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# Where’s Walden?

In Tracy Fullerton’s video game adaptation of author and naturalist Henry David Thoreau’s “Walden,” the gameplay involves fishing in a pond and building a one-room cabin.

That’s a far cry from the bombastic experience of more traditional video games, which often are full of mission briefings, checkpoints and explosions.

But in designing “Walden: a game,” Fullerton wanted players to find balance and inspiration within the game world. “Thoreau’s experiment in living had always seemed to me to be a fascinating kind of game he had set for himself in the woods,” Fullerton said. “An important part of his experiment was about slowing down the pace of life and reflecting on what that meant. I think it’s the kind of emotional and intellectual play we could use more of today.”

As the College of Creative Studies’ 2019 Transdisciplinary Fellow, Fullerton will bring her game design sensibilities to UC Santa Barbara Wednesday, May 29, in a talk titled “From Page to Play: Translating Thoreau’s ‘Walden’ in a Videogame.” Her lecture begins at 9:30 a.m. in the MultiCultural Center Theater and will be followed by a question-and-answer session with Alenda Chang, an assistant professor of film and media studies, and Richert Wang, a lecturer jointly appointed in computer science in the College of Engineering and the College of Creative Studies.

Fullerton also will participate in a game design workshop — complete with student game demonstrations — at 2 p.m. in the Digital Arts and Humanities Commons.

Transdisciplinary Fellows are scholars or practitioners working at the intersection of two or more disciplines and/or whose work provokes an exchange of ideas across majors.

“We are thrilled that Tracy Fullerton has been selected as this year’s CCS Transdisciplinary Fellow,” said Wang. “Game design in general is an interdisciplinary application of ‘traditional’ fields of study fused together to create an interactive experience. Player experience (psychology) is carefully crafted with a balance between aesthetics (art), storytelling/themes (writing and literature) and the underlying technology/mechanics (engineering). Tracy Fullerton’s extensive experience and knowledge will provide students with invaluable context on the importance of the integration of various fields of study in order to create unique experiences.”

Added Chang, “Fullerton’s most recent game has been described as ‘the world’s most improbable video game’ (Britt Peterson, Smithsonian Magazine), probably because you play as Thoreau himself, living on the shore of Walden Pond during the two years of his experimental flight from civilization. ‘Walden, a game’ is not about points, warfare or winning. Instead, it’s a unique celebration of solitude, reflection and the ways that writing and the world around us can feed the soul.”

Thoreau’s “Walden” is the keystone of transcendentalism. In 1845, Thoreau took a plot of land on his friend and fellow author Ralph Waldo Emerson’s estate and built a solitary life, journaling his observations about the flora and fauna around him. In so doing he created a meditation on the economy of the self. Fullerton’s “Walden: a game” is the result of over a decade of design and programming, with roots in Fullerton’s own experience at Walden Pond in Massachusetts.

“I had read ‘Walden’ growing up and had visited the area many times on family vacations, since my father’s extended family all live nearby,” she recalled. “As a child, the book had attracted me because of the idea of living alone in the woods, which seemed exciting and adventurous. As I got older, I became more attracted to the themes of social critique and activism at its core. And then, as an adult, I re-read it again, while visiting the pond, and found a deep resonance with Thoreau’s ideas about time and pace of life.”

While video games such as Minecraft and Rust emphasize the player’s survival against an aggressive world full of monsters and other players, “Walden: a game”

aims to create a world in which players understand the motivations and aspirations of Thoreau's experiment in nature. The game's challenge stems from maintaining a balance in life and seeking inspiration. Wander the forest picking berries and Thoreau will become inspired and start narrating passages from his memoir. Wander the forest too long without eating the berries and you'll pass out from hunger. Work too much on your cabin and the game world will turn gray.

"While Walden has a light survival aspect to it, that is not the focus of the game," Fullerton explained. "Rather, the game is about finding and maintaining balance between what we need to survive and what we need to truly thrive in life. In a way, the survival aspect of the game is only an entry point to the real, philosophical journey that the player experiences over the course of the in-game year."

According to Fullerton, as modern life feels increasingly chaotic and stressful, the philosophical journey Thoreau takes in "Walden" strikes a resonant chord. "He was writing at a time when technologies such as the railroad and telegraph seemed to be speeding up the pace of life and he was concerned with how we were responding to that acceleration," she said. "His cautions against letting these technologies dictate the way in which we live rang very true to me, and I felt like taking on a translation of the book now, using a core technology of our own times, was a very topical challenge."

Available on PC,  Mac and PlayStation 4, "Walden: a game" has been exhibited around the world at venues including the Smithsonian American Art Museum; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Sundance; New York's Museum of the Moving Image; the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland; and is currently part of the Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial in New York and the Netherlands.

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## About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.