

Thoreau's 'Walden' gets new life as a video game

May 15 2018, by Dylan Mcguinness



This May 23, 2017, file photo shows a view of Walden Pond in Concord, Mass., where the 19th century American philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau spent two years in solitude and reflection. A new Playstation game devoted to the Thoreau classic debuts on Tuesday, May 15, 2018. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola, File)

Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the

fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth—err, game.

Henry David Thoreau wrote those words—most of them—in his seminal book, "Walden." They make up the objective of a video game that seeks to translate his exploits in the woods of Concord, Massachusetts, into a playable digital reality.

"Walden, a Game" is adapted from the book and launches Tuesday on PlayStation 4. It has been available on computers for almost a year.

"Obviously it's an odd or unique idea for a game," said Tracy Fullerton, who conceived the idea and led the team that created it at the University of Southern California's Game Innovation Lab.

Fullerton told The Associated Press that "Walden" is one of her favorite books, and she thinks its meaning—a tale of escaping technology to appreciate nature—is topical today.

"It seemed to be a kind of game that he was playing," Fullerton said. So she created one to mimic it.

Fullerton acknowledges the irony of trumpeting nature in a video game but said she hopes the game will be more contemplative than others.

Players drop in with a half-built cabin on the shores of Walden Pond. From there, they can essentially decide everything they do over eight seasons (Thoreau thought a year was better divided into eight parts than four), which takes six hours of real time.

They can finish building the house and toil in the fields, or they can venture out into 70 acres of virtual nature.

The objective is to find the right balance between survival—players can't

die, but they can faint—and fulfillment. As players seek more inspiration from nature, interacting with animals and trees, the actual game world becomes more colorful and more physically beautiful, Fullerton said.

The team at USC spent more than a decade creating the game, she said. Team members consulted literature and history experts to ensure the accuracy of its portrayals, and the game's sound designer recorded all of its audible elements in the real Walden woods.

It's available for free for teachers, and a curriculum is available online, but Fullerton said the game's primary purpose is entertainment.

Joseph Simpson, a software developer from Ohio, said he reads Walden every year and discovered the game while reading about Fullerton.

"I immediately, without hesitation, bought it and started playing it," he said. Simpson said the essence of the book has been implemented into the game in a way that doesn't corrupt it with too many objectives or missions.

"I may not have to read Walden this year because I can play the game," he said.

Experts on the textual version of "Walden" also were intrigued.

Robert Hudspeth, a former president of the Thoreau Society and an English professor at the Claremont Graduate University in California, said he has heard of the game but hasn't played it.

"I will say, however, that anything that might spark an interest in Thoreau's writing is welcome," Hudspeth said. "If playing a game stimulates the players to go to the books, then I'm all for it!"

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