

Finite and Infinite Games

Notes on *Finite and Infinite Games - A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* by James P. Carse

- There are at least two kinds of games: finite and infinite.
- A finite game is played for the purpose of winning and is a game that has fixed rules and boundaries; an infinite game is played for the purpose of continuing the game and, by definition, has rules or boundaries that accommodate change to keep the game going.
- Another view of the same thing: To be true to their own existence, the rules of a finite game *may not* change; the rules of an infinite game *must* change. Finite players play *within* boundaries; infinite players play *with* boundaries.
- Because they play to win and end the game, finite players are goal oriented and more serious; because they play to continue the game; infinite players have a different orientation around goals and are more playful.
- Finite players try to control the game, lower the number of possible outcomes to one (i.e. “winning”), fix, if possible, the possibility of winning in advance, and they are serious and determined about getting to that outcome; infinite players do not try and control the game, they actively expand possibilities, and they enjoy being surprised because continuously running into something one didn't know helps ensure that the game will go on.
- All finite games have rules. If you follow the rules you are playing the game. If you don't follow the rules you aren't playing. (example: if you move the pieces in different ways than the rules of chess allow, you are no longer playing “chess”).
- Infinite players “play” with rules and boundaries and they include them as part of their game. Playing infinite games is most enjoyable when it is both clear that it is chosen play, that it is the players doing it (playing) voluntarily, and at the same time the game is so convincing, and everyone is following the rules well enough such that the game seems real.
- In finite games the past events describe what is possible and meaningful; in infinite games the meaning of the past changes depending on what happens in the future.
- All games are inherently voluntary. There might be consequences of not playing, but there is always a choice required. Most finite players do not recognize this as a truth; most infinite players do.
- You can play finite games within an infinite game. You cannot play infinite games within a finite game.
- There is no rule that says you have to follow the rules.