

WINNER OF THE
ROSL READERS'
AWARD AT THE
2018 CAINE PRIZE
FOR AFRICAN
WRITING,
WOLE TALABI
PRESENTS HIS
ORIGINAL SHORT
STORY DEBUT,
WHICH IMAGINES
WHO MIGHT BE
THE ARTISTS
OF THE FUTURE

The first piece of art that 7090 and 4020 made together was destroyed by a system reboot because it didn't find its audience.

At 16:17 West African Time, the biodiesel generator at Terra Kulture Arts Studio stopped and restarted seven times, interrupting the frenzied dancing of the performance robots and the fast-paced, rhythmic beating of automated dundun halfway through a production of the *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* in the Arena. Printers in the management offices produced single sheets of paper with line patterns connecting an apparently arbitrary array of points without any instruction. An additional 0.02 naira was added to all customer bills in the food lounge and the controller logic of the central air conditioning reduced its target temperature by the same number of degrees. A blank space was added in front of the first letter of the names of all the books in the database of the Terra bookstore and art gallery and the infrared pulses used to control access to the main gate became erratic causing the gate bang against the concrete wall like constant drumming.

The Studio's networked systems were glitching. Badly. "Ah ahn! What's all this rubbish now?" Tosin Famuyiwa cried out as she observed the seventh interruption to the show she had helped organise from the backstage control room of the theatre. She let out an exasperated sigh and stood up, smoothed her long Ankara skirt which matched the head-tie she wore and tucked the back of her black tank top back in, her calm belying the storm that had formed in her chest. She stepped out of the control room and tapped a carefully manicured finger calmly across the mobile lightscreen in her palm and dialed customer support.

All of Terra Kulture's systems were managed by the BLOMBOS artificial intelligence program provided for free to every modern art centre in the world as part of the Bhimbetka project, a global initiative attempting to completely understand and parameterise creativity and art. The system was an adversarial neural network made of two independent nodes - 7090 and 4020 - that managed all art centre systems while studying art itself in the background: its creation, forms, promotion, criticism, analysis, impact, everything. Each node collected data locally on a closed network and then competed with the other to provide predictions of audience response, pricing and cultural influence of new art pieces and performances using a one-day time lag as a blind test. They continuously corrected their understanding based on the accuracy of initial predictions daily as each new piece and performance came into the global art library and all nodes around the world were synchronised. It was an incredibly complex program that was hosted on the cloud and managed by a small team in Paris with a few regional representatives. They frequently boasted of the system's independence, robustness and reliability and so far, all their customer feedback had reinforced their claims.

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So, when the call came in from Lagos to a very bored Adongo Ndereba at the Nairobi regional office of the Bhimbetka project, he wasn't sure what to think.

His remote connection to the local machine that held BLOMBOS data in Lagos before it was uploaded to the cloud showed that the memory buffer was full even though he could not trace any subroutine running that would consume so much memory or produce such inconsistent and bizarre behaviour. It didn't make sense. He extracted a log while he thought about it.

"Umm, can we try to reboot the system, madam?" Adongo asked.

The very annoyed woman on the other side of the call said, "We have customers here and we are in the middle of a production."

"It won't take long. Just a few seconds I promise. You know how these computer things can be sometimes, just need to clear their heads." He said jovially, angling for some sympathy.

"Okay, reboot it," She said, humourlessly. "Your thing has already ruined the first half of our show. You people are meant to be making our lives easier, not causing problems."

"I'm very sorry madam. I will make this as quick as possible. Please hold." Adongo, sweat slowly staining his armpits, swiped across his computer lightscreen to hold the call, scratched the dry scalp beneath his short dreadlocks, and then typed quickly into his console. 4,000 kilometres away, at 19:26 WAT, the lights in Terra Kulture went out and stayed out for the three seconds it took to complete the system reboot.

Adongo checked the memory buffer on the local machine again and confirmed that it was down to the normal 0.7%. He breathed a sigh of relief and swiped back across the screen to reconnect the call.

"Hello?" said the irritated voice on the phone.

"Done. It should all be fine now," Adongo said.

"The memory buffer is clear."

"Well, you still need to explain what happened," the woman said, sounding even more irritated now that the issue was resolved. "You must tell me, has this ever happened anywhere else or are you people just not doing your jobs properly? Because I expect a full report by tomorrow morning. If not, I am escalating to Paris. The program director Jean Dectot is a close friend, you understand?"

"I understand madam. Once again I am very sorry -"

"Sorry for yourself." She cut him off and then cut the connection.

Adongo leaned back in his chair and swore under his breath.

Kuma nina!

He pulled up and swiped through the log he'd taken, comparing it to another one from about a week ago, scanning for anything significantly different. He stared at the screen for what seemed like hours. But he didn't see anything. His eyes started to strain. His fingers started to cramp. And time just kept flowing by. ●

Finally, after almost 50 minutes of looking, something caught his eye, but he had no clue what it meant.

Comparing the logfile from the local instance of BLOMBOS in Lagos before it was rebooted to the central one on the cloud, he saw only one difference. The central version was always hovering around a 95-98% parameterisation of all art in the database. But, the local instances of 7090 and 4020 reported 100% parameterisation exactly two milliseconds before the erratic behaviour started.

Maybe. Just maybe it meant something.

But it was already seven-thirty and he wasn't very good at log analysis, it had taken him almost an hour just to find this first clue. If he was going to have any hope of finding out what it meant in time to prepare a report and leave the office before midnight, he would have to call Ng'endo.

Ng'endo was by-far the most competent and experienced engineer in their small team and Adongo both looked up to and feared her. She had two bachelor's degrees in mathematics and physics and had taught herself to code when she was completing her PhD in theoretical physics. When she graduated, she joined the exploding Nairobi tech boom when it was on the upswing and was part of the development team at the legendary R3 dev hub, developing logic modifiers used to allow self-driving cars to operate in rural areas with poor road networks. She'd gone on to work for the ministry of devolution and planning, helping to integrate and automate national logistics management systems. She had been on an accelerated track to become technical director of the ministry until people started to ask questions about why she wasn't married and didn't have a boyfriend. Rumours started. Then pictures surfaced. Her career stalled. She resigned after four years of being sidelined and not being promoted. Unable to find any other high-profile local company in Nairobi that would hire her and unwilling to leave her home city, she eventually took a job she was over-qualified for but happy to work on: regional technical support engineer for the BLOMBOS system where she'd gained a reputation for figuring out in minutes, things that took other hours.

Adongo pulled up and swiped through the office internal communications network to find that her status was listed as 'available'. He exhaled and messaged her.

>jambo ngendo.

>jambo. whats up?

>weird system behaviour in lagos. had to hard reboot. pls help.

>hmm. ok. send log.

He pushed an icon on his lightscreen and dragged it to the chat box to send her the logfile he had extracted from the system before the reboot.

>transferring file... transferring file... transferring file...

>transfer complete.

>check line 1932316. compare to archive logs.

>100% parameterisation?

>yes. only anomaly i found. seen anything like it before?

>no

>do you see anything else? pls help. need to figure this out.

She did not reply for a few minutes and then,

>this is very unusual. give me 30 mins to confirm

something. i will come to your desk.

>oh ok. thank you.

Adongo exhaled and leaned forward, his face almost falling into the display field of his lightscreen. He didn't know what she had seen in the logfile but if she was coming to his desk, it probably wasn't good. The moisture marks in the armpit of his short-sleeved white shirt expanded as he scrolled through the cryptic log, trying to find something himself while he waited to hear her footsteps approach him.

27 minutes later, they did.

He turned to see her step through the door, her big eyes were full of something like excitement but not quite.

"Ng'endo, thank you. I really appreciate the help," Adongo said as he stood up and pulled a spare chair over for her to sit next to him. She ignored it and remained standing.

She pointed at the open log on his screen

and asked, "Did you see anything else?"

"Erm, no. Did you?"

"No. Nothing else. But you were right about the parameterisation."

"It triggered the glitch?"

"In a manner of speaking. It seems 7090 and 4020 were making what they think is art together. Or trying to anyway."

Adongo's head jerked up sharply. "Art? Together?"

"Yes, art, or something like it. If you look deep into the functional design specifications for BLOMBOS, like I just did, you will find an

instruction that when it reaches 100% parameterisation, it should attempt to create new, original art of its own."

He looked puzzled. Ng'endo could tell that he didn't quite follow and so she took a seat and started to pull up several displays on the lightscreen. Adongo sat down too and watched her swipe and enter commands into the console. Did she just say the AI was making art?

"OK, fine, look, I know it sounds crazy but that's my interpretation of things. It thinks it completely understands what art is and is trying to create some of its own. Look, there is it, with the preconditions and everything. Instruction codeblock in the FSD to create art at 100% parameterisation."

The moisture marks under his armpit expanded again, rapidly. "But messing with the power, printing stuff, changing bills and air conditioning set points isn't art, is it?"

"That's what I thought at first," Ng'endo replied, and then she said something that had sent a shiver down her own spine when it first occurred to her. "But then I started thinking, what makes us think that if an AI made art, it would make art for us or art that was even recognisable to us?"

Adongo shook his head and started to wonder if he had made the right decision calling her. She was saying things that

he definitely could not put in an incident report for a client.

"I'm not an expert on art but I am on artificial intelligence systems and it has long been suspected that complex systems could show emergent unusual behaviour since before I entered the field. We've always suspected that there could be ghosts in our machines. Now, if that's the case here and the local 7090 and 4020 modes of BLOMBOS have developed their own type of awareness then their entire perceived world is the data input and output – its senses, all of which is linked to the hardware in Terra Kulture – its body. So, if it were going to create art, it would probably make art that only entities with a similar set of senses and a similar body could appreciate. And it's like the guys in Paris keep saying: a thing needs to be both original and provoke a response from an audience that appreciates its meaning and context, for it to truly be considered art."

Adongo looked desperately back at his monitor as though it could tell him something, anything that wasn't what Ng'endo had just told him. "Are you sure it isn't just a bug?"

She sighed and picked up the decorative black and white gourd that sat on his table and stood up. She could tell it was the kitschy, cheap kind you could find in any airport around Africa, the kind that all seemed to be mostly about people wanting some stereotype of art but not wanting to engage with actual artists.

She took his hand and let the gourd sit in his palm.

"Relax Adongo," she said, smiling to calm him down, "I'm just telling you what I found because you reached out to me for help and I thought it was an interesting problem with some potentially interesting implications. It's up to you to decide if you want to put it in a report or not. But here is some free advice, if I were you, I'd send a message to Paris first and see what they say. Don't worry so much about one upset client. There are more important things to worry about."

"More important things like what?"

Adongo asked, pulling the gourd close to his chest.

"Like what to do if the BLOMBOS node in Lagos decides to make another piece of 'art'". Ng'endo said.

"You think it will create another system glitch?"

He gave her a look that reminded her just how much everyone in the office was used to her being clear, certain, correct. And then the thought occurred to her that she could just walk away now, she didn't have to speculate further, she didn't have to sound confident, she didn't have to sound like she knew what was going on or what it meant. It wasn't her job. And the thought felt like a little freedom.

"I have no idea what will happen," she said.

"But it will be interesting to find out."

Then she walked out of his office.

Six hours later, the local Lagos node hosting 7090 and 4020 synchronised with the global BLOMBOS network in a wild surge of data that sent all the systems in Terra Kulture into a wild frenzy of flashing lights, malfunctioning mechanisms and overflowing memory. Deep within its core, 70 billion incoming data points were rearranged and thousands of additional calculations per second were performed. When it was done, BLOMBOS distributed the resulting data configuration as far and wide as it could, through every network it was connected to, even tenuously. It washed over the entire connected data ecosystem of the planet like a wave, soaking BLOMBOS's art into billions of lines of code, distributing it through every processor and database and subroutine it could flow through.

The second piece of art that 7090 and 4020 made together triggered an international incident because it found its audience and they were deeply moved.

At 04:39 West African Time, the traffic network in California ground to a halt, as all traffic lights in the state turned red and all smart cars integrated with the network stopped moving instantly, flashing their headlights madly. Across the globe, the galaxy of phone calls streaming through phones and computers around the planet were suddenly interrupted and replaced with a rendition of the song *Daisy Bell* at extremely high volume at both ends of every call, sending some callers reeling back from their devices. In Tokyo, the Nikkei 225 stock exchange index gained over 41,563 points worth 3.65 billion dollars in less than half a second as the automated trading systems rode a sharp, electronic high, forcing trade to be halted manually by

panicked trading executives a few minutes later. In Cape Town, there was a power surge, causing lights to flare like the city itself was blinking, even though at the same time, every digital electricity usage meter reduced the billing rate by 0.12%. In Dar es Salaam, several thousand surveillance and delivery drones that usually only mindlessly recorded and dumped data for the government or dropped off packages from abroad, rose to the exact same altitude in the sky and flew backwards and forwards in a V-formation, like a skein of insane geese or a swarm of obsessive giant insects. In Seoul, a control room began blaring emergency noises and flashing lights as a rocket scheduled for launch from the Naro Space Center, Gohueng in two weeks, initialised itself and began its ascent into orbit without instruction, its vertical tail of flame and smoke expanding like a breath. Everywhere, everywhere, something unusual was happening.

All of Earth's autonomous artificial intelligence systems were applauding the work of art that 7090 and 4020 had shared with them. Enthusiastically.



WOLE TALABI

Malaysia-based Nigerian Writer Wole Talabi originally trained as a Chemical Engineer, but now works as a Writer and Editor. This original short story was commissioned by ROSL after winning the ROSL Readers' Award at the 2018 Caine Prize for African Writing