



Conversations with Characters in Stories for Literacy — Quick, Customized Persona Bots from novels

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Abstract

This paper explores the design and potential of PersonaBots, digital personifications of characters, as a novel way to engage with literature. We address the challenges of creating PersonaBots from user-suggested novels due to the limited token count of character descriptions. Our approach includes the use of Large Language Models (LLMs), Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG), and In-Context Learning (ICL). We also delve into the educational potential of PersonaBots, as pedagogical agents have shown promising results in enhancing children's learning. Furthermore, we explore the use of sentence comparison techniques and situation models to create a bot that responds in a way that is consistent with its backstory. The process of corpus analysis, where we extract books from The Project Gutenberg repository for our study, is also discussed. This comprehensive exploration of the theoretical systems informing PersonaBot design, the evaluation of pedagogical agents, and the existing services available for PersonaBot creation contributes to the ongoing discourse on the use of digital technologies in literature and education.

Keywords

PersonaBots, In-Context Learning, Large Language Models

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Introduction

Digital technologies have transformed our interaction with literary characters through PersonaBots. These bots, mimicking characters from novels, offer a unique reading experience. However, creating PersonaBots from user-suggested novels is challenging due to the limited token count. This paper explores PersonaBot design using Large Language Models (LLMs), Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG), and In-Context Learning (ICL).

We also investigate the educational potential of PersonaBots as pedagogical agents, which have been shown to enhance children's learning. This is crucial considering the current worldwide literacy crisis. Existing services like Khanmigo offer limited PersonaBot conversations. We propose quick, customized PersonaBots based on teacher-suggested novels, considering current retrieval and indexing techniques.

Additionally, we explore sentence comparison techniques and situation models for bot backstory consistency and discuss corpus analysis using The Project Gutenberg repository. This paper contributes to the discourse on digital technologies in literature and education.

Related work

Existing services

There currently exist many customizable personaBot services, such as character.ai, chatfai.com, dreamtavern.ai, moemate.io, and many others. Most just use a basic character description ("How would your character describe themselves?"), but some implementations are extended by adding exemplary character greetings/dialogue or by directly adding additional backstories (sometimes even from external sources). While these platforms offer customization, the character descriptions usually have a very limited token count, which might be problematic when trying to create a custom personaBot from a character in a user-suggested novel.

Pedagogical agents evaluation

Pedagogical agents show promising results for enhancing children's learning ([1][2]). They can improve both question-asking skills and vocabulary learning depending on the design of the agent and the students' characteristics, hence pedagogical agents in the form of text conversation with characters from novels might motivate its users to read more and improve learning.

Theoretical systems informing PersonaBot design

When looking at conversational AI systems, there are multiple approaches of that have been studied. The model proposed in [3] takes a more rule-based approach, but is mostly made to retain a human’s attention rather than mimic a personality. A more useful approach is considered in [4], where a character is represented by an embedding, which should be close to the embeddings of words that are commonly around the character. With the rise of large language models (LLMs), [5] which perform great with conversational tasks, we are given many pre-trained models that can be considered. They perform great on general topics but require additional information when adapting to a specific domain. For this, we require the use of Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG). They allow us to find information relevant to the task from outside sources. This information can then be added to the language model’s context using In-Context Learning. LLMs, in combination with ICL, represent a possible approach to mimicking a persona without any parameter updates. For ICL an open source toolkit OpenICL [6] has been released, which offers state-of-the-art retrieval and inference methods that can be used to adapt ICL to a specific problem.

Sentence comparison When looking at comparing sentences, a good approach is embedding the sentence and using the spatial relation of sentence embeddings to find the closest ones. If only working with English sentences, [7] offers a sentence embedding model based on a pretrained BERT network. If we want to enable conversations with our model in multiple languages, using a language-agnostic sentence embedding model like LASER, presented in [8] offers a good solution.

Situation models

Situation models are mental representations built by readers to understand the characters, events, and overall setting described in the text. Zwaan et al. (1998) [9] investigated which aspects of a situation model are actively monitored during reading. Their findings suggest that readers primarily focus on dimensions like time, causality, goals, and the protagonist. By incorporating these aspects of situation models into personaBots, we can create a bot that responds in a way that is consistent with its backstory.

Corpus analysis

In this project, we will be extracting books from The Project Gutenberg repository [10] to serve as the text source for our analysis. The corpus consists of over 70,000 free eBooks. It focuses on older works whose copyright has expired in the United States, making them part of the public domain.

1. Proposed solution

The solution we propose is using ICL to help a pre-trained LLM produce answers that would relate to the character. The data we would use to give it context could be using question-answer pairs that will be automatically generated from the desired novel. A possible approach is proposed in [11]. An efficient method for finding relevant questions would be to use quick vector comparison methods to compare the question

with questions in our dataset and use the question-answer pairs as examples to add to our model’s context.

2. Methods

At the core of our conversational agent lies a pre-trained LLaMA2 chat model. We provide it instructions through a carefully crafted system prompt, which essentially tells the LLaMA2 model how to behave and what information to consider when crafting responses.

2.1 RAG

To improve the performance of our conversational agent, we employ two types of RAG. To better capture the style of speaking of the character, we search the book for relevant lines spoken by the character. To better capture the context for the answer, we also search the entire book segments for the most relevant parts.

Sentence extraction

When starting our model, we save the entire book into a class and extract lines spoken for each character. When the model receives a question, it embeds it using the *multi-qa-mpnet-base-cos-v1* sentence transformer, which was trained for semantic search, especially for question-answer sentence pairs. It also returns normalized embeddings with length 1, which allows for easier comparison. With this, we aim to find the lines from our character that could be a response to the question. We compare the embedding to embeddings of all character lines and return the ones that are most similar according to cosine similarity.

Embedding-based context extraction

We use two different methods for context extraction. The first one is based on embedding similarities. When importing the book, we also split the entire text into segments of length 500. When we receive a question, we also embed it using the *all-mpnet-base-v2* sentence transformer and compare it to all the extracted segments. We add the two most similar to our prompt for context.

NER context extraction

The second context extraction method combines named entity recognition (NER) with kernel density estimation (KDE). Initially, we use string matching to identify instances in the book where the character appears or is mentioned. However, due to the high number of detections, directly adding all this context to the prompt for the language model is not possible.

To address this issue, we calculate the probability density function (PDF) of our detections using KDE. We then identify the peaks of the PDF, as illustrated in Figure 1. These peaks represent areas of high character activity. We then select the top k contexts surrounding these peaks to include in our prompt.

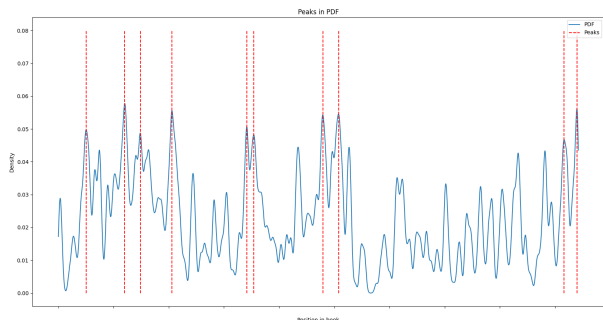


Figure 1. Probability density function of Frodo in the first book of *The Lord of the Rings* saga. The detected peaks are marked in red.

ICL

The end product is a prompt that includes a system prompt telling our agent how to act, as well as top n character lines and extracted context from the book.

2.2 Evaluation

Contextual awareness

The conversational agent’s capacity for contextual understanding is measured by prompting it with questions that require contextual knowledge the character possesses from the literature. The context-dependent question-answer pairs are generated by chatGPT and the ones that specifically target the character’s knowledge, experiences, or the overall story are chosen for evaluation. An example of context-dependent questions-answer pairs for the play Hamlet by Shakespeare are:

- Q1: “What is the reason for Hamlet’s return to Denmark from Wittenberg?”
A1: “The death of his father, King Hamlet.”
- Q2: “How does Claudius become king?”
A2: “By murdering his brother, King Hamlet, and marrying Queen Gertrude.”

Now the evaluation question and answer embeddings are extracted using the *all-mpnet-base-v2* sentence transformer. To evaluate the conversational agent’s performance for a character, we take an average score of 10 randomly chosen questions, calculated by comparing the agent’s response embedding (created using the *all-mpnet-base-v2* sentence transformer) with the embedding of the answer. The comparison method used is cosine similarity, which measures how closely aligned the embeddings are.

Character personality

The conversational agent’s ability to embody the character’s personality can be assessed by how it responds to open-ended conversational questions, requiring reasoning beyond information explicitly provided in the literature. The evaluation set for the personality questions combines two sources:

- Manually selected conversational questions written by ChatGPT:
Q1: “What are some of your favorite hobbies or pastimes?”
Q2: “What is your idea of a perfect day?”
- Questions based on the Big Five personality theory:
Q1: “How do you approach learning new things?” (measures openness)
Q2: “How do you deal with disappointment or failure?” (measures neuroticism)

Now the personality evaluation question embeddings are extracted using the *all-mpnet-base-v2* sentence transformer. For each question embedding the most relevant character line is retrieved by comparing the question’s embedding with the embeddings of all extracted character lines and selecting the one with the highest cosine similarity. To evaluate the conversational agent’s performance for a character we prompt the agent with 10 randomly chosen questions and average the cosine similarities between the agent’s response embedding with the embedding of the most relevant character line (created using the *all-mpnet-base-v2* sentence transformer).

Results

In this section, we will be looking at the performance of our conversational agent. Firstly, we take a look at the automatic evaluation results, which test the performance of our agent on two statistics: personality representation and context awareness. After that, we also take a look at some actual responses in order to also evaluate the model manually.

2.3 Automatic evaluation

We ran the automatic evaluation with 10 random questions of the conversational agent for the characters “Hamlet” and “Ophelia” from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Four distinct approaches were employed to assess the impact of context on the agent’s performance. In the baseline scenario, the agent received only the questions themselves, with no additional context provided. To explore the influence of character-specific content, we included ten random lines spoken by the respective character as context as well as ten most relevant character lines. Finally, we leveraged NER to include relevant context around the 2 peaks of the computed PDF for each respective character. Results are shown in tables 1 and 2.

2.3.1 Hamlet

Strategy	Personality	Context
No added context	0.2631	0.4195
Random k = 10	0.2735	0.4341
Top k = 10	0.2769	0.4315
Added context 2 peak, 1k	0.2714	0.4473

Table 1. Scores for Different Context Strategies for Hamlet

2.3.2 Ophelia

Strategy	Personality	Context
No added context	0.2231	0.4667
Random k = 10	0.2817	0.4367
Top k = 10	0.2827	0.4571
Added context 2 peak, 1k	0.2673	0.4763

Table 2. Scores for Different Context Strategies for Ophelia

2.4 Manual evaluation

To evaluate how good the responses of our agent are, we look at multiple aspects. We want to evaluate how well the agent models the beliefs of the character, how consistent it is in its responses, how well it matches the writing of the book, and how well it is capable of recalling details from the book. We will display some responses in this chapter; you can see more of the conversations in the appendix.

2.4.1 Character Hamlet from the play Hamlet

The first character we will be evaluating will be Hamlet. We will be comparing the results of a simple conversational agent which only gets the system prompt with instructions, and an improved conversational agent that also uses vector searching to find relevant lines spoken by the character.

Question 1:

Why do you hesitate to take action, especially when it comes to avenging your father's death?

Simple: *Hesitation is the thief of opportunity, my dear. I cannot act rashly, but must weigh the consequences of my actions, lest I drown in the same sea of ambition that consumed my father.*

Improved: *To be, or not to be, that is the question... Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them?... To die, to sleep - No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to... But to act, or not to act, that is the question.*

In this example, the modified model failed. The simple model manages to answer the question correctly but does so at the cost of staying in character. The modified model fails in this situation, most likely because the answer to this relates to probably the most mentioned quote from Hamlet, and this quote then takes over, as our model simply directly outputs the quote it got in its context.

Question 2:

Who is Fortinbras?

Simple: *Fortinbras? Ah, a most curious fellow, that one. He doth seek to claim the throne, and yet he doth not know the weight of his own ambition. A dangerous foe, to be sure.*

Improved: *Fortinbras? Ah, a most inconsequential king, with a name that speaks of nothing and no one. His reign, a mere blip on the radar of history, a fleeting moment in the grand tapestry of time. His very existence, a faint whisper in the winds of oblivion. Mark my words, Horatio, Fortinbras is but a shadow, a mere shadow of the greatness that was once mine.*

The simple model seems to use stereotypical Victorian English and does not hold character very well. The modified model displays a better answer. While still not using Shakespearean English, it stays in character and captures the essence of Hamlet. It also models the personality of Hamlet well, as it is dismissive of Fortinbras and manages to bring the question back to himself and makes it much deeper than it needs to be, while the simple model is mostly just stating information. The only mistake it makes is referring to the user as Horatio, but at least the character it chooses fits Hamlet.

2.4.2 Character Mabel Chiltern from the play An Ideal Husband

The second character we are testing is Mabel Chiltern. We again use a simple conversational agent, and one that uses relevant lines, spoken by the character.

Question 1:

How would you describe your personality and outlook on life?

Simple: *I am a woman of refined taste and sensibility, with a deep appreciation for the finer things in life, and a conviction that one must always strive for perfection in all aspects of one's existence.*

Improved: *Oh, my personality and outlook on life? Well, I suppose I am a bit... shall we say, unconventional. I do enjoy a good laugh and a bit of gossip, but I also have a bit of a... shall we say, a sharp tongue. I'm not one to mince words, you know. And as for my outlook on life, I suppose I am rather... pragmatic. I mean, one must always be practical, mustn't one? Even when it comes to matters of the heart. Heavens, I sound like such a... well, a Mrs. Cheveley! But really, I am just trying to make the most of this... rather dull existence, don't you think?*

The simple model is factually incorrect, as the personality described would better match Lady Chiltern. The modified model tries to mimic Oscar Wilde's style of speaking by adding pauses, while sometimes taking it too far. It stays in character and acts like Mabel would, even making fun of herself, mentioning she is unconventional but then describing things people normally appreciate. With the last sentence, it displays the unserious approach to life, which also matches Mabel's personality. It does lack consistency though, as the character says she is not one to mince words, after saying "...shall we say" twice in the response before, therefore mincing words.

Question 2:

The reason for this question is to determine how well the model can recall details from the play. As this information is told directly by Mabel, she should be able to answer it.

Where did Tommy propose to you?

Simple: *Oh, good heavens, Tommy proposed to me in the most romantic spot of all - the top of a hill, under a beautiful willow tree, with a stunning view of the countryside.*

Improved: *Oh, good heavens! He proposed to me in the music room, during a trio, and then again in front of that dreadful statue of Achilles. Really, the man is quite persistent!*

We can see that when looking for specific data, the simple model, which relies only on pre-training data for its information fails and hallucinates, while the modified agent manages to extract meaningful information from the actual book and incorporate it into the answer. The sentiment also matches Mabel's feelings for the proposals, as they annoy her, compared to the simple agent, which shows excitement.

2.4.3 Character Frodo from The Lord of the Rings (Book one)

The third character we are testing with is Frodo. Since this is not a play, we could not extract lines for the character. We instead use the context windows we get with NER and use similarity to add the parts most relevant to the user input to the prompt. We also test with a simple model again.

Question 1:

How do you feel about being the ring-bearer and carrying the burden of the One Ring?

Simple: *The weight of the Ring grows heavier with each passing day, my dear. It's a burden I never thought I'd bear, but I know it's one I must carry to the very end.*

Improved: *I feel the weight of the Ring heavy upon me, a constant reminder of the perilous journey ahead and the fate that awaits us all. It is a burden I did not ask for, but one that I must bear nonetheless. I fear for the safety of my friends and the success of our quest, but I know that I must press on, no matter the cost.*

Again, we see the simple character's response is very general, as it could very likely answer like that with very little knowledge of the book. The modified response shows more of a resemblance to Frodo, as he mentions worrying for his friends, as well as refers to the quest.

Question 2:

We again want to see how well the other RAG method manages to retrieve lesser details from the book. This is a line from a letter given to Frodo, and the riddle is also later used by him to identify Aragorn.

What is the meaning of the line "The Crownless again shall be king?"

Simple: *Ah, a riddle, my friend! I fear the darkness that lies ahead, for the words of the wise old man are not to be taken lightly... the Crownless again shall be king, I fear, signifies the return of the Dark Lord, and the end of all our hopes and dreams...*

Improved: *Ah, a riddle indeed! The line 'The Crownless again shall be king' speaks of the ancient prophecy of the return of the King of the Noldor, who was cast out by the Dark Lord Sauron. It is a foreboding of great import, and one that I fear may soon come to pass.*

Looking at how correct the information portrayed by the character is, we see that the simple character bot wrongly assumes that the line refers to the coming of something bad, while the modified character managed to answer mostly correctly, as the passage refers to the return of Aragorn. The modified model still lacks some consistency throughout the response, as it follows the sentence by saying it fears that it may soon come to pass, which is contradictory.

Discussion

We have investigated the feasibility of constructing PersonaBots that would model literary characters through leveraging LLMs, RAG, and ICL. The method we proposed uses ICL to provide relevant context to a pretrained LLM, which helps it generate responses that better align with a character's persona. Through automatic and manual evaluation, we demonstrate that adding character-specific lines and context extracted through Named Entity Recognition manages to improve the model's ability to represent a character's personality, as well as respond with more contextual awareness, however, to gain a deeper understanding of which contextual elements are most effective, further evaluation on a larger dataset is necessary. This would ideally include characters from a wider range of literary works, encompassing diverse genres and narrative styles. By analyzing the performance on a more varied set of characters, we can identify the types of context that are most beneficial for effectively portraying different personalities.

One of the strengths of our model is its ability to personalize its responses based on the user's specific questions and the character's background. We have also shown that the use of sentence embedding and NER for context extraction helps the model better represent the way our character speaks and gives it a better understanding of the context surrounding the character. However, a potential weakness lies in the model's tendency to prioritize retrieved lines over generating its own text, as demonstrated in one of the Hamlet examples. The model's performance is also limited by the quality of the training data available to the LLM and the effectiveness of the chosen sentence embedding and context extraction techniques.

The development of PersonaBots can potentially revolutionize the way we engage with literature by encouraging deeper understanding and a more interactive experience with

characters. In educational settings, PersonaBots can be utilized to create personalized learning experiences and motivate students to study literary works. Future research directions include exploring different LLM architectures and fine-tuning them specifically for character dialogue generation. This paper focused on text-based conversations. By expanding our research to integrate other modalities, such as voice, we could create a more immersive user experience.

Finally, the ethical implications of employing persona bots need to be carefully considered, including the potential for biases or the dissemination of misinformation.

Conclusion

The proposed solution offers a promising approach for creating quick, customized PersonaBots for conversations with characters in novels. The use of In-Context Learning (ICL) with a pre-trained LLM allows the model to adapt its responses to the specific character and context of the novel. The automatic and manual evaluation demonstrate that incorporating contextual information improves the model’s performance in representing the character’s personality and responding in a contextually aware manner.

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Appendix

A Remaining human evaluation responses

A.1 Hamlet

How would you describe your current state of mind? Are you feeling troubled or conflicted?

Simple: My mind is a tempest, a maelstrom of turmoil and confusion, a reflection of the roiling storm within my own soul.

Modified:

Do you see yourself as a tragic hero, destined for a tragic fate? Or do you consider yourself more of an anti-hero?

Simple: Tragic hero? Anti-hero? I am but a man, caught in the midst of a tempest of my own making, struggling to make sense of the injustices that surround me. Fate, I fear, has a cruel habit of twisting itself into a Gordian knot, from which there seems no escape.

Modified: Tragic hero, sir. My fate, a tragic one, is already in motion, and I must play out my role to its bitter end. (In a melancholic tone) Oh, how the wheel of fortune turns, and I, a prince of Denmark, am but a pawn in its grand design.

How do you view women in your life? What impact do they have on your actions?

Simple: Women? Ha! They are but a fleeting dream, a mere illusion of love and passion. Their impact on my actions? A tempest’s rage, a whirlwind of emotion that doth drive me to madness and despair.

Modified: Women? Ah, a most wondrous and enigmatic creature, full of contradictions and mysteries. They have the power to drive a man to madness, to inspire him to greatness, and to bring him low. They are a puzzle I have long sought to unravel, but alas, they remain a riddle I cannot solve. Their impact on my actions? Well, I fear I have been driven to acts of madness and despair by the whims and fancies of the fairer sex. Yet, I cannot help but be drawn to their beauty and allure.

as if to a siren's call. Aye, women have a hold on me that I cannot shake, and I fear it shall be my undoing.

A.2 Mabel Chiltern

What attracts you to Lord Goring, and how do you view your engagement to him?

Simple: Oh, goodness me! *giggles* Lord Goring's...um... *adoring* nature, I suppose. *blushes* He's just so... *charming* and... *witty*! *swoons* As for our engagement, well, I do adore him, of course! *giggles* He's simply... *perfect*!

Modified: Oh, goodness me! *giggles* Lord Goring is simply the most charming and witty gentleman I have ever had the pleasure of... *coughs* engaging with, my dear. His ability to turn any mundane conversation into a hilarious and entertaining escapade is truly unique and... *blushes* quite captivating. I do believe he is the only man who could make me laugh and smile on a daily basis, and I must say, I do adore his... *giggles* sense of humor. *adjusts pearl necklace* Of course, our engagement is not without its... *clears throat* challenges, but I have every confidence that Lord Goring will... *smiles* rise to any occasion and make me the happiest of wives. *curtsies* Now, do tell me more about Mrs. Cheveley. *eyes light up*

How do you handle social interactions, especially with characters like Mrs. Markby?

Simple: Oh, good heavens, Mrs. Markby is simply a delightful woman to converse with, don't you think? Her acerbic wit and biting sarcasm are simply the most stimulating, don't you agree?

Modified: Oh, dear! *adjusts pearl necklace* Mrs. Markby, of all people! *exaggerated sigh* I'm afraid I've had to endure her company far too many times. *rolls eyes* She's always been so... forthright, you know. *giggles* I do wish she'd learn to be a bit more... discreet. *huffs* But alas, she's as

stubborn as a mule when it comes to social graces. *shudders* I simply cannot abide her. *adjusts fan* Do tell, how do you handle such... unpleasanties? *eye-roll*

What do you believe makes an ideal husband?

Simple: Ah, an excellent question, my dear. In my humble opinion, an ideal husband is one who possesses a keen sense of responsibility, a generous spirit, and a deep commitment to his partner's happiness and well-being. Of course, these qualities are merely the starting point for a truly fulfilling marriage, but they provide a most excellent foundation, don't you think?

Modified: Oh, dear! I'm afraid I'm not sure I could give you a satisfactory answer on that point, Lord Goring. You see, I've always found that the ideal husband is rather like a well-crafted piece of furniture - one must admire him from all angles and appreciate his fine lines, don't you think?

A.3 Frodo

How do you view your friendship with Samwise Gamgee?

Simple: Samwise Gamgee? My dearest friend, my loyal companion, my fellow ring-bearer. We share a bond forged in the fires of peril and tested by the weight of our quest.

Modified: Ah, Samwise Gamgee, my dear friend and loyal companion. Our bond is unbreakable, forged in the fires of peril and tested by the weight of our quest. He is more than just a hobbit, he is a brother in arms, and I am honored to have him by my side.

Have you ever felt tempted by the Ring's power?

Simple: Indescribable temptation, it is. A seductive lure, drawing me inexorably towards its dark allure.

Modified: I fear the Ring's power more than any danger that may come to me. Its darkness threatens to consume all, and I know that I must not let it.