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Carrier Bag Ecologies: Rethinking Storytelling and More-than-Human Care in Digital Environments

Abstract

Digital ecologies are often shaped by the logic of the heroic arc described by Joseph Campbell, in which conflict drives the plot, a singular protagonist secures resolution, and worlds are remade through conquest. Such Campbellian narratives, common in video games and virtual reality (VR) environments, mirror cultural imaginaries where salvation arrives through domination. Against this, Ursula K. Le Guin's The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction offers a different orientation (stories of relation, multiplicity, and ongoingness). This article compares four digital ecologies, comprising three video games and one virtual reality game, two of which are structured through monomythic arcs of Campbellian thought and two that turn toward Le Guinian storytelling, to demonstrate how narrative choices shape ecological imagination. Drawing on María Puig de la Bellacasa's understanding of care as "maintenance," "repair," and "situated knowledge," the analysis reframes digital ecologies as sites for cultivating more-than-human awareness. By shifting from heroic scripts to relational practices, the article advocates for feminist approaches to digital storytelling that sustain rather than conquer, and open digital worlds to ecological futures of care.

Keywords: storytelling, hero's journey, Carrier Bag, more-than-human care, digital ecologies

1. Prologue (Conflict or Carrier Bag?)

Stories are integral to the 'lifeworld.' They are not merely for entertainment, but serve to hold, sustain, and transmit relations between humans, nonhumans, and environments. In this sense, they function as mnemonic ecologies. Krizek explains that stories open pathways to personal and

shared layers of meaning, offering ways to interpret the experiences in which they are situated. Rukeyser claims that "the universe is made of stories, not of atoms" (111). From verbal to written (from novels to news), and then to digital environments for storytelling and gaming, the role of narratives expanded its impact on life on Earth. World-making and future-making occur through the stories of individuals, communities, and societies. This article explores the contrasting narrative approaches of Joseph Campbell and Ursula Le Guin in order to rethink storytelling and more-than-human care, specifically in digital ecologies.

According to Campbell, stories across cultures share a universal archetype (the 'Hero's Journey'), which is built upon a linear understanding of progress and achievement. A hero departs from his ordinary world, faces trials, gains wisdom/power, and returns transformed (Campbell xix). This human-centric narrative approach is teleological, privileging the individual male hero as the axis of meaning and cultural transformation. As illustrated in figure 1, this male protagonist travels the world with a quest-centric, achievement-oriented approach. He defeats the enemy, he wins, and he transforms from an ordinary man to a hero. This Campbellian approach to the storytelling arc draws on Jungian archetypes and psychoanalytic myths. It is hierarchical with climactic peaks (ordeal, boon, and return). There are wars and destruction as you save the world. Hero's weapon(s) and helpers are an essential part of the story arc.

As a contrast perspective, Le Guin reminds us that the stories we tell shape what becomes possible in our shared world.
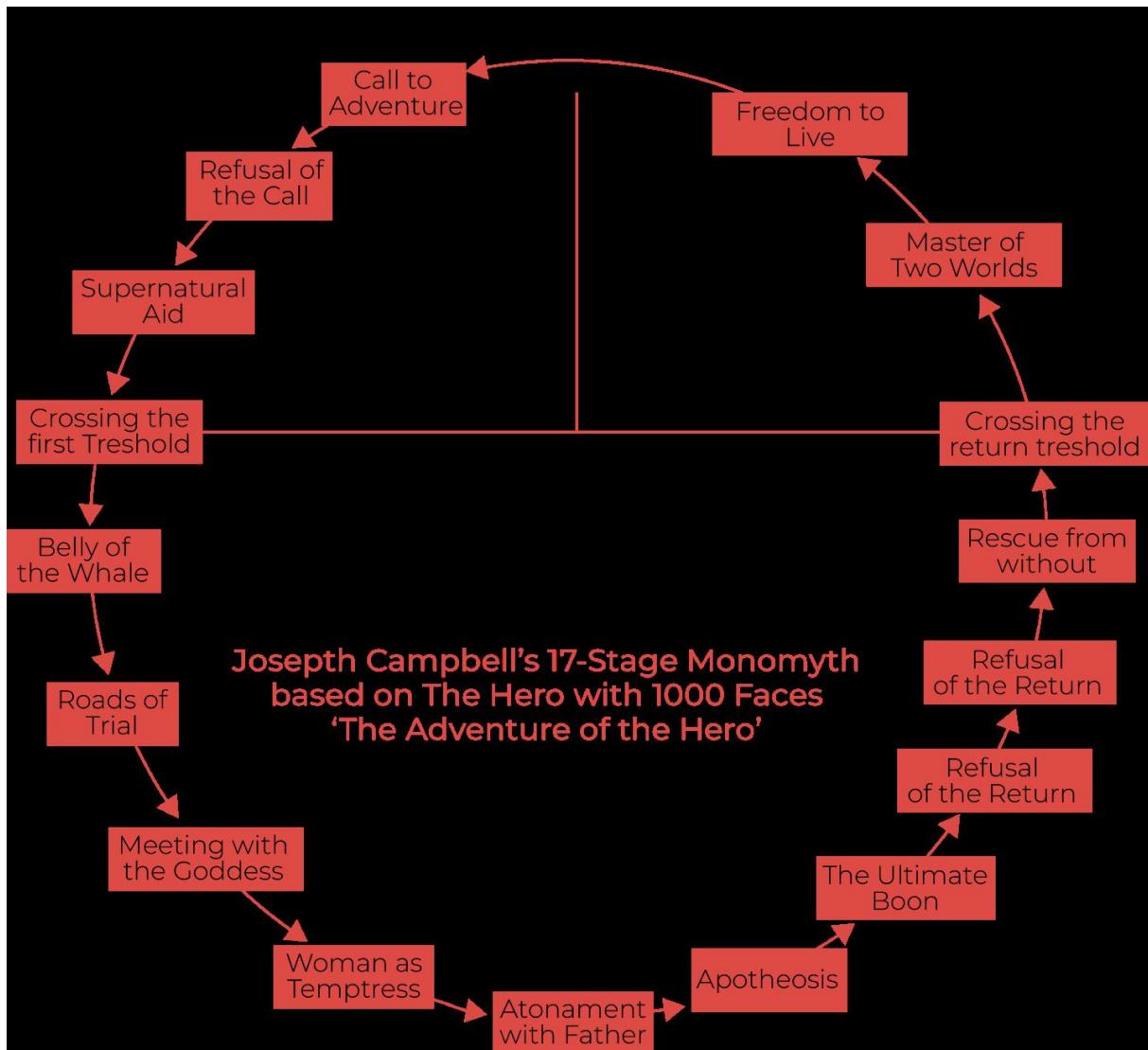
Figure 1. Joseph Campbell 'Hero's Journey' (1990/2018), illustrated by the author.

Her narrative approach is relational rather than heroic or hierarchical. In The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction (initially published in 1986 and later republished in 2019 with an introduction by Donna Haraway), Le Guin draws on Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas, where Woolf satirically reframes "heroism" as "botulism" and "hero" as "bottle." Le Guin cites this passage to challenge dominant, conquest-driven narrative traditions and to foreground storytelling as a practice of relation and sustenance rather than domination (166). Le Guin also references anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher, who suggested that the first cultural device was likely a container, predating the axe or weapon (167). Le Guin supports Fisher's idea and extends it: survival depended less on hunting and more on collecting, carrying, and holding (168-169). Her story concludes that what truly mattered was not the weapon or the meat from the hunt, but the story that shapes meaning, community, and

possibility (see figure 2 for Lee Bul's illustration in Le Guin's book). A 'carrier bag' is a vessel for gathering, holding, and sustaining stories. The story of the "hero's journey" may come first in cultural prestige, but Le Guin argues for a different kind of novel: one without a hero, but with humans (169). Le Guin's approach is situated in feminist anthropology and ecological thought.

Campbell naturalizes the hero/weapon story as universal.
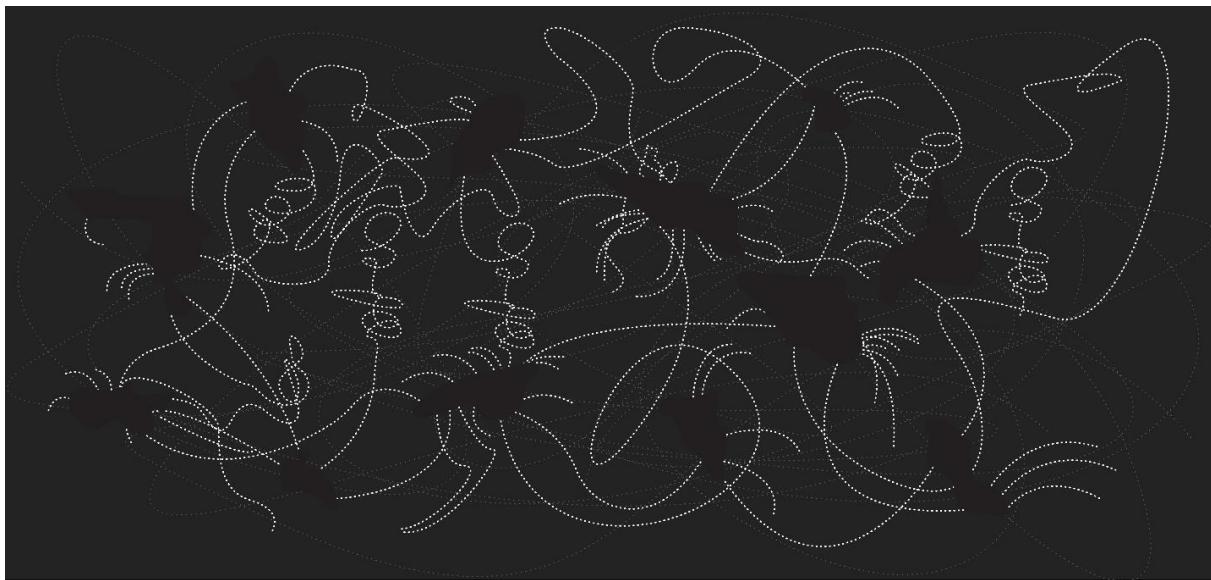
Figure 2. Drawing for Mon Grand Récit (abstract crystal sculpture I) (2006). © Lee Bul. Permission requested.

In contrast, Le Guin insists this is just one (male-coded, hierarchical) mode among many and argues for recovering the carrier bag/relational story as more truthful to human survival. In a sense, Campbell's myth is about exceptionalism (built on weapon/quest), and Le Guin's thought of myth is entanglement (carrier bag/gathering). Campbell's monomythic attitude versus Le Guin's alternative narratives are not only opposites but also mutually revealing—Campbell's monomyth shows us the persistence of heroic, individualistic narrative structures while Le Guin exposes the costs of that dominance and offers an alternative that foregrounds care, multiplicity, and ecology.

This article argues that everyday narratives are dominated by Campbellian thinking. Across news, novels, and digital environments, including movies, video games, animations, and virtual ecologies (with XR understood here primarily as VR), stories tend to be monomythic and hero-centered. Contemporary world-making and future-making unfold through these narrative structures and through the memories and forms of remembering that arise within this media ecology. By contrast,

a growing set of digital works gestures toward Le Guinian world-making, proposing relational rather than heroic modes of orientation. This article, therefore, aims to unfold these narrative structures and examine how "care" operates within them, with the hope of encouraging designers and scholars who work within digital and virtual ecologies to imagine approaches less tethered to Campbellian heroic arcs and more aligned with Le Guinian relational narratives.

To pursue this aim, the article examines four digital ecologies: two grounded in Campbellian approaches, Journey and Assassin's Creed, and two that model Le Guinian narrative sensibilities, Everything and Tree.

2. Cartographies of Digital Ecologies

To think of digital worlds as ecologies is to trace not only their spaces and characters but also the stories, memories, and relations they sustain. Haraway reminds us that "[i]t matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (12). Narratives are not simply containers of meaning, but active forces in shaping environments and the ways beings inhabit them. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative, Hustvedt frames storytelling as the process through which otherwise disconnected experiences acquire coherence and meaning. Narratives as meaning-making: they shape life and coexistence. Tim Ingold describes "the idea of life as lived along lines (xii)," where "□behind the conventional image of a network of interacting entities … meshwork … [is the entanglement of these] lines of life, growth and movement" (63). His idea of lifeworld is □"a meshwork of interwoven lines" (63). In this sense, digital ecologies can be approached as a meshwork of traces and trajectories, interweaving players, technologies, and environments.

Félix Guattari contends that the ecological crisis is at once environmental, social, and psychological, as these domains are inseparably connected. He emphasizes that ecology must be understood across three interwoven dimensions, namely, "the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity," which can only be addressed together through an integrated ethico-political framework (28). As Rosi Braidotti argues, the 'nomadic subject' (1) is an embodied, relational, and

continually transforming subjectivity that resists fixed identities and emerges through its material, environmental, and more-than-human relations. Similarly, Karen Barad suggests 'agential realism,' which proposes that agency emerges through 'intra-actions,' the ongoing entanglements of bodies, materials, technologies, and spatial arrangements (33). Together, these perspectives allow me to map digital narratives as cartographies of interdependence, where the ecological, social, and experiential converge.

As Frances A. Yates has shown in his work The Art of Memory, memory is never neutral, but is structured through cultural techniques, the method of loci (mnemonic), images, and narrative forms that determine what is remembered and how. In this sense, a hero-centric approach functions as mnemonic architecture—it provides the "places" and "images" within which collective remembering is organized, privileging the heroic figure as the central anchor of memory. Creating an enemy and acting upon it is the focus. However, in the era of disasters and the exploitation of nature and ecology, we should turn our faces not to the hero with a thousand faces but to the carrier bags that hold the care, awareness, and collective memories. It suggests a different mnemonic ecology, one not centered on the hero but on the gathering of fragments, traces, and ordinary gestures. Remembering here becomes less about monumental anchors and more about an ecology of care, where stories accumulate like objects in a carrier bag, holding together multiple voices, environments, and temporalities.

Haraway emphasizes that survival and thriving depend on forming unlikely partnerships and interconnected collaborations, which she calls 'becoming-with' (3) one another, or else not becoming at all. She reminds us that the stories we choose shape the stories that can follow, ideas generate other ideas, and the worlds we live in actively create new worlds. Haraway further explains that care is a practice of "response-ability," a commitment to making kin and fostering flourishing in multispecies worlds, where the goal is not to fix everything but to "stay with the trouble" of living together on a damaged planet (2). Similarly, Puig de la Bellacasa describes care within more-than-human ecologies as a form of maintenance, characterized by ambivalence, messiness, and the often tedious work of ongoing attention (5).

In this context, I draw on Puig de la Bellacasa's notion of care as a vital ethical and material practice that extends beyond human-to-human relations. Care, she argues, is "everything that we

do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (3). It is not only an affective state but also "a practical labour" and "an ethical obligation" (4), entangling emotions, politics, and material practices. Importantly, care is ambivalent: it does not guarantee harmony but obliges us to confront questions of dependency, asymmetry, and power within our relations (6). As such, care becomes a speculative commitment to more-than-human futures, an orientation toward sustaining interdependence rather than pursuing heroic mastery.

Within digital ecological contexts, this understanding of care can be read as a narrative approach: one that maintains, continues, or repairs worlds without relying on heroic arcs. The following case studies explore how such possibilities emerge, or fail to emerge, across different digital environments.

3. Case Studies in Narrative Ecologies

To investigate how everyday narratives are shaped and expressed within digital environments, this article examines a selection of video games and a virtual reality (VR) experience. While video games constitute more familiar digital ecologies, VR (particularly as a tool for perspective-taking) offers the potential to explore nonhuman points of view. For this reason, I selected three video games and one VR work in which the player can inhabit the perspective of a tree.

Together, these four cases represent contrasting narrative orientations: two that follow a Campbellian, hero-centered structure, Journey and Assassin's Creed, and two that draw on a Le Guinian emphasis on relationality and multiplicity, Everything and Tree. It is important to note that, in the context of video games, a Campbellian structure may shift or depart from its traditional circular form, as interactive environments invite multiple pathways, interpretations, and player-dependent variations. In this analysis, I use "Campbellian" not to suggest a complete replication of Campbell's seventeen-step monomyth, but to signal a narrative orientation grounded in heroic progression, individual agency, and conflict-driven resolution.

My analysis is based on close readings of the games' official websites and developer statements, complemented by systematic viewing of gameplay footage. This approach allows me to

understand not only the formal mechanics and narrative design of each work, but also how these elements shape the ecological imaginaries they invite players to inhabit.

3.1. Journey

Firstly, Journey, developed by Thatgamecompany and released in 2012 (see figure 3), follows a largely linear, pilgrimage-based narrative that echoes elements of the monomyth: an initial call, a sequence of trials, a climactic ascent, and a final moment of transcendence. Spatially, the game world is organized as a symbolic landscape for a hero's passage. The player embodies a lone, robed traveler whose progress depends on navigating environmental challenges. Nature in Journey operates less as a co-agent and more as an aestheticized terrain, beautiful, mysterious, and at times adversarial. Digital traces appear as glowing pathways, murals, and ruins that function as narrative residues, hinting at a lost civilization.

The game's worldbuilding is visually striking and highly atmospheric. Although the player begins alone, anonymous companions may appear intermittently through the game's unique, ephemeral multiplayer system. The environment shifts from desert to subterranean spaces, snowy mountains, and ultimately an otherworldly aerial realm, each transition signaling a new phase in the narrative arc. Sentient textile-based lifeforms that once coexisted with the Ancients and whose remnants still haunt the dunes, caverns, and sky. A recognizable dystopian element is the world's desolation: the ruins imply collapse, and the absence of non-player living creatures reinforces the sense of a once-vibrant ecology now emptied of life.

While Journey draws on several recognizable stages of Campbell's 17-step monomyth, it does not fully conform to a classical heroic arc.

Figure 3. Journey (2012). Image retrieved from thatgamecompany.com. © 2025 thatgamecompany, Inc. Permission requested.

There is no villain, no battle, and no conquest; instead, the game emphasizes companionship, perseverance, and wordless connection. The narrative's emotional trajectory resonates with heroic structure, yet its ethos aligns more closely with quiet transcendence than with triumph over conflict.

3.2. Assassin's Creed

The second case study is Assassin's Creed, developed by Ubisoft Montreal and released in 2007, an exemplar of a conflict-driven, quest-oriented video game. Its narrative structure is organized around missions, combat sequences, and character progression, incorporating several stages of Campbell's 17-step monomyth, including the call to adventure, crossing of the threshold, the road of trials, atonement, and the attainment of the ultimate boon. Spatial logic unfolds through expansive open-world cities designed as arenas for mastery, surveillance, and tactical movement. The player-protagonist, endowed with exceptional abilities, follows a trajectory centered on individual accomplishment and conflict resolution. Ecologically, the game adopts a stance of domination: the environment functions primarily as a resource, something to be navigated, exploited, or controlled in service of the hero's objectives. While the architectural reconstructions of historical cities provide compelling digital-historical traces, they remain secondary to the overarching gameplay logic of conquest and strategic control.

Taken together, these elements position Assassin's Creed as a paradigmatic instance of a narratively and ludically teleological design ethos, one in which spatial, narrative, and ecological systems cohere around the consolidation of heroic agency. The game's richly realized urban environments gesture toward historical depth yet ultimately serve as a substrate for mission advancement and player empowerment. As a result, the title illustrates how classical quest-driven frameworks tend to subordinate ecological and architectural specificities to mechanized loops of progression and mastery, reinforcing a worldview in which place is instrumentalized and complexity streamlined in service of individual triumph.

3.3. Everything

In contrast, Everything, designed by David O'Reilly and released in 2017 (see figure 4), exemplifies a Le Guinian narrative approach. Its storytelling is nonlinear and accumulative, with meaning emerging through the continuous gathering of perspectives rather than through a singular plotline. Spatially, the game unfolds as an explorable, hierarchy-free cosmos in which players can move seamlessly between scales. Through its remarkable mechanics of shifting embodiment, from microscopic entities such as cells, insects, and blades of grass to mountains, planets, and entire galaxies, the game invites players to experience existence from multiple vantage points. Agency is radically distributed: players may inhabit animals, plants, objects, or cosmic entities, each offering a distinct mode of movement, perception, and relational encounter. Embodiment depends on intentionality.

In this configuration, ecology is understood relationally, as a densely interconnected totality in which all entities matter and no single perspective is privileged.

Figure 4. Everything (2017). Image © David O'Reilly. Permission requested.

Digital traces accumulate through an ever-growing database of beings encountered and embodied, forming a digital "carrier bag" of existence that holds multiplicity rather than directing players toward a climactic resolution. The effect is a world of ongoingness, where narrative emerges through motion, scale-shifting, and the continual reorientation of the self in relation to others.

3.4. Tree

The final example, Tree, a VR experience designed by New Reality Co. and released in 2017 (see figure 5), structures its narrative through the embodied life cycle of a single tree, from seed to sapling to mature canopy, and finally to destruction. Spatially, the VR rainforest operates as an immersive, affective carrier bag of ecological experience, surrounding the player with layered sensory cues, including ambient forest soundscapes, shifting light, and the tactile illusion of growth. Agency is deliberately constrained: the player inhabits a nonhuman perspective, rooted in place, with movement and action shaped almost entirely by environmental forces. Rather than enabling mastery, the game compels the player to feel the slow temporality of growth and the vulnerability of ecological interdependence.

Ecology is therefore central, and human agency is radically decentered as players experience themselves as part of a living environment rather than as controllers of it.
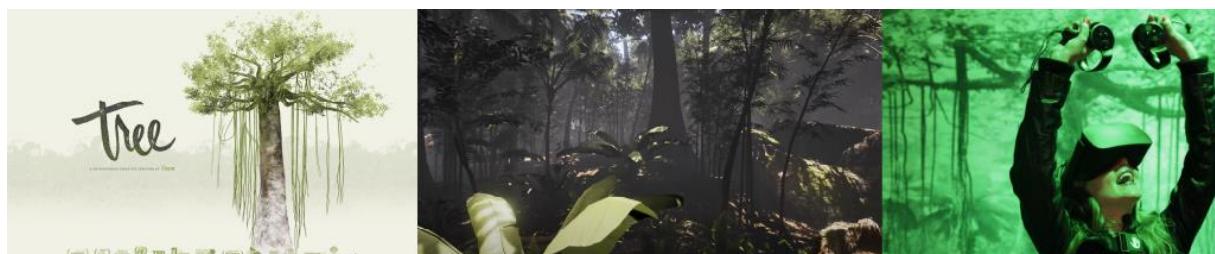
Figure 5. Tree (2017). Image © New Reality Co. Permission requested.

Themes of care, fragility, and exposure to harm are foregrounded as the narrative culminates in deforestation and fire. Digital traces arise as embodied and temporal imprints of climate precarity, moments in which players witness environmental loss not from above, but from within the body of the tree itself.

4. Dialogues Between Worlds

The Campbellian paradigm, represented in different ways by Journey and Assassin's Creed, positions the player as a hero moving through a structured arc of transformation. While Journey adopts only a minimal version of this model, evoking pilgrimage and ascent without explicit conflict,

Assassin's Creed offers a far more complete and orthodox expression of Campbell's framework, built around battles, missions, antagonists, and the steady acquisition of mastery. In both cases, however, the world functions primarily as a backdrop: a stage on which the hero's development unfolds. Mountains, cities, deserts, and other environments appear as resources for progress or obstacles to overcome. Ecology in this mode is subordinated; it provides atmosphere and challenge but does not act as an autonomous presence. The hero's path remains central, and nonhuman forces are dramatized only insofar as they advance, test, or symbolize the hero's inner journey.

By contrast, games such as Everything and Tree exemplify what Ursula K. Le Guin termed the "carrier bag" model of narrative. Instead of a singular heroic arc, narrative emerges through relation, vulnerability, and ecological entanglement. In Everything, the player inhabits a multiplicity of beings, discovering story not through conquest but through the interconnections of scale, movement, and coexistence. In Tree, the player becomes a fragile organism, experiencing growth, exposure, and precarity from within, a reminder that survival is never solitary but always relational. These games reposition ecology not as a stage but as the story itself, an unfolding process in which a human becomes only one participant among many. The juxtaposition reveals a fundamental choice in digital ecologies: to reproduce the Campbellian hero's journey or to invite players into alternative modes of care, relation, and shared survival.Table 1. Case study analyses of narrative structure, agency, conflict vs. relation, world/ecology, and temporality.

Axis	Journey	Assassin's Creed	Everything	Tree
Environment	Video Game	Video Game	Video Game	Virtual Reality
Narrative structure	Mythic pilgrimage	Historical epic	Non-linear multiplicity	Embodied ecological cycle
Agency	Single chosen hero	Chosen assassin	Decentralized, any being	Tree as ecological node
Conflict vs. relation	Struggle and transcendence	Struggle between factions	Relations, gathering	Vulnerability, care
World/Ecology	Stage for trials	Stage for conquest	Protagonist itself	Co-constituting agent
Temporality	Linear, teleological	Linear, heroic repetition	Recursive, infinite	Cyclical growth & death

Table 1 outlines how the four case studies diverge across narrative structure, agency, ecological framing, and temporality. Journey and Assassin's Creed both follow familiar video-game conventions, yet the former casts the world as a site of pilgrimage while the latter frames it as terrain for conquest. In contrast, Everything and Tree disrupt hero-centered design: Everything distributes agency across all beings in a recursive, relational cosmology, while Tree focuses

experience through a single ecological life cycle. Together, these comparisons reveal a continuum from teleological, conflict-driven models to works that reimagine worlds and organisms as co-constituting agents.

To unfold these in depth, I would like to introduce Tadao Cern's Assisted Shedding, an installation of felled tree trunks whose upper portions retain their bark, while the lower sections are precisely stripped to a straight horizontal line (see figure 6).
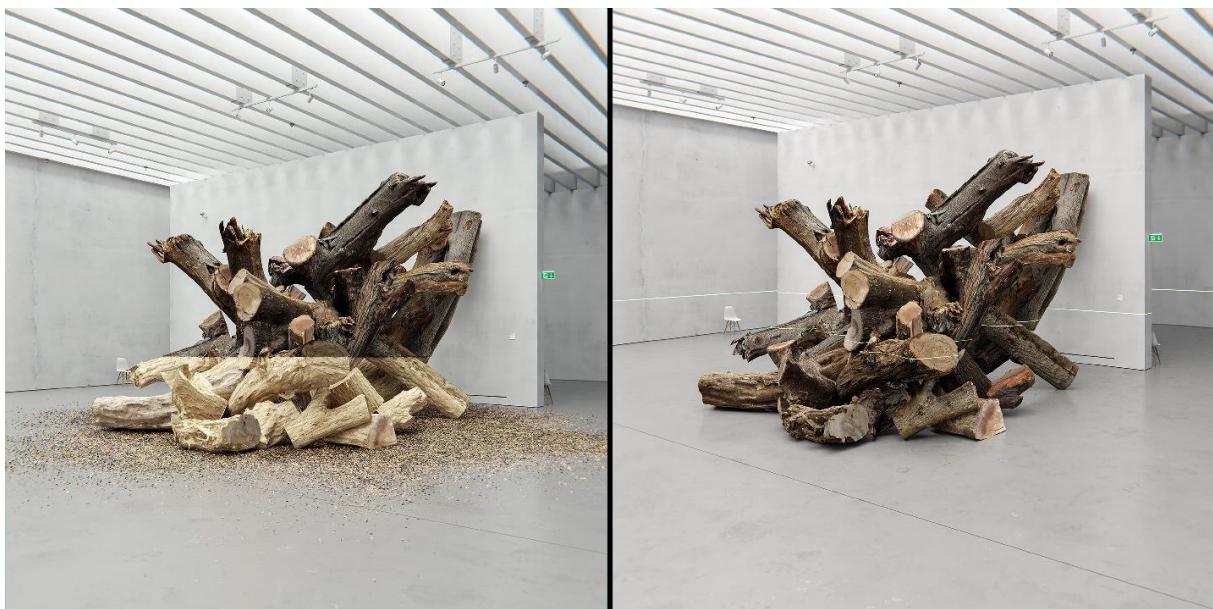

Figure 6. Assisted Shedding (2025). © Tadao Cern. Permission requested.

By arranging and partially peeling these logs, the work turns living matter into a staged surface for our gaze, exposing how gestures that read as care can also operate as control and curation. Although a physical artwork, its narrative function resonates with how daily, material narratives become translated and often disciplined within digital environments. The piece enters this tension by foregrounding the complexity of "care." It reflects on how gestures of care frequently mask acts of ordering, stripping, and arranging life to fit human perceptual expectations. In this context, preservation collapses into control: living matter becomes valuable only after being stabilized, classified, and made legible to the human gaze. As Cern notes, this dynamic recalls Bruno Latour's argument that "nature" is never simply given but technologically produced to secure particular cultural distinctions.

Viewed through this lens, Assisted Shedding exposes how practices framed as care can reproduce Campbellian impulses. Like the hero who protects by mastering, care here becomes a mode of dominance, safeguarding through containment, tending through regulation. María Puig de la Bellacasa warns that care is always "ambivalent" because it sustains while also governing; to "take care" is never innocent but bound up with power. While Assassin's Creed frames care in explicitly interventionist terms, preserving the world by asserting control, stabilizing disorder, or eliminating threats, Journey operates differently. It does not demand mastery over the environment or the defeat of antagonists. Instead, its form of "care" is atmospheric and symbolic: the player moves through a world marked by loss and renewal, guided not by conquest but by subtle gestures of companionship and perseverance. Yet even here, the Campbellian arc persists. Journey still centers the player's individual ascent and transformation, positioning the world as a landscape that supports the hero's spiritual progression rather than acting as an autonomous agent. Thus, while Journey avoids domination, it remains tethered to a hero-centric model that contrasts sharply with relational or ecological modes of care.

A Le Guinian mode of care operates differently. In Everything, care appears as attuned to multiplicity, the recognition that existence is shared, provisional, and always relational. In Tree, care emerges as vulnerability, revealing that survival depends on cycles and conditions that exceed human control. Here, care does not eliminate unpredictability; it lives with it. It becomes a practice of openness rather than domination.

These contrasting logics, heroic mastery and relational attunement, clarify how digital ecologies construct ethical orientations. Care can be preserved through control or sustained through entanglement. If Campbellian care seeks to maintain the world by mastering it, Le Guinian care embraces uncertainty and interdependence. To "carry" rather than to "conquer" is to acknowledge that care cannot guarantee stability; it instead makes space for vulnerability and shared becoming. This article reveals care's doubleness: it can reinforce heroic mastery but also be open toward ecological relation.

In dialogue with Journey, Assassin's Creed, Everything, and Tree, the article expands the conversation about ecological storytelling in digital culture. It demonstrates that ecological aesthetics are never neutral. They either reproduce the monomyth, casting the world as backdrop

to the hero, or foreground the world as a dynamic carrier bag in which human and nonhuman lives are co-constituted. Situating care within this tension invites players and creators alike to consider not only how we play with ecologies but how we inhabit them.

5. An Epilogue: Toward Other Ways of Storying

Life on Earth is not a homogeneous system or a machine operating within human-centric ecologies. On the contrary, from microorganisms to forces and energies, from animals to plants, from landscapes to weather and climate, from machines and devices to food and resources, and from humans to all nonhuman entities, existence unfolds through symbiotic structures that both operate and transform, composing and decomposing as complex relationalities emerge. Human–machine–oriented, linear modes of communication have imagined "systems," yet these are less anthropocentric mechanisms than decentralized webs of complexity.

Experiences and developments are not isolated within human orientation or direction; rather, they are co-constituted, relational, and situated within geographies, political–technological entanglements, and non-heroic dynamics. They are shaped by narratives through which both individual and collective memories take form. These memories are not confined to humans or societies but extend across the relationalities of materials, technologies, and other nonhuman entities.

Ethical and political discussions often frame care as a form of justice, universally understood as both an action and an attitude that recognizes and supports the needs of others through responsibility and the promotion of well-being. Yet while this universal principle promises equity, it neglects the contextual and situated dimensions of ethics. The solution is not simply to replace the male hero with a female counterpart, but rather to transform the very narrative of the heroic arc (into one where human and nonhuman entities share agency in the storyline, collectively carrying Le Guin's 'carrier bag' of culture and future-making).

Rethinking and redefining digital ecologies, then, requires reframing them through practices of care (grounded not in abstract universals but in situated knowledges and material-semiotic discourses).

The analyses developed throughout this article, moving from Journey's mythic pilgrimage to Assassin's Creed's heroic teleology, from Everything's decentralized multiplicity to Tree's embodied ecological cycle, demonstrate how digital environments can either reinforce or reconfigure the narrative conventions through which humans have long understood themselves in relation to the world. These case studies reveal a spectrum between designs that prioritize mastery, individuation, and conflict, and those that cultivate relationality, vulnerability, and co-agency across species and scales. By tracing how narrative structure, agency, ecology, and temporality differently manifest in these works, the article has argued that digital ecologies can serve as powerful laboratories for rehearsing other modes of storying, modes that foreground interdependence rather than domination, and that imagine futures not secured by heroes but sustained through shared, situated practices of care.

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