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Emissaries Guide to Worlding:
A Brief History of Infinite Games (and Worlds)

Religious scholar James Carse says there are two types of 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 writer Ursula K. 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 games status by continuing to stay alive through the people who believed in its meaning, lived by its laws, and benefitted from its stabilising 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 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 the twentieth-century Worlders like Walt Disney, George Lucas, Steve Jobs.

But what about the rest of us? 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 incentivising other humans to occupy your World. How can a single mind conceive an infinite game, enact its ongoingness, and make a repeatable practice or 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 world stretching, 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 ongoingness of Worlds, thereby reducing the requirement that Worlds need to incentivise 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.

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