Adaptive Action:
Finite and Infinite Games

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How many times have you found yourself "stuck" in situations that match the following descriptions?

- Working together feels competitive and unproductive when what you are trying to do is collaborate to accomplish something that everyone says they support?

- People are engaged in never-ending discussions about finding the one "best" solution to a problem that has multiple possibilities and no single cause?

- Expectations don't seem to change, in spite of the fact that the situation and surrounding forces have shifted considerably?

- People feel trapped in a place they didn't choose to be and don't see a way out.

What?

Adaptive Action calls for the use of data and information that increases understand understanding about the dynamics of a situation. HSD offers a number of models and methods to help explore and explain those dynamics. When a situation looks like one of the scenarios listed above, HSD offers a metaphor that comes from a James Carse in a small, powerful book he published first in XXXXX, Finite and Infinite Games: XXXXXXXXXXXX. Carse offers highly useful ways of thinking about these kinds of situations. He describes them as "finite games," and offers an alternative possibility for our engagements with each other, which he refers to as "infinite games." He defines each set of games in ways that help us see both the seeds of our frustrations and options for changing the game. While there are a number of characteristics he names, we have identified seven that make sense in most organizations and systems where we have worked.

In finite games rules remain the same. In infinite games, the rules adjust according to the needs of the players. Often we engage with others according to set expectations or "rules" that we did not set and that we may have been surprised about once we realized what the rules were. Sometimes these set expectations have to do with power--who has it and who doesn't. Closely related are other rules, based on role, political clout, traditional functions, risk aversion, and/or bias. People may have their own social or group biases, but this also speaks to the organizational expectations set up around these types of issues. When we are locked in finite games, these rules seem impossible to change, regardless of the situation or needs of the individuals who are involved.

Finite games have a set time limit or point of completion. Infinite games have no pre-determined completion point. Finite games go for the full "four quarters" or "two halves" or "15 rounds" whether that is, in the long run, the necessary wholeness for accomplishing the task. On the other hand, sometimes we work against arbitrarily set deadlines that get stated irrespective of challenges and opportunities that may emerge to influence how the system responds.

In a finite game, one skillset determines "expertise." In infinite games, expertise is drawn from a variety of sources, based on the needs in a given moment. Finite games have one set of expectations and one way of playing the game, so there is only one skillset that "fills the bill". The problem with this is that new ideas and perspectives are often overlooked or discounted when they are needed most.

Finite games produce allies and enemies; infinite games produce only allies. When the objective of our taking action is to "win" and when requisite skillsets are limited, then by definition there will always be "others." Those who prevent our "win" or who can see things or do things we are unable to do or don't value become the enemy. Those who support our win and whose skills--language, culture, abilities--align with our own are seen as allies.

In a finite game, the "field' is set with boundaries and a goal. In infinite games, there are no boundaries, and the goals may change, according to situational needs. When we enter into finite games with each other, we know the boundaries--expectations, rules, limits--that focus us and clarify the goal. On the other hand, when we play infinite games, we seek the best answer for today or for this situation--we seek fitness. When fitness is the goal, expectations and boundaries may shift with the situation.

Because there are players and observers in a finite game, people can opt in or opt out or they can be selected in or out. In infinite games, there are no observers because everyone is engaged in playing. People have to make a choice to be involved in a finite game, or they are chosen to play. They must agree--explicitly or implicitly--to play by the rules or respect the boundaries or identify the enemies and allies. On the other hand, if they don't have the "right" skillset or affiliations, they may not be allowed to play. When they choose not to play or are not chosen to play, they become spectators--either cheering for the team they agree with but cannot help or cheering against the team whose rules they cannot support. In an infinite game, on the other hand, everyone is "in play". Collaboration, participation, openness are at the heart of infinite games so no one sits on the sidelines.

The object of a finite game is to win or lose; the object of an infinite game is to keep playing. Finite games have limited and limiting goals and desired outcomes. Even the most grandiose of goals or images of success can limit creativity and potential if they exclude the consideration of unknown opportunities or challenges. Engaging in a finite game is to seek to win. Because they have no one set goal and the field is unbounded, infinite games can keep playing. Because in an infinite game, the goal is to find the best fit for this time and place, we just continue to play--seeking fit as the world changes around us.

So when we find ourselves "stuck" in a place that feels, at best, frustrating and, at worst, hopeless, the first thing to do is to ask ourselves about the kind of game we are playing and about the kind of game that will be the best fit for the whole, the part, and the greater whole of whatever group is the focus of our work.

So what?

What can we learn from thinking about the differences between finite and infinite games? Let's look at the few examples from the first paragraph.

- ***Working together feels competitive and unproductive when what you are trying to do is collaborate to accomplish something that everyone says they support?***

  Recognizing that this finite game may be fueled by old rules and expectations about who can be the "best" or about resource allocation that rewards "winners" or any number of ways we set somewhat arbitrary rules to find winners and losers. Additionally these challenges can point to a limited perspective about what skills and information people have to bring to the group. Remember that collaboration works when you think of it as an infinite game. How can you bring in and take advantage of new ideas, involve other people and find ways to reward and reinforce the behaviors you seek?

- ***People are engaged in never-ending   discussions about finding the one "best"***

solution to a problem that has multiple possibilities and no single cause?

Infinite games recognize multiple options for action and invite people to look at all possibilities as they emerge rather than seeking the one solution that seems right at the outset. How can you be clear about the current and changing needs of the system without getting too locked into the idea that there is just one solution?

- **Expectations don't seem to change, in spite of the fact that the situation and surrounding forces have shifted considerably?**

  In finite games, the rules (expectations) aren't allowed to change and people who don't play by the rules are penalized in various ways--they are pushed out of the game, or lose status or power, or they are demoted in some other way. Infinite games allow the players to be sensitive and responsive to the dynamical nature of the systems they are in by using powerful feedback loops, simple rules, open dialogue, and inquiry. How can you delineate expectations in a way that works, even as the situation and needs change?

- **People feel trapped in a place they didn't choose to be and don't see a way out.**

  In finite games, people only have the choice to be in the game or out, and for many of us, being out is not a good option. When we are engaged in a task we feel passionate about or when the task is important to our livelihood, we don't always have the choice to opt out. That's why we sometimes feel trapped. When we shift to play an infinite game, we can engage with people in ways that value their input, allow for their authentic contributions, and respond to their needs as well as the needs of the larger whole.

Your own situation may or may not mirror aspects of these examples, but that's not the point. The real value in understanding finite and infinite games is the insights it can provide as you explore the real dynamics of the patterns that frustrate and constrain you. When you use look at your challenges through the lens of finite and infinite games, you open options for action that were previously unavailable to you.

Now what?

If you find that you are in an finite game that you want to shift, there are a number of steps you can take. The table on the next page offers some questions and perspectives that might help. What is most important is that you

- Remember and use your understanding of finite and infinite games,
- Continue to understand the needs of your system, and
- Stand in inquiry as you engage with those around you.

For more on Finite or Infinite Games or Adaptive Action, visit the HSD Institute wiki at wiki.hsdinstitute.org. Be in touch!

Is Your Game Finite or Infinite?

Finite Games	Infinite Games
Rules remain constant throughout the game.	Rules change to fit the needs of the players.
• What are the ways we create the rules of the game around here? • What rules might better serve us in this particular game?	
Game has set time or point of completion.	Game has no expected ending point or time limit.
• How do we know the set point by which we have to accumulate all the "scores" we need? • Can we change the timeframe of this game? If so, how?	
One skillset determines your expertise in the game.	Multiple skill sets and abilities expand the game.
• What is the dominant set of skills or mindset we continue to listen to for our answers? • How can we benefit from all potential contributors?	
There are allies and enemies.	Everyone has potential to contribute and be an ally.
• What are the ways we set up up our allies and enemies? • How can we engage everyone as allies?	
The field of play is set with boundaries and goals.	The field of play is unbounded.
• Who names the boundaries of our games and how do those boundaries limit our potential? • What can we do to move beyond boundaries and limitations?	
People opt in or out of a finite game – there are players and observers.	Everyone plays in an infinite game.
• In what ways do we force people either to play to win or leave the field? • How can we invite people to abandon their finite games and come "play" with us?	
Object of the game is to win.	Object of the game is to keep playing.
• In what ways have we turned this into a win/lose situation? • How can we change the object of the game?	