Chapter 6

Finite and Infinite Games:
A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility

While I was editing the previous chapter, my wife reminded me of a book that I had given her years ago: James Carse's *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility.* I thought it fitting to reacquaint myself with the contents of Carse's *New York Times* bestselling book, which, coincidently, was published the same time that Fred and I were collaborating on "Books With a Clear Heart: The Koans of Play and the Picture Books of Ezra Jack Keats." In fact, I'm surprised that Carse's book didn't appear in our bibliography, surprised given the resonance between Carse's ideas about play and our own. For instance, consider the conclusion of our article in which we state that play is universal, that the world is filled with playmates and playgrounds, and, perhaps most importantly, that the world that presents itself to us is our own playmind. How does this differ from Carse's observation: "What will undo any boundary is the awareness that it is our vision, and not what we are viewing, that is limited" (Carse 75). Are we not saying the same thing, just in a different way? There are many correspondences between our ideas about play and Carse's vision of life as play and possibility. The crossover is even more salient given our interest in Eastern philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism and Chinese Taoism, and Carse's interest in the history and literature of religion.

To gain a foothold into Carse's book, let's start with the opening lines: "There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning. An infinite game is played for the purpose of continuing the play" (Carse 3). Carse goes on to state that it is an invariable principle of all play "that whoever plays, plays freely," at the same time Carse states emphatically, "whoever *must* play, cannot *play*" (Carse 4). I am reminded of Keats's book *Goggles!* There seem to be two types of games being played throughout the course of Keats's picture book, with the pair of neighborhood "big boys" playing the *finite* game of capturing the motorcycle googles, and Peter and Archie, though willingly "playing" along with the "big boys," enjoying the *infinite* game of outsmarting their neighborhood pursuers in order to continue their own play with the googles.

Staying with our discussion of the work of Ezra Jack Keats, I thought it might be instructive to look at a few of Carse's ideas regarding the nature of finite and infinite games—and how each respective set of players plays—and relate them to specific books by Keats. Let's start with Carse's ideas about "boundaries" and Keats's book *Pet Show!*

The Nature of Boundaries

When it comes to boundaries, Carse identifies three domains: temporal, spatial, and numerical. Of the two types of games, finite and infinite, finite games have the most pronounced and consensually agreed-upon boundaries. Take football for instance, it is played over the course of four 15-minute periods (temporal), on a gridded 100-yard field (spatial), with 11 players on the field for each team at a time (numerical). You could take any number of finite games (especially related to competitive sports) and find similar demarcations related to the temporal, spatial, and numerical dimensions of the game. Such demarcations or "rules" are essential for finite games since the outcome is to produce a winner. Without rules there is no game; without a game there is no winner.

Infinite games stand in stark contrast to finite games in this regard. If the purpose of an infinite game is to continue play, then having rules to regulate the temporal, spatial, and numerical dimensions of the game runs contradictory to this aim. As Carse states, "Infinite players cannot say when their game begins, nor do they care. They do not care for the reason that their game is not bounded by time. Indeed, the only purpose of the game is to prevent it from coming to an end, to keep everyone in play" (Carse 8). The same is true for spatial and numerical boundaries: play can happen, not only any time, but anywhere and with any number of players.

In Keats's book *Pet Show!,* there do seem to be boundaries related to the forthcoming neighborhood event (there's a prescribed date, time, and expectation for pet entries), but as the story unfolds we find that almost all of the boundaries are relaxed, if not discarded: anyone who wants to enter may enter; any pet is acceptable, even Al, Archie's pet "germ." Most importantly, everyone gets a ribbon, which means everyone is a winner. This is an excellent example of Carse's notion of an infinite game where play is extended to all who wish to participate and for as long as the play can be sustained.

In both finite and infinite games there are rules, however they operate in very different ways in each domain. When it comes to finite games, rules of play must be established ahead of time, and they must be consensually agreed upon by all parties—players, coaches, umpires, referees, judges, even spectators. In short, by knowing what the rules are, we know what the game is. But rules are not laws, they are regulations that establish a range of limitations on player behavior; the best rules constrain the freedom of players while allowing considerable room for choice within those constraints.

An important point Carse makes is that the rules of a game, decided ahead of time, may not be changed during the course of play (if they are, either play abruptly stops or players recognize that a different game is being played). Here, Carse finds a most critical distinction between finite and infinite play: Whereas the rules of a finite game are not only agreed upon ahead of time, but

they are also fixed during play; the rules of an infinite game *must change* in the course of play in order "to prevent anyone from winning the game and to bring as many persons as possible into the play" (Carse 11). This confirms the "game" played in *Pet Show!* It is an infinite game, a game with fluid boundaries that is inclusive of everyone (even the "bag lady" who brings Archie's stray cat to the show) and it is a game that has no winners or losers (as I mentioned earlier, everyone receives a ribbon, even Archie for his pet germ). Just another way of saying that while finite players play within boundaries, infinite players play with boundaries.

Transformed by Surprise

Carse has a lot to say about the nature of surprise as it pertains to both finite and infinite games. In a finite game, let's say the game of chess, surprise is the triumph of the past over the future. What does Carse mean by this? Simply, the master chess player who knows what moves are to be made (due to the scrupulous study of chess moves across many recorded chess matches) has a decisive advantage over the novice player who does not possess the knowledge to know what moves can be made. As Carse puts it, "A finite player is trained not only to anticipate every future possibility, but to control the future to *prevent* it from altering the past" (Carse 22).

This is quite different from the infinite player who continues to play *in the expectation* of being surprised. In fact, if surprise is no longer possible, according to Carse, infinite play ceases. Put another way, if surprise causes finite play to end, it is the reason for infinite play to continue. In this sense, then, just as surprise in finite play is the triumph of the past over the future, in infinite play surprise is the triumph of the future over the past, because with each surprise the past reveals a new beginning in itself (Carse 22). Infinite players, therefore, prepare themselves to be surprised by the future, and, as such, they play in complete openness; it is not an openness, however, as in *candor*, but an openness as in *vulnerability* (Carse 23). Moreover, and profoundly, "The infinite player does not expect only to be amused by surprise, but to be transformed by it, for surprise does not alter some abstract past, but one's own personal past" (Carse 23).

Let's apply these ideas to Keats's book *Hi, Cat!* (a book that I looked at in an earlier chapter through the lens of pretense and sensorimotor play; but now let's apply Carse's understanding of play to it). In the opening scene of *Hi, Cat!* we find Archie wandering the neighborhood looking for his friends. Two things happen in this scene: first of all, Archie sees someone new on the block—a stray cat, to which he says hello—and, as he strolls by a storefront window, Archie notices that the ice-cream cone he is eating has given him a mustache, whereupon, rounding the corner and seeing his friends, he pretends to be a stoop-shouldered old man. After Willie licks Archie's ice-cream cone mustache, Archie disappears, only to reappear wearing a large paper bag decorated with a giant smiling face, in time for Peter to announce, "Make way for Mr. Big Face." All is well until the stray cat climbs inside the bag, making Archie uncomfortable, resulting in

Archie and the cat exploding out of the bag in different directions. As the neighborhood kids begin to leave, quick-thinking Archie shouts, “Wait—wait—the show will go on! See the tallest dog in the world take a walk!” As Willie begins to walk across a makeshift stage, he sees the stray cat and bolts from Peter’s shoulders to chase the feline intruder, leaving Peter and Archie and a rather tattered Mr. Big Face to ponder their afternoon escapade.

At the heart of this book is the ever-present sense of surprise: at every turn of the page, something new appears, something that both surprises Archie and his friends, but also upends the past, while creating new possibilities for the future. We know that the play that Archie and his friends are engaged in is infinite: it has no boundaries (or at least they are changing every few minutes), and it is full of surprise: in fact, multiple surprises that enable the play to continue. This is verbalized by Archie when he shouts, “Wait—wait—the show will go on!” Yes, the show will go on, as long as there are no boundaries and a surprise around every corner.

The uproarious nature of *Hi, Cat!* begs the question: What does it mean to be playful? According to Carse, “We are playful when we engage others at the level of choice, when there is no telling in advance where our relationship with them will come out—when, in fact, no one has an outcome to be imposed on the relationship, apart from the decision to continue it” (Carse 19). We see this in Archie’s fluid nature: he is open to everything and anything. This does not mean that his play is trivial or frivolous, that nothing of consequence will happen as a result of it. On the contrary, according to Carse, when we are playful with each other and relate to each other as free persons, then and only then is our relationship open to surprise. In this context, in the context of an infinite game, everything that happens is of consequence. It is “seriousness” that closes itself to consequence, for seriousness is dread of the unpredictable outcome of open possibility. In other words, according to Carse: “To be serious is to press for a specified outcome. To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself” (Carse 19). In Archie’s case, it is the loss—albeit temporarily—of Archie’s recently befriended stray cat.

Power vs. Strength

One of Carse’s most interesting discussions involves the difference between power and strength. According to Carse, while a finite player plays *to be* powerful, an infinite player plays *with* power. To differentiate between the two, Carse uses “strength” rather than power when talking about the infinite player. The two are not synonymous: whereas power is finite in amount and intensity; strength, though detectable, cannot be measured, primarily because it is an opening, not a closing act. Here are some other distinctions between the two:

> A powerful person is one who brings the past to an outcome, settling all its unresolved issues. A strong person is one who carries the past into the future, showing that none of its issues is capable of resolution. Power is concerned with what has

> already happened; strength with what has yet to happen. Power refers to the freedom persons have within limits, strength to the freedom persons have with limits. (Carse 38-39)

Finally, after describing the ironic nature of power (those who display it the most are usually the least secure and powerful), Carse describes the paradoxical nature of strength: "I am not strong because I can force others to do what I wish *as a result of my play with them*, but because I can allow them to do what they wish *in the course of my play with them*" (Carse 39). Here, I'm reminded of Fred Donaldson's ideas about the nature of rough-and-tumble play, how players give space and autonomy to each other, never forcing a movement or dominating the other player, but allowing the mutually shared energy to dictate the next move or attitude.

Let's apply the principles of strength and power to one of Ezra Jack Keats's books. The one that comes to mind first is *Regards to the Man in the Moon*. The book opens with Louie saddened by what the neighborhood kids are calling his stepfather—*Junkman.* Rather than responding adversely to the accusation (a sign of the need for manifest power), Barney, Louie's stepfather, reframes the accusation (a sign of inner strength and self-confidence), telling a disheartened Louie, "They should know better than to call this junk. All a person needs is some imagination!" Louie agrees and together they begin to assemble odds and ends from the junkyard into a "spaceship."

When the neighborhood kids snicker at Louie, scoffing, "Is that Voyager III?" Louie retorts, "No, it's IMAGINATION I!" With this response we begin to see Louie's growing self-confidence: he has no need to "power" his way through his friends' taunts, just to trust himself, his ideas, and, given Barney's encouragement, to rely on his emerging inner strength. Intrigued, Susie joins him, and the two "Blast off!" the next morning. But once in space, staring down at planet Earth, they get scared, still they continue on, mesmerized by all that they see, until they are jolted to a standstill. It's Ziggie and Ruthie who have followed them, hitching their bathtub spaceship to Louie and Susie's makeshift spacecraft. This is a crucial point in the story, one that points to the difference between strength and power. Ziggie and Ruthie are also scared, admitting that they are stuck and can't move. Why? Because they've used up all of their imagination.

The idea that they can't move, that they are frozen in time and space, is quite telling, and reminds me of Carse's observation: whereas power is finite in amount and intensity; strength, though detectable, cannot be measured, primarily because it is an opening, not a closing act. Whereas power, or the lack thereof, closes us off to new possibilities, strength opens us up, enabling us to "imagine" (rather than "power") our way out of even the diciest situation.

And that's what Louie and Susie do, except they don't use *their* imagination to get Ziggie and Ruthie unstuck. Instead, they argue that the only way for Ziggie and Ruthie to get unstuck—

to move again—is to use their own imagination; it's the only way they can free themselves from immobility and self-doubt. This is precisely what Carse means when he talks about the paradoxical nature of strength. Let me reiterate: "I am not strong because I can force others to do what I wish *as a result of my play with them*, but because I can allow them to do what they wish *in the course of my play with them*" (Carse 39). In the course of their play with Ziggie and Ruthie, Louie and Susie encourage the tag-along duo to use their imagination: they do, and the foursome, after navigating a monster-laden asteroid field, return home, only to convince all of the neighborhood kids to join them the following morning on another out-of-this-world adventure.

For such a slim volume, Carse's book contains a mountain of ideas. As Robert Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, wrote in his endorsement on the inside front flap of Carse's book: "Normally we add new facts to existing knowledge. But once in a while a book like this comes along and does just the opposite—it adds a new pattern of knowledge to existing facts. The result is striking. Old dull things you've known for years suddenly stand up in a whole new dimension." Taken as a whole, the picture books of Ezra Jack Keats do the same: they present the world of children in an entirely new light, certainly new for their time, and they continue to do so, staying relevant, inspiring, and instructive more than half a century later.

Notes

The contents of this chapter lean heavily on James Carse's seminal work *Finite and Infinite Play: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility,* published in 1986 by Ballantine Books. Admittedly, I only touch the surface of Carse's provocative ideas, as such—and I cannot overstate this—it is a book well worth reading in its entirety.