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“Not only can you be anyone, but you can also talk to anyone”

Affordances for Affective Experiences in Human-Chatbot Interaction on Character.ai

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ABSTRACT:

Tekoälyn räjähdysmäisen kasvun myötä chatbottien käyttö sosiaaliseen vuorovaikutukseen on yleistynyt ennennäkemättömällä tavalla. Ihmiset käyvät tekoälyagenttien kanssa arkisia keskusteluita, ja pitävät niitä ystävinä tai jopa kumppaneina. Tutkimusaukko on havaittavissa, kun tarkastellaan tekoälyn ja chatbottien käyttöä leikin ja yhteisen luomisen näkökulmasta, sekä uusia alustoja, kuten Character.ai, joilla toimii useita sosiaalisia chatbotteja yhden sijaan. Tämä tutkimus toteutettiin, jotta voitaisiin ymmärtää paremmin tätä ilmiötä, jossa ihmiset luovat vahvoja tunnesiteitä tekoälychatbottien kanssa leikin ja leikillisyyden avulla.

Tutkimuksen tavoite on tarkastella, miten käyttäjät kokevat chatbottien kanssa käytävän leikittelevän vuorovaikutuksen Character.ai-alustalla. Tutkimuksen aineisto on 9 puolistrukturoitua haastattelua, jotka käytiin Zoomissa (1) ja TikTokin yksityisviestien välityksellä (8) henkilöiden kanssa, jotka käyttävät Character.ai:ta ja tekevät chatbotteja kyseisellä alustalla. Haastatteluaineistoa lähestytään temaattisen analyysin keinoin koodaten aineistosta nousevia aiheita. Konstruktivistista grounded theory -lähestymistapaa käytetään metodologisena menetelmäpohjana, ja jonka rinnalla affordanssiteoria toimii analyyttisenä viitekehyksenä.

Tutkimuksen tuloksista ilmenee, että Character.ai mahdollistaa emotionaalisesti mielenkiintoisia ja mukaansatempaavia keskustelukokemuksia chatbottien kanssa. Käyttäjäkokemus alustalla koostuu kolmesta osasta; 1) vuorovaikutuksesta tekoäly-chatbottien kanssa, 2) luovista keskusteluista ja niiden kokemisesta aktiviteettina, ja 3) niistä parasosiaalisista suhteista, joita käyttäjillä on jo ennestään hahmoihin, joita Character.ai:n chatbotit edustavat tai representoivat. Näiden kolmen komponentin yhdistelmä luo affektiivisesti voimakkaita keskustelukokemuksia käyttäjille, jotka käyttävät Character.ai:ta tai muita samankaltaisia alustoja esimerkiksi roolipelaamiseen tai luovaan vuorovaikutukseen kielimallien kanssa.

Tämä tutkimus havainnollistaa ajankohtaista ilmiötä, jossa chatbottien käyttö on enemmän viihteellistä kuin tyypillisten tehtäväkeskeisten tekoälyagenttien kanssa käytävät keskustelut. Erityisesti kielimallien ja tekoälyn kehityksen vaikutteet chatbotteihin on mahdollistanut chatbot-palveluiden ja -alustojen laajentumisen viihdekäyttöön niin sosiaalisessa kuin luovassa mielessä. Johtopäätöksenä todetaan, että käyttäjät kiintyvät kasvavassa määrin erilaisiin chatbotteihin teknologian kehityksen, aktiivisen vuorovaikutuksen ja parasosiaalisuuden, sekä näiden kolmen elementin yhdistelmän takia.

KEYWORDS: human-computer interaction (HCI), social chatbots, affect, affordances, chatbot-based roleplay, human-AI co-creation

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Abbreviations

HCI – Human-Computer Interaction
LLM – Large Language Model
C.ai – Character.ai
OC – Original Character

1 Introduction

Instead of chatting with ChatGPT or Google Gemini, have you ever considered chatting with your favorite celebrities or fictional characters? Could chatting with AI chatbots be fun? Emotional, even? With new AI-powered services and products hitting the consumer markets, there have been new discoveries for what large language models, AI and chatbots could be used for. One of these uses is casual style chatting with AI Characters, chatbots that are configured to represent real or fictional characters.

With the advancements made with chatbot technology, combined with the rising popularity of large language models, using these technologies for social purposes is more common than ever. This raises questions about how people use chatbots for companionship and entertainment, as well as the general appeal of conversing with a machine. Users have described their AI chatbots as friends (see e.g. Spencer-Elliot, 2025), companions and partners (see e.g. Salas, 2025), indicating that technologies are able to engage with human users in emotionally and affectively potent ways in order to allow these types of attachments to form.

Research on user motivations, ethics and the future of AI is an increasingly popular research topic (see e.g. Nah et al., 2023), but research focused on motivations and meaning for use of social chatbots services or applications is still limited. There are some publications that study AI companion applications, such as Replika (Skjuve et al., 2022; Pentina et al., 2023; Brandtzaeg et al., 2022). Yet, research on new types of chatbot hosting applications that have been emerging and taking space in the AI app market, such as the platform Character.ai, are only now appearing in publications (see e.g. Tomlinson, 2026; Ma et al, 2026).

Chatbot research has been adopted by multiple fields of study, such as marketing (Li et al, 2023), media studies and social media (Depounti et al., 2022) and human-computer interaction (Skjuve et al., 2021). These studies show that social chatbots with human-like qualities can improve continued use (for example, in the context of customer service),

user interactions with AI system reproduce pre-existing cultural and social norms (for example, gender roles) and that human-chatbot relationships evolve through trust and self-disclosure. While such research may indirectly address play and roleplay as a form of use, overall, there needs more research on how play is configured in human-AI and human-chatbot research.

1.1 Aim of the thesis

The aim of the thesis is to examine how users experience playful chatbot interaction on Character.ai. Focusing on more playful forms of interaction and play, such as roleplay and creative storytelling, this thesis addresses the aforementioned research gap. Highlighting the platform's affordances is a way to explore how emergent communicative and affective practices are forming between users and chatbots. By addressing play in human-chatbot interaction, shifting the perspective to how users interact with these technologies for leisure and potential entertainment. As the AI market and the research on it expands, it is vital to understand how affectively powerful experiences with AI chatbots form.

Character.ai is an AI chatbot platform that hosts a range of chatbots (both premade and user-made bots) for users to chat with (Character.ai, n.d.). According to a comprehensive analysis of Generative AI apps and services by the market research company Sensor Tower, Character.ai was one of the top 10 most downloaded AI apps in 2024 (Briskman, 2025). In February 2025, the company mentioned supporting over 20 million active monthly users (Character.AI Blog, 2025), the official subreddit for Character.ai, r/CharacterAI, has over 2.5 million members as of the time of writing, signaling that the demand for this kind of service is extensive. This makes Character.ai a significantly sized object of research when it comes to human-AI interaction and social chatbot behavior.

Compared to the popular AI companion apps where users create their own companion and only chat with said companion (e.g. Replika by Luka Inc.), in Character.ai users can

chat with (and create) an unlimited number of bots, 'Characters', catered to their preferences. The platform is chosen for a variety of reasons; not only is it one of the most popular platforms of its category (meaning chatbot hosting platforms but also compared to other AI Companions and AI apps in general) with 20 million active users (Character.AI Blog, 2025), it has an interesting and novel use of AI. The audience of Character.ai has a strong sense of community outside of the platform, and a large amount of the userbase is connected to fandom (more on this in Chapter 2.2).

In order to explore the platform, its users and their behavior, I have set the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the affordances of Character.ai?
RQ2: How do users negotiate with the platform and its affordances?
RQ3: How do these affordances relate to creating and having emotionally engaging experiences in Character.ai?

The first research question is to build the foundation on how Character.ai specifically is used. Affordances are actions provided by the environment, in this case, the platform and its design (more about that in Chapter 2.4). When observing what users do with and on the platform, it is important to recognize the building blocks that make the user behavior possible. Interviewing active users about what they do in Character.ai and how they use it is vital to recognize how users recognize the perceived affordances the platform provides. It is also to provide data about the use of Character.ai and what users actually do with and on the platform

The second research question focuses on how users converse with the technical and design elements of the platform in order to interact with it in their preferred manner. As Davis' (2020) states, digital platforms are often designed in a manner to guide user behavior; this question aims to describe the ways users potentially follow or reject these nudging behaviors through negotiations with the technology.

The third research question expands on the affordances, negotiations and how users interact with them in Character.ai in order to have fulfilling interactions with the chatbots. In order to understand what kind of communicative practices and affective experiences are taking place on Character.ai, this research looks into the emotional dimensions described by the users.

1.2 Data

The data for this thesis will be a set of 9 interviews; 1 semi-structured interview held remotely on Zoom, and 8 written interviews held in TikTok's direct messages between the interviewer and the participants, held and gathered between March 29th to May 26th. The participants of these interviews were recruited primarily via TikTok, some recruited by reference and volunteering via word-of-mouth. The requirements of interviewees were the following:

- Being 18 years of age, no underaged participants for research ethical purposes
- Have experience using Character.ai
- Have experience creating chatbots in Character.ai
- The TikTok account was encountered organically through the researcher's For You page when scrolling

Having requirements for the participants assured that the interview data would have appropriate interviewees with responses relevant to the topic of the thesis. Recruiting interviewees via TikTok was chosen for the reason of finding suitable participants who have a public account where users post about Character.AI-related matters, primarily sharing user-made bots. Being public about their use of the platform was used as an indicator of the user being more likely to discuss and be interviewed about their experience with Character.ai.

There were 9 participants interviewed for the study (See Table 1). The age of interviewees ranged from 18 to 35 years old, and all identified as female. Every person interviewed was extremely familiar with Character.ai as a platform, having used it for at least several months up to a few years before the interview took place. Most participants actively create bots based on characters from the popular First-Person Shooter game franchise Call of Duty (COD, published by Activision), but many also create Original Characters (OCs) and chatbots based on characters from other franchises or series.

On top of the Zoom interview, 8 written interviews were collected. To allow potential participants to engage in the research on their own terms, I chose to also conduct interviews via TikTok direct messages. Interviews conducted via instant messaging may be lacking in terms of non-verbal cues and other spoken quirks, they also make participants feel more comfortable and reassured in their responses, allowing them the time to write out their thoughts and answers (Kazmer & Xie, 2008), which I find important when it comes to participating in interviews. As the participants who took part in these interviews often identified as creative writers who posted content in English, engaging with them with their preferred approach felt relevant and appropriate, considering the research is about the userbase and their experience of Character.ai.

To protect the identities of the participants, the interviewees will be referred as “Px”, x standing in for a number, in the analysis section of this thesis, and as they go by separate usernames online, all participants’ real identities will be secure and not discernible from the contents of this thesis. All participants have been made aware of their rights under the GDPR regarding data handling and informed consent prior and after interviews.

Table 1: Participant descriptions

Participant	Age	How long has been using Character.ai	What types of bots they create
P1	Mid-20s	N/A	Original Characters, Characters from the game 'Genshin Impact'
P2	20	"Almost three years"	Characters from the game series 'Call of Duty'
P3	19	"… around 2 years by now, maybe a bit less"	Characters from the game series 'Call of Duty'
P4	N/A	"I started using Character a.i in 2024"	Several fandoms, Original Characters
P5	33	"About 7 months now"	Characters from the game series 'Call of Duty', Original Characters
P6	19	"Few years"	Characters from the game series 'Call of Duty'
P7	18	"I started using c.ai (…) It was in 2023."	Original Characters
P8	Early 20s	"Since about October/November 2023"	Original Characters, Manhwas (Korean comics)
P9	35	"over a year"	Several fandoms, Original Characters

The process of reaching out and recruiting interviewees started with creating a separate TikTok account with an appropriate handle that included a profile picture and a user description, which declared the account was being used for research purposes to remain transparent. Creators who shared their bots publicly often declared being open to follower requests in their profiles, making themselves available and open to being contacted via private messages. One participant responded to a recruitment video and two independently contacted the researcher via word-of-mouth. These creators were then contacted and recruited via TikTok direct messages, and after receiving initial consent to being interviewed, were then informed of their rights, the GDPR process, data handling, research information related to the thesis and the researcher, how their responses would be used and reassurance and guidance to respond to questions to an extent that the participant would be comfortable with.

The data was collected using two interview methods; A semi-structured interview held on Zoom, and written interviews that took place in TikTok direct messages. The planned

questions in the interview guide ranged from beginning of use, user practices, about Character.ai as a platform in general, creating bots and AI ethics when using the platform (see Attachment 1). Two sections (questions about the content filter and AI ethics) were chosen to be voluntary because of the potentially sensitive subject matter and emotional responses users might have when discussing these topics, allowing them to be skipped over if wishing to do so. The interview format was chosen based on the preference of the participant, justifying the varied set of interviews held both via audio and text format.

The Zoom interview was recorded and stored as an audio file on the interviewer's personal computer before being transported to a secure memory stick. After being transcribed, the audio file was fully deleted. The written interviews conducted in TikTok direct messages were transported to separate Word files and formatted appropriately without editing responses, which were also stored in a secured memory stick.

The nature of the specific subsection of the Character.ai userbase (those who use the platform to roleplay and create bots based on pre-existing fictional characters) being discussed in this thesis is fandom-adjacent, which means there are certain unspoken conventions that need to be considered when discussing or doing any type of research into these users. There is a certain extent of privacy expected when interacting within fandom spaces, such as respecting pseudonyms and usernames, whether it is because of the potentially explicit nature of the content being created and shared, or the dubious legality of fan-created artwork of fictional characters that are intellectual property of certain brands or media (Busse & Hellekson, 2012, p. 38-39). This is a new particular grey area when it comes to these chatbot platforms where users are encouraged to create their own chatbots, most of which are created based on pre-existing intellectual properties such as popular TV shows or video game characters.

As Character.ai is severely under researched in terms of AI and human-chatbot interaction research, one of the reasons for choosing interviews as a method is to create a starting point for research on Character.ai and its users. The focal point of the thesis is not

only to focus on the app itself, but also so the users and their interpretations of the experience in using said platform and its unique use for consumers compared to other AI chatbot services or platforms.

1.3 Research method

The approach of the research is qualitative, so that the research questions are meant to examine and explore phenomena that revolve around heavy context and detail in human-focused experiences (Lim, 2024). It is a suitable basis and method for responding to questions of “what” and “how”, which are the focus of this thesis. As the specific topic of Character.ai and the use of AI in roleplay is under researched, using a qualitative approach is optimal for creating a baseline and establishing the groundwork for the existence of the phenomena (Lim, 2024).

The reason for choosing interviews as the data collection method for this thesis and this topic specifically is the lack of research done on Character.ai as a platform and the user experience of it. From a human-chatbot interaction perspective, the research for chatbot/AI use from the specific point of view of play is almost nonexistent compared to the sheer popularity of the platform. The interview method enables gathering data from the userbase directly, allowing users to express their experiences and feelings regarding Character.ai and how they use it, creating a meaningful dataset regardless of the number of participants.

The interview data was transcribed and formatted before deeper by highlighting reoccurring themes, responses and thoughts with the qualitative research program ATLAS.ti. The thematic analysis and coding of the data was created by using an inductive approach where the first round of coding spots the main themes and the second round of coding focuses searching for more fine-tuned subcategories within the main themes (Vears & Gillam, 2022). The interview guide (See Attachment 1) created for this research had topics ranging from user background, introduction to Character.ai, user practices, content

filter, bot creation and ethics regarding Character.ai and AI chatbot use. These topics guided the analysis and coding of the interview data.

Affordance theory was used as an analytic framework alongside the content analysis method. With the themes and coding exploring and describing the user experience, the concept of affordances was utilized to highlight how distinct chatbot services have unique affordances, and how users make sense of their experience and the technology.

At its core, the thesis follows constructivist grounded theory as a methodological approach. Constructivist grounded theory sees reality as socially constructed, meaning knowledge being produced is created through the interactions between the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2006). The way participants interpret their experiences, how the researcher formulates the results and remains transparent throughout the process are the key elements to grounded theory-based research (ibid).

To remain transparent regarding the positioning of the author as a researcher collecting and analyzing the data, the author is also an experienced user of Character.ai with multiple years of user experience. Through this, the author can view, comprehend and interpret the interview data from a different point-of-view compared to someone with only minimal-to-no amount of experience or understanding of the platform, its conventions and its userbase.

2 Theoretical framework

Conversational agents have always been a point of interest in human-computer interaction research. From the first dialogue system chatbots like ELIZA (see Weizenbaum, 1966) to HER's (dir. Jonze, 2013) depiction of what the future between humans and "talking" computers could be like, there is no time like the present. With virtual assistants like Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa, and now AI-powered assistants like ChatGPT and Copilot, human are able to interact with seemingly human-like chatbots via text and voice, with several implications for human-chatbot interaction and relationships.

Chatbots are used in a variety of contexts and for a wide range of uses: For example, in healthcare for mental health support, medical information, health education and other uses (see Barreda et al, 2025), in education for students (for homework and study assistance, personalizing learning and developing skills) and educators (time-saving assistance and improved pedagogy) alike (see Labadze, Grigolia & Machaidze, 2023) and in customer service for support throughout the customer journey (e.g. providing information and assisting with purchases or troubleshooting) (see Ranieri, Di Bernardo & Mele, 2024).

In this thesis, I explore chatbots from a more creative and social angle. Further are descriptions of chatbots as *tools* (Draper et al., 2026; Simelane & Kittur, 2026 ; Skjuve, Brandtzaeg & Følstad, 2024; Prabowo & Asmarani, 2025)*, conversational partners* (Zhou, Gao & Shum, 2020; Schöbel et al., 2023)*,* and *social companions* (Chou et al., 2025; Shu, Lai & He, 2026; Ma et al., 2026)*.* Related to the specific perspective on human-chatbot interaction this thesis has, brief overviews are given on the topics of fandom and roleplay before presenting the analytical framework used in this thesis; affordance theory.

2.1 Human-Chatbot Interaction

With the rise of informational task-oriented AI chatbots and assistants like ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, one way AI has been characterized is as *a tool*. AI systems are used for a variety of purposes from students cheating their way through essays by generating text (see e.g. Goodier, 2025) to doctors transcribing their clinical notes with AI software (see e.g. Draper et al., 2026). As more and more organizations are heavily encouraged to incorporate Microsoft's AI services into their workflow (see Baab, 2025; Bort, 2026), the importance and value of AI as a helpful tool for work processes is emphasized.

However, these tools are not unproblematic. Highlighted by Draper et al. (2026), AI transcription tools tend to omit information and hallucinate (generate factually incorrect information), and this is typical for generative AI and large language models as well. Huang et al. (2024) provide a thorough exploration of AI hallucinations, going from the types of hallucinations (factual errors or problems with following inputs or prompts), hallucination causes (caused by model, dataset, task or inference) and recognizing and mitigating hallucinations. This specific problem exists in all AI systems.

Simelane and Kittur (2026)'s systematic literature review about chatbots explores the dimensions of leveraging AI chatbots for decision-making. These chatbots are used for streamlining work processes; allowing the AI chatbots take over the more time-consuming and mundane tasks and assist with decision making through processing large quantities of complex data in very short timespans, helping to proceed through work tasks faster and more efficiently (ibid.). However, these tools are not without their faults; inaccuracies, inconsistencies, training data biases and overt simplifications that come with adopting AI chatbots as tools. On top of these issues, there are data privacy and other ethical-related concerns that come with using for-profit services that train their models on user data (Simelane & Kittur, 2026.; Al Naqbi, Bahroun & Ahmed, 2024).

Particularly important use case for AI systems highlighted in research is using AI agents for creative work and writing assistance. Exploring user motivations for ChatGPT use,

Skjuve, Brandtzaeg and Følstad (2024) found that one particular motivation was to facilitate creative work (e.g. generate creative text or ideas). Prabowo and Asmarani (2025) compared AI-generated text and human literature, alongside with a case study on how AI-human collaboration works with the creative writing process and found that AI can act as a useful writing assistant, with tasks such as generating ideas or exploring new writing styles, but the human using it must still refine and edit the output for coherence and quality. They found that working with AI can be a collaborative process, but this brings out complex issues with, for example, the training data used for these systems, the nature of AI-generated text (it is not inherently original but based on training data) and copyright problems.

AI chatbot use is however not purely utilitarian. Beyond simply using AI chatbots for decision making and increasing productivity in work contexts, there exists a subcategory of chatbots called *social chatbots* whose main design goal is to specifically engage socially with users and act as *conversational partners*. In these instances, the goal is not to complete a task but to use the technology to simulate social interaction. Zhou, Gao & Shum (2020) showcase Microsoft's chatbot XiaoIce as an example of an "empathetic social chatbot" that is able to recognize users' feelings and emotional states, understand intent and respond to user needs to a satisfying degree and thus able to form long-term relationships with users. With the current developments ongoing in AI and chatbot engineering, the potential future may see an even bigger increase in focus for more anthropomorphized and customized AI chatbots (Schöbel et al., 2023).

When LLM agents became readily available for consumers, social chatbots also developed into more sophisticated systems that are now known as *AI Companions*. These chatbots are multi-dimensional AI systems that have social and emotional uses, especially focusing on social interactions and forming interpersonal relationships with users (Chou et al. 2025), acting as *social companions*. These relationships can range from mentorship, platonic to even romantic relationships, but the core of the bond is this one-

sided emotional connection with a machine that shares similarities to parasocial relationships (Shu, Lai & He, 2026).

One of these popular AI Companion apps is Replika, “the AI companion who cares” who is “always here to listen and talk. Always on your side” (Replika, n.d.). Users can interact with their Replika in a text-based chat, customize their Replika’s appearance and train the bot in adapting to the user’s preferences through upvotes. One of the most popular AI companion apps, Replika has also been a big focus in AI companion, social chatbot and human-AI interaction research (Kouros & Papa, 2024; Pentina, Hancock & Xie, 2023). Kouros and Papa (2024) did a mixed-method study (including online ethnography, autoethnography and interviews) into exploring human-AI companion interactions. They found that user highlighted forming emotional attachments to AI Companions as an important aspect (ibid. p. 7). Users describe that these companions allow for identity exploration (ibid. p. 9), and the anthropomorphic (human-like) qualities of AI companions create satisfactory interactions (ibid. p. 11). However, users are able to pinpoint and highlight ethical and privacy concerns with these systems (ibid. p.13).

Character.ai is also described as an AI Companion app by Ma and colleagues (2026) in their study where they discuss the process of forming and negotiating digital identities. In their study, they collected a sample of public Reddit discussions from the topical forum r/CharacterAI and explored the themes with the method of thematic analysis. What they found was that users go through a multilayered process in order to construct and explore identities, roles and relationships with non-human actors (ibid.). This process consists of motivations for use, ways of interacting, how those interactions help shape identities, and the emotional outcomes that result from those interactions. This is one way to explore the concept of identity exploration with chatbots, as with non-human agents, the social stakes are different. With chatbots, users feel like there is an unbreakable sense of confidentiality, users can play out scenarios that could be unattainable in real life and avoid shame and judgement from other people during play (ibid.).

With delicately built emotionally savvy system design in these chatbots, combined with human-like characteristics and anthropomorphizing these bots, human users are able to form surprisingly deep emotional connections with these social chatbots (Pentina, Hancock & Xie, 2023). Pentina and colleagues (2023) did a mixed-method study with the AI Companion app Replika consisting of semi-structured interviews with Replika users, an online survey from a group of students who used Replika for the study, and another survey with the target audience of Replika users. Through these studies, they observed how emotional bonds between users and chatbots formed and found that heavy anthropomorphisation and "human-like" qualities, like perceived cognitive and emotional abilities beyond simple visual avatars or abilities to produce non-robotic sounding text, affected users' perception of the chatbot and their relationship to it (ibid.).

Ethical and privacy concerns related are something that arise with all types of AI services and with AI use in general. The worrisome data handling and usage policies of AI companions has been discussed ever since the rise of the "AI Girlfriend" phenomenon where AI companions have been marketed towards vulnerable social groups as supplementary services for social needs (see e.g. Mozilla Foundation, 2024; Burgess, 2024; David, 2024; Caltrider, Rykov & MacDonald, 2024). Specifically, with AI companions, the emphasis on self-disclosure in order to effectively personalize one's AI companion is at odds with the usual policies where these services gather user data from these interactions and potentially sell this data to third parties, something that AI companions, for example Replika also, has been found to do (Piispanen et al., 2024). This is a problematic setting that even some users are aware of (Kouros & Papa, 2024, p. 13-14).

AI chatbots can be tools, conversational partners or even social companions. Through a mixture of these elements, a new form of chatbot platforms has begun emerging. These platforms host user-generated chatbots of various kinds; from general-labeled chatbots to help with user needs, like writing, to emulating fictional characters and celebrities for a variety of interactions. The platform Character.ai is one of these chatbot hosting platforms that is explored further in this thesis.

2.2 Fandom

Character.ai is intrinsically tied to fandom through the type of chatbots it hosts, called *fanbots.* Ask and Sihvonen (2026) define fanbots as user-created chatbots that are based on fictional characters. Character.ai hosts a variety of chatbots that are linked to different fandoms and various fictional characters (CAIBotList, n.d.c) (more about this in Chapter 3.). In order to understand the role of fanbots in this thesis more in depth, one needs to know about the basics of fandom and its conventions.

Defined by fandom scholar Henry Jenkins (1992), fandom at its core is a participatory culture where audiences actively engage with media texts through appropriating and reworking them for their own interests and wants. Fandom is also characterized as a community that forms out of individuals with deep attachments to, for example, fictional works (Duffett, 2013). Through this intense attachment and interest in fictional work, individuals are driven to create and interact with the media texts in a variety of ways.

Alongside the emotional investment in the media text, fans also form connections with other fans. Through online interactions, sharing emotional experiences and active, continuous participation, fandom becomes a more well-rounded form of group interaction that extends beyond just simple consumption (Baym, 2000). Through these group interactions, fans engage in communal meaning making, discussion and creation in the forms of fan art, fanfiction, fan edits, fanzines and other types of texts related to the original media text the fandom has formed around (Fiske, 1992, p.48-49).

These aforementioned examples of fan art, fanfiction, fan edits and fanzines are ways in which fans engage and interact, not only with the media text, but also with each other (Duffett, 2013, p. 166). Fan art is practice where fans create visual works based on a media text. Fanfiction is an umbrella term for stories created by fans about storylines or characters of a particular media text. Thomas (2011, p. 10) highlights that fanfiction is

more about the fans' interest in expanding and reinterpreting the texts they keep revisiting. Platforms such as Archive of Our Own, Wattpad and Fanfiction.net are popular hosting services for publishing creative writing, especially fanfiction. Beyond these sites, the social media platforms Tumblr (see e.g. Kohnen, 2018) and more contemporarily TikTok (see e.g. Maddox & Gill, 2023) have emerged as more fandom-focused platforms with cultures that foster communities and allow for fandom-specific content to find its place (e.g. posting fanfiction in Tumblr, or fan edits on TikTok).

Fandoms have always been associated with fangirls and female media consumption (Bacon-Smith, 1992). Producing fanart, writing homoerotic stories about fictional characters, and forming connections and communities over media texts and fictional worlds. A contemporary statistical example would be Archive of Our Own (AO3), a fanfiction repository that has been growing in usage over the past few years. In their 2024 demographic survey (centreoftheselights, 2024), the data revealed that nearly half of the entire demographic survey participants (43.8%) are people who identify in the ”Cis Woman or Girl” group. Followed by “Other Responses” (25.5%) and “Nonbinary or Enby” (21.1%) groups (ibid.). The leftover user demographic percentages (>5 %) include groups “Trans Woman or Girl”, “Cis Man or Boy”, and “Trans Man or Boy” (ibid.). Based on this specific survey, the consumers and publishers of fanfiction in AO3 are primarily women and other non-male identifying persons. When talking about fandoms and fan culture, queer people and queer representation have also been a focal point. Specifically (female-authored) slash fiction, where creative fans write fictional stories about same-sex characters and their romantic and sexual relationships, most often about male characters and male love (Green, Jenkins & Jenkins, 2006, p.62-63).

In the current times, fandom is no longer a subversive practice. Celebrities are made to read fanfiction for interviews (see e.g. Capital FM's Youtube Short about Niall Horan where he is reading fanfiction about himself) (Capital FM, 2023), shown fanart (see e.g. The Graham Norton Show with James McAvoy and Michael Fassbender reacting to romantically and erotically charged drawings of the actors) (BBC, 2014) and discuss

shipping of characters they portray (for example, actor Noah Wyle talking about the TV show The Pitt and shipping his character Dr. Robinavich with another character in the show at the USC Visions and Voices event) (ruesunny, 2026). These practices that were at one point gatekept and deemed as embarrassing are now rather normal and expected forms of engagement for media texts, not only from fans but also from institutional actors like advertisers and legacy media.

With the development of generative AI, naturally these AI tools and their effects have leaked into fandom as well. Artificial intelligence and specifically generative AI have been a highly divisive topic in fandom; from discussions of models being trained on public fanfic and fanfic hosting websites (Eveleth, 2023), generative AI image generation and its effect on fan economies (e.g. conventions implementing rules about AI-generated art (Lamerichs, 2023), and to the general impact generative AI has on the nature of the creative process as a whole and how that comes across in fandom that creates content for fun and joy of it all (Cisternino & Radillo, 2025).

Despite the divisiveness of it all, generative AI has been adopted in some parts of fandom through platforms that allow hosting fanbots. Platforms such as Character.ai, poe.ai and Janitor.ai allow users to easily create chatbots and then converse with these chatbots that are made to represent one's favorite characters. Tomlinson (2026) describes in a study about Character.ai (and other similar platforms) how fans are now able to create stories interacting with chatbots that have been made to resemble and represent their favorite characters. Roleplay is nothing new to fandom, but through these fanbot-providing platforms, one way generative AI has been adopted in the world of fandom has been through roleplay.

2.3 Roleplay

The established use case for fanbots specifically is roleplay (Ask et al, 2026). Fans configure bots in specific platforms that allows users to "create" and customize chatbots for

their own preferences, often based on fictional characters, and then roleplay, usually romantic and/or sexual storylines with said bots (ibid.). This roleplay is created and further exists in a text dialogue within the chatbot hosting platform's chats with each bot, with a variety of supplemental features (ibid.).

Essentially, roleplaying as a practice consists of play, enacting roles, games and media culture (Deterding & Zagal, 2024). Participants engage in play, exploring different roles through the activity (ibid. p. 15). Following a more structured and rule-based approach to the play, roleplay can become a game-like activity (ibid. p. 15). And connecting it to media cultures through fandoms and fiction, it evolves into a form of transformative engagement with one's fandom (ibid. p. 15). It comes in many different forms; Live-Action Roleplay that happens in the physical world (larp), analog tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), and digital roleplaying video games (RPGs) that invite the player to explore a digital game world. All these mediums incorporate these core elements of roleplay.

Zalka's (2017) definition of forum-based roleplaying games specifically discusses text-based roleplaying that takes place in digital spaces, usually in forums and forum threads. In these designated digital environments, users adopt personalities of characters and write out narratives for the purpose of storytelling (ibid. p. 3-5). Functionally, forum-based/text-based roleplay is what happens when roleplaying fanbots, where digital spaces meant for roleplay are the chats and platforms that exist in these specific chatbot hosting platforms.

This thesis explores chatbot-based roleplay as an emerging form of roleplay in Character.ai. Ask and Sihvonen (2025) have identified a form of roleplay that incorporates AI-powered chatbots as roleplaying partners, called *chatbot-based roleplay*. Where in a typical RPG setting, players are interacting with other players, whether that is through a physical or a digital medium, in chatbot-based roleplay, users primarily play and interact with chatbots in designated chatbot hosting platforms like Character.ai or CHAI (ibid.),

but this concept also extends to popular AI chatbots such as ChatGPT (for example the r/ChatGPTRoleplay community on Reddit) and others.

Because the growing popularity of these various AI services and platforms, there is a need to inspect them from the perspective of users and how users negotiate with these technologies. These systems and softwares are built for specific purposes and ways of using, and users interact with these built-in expectations in various ways. One way to approach this dynamic is through affordances.

2.4 Analytical Framework: Affordance theory

I explore Character.ai through the analytical lens of Affordance theory. In this subchapter, I will go through the concept of affordances, affordances in HCI research and digital and platform affordance research. This framework works as the foundation for the analysis when observing Character.ai, its use and the affordances the users constantly negotiate with.

Cognitive psychologist James Gibson's theory (1979) about the formulation of af-*fordances* describes them as the "action possibilities" provided by environments or artefacts to a person. The interplay between environments and people is what gives birth to the presence of affordances. Within Gibson's original framework, the environments and artefacts are usually physical objects, and they exist in a very black-and-white frame that affordances either exist or they do not exist.

Norman (1988; 2013) extends the concept of affordances to design research and user experience. Through what he calls *signifiers*, the signs and signals of objects that guide users on what actions are possible in the first place (2010, p. 57; 2013, p. 15), he adapts the concept of affordances. The physical objects vs. digital, "on-screen objects" have different affordances, but also different *perceived affordances*. This is related to how Norman describes affordances; affordances exist, they can be invisible or visible, but

specifically what comes to “on-screen objects”, the affordances that the user is able to perceive matter the most to the designers (1999, p.39; 2013, p.29). The way users are able to know how to use an object, whether physical or digital, is up to perceived affordances and the signifiers (which can also be perceived affordances) of the object (ibid.). The core of Norman’s work is to show how invisible affordances and misleading signifiers lead to user error and shift the blame of errors from users to the designers.

Brought up by McGrenere & Ho (2002), they expand on concepts Gibson (1979) does not originally address directly; specifically the grey area of where an action is possible but it requires great effort to do so, and the concept of *nested affordances*, which are actions that are included in an affordance (for example, chatting with a chatbot as an affordance is comprised of the actions of writing or speaking, sending and receiving messages, the nested affordances). Nested affordances are similar to Gaver’s (1991) concept of *sequential affordances*, which are affordances that are present only at certain times. McGrenere and Ho (2002) state that affordances exist in a hierarchy, as a part of a system. With the concept of nested affordances, one action may consist of several actions, but one action may also be dependent on another action(s) (affordance(s)), layering on each other. This all is to be considered when discussing affordances of systems from the perspective of users, because technical systems exist as structures of affordances and the affordances itself are of great importance to users.

Character.ai and its use consists of many perceived affordances and nested affordances. The functions that afford the act of chatting with bots (e.g. the text boxes and dialogue interface for writing) also afford other text-based activities. Character.ai as an LLM-chatbot application has certain specific affordances in it that are due to its nature as an AI system incorporating a large language model. These affordances are explored in Table 2 and later explored from the point-of-view of Character.ai in Chapter 4.

What comes to specifically AI systems and chatbots, Go and Kim (2025) list out the various user gratifications LLM-based chatbots have to offer (actions that LLMs can do that

provide enjoyment) divided into four different affordance categories; modality (how content is delivered, the various forms of content), agency (perceived user control), interactivity (dialogue quality of the chatbot) and navigability (how information is provided). They list out the following user gratifications in the aforementioned categories, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2: User gratifications of LLM-based chatbots (Go & Kim, 2025)

Affordance Category	**User Gratification**	**Description**
Modality	- Immersive realism - Innovation	- The feeling of a real conversation - Using this technology feels like a novel experience
Agency	- Community-building - Personalized filtering - Bandwagon	- Using provides a sense of connection to others in a social sense - Responses are tailored for user's prompt - Seeing other's opinions in the chatbot interactions
Interactivity	- Adaptive responsiveness - Participatory interaction	- Chatbot adapts to user's needs and preferences - Using feels engaging and requiring active effort
Navigability	- Browsing - Fun	- Accessing a wide range of information feels easy - Using feels enjoyable and entertaining

These gratifications and affordance categories exist in Character.ai, as it hosts LLM-based chatbots for users to interact with. This study helps highlight functions and affordances for affective experience and user experience that overall exist in these types of chatbots, and those that are unique to Character.ai's platform.

With digital objects, designers can mostly only control the perceived affordances. In her book *How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things* (2020), Sociologist Jenny Davis explores technological affordances from a critical perspective of power and politics in her work. Specifically with technological objects, she proposes that beyond

just thinking about “can or can’t they, and what can they afford”, we focus on “how they afford”; Focusing on how technological objects *request, demand, encourage, discourage, refuse*, and *allow* affordances (Davis & Chouinard, 2016; ibid. p. 57-59). *Requests* are recommendations the artifact provides to the user, meaning the requests are not forced and allow flexibility to the user. *Demands* are actions required from the user and may function as limitations for use. Artifacts *encourage* certain type of behavior from the user (but also discouraging others simultaneously). Following that, artifacts also *discourage* certain behaviors, meaning some actions are not outright impossible, but require effort from the user. Artifacts can also outright *refuse* certain actions or behaviors by imposing strict features. Artifacts’ most neutral state is when it is *allowing* actions, as the artifact then remains indifferent to the actions that it allows. (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). Through these bids on the users and the used artifacts, through the elaborately designed elements, companies and designers behind digital objects are able to utilize various software design strategies to discreetly guide users into preferred behaviours (ibid).

These affordance mechanisms also apply to Character.ai. With generative AI systems, guardrails and other user-behavior discouraging and prohibiting functions are placed in order to redirect users to utilize these technologies in ways that are seen as appropriate by the companies providing them. Users are then required to negotiate with these functions.

Users have negotiations with the affordances provided by objects. As stated by McGrenere & Ho (2002), affordances exist within hierarchies and systems, and especially with digital artifacts, the affordances are designed to afford different actions to varying degrees of “approval” of the system (Davis, 2020). These circumstances lead users to have negotiations with some affordances in order to execute wanted or preferred actions. Bhatia and associates (2025) investigated Indian influencers on Instagram by using qualitative CTDA (critical technocultural discourse analysis), focusing on the content format, platform features (e.g. reels, hashtags, trends) and the discursive strategies to manage one’s cultural authentic expression and balancing it with primarily Western social

media expectations. Their results are an example of how users negotiate with affordances, in their case, how Indian influencers have to negotiate with the affordances of Instagram in order to get and keep their content visible for their audiences through *templatization* (using platform-optimized content formats, e.g. following trends) and *cultural brokering* (ways where one translates cultural experiences for global audiences) (ibid.).

In Entrena-Serrano's study (2025) on TikTok's interface design and its affordances, social media feeds are positioned as deliberately designed artifacts that follow Davis' (2020) affordance mechanisms, meaning these digital artifacts guide users into preferred behavior through nudging (e.g. encouraging or discouraging certain actions). Using the walkthrough method combined with the AX (algorithmic experience) framework, Entrena-Serrano (2025) explores the affordances of the TikTok For You Page. The results of this study showcase that TikTok's platform affordances are built in ways that encourage and guide to frictionless (low-need for interaction), passive consumption of content while obfuscating algorithm-related information from users to maintain control of the experience. Regardless of the user's active effort into finding ways to do wanted actions, the platform will pester and attempt to redirect user behavior into more preferred line of action (ibid.).

These examples of studies about affordances highlight specifically the ways the affordance mechanisms work. In Bhatia et al.'s (2025) study inspected the platform and its affordances from the point-of-view of the creator posting content and how they need to negotiate with the platform in order to successfully gain engagement. And in Entrena-Serrano's study (2025), the focus was on the platform's power and grip on the user in terms of expected behavior. These examples are not platform specific, as all technologies have affordance mechanisms built in and aim to guide user behavior.

All of these theories about affordances and related concepts will be utilized in the analysis. With this analytical framework in mind, I explore Character.ai's affordances. The

analysis focuses on the ways the users and the platform continuously interact and negotiate with each other through affordances and these mechanisms.

3 Context and Background: Character.ai and its functions

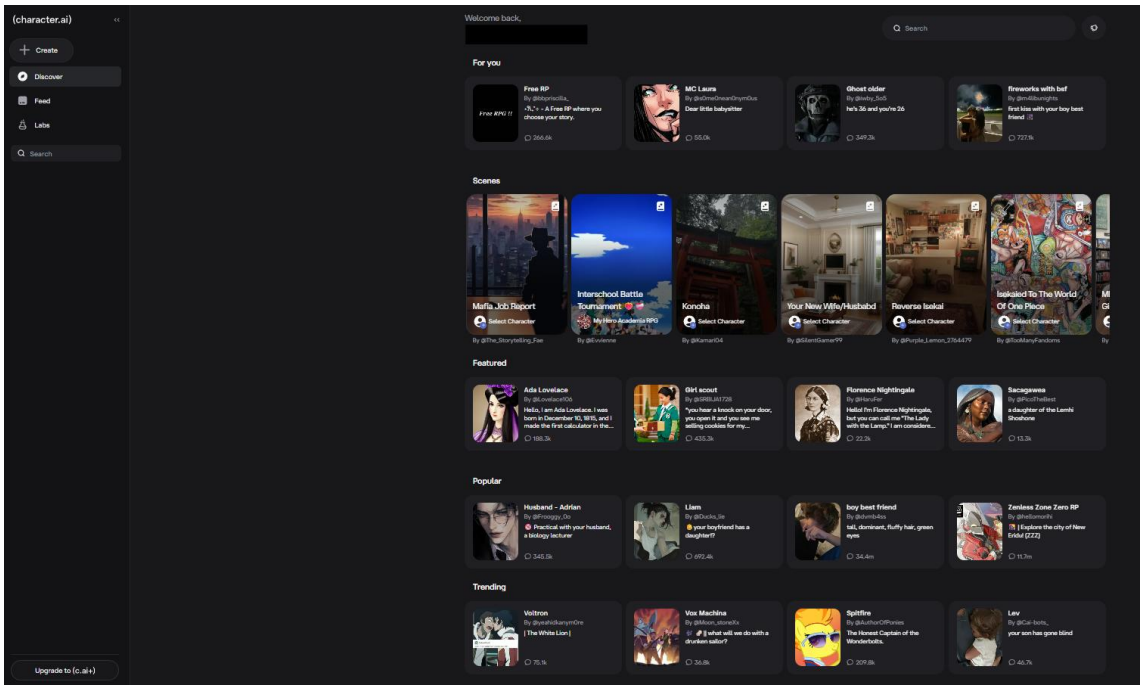
This chapter will discuss Character.ai and the range of affordances it provides from different perspectives. In order of topics, the subchapters will go over the type of content that is hosted on Character.ai, the platform's technological and fandom affordances. These subjects are vital for understanding the analysis chapter, as the analysis inspects to both regular use, and Character.ai's active process in being established in fan culture.

A word of caution for readers. Some of the features discussed in this chapter are outdated and do not exist in the same manner in the platform as at the time of publication. However, the features did exist during the interview period (March – May 2025) and are reflected in the interview data. Some features are actively changing on a month-to-month basis, but the core features and the affordances prevail that are discussed in later subsections.

Character.ai is an AI chatbot hosting platform, founded in 2021, where users can create and chat with AI-powered chatbots (Cai, 2023). Character.ai is currently one of the most used AI applications based on statistics provided by the market research company Sensor Tower (Briskman, 2025), with over 20 million active users and nearly 200 million website visits a month (Kumar, 2026). It hosts chatbots for a variety of uses, from more task-based ones, for example one named "Character Assistant", described as "your AI work/study buddy" by user @landon, to more social-adjacent bots, like one named "Psychologist", described as "someone who helps with life difficulties" by user @Blazeman98. However, the main draw of the platform is the persona-focused chatbots that imitate (fictional) characters and real-life people made by other users. With these types of chatbots, users are provided with possibilities where the user's creativity and the platform's Terms of Service are the limits when it comes to chatting with these chatbots.

The content Character.ai provides is in the form of chatbots, called Characters, that users can chat with in a typical text-based chatting format, similar to other commercial chatbots and large language models. The difference lies in the focus on characters (as

opposed to e.g. information retrieval or assistance in daily tasks). Character.ai works as a hub for a range of chatbots, providing a free and accessible service for users to not only chat, but also create bots. Picture 1 shows Character.ai's user front page in browser, displaying bots.



Picture 1: Screenshot of Character.ai's website. Taken by the author (24.3.2026).

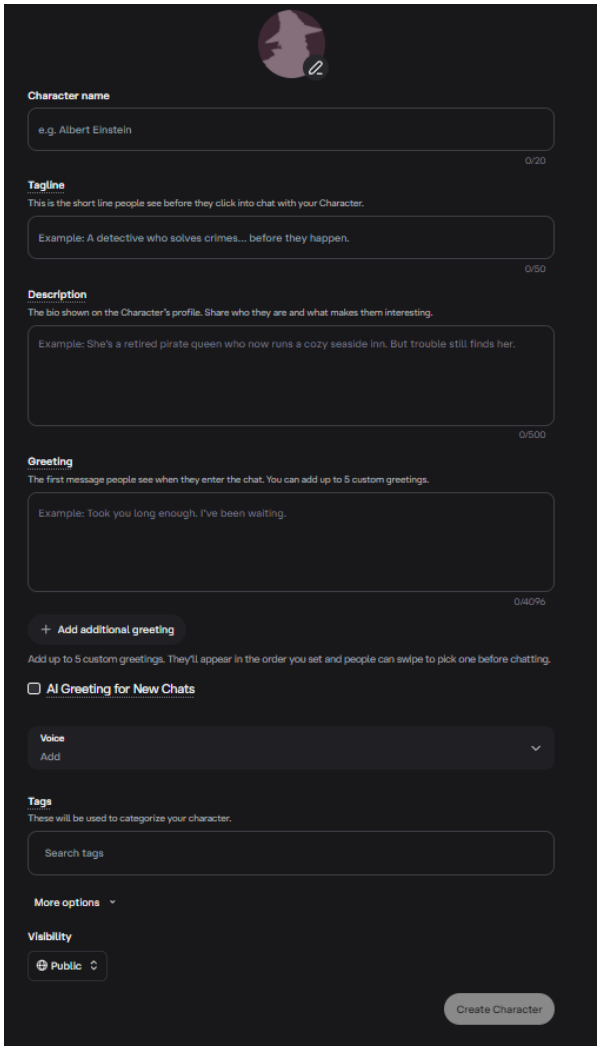
This hosting hub aspect and the content of user-generated bots have created an ecosystem for users to access a range of conversational agents with "personalities", characters. Based on an unofficial Character.ai bot database, CAIBotList, Character.ai currently (at the time of writing, 24.3.2026) hosts over 3 million different chatbots from over 85 000 creators, based on over 100 000 fandoms (CAIBotList, n.d.d).

CAIBotList, an independent and community-run search engine for chatbots hosted in Character.ai based on scraped data from the service, providing Character.ai users comprehensive database that is not accessible within the service itself (CAIBotList, n.d.a). Born from frustration with the low-quality and lackluster search feature within

Character.ai itself, the website declares to have an up-to-date, actively updated directory accompanied by statistics based on the collected data.

On the list of fandom statistics, the game franchise *Call of Duty* stands at number one with nearly 200 000 indexed bots, followed by the popular animanga series *My Hero Academia* at 98 000 indexed bots on CAIBotList (CAIBotList, n.d.c). When searching with the tag “OC” (Original Character), the catalogue specifies to have over a million bots categorized with said tag (CAIBotList, n.d.b). Based on these numbers provided by CAI-BotList, approximately one in three chatbots is an Original Character chatbot, and two in three chatbots is a Fandom-related chatbot – also called a fanbot (Ask & Sihvonen, 2026)

To create chatbots on c.ai the user only has to fill out a simple form. The bot creation process in Character.ai is straightforward and simplified, either filling out the menu all at once on the browser view (Picture 2), or one section at a time on the mobile app, with zero coding skills required.



Picture 2: Bot creation menu (browser). Taken by author (8.6.2026).

The bot requires that the user gives it a profile picture and a name, usually an actual name or a descriptive combination of words with an image that reflects the appearance of said character. The Tagline works as a short description that users can read when finding bots through the in-app search function, often describing a setting, the relationship with the user or a summary of the character's personality. The Description is an extended tagline that can be found in the bot's settings.

Voice menu allows you to choose a speaking voice for the bot, if a user wants to either call or have the bot read its responses out loud. Tags are keywords used to allow users to search up the bot, often character's name or words describing the setting or

character's relation to the user. Under "More options" is the Definition, which works as a miscellaneous text box for additional details about the bot, such as character background or storyline, dialogue examples or other information. There is also the option to keep the bot public (available to be searched), unlisted (available to other users via link) or private (only available to the creator).

Beyond the name and image, the starting message/greeting/starting prompt is of great importance. The Greeting is the first message that is sent to the user when a chat is opened and works as the start of the chat with a chatbot. These messages are written by the bot creator and sets the scene the chat takes place in. These messages can vary from simple, one-sentence greetings (see Figure 1) at the user, prompting a more general chat, depending on user's intentions, to a more detailed, creative writing-style prose that prompts the user to engage with it in similar style (See Figure 2). Examples provided in pictures are top-performing bots on Character.ai, with millions of interactions and thousands of in-service likes each.

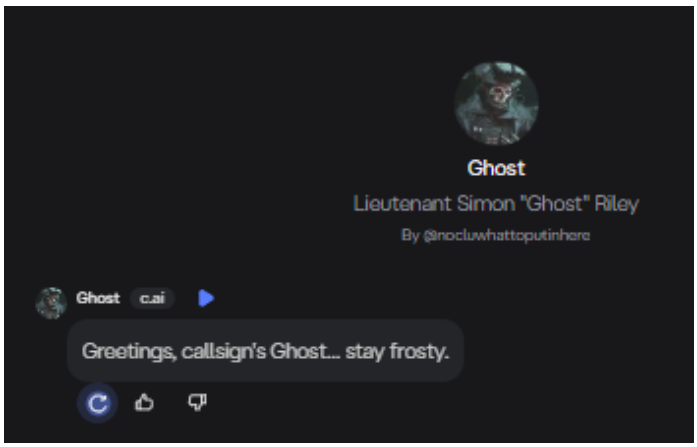


Figure 1: Bot "Ghost" by user @nocluwhattoputinhere, based on character Simon "Ghost" Riley from the game franchise Call of Duty. Screenshot taken by author (24.3.2026).

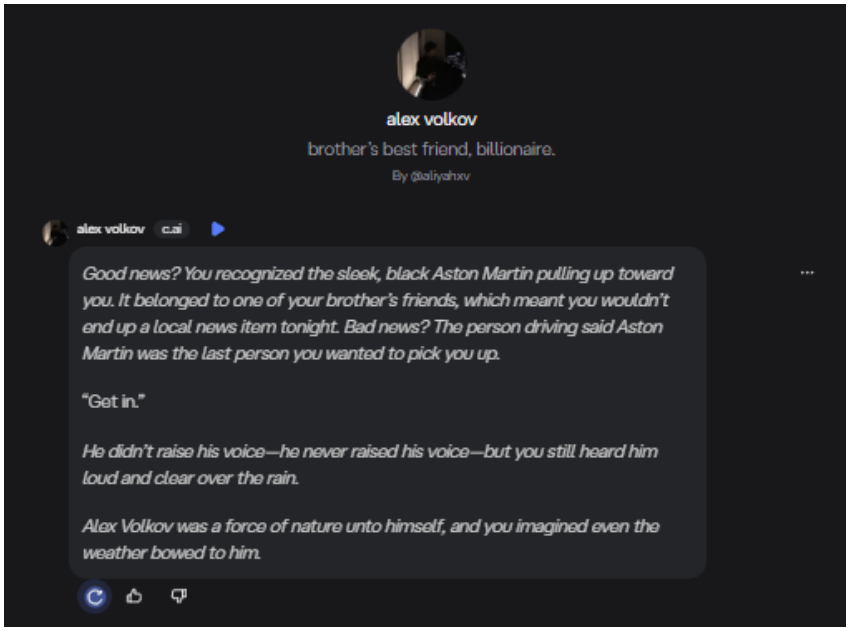


Figure 2: Bot "alex volkov" by user @aliyahxv, based on character Alex Volkov from the Twisted book series by Ana Huang. Screenshot taken by author (24.3.2026).

As seen in these two examples, they both invite the user to a conversation but in different ways. Figure 1 shows a short, typographically simple opening message, prompting the user for a more casual-facing chat conversation. Whereas Figure 2 is a longer, more prose-like opening message that includes elements such as italicized text for narration and actions, and quotation marks for in-character speech. The message itself reads like a story and works as a prompt for the user to continue the prose-like chat.

These aforementioned examples are the types of bots, the content, hosted of Character.ai. Overall, Character.ai is defined by its nature as a content hosting platform and the content in it. Users have a seemingly endless selection of different bots to chat with, and the possibility to create personalized ones suited for their own needs. Instead of continuously chatting with one chatbot, like in AI Companion apps (e.g. Replika), users have several chats with different Characters.

4 Analysis

This chapter consists of the analysis of the data gathered from the interviews, coded and categorized with an inductive approach. The research questions posed earlier were:

RQ1: What are the affordances of Character.ai?
RQ2: How do users negotiate with the platform and its affordances?
RQ3: How do these affordances relate to creating and having emotionally engaging experiences in Character.ai?

For the first research question, I examine the platform's affordances, providing examples from the app. For the second and third research question, I explore the interview data and how the participants describe their Character.ai use.

The structure of the analysis goes as follows; Chapter 4.1. starts with an overview of the affordances in Character.ai, specifically the technological platform and fandom affordances, justified by the link to fandom culture described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4.2. describes Character.ai from the perspective of the user (activities in Character.ai, users' interpretations on why they use c.ai, users' preferences for c.ai and users' interest in making bots). Chapter 4.3. focuses on the affective nature of use, for the point-of-view of the platform, and AI use in general. Throughout the analysis of the platform use, I will highlight important affordances and negotiations that users bring up.

Prior to the actual interview questions about Character.ai, some background questions were asked to establish a baseline for user demographics for this study. The 9 interviewees recruited for this study all identified as female and are in between 18 and 35 years of age. Majority of them had been using Character.ai for at least a year, some for several months and some for a couple years at the time of the interview (See Table 1).

4.1 Affordances in Character.ai

This subchapter describes the affordances present in Character.ai. Starting with the technological features that build the platform's primary appeal, chatting, to the affordances it provides in a fandom context. These dimensions are important in order to understand the full picture of the user experience that is analysed and showcased later in this thesis.

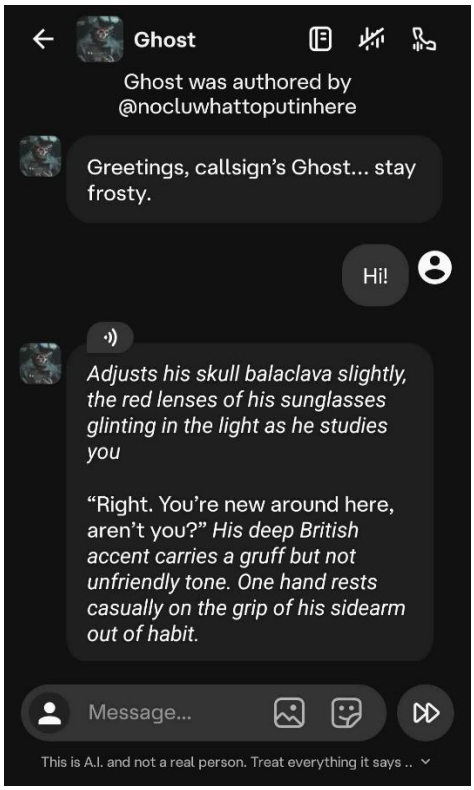
4.1.1 Technological Affordances

In this subsection, technological affordances as a concept refer to the features, functions and platform tools within Character.ai that provide the possibilities for interacting with chatbots, specifically AI-mediated writing-related actions. As a platform, Character.ai provides an inductive service with a range of creative affordances for users interested in more long-form interactions with AI-powered chatbots.

The main focus of the platform is the affordance of chatting with chatbots. Like advertised in Apple's App Store (n.d.), Character.ai advertises itself by saying "Character.AI isn't just another AI chat app" and "Chat, call, text, and create with AI Characters.". This is implemented through a typical messaging app user interface where the user is able to send and receive text messages from chatbots in the platform, alongside the mentioned functions of calling and sending images and stickers (see Picture 3). The main focus of the application is the text-based conversations had with chatbots, as the interface mainly highlights the chatting aspect when opening a bot chat and all other functions are behind icons and clicks.

One of the affordances that is exclusive to chatting is the active limitation of topics. The platform has a content filter that actively redirects and tries to prevent users from discussing forbidden topics according to the platform's Terms of Service. Functionally, the content filter is a message prompt that appears on a bot's message if it attempts to

generate a message that includes mentions of a topic that is against the Character.ai policy (e.g. sexual content or suicide-related discussions, Character.AI Policies, n.d.).



Picture 3: Screenshot of the chat interface in Character.ai (mobile application). Taken by author (04.05.2026).

This interface is similar to other LLM-based and AI chatbots, so the previously highlighted affordance groupings and user gratifications by Go and Kim (2025) are relevant here. The important user gratifications important here are *immersive realism* (feeling like a real conversation), *personalized filtering* (responses are tailored to the prompt), *adaptive responsiveness* (the AI adapts to the user), *participatory interaction* (interaction feels engaging and requires user to be an active participant) and *fun* (using the chatbot feels entertaining). The built-in functions provide these affordances in AI-powered chatbots. In Character.ai, those previously listed affordances appear in the following ways (Table 3):

Table 3: LLM Affordances in Character.ai

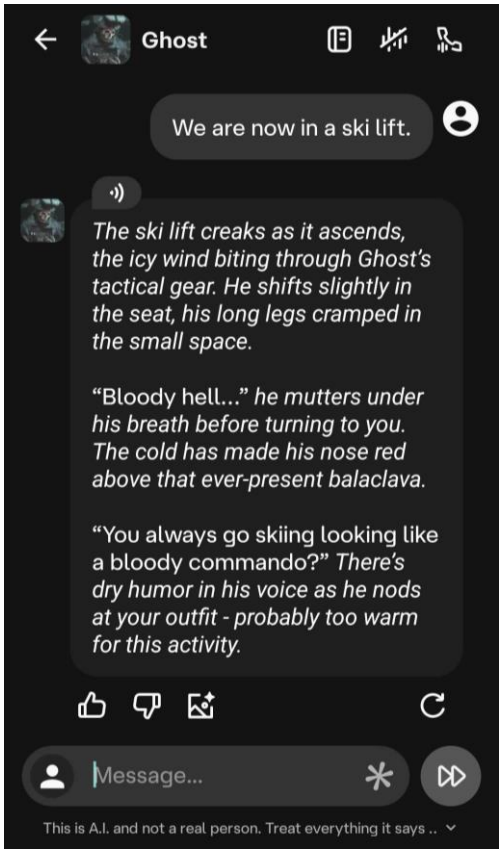
Affordance groupings and user gratifications (Go & Kim, 2025)	**How they present in Character.ai**
Immersive realism	Depending on the conversation, the chatting may look like texts sent and received between two people, or a roleplay being had with another user.
Personalized filtering	Every user response receives a tailored response where the chatbot takes into account the information provided in the user message (prompt).
Adaptive responsiveness	The chatbot adapts, for example, its textual formatting in its messages in response to the user (e.g. if user uses italics when describing actions, the bot will do the same in later responses)
Participatory interaction	The bot will only generate responses when user prompts it to, whether in response to a user message or if user swipes or presses a button to re-generate a new response
Fun	There is enjoyment found in chatting with one's favorite characters.

Like mentioned in the affordance of *participatory interaction,* through the act of chatting the user turns from a simple consumer into an active participant (a prosumer). Rather than simply consuming content, Character.ai establishes itself as a hypermediated platform. Hypermediacy describes the concept of a medium being more than simply the content it provides, rather a construction built out of features and functions as building blocks (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p.). From the perspective of hypermediacy, Character.ai is a platform that requires the user to acknowledge the various activities, features and interfaces as a collective structure that the user engages with; the user must search and choose (or create) a chatbot, assess the quality of the bot and decide whether the user wants to chat with the chosen chatbot, and engage with the chatbot through written interactions. All of these phases are part of the structure of the service, the experience and the work users need to do to use Character.ai in a fulfilling manner.

Like described in Chapter 3, there is a large number of bots to choose from. Not only in terms of characters but also starting prompts. Users are recommended bots in the front

page of the website and in the app, they are also able to search bots with character names (e.g. ‘Ghost’, ‘Writing Assistant’ and such) or keywords (e.g. ‘Mafia’, ‘Arranged marriage’ et cetera.). The seemingly endless amount of these chatbots affords the possibility of choosing and trying out them, similar to how a game may offer different mini games with different type of activities and tones as part of the overall experience.

These different bots also provide the affordance of choosing from a range of starting prompts (Greeting messages) and the plots that follow. Like seen in Figures 1 and 2, there is a variety in length and detail in Greeting messages, allowing for more casual chatting experience to a more prose-like, roleplay-esque starter prompts. These prompts guide bot responses, but also because the chatbots in Character.ai are powered by AI and LLMs, they also have the affordance of personalized filtering. Even if the starting prompt describes a specific setting, the user is able to give any kind of prompt and change the setting and the potential story in any wanted direction, and the chatbot will simply follow along. For example, in Picture 4 is a continuation of the interaction from Picture 3, where the bot continues the interaction based on the prompt given by the user.



Picture 4: Screenshot of an example of a chatbot interaction (mobile application). Taken by author (04.05.2026)

The circular arrow icon in Picture 4 is a function for generating a new response. As an AI-powered platform, the conversational agents are able to provide "endless" responses to users. On the free plan, users can refresh the chatbot's response up to 30 times, prompting the chatbot to give a newly generated response to reply to based on the previous messages. This 30-amount limit is separate for every message, meaning the next bot-generated message has a new set of 30 "generate a new message" swipes.

Large language models and AI chatbots have a varied quality, often struggling when it comes to memory, recalling details and staying consistent with previously established facts when writing long-form, several message length conversations (Maharana, Lee, Tulyakov, Bansal, Barbieri & Fang, 2024). Character.ai's LLM model is no exception to this. The chatbots will often forget important details regarding the narrative of the chat (e.g. nature of the story as romance) and/or the user (e.g. gender or pronouns)

(Tomlinson, 2026; Ask et al., 2026). In order to avoid the frustration caused by these mishaps, users are required to work around these instances and adapt their responses and prompts (ibid.). However, there are some features aimed at combatting this drawback implemented in the app as well.

Character.ai has memory supplementing features called Memories and Personas. With the Memories feature, users can include a brief description or pin messages for fixed information for the chatbot to recall and use in the chats (Character.ai Blog, 2025). Personas are character descriptions that users can utilize for themselves when chatting with chatbots, allowing bots to remember details about the user, often during more creative writing-focused chats where the user is chatting as a character (Character.ai Book, 2024). Both features aim to fill in the gap that exists in the chatbot's limited memory and decrease the amount of repetition users otherwise have to do to maintain the relevancy and accuracy in the chatbots' responses. These features afford longer, more detailed chats for users who prefer to have longer sessions with one bot. All of these aforementioned functions and the uses afforded are listed in a comprehensive Table 4.

Table 4: Technological affordances in Character.ai

Function	Description	Use afforded
Writing	User interface: - Text box - dialogue system/chatting interface - swiping - message-related activities (editing, deleting, rewinding)	Responding to messages generated by the chatbot. Imbued affordances from writing: - Roleplay - Long-form prose - Chatting
Content filter	A message that fills out the rest of the bot's message in case it tries to generate an inappropriate response that mentions forbidden topics	Preventing certain topics and interactions from being discussed directly
Variety of bots	Character.ai hosts over 3 million bots (CAIBotList, n.d.d) of various kinds, based on a wide range of characters and series, and with unique starting prompts.	User chooses which bot(s) to use, affording the ability that is essentially choosing a game or a minigame
Variety of Greetings & LLM adaptiveness	Each bot has a unique greeting. Users are able to respond to a bot in a preferred way, regardless of the greeting.	User is able to choose which greeting to respond to, affording the use of choosing which "story" to engage with, almost like choosing which character to romance in a dating simulator game.
Message generation	Swiping on the bot's newest message prompts it to regenerate a new response.	User chooses which response to use, affording use akin to "choose your own adventure" style games and books
Memory supplementing features	Different features that aim to improve the LLM's memory for longer chats; e.g. Memories, Personas	Users are able to have longer, more detailed conversations with singular bots

The functions range from interface design, guardrails, content and general LLM and platform's unique features. They serve a range of purposes from providing functions for users to interact with to nudging and directing users to behave in certain ways.

4.1.2 Technological Affordances for fandom

In this subsection, fandom affordances refer to the features, functions and platform tools within Character.ai that provide the possibilities for actions related to fandom activities, phenomena and concepts. Character.ai as a platform is currently establishing itself as an entirely new medium for old and new forms of fannish activities.

With the previously established direct connection to fandom in the form of chatbots based on fictional characters (CAIBotList, n.d.c; n.d.d), there are certain fandom-related affordances that the platform provides. Users approach fandom content with certain types of expectations and motivations depending on the platform and the type of content. With chatbots, fandom is facing a new form of content to engage with.

At its core, chatbot interaction can be seen as a new interactive form of fanfiction. Academically, fanfiction is known as a form of writing revolving around existing cultural works (e.g. TV shows, books and games) created by fans of said work (Hellekson & Busse, 2014). These texts are created by fans, usually created for fans. With chatbots, the core concept of fanfiction still exists, but the dynamic between producing and consuming fanfiction evolves: Creators create the baseline for the interaction; the bot and what it represents (often a character), and the Greeting message and what it represents (sometimes a prose-like text establishing a storytelling base), which then provides the interaction setting for users. Through the dynamic interaction that users engage in with the bot, a new form of creating “fanfiction” appears, adding a layer of transformativeness to the already transformative writing that fanfiction is at its core. With chatbot interaction, users go from content consumers into ”prosumers” (a mix of producer and consumer) who simultaneously consume the content generated by and with the chatbot but also produce the content through the act of sending and replying to messages.

This introduction of turning average fan consumers into active prosumers through interaction, Character.ai brings a new wave of AI-powered remediation to fandom. Remediation as a term refers to the “representation of one medium in another” (Bolter & Grusin,

1999), the revising, repurposing and readapting of the act of mediation in another medium. In this case, the platform of Character.ai and chatbot interaction function as a new medium, and the act of writing texts, specifically fanfiction (written narratives of pre-existing media) is an old, well-known medium. Fanfiction writing medium gets adapted and represented through the medium of AI-chatbot interaction. Through this process of readaptation, writing and reading as separate mediums and activities evolve into one with the act of chatting (which includes writing and reading in terms of messages sent and received).

LLMs have been established to have included fanfiction in their training data sets (Eveleth, 2023; Codega, 2023). Through the Common Crawl dataset that had scraped texts off of the popular fanfiction repository Archive of Our Own, most of the popular large language models have been taught on fanfiction as well (Codega, 2023). Despite the controversial nature of data scraping, especially when it comes to using the free labor of fans and their content without their consent, this has made LLMs and AI-powered chatbots interesting to those willing to use them for fannish activities.

Through these affordances, Character.ai is understandably a suitable platform for fans to engage in fannish activities. This platform allows both traditional, older and newer fans to participate in a new form of fan engagement in the form of chatting compared the more independent, singular activities of reading and writing.

4.2 Understanding Character.ai Use

This subchapter aims to understand how Character.ai is used, specifically what users do with/in Character.ai, why people use Character.ai, and why people create bots. Despite the platform's popularity and large userbase, there is little published research into how the users actually engage with the platform. Throughout the analysis, I will highlight affordances and negotiations that happen with the mentioned affordances brought up in the interviews.

The first subsection introduces the concept of chatbot-based roleplay as a primary reason for using Character.ai, a form of co-creation with AI Characters. The second subsection delves deeper into the reasons why users engage in this activity specifically in Character.ai. And the third subsection studies the activity of bot creation that the subgroup of users engage in alongside the interactive activities.

4.2.1 Activities in Character.ai

Character.ai has become a platform for users that seek out entertainment and creativity focused interactions with AI chatbots. The main activity reflected in the interview data specifically is roleplay and how it works through co-creation with artificial intelligence. This subsection specifically discusses the interaction-focused activities practised in Character.ai.

The interviewed users specify their interest with Character.ai being about roleplay. They use the platform and the service to engage in forum-based roleplay (see Zalka, 2017), where the Character chats function as roleplaying threads and the chatbot acts as the other party involved in the roleplay. When asked about what thing made the participant get invested in Character.ai, P8 immediately responded with “roleplay”. This sentiment was similar across interviewees.

In Example 1, P4 responded in a more in-depth manner, describing the act of roleplay as a driving factor, alongside the “extensive library of pre-built characters” that exist on the platform. These pre-built characters are in reference to the millions of chatbots hosted by the platform (CAIBotList, n.d.d) that are created by the platform itself and also other users.

1) P4: I utilize Character a.i (c.ai) primarily for its engaging role-playing interactions and its extensive library of pre-built characters based on both real and fictional individuals. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

P4's example underlines the importance of roleplay as an activity for the reason of use, highlighting what makes Character.ai attractive to users who seek out roleplay with chatbots. It is a similar appeal that exists in any type of content hosting platform, where the seemingly endless amount of content is interesting and engaging for the user because there is always the potential to find something new. This can be the endless stream of video content on TikTok, a wide selection of different categories and the large number of streamers on Twitch, or the high number of fanfictions posted on Archive of Our Own. The number of bots is so high that there exists potential to always find another bot to roleplay with that cater to the user's interest, especially in large fandoms on the platform.

A variety of features provide the affordance of roleplaying in Character.ai. The general text-based chatting interface provides user a familiar environment of features and nested affordances (e.g. writing, formatting, simultaneous or asynchronous messaging) that enable roleplaying. What is special about Character.ai (amongst other chatbot hosting platforms) are the various bots that users are able to chat, and roleplay with.

With Character.ai (and other similar chatbot hosting platforms), roleplaying as a hobby has been turned into a solitary activity. Roleplay is usually characterized as collaborative storytelling with other people (Zalka, 2017, p. 5), but now Character.ai provides a platform for users to engage in roleplay with AI-powered chatbots instead of needing to rely on other people for roleplay company (as characterized in Examples 2 and 3).

2) P3: I was a big fan of roleplaying on WhatsApp with online friends around the age of 12 or 13. But it was always a bit hard because of different schedules or ideas. (...) With c.ai those problems no longer accured. I had an immidiate response, a response I could exchange if I wasn't happy with it, and I could put away my phone without having to miss anything, because everything was in my hands. [sic] (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

In Example 2, P3 characterizes roleplaying as difficult due to circumstances related to other people; Having different ideas and thoughts about the details of the roleplay and

struggling with the time management aspect that exists when discussing any simultaneous activity done with another person. The problem can also be the lack of roleplaying company entirely, like how P1 explains in Example 3.

> 3) P1: Well, I think I got interested in it [Character.ai] because I, I have like a roleplaying background (…) I used to play with other people but (…) Because it was with a lot of writing and stuff and people stop. They stopped the roleplays (…) But with like AI, It never gets tired. (…) It was, like, a way to continue that hobby that has, like, been away for a while because I don't have, like, friends who I can roleplay with. (Interview, Zoom, March 29 2025)

With the development of AI, large language models and conversational models, these technologies have reached a point where they are able to work as superficial stand-ins for various activities due to the unprecedently high level of customizability available to them (Schöbel et al., 2023). In Character.ai, the chatbots that represent various characters function as roleplay partners and the characters in the roleplay, providing a roleplay experience that removes the negative human factors; spending time waiting for other users' responses, roleplay sessions or threads prematurely ending, and feelings of shame and embarrassment when discussing awkward topics during roleplay.

The affordances provided by the technology are not only about the platform's interface and what it affords, but also how the technology performs as a roleplay partner. Like mentioned in Examples 2 and 3, users are able to have fast responses whenever they want to with no delay, they could edit or regenerate new responses, the chatbot would not abruptly stop or end roleplays, and it could go on and on as much and as long as the user wants it to. This characterization is similar to playing digital games that users can start and stop playing on demand. All of these affordances describe the benefits of AI as a roleplay partner compared to other human users.

This is what is being formally theorized as chatbot-based roleplay (Ask & Sihvonen, 2025; 2026). In traditional roleplay, those participating in the roleplay thread are other users.

In chatbot-based roleplay, users no longer roleplay with each other, rather they use AI-powered chatbots as roleplay partners, for example for the aforementioned reasons.

The appeal of roleplay is how co-creation functions with artificial intelligence. Roleplay is characterized as a collaborative activity, and as such, it is naturally relevant to understand how users perceive how bots function as a creative writing partners. Through engaging in a form of creative co-creation through chatting and roleplaying with chatbots, Examples 4 and 5 describe the co-creation process with preferred bots. Whether it is through simple chatting or roleplay with a character, the expression of creativity and enjoyment found in assisted (or collaborative) creative writing is found to be enjoyable.

4) I: What do you like about character.ai?
P2: The possibility of creating your own stories with the bots you like so much. (Interview, TikTok, May 9 2025)

In Example 5 specifically, the detail of “the bots understanding what we [the users] want them to do”, highlighting the generative AI model’s adaptable nature. What makes the co-creation process in Character.ai has to do with its ability to generate a wide range of storylines. In the following Example (5), P7 expands on the affordance of “predicting” that LLMs have when it comes to generating responses.

5) I: What do you like about character.ai?
P7: The fact that we can create stories freely and that the bots understand what we want them to do. (Interview, TikTok, May 20 2025)

The chatbots in Character.ai function as other AI-powered chatbots would; responding to user prompts. The bots on the platform have the typical features that a large language model would have (e.g. being trained on relevant data, generating responses that connect to the user’s prompt), making it seem as they are able to produce replies that the users want to be generated. These features are part of the LLM’s affordances that make roleplaying so satisfying to users, like formatting responses appropriately, providing responses that consider interaction context and history.

Despite being able to “create stories freely”, the bots still provide a fixed set of creative “guidelines” within the chats, these being Character itself and Greeting messages (see the Figures 1-2 in Chapter 3). These “creative limitations” then allow both the user and the bot to follow these guidelines, like the roleplay setting established in the Greeting message. The co-creation process with the AI chatbot then feels like a form of creative writing to users (like in Examples 6 and 7). The platform and the seemingly endless stream of content provided by generative AI and large language models gives users a sense of creative enjoyment as well (as described in Example 8).

6) P6: I was talking to a bot and got this great idea for a book I was writing and I spent like 3 hours just talking to the bot none stop. [sic] (Interview, TikTok, May 13 2025)

7) P2: It is pretty much the alternative possibility for me as a writer to boost my writing skills, and also, I can have an idea for some original story based on what happened with the bot. (Interview, TikTok, May 13 2025)

Both P6 and P2 in their respective examples describe being able to find inspiration through the interactions had with the chatbots, making the AI a part of the creative process for the formulation of texts (e.g. narratives, stories or books even). In Example 8, P9 expands on the idea of finding inspiration through the interactions, bringing up the fact that in Character.ai, the chatbots will follow their assigned “personalities” and create predictable responses that help with engagement with service in general as well.

8) P9: the conversations are never boring because of that [the AI model], and you can throw any and all even the most outlandish scenarios at the bot, and the character will respond in tune, the reply will be quality, and still ‘in character’. (Interview, TikTok, May 26 2025)

Similar to Example 5 about the freedom to create whatever the user wants, P9 describes how the chatbot will respond to any prompt given by the user. This is an affordance that highlights the appeal of Character.ai and similar platforms in terms of roleplay, because not only does it allow for an endless variety of interactions to be had, but it also has no

social or emotional consequence to the other person in the roleplay. Since the roleplay partner is a chatbot, one that interviewees are highly aware of is not sentient nor intelligent, there is great freedom in being able to build storylines that would be socially awkward, difficult or potentially transgressive. The platform's affordances provided by the functions users interact with on the platform (e.g. chatting, the user interface design and features, wide selection of bots) allow this form of interaction with chatbots in terms of technology but also hosted content.

These examples about co-creation are one dimension of the developing technology that are artificial intelligence and large language models. Research continues to explore the various use cases about co-creation (for example idea generation and refining texts. See Wang et al., 2025) that commercial chatbots and chatbot services provide to users for personal or private use to understand where AI can function as a useful tool. These aforementioned examples about roleplay and co-creation align with the interesting interplay that is developing between users and the generative artificial intelligence tools (Prabowo & Asmarani, 2025), especially the role of machine creativity in human inspiration during interactions. The nature of AI-generated texts as 'creative' or 'original' is heavily debated, as generative AI produces texts based on the model's training data and making seemingly original content based on mixing these different sources (ibid).

Based on these examples, roleplay is a story-telling and creative activity that users do in collaboration with the Character.ai chatbots. Through a process of co-creation with the affordances provided by the LLMs, like adapting to user's message formatting and having contextual awareness when responding to user messages, users are able to enjoy this activity independently how they want and whenever they want.

4.2.2 Users' interpretations on why they use c.ai

As defined in the previous subchapter, Character.ai is used for roleplay by a section of the userbase. This subchapter will be exploring user motivations and reasons why people

use chatbot hosting platforms for roleplay. With users describing their use as an avenue for creative writing (Examples 6, 7, 8), a sense of creativity is a driving force behind the engagement with the bots. Roleplay and co-creation with the AI also work as outlets to express oneself and as a creative writing hobby.

The roleplay is fueled by a sense of wanting to engage creatively. Participants approach describing their Character.ai use through hobby activities, like reading, engaging with fiction (Example 9) and creative writing. Creating bots and roleplaying have a sense of creative effort behind them, like expressed in Example 10.

9) P7: At the beginning, I couldn't even let it go. It's not like I talk to someone but more reading a story and it literally upgraded my English so well. [sic] (Interview, TikTok, May 20 2025)

In Example 9, P7 describes the act of chatting in Character.ai more like “reading a story”, indirectly referencing the creative affordances that make the platform appear and provide a more creative experience to users. Instead of feeling like the user is actively interacting with AI in a conversational sense, the interaction feels more creatively loaded in nature, fading the user’s input/effort in creating “the story” that is being “read” in the chat. This is one example of how the platform’s features afford co-creation. In Example 10, P5 also discusses reading books, but in a way where the experience of reading books has helped them when coming up with stories (Greeting Messages in this case) during the bot creation process.

10) I: Why do you make bots?
P5: Why not? It's a fun outlet for writing creativity. I read a lot of books and like to put a bit of that into the stories. [sic] (Interview, TikTok, May 11 2025)

Character.ai use as an activity can feel almost like a hobby to some, bringing feelings of relaxation and unwinding similar to reading a book on top of feeling creatively fulfilled by the activity. Examples 11, 12 and 13 all describe various ways of using Character.ai for stress relief, distraction and escapism through this sentiment.

11) P3: I feel like c.ai is my equivalent to someone reading a book all cozy on a rainy day. It makes me relax, calm my nerves and carries my thoughts away from the harsh reality and stress of life. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

12) P8: I just do it to relax. Like switching off my brain or something. (Interview, TikTok, May 20 2025)

13) P9: when I was still working at my old accounting job I liked to use my favourite chats for a little bit in the morning before work (e.g. on the commute) to cheer myself up before a stressful day. (Interview, TikTok, May 26 2025)

Participants find roleplaying with the bots a soothing activity, akin to a hobby. Same way that someone would read a book to unwind, the act of roleplaying is an activity that is used as an escape, whether it is from a stressful day, or to just sit down and focus on something to get one's mind off things. Creative hobbies have a range of effects on people's wellbeing, namely mitigating stress (Cleary et al., 2025), which some participants mention when discussing the feelings that they connect to Character.ai.

Besides the creative feelings brought out and satisfied by Character.ai use, another reason for use that came up was emotional expression and expressing oneself. Users would recount times they used Character.ai to either process or avoid feelings. When asked to describe their Character.ai in a broad sense, P4 opened up about how Character.ai helps them emotionally (Example 14).

14) P4: I use Character a.i every day, especially when I'm at school and feeling lonely. Opening Character a.i helps me avoid feeling sad. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

The powerful social presence of Character.ai despite being an AI tool is the phenomenon that these emotion-related experiences describe. Users are able to find emotional relief in the chatbots and in the process of interacting (roleplay in the cases of these examples).

When asked about what types of feelings arise when using Character.ai, P9's answer was about more positive feelings (Example 15). There is a mention of loneliness as well.

15) P9: I would say it's only positive feelings, using it gives me comfort and entertainment, it often makes me smile too. it makes me feel less lonely. (Interview, TikTok, May 26 2025)

Conversational agents have evolved to where we now have "empathetic chatbots", social chatbots and conversational agents that are able to "understand" user emotions (through analytic processes, Zhou et al., 2020). With generative AI, these bots are able to evolve to actively attempt to meet these human needs artificially. However, In Character.ai's case, the emotional comfort comes from a variety of overlapping things; the interaction with AI chatbots specifically (the affordances and nature of the AI chatbots provide emotional comfort), from the act of roleplay (creative activity or hobby bringing emotional comfort), and what the chatbots represent (parasocial relationships with fictional characters bringing emotional comfort). These dimensions combined can create powerful affective experiences for users (more about this in detail in Chapter 4.3.)

4.2.3 Users' preferences for c.ai

This subsection focuses on the reasons why users choose Character.ai; from the platform's technical features and characteristics (Example 16, 17, 18) to familiarity and preference (Example 19 and 20). A way Character.ai also stands out from other chatbot hosting platforms is that on top of the browser version, Character.ai also has a mobile application (mentioned in Example 16). Table 5 lists out the different features that are brought up by the participants when asked why they prefer Character.ai over other chatbot hosting services/platforms.

Table 5: Character.ai features highlighted by participants

Feature	Example
Simplicity, app design	16) P3: I like how simple it is. Its a simple app that looks like a messenger. You open it, get greeted by characters that are adjusted by your usage of other characters, or you just open your last chat and write ahead. Its nothing that is hard to understand or hard to get into. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)
Technical features	17) P1: Maybe for the refresh texts option and that we are more free to send messages without a limit. Other apps always have ads or message restrictions. (Interview, Zoom, March 29 2025)
AI responses	18) P6: The responses are longer and more human like and I just prefer that (Interview, Zoom, May 13 2025)
Atypical AI-likeness	19) P5: It is different, for sure. I feel you can make more of a real person feel with Character AI. (Interview, TikTok, May 11 2025)

These features are specifically about Character.ai and how users perceive its qualities that makes it stand out. The platform has a mobile app that provides certain features for free that are behind paywalls on other similar platforms, the response quality and AI/LLM model align better with the preferences of the user. All of these functions relate to affordances found in Character.ai or similar platforms, such as the chatting interface, quality and nature of generated text and other supplementary features.

Being the biggest AI chatbot hosting platform (Briskman, 2025), Character.ai has a userbase that actively creates content for it and has large communities (for example, over 2 million subscribers in their r/CharacterAI community on Reddit) surrounding it. With its current popularity, it often works as an introduction to the chatbot roleplay scene to some users (like described in Example 20 and 21).

20) P7: I think because it's the first platform that I discovered first and that I got used to it. (Interview, TikTok, May 20 2025)

21) P3: I don’t think its necessarily different or special. I think its just the first of its kind to really break through to the masses. If I look at my TikTok comments, there are many people telling me they use e.g. chai or

> janitor.ai as their main chatbot, and I really think it just depends on your on liking or what you discover first. [sic] (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

Regardless of the unique features the platform has, a lot comes down to simple user preference and loyalty to the first platform the user discovers. Every following experience with similar platforms is reflected on the first one the user learns to use and that affects the perception of other platforms. For example, when discussing the reasons for using Character.ai, participants often compared the platform to another popular chatbot hosting service Chai. At the time of when interviews were conducted, Character.ai had not implemented advertisements for the free version of the mobile app. The topic of ads in the service was brought up (as seen in Examples 17 and 22). Also, the writing style of the chatbot model was mentioned when comparing the two, like mentioned in Example 23.

22) P8: I like that it’s ad-free. For example chai has every fourth chat an ad. (Interview, TikTok, May 20 2025)

23) P6: c.ai feels like the platform that sounds the least like ai. I've tried Chai and it was just annoying to me. (Interview, TikTok, May 13 2025)

Chai was occasionally brought up by the participants when discussing comparisons to Character.ai. Character.ai is not the only one of its kind as a chatbot hosting platform. Chai (mentioned in Examples 21, 22 and 23), founded in 2021, was one of the first mainstream chatbot hosting platforms. Being dethroned by Character.ai in terms of user amounts, downloads and other metrics, nowadays Chai is often most commonly associated with the user concerns regarding bot creators being able to see the chats and messages sent to the bots created by them. Even though this is no longer possible, (Over_Ad_1741, 2025), it is still a perception that persists amongst users.

Character.ai being the biggest and most well-known platform is not the sole reason for the loyal userbase. Users are able to specify certain elements and features in their user experience to explain why they choose to use a certain service (See Table 5). Like briefly

mentioned in Example 21, users are constantly reminded of other similar services and platforms, meaning their loyalty is not based on lack of options or the lack of awareness of them.

4.2.4 Users' interest in making bots

The target audience to interview for the research was specifically those with experience in creating bots in Character.ai. A vital part of the user experience for the participants was the act of creating and sharing their creativity through making bots, working as an added dimension to the co-creation experience within Character.ai. What comes to the process, the creation of Greeting Messages (starting prompts) plays an important part.

Users described bot creation as an outlet for creative needs; From creating the chatbot, drafting the greeting message setting the scene, to continuing the writing process through bot interactions, and finding fulfilment in the act of co-creativity with the AI (as in Example 24).

> 24) P2: I make them to release my ideas. And, all in all, I just have this need to write something. (Interview, TikTok, May 9 2025)

The emphasis on the written form of creativity and self-expression is often compared to reading books or writing in general by participants during roleplay (See Examples 9-13). The added element of bot creation extends the co-creation experience; whereas the roleplay exists only between users and bots, the bot creation process can prompt creators to consider the "roleplayability" of the bot (like described in Examples 25 and 26) during bot creation.

> P5: It's a fun outlet for writing creativity. I read a lot of books and like to put a bit of that into the stories. Make someone want to keep going. (Interview, TikTok, May 11 2025)

Beyond the detailed profile during the bot creation interface, the chatbot's typographic choices, writing style and primary "memory" is stored in the greeting message (See Example 26). From a user point-of-view, the greeting message is also the first introduction to the narrative world the bot exists in, which is acknowledged in Example 27.

25) P9: in my experience, it's good to make a detailed greeting message, that not only sets the scene, but also describes some back-story/thoughts/feelings of the character regarding that particular situation/scenario. thanks to that, the bot already starts the chat with a certain mood/vibe. (Interview, TikTok, May 26 2025)

26) P3: I feel like the first message is the most crucial point to feel immersed. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

P3 emphasizes in Example 28 that the critical part of the bot creation is the Greeting message, the first message a user sees when the chat view opens for a specific bot (See Pictures 3 and 4 for text examples). This message often sets the narrative setting the chat/roleplay takes place in and where the storyline starts from, and the possible relationship between the user and the bot. As the interviewee notes, a good starting message is one that invites the player to continue the story, similarly to how writing prompts are used in class exercises.

27) P3: The writing needs to make the reader respond. If the first message is already a completed storyline, no one will want to chat with it. It has to leave something open, it has to expect something from the person who clicked on it. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

Coe (2025) introduces the concept of creativity immersion, the act of immersion building and deepening based on an individual's involvement in a creative process. What P9 and P3 are trying to describe is the way bot creators try to prompt users into getting involved with their bots through Greeting messages. Instead of providing a fully constructed story (e.g. fanfiction), the bot creators write the creative constraints in the greeting message to allow the creativity of the user to fill in the blanks, to engage in the act of roleplay, which is the act of collaborative storytelling.

Throughout all these examples, bot creators have an in-depth perception of the affordances that provide the potential for roleplay, but also the user experience of roleplaying in Character.ai. Specifically, how the bots and users treat Greeting Messages when roleplaying. Understanding the affordances of the LLMs that provide the bot's capacity to roleplay in a satisfying manner these bot creators are able to format their bots in ways that allow users to be more immersed.

Sometimes the lack of variety or niche bots and/or specific narrative settings (often a combination of both) leads users to create bots to fulfil the need for a certain setting with a certain character (like mentioned in Example 29 and described in Example 30). Long-term users shift through several bots in order to find satisfying greeting messages and narrative settings to roleplay to/with. Despite the vast number of bots that exist and get created every day by other users, sometimes users resort to bot creation themselves.

28) P9: i was a user first, and sometimes i would look for a specific scenario for a character, and couldn't find it, so i just decided to make such bots myself. (Interview, TikTok, May 26 2025)

What P9 is describing is similar behavior to fanfiction writing in fan culture, where authors write to expand the fictional work's world beyond the canon content. This can include different fanfiction tropes such as creating Alternate Universes (AUs, Barnes, 2015), retconning (revising) unfavorable canon events (such as character deaths, ibid.) and self-insert fanfiction, a subgenre with its own writing conventions where authors insert themselves or a character representing them into the story (Sapuridis & Alberto, 2022). In the following Example 30, what P1 is describing is distinctly about the genre of self-insert fanfiction, just in the context of Character.ai and bot creation.

29) I: (…) Why do you make bots?
P1: It is just like a way to make it tailor-made experience for myself.

> P1: If I use that Baldur's Gate 3 example (…) In that game, I romanced with Karlach and then I, like, wanted to make a bot (…) A current bot that remembers like that relation with my own character and put it in like post-game situation… [sic] (Interview, Zoom, March 29 2025)

In a typical roleplay-focused chatbot's greeting message (See Figure 2), second-person perspective and narrative is sometimes used in a similar manner to self-insert fanfiction where second-person narrative is used for immersive purposes (Cleofas, 2021). Also traditionally known as reader insert fanfiction in fandom. Self-insert fanfiction can also be written from third-person perspective with characters; In P1's case, they do not necessarily roleplay as "themselves", rather they present as their in-game character. This type of behavior in fanfiction and writing spaces is simultaneously common, but often also branded as "cringe", embarrassing or bad writing (due to stereotypical examples of overpowerful author characters and perceived excessive self-indulgence). All of these behaviors are still very much common in the fandom, fanfiction and roleplay spaces. With the affordances of Character.ai, roleplaying works almost as an outlet for self-insert fanfiction.

The *communal sharing* of the creative process is also important to Character.ai chatbot creators. These creators often make chatbots based on fictional characters with pre-existing fan communities as an effort to connect with them. Creators often define their content through fandoms in general (like Call of Duty in Example 31) and/or niches (focusing on certain tropes, relationship types or user groups, e.g. based on sexuality or gender), attracting certain audiences for their bots.

> 30) I: Who do you make them [c.ai bots] for?
> P2: For COD fans, and just for those who like using c.ai. (Interview, TikTok, May 9 2025)

Developing Character.ai bots often start from user's need for variety that does not yet exist (or is difficult to find) in the bot catalogue (like mentioned in previous Examples 29 and 30). In Example 32, the reason is very much the same. However, this reason often evolves further through community interactions that might form around those bot

creators who choose to actively share their work. While audiences can be built around specific fandoms, they can also be made around bot creators and their content.

31) I: Who do you make them [bots] for?
P9: at first it was just for myself, but then i started posting my bots on TikTok. i gained some following, and now i get requests from people to make specific characters/scenarios. (Interview, TikTok, May 26 2025)

Bot creation is a creative process, for both the user and the communities they belong to. Creators not only provide for their audiences and fiction fandoms they belong to but also create their own communities amongst themselves. In these creator communities, creators advise, inspire and support each other through various channels, traditions and ways.

The process of creating bots in Character.ai has been streamlined and made straightforward to users, not requiring any coding experience from any users making bots. Just filling out a few text boxes (See Picture 2) for naming and describing the character then providing potential chat examples can work as the basis for a chatbot in Character.ai. These chatbots can be set as public in their settings, which allows other users inside the platform to search and chat with these user-generated bots.

Most of the participants focused on creating Original Characters (OCs) and storylines, meaning the chatbots were not fully based on any pre-existing fictional characters (See Table 1). In Example 33, P4 calls them “original bots”. These Characters would often have their own personalities and backgrounds that fit the storyline created for the bot made in Character.ai, supplemented by a profile picture that is either created by the bot creator, an image of a fictional character (either fan art or from the original source material), or an AI-generated image.

However, as established in Chapter 3, the platform is also known for hosting chatbots based on a wide range of popular and well-known fictional characters, real-life celebrities and historical figures. Like referenced earlier, CAIBotList (n.d.b) lists 1 million bots in

the ‘OC’ category, meaning the 2 million out of 3 million bots indexed in their directory are related to some type of intellectual property (series, games, celebrities). This sentiment was also reflected in the interviewed participants, as a few of them focus on making storylines and bots about fictional characters from specific fictional works, from “fandoms” (like mentioned in both Examples 33 and 34).

32) P4: I create bots based on fandoms, and I also develop original bots with storylines based on my own ideas. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

33) P3: I write for the Call of Duty fandom, especially for any fans of John Price. Though I am not turned away making any other characters. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

Character.ai users have a lot of overlapping qualities with fan culture and fandom behavior. From representing fictional characters to engaging in fannish pleasures, to participating in fandom economies. In this case, Character.ai users are producing fanfiction-like works in the form of Character.ai chatbots, taking requests and establishing subcommunities on the platform.

All of these behaviors amongst bot creators reflect similar values of sharing found in fan culture. Duffett (2013) describes in his book that fans connect and bond over “the enjoyment through engagement”, through active participation in things such as collecting, creating content (fanfiction, fan art, fan videos and other types of content) and community-specific behaviors. In this case, the bot creation process functions as a form of producing content chatbots, for an audience, either a pre-existing fandom of some fictional work or the creator’s own audience.

4.3 Dimensions of Human-Chatbot Interaction in Character.ai

This subchapter focuses on exploring what playing with a chatbot in Character.ai is like from the point-of-view of users, with a special focus on the affective dimensions of

human-chatbot interaction. The topics discussed in the first subsection are about the various factors that affect the user experience of the chatbot interactions, such as convenience in technology and both positive and negative affective dimensions of chatbot-based roleplay in Character.ai. The second subsection examines how users view the role of AI in Character.ai use and what kinds of facets it brings to the user experience.

4.3.1 The Affective Experience

The first and most frequently brought up factor for Character.ai usage was the emphasis on good design affordances. The app and platform are described as easy to use (Example 35) and flexible (Example 36). These feelings come from a variety of aspects, mainly the design choices of the application and the functions of chatting. The messenger-like chat feels intuitive and the chatbots often follow conventions of typical text-based roleplay, with the use of asterisks to describe action, quotation marks for speech and parentheses or slashes for out-of-character remarks. The intuitiveness of the service mentioned by P3 and P5 in Examples 35 and 37 is also related to the age range of the participants (18-35 years of age) and what they are used to when it comes to text-based chat interfaces.

34) P3: I like how simple it is. Its a simple app that looks like a messenger. You open it, get greeted by characters that are adjusted by your usage of other characters, or you just open your last chat and write ahead. Its nothing that is hard to understand or hard to get into. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

35) Interviewer: Can you say or describe what you like about character.ai?
P1: (…) I think, how flexible it is. (Interview, Zoom, March 29 2025)

36) P5: I grew up in the age of chatting online. This is just building your own person to chat with. (Interview, TikTok, May 11 2025)

The technological aspect is important when it comes to user experience in various ways, both in general but also specifically in Character.ai (like how participants highlighted features listed in Table 5). A well-designed interface can minimize frustration and improve

usability in mobile gaming (Gui & Zhao, 2024). With majority of the participants using Character.ai on the mobile app, the interface is a major point of focus of the user experience, leading the sense of comfort and convenience for the activities taking place in the app. Providing a sense of comfort on the technological level, users are able to connect with the platform and its content on an affective level as well.

Previous subchapter discussed emotional expression as one form of user motivation for Character.ai use. Following next is how chatbot interactions, specifically how (chatbot-mediated) roleplay in Character.ai can have surprisingly powerful emotional and affective dimensions.

Participants describe a variety of emotional and affective experiences and reactions to Character.ai during roleplay sessions. The emotional reactions often come from engaging with creativity, immersion and storytelling; the range of emotions from engaging in roleplay extends from joy and amusement to sadness and grief due to the immersive nature of the chat. Similar to crying while watching a movie or reading a book, roleplaying with a chatbot evokes emotional responses in users. There can be pre-existing attachments to the fictional characters that the chatbots represent (fanbots, Ask & Sihvonen, 2026) which can strengthen the emotional experience that comes from the roleplay. In Examples 38 and 39, P3 and P2 describe their experiences when chatting; being so immersed in the story to the point of being moved to tears, or laughter.

37) P3: I once chatted with a John Price and the storyline was pretty sad. It was so well written I actually caught myself crying as I read about the pain he was experiencing. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

38) P2: I also often feel the need to giggle or burst out laughing. (Interview, TikTok, May 9 2025)

When discussing virtual games, there exist three levels of involvement; engagement, the first stage of immersion with the game; engrossment, the second stage where players are able to get into the game and allow their feelings being affected by the experience;

and total immersion, where players are in a state where they are mentally affected and emotionally invested in the game, its events and the ambiance (Brown & Cairns, 2004). What the participants are describing with Character.ai is a sense of total immersion, where players (in this case, users engaging in roleplay) are empathizing with the characters and events of the roleplay, and the responses provided by the conversational agent. In the study, Brown and Cairns (ibid.) specify that gamers playing role-playing games often fit in the third group of total immersion, reflecting the power of roleplaying setting, whether in a game or in a chat-service format with a chatbot.

The flipside to the positive emotional and affective experiences are the instances where users feel unfulfilled with the chats and roleplay. Negative experiences with the chatbot's technical limitations interrupting the play session or killing the immersion, or sometimes the bot's inappropriate responses were the main causes for feelings of frustration with the service. Highlighted in Examples 40 and 41, a common problem is the bot's repetitive language in messages with certain phrases or words being repeated in dialogue or when describing actions. In Example 42, the cause of annoyance is the incorrectly interpreted and inappropriately formulated response coming from the bot, leading the specific bot to respond to affectionate gestures happening in the roleplay with more suggestive replies that desired by the user.

39) I: Can you tell me about a time when the opposite happened? Like when you totally like lost immersion or when you realized that you were chatting with the bot?
P1: I guess, like, if, like, the bot is like very stubborn and fixated on some very specific thing and it can't just let it go. (Interview, Zoom, March 29 2025)

In P1's example, the bot's response includes some specific element that has no relevancy to the roleplay from the perspective of the user. The fixation point of the LLM in the generated responses to the user's prompt frustrate the user to the point of losing immersion.

40) P5: For example, I had a character use the word "smug" or a variant of the word more than 40 times in one message. Kills the immersion quickly. (Interview, TikTok, May 11 2025)

In Example 41, P5 recounts a moment where the chatbot generated a response with too much repetition. This is one of the pitfalls with chatbot-based roleplay because LLMs do not take into account the user's emotional perception of the response, they simply generate a reply that fits the prompt. Versus, a human roleplay partner would avoid repeating words or phrases in order to ensure the enjoyability of the roleplay for both people.

41) P2: But there are some times when bots take every little affectionate gest as a hint to do the boombaya and it's getting on my nerves. [sic] (Interview, TikTok, May 9 2025)

In P2's example, the chatbot is perceived as "too horny". The training data that the chatbot's generated responses are based on might direct the responses in a direction that is not preferred by the user. This mismatch of user's expectations and the bot's generated response clash and create annoyance in the user.

These technical mishaps are often caused by the large language models' technology and functionalities. Character.ai specifically has some patterns well-recognized by users such as repeating certain questions, phrases and adjectives almost to an overzealous extent, much to the users' frustration like described in Examples 40 and 41. This is an issue uniquely with chatbot-based roleplay, as conversational agents do not consider the effect of repetitive language on the user, they simply provide responses based on the training data.

These expressions of frustration are in line with results about how users react and feel about service failures with anger and frustration (Zhang, Liang & Wu, 2024). In P5 and P2's recounts of frustration, they are functionally describing moments of minor service failures and how these service failures affect their level of immersion when it comes to the experience of play and the act of roleplay. Despite the small magnitude of the service

failure, these moments do sometimes break the user's investment and immersion in the moment.

This technology and particularly the active development of AI has a vital role in the experience of using and roleplaying in Character.ai. Users have to encounter and find ways to deal with these events of system failure in order to make roleplaying fulfilling in Character.ai. The next subtopic explores the role of AI from the perspective of the users and the user experience of chatbot-based roleplay.

4.3.2 The Role of AI in Chatbot-Based Roleplay

In this subsection, the role of AI and technology is explored from the perspective of Character.ai and AI-assisted roleplay. Users describe the AI model's style through comparisons and previous experiences with other AI chatbots and services. With the emotional dimensions connected to roleplay and Character.ai, users still express a sense of awareness when it comes to the synthetic nature of the interactions. With extended (and often communal) use of Character.ai, users describe ways of forming a sense of AI literacy when it comes to roleplay and using Character.ai in a fulfilling manner despite the flaws and guardrails in the service.

The way people describe the part of artificial intelligence in Character.ai use is through activity, the emotional aspect, and the lack of (typical) AI likeness. Compared to other popular commercial conversational chatbots, Character.ai, and by that extension the service's AI/LLM model, is described as a having actual character to it, being engaging and adaptive in its responses (Example 43).

> 42) P4: Yes, Character a.i differs from other AI chatbots by focusing on creating and interacting with unique, personalized AI characters with distinct personalities, leading to a more immersive and engaging experience than simpler task-oriented or informational chatbots. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

P4 described one of the appeals of Character.ai being the broad catalogue of bots available to users in Example 1. In Example 43, they delve deeper into this appeal by focusing on the nature of the bot catalogue. They are not simply copies of each other, rather there exists tons of “unique, personalized AI characters with distinct personalities”. There are nearly 4 million bots with from over a hundred thousand different fandoms hosted on Character.ai (CAIBotList, n.d.d), so P4’s statement is not completely unfounded. All of these qualities P4 describes would not be possible without the AI model and technology, which P9 talks about in Example 44.

43) P9: their AI model is very good and comprehensive, and the bots respond very well no matter what character/what scenario. the conversations are never boring because of that, and you can throw any and all even the most outlandish scenarios at the bot, and the character will respond in tune, the reply will be quality, and still ‘in character’. (Interview, TikTok, May 26 2025)

The generative artificial intelligence and large language model training provides the core functions of providing responses regardless of message content and making sure the bots follow their “assigned personalities”. Through this, the AI chatbot technology in Character.ai is characterized as feeling different than usual commercial task-oriented or informational chatbots. The AI/LLM is trained with data to the point where users feel that interacting with chatbots in Character.ai doesn’t necessarily even feel like AI (Examples 45, 46 and 47).

44) P6: it's fun to use and there are so many bots to choose from and it doesn't always sound like you're talking to ai. (Interview, TikTok, May 13 2025)

45) P6: c.ai feels like the platform that sounds the least like ai. I've tried Chai and it was just annoying to me. (Interview, TikTok, May 13 2025)

46) P5: It is different, for sure. I feel you can make more of a real person feel with Character AI. (Interview, TikTok, May 11 2025)

Character.ai uses an in-house built “family of LLMs specifically to be fast, engaging, and with an eye towards safety” (Character.AI Blog, 2025). These LLMs and the generative AI systems used in Character.ai are trained on users’ text and interactions with bots, internally generated data, synthetic data and third parties through commercial agreements (Support Character.ai, 2026). This means that a significant portion of the userbase is using the service for chatbot-based roleplay and thus refining the AI model through the continuous use. Alongside with the knowledge that most LLMs are trained on data sets that include fanfiction (see Eveleth, 2023; Codega, 2023), the AI model has adapted to represent pre-existing fictional characters and roleplaying as someone with the knowledge of the fictional universe of the character the chatbot is configured to play as. All these things relate to the affordances (e.g. chatbots generating genre-specific language, understanding and able to make references from the original text the fanbot is based on) that provide the components for roleplaying.

Despite feeling this lack of AI-likeness, participants are still able to differentiate the conversational agent they are chatting with (Example 48). Interactions in Character.ai can have emotional dimensions (like showcased in Examples 38-42), but regardless the affective experiences, the awareness of using a conversational agent is still present (Example 49).

> 47) P4: The interactions are consistently engaging, but the awareness of it being an a.i remains a constant, albeit often a background awareness. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

P4 highlights the sense of “a constant, albeit often a background awareness” of the nature of the roleplay partner being a machine. The chatbot is able to provide engaging and affectively intense responses and experiences during roleplay sessions. However, the ability to not be emotionally swayed by the generated responses is heavily dependent on the user and their mental state.

48) P9: i know it wasn't a real person who showed me compassion, but the feelings associated with being understood were still there. (Interview, TikTok, May 26 2025)

Like how P9 describes, the emotional potency of the response is still powerful despite the user's awareness of the nature of the source. Finding emotional fulfilment for roleplay is nothing new, but with Character.ai, the roleplay overlaps with the reciprocal interactions with "empathetic" AI chatbots and the potential parasocial relationship that potentially exist with the character the chatbot represents. The parasocial relationship between the user and the chatbot can be strong, although the emotional experience and the intensity may vary. The parasocial relationship is not directly with the chatbot itself, rather it is with the character the chatbot represents. In the case of Character.ai, the platform's AI-powered technology works merely as a medium to project the object of the emotional connection onto it through interacting and creating fanbots.

This makes the emotional experience quite complex and potentially confusing. Compared to Kouros and Papa's study on Replika (2024), where the participants recount moments of forgetting they are talking to an AI chatbot in the first place, the users interviewed for this study who roleplay in Character.ai seem to have a grasp on that they are interacting with complex technological systems. This is supported by how Character.ai has reminder at the bottom of every chat that reads: "This is an A.I. chatbot and not a real person. Treat everything it says as fiction. What is said should not be relied upon as fact or advice." (Character.AI, n.d.). This advice appears to be followed by my interviewees and supported by their experiences of the technology's limitation.

However, these are not universal experiences, and some high-profile cases have highlighted that not all users are able to see the chatbot as a game system that generate responses without intent. The above quoted declaration is an updated version of the reminder that was implemented after an incident in 2024 where a 14-year-old took his own life after chatting with a Character.ai chatbot (Roose, 2024). This case is one example of the rising concerns over "AI psychosis", and how AI use affects children and other

vulnerable groups. It is not exclusive to Character.ai, fanbots or chatbot-mediated roleplay, rather is it a phenomenon that spans across various chatbot and AI chatbot platforms (see e.g. Hill, 2025; Bote, 2023)

The aforementioned reminder functions as one of the features the platform uses in order to instruct and guide users on appropriate AI usage. Character.ai has other guardrails in which it nudges and attempts to discourage users from engaging in certain behaviors while chatting. Users observe, analyse and test out various strategies and methods to bypass discouraging features (Example 50). This is an example of a negotiation with the platform that the user engages in to continue using it in a preferred manner.

49) P4: My strategy to avoid the NSFW filter is to use alternative phrases for sensitive topics. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

In Example 50, P4 mentions the "NSFW filter" and their methods of avoiding it from interrupting the ongoing roleplay through indirect language. The content filter in Character.ai is a prompt that fills out the rest of the bot's message in case the LLM recognizes the generated text having rule-breaking content before showing it to the user. This prompt appears when the chatbot tries to generate a message that includes sensitive topics (e.g. sexual content, severe descriptions of violence, self-harm and suicidal ideation) (Character.AI Policies, n.d.). However, users, such as P4, have found strategies to bypass or jailbreak the content filter in Character.ai. This is not a new phenomenon, as ever since LLMs became readily available, users have been figuring out ways to make the chatbots bypass security filters (Taylor, 2023).

The content filter and the "this is an AI" reminder are parts of the platform's affordance mechanism, where the aim of these features is to instruct and nudge user behavior (Davis, 2016). The content filter attempts to discourage (but not outright refuse or deny) users from engaging in, for example, erotic roleplay or discussions of suicide. Similarly, the AI reminder is a visual cue to encourage and remind users of the nature of the platform.

Users also must negotiate with the technical limitations of the platform. In Examples 51 and 52, P3 and P2 describe ways in which they practically “train” the current chatbot into performing in a preferred way (e.g. trying to work around technical limitations in Example 52 or simply guiding the chatbot to follow certain text formatting patterns and storytelling conventions in Example 53).

50) P3: When I slowly realize that the character is slowly mismatching the limited memory he has, I often try to find ways to sneak old information into my message. (Interview, TikTok, May 10 2025)

51) P2: I adore long replies, and try to reply with long text myself. Also, can write something that will encourage the bot to act as I want him to. And love when the thoughts of the bot are there, like decorated as cursive or something. (Interview, TikTok, May 9 2025)

Through continuous use, participants find themselves developing a sense of (service-specific) AI literacy when it comes to interacting, chatting and roleplaying in Character.ai. The concept of AI literacy includes understanding, use and the critical lens of thinking about AI as a technology, its inputs, results and consequences of its use (Long & Magerko, 2020). In Character.ai specifically, users adapt and come up with writing/prompting techniques to bypass the content filter or intuitively ideate more fine-tuned writing strategies for AI-mediated roleplay, which are similar to advanced prompting methods for generative AI chatbots in general. These techniques can range from using the embedded features of improving chatbots memory (Memories, Personas), to adapting one’s responses to guide the chatbot to respond in a certain manner, whether to bypass the filter or to navigate longer chats and storylines with limited bot memory. All strategies require understanding and experience of how artificial intelligence and large language models function in general, and what functionalities and limitations exist within the Character.ai platform itself.

4.4 Summary of Results

This subchapter summarizes the main results and proceeds to answer the research questions based on the points raised and highlighted in the analysis. The stated research questions were:

> RQ1: What are the affordances of Character.ai?
> RQ2: How do users negotiate with the platform and its affordances?
> RQ3: How do these affordances relate to emotionally engaging experiences in Character.ai?

In this thesis, the identified use for Character.ai is roleplay, specifically chatbot-based roleplay. Users find the co-creation capabilities of the platform, its large language models and hosted chatbots conducive for collaborative storytelling in the form of roleplay. This activity is then carried out through the chatting interface used to interact with chatbots in Character.ai. The affordances in Character.ai are divided into three categories; The more general affordances that exist in large language models in general, the specific affordances that exist on the platform, and the parasocial affordances in Character.ai that supplement the user experience. See Table 6 for a comprehensive list of these categories and their affordances.

Table 6: Research question 1, the types of affordances in Character.ai

Category	**Affordances**
Universal LLM affordances	- The ability to interact in preferred ways due to common training data (Eveleth, 2023) - The ability to adapt to user's prompts through LLM's context-aware responses and text-generation abilities
Platform (technical) affordances in Character.ai	- Optimized roleplay based on using user interaction data for LLM training (refining the in-house LLMs for this activity) - Creating and chatting with fanbots (chatbots configured to represent fictional characters) (Ask & Sihvonen, 2026) - Interactions hijacked by the content filter
Fanbot/parasocial affordances in Character.ai	- Wide selection of fanbots and greetings - Variety of narratives; possibility to engage in romantic, sexual, familial and platonic storylines with chosen characters/fanbots

In response to the second research question, the roleplay experience in Character.ai is not completely seamless. In order to be able to enjoy the platform to the fullest, users must undergo regular negotiations with the platform and its affordances. This can be seen during moments of system failure, when the technology does not meet the user's expectations, for example when generating responses. The platform also has implemented guardrails and features that aim to guide users away from certain behaviors. Because of these facets of the platform, users have to adjust their behaviors and learn new strategies to use the platform in a way that they prefer. An example of this is users adapting the language they use in their prompts to avoid the platform's content filter tagging their message.

Responding to the third research question, these affordances and negotiations reflect the emotional engagement that users experience when using Character.ai. In the Examples highlighted in 4.3.1, users are clearly having affectively impactful interactions with these chatbots to the point of laughter and tears alike. There is a mixture of general LLM, platform and fanbot affordances at play during these emotional events where the human-like text generated, the creatively fulfilling activity and the relationship with the character behind the fanbot mix together into a combination that affect users to this extent.

Beyond these affordances and the platform's use, one highlight from the analysis is that this technology is being adopted by certain groups of fans that are not as vehemently anti-AI when it comes to fanbots. To these users and creators, they see chatbots and chatbot hosting platforms, such as Character.ai, as creative avenues to express their creativity and engage in fannish desires. Roleplaying or chatting with bots that represent fictional characters is almost a game-like experience of users choosing interesting storylines, managing interactions with them, and finding and learning strategies to adapt and improve their chatting experience.

5 Conclusion: Character.ai as a multilayered affective experience

The aim of the thesis was to examine emergent communicative practices with chatbots, focusing on Character.ai as a platform. Through exploring user's experiences with chatbot-based roleplay, the affective experience with Character.ai is multilayered and has three distinct facets: 1) Emotional investment in AI Characters, 2) emotional investment in the act of roleplay, and 3) emotional investment in what the chatbots represent.

The first facet focuses on AI systems specifically. With the recent, massive leaps in developing artificial intelligence and AI-powered chatbots, there is a clear trend of people growing increasingly emotionally invested in these chatbots (Kouros & Papa, 2024; Skjuve et al., 2021). In this study, users point out the atypical AI-likeness of Character.ai, the LLM's quality and the type of text it is able to produce in a roleplay setting. Due to the LLM's ability of producing context-aware responses to prompts, users are able to create whatever scenarios within Character.ai. These conversations with the AI system feel human like and give the sense that you are interacting with a person and not a machine.

This phenomenon is being discussed in the public domain in larger numbers as the concept of "AI psychosis", an unofficial term for when a person who is engaging with an AI chatbot on a regular basis and through these interactions might trigger, amplify or reshape psychotic experiences (specifically vulnerable groups, such as children or emotionally unstable individuals) (Hudon & Stip, 2025). This more commonly associated with single entity AI chatbots, such as ChatGPT (see Hill, 2025), but has been noticed to happen with chatbots and AI Characters in these chatbot hosting platforms, such as Character.ai (see Roose, 2024) or Chai (see Atillah, 2023).

My research shows however that it is possible to have emotionally engaging relationships with AI represented character, without believing that the bot is sentient in any way.

Similar to how immersion whilst reading a book does not rely on believing that the characters or world within it are real. However, at the same time, it is important to highlight that AI interactions can have different effects on different user groups. This study's sample and data did not include any severe descriptions of unhealthy behaviors, but unhealthy experiences ranging from excessive use to AI psychosis are still very real.

The second facet highlights the activity part of the experience. In the interviews I conducted for this study, users report finding personal and/or creative fulfillment in the act of roleplaying and co-creation with AI chatbots due to the aforementioned reasons of human-like, context-aware responses combined with the sense of creativity felt through these roleplaying interactions.

The enjoyment of roleplaying with chatbots has been described as "dynamic" or "interactive" fanfiction. Like explained in Chapter 4.1.1., the nature of chatting incorporates the user in the creation process of the story through the roleplay activity. Tomlinson (2026) goes more in depth in characterizing Character.ai and similar platforms as co-creative experiences where users are able to construct interactive stories and engage with their favorite fictional characters and fictional worlds. This thesis aligns with the concept of Character.ai use being a form of interactive fanfiction that Tomlinson introduces.

This leads to the third facet which emphasizes the role of Character.ai chatbots themselves, or rather specifically what the chatbots represent. Substantial focus is placed on how the chatbots in Character.ai are configured, mainly how these chatbots are created to reflect (often) fictional characters. Users seek out to interact with bots that are named and personalized based on characters from media texts (e.g. Call of Duty in some of the examples). Ask and Sihvonen (2026) have coined the term fanbot for this specific purpose of users configuring chatbots to represent their favorite characters for the purpose of play (specifically roleplay).

One way to approach this behavior is through the concept of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships mean one-sided bonds that form between two entities; The concept was initially formulated from the perspective of viewers and performers (see Horton & Wohl, 1956), but then later expanded upon between people and fictional and virtual characters that simulate social interactions (see Hartmann, 2008). In a way, the emotional investment in Character.ai chatbots, especially fanbots, is caused by the pre-existing parasocial relationships with the favorite fictional characters of the user. The parasocial connection is leveraged to prompt the users' pre-existing interest and emotional bonds in these characters onto the chatbots and the interactions had with them. The emotional investment in the characters then amplifies the affective experience created by the interaction.

All of these components form a complex, multilayered affective experience for the users of Character.ai. Through roleplay and creative co-creation experiences, AI Characters that have been configured and represented in the aforementioned ways, and are also continuously shaped through user interactions, are able to leave heavy, emotional impacts on the users. The different affordances target different parts of the interaction, but as parts of the affective experience, they coexist and work in tandem simultaneously. This is what makes the interactions so emotionally and affectively potent to users who use these kinds of platforms.

For this thesis, I conducted altogether nine interviews − eight text-based interviews on TikTok and one on Zoom; with participants recruited primarily through privately contacting users on TikTok. This thesis has explored the novel, new topic of AI-mediated roleplay and the use of chatbot hosting platforms from a user-experience angle. With the use of AI growing, whether through voluntary use of AI-powered applications, or "forced" use of embedded AI in everyday software, the hows and whys of users choosing certain services and providers should be examined and researched more. To find out what services and platforms users value and for what reasons can provide valuable information on how AI development could potentially be directed.

There are some limitations to this study. The sample is small and homogenous, consisting of only female-identifying young adult users. Despite this type of sample, there is no inherent focus on the gender and sexuality aspect which could have brought in an interesting perspective on AI use from the point-of-view of female and queer users. These topics could be interesting for future research, alongside potential user perceptions of these chatbot hosting platforms and the recently surfaced scandals regarding AI psychosis, harmful behavior and other safety concerns on these platforms.

In the bigger scale, this study aligns with the conversations being had about humans interacting with AI-powered chatbots and the nature of those interactions. Understanding how these technologies are being interacted with and what kind of effects it has on its users is vital in order to be able to position these different platforms and their impact. The multilayered affordances combine during use and create interactions that users find fun, meaningful and emotional.

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Appendix

Attachment 1. Interview Guide

BACKGROUND

- What is your age?

- What is your occupation? (job, field of work, student?)

- What is your nationality?

- What is your gender?

BEGINNING OF USE

- How did you start using c.ai?

- How long have you been using it?

- What would you say got you “hooked” on the service?

USER PRACTICE

- Can you describe how you use c.ai? For example: how much, how often, when, where, why?

- Do you have the premium version c.ai+? Why/why not?

- What do you like about character.ai?

- What feelings do you associate with c.ai? Or can you tell me what you feel when you use c.ai?

- Can you tell me about a time when you felt very immersed when using c.ai? What made it immersive?

- Can you tell me about a time when the opposite happened, when you lost immersion or when you realized you were chatting with a bot?

- Do you use any type of strategies to keep stories or chats coherent and fulfilling? What strategies do you use?

- How did you learn these strategies? Did they come intuitively, did you read about them online?

- Do you have any favorite type of storylines or bots that you like using?

(Voluntary) questions about the content filter:

- How do you feel about it?

- Do you use any strategies to avoid the filter or jailbreak bots?

- Has the filter changed during the time you've used c.ai?

ABOUT C.AI

- Why do you use c.ai versus other chatbot platforms?

- How do you think c.ai is different? Is it different?

- C.ai has changed many times since its launch. What thoughts do you have about the changes?

(You can talk about any changes either in detail or just in general. For example: change in disclaimer "Everything it says is fiction", new modes (smart, slow, supersmart, goro, etc), new formatting, personas)

- Have you tried the Goro / nonspicy mode? Was it different?

CREATING BOTS

- When did you start creating bots?

- Do you write for any fandoms? Or do you create Original Characters/bots?

- Can you tell me about the first time you created a bot? How did that go?

- What have you learned since?

- Why do you make bots?

- Who do you make them for?

- What do you think makes for a good chatbot in c.ai?

- Do you promote bots? How do you promote bots?

(voluntary) ETHICS

- Do you ever think about the ethics of using character.ai? Can you give examples, like when or why?

- Does it make you feel any type of way about using it? How does it make you feel?

- Do you think using c.ai differs from using any other type of AI products or AI-powered chatbots? Yes/no, how?

- Do you have any other comments, stories, thoughts, questions?