



ONE TAKE: Ian Cheng's *Emissaries*

Jace Clayton discovers hyper-intelligent dogs and violent humans in the artist's computer-simulated worlds





A GROWING CHORUS of philosophers and scientists is supporting the notion that we may be living inside a computer simulation. The numbers, they say, don't quite add up. What we understand as reality may, in fact, be an app – complete with subjective mental feedback squeals of consciousness. The notion is at once scary (will our universe be deleted by a bored user?) and comforting (there is a god and she's a really good software designer). From Plato's allegory of the cave to *The Matrix* (1999), the life-is-but-a-dream meme is as old as storytelling itself. Yet, the recent proliferation of virtual-reality headsets and assorted devices – not to mention the evacuation of facts from mainstream political discourse – lends urgency to considerations of what computer simulations might have in store for us as a species. We are now *homo digitalis*: online beings whose habitat spans the global information stream.

Digital simulation becomes a generative, structuring force in the art of Ian Cheng, a native Angeleno who lives and works in New York. His tidy Chinatown studio houses two computers, some printouts and little else. More typical of a digital producer's office space than an artist's studio, it contrasts starkly with the palimpsest hieroglyphics of stickers and graffiti tags that plaster the stairwell outside. Cheng spent a year at George Lucas's special effects studio, Industrial Light & Magic, between an undergraduate degree in cognitive science and a studio art MFA at Columbia University. His work triangulates the language and techniques of those three disciplines.

Commercial animation inspired *This Papaya Tastes Perfect* (2011), an eight-minute video Cheng cites as the

gateway to his current screen-based simulations. For this work, the artist asked friends to re-enact a brawl that he witnessed on the streets of Manhattan between a couple and a car driver. He used motion-capture technology to record their movements, which were then mapped onto rudimentary animated bodies and further enhanced with goofy sound effects. What makes the video so effective is Cheng's decision not to correct any of the gross imperfections in the motion capture. Fighting bodies lurch and flicker, overlap and disappear. *This Papaya Tastes Perfect* communicates the random horror of violence – so often experienced as viscerally discontinuous from daily life – at the same time as it celebrates silly cartoon corporeality and software hiccups. The angular, lo-res figures struggle in a landscape of undifferentiated light grey, yet their skin colouration often flickers into black. Does the implied racialization result from a software preset? Or might our impulse to view even abstracted bodies through the categories of race be the deeper and more disturbing preset? The virtual camera's perspective restlessly prowls around the scene, contributing to the queasy atmosphere.

Cheng's subsequent works share the rudimentary animation aesthetic of *This Papaya Tastes Perfect*, yet he asks that we understand them not as animated videos but as 'live simulations' or, in his words, 'a video game that plays itself'. Motley humanoid and animal characters populate his virtual worlds. They fight and feed, flock and scatter, mutate and learn. Using the popular video game development platform Unity, Cheng programs the characters' behavioural rules and cognitive models, as well as the world's physical

OPPOSITE PAGE
Emissary Forks at Perfection, 2015, video still. All images courtesy: the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

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Emissary in the Squat of Gods, 2015, video still



characteristics. Once these defining constraints are set, the simulations run live on screens or projections in the gallery: what we see are realtime software renderings. In a typical installation, one screen will depict a wide-angle view of the virtual landscape while another follows a particular character, thus creating a protagonist from the multitudes.

Just as a television series can be streamed on multiple devices, Cheng's simulations can be deployed across any number of formats. 'The iPhone is as valid and occupied a window as the movie screen – if not more so now – and if that's the form a certain exhibition context asks of me then I'm happy to occupy that,' the artist has said. 'But, more often than not, an exhibition is paired with a physical space, so I try to scale my work to the size of the space. That way, when a viewer enters, they feel they're looking not at a screen or a video but a portal – in the same way that looking out of the window at an alleyway or a park feels like a portal.'

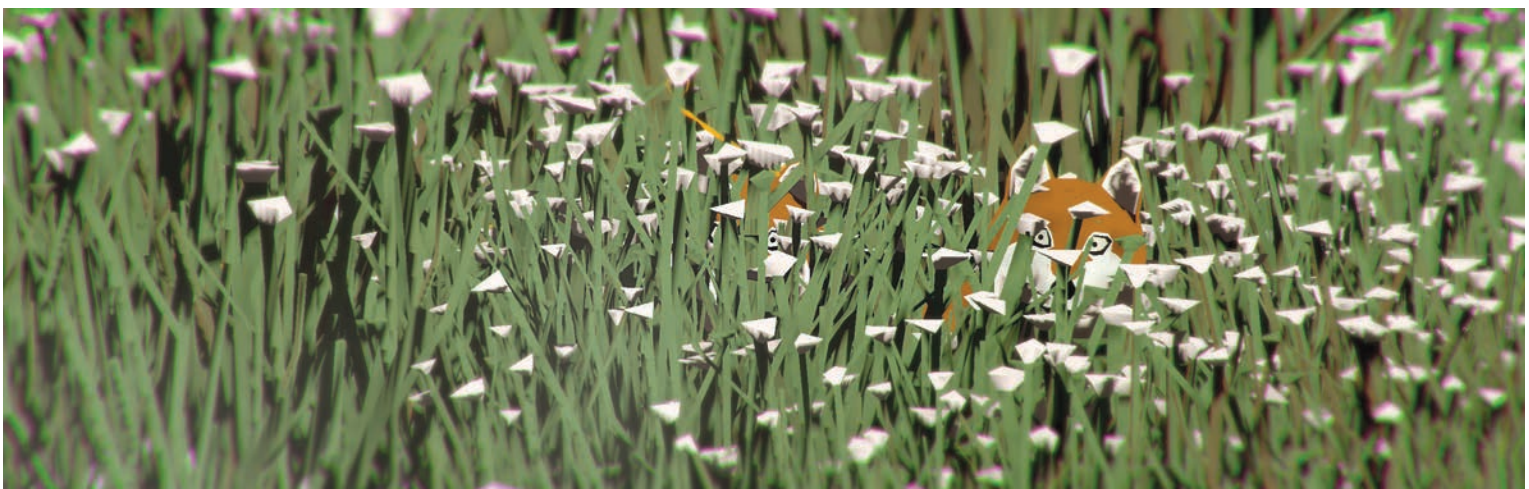
Visitors to *Emissary Forks for You* (2016) were given handheld tablets with which to chase a virtual Shiba Inu around the gallery. (This dog breed reappears throughout Cheng's work in homage to 2013's 'doge' meme, which saw people captioning photos of a cute Shiba Inu with humorous and grammatically stilted text representing its interior monologue. 'Wow', 'such' and 'very' were the dog's favourite words.) The playful installation evolved out of (or 'forked' in software-developer lingo) the simulation *Emissary Forks at Perfection* (2015–16).

This is the second episode of Cheng's most ambitious work to date: the 'Emissaries' trilogy (2015–17). Three simulations occur in a shared fantasy world with an expanding storyline. The completed version forms the basis for his

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IAN CHENG

Emissary Forks at Perfection, 2015–16, video still





*Emissary in the
Squat of Gods, 2015.*
video still

solo show at MoMA PS1, where it has been installed as three large-scale projections. The previous simulations exist like a video game without a player: characters wander around but lack narrative drive. Each episode of 'Emissaries' contains a protagonist with a goal-oriented motivation, akin to the player's mission in a video game. In *Emissary Forks at Perfection*, this character is a hyper-intelligent Shiba tasked to 'keep a revived human talking about his memories before he dies. This requires staying close and batting away the other failed Shiba forks who distract the human.' 'A lot of things going on in the country right now have to do with the sense that people's stories are being rendered increasingly meaningless,' explains Cheng. 'Within the 'Emissaries' simulation, I was trying to give voice to both of these forces: the meaninglessness of the underlying simulation and the meaningfulness of the story – but not to give one precedence over the other.'

To be clear, Cheng has written the laws that govern possibility in these invented worlds. However, he makes a distinction between the 'meaningless simulation' – digital life *sans telos*, analogous to indifferent nature – and a series of 'meaningful' motivational prompts forming a storyline the character tries to fulfill (as the rest of the world's inhabitants go about their chaotic business). 'We need meaning to ground ourselves in a sense of purpose, otherwise we're just filled with anxiety,' he continues. 'On the flip side, we need meaninglessness to interject bald reality into our life scripts, in order to force ourselves to refresh them. So, in the simulations, I'm trying to find a way in which these two forces constantly sculpt each other in a very formal way.'

Of course, it is difficult to discern any of this struggle between chaos and story on our own: we must take Cheng's word for it. The work's interpretive frame leans heavily on its technological substrate. This infrastructure powers the simulations in both the literal and discursive senses. A paradox emerges: to say that an artwork explores the formal ramifications of pitting meaninglessness against meaning is to banish meaninglessness from the discussion.

'Emissaries' manifests Cheng's power as storyteller. Some of the thrill of encountering his art comes from learning, via his terms, what is going on and what is at stake. His explanatory framework defines an unusually large part of what we see. To engage with 'Emissaries' is, in part, to repeat the story of what the artist says it is and what it is doing, using his language. This suggests that Cheng's core art might be programming *us*.

Venturing outside the frame: YouTube user GoldVision's 'Grand Theft Auto Pacifist' videos (2014–ongoing) explore many of the same themes as Cheng does in his work, albeit from a different angle. The project documents GoldVision's

attempts to play *Grand Theft Auto* without hurting any characters. Each episode is built from game footage combined with running commentary. 'It is now time to see if I can persist in a world defined by violence by acting independently of it,' explains GoldVision in the first episode.

The *Grand Theft Auto* franchise presents an amoral world in which aggressive rule-breaking is not only a core system component, it makes the narrative move forward. By pushing against this simulation, 'Grand Theft Auto Pacifist' functions as an allegory for the failure of liberal humanism to deal with predatory capitalism: we'd rather just shoot dissenters, thank you very much. Likewise, with an optimistic blast of posthumanism, Cheng investigates computer model-making as a transformative force in and of itself. 'Emissaries' suggests that the act of creating or watching a digital simulation has the potential to blowback into our world and inoculate us against its precariousness.

Of course, this has already happened: in a sci-fi novel – a genre that provides one of the more robust simulation formats around. Ken MacLeod's *The Corporation Wars: Dissidence* (2016) features a robot, nicknamed Seba, who achieves consciousness as a result of attempting to model the mind of a fellow robot. 'Rocko's model of Seba had been more accurate than Seba's model of itself, which had included Seba's model of Rocko's model of Seba, and consequently what was required was a model of the model of the model that [...] At this point, the robot attained enlightenment.' Seba launched the simulation for results – and calculated wrong. It was the mere act of running the simulation that gave Seba a transcendent self-awareness as valid as any cellphone-enabled upper primate's. Cheng's work looks for such provocative encounters between different forms of intelligence. Game, mutate player. Player, mutate game ●

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IAN CHENG is an artist living in New York, USA. His solo exhibition at MoMA PS1, New York, is on view until 25 September 2017.