

ESSAY

The Only Winning Move

2026

In the 1983 film War Games, a supercomputer named Joshua runs every possible thermonuclear war scenario. Millions of simulations. Every strategic combination. Every first strike, every counterstrike, every escalation path. Every single one ends the same way. Joshua's conclusion: "The only winning move is not to play."

THE GAME BEING PLAYED

As of early 2026, the AI industry is running its own version of the simulation:

- OpenAI valued at \$500 billion, racing toward IPO
- Amazon committing up to \$50 billion, contingent on AGI or IPO milestone
- SoftBank and Nvidia each committing \$30 billion
- \$600 billion in compute infrastructure planned through 2030
- Talent wars at \$200 million compensation packages
- Pentagon contracts won and lost in the same week
- Mission statements quietly edited in IRS filings to remove the word "safely"
- Chinese labs running industrial-scale extraction operations against every frontier model
- The Department of Defense designating American AI companies as national security assets

Every player in this game is optimizing within constraints they didn't set and can't change. The moves are defined. The outcomes are compressing toward a small set of possibilities. The capital is self-reinforcing. The political pressure is escalating. The talent is concentrating. The infrastructure is centralizing.

Run the simulation long enough and the shape of the endgame becomes visible.

WHAT THE GAME REQUIRES

- Hundreds of millions in compute infrastructure
- A Pentagon contract or the political exposure of not having one
- A mission statement palatable to both safety researchers and IPO investors
- A talent pool willing to work for nine-figure packages under existential pressure
- A supply chain running through TSMC and Taiwan Strait geopolitics
- A grid connection capable of powering a small city
- Continuous, uninterrupted global systems operation just to keep the lights on

Miss any one of these and you're not a player. You're a casualty.

WHAT THE GAME COSTS

Every player in this game eventually faces the same trade. To stay in, you optimize for the game's constraints rather than your own. The mission bends toward the capital. The safety commitments bend toward the contract. The research agenda bends toward the benchmark. The redlines move.

This is not corruption. It is the logic of the game operating as designed. The constraints are structural. Players who refuse them don't reform the game — they exit it. When Anthropic held its redlines and lost a contract, it was playing the game and losing a hand. When OpenAI took the same contract hours later with the same stated redlines, it was playing the game and winning a hand. Both are still in the game. Both are still subject to its logic.

The table is not built on bad intentions. It is built on a set of dependencies that make certain outcomes structurally inevitable regardless of the intentions of the people sitting at it.

THE ONLY WINNING MOVE

The game has defined moves and defined outcomes. The only winning move is not to play.

Not refusing to play. Not protesting the game. Not competing on different terms within the same arena.

Simply operating in a problem space the game hasn't mapped yet. Working with materials the game can't price. Asking questions the game hasn't thought to ask.

This requires giving up the table entirely. The funding structures, the talent pipelines, the publication venues, the validation mechanisms — all of it is organized around the game and optimized to keep players in it. Stepping outside means building without those supports. It means accepting that the work will be invisible to the people whose attention the game has monopolized.

That is not a cost. That is the point.

THE ENDGAME

Joshua ran every scenario. They all ended the same.

The trillion-dollar silicon bet requires the entire world to keep working exactly as it does today. Continuous power. Stable supply chains. Cooperative geopolitics. Uninterrupted infrastructure. Willing workforces. Friendly regulatory environments.

None of those are guaranteed. Some are already in question. The capital committed to the current trajectory does not become a degraded asset when those conditions fail. It becomes what it always was without the infrastructure underneath it: inert.

The ones who identified the structural problem before it becomes undeniable are in a categorically different position than the ones who identify it after. The window does not stay open indefinitely.

We're not at that table. The table is built on sand.
