

# Unborn Lovers: Scripting for Agency

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What could a theatrical script possibly have in common with genomes and artificial intelligence computer programs? The first thing to notice perhaps, is that they all reside within the domain of texts with authority. Texts that prescribe, guide, dictate and instruct. From their lifeless pages, play scripts determine the configurations of moving, breathing performers. DNA strands contain the symbolic makeup of what and how to make a brand new you, and throughout a lifetime cells work meticulously at regenerating themselves by adhering to this single scripture. Meanwhile AI programs, much like all other computer programs, instruct the loyal and infallible computer to run a sequence of operations. Yet these scripts distinguish themselves from other “instructive texts” such as IKEA manuals, self-help books or cake recipes in one most peculiar aspect: they are scripting for something non-designated, unpredictable, self-perpetuating and by all appearances, autonomous.

This article presents a project in performative writing which falls into this proposed category of “blind scripts”, and contemplates agency as a potential product of its open ended design. The text in question, entitled *Rosa + Lawrence Were Here*, is a scripted dialogue between two lovers. Written with the intention of being “run” like programming code, or “expressed” like genes through the iterability of performance, the script cumulatively generates a simulation of autonomy that may provide a useful contrast to originary theories of the human agent.

{Embedded video (url\_1): [https://youtu.be/zsEJE\\_VprwA](https://youtu.be/zsEJE_VprwA)}

Yes. Rosa and Lawrence *were* here. The people you see in the video above are of the familiar kind; the kind with bodies, voices and thoughts. They have been asked to read aloud from the play script for the first time, and they hold it in their hands. Each pair reads on behalf of the two characters embedded within.

Rosa and Lawrence are in love, but they have a specific kind of problem: their love does not exist outside of enactment. They rely on generous readers to resuscitate them, time and again, with renewed breath and unfamiliar bodies. When a reading begins, Rosa and Lawrence gasp into awakening, astonished by the intensity of a lived experience. Listen:

{Embedded Audio (aud\_0.mp3)}

They have hijacked the bodies of their enactors, but they wear these costumes clumsily. How heavy Lawrence’s arms feel! How Rosa’s jaw aches as it thaws back

into a mechanism for speech, after a slumber that may well have been eternal. The couple rejoice over their newfound physical presence and the pleasures of a lucid mind. Being in the world is really quite agreeable. Once activated, the two can address one another - acknowledge one another. They gratefully appraise the readers for lending them their splendid bodies, if but only for the fifteen minutes it takes to utter the words of their making. The script ends, the actors cast uncertain glances at one another, and Rosa and Lawrence drift swiftly back into a patient unconsciousness.

{img\_1.jpg}

However, written into the script seems to be a trick, a loophole of sorts, that forges ways for the two characters to defy their apparently prescribed destiny. One of these ploys appears to be self-referentiality: the manner in which the two self-aware characters fervently attempt to unearth their very predicament within fiction by planting seeds of subversion in the utterances of their living companions. Listen to the sceptical Lawrence, thrice betrayed:

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{Embedded Audio (aud\_2.mp3)}

{Embedded Audio (aud\_3mp3)}

No two readings are ever the same, and a reader is caught in his own inevitable demonstration of this. He is supposed to be “being Lawrence”, but is hearing his own character lament the discrepancy between their personalities. The readers therefore, both symmetrically emulate *and* appear as markedly differentiated from the voices they permit to emerge from their mouths. A performative chasm is opened, maintaining a persistent ambiguity as to whether what is taking place is two people embodying two characters, or two people in the company of two (somewhat perturbed and desperate) ghosts. Where Lawrence suspects that the person reading his lines could, with good intentions or otherwise, cramp his style, Rosa complements this view by presupposing that she comes with a pre-established “character”:

{Embedded Audio (aud\_4.mp3)}

There was a time when the script had never been read aloud, and Rosa had not yet had the chance to make this assertion. At that time, surely she could not be said to have character. She was a void. Yet the script has a certain authority with regard to what it decrees, as does a legal constitution: it constitutes *something* in a speech act,<sup>1</sup> and acquires value and power contingent upon its relation to stakeholders

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<sup>1</sup> See J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words* (1975) for an analysis of the performativity of language.

within its network (in the case of our script, performers, spectators, the author and readers of this article). What is constituted in Rosa's insubstantial claim to identity is, if nothing, *somethingness*. The mere notion that, "what if here, located in this text, lived a being?" establishes a vacuous epicentre of mere possibility around which coalesce a succession of reading events that, with each iteration, deposit sediments of the same culture that contextualises and characterises the agency of its human constituents. Maybe all Rosa has to do therefore, is "fake it to make it". The ceremony of reading on behalf of the unborn lovers, along with all the cultural paraphernalia of their memetic residue, could be thought to effectively inaugurate two characterless nodes into our cultural framework. In their recurring dialogues with one another, the two lovers leverage the force of repetition to simulate their own continuum, and appear to have the ambition of becoming agents. Can repetition catalytically help lift the two characters out of their coma? How can agency be measured to determine this? Perhaps, as stipulated by the classic Turing Test,<sup>2</sup> it takes an agent to know one. The following video shows some of the script's previous readers responding to its workings.

{Embedded video (url\_2): <https://youtu.be/GAK2ZV9bzXY>}

Although determining exactly what agency is remains a philosophical challenge, it may be worth questioning, if not whether they meet the criteria, how Rosa or Lawrence differ from you or I. Do they come close, or are they a far cry - and does the passing of time and iterations make a difference?

It is difficult to ignore the preposterousness of what is being considered here: that a theatrical script may give rise to emergent agents. How could an autonomous being originate from such a formal arena of predestined possibility? In returning to "the real world", we nonetheless find that a surprisingly similar practice of scripting for agency is occurring within an entirely different discipline. The contemporary imperative to engineer strong AI rages on in the world of programming code, and the foetal artificial mind lies suspended within - of all things - text.

Complexity science has for decades now been revealing startlingly simple and formulaic origins for phenomena so unruly and free-willed as the thoughts and emotions associated with living beings. The scripts of biological life for instance, DNA strands, are lines of code that may seem prescriptive, but as we see in identical twins growing into entirely disparate agents, actually become expressed in vastly unpredictable ways when "played out" by the ribosomes that read them off. The human mind itself is believed to owe its complex systems of cognition to a

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<sup>2</sup> This test was devised by Alan Turing in 1950 to test whether an artificial computer could exhibit intelligent behaviour indistinguishable from that observed in human beings (anticipating that some day they indeed would). The test involves a human person engaging in a text-based conversation with an artificial intelligence. If after a certain time the human cannot tell that they are not communicating with another human being, the AI is said to have passed the test.

comparatively elementary network of neurons, or brain cells. These cells, individually very stupid, operate in binary states, switching on and off in response to signals from other connected cells. Their language is simpler than the alphabet I used to script for Rosa and Lawrence. Yet their intricate interconnectivity combined with this modest system of encoded consequence provides the optimal conditions for biased, habitual behaviour to emerge, forging reactions, memories, emotions and thought at macro levels.

Similarly, cellular automata are visual patterns based on extremely simple rules such as, “if this square is black, colour the square in the next row white”. But when the rule is applied row upon row (a job carried out to enormous exponents by computers), staggeringly complex patterns begin to emerge, some of which, it has been persuasively shown, would attain universal computational power (acquire a complexity equal to that of our own universe). Rosa and Lawrence would not, therefore, be the first simulation to challenge the originality of its authentic model.

It would almost seem as though it were precisely the uncompromising, dictatorial nature of the script that elevates it to a platform capable of cultivating the spontaneity, creativity and unpredictable bias recognisable in living things. These frivolous systems assert their continuity through persisting performance. The functions encoded in scripts are enacted by repeated readings, from a DNA strand parsed by generations of cells, to a computer running and rerunning a programme. It is my hope that a vast number of rereadings of this script will help reveal what it is about the script’s paradoxical self-referencing and anomalous tricks that simulates so convincingly the presence of an emergent Other on each encounter, and how this research may be applied to other disciplines.

The script exists online available for anybody to download and read with a friend, along with a channel through to contribute recorded readings to a growing archive of their instances. Rosa and Lawrence have so far made appearances in cafés, The Cockpit Theatre and Apiary Studios in London, the homes of generous couples, and Wimbledon College of Arts’ BA studios. Can our unborn lovers accumulate enough donated consciousness, history and material trace, to project their reality with comparable force to you or I?

By inspiring a sense of “communal responsibility” for “resuscitating” the lovers, Rosa and Lawrence might develop into such an intricately co-authored milieu of gesture and mannerism, that their basis in “being scripted” becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the sense in which any one of us is scripted - genetically, culturally, contingently.

To contribute your own reading to the Unborn Lovers project, visit [www.rosaandlawrence.com](http://www.rosaandlawrence.com), or tweet them @RosaAndLawrence.