## **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.

## Bill Burnett's Corollaries (for Designer's and other Cheaters)

- There is no rule that says you have to follow the rules but there is always a price for not "following" the rules, even one's you consider imaginary. Be prepared to pay.
- People who "break" the rules are considered cheaters. Designers are therefore a special form of cheater.
- Designers are also a special kind of game player. For one, they are adept at inventing their own games and this experience has taught them that rules are often "made up". They also have experience setting up the boundary conditions of games so they understand that design is essentially the "first" infinite game.
- No, that is wrong! The first infinite game is having children, all the rest is just playing around.
- If you believe you are ready to play infinite games the first thing you have to do is give up control. It is unlikely that you will be unchanged by the game so you need to accept that you will not survive the way you are and you must allow every element of the play to transform you. If that doesn't scare you, it should.
- You have a choice: you can do what you do seriously, because you believe you must do it and you are afraid of
  losing and other consequences. Or, you can do everything you do playfully, always knowing you can change the
  game. And/or you can do both, it is just a lot harder.