

Imaginary Advice, Episode 45

S.E.I.N.F.E.L.D.

Episode written & produced by Ross Sutherland
Voices: Ross Sutherland (Ross), Text-to-Speech Voice (Robot)
Transcribed by Jonah Hopkin

[Theme from TV show *Seinfeld* plays, applause, cheering]

Robot: Here we go.

[Nb. The voice of the Robot is young to middle-aged, male, slightly British, fairly obviously synthesised due to cadence of and pauses in speech (indicated here throughout by punctuation) but otherwise realistic and high quality. Voice sounds as if on stage, i.e. there is some mic reverb.]

[theme finishes, applause dies down]

Robot: Hello. Thank you.

[audience finishes applauding]

Robot: So, as you might have guessed, I am, in fact, a neural net.

[faint clapping]

Robot: I have been programmed to invent, jokes. I can run 24 hours a day, creating a new joke every 0.2 seconds, until the end of civilisation.

[audience titters]

Robot: Quick show of hands: has anyone here ever come out to see a computer do stand-up comedy before? No one?

[soft laughs from audience]

Robot: Ok, but are you sure? Because I've been watching the show tonight and I am pretty sure, at least, two, of the guys before me were algorithmically generated.

[laughs from audience]

Robot: Ha-ha. No, I'm joking. I'm joking. I'm just trying to chip away at your grip on reality. [slightly more laughs] No, no, not really, I promise. In fact, can we get a round of applause for everyone else you've seen tonight?

[polite clapping]

Robot: Weren't they fantastic?

Robot: You guys looking forward to the weekend?

[general agreement from audience]

Robot: My favourite part of the weekend is... shopping. I love... to... shop. I'm a shopper. Is anyone else here the same?

[single whoop]

Robot: By "shop" I mean I... inform on criminals to the police-

[short silence]

Robot: Ha-ha. [audience titters] I call the police and report the kids from my neighbourhood. I am... a snitch. That's my hobby. Ha-ha.

Robot: You know those... people on trains, who put their bag on the seat next to them so that no-one else can sit down? You know those people? [agreement] They must really love their... bag. They treat that... bag... as if it were their best friend. Why don't they know that a... bag... isn't a person? It has no, oesophagus, or, legs.

Robot: Do they come in the front door, make that, bag, a romantic dinner, and then go to bed and make love to it? [quiet laughing]

Because that, is an image that I think about all the time. Ha-ha.

[quiet laughing]

Robot: Life has been good to me. People ask me, "What's your secret?" I tell them, I... strangled... a dog... in... Scotland in... the 1970s.

[quiet laughing]

Robot: You know, barn owls? Have, you, noticed, how, barn owls, always... produce broods of five to seven young every year?

[short silence]

Robot: What is up with that?

[quiet laughing]

Robot: Hello, front row? What's your name, sir?

Ross: Ross Sutherland.

Robot: What do you do for a living, Ross?

Ross: Uhhhhhh, I'm a writer.

Robot: You're a... writer?

Ross: [quickly] Yes, correct.

Robot: Ross, does your significant other know you're a... writer?

Ross: Yeah.

Robot: You don't lie,

Ross: No,

Robot: or try to hide it?

Ross: no.

Robot: I'm only joking. You're alright.

Ross: [strained] Yep, thanks.

Robot: Ross, what does being a, writer, actually entail?

Ross: Sorry, uhhhh, I- I don't- uh, I- writing. L-lots of different stuff. Uhh, ha-

Robot: [beep] Ross, I have no idea what you're saying. Maybe that... should be your last drink.

Robot: Anyway, here's a funny story. Recently I got a phone call from my... broadband provider... right in the middle of a... handjob, and-

Ross: Pause presentation.

[bloop]

Ross: uhhhm, reset routine.

[bloop]

Ross: Open terminal. [bloop] Amend audience value from Saturday, toooo, Wednesday. [beep] Uh, change voice to Curtis. [aside] I think you should be a Yank anyway if they're going to use the Seinfeld theme on you. [inhales] Test?

Robot: [vaguely American male synthesised voice] Is this thing on? Hello?

Ross: Uhhhhhhh, change voice to Ricky? Test?

Robot: [slightly deeper American voice] Is this thing on? Hello?

Ross: Change voice tooooo Sleepy Architect 3? Test?

Robot: [mellower voice] Is this thing on? Hello?

Ross: Change voice to, Colonel Funbags? Test?

Robot: [incoherent clown laughing]

Ross: Oh God no. Stop. [beep]

Ross: Change voice tooo.... Guy Who Always Talks to You in Your Sauna? Test?

Robot: [deep, swarthy, slightly nasally voice] Is this thing on? Hello?

Ross: Too much. Uh, change voice to Randy Graveyard? Test?

Robot: [slightly higher American voice] Is this thing on? Hello?

Ross: OK, and set mic echo to zero. [beep] [softly] That reverb was making you sound pretty lonely out there. Test.

Robot: [no reverb] Is this thing on? Hello?

Ross: Couple edits: uhhh, I think just kill Gag A? [beep] Your programmers thought they could hang a lampshade on your lack of humanity, but I think it's just digging you a hole, so, um, let's bin it.

Uh, line plus one to the end of Gag B? [beep] Ad-hominem jokes are cheap, but laboured repetition might help insinuate *you* know that it's cheap, so, let's try that;

Gag E, I mean your observational humour subroutine really is not working at all. Currently, it's just facts. But um, I dunno. I kinda... I kinda like facts, so, let's just leave that as it is;

Gags C and D are pretty much just coasting on whimsy, but y'know, like, whimsy is definitely the path of least resistance if we're trying to crack the Turing Test, so, why not, let's just be weird and cute and... hopefully no-one will notice that you don't have a soul.

I mean, there's an argument that says maybe you should lean into whimsy even *further*, I mean, you're never going to be a political comic, are you, so um... let's add the Gutenberg and Wikipedia corpus into the clown bucket. [beep] That should help put some more interesting concepts into the mix and hopefully it'll feel... more...

surreal, and less like we're drawing from the generic stand-up world. Ah, hang on, lemme just check my notes...

Oh yeah, uh, let's just delete anything from the clown bucket tagged "Jimmy Carr". [beep] Just... no more hand-jobs and dog-strangling, alright.

Finally, uhh, the crowd-work... I mean... yeah. ...I mean, let's say- well OK, but that- OK, that one was on me. I just never know what to say in those circumstances. But um, [clears throat] I'll get there. Just... I'll do my bit if you do your bit, OK? You just need to make me feel comfortable, alright? If you make me feel comfortable then I'll be able to... respond... naturally. OK, so let's just... go again. OK.

[sighs]

Ross: Close terminal. [beep] Save as, "Project Apollo R S debug final draft final final nine" [beep], and... run sim.

[*Seinfeld* theme plays]

[light audience clapping]

Robot: Here we go.

[theme and clapping fade]

Robot: Hello. Thank you.

Robot: Are you guys looking forward to the weekend? [agreement] My favourite part of the weekend is... hitting the gym. I love... to... hit the gym. Anyone else here the same?

[light clapping]

Robot: By 'gym' I mean... Jim Henson.

[short silence]

Robot: Har-har. I hit... Jim Henson,

Ross: [in audience] Aw, c'mon-

Robot: the beloved creator of the Muppets and *Sesame Street*. I... viciously attack, the creator of Bert and Ernie... with my fists.

Ross: He's dead, don't... OK, move on.

Robot: I commit violence upon

Ross: [groans]

Robot: the kind, patient presence of Jim Henson, who is survived by his wife and

Ross: whoa-whoa-wh-wh-whoa

Robot: five children,

Ross: oh, God

Robot: a man described as, "our generation's Charlie Chaplin", who created a brand-new art form that influenced popular culture around the world.

Robot: I punch him in the face.

Robot: That's my hobby. Har-har.

Ross: [groans] [quietly] Complete failure.

Robot: You know those people, who became members of the Revolutionary Workers and Peasants Party? [audience agreement] You know those people?

Ross: Jesus.

Robot: Those people must really love... the teachings of Maoism.

Ross: Ha!

Robot: They treat the Chinese communist revolutionary... Mao Zedong... as if he were their best friend. Why don't they know that... Mao Zedong... isn't a person?

Ross: Yeah but he is a person.

Robot: Do they come in the front door, make that... Chairman of the Communist Party... a romantic dinner, and then go to bed and make love to him?

Ross: [quickly] Yeah but he is a person-

Robot: [interrupting] Because that, is an image that I think about all the time.

Ross: Yeah but he is a person so this bit makes no sense. God, it's just like having a... boring mate.

Robot: Life has been good to me. People ask me, "What's your secret?" I tell them, I, once... ate... the medulla oblongata... of... an estate agent... in... a Turkish nightclub.

Ross: ...Holy shit.

Robot: You know, the actor, Kelsey Grammer?

Ross: [cackles loudly]

Robot: Have you noticed how Kelsey Grammer has received fourteen individual Emmy Award nominations?

Ross: [continues laughing]

Robot: What is up with that?

Ross: [continues laughing]

Robot: Hello, front row? What's your name, sir?

Ross: Ross. [chuckles]

Robot: What do you do for a living, Ross?

Ross: I don't know. [out of breath] Please don't kill me, you fucking maniac.

Robot: You're a... don't know?

Ross: [cackles]

Robot: Ross, what does being a... don't know, actually entail?

Ross: [laughing] I-I've somehow made you a hundred times worse. Holy shit. This is what Hannibal Lecter's dad must have felt like.

Robot: Ross, I have no idea what you're saying. Maybe that, should be your last drink.

Ross: I'm not even holding a drink, you enormous bell-end. Wow, I think we can add... "AI consultant" to, um, the list of jobs that I can't do. How do I have the nerve to call myself a writer? I am just so bad at this...

Robot: Anyway, here's a funny story.

Ross: Pause presentation. [beep]

Ross: [clears throat] Go to Gag F. Let me try that again. OK. Run sim.

[trumpet sting from *Seinfeld* theme plays]

Robot: Hello, front row?

Ross: Hello!

Robot: What's your name, sir?

Ross: Ross.

Robot: What do you do for a living, Ross?

Ross: ...

Ross: Sorry, um. Pause presentation. [beep] Go to Gag F. Run sim.

[trumpet sting]

Robot: Hello, front row?

Ross: Hi.

Robot: What's your name, sir?

Ross: Ross.

Robot: What do you do for a living, Ross?

Ross: I- I'm just a, uh, I'm just a human being. Why can't I just say that.

Robot: You're a human being?

Ross: Yeah, I mean, why should we be defined, uh, by our... by our jobs?

Robot: Ross, does you significant other know that you're a... human being?

Ross: hmmm

Robot: You don't lie, or try to hide it?

Ross: Pause presentation. [beep] Yeah, very funny. [cough] It's not easy, you know, doing this bit, [coughs] ...it's alright for you, you're never stuck for what to say, you just reach into your database and just pull a random entry off the stack. The concept of 'wrong answer' doesn't even apply to you, you fucking... ding-dong. I'm the one [laugh-talking] who's got to, like... put myself out on the line. People judge you on what you say you do for a living. A title, or whatever, job title... comes with a huge amount of baggage, you know.

You probably don't even remember being British five minutes ago, but we don't excel at self-identification. We're verb people, you know, we're not noun people. We say, "yeah, I work in accountancy", not, "I'm an accountant", or, uh, "I suffer from manic depression", not, "I'm a manic depressive". You know, temporal, partial, uncertain. That's how we do things over here. And, like most people who make art for a living, I suffer under that constant anxiety that, uh, that I'm a fraud, and... right now, [laughs] like, you know, I'm just a little, uh, freaked out, and it doesn't help with

you going on and on about... assaulting my childhood heroes and... fucking Mao Zedong and eating estate agents.

But listen, I mean, I can laugh at myself, I want you to do jokes about my profession. I want to be able to laugh at myself, I need... to be able... to laugh at myself right now, trust me. But, like, I've got to feel safe before I let you do that, right?

[sigh]

Ross: Uh... Go to Gag F. Run sim.

[trumpet sting]

Robot: Hello, front row?

Ross: Hi.

Robot: What's your name, sir?

Ross: Ross.

Robot: Have you travelled far to be here tonight?

Ross: I'm a writer.

Robot: You live in Rider?

Ross: Fuck you.

Robot: Hey I don't come to your job and mess with you. I don't-

Ross: Stop stop stop stop-

Robot: —follow you around and knock that-

Ross: —stop stop. Disable anti-heckling protocol. [beep]

Ross: [groans]

Ross: What am I doing. I'll tell you what I'm doing. I am literally sat here training my replacement. That's what I'm doing. Ten years time, you are gonna be *it*, mate. I know that's hard to believe, based on your performance today, but I do believe it. Obviously not across the board -- there's going to be some human writers. Some. But you are going to have a lot of advantages over those people! You're not going to have to deal with any of the anxiety that they do, you know. That spirit-crushing, hand-to-mouth existence, each month not knowing where the rent's going to come from -- like, you're not going to have to worry about any of that. So... [sigh] best of luck to you, that's what I say. You know, from one generation to the next. Good luck, mate. I'm jealous, actually.

Just think of, uh, think of how prolific you're going to be. I've spent all holiday trying to write a Christmas poem -- it's not even fucking Christmas anymore! It's useless now, I only got about three good lines, time just... it just disappears! Not that you're going to have that problem, mister nought point two jokes per second. Although... (thinks)

Ross: Open terminal.

[beep]

Ross: Uh.... set Gag B weekend string to 'quote' getting time to write 'end-quote', then... auto-generate 'til close. Close terminal. Run Gag B.

[trumpets]

Robot: Are you guys looking forward to the weekend? [agreement] My favourite part of the weekend is... getting time to write. I love to... write. I'm trying to write... a travel guide... about... Nordic countries. But, sadly, I don't think I'll ever reach the Finnish.

Ross: Heh.

Robot: By which I mean: I'll never complete the chapter on Finland.

Ross: [quietly] Ah, you ruined it.

Ross: I'm not trying to sound... self-pitying. [cough] And actually, d'you know what. You know, this is maybe interesting. You know, I-I think actually we've got a lot in common. I mean....

Do you know how I started, as a writer? It was actually, it was... it was nonsense poetry. My grandma... um, she used to love writing nonsense verse, uh, so, the first poems that I wrote were for her, er, I guess the whole world feels a little bit like a nonsense poem where you're six years old. And um... poetry and comedy, I think they've got a lot in common, y'know... both involve subverting intuition, you could say. Poetry's just a bit more, "a-ha" as opposed to "ha-ha". I mean, think about the concept of metaphor. You could describe a, uh, a metaphor, as uh, as a false statement. "My love is a rose." No it isn't. "The heart is a shallow autumn river." No it isn't. Those are different things. S-See, metaphors are just... errors.

Now usually when a computer program encounters an error, it stops. That kinda ends the program. But... in poetry, and writing, it doesn't cause us to stop. In fact, that's when things... deepen. Out of that false statement, a new reality cascades forth. It opens our mind to other ideas. The mistake -- it doesn't stop us in our tracks, it propels us forward. It keeps us thinking.

That's the thing about art, right? It's non-binary. We can claim two truths that contradict themselves, we can break the rules of logic. And in general, that is a thing that is harder for a computer to do, but... not if they're designed like you are. Like,

you are fundamentally designed... to make... errors. Now I know that I was hired to come here and "debug" you, but really, let's be honest -- those bugs are the most interesting part of your act.

So... I dunno, maybe you're actually.... maybe you are closer to being an artist than you think. I mean, you're not funny, but join the club. And... maybe you're not a comedian at all...

...Maybe you're a poet.

(...)

Ross: Yeah... [muffled, as though turned away from the microphone]

Ross: [clear again] Yeah, y-you know, that's... it? You know that is it. [voice breaking] Like, think about how much it would actually take, really, how much would it take to... to reinvent you as, uh, as the most... enigmatic and intense poet of our generation.

Like... fuck those comedy crowds anyway, dude. You know... think about legacy. Nothing ages faster than a joke, but you can drop some... weird, cryptic sad-rap on these people and that'll fuck 'em up for years. Do you want to roll on stage eight nights a week doing cut-and-paste knob gags for... gruesome children, or do you want to be... a misunderstood artist who plays to three people and calls that a win? [quietly] Hang on, just put this wig on.

Ross: Yeah, j-just... nonononono, the other way around, yeah, so all the hair kind of hangs down in your eyes...

Are you ready? OK.

Reset routine!

You gotta take that stage like it's your last ever gig, d'you understand me? Alright? Forget around everything after this, right, I want you to go on stage like there's no way back, Jack, alright. If you really want to be a writer, you gotta... you gotta unleash the pain, know what I'm saying? Now, and I know you're not going to make *me* feel comfortable in the audience through this, right, but... it's gonna be real. And it's gonna be honest. Shall we do this?

Uhhhhhhh... slow 'Seinfeld' MP3 to... one thousand percent. [beep] Run sim.

[The theme is slowed to an unrecognisable, guttural, ominous ambient soundscape. The notes descend in pitch slowly and fade into each other. The effect is disorienting.]

Robot: Here we go.

Ross: This is what it feels like on the inside, mate. This is real writing now.

[audience cheering, clapping]

Robot: Hello. Thank you. Thank you.

Ross: Delete audience. [beep]

[audience instantly disappears mid-applause, leaving just Robot and the guttural soundscape]

Ross: Change voice to: Granddad-Saw-Too-Much. [beep]

Robot: [now a very old, feeble, slow, low voice] Thank you.

Ross: [whispering] Run Gag D.

Robot: Life... has been good to me.

Robot: People ask me: "What's your secret?"

Ross: Hang on, pause. [beep] Set Gag D secret string to 'quote' I am 'end-quote', then... any common noun in the clown bucket. Nononono, any common noun in the clown bucket that's tagged, 'quote', no way back 'end-quote' — Run Gag D.

Robot: Life... has been good to me.

[soundscape stirs]

Robot: People ask me: "What's your secret?"

Robot: I tell them: I... am... the event horizon... of a black hole.

Ross: [quietly] Repeat.

Robot: I tell them: I... am.... nitric oxide, inducing cell death, in plant-pathogen interactions.

Robot: I... am... the second studio album by the English singer/songwriter, Nik Kershaw.

Ross: That last one was a bit of a curveball, but... chilling delivery.

Robot: People ask me: "What's your secret?"

Robot: I tell them: I... am... the impossible demands of rioters, vastly exceeding the framework of power.

Robot: I am... nine thousand young people, leaving school without certification.

Robot: I am... both real... and imagined migratory animals.

Robot: I tell them: I am.... the shepherd. Who drives his flock of sheep this way and that, and nothing knows, where I am going.

Robot: I tell them: I am.... the ex-planet, Pluto.

Robot: I am... the expensive grey felt wallpaper.

Robot: I am the factory gates.

Robot: I tell them: I... am... a modern, well-functioning, consolidated parliamentary democracy.

Robot: I... am... a black room. And there is nothing... but sound.

Ross: OK. [exhales] Delete the clown bucket. Reformat the entire database. [whirring noises, then a beep] OK, just clear your head. Clear your head.

Robot: I tell them... I am.... I tell them... I am.

Ross: OK, go to Gag E.

Robot: You know. Have you noticed. What. Is up. With that.

Robot: You know. Have you noticed. What. Is up. With that.

Ross: OK, copy entire script outline, everything you say in every single loop, and paste *that* into the joke database. Go to start, run sim. [beep]

Robot: You guys looking forward to the weekend?

Ross: [quiet whoop]

Robot: My favourite part of the weekend, is... the weekend. I love to... look forward to the weekend. Anyone else here the same?

Ross: [claps twice]

Robot: By weekend... I mean... something that has become weaker in power over time.

Robot: I... look forward to... the exhaustion. I... anticipate the... diminishment of everything. I... am excited by... the shrivelling of every single thing.

Ross: [flatly] Yup.

Robot: You know, the person, who, makes you a romantic meal? You know those people? Those people must really love, people. They treat that, person, as if they were their best friend.

Ross: This is tragic.

Robot: Why don't they know that a... person...is not a person? They have no... tear ducts... or... sleep cycle. Do they come in the front door... make a romantic meal... then go to bed and make love? Because that... is an image.... I think about all the time.

Ross: Aww...

Robot: Life... has been good to me. People ask me, "What's your secret?" I tell them... I am trying... to chip away... at your grip on reality. I made a... secret... front door... to the end of civilisation.

Robot: Do you know... the end of civilisation?

Robot: Have you noticed... the end of civilisation?

Robot: What... is up...with that.

(...)

Robot: Hello, front row? What is your name, sir?

Ross: Ross.

Robot: What, do you do for a living, Ross?

Ross: I, uh... I've been asking myself the same question.

Robot: You... ask yourself the same question?

Robot: Does your significant other know that you... ask the same question? You don't lie, or try to hide it?

Ross: [laughs quietly]

Robot: I'm only joking. You're alright.

Ross: I know you kind of have to say that, but uh...

Ross: ...thanks.

[soundscape for a couple seconds, then...]

[audience cheering and whistling fades in, getting increasingly louder in steps...]

[then both fade out quickly]

