Telling Stories through Multi-User Dialogue by Modeling Character Relations

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Abstract

This paper explores character-driven story continuation, in which the story emerges through characters' first- and second-person narration as well as dialogue-requiring models to select language that is consistent with a character's persona and their relationships with other characters while following and advancing the story. We hypothesize that a multi-task model that trains on character dialogue plus character relationship information improves transformer-based story continuation. To this end, we extend the Critical Role Dungeons and Dragons Dataset (Rameshkumar and Bailey, 2020)—consisting of dialogue transcripts of people collaboratively telling a story while playing the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons-with automatically extracted relationships between each pair of interacting characters as well as their personas. A series of ablations lend evidence to our hypothesis, showing that our multi-task model using character relationships improves story continuation accuracy over strong baselines.

1 Introduction

Automated storytelling can be thought of as creative, long-from text generation and understanding—requiring explicit long-term memory, consistency, and creativity among other pre-requisites. Most modern (neural) automated storytellers are *plot-driven* and frame the task in terms of sequentially generating plot points that narrate the story in third-person (Kiros et al., 2015; Mostafazadeh et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2018; Fan et al., 2018). This approach does not generally place much weight on individual characters or their interactions—information known to be critical for creating stories (Riedl and Young, 2010).

We are inspired by the idea of *character-driven and emergent storytelling* wherein narrative emerges through characters' interactions as seen

	⟨ Scanlan, neutral, Vexahlia ⟩,	
Relations	⟨ Keyleth, positive, Scanlan⟩,	
Kelations	⟨ Grog, negative, Vexhalia⟩,	
	⟨ Scanlan, positive, Vaxildan ⟩	
	They wake up in the morning, prepar-	
	ing for the coming battle. Scanlan turns	
Summary		
_	them all into Ravenites with light cloth-	
	ing. The sleet storm is starting	
Vexahlia:	Bundle up!	
	Okay. How will we know when it's time	
Scanlan:	for me to release? We have to wait for	
	Tooma to go report.	
Vexahlia:	Is Vorugal back? He's back.	
Scanlan:	I assume.	
Vexahlia:	Do we see Larkin around?	
DM:	No, you do not see Larkin around.	
Scanlan:	Vax, do you want to go look?	
Vaxildan:	For Larkin?	
	No Larkin. I attempt to see see if Tooma	
	is coming. I don't want to release this	
Scanlan:	thing before Tooma is there reporting to	
	Vorugal.	
Vaxildan:	(Grog voice) Six. It said six.	
, amidaii.	(STOS TOTO) SILL IT SUIT SIN.	

Table 1: A sample from CRD3 extended, showing: pairwise character relationships; historical context via the summary; and current character interactions in the form of dialogue, *first-person* (green), and second-person (blue) narration. DM refers to the Dungeon Master who provides arbitration and additional context to players.

in Table 1. In addition to the challenges faced by automated storytellers, a character-driven storytelling system must produce language while simultaneously: (1) keeping each character's personas consistent while acting; (2) keeping track of relationships between characters that will affect their interactions; and (3) follow and logically advance the plot of the story.

To better explore how to give automated systems these two abilities, we focus on the task of *story continuation* solely through dialogue—i.e. picking the next character response that best continues a story. The task and data are seen in Table 1. We build off the Critical Role Dungeons and Drag-

ons Dataset or CRD3 (Rameshkumar and Bailey, 2020), a unique dataset that contains dialogue transcripts of a small group of around six players roleplaying various characters while playing the table top role-playing game Dungeons and Dragonstheir adventures and interactions forming a narrative that stretches hundreds of chapters, with each chapter forming a subplot. The original dataset was intended to be used for abstractive summarization and contains ground-truth summaries for each chapter. To better suit our purpose of studying character-driven storytelling, we automatically augment the dataset with information regarding character persona as well as relationship types between pairs of characters (friends, enemies, etc.) by clustering crowdsourced descriptions of character interactions from the Critical Role Wiki.¹

This extended dataset lets us break down the problem of *character-driven story continuation* into two sub-tasks corresponding to the three challenges mentioned earlier in terms of interacting within the confines of a story while staying consistent with respect to character personas and relationships. We show that training a system to optimize for both of these sub-tasks significantly improves story continuation accuracy.

Our work's two primary contributions are thus: (1) the extension to CRD3 enabling a study of *character-driven storytelling* and the corresponding methodology used; and (2) a multi-task learning system that leverages character relation and persona information to better complete stories.

2 Related Work and Background

Storytelling. Storytelling systems that use symbolic planning (Lebowitz, 1987; Gervás et al., 2005; Porteous and Cavazza, 2009; Riedl and Young, 2010; Ware and Young, 2011) focused on ensuring coherence and consistency of plot through explicitly listed rules in the form of pre- and post-conditions, often requiring extensive knowledge engineering. Modern neural language-model based approaches generally attempt to learn to tell *plot-driven stories* from a corpus of stories via learning objectives that optimize reconstructing the story itself (Kiros et al., 2015; Roemmele and Gordon, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2017; Fan et al., 2018). In particular, a two-step process in which the high level plot is first generated, followed by filling in rest of

the story constrained to the plot has emerged (Martin et al., 2017, 2018; Ammanabrolu et al., 2020; Tambwekar et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2019; Ippolito et al., 2019). Ammanabrolu et al. (2021) look at plot generation from a *character-driven* perspective using commonsense knowledge, though do not model character interactions at all. Closely related to the spirit of our task is the Story Cloze test (Mostafazadeh et al., 2016), which measures the ability of a model to correctly predict the end of a story. Like the other works mentioned here, however, this task does not require dialogue or other forms of character interactions.

Dialogue. Contemporary neural dialogue retrieval systems, both chit-chat and goal-oriented, more explicitly model agent interactions than most storytelling systems (Henderson et al., 2014; El Asri et al., 2017). Particularly relevant to our work are dialogue systems that attempt to model and stay consistent with an agent's persona, such as Persona Chat (Zhang et al., 2018), or using further contextual information such as setting in addition to character personas using a crowd-sourced fantasy text-game such as LIGHT (Urbanek et al., 2019). None of these works, however, have any notion of story or plot, often using significantly less long-term context than most storytelling systems.

3 Character-Driven Storytelling

This section first describes the automated extensions to the CRD3 dataset, specifically information on character relationships, followed by the multitask learning setup and transformer architecture that leverage the new data for story continuation.

	Train	Valid	Test
Avg. no. of turns in a chunk	38.37	61.17	62.18
Avg. no. of char.s in a chunk	4.06	4.07	4.36
No. of chunks	11400	815	761

Table 2: CRD3 (extended) dataset statistics.

3.1 CRD3 Automated Dataset Extension

CRD3, as originally seen in Rameshkumar and Bailey (2020), contains two seasons of 159 transcribed Critical Role episodes, consisting of 398,682 turns in total. It further contains 34,243 ground truth human-written summary dialogue chunks that abstractively summarize dialogue chunks. The chunks themselves consist of a sequence of dialogue and first- and second-person narration turns

that form a semantically cohesive unit—with the end of a chunk signifying the completion of a subplot or change in location. Table 2 provides statistics for the number of chunks in the train, as well as the average number of character turns and number of characters within a chunk.

To enable a more effective study of characterdriven storytelling using this dataset, we automatically extend CRD3 by adding descriptions of character relations from the Critical Role Wiki. These descriptions are free form text and often summarize character emotions during their interactions with another character. To condense them down, we cluster the character relation descriptions in an unsupervised fashion by calculating the vectorized TF-IDF representation of the description and applying the K-means algorithm. Varying the number of clusters changes the qualitative information conveyed by the cluster. For example, if we set the number of clusters to three, we can then also use the popular sentiment analysis tool VADER (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014) to provide human interperable relationship labels for each of the three clusterspositive, negative, or neutral as seen in Table 1. We specifically focus on incorporating these 3 relation types into our models. These relationship labels are attached to every dialogue chunk based on the characters appearing in that chunk. Further information regarding clusters is found in Appendix A.3.

3.2 Multi-task Learning

Based on the hypothesis that modeling character interaction information is critical for our overall task of *character-driven storytelling*, our system optimizes for two sub-tasks: next character prediction and story continuation. The next character prediction task can be summarized as: given current context, predict the next character who will act or speak—providing a proxy for judging who is most likely to respond to the current character in a multi-character setting. Similarly, the story continuation task refers to predicting the next character response that continues the story given the same context. The context itself contains information regarding: (1) a summary of the story so far using the dialogue summary chunks provided in CRD3 and described in Section 3.1, (2) pairwise relationship cluster labels between all characters within the dialogue chunk, and (3) the last n-turns of character interactions.

Our model's architecture is shown in Figure 1.

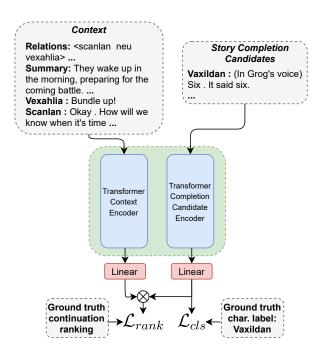


Figure 1: Multi-task learning overall architecture. The red shaded linear layers are task-specific and blue transformer blocks are pre-trained. Both transformer blocks share parameters across tasks.

It is inspired by the bi-encoder featured in Urbanek et al. (2019). In this model, two separate transformers are used to produce vector representations for the input context and each candidate utterance for the response retrieval task. All candidates are scored by via dot product between their vector representations and the context representation and trained using a ranking loss \mathcal{L}_{rank} . For the task of next character prediction, we use the same vector representation for the context and pass it through an additional linear layer with softmax layer to predict the correct character from the list of all possible characters. This sub-task uses a cross entropy loss \mathcal{L}_{cls} . The entire system is trained jointly by optimizing $\mathcal{L} = \lambda_1 \mathcal{L}_{rank} + \lambda_2 \mathcal{L}_{cls}$ for some hyperparameters λ_i . By virtue of the architecture, network parameters are shared between the tasks.

4 Evaluation

We conduct two ablations studies that analyze: (1) the complexity of performing *character-driven story continuation* on the dataset; and (2) the effectiveness of imbuing the model with relation information via input context and multi-task learning.

Our base transformer model that we build off of in each of these is the bi-encoder ranker described in Section 3.2. The transformer encoder is a similar architecture as BERT (Devlin et al., 2019), with

Eval Task	Character Prediction		Story Continuation			
Metric	Weighted F1		Hits@1/10		Hits@5/10	
Training Task Type	Single	Multi	Single	Multi	Single	Multi
Base	47.3	47.6	18.0	18.3	70.6	73.9
Base+Summary	48.4	49.0	18.0	20.4	71.7	74.3
Base+Relations	49.0	48.8	17.6	20.2	70.6	74.0
Base+Summary+Relations	48.8	48.8	18.0	21.3	72.9	74.6

Table 3: Multi-task ablations.

Eval Task	Char. Pred.	Story Continuation
Metric	Weighted F1	Hits@1/10
1	24.2	17.0
2	42.6	18.8
5	47.2	18.2
10	47.6	20.5

Table 4: Historical context ablations.

256 million total parameters, and is pre-trained using the Reddit dataset extracted and made available on pushshift.io (Baumgartner et al., 2020) seen in Roller et al. (2020). This dataset has been shown to result in an improved understanding of conversational natural language (Yang et al., 2018; Mazaré et al., 2018). Further hyperparameter and training details are shown in Appendix A.2.

For story continuation report standard retrieval metrics of $\operatorname{Hits}@N$, where we measure the ability of the model to output the gold standard dialogue candidate in the top-N of the given candidates. For character prediction, we report F1 weighted by the number of instances of each character type.

4.1 Historical Context Ablations

The first set of ablations measures performance on each of the two sub-tasks as a function of historical context required in an attempt to assess the complexity of the CRD3 extended dataset and its suitability for exploring *character-driven storytelling*. Recall that the CRD3 dataset provides summaries for each separate dialogue chunk. In Table 4, we vary the number of prior chunks of such summaries used as input context to the model and measure performance on each of the sub-tasks after training the model jointly on both sub-tasks.

The trends shown in Table 4 are quite clear—indicating that, overall, the CRD3 dataset requires very long contexts to ensure effective performance. On average, across both evaluation tasks performance gain between using a single historical context chunk and using two is greater than the corresponding differences when using even more chunks. Additionally, performance continues to rise with

added historical context up to the maximum context length we tested of 10. We note that this is a significantly greater amount of context than generally required for state-of-the-art chit-chat dialogue datasets (Roller et al., 2020) as well as prior story completion datasets such as ROC Stories (Mostafazadeh et al., 2016), reinforcing our hypothesis that the CRD3 dataset is well suited to enabling *character-driven storytelling* by focusing on interactions requiring long-term memory.

4.2 Multi-task Ablations

These ablations focus on analyzing the effects of our methods to imbue the agent with relationship and character information, specifically including the relationship cluster labels in the input and multitask training. Table 3 outlines these results when evaluated on both the character prediction and story continuation sub-tasks with different: (1) inputs types—with base referring to only character interactions and additional information as seen in Figure 1; and (2) training methods—single referring to training on only the evaluation task and multi to jointly training on both tasks.

We would first like to note that we use the same relationship labels for characters through the entire story—i.e. across all the dialogue chunks. Our approach intuitively averages the relationship type between characters through time—e.g. characters that are friends at first and then become enemies will have a neutral label throughout all the story. While more fine grained relationship labels that do not perform such averaging might perform better, they would also require extensive additional human annotations to track relationships through time.

For character prediction, the Base+Summary multi-task and Base+Relations single-task models perform best though are closely comparable to the Base+Summary+Relations multi-task model. For story continuation, the Base+Summary+Relations multi-task model outperforms all others. In all story continuation experiments, multi-task trained models outperform their counterpart single-task trained

model. Through these results, we can infer that imbuing character relationship information through *both* input relationship cluster information as well as next character prediction helps models continue stories—while staying consistent with a particular character's persona—more accurately.

5 Conclusions

We hypothesized that injecting models with information on relationships between characters would improve their ability to complete *character-driven stories*. A series of ablation studies support this, with a key insight being that a particularly efficient way of giving story continuation models this information is by multi-task training them on both character dialogue and relationship information automatically extracted from online sources.

6 Broader Impacts

Our work on character-driven storytelling has potential implications extending to the creation of learning agents that communicate using natural language, especially those requiring an agent to stay consistent with a character or persona throughout an interaction. As our system is trained entirely using a dataset collected from character interactions of a set of players role-playing in a fantasy Dungeons and Dragons world, we are prone to echoing biases found in the data. Some of these biases are necessary for effective story continuation, enabling a reader to identify the genre and conveying thematic information. Others may potentially involve non-normative language usage—acceptable in a fantasy world but inappropriate in the real world. Restricting our system to story continuation through a retrieval mechanism as opposed to generating text mitigates, though do not eliminate some of these biases. We urge future researchers and application developers that use automated storytelling techniques to similarly clarify the origins and methodology behind the creation of delivered story content.

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A Appendices

A.1 CRD3 Extended Examples

Relations	<scanlan, neutral,="" vexahlia="">,</scanlan,>
Relations	<grog, neutral,="" scanlan="">,</grog,>
	Scanlan deceives the clasp leader with a blue gem that can grant one
	wish if they say the password while holding the gem. He gives the
Summary	leader the gem and promises to give him the password if they can
	visit riskel. The leader reveals the clasp helped riskel prepare
	for his escape
Keyleth:	okay!
DM:	He looks over at the gentleman who inspected it earlier and nods his
DIVI.	head. "accepted." and they continue walking forward.
Grog:	Lucky fucking druid.
DM:	It is the piece you put in the actual—
Scanlan:	It's a blue shard that we found in-long, long ago- it's real crystal
Scaman.	and it's real magic.
DM:	Yes. I know what that is.
Scanlan:	Because I don't.
DM:	Well, it was sufficient upon inspection for this.
Scanlan:	Okay.
Vexahlia:	Whoa, I think it opens a portal to another plane.
Scanlan:	I don't know what it is, but it's magic.

Table 5: Randomly selected CRD3 extended examples

Relations <grog, neutral,="" vexahlia="">,</grog,>	
Kelations	<keyleth, positive,="" scanlan="">,</keyleth,>
	Rejoining the party, Vex wonders aloud why desmond is still in the
C	cell. Percy responds that it was originally for his own protection,
Summary	but that since the problem has been taken care of, it is a precaution
	that is no longer needed
Vexahlia:	Are there days of the week? what is a weekend?
Keyleth:	Yeah, There's days of the week.
Scanlan:	What is this world? How does time work here?
	There are days of the week, I'm not gon na go into the specifics of
DM:	it because I'm working on it. This question hasn't really arisen
	before and I probably should figure that out. It 's the equivalent of
	a thursday.
Scanlan:	It's always thursday.

Table 6: Randomly selected CRD3 extended examples