Bottester: Testing Conversational Systems with Simulated Users

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ABSTRACT

Recently, conversation agents have attracted the attention of many companies such as IBM, Facebook, Google, and Amazon which have focused on developing tools or API (Application Programming Interfaces) for developers to create their own chat-bots. In this paper, we focus on new approaches to evaluate such systems presenting some recommendations resulted from evaluating a real chatbot use case. Testing conversational agents or chatbots is not a trivial task due to the multitude aspects/tasks (e.g., natural language understanding, dialog management and, response generation) which must be considered separately and as a mixture. Also, the creation of a general testing tool is a challenge since evaluation is very sensitive to the application context. Finally, exhaustive testing can be a tedious task for the project team what creates a need for a tool to perform it automatically. This paper opens a discussion about how conversational systems testing tools are essential to ensure well-functioning of such systems as well as to help interface designers guiding them to develop consistent conversational interfaces.

Author Keywords

chatbot, conversational agents, testing

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

INTRODUCTION

Conversational systems have been gaining popularity thanks to advances in artificial intelligence and in other technologies such as speech recognition. Chatbots and other text-based agents are being used in several domains such as customer service, education, financial advising, and others. Companies such as Google, IBM and Facebook are jumping into the development of platforms for building conversational interfaces and also integrating various apps into chatbots.

As any software system, testing is required to detect problems in the system and compare the current version with previous versions [3]. However, conversational interfaces are complex and composed of many modules (e.g., dialog management, natural language processor, etc.) what makes testing not trivial because of the diversity of interaction parameters and their interrelation and temporal dynamics.

Furthermore, a chatbot evaluation is very dependent on the context of the application, for instance, an education chatbot has different test cases from a travel agent one. The goal of the chatbot is also relevant since task-oriented chatbots have specific goals which guide their interaction, while non-oriented chatbots do not have a goal and aim to establish free conversations with the users. Moreover, testing chatbots with human beings is a costly, time-consuming task, and tedious.

Previous work [1, 2] have proposed metrics which are mostly interested in testing separately modules of a chatbot system [3]. Other group of studies has focused only on the completion rate of task-oriented systems [6] while other researchers have performed qualitative evaluations with small groups of people [1, 5, 7] to assess user satisfaction. The famous Loebner competition[1] has also been used to evaluate the ability of chatbots to have human-like conversations.

We here explore the testing of chatbot systems focusing on the user perspective, that is, by observing the resultant interaction of all chatbot modules. Thus, we propose to simulate users with a chatbot tester tool which interacts with chatbots and collects measures about the interactions. This is the approach we explored in a tool we call Bottester.

This is an initial report about indicatives of quality and user satisfaction using metrics collected during interactions of the Bottester with the chatbot system. The testing system simulates a large number of interactions with the chatbot system, automatically creating dialogues which resemble real user interaction. The testing system then computes automatically

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[1] http://www.loebner.net/Prizef/loebner-prize.html

metrics which are related to user satisfaction as well as some related to the overall performance of the system. As a use case, we experiment with a finance chatbot system (CognIA) implemented to help a user to make basic investment decisions.

COGNIA CHATBOT SYSTEM

We developed a chatbot specialized in financial advice, named CognIA, which gives investment advice to people with limited finance knowledge. The design of CognIA was thought to be a mix of a free-conversation system and a goal-driven system which means that it does not have the sole objective to complete a task: it has to keep the user engaged and willing to come back for future interactions.

The CognIA implementation was designed as a multi-agent architecture composed of three chatbots: Cognia with acts as a moderator, PoupancaGuru which is responsible to advise about savings accounts and CDBGuru which is specialized in certificates of deposit. CognIA has a database consisting over 491 question-answer pairs in Portuguese language with question variations (e.g., "Tell me about savings?" or 'What is savings') summing up to 38 different intents.

THE BOTTESTER TOOL

Due to the space of possible test cases for CognIA was increasing, too big to be explored manually, the CognIA needed to be tested automatically. Thus, we needed a tool to perform and simulate users interacting exhaustively with the system. The development of the Bottester tool was therefore performed after CognIA was already implemented. The advantage of this approach was that to simulate the users we could use a corpus of data containing frequent questions and answers which was already collected and built.

Figure 1 shows the Bottester interface. The inputs for Bottester (left part of the interface) are files containing all the questions to be submitted to the tested system, the respective expected answers, and the configuration parameters for the tests and the connection protocols to the chatbot system. There are optional parameters such as the number of times the input scenario is to be executed, a sleep time to simulate a delay between the user inputs. On the right, the interface shows the submitted questions which were sent to the chatbot after pressing the play button. The bottester also have a dashboard module to show the results.

Evaluation Metrics

As mentioned earlier, the idea of the Bottester tool is to simulate a real user interacting with the system. Indeed, we are collecting our metrics at the interface level which means that we cannot point out which chatbot module may have a performance problem but rather identify the effects of that problem for the user interaction. The Bottester can be used during all different stages of the development phase, for instance, to compare different versions of the same chatbot system. Indeed, the first time designers and developers use the bottester, they can create scenarios based in previous user studies to create the first ground truth questions and answers to the new

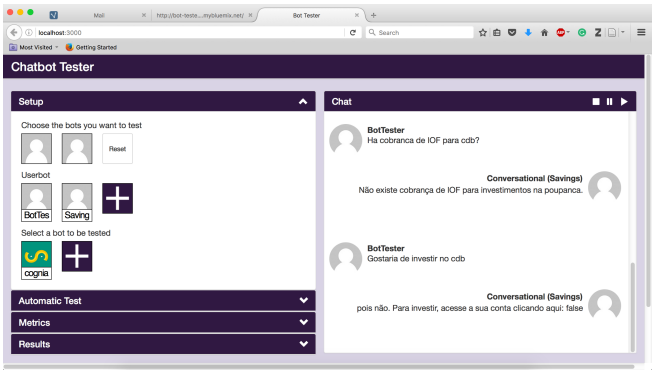

Figure 1. Insert a caption below each figure.

messages. Otherwise, the bottester will be biased to developers and designers and might not attend user needs and aim to good user experience.

Initially, we focused on improving the content presentation of the tool and thus we start measuring how the answers were presented in the chatbot interface. For that, we collect the size (in characters and words) of each answer given by the chatbot. The metric indicates how verbose are the answers pointing to the project team which ones should be shortened. Conciseness is often important since the chatbot can be accessed through several types of devices and thus performance is in many cases dependent on what the screen can display.

Moreover, we can test the accuracy of the chatbot systems natural language intent (speech-act) classifier. Since we built the application, we have access to each bot agent knowledge base and then the ground-truth of all questions. In the current version of the tool, we consider that the answer is correct only if there is a total match between the answer and the expected answer defined in the input file. Eventually, other similarity metrics (e.g. perplexity and distance measures) will be implemented to account for partially correct answers. The number of correct and incorrect answers gives an idea of how relevant and appropriate is the response for each question, what indirectly assess the performance of the natural language processor module.

Orthogonally, we also measure the number of repetitive answers. A high number of repetitive answers can suggest that the bot has a limited knowledge base (e.g., if there is a significant number of "I don't know answers') or may have a problem in their NLP/classification module. Figure 2 shows a word cloud created from the answers from CognIA. We can observe that the chatbot has word savings in many of its answers.

Finally, the Bottester tool also collects the response time experienced by the user which is the time interval between the question submission and the response arrival. The response time is a key metric because it is often related to the user's perception of the quality of service. This measure is an aggregate evaluation since it depends on several aspects such as the chatbot system server capabilities and its load, network delays, and response processing at the user side. We are es-

Figure 2. Word cloud generated using CognIA answers.

Metric	*Assessment*
Mean answer size	Answers conciseness
Answers frequency	Knowledge base limitation
Word frequency	Vocabulary limitation
# of (in)correct answers	Ability to understand the language
Mean response time	Overall user perception of the service quality
Response time per question	Delay of each answer
Response time per agent	User perception of each agent capacity

Table 1. Metrics used by the Bottester tool.

pecially interested in identifying whether the delay exists and therefore if the user experience can be being impaired by that. Future features of the testing tool will allow identifying where the delay is, which will help developers to understand why the delay was caused and in which part of the code. On the other hand, fast response times are problematic since the user may not to read if the scrolling bar moves too fast and may become frustated with the system [4].

TESTING COGNIA

Initially, we performed a sanity check of the CognIA system verifying whether all questions and answers implemented in it were being responded. We mainly focused on the number of correct/incorrect answers but we also used the response time to identify what types of questions were taking a significant

Figure 3. Bottester results interface

Example	*Scenario*
Cognia: Hello, how can I help you? *Bottester*: I would like to **invesg** on CDB	typo testing
CDBGuru: Which amount would like to invest? *Bottester*: **1000 sandwichs** *Cognia*: Sorry, rephrase your question	wrong answer

Table 2. Example of dialog between the Bottester and the CognIA.

amount of time. We also separated some of the metrics per each of the three chatbot agents and per type of question (see Figure 3) and also per type of question. This separation allows us to assess and correlate how the user experiences each agent. Table 1 summarizes the metrics used by the Bottester and Figure 3 shows the visualization of the same metrics.

Currently, we are refining the set of questions used in the sanity check by generating typos in the words of each question to be sure the intent classifier can withstand simple variations in the way the user formulates questions. Moreover, we randomly select words from the answers and replace by their synonyms. We intend with those two classes of experiments to mimic better user interactions. Table 2 shows an example of dialog in which we test different kinds of errors.

CONCLUSION

Testing a chatbot is not trivial since the space of possible inputs is extremely large: each dialog is interactive which means that each conversation may happen only once. Manual testing is time-consuming, often inaccurate, and, in scenarios of repetition, a very tedious task for developers. Automated testing or performing tests using a tool is not only faster but also allow the coverage of an extensive number of scenarios. The idea is not to replace experiments with real users but to make the system robust enough and with no critical problems before user experiments. Automatic testing can easily detect conversation flow stoppers such as the bot answering "I dont know", nonsense statements, or repeating utterances, which clearly will affect the user experience. Knowing those issues, experience and content designers can identify and fix those faster and earlier in the process.

Some of the main issues to develop a chat testing tool are is to measure user satisfaction, task success, and dialog cost. This is even more problematic in non-task orientation situations, where it is challenging to define and predict the contents and topics of user utterances and therefore specify conversation scenarios for testing user satisfaction. Our testing tool can assist developers and designers in evaluating single and multi-agent chatbots in those contexts. As future work, we will evaluate the effectiveness of the Botttester tool to compare its results with usability tests performed on real users.

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