

## *A Question: Are You Playing a Finite or Infinite Game?*

I love playing games. Board games, card games, all the rest. We associate games with free-time activity. Sometimes we play to pit ourselves against others, and sometimes just to enjoy the fellowship of family and friends.

Games involve a set of rules. We learn them, master them, then apply them each time we play. Rules are finite. The cards, the boards, the playing fields are finite – and for good reason. It's impossible to play a game with others if the rules are always changing.

Of course, within the game itself, the choices, the plays, the moves, the adjustments can be infinite. That is where the real fun is. We love watching our favorite sports players and teams play their games in infinite ways. We seemingly never tire of watching players evolve over years and even decades.

Watching and playing games can become highly emotional. Fans and family members can be ostracized for generations because they cheer and support the “wrong” team. We even assign character traits and emotions to those we root for, and to their opponents.

It's deeply ironic to me that the “play” side of life doesn't always mesh well with the work, financial and social side of life.

Thinking of life in “play” terms would allow us to define our life as a composition of various games. You and I are the game creators. We get to set our own rules. The rules reflect each of our own needs, wants, desires, and notions of who we are and who we want to become.

Let's take money, the financial side of our lives. As I've written in the past, most of us play either the “Get Rich” or “Stay Rich” game. The game's objective is either to gather up a bunch of money, or not run out of the money we've already gathered.

Knowingly or unknowingly, we pursue one of these two money games – so it's critically important to acknowledge which money game we're playing.

While there is a finite set of money rules and practices, there's an infinite way of playing the “cards.”

Yes, you may have restrictions: varying sources of income, work hours to keep, bosses to obey, time restrictions, unfulfilling work, and so on.

But if you have certain freedoms around your work, or in the manner you make a living, you can modify or limit some of the rules. Entrepreneurs often are attracted to their particular pursuits through their natural inclination toward such freedoms.

Scientists learn to address both the finite and infinite. For example, gravity may be defined in a finite way, or at least when considering planet Earth.

Consider energy, a frequently contentious subject, which hasn't just been controversial for the past several decades.

Back in the 1700s, a certain group of French economists became known as the physiocrats. At the time, the power of steam was first being

harnessed, starting the Industrial Revolution.

Thomas Newcomen's 1712 single-piston-pump steam engine fulfilled the need to stop burning England's forests, and instead – by pumping water out of flooded mines – enable a much greater volume of coal and various minerals to be extracted. Until Newcomen's invention, coal had been mined by hand since pre-Roman times two millennia earlier.

Companies were formed, markets established, and these first enterprises employed steam power using crude steam engines.

The physiocrats, using finite thinking, proclaimed there was no real value in these enterprises. True wealth resided in land, and the agricultural products that land produced. As you can quickly surmise, the physiocrats were soon discredited, once the populace grasped that real value creation had taken place, leveraging steam power into newly formed industries and vehicles of wealth creation.

It's not that the physiocrats were right or wrong, or that their belief system was right or wrong. It was that their thinking could not advance beyond their current definition of "value." Their definition of value was finite.

Today coal, hydro, wind, solar, oil, gas, nuclear and other energy sources have their fans and foes. We have learned to harness the energy of molecules and atoms in many different ways. It's highly likely that change will occur again and again and again – some good, some bad – as societies continue to adjust and evolve.

We can inadvertently get caught up in finite thinking that limits our choices, restricts our freedoms, and imprisons us in a sort of repetitive spiral. Progress tracks directly with an openness to change, mind-expanding ideas, and multiple mindsets with infinite possibilities.

Thank goodness for the Albert Einsteins of our world who continuously challenge our thinking,



*"And every time Elmo laughs we drink."*

opening whole new realms of possibilities that challenge our "always" and our "never."

I often chuckle when a scientist, politician or business leader states something unequivocally: "The findings are in; it's proven beyond a shadow of a doubt."

Tell that to Einstein in the early 1900s when he challenged and was vilified for questioning "proven" Newtonian physics about the full nature of gravity.

It's amazing to watch children play. They say and attempt things that conventional adult thinkers insist are not possible. Then one of these kids, sometimes not long after, proves their farfetched idea, leaving humankind speechless and the beneficiary of a brand-new technology.

For adults, playing the finite game is comfortable. It truly is. We've become experts at learning how to apply finite rules, with a high probability of success each and every time.

We do indeed rely on life to be finite. Driving vehicles, flying planes, performing surgery and many other life or death situations require an extensive finite set of rules. However, there potentially are an infinite number of ways to perform the art of driving, flying and surgery.

Long-term, successful life will be about the new stuff. The new ideas. The new services that

will require different kinds of thinking. An open mind to new possibilities and applications.

An infinite mindset.

And keep in mind – a mindset is not singular. There are many elements in place that make up its whole.

When we hire new team members, we look for their mindset first. We're looking for lifelong learners, self-starters, team players, people open to change, and people dedicated to a high level of service to others. These and other attributes collectively make up the mindset required to participate and contribute to our culture and our mission of deep support.

Boy Scouts learn and practice the 12 points of Scout Law. A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.

One sees a similar orientation with fraternal organizations, the military, clergy, and others.

When we finally do our own self-examination, do we have a finite or an infinite mindset?

We can't function without the finite basics of life. Conversely, we can't grow without a long-term, innovative ability to tap into an infinite set of mindsets.

Actually, we may pass these mindsets along generationally. Sometimes it skips a generation. With tongue in cheek, Ed Coyle used to joke, "I love my grandkids; it's my children I'm not so sure about."

However it happens, through act or deed, omission or commission, intentionally or unintentionally, we bequeath our mindsets to our next generations. My partner Kevin is fond of saying (as was his father), "Your actions speak so loudly, I don't hear what you say."

When Debra and I were raising our children, one of my mentors said, "Children are great listeners, but poor interpreters." It helped me

understand the limitations of a child's mindset, their capacity to grasp complex concepts, the infinite, without the ability to process the context.

We forget that those younger than us have difficulty understanding why we do what we do. They are in one place; we are in another. It's up to us to encourage them to start asking those questions early on and to think big.

Playing an infinite game throughout life allows us to see, take action, and thrive during good and bad times.

There is one catch in vigorously playing the infinite game. It's one not palatable to many adults – occasional failure. We may go through periods of fear, discomfort and uncertainty before we get it right and break through with greater confidence, clarity and success.

It's the willingness to submit ourselves to the fear, discomfort and uncertainty that makes the infinite game possible. Otherwise it's a long slow slog and we eventually give in or give up.

Einstein had to endure many years of scoff, criticism and challenge about his crazy theory of general relativity before many colleagues accepted this new wonder of the universe, replacing Newton's 250-year-old accepted scientific hypothesis.

Actually every single science in existence today,

*If the doors of perception were  
cleansed everything would  
appear to man as it is, infinite.*

- WILLIAM BLAKE

starting with astronomy and the ancient Greeks, began with one person's "BS" brainstorm. Yes, a zany idea with no proof.

It was Aristarchus of Samos, to name one

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Greek, staring at the stars in the 3rd century BC, and Newton after presumably being bonked on the head by a falling apple in the 17th century, who spurred our understanding of astronomy and gravity.

I'm not teasing or goading you into establishing a brand new science. I am merely suggesting you might consider playing a little more of the infinite game so that your progeny, friends, colleagues and acquaintances might possibly find the next great scientific "Eureka!"

So – let's ask ourselves: Are we playing the right balance of finite and infinite games? Finite games have winners and losers, because the rules are known to both sides. Infinite games continue forever, because the goal is to outlast, endure and prevail.

For us to look further into the future, we have to understand and tackle our immediate concerns. The finite — albeit important — can be an obstacle to long-term thinking. Fear of change and uncertainty can thwart better solutions and long-term innovation.

If diverted and distracted by foreign wars, domestic elections, new technology rollouts, and quarterly shareholder reports, our infinite game plan can fade from view. The seemingly urgent has crowded out the long-term important.

A highly successful life, though, is about the present and the future. Since the future starts momentarily, both are inextricably linked. So an immediate situation must not drown out crucial messages about the future. The key is to identify what's on our mind right now, and realize how it fits into a longer-term context.

History shows us that perseverance pays

dividends. One can lose many battles, but still win the war. Examples abound with philosopher Thomas Kuhn's scientific "paradigm shifts": Copernicus and Galileo in astronomy, Lavoisier's oxygen theory, Darwin's natural selection, Keynes' approach to macroeconomics, Schumpeter's idea of creative destruction. On and on.

From time to time I write a blog about legacy. Money is a tool, a thing. It makes life a little easier. But that is about it.

Fresh ideas, curious mindsets, and eager openness to infinite games are priceless. No amount of money can buy these things. We can pass infinite gaming on.

The successful inventors, scientists, writers, poets, leaders and others who have stood on the shoulders of those before them have all played the infinite game.

Henry Ford said, "I am looking for a lot of men who have an infinite capacity to not know what can't be done."

Half a century later, Martin Luther King, Jr. remarked, "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."

Isn't the point of life to transcend the limitations of the finite self by linking with greater things that endure?

So surely the infinite approach is truly worth it?

Well, is piling up a million bucks over a quarter-century worth it?

The finite game of life keeps us on our toes with our minds engaged. The infinite game feeds our soul while guiding us to an optimal future.



Gary Klaben

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