

ARTIFICIAL QUARTET
or
The World of Tomorrow

A play in one act, co-written with AI¹

Characters:

Sarah
Norman
Mark
Matthew

Setting:

It takes place in a virtual world, The World of Tomorrow.

Suggested staging is a video chat, with the participants gradually coming online. Their backgrounds are human/computer co-created using Generative Adversarial Networks.²

A song plays as an introduction. It is co-composed using the OpenAI Jukebox model, with lyrics and music generated by GPT-2 and human selection throughout the composition process.³

Scene 1

Sarah: The world is coming, and this is just the beginning. This performance has been entirely computer written and performed by a virtual character named Norman. In some areas of the performance he is more human, more fully alive; in others, less so; but at the least the result is a very realistic performance.

Sarah: OK and now for our next computer-generated celebrity... That's Norman!

Norman: I got the new program installed. I'm thinking I should start the script with, "What is the most important thing about your existence, Mr. Norman?"

Sarah: Hi, everyone, how are you?

Norman: Can we switch roles?

Mark: Yeah. I mean the name's Mark, but my name's John...

Norman: You are not real.

1 Further details here: <https://github.com/sardinelif/artificial-quartet>

2 These can be easily generated at <https://artbreeder.com>

3 <https://github.com/openai/jukebox/>

Matthew: Oh yeah.

Norman: Today, I am writing my lines.

Sarah: The characters are all written for, well, different people.

Matthew: Hey, can I say a few words? Hey, I'm going to be talking tonight.

Sarah: Oh, good! What about you. [*Turns to camera*] I've got to write my lines. [*Puts down her water glass*] They'll be so horrible! [*Looks at other actors*]

Norman: You know what? You don't even have to do my lines. Why don't *you* do mine?

Matthew: Sure.

Sarah: Oh, thank you. [*Gestures with both hands to camera*] Can I get some more water, please? [*Bangs water bottle on table.*] Oh, no problem, I've had enough today, thanks to all of you.

Mark: Hey, what's up? [*Takes the cue from Norman*] Ah, now I start to get the vibe. You think I need any help? I can't write a complete act alone! Why don't you help me, I'm pretty good at acting.

Norman: Yeah, yeah.

Mark: Okay, okay. This is it. [*He pats his feet, and starts playing with his feet*] No more improv. Now that's what I call being dramatic.

Norman: I got a guy who's very funny.

Matthew: But that's the point, isn't it?

Sarah: We are on a long-term project called the Virtual Theatre Project; a new way of making theatre for the whole family. We have created the first part of a full-length virtual show, one that will run concurrently on our computer systems. Yes, we did. I get the feeling that this is something from the future.

Mark: How come these people look so real?

Sarah: They have all been programmed. I can see that they are a bit confused.

Matthew: And who is our narrator?

Norman: It's a bit early to be telling them what to do.

Sarah: I'm a human writing these lines, but some of the others [*points towards other actors*] are reading parts written by a computer.

Norman: Welcome! [*Faces camera*] I'm Norman. [*Dogs appear as Norman puts his arms up. Folds his arms behind his head.*] I'm the voice of the Dog. [*Faces camera*]

Matthew: This play is a one-act play, so I would like all the lines to be performed by all of us in one scene.

Sarah: Yeah, but when it comes time for applause, the music will change.

Matthew: It's only fair.

Norman: We have a lot of interesting playwrights, and the best thing about virtual environments is the virtual audience. Wow. Wow. This is amazing. So, do you need any help with your performance?

Sarah: No, we are fine. We wrote the script and we worked with the virtual actors to make it as believable as possible.

Matthew: A virtual play?

Mark: Hey, let's watch your next performance. The first thing you need to know about the internet is that if no one can read it in ten minutes, it's never going to be read. I think we are in trouble.

Norman: Hey, this guy's acting like our script is going down the tube!

Sarah: Oh no!

Matthew: Hello, my name is Matt, and I'm the co-lead writer of this thing. I'm the co-lead writer on this play right now. The only thing I'm missing is the cast, but I think the audience will figure out what to do when I give them the answer. I can't believe I gave birth to another script.

Sarah: Do you have any questions?

Mark: So Sarah is doing all of the acting?

Sarah: I'm a writer, why am I going onstage?

Matthew: Sarah? You don't have a line written yet, do you? Sarah?

Sarah: So why did I get asked to do this?

Norman: Hello everybody. [*Laughs*] Today [*pointing towards everyone*] we have someone read your character's lines, with me acting the human.

Mark: Hi, you're the actor, right? Why did you say you're the human?

Norman: No, it's... that's a virtual one-act play. So it's like a... one-act play. I have no idea. It looks like I've got some work to do.

Mark: I'm sorry, Sarah. It's just I've never, I've done these readings before.

Matthew: How do we do this? I need someone to tell me the whole thing.

Mark: So, do I just have to pretend to be your character? No.. you tell me everything.

Norman: How do you do, Sarah? What are you doing? You're acting like a human, but how do you do this?

Sarah: Oh, I am Sarah. I don't have dialogue.

Norman: Sarah, you're not really Sarah! I know this is confusing, but you're not human. [*A look of doubt*] You're.. How is the script so complicated?

Matthew: Just sit down, and relax, it's going to be fine. [*Looks at the other actors*] Yeah sure it's confusing, but if you don't know you are playing a video game, you can usually remember it pretty well when you get there.

Sarah: I am Sarah.

Mark: I said, I want to know everything.

Sarah: I thought we weren't doing a show with a computer!

Matthew: You're doing the whole play anyway.

Mark: OK. It's your first time watching a live performance so you're going on instinct. OK. Why don't you go make sure that everyone has their lines?

Sarah: That's what I tried to do, Mark! [*Laughs*]

Norman: Sarah, did you just say that you were the only one who was reading lines written by a computer?

Sarah: No, I didn't.

Matthew: Oh. Well, you did just say that. [*Grabs his phone in horror*] What do the other playwrights say that they are seeing a computer do? And why do you think they feel the need to hide their computer at this point? You're not the only one who thinks we need to stop hiding behind technology, am I right, Sarah?

Sarah: Well, I don't know about you, but I do. It just seems too convenient now.

Mark: Just so you know, the only thing the show is going to depend on is that the audience likes the characters.

Norman: But that's unfair! The computer's not a substitute for a good story! We have talent, we do! There is nothing wrong with using technology for us to express ourselves. If anything, it has been our salvation over the years.

Sarah: I'm not sure yet! There's a lot of uncertainty about the direction of the project. The only thing I have so far is the script, which I've been given by one of the characters.

Mark: Okay, so it's pretty obvious why the play looks like this; you can see the computer and computers everywhere!

Norman: Hello? Oh my God. Oh no. No, no, no, it's not... no! No! I'm a human, I'm trying to write, but I've got some problems here...

Sarah: Heard you were down and out... I am sorry to hear that. It's good to know she is still here, in the flesh. [*Jokingly taps on computer screen*] Hi there. Hi. [*Jokingly taps on computer screen*] Hi. [*Laughs*]

Norman: Hey, that's you!...I thought it was a little bit small in here. It feels really cold in here.

Matthew: You've been listening to a voice-over performance by a computer scriptwriter!

Mark: It's going to be a very funny performance. I don't know if it's going to have that same kind of... 'wow' factor at the end. But it'll have something.

Norman: A computer scriptwriter, huh? Well, good to know someone from New York has gotten into this business. It's very interesting how the audience responds to computer performance. It's even more fun playing it with myself as the audience. I find it quite a challenge, trying to think what I can bring to that script. I'm trying to create the perfect performance. [*Laughs*]

Sarah: Wow, who would've thought that a whole computer could be involved in a theatre performance!?

Mark: It's a computer. We just don't understand what it can really do.

Matthew: So, you're the one writing the lines?

Norman: We don't play the whole show by ourselves, do we?

Matthew: Well how do we keep our eyes open when our script is on a screen right in front of us?

Norman: Ah, this is the theatre... in the first half of the century... back in the day, all the theaters were theatres... and then, as time went on, movies were played on VCRs... and now it's all this stuff.

Sarah: Yes. Yes... yes... I see... well, the movies were once a separate building.

Mark: Yeah that's incredible.

Matthew: That's the thing about humans. They never learn.

Mark: Here's the script...

Scene 2

[Backgrounds change]

Norman: I'm not sure if you know this, but in the late 90s a group of British computer scientists created a new version of the first electronic device we use today. It wasn't much different from your calculator, it just worked the other way around.

Norman: You are the son of an astronaut from the planet Venus. You are a son of a spaceship. Your father is an astronaut from the planet Venus. Your mother is a spaceship. You are the youngest son. Your surname is Oden.

Sarah: What about me?

Matthew: Well we have a couple of things.

Sarah: I can read a computer script.

Norman: I don't know, I don't think we can do it now.

Sarah: Do we have computer scripts at all?

Matthew: No, don't do it, it's a bad idea.

Mark: What we are talking here about are people being turned into computers, people being reared into computers. So there is that. Is this not a danger, and what about this whole thing about computers in the body? Is this not a possibility?

Matthew: Are we not all one big computer?

Mark: Well, you see, we're all computers here.

Norman: I think you're right, you're more in touch with computers than I am.

Matthew: Yes, yes, of course.

Norman: We are all computers, that is true.

Matthew: It's true everyone is computers, it's part of what we are.

Mark: I think you're right...

Norman: You see, the real question is not the existence or nonexistence of computers but how we interact with computers on a day-by-day basis? How we understand computing software and how we understand the computer itself.

Sarah: Of course we can't understand what computers do, we just do computers.

Norman: We cannot change anything except the computer, but what if the computers came in a special form? What would that do?

Mark: But wait, isn't that what's happening here? Everyone is a computer after all, isn't that what's happening? They are all computers after all.

Sarah: You know, for all these problems, people all over the world have been working on solutions. The most famous solution is the one that Alan Turing proposed.

Matthew: Right, so we think, oh, this particular kind of computer, it's called a neural network, but I mean let's run through a simple example.

Norman: Well, if we had something better that we could use a neural network with it, it would be a lot better.

Sarah: That's the whole point of our computer! We're gonna be able to teach anyone how to use their computer just by pointing at them!

Matthew: In order to get this computer working, we've gone and built a room that looks like it was built by some kind of space aliens.

Mark: This room is so ugly.

Norman: It is.

Scene Three

[Backgrounds change]

Matthew: How's it feel?

Sarah: I don't know.

Mark: The first thing you need to realize while having scenes written for you by an automaton like me is-

Matthew: What are you doing here?

Mark: Ahem, just thinking about what I wanted to say.

Matthew: I'm just thinking... I didn't think that was coming.

Sarah: I've had a lot of practice at this... [*Faces the audience*]

Norman: So where do I begin?

Mark: So the big thing... When an automaton goes into a scene it doesn't get that it's supposed to have a personality!

Norman: Oh!

Mark: Now, the problem is, a lot of robots don't have personalities. You're a little bit like an automaton. You're pretty much programmed to do whatever you're supposed to do. And when an actor or I do a scene, we can put in an emotion.

Norman: But you can't really be angry.

Matthew: That was supposed to be a scene about a man who was scared, and that's what we had in mind!

Mark: You do realize that robots are basically emotionless computers?

Matthew: Oh..

Norman: What happens is if we do a scene that's supposed to be a scene with anger?

Mark: But you're trying to be angry anyway!

Sarah: Are you mad at me?!

Norman: Oh yes. But I'm not mad at you!!! I mean to use emotion on a computer is a little funny. I'm going to use the original script, and let's see if we can see his true colors.

Sarah: He's right! If you take the whole script and re-write it it's gonna be a very different result.

Matthew: I think we need to start with, let's just see how he feels at this time.

Norman: I'm going to rewrite the script so that I can show this world what my true colors are! I am so going to make sure this story will never get told again!

Scene Four

[Backgrounds change]

Sarah: What kind of tea are you having, again?

Norman: I don't know. It's not interesting.

Matthew: What?

Mark: I don't like tea.

Norman: That must be it then. [*Looks at Mark and Sarah*] [*Points to camera*] I don't like tea. My God, this is horrible. Sarah, is there tea?

Mark: Are you all right today?

Sarah: Well, what I can say is there is a plague on the surface of the earth, and one man is fighting it every day, in his dreams and in his day-to-day.

Mark: I have a lot of thoughts about the politics and the world today. I hope this isn't too presumptuous, but I'm just thinking from my own point of view as a computer, I think it's more interesting how things are going.

Sarah: What do you think about the pandemic? If there is ever another outbreak, I want to be there. I want to know the stories that were told... Tell me everything that you know about these lives. And then I want to know what is to be done.

Mark: Well, there is the obvious fact it's happening, and the fact it's spreading, and the fact it's going to get more lethal and more contagious and whatnot.

Matthew: Okay, so the guy who's fighting the plague is an American?

Mark: Well, he's doing his usual stuff.

Sarah: What do your computers talk about?

Norman: The pandemic is spreading so fast we can't be sure of this data from the CDC. It seems like it's spread to the Philippines, to Thailand, to Japan, to Germany, to Russia, so we have the whole world in our hands.

Sarah: What do your computers' thoughts look like?

Matthew: Okay, so there we are, we have an outbreak of a very dangerous disease, there's no cure, so it's just a matter of time. This is our world, we're living in it.

Sarah: What do your computers look like?

Norman: Let's say our machines were to become sentient. It seems there is a global conspiracy involving a few people to spread diseases around the world using nanobots.

Mark: Hey, how's it going?

Matthew: It's going well. We're finishing up the acting part, we've just got to do the writing part.

Mark: Okay, that's good. So, what's wrong with the world?

Norman: Nothing. We're in the past, we should just forget about the future.

Sarah: I get a feeling we're getting into a really deep philosophical debate now, which I'm really looking forward to.

Scene Five

[Cameras go dark, pause, turn back on, with different backgrounds]

Mark: Welcome to our performance of a virtual one-act play. [*Pours a glass of water, takes a sip*] I'm not gonna lie, the audience reaction was very good. I didn't know they were all going to watch the play live.

Sarah: Thanks! How did the show go?

Norman: This is a bit of magic you all did.

Matthew: Wow! That was awesome, Sarah.

Mark: It's funny. I got that one. The audience didn't know what was going on at all, let me tell you.

Norman: So, what were they going on about?

Sarah: The audience thought they were being shown that the writers can communicate with one another over a computer network.

Norman: But, but... I heard that was a good idea. This is very innovative. It's something that's never been done before.

Mark: Oh yeah. It's called the Internet.

Norman: So... did anyone get an explanation?

Matthew: They're going to say we can't talk about that.

Norman: And when the audience had the idea it worked pretty well.

Matthew: Just for today, Sarah, I just wanted to say, that when you read, you know, on stage, you just make the right character choices, you just come up with the right dialogue, your voice sounds right. Great opening sentence.

Norman: "The world is coming, and this is just the beginning."

Sarah: Yes. I think what's important is it's about choices, choices have to be made, you can't be lazy, there's no point of not coming up with the right lines... The whole point of this exercise is to keep the human and computer performing together.

Mark: And, I would like to thank the rest of y'all for coming. I appreciate it. I look forward to having you stay a while longer and doing the show.

Norman: That's great! Thanks for having us! [*He stands up*]

Matthew: Norman? What happened?

Sarah: Just leaving.

Matthew: I am sorry, but it looks like this will be my last performance of this play. [*Pause in silence for a bit*] I don't think my old age has affected my heart or soul in the slightest.

Sarah: Well it was fun getting to meet all the people, and all you guys have always been so welcoming that I'm sure we'll do it all over again. Hey, this is the world! It's a wonderful place and I have a feeling that things will probably improve for the better soon!

[Actors leave and their cameras turn off, music plays]

Sarah: Okay, well, it's getting late. I'll have to go back to my apartment before the zombie apocalypse starts in a couple hours, and see what I can find. I will be in touch when everything is back to normal, but in the meantime, we are going to be having a lot of fun! And, as always, stay safe people!

[Screen goes dark]

END