The Art of Play
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Abstract
In this address, I will defend a version of an aesthetic hypothesis, which is an idea associated with many philosophers and prominent thinkers. The aesthetic hypothesis is that the way to live a good life, a happy life, is to consider that life as a work of art, and to see that the aesthetic dimension of one’s consciousness, where pleasure is taken from beauty and harmony, is the primary one. I want to argue that those aesthetic values, properly conceived, are at the very heart of being human. I then explain the ‘art of play’ as a doubled phrase in what follows. There is the art of play that is learning how to play or thinking about what it is to play; but there is also the kind of play that is particular to art—not just visual art but aesthetic values in general. I’m going to talk about these ideas along five dimensions. (1) Time - Play at its best takes place within, and allows, that temporal shift. It is the entry into a non-secular time. When we come to talk about finite games we will see how time is both kept and not kept in games. (2) Play - There are many different ways we can conceive of play, and its relation to temporal shifts. Play can be analyzed as a form of socialization, communication, creative imagination, relationship building, and transcendental play. (3) Finite Games - Games and play are not identical categories. Games are organized forms of play. Finite games are games that come to some kind of conclusion. In philosophical terms this outcome would be the telos or final cause of the game—the purpose of the game. (4) Outcomes – What are the outcomes that we derive from finite games beyond winning and losing? At least since Plato and Aristotle, people have believed that the importance of games was that they created a kind of competitive wisdom: agon, the competition-born wisdom of play. (5) Infinite Games – What can we say in conclusion about infinite games and the art of play? We play infinite games in a manner that extends right back to the earliest forms of pretending: We do it, because it is fun. But an infinite game is more than just fun—or perhaps I should say that fun is more philosophically significant than we sometimes think.

Introduction
When I got the invitation from Dr. Wong to participate in the Meaning Conference, it was the first time I had heard of the International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM). When that happens, as it sometimes does, my curiosity about the history and mission—as philosophers would say the telos, or final cause – of any organization is piqued. So I’ve been spending lots of time looking at INPM’s online trace. Online trace is such, now, that it’s creating a kind of extended personality or consciousness of both organizations and persons. We all know this, but the implications of it are not entirely clear to us yet. In an older model of extended consciousness, my consciousness might extend physically: Beyond the limits of my body, say, by means of things such as a cane that helps me see, or with communications media that allow my voice to traverse large distances, and so on. These are spatial extensions of consciousness.

But now we also have temporal extension of consciousness; that is to say, earlier versions of ourselves trail after us in this online trace and in lots of cases they can be very hard to eradicate, supposing you wanted to do that. I am interested in a question of what these traces say about the very idea of consciousness, and of the individual. I think we’re in transition concerning the very nature of individuality, and that is partly the focus of my discussion. This large question of changing consciousness may not be an obvious focus of the paper, given its title, but I hope the contours of this question will emerge as a property of our time together.

To that end, in what follows I will defend a version of an aesthetic hypothesis, which is an idea associated with many philosophers and prominent thinkers such as Nietzsche and even, in his own fashion, Plato. The aesthetic hypothesis is that the way to live a good life, a happy life, is to consider that life as a work of art, and to see that the aesthetic dimension of one’s consciousness, where pleasure is taken from beauty and harmony, is the primary one. This position might seem strange, because we tend to think of aesthetic values as secondary or even tertiary to other kinds of values: perhaps ethical ones, political ones, family-based or kinship values, and so on. But I want to suggest to you in the course of this argument that those aesthetic values, properly conceived, are at the very heart of being human, and being conscious; and moreover that they are the locus of the most important and lasting meanings of which human consciousness is capable.

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The ‘art of play’ is a doubled phrase. That is, the ‘of’ here is a grammatical double generative: there is the art of play that is learning how to play or thinking about what it is to play; but there is also the kind of play that is particular to art—not just visual art but aesthetic values in general. I am, in turn, playing with that doubleness—the art of play, the play of art—in what follows. I’m going to talk about these ideas along five dimensions.

The first of these is Time, about which more in a moment. The second is Play itself: I want to investigate this mostly philosophically, but I hope you’ll see that there are enough points of contact with psychological discourses to make sense to people in this field. Philosophers and psychologists don’t talk to each other nearly enough, but we’re starting. Third, Finite Games, I will talk about what they are and both what they can and cannot do. Fourth, I will address the Outcomes of finite games and the risks associated with those outcomes. And finally, I will investigate Infinite Games. Influential background ideas here include the work of James P. Carse on finite and infinite games, and the work of Bernard Suits in his book The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia (1978), both of which address what is sometimes called ludics, or the philosophy of play.

1. Time

So let us consider time first of all. It may seem strange to talk about time as the first point with respect to play, but what I want to suggest first of all is that play is a form of shifting time—temporal shifting—and the most obvious way in which that is true, is that playing is time out of time.

The idea of the temporal shift has a long and cluttered history, in philosophy and in other traditions, particularly religious ones: the concept of the Sabbath, or sacred day, the time that is different, time that is not secular. I want to use these religious ideas without any particular religious connotation. That is, I want to use them diacritically. We can talk about the sacred without committing ourselves, or needing to commit ourselves, to a religious position. On this diacritical view, the sacred can be understood simply as that which is not the secular. That which is not the secular, a phrase that means of the age, is therefore whatever is not the everyday or the workaday. The sacred’s power of difference, what we might call its diacritical leverage, is what makes the move from secular to sacred a temporal shift.

Play at its best takes place within, and allows, that temporal shift. It is the entry into a non-secular time. When we come to talk about finite games we will see how time is both kept and not kept in games. In everyday life, the most common experience of time, shown among other things in the persistence of memory, is of a kind of dominance. That is, we are burdened by time. We have to spend time, we have to waste time, we have to save time. These common notions of saving and spending in themselves show that there is an economy of workaday time, secular time, which is already transactional. We save it or we spend it, and often we are criticized for how we spend it or whether we save it. Everywhere in the secular realm, we are expected to be on time, sometimes we have to make time, or make up time, and so on.

Salvador Dali’s (1931) painting, titled The Persistence of Memory, gives a graphic (if surreal) expression to a specific experience of time and memory, in particular the uncanny texture of having one’s personhood constituted, or overwritten, by the variable faculty of memory across temporal ranges: having to, among other things, reconstitute one’s personal identity each morning by recalling the night before and the constructed continuity of all the previous nights, mornings, and days in between. But this image also conveys the larger sense that measured time, the time of the melting, creepy clock, is everywhere in our lives; and how we must structure our lives relentlessly according to that secular time. This is the time of, let us say, appointment, of always having to be somewhere, and to be there on time. Now it is obviously true that some things are simply impossible, things such as efficiency but also higher-order human goods such as cooperation and shared projects, without such appointed time. We cannot get together and do things unless we have an appointed time at which that will happen. We would not be here in this room at 3 pm, more or less, without that kind of time. But the idea of play as a diacresis on that time, something that shifts away from it, is very powerful and important to our deeper sense of ourselves. Not surprisingly, play and its associated playtime—the time out of time—has existed in every culture and tradition that we know of.

This famous painting by Pieter Bruegel, Children’s Games (1560), is a depiction of play, but it is not just a social document. Social historians have examined this famous painting and found something like thirty-five or thirty-seven games actually being played. It is a beautiful example of a kind of social history, but the most important thing about this scene as depicted is that these people are not working. They are outside of the workaday; they are in a different time. It happens that they are here in this public space, which is another aspect of the sacred, at least potentially, since such space, owned by everyone and no one, is never subject to transaction and the use values of the secular. This dream of the non-secular, playful time has been, as I said, part of every cultural tradition we know. Another, earlier example of its physical manifestation is Babylon, the idea of Babylon as a pleasure garden: a place where that time of play is instantiated concretely. You may
object that this is a dream, a mad utopian vision. Perhaps. The interesting thing to me is the persistence of this dream, our ongoing willingness to entertain new versions of it.

This is a sketch by the Situationist architect Constant Nieuwenhuys and his project the New Babylon. The Situationists were post-Second World War intellectuals and activists who wanted to reintroduce playful, disruptive elements into what they saw as the gridded regularity of late capitalist life. So, famously, Guy Debord, the leading thinker among the Situationists, invited us to participate in what he called the derive, the drift: to go in unexpected ways rather than along the standard directions. The idea here is to reclaim the streets and places of the city by not using them the way they are ordained to be used, by breaking the bonds of use. Nieuwenhuys, influenced by these ideas, designs an ideal city he self-consciously called the New Babylon, to forge a link with that earlier concrete vision. This is the sort of thing that no architect today could ever try to get past his or her supervisor: a total re-imagination of human civilization and all forms of dwelling. Constant reasoned this way: If we create a city that is like the old Babylon, a concrete instantiation of the temporal shift of play, then we will be finally liberated from all the forms of pressure that have ever been institutionalized. His design is thus one of those great moments where political theory meets concrete building practice.

Now, in fact, this project was never built! But it has all kinds of great manifesto elements around it. There should be multiple levels and people should be able to drop or rise levels at will, so that they have all kinds of unexpected encounters with fellow citizens. Every moment is a moment of spontaneous engagement with the other. Wall-to-wall play, in other words. For some people, of course, this might sound like hell. As in, “Wait a second, a couple spontaneous interactions a day is plenty, thank you very much.” In a sense this vision is, really, a total annihilation of the idea of the private. The private, which has been historically aligned with property and the retreat into the domestic, is obliterated by this new urban scene. Our status as fellow citizens is foregrounded constantly.

I said it has never been built, but some models have been built, and this image is just for your interest. You can see the different levels. If you ever played with building toys as a child, you can see some of the modernist forms that were popular in the decades after the Second World War. Not the Lego style, but the space-age, futuristic toys that some of us had in the 1960s and '70s. Of course, no 20th-century utopian architecture is complete without gyrocopters in the helipad at the top of the building.

2. Play

There are many different ways we can conceive of play, and its relation to temporal shifts. Let us consider some of the most central conceptions.

In the natural world, which includes us of course, but looking at the world as a deployment of species and their existence within an environment, play can be analyzed as a form of socialization. Socialization is not as simple as it sounds, however, because the playful bite that is not a real bite is not just a matter of socializing. It is also a matter of communicating: it communicates the kind of irony of which non-human animals are capable. That is, the wolf is able to send the message, “This is play. I am biting you without really biting you.” The bite is “just a nip,” as people would say, a playful bite; that message goes along with the bite itself. Furthermore, of course, in pack animals this kind of play can establish position. So when the play results in the performance of submission, then the dominant play-fighter establishes position without actually having to fight the submissive. And this is important to the survival of packs, to the order and flourishing of the species. Play takes on this kind of role in a natural environment through this kind of natural display.

Humans do it too. I have two brothers, and I have the scars to show it. The cuts, the bruises, the broken arm. I won’t tell the story of the broken arm here, as it still kind of pains me to think about my brother breaking my arm; but he did. Was it playful? Yes, I can say that now. And as with animals at play—the non-human animals—when human animals are at play they are doing the same kinds of things: socializing, communicating, and sometimes establishing position. We humans are doing a lot of other things when we relate to each other, because we have higher-order consciousness and are always learning how to create skills that will be transferrable to other parts of life. There has been a lot of interest recently in sibling studies, in how siblings’ behaviour creates skills and competencies for relationships, for work, and so on. One of the many ways we acquire those skills is through play.

A third way, or concept, of play is the idea of play as a kind of thinking: free-ranging creative imagining. We sometimes call this process ‘brainstorming’, or ‘idea-floating’, or (one of my favourites) ‘blueskying.’ The idea is that by playing around with things, by having a non-directed encounter with each other, we can actually do better and achieve more than if we were constrained by an actual direction. Some people don’t think it works. This image might be a little self-indulgent but what is play for if not that? This mind-map is probably the ultimate mind-map; for me, it puts a line under the very idea of mind-mapping.
And, finally, in this preparatory vein, note that humans engage, as do other animals, in sexual foreplay. Sexual foreplay can include, in my conception here, flirting and other forms of behaviour which are allowing us to act in ways that may or may lead to further acts of procreation that sustain our position in the natural environment. From a strictly biological point of view, foreplay is unnecessary and, indeed, there are many people who go along with that theory if they can find partners who are willing to tolerate them. In one strict sense, foreplay has no utility. It’s not biologically necessary to procreation that there shall be flirting and foreplay, but typically we take pleasure from these behaviours and, moreover, they allow us to establish relationships and ongoing intimacy as well as to procreate. In this larger sense, foreplay does have social utility, just not one directly related to biological procreation. I nsofar as the creation of relationships and intimacy is important to us, it is literally unimaginable to have a full life without this third form of play.

What I am going to suggest now is that all of these ways of thinking about play, however correct they are within their own areas, fail to see the big picture. They do not see what I am going to call the transcendental aspect of play. To see what I mean, let us look briefly at some analysis of what goes on in certain kinds of play, crucially in the play of pretending. This follows, in outline, the work of Donald Winnicott and other Freudian-influenced child psychologists. On this psychoanalytical view, what is important about play is not just its ability to socialize, or to instrumentally serve other desired ends, whether in the services of ideas, procreation, or intimacy; what is important is to pretend on purpose but without purpose.

I said earlier that the animals are enacting their own, limited form of irony with the bite that is not a real bite. Humans are capable of much more complex forms and layers of pretending, ironizing means. Consider the little girl with her teddy bear. What is she doing? She is feeding the teddy bear. There are at least two levels of meaning here: her play may seem simple but is actually quite complex. The bear is not a real bear, and she is not really feeding it because, in being not a real bear, it cannot ingest the morsel of food. If you asked the girl what she is doing, she would say, “I’m feeding my bear.” The pretended deflections from the real state of affairs allows us to create levels of consciousness, and the ability to make this kind of distinction, between real and pretend, even as we decide to ignore it in the service of play. This strange contract of consciousness with itself—to create something unreal, and then treat it precisely as real—is at the heart of our appreciation of higher-order forms of pretending such as literature. We observe here the layered “as if” consciousness, or the suspension of disbelief.

This form of play brings us closer to the transcendental. How so? Notice that feeding the bear doesn’t have a purpose, indeed can have no purpose, since it is not a real bear and it is not eating. The bear will be just as nourished, or non-nourished, before and after the feeding session. What, then, is the point of doing it? It is precisely to enact this simultaneous is/is-not consciousness of pretending. If you were to ask why she is making these motions, given that the bear is not a bear and cannot eat—the questions only a psychologist or a spoilsport would imagine asking—she might respond, perhaps impatiently, “Because the bear is hungry.” It is not the place of the non-pretender to end the double consciousness; only the pretender has that privilege, and responsibility.

Consider some similar examples. A pointed finger becomes the gun. But notice that there is, once again, more than one level in play. With a pretend gun, I can shoot real enemies. To be sure, this is not recommended! If you were to go down the street going BANG! BANG! BANG! with a pretend gun, ‘shooting’ people you really don’t like, even strangers, that is considered assault under the Common Law of this country. Yes, it’s true: you can be arrested on the charge of assault for pretend-shooting someone, and a defence hinging on the fact that the gun was only a pretend gun may or may not help you. Of course, you can also be arrested for really shooting someone, but I feel compelled to issue this fair warning against pretend shooting: the play of pretending takes you out of the mundane realities of the everyday world, perhaps, but others are still in that world, and may judge you according to its standards.

So, one can (a) pretend to shoot real enemies by aiming a pretend gun at them (the cocked finger); and one can (b) really shoot real enemies with a real gun. But there are at least four other logical possibilities in play here, and they illustrate the levels and complexity of any and all pretending. In addition, then, one can (c) pretend to shoot real enemies with a real gun, by not firing it but instead shouting (say), “Bang, bang, you’re dead.” This, too, constitutes an assault under the law, perhaps even more obviously than the ‘real’ shot from the pretend gun. One can also (d) pretend to shoot pretend enemies with a real gun, as when, for instance, I am joking around with my (real) gun and ‘playfully’ point it at a friend. Not a good idea, as gun-accident statistics demonstrate. And though it is a little hard to imagine the circumstance that would call for it, except within the details of a complicated game, it is logically possible that one can (e) pretend-shoot pretend enemies with a pretend gun. Why? To confuse another player in the game? To complete some ruse de guerre? I don’t know, but logic demands the option—though it also throws open a host of possible second- and third-order pretending
possibilities within a given game. And, finally, in what is very likely the most common case of pretending when it comes to
guns and play, the paradigm case that implies all the others, one can (f) shoot pretend enemies with a pretend gun.

When my brothers and I took up our imagined space-man and cowboy adventures as children, we were almost
certainly performing the last of these forms of deflection from the real (not a real gun, not a real enemy). We would shoot a
pretend enemy with a pretend weapon, and he would pretend die. We might, if the right toys were on hand, substitute a fake
gun—a gun made of plastic, resembling a real gun, or fantastic science-fiction-style gun, also made of plastic but not
resembling a real gun—in place of the hand with pointed finger. But I want to say that the gun-as-gun thing is actually
essential to the performance of pretending, because here we perform the basic deflection of meaning without anything
except the imagined similarity between the index finger and the gun’s barrel, the fist’s sense of gripping something, the
raised thumb’s ability to recall a cocked trigger on a single-action revolver.

There are many lurking limits to this kind of play, as my references to the force of law indicate, but of course the
obvious limit is reality itself. This makes it clear that the space in which this common, but in fact profound, kind of play
is possible is at the edge of the real—going beyond it. The kind of play evident in pretending is all about the world of the
game not being real, conceptually moving away from the presumed limits of reality. Those limits can be painful, as I have
suggested. When the pretend pistols go up against the actual police force, that is almost a bad thing. In all seriousness, I
cannot say you should do it.

3. Finite Games

Gathering some of these insights together, what can we say about transcendental play? I want to be clear, first, that
games and play are not identical categories. Games are organized forms of play; they have elements that might not be
playful. Finite games are games that come to some kind of conclusion, and the conclusion governs how the game is played
and what the game means. In philosophical terms this outcome would be the telos or final cause of the game—the purpose
of the game. To accept this point, you don’t have to be Vince Lombardi and say, “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only
thing.” You need not be quite that strict about the telos to recognize that a finite game has an outcome. We play until we
reach some kind of conclusion.

In certain kinds of finite games called sports, especially the category of territorial finite games that includes
hockey, football, and soccer, we create a gamespace in order to give the contest shape and help achieve the outcome. That
is, we construct a very particular kind of constrained arena or forum, a deployment of bounded space which also operates
according to a logic of bounded time, set off from ordinary spaces and times. But this constrained time, though distinct
from the pervasive time of the world outside the sport—it can be started and stopped, for example, or extended into
overtime, even into that pinnacle of sporting drama, sudden-death overtime—does not yet achieve the temporal shift of
transcendental play, because this time, like the time outside in the rest of the everyday world, is regulated. So, for example,
in a hockey game there are three periods of twenty minutes; in a football game, there are four quarters of fifteen minutes,
and so on. Even though this gametime can be counted down dramatically, stopped and started, its actions even captured and
studied in slow-motion replays which effectively slow time below the experiential threshold, it is still working according to
the logic of the outside, chronological time. The gametime is, as it were, a way of bringing that outside time into the
constrained space and squeezing it for dramatic effect. That fact is important because it will show that these games are
unstable with respect to realizing the transcendental possibilities of play.

By creating a constrained space, we strive to force a heightened outcome. That is what the field of sport does.
There are often arguments, within the game’s logic, about how exactly the space is arranged. Consider the hockey rink. If
you are familiar with the game, you know that there are ongoing disputes about whether there should be a red line, whether
you can have rink-long passes, or whether they should be shorter passes. There is an icing rule, which prevents the puck
from being moved without certain kinds of control. Most significantly, there are the blue lines, which create the possibility
of ‘offside’ calls. Going offside is important in territorial games because it creates a limit, such that all attacks on the goal
shall be, as it were, square and just. There would be no need for an offside rule if this notion of fair territorial confrontation
were not itself generated by the idea of the game’s constraints. We want the outcome to have a certain kind of character. So
you are forbidden from hanging around down in your opponent’s end when the puck is behind you: hockey’s offside rule
dictates that you cannot advance into the opponent’s end ahead of the puck. In soccer, by contrast, there is also an offside
rule but there is no painted line, only the imaginary line that goes through the body of the final defender in front of the
goaltender. Hence the possibility, in soccer, of the ‘offside trap’, where the attacker is left hanging without the ball by the
defenders running upfield. This is a risky tactic, and a neat nuance of the offside rule’s inner meaning: maintaining fairness.
Non-territorial games are equally interesting precisely because they do not have this kind of spatial limitation to force face-to-face contact but nevertheless strive to achieve interesting, and final, outcomes. Non-territorial games lack the warlike quality of territorial games and so can arrange their gameplay differently, without face-to-face lines of conflict on grids or roughly rectangular plots of property. Baseball is my favourite example of the non-territorial finite game. It takes place in a space that is interestingly constrained along conventional, but not arbitrary, lines. The conventional distance between first base and home plate, for example, is ninety feet. Why is it ninety feet? The question is rhetorical. Do we want to say, “Well, that’s what Abner Doubleday said” or “Well, that’s what God told Abner Doubleday to say.” No, the reason the distance is ninety feet is a matter of pure, stipulated convention--although there is some validity in the suggestion that baseball is awash in threes and nines (three bases, three strikes, three outs; nine players, nine innings, the distance from home plate to the pitcher's mound - sixty feet six inches, etc.). But even if we dismiss this claim of numerical mysticism and insist on pure conventionality, that does not mean the distance could just as easily be some other, say eighty-five or ninety-five feet. In order for the game to be the game, to serve its finite purpose, there has to be some suspense in the possibility of reaching first base, given the ability of athletic human beings and the equipment of the game. If you are a fan of baseball you know that reaching first base is much harder than it looks. The very best hitters get to first base, on hits anyway, something less than four times out of ten. Consider this: there has not been a professional baseball player who hit more than four times out of ten for a whole season since Ted Williams.

Fascinating for baseball fans, too, is that this non-territorial game puts us in a different relationship with time. Time in baseball is not told in minutes and hours; it is told in outs and innings. A baseball game can take as little time as an hour and as much time as eight, ten, twelve hours. In fact, theoretically, a baseball game can go on forever. If the score is high and nobody ever gets a winning run in extra innings, there is nothing in the rules of baseball to stop the game never ending. Meanwhile, the foul lines in baseball, before the invention of outfield fences, which vary from park to park, were considered to extend to infinity. If you extend them in this manner, the field theoretically encompasses the entire earth. Baseball is thus a game that encompasses the entire earth and can last forever. No wonder philosophers like it so much; by contrast hockey and football are boring, they’re just analogues of war.

We can also consider, here, more specific kinds of contests, playful sporting contests, such as the confrontation between individuals in boxing. We create the ring; the ring can then become a metaphor or a synecdoche for any constrained conflict. You will find it in political rhetoric: to enter the ring, to throw your hat in the ring, to call in your second, and so on. The idea is that this is a conflict and the ring is not just a physical space anymore, it is a metaphorical space. Tennis has a similar quality, though here, as David Foster Wallace argued, your opponent is not actually the person on the other side of the net. Your opponent is yourself, tennis being, unlike boxing, not a game of direct conflict but a game, as it were, about geometric conflict, a constrained confrontation with space itself: can I bend my return such that it both passes the outstretched racquet of my opponent and manages to strike the earth within the tight confines of the court.

Now we are getting to the center of finite games. I said before that they are unstable, and in part that is because they can never quite resist the infinite elements that keep creeping in—the elements of transcendent play. Consider an image of a football field, marked according to the conventions of its finiteness. But what does a football game actually look like? The field seen from ninety vertical degrees is an abstraction. A football game looks like the beautiful moment when a thrown pass hits a downfield receiver in midstride. You can draw up a play, the coach can give the players their assignments, but when they execute the play there is something absolutely incalculable about the success of a thrown pass. We might say, loosely, that the quarterback ‘calculates’ the distance from his position in the pocket to where the receiver will be, but in fact he does nothing of the sort. In philosophical terms, he is not engaged in Cartesian geometry, he is engaged in lifeworld phenomenology. When you are a good quarterback, you don’t measure distances, you exercise skillful judgment and throw to the spot you know the receiver will occupy. That is what it means to be good at this sport, to execute the play you might have learned from the diagram. This interesting incalculability lingers at the center of what looks like the most finite, constrained, drawn-up game.

This is the beauty of any finite game, ultimately: not the contest itself, and certainly not the field, but the moments of pure connection created from within the constraints. That is when you can say, with some plausibility, football is poetry in motion. That is when you have an aesthetic appreciation of the game. We might call this aesthetic dimension the whiff of the transcendent, or the non-finite, in this particular finite game. (There is, to be sure, unsettling violence at the heart of this same game, which makes appreciation of it an uneasy business; I note this point without being able to develop it here.)

I want to make the point about instability in a different way by quoting a famous passage from a work of J. D. Salinger called Seymour: An Introduction. The scene is in Manhattan, at the magic moment of dusk. Two boys are playing marbles while a third, a brother of one of the players, is watching, then commenting on the play. “Could you try not aiming
so much?” he asked, still standing there. “If you hit him when you aim, it’ll just be luck.” He was speaking, communicating, and yet not breaking the spell. I then broke it, quite deliberately. “How can it be luck if I aim?” I said back to him, not loud but with rather more irritation in my voice than I was actually feeling. He didn’t say anything for a moment but simply stood balanced on the curb, looking at me, I knew imperfectly, with love. “Because it will be,” he said. “You’ll be glad if you hit his marble—Ira’s marble—won’t you? Won’t you be glad? And if you’re glad when you hit somebody’s marble, then you sort of secretly didn’t expect too much to do it. So there’d have to be some luck in it, there’d have to be slightly quite a lot of accident in it.”

What this scene illuminates, in Salinger’s typical fashion, is the kind of insight that we know from the Zen tradition, namely that in the perfection of a truly transcendent or transfinite performance there is no luck or accident. In other words, we go beyond our sense that it would be a good thing or a happy thing if something happened, some outcome was achieved, to a certainty that it always has happened, is happening, and will happen. When the Zen archer draws her bow, the arrow is, in a sense, always already in the target. The mere enactment of its flight is the least of the truths concerning bow, arrow, and target. Now compare the archer to the very best quarterback, tennis player, or hockey forward: even in finite games, there is ever this hint of the transcendent.

4. Outcomes

I am pressed for time—and space—so I am going to move a little more quickly through this next section, in part because I think it will be familiar territory. What are the outcomes that we derive from finite games?

At least since Plato and Aristotle, people have believed that the importance of games was that they created a kind of competitive wisdom: agon, the competition-born wisdom of play. Consider the role of the ancient Greek gymnasium. The gymnasium was for things other than play: it was for socializing, establishing position, finding lovers, advancing political outcomes, and so on. But the most important thing, philosophically, about the gymnasium was that struggle itself was wisdom-producing. To wrestle—to wrestle in nakedness, as the Greeks did—was to bring yourself to the other in order to learn about yourself. Some people think that this claim about wisdom is just a lot of high-toned hooey, but the idea persists: games, especially competitive sports, are thought to build character. At the margins of thought, this claim does run into trouble, however. I n what follows I am going to suggest, briefly, some of the marginal problems with the outcomes allegedly generated by finite games.

Consider this image, analyzed by the architect Rem Koolhaas in his book Delirious New York (1978), of the place of a modern gymnasium within a skyscraper. Koolhaas is writing about Manhattan in the middle of the twentieth century, but this could easily be a depiction of a present-day condo or a condo brochure: we have a spa, we have an exercise room, we have a boxing room where these heavily-muscled gay men come together. The idea is that you can come and live here and among the many things you can do is discipline your body. The agon, which for the Greeks produced a kind of wisdom through struggle, has been domesticated, you might say, into a purely personal project of physical discipline: the creation of an obedient athletic body. You get a new, and perhaps somewhat pathological, kind of marginal outcome: you must “Exercise ‘til your body behaves.” Under the force of this imperative, the body becomes a kind of raw material that you are working, or even punishing. The implicit premise here is that the body is unruly and needs to be tamed and disciplined.

There are other ways in which the outcome of games and other playful things are similarly instrumentalized. Even entertainment, the kind of play that is not athletic, can become a site of competition. People out for an evening of fun are having such a good time that they will be able to say, tomorrow, “I got so wasted!” “How wasted did you get?” “More wasted than he did!” It is interesting how conceptually close these two things are—disciplining the body and competing to make the body suffer through intoxication—even though we might think of them as different. They are both ways of putting otherwise playful elements of our existence and physicality into a competitive frame, a disciplinary frame. We might then link this apparently odd similarity to the insight that many kinds of play and games are subject to the creation of status or position. Golf, for example, which can be in many ways a beautiful game, is inseparable from its status-conferring features, the deployment of capital and its benefits. To have a golf membership, to play golf, to talk golf, to make business deals on the golf course: all these things are unrelated to the game itself, yet attach themselves so inextricably that golf becomes a handy metaphor for privilege.

Other kinds of marginal problems occur when elements which do not seem intrinsic to the play enter into the game and become ineradicable over time. If you are Canadian, you know that fighting in hockey is just such an example. You have an endless, tiresome, and irresolvable debate about whether or not it is “part of the game,” or that it “has always been
part of the game.” Do we find fighting discussed in the rules of hockey? No, but the rules are only one part of the norms and culture of a game. Fighting is part of the culture of the game, like it or not; this would still be true even if fighting were banned, since it would remain as a limit case on the game’s physical violence and aggressive tactics. Does fighting serve any good purpose in hockey? Many people think not, but the counter-argument is that, if a team is down, a player getting into a fight might “fire them up” so that they play harder to come back. Whatever one’s views on this particular example, it is clear from these examples that this kind of argument works, at the margins of a game, to chip away at the positive philosophical idea concerning the outcomes of finite games. Is there really any wisdom to be found in hockey fights? (How one answers that question may indicate one’s position in the debate!)

Finally, in a related problem of marginal outcomes, notice how many of the things we now call play are not only sedentary, they do not have any aspect of somatic or psychological interplay to them. For many children and young adults, ‘playing together’ might mean a mediated contact by means of a screen and two video-game controllers. The players need not even be in the same room in order to play together in this sense. There is a phenomenon described in child psychology known as parallel play: this is where you might get two girls with teddy bears, say, both feeding them but not doing it together—and yet they are nevertheless aware of each other as both engaged in play. Such play is considered an important moment in psychological development. Combined video-gaming is parallel play of a different kind: the two players are not relating to each other at all, even though they are playing the same game. It will come as no surprise to hear that when you do a Google image search of the word ‘play’, the computer icon for ‘start’—the right-facing triangle—is by far the most common image to generate hits.

5. Infinite Games

With those kinds of limitations on finite games in view, but also bearing in mind the hint of the transcendental that I identified before, that kind of Zen-like arrow, what can we say in conclusion about infinite games and the art of play?

Infinite games offer the obvious point of contrast. In such games, there are many possible nodes of temporary outcome, momentary points of contact where the players reach a momentary conclusion or victory, but the point of an infinite game is that it shall continue. Thus a good move in an infinite game is a move that keeps the game going, whereas, naturally, a move in a finite game is one that gets you closer to the end. We play infinite games in a different way than finite ones because we play them not to win. There are no winners, nor is there an end. In fact, we play infinite games in a manner that extends right back to the earliest forms of pretending: we do it, in one very straightforward sense, because it is fun. But an infinite game is more than just fun—or perhaps I should say that fun is more philosophically significant than we sometimes think.

An infinite game is a game that has no purpose beyond itself. But the purpose within itself is precisely to expand the realm of human possibility. I might invoke the Kantian notion of beauty here: this is the creation of purposiveness without purpose. An infinite game is governed by the norms of poiesis, in the original Greek sense of the word: that is, creativity itself. In English we hear this etymological root when we talk about poems and poetry, but poiesis in Greek just means ‘making’. Poiesis does not necessarily mean the making of things; it can be the making of moves, of gestures, of ideas.

Dancing is thus a kind of infinite game. There are, to be sure, forms of constrained dancing. You can go to a conservatory to learn your constrained steps, maybe even in order to show them off later in a ballroom dancing competition, but when we dance at a nightclub we dance because it has no purpose beyond itself. Art-making, of objects or installations to be enjoyed just for what they are, is likewise a form of such infinite game. It is actually quite a curious fact about humans, that we make art, that there is such thing as the art world. Though there is an economics of buying and purchasing art, even of producing and enjoying art, art’s value lies precisely in the fact that these objects are not necessary even as we realize, in our experience of them, that the aesthetic is among the most profound aspects of ourselves, of our human possibilities.

More important here is the openness, the gestural, intimate quality of art. You do not have to be Georgia O’Keefe to see that art is an infinite game in this way. I think that philosophy and poetry are also infinite games in this sense of undirected, non-utilitarian purposiveness. You can imagine that, as a professional philosopher—that paradoxical title!—I am often asked to explain the point of what I do. People are usually too polite to demand this explanation in a direct way. Instead, they say something like, “So you teach philosophy? What do you tell your students they are going to do with it?” There is a particular intonation of that verb ‘do’ that I have come to dread. “What are you going to do with that? What is it going to do?” I don’t know, I want to reply, is doing so important? My students are becoming philosophers; that is quite something all by itself. But it can be hard to make this intrinsic-value argument to an often confrontational non-philosopher.
This generates a version what we call the Paradox of Philosophy. You only come to value philosophy when you are already doing it, because seeing the value of philosophy is itself part of what doing philosophy demonstrates; but you cannot give non-philosophical reasons for why philosophy is worth doing because the reasons philosophy is worth doing are all philosophical. It follows that you can only do philosophy if you are already doing it.

Indeed, we can go farther: this paradoxical quality of the undertaking is part of what makes philosophy an infinite game. All of its reasons for being valuable are contained within itself. It cannot be instrumentalized; it cannot be reduced to some other scale of value. Of course, one always can say, “Well, you should take philosophy because then you will do well on the LSAT and get into law school and make a lot of money.” You can say that, and it might even be true. But that is not why you should do philosophy. You should do philosophy because philosophy is worth doing. And I invite you to find out why. If you are a good teacher of philosophy, you seduce people into seeing themselves philosophically, and then they might just see that philosophy is worth doing. In fact I am of the view that this structure or possibility of seduction is found in all the best aspects, the most playful aspects, of our lives; and this is so because they refuse to be judged by the scale of everyday standards of use-value and necessity. We can therefore say that the most playful kind of games, the highest forms of play, are those which touch the divine. I mean the divine that Aristotle speaks about in the last book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: that which in us as mortals is closest to immortality.

And so we return, near the end of our time together, to the theme of time. What is immortality, after all? Our bodies perish but we are all capable of immortality nevertheless. The immortality I have in mind depends on no supernatural order, and makes no claims about infinite mortal existence; it is, instead, the contemplation of that which is beyond the workaday. Immortality is the entry into that time which is not regulated, which is not constrained, which is open and forever. That happens here and now, not in some other heavenly place, but it happens only when we suspend the normal understandings of here and now: when we no longer tell time, even in outs and innings, but instead experience ourselves as out of time, lost in a game without end. The philosopher Wittgenstein made the point by advising us to think about time on the analogy of the visual field. At any moment, your visual field may be constrained by what is around you, for good reasons and bad. Even in an open field you will be constrained by the field of your vision and the horizon. But vision has no theoretical end; it extends infinitely. We have to move our bodies physically toward the horizon but theoretically that horizon is unlimited. Life itself is like this, in similarly having no limit within our experience of it.

To be sure, this is never easy. As adults, we all too often misplace our ability to drop out of time, so powerful are its mundane demands. But if you can conceive of life and temporality the way I am suggesting, then not only are you immortal, but you are playing infinitely. You are doing what the poet Blake famously did when he wrote, in “Auguries of Innocence” from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, these lines; “To see the world in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour.” I hope that I have, in just under an hour—or, now, in about twenty pages—brought you at least to the brink of eternity. Game on.