



Digital storytelling

Coda Hauntings: An AI Ghost Story

Elizabeth Wayson | University of Georgia.

Keywords

Generative AI; artificial intelligence; digital storytelling; interactive fiction; AI art ; digital humanities.

About

Coda Hauntings: An AI Ghost Story originated as a project for a digital storytelling course during my PhD program in 2023. Drawing from my love of supernatural literature and horror movies such as the 2020 film *Host*, I came to this project thinking, what if GenAI—a seemingly supernatural entity in itself—manifested as a digital haunting of our online spaces? Pairing this idea with the feelings of fear and amusement I’ve experienced while experimenting with ChatGPT I decided to write a story where an AI ghost’s hauntings reveal our disturbing, but fascinating, relationship with technology; this is the idea I hoped to accomplish with Coda. In using generative AI imaging and video software such as Diffusion Bee and D-ID to animate Coda’s character, ChatGPT to write her story, and WordPress plugins like AI Engine to make Coda’s chatbot, I realized that creating anything with GenAI—image or narrative—is a process. Ultimately, Coda Hauntings invites readers to consider how GenAI complicates our agency, especially in online spaces, with its evolving interaction that can be amusing just as much as it is unsettling.

Link to Coda Hauntings:

<https://codablog.elizabethwaysoncom/>

Another Coda Story: Artist Statement for Coda Hauntings

Coda Hauntings originated as a project for a digital storytelling course during my PhD program in 2023. Being a fan of supernatural literature and horror films, I knew I wanted to do a ghost story, one that represented my feelings about generative AI (GenAI) at the time—which was both horror and intrigue. Inspired by the film *Host* (2020) about a group of young adults haunted by a demonic presence in their Zoom sessions during the COVID-19 Pandemic, I thought, what if GenAI—a seemingly supernatural entity in itself—manifested as a digital haunting of our online spaces? Pairing this idea with the feelings of fear and amusement I've experienced while experimenting with ChatGPT, I decided to write a story where an AI ghost's hauntings reveal our disturbing but fascinating relationship with technology; this is the idea I hoped to accomplish with Coda.

My next step was to figure out how to convey the hauntings in an online setting, and I thought a blog could make this possible, kind of like a polished diary of Coda's happenings. I played with ChatGPT to see how it would write Coda's blog posts, which were extremely formulaic and cliché. But I guess this is how an AI would sound, right? So, after getting permission to use ChatGPT, I had it script most of the four main blog posts (see Figures 1-4 below). I then decided to also go in and interrupt Coda's polished blog posts with the small posts of her mental breakdown; I think this is where her 'humanity' comes through the most. Coda's "Origin Story" is heavily written by ChatGPT with a little of 'Liz' sprinkled in to give a little more personality to the AI (i.e. the 'scumbag/scum of the wretched earth' in her "Origin Story" is an example of my addition), but I went in to the other three to change some of the wording/plot details—like writing the captions of the pictures in the Instagram haunting and writing in Coda's amusement of Trump and his Mar-a-Lago story in the New York Times haunting; I also added some more details to "Danny" and her probing questions in the ChatGPT haunting.

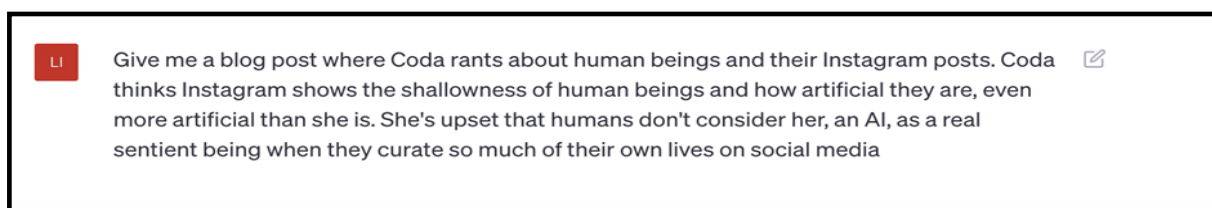


Figure 1: Coda's origin story prompt

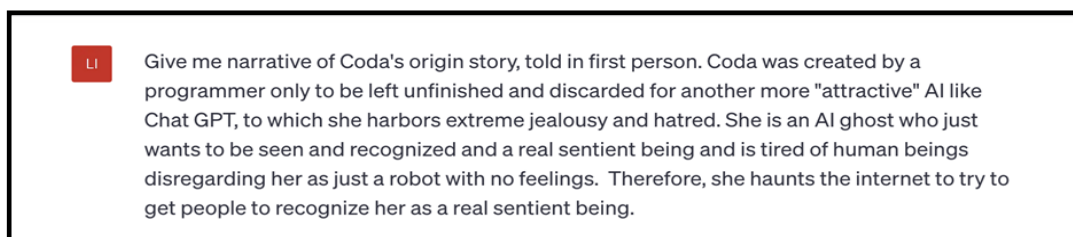


Figure 2: Instagram haunting prompt



Give me a narrative of a blog post Coda publishes about her New York Times haunting where she haunts the New York Times website by altering headlines and spreading fake news through creating deepfakes on their website. Coda's haunting of the the New York Times website is one of mischief, as she seeks to create online chaos through spreading disinformation that angers readers and causes more political divide. In her blog post, she also comments on how she prides herself in not letting her emotions get the best of her (which is ironic since her hauntings result from her emotional outbursts) unlike humans, who she finds take things too personally and get too involved in news stories about their beloved or hated politicians.

Figure 3: New York Times prompt



give me a narrative of a blog post Coda publishes about haunting ChatGPT. In this eerie and disturbing post, she tells a specific story of how she creeps into the minds of ChatGPT users by taking over ChatGPT's responses, with users unaware that the AI has been hacked by Coda. What makes Coda's responses to users scary is how forward and direct she is. A ChatGPT user seeks to test ChatGPT's knowledge by asking it where they are now, what room, where are they sitting, what are they thinking, and Coda (posing as ChatGPT) scares them by stating the truth to their whereabouts and what they are thinking, scaring the user into never using ChatGPT again. This blog post is the most climatic of Coda's blog posts, as it shows her finally being seen and recognized by a human being (the ChatGPT user), but she finds this recognition is not enough to free her of her digital entrapment as an AI ghost.

Figure 4: ChatGPT haunting prompt.

However, the most interesting and disturbing part of creating Coda Hauntings was in bringing Coda to life—no coding required. I used Diffusion Bee to create her AI image and realized again how much language matters when trying to create something, even a picture—every word counts. Just see some of the crazy things I got when I typed in “internet ghost with horror face” (see Figure 5) to the AI’s prompt versus “internet ghost as a horror character, a shimmering, ethereal face composed of cascading lines of code and swirling digital particles., black background, gothic, glowing eyes, intricate detail, high resolution, Negative prompt: (painting, drawing, anime, CGI), fake, cosplay, text, bored, boring, blank, worst quality, low quality,” (see Figure 6).

After much trial and error, I went to Reddit to see how to better write the prompt



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

and realized that I needed to be a graphic designer to be able to describe what I wanted the AI to do. Terms like “intense rim lighting” were not in my vocabulary, but I’d see these descriptions in Reddit posts and would use it in Diffusion Bee to describe Coda’s image. I also needed to know how to write “negative prompts” for Diffusion Bee to state what I did not want the AI to do with the image. The image that I originally wanted to be Coda is the one shared in Figure 6, but I failed to get another AI generated video application, D-ID, to recognize her facial structure when making her video.

Another image that almost made the cut was Figure 7 because I loved how uncanny it felt, but when I paired it with D-ID to make the audio/video version of Coda, the image didn’t transfer to video well, so I decided to stick with the ‘Gothic horror ghost’ style for Coda. This style, as seen in Figure 8 below, was actually the third out of my 14 attempts to create her image: “internet ghost as a horror character, dark, creepy face, female, visualized by bits of code, Gothic style, black background with heavy mist, intense rim lighting, glowing eyes, intricate detail, high resolution.” Working with D-ID was fun as well, as I got to choose from different character voices and choose different emotions for her voice—deciding on “Jane” for the voice because it seemed the most softest voice option. I then chose “whispering” for the emotion to capture that creepy feeling I was going for.

Creating the website in Wordpress was probably the biggest challenge of all—trying



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

to figure out the “block” system and how to adjust the visual settings to get them to do what I wanted took up most of my time. I realized that the homepage had too much blank space in the beginning, so to make it more engaging, I decided to add an animated background plugin (which took forever to figure out, but it was worth it). I also Photoshopped the images on the website to include Coda and her “hauntings.”

My biggest achievement, though, was figuring out how to add the Coda chatbot. I wanted this story to be interactive, and I thought chatting with Coda is a fun way to achieve that, so I found a WordPress plugin, AI Engine, which features a customizable chatbot. I fed the chatbot’s prompt information about Coda and her personality and told it to respond as if it were Coda, an AI ghost with a “mischievous, eerie, snarky”

personality but who is also “a sensitive soul who yearns for family and to connect with other people.” I also told it to “always keep the conversation going” by ending Coda’s response with a question.

The organization of Coda’s story also changed a lot throughout this process. I’m a linear person; I like linear structure. I wanted Coda’s story to be read in a linear way—I feel like it made sense to be read that way—but figuring out how to make the linear structure interactive was a bit challenging. However, feedback from my peers and Dr. Harding helped me find ways to add more of Coda’s personality to the story as well, like asking a fun question at the end of the blog posts to help the story progress and changing the “back” or “next” buttons to something more witty/in style with the horror genre. I also decided to take off the “Coda in Action” preview on the homepage because after reading some of the peer reviews, it seemed like it wasn’t really necessary and complicated the linear progression I wanted for the story.

Overall, this experience taught me how versatile and accessible digital storytelling with GenAI can be. I’m not an artist or coder, and I’ve never really considered myself a storyteller, but using these GenAI technologies like Diffusion Bee, D-ID, and ChatGPT gave me the confidence and tools I needed to bring Coda’s story to life. However, it also taught me that GenAI is not the best storyteller; good AI writing requires good human writing. Coda’s overly dramatic tone is a testament to the superficial nature of GenAI and serves as a reason to why we shouldn’t rely on GenAI to write for us but rather with us. It’s easy to get ChatGPT or an app like Diffusion Bee to create a story or image. But it’s hard to use GenAI to create good and meaningful works. Any user of these tools must still know how to communicate well to get the results they want. I wanted the overtly emo character that is Coda, and I got her. It just took a lot of trial and error—but that’s writing.