

Carrier Bag Narratives for More-than-Human Care: Rethinking Design, Maintenance, and Worldmaking in HCI

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Abstract

Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and its surrounding areas, such as Human-Building Interaction (HBI), and Media Architecture have long been shaped by narratives of progress, innovation, and problem-solving, often following the “heroic arc” of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth. While productive, these narratives tend to marginalize practices of maintenance, repair, and care, as well as the more-than-human relations through which sociotechnical systems persist. This full-day workshop invites participants to explore alternative narrative forms for HCI through Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, narratives centered on gathering, sustaining, and caring rather than heroic achievement. Through short provocations, peer annotation, and collaborative exercises, participants will bring existing research projects, probes, or artifacts and collectively surface and rethink the narratives embedded within them. The workshop will generate speculative narrative artifacts such as storyboards, diagrams, or care-oriented reframings. By foregrounding narrative and care, the workshop aims to expand how interactivity is understood at DIS, contributing to relational and care-centered approaches beyond interaction in HCI.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms; Interaction design process and methods**; • **Applied computing** → *Architecture (buildings)*.

Keywords

more-than-human, care, narrative approach, design, carrier bag theory of fiction, hero’s journey

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1 Introduction and Background

Design research in HCI, HBI, and Media Architecture has often been shaped by progress-oriented narratives that frame innovation as a breakthrough, design as a disruption, and technology as heroic problem-solving, echoing and methodologically reinforcing Joseph Campbell’s monomythic narrative, with its emphasis on decisive action, mastery, and resolution [7, 8, 19]. While productive for advancing technical agendas, these narrative forms also delimit what kinds of work are valued and what futures become imaginable. In privileging novelty, efficiency, and visible outcomes, they tend to marginalize forms of labor that are ongoing, relational, and



resistant to heroic framing, such as maintenance, repair, care, and more-than-human entanglements.

In contrast, Ursula Le Guin's *the carrier bag theory of fiction* offers a counter-narrative mode that foregrounds gathering, holding, sustaining, and continuing rather than conquering or solving [31]. Where Campbell's hero narrative centers on transformation through rupture, Le Guin's carrier bag attends to what sustains life: mundane practices, shared dependencies, and collective survival. This distinction is not merely literary but methodological. Narrative forms actively shape what is recognized as meaningful work and how responsibility, agency, and value are distributed within research and design practices.

Care has recently gained prominence in HCI through discussions of sustainability, AI ethics, infrastructures, and climate-related technologies, all of which foreground long-term responsibility and interdependence. Yet care is often operationalized narrowly, reduced to user empathy, ethical checklists, or secondary considerations, rather than examined as a foundational condition shaping how systems are designed, maintained, or narrated. Speculative design has been widely adopted within HCI as a means to both imagine possible futures and critique present practices [1]; however, such work often remains oriented toward future-facing scenarios that reproduce progress-driven or solutionist narratives, rather than attending to the ongoing practices of care, maintenance, and relation that sustain sociotechnical worlds. This workshop proposes carrier bag narratives as a design resource for rethinking how care is articulated in HCI, shifting attention from moments of innovation to the relations and labor that sustain sociotechnical systems over time [11, 17, 20, 21, 25, 30]. Approaching narrative as a design method rather than a representational layer, the workshop invites participants to diagnose, re-read, and rework the narrative structures embedded in their own research and design projects. Through collective annotations, discussions [5, 22, 28], and speculative rewriting, we aim to surface overlooked forms of care, maintenance, and more-than-human dependency, opening space for alternative care-oriented modes of worldmaking in HCI [18].

2 Background and Motivation

Feminist ethics of care offer a critical lens for examining how responsibility, attentiveness, and interdependence are organized within social and technical systems. Early work by Gilligan foregrounded situated, relational modes of moral reasoning [12], while Noddings conceptualized care as an ongoing practice sustained through attentiveness and responsiveness rather than isolated acts [24]. Tronto further politicized care, framing it as distributed labor embedded in institutional and infrastructural arrangements, and emphasizing its temporal, collective, and often invisible character [30].

Feminist science and technology studies extend care beyond interpersonal relations to material, technological, and ecological entanglements. Puig de la Bellacasa conceptualizes care as both ethical and ontological, inseparable from the worlds and practices it sustains [25]. Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble" frames care as ongoing engagement with unfinished relations [14], while Braidotti situates care within a posthuman ethics of relational accountability across human and nonhuman actors [6]. In design research, these

perspectives align with more-than-human approaches that understand design as cultivating ongoing relations rather than optimizing discrete user interactions [15, 27].

These commitments resonate with Barad's *agential realism*, which understands agency as emergent from material-discursive entanglements and treats research and design practices as performative rather than representational [2]. Barad's notion of diffraction, attending to patterns of difference and interference, offers a methodological orientation aligned with care, maintenance, and more-than-human relations [3]. Building on this, Gullion advances diffractive analysis as a qualitative practice that reads theory, data, and experience through one another, foregrounding partiality, accumulation, and entanglement [13]. These qualities resonate with Le Guin's carrier bag narratives and with care as a collective, ongoing practice. In design research, such narrative artifacts function as intermediate-level knowledge that supports reflection and theory-building without requiring stabilization into finalized solutions [22].

Within HCI, these frameworks highlight how narrative and language shape what becomes perceptible and valued. Dominant interaction vocabularies often privilege control, efficiency, and intention, obscuring practices of maintenance, adjustment, and shared vulnerability. These perspectives can be further understood through vocabularies as materially and relationally constituted assemblages that emerge through interactions among heterogeneous elements [23]. In response, recent work explores alternative narrative forms, such as Dumlu's Carrier Bag Ecologies, which mobilizes Le Guin's theory as a methodological device for rethinking care in digital environments [10].

Multispecies and speculative design approaches further frame care as relational and processual [9], unfolding through sustained interactions among humans, nonhumans, technologies, and environments, for example, in practices such as Miyawaki forest cultivation [4]. Similarly, experiential design projects like FeltSight [16] use sensory extensions to open alternative interaction imaginaries, cultivating modes of perception that decenter the human and foreground distributed, more-than-human relations, where sensing and meaning emerge through ongoing co-constitution.

In a related vein, Søndergaard and Campo Woytuk extend the notion of care to more-than-human bodies within ecological and feminist design practices, while other studies trace how such practices scale from intimate care to broader environmental relations [29, 32]. Speculative interaction design research also examines how future-oriented, more-than-human approaches can generate alternative relational imaginaries in built and multisensory environments (e.g., [26]). Taken together, these perspectives position care in HCI not as an auxiliary concern but as a condition shaping how systems are conceived, narrated, and sustained. Building on this view, the workshop foregrounds carrier bag narratives and diffractive methods to rework dominant heroic design stories, inviting participants to reflect on how care is enacted in their own research and how alternative narratives might support more relational, collective, and more-than-human futures in HCI.

3 Workshop Focus

3.1 Goals

We position this workshop as going beyond interaction while emphasizing the narrative, care, and worldmaking. The workshop treats narrative not as representation, but as an infrastructural condition that shapes how care, maintenance, and responsibility are designed into sociotechnical systems.

- **G1:** Narrative methods as a design method. Develop a shared vocabulary and set of “narrative prompts” for carrier-bag storytelling in HCI (e.g., protagonists, temporalities, agencies, infrastructures).
- **G2:** Reframe design work as care/maintenance. Explore how repair, upkeep, and interdependence can be foregrounded in research narratives and artifacts.
- **G3:** Produce outputs. Co-create a small toolkit (prompt cards, zine, or worksheet set) and a plan for post-workshop dissemination.

3.2 Themes

The workshop is organized around the following interrelated themes, which participants will explore through discussion, collective reading, and narrative experimentation:

- **Carrier Bag Narratives and Alternatives to Heroic Design:** Challenging progress-oriented and solutionist narratives in HCI by foregrounding carrier bag storytelling that emphasizes gathering, holding, maintenance, and continuation over disruption, mastery, and resolution.
- **Care as Situated, Ongoing, and Relational Practice:** Examining how care is enacted through maintenance, repair, stewardship, and attention within sociotechnical systems, and how such practices are often rendered invisible or secondary in dominant design narratives.
- **Diffractive Reading, Writing, and Design:** Exploring diffractive approaches to narrative and analysis that attend to entanglements, partial perspectives, and patterns of difference, drawing on feminist STS to rethink how design knowledge is produced and interpreted.
- **More-than-Human and Posthuman Relations of Care:** Investigating how care extends beyond human users to include technologies, infrastructures, environments, and other forms of life, and how design narratives shape responsibility and agency across these relations.
- **Narrative as Method in HCI Research and Design:** Considering narrative not as a representational afterthought, but as a methodological practice that actively configures what counts as design work, ethical responsibility, and collective worldmaking.

4 Audience

We invite 15–20 participants from HCI, STS, design research, digital arts, and practice-based communities who work with research or design probes. Participants may engage with narratives of care, repair, maintenance, and more-than-human approaches, through commitment, curiosity, ambivalence, or scepticism, and explore the productive tensions these perspectives generate. Researchers,

practitioners, and artists at all career stages are encouraged to apply. We support multiple contribution formats (e.g., text, images, artifacts) and will collect access needs in advance.

Participants apply by submitting a short description of an ongoing project, research question, or topic of interest (up to 4 pages, excluding references) in either the ACM article or pictorial format via the workshop website; submissions need not present finished work and will be used only as shared material during the workshop.

5 Anticipated Outcomes

The workshop aims to generate outcomes at the levels of practice, method, and community, rather than producing an exploratory framework. Participants will develop shared narrative awareness around care, maintenance, and more-than-human relations in HCI by examining how dominant heroic narratives shape research questions and design decisions, and by experimenting with alternative carrier bag-inspired narrative forms.

A primary outcome is the situated experience of collective reflection and rewriting, through which narrative is encountered as an active design material rather than a neutral means of reporting. During the workshop, participants will produce narrative artifacts, such as annotated texts, speculative rewritings, prompts, and reflective fragments, which are understood as diffractive traces of the workshop process rather than finalized outputs.

With participants’ consent, selected materials and documentation will be shared via a simple workshop website that supports announcements in advance and serves as a supplementary archive after the event. The site will host a public summary, selected artifacts, and a zine-like/booklet-like PDF, making the workshop process and narrative shifts visible for reuse or adaptation.

Finally, the workshop will contribute methodological insight by demonstrating how *carrier bag narratives* and diffractive approaches can operate as modes of inquiry in HCI, while fostering a community of researchers, practitioners, and artists engaged with care-oriented and more-than-human approaches beyond the event.

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