

Are You Living in a Computer (Game)?

Walter Barta

Walter Barta, M.A.

University of Houston

Digital Research Commons (Room 266-C), MD Anderson
Library

University Drive 4333

772 04 Houston, TX

wjbarta2@uh.edu



Walter Barta is a graduate student at the University of Houston where he is also a principal investigator for the Digital Research Commons at the M. D. Anderson Library. He has published on various topics related to digital humanities, philosophy, science fiction, and literature & science. He is a contributing author for the *Popular culture & philosophy* book series, and his most recent contributions are chapters in *The Witcher and philosophy* on moral dilemmas, artistic representations, and games as postmodern art.

First, we can reconstruct the simulation argument from Bostrom's "Are you living in a computer simulation?" (2003, p. 243), more recently and lengthily defended by Chalmers (2022). As the argument goes, at least one of the following must be true:

- S1. 100% of civilizations go extinct before making computer simulations.
- S2. 100% of civilizations will never make computer simulations of ancestors.
- S3. We are probably living in such an ancestor simulation.

To simplify, we can assume that S1 is probably false, since even if 99% of civilizations are doomed to extinction, it seems probable that *at least some* survive to make simulations. To complicate though, we can attempt to show that S2 is probably false if we accept *at least one* of many possible reasons (a disjunctive list: A, B, C, etc.) for some civilizations to make simulations of ancestors. In order to conclude that we are probably a computer simulation, we only need to find *at least one* reason for civilizations to simulate ancestors, so we will propose gaming as one. Ancestor game hypothesis: *Civilizations will make ancestor simulations for gaming.*

This hypothesis can come in a strong form if *all* civilizations do it and a weak form if just *some* do it. Either way, the ancestor game hypothesis is enough to reject S2 and thus implies S3. So, can we think of any reasons to believe that *all* or *some* future civilizations will make ancestor games?

In the strong version of the hypothesis, *all* future civilizations have reasons to make ancestor games. At least one reason for this can be found in Suits' *The grasshopper: Games, life and utopia* (2005) and more recently in Nguyen's *Games: Agency as art* (2020). According to Suits (and to a lesser degree Nguyen), in a Utopia, a world in which all instrumental goals are accomplished without difficulty, the Utopians would intentionally make things difficult (though not dangerous) for themselves, in order to have something to accomplish. These intentional 'unnecessary obstacles' are necessary to what Suits dubs a 'game' (Suits, 2005). Because games are what people would do if they could do anything at all, games are the ultimate intrinsic good (i.e., the meaning of life). And, because this would be true even in Utopia, not just some but all civilizations that can make simulations on computers will make them – for the sake of games. Furthermore, because games featuring the ancestral conditions of players will offer a substantial level of difficulty and because computer simulations of such conditions will not be dangerous to their players, many of these games will be ancestor simulation computer games.

In the weaker version of the hypothesis, *some* future civilizations have reasons to make ancestor games. As Hurka (2005) argues, although gaming may be a *good*, positing it as *the good* is perhaps overstating the case, as there are other competing candidates for intrinsic good. So, *all* civilizations may not simulate ancestor computer games; though, *some* civilizations still may – as long as they can manage to do so while accommodating other intrinsic good (e.g., safety).

So, what might be some reasonable objections, and are there credible responses?

- *Objection 1:* Would we not remember starting the game?
- *Response 1:* Not necessarily, since, if the difficulty of the game is increased by the players' amnesia or if game requires conscious non-player characters, then no one in the game may remember starting the game (Nguyen, 2020).
- *Objection 2:* Might civilizations reject ancestor gaming since the good of gaming is often outweighed by other good? (Hurka, 2005).
- *Response 2:* Perhaps, but we cannot be sure that other good *always* outweighs the good of gaming (Suits, 2005).

- *Objection 3*: From the panoply of possible simulations for gaming, ancestor simulations may not be ideal gaming simulations, so might future civilizations avoid running them? (Gleiser, 2017).
- *Response 3*: Perhaps, but ancestral conditions would probably be optimally difficult and interesting games for Utopian players since their ancestors would have evolved from (and for) surviving precisely under such conditions – unless we stipulate that players' minds are substantially modified and unlike their ancestors' minds (Abramson, 2020).

So, we have argued that the ancestor game hypothesis is one plausible way to resolve Bostrom's simulation argument. Furthermore, there are some reasons to believe that *at least some* and *perhaps all* civilizations will make such computer games. Therefore, if we accept all this, we may have reason to believe we are living in a computer game.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abramson, A. (2020, February 25). *Our brains are stuck in the Stone Age*. Medium. <https://elemental.medium.com/our-brains-are-stuck-in-the-stone-age-13bb5d2aea36>
- Bostrom, N. (2003). Are you living in a computer simulation?. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 53(211), 243-255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00309>
- Gleiser, M. (2017, March 9). *Why reality is not a video game — And why it matters*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/03/09/519376356/why-reality-is-not-a-video-game-and-why-it-matters>
- Hurka, T. (2005). Introduction. In B. Suits (Ed.), *The grasshopper: Games, life and utopia* (pp. 7-20). Broadview Press.
- Chalmers, D. J. (2022). *Reality+: Virtual worlds and the problems of philosophy*. W. W. Norton.
- Nguyen, C. T. (2020). *Games: Agency as art*. Oxford University Press.
- Suits, B. (2005). *The grasshopper: Games, life and utopia*. Broadview Press.

