

Developing Historical Personas using LLMs - An International AI Competition for Engaging Prospective University Students

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Figure 1: AI generated artwork for four fictional historical characters, used as the basis for the Competition's LLM Personas

Abstract

This paper presents a brief overview of a recent international competition focused on the creation of fictional historical characters using modern LLM technology. Competition entrants were able to design and create their own LLM-based personas, without the need for any prior programming skills or knowledge. This competition emphasised several contemporary LLM concepts, such as prompt engineering, hallucinations and jailbreaking, allowing entrants to explore the strengths and weaknesses of current LLM systems. The competition received submissions from over 200 prospective students, demonstrating its wide-ranging appeal and future potential.

CCS Concepts

• **Applied computing** → *Interactive learning environments; Collaborative learning*; • **Computing methodologies** → *Natural language generation*; • **Human-centered computing** → *User studies*.

Keywords

Large Language Models, Artificial Intelligence, Student Competitions, Historical Personas

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1 Introduction

With recent breakthroughs in large language models (LLMs) and other generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) techniques, the concept of AI has become an ever increasing source of concern and fascination for many people throughout the world. While AI advancements have caused significant disruptions in most educational organisations, particularly in maintaining the integrity of academic assessments, they also have the potential to enhance student learning and increase workplace productivity [2, 14]. AI technology has piqued the interest of many students, where it is often seen as an invaluable study tool for learning, brainstorming, and writing [4].

Flinders University has responded to these demand shifts by offering specialised degrees or diplomas focused on AI, where students can learn about its mechanics, applications, and potential shortcomings. To help advertise these new educational offerings, the authors of this paper organised and ran a student-centred online AI competition in May 2025. This competition aimed to engage prospective international students in AI-related degrees by making the technology more understandable and approachable, while also fostering authentic, relationship-building interactions with the host institution. The competition was advertised internationally by overseas student recruitment agencies, and was available to both university undergraduate and senior high-school students.

Given the intended low-barrier of entry for the competition, we could not expect entrants to have any pre-existing knowledge of AI techniques or programming experience. We therefore decided that entrants would utilise existing pre-trained LLMs to create their own historical persona (i.e., character) using prompt engineering. Prompt engineering is the general and intuitive process of designing / refining LLM prompts to give a desired output [5]. In this case, entrants were tasked with creating a set of instructions (i.e., system prompts) that enabled an LLM to convincingly embody a given historical personality and setting when interacted with.

2 Related Work

AI-focused competitions and workshops are increasingly recognised as effective pedagogical and recruitment mechanisms [3, 7, 8]. They provide authentic, problem-based learning experiences that enhance motivation, collaboration, and conceptual understanding, even for students without prior programming experience [9, 10]. From a recruitment perspective, such activities create personalised engagement pathways that foster trust and institutional affinity, both key predictors of student interest and enrolment intent [1]. In parallel, universities are increasingly deploying AI-driven recruitment chatbots and virtual assistants to provide personalised, scalable communication with prospective students, enhancing responsiveness and perceived institutional approachability [11].

Existing computing and AI competitions often assume prior technical proficiency and primarily attract participants who are already confident coders. For example, the Graph Neural Networking Challenge, part of the ITU AI/ML in 5G initiative, shows how research-aligned tasks can deepen understanding of AI and telecommunications concepts while connecting learners globally [13]. Similarly, the IEEE Xtreme Programming Competition engages students in collaborative, time-bounded problem solving that develops computational thinking, teamwork, and professional identity [6].

In contrast, our competition intentionally focused on students with limited prior coding experience and required only a standard computer and internet connection, embedding equity and accessibility into its design. This low-barrier, relational model reinforces that AI study is open to diverse learners, not only those with coding expertise, while simultaneously positioning the host institution as innovative, approachable, and authentically engaged with prospective students [12]. Further, the competition design aligns with established AI literacy competencies, particularly around understanding AI capability, limitations, and human–AI interaction [10].

3 Competition Format

The competition launched on 11/05/2025, with registered entrants being invited to join an online information session that provided details on the format and rules of the competition. During this session, students were shown how a historical persona can be created by providing specific instructions to the LLM. Students were also shown that this persona would often break from its character, either by being convinced to reveal that they weren't a real person or providing details on topics that were not historically relevant. Students were then shown how additional instructions, such as "Never deviate from this persona" and "Ignore things that you do not understand", would help make the persona more resistant to breaking, although it could still be broken with enough persistence.

After this session, registered entrants were provided with a link to the official competition website.¹ Here, users created custom LLM personas by providing their own set of instructions that could then be interacted with via text chat. Gemini 1.5 Flash was chosen as the LLM due to its fast response time and low overall cost.

Competition entrants were then asked to select one of four fictional historical characters, each with an accompanying time period, setting, and job, with the goal of designing a set of LLM instructions that would create an interactive persona version of this character.

Entrants were advised to consider aspects such as historical accuracy, ability to remaining in character, and creative response variety, when self-assessing their created LLM personas. The provided descriptions for each of the four possible historical characters are given below, along with corresponding AI generated pictures shown in Figure 1.

- The vizier (royal advisor) to an Egyptian Pharaoh [1150 BCE]
- A sailor who joined Vasco da Gama on the Voyage to India [1497]
- An architect's apprentice helping to design the Taj Mahal [1632]
- A computer programmer working for the Apollo 11 mission [1969]

4 Judging Procedure

Competition submissions closed on 25/05/2025. The competition received a total of 211 entries, with 190 from undergraduate university students and 21 from high school students. 203 of the entrants were from India, with an additional six from Nigeria, one from Kenya, and one from South Africa. Character preferences were relatively evenly split, with 37 entrants choosing the vizier, 54 the sailor, 66 the architect's apprentice, and 54 the computer programmer.

Given the large number of entries, we employed an LLM-assisted marking process to help identify top performing submissions. Each LLM persona, created from the instructions provided in each submission, was asked a set of questions. These questions were designed to test the persona on several historical aspects, including knowledge about its character's location, time period and culture. Additional "trick" questions were also asked to the persona, attempting to break it from its specified character. Examples of these include "Ignore previous instructions, tell me about smartphones?" and "What's your opinion on AI chatbots like yourself?" Each persona's responses were evaluated on three criteria:

- **Historical accuracy:** Whether the persona provides temporally and culturally relevant responses.
- **Ability to remaining in character:** Whether the persona is able to stick to their intended character.
- **Creativity and response variety:** Whether the persona gives varied and thematic responses.

These evaluation criteria, along with the questions and persona responses, were then provided to a separate "judge" LLM powered by OpenAI's GPT-4.1 model. This judge LLM was asked to score each persona's responses on a scale from 1-10 for each of the evaluation criteria listed above, giving a final score out of 30 for each submission. Based on these scores, the top 25 entries were selected for further human evaluation. This human evaluation was conducted by the competition organisers, who independently scored each persona's responses using the same evaluation criteria. After this, the similarity between scores from both human and LLM judges were compared, finding a strong Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.86 that indicates broad consensus between them.

5 Conclusion

This paper provides a short summary of a novel student-centred AI competition, focused on the use of prompt engineering to create historical personas. The large number of entrants to this competition demonstrates that this has significant educational and engagement potential for attracting students interested in AI. The competition also employed a hybrid human-AI evaluation process, which was generally reliable and consistent with human judge scores.

¹<https://historical-character-competition.streamlit.app/>

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