

The background is a solid light blue color. Scattered throughout are various stylized illustrations of people in athletic wear playing tennis. Some are in mid-swing, some are preparing to serve, and some are in ready positions. There are also small yellow tennis balls floating in the air. The overall theme is active and social.

# The Infinite Game

How to live well together

Niki Harré

‘... a novel, thoughtful, and forward-looking book that stresses that all beings on Earth – human and nonhuman – and their homes must be viewed as a united, interdependent, and global community...’ – Marc Bekoff, author of *The Animals’ Agenda: Freedom, Compassion, and Coexistence in the Human Age* and *Canine Confidential: Why Dogs Do What They Do*

Whether we are competing for a job, building a business or championing a good cause, some days it can feel as if we are trapped in an endless competition for status, wealth or attention. Maybe if we learn to play the game and follow the rules we’ll come out on top. But is life really a finite game – a game of selection and rules, winners and losers, players and spectators?

In *The Infinite Game*, Niki Harré asks us to imagine our world anew. What if we are all part of a different type of game entirely – a game in which playing matters more than winning, a game that anyone can join at any time, a game in which rules evolve as new players turn up – an infinite game? Harré looks at our society (are people pawns or participants?) and ourselves (what kind of player would you like to be?) to offer an inspiring vision of how we might live well together.

Deeply informed by psychological research and a life of social activism, Niki Harré’s provocative book teaches us all how we might live life as an infinite game.

**Niki Harré** is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Auckland. She is the author of numerous scholarly papers on community psychology, youth development and social change, as well as the book *Psychology for a Better World: Working with People to Save the Planet* (revised and updated edition, Auckland University Press, 2018). She has conducted numerous ‘infinite game’ workshops in New Zealand and overseas.

## Introduction

# Welcome to the Infinite Game

Welcome to the infinite game. The infinite game is a game about our times, a game about how to live well together. Everyone is invited. We don’t *need* you exactly, but whatever you offer will make the game a little better for the rest of us. With a bit of luck, you’ll get something out of it too.

Like any game, the infinite game works best if the players appear to take it seriously. This means that if you want to play, you are asked to concentrate, to try hard, and to act as if it matters. In the end, it does not matter. But if everyone pretends there is some goal, something worth striving towards, it will be a better game. So let’s get started.



In 1986 the philosopher James P. Carse wrote that in life there are at least two kinds of games: finite games and the infinite game. He described these games in a book called *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*.<sup>1</sup> I’ve taken some key insights from his book, played with them a little (or a lot), and added some contributions of my own. The characteristics of these games are laid out as a list of fifteen paired features on the following page.

## Features of the infinite game and finite games

1. The purpose of the infinite game is to continue the play  
*The purpose of a finite game is to win*
2. The infinite game is played with that which we value for its own sake  
*Finite games are played with the values relevant to the game*
3. The infinite game includes finite games  
*Finite games may exist outside the infinite game*
4. The infinite game invites others in  
*Finite games include only select people*
5. Infinite players relate to the humanity in each other  
*In finite games others are allies, pawns, spectators or competitors*
6. The infinite game values open-ended expression  
*Finite games value expression only within the mediums and rules set by the game*
7. The infinite game may provide a deep sense of connection with others  
*In finite games victory may be joyful but must be guarded*
8. Infinite players may come and go  
*Finite players must be alert – to relax is dangerous*
9. The infinite game is an open network in which everything is interconnected  
*Finite games are discrete entities that may expand or replicate*
10. The infinite game tends towards diversity  
*Finite games tend towards sameness*
11. Infinite players are in awe of life in all its forms  
*Finite players attempt to control the life forms relevant to the game*
12. The infinite game seeks and responds to information about the world  
*Winners of finite games claim knowledge of the world which may be treated as the truth*
13. Infinite players attempt to understand themselves  
*Finite players attempt to train themselves*
14. The infinite game looks to the future and does not assume the past will reoccur  
*In finite games players try to replicate the winning strategies of the past*
15. The rules of the infinite game must change over time or the game will cease  
*To change or break the rules of a finite game is a violation*

Are you starting to get the idea? The features of the infinite game and finite games will be teased out more fully in Part One of this book. For now, to help understand the difference between these two types of games, let's imagine beach cricket as the infinite game and compare it with a finite game of international cricket. In beach cricket, someone has a tennis ball and ideally a bat of some sort, although a piece of driftwood will do. Teams are created from whoever is willing; everyone on the beach is invited to play. Age, prior experience with the game, fitness, being able to speak the language of the instigators, none of these are prerequisites to – or protections from – being encouraged to have a go: 'We'll teach you – it'll be fun!' The rules are set, but most people can't quite remember them and make lots of mistakes. When it's a four-year-old boy's turn to hold the bat, the rules are changed completely: he doesn't actually have to *hit* the ball to run, and no one tries to get him out.

Experienced players are often theatrical, exaggerating or slowing down their movements to the laughter and spontaneous applause of others. Experienced players may also focus intensely when up against each other, trying hard to make as many runs as possible or get the opposing player out. The most valued player is not, however, the best cricketer, but the one who has the knack of making everyone feel welcome. He calls for breaks in the play to show those who are uncertain how to hold the bat and run with it to the opposing wicket. She senses when to cajole a shy player into running into the sea after the ball and when to back off and let the player leave the action to others.

People leave the game for a while, switch teams to keep the numbers more or less even, and none of this matters. It doesn't even matter when a teenager misses a great catch because she is watching a surfer catch a wave, although everyone groans loudly. The truth is, everyone is somewhat distracted by the blue of the ocean, the crunch of the sand, and the oystercatchers' attempts to crack open shellfish with their long orange beaks.

As a player, you experience moments of deep contentment, wrapped in a warm blanket of goodwill. It is as if you are in a time apart from time, a space apart from space, where no one has anything better to do

than simply be together. Perhaps you feel an absurd love for this odd collection of people, whose lives you may know little or nothing about.



International cricket is rather different. For starters, the teams are carefully selected. Have you ever been selected to play cricket for your country? I suspected not. And it would be ridiculous for players to switch sides or to change the rules part way through the game. How would we know which team won? Players must focus completely on the game and all are needed. Missing a great catch because you are texting your girlfriend in the stand is out of the question. And the setting, apart from the cheers and boos of the spectators, is largely irrelevant. The grass on which the game is played has been carefully cut to the right length and the pitch protected overnight to ensure it does not become sticky from unwanted rain or dew. Victory, when it comes, is euphoric for the winners and dismal for the losers. No matter how small the winning margin, the difference between the two outcomes is absolute. The post-game ritual requires the losers to concede defeat and the audience to praise the winners, usually by detailed public discussion of the brilliant plays that led to their triumph.

International cricketers learn their sport by studying the winning strategies of the past. They acquire a coach and train their bodies and minds to be the perfect cricket clone, just fractionally better than what has gone before. In fact, if I was to line up elite sportspeople in front of you and get you to guess their sport – rugby, swimming, gymnastics, middle-distance running – you would probably do very well indeed just by looking at their body shapes.

Like all master finite players, elite cricketers want to control the outcome of the game before it begins. Surprise is to be eliminated. Thus, international cricket, like other finite games, is inherently conservative. Players aim towards a known goal and follow a well-worn path to get there. By contrast, one day's game of beach cricket is never the same as another's. The players reconfigure and change the game depending on the tide, the wind and the collective mood. They may even play a

different game entirely. A sand-castle city anyone? *'Come on, I'll lend you a spade!'*



This book is an invitation to imagine life as an infinite game. Just like beach cricket, the infinite game thrives when people offer their talents, look out for each other, and know when to break the rules. It's a game that deals in joy – the joy of being deeply alive and trusting that others are on your side.

This book is also an invitation to take a critical look at the finite games that surround you. Sure, international cricket has its place; but are the competitive structures that underpin our major institutions (the qualification game, the economic growth game, the housing market game, the funding game, the publishing game, the career game, the patriotism game, the political election game) really the best way to draw out people's talents, create community and revitalise the natural world? How would life look if we flipped our usual perspective – if we put our finite games aside for a moment and considered instead what we really, truly value and how to keep *that* in play?

The infinite game is not an invitation to anarchy. Even beach cricket has nominal rules and boundaries. When it comes to life, we do need structure. After all, we need to grow food, build shelters, make clothes, access clean water, care for people who are ill, teach children, respond to collective threats, and much more besides. We also need challenges and goals. We may want to restore a historic building, plant fruit trees, learn how to play the guitar, or get bicycle stands installed at the local library. We may also want to be a good parent, learn to forgive all those dreadful people who have betrayed us in the hope of finally finding inner peace, or give up smoking. We may even want to discriminate between people on some dimension and acknowledge those who are particularly skilled at an activity. To do all this, we need finite games. We need boundaries, allies and rules, and to spend time learning and repeating the games of the past. I'm rather glad, for example, that my doctor has been to medical school and absorbed the rules of Western medicine.

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