

Lawrence Dabu

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### Lecture w/ Ian Cheng

In the EDA on April 10th, UCLA DMA hosted a talk with simulation artist, Ian Cheng. Coming from a cognitive science background, Cheng's work takes on a conceptually and aesthetically unique approach to world building. Cheng's live simulations can be referred to as "virtual ecosystems" that evoke a myriad of emotions while maintaining a bizarre, surreal atmosphere. In his simulation series, *Emissaries*, the world exudes dark and eerie undertones, featuring a primitive, humanoid tribe with different social groups participating in various pagan activities. Cheng displayed scans of old sketchbooks, walking the audience through his creative process of building the *Emissaries* world. Early character designs were juxtaposed with elaborate behavioral diagrams, showing the in-depth and meticulous mechanics of how the ecosystem runs. In order to make the simulation more interesting, Cheng singles out a character and gives it its own unique behavioral setting and design, adding a narrative element to the environment. In his most recent project *BOB*, Cheng programmed a virtual creature named BOB that functions almost as a pet. The alien-like creature is a furry red with lanky limbs that grows when you feed it. With a unique intelligence, BOB exhibits various emotions and behaviors. For this project, Cheng was inspired by the character aspect of his *Emissaries* series and the narrative possibilities and elements imposed by a character concept.

On his creative process, Cheng sees that the tools are right in front of him (Unity, network media, etc.), he just needs to play around in the environment to get a project idea going.

Cheng has also expressed interest in more interactive art or “art with a nervous system”. Future works would explore the user as an influence to this nervous system, and the narratives that play out in these interactive simulations. Ian Cheng’s particular approach to live simulations warrants a meticulous attention and is achieved by the complexities of his ecosystems, as well as their aesthetic qualities.