Ian Cheng

Artist working with simulations, living stories and digital characters

Ian Cheng is a New York artist, born in Los Angeles in 1984, who builds animated environments in which things can happen without his deciding every event. The Emissaries trilogy and BOB, his evolving digital creature, made that practice internationally visible. He subsequently returned to a more directed form of storytelling in Life After BOB, an animated film about a father who confuses helping his daughter with replacing her agency. Since 2024 he has also been the founder of Opponent Systems, developing AI for family life.[1, 2, 3]

These changes have required different kinds of authorship. Cheng learned to leave a simulation running after years spent controlling animation; he then discovered things that its openness could not give a film. Parenthood changed the stakes of setting another being's conditions, while a studio and production company made his expanding projects possible. His work is intelligible through those decisions and arrangements, including the collaborators who keep the worlds running and the people whose attention they ask for.

[External image / 外部圖片] Portrait of Ian Cheng
Ian Cheng in the portrait accompanying his Pilar Corrias artist biography. Louis Vuitton / Christian Kain (source image credit) / Pilar Corrias · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

A childhood of inhabited worlds

Cheng grew up in the San Fernando Valley with games, cartoons and films. Screen worlds could be investigated, and familiar surroundings could reappear as somebody else's fiction. The attraction was not limited to images: he wanted to understand how a world had been made.[4]

His mother took him movie-hopping, sometimes seeing five or six films on a Saturday. Watching Paul Thomas Anderson's Magnolia, he recognized the Valley's streets and shops and felt proud; his parents found the emotional behavior foreign to their Asian household. A place could be his own and still support a version of life unlike the one at home.[5]

Will Wright's SimCity offered another route inside. Terraforming led Cheng into zoning, roads and fire-station placement. An apparently unexciting subject became absorbing through the consequences of decisions; play prompted curiosity about the designer who had arranged that experience.[6]

At Berkeley he studied cognitive science and art practice, completing his BA and receiving the Eisner Award in Film and Video in 2006.[7] He remembers AI research as intellectually promising but difficult to make practical with the available tools. Work at Industrial Light & Magic brought him into visual-effects production. Art ultimately offered something different: the ability to choose the problems on which he would spend his time.[8]

An MFA at Columbia followed in 2009.[9] Graduate school did not immediately resolve that choice. He later remembered it as a refuge during uncertainty, and himself as unhappy and unproductive. Knowing subjects that would matter to his art had not yet yielded a workable practice.[10]

Cheng also recalled psychedelic experiences beginning in college. They unsettled the idea of a single stable self, but increased his appreciation of the coherent identity needed for everyday plans. That interest in internal multiplicity would coexist with a very practical task: programming entities capable of doing something.[11]

Learning how an artist organizes a life

After Columbia, work with Paul Chan and Pierre Huyghe provided an apprenticeship in artistic operation. Cheng recalls roughly a year and a half before developing his own practice around 2011. Huyghe’s example included exercise, breakfast and refusing demands, as well as ambitious work. Deciding what not to do was part of making room for something of one’s own.[12]

Chan’s Badlands Unlimited gives this apprenticeship a weekly shape. In September 2012, Chan named Cheng a co-director alongside himself and media assistant Micaela Durand. Publishing was concentrated on Mondays and Tuesdays; Cheng programmed e-books, within a small undertaking that also handled contracts, permissions, promotion and print. His independent exhibitions were beginning while this defined portion of the week still belonged to collective work.[13]

Huyghe’s living systems and Hayao Miyazaki’s inhabited fictional worlds offered different models. One admitted independent processes into art; the other gave creatures lives that seemed to exceed the protagonist’s concerns. Cheng could investigate related possibilities digitally without requiring an exhibition to sustain real animals.[14]

Independence did not mean working alone. By 2015 Cheng described producer Veronica So as essential to discipline and community, with engineers, composers and animators helping realize projects. Running or walking, fewer obligations and learning to say no protected working time. Organization was becoming a condition of artistic freedom.[15]

His first solo presentation, This Papaya Tastes Perfect, took place in Miami in 2011, with a publication associated with this early phase.[16] The publications mattered alongside the exhibitions: programming, making images and putting ideas into circulation already belonged to the same working life.

From choosing a recording to letting a program run

The 2012 video for Liars’ “Brats” began with a recognizable hunter-and-rabbit cartoon situation, transformed through motion capture. Madeline Hollander choreographed, Christian De Vietri produced, and David Yijae, Max van der Sterre and Ade Chike Torbert performed. Motion Capture NYC’s Steve Day and Henry Brito helped translate bodily movement into animated material.[17]

For the ending, Cheng ran a simulation about two hundred times and selected a recording. He then wanted to exhibit a program that continued without choosing its best-looking moment. That decision changed the delivered work: a video repeats selected frames, whereas a simulation computes successive states whose interactions can surprise their author.[18]

He had not stopped composing. He moved some decisions upstream, from the preferred final image to the conditions under which events could occur. In the Entropy Wrangler works, objects and animated entities collided under physics rules, making familiar things lose their stability.[19] The disorder was not merely a depicted subject; it was something the software was allowed to produce.

Material engineering remained involved. Abax Siluria, presented in MoMA PS1’s ProBio, used phones, vibration, an animatronic medical hand and mineral oil in which electronics could operate. Leaving a system active required a functioning apparatus, not just an argument for relinquishing control.[20]

Off Vendome in Düsseldorf and Standard in Oslo presented his work in 2013; the 2014 Taipei Biennial extended its circulation.[21] Galleries and exhibitions gave these experiments places to run and people with whom to explain them. His 2014 Infinite Game of Thrones writing considered the disorientation between a losing old reality and an unsettled new one. It put into words a predicament his unstable environments could make perceptible.[22]

Emissaries makes a protagonist possible and then frustrates it

Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo commissioned the first Emissaries work in Turin in 2015. The trilogy, completed in 2017, placed a character pursuing a story inside an environment able to interrupt it.[23] A protagonist could have an intention without possessing the world through which that intention had to pass.

In Emissary in the Squat of Gods, a community lives near an unstable volcano. Julian Jaynes’s contested bicameral-mind hypothesis supplied an imaginative resource for an agent beginning to act differently from a group organized by perceived commands.[24] Later phases transform the site into a caldera lake, where an AI investigates a resurrected human and a Shiba Inu acts as emissary, and then into a sentient landscape. The same place

outlasts several arrangements of mind and agency.[25]

The project had initially been conceived as a children's film about cognitive evolution. Cheng could not find a single model producing the behavior he wanted, so he combined threat responses, slower needs such as hunger and sociability, and narrative planning. Immediate threats could displace needs; plans became possible when those pressures subsided. The system emerged through workable combinations of game models, not the implementation of a finished psychology.[26]

Dramatica, a 1990s story-development program, offered another tool for examining conflicting perspectives on a narrative problem.[27] Cheng was learning to combine the desire for a story with conditions that resisted straightforward storytelling. Neither the dramatic framework nor the simulated mind could do all the work alone.

He dates his production company Metis Suns to 2015. It supplied continuity for production and later publishing.[28] As the works grew, a continuing organization could assemble technical and artistic skills across projects rather than start every installation from nothing.

Raphael Gygax's 2016 Migros Museum presentation in Zurich placed large screens in relation to mobile viewing devices; a publication extended the exhibition's discussions.[29] At the Liverpool Biennial, tablets tracked visitors while a Shiba Inu gave commands. Cheng observed that obeying the dog could make other artworks seem like obstacles: the visitor temporarily became the animal's pet.[30]

Bad Corgi, commissioned by the Serpentine with Rolls-Royce Art Programme support, put unstable control into a free mobile app. A player tried to herd sheep through an unruly dog. Patron support made this experiment publicly available without depending on ordinary game sales.[31]

In April 2017, Peter Eleey and Jocelyn Miller brought the full trilogy to MoMA PS1. MoMA had acquired it; ten-foot projections and a Twitch component gave different ways to encounter its duration.[32] Carnegie later presented the third simulation on a seventeen-foot LED screen.[33] Collection, display apparatus and streaming each changed how a running work could reach people.

Critic Ed Halter found the elaborate world descriptions difficult to reconcile with what could actually be seen, and asked how the software would survive changing hardware.[34] These were related problems. A world must keep operating, but continuity alone does not ensure that its behavior communicates what the artist believes it contains. Institutional recognition left both questions open.

BOB acquires a history and the audience waits for acknowledgment

At the Serpentine in 2018, BOB, or "Bag of Beliefs," occupied the first phase of Cheng's

exhibition, followed by Emissaries. Initially a litter of creatures, BOB could develop behavior while the gallery was closed and need not center a visitor’s attention.[35] The emphasis moved toward a being whose history formed through responses rather than a protagonist continually pursuing an assigned story.

BOB could infer a rule from a few examples and apply it imperfectly elsewhere. Cheng compared that transfer to arriving in a city with expectations learned in another place.[36] Its competing motivations also drew on Eric Berne’s account of personality and life scripts. Such psychological descriptions gave Cheng material for composing agents, rather than turning the artwork into a clinical validation of the theory.[37]

The singular BOB at Gladstone in 2019 made this independence uncomfortable. In an iOS app, visitors arranged offerings including plants, rocks and starfish in named shrines; BOB could select a shrine and receive its contents. Reinaldo Laddaga described waiting, increasing his gifts and eventually receiving a notification at home. His skeptical review exposed the human desire for acknowledgment within an encounter advertised through the creature’s intelligence. Participation meant making an offer, not commanding a response.[38]

The creature and app required a team: So produced, Ivaylo Getov directed the technology, Samuel Eng worked in Unity, Francis Tseng developed AI, Jeremy Yang designed sound and Nick Shelton programmed graphics. Further modeling and optimization supported the work as BOB circulated through Venice, Okayama and Stockholm.[39] The capacity to let a creature develop rested on highly organized human labor.

MOCA Los Angeles acquired a live-simulation version through the Kwon Family Foundation’s Asian Art Acquisition Endowment.[40] A philanthropic fund and a museum collection thus became part of the work’s continued institutional life, beyond the artist’s initial installation.

Cheng’s writing about worlding grew alongside these projects. In a 2019 exchange with Venkatesh Rao, he described a world through relations among order, disorder and capacities for transformation.[41] Ben Vickers at the Serpentine had given Rao Cheng’s book the year before; Ribbonfarm became their shared publication venue. James Carse’s finite and infinite games supplied language for bounded outcomes and continued play.[42]

In “Who Worlds?”, Cheng distinguished the director, cartoonist, hacker and emissary: different dispositions for direction, expression, workable intervention and uncertain encounters.[43] The distinction was practical. A single author could move between these roles, but could not make a world by maximizing one of them indefinitely.

The Serpentine and Koenig Books published Emissaries Guide to Worlding in 2018 with Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, including Nora Khan, Vickers and Hans Ulrich Obrist; Metis Suns issued Emissary’s Guide to Worlding in 2019.[44, 45] Writing let the questions of the practice move at a different pace from the creatures on screen.

Becoming a father and choosing a story

Cheng and artist Rachel Rose became parents in 2019, with a second child arriving in early 2021. He began Life After BOB soon after the first birth.[46] Setting conditions for another being now had a domestic counterpart whose consequences could not be treated as an artistic experiment. His daughter's enthusiasm for My Neighbor Totoro also returned him repeatedly to Miyazaki.[47]

Following a prompt he associated with Stephen King's On Writing, Cheng imagined his worst self as a father. The result was Dr. Wong, a neural engineer whose care for his daughter Chalice becomes entangled with his technological creation. He implants an AI intended to guide her life, which becomes so capable that her own participation is in doubt.[48] The film asks what protection removes when it removes difficulty, and what happens when a parent's attachment to work occupies the place of attention to a child.

Therapy helped Cheng think about inhabiting artist and father roles together. Work had organized his identity; other roles now needed room.[49] Berne's life scripts also gave him a way to examine learned expectations about who someone may become.[50] Dr. Wong was deliberately unflattering, rather than a surrogate who conveniently proved his creator's wisdom.

There was an artistic revision too. Cheng said the accumulating chaos of Emissaries could entertain without becoming meaningful. Life After BOB committed to a more definite character drama.[51] Openness had enabled the simulations, but it did not give him everything he wanted from a film. Making consequences felt required choosing and ordering events again.

The roughly fifty-minute work was built in Unity and premiered at LUMA Arles in June 2021, before presentations at The Shed and LUMA Westbau.[52] It retained real-time rendering while giving the main story an authored progression. The engine's capacity to calculate an image should not be confused with an AI writing the dramatic decisions.

A film made through a studio's constrained time

LAS, The Shed and LUMA commissioned Life After BOB, with research support from the Berggruen Institute's Transformations of the Human program. So produced, Nicholas Sung handled animation production and Getov directed technology, alongside editing, cinematography, voice, music and sound collaborators.[53]

Cheng began with a sixteen-page comic and developed a forty-eight-page script. So was its first reader and gut check. Budget and schedule allowed only one or two animation revision passes; over twenty people met on Zoom every Monday for roughly a year during the pandemic, with smaller task meetings. He remembered those relationships as making lockdown bearable.[54] A more directed story had not simplified production: it made communication and the timing of decisions especially important.

Unity helped keep lighting and scene conditions adjustable without committing to a slow render each time.[55] Nick Shelton's account shows the craft behind that flexibility: toon-shading controls, shadow and color adjustments, volumetric lighting, and projection or vertex distortions for the Wavyverse. The team had to make a game engine produce an illustrated aesthetic, not simply accept its default look.[56]

After the narrative, "World Watching" let visitors revisit the environment and inspect details through a phone interface.[57] Directed attention came first; exploration followed in a world the team had already constructed. Film and simulation were becoming different arrangements of the same production, rather than mutually exclusive positions.

An unrestricted Foundation for Contemporary Arts grant in 2021 also mattered. Cheng's testimony describes its help in moving away from exhibition production at all hours and toward a more resilient basis for family and work.[58] The capacity to make worlds included the capacity to stop working, pay for continuity and inhabit the household that had changed his art.

Different viewers and different traces of a person

Leeum's Worlding in Seoul, from March to July 2022, brought the simulations and film together in his first solo exhibition in Asia.[59] Cheng linked his interest in Korean cinema to Korean and Korean American childhood friends, and considered how Asian viewers might receive the parent-child relationship and indebtedness to parents.[60] The film's familial question was not the same everywhere merely because the file remained the same.

Later in 2022, Amira Gad curated the LAS presentation at Halle am Berghain, shaping entry into the cinema through light, sound and movement.[61] Its TRUE NAME experience invited visitors to provide information and collect a personalized token through a Tezos wallet without a financial contribution. Token collection became part of an exhibition encounter, including for people who had not arrived as crypto collectors.[62]

Cheng did not regard Web3 as progressive by technological definition. In conversation with Ann-Marie Alanes and Bettina Kames, he insisted that values must be created within a system, while defending art's space to imagine disturbing possibilities without becoming a policy prescription.[63] That position leaves a real tension: speculation may be art's purpose, yet its interfaces still establish practical relations with people.

3FACE, developed with Outland in 2022, used public wallet activity to generate and update a visual personality account.[64] MoMA records it as a gift of Outland Art.[65] Here the changing entity was a portrait based on selected traces of an owner. A wallet makes some conduct visible and leaves other life absent; the resulting personality is an artistic construction, not a person transparently read from data.

In Thousand Lives at Pilar Corrias in 2023, Cheng returned to a creature, centering a turtle previously in the background of Life After BOB.[66] At the 2024 Seoul presentation, he

explained that a new life retained a random twenty percent of memories after the turtle died.[67] A fixed environmental view and a closer moving viewpoint offered different encounters with its state.[68] One supporting character's life could exceed the film's story, while memory made repeated lives neither identical nor entirely new.

The company changes what continuity is for

Cheng dates Opponent Systems to 2024.[69] In January 2026, he called it a company rather than his latest artwork. His children and aging parents prompted an interest in AI roles within family life, such as tutor, jester and biographer. Continued use also meant a different feedback cycle: opening-night compliments gave way to whether people returned, and what their indifference revealed. Persistent memory was central to encounters accumulating into relationships.[70]

SAGA is presented as a family "house spirit," being demonstrated on FaceTime with a waitlist. Its intended role links generations through an ongoing household presence.[71]

Shrine Oberon brings the company back into an artwork. At Oberon in New York's New Museum, its shrinekeeper SQ is designed to remember introductions and produce shrine cards. The interface invites introductions and offerings, with named or anonymous participation and optional photographs.[72] Recognition is now connected to information a visitor supplies, and to the possibility of returning to the same place.

So and Getov again produce and direct technology. Ben Vance develops Unity, Jack Kalish sensory interaction, John Brumley sound and Isaac Sante the interface; Cezar Mocan and Ramsey Nasser develop AI, Opponent handles agent design and A. E. Benenson curates.[73] The museum places Cheng's work alongside Minjae Kim and Laurie Anderson in a restaurant operated by the Oberon Group, within its OMA-designed expansion.[74] Eating, conversation and repeated visits provide a different rhythm of attention from a gallery's concentrated encounter.

Books continue alongside these roles. Cosmogenesis's print Worlding gathers writings and exchanges with Rao, whose foreword addresses readers including artists, founders and parents.[75] Those audiences now describe different responsibilities Cheng himself has had to learn, rather than interchangeable metaphors for the same activity.

The direction of his career has not been from controlled images toward ever greater autonomy. He learned to let a program run, then regained dramatic control for a film; he built persistent creatures, then asked what persistence would mean for people who might actually depend on a product. Each move changed the work expected of him and his collaborators. An animal that ignores a visitor can be an absorbing artwork. A family service that fails to attend to its users encounters another standard.

Cheng's imagined beings make agency visible partly by obstructing the human desire to control them. His own working life shows the less spectacular conditions under which that

imagination can continue: publishing days, production schedules, technical partners, institutional support, household time and the ability to revise an earlier artistic choice. Life After BOB makes the desire to help another person inseparable from the risk of displacing them. The company carries that question into ordinary use; it has not, simply by being founded, answered it.

Notes and sources

Public documentation establishes the projects, credited collaborators, commissions and stated changes in working life more fully than salaries, artwork sales, contracts or company finances. Personal recollections remain recollections; system descriptions establish design and presentation rather than independent proof of machine intelligence or consumer benefit.

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1. Gladstone biography.↩
2. Pilar Corrias biography.↩
3. Cheng, official website.↩
4. Interview, 2015.↩
5. Yale Maquette interview.↩
6. Gary Zhexi Zhang, “When AI Grows Up,” Plinth, 2023.↩
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8. Keshav Anand, Something Curated interview, 2023.↩
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11. Adriana Blidaru, Living Content interview, 2018.↩
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13. Paul Schmelzer’s interview with Paul Chan, Walker Reader, September 2012.↩
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16. Pilar Corrias, Emissary Forks at Perfection, 2015. The secure first-solo date is 2011; sources differ on the associated early publication date.↩
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18. Dylan Kerr, BOMB interview, October 2013.↩
19. Pilar Corrias biography.↩

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21. Pilar Corrias, CV.↩
22. Cheng, excerpt from Infinite Game of Thrones, 2014.↩
23. Serpentine, Emissaries, 2018. The trilogy was completed in 2017; catalog dates for individual versions differ. The 2018 institutional publication is distinct from the artist’s 2019 publication.↩
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38. Reinaldo Laddaga, 4Columns, February 2019.↩
39. Power Nap Studio, BOB production record.↩
40. MOCA, BOB (Bag of Beliefs).↩
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48. Emily Spicer, Studio International interview, 2022.↩

49. Ido Nahari, Spike interview, 2022.↩

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51. Wallpaper interview, 2022.↩

52. Pilar Corrias, LUMA Arles exhibition record. Arles exhibition dates were June 26–September 26, 2021.↩

53. LAS, Life After BOB, project and credits.↩

54. Yale Maquette interview.↩

55. Ido Nahari, Spike interview, 2022.↩

56. Nicholas Shelton, technical production account.↩

57. Emily Spicer, Studio International interview, 2022.↩

58. FCA grant record.↩

59. Pilar Corrias, Leeum exhibition record.↩

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61. LAS, Life After BOB, project and credits.↩

62. LAS, TRUE NAME, September 2022.↩

63. Right Click Save interview, October 2022.↩

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71. Opponent Systems. Public page checked October 5, 2026: demo and waitlist. Its current body identifies SAGA; the page title retains Dragon Time.↩

72. Shrine, project site. Public interface checked October 5, 2026; no personal

information was submitted, offering made or operational performance tested.↩

73. Shrine, credits.↩

74. New Museum, Oberon. Institutional description retained from the original profile; this fresh retrieval returned no readable page text.↩

75. Cosmogenesis, Worlding publication page. Print availability is listed; the page does not establish an exact release date.↩