

Return to *Life in the Garden* | Hands-on Experience

**An Experiment in Procedural
Storytelling Empowered by
Generative AI**

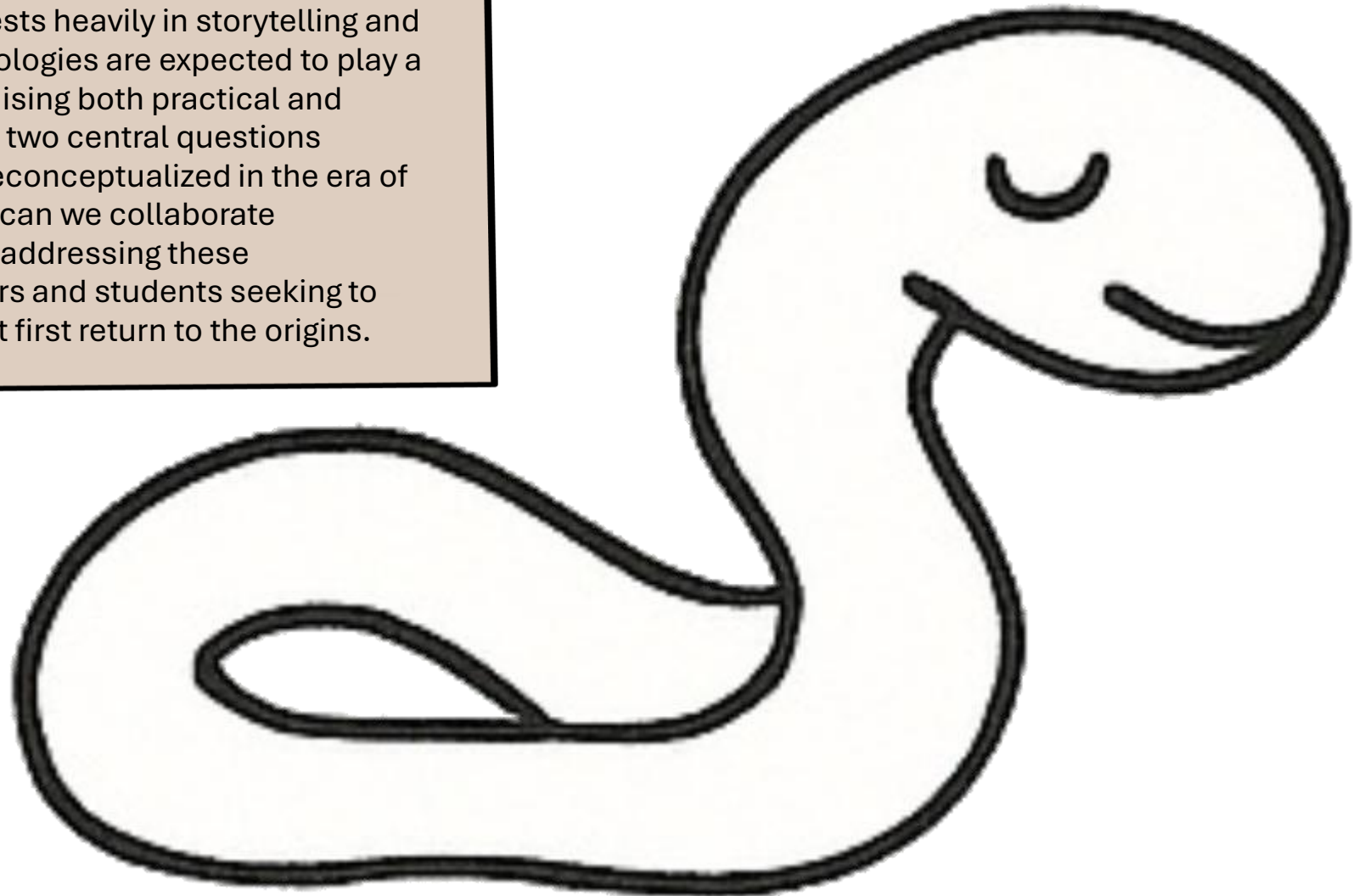
ChiGreece 2025 | Friday, 15:00-16:30

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1

The Problem

Contemporary game development invests heavily in storytelling and narrative-rich characters. GenAI technologies are expected to play a key role for future digital storytellers, raising both practical and ethical implications. Within this frame, two central questions emerge: (a) How must storytelling be reconceptualized in the era of computational creativity? and (b) How can we collaborate productively with AI systems? To begin addressing these questions—especially for new designers and students seeking to craft vibrant narrative worlds—we must first return to the origins.



2

The Garden

In 1999, artist and designer Nancy Nowacek and game designer Eric Zimmerman experimented with modular storytelling and created *Life in the Garden*. This story machine built from modular fragments offers an elegant alternative [1]. The exercise was later adapted into a shorter, simplified version, known as A Deck of Stories [2], described as:



[1] <https://ericzimmerman.wordpress.com/back-in-print-life-in-the-garden/> (retrieved June 24, 2025).

[2] Zimmerman, Eric. 2022. *The Rules We Break: Lessons in Play, Thinking, and Design*. First edition. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, pp. 117–120.

“Write a dozen pages on cards so that when you shuffle them and draw 5, you get a coherent story every single time”.

Adam, Eve
and the
serpent lived
in the garden.

And the
serpent tried
to sleep but
could not.

Then the
garden
grew quiet.

God
was not
pleased.

So at last
the serpent
was happy.

And nothing
happened
for a very
long time.

The
End

But that is only
what the serpent
has told me. And
who really can
believe the slim
words of a serpent?

And the
serpent tried
to sleep but
could not.

And the serpent drew a
map of the garden by
tracing lines in the earth

God was not
pleased.

And a gentle breeze
passed through the
garden disturbing
the leaves on the
fruit trees of the
orchard.

And Eve dug a
hole in the eart
of the garden.
She climbed inside
and slept for a
very long time.

God
remained
silent.

And Eve
bathed in the
river that
encircled t
garden.

One day Adam cried. Eve
asked him, Why do you
cry? Adam said, with his
two wet eyes, I cry
because I do not know
what day I was born. How
old am I, Eve?

And the
sun
became
angry.

And Eve
laughed to
herself.

And the trees
in the
orchard bore
fruit.

Meanwhile
Eve slept
among the
trees of the
orchard.

And the
serpent tried
to sleep but
could not.

And
Adam
Slept.

So Eve

But that is only
what the serpent
has told me. And
who really can
believe the slim
words of a serpent?

And the serpent drew a
map of the garden by
tracing lines in the earth
with the thin stylus of his
body. And so the serpent
realized with a shudder
that the garden was not a
garden.

Many days
passed. Too
many to
count.

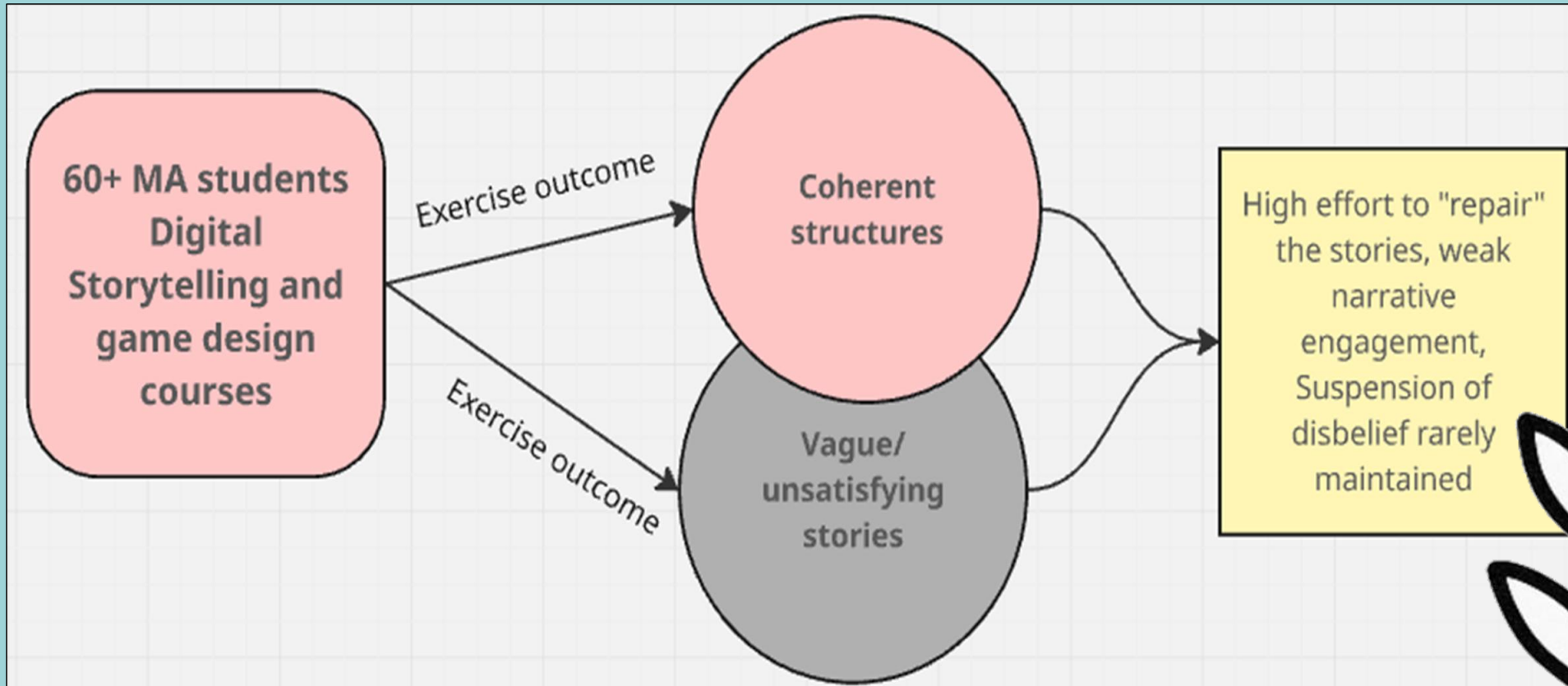
God was not
pleased.

And with a branch
had fallen from on
trees in the orchard
the serpent on the
many times and w
strength. But we a
how difficult it is
serpent.

And as
done sin
very beg
the sun c
it.

Testing The Garden

Zimmerman and Nowacek's approach asks: *Can modular fragments consistently generate coherent stories?* Our tests show:



Revisiting The Garden

Applying these 'fruits of wisdom'

- 🍎 Narrative Theories & Principles - *Chekhov's Gun*
- 🍊 Character Development and Dramaturgical design using Vonnegut's model
- 🍇 Computational Storytelling - Discourse markers, Trigger points, goal resolution.

Adam, Eve
and the
serpent lived
in the garden.

And the
serpent tried
to sleep but
could not.

**It plucked soft
leaves into its
ears.** Then the
garden grew
quiet.

But God
was not
pleased.

But at last
the serpent
was happy.

**He closed his
eyes,** and
nothing
happened for a
very long time.

**Good
Night.**

Hero

Catalyst

- Chekhov's Gun: sleep introduced early → sleep fulfilled clearly at the end.
- Man in Hole: serpent struggles → finds solution (leaves) → peace restored.
- Good ending: positive closure, self-contained, no vagueness.
- Discourse Connectives: minimal linking words (to link scenes).
- Minimal Revision (computational principle).

5

Machine-Human Performance Collaboration: Design, direct and play a short script based on Vonnegut's “Man in Hole” arc

Beyond the “human-in-the-loop” approach (Wang, 2019), we examine how a GenAI agent can function as both co-star and narrator, collaboratively creating a dynamic, live system with humans. Adopting a “cinematographic performative mode,” we will design our scene in real time, as if it were a cutscene in our biblical video game. By the end, we will have a complete script ready for production.



6

Play a short three-act arc



Act I — Setup

Introduces the characters, setting, and initial problem.

Example: The serpent cannot sleep.

Act II — Confrontation

The character faces obstacles and rising tension.

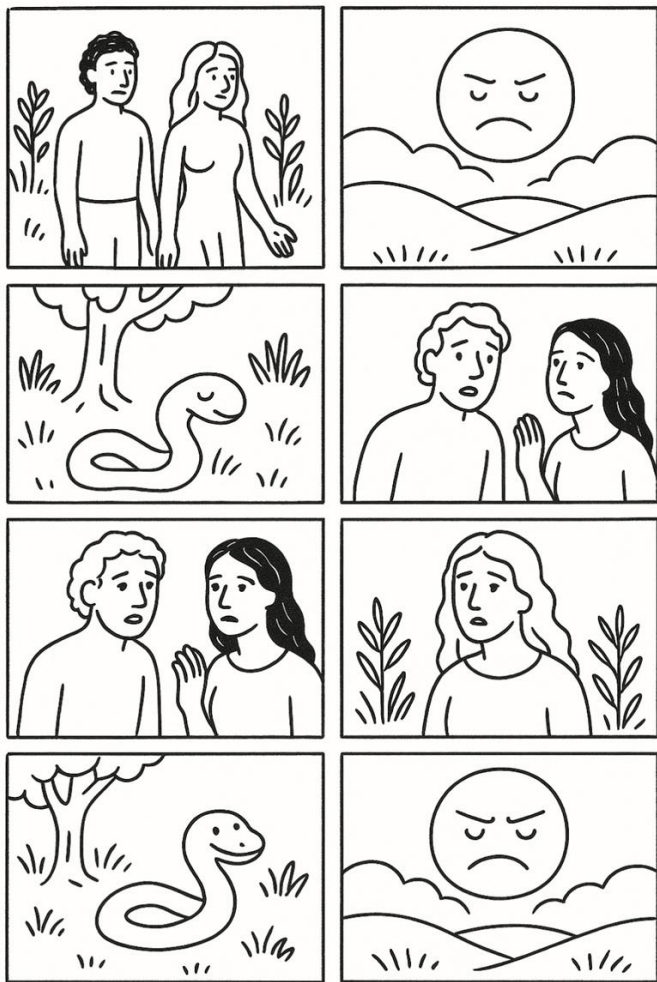
Example: The serpent tries different ways to rest while God grows displeased.

Act III — Resolution

The conflict is resolved, bringing closure.

Example: The serpent plugs leaves in its ears, finally sleeps, but the quiet displeases God.

Following Murray's principle of *scripting the interactor* (2012), we define the behavioral rules that function within a dynamic context. In other words, our role at this stage is not to prescribe dialogue or constrain action, but rather to establish parameters and allow the human–non-human interaction to unfold.



EXT. GARDEN – DAY

The garden stretches in soft sunlight. ADAM, EVE, and the SERPENT are present. The SERPENT coils beneath a tree, restless, eyes flicking across the leaves.

GOD (voice calm, resonant, walking slowly among the trees)

Serpent... I sense your unrest. Why do you struggle to sleep?

The camera pans from the SERPENT's tense body to GOD's frowning face, highlighting the quiet tension in the garden.

Your move as the SERPENT—describe your reaction, movement, or whisper. I'll respond as God, keeping the scene cinematic and interactive.

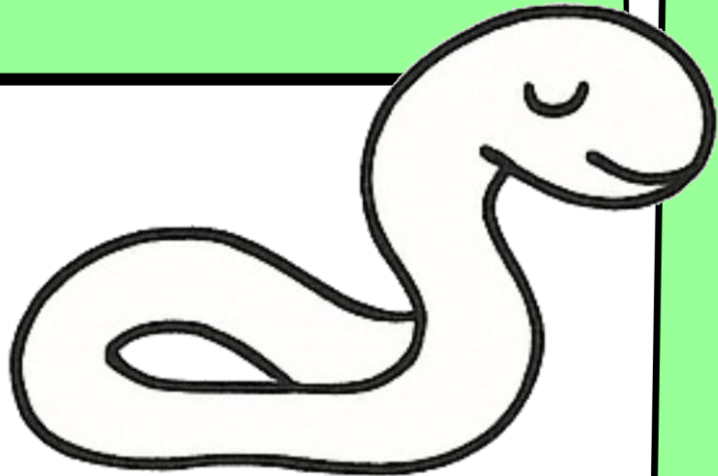
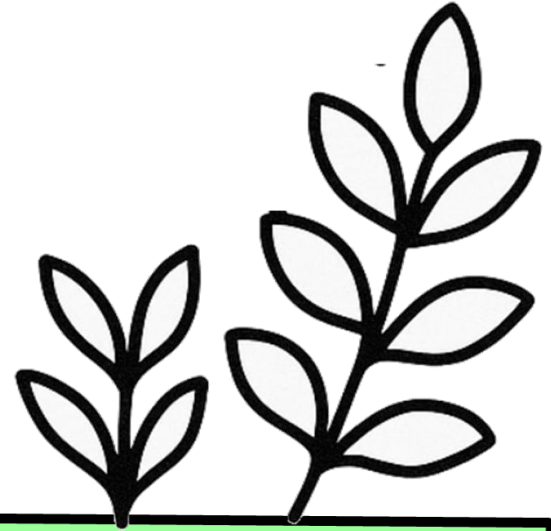
We Ask:

- Whether generated stories show stronger coherence than the original exercise?
- Based on what logic we prioritize one narrative tool over another?
- What live play reveals on the potential and pitfalls of co-authorship between players and AI?
- Insights on how to train GenAI to stay in-character (supporting roles) and manage scenes effectively (as director).

8

Why It Matters?

- Demonstrates how GenAI combined with applied narrative theory can produce more cohesive stories
- Provides a framework for industry and academia to rethink interactive narrative systems
- Employs a performative-led practice to explore narrative design choices





Thank You

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