



Attractors

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Every month *Attractors* shares tips and tools from human systems dynamics. In this month's edition, Glenda Eoyang talks about:

Playing to Win

There was a time when a pocketful of sports metaphors were all you needed to make your business case—kick off a project, reach the goal, hit it out of the park, lob one over the wall, beat the competition, score a home run, know your game plan. These ideas are still relevant in today's marketplace, but they are no longer enough. The 21st century game of business, to say nothing of life, requires a different kind of play.

James P Carse wrote a little book¹ in the mid-1980s that introduced me to a big idea. He explained the difference between finite and infinite games. As our world becomes more complex—more boundless, more diverse, and more interconnected—we must learn to play the infinite game.

A finite game:

- Has a clear field of play
- Is bounded in time
- Has consistent and well-known rules
- Distinguishes player from observer, and colleagues from competitors
- Depends on keeping score in a particular way
- Focuses on winning as a primary purpose of play

Until quite recently, business, government, and industry could be played according to these rules. Leaders functioned as coaches and cheerleaders, opponents competed on price and quality, products and product lines were clear and relatively consistent, roles and responsibilities were well understood, and it was easy to tell the winners from the losers. In that world, our sporting metaphors made sense and really did reflect our experience in the workplace.

Today, we are invited into business as an infinite game, where:

- One move affects play in many different fields of engagement
- Change in an instant and over eons influence every decision and action
- Rules of engagement change often and unexpectedly

¹ Carse, J. P. (1986). *Finite and infinite games*. New York: Free Press.

- Competitors are partners; and partners sometimes compete
- Measures of success are many, varied, and constantly evolving
- The primary purpose is to keep the game going

The changes we experience demand more of us than simply updating our clichés. Playing the infinite game requires a new set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge. We call this emerging set of competencies *adaptive capacity*. Leaders across organizations practice adaptive capacity when they pay attention to emerging patterns inside and beyond the bounds of their own circles of influence. They analyze incoming information from multiple perspectives and with a variety of qualitative and quantitative, rational and intuitive tools. They take considered action to influence patterns as they emerge from chaotic messes. Finally, they watch how the system responds to their actions and complete their adaptive cycles of data collection, analysis, and action over and over again.

At the HSD Institute, we help individual and institutions develop adaptive capacity. In our action research, we have observed some key features of the infinite game of the 21st century. Have you seen these, too?

You can play many finite games inside an infinite one, but not the other way around.

Playing an infinite game lets you move with agility among diverse finite games.

A losing strategy in one finite game may be a winning one in another or in the infinite game, but a losing strategy in the infinite game loses everywhere.

Both finite and infinite games have their places, but sticky issues arise when you play either one as if it were the other.

The most intractable issues—conflict, sustainability, human rights, economic stability, hunger, violence—are transformed when we think of them as infinite games.

The dominant European culture wins the finite game with ease, but some other cultures have the inside scoop on the infinite game.

Quality, accountability, value, and worth are difficult to recognize and even more difficult to describe in an infinite game.

The more the merrier in the infinite game. As more people distinguish finite from infinite, the more robust the play will be in every game.

What are your observations as you discover play in the infinite game? Please share your thoughts at <http://hsdcommunity.ning.com/group/finite-and-infinite-games>.

For help playing your infinite games, give us a call.

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