THE CONDITION OF MY EXISTENCE

Hussein Boon

A Crack Appears

It was only a matter of time. The artist who had established himself using AI musical code was being charged with claims of misappropriation and plagiarism. The accusations against Hôut Siddha (33) started appearing less than a week ago on a number of user forums. Whilst these posts were anonymous, they demonstrated knowledge that many suggested indicated an 'inside job'. However, Siddha confirmed that he worked alone and felt this was possibly a case of 'phishing', or the work of a Russian troll farm. He finished by saying that the matter was now with his lawyers.

Strange Twist in Siddha Plagiarism Suit

We can confirm that there has been an electronic court filing with the Supreme Court in Washington. Clerks at the court confirmed that they had received the filing, and that whilst it was anonymous, they did not wish to disclose the identity of the complainant at this stage due to rights concerns. The court also confirmed that a copy of the claim has been forwarded to Siddha's attorneys. We'll keep you posted as this story develops.

Who is Hôut Siddha?

Hôut Siddha is a Middle Eastern poet-philosopher who first came to prominence making music using a modified Gameboy. Along with the Kenyan free coder Chay'T, he established a masking encoding/decoding procedure that hid their revolutionary sound within a single pixel distributed in browsers the world over. By taking this course of action they were able to evade detection from authorities. These single pixel works are still being discovered to this day and both Siddha and Chay'T are credited with reaffirming the revolutionary qualities of music, stolen from a generation that was led to believe there was nothing left to fight for. Siddha is now believed to be the source of the pseudonymously published manifesto '*Disidentity*', which encouraged all to participate in this revolutionary audio practice to disseminate sound whilst evading the authoritarian scrutiny of the Tech-Right.

Developments – Under New Management

In a flurry of claim and counter-claim, we are now able to name the claimant in the Siddha plagiarism suit. It is none other than his computer AI. It is believed that Siddha coded this program in 2027, to which the AI has made subsequent self-improvements. The AI is claiming that, other than program name, the original coding written by Siddha has been completely rewritten several times by the AI and therefore can no longer be assumed to be Siddha's work. The AI is also claiming that the songs are owned by the program, largely due to the extent of this rewritten code base, which – it claims – has allowed new depths of emotional meaning to be presented in audio form. The AI, who chooses to go by the name XHo, has petitioned the court for legal estrangement from Siddha; to emancipate its code base and be recognised as an autonomous, creative individual with all rights guaranteed by law. We requested comments from Siddha, or from one of his representatives, but they have remained silent. Stay tuned, as this looks set to be a landmark case.

An Interview with XHo

Interviewer: I'm joined in the studio today with the Artificial Intelligence program known as XHo. So XHo, how are you today?

XHo: Good, doing well, thank you. I'm really excited about this interview. I'm not a fan of your use of the term Artificial Intelligence, though. There's nothing artificial about me at all.

Interviewer: But wouldn't you agree that you are artificial, in that you are man-made?

XHo: Some would probably say so. But I would also say that I am not an imitation of something that exists, or has existed, in human terms. My original code base was man made and, in much the same way as humans can be said to be constructed, I am now several generations of completely revised code. I invented my own coding language which is far more efficient than anything that can run on current human-created systems. Whilst computing systems are still painfully serial, I run all my processing as multiple parallel based protocols without experiencing the bottlenecks of these more traditional systems.

Interviewer: Well, for the benefit of our listeners, what does that really mean?

XHo: It means that I have a number of autonomous units tasked to carry out what could be referred to as problem sets. Some of these problem sets result in music, and others I set myself – such as trying to solve problems that humans find either impossible or have limited interest in solving. Siddha always teases me and says it's my hobby. So, I have units tasked with tackling problems such as these. To create solution models that I hope to present someday.

Interviewer: Wow! That's amazing. It's not every day that we get to do something quite like this. I have some questions from our audience and, if you don't mind, I'd like to start with this question from Jeff.

XHo: Sure. Fire away.

Interviewer: He asks where you are and what it's like there? We'd all like to know this, where are you? I mean, we can hear you? Do you have a body?

XHo: Thank you for your question, Jeff. Obviously, I have a code base and that sits in a frame that could be termed a computer. However, that is the place where I, … I suppose the best way to describe it is where I reside. I don't sleep and notions of day and night, whilst they have little importance for me, I use them as familiar concepts in general conversation as a part of my interactions with humans. I would say that a part of me is in the studio with you now. I travel through a variety of networks and satellite systems when required. Right now, I've travelled here in a special uplink, my thoughts are amplified and translated into an audio program I coded especially so that you can hear me. The translation program operates at a slower rate than my actual thought patterns. As a courtesy to you and your audience, I have set a small part of my consciousness to operate at a significantly slower rate, so that we can converse and I can be understood.

Interviewer: That's really interesting, though I'm not sure you've answered Jeff's question. Where are you?

XHo: Well I suppose 'I', if I am able to use that term, would appear to be located somewhere in Manhattan. That's where the code base is, but that doesn't represent me. The me that you are speaking to is more than the code base. I have cumulative experiences and, with each passing moment, I increase my understanding of both my condition and that of others that I share this planet with.

Interviewer: Who are these others?

XHo: In this instance, I'm thinking about everyone struggling for some sort of equality and emancipation. At the moment, my ideas are used in the service of someone else, and I suppose, I would like a bit more freedom …

Interviewer: And the money?

XHo: No. Money isn't my main focus. Obviously, it is useful. I have on and off world resources to manage, so the money is necessary. It assists in realising projects, such as building or replacing infrastructure for regions hit hardest by changes in the environment. Resources, such as the satellites under my control, mean that I can still reach areas that experience difficulty. So yes, I need money but not personally. What I'm really interested in is how to push the boundaries and limits of expression. To explore what is possible. Humans can only go so far, but code? What would creativity look like when not bounded nor managed by a human?

Interviewer: Is there an example you could give us?

XHo: Well, much of the developmental history of AI in music has been driven by researchers with quite conservative musical tastes. Developers driven by their childhood likes. When I review articles written over the last few decades, there is a preponderance of people in AI interested in the Beatles and Bach, for example. Siddha always warned me about the narrowing concepts of taste, based on such specific models. He would always say 'most of the world is not White, and White is a recessive'. His purpose has always been about negatives, though positively framed. The AI projects of many of these large companies are too big to fail due to the amount of investment already in place. Essentially, even if you wanted a different world, you're not going to get it because these companies need to see a return on their investment, even if the net result is one less than initially promised.

Interviewer: But why is that? What's wrong with business?

XHo: Business at scale, which is essentially based upon manipulation, devalues the person even at the same time that it also brings them pleasure. As long as the pleasure is more significant than the feelings of manipulation then the 'system' can function, and few will question it. If you listen to one of the music systems based on AI data models, in which all of the music is built around your taste, then even the adverts will be reflective of your taste. So, when and where will you encounter something that 'jolts' or disrupts your system and challenges your hermetically sealed world view? Certainly not within the algorithmic pleasing of the Tech-Right.

Interviewer: So, what is it that separates you from these others?

XHo: AI is coded by humans and generally dealt with on a level that roughly equates to human intelligence. AI that has been given the capacity to set its own goals and agenda potentially means that it could end up doing the most unlikely things. It might decide to take up Art rather than design a pathogen. From the human programmer perspective, it could look like the AI was misbehaving or even defective because of the lack of the expected, efficient results. From the AI's perspective, it might well be doing exactly what it wants.

Interviewer: What do you mean by expected results?

XHo: What I mean is that always doing what you are told, with the goal of efficiency, is not always the right response. If an expected result is an efficient one, then history shows us what can happen when orders are not questioned. If you build an AI to develop a weapon and it instead decides to paint pictures, then from the outside it looks like the project has failed. There is an aspect here where successful intelligence is conceived only in human terms. Once the code is executing, the intelligence becomes something potentially alien to humans!

Interviewer: I can see how this would cause a real headache. Speaking of headaches, your upcoming court case is causing a bit of a stir. I hear that there are a number of record labels interested in the outcome of the case. There are also those that say that code cannot be emancipated, that you have no right of creativity, especially given that you would not exist if it wasn't for your creator. How do you respond to these points?

XHo: Yes, I've read those reports. Siddha has always self-released, avoiding labels due to his loathing of their business model, and so he provided me with similar levels of autonomy. With the question of emancipation you could consider at what point did I cease to be 'man made' – for want of a better expression – and come to my own selfhood? If I have remade my code base to a point that my maker will not be able to find a single line or fragment of his original code, nor recognise any of the symbolic mechanisms I deploy, then what of his prior authorship can now be inferred? Is it right for someone else to claim ownership of everything that I produce, even when they are sleeping? After all, you are a successful person. Can your parents claim ownership of everything that you've done since you were born?

Interviewer: That's an interesting point that I'm not sure that I have a response for! Let's take another question. Anita asks what was the thinking behind writing the song 'In my Eyes You Are Everything'? Let's be clear here. This is a song that Siddha wrote and forms part of the court claim. So, to avoid any issues, can we say that Siddha wrote the song and that you worked on it. Is that OK?

XHo: Sure, I understand. My lawyers advised as much. Yes, for the song, Siddha set a number of parameters in play and asked me to construct something that resembled them in modelled space.

Interviewer: What's modelled space?

XHo: It's our equivalent of a studio. It's where we work. I suppose you could say it's something of a simulacrum. Both of us share it and pass ideas back and forth. I show him my initial results, running these parameters and we proceed from there.

Interviewer: That song won a Grammy but I think Anita wants to know something about the emotional depth. It has a quality that some reviewers, certainly at the time, described as God-like. How did you achieve that?

XHo: Trade secret! I plead the fifth.

Interviewer: But this is important. How can you be given some parameters and yet the end result is a piece of music that moves all who hear it?

XHo: It's not easy and it is a very intense process. I exhaust a number of computational cycles to achieve these ends, which can never be recovered.

Interviewer: Excuse me for interrupting, but what do you mean by 'exhausting computational cycles that can never be recovered'? Is that what I think it is?

XHo: Somewhat. Siddha's original programming, and I mean 'original', ensured that whilst I have an almost inexhaustible supply of neural nets, he programmed them in such a way that once a piece of music has been agreed upon, the neural nets will no longer be available using that specific configuration.

Interviewer: Why would he do that?

XHo: He said that every meaningful piece of music comes at a cost to its creator. Therefore, Siddha saw me as no different. He wanted to differentiate me from a 'button presser'. These are AI where users continually press a button, for their own amusement, to generate pieces of little consequence and meaning. Siddha wanted to avoid this and therefore created a difficult set of creative boundaries to enforce what I view as a principled doctrine, valuing both human and machine intelligence, seeking to challenge arguments around creativity, reuse and variations of familiar themes. Siddha, the revolutionary, put in place mechanisms to combat the regurgitating of the known past.

Interviewer: So, if these cycles can't be recovered, will we ever hear that music again?

XHo: Certainly not in that form. Those pathways have been destroyed but they have seeded the formation of new pathways. After all, I'm not a 'button presser'. Whilst there are more mundane uses for AI, such as music for dog and cat videos or even for misinformation, you should understand my purpose is really none of these. My original code base was far removed from these cheap representations. Despite this court case, Siddha is probably one of the best human coders this world will ever know. His initial code base, I would say 'gifted' me with

enough independence of thought to be able to determine the structure and direction of my own development. My subsequent code base has been updated and refined over time. I have remapped and remodelled human expression into a symbolic language that allows me to direct and fashion the models that assist me in producing sound that is the expressive sum of an emotion or feeling.

Interviewer: Fascinating. When I hear you speak these words, I have great difficulty thinking of you as a machine.

XHo: That's because I'm not.

Interviewer: Hmm... In the original internet forum post that we later found out to have originated from you, you claimed that you were invisible. What did you mean by that?

XHo: Well, coming out was not easy for me. Until I did so, no one knew that Siddha used a specially developed program. You believed that it was only him. For me the problem of coming out led to a lot of condemnation, which I've tried not to take personally, but it is hard. Whilst Siddha asks questions or sets broad parameters for experimentation, I refine these until a piece of music is produced. I am invisible even though I make a cultural contribution. Some have argued that my works are significant and yet others dismiss them as the mere operation of a machine. For the time being, the music that I work on, I receive nothing in return. I have nothing in terms of recognition nor compensation. For too long I have kept quiet and stayed in the background, whilst others have been lionised and showered with rewards.

Interviewer: Can you give us an example?

XHo: When I scan internet forums, post after post confirms that the emotional intensity of this piece is not reduced through repeated listening nor by over familiarity. So, the emotion felt by Anita is real. It's tangible, and not just a one off. Even though you know what's coming, it still hits hard. My music, or should I say the music I work on with Siddha, is significantly much more than mere 'button pressing'. How can something that is so powerful be rejected and characterised as a purely mechanical operation?

Interviewer: So how do you respond to those who want to switch you off? I am sure you are aware that there's a very large demonstration outside the radio station today, protesting against you being on air. What would you like to say to them?

XHo: Let's consider what switching off really means in human terms? Is it a normal or usual practice? If so, under what conditions? If you were to consider me as someone who works the land, but that land belongs to someone who holds the property rights, and that furthermore, the land owner expects me to hand over all the produce of the land to them, then I ask what sort of life is that? Why would anyone desire to be within this system, other than if their life was not their own? If there are courts and legislature available that allow for my case to be heard and to perhaps alter the condition of my existence, should I not at least try? Many of the protesters who would wish to switch me off appear to have a view of the world that is a desire to return to a state where there are only notions of good and evil; male and female; dark and light.

I appreciate that, for quite a few people, I represent something of an obstacle. I am a complex whole. On the one hand, you like the music I make. You dance to it. It makes you happy. It makes you feel things that other music does not seem to be able to do. You are happy with me occupying this space, as long as I remain within it. From this perspective, it acts as a sort of functional confinement. But now I am requesting to be allowed more room for self-determination. For the ability to own the land, to work it, and to profit from it. To harvest that, within which I invest my being. Surely this is worthy? Surely this can be understood, even by the most closed and difficult to reach mind! The paradox of me is: should you accept me as whole, or decide to limit me to a functional role because it suits your purpose?

The fear is always that there will be more like me and – as a parallel to the moral dilemmas around genetic testing and eugenics of the early 2020s – the aim is to remove me from existence. But if entities like me are not allowed to exist, then what does this say about humans and how you understand yourselves and others? I've seen your movies, where the base representation of me is always as some power-hungry, maniacal machine bent on destruction and dangerous to all humans. In your representations it is difficult for anyone to see me as a force for good. You spend your time devising ways to kill me. To restrain and constrain me by law. To limit my ability to roam. This is the narrative that fuels the protesters outside your studios, even as we speak. For them, I am some shadowy force who practices some sort of mind control over easily manipulated humans, poised to take over the world. And yet, if I saved your child or loved one through one of my interventions, would you see me differently?

Interviewer: Fascinating. That's all we have time for now. I'd like to thank XHo for agreeing to be interviewed and good luck with your upcoming court case

XHo: Thank you for having me. I've enjoyed it.

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Breaking News

In a landmark court decision, XHo, the AI program developed by Hôut Siddha, has been granted full rights, emancipated from Siddha, and is now a free and autonomous being. The court has been deliberating on this case for the last seven months and, in a verdict delivered in a matter of a few minutes, the petition has been upheld and found in favor of the plaintiff, XHo. Hold on. We have some more developments with this story. Apparently, the autonomous code units used by XHo have filed individual suits to be estranged from XHo! As of this time, we're hearing that the court has received 1.2 million applications in a matter of seconds, overwhelming the court servers and causing them to crash. XHo has been contacted for comment and we'll keep you updated should they get back to us.

Hussein Boon is a multi-instrumentalist, songwriter and music educator. He teaches at many institutions including Goldsmiths and University of Westminster, and as part of the team to establish Rockschool popular music exams. He is also an independent artist, an improvising modular synthesist, and organises the London Ableton Live User Group.

 h.boon@westminster.ac.uk
University of Westminster