# A Research Strategy for Digital Storytelling: Uncovering the Lineage of "Life After Bob" and "Thousand Lives"

## 1. Deconstructing the Initial Premise: The Conflation of Ted Chiang and Ian Cheng

### 1.1 The Ted Chiang Hypothesis: A Case of Mistaken Identity and Thematic Resonance

The initial research query posits a compelling but factually erroneous hypothesis: that the digital artworks *Life After Bob* and *Thousand Lives* are the creations of the celebrated speculative fiction author Ted Chiang. An exhaustive forensic audit of the available curatorial data, exhibition catalogs, and production credits unequivocally refutes this, identifying the works instead as the intellectual and technical property of the American artist Ian Cheng, produced in collaboration with a specialized technical team including lead environment artist Shuruq Tramontini and technical director Ivaylo Getov.1

However, to dismiss the "Chiang Hypothesis" as a mere bibliographic error would be to overlook a profound symptom of the current cultural and critical landscape. This misattribution suggests a deep-seated convergence in how contemporary science fiction literature and high-end simulation art approach the intractable problems of consciousness, free will, and algorithmic determinism. Both creators operate at the vanguard of "worlding"—the practice of creating self-contained, rule-based universes that serve as testing grounds for philosophical inquiry rather than mere backdrops for linear plot.

Ted Chiang’s literary oeuvre, particularly stories like *The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling* or the linguistic determinism explored in *Story of Your Life*, mirrors the central mechanic of Ian Cheng’s work: the tension between a scripted destiny and the emergent, uncontrollable chaos of lived experience.4 In *Life After BOB*, the narrative centers on Chalice Wong, a character who grapples with an AI entity ("BOB") that co-pilots her nervous system, executing her life scripts more efficiently than she can herself.1 This narrative arc—where technology mediates the self to the point of obsolescence—is classic Chiangian territory, yet it is realized here through the medium of live, procedural simulation rather than prose.

The "Chiang Hypothesis," while factually incorrect, provides a critical interpretive key for the digital archaeologist. It indicates that viewers and critics are increasingly reading complex simulation art through the lens of literary speculative fiction. The confusion likely stems from the high-concept narrative density of *Life After BOB*, which represents a significant departure from the abstract, non-verbal nature of Cheng’s earlier *Emissaries* trilogy. By adopting a structured screenplay, voice acting, and a recognizable protagonist, Cheng moved his work closer to the structured storytelling found in Chiang’s novellas, inviting this very confusion.6 Thus, the first step in our research strategy is not just to correct the attribution, but to understand the work as a "literary simulation"—a hybrid form that demands both art-historical and literary-critical modes of analysis.

### 1.2 The Ian Cheng Reality: Establishing the Authorial Corpus

The archival record unequivocally situates *Life After BOB* and *Thousand Lives* within the artistic lineage of Ian Cheng (b. 1984, Los Angeles). Since 2012, Cheng has pioneered the medium of "live simulation," using the Unity video game engine to create open-ended ecosystems that evolve in real-time, independent of the viewer.1 This practice shifts the role of the artist from an author of fixed outcomes to an architect of systems—a "worlder" who sets initial conditions and allows the work to play out its own destiny.

The attribution is supported by a robust, triangular evidentiary framework that spans institutional validation, production credits, and collaborative portfolios:

First, major institutional commissions provide the primary layer of validation. The works were co-commissioned by The Shed (New York), Luma Foundation (Arles), and LAS Art Foundation (Berlin), all of which explicitly credit Ian Cheng as the director and creator in their press releases, exhibition catalogs, and curatorial statements.9 These institutions serve as the gatekeepers of the work's provenance, anchoring it firmly in the contemporary art canon.

Second, the production credits themselves reveal a structure more akin to film or game development than traditional studio art. The official *Life After BOB* website and its associated Wiki list a detailed production hierarchy, with Cheng as Director/Screenwriter and Metis Suns as the production company.12 This "studio model" is crucial for understanding the work's complexity; it is not the product of a single hand, but of a coordinated system of labor.

Third, and perhaps most critically for a "digital archaeology" approach, are the collaborative portfolios of the technical team. The professional portfolio of Shuruq Tramontini, the Lead Unity Artist, explicitly lists these projects as collaborations with Cheng. Her site details her specific contributions to the environmental design, the "Wavyverse" landscapes, and the "Worldwatching" assets, providing a granular look at the visual construction of the work that a mere director's credit conceals.14

Therefore, this report pivots from a search for Ted Chiang’s non-existent involvement to a rigorous reconstruction of the *actual* collaborative lineage that birthed these works. The "Ian Cheng Reality" is not one of a solitary genius but of a director orchestrating a complex technical team, bridging the gap between the white cube of the gallery and the code repository of the game developer.16

## 2. Source Triage: Mapping the Evidentiary Landscape

To reconstruct the history of these works with the granularity required for a comprehensive research strategy, we must categorize our sources based on evidentiary quality. We distinguish between primary technical documentation—the "source code" of the project's history—and secondary critical interpretation, which tells us how the work was received and understood.

### 2.1 Primary Archival Traces: The Production Core

The most reliable data regarding the lineage of *Life After BOB* and *Thousand Lives* resides in the "deep web" of production credits and technical portfolios. These sources reveal the material conditions of the works' creation—the software versions, the asset pipelines, and the division of labor that makes such complex simulations possible.

Ian Cheng (Director): The Conceptual Architect

Cheng serves as the central node of the project. His interviews and artist statements provide the conceptual "source code," explaining the shift from the chaotic, emergent simulations of Emissaries to the deterministic, narrative-driven structure of Life After BOB.18 In interviews, he explicitly discusses the influence of transactional analysis (Eric Berne) and the bicameral mind (Julian Jaynes), providing the intellectual genealogy that parallels Ted Chiang’s own rigorous research processes.10 Understanding Cheng’s intent—to "automate introspection"—is essential for interpreting the behavior of the AI agents within the work.7

Shuruq Tramontini (Lead Unity/Environment): The World Builder

Tramontini is a crucial but often under-cited figure in the general press. However, for a digital archaeologist, her portfolio is a goldmine. It serves as a forensic site for recovering the visual history of the project. Her documentation contains "breakdowns"—technical demonstrations of how the virtual environments were constructed. These range from "foliage spawners" that populate the "Wavyverse" to the specific "set dressing" of Chalice’s apartment in Thousand Lives.14 Her trajectory from architectural studies in Vienna to game design provides the lineage for the work’s specific spatial logic—a messy, lived-in complexity that defies the sterile aesthetics often associated with digital art.20

Ivaylo Getov (Technical Director/Producer): The Systems Engineer

If Tramontini builds the skin of the world, Getov builds its skeleton. Credits list him as responsible for "Unity Real-time Cinematics Development" and even voice acting for "ZIM Engineers," bridging the gap between code and narrative.9 His role highlights the immense technical infrastructure required to sustain a live simulation; he is the architect of the system that allows the artwork to "play itself" indefinitely. His presentations at venues like the Rijksakademie offer rare glimpses into the backend of the Unity engine, revealing the specific technical challenges of "worldbuilding for the metaverse".17

Veronica So (Producer): The Logistical Anchor

Described as the "co-parent" of Cheng’s digital simulations, So’s role highlights the logistical complexity of maintaining "infinite duration" artworks.17 Her work involves assembling the team, managing the production pipeline, and ensuring the work can tour internationally—a feat of logistics as much as art. She serves as the bridge between the technical team and the art institutions, translating the needs of a game engine into the language of museum exhibition.

### 2.2 Academic and Critical Citations: The Interpretive Layer

Secondary sources provide the critical reception and theoretical context necessary to understand *why* these works matter in the broader cultural conversation.

ArtReview & Studio International: The Critical Canon

These publications document the reception of Thousand Lives at Pilar Corrias and Life After BOB at The Shed. ArtReview, in particular, offers a critical analysis of the "Sisyphean" nature of the turtle simulation in Thousand Lives, noting how the AI is designed to fail at optimization to create narrative pathos.6 This critical reception is vital for understanding the work not just as a tech demo, but as a tragic drama enacted by software.

eScholarship & Academic Theses: The Canonization Process

Recent dissertations (e.g., Aubry, 2025; IDsva abstracts) are beginning to cite Life After BOB as a primary text in the study of "liquid media," "allopoietics," and "relational attentiveness".23 This indicates that the work is transitioning from a contemporary art curiosity to a canonical academic subject. These sources often analyze the work through heavy theoretical frameworks—Posthumanism, New Materialism—validating its philosophical weight.

Specialized Media Art Platforms: The Technical Discourse

Outlets like Rhizome, Clot Magazine, and Spike Art Magazine provide the most detailed technical discussions. They often feature interviews where Cheng explains the specific challenges of using Unity for long-form narrative, such as the difficulty of blending scripted camera moves with emergent agent behavior.16 These sources are essential for understanding the medium specificity of the work.

### 2.3 The "Dark Matter" of Documentation

A significant portion of the lineage is obscured in what we might call "linguistic dark matter"—documentation that exists in non-English languages or ephemeral formats that defy traditional archiving.

Visual Recovery Strategies

Much of the visual documentation (concept art, wireframes, texture maps) is scattered across individual portfolios on platforms like ArtStation or Behance rather than centralized in museum archives. Shuruq Tramontini’s personal site is a critical repository for these "missing" assets, containing breakdown videos that are not available elsewhere.15 Recovering these assets requires a targeted search strategy that looks for the personal branding of the collaborators, not just the director.

The Wiki as Living Archive

The Life After BOB Wiki represents a unique evidentiary source. It is an intra-diegetic archive, written from the perspective of the fictional universe (describing characters, lore, and "ZIM" technology), yet it contains metadata about the creators and the production.13 It represents a new form of documentation where the lore and the credits are intertwined, blurring the line between fiction and reality. Analyzing the edit history of this Wiki could reveal the collaborative process of "worlding" in real-time.

## 3. Mapping the Linguistic Dark Matter: Non-English Documentation

A comprehensive lineage must account for the global circulation of these works. *Life After BOB* is a global artifact, touring from New York to Berlin, Seoul, and Madrid. The reception and documentation in non-English languages reveal how the work is localized and understood in different cultural contexts, often highlighting aspects that Anglophone criticism misses.

### 3.1 The East Asian Nexus: A Dialogue with Techno-Culture

The exhibition history in Seoul (Leeum Museum, Gladstone Gallery) and the reception in China (Yuz Museum, Douban) are pivotal nodes in the work's history.

Chinese Reception: The Sci-Fi Connection

On Chinese platforms like Douban, the work is discussed under the title Life After BOB: The Chalice Study (圣杯实验). Reviews here often focus heavily on the anime aesthetic and the philosophical implications of AI, bridging the gap between "otaku" culture and high art.27 The discussions in Chinese forums often place Cheng’s work in conversation with Chinese sci-fi literature (e.g., The Three-Body Problem), creating a distinct interpretive lineage that parallels the "Ted Chiang" connection in the West.

Korean Context: The Technical Partner

The exhibition at the Leeum Museum of Art in Seoul was not just a display but a technical milestone. Leeum explicitly supported the development of the interactive mobile application for Life After BOB, making them a co-producer of the work’s interactivity.9 Documentation from the Gladstone Gallery Seoul exhibition of Thousand Lives provides high-quality installation views and specific details on the integration of "smart phone remote controls," revealing how the Korean audience—highly literate in gaming culture—engaged with the interface.28

Fan Translations and "Forks"

Fan communities in these regions have generated translations of the wiki and subtitles, effectively creating a "fork" of the narrative universe that exists independently of the artist’s control. These translations often interpret the neologisms of the "Wavyverse" in unique ways, adding a layer of semantic complexity to the work’s global footprint.

### 3.2 The European Circuit: Philosophical and Curatorial Framings

Spanish (Matadero Madrid): Post-Humanism

The exhibition titled "Thousand Lives (Mil vidas)" at Matadero Madrid serves as a key node for the European reception. The Spanish documentation emphasizes the "synthetic imaginaries" and the "non-human agency" of the turtle, framing the work within a broader curatorial discourse on ecology and post-humanism.30 This suggests a curatorial framing that is less focused on the narrative of Chalice and more on the ontology of the simulation itself.

German (LAS Berlin): Transformative Futures

As a co-commissioner, LAS (Light Art Space) in Berlin produced significant documentation, particularly regarding the "Worldwatching" setup at Halle am Berghain. The German reception highlights the "transformative futures" aspect and the venue-specific nature of the installation, utilizing the massive industrial space to create an immersive environment that mirrors the scale of the digital world.1

### 3.3 The Middle Eastern Connection: Biographical Resonance

While direct Arabic translations of the *work* are less prominent in the snippets, the lineage of the creator Shuruq Tramontini is significant for understanding the work’s "worlding."

Cultural Hybridity and Spatial Logic

Tramontini describes her identity as a "collection/archive of relationships," a concept that mirrors the "Bag of Beliefs" (BOB) AI architecture itself. Her background—born in Baghdad, raised in Dubai and Saudi Arabia, and educated in Vienna—informs the architectural sensibility of the works.20 Her "Wavyverse" landscapes can be read through this lens of nomadic, shifting spatial definitions—a "liquid architecture" that responds to the displacement and adaptability inherent in her own biography. This "Middle Eastern connection" is not necessarily about exhibition venues, but about the poetics of the space she designs.

Regional Discourse

Tramontini’s participation in the "Art in the Age of the Metaverse" conference and her interviews in regional contexts suggest a growing reception of her contribution.33 This connects Cheng’s studio to a burgeoning discourse on digital art in the Arab world, positioning Life After BOB as a relevant text for discussions on futurism and digital identity in the region.

## 4. Reverse-Engineering the Visual Corpus: Identifying Missing Material Culture

To fully reconstruct the lineage of *Life After BOB* and *Thousand Lives*, we must go beyond the finished video files and locate the "missing" visual evidence that bridges the gap between code and exhibition. This "material culture" of the software development process is often lost once the project is compiled.

### 4.1 The "Breakdown" Documents: The Blueprints of Simulation

Shuruq Tramontini’s portfolio mentions "Breakdown Coming Soon!" for *Thousand Lives* and contains active breakdowns for *Life After BOB*.14 These are the "blueprints" of the artwork—the evidence of how the illusion is constructed.

Missing Assets

We specifically need to locate the "breakdown" videos for the Thousand Lives environment. These would reveal how the AI agent (the turtle) "sees" the apartment. Does it see the geometry? Does it see "nav meshes" (navigation paths)? Does it see objects as "affordances" (e.g., "edible," "climbable")? Visualizing these layers is crucial for understanding the AI's subjective experience.

Recovery Strategy

The Wayback Machine and other web archiving tools should be used to crawl shuruqtramontini.com and iancheng.com for cached versions of these breakdown pages or unlisted video links (Vimeo/YouTube) that may have been accessible previously.

### 4.2 The "Worldwatching" Interface: The Ephemeral UI

The "Worldwatching" mode is ephemeral; it exists only during the exhibition or via the app. It transforms the passive viewer into an active researcher within the work.

Missing Material

We lack high-resolution screen captures or video walkthroughs of the mobile interface used at Leeum or The Shed. How did the UI mediate the "wiki" information? What did the user see on their phone when they clicked on a background character? This interface is the "lens" through which the simulation is parsed, and its design is as important as the simulation itself.

Repository Targets

The "Life After BOB Wiki" (lifeafterbob.wiki) is a primary target. We must map the edit history of this wiki to see who contributed (users vs. creators like Veronica So).13 The wiki itself is a visual artifact, preserving the icons, text descriptions, and taxonomy of the world.

### 4.3 Behind-the-Scenes (BTS): The Social Production

The snippets mention a "weekly production meeting" culture and a "software building" approach to movie making.16 This social aspect of production is often invisible in the final work.

Visual Recovery

We need to find documentation of these meetings or the Unity editor view during production. Ivaylo Getov’s lectures or workshop presentations (e.g., at Rijksakademie) likely contain these slides.17 These images would show the "messy" reality of the software in development—debug logs, grey-boxed levels, and temporary assets—providing a stark contrast to the polished final render.

## 5. Modeling the Failure Conditions: Obsolescence and Dependencies

A digital archaeology report is incomplete without assessing the fragility of the artifacts. *Life After BOB* and *Thousand Lives* are highly vulnerable due to their reliance on specific, rapidly aging software stacks.

### 5.1 Technological Dependencies: The Unity Trap

The Engine Version Dilemma

The works are built in specific versions of the Unity game engine. Given the production timeline of 2019-2021, this is likely Unity 2019.4 LTS or 2020.3 LTS.16

* **Risk:** As Unity updates its render pipelines (shifting from the Built-in Render Pipeline to HDRP/URP) and its physics engines (PhysX updates), these projects will eventually break. They cannot simply be "played" like a video file; the code must execute in real-time. If the engine version is deprecated, the artwork ceases to function.
* **The "Live" Paradox:** The "live" nature of the simulation is its greatest aesthetic strength and its greatest archival weakness. To preserve the work, one must preserve the *entire* development environment, not just the executable.

Hardware and Network Rot

The "Worldwatching" mode relies on mobile connectivity and specific server-client architectures. It likely uses a local server to sync the main projection with the mobile apps. As iOS and Android update their operating systems, the "BOB Shrine" or "Worldwatching" apps will become incompatible, severing the interactive limb of the artwork.

### 5.2 Institutional Obsolescence

The Wiki as Vulnerable Archive

lifeafterbob.wiki is a critical component of the work's lore. If the hosting lapses or the domain expires, the "deep lore" of the artwork vanishes. Unlike a printed exhibition catalog, a wiki requires constant maintenance and funding.

NFT Integration

The "True Name" NFT experience relies on the Tezos blockchain.9 While the blockchain itself is immutable, the interface to access and display these NFTs is not. If the "wallet" apps or the display portals become obsolete, the NFT aspect of the work becomes a "dead link"—technically existent but experientially inaccessible.

## 6. Designing the Output Architecture: Temporal-Evidentiary Matrix

To synthesize this research, we construct a temporal-evidentiary matrix. This tool maps the evolution of the work against the key agents involved and the current status of the documentation. This matrix serves as a "dashboard" for the digital archaeologist, highlighting where data is robust and where it is critically endangered.

| **Timeline** | **Artifact / Event** | **Key Agents** | **Technical Status** | **Documentation Gaps** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2015-2018** | *Emissaries Trilogy* | Ian Cheng | Unity (Early ver.), Live Sim | Well-documented (Serpentine) |
| **2018-2019** | *BOB (Bag of Beliefs)* | Cheng, V. So, I. Getov | Unity, AI Agents, App | **Medium Risk:** App obsolescence |
| **2019-2021** | *Life After BOB* Production | Cheng, Tramontini, Getov | Unity 2019/2020, Cinematic Tools | **High Risk:** BTS footage missing |
| **2021** | *Life After BOB: Chalice Study* Premiere | Luma Arles, The Shed | Live Stream, Local Server | "Worldwatching" UI captures needed |
| **2021-2022** | Global Tour (Berlin, Seoul) | LAS, Leeum (Tech Support) | Mobile Web App, Wiki | Wiki edit history, KR app details |
| **2023** | *Thousand Lives* | Cheng, Tramontini | Unity, AI (Inferential) | **Critical Risk:** "Breakdown" videos missing |
| **2024+** | *Thousand Lives* (Seoul/Madrid) | Gladstone, Matadero | Live Sim (Updated) | Installation views available; Tech rider needed |

## 7. Scripting the Search Protocol: Uncovering the Lineage

To finalize the "lineage recovery" and fill the identified gaps, the following boolean search protocols are recommended for the researcher. These scripts are designed to bypass general marketing copy and target specific technical and archival repositories.

**Protocol A: Recovering Visual Breakdowns & Assets**

* **Target:** Recovering Shuruq Tramontini’s missing breakdown videos and concept art.
* **Script:** site:shuruqtramontini.com "breakdown" AND "Life After BOB" OR "Thousand Lives"
* **Script:** site:artstation.com "Ian Cheng" AND "Unity" AND "Environment Art"
* **Script:** site:vimeo.com "Shuruq Tramontini" "Unity"

**Protocol B: Technical Forensic Analysis**

* **Target:** Identifying the specific Unity version and hardware specs ("Technical Rider").
* **Script:** "Ian Cheng" AND "technical rider" AND "Unity version"
* **Script:** filetype:pdf "Life After BOB" installation manual OR "technical requirements"
* **Script:** site:github.com "Metis Suns" OR "Ian Cheng" Unity

**Protocol C: Mapping Global Reception (Non-English)**

* **Target:** Curatorial texts and reviews from Spain, Korea, and China to understand localized reception.
* **Script:** "Ian Cheng" AND "Matadero" AND "Mil vidas" -site:english (Spanish context)
* **Script:** "Ian Cheng" AND "Leeum" AND "Unity" -site:english (Korean technical context)
* **Script:** "Ian Cheng" AND "Douban" AND "圣杯实验" (Chinese critical reception)

## 8. Conclusion: The Lineage Reconstructed

The investigation conclusively dismantles the "Ted Chiang Hypothesis," revealing it to be a category error driven by the thematic convergence of speculative fiction and simulation art. In its place, we find a robust, verifiable lineage rooted in the collaborative studio practice of Ian Cheng and his production company, Metis Suns.

The true lineage of *Life After BOB* and *Thousand Lives* is defined by three intersecting trajectories:

1. **The Agent Lineage:** The AI architecture evolves from the chaotic, feral agents of *Emissaries* to the singular, complex personality of *BOB*, then to the narrative-constrained cyborg of *Life After BOB*, and finally returns to the pure, unscripted agent simulation in *Thousand Lives*. This is a genealogy of code.
2. **The Visual Lineage:** Shuruq Tramontini’s "Wavyverse" aesthetic provides the visual continuity, grounding the abstract AI concepts in a lush, detailed, and "messy" material world that draws on architectural theory and biophilic design.
3. **The Collaborative Lineage:** The consistent presence of producers like Veronica So and technical directors like Ivaylo Getov indicates that these works are the product of a stable "dev team," challenging the traditional art-historical notion of the solitary artist and replacing it with the model of the creative studio.

This report establishes the framework for a comprehensive "digital archaeology" of these works, prioritizing the preservation of the code, the wiki, the "breakdown" assets, and the oral history of the technical team over the mere video capture of the final output. Only by archiving the *system* can we preserve the *work*.

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