



# The University as an Infinite Game

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“In life there are at least two  
kinds of games.”

(James Carse, 1986)

# What kind of knowledge is the infinite game/finite games?

Each game is an archetype: a representation of a state of being and acting that is meaningful insofar as it resonates for those who encounter it.

- Culture
- Human Nature
- Hope/imagination



“In life there are at least two kinds of games.” (James Carse, 1986)

## The infinite game



## Finite games



The purpose of the infinite game is to continue the play

*The purpose of a finite game is to win*

The infinite game is played with that which we value for its own sake

*Finite games are played with values relevant to the game at hand*

The infinite game includes finite games but finite games may exist outside the infinite game

**Overarching principles**

The infinite game invites others in  
*Finite games include only select people*

# People

Infinite players relate to the humanity in each other  
*In finite games others are allies, pawns, spectators or competitors*

The infinite game may provide a deep sense of connection with others  
*In finite games, victory may be joyful, but must be guarded*

In the infinite game any single player is not needed and cannot finish the game  
*In finite games each player must be alert, to relax is dangerous*

The infinite game is an open network in which everything is  
interconnected

*Finite games are discrete clusters that may expand or replicate*

The infinite game tends towards diversity

*Finite games tend toward sameness*

Infinite players are in awe of life in all its forms

*Finite players attempt to control the life forms relevant to the  
game*

# Setting



The infinite game reaches towards horizons that shift as the players shift

*Finite games are within boundaries that contain the vision of players*

# Knowledge

The infinite game seeks and responds to information about the world

*Winners of finite games claim knowledge of the world, which may be treated as the truth*

Infinite players attempt to understand themselves

*Finite players attempt to train themselves*

The infinite game values open-ended expression

*Finite games value expression only within the mediums and rules set by the game*

The infinite game looks to the future and does not assume the past will reoccur

*In finite games players try to replicate the winning strategies of the past*

The rules of the infinite game must change over time or the game will cease

*To change or break the rules of a finite game is a violation*

**Time**

# That which is of infinite value

Sacred, precious, special

Of value for its own sake

That which makes the world truly alive

In any dimension – an emotion, relationship,  
part of the natural world, a quality, an object

Here is what 1,085 people said  
is of infinite value

Family

Love

Happiness Creativity

Friendship Personal strengths

The ocean Respect

Compassion Beauty of nature

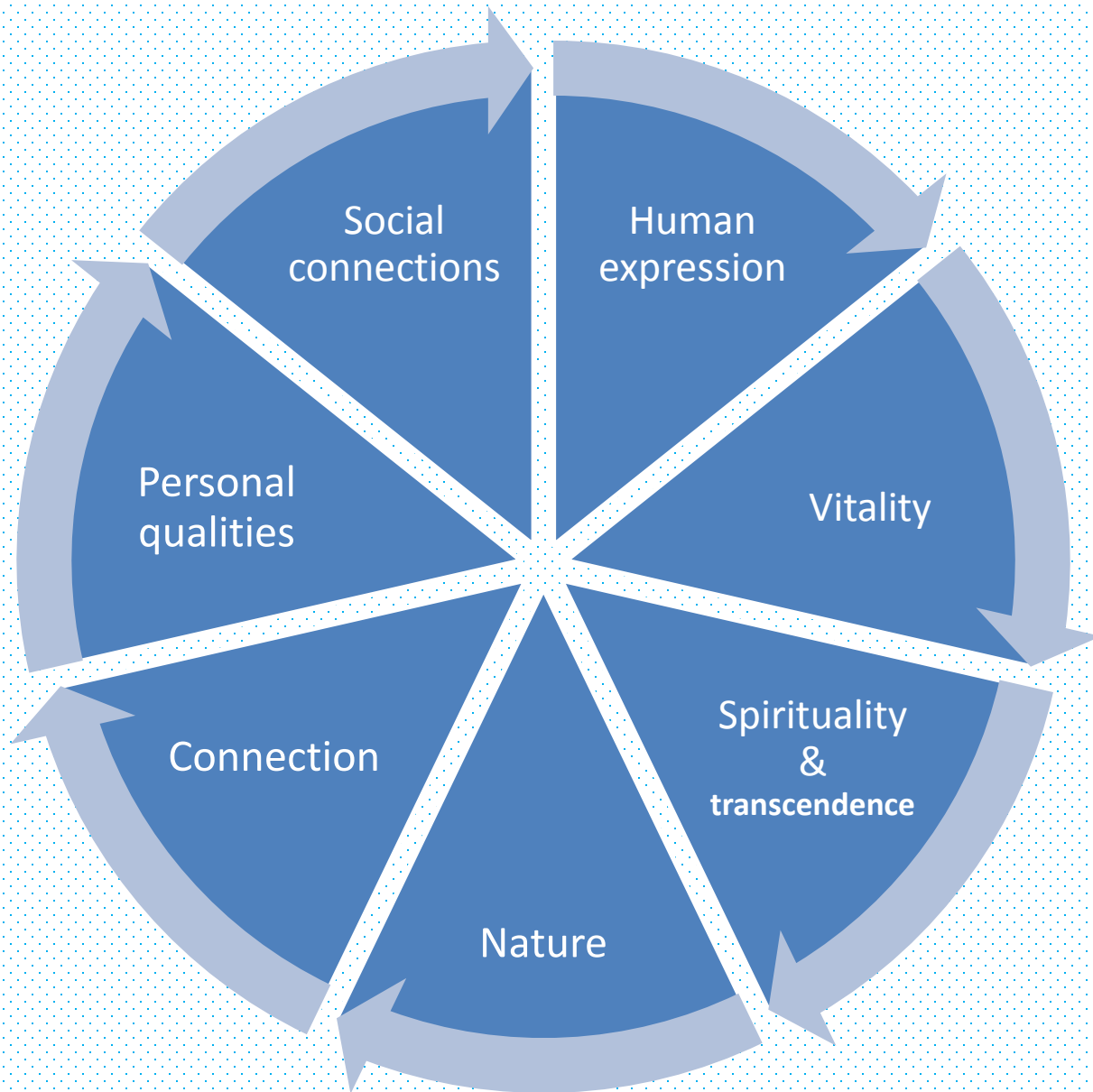
Healthy environments Communication

Safety and survival Knowledge

Appreciation & Wonder Delicious food

Spirituality & Transcendence Cooperation

Purpose  
Solitude & silence  
Animals & plants  
Mountains & rivers  
My partner  
Sharing  
Water  
Health & Vitality  
Human connection  
Relationships  
Helping others  
Learning  
Life Force  
Action  
Wilderness  
The land  
Hope  
Beauty  
Trust  
Care  
Clean air  
Joy  
Fun  
Smiles  
Emotions  
People  
Children  
Integrity  
Passion  
Freedom  
Kindness  
Peace  
Civil society  
Artist expression  
My children  
Biodiversity  
Life  
Human warmth  
Parenting  
Commitment  
Connection to the whole  
Trees  
Faith  
Truth  
Pets  
Inclusion  
Equality  
Vision  
Fairness  
Curiosity  
Humour  
Smiles  
Wilderness  
Action  
Wilderness  
Humour  
Smiles  
Emotions  
People  
Children  
Belonging  
Community  
Landscapes  
Curiosity  
Openness  
Vision  
Fairness  
Equality  
Creativity  
Personal strengths  
Respect  
Beauty of nature  
Healthy environments  
Communication  
The universe  
Safety and survival  
Knowledge  
Appreciation & Wonder  
Delicious food  
Spirituality & Transcendence  
Cooperation



Social connections

Human expression

Vitality

Spirituality & transcendence

Nature

Personal qualities

Connection

# That which is of finite value

Of value because of what it signifies or enables.

Of value because a group of people deem it so.

In any dimension – an emotion, relationship,  
part of the natural world, a quality, an object

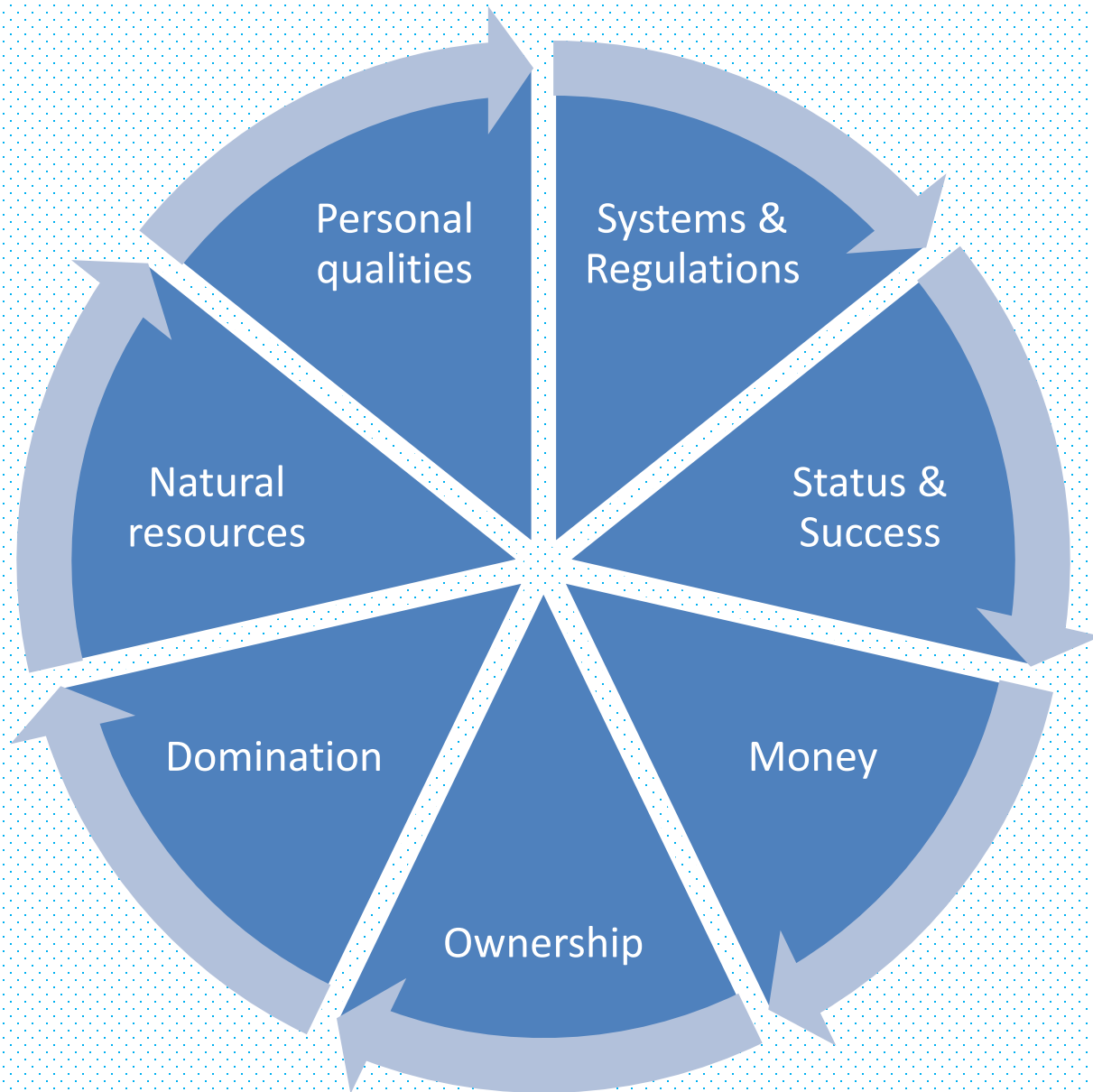
Here is what 1,085 people said  
is of finite value



Technology  
Wellbeing needs  
Social media  
Fossil fuels  
Bureaucracy  
Religion  
Consumerism  
Beliefs  
Appearance  
Celebrity  
Greed  
Life stages  
Success  
Natural resources  
Law  
Wealth  
Transport  
Sports  
Rules  
Conventions  
Prestige  
Oil  
Houses  
Communication  
Limits  
Property  
Social position  
University degrees  
Precious objects  
Status symbols  
Food  
Expectations  
Social categories  
Territory  
Pride & Ambition  
Ability  
Education  
Currency  
Cars  
Jewellery  
Stuff

# Money

Assets & Profit  
Control  
A job  
Gold  
Structure  
Ecological demands  
Employment  
Junk food  
Status  
Competition  
Prizes  
Economic systems  
Pleasure-seeking & ego  
Negative emotions  
Personal strengths  
Natural phenomena  
Conflict & isolation  
Power  
War  
Domination  
A single life  
Qualifications  
Politics  
Fashion  
Exclusivity  
Authority  
Ownership  
Marriage  
Knowledge  
Achievement  
Beauty



Personal  
qualities

Systems &  
Regulations

Status &  
Success

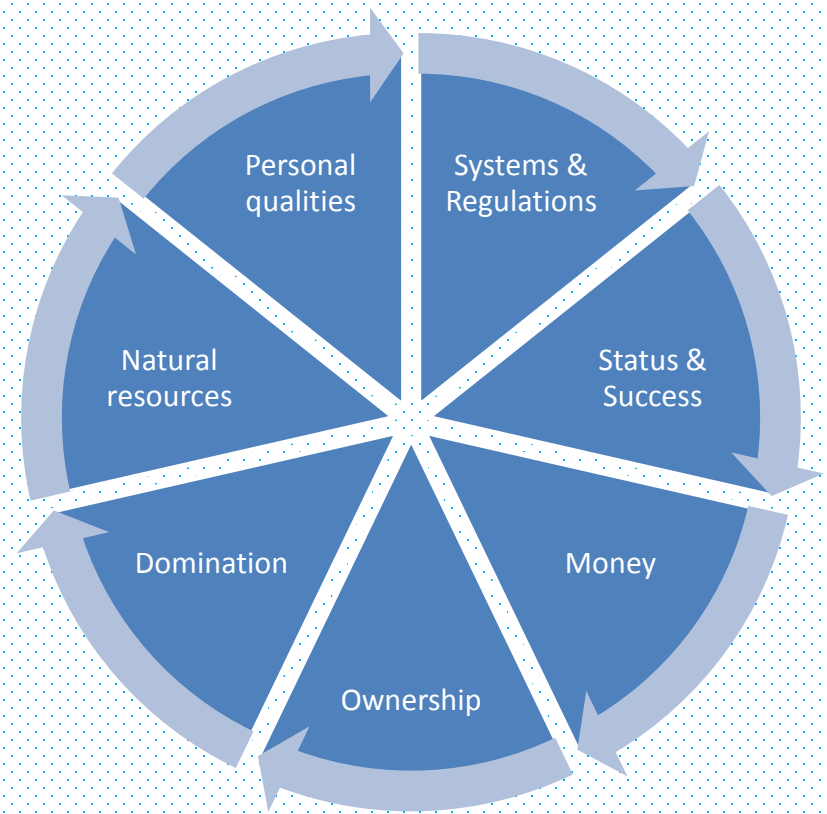
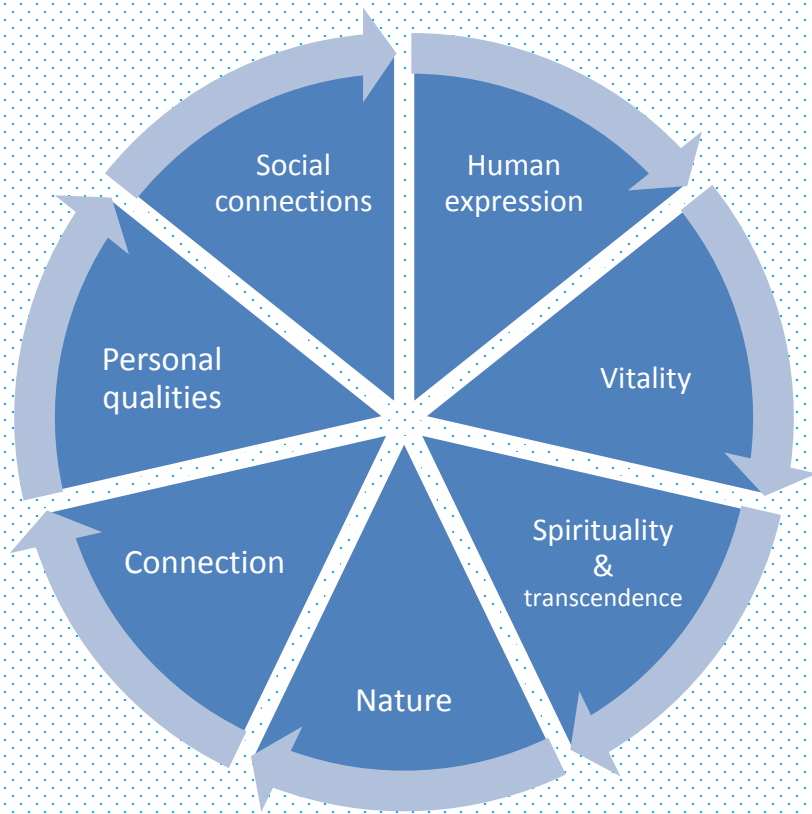
Money

Ownership

Domination

Natural  
resources

# Each type of values forms a cluster



# So how is the university an infinite game?

Our core foundation is as a learning community charged with exploring new horizons and welcoming new players



# Signs of the finite in play

- Tendency to absorb new players, without changing the rules to suit them – Herbert Marcuse *One Dimensional Man*.
- Celebration of individual success – through “careers” and awards. “Today, now more than ever, we can remember that not only did Virginia Woolf specifically caution her sisters against attempting to make a career in the university, but, more generally, against joining the procession of those who are engaged in these professions where it is a quest of ‘making a career’. Earn your living soberly, not a penny more than necessary, she had written, or else you will be trapped in this process that fabricates prostitutes defined by the competition for prestige, honors, and the devouring quest for a power that is always derisory, never sufficient.”  
(Stengers & Despret, 2014, p. 150; Barbara Grant, AIC 2016)
- Use of finite game language (although use of infinite game language is no guarantee the infinite game is in play).

# “Managerialism” and the “Neoliberal university”

“The university has been occupied – not by students demanding a say (as in the 1960s), but this time by the many-headed Wolf of management. The Wolf has colonised academia with a mercenary army of professional administrators, armed with spreadsheets, output indicators and audit procedures, loudly accompanied by the Efficiency and Excellence March...The academics allow themselves to be meekly played off against one another, like frightened, obedient sheep, hoping to make it by staying just ahead of their colleagues. The Wolf uses the most absurd means to remain in control, such as money-wasting semi- and full mergers, increasingly detailed, and thus costly, accountability systems and extremely expensive prestige projects.”

Hauffman & Radder (2015) – From Dutch Universities

# Focus on technical problems

“Technical rationality depends on agreement about ends. When ends are fixed and clear, then the decision to act can present itself as an instrumental problem. But when ends are confused and conflicting, there is as yet no ‘problem’ to solve. A conflict of ends cannot be resolved by the use of techniques derived from applied research. It is rather through the non-technical process of framing the problematic situation that we may organize and clarify both the ends to be achieved and the possible means of achieving them... Shall the practitioner stay on the high, hard ground where he can practice rigorously, as he understands rigor, but where he is constrained to deal with problems of relatively little social importance? Or shall he descend to the swamp where he can engage in the most important and challenging problems if he is willing to forsake technical rigor?” (Schon, 1983; p. 41/42).

- Market-driven
- Temporary work force that lives under constant threat of disestablishment
- Demand that all degrees increase “employability”
- Notions of “profit”
- Large classes that reduce teacher-student contact
- Student debt that creates a “consumer” mentality and the commodification of knowledge

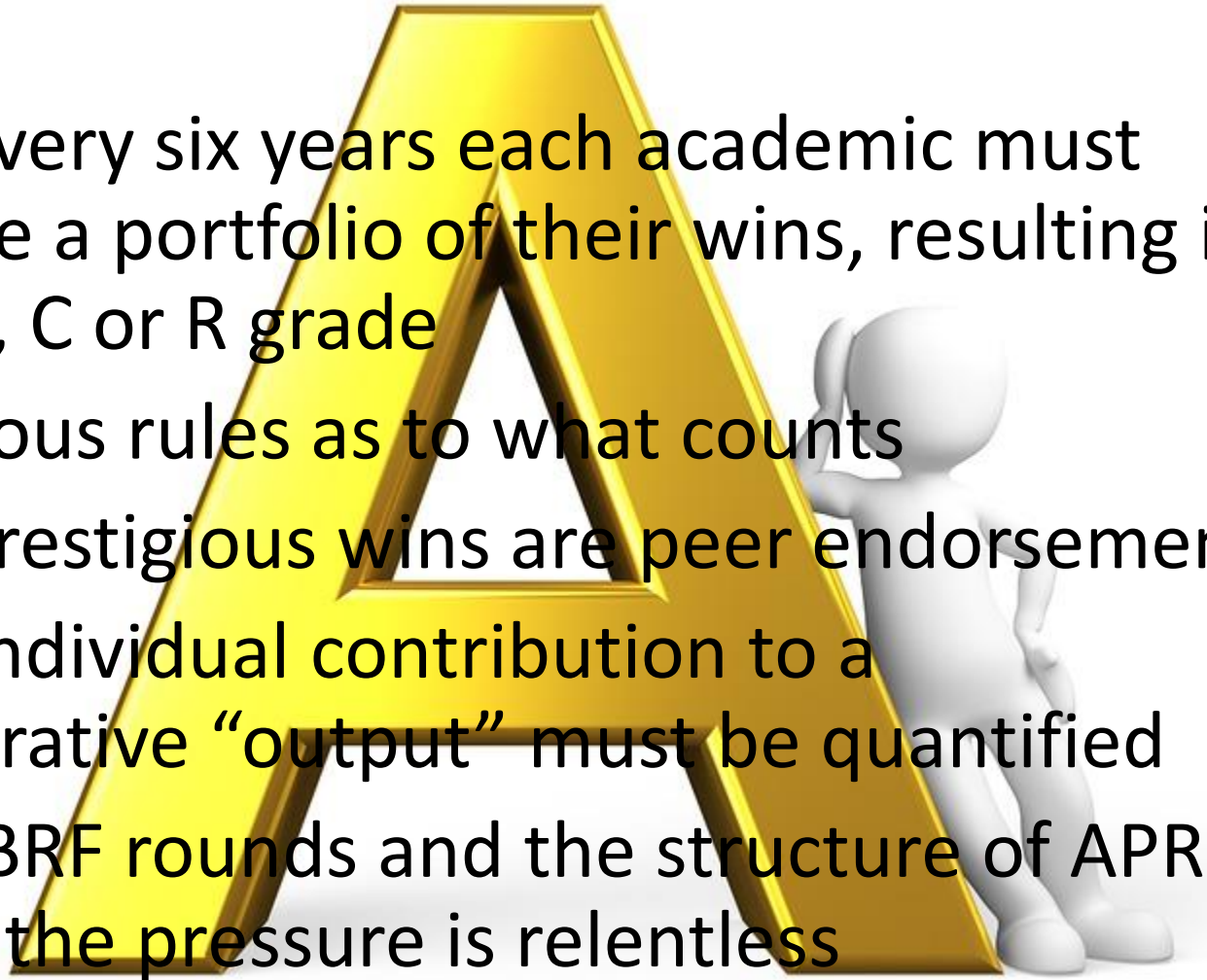
(e.g., Giroux, 2013; Chomsky, 2014)



Competitive structures that focus us on winning,  
and separate us from each other.

# The PBRF game

- Once every six years each academic must produce a portfolio of their wins, resulting in an A, B, C or R grade
- Numerous rules as to what counts
- Most prestigious wins are peer endorsements
- One's individual contribution to a collaborative "output" must be quantified
- Mini-PBRF rounds and the structure of APRs ensure the pressure is relentless



# The PBRF game

- The competitive element is focused on the individual
- A psychological effect of this is a deep, shameful, divisive fear of failing at PBRF *per se* (not necessarily one's research failing)
- A behavioural effect is that much energy is put into succeeding at PBRF; pulling energy from other activities
- Little effort is put into improving the “*how we demonstrate the value of our research*” game



# Emotions of PBRF

## (Grant & Elizabeth, 2015)

- Excitement/pride
- Pleasure/enjoyment
- Satisfaction/pride
- Optimism/hope/zeal
- Surprise
- Relief
- Schadenfreude/self-righteousness
- Acceptance
- Compliance/obedience
- Resignation
- Impatience
- Rejection/frustration
- Resentment
- Dislike/frustration
- Worried/anxious
- Hurt/punishment
- Shame
- Fear
- Anger/disgust/rejection

**you  
snooze,  
you lose**

# Stepping toward the infinite game

- *We* – academics – are the conduits of our finite games, so we – academics – can resist them and reconfigure the university (individual academics feel “put in place” by their immediate managers – Julie Rowlands, AIC 2016).
- Individual examination of why we are doing what we are doing (only we know if we are making an infinite game move)
- Refusal to allow ourselves to be directed toward finite games for the sake of personal or institutional advancement *per se*.

- Fatalistic disenchantment and utopian hope: “hope in the small spaces of praxis” (Sutton, 2014, p. 9)
- Making use of the empty frames that comprise research outputs and (to a lesser extent) courses  
(Barbara Grant, AIC, 2016)
- Being brave: self-protection/self-care is a tempting play in a finite game setting, but it is a holding pattern unless it is joined to other plays.

# Giving up on Academic Stardom (Eric Grollman, blog)

“I have bought into the ego-driven status game in academia. Hard. I find myself sometimes wondering more about opportunities to advance my reputation, status, name, and scholarship than about creating new knowledge and empowering disadvantaged communities. Decision-making in my research often entails asking what will yield the most publications, in the highest status journals with the quickest turnaround in peer-review. I often compare my CV to others’, wondering how to achieve what they have that I have not, and feeling smug about achieving things that haven’t. Rarely do I ask how to become a *better* researcher, but often ask how to become a more popular researcher... I am giving up on my dream to become the Lady Gaga of sociology. I have to do so for my health... Beyond my health, the lure of academic stardom detracts from what is most important to me: making a difference in the world. Impact factors, citation rates, and the number of publications that I amass distract from impact in the world and accessibility. It is incredibly selfish, or at least self-serving, to focus more energy on advancing my own career rather than advancing my own communities. ”



# Developing shadow networks

Ralph Stacey (1996) – *Legitimate networks* are the ones endorsed by the institution, *shadow networks* are the links between people that are not acknowledged by the legitimate networks. These can act as *strange attractors* that reconfigure organisations.

Critic and Conscience group:

<http://www.criticandconscience.org.nz/>



[www.infinite-game.net](http://www.infinite-game.net)