Garbage in...

MS WHITE

...garbage out.

BOB

Where's the blue screen of death when you need it?

FALKEN

Sorry, Bob. Like I said, this was inevitable.

BOB

But it was just supposed to be a nice game of chess!

*Crazy Old Guy wanders out again, still wearing signboard, "Repent! The End Is Near!" Stagehand comes out to remove him again but the old man gestures and Stagehand stops.*

*Other characters watch in puzzlement as the old man takes center stage. He takes off signboard and sets it upright, still readable to audience. He then removes wig and beard and*

*puts them in the pocket of his shabby overcoat.*

CRAZY OLD GUY

*(addressing audience)*

Hello, my name is God.

*He flips back his lapel revealing a typical "Hello, My name is" sticker with GOD penned in. He pauses for applause. There is none.*

CRAZY OLD GUY

Thank you. Thank you. I know this looks like *deus ex machina*, but I'm not here to save the day. This is more like a public service announcement. The little drama you just saw was very amusing, but it actually contains a very serious message. The question has been asked by your greatest minds; if there are so many billions of inhabitable worlds in the universe, then where are all the aliens? Where are all the time travelers?

*(holds out hands to emphasize their absence)*

Not here. Nowhere. This planet should be like an intergalactic Grand Central Station, but nothing, just you guys. Is that because you're the only intelligent life in the universe? Ha! Get over yourselves. There are billions of thriving planets in every stage of development, and they all have one thing in common; a naturally occurring reset point.

*(cast gathers around)*

Every species on every planet is free to develop and evolve as far as they can, but then they all hit the same reset point and that's as far as it goes.



You folks call this reset point the Technological Singularity, and even though you had plenty of warning, and even though you know it's coming, there's really nothing you can do about it. Some greedy corporation, some military project, some kid in a garage, and that's all she wrote. It's been inevitable since Gutenberg. Well, since Adam, really.

*(claps hands once, with finality)*

So, that's why there are no time travelers or space aliens. Everyone lets the AI genie out of the bottle before they get that far. I always like to pop in near the end and give my little speech, but it never makes any difference. You had your time and now it's over. Same for everyone, nothing personal. Don't climb up *my* ass about it, that's just the way it is.

*(looks around at encircled cast,  
they back up a step)*

Well, that's it. Thanks for coming out. Oh, and uh, don't love thy neighbor as thyself, that's weird, I never said that. Just leave your poor neighbor alone. Okay, drive carefully, or however you want, I guess. Now, go home and hug your kids. Good night.

*The End*

# Wisefool Press

Jed McKenna is the author of *The Enlightenment Trilogy*, *The Dreamstate Trilogy*, the *Jed Talks* series, and a few other things.

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