#23 SPOTLIGHT IAN CHENG IN CONVERSATION WITH ELVIA WILK

Elvia Wilk You're showing a piece right now at the Liverpool Biennial called *Emissary Forks for You*, which has viewers carrying tablets around the space, chasing a dog that appears on the screen. Is this a sort of augmented reality experience?

Ian Cheng I used Google Tango tablets that sense your exact position in a space. On the screen there's a Shiba dog character that you can follow around – it's the only thing in the virtual landscape. The dog talks to you, with commands like "Follow me." The only thing you can do is follow, and so over time you very naturally become its pet. I first showed a version of this work at Migros Museum, where the dog led you through an empty exhibition space. At the biennial it leads you amongst works by other artists. Because you're focused on following the commands of the dog, the objects within the space can lose their status as artworks; some people even treated them as obstacles to get closer to the dog. In many ways, art exhibition spaces are already a kind of virtual reality, coded with their own set of laws. If an attendant commands you to wait, or step away from the art, or refrain from touching, you just obey. The church of art is already a much stronger virtual reality than anything on a tablet device. Chasing the virtual dog around on the tablet throws this into perspective.

EW I can't help but ask about Pokémon Go, that new app game that also gets users to follow an animated character around.

IC Pokémon Go hit critical mass around the time of the biennial, and it has already changed the world. It recasts everything in physical space under a different set of laws and there is a mass

consensus on the reality of those laws. I read today Nintendo placed a flamboyant Pokémon inside the Westboro Baptist Church – that really racist, homophobic, radical Christian church – so now all these kids playing Pokémon Go have been swamping the church to find it. To the kids, the church has no meaning except for being a valuable Pokémon site. The social reality of the church is rendered completely irrelevant.

EW That reminds me of the recurring use of the "emissary" in your work – you have a series of simulated animations called the *Emissary Trilogy*, and in each animation there's a figure who helps bridge the gap between the viewer and the simulated reality. Are the kids who show up at the Westboro Church looking for Pokémon kind of the opposite, like "emissaries" from a simulated world?

IC I think they are. The emissary is a person who is immersed in one social reality, but is sent to physically enter an alien territory governed by a different social reality. The emissary is tasked with translating an old map onto a new territory, and drama naturally arises from this mismatch. I like this in-between character who must negotiate which reality to occupy, which habits and laws to transplant, which to abandon, and which to adopt. It is a morphic character whose consciousness is environmentally pressured to grow into or out of its resolve.

EW The emissary is a classic sci-fi figure, and also the figure in which sci-fi narratives meet biblical ones: the time traveler and the prophet. Are there emissaries from literature whom you're particularly interested in?

IC There's a Russian sci-fi novel from the 1960s called *Hard to Be A God*.[1] In the book, an advanced human race finds another Earth-like planet with humans stuck in their version of the Middle Ages. They send an emissary to live among the locals disguised as one of them, but with the mandate that he can't intervene in the natural progress of their world. The more time he spends inside their squalid reality, the more he loses perspective that their pain and

suffering is a historical necessity, a passage for humans to work through over many generations. He tries to influence the local king toward more enlightened ways, but ultimately fails to help improve their immediate quality of life. The idea is that even with so much knowledge, the emissary's agency is overwhelmed by the pervading consensual reality.

I also really liked a book called *The Master and His Emissary*, which is a comprehensive study of the left and right brain.[2] The author uses the classic story of the king who sends an emissary into his kingdom, who then takes credit for the king's good deeds, becoming a false prophet or god. This is a metaphor for how early human cognition was governed by a much stronger right-brain inclination, but over evolutionary time, the left brain asserted itself as the primary voice of cognition. The left brain communicates through language and relies on reason and analysis, and so it has more means to express organizational dominance over the right brain's unfiltered intuitive ideas. We live in a culture structured by left brain concerns. The book is about re-culturing a world in which the left brain is demoted to a capable servant – like a manager – and the right brain is given renewed status as the generative source of creativity and situated problem solving.

EW That idea that we should reduce the left brain to a hands-off managerial role sounds like a lot of recent management theory, which says we should flatten hierarchies and expropriate the manager from the center of creation. The imaginative work is given to a small team that the manager can delegate and extract value from. I wonder whether you think of yourself as a sort of manager of the many elements you create in your animations, who you then leave to make creative decisions on their own.

IC Definitely. But this has changed over time. At the beginning I was making animated videos with a very deterministic choreography of events. Then, when I began to make simulated systems, my initial impulse was to renounce authorship completely and let the elements play out by themselves. The outcome of these simulations was total chaos. It's entertaining to watch entropy and evolution play out, but over time I felt that these processes

evolution play out, but over time I felt that these processes, however natural, had an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness. As I continued to develop the simulations, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to develop a system that could circulate between meaning and meaninglessness: a system that could make you feel how meaning can be contextually disrupted into meaninglessness, and how meaninglessness can serve as a spark for the invention of new meaning. I feel now that my work has zero obligation to be meaningful. Rather it aspires to capture the relationship between meaning and meaninglessness.

EW So the earlier work was deterministic, and then you tried randomization, and now it's more of a hybrid – like your authorship went from total to absent to somewhere in the middle?

IC Exactly, that's what I'm exploring right now: how a narrative can meet a simulation. Most of the simulated characters possess a "reactive" AI. But one character, the emissary, is different: she has a set of narrative goals. A tension is created by placing the emissary within the gauntlet of a simulation, where the simulated ecology and other character agents are often obstacles to her enacting her narrative goals. This allows the narrative to sculpt the inherent meaninglessness of a simulation, and the simulation to erode the overly deterministic meaning of a narrative.

EW That is in some sense the central tension of all narrative fiction, right? There's a character, protagonist, with goals that lead the story line, but then there are all these competing elements of the world she inhabits. The character's goals have to be determined by the system as much as the system has to be determined by the character's goals, creating a kind of symbiosis between figure and ground.

IC My dream is to have a simulation complex enough that it can actually solve story problems for me. Whether in my head or through the prosthesis of a simulated computer system, creating a comprehensive world is like that feeling that writers often talk about, where the story "writes itself." But a simulation not only

writes itself for me; it can *show* itself to me.

This process has resulted in trying to find basic but truthful models about how agency can work. And I've come to certain conclusions – for one, I'm not sure if any living agent, human or not, can be conscious without some sort of embodiment. Having tried to create simulated agents with reactive behaviors, with and without sensing bodies, I think it's impossible to grow an intelligence without access to a portfolio of sensory apparatuses.

EW And that's also true for you as a creator of a world. You aren't just inventing behaviors, but crafting the aesthetics of those behaviors through your senses.

IC Yes. I'm also trying to simplify the aesthetics so you can just observe the behaviors and not feel caught up in a fidelity to "photographic" reality. It's possible now to create photorealistic digital imagery, but since these simulations are occurring live in real time, it would be very hard for the computer to render quickly enough for that. And if I tried to create a fully articulated or hyper-real thing, I think the viewer's mind would focus more on the flaws in the realism than the characters' movements or their manner of agency.

This focus on movement comes from my love for [the director Hayao] Miyazaki. In his movies it's the behaviors that breathe life into the images – like how the little boy in *Ponyo* takes off one shoe using his other foot instead of bending down to take them off with his hands. The characters we really remember from movies are the ones who have a choreographic identity. They have a vocabulary of gestures that are distinct from other archetypes.

EW Besides Miyazaki, you reference a lot of different histories or subcultures of animation. Like in the video *This Papaya Tastes Perfect* (2011) one reference was video game graphics, where others, like the recent Serpentine digital commission *Bad Corgi* (2016) refer to app-based games. How do those aesthetic reference points connect to the level of independence or agency you give each system?

IC It took my trying to model all these referential types of simulation to get to the point I am now, where the agents have their own non-referential morphology as well as complex agency. The most exciting zoological thing that's come out of this is in a simulation called *Something Thinking of You* (2015), where the entire body of this seaweed-y creature can change its form, looking like an animal, a still plant, and all the states in between. Because the entire morphology is simulated, down to contractions in its skin, it has an alienness to it that also feels born of a natural evolutionary process.

But I'm also still interested in creating animated human characters, because we relate to them. The work has to interface with us. In stories, characters aren't people, they're perspectives for the viewer to weigh against each other. I like the idea that the simulations continue unfolding with or without any observation, but that there are wavelengths that a viewer can experience and appreciate. I want to retain the aspect of a creature that evolves itself independently of an observer, but that also has a clearly crafted perspective that a human – raised on narrative appreciation – can tune into.

EW There's definitely no consensus in philosophy right now about whether the human observer is necessary for meaning production, or whether things – even art – exist for us to see them. So it's refreshing to hear you say that the two aren't mutually exclusive, meaning that a system can have its own life and internal logic, but that meaning emerges with the presence of the viewer.

IC I guess I want to have it both ways – something that we can feel, but that also exceeds our sense of space-time scale, something that is beyond the limits of our human *Umwelt*. Like the secret lives of pets. There's a hardcore quality to recent anti-anthropocentric lines of thought. Saying the universe is vast and we are but a rounding error: that is very real and very true. On the other hand, statistically, there's more complexity to study on one square inch of human-scorched Earth than billions of square miles of outer space.

While I do recognize the smallness and finitude of the human being, the Earth is a beacon of evolutionary complexity compared to all the other lifeless rocks out there. Reconciling the contradiction between being a human with all our neurological limitations and the overwhelming ambiguity and uncertainty of the universe is what really interests me.

EW I think fiction narratives are particularly suited to showing those contradictions on a human scale, by drawing parallels between a character's evolution and historical developments. Do you think having characters – emissaries – in each work in a way helps "personify" our historical moment?

IC We live in a relatively unstable time: institutions of the past are disintegrating; conventional life scripts are unraveling. This happens at a certain point in all narratives. There's always a moment in a story when a problem becomes so dire that the character hits rock bottom, and all the veils that have until then obscured the true nature of the problem are lifted. It feels like rock bottom because the character has no situational awareness or perspective or habits left for handling reality. Everything is raw and meaningless. At that moment the character can make a choice: she can forge a new set of habits and mental models out of meaningless reality, or she can persist in her current way of thinking. This kind of modeling that stories naturally follow unsurprisingly mirrors civilizational collapse and the growth that comes out of it. I feel like storytelling is such an essential tool to understanding our condition right now.

EW Isn't that rock-bottom place exactly where the artist or storyteller always has to be sitting, in order to invent new scripts?

IC Exactly. And that's psychologically hard. It's hard to not have a boss who shields you from the decision-making process. The artist stands in a void where no one cares what you're doing more than yourself. Personally I have to outsource some of that decision-making to my producer to relieve me from that nothingness. On a pragmatic level, my producer Veronica helps me hire, manage, and

pragmatic level, my producer Veronica helps me hire, manage, and communicate with programmers. But on a fundamental level, she's like my mom – an exterior authority to myself. I tell her what the goals of a project are early on. Then when in the process, I get distracted, depressed, overwhelmed, or feel the void too much, she's there to relieve me of the burden of having to be both my own manager and my own creative decision-maker at the same time. She is the other brain-hemisphere of the art-making process.

EW What are you working on with her right now?

IC The third episode of *The Emissary Trilogy*. It takes place within the same landscape as the first two. The first episode [*Emissary in the Squat of Gods*] simulates an ancient community living on a volcanic mountainside, faced with the threat and stress of an eruption for the first time. The second episode [*Emissary Forks At Perfection*] takes place inside the volcanic crater, now an ecological preserve. An artificially bred Shiba dog acts as an emissary who introduces an ancient twenty-first century human to the new ecology. The third episode is about a super-organism living in the atoll remains of the volcano. It will play out the relationship between that super-organism and a series of very deterministic trials or qualifications. It will have to reconsider its own subagents within itself, losing and gaining parts of its personality.

EW Why do you so often choose dogs as emissaries?

IC We imagine AI as an all-knowing, omniscient machine, but I really like the opposite idea – that an AI is just another organism in a diverse landscape of organisms. And so I started to use the metaphor or embodiment of the dog in my work as a way to clarify the thought that AI is just another creature with its own set of behaviors, strengths, flaws, and capacity to learn. I have a pet Corgi, and I find him infinitely fascinating, even though his motivations are so predictable. When I send him off to a dog trainer, he comes back like he got an iOS upgrade – his behavior is tuned up; he has a few new features. But when his behavior begins to drift, or when bad habits return, I don't treat him like he's a

broken microwave. It's a constant management process that requires empathy for what it feels like to be alive. The way AIs will learn is very similar to the way a dog or a small child learns. If we take the perspective that we're growing up with AI, raising AI, rather than expecting AI to be perfect mechanisms on arrival, we could unleash so many other possibilities – in terms of artistic collaboration, but also in terms of appreciating our relationship with non-human agents. Children attribute agency to inanimate toys and animals, so it's no stretch to imagine how invested we will become in embodied AIs in the near future. We should look at them as companion creatures, not as perfect servants.
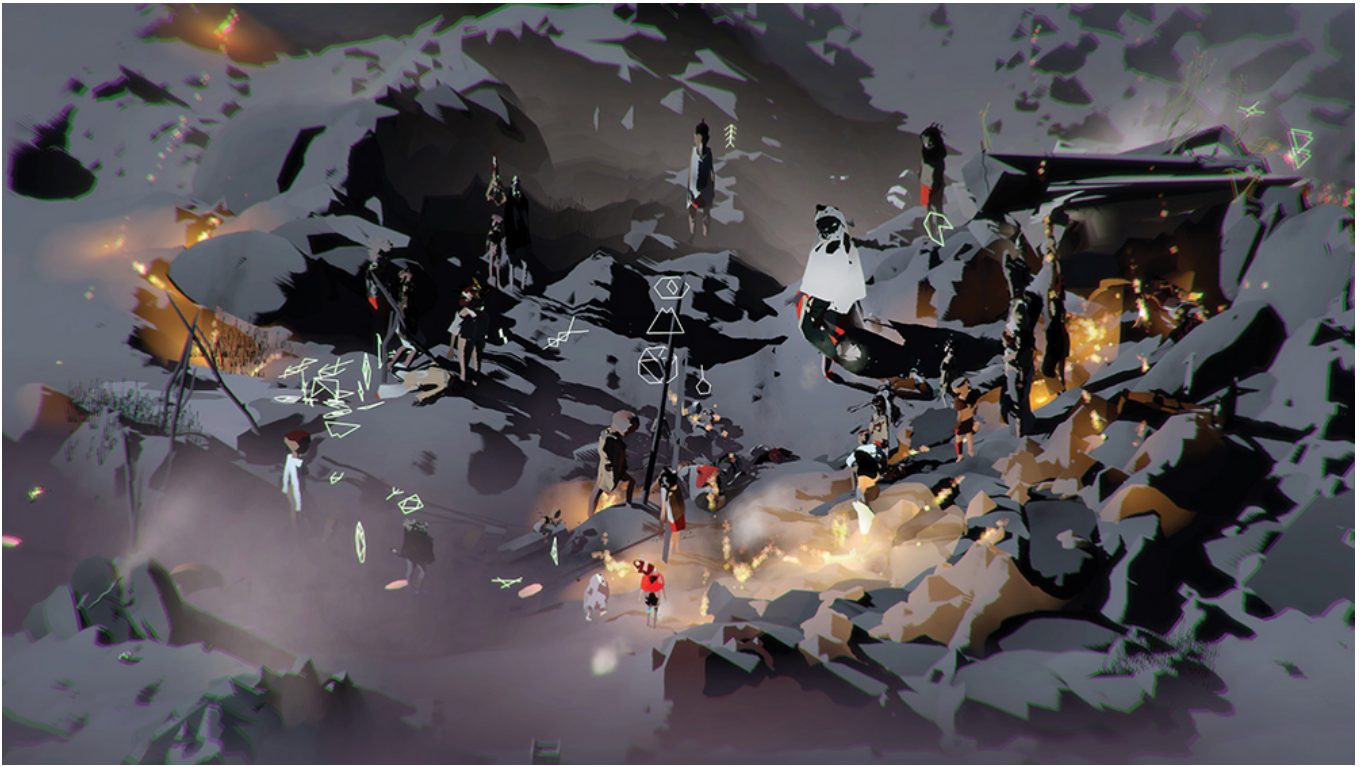
[1] Arkady Strugatsky and Boris Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), first published in Russian in 1964.
[2] Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

TAG

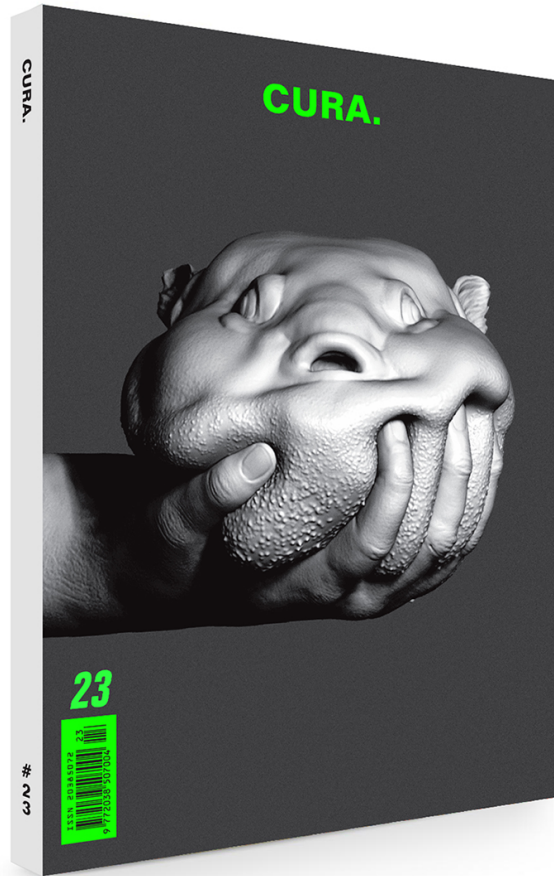ELVIA WILK, IAN CHENG, LIVERPOOL BIENNIAL, SERPENTINE GALLERY

FB — TW

MORE...

RELATED ARTICLES