


Procedural Rhetorics of Immediacy, Transcendentalism and Life in *Walden* (1854) and *Walden, a game* (2017)

Ida Lott Nürnberger 

1. Introduction

Through time, several novels, films and other sorts of fictional stories have undergone video game-treatment. In many cases this seems to be the next logical step when large media franchises are deciding new modes of adaptation. Just look at Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which has taken the leap from book to film to game adaptation. What is less common, however, is the adaptation of non-fiction classical works, but there is an interesting example to be found in *Walden, a game* (2017) released by USC Games, which offers an adaptation of the classic Henry David Thoreau work, *Walden*, from 1854.

Thoreau's *Walden* sees the author undertaking a transcendental experiment involving his going to the woods and living by the lake shore of Walden Forest. It is a potent philosophical reflection on what life could be like away from civilization, and what life could be like if one were "to front only the essential facts of life" (Thoreau 65). The idea of living ascetically, simply and closer to nature is hardly revolutionizing, but Thoreau has a convincing pen and is in *Walden* able to make simplicity and mundanity engaging for the reader. Among many other literary devices, Thoreau does this by using complex allegories and metaphors which encourage the reader to engage actively with the text, but also by using humor, irony and sarcasm. At its release in 1854, *Walden* is moderately successful and quite well received and is today regarded a classic work of American literature (Britannica, s.v. "Henry David Thoreau"). However, one does not need to dwell on its status as a classic for long to realize just the sheer relevancy of *Walden* today. Now, more than ever, in a post-industrial, globalized world, the core philosophies of *Walden* resonate with the average person (Rossi ix). New information is no longer just contained within tangible objects such as a book or the daily paper; it is at our very fingertips, and while this late modern ideal of interconnectedness in principle brings us closer to the real world and all the action, it also takes us away from the material world.

There is a lot to learn from Thoreau's experiment, and therefore there is an extremely apt and interesting avenue in adapting *Walden* into a video game; a medium which is so inherently mediated and modern.

In *Walden, a game*, the player is placed at the very start of Thoreau's experiment, assuming the role of the author himself. Along with many other aspects within the game, the player must now, just like him, live by Walden Pond, cultivate beans, build a wood cabin and maintain it, get inspired, observe nature, and perhaps most importantly, write. The adaptation of a non-fiction work is unusual, as most video game adaptations involve a work of fiction as its source material. However, lending from the "survival game"-genre, the game adapts the practical aspects of its source text, i.e. the mundane work necessary to sustain life by Walden Pond, such as collecting berries and chopping firewood. These mundane tasks are indeed a central point of the book, but one must not forget that as an artistic literary work, the book offers much more than just descriptions of various types of work. In this article, I will argue that, through persuasive processes, the adaptation simulates the transcendental philosophies argued for by Thoreau in *Walden*, while also exposing a paradox in the mediating of a text which encourages the reader to live with as much immediacy as possible.

To aid in the reaching of this conclusion, the following questions will be considered: How are literary, narrative, and philosophical qualities adapted from *Walden* into a video game, and how might such an adaptation work to expand the framework by which we read and interact with the source text?

To answer this question, I will first define and consider what really sets literary texts apart from the audio-visual medium of video games. In connection with this I will introduce the theory of procedural rhetoric cf. Ian Bogost, which will be the primary framework by which I read and interpret *Walden, a game*. I will then move on to examine the book and the video game in tandem with one another. This is done because it is when the two texts are placed in direct comparison to one another that the medial affordances of each text are exposed. In the analysis, I will be examining various points that will aid in answering the main question of this article. In the errand of this, I will be analyzing the differences in narrative structure, analyze and compare how different philosophies of "a good life" are put forth, and finally I will map out how the two texts present different discourses and rhetorics of inspiration. The results of this analysis will then finally aid the discussion of how transcendentalist philosophies and messages are communicated in *Walden, a game* in opposition to *Walden*.

2. Theoretical and methodological frameworks

In the following section I will offer a brief definition of the interactive video game, as well as what methodological considerations come with analyzing such texts. I will then present the theory applied for analysis in this article as well as its relevancy in this endeavor.

The definition of the video game is long disputed and polemicized. Dwelling on this extensively is not productive. Instead, I will cast a look upon Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman who write the following in the chapter "What Is a Game?" from the anthology *The Game Design Reader* (2006): "Does it matter? The real question is not [what] the definition is, but [why] games require such definitions and [how] they can be utilized" (Salen & Zimmerman 80). Here, emphasis is put on how definitions shape how we analyze video games. Then what could a standard dictionary definition afford in analyzing video games? The Oxford English dictionary defines the video game as "[a] game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a monitor or other display" (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "video game"). Here, the notion of "manipulation" bears a clear connotation and necessary type of agency, namely the agency of the player. By this definition, then, analysis of a video game must focus on the interaction between the player/reader and the game. To bring this focus into the article, I will be reading and analyzing *Walden, a game* by way of procedural rhetorics cf. Ian Bogost. In the article "The Rhetoric of Video Games" (2008), Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as the following:

Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion—to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively. Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. ... video games make argument with [processes]. (Bogost 125).

This definition and the use of procedural rhetoric as a mode of analysis for examining *Walden, a game* is apt, because it allows for an analysis of how processes and gameplay mechanics author arguments for the reader. The relevancy of this also becomes increasingly clear when looking at what *Walden* does as a text. Thoreau's great work opens with an epigraph: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (Thoreau 5). This epigraph is in many ways emblematic of what

Walden as a text does. First and foremost, it encapsulates the position that the author himself assumes for the rest of the text; as a figure that is one and living in symbiosis with nature. Secondly, it frames Thoreau's work as a persuasive text, which could be implied by the wording "brag lustily ... if only to wake my neighbors up" (Thoreau 5). This also makes the text apt for a video game adaptation, as transcendentalist ideals and philosophies can be further explored by the reader assuming the position of Thoreau himself. Also, following Bogost's model of procedural rhetoric that frames video games as persuasive, the adaptation and subsequent analysis of *Walden* as a text that wishes to persuade becomes increasingly appropriate.

These were the methodological and theoretical considerations that have been made regarding the following analysis. I will now move on to conduct a detailed comparative analysis of the two texts.

3. Analysis

In the following section I will be conducting a comparative analysis of *Walden* and *Walden, a game* using the theoretical framework of Bogost. I will initially examine the basic narrative structures that inform the two texts, as well as examine their similarities and differences. After this, I will examine how the two texts position themselves in terms of "living deliberately", and what they each afford in fulfilling this tenet of Thoreau's life philosophy. Finally, I will analyze how both texts present ethics of inspiration.

Walden is divided into 18 chapters, each chapter detailing different subjects pertaining to life by Walden Pond. The book ends with the chapter "Conclusion", which instead of detailing his leaving of the woods is a type of philosophical crescendo, where Thoreau with high abstraction directs his perspective from Walden Pond and into the universe: "The buck-eye does not grow in New England, and the mocking-bird is rarely heard here. The wild-goose is more of a cosmopolite than we; he breaks his fast in Canada, takes a luncheon in the Ohio, and plumes himself for the night in a southern bayou" (Thoreau 214). This represents a figurative movement away from Walden Pond, and "Conclusion" is by all indication written after Thoreau leaves his cabin in the woods. This is indicated by the last sentence of the chapter "Spring" right before "Conclusion": "I finally left Walden September 6th 1847" (Thoreau 214). This is the physical move away from Walden, and is clearly contrasted with the figurative, philosophical movement away from Walden, which happens in the final chapter. As explicated before, each chapter is preoccupied with different subjects pertaining to Thoreau's life in the woods. Towards the end, a cluster of four chapters all pertaining to subjects relating to the seasons ("Former inhabitants; and Winter Visitors", "Winter Animals", "The Pond in Winter", and "Spring") precede the final chapter. The seasons as a

structuring element is something that plays a much larger role in *Walden, a game*. In the game, instead of structuring the story around the same chapters as in the source text, it is divided into eight sections: “Early Summer”, “Late Summer”, “Early Fall”, “Late Fall”, “Early Winter”, “Mid-Winter”, “Late Winter”, and “Spring” (USC Games). Although this sectioning differs from the source text, there are some similarities. In *Walden*, winter takes up a considerable amount of space, as is also seen in the adaptation. Another similarity could then also be seen in the section “Spring”, which in each text has one dedicated section.

Walden, a game starts with a short cutscene, which is a scene wherein the player cannot interact with the game. Here, the player is shown a cinematic view of Walden Pond. As exemplified in Figure 1, text is written across the screen.

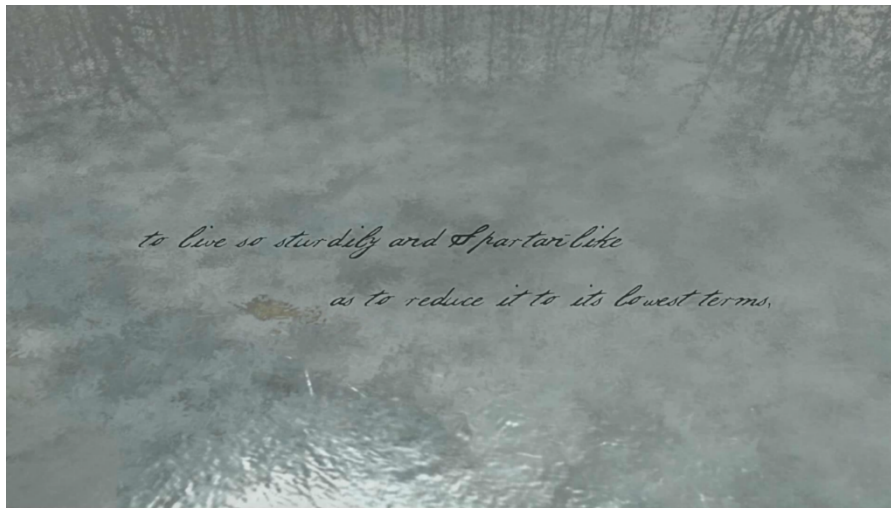


Figure 1. Still from the first cutscene of the game. *Walden, a game*. Stills throughout this article are reproduced by courtesy of Tracy Fullerton/USC Games.

Here, the game is quoting perhaps one of the most well-known passages from *Walden*: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ... to live so sturdily and Spartan-like ... as to reduce it to its lowest terms” (Thoreau 65). By using this excerpt from the book, the video game adaptation also positions itself in relation to its source text. I argue that by doing this, the game qualifies this part of *Walden* as central to its overall messaging; it positions “living deliberately” as something essential to the core message of the source text. Later in this article, I will return to how this is elaborated through the procedural rhetoric of the game.

The game starts in early summer, where the player is asked to “begin living Thoreau’s experiment” (USC Games). The player is instructed to do this by interacting with a glittering arrowhead. The motif of the arrowhead is not coincidental; while having an indexical function in

the game, it is also referring to page 107 of *Walden*: “I did not give it any manure; but in the course of the summer it appeared by the arrowheads which I turned up in hoeing, that an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here...” (Thoreau 107). In the book, these arrowheads are proof of former inhabitants of these very same woods.



Figure 2. Agency is given to the player. *Walden, a game*.

When the player interacts with the glittering arrowheads around Walden Pond, the camera pans towards the direction that the arrowhead is pointing. Thoreau, voiced by Emile Hirsch, will then go on to speak about the object that the arrowhead is pointing toward. In the case of Figure 2, the arrowhead prompts Thoreau to speak. He begins describing his abode in the woods: “When first I took up my abode in the woods, my house was not finished” (USC Games). When the day ends in the game, it is revealed that this same interaction with the arrowhead also prompts him to write down in his journal what was just told to the player. To the player that has also read *Walden*, it will become apparent that the game pulls the journal entry and speech from the book. Although, when inspecting the source text there is a difference: “When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence day, or the fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter ...” (Thoreau 61). In comparing the two text excerpts it becomes clear that the game has included an abridged version of the original text. This could be interpreted as a way for game developers to concretize Thoreau’s messaging. Looking at the excerpt from page 61 as cited above, there are indeed a considerable number of parenthetical clauses. However, this abridging serves another purpose in situating the adaptation in relation to the source text. In a way, the abridging situates the game as a representation of the process of the authoring of *Walden* itself; the player interacting with points of inspiration around Walden Pond to then later “note” these points of inspiration down in a journal, the contents of

the journal to be later used as part of making the manuscript for the source text. What is then not seen in the game is the editing of the contents of the journal; the player does not see the process that leads to the final product, which would be found in the source text, for example as seen on page 61 in *Walden*.

As a final point about the narrative structures in the two texts, I will examine the ending of *Walden, a game*. To trigger the ending, the player must complete all eight sections of the game. A prompt will then be presented to the player, asking whether they would like to end the experiment now, or keep going. If the player chooses to end the experiment, the game will also end. This prompts a cutscene, similar to the one the player saw at the start.



Figure 3. The sun sets on the Walden experiment. *Walden, a game*.

Looking at Figure 3, as the game is approaching its end, it quotes and situates itself in relation to the source text once more. Firstly, it quotes “Conclusion”: “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live” (Thoreau 217). By doing this, the game narratively ties itself to what it claimed to be the crux of it at the very beginning of the game, namely the following: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately” (Thoreau 65). By doing this, the game not only cements its core ideas, but it also, like its source text, ends on a philosophical note, which operates at a level which abstracts itself both physically and figuratively away from Walden Pond.

I have now commented on the structure of the two texts, and I have explicated which messages and philosophies the video game adaptation of *Walden* has appropriated and represented textually by quoting its source text. But this leaves an important question: How, apart from textually, does *Walden, a game* procedurally generate a rhetoric that matches with “living deliberately”?

In the first chapter “Economy”, Thoreau makes this central claim about the necessities of life: “The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success” (Thoreau 11-12). This is directly reflected in the adaptation which requires that the player takes care of these four aspects of sustaining life by Walden Pond. The player is required to take these aspects into account all the time while playing. When one of the four resources starts depleting, the game will warn the player with an icon, as seen in Figure 4 marked by a red circle.



Figure 4. Fuel stores depleting. *Walden, a game.*

Multiple resources can be depleted at once. When this happens, the player character, i.e. Thoreau, becomes lethargic. He cannot run for long, and it becomes more difficult to chop wood for extended periods of time. The red circle on Figure 4 points out this depletion of wood/fuel stores. When the player character cannot run, it also becomes more difficult to make trips to Concord, where a questline about Thoreau’s authorship takes place. Here, through processes, the game is authoring the argument that the author himself presented in “Economy”, i.e. that the basic needs of food, shelter, fuel and clothing need to be fulfilled before one can go out into the world and entertain the “true problems of life” (Thoreau 11-12). The game is doing this by sanctioning the player if it is unable to fulfill these four parameters, especially by targeting the player character’s ability to run. I highlight this mechanic, because every in-game day is set to a timer. When the day runs out, the game gets closer to its end, and the player must go to sleep and start anew the next day. If the player character cannot run, they will not be able to complete the requests put forth by other non-player characters. For example, on the second day of late summer, Bronson Alcott

requests Thoreau/the player to go out into the woods and place rations for fleeing slaves (USC Games). These requests have a strict time limit, which will be a challenge if the player character is not fulfilled in what Thoreau names to be “the necessities of life” (Thoreau 11-12). This forces the player to consider these four aspects closely.

I have argued for how the game through processes authors and reflects central arguments made by Thoreau in *Walden*. I will now consider what arguments are authored, when the player must repeat menial tasks to stay alive.

In the game, the days pass quickly when the player balances the necessities of life and other requests given by non-player characters. The player will build a routine; whether it would be to tend to the bean field first thing in the morning in summer, fall and spring, picking berries, chopping wood, maintaining the cabin or mending Thoreau’s clothes. Here, I wish to highlight the actions which include replenishing the food reserves. How much food the player has in the game is measured by glass jars sitting on a shelf in the cabin. When the jar(s) are full, the food reserves are at maximum capacity. The player, as an example, could pick sumac to fill the reserves. To fill a jar, the player must interact with the plant numerous times. This is repetitive, and this in particular has been criticized, for example on the game platform Steam by user “Annenouk”: “All you do is constantly looking for food. When you finally find some you have to ta[p] x over a 100 ... times to fill one food jar” (Steam). Certainly, there is something to be said about repetitiveness, but there is a point to repetitiveness in this game. About repetitiveness in video games, Ian Bogost writes the following: “...[Animal Crossing]... is a game about the repetition of the mundane work necessary to support contemporary material property ideals” (Bogost 119). While *Walden, a game* is similar in its representation of mundane work as necessary work, its repetitive nature itself presents a procedural rhetoric of simplicity. This is because the repetitive act of collecting berries does not impose any difficulties on the player; it is simple, but time-consuming. The argument for simplicity as well as anti-materialism is also presented by Thoreau in *Walden*: “An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! ... Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five” (Thoreau 65). Thoreau argues that people burden themselves with unnecessary complexities. The game mirrors this by showing how basic needs can be met with modest labor; the time invested in berry-picking could be viewed as a type of digital enactment of Thoreau’s minimalist ethic, as well as time for introspection.

Other examples of repetitiveness are also seen in the gameplay, for example when the player traverses Walden Pond in a rowboat.



Figure 5. Walden Pond at night. *Walden, a game*.

Here, the player must simulate rowing by moving the computer mouse in the direction of the arrow as seen on Figure 5. This, like picking sumac, is repetitive and takes a long time. But while it takes a long time, it forces the player to slow down, enjoy the scenery of Walden Pond and perhaps become introspective as the motions of rowing become a type of second nature. This connects to something central in *Walden*: “It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side;” (Thoreau 217). Apart from the player having a similar experience with travelling between Emerson’s house and Thoreau’s cabin, the procedural rhetoric of slowness, which is created by the processes in the game which require repetition, creates a similar experience of “falling into a particular route” (Thoreau 217). The player learns where food is, where fuel can be replenished, thus the path of survival is trod by the player; not unlike how the author fell into a particular route himself.

I have examined and discussed repetitiveness in the game, as well argued for how repetitiveness authors a procedural argument for the virtues of simplicity, slowness and anti-materialism. Related to this, I wish to highlight the use of Graphical User Interface in the game. George & George define Graphical User Interface (GUI) through its advantages, namely its affordance to use panels, icons, menus, and arrows (George & George 2). An example of GUI in *Walden, a game* would be its use of icons, for example in Figure 4. Another, and perhaps more pertinent example, is the GUI in the game pertaining to the journal.



Figure 6. The map of Walden Pond. *Walden, a game.*

When the player presses “J”, the journal will appear as seen in Figure 6, offering an overview of Walden Pond. The player cannot view this map elsewhere, and it is presented as though it is a part of the natural environment of the game; not GUI that is there to aid the player in its exploring of Walden Pond, although it most certainly is. This naturalistic map aids in heightening the sense of immersion in the game. Conversely, the use of non-naturalistic GUI would take the player out of the experience, which would contradict the game’s procedural rhetoric of “slowing down” and anti-stress.

Another important point pertaining to the map is how it is used in the game. As noted, the player can press “J” to take out the journal containing the map. However, as soon as the player uses the “WASD”-buttons, which make the player character move in the game space, the journal is put away.

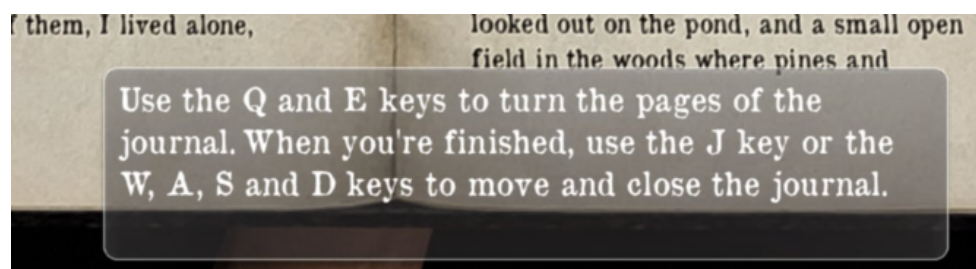


Figure 7. This is how you control the journal. *Walden, a game.*

This means that the player cannot use the map while walking; the player must familiarize itself with the route and will have to make full stops in its travels to look at the map again. This is another example of how the game through processes forces the player to “fall into a particular route, and

make a beaten track for ourselves” (Thoreau 217), mainly in how the player must rely on repetition and familiarization to effectively move through the game environment.

A final argument I wish to make about GUI in the game is about difficulty. During the game, the non-player character (NPC) Ralph Waldo Emerson asks for the help of the player, namely, to aid him in finding books in the forest. This is a so-called fetch-quest, which entails the player finding something in the environment and bringing it back to the requester. The locations of Emerson’s books are marked with an “X”, which can also be seen in Figure 6. Thus, the task is simple: The player must reach the “X” on the map to finish the quest. The lack of difficulty in this endeavor reflects a larger point about Thoreau’s role in the forest. In “Solitude” Thoreau writes the following: “I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me” (Thoreau 90). He has created a tight bond with his environment, the elements of which are “congenial” to him. In the game, this “congenial” relationship is reflected not only in the visual expression (naturalistic computer graphics), but also in the ease that the player is able to find its way around Walden Pond. Thus, the game authors through (lack of) difficulty a procedural argument that expresses the tight bond between the woods and Thoreau.

I have argued that the game through certain mechanics simulates the familiarity with the woods that Thoreau places great emphasis on in *Walden*. Finally, for this analysis, I wish to examine the way in which the game presents a procedural rhetoric of inspiration. I have formerly explained the way in which arrowheads in the game present an avenue for the adaptation to situate its source text in the game itself. While the arrowheads play a central role in the authoring of *Walden* in the game, they also present a procedural rhetoric of inspiration. Some arrowheads will only appear when the player character is inspired enough.

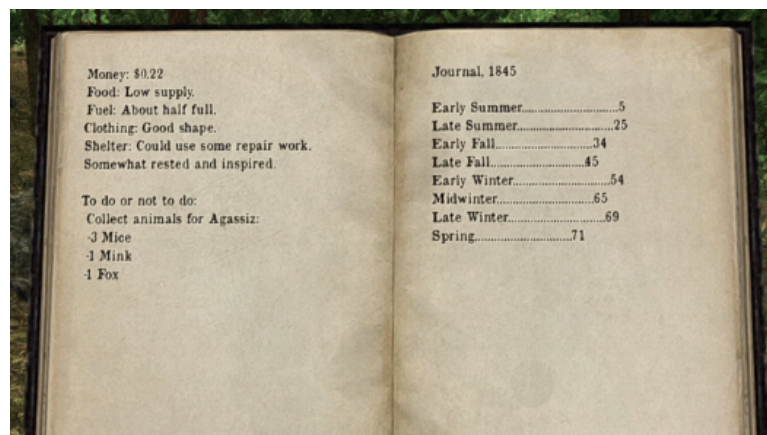


Figure 8. An overview of needs and tasks in Thoreau's journal. *Walden, a game*.

As can be seen by looking at Figure 8, inspiration is a resource. The player can replenish inspiration by going to a solitude cairn, which can also be seen in Figure 6. Spending time here will then make more arrowheads appear, thus creating drafts for the work of *Walden*. Viewing inspiration as a resource, as well as its replenishing being conditioned by the player's deliberate move to a solitude cairn, presents a procedural rhetoric of inspiration which carries the procedural argument that "living deliberately" (Thoreau 65) changes what the beholder is capable of seeing. The beholder must be ready to see for inspiration to appear. Finally, the appearance of arrowheads in nature in the game presents the procedural argument that meaning in nature is not objective and static; it is conditioned by the inner state of the onlooker. This connection between a person and its natural environment has its obvious ties to transcendentalism. In his lecture, "The Transcendentalist" (1842), Ralph Waldo Emerson defines the transcendentalist as the following: "[The Transcendentalist] believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy." (Emerson 5) The mind being open to inspiration clearly matches the way that both *Walden* and *Walden, a game* thematize the very same concept. While Emerson positions the transcendentalist perception of the mind as susceptible to the impressions around it, he also places "Man" as an extension of nature and the world around him: "Nature is transcendental, exists primarily, necessarily ever works and advances, yet takes no thought for the morrow. Man owns the dignity of the life which throbs around him in chemistry, and tree, and animal, and in the involuntary functions of his own body" (Emerson 7). Thoreau going to the woods and "living deliberately" (Thoreau 65) is one way that he "owns the dignity of the life which throbs around him" (Emerson 7). In many ways, the video game adaptation of *Walden* helps explicate some of these relationships between Man and Nature; but how? And could the medium of the video game collide in such a way with central transcendental themes that it renders the very messages that it tries to convey incoherent? I will discuss these questions below.

4. Discussion

In the analysis above, I have compared the ways that *Walden* (1854) and *Walden, a game* (2017) author arguments of transcendental deliberate living. I have looked at how their messaging compares to one another and how the game positions itself in relation to its source text and its messaging. But questions of mediacy have arisen: Could ideas of transcendentalism be furthered by a video game adaptation of a central transcendental text like *Walden*? Is there perhaps something paradoxical in the relationship between the medium and the transcendental philosophy presented in the text? I will discuss these questions in the section below.

In many ways, the video game medium is one of great affect, and just like in the reading of fiction and other personal narratives (for example *Walden*), games offer great empathy between the player position and the point of view-position. *Walden, a game* is played in the first-person perspective with very little user interface. When the player left clicks to perform an action, it can see the hands of Thoreau reaching out as though it was the hand of the player itself. In other words, the game is able, because of its mediacy, to create a sympathetic bond between the player and the author. This is also furthered in how the game offers an experiential bond between Thoreau, the text and the player. In her work, *Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace* (1997), Janet Murray writes that “[j]ust as the computer promises to reshape knowledge in ways that sometimes complement and sometimes supersede the work of the book ... so too does it promise to reshape the spectrum of narrative expression ... by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework” (Murray 15). Although *Walden* is non-fiction there is something to be said about how a video game adaptation of Thoreau’s work has the ability to expand the *Walden*-universe and its sentiments. By adapting Thoreau’s great work, the developers are to some extent “expanding the timeless bardic work within another framework” (Murray 15), not changing it. The adaptation also falls in line with the sentiments of *Walden* being even more relevant today, as the world is becoming increasingly interconnected. The noise of several information streams sheds new light upon Thoreau’s going to the woods, living in quiet and solitude and becoming one with nature. The unique position that the player assumes when playing *Walden, a game* thus has the potential to expand the messages of the source text.

A transcendental experience could also be offered to the player in repetition in *Walden, a game*. In *Gaming and the Virtual Sublime* (2020), Matthew Spokes argues that repeating the same thing allows the player to reach a flow state, where the player is pushed beyond self-consciousness and boundaries are dissolved (Spokes 143). As has been made clear, the player in *Walden, a game* experiences this clearly in its repetition of chores (the fulfillment of the “four necessities”), filling of food jars, trips between the cabin and Emerson etc., all in the errand of completing the game. By doing these tasks repeatedly and routinely, the player, in theory, could reach a transcendent state, where the player becomes part of the organism that is Nature. But an issue arises with this line of argumentation. The innate interaction between the player, the source text and its ideas of course heighten identification with the author and his ideas, when the player is able to assume the position of Thoreau himself. While adaptation of transcendental ideas from *Walden* into a video game can expand these same ideas, there is also something paradoxical about the game-situation. On one hand, the game offers a vivid experience of Walden Pond which goes beyond the affordances of prose. It offers illustration, graphics and interactivity. But on the other hand, this is

an experience mediated by technology and code. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes: “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us” (Thoreau 66). This excerpt is emblematic of how Thoreau views technology. While it might feel like technology is there to aid its users, the effect turns out to be the opposite of this; technology will control us. Therefore, there is tension between the video game-medium itself and its source text. Thoreau is critical of that which takes us away from reality, and while the video game-medium offers an experiential bond between Thoreau’s own experience and the player, this bond is necessarily mediated. The immediacy of transcendentalist philosophy proves that to really experience transcendence and a connection to nature, one must go out and experience it for themselves, completely unmediated. However, this is not to say that the game does not communicate Thoreau’s message successfully. Apart from how processes and interactivity offer insight into life by Walden Pond, the paradox of the message and medium is also productive in some sense: *Walden, a game* enacts transcendentalism but also exposes what must be formalized to simulate this very philosophy. It is a perspective into what happens when transcendent ideas of immediacy and presence are mediated in the most extreme ways possible.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined and analyzed how literary, narrative and philosophical aspects of *Walden* (1854) are adapted and translated into the video game, *Walden, a game* (2017), as well as examined how such an adaptation might affect how the source text is read. It became clear that the game makes an attempt to be a naturalistic adaptation of what would have been Thoreau’s life in the woods. The game, sectioned into seasons, is perhaps not as much of an adaptation of *Walden*, as it is a representation of what Thoreau was doing when he was writing the book and living the experiment. This is made clear in how the game situates *Walden*, the text, within the game itself. This is done by the player interacting with arrowheads, which are markers of inspiration. This inspiration is then written down in an in-game journal, these entries being abridged versions of excerpts from the source text of the game. Apart from thematizing the authoring of the book in this way, the game also starts and ends with excerpts from the work, using *Walden* as a clear framework for the game.

It also became clear that the game takes a clear stance on what it deems to be the core messages of the source text; namely going to the woods “and living deliberately”. This “living deliberately” is expressed by adopting a minimalist ethic both in *Walden* and the adaptation. Apart from this, and perhaps more pertinent, the game adopts transcendental philosophy by authoring this through processes and procedural rhetoric. Many examples of this became clear in the analysis of *Walden, a game*. One aspect was repetition; for example that which is present in the collection of

berries and the repetitive movements in the in-game rowing mechanic. In practice, these activities became time for introspection for the player, not unlike how solitude for Thoreau made him connected to a divine idea of Nature.

Thoreau ends up becoming increasingly familiar and confided with his environment by Walden Pond. In the game, this is procedurally authored by affording the player very little difficulty. When the player is asked to go look for something in the forest, this endeavor will be simple, because it will be marked on the map in the journal. This journal plays a role in creating immersion for the player; it offers a naturalistic illustration of the graphic user interface that would alternatively be used. This means that the sense of immediacy in the game is heightened.

As a final point in the analysis, it became clear that the game, by offering time for introspection, both by being characterized by repetition, but also by directing the player to “solitude cairns”, presents a rhetoric of inspiration, not unlike that of *Walden* and transcendental philosophy. The “living deliberately”-tenet is part of this, as going to specific scenic locations in the game as a deliberate act of acquiring inspiration, is one way of unifying the self with its environment. This led me into a final discussion of this transcendental framework from which *Walden* and its adaptation operate. A paradox became apparent; living deliberately entails living with immediacy and simplicity. While *Walden, a game* in many ways creates a sympathetic experiential bond to Thoreau and his lifestyle, it is also impossible to ignore that the video game medium by nature is hypermediated. *Walden, a game* is thus in some ways burdened by this discrepancy. But ultimately, the paradox is also constructive; it exposes what happens when you translate and adapt prose about living spartan-like into a complex, mediated art form.

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