CENTER VALLEY (October 1, 2008) – As America enters its second season, with the onset of the Major League Baseball playoffs, an insidious invention lurks quietly behind the scenes. Positioned at various angles in the rafters of ballparks, television cameras are poised to capture the action; now they also stand at the ready to intervene with video veracity should some of that action cross the discretionary boundary of official judgment.

Breaking with its storied tradition, baseball is now allowing the use of instant replay in certain situations. While other pro sports have used the television lens for decades to adjudicate disputed calls, only this year has baseball fallen under the sway of such digital discernment. Though it was only employed twice during its tune-up in the regular season – once to confirm a call on the field, once to overturn it – instant replay is now ready for prime time. And with the decision to allow it, the guardians of the game display a cavalier disregard for the cultural quality by which our national pastime captivates us.

Despite verbalizing his admiration for tradition and the “human element” in the sport, baseball’s commissioner acquiesced to instant replay on the principle that “Like everything else in life, there are times that you have to make an adjustment.” But turning the dial on an umpire’s judgment does more than adjust the vantage point. It seeks to eradicate the finitude that is characteristic of the game. In doing so, it aims to avert the need for humility that remains essential to our well-being.
The contradictory limitations placed upon baseball’s use of instant replay belie this tension. Replay can only be used for “boundary” calls, like home runs or fan interference. But if it is good for some calls, why not for others? Replays cannot be shown on the big screen at the park. But if a television angle is decisive, why limit the view only to fans at home? And arguing about a replay call results in an automatic ejection. But if a live view can be disputed, why not a televised view, which in the end is just a different angle on the same play?

Differing from mere play, sports regulate the competitive instinct within a set of rules whose arbitration and application are entrusted to officials, themselves an integral part of the game. In baseball, these are the boys in blue, the umpires whose labors were once fittingly described as demanding “the integrity of a Supreme Court judge, the physical agility of an acrobat, the endurance of Job and the imperturbability of Buddha.” In sum, their judgment reflects character traits we would elsewhere admire and wish to emulate. Disagree with them as we might, our desire to replace human virtues with technological insight gives short shrift to who we are and who we seek to become.

Baseball captures our imagination by embodying the quest for the virtuous life precisely through its distinctive embrace of failure. Its flukes and gaffes are the stuff of lore. Its statistics include “error” as a significant part of the truth of the game. Its seasonal misadventures break some hearts, and leave the vast majority of fans yearning for more with cries of “wait ‘til next year.”

Baseball epitomizes a “spirituality of imperfection” that reflects a larger truth about life. Speaking of players who become stars despite succeeding in only one out of three chances, as baseball hitters do, former commissioner Fay Vincent commented that “life rewards those who having failed, and having failed over and over, still manage to move on. It is the decision to try again that will eventually lead to a reward.” Is not this decision, and its playoff reward, what fans vicariously cheer, because they know, even without being able to articulate it, that such is the nature of the game we all play in this season of our own mortality?

Saul Steinberg, once the artist for The New Yorker, famously quipped that “Baseball is an allegorical play about America, a poetic, complex, and subtle play of courage, fear, good luck, mistakes, patience about fate, and sober self-esteem.” Were he still with us, he would have to suffer the absence of both his city’s teams from this year’s post-season. Hopefully, the rest of us won’t have to endure technology’s assault on his wisdom.