

FINITE AND INFINITE GAMES

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1.

THERE ARE AT LEAST TWO KINDS OF GAMES. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.

6.

In one respect, but only one, an infinite game is identical to a finite game. Of infinite players we can also say that if they play they play freely; if they must play, they cannot play. Otherwise, infinite and finite play stand in the sharpest possible contrast.

Infinite players cannot say when their game began, nor do they care. They do not care for the reason that their game is not bounded by time. Indeed, the only purpose of the game is to prevent it from coming to an end, to keep everyone in play.

There are no spatial or numerical boundaries to an infinite game. No world is marked with the barriers of infinite play, and there is no question of eligibility since anyone who wishes may play an infinite game.

While finite games are

externally defined, infinite games are internally defined. The time of an infinite game is not world time, but time created within the play itself. SINCE EACH PLAY OF AN INFINITE GAME ELIMINATES BOUNDARIES, IT OPENS TO PLAYERS A NEW HORIZON OF TIME.

For this reason it is impossible to say how long an infinite game has been played, or even can be played, since duration can be measured only externally to that which endures. It is also impossible to say in which world an infinite game is played, though there can be any number of worlds within an infinite game.

10.

If the rules of a finite game are unique to that game it is evident that the rules may not change in the course of play—else a different game is being played.

It is on this point that we find the most critical distinction between finite and infinite play. The rules of an infinite game MUST change in the course of play.

The rules are changed when the players of an infinite game agree that the play is imperiled by a finite outcome—that is, by the victory of some players and the defeat of others.

The rules of an infinite game are changed to prevent anyone from winning the game and to bring as many persons as possible into the play.

If the rules of a finite game are the contractual terms by which the players can agree who has won, the rules of an infinite game are the contractual terms by which the players agree to continue playing.

For this reason the rules of an infinite game have a different status from those of a finite game. They are like the grammar of a living language, where those of a finite game are like the rules of debate. In the former case we observe rules as a way of continuing discourse with each other, in the latter we observe rules as a way of bringing the speech of another person to an end.

The rules, or grammar, of a living language are always evolving

to guarantee the meaningfulness of discourse, where the rules of debate must remain constant.

24.

INFINITE PLAY IS INHERENTLY PARADOXICAL, just as finite play is inherently contradictory. Because it is the purpose of infinite players to continue the play, they do not play for themselves. The contradiction of finite play is that the players desire to bring play to an end for themselves. The paradox of infinite play is that the players desire to continue the play in others. The paradox is precisely that they play only when others go on with the game.

Infinite players play best when they become least necessary to the continuation of play. It is for this reason they play as mortals.

THE JOYFULNESS OF INFINITE PLAY, ITS LAUGHTER, LIES IN LEARNING TO START SOMETHING WE CANNOT FINISH.

32.

No one can play a game alone, one cannot be human by oneself. There is no selfhood where there is no community. We do not relate to others as the persons we are; we are who we are in relating to others.

Simultaneously the others with whom we are in relation are themselves in relation. We cannot relate to anyone who is not also relating to us. Our social existence has, therefore, an inescapably fluid character. This is not to say that we live in a fluid context, but that our lives are themselves fluid. As in the Zen image we are not the stones over which the stream of the world flows; we are the stream itself. As we shall see, this ceaseless change does not mean discontinuity; rather change is itself the very basis of our continuity as persons. ONLY THAT WHICH CAN CHANGE CAN CONTINUE: this is the principle by which infinite players live.

The fluidity of our social and therefore personal existence is a function of our essential freedom—the kind of freedom indicated in the formula "Who must play, cannot play." Of course, as we have seen, finite games cannot have fluid

boundaries, for it is impossible to agree on finite games floating unconstrained in the making in entering the play. Finite games appear, therefore, as points of social reality where there are true and loving your country, there is a positive you do so.

It is this essential humanness that is at issue with the seriousness of life. It is therefore, this presents us with an challenge: how to be serious within the truly how to keep all our infinite play.

This challenge is misunderstood as the room for playfulness in games. This is what to above as playing playing around, a kind has no consequence sort of playfulness in ordinary sense of such entertainment, amusement, comic relief, recreation. Inevitably, however, will creep back into the play. The executive's like the football team comes to be a device in the contestant for level of competition. Even playfulness of children through organized athletic educational regimens of preparing the young adult competition.

45.

To regard society as of culture is not to over even alter society, but to nate its perceived necessities. players have rules; they forget that rules are an of agreement and not a for agreement.

Culture is not therefore disorder. Infinite players understand their culture as composite of all that they individually to do, but as a congruence of all that they do with each other. Because no congruence without th

guarantee the meaningfulness of course, where the rules of debate remain constant.

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INFINITE PLAY IS INHERENTLY PARADOXICAL, just as finite play is inherently contradictory. Because it is the purpose of infinite players to play the play, they do not play themselves. The contradiction of infinite play is that the players desire to play to an end for themselves. The paradox of infinite play is that the players desire to continue to play in others. The paradox is only that they play only when they go on with the game. Infinite players play best when they become least necessary to the continuation of play. It is for this reason that they play as mortals. THE JOYFULNESS OF INFINITE PLAY, ITS LAUGHTER, ITS LEARNING TO START SOMETHING WE CANNOT

2.

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fluidity of our social and personal existence is a freedom indicated in a "Who must play, cannot. Of course, as we have seen, games cannot have fluid

boundaries, for if they do it will be impossible to agree on winners. But finite games float, as it were, in the unconstrained choice each player makes in entering and continuing the play. Finite games sometimes appear, therefore, to have fixed points of social reference. Not only are there true and false ways of loving your country, for example; there is a positive requirement that you do so.

It is this essential fluidity of our humanness that is irreconcilable with the seriousness of finite play. It is therefore, this fluidity that presents us with an unavoidable challenge: how to contain the seriousness within the truly playful; that is, how to keep all our finite games in infinite play.

This challenge is commonly misunderstood as the need to find room for playfulness within finite games. This is what was referred to above as playing at, or perhaps playing around, a kind of play that has no consequence. This is the sort of playfulness implied in the ordinary sense of such terms as entertainment, amusement, diversion, comic relief, recreation, relaxation. Inevitably, however, seriousness will creep back into this kind of play. The executive's vacation, like the football team's time out, comes to be a device for refreshing the contestant for a higher level of competition. Even the open playfulness of children is exploited through organized athletic, artistic, educational regimens as a means of preparing the young for serious adult competition.

45.

To regard society as a species of culture is not to overthrow or even alter society, but only to eliminate its perceived necessity. Infinite players have rules; they just do not forget that rules are an expression of agreement and not a requirement for agreement.

Culture is not therefore mere disorder. Infinite players never understand their culture as the composite of all that they choose individually to do, but as the congruence of all that they choose to do with each other. Because there is no congruence without the decision

to have one, all cultural congruence is under constant revision. No sooner did the Renaissance begin than it began to change. Indeed, the Renaissance was not something apart from its change; it was itself a certain persistent and congruent evolution. For this reason it can be said that where a society is defined by its boundaries, a culture is defined by its horizon.

A boundary is a phenomenon of opposition. It is the meeting place of hostile forces. Where nothing opposes there can be no boundary. One cannot move beyond a boundary without being resisted.

... A horizon is a phenomenon of vision. One cannot look at the horizon; it is simply the point beyond which we cannot see. There is nothing in the horizon itself, however, that limits vision, for the horizon opens onto all that lies beyond itself. What limits vision is rather the incompleteness of that vision.

One never reaches a horizon. It is not a line; it has no place; it encloses no field; its location is always relative to the view. To move toward a horizon is simply to have a new horizon. One can therefore never be close to one's horizon, though one may certainly have a short range of vision, a narrow horizon.

We are never somewhere in relation to the horizon: since the horizon moves with our vision. We can only be somewhere by turning away from the horizon, by replacing vision with opposition, by declaring the place on which we stand to be timeless — a region, a holy land, a body of truth, a code of invaluable commandments. To be somewhere is to absolutize time, space, and number.

Every move an infinite player makes is toward the horizon. Every move made by a finite player is within a boundary. Every moment of an infinite game therefore presents therefore presents a new vision, a new range of possibilities. The Renaissance, like all genuine cultural phenomena, was not an effort to promote one or another vision. It was an effort to find visions that promised still more vision.

Who lives horizontally is never somewhere, but always in passage.

68.

THE INFINITE PLAYER IN US DOES NOT CONSUME TIME BUT GENERATES IT. Because infinite play is dramatic and has no scripted conclusion, its time is time lived and not time viewed.

As an infinite player one is neither young nor old, for one does not live in the time of another. There is therefore no external measure of an infinite player's temporality. Time does not pass for an infinite player, each moment of time is a beginning.

Each moment is not the beginning of a period of time. It is the beginning of an event that gives the time within it its specific quality. For an infinite player there is no such thing as an hour of time. There can be an hour of love, or a day of grieving, or a season of learning, or a period of labor.

An infinite player does not begin working for the purpose of filling up a period of time with work, but for the purpose of filling work with time. Work is not an infinite player's way of passing time, but of engendering possibility. Work is not a way of arriving at a desired present and securing it against an unpredictable future, but of moving toward a future which itself has a future.

Infinite players cannot say how much they have completed in their work or love or quarreling, but only that much remains incomplete in it. They are not concerned to determine when it is over, but only what comes of it.

For the finite player in us freedom is a function of time. We must have the time to be free. For the infinite player in us time is a function of freedom. We are free to have time. A finite player puts play into time. An infinite player puts time into play.

76.

INFINITE SPEECH IS THAT MODE OF DISCOURSE THAT CONSISTENTLY REMINDS US OF THE UNSPEAKABILITY OF NATURE. It bears no claim to truth, originating from nothing but the genius of the speaker. Infinite speech is therefore not about anything; it is always to someone. It is not

command, but address. It belongs entirely to the speakable. That language is not about anything gives it its status as metaphor. Metaphor does not point at something there. Never shall we find the kingdom of daylight's dauphin in one place or another. It is not the role of metaphor to draw our sight to what is there, but to draw our vision toward what is not there and, indeed, cannot be anywhere. Metaphor is horizontal, reminding us that it is one's vision that is limited, and not what one is viewing.

The meaning of a finite speaker's discourse lies in what precedes its utterance, what is already the case and therefore is the case whether or not it is spoken. The meaning of an infinite speaker's discourse lies in what comes of its utterance — that is, whatever is the case because it is spoken.

Finite language exists complete before it is spoken. There is first a language — then we learn to speak it. Infinite language exists only as it spoken. There is first a language, when we learn to speak it. It is in this sense that infinite discourse always arises from a perfect silence.

Finite speakers come to speech with their voices already trained and rehearsed. They must know what they are doing with the language before they can speak it. INFINITE SPEAKERS MUST WAIT TO SEE WHAT IS DONE WITH THEIR LANGUAGE BY THE LISTENERS BEFORE THEY CAN KNOW WHAT THEY HAVE SAID. Infinite speech does not expect the hearer to see what is already known to the speaker, but to share a vision the speaker could not have had without the response of the listener.

Speaker and listener understand each other not because they have the same knowledge about something, and not because they have established a likeness of mind, but because they know "how to go on" with each other (Wittgenstein).

83.

The paradox in our relation to nature is that the more deeply a culture respects the indifference of nature, the more creatively it will call upon its own spontaneity

in response. The more clearly we remind ourselves that we can have no unnatural influence on nature, the more our culture will embody a freedom to embrace surprise and unpredictability. Human freedom is not a freedom over nature; it is the freedom to be natural, that is, to answer to the spontaneity of nature with our own spontaneity. Though we are free to be natural we are not free by nature; we are free by culture, by history. The contradiction in our relation to nature is that the more vigorously we attempt to force its agreement with our own designs the more subject we are to its indifference, the more vulnerable to its unseeing forces. The more power we exercise over natural process the more powerless we become before it. In a matter of months we can cut down a rain forest that took tens of thousands of years to grow, but we are helpless in repulsing the desert that takes its place. And the desert, of course, is no less natural than the forest.

94.

MYTH PROVOKES EXPLANATION BUT ACCEPTS NONE OF IT. Where explanation absorbs the unspeakable into the speakable, myth reintroduces the silence that makes original discourse possible.

Explanations establish islands, even continents, of order and predictability. But these regions were first charted by adventurers whose lives are narratives of exploration and risk. They found them only by mythic journeys into the wayless open. When the less adventuresome settlers arrive later to work out the details and domesticate these spaces, they easily lose the sense that all this firm knowledge does not expunge myth, but floats in it.

Few discoveries were greater than Copernicus', for they projected an order into the heavens that no one has successfully challenged. Many thought then, and some still think, that this great statement of truth dispelled clouds of myth that had kept humankind in retarding darkness. What Copernicus dispelled, however, were not myths but other explanations. Myths lie elsewhere. To see where, we look not

at the facts in Copernicus' works; we look for the story in his stating them. Knowledge is what successful explanation has led to; the thinking that sent us forth, however, is pure story.

Copernicus was a traveler who went with a hundred pairs of eyes, daring to look again at all that is familiar in the hope of vision. What we hear in this account the ancient saga of the solitary wanderer, the peregrinus, who risks anything for the sake of surprise. True, at a certain point he stopped to look and may have ended his journey as a Master Player setting down bounded fact. But what resounds most deeply in the life of Copernicus is the journey that made knowledge possible and not the knowledge that made the journey successful.

That myth does not accept the explanations it provokes we can see in the boldness with which thinkers in any territorial endeavor reexamine the familiar for a higher seeing. Indeed. The very liveliness of a culture is determined not by how frequently these thinkers discover new continents of knowledge but by how frequently they depart to seek them.

This set of instructions accompany a children's game currently being assembled by David William (David Reinfurt and Will Holder) and commissioned "For the Blind Man in the Dark Room Looking for the Black Cat That Isn't There," curated by Anthony Huberman (2009–2010).

This pamphlet is composed solely of completely excerpted chapters from *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, written by James P. Carse and published by Ballantine Books in 1987. For thirty years, James Carse was Professor of the History and Literature of Religion at New York University and Director of the Religious Studies Program. Carse claims no belief in a God, but describes himself as religious "in the sense that I am endlessly fascinated with the unknowability of what it means to be human, to exist at all." A small-format paperback, *Finite and Infinite Games* is essentially a popular philosophy text, and has been applied to a wide variety of fields. Although the book uses "games," finite or infinite, as a grand metaphor rather than a literal subject matter, the book is said to have directly inspired Game Neverending, a massively multiplayer online game, which, following Carse's preferred logic of infinite play, led its creators to design and program Flickr, the massively-associative Internet photograph archive.