Carse’s book playfully makes connection between life and games

**FINITE AND INFINITE GAMES**


by CARL A. LACOMBE

When I first picked up "Finite and Infinite Games," I expected a book on mathematical game theory. I have an MIT mind set, I studied mathematics. What could be more logical? What could have been more pleasantly, provokingly wrong?

In broadest terms, "Finite and Infinite Games" is about life. This statement tells very little, but the book is so dense and comprehensive that this statement is basically accurate. It is about sports and government and art and culture and society and sexuality and science and technology and more. It examines all these subjects and shows their underlying nature as games. "Technology a game, you say? Blasphemy!" No, those who take things painfully seriously will not be amused or enlightened by this book. Those who do have a sense of humor and an open mind, however, will be in for a treat.

The idea of life as a game is not a new one. What gives worth to Carse's worth is the distinction he makes between finite and infinite games. "Finite and Infinite Games" clarifies this distinction and investigates its implications.

In Carse's words, "A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play." Sports matches are finite games, as are formal education, political connivance, and war. None of these games is so important as the end of that game. One cannot be the winner until the game is over. It is in this sense that these games are finite. Each player is trying to guarantee that he shall win in the end. Surprise to a finite player is unwelcome, because it could prevent him from winning. The finite player wishes to eliminate surprise and thus prepare against it.

The infinite player, on the other hand, prepares for surprise and welcomes it as crucial to the continuation of play. When surprise is no longer possible, neither is play, just as the lack of variations in tactics soon makes meaningful play impossible.

To the finite player life is serious. He forgets that when he takes part in any game, he plays partly by choice. The necessity he feels in playing these games makes him view their outcome as highly important. Failure is catastrophic to the finite player.

To the infinite player life is playful. He plays in finite games, but he is fully aware that he does so only of his own free will. Knowing that he may leave the games at any time he chooses, he is not concerned that the game come to any particular end. Failure is viewed as a means toward future growth.

Having established this distinction, Carse then goes on to apply this distinction to many aspects of life. He discusses these aspects as finite or infinite games. Being careful to delineate exactly what he means by each one. For example, he considers society a finite game but culture an infinite game. Further, society is a subset of culture and not the reverse.

Appropriately, Carse's time throughout the book is playful. Although he is a professor of religion, he is not preachy, nor does religion play a central role in the book. He says, "It is not necessary for infinite players to be Christians — serious. Neither is it possible for them to be Buddhists or Muslims or atheists or New Yorkers — seriously."

A reviewer cannot do justice to "Finite and Infinite Games." It is entirely too complex and comprehensive to be condensed adequately. I highly recommend that anyone who enjoys a good philosophical discussion read this book. Even if it does not change your philosophical viewpoint, it will at least serve to fuel late-night flame sessions.

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