

CHAPTER 1: WORLDS AND WORLDING

WHAT IS A WORLD?

What is a World? A World evokes a place. A World has borders. A World has laws. A World has values. A World has a language. A World can grow. A World can collapse. A World has mythic figures. A World has visitors. A World has members who live in it. A World looks arbitrary to a person outside of it. A World satisfies both the selfish and collective interests of its members. A World grants magic powers, especially the power to filter what matters to it. A World gives permission to live differently than the wild outside. A World creates an agreement about what is relevant. A World counts certain actions inside it as meaningful. A World undergoes reformations and disruptions. A World incentivizes its members to keep it alive. A World is a container for stories of itself. A World expresses itself in many forms, but is always something more.

All these qualities describe a World from the perspective of living inside one, in all its manifest subsuming glory. But this view takes for granted how a World begins, how it comes to be. To think about beginnings, we have to go back to the moment before a World, to the moment of a creator looking at Reality - meaningless but interesting - and wondering

what to do with it. Philip K Dick said, "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." A World is conceived when a creator decides to pick some part of Reality and start *believing* in it again. The belief is fragile, but immediately suggests interesting drama to the creator. The creator sets about trying to shape this belief and channel its potential. And at the same time, the creator begins to imagine another pleasure: putting aside the role of creator and being a person living inside the belief, the beneficiary of its potentiality, a believer.

From the artistic perspective of creating a World, a fertile definition suggests itself.

**A World is a future you can believe in:
One that promises to survive its creator,
and continue generating drama.**

A future you can believe in is one that sustains some combo of special conditions that you find meaningful and want to give energy to its continued existence. Because these special conditions promise to make your future better, or more pleasurable, or more interesting to live in. Because you also know these conditions would not exist in Reality otherwise. Not quite the way you like it. The special conditions might be as modest as the pleasure of an entertaining character who only lives within a fantasy World. It might be the special neurological state that can only be mastered in a private psychedelic World. It might be the complex of rituals, hypnotic state, and mythology that exists in the World of a particular religion. Your belief in a World drives your actions toward giving a World expression in physical, verbal, and thought form. In return, you are rewarded with getting closer to a future you want to live in. Later, you are rewarded by others for whom the World is also a future they can believe in.

An important feature of this definition of a World is its double promise: when a World can "survive its creator," that means it has achieved sufficient stability to regulate and safeguard its potentiality without authorial intervention. This is a World's requirement for Autonomy. When a World can "continue generating drama," a World is sufficiently interesting for people to care about and want to explore. This is a World's requirement

for Aliveness. When a World is keeping its promise, it continues to be a future you can believe in.

A World that fails on its promise to “survive its creator” will rot and die soon after its creator exits. Think of a franchise whose canon is authoritatively governed by its author. Think of a company whose vision, spirit, ideas, relationships, and values were solely embodied in its founder. Likewise, a World that fails on its promise to “continue generating drama” becomes a boring utopia populated by the undead. Think of the deadening World experienced by zoo animals. Think of a massive multiplayer game lacking enough emergent gameplay: everyone exits, except the bots, because no one can believe that an interesting future will come of it.

"Drama" means problems that trigger interesting new paths in a World, that arouse its members in unexpected ways, without causing total collapse. A new law that re-allocates base income to every member of a World is a reformative kind of drama. An assassination of a World's lead emissary is a disruptive kind of drama. Drama reminds a World's members of its aliveness and keeps the World worth fighting for.

So a World begins with the creator looking at Reality and imagining a future it can believe in. The creator works to make this future come true when the creator solves for the Aliveness, and later, the Autonomy of the World. How to do this is the subject of Worlding.

There is a bitesize way to say all this: A World is a future you can believe in, by promising to become an infinite game.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORLDS

Religious scholar James Carse says there are two kinds of games: finite games and infinite games. A finite game is a game you play to win. It has clear rules and a defined ending. An infinite game is a game you play to keep playing. If it is at risk of ending, the rules must change to keep the game going. According to Carse, the ultimate infinite game is evolutionary life itself: Nature.

For us humans, life is filled with the familiar contests of finite games: Deadlines. Deals. Rankings. Dating. Elections. Sports. College. War. Poker. Lotteries. When our finite games are won and done, what is strange is that we don't exit back into base Reality. We wake up in a field of infinite games that perpetually mediate our contact with base Reality. We choose to live in these infinite games because they give us leverage, structure, and meaning over a base Reality that is indifferent to our physical or psychological health.

We have many names for these infinite games: Families. Institutions. Religions. Nations. Subcultures. Cultures. Social Realities. Let's call them WORLDS.

A World is a construction. It is nothing compared to the true infinite game of Nature, but it is infinite enough because it sustains the qualities of an infinite game long enough and surprising enough for humans to treat it with the status of being alive. A World is an artificial living thing, but a living thing nonetheless. It is ongoing, absorbs change, and attracts players to help perpetuate it. A World is marked by artificial boundaries that filter the shock of Reality's unending surprises and the complexities that they create. Yet a World is itself complex enough that we can generatively inhabit it and create new meaning within its local language. A World asks us to believe in its inventions and contradictions and to be 'safe' from our disbelief. In return, a World eats back at Reality, arms us with perspective, furnishes us with meaning, and gives us some measure of agency to expressively deal with new surprises from Reality. A World offers what Ursula Le Guin describes as 'room enough' to survive, thrive, and imagine possible futures for ourselves, indefinitely.

Up until recently, Worlds were the achievement of long periods of cultural evolution. Think of a nation or a religion. An individual may have originated an idea or performed an act that sparked a World. But no one person authored a World. A World emerged from an iterative process over many generations. Its character formed as a result of stretching itself to accommodate new surprises from Reality. Its health was maintained by players with the power, prestige, and tribal identification to do so. A World

perpetually earned its infinite game status by continuing to stay alive through the people who believed in its meaning, lived by its laws, and benefited from its stabilizing structure.

What about fictive worlds? It seems that authors of fiction have been making Worlds for a long time now. But fictional narratives on their own are only the spark of a world to come, the DNA of a world, and threaten to collapse without their original author. To turn a fiction into a World, a World needs an engine of ongoingness that can generate complexity and therefore surprises, without the supervision of its original author. In the past, engines of prestige and status powered religious Worlds. Recently, engines of commerce have powered fantasy Worlds, manufactured through an expansion of media – the fiction becomes the movie, becomes the video game, becomes the toys, spinoffs, theme park, becomes the working mega-economy of a franchise. This was the innovation of twentieth-century Worlders like Walt Disney, George Lucas, Steve Jobs.

Can we make Worlds on our own? The guardians of old Worlds will tell you a world cannot simply be made by one person in less than one lifetime. It is the product of an evolutionary process. A World requires a past that is complex enough to feel lived in by other players. People don't just want the spark of a World, they expect to discover a World fully formed, inhabit its complexities, believe in its potentiality, and continue to generate meaning from it. If you truly wish to manufacture a World, it will cost you billions and a lifetime of work spent incentivizing other humans to occupy your World. How can a single mind conceive an infinite game, enact its ongoingness, and make a repeatable practice of Worlding?

Luckily, we are in the midst of a strange transitional era. Worlds are stretching faster than we can stomach. Old Worlds are forking off younger Worlds to keep their games going. World boundaries are breaking and reforming. We are developing not only a tolerance for the disorientations caused by the stretching of Worlds, but a desire to experience a mass variety of Worlds. More is better: a proliferation of Worlds gives us an opportunity to consciously reflect on the artificiality of Worlds and appreciate how they allow us to engage with Reality expressively. For the first time, we feel a sense of agency in choosing our life's portfolio of infinite games to play or

to exit. Most profoundly, with the affordances offered by simulation and artificial intelligence (AI), non-human players are poised to help perpetuate the ongoing drama of Worlds, thereby reducing the requirement that Worlds need to incentivize economic scale or religious fulfilment to stay alive strictly via humans. There is the feeling that creating a World – Worlding – might be just within reach of an individual artist.

WORLDING IS SOLVING FOR ALIVENESS

What is Worlding? Worlding is the artistic activity of an individual artist conceiving, incubating, triggering, and nurturing a World towards aliveness.

We can look at the journey of Worlding on an ALIVENESS spectrum. Like a baby, a World begins its life incubating in the care of its creator, not alive, not self regulating, not generating its own drama. When a World is born, it is technically alive, but fragile. The creator celebrates but carefully guides the World's every move. When a World begins to generate its own drama, it is unquestionably alive to the creator's delight, and attracts new members who believe in its future and wish to further its expression. And when a World is so alive that it exceeds its creator's ability to envision its future, the World either peaks or is granted Autonomy.

The spectrum of Aliveness can span from an idle World doodled in the margins of a notebook to the macro simulation of Nature itself. This spectrum includes all the Worlds that fail to achieve infinite game status, the ones never quite survive its creator and continue to generate drama. Novels that never turn into media mythology. The business that lives and dies by its owner. The MMO that serves only as training for bots. The fictional religion whose church is a message board with five members. As long as they remain a future that someone believes in, they keep the status of being alive, even if barely. Here, we must take an explicit moral position about Worlds: a World is better alive than dead, better when it keeps striving to become an infinite game, better autonomous than peaked. In other words, we should aspire to make Worlds that maximize ALIVENESS.

Here is a formula for measuring where a World stands on the ALIVENESS spectrum:

$$\text{WORLD'S ALIVENESS} = (\text{Evidence Usage} / \text{Creator's Hold})$$

Evidence Usage means the sum quantity of the usage of all manifested expressions of the World. For Star Wars, all the films watched, toys played with, novelizations read, conventions attended, vfx technique innovations forked, online forum conversations, images circulating in people's minds, and influence on other creator's Worlds constitute its evidence usage. For a personal blog, the caring authorship and tinkering of the blog itself by its creator, its influence on its reader's thought, bots ranking and scrapping its content, constitutes its evidence usage. A World's Evidence Usage approximates how much people believe in a World enough to perpetuate its expression. Evidence Usage drops when the expressions of a World go unused. There may be evidence somewhere of an ancient cult that could transcend spacetime, but it is lost or no longer believed in, and therefore a World with zero aliveness. Evidence Usage that remains unchanging but non-zero means a World is alive, whether to a thousand people or one person.

“Creator's Hold” refers to the degree of authoritative control the World's creator has on evidence production. The stronger the Creator's Hold, the less permission the creator grants to the World to generate new evidence of itself through its members. Think of Hayao Miyazaki and his strong Creator's Hold over both the Worlds of his movies and the World of Studio Ghibli. When Miyazaki announced his retirement, new directors considered for future productions had to fulfill working in the mold of Miyazaki, and when Miyazaki reviewed their work he found their work inferior. Production at Ghibli halted. In contrast, the weaker the Creator's Hold, the more freedom there is for the World and its members to generate evidence on their own and perpetuate the World beyond the creator. The Creator's Hold on Nature is basically zero. No one is looking to a universe god or Mr. Big Bang or a higher dimensional simulator for permission to generate new and interesting evidence within the domain of Nature, which makes it a really special World to continue creating in.

When a Creator's Hold approaches 1.0 — an authoritative grip on a World — so long as evidence keeps getting produced and used under the creator's control, a World's aliveness can remain non-zero. However, when the creator exits or dies, the World left behind and those in it were so dependent on the creator to permit and guide evidence creation that no new evidence can confidently be made. Evidence usage might still persist, but often the confidence to keep expressing the World diminishes, and actual usage is reduced to only a few enthusiasts or loyalists. Sometimes, Creator's Hold increases after the creator dies, as loyalists to the creator block others from updating the World with evidence of their own making. Regardless, the World's aliveness often drops to zero when a strong holding Creator exits a World. This happens a lot with small businesses where the owner — the heart and soul and tyrant— dies and the World falls into decay, sometimes taking down the lives of employees and customers who live inside it.

When Creator's Hold approaches zero — a complete relinquishing of creator control — and evidence continues to be created and used, you get a World with the potential for infinite aliveness. This is when a World has achieved Autonomy. Think of this as the moment when a child has grown up, left her parents, overcome their strong hold, and can finally choose to do anything with her life.

WORLDING IS GETTING TO KNOW AUTONOMY

Worlding is firstly the act of creating a life, then secondly letting that life live itself. The first part is about achieving Aliveness. The second part is about granting Autonomy.

We can only value Autonomy in our creations as much as we can understand and value Autonomy in ourselves. Psychiatrist Eric Berne says, "Each person constructs a life script given by their parents, which structures long periods of time, based on illusions that may persist throughout whole lifetimes. Overly desperate attempts to maintain the illusions in later life lead to depression or spiritualism, while the abandonment of all illusions may lead to despair. For sensitive, perceptive people these illusions dissolve

one by one, leading to various life crises: the adolescent reappraisal of parents; the protests, often bizarre, of middle age, and the emergence of philosophy after that." He observes that Autonomy is the condition achieved when you come to see your life script as a choice rather than a fixed destiny. Whatever you choose to do then is an act of agency.

Even after you become aware that your life script has hold on you, the difficulty in dismantling your life script is the overwhelming fear of structuring time. "If my life script is a choice, I may either continue my given script, or I may choose Autonomy. If I choose Autonomy, I am left with no requirements in life to do anything in particular. I have unstructured time, for the rest of my time! What is the reason to keep living? Is it up to me to invent it? Who is in charge here? What do I do with myself? How do I motivate myself to work on anything when anything is possible, but nothing is necessary?"

It is possible to avoid Autonomy by doing nothing. Everyday life creates mundane obstacles and dramas to procrastinate dealing with Autonomy. Small finite wins carry us forward through each day. Yet we accrue a debt in existential misery and regret that eventually comes calling, even if as late as the death bed. If only there was a culture that had ways to practice feeling the strange condition of Autonomy at earlier stages of life!

Here is Steve Jobs with an artistic perspective on the moment of Autonomy: "When you grow up you tend to get told the world is the way it is, and your life is to just live your life inside the world. Try not to bash into the walls too much, try to have a nice family life, have fun, save a little money. That's a very limited life. Life can be much broader once you discover one simple fact, and that is: everything around you that you call life was made up by people who were no smarter than you. And you can change it, you can influence it, you can build your own things that other people can use. That's the most important thing: to shake off this erroneous notion that life is there and you're just going to live in it. Versus embrace it, change it, make it better. Cause it's kind of messed up in a lot of ways. Once you learn that, you'll never be the same again."

For most people, living by this attitude is easier said than done. But

one way to get better at understanding how Autonomy might emerge in ourselves is by practicing Autonomy in sandbox versions of life. Worlding is a laboratory to keep failing upward towards Autonomy. We will make and fail many Worlds, but the feeling and experience of doing so is the reward of an artistic practice of Worlding.

In the creation of Worlds, the creator becomes the parent of a World. By creating, caring, and nurturing a living thing, you bank the joys of generating a zone of meaning, purpose, and potentiality where none quite like it existed before. And then, in learning to let it live on its own without your guidance, you begin to appreciate how a Creator's Hold becomes the obstacle to granting Autonomy.

In practicing Worlding, we are engaging in a full-brain activity. This seems like an unnaturally demanding standard to structure a human being's time. All the criteria for what constitutes a World seems to exceed the capacity of a single human mind to conceive and create such a complex thing from nothing. And then sustain caring for it, updating it, and letting it go. It's hard enough to write a good song or invent a new dish. It's hard enough to make art. So how can an artist make an entire World and stay motivated along the way?

The answer is, making art becomes exponentially easier when you believe you are also creating a World along the way. The reward of creating a World along the way is that the inevitable ups and downs of making art feel purposeful. It is an act of making, guided by a higher calling. A future you can believe in. One that is envisioned by you. But before we can learn how this is possible, we need to first understand the psychology of the artist-- the source of invention, but also of paralyzing doubt and self-sabotage.