

# Dear Carnegie Hall: Utilising Digital Technologies to Unlock Multiple Perspectives of the Past

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33008/IJCMR.2020.26> | Issue 3 | April 2020

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## Abstract

*Accounts of history inherently vary. This single-piece exploration investigates how digital media technologies – specifically, an app – can be used to capture the complexities of understanding a history's multiple perspectives and perceptions. Dear Carnegie Hall is an interactive storytelling app commissioned by Carnegie Hall in New York to commemorate the music venue's 125th anniversary. This project was a collaboration between researcher and app producer Ruth Farrar and Barney Heywood and Lucy Telling from Stand + Stare: an interactive design company based in the UK.*

*In terms of process, Dear Carnegie Hall applies app, image recognition and augmented reality technologies in conjunction with archive material and messages from patrons, backstage staff and audience members. The project provides an original contribution to the emerging trend of museums and galleries mediating digital technologies in apps to create new modes of understanding history. Such apps typically provide a one-way channel of sharing history from the organisation's app to attendee (see 'British Museum Visitor Guide' app (2016) and 'Uffizi Gallery', Florence (2017)). In contrast, 'Dear Carnegie Hall' explores how the affordances of an app can provide for a more democratic approach to narrating the stories of history. As well as the app curating stories of Carnegie Hall's past, the user is also able to record an audio postcard (Farrar, 2015) of their personal story and experiences of Carnegie Hall, which in turn aimed to position the app as that which broadened the diversity of the venue. Dear Carnegie Hall thus demonstrates how using new digital technologies can encourage a sense of play with the seemingly fixed stories of history, which led to its users commenting on a deeper understanding of the organisation's history.*



Figure 1: A selection of postcards designed for the *Dear Carnegie Hall* app (2015). Image Credit: Barney Heywood (2015).

## Background research

*Dear Carnegie Hall* (2015) is an interactive storytelling app commissioned by Carnegie Hall in New York to commemorate its 125th anniversary. I was invited to create this commission after *Carnegie Hall's* Head of e-Strategy discovered my work in *The New York Times* and then came to experience my sound art installation *From Austria to America* (2013). My commissioned sound art piece creatively captured multiple oral histories of Austrians emigrants in America. As a practitioner, I am drawn to the creative challenge of capturing and exhibiting multiple histories in one artefact. *Dear Carnegie Hall* provided me with an opportunity to investigate documenting multiple perspectives on a larger scale. I collaborated with industry partners Lucy Telling and Barney Heywood from interactive design company *Stand + Stare* on this app project. *Dear Carnegie Hall* invites a participant to unlock 12 stories from its past. These stories move beyond a typical primary focus on stage performers to explore Carnegie Hall's rich history from diverse perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of this iconic institution.

## Research questions

Accounts of history inherently vary. This is further complicated when a practitioner is tasked with equitably representing multiple subjective histories in one artefact. One creative technique is re-telling a classic history from a different perspective ranging from Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) novel decolonising the story of 'the mad woman in the attic' from Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre* (1847) to *Hidden Figures* (2016) film retelling NASA's history from the perspective of a team of pioneering female African-American mathematicians. They played a vital role in astronaut John Glenn's launch into orbit yet were notably absent from its original history.

However, deconstructing a history to retell a new history is in itself 'fixing' the history again within the confines of a book or a film artefact as it returns to focusing on history from a singular angle or perspective. In *Dear Carnegie Hall*, I was interested in how new media technologies offer a practitioner new approaches in documenting multiple histories in one artefact. My primary research question was how can new media technologies – specifically, an app, image recognition and augmented reality technologies – be used to capture the complexities of understanding a history's multiple perspectives and perceptions? Also, how can new media technologies be used to deepen an understanding of an organisation's history? From a social constructivist perspective, in what ways can researchers shape new media technologies to help archival material come to life for new audiences? [1]

## Methods

To understand how the app operates and shapes image recognition technology and augmented reality, please view the app demonstration video below.



Figure 2: A video demonstration of the app's features

In two field trips to Carnegie Hall, we examined its archive's research material, gained feedback on our proposed new media technologies and interviewed 12 people with different connections and stories of Carnegie Hall such as interviewing Carnegie Hall patron Jim Stewart at the *New York Times* building. Our method for interviewing stories included inviting participants to bring an object connected to a memory of Carnegie Hall. One interviewee Bernard Kaplan brought an old ticket stub from a performance he experienced at Carnegie Hall in the 1970s. The physical object proved an effective method in helping unlock his memories of Carnegie Hall's history. Each interview was edited to found archival material connected to Carnegie Hall shaped as a postcard from the past. [2]

In post-production, I reshaped a feature from a previous project I originally created for a website installation piece, *Audio Postcards: Brooklyn (2013)*, into the app. This key method enables the app user to experience 12 postcard stories and then create their own postcard by selecting a postcard cover from archival material and then in-app audio recording a postcard message sharing their memories of Carnegie Hall, which can then be emailed to a recipient. This method was used to openly encourage further diverse perspectives of Carnegie Hall's history.

## Research findings

My research as practice approach revealed three key insights. Findings were informed by the following data evaluations: my practitioner's journal; reflective discussions with industry partner Stand + Stare; feedback from Carnegie Hall staff in USA; quantitative and qualitative feedback from the app's user testing group of 15 UK-based participants; theming feedback about the app from press coverage and social media and feedback forms from a knowledge exchange interactive keynote session I led in Japan.

**1) This app is original and different to current apps used by museums, galleries and cultural organisations in that it does not provide a one-way 'fixed' history of an organisation but instead openly invites, enables and validates multiple diverse historical perspectives.**

The project provides an original contribution to the emerging trend of cultural organisations mediating digital technologies in apps to create new modes of understanding history. Current apps on the market typically provide a one-way channel of sharing history from the organisation's app to attendee (see *The British Museum Visitor Guide* app (2016) and *Uffizi Gallery*, Florence (2017)). In contrast, *Dear Carnegie Hall* explores how the affordances of an app can provide for a more democratic approach to narrating the stories of history. The user experience of the app encourages a user to explore twelve different stories about *Carnegie Hall's* history. These include Carnegie Hall's Director of Archives Gino Francesconi's retelling of Andrew Carnegie's story, Artist Liaison Debby King sharing backstage experiences with stars such as Frank Sinatra and Jenna-Marie Sparacio, a youth orchestra student, shared how the organisation shaped her: all different yet equally validated experts in helping a user understand Carnegie Hall's rich history.

This invitation to be an expert is further extended when users are invited to share their memories of Carnegie Hall thus opening out the organisation's history beyond internal representations. This sense of play elicited from making a digital postcard helped created a welcoming invitation and validation that their story matters too in understanding Carnegie Hall's history. When sending digital postcards, users had the option to grant permission for their story to be saved by Carnegie Hall for archival purposes. The app became a significant method of gathering stories about the organisation, which may ordinarily have been missed.

**2) This unique app makes visible the remediation process of documenting an organisation's history using new media technologies. This invited participation process enhances engagement and deepens a user's active understanding of an organisation's history.**

Documenting history inherently involves a shaping process. A deconstructionist perspective of history acknowledges the 'unavoidable, impositionist role of the historian' in creating meaning from texts (Phillips, 2012). I am also aware of my role as researcher and practitioner in making meaning from and remediating archival material, editing audio interviews and shaping digital technologies for this app.

For Bolter and Grusin, remediation rests upon the 'double logic' of different degrees of immediacy and hypermediacy (1999). Placing and scanning the physical postcard in the app's viewfinder unlocks a history and provides the user with 'window through' of immediacy to understand Carnegie Hall's history. However, this action also makes the user aware of the 'window at' visible medium of the app as they experience the image recognition technological process used to remediate archival material bringing the postcard to life via the app. Hypermediacy is also at play because the app's multimedia elements form an invitation for the user to create their own postcard. This process intentionally fragments the self-contained unified perspective of each postcard's history in the app to expand upon and add more perspectives of the organisation's history.

The unconcealed remediation of the app invites participation. I discovered this increases a user's engagement. Through play, users actively learn about Carnegie Hall's history such as giving them the option to choosing which postcard to listen to next or the option to make their own postcard increased users' deeper understanding of Carnegie Hall's history. Illustrative qualitative data statements include:



**'it brought the history to life'**

**'the creative little details such as the archivist's letter helped me understand the bigger historical context'**

**'Really engaging! Loved how I can also add my own story to Carnegie Hall's history. Making my postcard helped me rediscover fond memories of Carnegie Hall' (2015).**

This app is a creative statement on the role we play in shaping, remediating and retelling history. Users decide which of the 12 stories to experience and how they remediate archival material and record their memories of Carnegie Hall in their own digital postcards. While a film may conceal its remediation, this app's remediation is visible and promoted as it acknowledges history is not 'fixed' but open to being shaped and remediated.

**3) '*Dear Carnegie Hall*' provides a new technique for documenting multiple perspectives of the past and its significance has since influenced industry and academia**

I and my industry partner Stand + Stare retained the intellectual property rights for the app's design and development. When Stand + Stare was tasked with the challenge of documenting multiple historical perspectives, they applied our app's infrastructure to a new industry setting for further impact. The result was a funded commission: Stand + Stare's *app Illuminators of Aberdeen* (2016) unlocking the stories of six innovators from Aberdeen's past for *Spectra: Aberdeen's Festival of Light*.

I also shared our original techniques in a knowledge exchange invited keynote at *The International Academic Forum* (IAFOR) Conference in Kobe, Japan. My interactive keynote session influenced an attendee: Professor Norman Ralph Isla from the Philippines and his teaching practice. When teaching students about a complex topic, which required students to understand multiple perspectives of the past, he used insights and a reshaped shorter version of our app's methods using image recognition and smartphone technologies in the classroom. He found this method measurably increased students' engagement and deepened their understanding of a historical topic.



Figure 3: Sharing our app's techniques in Japan influenced teaching practice and enhanced student engagement and learning in the Philippines. Image Credit: Professor Norman Ralph Isla (2018).

Our original aims with *Dear Carnegie Hall* were to help people beyond the organisation to understand its history. However, a further application of this app's techniques emerged when a globally renowned tech company became aware of the app. Due to a non-disclosure agreement, I am unable to go into the finer details. However, they can see how this original technique of sharing multiple perspectives of the past can be applied to educate new employees about an organisation's history in industry.



Ultimately, this process has confirmed that when a researcher shapes new media technologies in a unique way, it leads to increased participant engagement and a deeper multi-layered understanding of an organisation's rich layered history. The techniques employed in this app effectively provide a solution for the challenging yet important task of documenting multiple diverse perspectives of the past.

### Acknowledgements

This project was commissioned by Carnegie Hall. Many thanks to Carnegie Hall for their generous support including Seamus O'Reilly, Debby King and Carnegie Hall's Director of Archives and the Rose Museum: Gino Francesconi. It was also a pleasure collaborating with Lucy Telling and Barney Heywood from Stand + Stare on this project.

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### Notes

[1] Pinch and Bijker's social constructivist SCOT critical framework eschews a scientific objective 'real truth' of a technology (1984). Instead, they argue a technology's development is shaped by its users. This approach appealed to me as a user of image recognition and augmented reality technologies shaping its developments and pushing forwards its capabilities in the context of app development for cultural organisations. We developed and shaped these new digital technologies to avoid a singular history of Carnegie Hall in order to generate and celebrate multiple diverse perspectives of the past.

[2] The app can be used without a physical postcard. However, as previously mentioned, interviewees found the method of bringing a physical object helpful in unlocking their memories of Carnegie Hall. Moving forwards with this method, the printed postcards act as a tangible physical device connecting past documenting memories methods (a physical postcard) with current technologies (a digital postcard) as a useful way to spark a user's own memories of Carnegie Hall. The printed postcards also served as a creative technique to generate awareness about the app. The postcards were displayed in Carnegie Hall's foyer and shared via an international postal marketing campaign providing an accessible way for all age demographics regardless of technical ability to become aware of the app and to reflect on Carnegie Hall's rich history from multiple diverse perspectives.