

# Worlding Raga: 2 – What is a World?

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7–8 minutes

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This entry is part 2 of 7 in the series [Worlding Raga](#)

Hi, I'm Ian Cheng. I'm an artist. Over the last six years, I've been creating a series of simulations that explore an agent's capacity to deal with an ever-changing environment. These works culminated in the [Emissaries trilogy](#), which introduced a narrative agent — the emissary — whose motivation to enact a story was set into conflict with the open-ended chaos of a simulation. In the process, I began to see the edges of a new layer of artistic activity. One that could organize my base ingredients — deterministic stories and open-ended simulations — into something more than the sum of its parts. Something meaningful yet alive, bounded yet transforming. I've been calling this activity Worlding.



At Venkat's invitation, I'm contributing to [Worlding Raga](#) with the hope of further developing a literacy around Worlding. As a tourist of this part of the blogosphere, I've been drawn to the spiritual dimension of Ribbonfarm again and again. It is the side of Ribbonfarm that is hungry to identify phenomena in the wild that don't seem to die, and to name them so that they are enduring tools for others to see and act anew. This voluntary desire to surf chaos, metabolize it into new order, and then do it all over again, is sometimes called "walking with god." Maybe it's more like slouching with god around here. Either way, it is a spirit I resonate with and one that I

believe is highly suited to Worlding.

First things first. What is a World?

We could say a World is something like a gated garden. A World has borders. A World has laws. A World has values. A World has dysfunction. A World can grow up. A World has members who live in it. A World gives its members permission to act differently than outside of it. A World incentivizes its members to keep it alive, often with the pleasures of its dysfunction. A World counts certain actions inside it as relevant and meaningful. A World undergoes reformations and disruptions. A World has mythic figures. A World is a container for all the possible stories of itself. A World manifests evidence of itself in its members, emissaries, symbols, tangible artifacts, and media, yet it is always something more.

All these qualities describe a World from the perspective of living inside one, already deep within its ongoing history. But this view takes for granted how a World begins, how it comes to be, and how it could ever originate from an individual author. As an artist, this is at the heart of my desire to understand what a World is. Because the dream is to be able to possess the agency to create Worlds – now more than ever – not just inherit and live within existing ones.

To think about beginnings, we have to go back to the moment before a World is born, to the moment of a curious creator looking at Reality — chaotic, meaningless, scary, but latent with potential — 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. Think of JK Rowling stuck on a broken train for four hours, her mom dying, and the life arc of Harry Potter coming to her fully formed. Think of Elon, after the Russians rejected his bid to buy a used rocket, firing up his spreadsheet and costing out how to build one from scratch. Think of George Lucas, unable to secure the rights to Flash Gordon serials, thinking I’ll just roll my own episodic space opera. Think of your mom looking at your dad for the first time and imagining, I could build something with that. The belief is fragile at first, but immediately suggests both a stabilizing structure and interesting generative dysfunction. The creator sets about trying to structure this belief and channel its potential. And at the same time, the creator begins to imagine another satisfaction: putting aside the role of creator and being a person living inside the belief, the beneficiary of its potentiality, a believer.

So what is a World from the perspective of a creator? Here is a working definition:

{ A World is a reality you can believe in: one that promises to bring about habitable structure from the potential of chaos, and aim toward a future transformative enough to metabolize the pain and pleasure of its dysfunction.

Such a notion of a World — with its built-in dynamic between structure and dysfunction — is the sufficiently complex and

enduring response to the chaos of bald Reality. One that a creator of a World must account for and encompass within its creation. It invites both sides of your brain to the party: the open/spiritual part of yourself who seeks change and transformation, alongside the conservative/dogmatic part of yourself who seeks stabilizing structure and evolutionary enduring procedures. It ensures a World that is perpetually interesting in its dysfunction in ways that a perfect utopia can never be; nurturing and habitable in ways that a no-rules dystopia can never be; and spiritually transformative and meaningful in ways that routine everyday life lived within aging institutions can no longer be. In short, it's a World that can keep going because it is a World worth living in and contributing to.

Let's wrap here with a pragmatic application of this notion of a World. There are three minimum archetypal forces that need expression in a World to keep a World alive, interesting, and structured enough to want to keep Worlding it. They are:

1. Chaos: an encroaching, unknowable, nature force.
2. Order: a dogmatic, conservative, structuring force.
3. Transformer: A spiritual, open, metabolizing force.

For example, in the World of *Game Of Thrones*, George RR Martin establishes:

1. Chaos: expressed via the white walkers and the dragons.
2. Order: expressed via the seven ruling kingdoms and its

various representative characters vying for control of the age-old hierarchical ruling throne structure.

3. Transformer: expressed via individuals like John Snow and Daenerys Targaryen who transcend their given roles and attempt to metabolize the encroaching chaos and the classic kingdom structure into something more. In doing so, they irreversibly update Westeros.

With these forces at play, Martin's stories have a sufficiently dramatic domain to exercise in, there's enough dysfunction to surprise him as he writes, and there is enough complexity and artistic aim to grow beyond Fire and Ice in the minds of its members (showrunners, actors, fans, etc). The proof of its success as a World: HBO doesn't need Martin, the creator, to write the rest of the show. This is a World that can perpetuate itself.

So what is Worlding?

{Worlding is the art of devising a World: by choosing its dysfunctional present, maintaining its habitable past, aiming at its transformative future, and ultimately, letting it outlive your authorial control.