Navigating Between Finite and Infinite Games: Transitional Play

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper we explore the metaphor of “group life as game.” By conducting a thematic analysis of weekly conversations held within a particular group, we found two contrasting types of group interactions we called games. Inspired by James Carse’s (1986) concept of games, we defined those interactions as finite and infinite. In the finite game, group members adhere to titles and preset rules, compete, and seek out conformity. When group members are engaged in the infinite game, they relate person to person, are flexible with rules, seek universal connection, and experience discovery. Our analysis indicated that while group members increasingly played the infinite game over time, they stayed engaged in both types of games and frequently oscillated from one to the other. We categorized the interactions that moved the group towards either the finite or the infinite game as transitional play. By juxtaposing the dimensions of finite and infinite games, and transitional play, we composed several propositions about this rich metaphor for group life.
Navigating Between Finite and Infinite Games: Transitional Play

We first met on a Wednesday night in January. To the accidental passerby we may have looked like an interesting bunch. The colors of our skin, our builds, and our fashion statements were all clues to our diversity, a diversity that went beyond our obvious appearances. We came from Malaysia, Hungary, or Holland. And if we were born in the United States we carried the Swiss, Indian, Korean, Irish, African, Chinese or Russian traditions of our parents, grandparents, and ancestors with us. We were brought together by a shared interest in being part of a course on group dynamics and interpersonal skills. We came because it seemed to be a nice way to meet with people, or a repetition of an interesting and easy course taken before. We came to enhance our leadership skills, or simply to accompany a friend. We were undergraduate, MBA, PhD, and foreign guest students. Our group was composed of nine people that came together on the basis of similarities and preferences. The nine were joined by two 'nerdy'-looking facilitators the first evening and a new member the next week. Thus we became a group of twelve, a small group that belonged to a larger community of almost 60 people taking the same course.

We were provided with structure, rules and roles. We knew when and where to meet. The students were supposed to write their papers, and the facilitators were expected to evaluate and grade them. We were provided with readings. We were in plenary sessions where we did structured activities, and then we spent time as a small group in a room of our own. There, rules were set by the facilitators for tasks that simply had to be done. Thus we started within a certain context.

At the beginning of each session we arranged our room, placing tables and chairs into a configuration that seemed right for that night. Members would come in and then leave again to get drinks or warm up food. We developed a habit of getting re-acquainted through small talk. How was the weekend? I like your haircut! Should I go to Greece or to Alaska for my honeymoon? Hey, that's a bright yellow sweater you're wearing today!

Food and drinks were always on our table. Food gave us energy for the session. One of us volunteered to get pizza for the second night. We shared sweets, goldfish crackers and girl scout cookies. We commented on the quality of a macaroni and cheese dinner. We showed curiosity when one of us was fasting and adapted to her needs. Food became a source of conflict when individual preferences didn't come together in the planning of a shared lunch. Thus we knew we had traveled far when in the last session we celebrated our journey with an international dinner to which we all contributed.

Among the twelve of us we shared an abundance of energy and our next-door neighbors commented on our frequent and loud laughter. As one of us commented: we sure had some great comedians amongst us. Humor played different roles. Sometimes it was used to laugh at, but more and more to laugh with one another. Group members became fondly known through identifying jokes around such topics as one's enjoyment of beer, one's knowledge of the 'meat market,' one's habit of taking pies through the airport scanner or one's love for a family of eight boys.

Total and prolonged silence was rare. Our talkative members took care of that! They also identified who the quiet members were. Those were invited to speak. Sometimes they were asked directly, but often also through what became 'the round the table method'. Going round the table made sure that everybody could join the conversation. This method was also useful when the pressure was on conforming, and staying quiet could be read as silent dissent. It sometimes helped us find a topic in the absence of a preset task or an 'incident'.

Outside 'incidents' came from our interactions with the larger community. We decided we were 'the best group,' escaping the predictions of Tuckman's model, and we didn't want to be bothered by what happened outside of our room. We tested the boundaries between us and them and discovered
outside enemies. Such enemies made us confront trust and loyalty inside our group and gave us recurrent themes for conversation. Through talk, we would address our competitive feelings in terms of sports, teams and warfare.

In talking we would stumble onto seemingly trivial topics such as doing laundry or the right way to bake perfect chocolate chip cookies (as learned from dear mom). But then we all do laundry and we all do eat. Thus the seemingly trivial proved highly valuable in the weaving of a rich fabric of our togetherness. We felt this togetherness deeply when we shared our widely diverse notions of the sacred and religious in our lives.

When left to ourselves in our room, we somehow found ways to go where our energy would take us. From the beginning of our joint existence we spoke about movies and one day we watched one together. Some of us had high energy around playing board games. So we played, and in so doing, we vented our competitive spirit or tested the waters for new conversational explorations.

In the time we spent together, through our playing and conversing, we created something that was uniquely ours. We created a holding space of shared experiences, understandings and connections, rich with possibilities for us to tap into in whatever way we liked, whenever we liked. This space continues to be available to the group as well as to each of the 12 members wherever we will go next.

Two Kinds of Games

The above is the story of a group that met weekly for three months (eleven two-and-a-half hour sessions and two full-day sessions). In many ways, the group was typical, in others, it was unique. One of the distinguishing features of this group’s life was the games that they played. The group members’ desire to play games as part of the course started with the simple idea that a game will help them get to know each other better. As the facilitators of the group, this triggered our own curiosity to explore the different dimensions of games and how these relate to group life. Initially, the group members’ choice of games intrigued us:

The first game, played at the end of the fifth session, was a competitive game called “Pictionary”, where the group was divided into two teams. Initially, the more experienced players were in one team. When this was discovered, the teams were rearranged, and then once again to separate the two inexperienced foreign group
members, so the teams would be “fair.” A long time was spent explaining the rules prior to play, and the rules were strictly enforced by one of the older team members who acted as Game Master, managing the timer and consulting the rules manual when there was a dispute between the teams. Team members egged each other on using aggressive language, and made disparaging remarks about the other team. There were frequent accusations of cheating, physical blocking, and one team member pushed another aside. The group played until one team won and the other lost. It was a zero-sum game, and because of its focus on rules and a clear end when one team won, we began naming it what Carse (1986) called a finite game.

The second game, “True Colors”, played at the end of the eleventh session, was a cooperative activity, where group members shared their perceptions of one another as they answered specific questions. The game was played in the comfortable, homey setting of a student apartment, and began with group members adjusting the rules and inventing tokens and symbols. A special token was designated for a group member who was absent in order for that person to be part of the play. Numerous rounds were played amid much comfortable conversation and laughter as people discovered how they were perceived by their fellow group members. New methods were invented to increase group member interest in playing. There were no winners, no losers, and rules were continually adjusted according to group member preferences. The game ended when group members agreed to disperse. Group members chose to play this game a second time during the last hour of the final course session, again devising new variations for how it was played. It was a game that could go on forever as long as the players chose to continue playing. Because of these characteristics and its focus on
adjusting to mood and the preferences of the players, we recognized this as an infinite game, again as defined by Carse (1986).

The first game was played at a time in the life of the group when competitive talk was high both within the group and in their attitude towards other groups in the course. Group members played the second game at a time when their interactions indicated they were increasingly curious about the impressions they had made on each other, and then again at a time when it seemed to help group members stay connected in meaningful conversation despite the imminent end of the course. Clearly, two very different types of games had been played, each corresponding to a mode in which group members were currently relating to one another.

This discovery only stimulated our thinking further! We thus embarked on a joyful exploration of the varied activities and conversations the group engaged in over the course of the three months, to see if they could also be viewed as finite and infinite. And behold! We found that the group was continually engaged in numerous games, some of them feeling finite in quality and some of them feeling infinite! So, we undertook a more rigorous research journey to continue the exploration.

Our Methodology

We chose a methodology which represents a blend of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1997) and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As facilitators of the group, we had taken extensive notes (over 150 pages) during each of the sessions, which the two of us compared and wrote up immediately afterwards to capture, as best we could, the conversations word for word. The thematic analysis method proved
immensely helpful to systematically analyze, categorize and label our data. Using the broad distinction between finite and infinite games from above, we carefully reviewed our session notes from the small group sessions. Over several iterations, we recorded the following:

(1) interactions that corresponded to finite games and to infinite games;

(2) interactions that seemed to indicate that a transition was taking place from one kind of game to another;

(3) quotations that we found particularly compelling as they related to our inquiry into games.

From this review, we identified, categorized, and labeled the themes representing the various dimensions that seemed to represent finite or infinite games, finally emerging with a set of indicators for the two kinds of games. We also reviewed each session's themes, and invented a title for the session to capture its overall flavor, and help get a sense of the flow of the group's journey over time. For example, we entitled the first session "Establishing who we are: rules and titles" because the group spent the hour and a half asking the facilitators about the rules for the class and introducing themselves by referring to their titles (credentials and affiliations, such as being an MBA student, a Clevelander, or belonging to a fraternity). We called the last session "In every end, a new beginning" because group members made multiple references to their history together and their hopes for the future. In an effort to illustrate this flow through finite and infinite games over the thirteen sessions, we then calculated the percentage of lines on each page of notes that corresponded to finite games and infinite games and charted them in a graph.
Once we had reached this point, we discovered that the group frequently oscillated between the two kinds of games. Even within a session, conversations could take the group from one game to another and back again several times. Our curiosity now focused on this oscillation, which led us to ask the following questions: How does the infinite game become available to group members playing a finite game? And, how does the finite game become available to the group members playing the infinite game? The interactions we had marked as indicating a transition from one kind of game to the other appeared useful in addressing these questions, so we subsequently categorized and labeled these as transitional play.

From this rich harvest of data, now organized into more manageable categories, we allowed ourselves to be inspired by Strauss and Corbin’s proposition-building methodology, and compared and contrasted the various dimensions that emerged from juxtaposing the different games. We subsequently composed several propositions on the relationships we had discovered between the different dimensions. The following pages chronicle our research journey. We begin with thorough descriptions of the finite and infinite games.

**The Finite Game**

The finite game has a definite feel to it, best illustrated with an excerpt from a group conversation. This conversation took place in our small group during the seventh session, which we called “A Crack in the Armor.” In this session, several group members were reacting to statements made in the plenary by Kim, a member from another group. Kim had shared her discomfort with the way in which Paul, one
of our group members, had given feedback to her and others after a fishbowl exercise
two weeks earlier. Another one of our group members, Susan (who, significantly, is
Hungarian), had just said to Paul that she thought his feedback to Kim was too strong
and personalized. Paul responds:

Paul: But Susan thought I was personalizing [in the plenary]. She didn’t feel like it was a group
comment that I made. I don’t understand that.
Susan: Let me explain. I saw the incident Kim’s way. She’s taken me to the zoo in Cleveland, and
helped us get to know this place. I may not agree with her and how she acted... but she’s been very
kind to me.
Walter: Also, Kim’s father is an emigrated Hungarian.
Diana (Facilitator): Knowing someone seems to make a big difference in understanding this incident.
Susan: I would have made stupid remarks as well in the plenary, and then you would have told me I
was stupid.
Katherine: Well, we were objective.
Pual: It made you biased in this.
Susan: I am biased. And I mentioned it to her [Kim], but I’m sorry I didn’t mention it to you
[Paul].
Paul: You never told me at the time. Telling me tonight, it really affects me.
Diana (Facilitator): [to Susan] Why didn’t you tell Paul?
Susan: I respect Paul’s personality.
Paul: Why didn’t you feel comfortable to talk to me before? Why were you comfortable with her
and not with me? I’ve always been part of the team. I feel betrayed. I’m extremely competitive.
Katherine: You brought the group perspective to the plenary, and none of the rest of us wanted to
present.
Paul: I don’t understand. Why didn’t you tell me?
Diana (Facilitator): Paul, it seems to be an important question for you.
Paul: She’s not as close to me as before. She’s now a bit of an outsider [about Susan].
Susan: I didn’t think you would mention names in the plenary.
Scott: I’m confused.
Katherine: So am I.
Diana (Facilitator): [to Scott] So, what is the issue?
Scott: Are you also confused or do you want to nail me?
Diana (Facilitator): No, I’m confused myself.
[...] Susaan: SSSS!!! Please listen to me. I thought you were a bit too strong even at the time... I thought
it was too strong. I didn’t dare to talk because you were so strong about this.
Scott: Susan is using Kim’s weight to raise the point again.
Diana (Facilitator): we’re now all pointing at Susan. There is another way of looking at it. It didn’t
come up before, and it’s interesting why it didn’t come up before. It must have been difficult for
Susan to raise the issue.
Paul: Why was it tonight? Why didn’t she say anything then? Susan isn’t an introvert!
Katherine: [to Susan] You speak what’s on your mind.
Paul: I don’t think she had any loyalty to our group.
Emily (Facilitator): Listen to what you’re saying. Paul. You are referring to Susan in the third
person, and turning her into an object.
Paul: She’s not loyal.
Diana (Facilitator): (to Paul) Susan is trying to tell you something.
Paul: I disagree. The trust between me and Susan has been broken.
Susan: I try to keep bad things inside of me.
Paul: I disagree. You talk a lot. [...] Loyalty and trust are huge issues for me. When I see a crack in the armor, it upsets me. I feel tonight that trust was broken.

This and other similar conversations that we categorized as finite provided us with the data to define the following indicators for finite games:

**Indicators for Finite Games**

**Adherence to titles:**
- Defining self and other by titles gained from prior experience or affiliations
- Interacting with other group members on the basis of their title
- Reacting defensively when titles are not respected
- Referring to a present group member in the depersonalized 3rd person form

**Adherence to preset rules:**
- Acting according to imposed limitations and rules imposed from the outside (in reference to space, time, task, and group membership)
- Emphasizing the importance of understanding and conforming to the rules
- Evaluating the self and/or the group against bounded norms or assumptions
- Declaring that emotions interfere with effective group performance

**Competition:**
- Using competitive, sometimes violent language or metaphors
- Judging another group member’s title
- Declaring who is in and who is out of the group
- Declaring own group to be superior or slandering outsiders
- Interrupting another person in mid-sentence or shutting down a conversation
- ‘Winner takes all’ decision-making by majority vote

**Conformity:**
- Pushing group members towards closure
- Language and metaphors emphasizing conformity
- Solving a perceived problem
- Seeking conformity within the whole group, allowing no dissent or silence

In the finite game, we saw group members interacting within a given set of boundaries. The course for which the group met was itself a finite game, with clear authority figures (the professor and facilitators) who evaluated and graded the students according to norms that were spelled out in a rule book (syllabus). The group met for
pre-determined finite periods of time in designated classroom space. From this perspective, group members had to conform to the rules to succeed. The finite game of taking a course towards graduation may also create a context for competitive behavior among group members.

During the three months of contact, particularly the initial sessions, the group spent much of its time in the finite game. As they introduced themselves to each other, they defined themselves by their "titles" (academic credentials, specialization, geographical affiliation), and much group energy was spent on understanding the rules of being in this class. Subgroups of MBA, PhD, foreign students, and students with fraternity/sorority affiliations were reinforced in the conversation. Certain group members spoke of the importance of not just being a group, but being the "best" group, and became critical of group members who may have had different opinions.

After the fifth session when they played the first game described at the beginning of this paper, the group began spending less time in the finite game. The seventh session "A Crack in the Armor", excerpted above, seemed at least in part to be fueled by contact with other groups taking the course. Interactions indicative of the finite game were lowest in the final few sessions the group had together. The group's journey through finite games at the session level is graphically illustrated in Figure 1 (see the following page).
Figure 1

Group's journey through finite games

- 1. Establishing who we are: rules and titles
- 2. Setting the stage for play
- 3. We are the best!
- 4. Our competitive streak comes out
- 5. Expression of anger and competition
- 6. Differences that contrast
- 7. A Crack in the Armor
- 8. Healing and uniting
- 9. What game are we here to play?
- 10. Really check there are different games out there!
- 11. Shared bearings and new exploration
- 12. Feedback from the heart
- 13. In every end, a new beginning

Percentage of finite interactions per session
The Infinite Game

Again, we begin a description of the infinite game with an illustrative excerpt from a group conversation. The following conversation took place during the eighth session of the group, which we entitled “Healing and Uniting.” The session had begun with one group member, Harry, asking for advice about how to let his parents know about a small car accident he had had. This led to a long conversation typical of what we called an infinite game, which featured stories and anecdotes about relationships with parents and with siblings, birth order, family size, and even something as habitual as doing the laundry. All participated, and the atmosphere in the room felt very comfortable to us.

Paul: Is anyone here an only child?
Denise: That’s what I was wanting to ask!
Harry: I kind of feel like an only child.
Paul: Man, does your brother know about this?
Harry: We don’t have much in common. I have problems with him. He’s gotten kicked out of three schools, two of them state schools, and I don’t know how you can be kicked out of a state school. He’s pretty much an idiot.
Jasmine: Did he get kicked out for academic reasons?
Harry: He gets into trouble all the time, even as a little kid. At a birthday party he bit someone in the eye.
Jasmine: That’s happened to me! I got bit in the eye.
Harry: He never takes responsibility for anything. It stresses me out.
Susan: I heard a radio program about hyperactive kids... sounds like they do lots of things like that. They said it was chemically induced.
Katherine: I don’t agree with that. I was hyperactive when I was a kid, and hospitalized. They put me into a special bed which felt like a cage. I grew out of it.
Paul: Have you recently grown out of it? What about that airport security story of yours a few weeks ago?
Katherine: I still remember that hospital bed, it’s probably my first memory.
Paul: What does your bro do now, Harry?
Harry: He’s at Ball State, where you get to retake classes if your grade is low. He had a GPA of .5 last semester. I don’t know how he does it. The way he’s doing, he’ll graduate after I do.
Susan: What is GPA?
Denise: It’s your grade point average, how we measure grades in the U.S.
Susan: This could be one of these situations on the radio program.
Harry: He’s been to psychiatrists and tested, nothing has helped. He’ll start a program and then drop it.
Scott: Is he rebellious? Has that anything to do with your parents’ culture?
Harry: If anything, it has something to do with my dad. He never liked to be with little kids.
Katherine: Does your brother’s style influence you not to be like him?
Harry: Yeah, I didn’t want to be screamed at by my parents. I hated hearing when they screamed at
my brother. I use him as an example of what not to do.
Paul: I don’t know how my parents would put up with that.
Harry: I’ve told them that. He’s even gone to Florida to stay with my aunt for a while, but that
didn’t change anything.
Katherine: It would be hard for any parent to let go of their child.
Paul: After 26 years, you kind of have to...
Scott: That’s kind of like what we saw in “Parenthood.”
Jasmine: Yeah, I agree with that.
Paul: [to Diana (Facilitator)] See, now we’re talking about the movie!
Emily (Facilitator): Right on, Scott!
Lucia shares goldfish crackers with the group.
Katherine: I was also thinking of that.
Jasmine: So was I.
Scott: There was the gambling son, and the daughter with the no-good boyfriend.
Paul: This could be a cultural thing... with family not being as important in the US culture.
Scott: Different cultures stress different things. Asian cultures are considered smart, so I had to live
up to that image. Parents get all tied up in education and traditions, but don’t express much emotions.
Paul: I remember how religion was kind of a social thing for your family in that other conversation.
Harry: Image is important to my folks. They make up stories to keep the image. They tell everyone
my brother’s in grad school in journalism.
Paul: You’re telling us all of this and you’re worried about a car in the ditch?!
Katherine: Parents have different standards for different kids.
Paul: My little brother gets away with murder.
Denise: I bet you’re jealous.
Paul: Yeah... he’s spoiled. My parents have more money now. I wish I could be 11 years old
again. Is it the same for you and your bro, Lucia?
Lucia: It’s the same thing. He even gets to go out on dates.

This conversation was a prototype for interactions we categorized as infinite.

We used it, along with a number of other similar conversations, to develop the

following indicators for the infinite game:
Indicators for the Infinite Game

Relating as person to person:
- Asking for and giving feedback from the heart
- Sharing food
- Describing the self doing the mundane
- Appreciating others’ emotional expression
- Caring for one another
- Appreciating our varied cultural heritage

Flexible rules:
- Expanding space when more come to play
- Seeking alternatives that take into account different needs
- Creating own rules

Universal connection:
- Conversing about family life
- Stretching time boundaries, spanning back 2 generations to the future generation
- Sharing experiences of rites of passage, religion, and the sacred
- Sharing stories and anecdotes that invite other stories
- Tapping into common group experience to deepen relationships

Discovery:
- Noticing ‘new’ connections to each other
- Discovering ‘new’ possibilities for interactions
- Describing personalized learning through the group experience

Above, we see how group members engaged with each other in the infinite game with tremendous interest in connecting with each other and with practically no concern about boundaries. They seemed almost to transcend an awareness of the classroom situation, which represents a finite game so clearly bounded by rules. These conversations had a timeless, generic feel to them, touching on topics that every group member could relate to by virtue of being universally connected. They took time to listen to each others’ stories about grandparents and ancestors, and in some cases,
anticipated the generation to come. Group members spoke appreciatively of emotions they saw each other expressing, and the varied cultural traditions in the group.

The infinite game was very elusive at the beginning of the three months the group spent together. Individual members may have brought an universal topic (such as marriage, family relationships, religious traditions) into the group, but these interactions were short-lived, never picked up by more than one other group members. It was only in the sixth session, that the infinite game fully blossomed, after one group member asked another about the ashes on his forehead (it was Ash Wednesday), and a third student voiced an interest in discussing religion and spirituality.

This conversation was later known as “the religion conversation” and became a cornerstone experience and a frequent reference point for the group during future interactions. Time spent playing the infinite game increased thereafter. We discovered that the sessions with the most time spent in the infinite game were the sessions reserved for small groups only, when no time was spent in plenary. The infinite game peaked during the last session, when we all shared food we’d prepared for each other, spoke about the various ways we learned how to cook, and played the second game described above for which we invented new rules to fit the current mood of group members. We charted out the group’s journey through the infinite game in Figure 2 (see the following page).
Figure 2

Group's journey through infinite games

Percentage of infinite interactions per session

Session Title

1. Establishing who we are and titles
2. Selling the stage for play
3. We are the best
4. Our competitive streak comes out
5. Expression of anger and competition
6. Differences that connect
7. A Crack in the Armor
8. Healing and unifying
9. What game are we here to play?
10. Reality check: there are different games out there!
11. Shared learnings and new exploration
12. Feedback from the heart
13. In every end, a beginning
Some Theoretical Linkages

At this point, we feel it is important to discuss how the findings from the group are compatible with the concepts developed by Carse in *Finite and Infinite Games* (1986). In fact, Carse’s writing helped clarify a number of questions we had about distinguishing the two games. For example, it reinforced our choice to use the terms finite and infinite to refer to the phenomena we were observing. Carse’s vision of life as play opens the reader’s mind to a much fuller understanding of games as they are played in group life. Games are not just a past-time, child’s play, or distraction, but our way of life, of interacting with others, and of being with ourselves and our natural environment. Carse first distinguishes between the two kinds of games according to their purpose:

A finite game is played for the purpose of winning … [and] comes to an end when someone has won. An infinite game [is played] for the purpose of continuing the play. (p.3)

The only characteristic that these two kinds of games have in common is that all players in any game play freely (although this element of choice may be veiled for some finite players): no one can play who is forced to play. In broad strokes, these are the major distinctions Carse makes between the two kinds of games:

**Finite Game**
- play to win
- ends when someone has won
- is bounded by defined rules (temporal, spatial, and numerical)
- requires other players, known as opponents
- the player as seeker of titles recognized by society
- there are many finite games to play

**Infinite Game**
- play to continue playing
- rules are internally defined
- play with (not within) boundaries of time, space, and numbers
- no question of eligibility about who can play
- the player as poet, artist
- there is only one infinite game
Carse clarifies for us that while players can be engaged in many finite games, there is only one infinite game to be played – each time we play the infinite game, we are returning to the same, endlessly mutable game. Carse implies that finite games and the infinite game are played in all aspects of our lives. For example, he frames the concept of “society” as compatible with the finite game, as its role is to enforce the rules at a large level. In contrast, “culture” is integral to the infinite game for Carse, because of its inherent mutability. Carse uses the compelling metaphor of a garden to illustrate the infinite game:

‘Garden does not refer to the bounded plot at the edge of the house or the margin of the city. This is not a garden one lives beside, but a garden one lives within. It is a place of growth, of maximized spontaneity. To garden is ... to design a culture capable of adjusting to the widest possible range of surprise in nature. Gardeners are acutely attentive to the deep patterns of natural order, but are also aware that there will always be much lying beyond their vision. (p. 140)

An important notion of Carse is that “finite games can be played within an infinite game, but an infinite game cannot be played within a finite game.” (p.8) For the infinite player, losses are just “moments in continuing play.” (p.8) The image that we have of the interrelationship between the two games is of a number of finite games of all sorts of dimensions within the larger unbounded frame of the infinite game of which we may or may not be aware:
This image of games within a game is helpful in understanding the oscillation of the group from finite to infinite interactions. To deepen our understanding of this interrelationship, we combined the graphs for the finite and infinite games (Figure 4, see the following page). In each session, there were moments of heavy finite and infinite game-playing. Since we used the session as our unit of analysis for these graphs, the interplay between finite and infinite games within a particular session is not captured.

This graph clearly indicates how finite and infinite mirror each other in the different sessions, which is hardly surprising, as in Carse’s words “infinite and finite play stand in the sharpest possible contrast.” (p.7) When the group is engaged in infinite play, the finite content in conversations is very low. When finite play abounds, infinite play is largely intangible. This doesn’t mean that the infinite game has disappeared: if we look at the play in a wider context, we can see that the different finite games around subgroup and inter-group competition, relationships with authority figures, and forcing group members to conform all can fit as “moments in continuing play” of the infinite game.
Figure 4

Group’s journey through finite and infinite games

Percentage of interactions per session

Session Title

1. Establishing who we are and rules and titles
2. Setting the stage for play
3. We are the best
4. Our competitive streak comes out
5. Expression of anger and competition
6. Differences that connect
7. A Crack in the Amul
8. Healing and unlearning
9. What game are we here to play?
10. Really check there are different games out there
11. Shared learning and new exploration
12. Feedback from the best
13. In every end, a new beginning

Infinite
Finite
In examining the combined graph, we were compelled to ask what happened at the mid-point, when there was extreme fluctuation between finite and the infinite, creating the diamond-like shapes on Figure 4. We wondered whether this was a mid-point transition when the group was rearranging itself. We were trying in particular to link this to Gersick’s model of punctuated equilibrium for group development (1989), where work groups were found to make a significant transition in their task orientation at the mid-point of the period of their collaboration, in order to get the job done in time. This may be so. However, Gersick’s model was developed with data about groups united by a clear task, which our group did not have.

Another possible explanation for the group’s strong oscillation between infinite and finite interactions at the mid-point, is that the group was dealing with the impact of outside interference into their system, such as plenary discussions, comments made by members of other groups, and required written assignments. In the seventh session much of their conversation focused on how to come to terms with the outside. This in itself is not surprising, since, as Luft (1984) states: “The physical and social environment can have a powerful influence on a group.” (p.17)

This awareness could have guided us in the direction of building a more systemic understanding of the group, following approaches like those of Homans (1950). Homans describes how the external system of the group (such as relations between a group and its environment brought into being by a given task and other design parameters) builds on its internal system (the sentiments of the group toward one another), and may affect its behavior. In fact, we did assess the outside forces affecting our group through time. What we noticed is that although the intensity of
those outside forces differed per session, the impact from the outside was there throughout the life of the group. Perhaps it was more a question of how the group managed dealing with the outside, rather than whether there was outside influence or not. This brought our attention back to focus further on the quality of the interactions within the group itself.

**We Discover a Third Game: Transitional Play**

This question of how the group managed outside interference as well as how it managed itself particularly intrigued us because we saw that, over time, there was a heightened tendency for infinite game content, and a lowered one for finite game content in the sessions. What caused the group to oscillate between finite and infinite games and back again several times in a session? How was it that the group increasingly chose to play the infinite game over time, even during the last group session, which could be seen as the “death of the group,” a seemingly finite concept, was imminent?

We began focusing our attention on what was happening in the group in the interactions that appeared to us to be neither clearly indicative of a finite game nor of the infinite game. Since these were the type of interactions that seemed to lead to movement in the group towards the finite or the infinite, we decided to call them “transitional play”. Once again, we selected a passage from the group’s conversation that typified transitional play to illustrate how our group members interacted at such a time. This excerpt is from the eleventh session, entitled “Feedback from the Heart,” where the group spent most of the conversation in deep connection with each other.
But before they entered this infinite game, they found themselves in a prelude of intense transitional play. Here, some members want to play “True Colors”, the board game from the week before. Others weren’t so sure. Along the way, they question the authority of the facilitators, who themselves ask the group to decide. They question each other’s assumptions, encourage each other, explore different topics, reflect on shared experience – all integral aspects of transitional play.

Paul: It’s a group decision what we want to do... play the game again, or go into this deeper stuff.
Denise: Emily (Facilitator) didn’t play the game yet.
Emily (Facilitator): I appreciate your wanting to include me in the game, but don’t use me as an excuse to play the game today. What’s important is that we are all learning in this group.
Diana (Facilitator): I think there’s enough information to work on... for that we don’t have to play the game again.
Paul: This makes me think of the Teacher and the Student -- no, no, no that’s just a joke!
Emily (Facilitator): No, Paul, that’s good point. Here you’ve got two facilitators being directive about what would be valuable to do.
Susan: The facilitators are feeling responsible to us.
Emily (Facilitator): It’s your responsibility to get the most out of the course. If that means playing the True Colors, that’s fine!
Scott: I know, let’s talk about the Kim issue!
Laughter and groaning.
Diana (Facilitator): No.
Paul: (picks up on the issue) The Kim incident spoke about who we are.
Emily (Facilitator): The amount of time we’ve spent on Kim is fascinating. It has drained so much of our energy. Why?
Diana (Facilitator): It’s the same with why do certain issues come back again and again?
Paul: Well, things keep happening.
Katherine: And it’s not resolved yet.
Paul: What do you think about the Kim issue, Diana (Facilitator)?
Diana (Facilitator): I don’t mind getting into that, but we were on how to spend this evening session, and don’t think we’re clear on that yet.
Scott: Something that stood out for me on Saturday was how we are perceiving each other as introverts and extroverts... I mean, how do we perceive each other? Some of the stuff that came out of the game was both kind of funny and surprising for all of us. How do you perceive me?
[...]
Susan: I’m also interested in that.
Paul: I’m just afraid. I don’t see that we will be honest with each other. Saying positive and negative things about each other are important in feedback, and there are some of us here who I don’t think can take it.
Scott: But then there is no trust here.
Paul: I just think that this only makes sense if we can be critical.
Scott: Here’s a chance to receive feedback and it’s our choice how we do it... do you take a card situation as the basis for this or something else?
Diana (Facilitator): Scott is inviting feedback here.
Paul: I’m not sure I’d be able to say it. I’m strong enough to hear what other people think, but I don’t know about the others. I don’t want to say something negative if they can’t take it.
Diana (Facilitator): You’re worried about the process of receiving feedback in the group. Are you afraid of hurting somebody?
Paul: I want people to be honest here. Are we going to be straight with each other?
Susan: You can’t judge personalities, but just the way you are in the group.
Scott: This is tricky because how do you know somebody here... particularly because we had the Kim situation to show that this can be really misinterpreted. If trust isn’t there, then let’s not go that way.
Paul: We need trust here, and I have more trust for some of the group than for others.
Diana (Facilitator): You don’t have to say everything to everybody.
Paul: We might want to make some ground rules.
Diana (Facilitator): You don’t have to completely bare your soul to all – just open that Johari window or that zucchini a little bit [refers to class readings by Joseph Luft].
Paul: Don’t mess with my zucchini!
Emily (Facilitator): The thing is that you have choice. It’s in your own hands.
Paul: Then I would ask Denise and Scott for feedback [the other two MBA students in the group].
Scott: There’s an irony here of 12 of us being able to give feedback to Vanessa, but now we’re not sure about being able to give feedback to each other.
Harry: We’re tentative because we have a comfort level with each other that we don’t want to disrupt...
Veronica: We didn’t know well nor did we care so much...
Scott: People have different thickness of skin... think of Kim for example and how sensitive she was.

With the help of other similar session excerpts, we developed the following indicators for transitional play. These indicators appeared to be particularly rich: we elaborated seven categories, as indicated on the following page.
Indicators for Transitional Play

Demystifying titles:
- Testing the authority of leader figures
- Leader figure questioning own role and rules
- Playing with each other’s titles

Testing the rules:
- Creating awareness of rules through humor
- Questioning rules and assumptions, frequently using humor
- Revisiting rules for possible alteration
- Comparing rules with those of other groups

Affirmation:
- Expressing joy at being together
- Paying attention to the non-verbal
- Attempts to stay in relationship
- Encouraging others to add their own thinking

Recognizing variety:
- Pointing out differences in the group
- Differentiating between like title-holders
- Expressing desire to play different kinds of games
- Suggesting to approach an issue from different perspectives

Moving with the Group’s Energy
- Exploring and observing group interest in conversational topics
- Energizing the group through humor and emotions
- Using metaphor, fantasy, and proverbs to explore possibilities for the group

Arranging space:
- Ritualistic settling in to being together
- Reconnecting through small talk after time spent apart
- Asking to be brought on board by other group members after an absence

Reflection and learning:
- Inviting group members to reflect on a shared experience
- Learning from comparison with other groups
- Sharing impressions of each other

These indicators lead us to a fuller understanding of transitional play. Many of the interactions have to do with testing leadership and rules, with the leader figures in
the group themselves playing an active role in engaging in those questions. In transitional play, group members are actively expressing a desire to expand the space within which they are interacting, by pointing out the variety in the group, by tapping into the most interesting topics for conversation, by comparing their way of doing things with that of others, and in some cases, by actively trying to take on new roles for themselves. At these times, the group felt particularly “alive,” and several group members verbally expressed their joy at being together. Transitional play was evident throughout the three months of the group’s interactions.

Transitional play enhances and expands the repertoire of possibilities for different games available to the group. Transitional play is thus similar to Nachmanovitch’s notion of ‘free play’ when he states that:

To play is to free ourselves from arbitrary restrictions and expand our field of action. Our play fosters richness of response and adaptive flexibility. This is the evolutionary value of play – play makes us flexible. By reinterpreting reality and begetting novelty, we keep from becoming rigid. Play enables us to rearrange our capacities and our very identity so that they can be used in unforeseen ways. (1990, p. 43)

Transitional play may lead to the widening of the infinite game in what Carse calls “horizontal growth” (literally, expanding the horizon). It may also increase the number of finite games being played. This idea of expanding the field of play takes us back to Carse’s notion of finite games within the infinite game, allowing us to reframe the image of game within a game in the following manner:
Figure 5: Transitional play may enlarge our space for playing the infinite game, or...

Figure 6: Transitional play may lead us to find more finite games to play.

Transitional play does not mean a transition is being attempted in one direction only, such play can lead from finite back to finite, from finite to infinite, from infinite
to infinite, from infinite to finite. In our group, we were able to observe how transitional play led to all four of these scenarios.

**Emerging Propositions**

We began our inquiry with an exploration of the nature of finite and infinite games in the context of our group. In this group, members made use of the infinite game more frequently over time, and spent increasingly less time in finite games (see Figure 4). However, we feel it would be premature to conclude that this is a generalizable observation, as each group is unique in character. What we do feel confident about relates to the oscillation that we observed as the group traveled through the two games. Both kinds of games seemed necessary to the group at different times of its life. Hence, the following proposition:

**Proposition 1:** Groups oscillate between finite games and the infinite game in their time together. These two games stand in stark contrast to each other.

We examined the contrast between the two kinds of games by juxtaposing their dimensions, and were able to make four obvious linkages between the two:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finite Game</th>
<th>Infinite Game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adherence to titles</td>
<td>Relating as Person to Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adherence to preset rules</td>
<td>Flexible rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Universal Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While in a finite game, players are highly aware of titles and rules, compete to win, and seek to enforce conformity within the group or team. In contrast, players
engaged in the infinite game find themselves in a place where they relate to each other
as people irrespective of their titles, no longer restrict themselves to preset rules, feel
and act according to a universal sense of connection, and seek to learn by discovery.
When we think of one group experiencing both games several times over the course of
a single two-hour session, we see that the players must somehow transcend one game
to access the other.

To understand this transcending as a group oscillates from one game to the
other, the concept of transitional play becomes pivotal. The arrows above can be
replaced with category indicators from our exploration of transitional play:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Finite Game</strong></th>
<th><strong>Transitional Play</strong></th>
<th><strong>Infinite Game</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adherence to titles</td>
<td>Demystifying titles</td>
<td>Relating as person to person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adherence to preset rules</td>
<td>Testing the rules</td>
<td>Flexible rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>Universal Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>Recognizing variety</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This juxtaposition affirmed our belief that transitional play is crucial in the
oscillation phenomenon. As group members engage in such transitional play, which
“fosters richness of response and adaptive flexibility” (Nachmanovitch, 43), they
become aware of the malleability of the rules by which they are playing. Transitional
play in and of itself also allows the group to build a wider repertoire of the possible
games to play.

Transitional play also plays a useful role in the context of Carse’s notion of the
veiled finite player:

Some self-veiling is present in all finite games. Players must intentionally forget the
inherently voluntary nature of their play, else all competitive effort will desert
them. (p. 15)
Thus, for players of a finite game, transitional play creates peepholes in the veil that they have fabricated for themselves, making other finite games and the infinite game available to them. Meanwhile, transitional play is equally helpful in revitalizing the group engaged in the infinite game, where players may at times feel lethargic because of the floating quality of its energy.

Through transitional play, choice becomes available to players of both games. They become aware that each finite game is but one possible game to play, and that there are endless ways in which to play the infinite game. In transitional play, group members appeared energized and animated: this may come with the growing awareness of the choices that are available to them and the prospect of a new journey. Such a journey may take them to the fields where other finite games are played or to ever new horizons of the infinite game of life.

The above inspired us to put forth a second proposition which relates specifically to transitional play:

**Proposition 2:** Through transitional play, choice about which game to play becomes available to the group.

Using the dimensions of the finite game, the infinite game and transitional play, we could develop this proposition more fully into sub-propositions that illustrate how transitional play plays itself out in the four dimensions:

**Proposition 2a:** When group members demystify titles and question authority, they may choose to continue adhering to them or to relate to each other as person to person.
Proposition 2b: When group members test rules guiding their behavior, they may choose to continue adhering to them or create rules to fit the particular occasion.

Proposition 2c: When group members express their joy at being together they may choose to continue competing with each other or seek to explore more fully their universal connection.

Proposition 2d: When group members recognize variety in their group, they may choose to continue seeking conformity or to engage with each other in conversations that lead to discovery.

There are three other dimensions of transitional play that did not fit neatly into linkages with the finite and infinite games, namely: moving with the group's energy, arranging space, and reflection and learning. We believe that these capture unique aspects of transitional play; therefore, they merit brief discussion here.

In transitional play, groups members find ways to locate and then move with the energy of the group. In our research, group members did this by exploring and observing group interest in conversational topics, when one person might suggest talking about something, and others chime in or suggest a different topic. Group members also developed identifying jokes about each other and were able to energize the group through humor and occasionally by expressing their emotions (be they of affection, loss, or anger) to each other. A third specific way our group moved with energy was through the use of fantasy, supported by metaphors and proverbs, which represented a means for group members to share possibilities for the group with others.

Particularly, the group's use of fantasy intrigued us. When a group uses fantasy it lives somewhere in between what is and what can be, in 'an intermediate area of experience' (Winnicott, 1957):
This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external shared reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work. A positive value of illusion can therefore be stated."

Fantasy can thus energize the group’s creative spirit and encourage it to move ahead in the direction of an enticing new possibility.

We also noticed that at the beginning of each session, group members would spend the initial few minutes in what became an almost ritualistic routine of arranging space and settling in: they would come in, move around tables and chairs, find their place, leave their things, go out, come back, heat up food, make a quick phone call, comment on each other’s food or new haircut, buy sodas for each other. Group members often engaged in small talk about their other courses, their weekends, their plans for the summer. If a person had been absent the session before, they would themselves make the effort to reconnect with one another. Once they were settled in this manner, a more formal conversation would begin. In this way, they seemed to make the stark space of a classroom more of a home for themselves.

In transitional play, group members engage in a variety of activities that reinforce reflection and learning from the experience of being together. For example, they may invite group members to reflect on a shared experience with statements such as: “What do you think about this?” or “I need to understand how you are seeing this.” They may also share some of the impressions they have of each other: “I see you as someone who talks a lot. Is that how you see yourself?” to enhance each other’s learning. Another type of reflecting we discerned was how some group
members explained the effect of the group on the self, such as “I feel like the group is putting a lot of pressure on me right now.”

A third aspect of reflection and learning was the group’s contact with other groups. This took place particularly during the tenth session when each group was split in half to meet with other half groups, and exchange ideas about how and what they’ve learned so far. These encounters engendered new perspectives on some of the issues the group was struggling with, such as how to manage differences between the talkers and the more quiet group members. In the flow of the group, reflection and learning often felt like stopping the game and taking a bit of a time out to think about what was going on.

These reflections on the additional dimensions of transitional play give rise to three more propositions:

**Proposition 3:** During transitional play, through exploring conversational topics, using humor, emotions, and fantasy, a group moves in the direction of its energy. This revitalizes the group.

**Proposition 4:** During transitional play, through ritualistic settling in and small talk, group members reconnect and prepare themselves for play.

**Proposition 5:** Transitional play sometimes means stopping the game and taking time out for reflection and learning. This allows group members to check the reality of the game they are playing and build a repertoire for possible future games.

**Some Concluding Remarks**

In the formulation of the above propositions, we emphasized the importance of transitional play, the phenomenon which became the focus of our inquiry in these pages. From our exploration into finite games, the infinite game, and transitional play,
we see that many more compelling propositions could emerge. These are nascent ideas that hold much promise for future research.

We are struck for instance, by the different uses of language, particularly metaphor in all three of the games. In the finite game, metaphor appears to be used in the service of upholding the boundaries, either with the outside or within subgroups or the group as a whole. Metaphorical statements such as “there’s a crack in the armor”, “this feels like a gang war” can also stress conformity. As discussed above, in reference to transitional play and fantasy, metaphors seem to be used for exploring other possible games to play, they are “an invitation to direct perception and enrich awareness” (Srivastva and Barrett, p. 35). It is in transitional play that people reframe metaphors, for example from a competitive team analogy to a more connective metaphor of musicians playing together. Metaphor seems to give way to storytelling in the infinite game. It is only in the infinite game that people tell the kinds of stories that invite other stories and develop what Bateson calls a language of relationship:

Since relationships are the essence of the living world one would do best, Bateson maintained, if one spoke a language of relationships to describe it. This is what stories do. Stories, Bateson would say, are the royal road to the study of relationships. (Capra, p. 78)

We are also intrigued by the different qualities of energy within the group when playing the different games. When in finite play, energy seems to be either aggressive, or even tense (the uncomfortable silence). In transitional play, there seems to be a vibrating bubbling restlessness, as group members use teasing humor, arrange and rearrange space, engage in small talk, question rules, test authority figures, and share impressions of each other. It is in this play that the group seems to be most focused on
determining where the energy is, and eager to build on it. In the infinite game, there
seems to be a calm, nurturing energy that is almost floating, and reminds us of Carse’s
image of tending the garden.

Finally, we are curious about how the dimension of time changes across the
games, and how it might affect a group’s ability to play both finite and infinite games.
Finite game players are tremendously aware of time, interjecting a conversation with
statements like “we’ve run out of time”, and “we need to get this done in ten minutes.”
Infinite players seem oblivious to time as it is measured in hours and minutes, but seem
to stretch time across multiple generations. How might time lead to an increased level
of comfort, feelings of affiliation, friendship, and familiarity among group members?
How would this in turn lead them towards choosing to play the infinite game or other
new finite games?

Our speculation about groups and play can go on and on, as we seek to play the
infinite game here in a finite paper ...
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