

G L A D S T O N E

Park Han-sol, "Ian Cheng and his AI Turtle with Thousand Lives," *The Korea Times*, March 3, 2024



# Ian Cheng and his AI turtle with thousand lives



A still from Ian Cheng's "Thousand Lives" (2023–24) on view at Gladstone Gallery Seoul /  
Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery

**By Park Han-sol**

"I'm feeling 'neutral.' My current goal is 'eat / grapes green.'"

"I'm feeling 'anger.' My current goal is 'fight / food pellet.'"

These seemingly random texts, flickering on a digital screen in one corner of Gladstone Gallery Seoul, offer a curious glimpse into the mind of a tiny turtle. But not just any turtle. It's a creature living inside a live simulation, powered entirely by "neuro-symbolic" artificial intelligence (AI).

Meet Thousand, the latest brainchild of Ian Cheng — the artist best known for his virtual ecosystems teeming with AI-based characters with “minds of their own.”

The life of this pet turtle begins when it's spawned inside a messy apartment of Chalice, a character from Cheng's previous animated piece, "Life After BOB: The Chalice Study."

Over the course of however many days, Thousand gradually begins to learn the function of all the objects it runs into within the environment — discerning whether they are meant to satisfy its basic urges or pose a threat to its life.

“All the objects that the turtle encounters, their meanings are not known to the turtle when the simulation begins. It has to learn them — one by one and along the way — maybe make some mistakes, suffer some pain or discover joyful surprises,” the artist said during a recent press conference at the gallery.

The accompanying text-based metadata provides insight into the animal’s AI brain as it learns about the world around it.



Installation view of Ian Cheng's "Thousand Lives" (2023–24) / Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery

But there's a catch to Cheng's simulation: the turtle can die over and over again — hence the work's title, "Thousand Lives."

The cause of its demise can be myriad. It may come across an item in the apartment that poisons or harms it. Or, it may misinterpret the function of certain objects and fail to satisfy its basic needs for food, water and rest. Sometimes, unexpectedly, its action may be thwarted by its owner, Chalice, who appears out of the blue from time to time and acts as "the force of nature" in the small animal's universe.

Every time it dies, it gets reincarnated, retaining about 20 percent of the beliefs it obtained in its previous life. What gets left or wiped out from its memory is determined randomly and autonomously by AI; even the artist himself is not in control of the process. Once reborn, the turtle is left to explore the world in a new way all over again.

The element of unpredictability and spontaneity that dictates all of Cheng's open-ended worlds, like that of Thousand, means that any interaction or event among AI-powered characters witnessed by the audience at a given time can never be repeated in the exact same way.

His simulations are ultimately akin to a video game "that plays itself" — a never-ending but ever-changing loop that feels "alive" precisely due to its unforeseeable nature.



Installation view of Ian Cheng's "Life After BOB: The Chalice Study Experience (LABX)"  
(2021–22) / Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery

In the basement of the gallery, Cheng's 50-minute anime, "Life After BOB," is being screened. It tells the origin story of Chalice, the first child to grow up with a fictional AI symbiote called BOB.

The piece was also featured in "Worlding," his first comprehensive solo show in Asia, mounted at the Leeum Museum of Art in 2022.

Unlike "Thousand Lives," the animation of "Life After BOB" follows the same script each time it plays. But it boasts one ingenious technique: visitors can use their smartphones to connect to the film itself and remote control it. This allows them to not only pause or rewind the story but freely click on and zoom in on every detail of the virtual universe.

"I thought it would be so beautiful to have a new kind of cinematic medium, where you literally could go into the world and not just watch it as a linear movie," the artist said.

"Thousand Lives" runs through April 13 at Gladstone Gallery Seoul.