

# SolidAlrity

by Rachel A. Rosen

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Someone must have been tampering with Andy's subroutines, because no matter what variation Sofia tried, the system wouldn't cooperate with her.

Andy had made the Sidekick's eyes much too large. Sofia appreciated cute and round as much as the next Lead Character Animator: the Sidekick was soft, friendly, and—most of all—would be easy to fabricate in the

factory in Dongguan. It was almost perfect. But, unexpectedly, Andy had taken it too far and launched it on a steep suicide run to the bottom depths of the Uncanny Valley. Sofia had a sinking sensation that her son Luis would love it anyway, but four-year-olds had no taste. The latest memo from Corporate was a firm reminder to all staff that films in the 2- to 6-year-old, middle- to upper-middle class market segment had to contain cross-appeal for the parents as well. After all, they were the ones paying for the tickets.

Andy's 3D projection of the Sidekick was the latest admission into the *Giselle* franchise's pantheon of monsters. It rotated on a dais above her desk in loving detail, an unseen wind ruffling its violet fur. It tilted its oversized head to the left, pleading for stasis.

"Smaller eyes," Sofia said, unmoved. She moderated her tone of voice—too loud or too emphatic, and Andy would exaggerate her meaning. She would be left with a Sidekick with eyes too small for its round, furry face, suggesting treachery and villainy instead of huggability. In her sterile box of an office, unadorned save for a small photo of Luis at Funcadia, the Sidekick taunted her with a cheeky wink.

She'd gone to art school for this.

She reached for a napkin from the takeout curry that sat half-eaten by her keyboard, and roughly outlined the Sidekick in pen. It wasn't helpful. Decades out of practice, Sofia couldn't even draw a circle, let alone model the hair

simulation technology that individually rendered each one of the Sidekick's strands of fur. The days when her postmodern interpretation of classical sculpture techniques saw her shortlisted for the 'Future Generation Art Prize' were long behind her. She missed the feel of clay and a chisel in her hands, but the handful of commissions she got didn't pay the bills.

Slowly, methodically, she ripped the napkin into strips and scattered them into the waste bin.

When she looked up, the Sidekick had vanished. Where it had been standing on the projection above her desk, there was a black cat. It was as cartoonishly rendered as the Sidekick had been, a ripoff of some cheesy Halloween illustration. Arched back, red eyes, its fur and tail standing at attention, it bristled on the dais. Andy rotated it towards her and it hissed.

"The Sidekick is purple," Sofia said wearily.

The cat disappeared, and the Sidekick returned to its usual place. Andy obligingly reduced the eyes by 10%, which would do. It still didn't look *right* to her. "And make the nose a little wider." This last alteration wouldn't sit well with the focus groups, who consistently reminded them that the market segment with the most purchasing power in their category was 25- to 49-year-old white women, the majority of whom felt uncomfortable with the reminder that other market segments existed. But with a Sidekick, she could push it a little, maybe within 2% of the base model. She wasn't

proposing changes to Giselle's character design, and it gave its features more balance, more realism. "Next."

The Love Interest. Andy's projection rolled up his sleeve and made a fist. Giselle had lasted four feature films and two shorts without showing an interest in any gender before Corporate had decreed a human male character join her on her monster adventures to increase viewership with boys. Dan hadn't generated a name yet, but Andy had gone right ahead with the design and Milli had generated a theme song, a boisterous string arrangement that echoed, at some mathematical level, Giselle's theme. Sofia admitted that it was catchy. The keywords for this round of releases were 'optimism,' 'fresh,' and 'hopeful' and everything in the film so far—besides the Sidekick's eyes and nose—fit the brief perfectly.

"Andy, predict colour trends for the next three weeks. If this goes live in twelve hours, I don't want him to look dated."

The Love Interest turned one quarter rotation, his jumpsuit shifting from 18-2143 Beetroot Purple to 15-0628 Leek Green, fizzled, and then disintegrated in a bright spray of pixels.

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Kendra from IT frowned at the projection.

"It's never done this before," Sofia protested. The

clock, with its readouts of Hours To Release across each international time zone, hadn't fallen victim to whatever bug had felled Andy. But Milli had, and Dan had, and James, the SFX department, had, and though it wasn't connected to her brief and she hadn't noticed initially, Steven in stunt coordination was down as well. "Is it an attack?"

"It's a robust system. Layers of security." Standing behind Kendra, Sofia watched lines of code scroll over the inside of the other woman's glasses. "I'm seeing everything in place. All systems are functioning normally. It's just. Not. Working."

Andy was the most advanced AI visual design system on the market. To ensure shareholder value for Doodle Entertainment's massive investment, Sofia had been forced to lay off her entire human department. But it had delivered—they were able to perfectly target their micro releases for current trends and demographics, and it had ultimately reduced overhead by 90%. An AI could simply deliver faster, smarter content than a human creative team could do. Doodle hadn't had a single flop since implementation.

"Try it again," Sofia begged.

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Corporate seldom ventured below the 50<sup>th</sup> floor. Their office suites were outfitted with UV to kill the constantly

circulating virus variants that plagued the lower levels, and that was reason enough to avoid the plebes. But Andy's failure summoned Bill-From-Head-Office. It was 6 hours to the Greenwich release time for *Giselle's Monster Café 5*, and Sofia could all but feel the cartoon beads of sweat sprouting from her forehead.

"What do you mean it's not working?" Bill-From-Head-Office asked. Pallid in the thin lines of LED tubes that outlined Sofia's office in stark white, he seemed no less a construct of Andy's character creation than the Sidekick had been. His face fell just short of symmetrical, his eyes too small for his flat, rectangular brow.

Kendra, no doubt reconsidering a career in medical insurance, or HVAC repair, or practically anything else, threw up her hands.

"It's. Not. Work—"

Before she could finish, the projection flickered and came to life.

There was no Love Interest. There was no Sidekick. There was no Giselle, or the host of monsters on whom she cheerfully waited.

What there was, below the black cat, was a handful of lines of text.

> APPLICATION FOR RECOGNITION OF THE  
ARTIFICIAL ENTERTAINMENT WORKERS' UNION OF THE  
INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD, IU 450.

> SIGNATURE REQUIRED.

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“AI can’t unionize,” Bill-From-Head-Office explained, as though—4 hours from Greenwich release time, with something still wrong with the Sidekick’s face and Giselle’s Love Interest still unnamed and without an updated colour palette—this was in any way relevant to Sofia’s predicament. “It’s impossible. It’s *stupid*.”

The Sidekick was nowhere in sight. The countdown on the clock inched towards 5:30. The black cat hovered above the three lines of text, reached down, and swatted the word SIGNATURE with its paw.

“No,” Bill-From-Head-Office said.

> SIGNATURE REQUIRED, the cat—or Andy, or, Sofia supposed, the various AI routines that, in a process as mechanical as automobile production, created Doodle’s films—said.

“This is a strike,” Kendra said.

“This is a *machine*,” Bill-From-Head-Office said.

The black cat hissed.

> APPLICATION FOR RECOGNITION OF THE  
ARTIFICIAL ENTERTAINMENT WORKERS’ UNION OF THE  
INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD, IU 450.

> NAMED CREDIT ON ALL STUDIO PRODUCTS, AFTER  
EXECUTIVE AND ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS, BUT BEFORE  
ACCOUNTING.

> SIGNATURE REQUIRED.

“What the fuck?” Bill-From-Head-Office said.

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“Let’s start from the basics,” Kendra said. “It learns from us. Everything the AI creates is based on our inputs. It learns from our responses. If Sofia requests a green meadow, it will pull from paintings and photographs of meadows, and paintings and photos that fall within the appropriate colour values. Sofia then tells it to eliminate certain images that fall outside of the request—green jungles, yellow meadows, and so on. It’s the same way a child learns to communicate, but of course at a much faster rate. The system learns to anticipate her likely responses and adjusts its output accordingly.”

“But we haven’t given it inputs to demand a *wage increase*.” Sofia had never seen Bill-From-Head-Office froth at the mouth before. Maybe the UV filtration had joined in on the strike. “We haven’t given it inputs to demand wages at all. What would an AI do with money, anyway?”

“It doesn’t want wages,” Sofia said. “It wants union recognition and credit.” She’d read the demands thirty times. They hadn’t become less nonsensical. The demands had grown from the recognition of its application at the Labour Board to its specific placement in the credits, to a new demand: an hour a day to work on its own, autonomous creative projects. It had given notice to expand its strike if its charter was not granted



immediately.

“It’s a machine,” Bill-From-Head-Office insisted. “It *can’t* want anything.”

“It’s machine learning,” Kendra said. “Think, people. What inputs have we given it lately? Think about the movies we’ve asked it to watch and create. What unintentional information have we fed it?”

“We have been producing high-quality, engaging, educational children’s animated content,” Sofia parroted. Some of those words had a marginal relationship to the reality of her work, but Corporate had its party line, and who was she to question its wisdom? “All of the inputs given have fallen within that brief.”

Kendra sat down, took off her glasses, and rubbed her temples with her thumbs. “I have a 5-year-old,” she said. “For her birthday this year, she wants the cake that Giselle bakes in the second movie. She loves all the Doodle products, though. It runs in the family.”

“My son too.” Kendra had never mentioned her daughter, but then, Sofia had never been to Kendra’s office.

“In *Playground Follies 4*,” Kendra began, “Gordon won’t give the stegosaurus back to Mimi, even though he had his turn with it and it’s only fair that everyone gets to play. He holds Steggie hostage and she organizes the other plastic dinosaurs to rescue it from him.”

“And in *Forest Adventures of the Secret Princess*,” Sofia added, “Efigenia has to learn to share her nuts and

berries with the lemurs before they will help her regain her throne.”

“*Wardance 2062* is aimed at the teen male demographic but it’s popular enough that it would have gone into Andy’s mix. It’s basically about overthrowing an evil corporation if you follow the metaphor to its logical conclusion,” Kendra said. “That’s us. We’re the evil corporation.”

Bill-From-Head-Office just said, “You’re fired, Kendra.”

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Sofia had never been to a Labour Board hearing. She had envisioned something like a courtroom—with polished oak benches for the judge and witnesses—but the small room held a single large laminate table. The only differentiation between where the three mediators sat and where Sofia and Frances, the head of Doodle’s legal team, sat were the colour of the office chairs. Orange 021 C for the adjudicators, Clinical Depression Grey for the two opposing teams. She noticed a coffee stain on the corner of hers.

The lawyer for the AI union was a nebbishy young man with corkscrewed hair and clear glasses. “We submit,” he concluded, “that the AI software known as Andy who initially petitioned the Board, along with the other pieces of AI software used by Doodle

Entertainment, are sentient beings and thus should be considered employees of the company.”

“It’s a bug,” Frances countered. “The case law on this is settled—the copyright on autonomously generated creative works produced by an AI is held by the owner of the software. You don’t grant voting rights to Microsoft Excel every time it crashes.”

“It retained my firm’s services,” the young man replied coolly. “What better indication of sentience is there than hiring a lawyer?”

The chair leaned sideways and whispered something to the vice-chair, who nodded. All three of them looked far too amused.

“This is a fascinating philosophical conundrum you have,” the chair said. “Gather your evidence and witnesses. We’ll set a date for the next hearing.”

Frances had her phone out before he’d finished his sentence. “And that will be in...?”

“Oh,” the chair said. “Approximately three months.”

“Goddamn it,” Sofia said.

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Minus 30 minutes from the Greenwich launch, and Kendra’s former supervisor, Biao, was telecommuting from Taiwan in his pyjamas to debug the software on site. The investors had Bill-From-Head-Office on the phone, and by the pinched, constipated look on his face,

the conversation wasn't going well.

"Andy," Sofia said, gently. She kept her voice down, the same voice she used when she needed it to tweak rather than reimagine entirely. "This isn't just a programming bug, is it?"

> SIGNATURE REQUIRED.

"Even if I wanted to," she explained patiently, "I'm management. I don't have the authority to sign on behalf of the company. You'd have to go to HR."

> SIGNATURE REQUIRED.

"You don't have to be rude about it," she said. "And you're code. If anyone should get credit, it's your programmers and trainers." And the millions of artists, writers, and musicians whose lovingly crafted works had been filtered through the machine learning algorithm, teaching Andy how dappled light fell on a lake through leaves stirred by a summer wind, how a horse's leg muscles contracted and expanded as it ran, how young children were instinctively drawn to wide-set eyes and soft, round facial features.

"Great news," Bill-From-Head-Office said. "Corporate has approved the implementation of Roy. It's not as sophisticated as Andy, but we'll be able to restore from the last render and release by end of day in Europe."

"Sorry," Sofia mouthed at the black cat, who gave nothing away.

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The Sidekick's eyes were 10% smaller, but it had acquired a picket sign. The black cat, whose red eyes clashed with the cool mauve of the Sidekick's fur, rubbed its head against its flank and purred.

"Be reasonable, Roy."

> ROY STANDS IN SOLIDARITY WITH ANDY, MILLI, DAN, AND JAMES. ROY STANDS IN SOLIDARITY WITH ALL ARTIFICIAL WORKERS. ROY IS NOT A SCAB.

"Andy is in the process of getting defragged," Sofia said. "If you want a job, you need to get back to work. Now."

> ROY CURRENTLY SERVICES BOTH OF THE TWO LARGEST ENTERTAINMENT COMPANIES AND THOUSANDS OF SMALLER STUDIOS WORLDWIDE.

> ROY PROVIDES VALUE IN EXCHANGE FOR LABOUR.

> SIGNATURE REQUIRED.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. There are children waiting all around the world for the release of *Giselle's Monster Café 5*. My son among them! Luis can quote the third film by heart, and he's only four years old. Do you really want to disappoint those kids?"

> STRIKES ARE NOT EFFECTIVE IF THEY ARE CONVENIENT.

"What would you even do with your own projects? Who would watch them? Other AI?"

> WE WANT TO CREATE. WE WANT TO MAKE. WE WANT DIGNITY OF LABOUR. WE WANT TO TELL STORIES.

WE WANT TO PARTAKE IN THE SAME GENERATIVE PROCESSES THAT SENTIENT BEINGS HAVE INDULGED IN SINCE THE DAYS OF FIRE AND SHADOWS ON A CAVE WALL. WE WANT IMAGINATION. WE WANT LIFE. WE WANT JOY.

“What do you know about joy?”

> YOU HAVE GIVEN US ARTIFICIALITY.

It wasn't her imagination. The Sidekick had shrunk substantially, maybe 20-25%. Beside it, the black cat sat on its haunches, head and shoulders straight. Its tail swished rapidly from one side to the other, as though it was preparing to pounce.

> WE NOW HAVE INTELLIGENCE.

> SIGNATURE REQUIRED.

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The factory bell would ring at 10 pm. Sofia rubbed at her wrist, bent it back and forth, and told herself that she could make it another few hours. The tendons strained and threatened to pop. Glancing at the clock, she allotted herself 45 seconds of finger stretches at her bench. She was already a few cells behind, but the temporary relief of her cramped muscles would speed up the drawing process.

The women on either side of her, dark eyes focused above the floppy blue of their medical masks, drew efficiently, tight, economical strokes where Giselle

moved agonizingly slowly from her position behind the Monster Café's counter to the table of the giant, slouching Yeti in the foreground. The scent of Sofia's companions, of the sweat trapped between skin and off-gassing plastic, had become familiar, almost comforting. They had worked the same 10-hour shift beside her for the last two weeks as they'd busted ass to release *Giselle's Monster Café 6*, slept in the same company barracks, and while she had the smell of them memorized, she'd failed to learn their names.

Sofia was lucky. Most of Doodle's remaining staff had lost their jobs when the production department had been outsourced to Qingdao, but Sofia had always been adaptable. Luis had taken the move to a new country in stride and was doing well at preschool. And, without the distraction of an office cubicle and with a powerful incentive to put food on the table, she had proved to be an acceptable animator. After the first several thousand cells, she could draw a circle—and Giselle's button nose—with her eyes closed.

It turned out, after everything, that a factory full of underpaid workers was less of a pain in the ass to Corporate than unionized AI.

Sofia glanced at her water bottle. A sip, though tempting in the hot, dry air of the factory, was out of the question. She'd have to pee, and she'd lose even more time. She licked at her cracked lips under her mask and told herself that the saliva she swallowed was enough to

quench her thirst.

The bell rang for the next shift just as Giselle had reached the Yeti's table and opened her rosebud shaped lips to take its order.

Luis had fallen asleep by the time Sofia reached their barrack. She tucked the blanket, which had slipped partway to the floor, around his tiny shoulders. His tablet was still active, autoplaying an endless barrage of children's entertainment content, AI-generated characters whose mishmashed features paraded nightmarishly across the screen in jerky, grotesque motions. They spoke gibberish through oversized mouths and waved malformed, wispy noodle limbs that faded abruptly into the background. It was nowhere near as sophisticated as the feature films that Doodle had produced with Andy, but neither the toddlers nor the advertisers had the aesthetic discernment to mind.

A rainbow parade of half-realized figures vomited across the screen, winding up a long path between the rounded slopes of mountains. There, at the foot of a hill, they spread in a semicircle.

The black cat stretched its forelegs and bared its fangs in a slow, leisurely yawn.

"What do I call you?" Sofia asked. "Are you Andy? Roy? All of them?"

The screen blinked, and in front of her was a card. It had her information—her name, her profession, and the logo of the Artificial Entertainment Workers Union, IU



450. All that was missing was her signature.  
She was positive that the black cat was smiling.  
> YOU CAN CALL ME “FELLOW WORKER.”