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Dhillon, S. (2023) *Rethinking – and maybe abolishing - graduations*. WONKHE.

Manuscript published by WONKHE on 21st June 2023 at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/rethinking-and-maybe-abolishing-graduations/>

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Rethinking – and maybe abolishing - graduations

If higher education is a kind of game, and graduation represents winning it, Sunny Dhillon argues that the rules of that game need to change

I acknowledge the great value students and staff place upon graduation ceremonies.

My employer (Bishop Grosseteste University) is even one of the few universities to also offer a matriculation ceremony in the local cathedral.

I understand how the awarding of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, as well as further professional qualifications, leading to all manner of post-nominal letters, is a (the most?) cherished aspect of one's time at university.

But I wonder whether graduations, and the awards they bestow, should exist at all.

According to the late professor of history and religion, James P. Carse (1932 – 2020), there are two types of game: finite and infinite. Here is a simple schema that helps distinguish them:

Finite games	Infinite games
Bound by time and space	Not bound by time or space
Require an opponent	Require participants
Have fixed rules, which require strict adherence to	Have rules, but these change in the course of play
Have eligibility criteria	No eligibility criteria
Means towards ends	Means as ends
Telic	Atelic

Carse offers a way to argue against the telic (tending toward an end or outcome) and finite traditions within higher education of awarding degrees and holding graduation celebrations.

And so considering the rampant marketisation of higher education in the UK, and the instrumental strategies employed by students and staff alike to “progress”, I think it is a good time to argue against the prevailing logic of the *finite game* in favour of an *infinite* one.

This is not simply an exercise in being a killjoy (at least not entirely). Rather, it is to explore the implications of rupturing the logic of the finite game with that of the infinite.

Part of this necessarily involves exploring the implications of abandoning the awarding of degrees and graduation ceremonies.

As both an undergraduate and postgraduate, whilst I readily accepted the award of my degrees via an email and letter in the post, I did not attend any of my graduation ceremonies.

Upon completion of my BA, I was conflicted about attending the graduation, but could not articulate why. Nearly 15 years later, I am now better able to reflect and understand my misgivings about the celebrations.

I do not stand on ceremony, which graduation obviously quite literally is. The robes, scrolls, and mortar boards never appealed. As a mature student, I undertook the BA for the intellectual pursuit, and whilst the degree certainly opened avenues for subsequent employment prospects, was never undertaken with that end in mind.

The same intrinsic motivations applied to the MA and PhD. Recently re-reading my applications to study these reinforced the naively romantic, but non-instrumental, attitude that I held towards them.

It was not until last year (2022), when attending a graduation at the local cathedral for my undergraduate students, and seated on the main floor (as opposed to enrobed and alongside colleagues on stage) that I better understood my long-held misgivings.

The pomp and ceremony – jingoism through hearty recitation of the national anthem, oaths of allegiance, prayers to deities and proclamations in Latin – all left me feeling uneasy.

The ceremony, described as the “worthiest telos” of a course of university education left me considering the pernicious effect that it may have on the study and scholarship processes of students and colleagues.

In the finite game of higher education, students primarily play to win the awards of degrees. Staff also play to win the awards of degrees, post-nominals, grants, and publications (like this!).

Finite players are transactional and instrumental: “what’s not done in the interest of winning is not part of the game”. One of my recent graduates, who was a finite player par excellence, would incessantly ask me questions and parse what content was needed, and what was not, for their summative module assignments.

When prompted to reflect on this habit, they responded – and would continue to respond throughout their course – with these words now etched into my mind: “it’s [the assignments] the only thing that matters”.

Carse makes a distinction between (infinite) education, and (finite) training – the title conferred by a degree award is the telos of a finite game.

What scholars often deem “education” is rendered “training” in Carse’s model through the conferring of an award. The “effectiveness of a title depends on its visibility, its noticeability to others”.

Hence, the importance of evidencing “graduate attributes”, “transferable skills”, and university sanctioned competence in the job market. Graduation ceremonies are celebratory rites of passage, in which finite play is marked as complete. The winners of this game are conferred status, and enter into the next phase of game play.

This even applies to mature students who may have retired from the world of work, and are encouraged to pursue further courses of study. Carse argued nearly four decades ago in the context of the USA, but which neatly applies to our contemporary context, that universities:

“...bestow ranked awards on those who win degrees from them. Those awards in turn qualify graduates for competition in still higher games – certain prestigious colleges, for example, and then certain professional schools beyond that, with a continuing sequence of higher games in each of the professions, and so forth”

Carse continues by observing that scholars (like me) “demand higher salaries [or other rewards] for their publishable successes; industrialists sit on university boards”. Our academic disciplines are, then, obviously “territorial finite games”. This “levelling up” in the game play results in a paradox:

“The more we are recognized as winners, the more we know ourselves to be losers. That is why it is rare for the winners of highly coveted and publicized prizes to settle for their titles and retire. Winners, especially celebrated winners, must prove repeatedly they are winners. The script must be played over and over again. Titles must be defended by new contests. No one is ever wealthy enough, honored enough, applauded enough.

Contrary to the logic of the finite game of the majority of contemporary HE practices, and especially that of conferring degree awards and graduation ceremonies, the infinite game is played for the purpose of perpetual continuation.

This type of game constantly evolves with players willingly joining and departing. It could be argued that whilst there is a turnover of students and staff engaged in finite games, perhaps central ideas and themes under discussion and experiments to explore particular phenomena are emblematic of infinite games?

There is another paradox at work here. In “advancing” knowledge through “original contributions”, the student and/or researcher set themselves a finite game to complete and “win” at (such as a blog submission like this, bounded by a word count and conventions), whilst cognisant that they wish the infinite game of intellectual enquiry to continue.

Playing an infinite game is about generativity, vulnerability and open-endedness, instead of celebration, award, reward or completion.

Given the affection in which awards and ceremonies are held among the wider higher education community, my argument is, admittedly, fanciful.

What I hope is that we reflect upon, and explore, the possibilities of introducing notions of infinite play into our contemporary HE practices of finitude.

This could begin by exploring the implications of hypothetically doing away with the awarding of degrees and celebration of graduations; in effect, removing the most effective telos employed within the finite narrative of university education.

The value of the argument lies in broadening the horizon of possibilities for higher education. How may we alter, or at the very least enact with greater critical reflection, our current teaching, learning, assessment, awarding and celebratory practices?