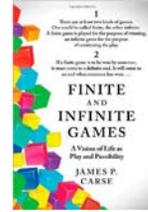


Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility



Book's Argument: Carse contends that when a system is generative it is self-altering and works to fulfill its own created future rather than simply adapting to the given future it was handed. Viewed this way, generative change is not a one-time event, but an ongoing engagement. It is also change that requires engaging with systems, rather than with artifacts, processes, or events. Carse's view is, fundamentally, a systems view. His introduction of the concept of infinite games, games that have no end in their design, and the fundamental commitment of which is to keep the "game in play," is at odds with the more traditional view of the world (and of organizations) that sees life as a series of discrete encounters, each to be won, lost, or drawn, with a final scoreboard at the end of the mega-game (life itself) that tells us whether we have won or lost. The generative view of organization, similarly, sees organizations as essentially creative systems, whose goal is to enhance and foster creation. Within that larger context, as in life, there are finite games to be won, lost, or drawn, but all of these are in service of keeping the bigger infinite game in play.

Key Takeaways: For Carse, to be playful is not to act as if nothing of consequence will happen. When we are playful with each other we relate as free persons: everything that happens is of consequence. In fact, it is being serious that closes itself to consequence, for seriousness is the dread of the unpredictable outcome of open possibility. To be serious is to press for a specified conclusion. To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself. In their own political engagements, infinite players make a distinction between society and culture. *Society* is understood as the sum of those relations that are under some form of public constraint. *Culture* is taken to be whatever we do with each other by undirected choice. If society is all that a people feels it must do, culture is "the realm of the variable, free, not necessarily universal, of all that cannot lay claim to compulsive authority." Just as infinite play cannot be contained within finite play, culture cannot be authentic if held within the boundaries of a society. Therefore, society and culture are not true opposites of each other. Rather society is a species of culture that persists in contradicting itself, a freely organized attempt to conceal the freedom of the organizers and the organized, an attempt to forget that we have willfully forgotten our decision to enter this or that contest and to continue in it.

Summary	Finite (theatrical – there is an outcome)	Infinite (dramatic – outcome is endlessly open)
<i>Purpose</i>	- Winning and gaining a title: the acknowledgment of others that one has been the winner of a particular game	- Continuing the play/prevent game from coming to an end
<i>Temporal/Spatial/Numerical Boundaries</i>	- Definitive beginning and end points - Teammates and opponent(s) - Play within boundaries	- No boundaries - Play with boundaries
<i>Defined</i>	- Externally - May have multiple finite contests within an infinite contest	- Internally - May NOT have multiple infinite contests within a finite contest
<i>Limitations (most critical distinction between the two)</i>	- Rules of play - The agreement of the players to the applicable rules constitutes the ultimate validation of those rules - Rules do not change in the course of play - Self-limitations - Some self-veiling to assume a role – a free suspension of our freedom – but also seriousness as that person playing and not as a role played by someone	- Rules must change in the course of play - Designed to deal with specific threats to the continuation of play - No limitation may be imposed
<i>Choice principle (only aspect in which both games are identical)</i>	Whoever plays, plays <i>freely</i> If they <i>must</i> play, they cannot <i>play</i>	
<i>Crucial Element of Surprise</i>	- Triumph of past over future - Causes play to end	- Triumph of future over past - Causes play to continue
<i>Conclusion</i>	- All players agree who among them is the winner	- Not bounded by time - Perpetual new horizon created within the play itself

Best Quotes: "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. When the less adventuresome settlers arrive later to work out the details and domesticate these spaces, they lose the sense that all this certainty does not erase the myth, but floats in it." "It is the desire of all finite players to be *Master Players*, to be so perfectly skilled in their play that nothing can surprise them, so perfectly trained that every move in the game is foreseen at the beginning. A true Master Player plays as though the game is already in the past, according to a script whose every detail is known prior to the play itself."
– James Carse

Why it's important: Carse's thinking stretches the boundaries of our thinking to encompass the possibilities of generative change and how it may further shape our profession.