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Relationships: Finite or Infinite Games?

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Recently I had an experience that reinforced for me the importance of understanding the differences between finite and infinite games when we consider our roles in establishing and sharing relationship with others.

First, some background: In the 1970's James P. Carse¹ published a book about the differences between what he called "finite games" and "infinite games." Finite games are like bridge or soccer. They have definite rules, boundaries, timeframes, and judges to reinforce them all. There are players and observers. The roles are clear, and the purpose of the game is to win. On the other hand, infinite games are different. There are no definite rules or boundaries, timeframes don't matter, and everyone plays. The roles change according to needs, and those who are engaged manage the play without a judge or referee. Ultimately the purpose of the game is to keep playing.

Recently my sisters and I went to a family reunion of most of the cousins from our mother's side of the family. There were eleven cousins in that part of the family, and nine were able to attend the reunion. Many of us have not seen each other in years, and our lives have developed in unique ways. We live in different locations and work in different professions. Some of us have been more nomadic, and some have stayed in one general area throughout their lives. There are political and social differences, as well in differences of faith and interests.

As children, the rules of our engagements were simple. They were confined by our parents' relationships. We interacted when our parents came together for holidays and celebrations. We ignored our differences, and behaved ourselves according to the rules our parents reinforced. Through the years, even as our parents aged, and we came together as adults, we continued to honor the rules of engagement that were set when we were children. In HSD terms, the container that bound us together was closed, defined by our parents' relationships. We ignored differences and stuck to the nonlinear script of our games and playtime.

Now we were planning this reunion among cousins who were well past middle age and were now the parents and grandparents in the room. How would the complexities of our lives and relationships change the dynamics among and between the cousins? Open

¹ Carse, J. 1986. Finite and Infinite Games. New York. Free Press.

Nothing is intractable.

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boundaries had expanded our worlds. Multiple, significant differences in lifestyles, perspectives, and experiences had created unique, nonlinear paths to adulthood. What did the weekend hold for us? Would the old rules and expectations hold, or would we form new connections? Would the differences that separated us make the time together seem interminable and intolerable?

I finally realized the questions I was asking were about whether we would continue to play the finite game of our childhoods, or could we step together into an infinite game of our own creation? Could we change the rules of engagement to fit who we are today, individually and as a family with shared history?

And then we were together—all nine of us in a tiny town in the Texas panhandle—making up new rules, redefining our relationships, and creating in an infinite game of long-term, ongoing connection and sharing. We came together somewhat tentatively, but soon we were laughing, sharing pictures and memories, telling stories, and learning about each other's lives and work in the world. After two days together, the reunion was over, and we went our separate ways. The rules had changed. Other "players" had been brought into the game as we introduced spouses, adult children, and even grandchildren. Our relationships had moved beyond the boundaries and expectations that had ruled our times together. We no longer needed our parents to act as the referees to our differences. We had moved from the confines of the finite game of our childhood relationships to the infinite game of adult interaction.

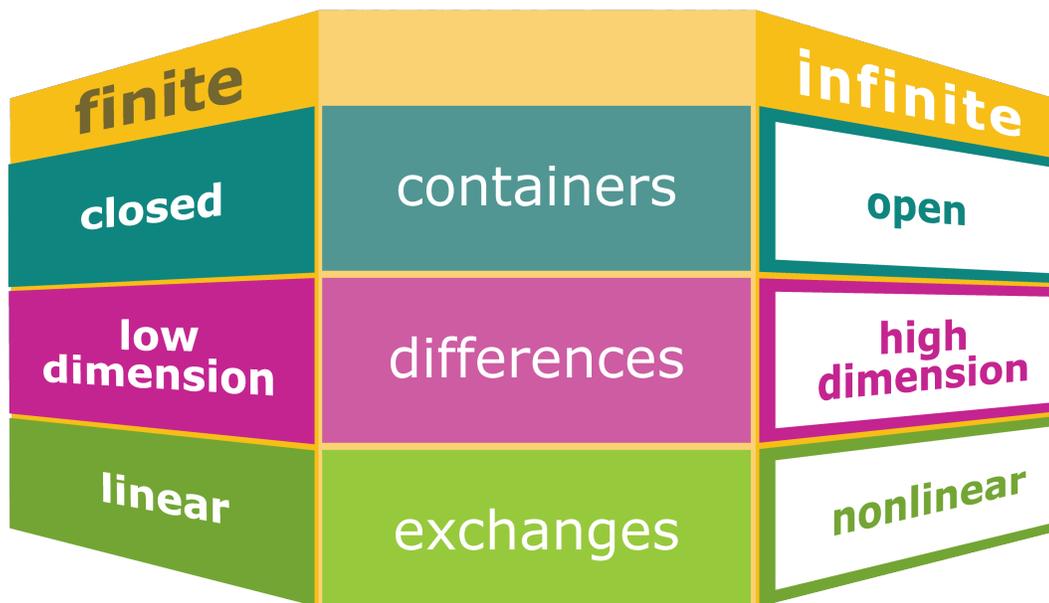
How might the idea of finite and infinite games shape your perspective of relationships? Be in touch and let us know!

Royce



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— Finite & Infinite Games —



Of Relationships:

Finite Relationships (Simple)	Infinite Relationships (Complex)
Bounded in space and time	Open across time, space, and experience
Few or limited differences	Multiple, significant differences
Exists in the moment; direct cause / effect	Exists across time & space; no direct cause / effect.

Nothing is intractable.