

# Finite And Infinite Games Summary

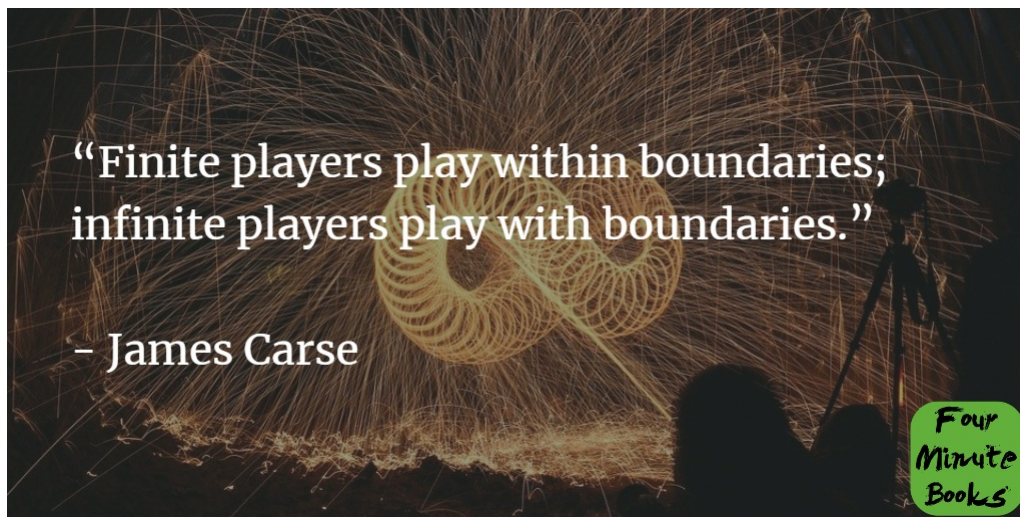
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 [fourminutebooks.com/finite-and-infinite-games-summary/](https://fourminutebooks.com/finite-and-infinite-games-summary/)

**1-Sentence-Summary:** *Finite And Infinite Games* offers a colorful theory of game playing in life that helps you to better understand how everything you care about really works.

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**



*Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* invites readers to leave their assumptions about the seriousness of life behind. According to religious historian James Carse, games aren't just things like sports and children's schoolyard activities. Instead, work, relationships, and politics already have game-like qualities.

By focusing on its game-like aspects, we can improve our understanding of how *everything* really works and learn to become better players in the game of life.

Here are 3 lessons I've learned:

1. Finite games are played for the sake of ending them, but infinite games are played simply for the sake of playing.
2. No one can force you to play a game, and winning isn't everything.
3. Basically everything in life can be viewed as a game.

Let's set aside our preconceptions about "games" and reconsider the very nature of human existence!

## Lesson 1: Games with boundaries must end, but some playful activities can go on forever.

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As suggested by the book's title, Carse believes that games come in two fundamental types: finite and infinite. Finite games are those where it's clear who the players are and who the audience is. Finite games also take place at clear places, spaces, and times, under set rules. The purpose of the game is to finish the game and agree upon a winner. Sports are clear examples of finite games.

Infinite games are less obvious and more complex: they have ever-changing sets of players and even rules. **The goal of an infinite game is to keep on playing forever, rather than to stop by declaring a winner.** Players in an infinite game are just trying to keep the authentic interactions rolling.

You might think of your job as a finite game. A job is about proving yourself to your boss and win titles and money. Your career is more like an infinite game. You can do anything within this game because it doesn't have fixed rules. At the end of a career, you don't win or lose, and your body of work can even live on in time after your death.

Both kinds of games are paradoxical, according to Carse. Finite games are played to be ended. After all, if a sports match doesn't end with a winner, it usually means something has gone wrong. Infinite games, on the other hand, are paradoxical because the players want the game to be continued even *by others*.

## Lesson 2: If you don't care about winning in front of the audience, then you have no reason to play that game.

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Games don't just happen in a vacuum. They have audiences who note what takes place, and whose memories can record information about winners and losers. Participants in a finite game are competing to prove that they're not losers and to earn a more positive assessment of others. Titles in finite games, like sports champions, look to the past for information about who therefore holds power now.

Remember, though, that forced play is no play at all! Players in a game may *feel* like they can't quit. However, even as children, we learned that if a playmate packs up her toys to go home, the game is lost. You can try to convince someone to play a game but you can't force them to play. If you feel like you can't quit a game, it's just because you've convinced yourself of that.

What's the implication here? **If you're playing a game that you don't care about winning or whose rules you don't like, you can stop at any time.** There are lots of interesting examples of people quitting finite games in life. Minimalists quit the possessions accumulation game, nomadic freelancers quit the conventional career game, singles living in

communes have decided not to play the nuclear family game. Are you playing any games you should consider quitting?

## Lesson 3: Games are all around us.

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Is this all sounding a little abstract? Well, it's supposed to — but only because Carse's theory of finite and infinite games ends up applying in one way to just about everything. He draws on examples as diverse as society, government, war, money, leisure, the family, and human sexuality.

Even the act of speaking can be finite or infinite. According to Carse, finite speakers report on things that were already the case, while infinite speakers use words so they can be taken up by their audience and co-players and thereby changed in meaning after the fact. This makes storytelling the ultimate infinite game: anyone can speak, anyone can hear, anyone can take a narrative and make it hers in some way. You can't stop a story: it has an infinite life of its own.

**Carse even suggests that maybe there's *only one* infinite game — with every human participating in various ways over time.** Players enter, experiment with things, change the game in various ways, and exit. This big, perpetual infinite game contains all the little finite games, but no finite game like politics or money can contain an infinite game.

## Finite And Infinite Games Review

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I wasn't really sure what to expect from *Finite and Infinite Games* since its premise of two basic kinds of games seems so simple, obvious, and true. However, Carse delivers a fascinating, winding, yet concise exploration of what it means to be a player in both types of games. Carse's theory can help us to refresh our childlike sense that life is a big, blank canvas and we can make of it whatever we choose. If something in your life is stressing you out and bogging you down, try abstracting a bit and reinterpreting it as a game instead.

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## Who would I recommend the Finite And Infinite Games summary to?

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The 25-year old young professional who's left school but still feeling like adulthood is kind of just a joke, the 50-year old parent in a mid-life crisis who'd like a fresh way of looking at things, and anyone who has a persistent sense that life is surreal.