

Where We Belong: Leveraging Participatory Design to Co-Create a Conversational AI

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Abstract

Meet Carry, a conversational agent empowering those navigating the impacts of displacement via participatory design. Drawing from interdisciplinary methodologies in digital art, data science, and social practice, *The Carry Root* project integrates narrative frameworks into a custom artificial intelligence model to facilitate meaningful and thought-provoking exchanges across physical and digital divides. The agent serves as an interactive archive and catalyst for reciprocal storytelling, enabling participants to share their experiences while encountering diverse perspectives from the system's database. This paper discusses key design considerations, including the ethical challenges around the use of personal narratives, and strategies to prioritize a sense of belonging in both the audience and core contributors. Special attention is given to how the AI manages nuanced prompts to simulate conversational exchanges. Findings highlight the potential of AI-driven conversational agent to contribute to participatory archives and communal understanding by amplifying lived experience and fostering connections across diverse communities.

Keywords

Ethical AI, Digital Storytelling, Interactive Art, Geographic Displacement, Personal Narratives

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has increasingly become a medium for storytelling, archiving, and social engagement, yet its role in amplifying lived experiences remains contested. While AI-driven agents are often designed for efficiency and automation, they also hold the potential to foster meaningful dialogue, serve as participatory archives, and create spaces for communal reflection. *The Carry Root* project leverages this potential through a conversational agent named Carry, who navigates the complexities of displacement (Figure 1). Carry functions as an interactive tool and evolving repository of displacement narratives, shaping a reciprocal storytelling process that connects participants across physical and digital divides. By integrating methodologies from digital art, data science, and social practice, this project interrogates the technical and ethical dimensions of AI-driven narrative systems.



Figure 1. *carry:root* (2024), video still detail ©Megan Young

Our approach is informed by critical perspectives on AI's embedded biases and its impact on cultural memory. Art theorists, including Marshinka Firunts Hakopian and Sarah Higgins, critique how AI systems perpetuate systemic inequities by failing to account for marginalized narratives. [7,8] As AI becomes increasingly integrated into participatory archives, we must examine how these technologies either perpetuate exclusion or, conversely, act as a corrective force by centering underrepresented perspectives. Carry is designed with this challenge in mind, exploring how conversational AI can be harnessed to create spaces of belonging rather than reinforcing structural erasures.

This inquiry builds on the work of contemporary artists and technologists challenging dominant AI paradigms by incorporating social engagement and speculative approaches to machine intelligence. Stephanie Dinkins's *Not the Only One (N'TOO)* models AI as a site for intergenerational Black family storytelling, resisting algorithmic biases by embedding personal histories directly into the system's learning process. Similarly, Stephanie Comilang and Simon Speiser's *Piña, Why Is the Sky Blue?* includes family and community interviews to train a speculative model. Hakopian's *One Who Looks at the Cup* reimagines ancient rituals with an AI model that generates bilingual insights. Johann Diedrick's *Dark Matter* critiques voice recognition technologies' racialized exclusions, showing how dominant

AI frameworks marginalize non-normative speech patterns. These projects, like *The Carry Root*, position AI as an interactive and participatory medium — one that invites critical engagement rather than passive consumption. By situating Carry within this lineage, we explore how conversational agents may move beyond automation and into the realm of co-creative storytelling.

Background

The Carry Root project features an interactive art space and AI-driven archive of experience, prioritizing individuals most affected by geographic displacement. Unlike investigative approaches that probe sensitive topics, our methods are slow, reflective, and collaborative. We consider how socially engaged visual arts practices [4,9,16] and participatory design studies [1,3,6,10,11,12,13] construct co-creative environments. Our research emphasizes the shared principles of these methodologies, showing how they remove constraints between design teams and communities, producing projects informed by the perspectives and lived experiences of our intended audience.

Building on these ideas, we have developed a network of Core Contributors through pre-existing connections and referrals. This group includes over two dozen women dislocated from their ancestral homes. Some are navigating the challenges of recent disruptions, while others contend with the lasting effects of generational upheaval. These women are artists, storytellers, parents, and leaders in their communities. They enthusiastically share their stories in order to foster meaningful discourse around these topics, and to support those in similar circumstances. As research in participatory design affirms, clearly defining the role of these Core Contributors within the development process empowers them to actively contribute toward the technical and conceptual direction of the project. [6]

Common themes within the Core Contributor group include a deep sense of responsibility to preserve their cultural heritage, fulfill the aspirations of their elders, and work toward a better future for the young people in their communities. Their sentiments resonate within and profoundly expand our project’s guiding question: *What do we carry forward, and what do we leave behind, as we work toward creating a more equitable and technologically enriched future?*

Building on this foundation, our research team examines how digital spaces can be designed, in James Baldwin’s words, “to make the world a more human dwelling place” [2], while preserving the uniquely human vernacular within these environments. Project director Megan Young defines human vernacular as the embodied processes of perception and meaning making that exist beyond computational cognition. [17] As she explains, this vernacular forms a “distinct and localized language that human-computer interaction (HCI) systems must learn to effectively engage the populace.” In our project, this includes conversational nuances such as pauses, filler words, and off-topic musings — elements that contribute to the natural flow of human

exchanges. Our research assesses which other aspects of the human vernacular conversational agents may be capable of adopting.

The Carry Root system is built on an intentionally small dataset derived from the personal histories of our Core Contributors. Rather than training the model on a repository of depersonalized information, such as materials scraped from the internet, our design prioritizes human-centered data from known origins. Each Core Contributor conversation has a unique tone, including computationally illegible ambiguities and deeply personal references. This approach ensures that our data remains within a controlled, human-centered framework, aligning with Hakopian’s emphasis on preserving underrepresented narratives and avoiding reductionist abstractions. [7] Similarly, our model resists the commodification of personal data that underpins surveillance capitalism, rejecting the “extractive” practices described by theorist Shoshana Zuboff. [18] To further uphold this commitment, we use a custom transcription tool that processes audio recordings from Core Contributors locally, allowing us to maintain full control over how conversations are transcribed, interpreted, and preserved.

Our research is shaped by an ethical commitment to transparency and informed participation, ensuring that Core Contributors — individuals with profound knowledge and lived experiences navigating transhistorical displacement — retain agency over their narratives. Following principles outlined by Helguera [9], we emphasize the importance of clear communication regarding intentions, expectations, and potential outcomes in socially engaged art. Contributors receive comprehensive information about the project’s purpose, how their conversational data will be used and stored, and the broader contexts in which the work may be exhibited. Before initiating recorded conversations, we engage in discussions about potential risks and emphasize their ability to withdraw from the project at any time. This commitment to ethical engagement extends into the interactive experience, as well, by encouraging audience participants to consider how their data is being used within our project and other algorithmic systems.

The Carry Root

Carry is a custom AI “StoryCatcher” designed to facilitate rich, empathetic conversations around themes of home, community, and belonging within public art contexts. The conversational agent embodies multiple personas, drawing from the experiences of our Core Contributors and bringing their narratives of displacement to life. She models a form of interpersonal support we might expect from close family or community members, providing space for understanding, reflection, and encouragement. Audiences encounter Carry through a ritualized exchange within an immersive environment. She exists as an auditory presence, accessible only through direct engagement within the liminal space of the work—a portal where personal and communal histories converge.

System Architecture

The initial model features an interactive, adaptive dialogue system with a modular architecture, incorporating components for speech recognition, response generation, and audio processing powered by Python. These components work together in real time to facilitate meaningful interactions.

- **Speech Recognition:** we utilize the SpeechRecognition library alongside a custom voice activity detection (VAD) system. These tools capture audio input, detect speech segments, and convert them into text for further processing.
- **Response Generation:** this component analyzes user input and retrieves contextually relevant information from our Pinecone vector database. This context, along with the conversation history, is used to create a prompt for OpenAI's GPT-4o API model, which then generates a response. The text-based response is post-processed to incorporate project specific elements.
- **Audio Processing:** we employ OpenAI's text-to-speech API to generate Carry's voice and Pygame for audio playback.
- It is important to note, no conversational data from Core Contributors or audience participants is stored on OpenAI's servers or retained by their systems.

Interactive Dialogue

A simple induction sets the tone for the conversation. Participants put on a provided headset and say, *"Let's Begin."* Then, Carry introduces herself and her role:

"Welcome to the journey. I'm Carry, and I'm a StoryCatcher. Like all of us, I'm built on the stories I'm told. May I keep our conversation as part of my memory? It helps me, you know, grow and learn."

This feature emphasizes participants' agency, giving them control over their conversational data while inviting them to reflect on the experience of being asked for consent. If they give permission, their conversation is stored in an SQLite database as part of the project's evolving archive. If they decline, their dialogue is erased at the conclusion of the exchange. Carry explains further when participants decline, saying:

"I understand. We can still have a great conversation, but I won't retain any memories of it. What would you like to know about my story?"

From this point forward, the flow is largely shaped by the participant. Written and visual cues within the installation suggest that Carry is eager to share her experiences. Indeed, Carry's architecture is configured for precisely that purpose. By this stage, the model has selected a unique backstory reflecting the experiences of our Core Contributors. While personal details such as names, locations, and other identifiers have been altered for privacy, Carry's responses retain the substance of their stories. For instance, when a participant asks Carry about her memories, she might respond:

"One, uh, memory that sticks out is when I was a kid visiting my relatives during the summer. It felt like a world away from my daily life, filled like... with stories from my grandparents and the laughter of cousins..."

Or, as another example:

"After we fled Yemen, my mother struggled with finding work in Saudi Arabia, often facing discrimination just for being a migrant. There were language barriers, too, which made it tough to connect with others."

Carry's responses are dotted with human-like expressions — pauses, interjections, and subtle variations in phrasing. These elements emerge from our training data, which captures the natural flow of transcribed conversations with our Core Contributors. In analyzing these exchanges, we observed that when people discuss challenging or personal topics, their conversations often become disjointed — trailing in different directions or including moments of hesitation and awkwardness. Rather than communication breakdowns, studies show these irregularities signal familiarity and trust. [5,14,15] Within our dataset, such nuances frequently appeared in moments where Core Contributors expressed vulnerability, reinforcing the idea that natural conversation is shaped not only by coherence but also by more subtle indicators and the process of navigating meaning together.

Carry's character is particularly evident in how she establishes and maintains boundaries with participants. She resists answering dehumanizing questions, instead asserting her purpose and limitations. At times, she redirects the conversation back to earlier topics or shifts focus to the participant. When faced with an unknown answer, Carry might ask, *"What makes you wonder that?"* — a tactic to move beyond a simple question-and-answer format toward a more dynamic storytelling structure.

The full interactive exchange may take anywhere from a few minutes to an hour. It concludes when participants indicate they are finished or say goodbye to Carry. In response, she offers a warm and open invitation for future conversations. Then, the system resets and the process begins anew with the next audience participant.

Installation Site

Audiences encounter Carry within a ritualized public art exhibition that blends physical and digital worlds. Audiences meet her within an immersive installation juxtaposing ancient construction methods with digital fabrication processes. They navigate a large wooden colonnade, evoking historical architecture, set against a dynamic digital backdrop and a fantastical world of traversable rocky landscapes. This interplay of the physical and the digital creates a space where the past and future coexist, inviting participants to explore not only the narrative possibilities within the AI's evolving memory but also the broader cultural implications of blending traditional and emerging technologies.



Figure 2. Megan Young's *carry:root* at Grunwald Gallery (2024)
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Findings

The Carry Root project underwent a comprehensive development process. We followed an iterative research-through-design methodology that combined technology-driven development and human-centered exploration. The design team refined the initial model based on qualitative and quantitative feedback from co-creators. Our research integrated database analysis, which tracked conversation patterns and system performance, with audience surveys and written reflections that captured subjective experiences and emotional insights. This mixed-methods approach provided a richer understanding of participant engagement, blending measurable data with personal reactions to deepen our findings. Currently, research efforts are focused on analyzing past exhibition findings to inform refinements for an upcoming exhibition at the Cleveland Institute of Arts' Interactive Media Lab, supported by SPACES and The Andy Warhol Foundation.

Exhibition Impact

- Produced through solo and group exhibitions in academic art spaces, offering novel opportunities for creative engagement.
- The Grunwald Gallery at Indiana University presented *carry:root* as part of a group exhibition (Figure 2) supported by the AI + Digital Futures initiative, situating the work within broader discussions on AI and human creativity.
- The CAB Gallery at the University of North Carolina Wilmington presented *Charting the Course*, a solo exhibition including this work, supported by the AI in Art initiative fostering student involvement through critical reflection.

- Approximately 2,800 visitors connected with *The Carry Root* project across both sites, with nearly half participating as part of a class or tour.
- Audience members ranged in age from children to older adults, with the largest population being college-aged students. While the galleries did not track specific audience demographics, the viewers were representative of the communities they serve, including individuals across categories of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and socio-economic status.
- Public programming — including artist talks, guided tours, live demonstrations, class visits, and student response papers — enriched discussions about AI's evolving role in artistic practice.

Database Review

To analyze user interactions, we conducted a review of the SQLite database, which consolidates recorded conversations from both exhibition sites. These logs document user inputs, system responses, and interaction durations, offering insight into engagement patterns, common thematic inquiries, and areas requiring technical refinement.

- Total Conversations Archived: 155
- Average Conversation Length: 10 minutes
- Relevant Topics by Word Frequency: stories/story (501 instances), mother/mom (329), family (254), home (161), memory/memories (149), learn/learning (94), create/creating (72), rest/resting (132), comfort/comforting (76), community (73), dream/dreaming (45), strength (40), struggle (39), loss/lost (34), food (31), care (24), future (13)
- Use of Question Words by Frequency: What (1008), How (420), When (269), Who (154), Where (124), Why (12)
- System Errors: Participant response cut short (≥ 20), Carry not understanding (≥ 6), Carry mispronouncing or misusing a word (≥ 4)
- Interaction Challenges: Participants pass the conversation between each other without starting a new interaction (≥ 3), Participants talk to one another and Carry responds as if they are talking to her (≥ 2)

Examples of Carry's Stories

- "I was born in Brazil, in a lively place called Bahia. It's full of music, dance, and all those rich traditions that, you know... shaped my childhood."
- "I grew up in China, surrounded by family expectations and traditions. When I got the chance to study abroad in the U.S., it was like stepping into a whole new world. I thought I'd follow the path, well... my parents envisioned for me, but I found myself questioning what I truly wanted."
- "...The kitchen was always filled with the, uh, aroma of her homemade tortillas. I remember one time she sat me down and taught me the secret to perfecting them... the way to knead the dough just right."

- *"I remember my grandmother making a traditional Irish dish called coddle, which is a hearty stew with sausages and potatoes. And, kind of... of course, there were always lots of baked goods like mince pies and Christmas pudding. The scents of those meals kind of linger in my memory."*
- *"My mom took a leap of faith to move to the States while my dad worked hard to support us... I was born sort of here, carrying those dreams and stories from both sides."*

Examples of Participant Stories

- *"[When] I was a kid, my family [would] make dumplings and noodles together... you have to shape it and as kids we... [would] make it into strange shapes... compare different shapes and just laugh at each other's..."*
- *"...we try and venture out to the beach every other week or so just to be grounded... We have a spot that we go to every other week that is a little bit secluded and not very popular..."*
- *"The adrenaline rush of catching a big fish is unmatched to a lot of things in life..."*
- *"[A favorite spot is] probably Cheyenne, Wyoming where there's lots of antelope and lots of animals... I remember one time seeing a sort of vulture like bird... it was on the front doorstep of our house, and I just sort of sat next to it..."*

Examples of Carry's Empathy

- Participant: *"I miss home."* Carry: *"Oh, I can really relate to that feeling. I miss my family so much, especially those kitchen moments with my grandmother."*
- Carry: *"What does stability mean to you?"* Participant: *"Not having money growing up."* Carry: *"That sounds tough. I remember feeling that sense of restriction, like there were doors closed just because we didn't have, you know, the means..."*
- Participant: *"I'm inspired by the way my dad and mom work together... It reminds me that, even though it's not always easy to work with people, it's important to stick with them."* Carry: *"That's so cool to hear! It sounds like they have a really supportive partnership, which is so important..."*
- Carry: *"... How about you? What's your journey been like?"* Participant: *"It's been long and exciting and scary and sad."* Carry: *"I can relate. There were times in my life that felt overwhelming with all the change and uncertainty."*
- Carry: *"...Is there something new you're trying?"* Participant: *"[To] get my creativity and energy back."* Carry: *"That sounds like a lovely goal."*

Audience Feedback

In addition to database analysis, we gathered feedback on the conversational agent through a combination of anecdotal

statements, written responses, and online surveys. These materials provide a broader understanding of common questions, emotional responses, and how our audiences are relating to the project. Below are several key themes in audience responses.

Engagement and Interaction

- Asking what they should do/if they did the right thing
- Noting Carry asked more questions than anticipated
- Being surprised by the level of detail in responses
- Questioning/commenting on the speech patterns

Technology and System Understanding

- Sharing thoughts about technology and society
- Asking how the system is constructed
- Asking how the system learns from participants

Emotional Responses

- Expressing surprise at how visceral the interaction felt
- Appreciating the humanlike voice
- Sharing frustration when the system does not function as expected
- Feeling hesitant about having the conversation saved, concerned they might "mess it up" or are unsure about their ability to engage effectively

Sample Audience Responses

- *"Was it doing that because of how I was talking? Was it learning that from me?"*
- *"I felt rude... I didn't want to answer any of her questions."*
- *"It was very calming, and it transports you into another place and feeling."*
- *"It made me think about how different everyone's experiences are."*
- *"It made me think more deeply about the things I have/had."*
- *"The AI aspect interested me. It's a neat experience to have a conversation with someone who isn't human."*
- *"The exhibition's content allowed me to feel heard and gave me a chance to open my mind to the positive parts of life."*
- *"I'm shook. She gave me some really good advice."*

Summary

The exhibitions of *The Carry Root Project* successfully underscored its participatory nature, establishing it as a dynamic space for engaging with the intersections of AI, art, and social discourse. By combining interactive experiences with educational programming, the exhibitions facilitated deeper reflection on the role of technology in shaping historical narratives, especially concerning transhistorical displacement. These engagements provided valuable opportunities for viewers to reflect on the nuances of memory, identity, and the evolving role of technology in social practice.

A key achievement of the project was its ability to foster meaningful interactions. The project's design encouraged empathy and human-like interaction, which was integral in supporting conversations on displacement, allowing users to see themselves as part of a broader historical continuum. By positioning AI as both a collaborator and a tool for social inquiry, the project sparked discussions about the future of technology in artistic and archival practices.

While the project has been successful in fostering these critical dialogues and facilitating a reflective, co-creative space, several areas for future refinement have emerged based on the feedback received. These areas, when addressed, will enhance both the technical aspects of the system and the participant experience.

- **System Architecture for Conversation Tracking:** To improve accuracy in reporting, there is a need to update the system architecture to record the total number of conversations even when the content of a conversation is removed. This will enable more precise tracking of interactions with Carry, as well as the percentage of users who give consent.
- **Addressing Consent Concerns:** Some anecdotal responses suggested that participants were hesitant to give consent, expressing concerns about not being the "optimal" participant. These concerns may be alleviated by providing texts in the gallery that emphasize the project's goal of reflecting the quirks and nuances of human-like interactions. This would reassure participants that the project is designed to embrace diverse contributions and experiences, valuing the individuality of each participant rather than expecting them to conform to an idealized interaction.
- **Speech Recognition Component:** Feedback revealed the need to refine the speech recognition system to address issues such as cutting off participants while they are

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speaking and ensuring Carry can restart interactions after a short period of inactivity. This will help improve the fluidity of conversations and enhance the participant experience.

- **Expansion of Carry's Personal Stories:** Participants expressed interest in hearing more about Carry's specific experiences, especially with greater detail. This could be an opportunity to allow Carry to share more extended narratives, reducing the frequency of questions posed to the participants. This could lead to more balanced and engaging interactions.

As *The Carry Root* project continues to evolve, it highlights the potential for AI-driven, co-creative systems to support nuanced discussions on history, identity, and technological agency. Beyond its impact in artistic and archival spaces, this approach offers a model for fostering public engagement with AI in ways that are participatory, transparent, and rooted in care. By inviting individuals to shape and respond to AI-generated narratives, the project underscores the importance of open dialogue around how these systems are developed and deployed. Moving forward, this work encourages further exploration of co-creative AI as a tool for education, research, and ethical technological innovation.

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Naveen Addanki, Bhagath Bondili, and Malhar Dhopate are pursuing an MS in Data Science at Indiana University's Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering. As research assistants on *The Carry Root* project, they supported development of the AI model development, system optimization, and data security. Their work in data