

# Roleplay with chatbots on character.ai: A new direction for online gaming?

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## ABSTRACT

Chatbots are integrated into a multitude of settings and services, ranging from representing historical figures in museums to customer service assistants in online retail (Chaves & Gerosa, 2020). Simultaneously as there are attempts to find interesting use cases for the technology, scholarly efforts are trying to characterize this emerging human-chatbot interaction. A promising new avenue in this respect has been the relatively recently launched research strand of human-machine communication that is focused on the communicative aspects of Artificial Intelligence (Guzman & Lewis, 2020). In this paper, we argue that game studies has much to offer in this endeavor, and that by applying play – and roleplay, in particular – as a perspective we may develop critical insights into how people make sense of and use chatbots. Drawing on an ethnographic study of the chatbot platform character.ai, the paper explores how chatbots are used for roleplaying purposes and how game studies-informed understanding of interactivity and engagement helps us grasp how and why people use chatbots in various contexts.

Character.ai (c.ai) is an online platform where users create their own chatbots by filling in a simple character sheet outlining the bot's main traits and a starting prompt. While the platform was originally presented as a place to chat with virtual representations of prominent people or build a customized virtual assistant, it is now framing itself as an entertainment company arguing that chatbots are the entertainment format of the future (c.ai, 2024). However, the success of the platform can largely be ascribed to how users have appropriated the platform for roleplay purposes. Fans take to c.ai to create chatbots of their favored characters and synthetic worlds, remediating and remixing them in new ways to create opportunities for pleasurable play.

The paper presents an analysis of how the character Simon "Ghost" Riley from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (Infinity Ward, 2022) is remediating as a chatbot on c.ai. The game gained an unexpected following of women and queer fans after the 2022

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release of the game (Ask & Sihvonen, 2024). The fandom started on TikTok but quickly spilled over to the chatbot platform that let users configure their own bots by filling in a simple profile form. Based on an ethnographic study from 2022–2024 on c.ai, the paper argues that the platform is best understood as an open world text-based roleplaying game run by user-generated storylines. While games have been using AI for a long time (Millington, 2019), the role of large language models (LLMs) in the future of games is contested. Consequently, insights into how such models are already in use for playful purposes are of importance. Chatbot-based roleplay is both an emergent form of play as well as a new practice within (gaming) fandom.

The analysis explores how chatbot-based roleplay becomes meaningful due to 1) pre-existing affective connections developed through fannish engagements on other platforms, and 2) the interactive, intimate, and emotion-driven play the technology of c.ai affords. While the technology offers no explicit rules or winning states, gameplay is structured by implicit limitations (e.g., the bot's limited memory and capacity for understanding) and through deliberate deployment of tropes and conventions from fanfiction and romance (e.g., starting prompts about "finally reaching the inn and finding out there is only one bed available"). Through trial and error, human players and chatbots co-create a play experience that, much like fanfiction, is often directed toward imaginary relationships and romance.

Studying chatbots as gaming platforms for fans is an example of game studies at the crossroads: It represents a new potential way of roleplaying (both as individuals and groups), and it is based on a technology not designed for gaming, by players who often do not consider themselves gamers. Consequently, we should understand the popularity of roleplaying with chatbots on c.ai as an example of ludification of culture where play characterizes both our leisure time and the affordances through which we relate to new technologies in general.

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