

*Finite and Infinite Games*

by James P. Carse

Notes by Generative Leadership Group

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What follows are notes on *Finite and Infinite Games*. At first blush, this small book, with its philosophical bent and poetic language, would seem to have very little to do with business or organization. Carse himself is a professor of theology and the history of religion, and would, I am certain, claim no particular expertise (or even interest) in the business world. Given all of this, it would seem that a few words of explanation and context setting are in order.

If you are reading these notes, chances are you have been asked to read them (or the book itself) in the context of some work you are doing with Generative Leadership Group on leadership and generative change. It is in this context that Carse's work becomes relevant, I think. One way to think of generative change is that it is the capacity of a system within an organization to create, in itself and the larger organization, change that is consistent with the future that leadership has envisioned. 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 game in play.

Some of Carse's thinking (e.g. on titles and power) translates directly to the organizational case. Other parts require more from the business reader, but the effort is well worth it and will stretch the boundaries of your thinking to encompass the possibilities of generative change.

While I strongly recommend you read the entire book, the following notes capture what for me are highlights of his thinking as applied to organizations. In some cases notes were impossible and I have transcribed an entire chapter. The footnotes are mine, and are intended to avoid confusion when Carse uses terms that, in our lexicon, have a different, or in some cases opposite, meaning. Numbers by each paragraph refer to the chapters of the book from which the notes are taken.

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Notes on **Finite and Infinite Games**  
by James P. Carse

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.

2. There is no game, finite or infinite, unless the players freely agree to play it. No one can play who is forced to play. This is an invariable principle of all play. Whoever *must* play, cannot *play*.

If a finite game is to be won by someone, it must come to a definitive end. It will come to an end *when* someone has won. Winning is determined by agreement of the players.

3. A finite game has a precise beginning and end, and has clear spatial and numerical boundaries. There must be at least one opponent.

5. In a finite game there can be only one winner, but other players may be ranked at the end of play.

6. Other than the principle of voluntarism, infinite games are the opposite of finite games in every way. Infinite games have no spatial, temporal, or numerical boundaries, and no winners or rankings. Finite games are externally defined; infinite games are internally defined. The time of an infinite game is determined in the game itself.

7. Finite games can be played within an infinite game, but no infinite game can be played within a finite game.

10. The rules of a finite game are predetermined and fixed. The rules of an infinite game must change in the course of play, to avoid a finite outcome. The rules of an infinite game are changed to prevent anyone from winning and to bring as many persons as possible into the play.

14. 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.

17. Surprise in infinite play is the triumph of the future over the past. Since infinite players do not regard the past as determining the present/future, they have no way of knowing what has begun in the past. With each surprise, the past reveals a new beginning. Inasmuch as the present/future is always surprising, the past is always changing.

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To be prepared against surprise is to be *trained*. To be prepared for surprise is to be *educated*. Education discovers an increasing richness in the past, because it sees what is unfinished there. Training regards the past as finished and the future as to be finished. Education leads to a continuing self-discovery; training leads toward a final self-definition. Training repeats a completed past in the future. Education continues an unfinished past into the future.

18. What one wins in a finite game is a title. A title is the acknowledgment of others that one has been the winner of a particular game. Titles are public; they are for others to notice.
26. Titles are theatrical, with a specified form of address and behavior. The title determines not only who may speak to you, but also how they may speak to you, and about what they may speak to you. The title is a recognition of areas in which the titled person is *no longer in competition*.
27. The titled are powerful.<sup>1</sup> Those around them are expected to yield, to withdraw their opposition, to conform to their will in the arena in which the title was won. Power is never evident until two or more elements are in opposition. The exercise of power always presupposes resistance and also presupposes a closed field and finite time, which casts power always in relation to others. Power is a concept that belongs only in finite play, and is never certain until the game is over, so to speak of a person's power is to speak of what they have *already done*. One does not win by being powerful, but one wins to be powerful. That is, power is conferred by the title, after the game is over, and I am no longer playing.
29. Infinite play is not theatrical but dramatic; its outcome is endlessly open. Rather than assessing the power or weakness of earlier play, infinite players look forward toward ongoing play in which the past will require constant reinterpretation.

Infinite players do not *oppose* the actions of others but *initiate* actions of their own in such a way that others will respond by initiating *their* own.

Where the finite player plays to be powerful, the infinite player plays with strength.<sup>2</sup> A powerful person is one who brings the past to an outcome, settling all its unresolved issues. A strong person is one who carries the past into the future, showing that none of its issues is capable of resolution. Power is concerned with what has already happened, strength with what has yet to happen.

Strength is paradoxical. I am not strong because I can force others to do what I wish *as a result of my play with them*, but because I can allow them to do what they *wish in the course of my play with them*.

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<sup>1</sup>Use of the term "power" throughout the book, and so in these notes, has the sense of "force" rather than "freedom."

<sup>2</sup>We would say the finite player plays to gain force, the infinite player plays for increasing freedom.

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33. It is because of the essential theatricality of politics that infinite players do not take sides in political issues—at least not seriously. Instead they enter into social conflict dramatically, attempting to offer a vision of continuity and open-endedness in place of the heroic final scene.

In their own political engagements infinite players make a distinction between society and culture. *Society* they understand as the sum of those relations that are under some form of public constraint, *culture* as 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. Society and culture are therefore 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.

35. Because a society maintains careful temporal limits, it understands its past as destiny; that is, its course of history lies between a definitive beginning (the founders of a society are always especially memorialized) and a definitive ending. (The nature of its victory is repeatedly anticipated in official declarations.)

Because culture as such can have no temporal limits, a culture understands its past not as destiny but as history, that is, as a narrative that has begun but points always toward the endlessly open. Culture is an enterprise of mortals, disdaining to protect themselves against surprise. Living in the strength of their vision, they eschew power and make joyous play of boundaries.

Society is a manifestation of power. It is theatrical, having an established script. Deviations from the script are evident at once. Deviation is antisocietal and therefore forbidden by society under a variety of sanctions. It is a highly valued function of society to prevent changes in the rules of the many games it embraces. Deviancy, however, is the very essence of culture. Whoever merely follows the script, merely repeating the past, is culturally impoverished.

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## Chapter 51 (entire)

I am the genius<sup>3</sup> of myself, the poietes<sup>4</sup> who composes the sentences I speak and the actions I take. It is I, not the mind, that thinks. It is I, not the will, that acts. It is I, not the nervous system, that feels.

When I speak as the genius I am, I speak these words for the first time. To repeat words is to speak them as though another were saying them, in which case I am not saying them. To be the genius of my speech is to be the origin of my words, to say them for the first, and last, time. Even to repeat my own words is to say them as though I were another person in another time and place.

When I forsake my genius and speak to you as though I were another, I also speak to you as someone you are not and somewhere you are not. I address you as audience, and do not expect you to respond as the genius you are.

Hamlet was not reading when he said he was reading words; neither do we act when we perform actions, nor think when we entertain thoughts. A dog taught the action of shaking hands does not shake your hand. A robot can say words but cannot say them to you.

Since being your own genius is dramatic, it has all the paradox of infinite play: You can have what you have only by releasing it to others. The sounds of the words you speak may lie on your own lips, but if you do not relinquish them entirely to a listener they never become words, and you say nothing at all. The words die with the sound. Spoken to me, your words become mine to do with as I please. As the genius of your words, you lose all authority over them. So too with thoughts. However you consider them your own, you cannot think the thoughts themselves, but only what they are *about*. You cannot think thoughts any more than you can act actions. If you do not truly speak the words that reside entirely in their own sound, neither can you think that which remains thought or can be translated back into thought. In thinking you cast thoughts beyond themselves, surrendering them to that which they cannot be.

The paradox of genius exposes us directly to the dynamic of open reciprocity, for if you are the genius of what you say to me, I am the genius of what I hear you say. What you say originally I can hear only originally. As you surrender the sound on your lips, I surrender the sound in my ear. Each of us has relinquished to the other what has been relinquished to the other.

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<sup>3</sup>“Genius” is used here in its original sense of “creator” or “generator.”

<sup>4</sup>Poiesis = creative activity. Poietes (pl. poietai) = creator (cf. “poet”; also “autopoiesis” in Wheatley, Flores, Maturana and others. Autopoiesis = self-generating or self-creating.

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That does not mean that speech has come to nothing. On the contrary it has become speech that invites speech. When the genius of speech is abandoned, words are said not originally but repetitively. To repeat words, even our own, is to contain them in their own sound. Veiled speech is that spoken as though we have forgotten we are its originators.

To speak, or act, or think originally is to erase the boundary of the self. It is to leave behind the territorial personality. A genius does not have a mind full of thoughts but is the thinker of thoughts, and is the center of a field of vision. It is a field of vision, however, that is recognized as a field of vision only when we see that it includes within itself the original centers of other fields of vision.

This does not mean that I can see what you see. On the contrary, *it is because I cannot see what you see that I can see at all*. The discovery that you are the unrepeatable center of your own vision is simultaneous with the discovery that I am the center of my own.

### Chapter 68 (entire)

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 not 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.

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## Chapter 70 (entire)

Nature is the realm of the unspeakable. It has no voice of its own, and nothing to say. We experience the unspeakability of nature as its utter indifference to human culture.

The Master Player<sup>5</sup> in us tolerates this indifference scarcely at all. Indeed, we respond to it as a challenge, an invitation to confrontation and struggle. If nature will offer us no home, offer us nothing at all, we will then clear and arrange a space for ourselves. We take nature on as an opponent to be subdued for the sake of civilization. We count among the highest achievements of modern society the development of a technology that allows us to master nature's vagaries.

The effort has largely taken the form of theatricalizing our relation to nature. Like any Master Player we have been patiently attentive to the slightest clues in our opponent's behavior — as a way of preparing ourselves against surprise. Like hunters stalking their prey, we have learned to mimic the movements of nature, waiting for the chance to take hold of them before they get away from us. "Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed" (Bacon). It is as though, by learning its secret script, we have learned to direct its play as well. There is little left to surprise us.

The assumption guiding our struggle against nature is that deep within itself nature contains a structure, an order, that is ultimately intelligible to the human understanding. Since this inherent structure determines the way things change, and is not itself subject to change, we speak of nature being lawful, of repeating itself according to quite predictable patterns.

What we have done by showing that certain events repeat themselves according to known laws is to *explain* them. Explanation is the mode of discourse in which we show why matters must be as they are. All laws made use of in explanation look backward in time from the conclusion or the completion of a sequence. It is implicit in all explanatory discourse that just as there is a discoverable necessity in the outcome of past events, there is a discoverable necessity in future events. What can be explained can also be predicted, if one knows the initial events and the laws covering their succession. A prediction is but an explanation in advance.

Because of its thorough lawfulness nature has no genius of its own. On the contrary, it is sometimes thought that the grandest discovery of the human genius is the perfect compatibility between the structure of the natural order and the struc-

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<sup>5</sup>Master Player: "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." (Chapter 16)

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ture of the mind, thereby making a complete understanding of nature possible. “One can say ‘the eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility’” (Einstein).

This is as much as to say that nature does have a voice, and its voice is no different from our own. We can then presume to speak for the unspeakable. This achievement is often raised as a sign of the great superiority of modern civilization over the many faded and lost civilizations of the ancients. While our great skill lies in finding patterns of repetition under the apparent play of accident and chance, less successful civilizations dealt with the threats of natural accident by appealing to supernatural powers for protection. But the voices of the gods proved to be ignorant and false; they have been silenced by the truth.

72. At its root all language has the character of metaphor, because no matter what it intends to be about it remains language, and remains absolutely unlike whatever it is about. This means we can never have the falcon, only the word “falcon.”

The unspeakability of nature is the very possibility of language.

73. If nature is the realm of the unspeakable, history is the realm of the speakable. Indeed, no speaking is possible that is not itself historical.

If the silence of nature is the possibility of language, language is the possibility of history.

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*<sup>6</sup>someone.

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 is 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.

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<sup>6</sup> For “to” read “for”



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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 said without the response of the listener.

94. 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.