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"Escaping isn't always something bad": exploring the ludonarrative relationship between Campo Santo's *Firewatch* and Philip Connor's *Fire Season*

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“Escaping isn’t always something bad”:
exploring the ludonarrative relationship between Campo Santo’s *Firewatch* and Philip Connors’ *Fire Season*

Rui Lemos

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes Campo Santo’s *Firewatch* (2016) as a cultural object, a videogame broadly inspired by a framework of themes and myths prevalent in Philip Connors’ novel *Fire Season* (2011). More precisely, the goal is to determine the relationship between both works through a ludonarrative methodology, a combination of ludic and narrative perspectives, and determine how *Fire Season*’s influence impacts *Firewatch*’s narrative aspects, gameplay mechanics and design. The importance of narrative for play progression and sense-making is imperative in *Firewatch*, influencing design techniques and environments. Much of *Firewatch*’s design approach can be directly traced to *Fire Season*’s detailed descriptions of lookout life in American wilderness. *Firewatch* culminates in an experience that reflects on the escapist nature of videogames, the shaping power of wilderness in American identity and the effects of purposefully deceptive and subversive game design. When appropriate, other works of literature or videogames relevant to the analysis will be used to illustrate specific aspects.

KEYWORDS: *Firewatch*, *Fire Season*, videogame, American literature, ludonarrative, game studies, escapism, wilderness.

“Fugir nem sempre é mau”:

explorando a relação ludonarrativa entre *Firewatch* do estúdio Campo Santo e *Fire Season* de Philip Connors

Rui Lemos

RESUMO

A presente dissertação pretende analisar o videojogo *Firewatch* (2016) enquanto objecto cultural, ostensivamente inspirado por um enquadramento de temas e mitos presentes no romance *Fire Season* (2011) de Philip Connors. Mais precisamente, o objectivo é determinar a relação entre ambas as obras através de uma metodologia ludonarratológica, uma combinação de perspectivas lúdicas e narrativas, e determinar qual o impacto da influência de *Fire Season* na narrativa, mecânicas e design de *Firewatch*. A importância de narrativa para progressão e criação de significado é imperiosa, influenciando técnicas de design e o próprio espaço do jogo. *Firewatch* é extensivamente influenciado no seu design por descrições da rotina de vigias florestais em *wilderness*, território primordial Americano. *Firewatch* culmina numa reflexão sobre a natureza escapista de videojogos, o poder transformativo de *wilderness* na formação de identidade nos Estados Unidos e os efeitos de design de jogo propositadamente enganador e subversivo. Outras obras, sejam literatura ou videojogos, serão usadas como exemplo quando apropriado.

PLAVARAS-CHAVE: *Firewatch, Fire Season*, videojogo, literatura Americana, ludonarrativa, estudos de jogos, escapismo, *wilderness*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Videogames have become one of the most popular forms of media, with nearly a quarter of the world's population playing daily (Clement n.p.). As a field of study, game studies are relatively young and encompass all games, including analog and digital mediums. For the purpose of this text, the focus will be on videogames. Jesper Juul broadly defines videogames as "a game played using computer power and a video display" ("Half-Real: A Dictionary"), including consoles, cellphones or any other object that uses video display such as an arcade cabinet. This text will address a subgenre of adventure games, walking simulators. The term 'walking simulator', albeit coined as a pejorative term, has become accepted due to positive critical and commercial reception of such games, some notable examples being *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013). Melissa Kagen defines walking simulators as games that "[…] offer an experience of spatial storytelling and exploration, in which players wander around a narratively-rich environment without earning points or necessarily accomplishing tasks. Even within a dynamic narrative structure, the player of a walking sim is often unable to exert agency, change the story, or perform mastery." (n.p.). Additionally, Kagen remarks that walking simulators "reestablish an anxious homogeneity of passive nonperformance" (n.p.) due to their rejection of hypermasculine paradigms, avoiding elements like combat, and placing greater emphasis on narrative, exploration and environments. Harmut Koenitz notes that walking simulators allow for "the discovery of «slowness»" ("Walking Simulators" 2), observing the subgenre's more leisurely pace.

This dissertation will address *Firewatch* (2016), a walking simulator videogame by studio Campo Santo, and *Fire Season: Field Notes from a Wilderness Lookout* (2011) by Philip Connors, an autobiographical novel read by the development staff of *Firewatch* (Valdes n.p.). In *Firewatch*, the player plays as Henry, a man struggling to cope with his wife Julia's sudden illness. Unable to face her mental deterioration due to early-onset dementia, Henry decides to work as a fire lookout during the summer of 1989 in the Two Forks tower of the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming. The game's prologue is simple textual exposition with occasional choices, prompting the player to make decisions as Henry; the prologue can seem strange when juxtaposed with the first-person, exploration and narrative-driven gameplay experienced in the rest of the game. After the prologue, the game is organized into various Days out of Henry's total stay in the Shoshone.

Throughout the available Days, the player predominantly interacts with Delilah, the fire lookout stationed closest to Henry and his walkie-talkie companion during the summer. What begins as an escape from the real world quickly devolves into a series of headaches for Henry and Delilah. Early on during the fire season, Henry comes across two girls who set off fireworks and then go swimming in nearby Jonesy Lake. In addition, they have littered and left a campfire smoldering. Henry chastises them and scares the girls away, and in subsequent days the player learns they have gone missing. After the lake incident, during his hike back to the fire lookout outpost, Henry spots a figure in the dark shining a torchlight in his direction. Upon returning to the outpost, he finds it completely vandalized. Subsequently, Henry and Delilah realize someone is listening to their walkie-talkie conversations, Henry is knocked out from behind, and reports of Henry and Delilah are found in a science camp deep within the forest, suggesting they are both being monitored and assessed. Henry and Delilah begin theorizing, weaving a conspiracy centered on themselves. These two initial events mark the start of many convoluted and paranoia-inducing events for both Henry and Delilah, culminating in a reveal that the shadow Henry saw was Ned Goodwin, a (possibly[1]) Vietnam War veteran hiding out in the wilderness after his son, Brian, dies due to Ned's negligent behavior. Many small and interconnected moments mark the pace of *Firewatch*'s narrative, but that reveal and the subsequent ending sequence, in which a fire is consuming the forest, forcing Henry and Delilah to evacuate without ever meeting each other, are rather abrupt. The player is denied an entertaining conspiracy plot and left with a tragic, mundane reality.

Fire Season: Field Notes from a Wilderness Lookout (2011) is the autobiographical recounting of Philip Connors' five-month stay in the Gila National Forest of New Mexico during the summer of 2009. Connors works at a fire lookout and describes not just the details of his job throughout his stay, but the history of the Gila National Forest, of fire and lookouts, both professional and amateur. From beginning to end, one facet of the job is clear – solitude is inescapable. *Fire Season* reflects deeply ingrained myths, validated or deconstructed, of American culture and identity pertaining to the Frontier era. The narrative of lookouts and wilderness reserves is the bookend of an era, the last remaining citizens of America's natural, wild lands.

[1] Brian Goodwin was twelve years old, having died some time prior to Henry taking over Two Forks tower. Ned leaves the army because he is the only family Brian has left, after his mother dies. The Vietnam War ended in 1975, fourteen years prior to the start of the game, roughly coinciding with the Goodwin family's stay in the forest. In addition, a "Korea war veteran" hat can be found in one of the supply caches further suggesting that there may be multiple generations of war veterans working as lookouts.

The importance of wilderness areas is marked by space as much as by time, a world within a world, surrounded by human civilization but untouched by it at its core. The Gila Wilderness, in particular, being the first area in the world with said status, is where Connors focusses most of his attention. Within Wilderness, the forests and their natural inhabitants are preserved, including fire and war memorials marking historical battles. The primary conflict surrounds the protection of nature, endangered by opposing views on how the land should be managed, heavily influenced by nostalgia towards peaceful agrarian or cattle ranging life. For Connors, there is such a thing as too much order and progress; a life starved of adventure is no life at all. The wild provides the adventure, the much-needed restorative escape from monotony and the rat race. Wilderness preserves are slices of land frozen in time and space, a living hand-picked physical memory of an older America. The closed ecosystem of the Gila Wilderness thrives when barely managed: the destruction of fire is also the birthplace for new life and a form of natural maintenance of the forests' health. Progress and order are counterintuitive here. The natural way, more beneficial to all parties involved, requires a modicum of chaos.

Fire Season is part of a larger, shared framework marked by the American mythos of the land, the psychology of East and West, self-reliance and isolation, wilderness, and fire. Connors makes several references to events of the American West and the Frontier, mentioning battles involving Native Americans, ruminating on his perception of the cowboy and considering several aspects which influence the work of a lookout, many of them characteristic of Western figures (laconic, isolated, accepting of danger). Within American nature writing, Connors' distills the unique perspective of lookouts, a profession on the verge of extinction, and their harmonious coexistence with nature and solitude. Fire, a force typically seen as destructive and harmful, is reconfigured as cleansing, a necessary harbinger of new beginnings, the natural cycle of life and death.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze the ludonarrative potential of *Firewatch*, the interplay between its ludic and narrative components, taking *Fire Season*'s themes surrounding wilderness and solitude into account and their cultural significance. Additionally, this dissertation will reflect on how said ludonarrative potential uses player expectations and trope knowledge to enrich the play experience and engage in "meaning-making through playful action (ludosis)" (Mäyrä 18).

Chapter I deals with methodological, briefly addressing the now nearly two-decade old ludology versus narratology debate. Explorations of the concepts 'game' (with

a greater focus on videogame) and 'narrative' are provided to ascertain how they can merge and work cooperatively. To illustrate how narrative can be essential in the process of creating meaning and engaging with players, specific claims in the ludology versus narratology debate are readdressed in light of various modern videogames. Lastly, Astrid Ensslin's functional ludostylistics approach is presented as one of the emerging cooperative methodologies applied to videogames, encompassing tenets of ludology and narratology. Ludology versus narratology is an important debate in the context of *Firewatch* because it tests the limits of what videogames are: can *Firewatch* and other walking simulators be disassociated from narrative without becoming devoid of meaning?

Chapter II is an analysis of specific aspects of Philip Connors' *Fire Season* and how they are transferred, adapted and treated in *Firewatch*. This chapter is organized by primary themes that shape both narratives with an emphasis on a ludonarrative approach, combining ludicity and narrative. This chapter reflects on the relationship between Philip Connors' novel and how its contents shape the experience of solitude and wilderness in a virtual space. To better understand how *Firewatch* operates, various aspects of its design are reviewed as components that contribute to the game's central themes in non-explicit ways, contrasting and comparing both works. The act of walking, the process of regeneration and its associated metaphors provide further examples of how *Firewatch* uses themes in *Fire Season* to create a character and environment-driven experience that reflects an American Frontier less mired in myth but equally important in molding character and perception. Both chapters include other videogames as examples of how ludonarrative approaches can enrich the study of videogames and provide new theoretical perspectives.

CHAPTER I: VIDEOGAMES AND NARRATIVE

1.1 What is a 'game'?

Building upon multiple proposed definitions, Jesper Juul suggests the classic game model (*Half Real* 36) is composed of six primary characteristics: rules, variable outcomes, valorization of outcomes, player effort, player attachment to outcome and negotiable consequences. Juul notes that it is a "barebones description" aimed at explaining the "platform upon which games are built" (54) and that videogames can alter and reshape this platform due to their medium-specific aspects, such as game rules being regulated by software (53). While this set of characteristics predominantly focusses on the ludological aspects of games, in which games are fundamentally systems of rules and mechanics, the present work aims to demonstrate that *Firewatch*, as a videogame, defies purely ludological approaches and instead requires a ludonarrative approach.

Before addressing *Firewatch*, Juul's notion that "rules themselves create fictions" (*Half Real* 13), fiction being synonymous with a game's fictional world, must be further explored. Considering the case of videogames, specific design choices, game mechanics and systems can themselves be considered part of the process of creating the gameworld[2], Juul's 'fiction'. These design elements contribute to the creation of fiction by conditioning or freeing player actions in ways that are complementary/contrasting to the narrative being explored, or to generate desired outcomes – put simply, they contribute to moments of ludonarrative harmony and dissonance[3] brought about by the player's actions. Narrative elements can reconfigure game rules by giving or taking from them contextual significance; examples of this are not scarce. In the *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007) series, the player is forcibly 'desynchronized' (the equivalent of a game over) and must restart a mission if he kills innocent civilians, which goes against the code of the Assassins within the narrative of the series; a gameworld rule that is reinforced by a narrative-driven justification. In *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004), the player takes control of a boy who loses his family and sees his sister abducted in a world of sword and sorcery, prompting the boy to embark on a lifelong journey to become a righteous hero. Yet, the game largely downplays the grandiose nature of the protagonist's quest through crude

[2] Gameworld, analogous to Juul's fiction, is the simulated universe of a game.

[3] Ludonarrative can be harmonious or dissonant and is determined by the contrast and relationship between the experience promoted by the game narrative and the experience promoted by gameplay (Hocking 257). In this text, ludonarrative harmony and dissonance are amalgamated as a spectrum named ludonarrative consistency. Explored in more detail in Chapter II.

comedy, a morality-based system that rewards both ends of the simplistic good-evil spectrum, and the option to simply join the forces of evil; *Fable* grants players a degree of freedom by not binding player choice to compulsory morality.

The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim (Bethesda, 2011) presents a world in which dragons have returned and the end of the world is nigh, yet the player can choose not to progress the quest, completely nullifying any sense of urgency or obligation, as Veli-Matti Karhulahti points out:

> In storygames (again: videogames that invoke story construction in their players), the empirical points of determinacy that invite the individual to progress specific arcs are normally supplemented by demands the confronting of which is so appealing that one is not likely to resist. But none of these demands is ever compulsory; there is always the option to disregard the demanding situation. Players of *Skyrim*, for instance, may well choose not to seek the dragon god Alduin (to which most narratologists would probably attach their kernels) but focus on building a butterfly collection instead. (53)

The narrative of *Skyrim* can be completely different when co-constructed by different players. If a player chooses to ignore the destined path the game intends the player to take, *Skyrim* does not force the player to return and instead offers a myriad of alternative paths. The only way to finish the game and resolve the original narrative premise is to follow the 'main questline' and its necessary events, such as the confrontation of Alduin, but the player does not need to follow the strict sequence of events which invariably lead them to that battle. This is a common system in roleplaying videogames, the existence of a main quest and side quests, which allow for every playthrough of the game to be vastly different regarding its sequence of events. Ludonarrative harmony is achieved if the player remains faithful to the main quest and acts as expected of their player-character, detouring only when prompted or when necessary until Alduin is defeated. Much more interesting, however, is when the player chooses to engage in other objectives, thereby creating a unique sequence of events in which their character might become an archmage from the College of Winterhold, a master alchemist, a husband or wife with a household and children, and a myriad of other options and any combination possible between them, all while diverted from the main questline. Ludonarrative consistency is disregarded by the player when opportunities to create unique or interesting experiences arise.

Storygames allow the player to be a reconfiguring agent, influencing the gameworld, and altering narrative aspects (within what is programmed[4]). Juul's notion is that the outcome of a game is what a player's expectations are attached to (*Half Real* 36). However, the process of getting to that final stage, the journey a player takes to create their characters, seems to be of particular relevance when considering the potential for choice and reconfiguration in games (and genres) conducive to certain narrative freedoms. In this regard, videogames can utilize both narrative and design structures to enforce certain ideas, such as the forceful desynchronization in the *Assassin's Creed* series reiterating the nature of the titular Assassins. In *Firewatch*, player agency and its inability to influence outcomes plays a significant role in player experience.

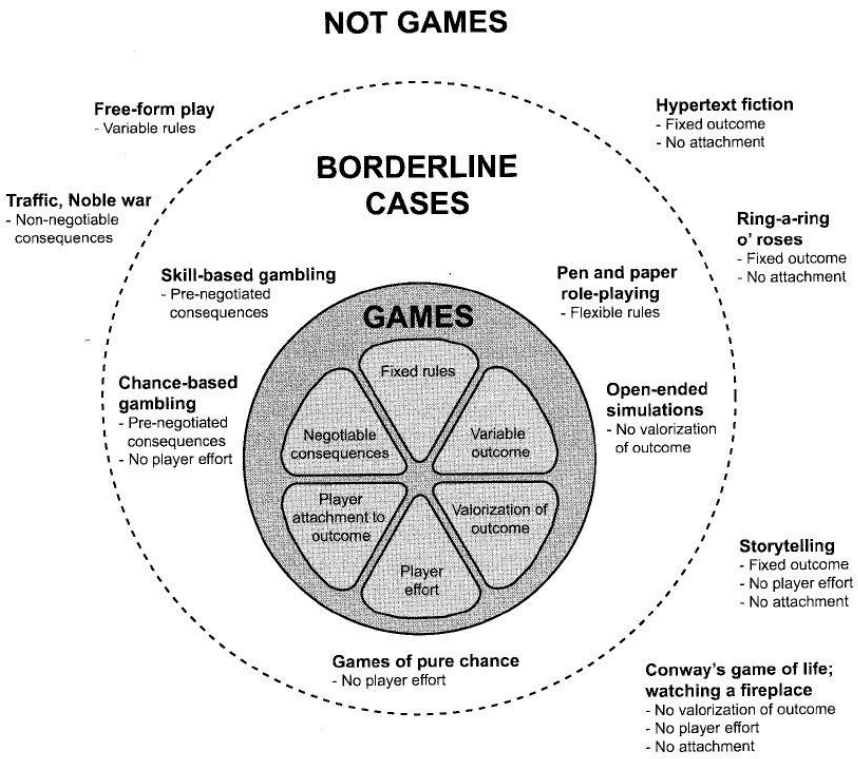

Fig. 1 - On the borders of the classical game model (Juul, *Half Real* 44)

In the previous figure Juul illustrates how the classic game model is bordered. The attempt at defining borders between 'games' and 'not games' highlights some potential problems when addressing *Firewatch*. Given its nature as a walking simulator, *Firewatch* can be seen as requiring very little effort within the world of videogames, given that the player mostly navigates and performs simple interactions. Nevertheless. without the narrative

[4] With the use of mods, player-made modifications, even this limit can be occasionally skirted as new functions, objects, characters and events can be introduced into the game. Additionally, mods can alter existing aspects of the gameworld by changing character models, voices, locations, etc. In games with a degree of freedom, storygames, the player is co-author and co-creator of the player-character's story.

context, an analysis of these actions remains incomplete. Additionally, as seen in Chapter II, *Firewatch* has a fixed outcome with no variability which subverts player expectation and attachment to outcome by having a fixed open ending which leaves many aspects of the game unresolved. Despite these potential interpretations, *Firewatch* fits the game category when considering ludic and narrative aspects combined. The effort required in navigating the gameworld of *Firewatch* includes problem solving and navigating conversations; while these are not mechanical skills, they are nonetheless required to understand various character motivations and interactions within the game. *Firewatch*'s fixed outcome can be attributed to its specific design choices aimed at subverting videogame tropes and player expectations, explored further in Chapter II with additional context. Attachment to outcome is born from player investment in narrative, as *Firewatch* does not have a clearly defined win or lose state.

Juul (*Half Real* 35) rejects the notion that games are unproductive and that their outcome generates nothing, arguing that a purely ludic nature "is dubious if productivity can mean something other than the production of physical goods". This allows for the consideration of intangible gains, such as virtual socializing, learning and the transmission of culture. The author also considers storytelling as having a fixed outcome, requiring no effort and therefore producing no attachment, but if reconfigured through interactivity all those characteristics become subject to change. Storytelling can be a component of videogames, which are not incompatible with narratives because "video games […] have several unique strengths that support the projection of fictional worlds" (Juul, *Half Real* 162). Rather, narratives and their components are one of the most appealing factors in modern videogames. Juul contends that "video games project incomplete and sometimes incoherent worlds. Game fiction is ambiguous, optional and imagined by the player in uncontrollable and unpredictable ways, but the emphasis on fictional worlds may be the strongest innovation of the video game" (*Half Real* 162). This, however, is a characteristic of any fiction. Any world is inherently incomplete when it is a projection, a virtual simulation of an imagined reality.

The emphasis on the importance of the fictional world is clear in *Firewatch*, as much of the information the player acquires is derived from it, an aspect explored in Chapter II. Additionally, the incomplete nature of a videogame world can be used by the developers precisely by harnessing the ambiguity that Juul refers to. The proposed model of games is applicable to any type of game, as it reflects the conceptual elements that compose the basis of a game rather than what a game itself is, but it will only be used, in

this text, in relation to videogames. These do not include or reflect tabletop games, as they are devoid of the element of graphical simulation, or visual novels, which present more detailed narratives than other genres, including multiple storylines and endings through player choice, but no gameplay elements, and display similar ergodicity, a concept explored further ahead, to print novels. Juul's skeletal model serves as a starting point for the many reconfigurations of *Firewatch*, a videogame designed with subversion and expectation in mind.

1.2 What is 'narrative'?

To understand the role and impact of narrative in *Firewatch*, Marie-Laure Ryan's proposed definition of narrative offers some relevant information:

1. Narrativity is independent of the question of fictionality.
2. Narrativity is not coextensive with literature nor the novel.
3. Narrativity is independent of tellability.
4. A narrative is a sign with a signifier (discourse) and a signified (story, mental image, semantic representation). The signifier can have many different semiotic manifestations. It can consist, for instance, of a verbal act of story-telling (diegetic narration), or of gestures and dialogue performed by actors (mimetic, or dramatic narration).
5. The narrativity of a text is located on the level of the signified. Narrativity should therefore be defined in semantic terms. The definition should be medium-free.
6. Narrativity is a matter of degree. Postmodern novels are less narrative than simple forms such as fables or fairy tales; popular literature is usually more narrative than avant-garde fiction.
7. Narrative representation is constructed by the reader on the basis of the text. Not all texts lend themselves to a narrative interpretation.
8. Narrative representation consists of a world (setting) situated in time, populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot) and undergo change.
9. The most prominent reason for acting in life is problem-solving. It is therefore the most fundamental narrative pattern.
10. Narrative representations must be thematically unified and logically coherent. Their elements cannot be freely permuted, because they are held together in a sequence by relations of cause and effect, and because temporal order is meaningful. The propositions of a narrative representation must be about a common set of referents (= the characters). ("Beyond Myth" n.p.)

Ryan's proposal is essential in untangling 'narrative', decoupling it from the literary domain and any assumption of format or medium. Narrative is a transmedial phenomenon, able to be developed in any medium, including videogames. This is further supported by the notion in point 9 that problem-solving is "the most fundamental

narrative pattern" (Ryan, "Beyond Myth" n.p.) because "games are usually well structured problems" (Juul, *Half Real* 8). Protagonists of narratives and players of games struggle towards the same goal, a (preferably agreeable) resolution to the encountered problem(s). Even if by coincidence, the fundamental aspect that narratives and games both predominantly feature a problem-solving component is reason enough to consider how narratives are explored in games and what role they play. Karhulahti offers an answer to the latter question in the form of narrative progression:

> […] narrative progression takes place as one advances her or his supradiscourse (in the discourse domain) or suprastory (in the story domain). Progressing a narrative work is thus a twofold traversal activity in the respective domains of discourse and story. Traversing discourse is an empirical activity (acting upon information), and traversing story is a conceptual activity (internalizing information). (50)

Karhulahti suggests that player action is crucial in achieving narrative progression, considering specifically storygames. The player adheres to the game rules to find a path towards a resolution. Whereas characters in a narrative have no choice in the matter, players can control their actions, to a certain extent, and influence the narrative progression by manipulating or halting time, through optional objectives that delay progression, or simply by choosing, when possible, to proceed in one of the many branching paths available. *Firewatch* presents itself as a strong candidate for a storygame, with a branching narrative, leading the player to assume that multiple dialogue options entail multiple outcomes and, subsequently, endings. This is a purposeful design choice meant to deceive the player, an aspect of *Firewatch* explored in Chapter II.

Karhulahti's use of structuralism theory, the understanding that narrative consists of something told (story) a certain way (discourse), the signified and signifier in Ryan's proposed definition, is key in identifying the narrative elements of a game and establishing a link between player action and narrative progression. Story comprises the foundational elements of a narrative: its characters, spatial setting and events, and discourse comprise the elements of perception of said story, such as differing perspectives through narration by different characters. *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix, 2016) for instance shows both these elements clearly as it establishes the story through player

exploration, interactions and cutscenes, and providing multiple perspectives from various characters through dialogue and in its DLC[5] Episodes.

Whenever possible, both story and discourse can be subject to change in videogames. If a videogame grants control (however free or limited) over each domain, players can alter the story by preventing predetermined events from ever happening or introducing new ones (as with characters), or by altering the setting/sequence of events in which the action takes place. This is possible in *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), a videogame based on the fantasy novels of Andrzej Sapkowski. The player controls Geralt of Rivia, the titular witcher, as he searches for his adoptive daughter, Princess Cirilla of Cintra. The game's antagonists are the Wild Hunt, a group that seeks to capture Ciri and use her spacetime manipulation powers. The climax of the game, a confrontation between Geralt and his forces against the Wild Hunt, has over thirty different configurations depending on the player's actions throughout the game. Geralt may be aided by all he has met and befriended throughout his journey, provided the player made specific choices to ensure that outcome. Alternatively, the bare minimum helpers may be the only aid Geralt receives, as there are non-optional helpers during the fight against the Wild Hunt. These different configurations also mean that the player, as Geralt, can either succeed or fail to save Ciri and that even those two conditions can play out in different ways: saving Ciri can mean that Geralt lies to her father, Emperor Emhyr, by telling him that Ciri sacrificed herself, thus freeing her of their strained relationship, or it can mean that Ciri succeeds her father as Empress. All of these variations in narrative representation, which remain "thematically unified and logically coherent" (Ryan, "Beyond Myth" n.p.), require choice and alter the ultimate outcome of the game's narrative, which the player co-authors. The many endings thus reflect player choices and their resulting ripple effect. If the player wishes for an alternate outcome, they must reconsider their choices and act differently in earlier saves or different playthroughs. The player has some control over the story and discourse elements of narrative, preventing or propelling certain events and altering character personalities through different player actions.

Returning to Ryan's definition of narrative, points 7 and 9 are of particular interest when considering a cooperative methodological approach to *Firewatch*. While the videogame has extensive dialogue, players are invited to draw meaning and make sense

[5] DLC, downloadable content.

of the narrative through exploration of environments. In that sense, *Firewatch* engages in environmental storytelling, a practice further explored in Chapter II. As a consequence of inviting players to interpret environments, and given that the problem-solving paradigm is paramount in *Firewatch*, players in control of Henry co-author their experience by engaging with the supposedly branching narrative dialogue trees, by exploring the environments of *Firewatch* and extrapolating theories based on context and clues.

Not all videogame genres are conducive to co-authorship on a narrative level or even present much narrative in the first place. Game genres become even more nuanced as games continue to test their boundaries. Thomas Apperley argues that "what is crucially important to video game genres is to be able to think of each individual game as belonging to several genres at once." (19). Apperley notes that removing narrative from the equation, comparative to contemporary film studies, allows for a greater breadth of theoretical positing of genre, yet he recognizes that games are, to an extent, still textual (20). The author's main argument is that videogame genres can be constructed on the basis of interactivity, a boundary crumbling effort that focuses on "their underlying similarities rather than their superficial visual or narrative differences" (21), as opposed to remediated genre categories. Apperley comments on the notion of genre in videogames:

> Video games may share many features with other media forms; however, I believe that it is crucial to acknowledge that running contra to the "neat" categories defined by the industry are emerging "messy" categories that cross the traditional boundaries of video game genres to place visually disparate games into new circuits of connectivity. It is by turning to the notion of "interactivity" in particular, that these new notions of video game genre are able to emerge from the domination of remediated genre categories. (Apperley 19)

Videogame genre categorization may be "messy", as Apperley suggests, because it is a twofold process of describing interaction and visual and/or narrative style. Whereas other mediums condense aspects down to single descriptors, videogames multiply descriptors to encompass narrative and ludic aspects: perspective, mechanical approach and visual style are all distinctly mutable aspects of gameplay. Interactivity and player action are an important factor in differentiating videogame genres from other media, thus genres might best be configured as descriptive of unifying rulesets rather than mimicking genre outlines from cinema or literature. The genre fragmentation, however, seems almost inevitable, not as an inherited remediation but rather a natural evolutionary reflection of the diversity

of experiences games can create, when considering the many-layered genres that can constitute an 'action' or 'roleplaying game' for example; these are configurative genres, rather than stylistic descriptors. In this sense, the various visual and narrative categories used in genre creation are not related to the remediated positions in other media, serving as configurating factors of interactivity: be it in the first or third person, story-rich, or completely lacking, featuring in-depth character progression systems such as attributes, skills, and other aspects.

Espen Aarseth's concept of ergodicity, the non-linear traversal of text, largely inspired by the concept of unicursal and multicursal labyrinths, describes the variation of how the problem-solving paradigm can occur when considering the (interactive) effort required:

> In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1-2)

Effort, classified as trivial and nontrivial, provides a border between classical texts, such as a novel, and texts (or indeed narratives) developed in mediums that allow for reconfiguration. Triviality, the somewhat subjective binary concept that defines ergodicity, can help distinguish between videogames that permit constant reconfiguration and require more moral, ethical, and personal choices to reach a desirable outcome (solving the problem) from the more abstract, rule-focused games that rely primarily on logic and abstraction, an exercise in defining borders to some extent. Likewise, ergodicity may be crucial in understanding the relationship between a game and its narrative by characterizing the actions required to progress; games with a predominantly mechanic-based progression (defeating enemies, solving puzzles) may present a different ergodicity to games that rely largely on character interaction and narrative progression (dialogue choices). *Firewatch* presents itself as a superficially ergodic game in which the player chooses dialogue when engaging with another character while other walking simulators may function differently. *The Stanley Parable* for example does not rely on dialogue options and instead uses exploration and space as its primary configurative agent, while the player is manipulated by the Narrator, thus creating ergodic paths.

Ergodicity in videogames is fundamentally more involved than a pure textual counterpart, as a non-linear traversal of the game narrative also means constructing a new

path (order) in which the player experiences new game rulesets or mechanics, which may lead to a recombination of mechanics not intended by the developer. This form of 'problem-solving', co-authoring narrative is interesting in how it reconfigures existing aspects. It presents a degree of complexity and/or uniqueness in the experience offered, a narrative that is worth exploring in a number of ways, meaning that games with little narrative ergodicity can still prove worthwhile to explore because of other aspects, such as unique game mechanics, specific combinations of rules or how gameplay is processed. This process is called emergent gameplay (Smith n.p.) and is a consequence of the player's creative manipulation of game mechanics and/or game narrative, a way of reinforcing player expression in the problem-solving paradigm through unique and personalized solutions within flexible simulations. Allowing the player to discover their own solutions and path has become an increasingly popular design choice and presents itself with a host of new challenges: players need adequate and sufficient tools to address any given problem the game might pose.

The design philosophy of providing the players every tool possible is further escalated by game editors in which a player can freely create a new world using the existing assets of the game. Two new, very popular subgenres of strategy games, MOBA's[6] and autochess[7] or autobattler, were born of player creation and co-authorship, extensions of the original gameworld now reconfigured into a new problem-solving paradigm. Like MOBA's and autochess, walking simulators such as *Firewatch* have their roots in early adventure games as well as game mods. *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), one of the first modern walking simulator videogames, was conceived by Dan Pinchbeck. Referencing William S. Burroughs as inspiration for *Dear Esther*, Pinchbeck remarks that his intention was to move "[…] towards a quite image-heavy, symbolic, poetic use of language rather than the normal descriptive tone we find in games" (McMullan n.p.). This trend, the semiotic exploration of spaces within videogames, continues in *Firewatch*, as explored in Chapter II. *Firewatch* relies on player expectations based on genre perceptions and on a narrative presented as ergodic to subvert said expectations.

The Vanishing of Ethan Carter (The Astronauts, 2014) provides an example of ergodic narrative. The player controls detective Paul Prospero in his attempt to find out what happened to young Ethan Carter, a fan who wrote him a letter and then disappeared.

[6] MOBA, multiplayer online battle arena.
[7] Autochess or autobattler, a game genre created by a player community using adapted chess principles.

The player explores the fictional Red Creek Valley in Wisconsin, piecing together parts of the story of Ethan's disappearance in whatever order they find them in (an ergodic exercise). Ethan's story, of course, is bound by a certain order, and therein lies the player's problem – narrative reassembly, making order out of disorder. Paul Prospero's narrative is determined by the player reconstruction of Ethan's story, a variation of discourse. *Ethan Carter* tests the boundaries of games and interactive fiction by offering very little in terms of traditional gameplay. However, it engages with the audience through reconfigurative action (exploration, puzzle-solving, and interactions), providing a problem and an open world for the player to find their solution. The two concurrent stories within the narrative are indicative of an epistemic plot, "one constituted by the events that took place in the past, and the other by the investigation that leads to their discovery" (Ryan, "Interactive" 7).

Aarseth's theory is productive when combining the notion of videogame and narrative, allowing for a multitude of reconfigurations, as every playthrough has the potential to be different, and every player will perform differently. A variety of design choices are inherently ergodic, altering each playthrough of a videogame and allowing for different experiences from player to player, such as dialogue trees, optional progression steps and other forms of player choice, procedurally generated games, mechanics like New Game+ [8] and alternate endings. Furthermore, the non-ergodic sections of games are not without relevance, as they too constitute systems that are part of games and may provide additional information. James Newman notes that ergodicity's domains are the play sequences, moments of gameplay where the player controls their character's actions, which are intersected by cutscenes, maps and menus:

> Importantly then, videogames do not present a singularly ergodic experience. They are highly structured and comprise episodes of intense ergodic engagement. However, these sequences are punctuated and usually framed by periods of far more limited ergodicity and very often, apparently none at all. […] This is not to say that you are staring at a blank screen waiting for the next level to load. These "non-ergodic" sections are integral parts of the game. They might, perhaps, give us some sense of progression through a world and explain how the levels fit together as in *StarFox*. They may offer breaks between levels informing us of our performance (*Super Mario Kart*) allowing us to gauge our progress, compare lap-times, bask in our glory or chide ourselves for the way we took that last corner. They might present cut-scenes that advance the game's framing narrative (if one is present) as in the *Metal Gear Solid*, *Final Fantasy* or *Tomb Raider* series, or

[8] New Game+, a feature in some roleplaying games, allowing the player to start from the beginning while retaining certain elements of progression from the original playthrough. This restart often entails increased difficulty.

> they may simply reflect the technical limitations of the host game system with its limited RAM and comparatively slow media access times. Regardless of their specific function or the reason for their existence, it is vital to note that videogames are not uniformly ergodic. (n.p.)

The non-ergodic elements in games can be, for example, helpful in making the gameworld more coherent and can also contribute to the unique configuration of each game, helping to build and destroy aspects of player construction, working together with ergodicity in identity construction and a sense of narrative progression. In *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2020), the player takes on the role of Zagreus, rebellious son of the Chthonic god of the Underworld, Hades. Zagreus' (and the player's) quest is to break free from the underworld, traversing through its many levels until he reaches the surface, Greece. One of the non-ergodic aspects is a menu filled with information about the various characters Zagreus meets, talks to, and befriends. The player can forego information regarding these relationships and still be successful, however it is crucial in understanding the context of *Hades* as well as how Zagreus views others. The menu the player uses to browse this information is called the Codex, an offering from the fallen hero Achilles, and in it the player can record information on the creatures and figures of the Underworld, like the brothers Hypnos and Thanatos, Olympian gods, such as Demeter and Zeus, and a host of other important figures, such as Achilles himself or his companion and romantic partner Patroclus.

The Codex provides other information, such as the identity of the moody shade sitting by the river Lethe in Elysium (Patroclus), the Fury Megaera's complicated relationship with her sisters Tisiphone and Alecto, and the emotional turmoil felt by Orpheus and Eurydice. All this information contributes to a generic introduction to prominent Greek myths, something not completely irrelevant to the gameplay (the player must open Patroclus' Codex entry to learn his name in order to receive his assistance before confronting Asterius and Theseus in the Elysian Colosseum) but tied more so to the narrative progress. Similarly, *Firewatch* has intradiegetic and extradiegetic elements like *Hades*' Codex that help players understand aspects about life in wilderness through the eyes of other characters. *Firewatch* uses elements analogous to *Hades*' Codex in parallel with other design elements to explore its narrative, an aspect explored in Chapter II.

1.3 Ludonarratological Methodology

The debate between ludology and narratology is perhaps best understood in the incompatibilities or the perception of incompatibilities between games and narratives, rather than ludology's focus on games as systems or narratology's games as texts; narrative is sometimes understood as homologous to literature. In the words of Celia Pearce, "what, exactly, are these people *saying* about games and story?" (2). Pearce argues that computer games, or videogames, present even more distinct medium-specific characteristics when compared to traditional games:

> The incorporation of the computer adds a number of characteristics that set the stage for expanding the role of narrative. The simple ability to create animations which are responsive to user input, and the ability to proceduralize (e.g., program) complex simulations with elaborate causal relationships may place computer games in another category altogether, one which has unique characteristics that do not map with complete satisfaction to board games. (3)

Consequently, it may be productive to think of games as a spectrum, more or less narratively inclined. If so, in some games narrative aspects may be intertwined with game mechanics. This is the case in *The Stanley Parable*, where the Narrator, an ever-present voice, describes and postulates on the player's actions, suggesting actions and routes to embark on in order to complete the game. Without this aspect, *The Stanley Parable* would simply consist of a player navigating a series of environments, without notion or feedback to their progress but likewise without influence or curiosity, driven by the Narrator's many interventions. Not only would it be a fundamentally less engaging game, but it would also be largely senseless and devoid of any context to player choices. While *The Stanley Parable* would be functional, it would not be a game but only a simulation devoid of elements conducive to attachment and with different outcomes without any difference in significance. This is also certainly the case with *Firewatch*, as explored in Chapter II.

Raph Koster presents two arguments in *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* that can present a problem: (1) games do not need narratives and (2) games are not stories:

> (1) While metaphors are fun to play with, players can basically ignore them. The name of the unique checker piece that has made it to the other side is irrelevant, mathematically speaking. We could call the regular pieces chickens and the crowned ones wolves and the game would not change one whit. Games, by the very nature of what they teach, push towards this sort of understanding. Since they are about teaching underlying patterns, they train their players to ignore the fiction that wraps the patterns. (80)

(2) Games are not stories (though players can create stories from them). It is interesting to make the comparison, though:
    - Games tend to be experiential teaching. Stories teach vicariously.
    - Games are good at objectification. Stories are good at empathy.
    - Games tend to quantize, reduce, and classify. Stories tend to blur, deepen, and make subtle distinctions.
    - Games are external—they are about people's actions. Stories (good ones, anyway) are internal—they are about people's emotions and thoughts.
    - Games are generators of player narratives. Stories provide a narrative.
    - In both cases, when stories and games are good, you can come back to them repeatedly and keep learning something new. But we never speak of fully mastering a good story. (88)

Regarding (1), games can indeed function without narratives and have done so from the very beginning. This does not mean that parallels with videogame narrative, whose elements are consistent with Ryan's proposed definition of narrative, should be discounted, but by themselves they do not constitute a narrative if the player can freely progress without needing these elements in any significant capacity. Also, (2) is true, games are not and do not need to be stories, much in the same way that they do not require narratives, although many of the claims regarding what games are in this point seem to be excessive generalizations. Game narratives can provide stories deeply entrenched in emotion and thought by addressing issues like mental health and trauma (personal or collective). Games are good at objectification but can also find ways of conveying empathy through clever design and narrative efforts; ambiguity is likewise possible through similar approaches, with branching paths through player choice, morality systems, and forced decision-making. These last aspects are relevant to the analysis of *Firewatch*, as the game cannot be played devoid of narrative or its story components while retaining meaning.

Additionally, Koster also claims that "narratives are not game mechanics" (Koster, "Narrative" n.p.). The author's proposition is that narrative is progression feedback rather than progression itself, which is certainly observable in games. Returning to *The Stanley Parable*, it may be impossible to fully distinguish between progression and feedback. The player is constantly bombarded by the Narrator's remarks and (sometimes not too subtle) indications, meaning that there is a constant influence at work in every decision. The Narrator's remarks cannot merely be a feedback system, as they are designed to also influence action, being closer to a hybrid of the two, progression and feedback. Narrative progression is story progression in *The Stanley Parable*. The

Narrator's prompts, goading the player into taking specific paths, which the player may at any point defy by proceeding in a different direction, standing still, backtracking, or even baiting the narrator by following its instructions and then retreating, constitute a key game mechanic. If such an element were to be removed, it would fundamentally change the dynamic of the game and how the player interacts, now freed of the Narrator's influence. In the case of *Firewatch*, narrative and narrative components are intrinsically part of the sense-making process, and many of the ways in which the game engages with the player is through dialogue choices and narrative progression.

The videogame industry is evolving in, at least, two branching paths, one more closely connected with narrative and one more interested in continuing to develop the mechanical, skill-based systems that award pattern recognition. The divide between these two is also growing narrower, with games more invested in providing both experiences. Precisely because of this evolution, it may prove worthwhile to recognize that pure ludology, "game essentialism" as Janet Murray described it ("The Last Word" 2), cannot hope to always be the methodological answer. More importantly, game essentialism cannot dictate which approach is correct and incorrect because "game studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving" (Murray, "The Last Word" 3). As more theory is developed, game studies may even be used to analyze non-game objects that have game-like elements.

The inclusion of narrative elements began to change player engagement and motivation. Players were no longer just driven by victory or completing the game but also wanted to see how the story unfolded. This factor meant that failure to progress the game also led to failure in continuing the narrative and its unfolding story. Technological progress was essential in creating videogame stories that engaged more deeply with their audience. Henrik Schoenau-Fog's delves into various aspects that stimulate players in order to "[…] categorise player engagement, determine the engaging elements of a game or an interactive application, examine player experiences and analyze game characteristics based on the components, categories and triggers of player engagement." (Schoenau-Fog, "The Player Engagement Process" 2).

Fog distinguishes between motivation and engagement, stating that the former refers to the initial allure of the game whilst the latter refers to why players continue to play ("The Player Engagement Process" 4). Fog contemplates four framework components in the player engagement process: objectives (intrinsic and extrinsic player

motivation), accomplishments (outcome of completed objectives), activities (player approach to objectives) and affect (player response). These components are interconnected in a cycle; if the cycle is successful, player motivation becomes sustained player engagement leading to a renewal of the cycle ("The Player Engagement Process" 6). Raph Koster's dismissal of story when he concludes that "by and large, people don't play with game systems because of the stories. The stories that wrap the systems are usually side dishes for the brain." (*A Theory of Fun* 86) seems to fall flat. Returning to Fog, "Experiencing the Story", a category of the Activities component, was the single most mentioned individual category by the respondents in this survey at 18% (Schoenau-Fog, "The Player Engagement Process" 12), indicating that narrative progression is the biggest engagement factor. Whether or not the pertaining theory recognizes narrative as being relevant to the study of games, players evidently do, and in no small amount.

In videogames with opaque or absent win/loss conditions at least like walking simulators, Juul's notion that players are attached to the outcome of games can be extended, to an attachment to the progress, the path to reaching an ending that is satisfying to the player. Narrative progression is how players learn and make sense of a gameworld's story, and discourse, when in the hands of the player, is how they express themselves in relation to that story. The added component of interactivity, which may see the player act out or modify elements of the story and discourse, is where players take on the role of detective, traversing the challenges the game provides to reach its conclusion.

Astrid Ensslin presents functional ludostylistics, introduced in *Literary Gaming* (2014), as a combined methodological approach, a cooperative effort that can extend even outside the dichotomic argument of ludology and narratology. Ensslin's proposed methodology offers answers to the lack of precision in analysis by clearly structuring and categorizing the methodological approach and the need for a spectrum of perspectives. *Literary Gaming* addresses a new object of study in digital media, between the ludic and literary (literary-ludic spectrum):

> […] literary gaming involves hybrid literary-ludic artifacts, some of which may be considered specific forms of either game art if they are inspired by or contain elements of ludic mechanics: others are verbal art games, and still others are simply playful, ergodic artifacts that do not involve gameplay in the narrow sense of the word. However, gameplay and reading do not exactly attract each other phenomenologically like opposite magnetic poles. […] some qualities of literary computer games and ludic-experimental digital literature are indeed compatible, especially considering how the digital medium

> enables semiotic multimodality, rule-drivenness, playability, relative agency, and interactive variability in various combinations and to various degrees. (38)

Ensslin's methodology is aimed at games and literature, developing a system of analysis for literary art games and literature with gamelike elements. Ensslin clarifies that literary games "are therefore not a subtype of fiction, poetry, or drama but are, indeed, a particular type of game that embeds literary elements but has conceptual and interactive emphasis on the ludic structures" (41). Ensslin's comprehensive methodological system (see table 1, *infra*) hinges on four analytical components, each component having several aspects, that place an object of study on the literary-ludic spectrum. Functional ludostylistics integrates "elements of narratology, poetics/stylistics, semiotics, mediality, and ludology" (51).

Table 1 - "Tabular overview of ludostylistics" (Ensslin 53-54)

Component	Aspects	Examples
Ludology	Rules	Game mechanics; aims and objectives; tools and methods
	Gameplay	Player actions, moves, and hardware/software interactions
	Game architecture	Level structure; progress
	Victory and termination conditions	Winning and losing; number of lives; game ending
	Risks and challenges	Threats; dangers; obstacles; difficulty levels
	Feedback	Rewards; penalties; feedback code
	Agency	(Illusory) player agency; freedom; sandboxing; choice
	Game genre	For example, platform, shooter, adventure, role-playing
	Types of play	Paidia, ludus, agon, mimicry, ilinx, alea (Caillois 2001), rhythmos
Ludonarratology	In-game Narrative	Game/storyworld (settings, props); points of view; showing vs. telling; player-character/avatar; cutscenes; backstory; voice-over; NPC's; plot types
	Game-story relationship	Coherence; consistency; narrative level design
	External narrativity	Player narratives, for example, playthroughs, walkthroughs; metaleptic narratives; transmediation
Ludosemiotics	Interface design	Graphics; art work; gameworld; 3D/2.5D/2D; settings and props; menus
	Verbal language	Written vs. spoken; foregrounding; stylistic considerations; poetry-prose-dialogue; segmental and sentential levels of linguistic analysis
	Text and discourse	

	Procedural rhetoric Multimodality	Textual macrostructure; linearity; discursive and social embedding; context and subtext; pragmatics (speech acts, implicature, etc.); themes, topics and argument structure; cohesion and coherence; monologue vs. dialogue Algorithmic encoding of rhetorical purposes (e.g. educational; polemic; religious; see Bogost [2007]) Semiotic modes other than language (image and sound) and their relationship with linguistic elements: clusters: complex meanings and their social aesthetic embedding: haptic interaction
Mediality	Platform Hardware Software/program code Ergodicity Textuality	PC; console;mobile device; online/offline; data carrier Keyboard; mouse; controller Flash; Shockwave; Java; HTML; php; C++… Nontrivial interactivity (Aarseth 1997) caused by specific coding mechanisms Self-reflexivity; remediation; intermediality; paratextuality; transmediation; and other intra- and intertextual processes

This methodology is not without limitations but offers flexibility, as the author recognizes that "every ludoliterary artifact requires for its analysis its own idiosyncratic selection of tools from this menu" (52). Functional ludostylistics may be applicable to commercial games that present strong ludonarrative characteristics. Ensslin's functional ludostylistics serves as the basis for the analysis of *Firewatch* in Chapter II with a greater emphasis on ludonarratological and ludosemiotic aspects and the influence of Philip Connors' novel, also explored in Chapter II.

Functional ludostylistics is one possible implementation of the cooperative paradigm, applied specifically to games uniquely placed in a spectrum that takes their ludic and literary characteristics into account. Videogames are bound to see far more methodologies similar to functional ludostylistics presented under the umbrella of cooperation, a gateway to the development of new analytical theory appropriate for this new medium. Rhythm games might benefit from cooperative analysis with music theory, considering players can create custom music tracks for the entire player-base to experience. City-building simulation games like *Surviving Mars* (Haemimont Games, 2018) are of potential interest to geopolitics, economy, urban planning and architecture for their specific configuration of space exploration. Even within specific cooperative

methodologies, games that allow for the study of specific characteristics in their design may require further existing theory to be adapted. *Valiant Hearts* (Ubisoft, 2014) and its First World War narrative, for example, forgoes the typical emphasis on violence and combat for an empathetic and historical approach, centered on the collective trauma experienced by all parties involved.

A ludonarrative approach is key in the analysis of *Firewatch*. Walking simulators tend to be more narrative-driven genres, with less complex ludological aspects in terms of gameplay and associated mechanics. Additionally, and due to the importance of the ludology versus narratology debate as a key aspect within game studies for the past two decades, it is important to reiterate that a hybrid methodology constitutes a better approach to a game and genre that clearly deviates from the expected norm of an entertainment-driven medium. To further inform the ludonarratological analysis of *Firewatch*, the following chapter includes an exploration of themes and their cultural backing in *Fire Season*.

CHAPTER II: FROM *FIRE SEASON* TO *FIREWATCH*

2.1 Shared Framework

Firewatch is inspired by various works, not just *Fire Season*, but its connection with Philip Connors' novel is particularly prescient, as many of the game's core metaphors are anchored to ideas developed in the novel. Defining the relationship between these two works is particularly difficult. Superficially, it could suffice to say that the game is inspired by the novel, though that does not precisely describe the degree and nature of influence exerted. Henry does not return from the wilderness into a refreshing new life of freedom, appreciation of the wild, and a newfound sense of self. Connors does not retreat into remote New Mexico Wilderness territory to escape a deteriorating wife, nor does he engage with outlandish conspiracies, find corpses and experience bizarre encounters with Vietnam veterans in hiding out in the wild. The influence that Connors' work exerts over *Firewatch* is far more fundamental and experientially nuanced. *Firewatch* is not an adaptation, though it does adapt various aspects, nor is it an appropriation. Equally, it is not a transmedia or remediation effort, though this latter category is relatively close when considering the media-specific requirements; games are about entertainment and fun, so remediating a narrative like Connors', one that described an inherently tedious job, would require significant alterations. *Firewatch* establishes a framework relationship with *Fire Season*, harnessing the novel's central themes into a new medium, as well as recreating the life of lookouts in ways that reinforce said themes, de-emphasizing their actual role and actions, while also subverting aspects of those themes.

While there are many similarities between both works, some differences are noteworthy. Connors works in the Gila Forest in New Mexico, but *Firewatch* takes place in the Shoshone in Wyoming; Sean Vanaman, lead writer of *Firewatch* grew up in Cody, Wyoming. New Mexico and Wyoming wilderness entail different historical backgrounds. Wyoming is of particular interest due to the state's enormous popularity in the Western genre as a space for Wild West fiction and history. Wyoming was the stomping ground of several iconic figures in the West, such as Buffalo Bill and the Sundance Kid. In addition, Wyoming was the primary source of inspiration for Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), a seminal Western classic, and Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" (1997). Its influence continues in cinema, having served as the filming location for the 1953 film adaptation of Jack Schaefer's 1949 novel *Shane* (specifically

Grand Teton National Park, the novel is likewise set in Wyoming), and more recently to Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. As a fictional setting, Wyoming is the Cowboy State and the home of several Wild West narratives across media. Another key aspect that appears superficially as a similarity is motivation – both Connors and *Firewatch*'s player-character, Henry, use wilderness as an escape from reality. This specific aspect leads to extensive narrative consequences in *Firewatch* that alter said similarity, contributing to *Firewatch*'s reinterpretation of *Fire Season*'s core themes.

Connors' *Fire Season* portrays a world of freedom initiated by an escape from what Richard Slotkin describes as an Eastern reality, a place of structure and a constant surrender to societal norms (*The Fatal Environment* 45), to western hopes and aspirations. *Firewatch* takes the same principle and removes the romanticized filter, reintroducing the notion of boredom to an extent, curbed by a paranoia-driven subplot, and questions whether or not every form of escape is the same and if regeneration is possible through said escape. Adopting the concept of a shared framework, by recognizing the inherent importance of the relationship between *Firewatch* and *Fire Season* (and by extent every other work that has contributed to it), allows for a broader analytical pool to draw from, more context and connections between the various aspects of game narratives and mechanics and a better understanding of the context of the game with regard to its expanded commentary on culture, politics, economy, among others.

In this context, the shared framework comprises historical and cultural underpinnings, aspects borrowed from the American Western, a heightened sense of isolation, a wilderness environment, and several premises regarding the character and influence of the previous elements. *Fire Season* lays the groundwork: the emotional and mental scaffolding of solitude is explored through the experiences of Philip Connors, his extensive knowledge of Wilderness Areas' history, and his veteran status as a lookout. Slotkin's analysis of American Western myth, particularly the concept of regeneration through violence, explored in more detail further ahead, is evolved for a modern era in which wilderness is now permeated with nostalgia and equated with freedom instead of characterized by savagery, fear, and violence. *Firewatch* takes these elements and abstracts from them the necessary base components to develop characters and environments suited to explore the themes.

Experiencing the new wilderness is a major overarching thematic driver in both *Fire Season* and *Firewatch*, complete with the inclusion of fire and an element of escape from reality. *Firewatch* foregrounds the escapist and regenerative elements in a medium

already connotated with escapism. Much of the game's mechanics deemphasize their ludicity, opting for a more realistic approach congruent with the narrative story. The game sacrifices potential 'fun' by mimicking the boredom of lookout work and transferring said experience into an interactable world while also striving for a more complex emotional experience. To curb the players' expected loss of interest, *Firewatch*'s story presents several subplots with ambiguous or otherwise unclear moments, engages with players via moral choices, and introduces conspiracy to align itself with a more traditional problem-solving paradigm commonly found in videogames.

Firewatch plans ludicity accordingly, using purpose-made mechanics and design elements to restrict player actions in contextually appropriate ways. Converting the documented lookout experience, coupled with a complex narrative, into a three-dimensional tailored simulation requires walking, in the broadest sense, to be limited so that players do not lose sight of the narrative arrow of progression. Unlike Philip Connors, players cannot walk to every area of the game in every Day sequence, as some areas only become accessible as the narrative progresses. This is achieved using invisible walls[9] and progression-locked areas; Henry/the player cannot simply pack up and leave when they have had enough. The map becomes progressively more personal with each Day sequence, with Henry jotting down notes about what he has seen and trails he has discovered (Fig. 2). The various intradiegetic elements (map and various other tools) transpose thematically relevant actions and emphasize the gameworld and narrative by having Henry physically interact with objects and perform actions.

Fig. 2 - Henry copying map information left by other lookouts (*Firewatch*).

[9] Invisible walls, a common terminology for the simulated physical boundaries of the gameworld.

This transfer of actions, from the real experiences of lookouts to a simulated space, represents one of the foundational blocks of *Firewatch*'s design, which can be further analyzed as part of a group of ludemes. Raph Koster attributes the concept of ludemes to another author, "What are the other fundamental components of a game element, the "atoms" of games, so to speak? Game designer Ben Cousins calls these "ludemes," the basic units of gameplay." (*A Theory of Fun* 120). In addition, using mythemes in conjunction with ludemes can prove productive. The basis of the shared framework between *Fire Season* and *Firewatch* are mythemes, shared thematic elements between both works that draw from narrative points foundational to the construction of American identity present in other works as mentioned previously: the importance and shaping power of the wilderness, regeneration through violence, masculinities, East and West realities and a connection with nature connotated with freedom. *Firewatch* uses these mythemes and a gameworld that generate corresponding ludemes, deemphasizing ludicity to grant the narrative primacy over a mechanics-driven gameplay experience. The use of culturally significant mythemes and contextually appropriate ludemes allows for an exploration of the driving forces behind Henry's narrative, but they also speak to the process of design and the relevance of games as cultural objects.

In addition, two concepts by Ian Bogost also provide insightful opportunities for analysis: (1) unit operations, a concept similar to ludemes, and (2) procedural rhetoric.

> (1) Unit operations are modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems. It is a term loosely amalgamated from several fields, including software technology, physics, and cybernetics, but it could be equally well at home in the world of literary theory. I contend that unit operations represent a shift away from system operations, although neither strategy is permanently detached from the other. (*Unit Operations* 3)
>
> (2) […] procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular. Just as verbal rhetoric is useful for both the orator and the audience, and just as written rhetoric is useful for both the writer and the reader, so procedural rhetoric is useful for both the programmer and the user, the game designer and the player. Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created. (*Persuasive Games* 3)

The first concept, unit operations, are similar to fundamental units like ludemes and mythemes. They describe isolated aspects, such as characters, actions or moments, that tesselate on a larger scale. Bogost adds to the second concept, "procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively" (*Persuasive Games* 29). Although largely

oriented towards politics, education, and advertising, Bogost's concept is useful in understanding how games frame and communicate the concepts which they seek to explore. This is precisely how *Firewatch* operates, as the game explores themes that serve as metacommentary on the medium itself in the form of *mise en abyme* – an escape within an escape – while it illustrates various outcomes of that behavior through Henry, Ned, and Delilah. *Firewatch* is a rhetorical exercise on the virtues and pitfalls of escapist tendencies, framing this exercise upon a seedbed of myths of American identity, connection with nature, and an evolving relationship with natural and metaphorical fire. Ludemes and unit operations help identify specific, discrete elements in *Firewatch* that have individual meaning and contribute to the continuation or subversion of themes from *Fire Season*.

Another relevant relationship between *Fire Season* and *Firewatch* is found in the storyworld concept explored by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon in the context of intermediality:

> Thus if a text rewrites an existing narrative, modifying the plot and ascribing different features or destinies to the characters, it creates a new storyworld that overlaps to some extent with the old one. While a given storyworld can be presented through several different texts, these texts must respect the facts of the original text if they are to share its logical storyworld. In an *imaginative* conception, by contrast, a storyworld consists of named existents and perhaps of an invariant setting (though the setting can be expanded), but the properties of these existents and their destinies may vary from text to text. (5)

Firewatch's storyworld pays homage to *Fire Season*, including the minutia of lookout work in everyday actions and objects, such as communicating weather conditions or the Osbourne firefinder, and its author Philip Connors, with the small inclusion of a teal typewriter in a den of solitude; Henry's typewriter bears a strong resemblance to Philip Connors' teal Olivetti Lettera, seen in an NPR interview (Rott 2019) pictured in the next page (Fig. 3). Between Day sequences, Henry writes journal entries that offer additional diegetic information, including Henry's thoughts, memories, and overall psychological progress from his stay in the lookout tower. These entries cannot be influenced or changed by players in any way. Henry reflects on how he is growing fond of working outdoors in the July 15, 1989 entry, considering continuing his summer job in the next years, similar to Philip Connors. The relationship between both works becomes more complex when considering the autobiographical nature of *Fire Season* and the fictional, further even simulated, nature of *Firewatch* given that "Computer games present another type of

multi-world narrative. Insofar as they are based on a simulation engine, they generate a different storyworld every time they are played." (Ryan and Thon 41). Similar to how the concept of ergodicity looks to narrative based on its medium, storyworlds are a "[…] phenomenological approach focused on the act of imagination required of the reader, spectator, or player." (Ryan and Thon 43); both concepts are bound to how the audience/reader/user experiences narrative within its medium. Considering *Firewatch* as a storyworld influenced by *Fire Season* also refocuses the analysis on the simulated space itself, giving further importance to how players navigate and read said space, interacting with the game environment and emotionally engaging design elements.

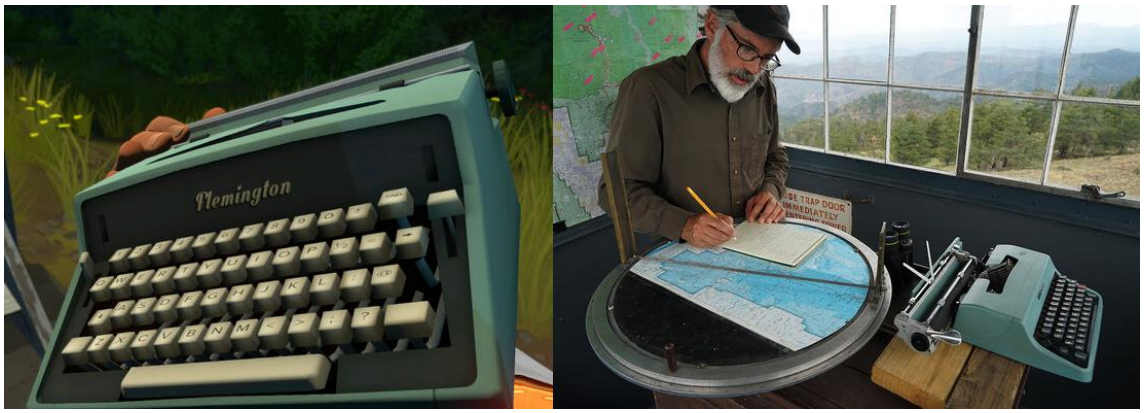

Fig. 3 - Comparison between Henry's typewriter (*Firewatch*) and Connors' typewriter (Rott).

Lastly, the space of *Firewatch* itself needs to be understood. In her analysis of adventure game spaces, Janet Murray identifies two distinct configurations, "the solvable maze and the tangled rhizome" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 126). The (1) maze and (2) rhizome structure, analogous to Espen Aarseth's use of the unicursal and multicursal labyrinth example in describing ergodic literature (*Cybertext* 5-8), both impart *Firewatch* with characteristics that allow for greater engagement:

(1) Whether an adventure maze is simple or complex, it is particularly suited to the digital environment because the story is tied to the navigation of space. As I move forward, I feel a sense of powerfulness, of significant action, that is tied to my pleasure in the unfolding story. In an adventure game, this pleasure also feels like winning. But in a narrative experience not structured as a win-lose contest the movement forward has the feeling of enacting a meaningful experience both consciously chosen and surprising. However, there is a drawback to the maze orientation: it moves the interactor towards a single solution, towards finding the one way out. The desire for agency in digital environments makes us impatient when our options are so limited. (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 127)

(2) Walking through a rhizome one enacts a story of wandering, of being enticed in conflicting directions, of remaining always open to surprise, of feeling helpless to

> orient oneself or to find an exit, but the story is also oddly reassuring. In the rhizome, one is constantly threatened but also continuously enclosed, the fact that the plot will not resolve means that no irreparable loss will be suffered. (128)

Firewatch is simultaneously a maze and rhizome, as it provides a singular path while promoting the deceitful possibility of multiple. The rhizome provides a comfort of sorts through the expectation of control over outcomes, as players make decisions in consideration of their outcomes, while the maze neglects player agency with regard to consequence, funneling the player towards the labyrinth's single solution. The two forces, pushing and pulling the player away/towards a definitive understanding of *Firewatch*'s systems, narrative, and spatial environment contribute to the general anxiety already weaved into its story and characters. This further implies that the very nature of wandering in pursuit of creating and shaping narrative is an exercise in self-comforting.

One important ludeme or unit operation is a branching narrative. Whenever Henry interacts with Delilah, the player is given multiple options to choose from, often with limited time to respond. The existence of choices implies a variance of outcome, an aspect of gameplay that reinforces the rhizomatic nature of *Firewatch*. Campo Santo's specific approach towards branching narratives in *Firewatch* plays a decisively important role in player engagement: there is no branching narrative, as the multiple choices given to the player all lead to the exact same ending. The game's ending is immutable and the variance introduced by player agency is virtually negligible insofar as the outcome of the choices. *Firewatch* is a straightforward yet emotionally and morally expressive forest maze disguised as a cruel rhizome in which the player has no real power or control by being denied agency over consequence. Furthermore, the character of the Frontier, as a place of harsh environments and constant challenges, is always present, surrounding the Two Forks tower. Campo Santo makes use of the environment by way of alternating elevations and obscuring the view to ensure that players can never discern the maze from the rhizome even in its spatial configuration.

In summary, the relationship between *Firewatch* and *Fire Season*, two works in different mediums that reflect aspects of American culture with a particular emphasis on wilderness and lookout life, is best understood through its continuities and breaks, rather than classifying it as an adaptation or a transmedial work. This approach allows for more specific analysis of commonalities and divergences between both narratives while also contemplating the inclusion of ludic and design elements by incorporating ludological

theory. *Firewatch* is not concerned with creating gameplay that addresses actual lookout work and instead weaves a narrative within its context.

2.2 *Firewatch*'s Prologue

Having discussed how the two works broadly intersect and how elements of game design can reflect culture and thought, its important to recognize that the seeds of subversion, specifically the subversion of expectation, begin with the prologue section. As a player, the strangest element of *Firewatch* is the prologue due to its format. Consisting of various expositional excerpts from Henry and Julia's life, punctuated by questions to the player as to how Henry would proceed in certain situations (limited to two predetermined options, Fig. 4) and intersected with small moments of gameplay in which the player controls Henry, the prologue can feel disconnected from the main portion of the game, as it does not directly impact Henry's stay and it presents in a completely different format from the gameplay, a first-person perspective exploration and narrative-driven game. In addition, the prologue imparts upon the player the first key mechanical aspect present throughout the game, which will prove essential in unraveling the goal of Henry's solitude and what that can potentially mean for the player – player agency. Initially, the questions that punctuate the prologue are perfectly mundane, ranging from how Henry first approaches Julia in a bar in Boulder, Colorado, to what sort of dog they choose to get once they have been living together for some time. However, before there is *Henry*, there is already a superimposition of identities. The first excerpt reads "You see Julia.", not 'Henry sees Julia'. In the second excerpt, Henry comes into being, the player is Henry; this superimposition is continued throughout the prologue.

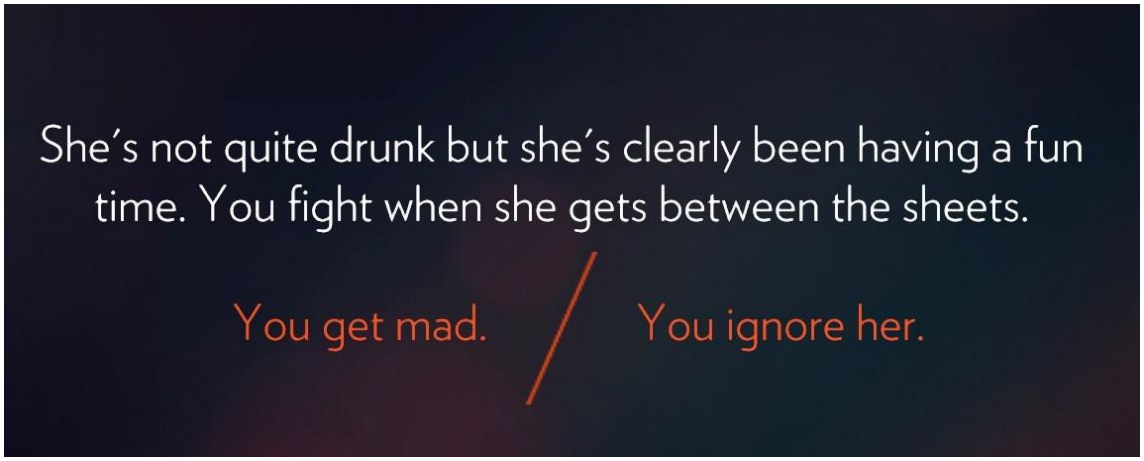

Fig. 4 - Limited options in the Prologue section (*Firewatch*).

Player agency is already limited in the prologue. You, as Henry, must always approach Julia, there is no alternative to Julia; Julia always begins a relationship with you, Henry. Even when there is more than one option, they can portray you, the player, superimposed onto Henry, as a less than ideal and supporting partner; when Julia gets a new job at Yale, two thousand miles away, the player as Henry only has two options: "Convince her not to take the job." or "Agree if she commutes back and forth.". The entire prologue was absent from the original demo, replaced by a single screen roughly summarizing Henry's situation (Fig. 5), never naming Julia nor reflecting any of the choices the player can make in the full version. In the developer commentary of *Firewatch*, the lead writer, Sean Vanaman, explains that the development team did not want Henry to feel like a blank slate onto which the player can project themselves. The choices the player makes are not meant to be completely free but reflective of Henry's consideration and potential choices during those moments.

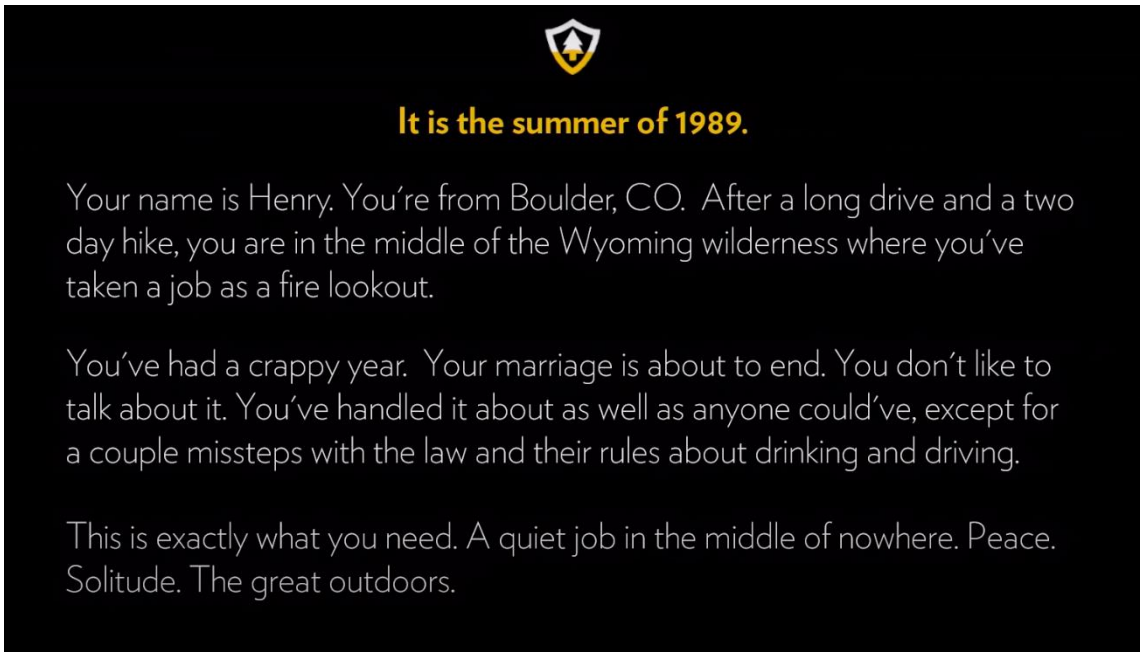

Fig. 5 - Original demo features a brief explanation of Henry (Gamespot).

Henry is meant to have an identity of his own, and the prologue attempts to integrate the player into Henry's identity by having the player take control of some aspects of Henry's backstory. The player has no choice other than to be Henry insofar as the choices given to the player belong to Henry; some segments of the prologue have no alternative choices to be made, yet still force the player to click the only available option, as if a choice is still being made – Henry's choice. This superimposition of identity can be found in many games; Heidi Ann Colthup's analysis of the use of the second-person

in another walking simulator, *Dear Esther*, provides more insight on this particular approach. According to Colthup, the use of the second-person "demands an overlapping identification as the participant virtually become the protagonist" (124), asserting the dualistic nature of the player as both game-player and game-protagonist. In addition to the use of the second-person, *Dear Esther* uses four scripts, which take effect upon starting a new game at random, meaning the player never knows which story they will get. Similarly, *Firewatch* features thousands of scripted dialogue events. These dialogue events feature multiple options but ultimately, as stated previously, do not contribute to different endings. The prologue design and limited player agency begin to make sense when considering Dan Staines et al.'s study of *Firewatch* as an ethically notable game (ENG):

> […] micromoral scenarios facilitate the *aggregation of choices*: an approach to ENG design where one-off moral scenarios with immediate, profound consequences are replaced with many smaller scenarios that accumulate significance as the game progresses (2013). […] One of the chief virtues of the aggregate approach is that it shifts the player's focus from outcomes to decisions, representing morality as more than big problems waiting for optimal solutions, but as an expression of one's identity – as something that one does, day-to-day, in a multitude of tiny but important ways. (274-275)

Firewatch is a game of micromorality, the player is constantly engaging in choice-making through interactions, an aspect of gameplay explored further ahead. In doing so, the player is constructing their own Henry within the existing dialogue options, an exercise that can prove emotionally engaging. Katherine Isbister argues that the two primary design elements which contribute to compelling games, capable of moving the player emotionally, are choices and flow. Choice-making is a medium specific design aspect of games in general, and Isbister asserts that:

> Actions with consequences—interesting choices—unlock a new set of emotional possibilities for game designers. Ultimately, these possibilities exist because our feelings in everyday life, as well as games, are integrally tied to our goals, our decisions, and their consequences. People go through a rapid and automatic set of evaluations as things happen to them, about what each event might mean for their goals and plans. Emotions arise in the context of these appraisals, and help guide quick and appropriate actions. Psychology researchers focused on this appraisal process, in fact, have used videogames as research instruments, in order to tightly control situations and demonstrate how particular challenges lead to emotional responses. For example, adding events that match up to someone's in-game goals reliably induces more pride and joy in players, while adding events that block their goals leads to anger. (2-3)

While *Firewatch* is not about consequences, "consequences aren't the point; the choice itself speaks volumes." (Staines et al. 275), choice is key. What drives narrative progression forward and gives meaning to the twofold escape, Henry's and the player's, is the act of choosing – Henry's choice of leaving Julia and going to the Wyoming wilderness, the many small, mundane yet morally revealing choices the player makes as Henry, and the ultimate lack of agency, in exercising choices with consequence. Morality is never measured within the game's mechanics; there is no morality meter, nor is there any advantage or disadvantage associated with making morally righteous or dubious choices. Still, morality is relevant in player choices. Player agency (regarding choice) is critical in producing "[…] a 'slower' more contemplative mode of engagement." (Staines et al. 275) in which choices are reflective of the player's conduct, emotions, and the kind of Henry the player chooses to be, given the circumstances they are presented with.

Firewatch dispenses emergent gameplay or emergent narrative, as it intends to maintain the player in a rigid narrative structure, with sufficient freedom to allow for exploration without allowing for the possibility of altering critical narrative moments. Likewise, there is no ergodicity, no possibility to restructure Henry's path from his first to his last day as a lookout; player choice exists, but there is no consequence that can potentially alter the path of the narrative. While ergodicity is a quality of games, narrative-driven videogames tend to be structured, as the possibility of choice may still exist but its consequences are rarely as impactful when compared to the choices of a tabletop roleplaying game campaign.

Designing towards a more nuanced player experience by subverting player agency in such a way that it is bereft of consequence, away from the well-known paradigms of shooting your way through and using righteous violence to defeat the evil villain, does entail a price, as "[…] designers who stymie player agency in this fashion walk a fine line and that a frustrated player can easily feel cheated or misled, which may negatively impact their capacity or willingness to reflect on the ethical dimensions of a given scenario." (Staines et al. 277). Beginning with the matter of agency and morality, the prologue sets the stage for a wide array of subversions, most of which reflect framework themes in game design aspects. These themes are explored in the following sections. As they are all interconnected, there are instances where explored themes overlap.

2.3 Regeneration and Escape

Connors has worked for nearly two decades as a fire lookout in the Gila National Forest, an area that includes the Aldo Leopold Wilderness, the Blue Range Wilderness, and the Gila Wilderness. Based on descriptions from *Fire Season*, Connors mans the Hillsboro Peak Lookout, Registry Number US651 NM16 in the National Historic Lookout Registry ("Hillsboro Peak Lookout" n.p.), the southernmost lookout in the Gila National Forest, built in 1933. The Gila Wilderness is the world's first designated protected wilderness area, meaning that human activity is heavily restricted to minimize potential changes to the land and disruption of the ecosystem. The land itself was classified as wilderness, in 1924, by the United States Forest Service and later recognized in Congress through the 1964 Wilderness Act. Wilderness Areas are hybrid spaces, pockets of protected, enshrined land within a tamed and commodified wider span of land. They are not completely without human interference, whether past (Native American populations) or present (U.S. Forest Service), yet remain largely unchanged from the moment they are designated a protected wilderness. These locations preserve some of the realities of the American land upon settlement and even prior to that, contrasting with early narratives depicting the land as idyllic, welcoming, and pristine. In that sense, Wilderness Areas are spatial pockets of the Frontier kept under great care and supervision, the environments and challenges braved by European-Americans and traveled by Native Americans, foundational to forming American identity and thought.

Contrasting with the wild nature of these preserved environments, large metropolitan areas offer a completely different experience, establishing a dichotomy largely attributed to a difference between the East and the West. Richard Slotkin describes the dichotomy as "two geographical poles: the Metropolis, with a predominantly negative character (else why should we leave it?); and the wilderness Frontier, necessarily with a rich endowment of good things to appeal so strongly to us" (*The Fatal Environment* 35). Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) and John Hector Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) were two highly influential works in describing the relationship between the population and the land during the westward expansion period. Both authors display a vision of an agrarian society. The first seven chapters of Jefferson's *Notes* are dedicated to environmental characteristics, remarking on geographical delineations, economic opportunities afforded by topographical features like rivers, fauna, flora, minerals, and favorable climate. These depictions paint an idyllic land, bountiful and welcoming, enriching to all. Crèvecoeur follows along the same line,

noting that individuals experience "a sort of resurrection" (77) when coming to America. Crèvecoeur states that this new way of living, patently individualistic and averse to traditional European hierarchy to ensure equality, distinguishes the American and is in constant association with agrarian life. The embryonic stage of American exceptionalism is underway, deeply intertwined with Jefferson and Crèvecoeur's vision of a paradisiacal garden. Heike Paul highlights the profile-raising nature of both Jefferson and Crèvecoeur's descriptions of American land and life, arguing that:

> […] both clearly write in a promotional vein and seek to advertise the United States to a European readership: Their self-fashioning as inhabitants of a new Garden of Eden is part of efforts to legitimize the new republic and to entice more prospective settlers to cross the Atlantic. […] In promoting America as the 'Garden of the World,' they thus gave a nationalistic, civil religious dimension to (much) older utopian visions of which they presented North America and more specifically the West as a concrete realization. (317)

The land itself is a dominant factor that contributes to the shaping of early American identity, and its role is to be a blank canvas upon which anyone can design their own future. Land, as well as people, had to be progressively acquired. The dream of an agrarian utopia had to be constructed through continuous expansion and settlement, "the winning of the West was above all a process of taking possession" (Paul 321). The undercurrent argument, which seeks to extrapolate identity from, among other aspects, the relationship between the population and the land, is further explored by Fredrick Jackson Turner. Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), later added as the first chapter of *The Frontier in American History* (1921), became incredibly influential in its analysis of the Frontier concept as a defining place and idea in shaping American identity. While the essay focuses largely on the role of the Frontier and its impact in constructing identity, the latter publication expands upon the role and relevance of the land itself, chronicling the expansion of the frontier from East to West.

The frontier thesis reiterates the notion that Americans are fundamentally different from other populations, namely from Europeans, noting that "the transforming influence of the American wilderness" (vi) experienced at the frontier line is a key element in making such a difference. The American individual is exceptional not by birth, higher virtue, or calling, but because it is faced with a wilderness that requires a form of adaptation, a renewal of the relationship between humans and the land, "the wilderness masters the colonist." (4). The land requires of the reborn European:

> […] coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (37)

These traits distinguishing a new people, given their interaction with a new and challenging environment, form the basis of American exceptionalism. Inherent to Turner's Frontier is the idea of Wilderness, which is crucial in the formation of the exceptional character, "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" (3-4). Wilderness is a multilayered concept marked by various defining traits: the difficult and inhospitable environments, the awe and admiration for the natural landscape (often perceived as pristine), and the economic impact and sociocultural rebirth which wilderness enables. Slotkin's analysis of the dichotomy between wilderness and civilized society shows how the American territory differs from its European counterpart and how that difference helped to mythicize the West, thanks in large part to the perception of a bountiful land and other associations with potential wealth:

> […] beyond the Frontier exists a world of naturally abundant and unappropriated resources. Since the Frontier lies outside the Metropolis, achievement there is not limited by the competition of a whole society, nor by the rules and hierarchies of the established order: the rules are remade according to the occasion, and after the preferences of the makers; and property is there for the taking. (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 41)

Geographical configurations of the land are key in understanding the myths surrounding it, namely the myth of America as an idyllic garden, and the idea of a pristine, untouched land. While ideologically motivated and averse to the facts, these myths have shaped popular representations of the land. This "cherished anachronism" (Paul 317) is infused with nostalgia for a way of life that was never as pastoral, natural, and bountiful as advertised. In *Fire Season*, Connors contends with the damage resulting from the perpetuation and popularity of these myths, aided by the explicit desire to escape the modern rat race. Connors' narrative reignites the dream of the West in a new way, one which reconfigures the "juxtaposition of those two "worlds" – the world of Metropolitan scarcity (demand) and of natural abundance (supply)" (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 45) – into an abundance or scarcity of restoration, through aspects like isolation, living a simpler life, and a stronger connection to nature and the history of the land. Connors alludes to this dichotomy of East and West when reminiscing about his own life, recalling

that he “did not have the requisite temperament for such work – the subservience to institutional norms” (26) in the East and that “Being here alone I may not be my best self, in the social sense of the phrase, but I am perhaps my truest self” (35) in the West. The West is seen as a space of freedom, a markedly American conception of freedom, which the metropolis cannot provide. However, Connors’ Frontier, the wild pockets of territory remaining, is not the same as that which was heavily popularized and mythicized by Jefferson, Crevècoeur, Turner, and others. It is a captive, preserved Frontier: one that invites awareness of its long-lasting ecological and sociocultural importance, less oblivious to the severe impact of adapting landscape for profit, fragile yet still capable of enacting change upon the American individual.

If the Frontier and going West had, as Crevècoeur suggested, a transformative influence, changing Europeans into Americans, then what about the land itself? The American territory was never an idyllic garden, a promised utopia for its new people from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The environments varied greatly, from deserts to craggy mountainous regions, water was scarce, and the climate was not always favorable. Anne Hyde notes that depictions of the land popularized an imaginary place, often beautiful and well within desirable expectations, and allowed those in the East to experience these lands second hand, reinterpreted by artists:

> Stunned by both the beauty and the sterility of the region, artists groped for adequate ways to depict it. Professionally trained artists had a particularly difficult time because far western scenery bore little resemblance to the landscape they considered artistically significant. The artists who traveled west and drew, painted, or photographed the region carried cultural expectations with them, and many had specific goals in creating their art. Often the works they sent back to eastern audiences were more reflections of personal ambitions or national expectations about the West than depictions of actual sights. (Hyde 189)

Artists made the West “bigger, better, and more fertile than it was. They created an image of the West as a compendium of fantastic landforms, plants, and animals that reflected the variety and wealth Americans hoped they would find.” (Hyde 189), yet that composite never aptly represented the territory and its environmental variety. Instead of luscious grassy plains and beautiful soft mountain ranges, environments more palatable to European perspectives, the harsher, less desirable environments in the West became immensely popular, emblematic of the entire western region, through representations in literature and cinema. The deserted landscapes became increasingly popular for their potential; not only did they convey a harsher lifestyle and the challenges faced by those

attempting to settle the land, but they acted as a canvas, "a tabula rasa on which man can write, as if for the first time, the story he wants to live. […] The apparent emptiness makes the land desirable not only as a space to be filled but also as a stage on which to perform and as a territory to master." (Tompkins 74). The various environments which broke with expectations gave the West its shaping power, "The region's strange appearance, combined with national expectations about its uses, created a volatile mixture of geography and culture." (Hyde 175). It is precisely the wild nature of the land, untamed and inhospitable**,** that contradicts the notion of an idyllic garden. While Connors is privy to a natural reality long forgotten by the majority of the population, destroyed in the name of constructing a more tamed, fertile, and economically viable environment, the wilderness he speaks of is not completely natural:

> The creation of 'managed wilderness' is one of our culture's fundamental paradoxes, and defining why we value it, and how we ought to relate to it, will remain an unfinished project. But leaving aside the notion of simply gifting what's left of it – less than 3 per cent of the land mass of the Lower Forty-eight states – to the gas, oil timber, mining livestock and hydropower industries, which at least has the value of a certain stark simplicity, these criticisms never lead to a better idea than the one hammered out by Leopold: that certain samples of our natural heritage should remain, in a gesture of humility to future generations and the nonhuman world, beyond the reach of the bulldozer and the backhoe. (Connors 138)

The mythologized, romanticized West and the challenge of the Frontier are key elements in shaping American thought. Through the melding of fact and fiction, from historical sources to entertainment, the West and the Frontier have become a popular playground of tropes and narratives. The reality of the land, one not remotely idyllic and at times inhospitable, endures and is experienced every fire season by lookouts. Connors is an example of a scarce group of fire lookouts, growing scarcer by the day, still engaged with an older reality being preserved for its cultural and ecological importance, still connected to an earlier period of American history. Likewise, the lookout cabins and towers themselves are becoming a relic of the past. The National Historic Lookout Register lists one thousand four hundred and fourteen lookout towers that are at least 50 years old ("Lookouts in the United States" n.p.), a fifth of the peak amount reported by the Associated Press of about 500 during the 1940s (Ridler n.p.). Though significant efforts have been made to maintain and even restore existing towers, the passage of time cannot be ignored. Connors' description of the climb to his place of work is another indication of how truly remote wilderness areas can be, far removed from any semblance of society:

> At Wright's Saddle my drive is over, though the real pleasures of the journey have just begun. […] I double check my own pack for all the immediate necessities: maps, binoculars, handheld VHF radio, freeze dried food, my typewriter, some magazines, some whiskey. […] Five and a half miles await me, five and a half miles of toil and sweat, nearly every inch of it uphill, with fifty pounds of supplies on my back. I can feel right off that winter has again made me soft. (17-18)

This climb is not towards an idyllic garden, at least not one within the expectations that early European settlers had, but towards the last remains of the original Frontier – the natural garden of America, not uniform or conventionally beautiful, molded by fauna, flora and potentially native Americans. Like the Frontier, the American wilderness, a space of transformation so important in shaping thought, is slowly disappearing. Wilderness reserves are the last real physical connection left to the original Frontier, and "Despite human efforts to the contrary, it remains pretty wild out here." (Connors 18).

Fire, not progress and industrialization, is the enemy of the Frontier, as it signifies potential harm to stores of wood, sources of great economic boons. In fact, fire was perceived to be as destructive as war; Connors remarks on the Korean War and the McKnight Fire, sharing newspaper headlines and descriptions from the summer of 1951, citing the fire was like a "holocaust". Both events "threatened American prosperity" (149). The greatest source of destruction remains human activity, but fire threatens the boons of the garden, the economic potential that so clearly characterized the American West. Human activity was necessary to make the garden a reality, shaping the land to feed a nation and kickstarting the economy by taming the land. The economic potential and the idyllic nature attributed to the land was manufactured, not as prevalent as advertised and assumed/idealized, and "both of these western visions [scenic West and West of opportunities] clashed with the facts of the landscape." (Hyde 179).

Within the partially fictionalized and ideologically-charged descriptions of the geographical reality of American land lie older influences of an idealized land predicated on the notion that America was a pristine land, untouched by humans as if gifted to its new citizens, "Geographical knowledge of the American West did not begin with a blank slate. Myths and assumptions long preceded and shaped knowledge. A useful way to characterize nineteenth-century exploration is as a series of "reality checks" that had relatively little impact on a durable myth." (Hyde 177). Of the three myths, the myth of a pristine land is by far the most fantastical and ideological one, ignoring the presence and

impact of indigenous populations and romanticizing the new world as a divine gift. William Denevan shatters the perceived pristine status of pre-Colombian America:

> The pristine view is to a large extent an invention of nineteenth-century romanticist and primitivist writers such as W.H. Hudson, Cooper, Thoreau, Longfellow, and Parkman, and painters such as Catlin and Church. The wilderness image has since become part of the American heritage, associated "with a heroic pioneer past in need of preservation" […] scholarship has shown that Indian populations in the Americas were substantial, that the forests had indeed been altered, that landscape change was commonplace. This message, however, seems not to have reached the public through texts, essays, or talks by both academics and popularizers who have a responsibility to know better. (369)

The myth of the pristine American landscape hinges upon the notion of an idyllic, untouched territory, a bountiful promised land that never truly existed within those terms. Before Europeans arrived on America's shores and began adapting the land to facilitate agriculture and ranching, the indigenous populations had already spread across the continent and developed ways of managing the land in sustainable ways. Native Americans prescribed fire to mold and manage the land, creating the landscapes that Europeans would later assume to be natural and lessening the ferocity and impact of wildfires by culling significant portions of potential fuel. The shift in policy towards forest wildfires came with Aldo Leopold and the first area designated as a protected Wilderness, the Gila Wilderness. Leopold, one of the primary figures in the American environmentalism movement, adopted a similar outlook to Native Americans on the role of fire – fire is not always a scourge but often a gift of cleansing "in its ancient marriage with grass, the two of them conspired against brush" (Connors 42). To the many indigenous populations of the American continent, fire was even more than a gift, it was a tool to mold the land:

> Indian clearing and burning created many grasslands within mostly open forest in the so-called "prairie belt" of Alabama. As improbable as it may seem, Lewis (1982) found Indian burning in the subarctic, and Dobyns (1981) in the Sonoran Desert. The characteristics and impacts of fires set by Indians varied regionally and locally with demography, resource management techniques, and environment, but such fires clearly had different vegetation impacts than did natural fires owing to differences in frequency, regularity, and seasonality. (Denevan 372)

The American continent and its territories were never 'pristine' but manufactured to fit the American populations' needs, just as Native American populations had altered the land to a lesser extent. What Aldo Leopold proposed was a simple recognition that the

American territory deserved to be preserved, preventing further alteration to the land beyond what was already done to protect its biodiversity. Connors acknowledges the presence and importance of the Native American population that used to occupy the Gila, Apaches led by Chief Victorio:

> Amid the flux of new settlement, Chief Victorio and his people lived much as they had for generations. They hunted deer, elk, and antelope. They gathered acorns and raspberries, yucca flowers and cactus flesh. They raided and traded, back and forth across the Mexican border, stealing horses and cattle to swap for guns and other provisions. In their reckoning, cattle, like deer, were part of nature's bounty, only slower, stupider, and easier to liberate. Horses provided both meat and locomotion. The Apaches considered raiding an extension of hunting and gathering, an entirely natural pursuit. The ranchers they raided felt otherwise. (Connors 161)

The special attention to what was natural to Victorio and his people, even if reinforcing the savagery argument towards an already adapting people being introduced to firearms, highlights Connors' belief in respecting the history of the land. However, it also reflects human actions aligned with a perceived natural flow, working with the land and its inhabitants. To Victorio and his people, ranching was taking away freedom from free-roaming animals. Connors remarks that two essential aspects of Aldo Leopold's ecocentrist view allow for wilderness to endure: its separation and protection from progress (128). Separation pertains to roads, structures, or intrusive actions of any kind or by anyone, and a clearly delineated line to protect the enclosed Wilderness Area, with the exception of containing dangerous fires which requires mobilization of firefighters or search and rescue crews to help stranded hikers. Protection from progress encompasses preventative measures, like the Wilderness Area designation, to prevent the destruction of the environment on the basis of economic gain.

While Turner's Thesis remains incredibly influential, providing a framework upon which American identity can be analyzed, it falters when faced with the ecocentrist perspective proposed by Leopold, adopted by the U.S. Forest Service, and supported by Connors. The few remaining pockets of Frontier left are not there to be conquered and made to serve, nor has the Frontier truly vanished. Its spirit is kept alive through the preservation of the land, the traditions of its people before European settlement, and its physical environments. Conquering the land is no longer the goal – the priority is to ensure it does not disappear. Paradoxically, the protection of Wilderness and its effective enshrinement further strengthens the impact and influence of the Frontier concept by

demonstrating its cultural significance and history contained within, immortalized for future generations.

Another inconsistency arises between Slotkin's original analysis of the East/West dichotomy and Connors' experience. The economic potential of the wilderness is now reversed, as these protected pockets of land are not seen as exploitable deposits of resources but important fragments of an ancient natural beauty, no longer destroyed and adapted to fit the population's needs. These shrines to the West and their worth comes from their restorative quality in *Fire Season*. Open wilderness is no longer the Frontier of the West but its remnants, now devoted to writing the wrongs of ecological destruction in the past and reinvigorating the American of the East, provide a respite from the oppressive, regimented life in the metropolis. Wilderness and its resident lookout(s) are born from the rejection of nostalgia and the imagined truth, and paradoxically become truer to the reality of the American land and an older way of life, between the mentality of East and West, integrating the idyllic, mythologized Garden vision of Jefferson and Crèvecoeur with the untamed, savage lands described by Turner, now ecologically conscious and striving for conservation, adopting knowledge from indigenous populations. Jefferson's Garden becomes true when stripped of its commercial value and idealized use, accepting the natural beauty of untamed land. The economic exploitation is destroyed, but the land that forces a continuous disassembly and reassembly of the pioneer, a land that constructs national character through adversity, remains alive and is immortalized in Wilderness Areas.

Connors' break with American land myths brings with it changes in attitude towards the land. Lookouts work to maintain wilderness, not tame it as was necessary for economic progress during the Westward expansion. Lookouts and wilderness coexist, a symbiotic relationship that sometimes requires counterintuitive decisions, such as letting a fire burn, knowing it could potentially grow unruly and become life-threatening, for the health and well-being of the forest. Before being a lookout at the Gila National Forest, Connors was a copy editor for the Wall Street Journal. However, civilized life proved insufficient. His primary motivation for a career change is dissatisfaction, "I surveyed my past and saw only blind striving; I played out my future and saw an abyss: day after day, the guillotine of an evening deadline, stretching into the murky distance. I looked long into the abyss and jumped. This is where I landed." (Connors 99). Symbolically and physically moving West, Connors seeks what the metropolis cannot provide, a closeness with nature and a simpler, more satisfying life. Lookouts bear a resemblance to several

archetypes of the American West and Frontier literature, such as the frontiersman and explorer, braving the wilderness as the self-reliant vanguard of a nation, the Cowboy, characterized by rugged individualism and readily accepting of danger, and the Indian, displaying a spiritual kinship with nature.

The requirements to become the vanguard of a nation are harsh, "breaking ties of love, kinship, filial obligation, legal duty and customary associations in order to recreate their lives in terms more suited to their personal ideals and ambitions" (Slotkin, "Dreams and Genocide" 39). During the Westward expansion, the ardent desire to shape the future and continuously push the frontier of the promised land – Manifest Destiny – was the driving force of the frontiersmen. This desire would overrule even the most fundamental aspects which defined the pursuit for the New World, the expectations of natural beauty, via sheer violence towards native populations and appropriation of already occupied territories. Within Richard Slotkin's analysis of the various aspects that molded American myths of the West, violence is seen as a necessary and often inescapable attitude resulting from the anxieties of European settlers, Puritans "convinced that the natural world was corrupt from its very roots, requiring total regeneration" ("Dreams and Genocide" 40). Facing a New World harshly different from set expectations and full of unexpected challenges, "in the Indian and the wilderness they confronted the extreme symbolic types of the corruption of nature and man." (40). The fear of being conquered, "that the wilderness was Americanizing and Indianizing them" (40), drowning them in the darkness and savagery they associated with native populations, was the catalyst for violence.

According to Slotkin, captivity narratives are representative of the cycle of regeneration for the Europeans, enduring the evil savagery and emerging, reborn, victorious over the Indian. These narratives would contribute to the hunter myth, with figures like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett:

> The hunter myth involves a hero who goes into the wilderness willingly, and is the heroic master of his own and the wilderness' destiny. His hunt involves him closely with the dark forces of nature, the beasts, and the Indians; in fact, his experience is an initiation into the Indian life of the wilderness, and he comes to share some of the Indian's spirit through the very act of hunting the Indian to death. This quality is the source of his power; but it is also a defect in his virtue, since it compromises his racial purity. Thus the frontier hunter is often seen as low, coarse, rude-spoken, antisocial, outlawed or socially inferior. ("Dreams and Genocide" 44)

Violence inevitably became one of the pervasive and most iconic characteristics of the West, a place of trials and tribulations. Its originating process, a willingness to engage with Wilderness and brave potential danger and the unknown, is continued in *Fire Season* but with a drastic alteration of the outcome. The lookout does not answer anxiety with any sort of violence, at least external to the natural conditions of the wilderness. Whatever violence exists, from predator and prey, is natural and therefore necessary for the continued preservation of the environment. The land is not altered and its inhabitants are not forcibly removed. Instead of forcing a new order, the lookout embraces what is already there and strives to make as little impact as possible. A lookout is a willing captive, entranced by the beauty and importance of the wilderness, and does not ascribe to it evil or darkness. Unlike the early European settlers, the lookout has a much broader and less ideologically charged understanding of the environment; similarly, they do not need to face wilderness with violence, for their reverence is such that they seek to preserve the environment, including its cycles of violence by native predatory species and wildfires, from their lookout tower as silent observers. Embracing Native American traditions and attitudes towards fire further connects lookouts to the American territory, steadily moving away from the environmental conceptions of earlier centuries.

Reverence for nature constitutes a new cycle of regeneration and takes place in the New West of the Wilderness areas, mirroring Slotkin's analysis of the myth of regeneration through violence. In Slotkin's original conception, the myth was "a variation on the archetypal myth and ritual of the "scapegoat" which is itself the reflection of a basic psychological mechanism for dealing with anxiety and guilt." ("Dreams and Genocide" 49). If the notion of captivity is relevant once more, it is because lookouts willingly submit themselves to captivity, yearning for the regeneration of an almost spiritual quality. Centuries past, a new attitude emerges from a carefully considered perspective, no longer mired by emotion and nervousness. Whatever regeneration is facilitated by wilderness requires a peaceful acceptance of the land and traditions, putting aside religious connotations of good and evil. This new regeneration is a modern evolution which respects the history of the land and its indigenous populations' traditions; it puts aside idealized realities for the American space and fully embraces the land's topographical and environmental features, its natural history and its traditions.

The job of a lookout is becoming progressively automated, with people being replaced by various forms of aerial surveillance, more recently with drones. The cowboy faced a similar fate at the supposed end of the Frontier era as signaled by Turner, slowly

replaced by barbed wire fences, better transportation, and a more technologically developed cattle industry. What signaled the end of the Frontier was the acquisition, control, and populating of all the Western territories. Like cowboys, lookouts are a dying breed and signal a potential loss of connection with the original environment that so dramatically influenced American identity and thought. Wilderness areas are heavily restricted and have very few modern amenities like roads, nor do they permit mechanized travel of any kind. With the slow extinction of the lookout, Wilderness areas may well be forgotten, a definite end to the original Frontier era, patrolled only from a distance by eyes in the sky in the digital age.

Inspired by *Fire Season*, *Firewatch* shows a man seeking some sort of inner regeneration in an isolated wilderness area, partly distracted or seeking escape from a previous reality. This regeneration does not come through the same mechanisms described by Richard Slotkin's regeneration through violence paradigm, as neither Connors nor Henry seek to destroy and remake themselves in order to adapt to their new reality, but rather to cope and better understand it by removing themselves from their previous, unsustainable and anxiety-ridden lives – a regeneration through solitude. *Firewatch* is not a transmedia continuity of *Fire Season*, rather it inserts itself into the framework which *Fire Season* also belongs to, creating a new storyworld and, inherently so, a gameworld; *Firewatch*'s space hinges upon cultural myths of the West, the reinvigorating character of wilderness and medium-specific design characteristics which emulate aspects of solitude in wilderness recounted by Connors in *Fire Season*. Regeneration and escape, alluded to previously, are parallel concepts operating in the spaces described and experienced in *Fire Season* and *Firewatch*, like two sides of a coin. Regeneration is a characteristic of wilderness and is connotated with a sense of boundless freedom, experienced through walking (Connors 18, 32) and a renewed appreciation for fire and its role (Connors 150-153).

Regeneration as a byproduct of experiencing primordial natural environments is not just couched in American myth. It is a real phenomenon that correlates isolation in natural spaces, separate from developed land, with an increase in well-being. In chapter 20 of *The Handbook of Solitude*, "The Restorative Qualities of Being Alone with Nature", Kalevi Korpela and Henk Staats report that among adults polled, between 50% and 63% cite natural settings like forests and parks as their preferred place connotated with emotionally restorative traits. Additionally, respondents noted that relative isolation played a significant role in the restorative capacity of these environments (356-357).

Regarding the presence of company, the authors add that "company may enhance restoration through the mutual appreciation of the given natural setting, but it also may degrade restoration if attention is drawn away from the environment" (363). The specific factors of natural settings that play a primary role in solitary restoration remain unknown (363), but one relevant factor is the development of place attachments.

Henry is not the only one seeking regeneration in *Firewatch*. Ned's initial escape into the wilderness is marked by his experience in war, an escape from humanity, as well as his attempted 'forced regeneration' of Brian; Brian loves fantasy roleplaying games, which Ned might perceive as weakness, therefore bringing him into the space which shaped American identity and character is an attempt at regenerating Brian into a more fit version of himself. Ned's regeneration turns into a nightmare with the death of Brian, and he becomes a recluse. After Brian's death, Ned remains in the forest but ceases all contact with Delilah or anyone else. He builds himself a shelter, constantly moves around various prepared places in order to avoid detection and uses his military training to his advantage when he realizes that Henry and Delilah might pose a threat. Ned's hideout reveals he is torn between the memory of his deceased son and an instinctual drive to avoid detection and survive outside of society. The hideout is filled with the tools he uses for deception: a typewriter and fake reports he used to deceive Henry, a workbench with wiring and communications material to listen in on walkie-talkie conversation, supplies and further documents which shed light on how he survived and what he scavenged for.

In an attempt to reconnect with his son, Ned becomes even more traumatized and is now too afraid to return to civilized life, afraid of potentially going to jail. The only reason why Ned even gets involved with Henry and Delilah in the first place is because of another common trap which those who spend extended periods in the wilderness must face, sheer boredom. In one of the various notes that Henry can collect throughout the game, it becomes clear Ned enjoys listening in on the pair of lookouts, monitoring them while staving off the monotony. Like Delilah, Ned's presence is minute; Henry sees Ned as a shadow right as he arrives in the Shoshone, but the only piece of evidence to document Ned and Brian's appearance are photographs revealed in the credits. During the game, Henry finds a disposable camera, and the player can use it to document the moments they wish to keep from their playthroughs. The camera serves as a detective tool, documenting evidence for posterity.

Just like Westerns were instrumental in mythologizing archetypes, space, and time in American History, videogames like *Firewatch* are building towards mythologizing the

present reality, evolving the shared American narratives of national identity by adopting many of the historical minutia from Connors' *Fire Season* and personalizing player experience through micromoral scenarios. Like Henry, Ned's fragility suggests a more nuanced masculinity, dominated by instinctual fear, regret, and sorrow, reflecting a more modern view of masculinity and personal struggles. Masculinity in *Firewatch* is free of the anxieties Elisa Bordin notes in an analysis of masculinity in Westerns, "

> The calling for a less traditional masculinity is concurrent to a fear of being disempowered and a sense of insecurity produced by the post-modern world, and many men feel caught between a need for a new emotionally-enriching life and the anxiety of being "feminized," a term that unfortunately still means disempowerment. (33)

Rather than the anxiety of feminization, *Firewatch* taps into escapism, control, and failed regeneration to explore the psychological landscape of its characters, engaging with players through moral decisions and empathy-driven emotional scenarios.

Delilah, the third seeker of regeneration, remains the most mysterious character in the game, even when considering Ned. Delilah is attempting to escape, albeit the nature of her escape is much less explored, and the specific reason behind it is largely speculative. It may be due to failed past romantic relationships, hinted at through overheard conversations and some dialogue, yet her initial escape to the Shoshone wilderness is eclipsed by the reveal of Brian Goodwin's death and her reaction to it. Delilah completely abandons her life as a lookout, detaching herself from a space of freedom and nature because it is now tainted. Delilah knew the Goodwin family and was quite fond of them, leading to her shocked reaction at the end of *Firewatch*. Despite protocol, she allowed Brian to be with Ned, inadvertently contributing to his death. Thus, Delilah's much more definitive second escape begins, an escape from a wilderness now corrupted with death, which she feels partly responsible for.

Despite the constant conversations between her and Henry, Delilah's voice remains her only form of presence. She is never seen, unlike Ned in the photograph reel during the credit sequence. Delilah is the primary mediator for micromoral scenarios, often serving as a counselor when Henry is not quite sure how he should act. Her visual absence from the game, the emotional exit from Henry's ongoing turmoil with reality, and the guilt she feels for Brian's death make Delilah an unconventional NPC[10] – she does not solely exist to fulfill a task like administering the flavor text introduction for a

[10] Non-player character.

quest. As an NPC, Delilah is as free as Henry, even when considering player input, as she is not made to replace Julia nor does any insistence from the player on pursuing her result in a romance.

Regeneration through solitude is a lofty aspiration for the characters of *Firewatch*, still bound to the memories that drove them to escape. The liberating quality of wilderness is not sufficient to restore control over their own lives. Henry desperately seeks to regain control by escaping reality and making sense of several unconnected events while in the Shoshone. Ned seeks control by abdicating true freedom, rejecting society, and self-isolating, afraid of what the world would think of a father who lost a son due to pure neglect (or a world that would speculate he murdered his own son). Delilah escapes twice, seeking control over her relationship and then rejecting her role (her control) over Brian's death. Collectively, *Firewatch* fictionalizes the escapist element of videogames into a narrative with multiple examples of the consequences of escape, moralizing on the issue along the way. The lofty goal of regeneration is subverted, becoming escapism masked by paranoia and fueled by anxieties and vice; during the very first conversation with Delilah, she states "People take this job to get away from something". *Firewatch*'s space reiterates the richness of the West, focusing on its detachment from society and replacing economic wealth with spiritual wealth. Wilderness draws its value, as mentioned previously, from intangible characteristics: its isolating nature, primeval form and its promise of regeneration. It is not pristine, virgin territory, as many clues dotting the land point out, such as the native American medicine wheel near the watchtower (Fig. 6), a Boy Scout campground and fire lines from control burns become landmarks the player uses to navigate the Shoshone forest.

Fig. 6 - Native American medicine wheel. Its quadrants represent various aspects of human health as well as cardinal directions and elements of nature, among other aspects (*Firewatch*).

To counter the inherent tedious nature of the subject matter, *Firewatch* engages with the player contextually and culturally. The result of the development team's research is found in the environment design of the game, with Henry's tower being a notable example – an accurate representation of a lookout tower, containing objects that, contextually, speak about the job and Henry – as well as its wilderness setting. *Firewatch*'s space is part of its narrative. This is a practice called environmental storytelling, detailed by Matthias Worch and Harvey Smith. These authors argue that environmental storytelling entails "Staging player-space with environmental properties that can be interpreted as a meaningful whole, furthering the narrative of the game." (16).

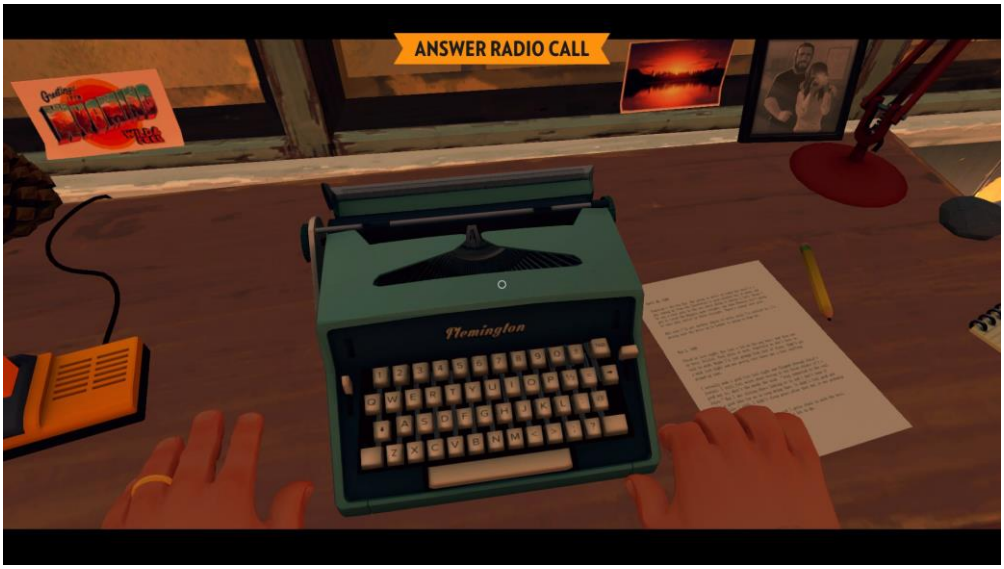

Figure 7 - Henry's Desk on the morning of Day 1, including the first journal entry and a picture of Julia (*Firewatch*).

Environmental storytelling functions essentially like a medium-specific *mise-en-scène*, adding specific objects in specific states and positions while forgoing the directed gaze of film in order to incentivize the player to explore, analyze and decipher the encoded story in the game environment (Fig. 7). Environmental storytelling is a design integration of the problem-solving paradigm. By allowing for elements of the environment to be missed or ignored, this design approach creates the possibility for multiple interpretations; the player can create meaning from a partial or total understanding of their environment.

Interviewed by Andrea Pitzer for the Neiman Storyboard, Harvey Smith clarifies two additional factors, which play a significant role in how the narrative of *Firewatch* unfolds: (1) the goal of allowing the player to miss potentially key elements of the environment and creating an incomplete understanding and (2) the different design consequences to push-pull narratives:

> (1) That's the classic insecurity of interactivity: Things might go badly. If you set up some systems where the player can't fail, and everything is very protected, it's not a game anymore. It's boring, in fact. It has to be possible to make bad decisions in order to make the good decisions meaningful. It has to be possible to miss some things to make finding them meaningful. You have to trust your players. Depending on execution, you can be successful at providing those details to the player while making it likely that they'll find them.
> (2) If I leave a body in a cave and put some monsters in the cave wandering around, some rocks on the ground near the body, and a hole in the ceiling with a shaft of light coming down, and the body has prospector gear, things that you might find on a miner, the player might look at that and say, "Oh, this guy was mining, and he fell through the hole and they killed him. I might need that equipment." That's still embedded narrative; the designer still places those elements. But instead of the designer pushing it to you through a conversation, you pull it from the environment yourself. You walk past it, you observe the scene, and you infer what happened. Or you might miss it. That's the thing. (Pitzer n.p.)

The opportunity to fail in this instance means that insufficient exploration leads to an incomplete assessment. Failing is a key element of videogames, as no other medium that can be interacted with will outright deny access to the interactor from continuing to experience the contents of the medium. In *Firewatch*, there is no formal game over if the player simply progresses as instructed, as there are no mechanics to master or challenges to overcome and be defeated by. The game is not interested in punishing the player in ludic terms. The failure that the player can experience is in gaming literacy, or more specifically, of the design aspect of gaming literacy as defined by Eric Zimmerman (24). Design entails the creation of meaning through context (28), and if players fail to grasp the meaning or ignore the context, they fail to grasp the totality of the game's intended design meanings. *Firewatch* sidesteps traditional game over scenarios but adds personal failure, a nuanced approach with no structured consequence. This sort of personal failure can be found in most environmental storytelling games and may be indicative of a fourth type of route to success as per Jesper Juul's classification of skill, chance, and labor (*The Art Of Failure* 74-75), a failure in understanding or interpreting. The exploration required so that the player can collect every interactable object is typically a small facet in other games, relegated to a collectible hunt with little implication. In *Firewatch*, these elements represent the various pieces of the puzzle that give meaning to the entire experience and form the fabric of the gameworld. Within Juul's three paths, skill is perhaps the closest, as navigating the environment, solving the problem of piecing together all the information, could constitute skill.

Harvey Smith's example of a pull narrative is fortuitous, as the body in the cave illuminated by a shaft of light can literally be found in *Firewatch*, in Brian Goodwin's final fate. The game attempts to pull the player towards a fake veneer of mystery, the collective escapist paranoia of Henry and Delilah, events that make their summer (game) interesting and distract from Henry and the player's reality, fueled by Ned Goodwin failing his son. This design approach also highlights the possibility for failure to grasp the totality of meaning, but it also imbues the game with opportunities for player investment through exploration.

Continuing Worch and Smith's environmental storytelling technique, *Firewatch* is full of tiny details that decorate the environment and culturally contextualize the game. Smokey Bear, the iconic mascot for the Forest Service whose tagline, "Only you can prevent forest fires", is replaced with a somewhat eerie new figure, Forrest Byrnes. As the name implies, Byrnes and Smokey differ greatly, his name alluding to the change in attitude towards wildfire prevention and the role of fire in wilderness. The closest to Byrnes tagline can be read in a poster, "Forrest Byrnes can dig it." (Fig. 8), with the mascot ranger digging a fire line to presumably halt the spread of fire, though given his design it could easily lead a player to believe Byrnes intends to spread it further. Smokey Bear taglines has been changed in recent years to more accurately reflect new attitudes towards fire, now reading "Only you can prevent wildfires". This change reinforces the idea that not all fires are detrimental and that some are indeed necessary for the health and maintenance of wilderness (Anton n.p.).

Forrest Byrnes directly reflects the change in policy towards fire detailed by Philip Connors in *Fire Season*, introduced in *Firewatch* as a game set one year after the calamitous fires in Yellowstone National Park. The fires raged for almost six months and consumed upwards of a third of the entirety of the park. The consequence of this fire was a reassessment of fire, natural or human-made, due to a better understanding of its role in the ecology of National Parks and Forests. Prescribed fire itself, albeit helpful, could not have helped Yellowstone, an environment that evolved over vast amounts of time, far before humans, to adapt and overcome

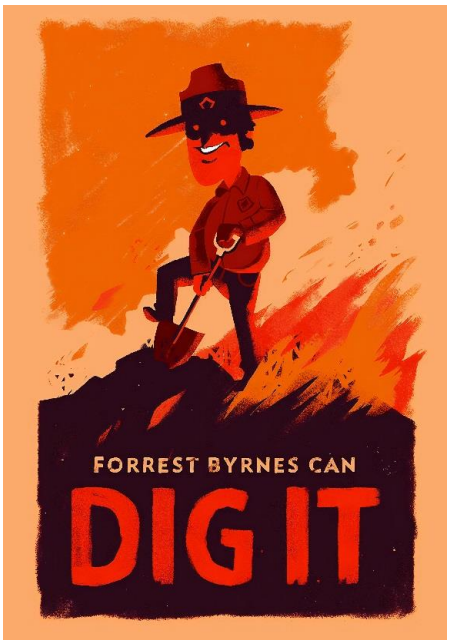

Fig. 8 - Forrest Byrnes poster (Firewatch).

periodical high-intensity fires. Natural fire, within reason, might have been the only consistent tool if it had not been put out at every opportunity, allowing the forest to maintain itself in cycles of burning and regrowth, as Mary Ann Franke concludes:

> Yellowstone's lodgepole pine forests have evolved within a regime of infrequent, high intensity stand-replacement fires that have a different impact from that of more frequent, low-intensity, controlled burns. A fire that is deliberately set to reduce the risk of a large conflagration entails a choice of fire intensity, size, location, and timing that cannot simulate that of a naturally occurring fire. In ways not yet fully understood, large fires may set in motion processes that are not replicated by the combined effect of many small fires. To preserve its ecological processes, Yellowstone must be subject to the haphazard risk of large, lightning-caused fires. (16)

Other aspects of *Firewatch* bind it to historical roots. The posters for the game, created by Olly Moss, are reminiscent of the Works Projects Administration (WPA), a government agency created during the New Deal era by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. FDR's goal was for the WPA to employ unemployed but able-bodied people to maintain and develop the country's infrastructure, from highways to hospitals, in order to combat the heavy economic blow suffered during the Great Depression. Part of the WPA was dedicated to the creation of art for various purposes, posters to promote social and cultural events, for instance. The posters created for the National Park Service have become iconic, revived in 2016 as a collection of stamps and, more recently, by congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to promote the Green New Deal. One clear difference between the WPA-style posters and *Firewatch*'s posters is the tonality (Fig. 9), as Olly Moss employed predominantly warm colors and incorporated much of the symbology

Fig. 9 - From left to right: WPA poster for Yellowstone ("Posters: WPA Posters"), Green New Deal poster ("Green New Deal Poster Pack") and a *Firewatch* poster.

pertaining to the game's iconography, referencing fire in every single poster. The game's UI uses the Verlag font, created initially for the exclusive use of the Guggenheim Museum and inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's 1950s art deco lettering. Almost every aspect of *Firewatch* refers back to the past, yet these details never prove anachronistic and become rather consistent footholds for immersion[11]. Henry is far away from civilization, working for a branch of government that is a relic of the past, and the player is transported with him to that moment in time with the aid of design and narrative techniques.

Fire is also connotated with regeneration. As the cycle of death and rebirth, fire provides an apt metaphor for Henry's impulsive life change as well as the guilt he feels associated with said change – as the fire burns, so does his old life, and when it subsides, he hopes to build anew much like a forest growing from the ashes. Danielle Karthauser explains the use of fire as a symbol succinctly:

> The fire is symbol for what happens when we ignore what is difficult. No matter how controlled the burn or how in control we feel, things will get out of hand if we don't take care of it. Henry begins his time in the Shoshone wilderness in peace and nothing bothers him. But as the summer continues, things get out of hand. Smoke becomes more prominent every day, making it harder to see and navigate the space. Not only do Henry and Delilah make some poor choices as fire lookouts which brings about the forest fire, but Henry has made his own poor decisions resulting in his own life catching fire. (Karthauser and Gronseth II 19)

Fire is both a necessary part of wilderness ecology as well as the consequence of Henry's negligence in *Firewatch*, his escape from a wife in need, and a willingness to abandon his former life altogether when he suggests to Delilah in the final moments of the game that they could get together back in Colorado. As Brian's death is revealed and Ned's plans are discovered alongside his hideout, the game comes to a close with a wildfire spreading fast, signaling that the end of this summer of delusion and paranoia has ended for Henry and Delilah. Like walking, fire is a non-verbal element of communication, a signal of beginnings and ends, separating reality and fiction and serving as metaphorical commentary; fire's natural role is cleansing nature, an agent of regeneration not unlike the violent behavior that Slotkin documents in his notion of regeneration through violence. The fire burns away all evidence of Ned's stay, hidden in the forest. The fire

[11] Immersion refers to the feeling players often experience of being inside, or being an integral part, of videogames they play. This is affected by perspective, as first-person perspective generates more immersion than third-person (Mäyrä 107) and can be further broken into three types of immersion; sensory, challenge-based and imaginative immersion (Mäyrä 109-110). In the present text, immersion refers to sensory and imaginative immersion primarily.

that Henry sets to his own life is mirrored by the fire that prevents him from meeting Delilah while also forcing him to leave the forest and return to his old life.

Death is another aspect closely related to fire and intrinsically part of the West, "To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die" (Tompkins 24). For Connors, accepting death as a natural part of the wilderness' self-regulating cycle is a difficult lesson "of good intentions and unforeseen consequences" (Connors 217) learned on the job by rescuing a fawn separated from its mother. Upon contacting a co-worker for advice on how to proceed, Connors is told to return the fawn, to ignore the emotional instinct, "What I am really being told, gingerly but unmistakably, is that it's my fault for interfering in the first place. I've disrupted the natural order of things. I should undo my error, return it to the place of its discovery, forget about it." (Connors 219). Against better judgment, Connors attempts to keep the fawn alive without taking away its wild nature. His remorse for interfering with the wilderness, "Even more, I wish I'd never seen it." (220), comes to a head as he witnesses the fawn take its last breaths from a distance. Within those last moments, Connors does not dwell on the pain and suffering of the fawn and builds a pyre (221). Cleansing fire honors the fawn and eases Connors' pain, like controlled burns ease the damage so that life in the Wilderness can continue to thrive in a continuous cycle of death and rebirth, yet wildfires still pose a threat to the Wilderness if left unattended. The fawn's death is paralleled in *Firewatch* by the death of Brian and Fire continues its role as a herald of death as an acceptable and indeed necessary part of the cycle, but there is no rebirth for Brian – no regeneration. This starkly mundane reality contrasts deeply and reiterates that there is no possibility for regeneration, only escape.

2.4 Solitude and Walking

Perhaps the most notable example of an American seeking solitude in wilderness is Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau's *Walden* is a survey for the essentials of life, removed from society and the regimented life of the East, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." (75). As a transcendentalist, Thoreau saw corruption in the world and wished to live a simpler life detached from society and its ever-growing needless complexity (76). Thoreau urges the reader to consider nature with great reverence. Nature is greater than the heavens, "Talk of heaven! Ye disgrace earth." (165), for it is readily found in this life. The deep connection with unspoiled nature in *Fire Season* is found in Thoreau's want for wildness,

stating “We need the tonic of wildness” (259). That which lookouts prize, their blessed solitude provided by relative isolation, is another aspect appreciated by Thoreau:

> I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows. (113)

The allusion to work, part of a regimented life in the East, is a continued echo of a sense of freedom found in the West. The dichotomy of East and West gains a dimension beyond the geographic, whereby its associations with facets of life, like oppression and freedom, company and solitude, the metropolis and nature, becomes greater identifiers of these spaces. Thoreau was not as isolated as a modern lookout is. In fact, Thoreau writes about his proximity to town. W. Barksdale Maynard writes “he only lived a half-hour away” (85) from town, which Thoreau visited fairly often by his own admittance (*Walden* 139). While “a hundred years of scholarship emphasizing Thoreau’s sociability has made not the slightest dent in public perceptions” (Maynard 86), Thoreau was never a hermit. His intent was never to remove himself from society and see its effects, but to remove oneself from the framework of society and assess whether or not that absence is meaningful to the individual. Solitude itself may be incorrectly understood, lacking a proper contextualization which arises only under a framework of detachment from society and a closer bond with nature:

> In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. (Thoreau, *Walden* 264)

Thoreau’s suggestion that simplicity, the shedding of societal precepts, enables the individual to create the foundations for dreams is continued in *Fire Season*. Connors embodies this ideal, having traded his old life in the East for a renewed one in the West. Solitude may be initially unsettling (Connors 31) but ultimately grants him great freedom and a sense of being reborn (32). Likewise, Connors’ life is exceedingly simple, from his “spartan workspace” (66) to his shedding of “the social imperative of productivity” (73).

Thoreau references ‘wild’ and ‘wildness’ but the idea is not fully explored until the publication of “Walking” (1862) in *The Atlantic*. Walking reinforces the idea that

nature is the primary order by which humans are regulated, not society, and that it has very few voices who champion its cause. It is the act of walking that proves the importance of Wilderness Areas, to which we are attracted by a "subtle magnetism" ("Walking" n.p.), as Thoreau believes we are instinctively compelled to walk towards freedom and the West, "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. Thither no business leads me" (n.p.). In a crystal-clear dream-like motivation for westward expansion, the myth of the West as a place for fulfillment endures:

> Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down. He appears to migrate westward daily, and tempt us to follow him. He is the Great Western Pioneer whom the nations follow. We dream all night of those mountain-ridges in the horizon, though they may be of vapor only, which were last gilded by his rays. The island of Atlantis, and the islands and gardens of the Hesperides, a sort of terrestrial paradise, appear to have been the Great West of the ancients, enveloped in mystery and poetry. ("Walking" n.p.)

In "Walking", the idea of setting roots, foundational elements to human aspiration, is explored once more, now associated with the 'wild' and the West, "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild […] From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind" (n.p.). The wild Thoreau references, descriptive of the shaping power of the Frontier and explicitly associated with the West, is a facet of the wilderness, an almost primitive simplicity in living which hardens and prepares the individual through contact with the natural world and its reinvigorating capabilities. Wildness, however, is not yet a place for the preservation of environments, only of tradition and potential. The Frontier environment, half-civilized but still rough and somewhat primitive, is the great environment of rebirth for the American.

Wildness is not without the rhythms of humanity. Wilderness does away with human intervention and influence yet reserves strategic positions for humans willing to respect and abide by its rules, accepting a natural cycle of death and rebirth, the inhospitable terrain, and the beauty of fauna and flora. Like Thoreau, Connors observes nature in a space within a space, a lookout tower and cabin within a Wilderness Area. He is, in effect, a willing prisoner of a frontier kept in stasis as seen from the outside. The tower itself is a modern intrusion into an older world, mirrored by Connors' example of the High Line in New York (Connors 143-144), an abandoned rail line in which wilderness began to intrude on civilization through the growth of wild weather-resistant shrubs and other plants – the West that traveled East.

In *Firewatch*, space is purposefully deceptive since much of the game narrative is spent convincing the player there are mysteries to be solved in the remote Wyoming wilderness, far removed from society and prying eyes. In order to aid player immersion, everything from the narrative developments to minute design aspects de-emphasizes the ludic nature of *Firewatch*. Environment design, in conjunction with this de-emphasis, heightens the sense of isolation. *Firewatch*'s user interface (UI) is outstandingly minimal. From the first new game screen to its contextual menus, *Firewatch* intends to intrude as little as possible in player experiences, something largely afforded by its setting. There is no combat, no physical confrontation that requires the use of skill or dexterity to overcome. The challenge, if any, relates mostly to contextual interpretation and spatial pathing. Consequently, there is no need for health bars or any related meters and no traditional quest log to indicate current or past progress. The map, for instance, is entirely diegetic[12] – Henry physically retrieves the map, holding it in his hands, and even interacts with it by updating known trails and adding notes. This is also true for the walkie-talkie, the disposable camera, the compass, and other less used items, usually specific to one of the Day sequences, like the fishing rod or the pulaski. The player has the additional menu option of hiding the interface entirely, disabling occasional captions on the bottom left and right side of the screen, informing the player of the key/buttons required to operate specific items. Henry's tower is a hybrid of Connors' lookout tower and cabin combined, a single working and living space with the bare minimum.

Firewatch's gameworld itself largely reinforces the idea of wilderness in *Fire Season* as it quickly dispels the notion of a pristine land. This dedication to reinforcing a sense of reality works towards aiding player immersion, being truly isolated with no intrusive elements such as non-diegetic HUD[13] elements (Fig. 10), a common element of first-person games, or unnecessary elements like a quest tracker which other games with strong adventure and exploration themes use, like *Skyrim*. There are some non-diegetic elements, like the walkie-talkie symbol on the left side of the screen whenever the player is interacting with Delilah, prompting a response through a set of options that appear on screen, as well as messages that appear on the top of the screen to guide the player to certain objectives necessary to progress the narrative. Lastly, there are moments without any UI, which heighten user experience (UX) even further by allowing for pockets of

[12] Diegetic representations occur when physical objects, whether or not they are part of specific game mechanics, are entirely within the game space and story (Russell n.p.).
[13] HUD, head-up display, with elements like a questlog, distance meter and others tools.

complete immersion, usually when Henry is exploring particularly beautiful parts of the Shoshone National Forest. These moments attempt to recreate the sense of solitude in isolation described by Philip Connors throughout *Fire Season*.

Fig. 10 - The only visible UI element during this segment of gameplay is a small opaque reticle at the center of the screen, providing a clear view of the scenery (*Firewatch*).

The very limited set of game mechanics continues to echo a commitment to minimalism, albeit in an ongoing attempt to engage with the player through meaningful exploration. Movement is fairly simple and straightforward. Henry travels mostly along the preset paths, is able to explore some larger areas (camps, caves), and can traverse more complex environments using a rope to climb or descend. The player is not free to roam anywhere, nor is the player privileged to an eagle-eye view of the entire map. The first-person perspective, combined with the importance of walking and pathfinding, plays an important role in player experience, as Daniel Golding explains:

> In the late 1990s, for example, space was one of the few points agreed on by both Janet Murray and Espen Aarseth – the most visible and principle members of the supposed antithetical ludology and narratology schools of thought – to be a defining characteristic of the videogame. […] For narrative, or fiction-oriented analysis, space was one of the defining areas in which videogames found their fictive expression. For the ludic, rule-based formalism of Jesper Juul and others, space was where rules often found their hardest configuration. Here we have the rules of the game writ physical: one cannot walk through walls, fly through mountains or leave the Battlefield 1942 arena without being 'shot' for desertion (Juul 2005: 163–66). Space rules, but it also tells stories. (120)

Constraints, limitations to player freedom, or agency, help to transform a supposedly liberating space, when described by Connors, into a cage that forces isolation and prohibits escape. *Firewatch*'s spatial configuration is indicative of its deceptive nature, though players may not suspect this to be the case. Golding differentiates two forms of spatial analysis, "from above" and "from below" (119). *Firewatch* operates almost exclusively 'from below', with 'from above' perspectives being entirely diegetic such as observing from higher terrain positions or the lookout tower (Fig. 11). The first-person perspective, surrounded by forest which occludes vision, minimal UI intrusion, and predominantly diegetic elements reinforce the premise of isolation by limiting player knowledge of what is to come and eliminating alternatives by maintaining a strict sequence of events. A 'from above' perspective would create distancing, widening the gap between the premise and Henry's experience as well as the player, and would undoubtedly provide a better view of the forest if the goal of the game was to truly be a lookout and protect the wilderness. The 'from below' perspective and limited mechanics enforce a finitude that constrains the player into adhering to the game's narrative, as well as allowing for mistakes in pathing to be made. The possibility of failure is important, "it is a routine act of play that is deliberately encouraged by the design of many – if not most – videogames." (Golding 128). Contrasting with *Fire Season*, Connors clearly identifies a 'from above' perspective from his watchtower, noting he can see for several hundred miles in various directions (Connors 67), identifying animals, land formations and weather events. Even *Firewatch*'s name is evidently deceptive, as the game has no interest in having the player perform the job of a lookout properly beyond the minimum necessary to immerse the player.

Fig. 11 - In the 'from above' perspective, the view from Two Forks tower hides the many landmarks the player can find (*Firewatch*).

Another diegetic element, the "Notes & Documents" section (Fig. 12), provides additional information about the various NPCs and helps in further establishing the game space. This section consists of various objects, primarily paper notes and letters that Henry can find in Supply Caches dotted throughout the map and other locations, which then form a collection that the player can consult and analyze. The majority of the objects belonging to this section do not help the player progress; they pertain mostly to events and characters in the game, further fleshing out the narrative outside of what Henry, and the player, experience through their stay at Two Forks. It is through back-and-forth letters that Henry learns about Ron and Dave for example, two lookouts operating in the same general area as Henry and Delilah in the summer of 1986. In their correspondence, the pair is amicable, but Ron repeatedly remarks they are friends, while Dave leaves messages like "Miss you". The player is led to speculate that Dave was beaten up at a bar, which is mentioned in the last note from Ron to Dave, and is having family and marital issues and is possibly homosexual. Another document supporting this theory is a clipboard, "Tracking 4 Subjects", belonging to Wapiti Station. Ned Goodwin uses this clipboard note, among other items, to convince Henry and Delilah they are being monitored. One of the remarks on the four subjects reads "Unreciprocated desire for copulation, conflict with other males". The player may make the connection between this comment and Dave, but the note refers to elk, which the player can find while exploring the wilderness; one of the elk found is dead and has a GPS tracking collar with the subject number on it.

None of this information aids player progression, nor is the speculation regarding Ron and Dave particularly meaningful to Henry, but it does speak to *Firewatch*'s commitment to creating a genuine lookout environment – people who wish to escape in order to be true to themselves – even if by deception. The "Notes & Documents" section can be ignored, as it is not required for progression, but this deliberate design choice of leaving clues and having Ned present them in a different context opens up the possibility that players may read some notes, possibly not find the elk (as again, it is not a required step for progression) and draw different conclusions. By introducing these details, Campo Santo is fleshing out the world of *Firewatch* and enriching player experience beyond the ludic dimension. Simultaneously, these elements distract the player from their ultimate lack of control. Additionally, the documents aid in making the space feel even more isolated, given that many of these documents refer to people who no longer work in the region or are missing.

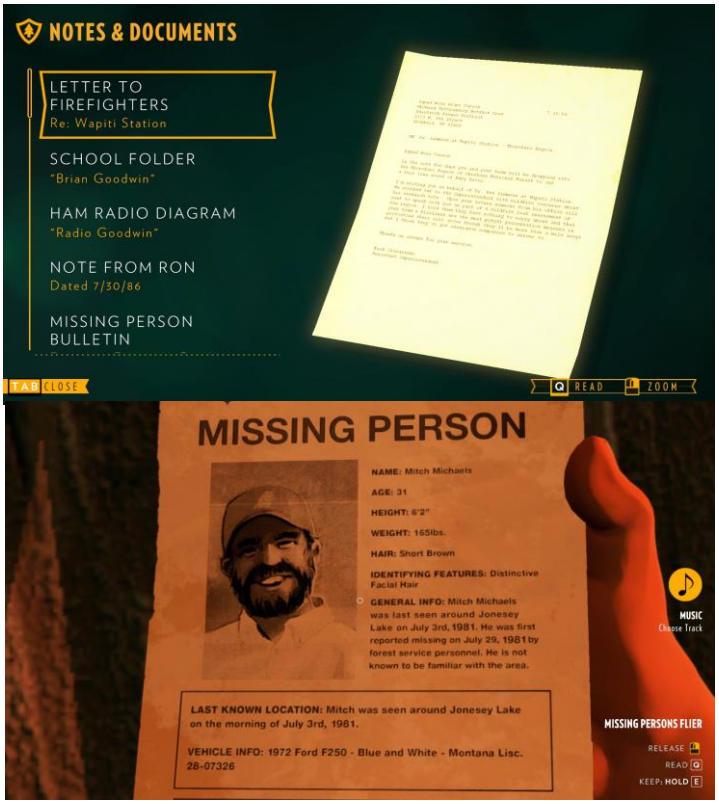

Fig. 12 - Notes and Documents menu and a missing person report (*Firewatch*).

Returning to the issue of player agency provides further insight on the impact of environmental design and the relevance of limiting agency. Hartmut Koenitz, addressing and analyzing the ludology/narratology debate, outlines two major components which are at the core of the disagreement, mapping scholarly positions on the debate along the dual axis of media specificity and player agency ("Beyond Walking Simulators" 4). Koenitz concludes that "the majority of positions are closely aligned when it comes to the dimension of player agency" (8), with media specificity presenting the biggest challenge. If player agency is central to video games, why does *Firewatch* so evidently limit player agency in various ways? Player agency aids in immersing the player, but the absence of control over outcomes is responsible for, as Piotr Kubinski's suggests, emerging the player. Emersion is the "[…] forces that pull player out from a swimming pool or ocean (i.e. from digital environment) back to his primary reality." ("Immersion vs. Emersive" 135). This push-pull situation, integrating and excising the player simultaneously, continues throughout the game in branching dialogue options in which, as previously mentioned, the player has limited options and no influence over outcomes; emersion happens due to an inability to definitively influence and alter events and their consequences. Creating the illusion of player agency helps in regulating player anxiety:

> The key to creating an expressive fictional labyrinth is arousing and regulating the anxiety intrinsic to the form by harnessing it to the act of navigation. [...] The drama of suspenseful approach does not have to be tied to combat or to jack-in-the-box effects. It can also have the feeling of a determination to face the truth, to stare directly at a threatening beast. It can be experienced by the navigating reader/viewer as well as by the player/protagonist. (Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* 129-130)

Campo Santo uses the fragments of reality embedded into Henry's background since the prologue and the historical importance of Wilderness Areas, National Forests and Parks to ground the player within the digital unreal and promote active creation of belief (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 107), rather than suspension of disbelief, by playing with immersion (and emersion) and blurring the borders between the narrative story players expect versus the one hidden in plain sight. *Firewatch* transforms an environment that, in Connors' work, is connotated with freedom, a sense of rebirth and serenity into an environment of unpredictability, anxiety and lack of control. The player is pulled into Henry with a promise of regeneration and pushed from Henry when confronted with his real motivation, escape. Walking, navigation as Murray suggests, as well as other design aspects like a 'from below' perspective and a sense of physical solitude and isolation from the rest of the world contribute to obscuring the true nature of the game's narrative, toying with player perception and expectations.

Firewatch is experienced through walking. From the very first instances of gameplay that intersect with the prologue, the player is primarily responsible for walking while in control of Henry. Most other relevant mechanics of the game, interactions with items and people, result from exploration through walking, yet movement has other importance outside of fulfilling the required actions necessary to progress the narrative.

As mentioned previously, Thoreau's "Walking" provides a glimpse into what pacing through the wilderness can truly mean. Much of the essay reiterates the sentiment of *Walden* that a connection with nature can be the catalyst for introspection and a reassessment of oneself as a member of nature firstly instead of society. The coarse, primitive land of the wilderness that then existed is now confined to National Forests, Parks, and Wilderness Areas. Thoreau had already seen society begin to settle, and the spirit of exploration dwindle with fewer people walking with the intent of exploring – the truest of American qualities was being eroded by rapid urban growth and societal developments. Scholars disagree on the exact relationship between Thoreau's conception of wildness and wilderness, which could change Thoreau as a key figure in the modern environmentalist movement to a staunch opponent (O'Toole n.p.) if wildness is equated

with unfettered freedom; a key aspect of Thoreau's vision of wildness is the presence of a primordial, character-shaping nature, somewhat invalidating a freedom which could nullify its existence. Regardless of original intent, Thoreau's influence rather than definitive stance is his legacy.

More to the point, Thoreau's conception of walking is valuable precisely because it is not productive but entertaining and soul-nurturing. In this regard, walking is similar to play as defined by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*. Walking is something separate from activities required by society such as work, ruled by a want for freedom and reinvigoration, and can be said to be "connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it" (Huizinga 13):

> Of course it is of no use to direct our steps to the woods, if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to Society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods? ("Walking" n.p.)

Thoreau's particular conception of walking sits comfortably within four of the five traits of play (Huizinga 13), as being a free activity, outside of ordinary life, with no material interests or expectation of profit and with proper boundaries of time and space according to rules. In *Fire Season*, walking bears the same markers of Thoreau's conception, but Connors still has access to the privileged view from above, and walking is part of his job. Despite this, Connors remarks on the restorative effect of walking in the wilderness (Connors 18), a distinction between East and West realities (26) characterized by a degree of separation from government and society (25), and a yearning for isolation (16).

While movement mechanics are a staple of videogames, their implementation in *Firewatch*, despite the affordances and limitations discussed previously, are key in analyzing player experience. Walking in *Firewatch* serves a dual purpose, providing the player a simulated nature walk while aiding in Henry's regeneration/escape. To walk is to experience the wild and to distance oneself, broadly speaking, from the systems that regulate society and from one's former life. In this regard, walking is *Firewatch*'s language and how the game informs the player (through non-verbal communication and heavily relying on design) of its intentions and proposed process by which the game explores the framework themes; walking is part of the procedural rhetoric of *Firewatch*.

2.5 Vice, Paranoia and Masculinity

For Connors, solitude and isolation are a joyous aspect of his work, though not every lookout has the personality necessary to embrace those aspects in quite the same way. Jack Kerouac, as chronicled in an unpublished diary which Connors transcribed by hand and always took with him up the mountain, could not adapt to the monastic lifestyle. In 1956, Kerouac spent a total of sixty-three days as the lookout for Desolation Peak in the state of Washington, motivated by his fascination with Buddhist scripture. As a lookout, Kerouac "would alternate between states of euphoria and states of despair" (Connors 187). A demanding new job deeply embedded in the wild, far removed from society and its purveyors of vice tested Kerouac and his beliefs. As Connors recalls, from reading the diary with "talismanic power" (185), Kerouac would range from decrying "There is no God, there is no Buddha, there is nothing but just this and what name shall we give it? SHIT." (qtd. in Connors 187) to glimpsing a state of serenity and peace while meditating and pondering the beauty of the land surrounding him. Kerouac's many vices, most notably tobacco and alcohol, would consistently deny him access to the experience he sought. Two weeks into his stay, he caved and asked for a supply drop of tobacco, using that as an excuse to have some company, spend the night drinking with others, and enjoying himself. This experience proved worthwhile, refocusing his mind, and his subsequent comments began to show an understanding of the environment he was in, "Decades before the Forest Service amended its fire policy, he perceived the futility and hubris of attacking every smoke. […] He went the whole summer without calling in a single smoke." (Connors 189).

Kerouac's appreciation for wilderness did not last long. Everything was an unfamiliar source of discomfort. The solitude meant he had "nothing to write about alone on a mountain" (Connors 191), yet the experience quite clearly left a long-lasting mark, having inspired or been included in many of his works, even fictionalizing the facts of his stay by omitting his night of partying, the length of his stay or the degree of his isolation (Connors 191). His quest for a deeper, spiritual connection and understanding gave way to his materialistic cravings and a want for companionship. Kerouac's isolation was severe. He was expected to spend the entire fire season at his lookout, receiving supplies whenever necessary. Neither solitude nor isolation proved worthwhile company. Unlike Kerouac, veteran lookouts are lone wolves who prefer the company of trees rather than any human, "Once we're sent up our mountains, we lookouts are largely forgotten, which

is just the way we like it." (Connors 24). Likewise, they are laconic individuals, either by nature or stunted by the extensive periods without human contact.

The influence of the Western genre on *Fire Season* helped shape and inform *Firewatch*'s setting and characters: the game gives the player the option to remain laconic, never engaging with Delilah. The player can choose to ignore the walkie-talkie and Delilah will still speak but Henry does not need to answer provided the player chooses no option to respond. This trait can be traced more significantly to Ned Goodwin. Like Henry, Ned is trying to regain control, likely suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after witnessing and being a part of the ravages of war. Delilah notes during the game that she deliberately turned a blind eye to Brian's presence, which would not be allowed because she was fond of him despite disliking his father. *Firewatch*'s narrative leads to the discovery of Brian's remains, deep inside a mineshaft ravine. Many of the environmental storytelling elements (various notes and an audio recording that Ned leaves for Henry to find) of the game indicate that Ned was trying to hide this fact from Delilah and Henry, which is why he engages in subterfuge. Ned remains unseen throughout the game like Delilah and is only heard once through a recording, making his presence even more elusive.

Vice was Kerouac's undoing and Connors recognizes that "every lookout has something they cannot live without" (72). For most, he adds, it is alcohol. This is precisely the case with Henry in *Firewatch*. Like Kerouac, Henry cannot quite escape vice, keeping a bottle of whiskey next to the typewriter on his lookout desk. There are continuous hints, starting with the many references to drinking during the prologue, that Henry may be an alcoholic. This would transform his escape somewhat, from one of sheer cowardliness or ineptitude to one motivated by self-improvement. However, he drinks and gets drunk during his stay. During Day 15, the player is prompted to respond to Delilah through walkie-talkie and in a moment her voice becomes Julia's: Henry may still be half asleep or partially drunk and imagining a conversation. In some respects, Henry is like his wife, in need of special care. The expectations placed upon him and his duty to Julia continue. Even as he escapes, he continues to think of her and maintains a journal often addressed to her where he relates his experiences. Additionally, there are a few opportunities to gather additional alcohol throughout the game that are completely optional choices, such as seizing it from the two girls setting off illegal fireworks in Jonesy Lake (Fig. 13). The teenage girls, whose bottle Henry can steal, are evidently drunk. Delilah also confesses, during Day 77, that she was drunk when first contacting Henry.

Fig. 13 - Before confronting the teenagers setting off fireworks in Jonesy Lake, the player can steal their alcohol and keep it (*Firewatch*).

Faced with his wife's condition and troubled by his inability to move forward, factors which likely aggravated the addiction, Henry's decision to abandon his wife seems like sheer avoidance of meeting expectations and facing responsibilities. Yet Henry does not go on vacation to some paradisiacal island nor does he immerse himself in an environment prone to social gatherings, establishing a new life. Henry attempts to pay penance while seeking escape, a voyage of self-discovery in a mentally strenuous and physically harsh environment in which, presumably, alcohol would be sparse. Wilderness is the great escape, but unlike Thoreau's proposal and Connors' acquiescing to the reinvigorating or regenerating quality of walking in the wild, Henry may see wilderness as a self-imposed punishment which he must endure.

The inescapable presence of vice is undoubtedly due to the sheer monotony of working as a fire lookout. In the Developer Commentary of *Firewatch*'s Free Mode, Nels Anderson notes that "the number one challenge with the job is that it is incredibly, impossibly boring" (Firewatch). Anderson was the primary source of research in the team regarding the reality of lookouts, having read Connors' *Fire Season* and done field research. Vanaman adds that the most common comment the development team received from those interviewed was "Why would you make about that? That is the most boring time of my entire life" (Firewatch). This is a significant struggle for *Firewatch*, not simply because it attempts to create a meaningful experience by de-emphasizing ludicity but also because the subject matter they attempt to recreate is inherently boring. *Firewatch* has no real mechanics pertaining to specific fire awareness tasks, such as consistent weather reporting, periods of observation, equipment maintenance and other relevant tasks.

Firewatch focuses instead on the more leisurely side of the job. Lookouts exchange books, notes, and whatever else is possible to prevent complete boredom, in addition to aiding others with necessities for survival. This is reflected in *Firewatch* through Supply Caches, in which the player can find books, letters, food and tools.-In addition to Supply Caches, *Firewatch* uses interactive music, which changes as the player progresses in certain areas. The sound design extends to the Shoshone forest, where the player can hear animals close and far, hear the changes in weather when the wind picks up, and the leaves and rocks under Henry's boots as he walks. This helps to heighten or alleviate tension following the narrative structure.

Paranoia is another element of *Firewatch* that helps distract the player from the monotony of work while also transforming regeneration into escape, shifting the nature of *Firewatch* and revealing to the player that there is no great mystery. Ned, in an attempt to maintain his presence hidden and prevent Brian from being discovered, fools Henry and Delilah into believing in a grand conspiracy. They, and the player, are tricked into believing they are being monitored by a group of researchers working from Wapiti Station with complicated scientific equipment. If the player is lured into the trap of paranoia, it is because they are taught by games to chase down mysteries and attempt to solve them, to escape from reality and the mundane. Campo Santo purposefully develop a narrative predicated on paranoia to test player's gaming literacy. Henry is a surrogate avatar for escapist, inquisitive behaviors developed by players while also providing said players with an empathetic and cathartic path. The use of a subplots which serves as a misdirect helps keep the player engaged. The ultimate use of Ned Goodwin as an antagonist figure and the death of Brian Goodwin brings *Firewatch* closer to more common game paradigms without detracting from the subverted experience, providing players a modicum of familiarity but also reinforcing the possibility for interpretation. The game suggests that Ned may have taken part in Brian's death, likely in an attempt to continue sowing ambiguity and preventing perfectly solved mysteries.

In addition to vice and paranoia, one important aspect that can be gleaned from how Campo Santo has explored Henry's narrative is how masculinity is portrayed and acted. Melissa Kagen argues that masculinity is at the core of *Firewatch*:

> Here we have a hero living a modern version of cowboy life: a rugged loner in the Wyoming woods, an unacknowledged alcoholic trying to escape a tragic past, essentially a videogame John Wayne. But Henry's hypermasculine presentation is continuously undermined by the game's mechanics, story and genre. The character exists in an

> interesting relationship with his masculinity—he performs the motions but is thwarted by a game that disrupts hypermasculine performance at every turn. (n.p.)

Kagen notes that the "pronounced privilege of [Henry's] identity" is at odds with his representation, "the complexity of his inner struggle portrays an othered masculinity within the context of traditional gaming and game protagonists" (n.p.). Kagen scrutinizes the prologue, adding that each choice presents "increasingly fraught masculinity tests that Henry fails, setting him up as a hypermasculine character who cannot perform hypermasculinity correctly." (n.p.). Henry's attitude could certainly qualify as hypermasculine, as he deliberately subjects himself to a harsh and unfamiliar environment in which he must accept the possibility of danger. Yet, by the very nature of his choice, one which the player has no say in – an escape from reality – Henry has already demonstrated he cannot be classified under stereotypical models of masculinity.

Returning to the prologue momentarily, the subversion of masculinity takes on additional nuance. Deviating from overtly gendered observations into a much broader and direct approach, Dan Staines et al. remarks:

> The prologue serves another purpose, however, in that it immediately confronts players with the almost aggressive ordinariness of its protagonist. Henry is a chubby, balding, everyman facing a painful, uncertain future. Like all of us, he is flawed – a fact that informs much of *Firewatch*'s subsequent narrative and moral content. (274)

Masculinity is certainly at play in *Firewatch* and the prologue's introductory choice-based sequence is useful in this exploration if seen as the early design footprints of subverting expectation based on choice. Even the most innocuous of choices in the prologue could potentially be tied, even if superficially, to masculinity (striking up a conversation with a woman at a bar, picking a German Shepard over a Beagle, displaying courage rather than caution) simply because we are following Henry. The player's masculinity bears little significance within *Firewatch,* given its underlying rigid structure, in which choices and their consequences are irrelevant for narrative progression and development. Henry will always find Brian dead, and be spied on by Ned while talking to Delilah, only to be left alone and faced with the reality forgotten in the few hours since the prologue – Julia is sick and Henry cannot run from that reality. In other words, masculinity, or hypermasculinity, is another subverted aspect that contributes to a larger, systemic set of subversions that predominantly reflect the player rather than preconceived

projected models of masculinity. *Firewatch* attempts to personalize the experience, in however limited a format it can, by making Henry an everyman figure.

Does *Firewatch* then fail to accurately communicate design intent by not including a female protagonist, which the player can choose before the prologue thereby subverting the damsel in distress? Should Julia be kept as is, in that scenario? In addition, should Delilah, Ned and Brian, and even the two teenage girls be altered? Should Ron and Dave? Should Henry/alternate protagonist be customizable to contemplate aspects like skin tone, voice, hair, body type, among others? Kagen points out two additional relevant aspects. Firstly, "The game plays with the tension it creates between the player's desire to control the world (a common videogame expectation and a central tenet of hypermasculinity) and Henry's lack of control and much more nuanced masculinity." (n.p.), though there seems to be another optional route within this argument. Henry is the one who desires to regain control over his world, even before the player has any say in it; inserting a quest for control within the narrative further strengthens the connection between Henry and the player. Henry, and *Firewatch* itself, is designed to reflect that reality, and the rest of the game mechanics and design choices coalesce into that driving force via a limited branching dialogue, limited consequences despite multiple choices, and a fixed ending. The entire narrative is rigid despite the illusion of control. The player's lack of control over outcomes mirrors what Henry feels. However, before the narrative of the game, Henry has already made a series of conscious choices later reflected by the dialogue options given to the player – he chooses to abandon Julia to become a lookout, he chooses to engage (or not) with Delilah, he chooses to succumb to paranoia and conspiracy and the player has no influence over these decisions.

Secondly, Kagen likens Delilah to a princess that the player never gets to save. Delilah is no damsel in distress and has no need for Henry. Like him, she appreciates the lonely nature of her work, and despite her outgoing nature, she further appreciates the isolation her castle-like lookout gives her: if the player attempts to reach Delilah's outpost before the end of the game, Delilah diffuses the attempt and denies the player access. There may even be some additional misconception as to what relationship Delilah is meant to have with Henry, based precisely on common videogame expectations that Kagen points out (n.p.). Delilah is Henry's superior, she is responsible for Henry during his stay in the Shoshone forest; her attitude is part innate character, part consequence of her professional position. Should the player assume that, because there are suggestions within the dialogue options given to Henry, Delilah falls into the romanceable-NPC

category, there is already a critical misconception based on gaming literacy, and this misconception is no doubt another evidence of purposeful design with the intention of subverting player expectations.

Kagen concludes by noting that *Firewatch* provides "a complex portrayal of masculine experience instead of a hypermasculine hero's journey" (n.p.), in which Henry and the player manage to discuss masculinity in a setting that escapes its less productive stereotypical models. While Henry's masculinity should not be disregarded, preconceptions regarding his supposed virtual privilege and how emotion is a female domain are simply more subversions along Henry's journey, one of escapism, avoidance, fantasy, and ultimately disappointment and reality. As explored previously, the prologue's true purpose is to foreshadow the subversion of player agency. The player has no real choice but to be the Henry that falls in love with Julia and gets married. One cannot avoid a certain degree of emotional investment as Henry and as a player, regardless of being male or otherwise. The use of the first-person perspective is important in increasing immersion through a more realistic perspective and hiding Henry, the player model, to minimize the moment-to-moment importance of the specifics of his ascribed identity.

2.6 Ludonarrative Discourse

Karthauser and Gronseth II note that "challenging our expectations is what makes the story succeed" (24). However, for expectations to exist, the developers and players must come together in a way: the game must use specific design elements in specific ways to elicit assumptions by the players, creating future expectations. *Firewatch*'s design and narrative, culminating in an unconventional ending, are predicated upon the relationship between design intent and gaming literacy. Whatever anger, disappointment, or understanding Henry might feel, it is shared by the player at the end of the identity superimposition, based on the player's gaming literacy and emotional investment.

Henry's backstory is determined for the player, as is typical of many games, but very few games put the player in a position of reckoning the outcome of that backstory on an emotional and empathic level. Prior to the prologue, Henry is no different from a traditional narrative character as his reality is set and unchangeable. Minor choices in the prologue help the player integrate into the backstory construction by altering small aspects of it, the breed of a dog or the attitude in one quarrel out of years in a relationship. These minor changes begin to intertwine the player's identity to that of Henry,

compounded by the game's supposedly branching narrative choices. In reality, this exercise in emotional investment can fail dramatically if the player becomes unsatisfied with the array of choices or fails to connect with Henry, an issue not easily dealt with. Replacing Henry with a customizable character and making the backstory broader and more ambiguous could potentially increase the opportunities for engagement but also sap *Firewatch* of its unique identity and formulation.

There are other ways in which the player may lose sight of Henry, largely connected to the deceitful nature of *Firewatch*'s narrative experience. The understanding that choices do not matter because they do not result in different outcomes is one such instance, something only revealed through multiple playthroughs. Players may disconnect from Henry when they recognize their own role is somewhat superfluous; micromoral scenarios and environmental storytelling may keep the player engaged but can ultimately prove insufficient at tempering the subversion to player expectations. *Firewatch* is a game that benefits from multiple playthroughs so that players may develop a broader understanding not just of Henry but of Delilah, Ned, and the wilderness environment. This may be jeopardized upon realizing that there are no alternate endings; *Firewatch*'s player experience approaches that of a novel with its linearity and intrigue. The instances of regeneration with the Goodwin family, Delilah, and Henry are another aspect of the deceitful experience while also contributing to the most meaningful moments of player engagement.

Firewatch's greatest subversion – its ending – has aroused some disappointment in reviewers and players while also hiding many of the important conclusions to the experience, in its narrative and mechanical structure. The forceful decoupling of the player from Henry generates emersion, counterintuitive from the ultimate objective of emotional engagement, immersion. In Worch and Smith's explanation of environmental storytelling, they note that an important aspect of design involves "Minimiz[ing] disconnects between the player's possible actions and pre-scripted setups." (57). The player might think 'there may be a right answer here', in hopes that the conclusion of the game may change, though there is no such possibility. There is no way to help Julia, no way to ever see Delilah, no different outcome with Ned Goodwin, or a change of fate for Brian; all of the plot points are set in stone, accepting that is one of the many lessons *Firewatch* teaches its prospective escapees. The disconnection between the existence of multiple options and the invariability of outcomes directly opposes Worch and Smith's

formulation, as the game is scripted to only have very specific and unchanging outcomes by design.

Given this disconnect, the perception of ludonarrative consistency, whether harmonious or dissonant, can be further modified via intentionally deceitful or non-explicit design or by exploiting flaws in player's gaming literacy. Ludonarrative consistency can be summarized as the relationship established between the story promoted by the game's narrative and the story promoted through gameplay, harmonious when both stories promoted match and dissonant when they do not, as pointed out by Clint Hocking (255-259). Introducing Eric Zimmerman's gaming literacy, a player's knowledge and understanding of game systems and mechanics, which directly relates to whether or not players can recognize purposeful subversion of ludonarrative consistency and extrapolate based on interpretation, as well as recognizing the frameworks of inspiration behind games and how design is affected as elements of Bogost's procedural rhetoric, leads to a new aspect of ludonarrative relationship – ludonarrative discourse. This potential second layer of ludonarrative relationships relates directly to the player's perception of the game, their understanding of genre and tropes, reading of the environment, familiarity with mechanics, and how games engage with the player. Ludonarrative discourse can be further broken into two forms, ludonarrative dialogic games and ludonarrative dialectic games, borrowing the Bakhtinian and Hegelian conceptions, respectively. Like ludonarrative consistency, discourse is best understood as a spectrum.

Richard Sennett delivered a lecture titled "The Architecture of Cooperation", in which he addressed Hegelian dialectic and Bakhtinian dialogic discourse, highlighting the specific aspects relevant for this text. Sennett mentions succinctly that

> […] dialectic is something in which there is a give and take in exchange that arrives in a conclusion or a form of closure. The dialogic is a form of exchange which doesn't seek for closure, doesn't even really seek for common ground, but for a different kind of interrelationship. (Sennett 19:30-19:53)

Sennett further clarifies that dialectics revolve around power relations which lead to a form of closure (Sennett 19:30-22:44). In contrast, dialogic is more concerned with a multitude of perspectives, likening the concept to listening skills as it highlights the interpretative nature of dialogic discourse which "focusses on responsiveness to the covert rather than the overt" (24:01-24:08). Unlike dialectic, dialogic discourse has no

closure, no definitive conclusion found in a point of agreement, and instead centers its focus on the meaning of words rather than words themselves.

This dichotomy is, like harmony and dissonance, useful in analyzing and understanding videogames. Regardless of ludonarrative consistency, some developers create experiences that allow for multiple answers and, indeed, multiple opinions on meaning and interpretation. For example, emergent gameplay and narrative are indicative of dialogic games. Multitude of choice, purposeful ambiguity, and the affordance of multiple mechanical approaches are all design choices that seek to integrate as many perspectives as possible. The subversive and deceitful nature of *Firewatch*, a maze masked as a rhizome, masks its ludonarrative discourse. The existence of multiple choices implies multiple outcomes, which never come to pass, indicating the game engages dialectically rather than dialogically. However, *Firewatch* saturates every decision with doubt, anxiety, and ambiguity by relying on micromoral scenarios in an emotionally charged narrative. *Firewatch* still offers multiple choices whose meaning and effect cannot be grasped by relying solely on the in-game consequences.

Regarding ludonarrative consistency, *Firewatch* is a harmonious game on its surface, the gameplay and the narrative promote parallel 'stories' by sharing many of the same ludemes: the narrative presents a character filled with a sense of loss and anxiety, the gameplay provides paranoia and a path towards regaining control littered with opportunities to make sense of things through notes and conversation. Henry is not a firefighter but a passive observer without control over the consequences of his actions, Delilah is not a romantic interest to replace Julia and there is no escaping reality, whether for Henry or the player, and Ned is not some lunatic murderer hiding away in the wilderness but a deeply troubled man wanting to hide his scars from the world. Ludonarrative discourse does not concern itself with being perfectly harmonious or dissonant, it makes use of immersion and emersion, subversion, environmental storytelling, and design based on expectation to navigate both poles of opposition, harmony and dissonance, intentionally. *Firewatch* is designed around the expectations developed by player's gaming literacy, a sign of medium and genre awareness. While ludonarrative harmony is preferred by developers and dissonance is avoided, as it generates emersion which may be jarring for the player, Campo Santo balances consistency with the intent of commenting on escapism and its consequences; there is very little actual fire watching in *Firewatch*, as the job and setting serve predominantly

as an advantageous strategy to explore themes of regeneration, escapism, and morality deeply embedded in wilderness environments.

Dialectic games treat the player as a reader, there are no choices or significant narrative deviations, no discussion regarding ambiguity to be had. These are games that do not require the player to significantly engage with narrative elements, do not challenge gaming literacy by design, do not play with or subvert tropes or other well-established relationships. The notion of ludonarrative dialogic games is born from games which do not employ explicit narratives and make use of environmental storytelling, for example, to expand the game and storyworld by promoting player interpretation and choice, as exemplified by Felix Schniz in "Skeptical Hunter(s): A Critical Approach to the Cryptic Ludonarrative of Bloodborne and Its Player Community":

> *Bloodborne* inspires emancipation on a diegetic and extra-diegetic level. It immerses the player into a virtual ideological world that is defined by mystified oppression, biopolitics, and a never-ending cycle of theocracy-sanctioned barbarism. It furthermore encourages its players, due to its cryptic tone, to actively engage a player. This leads to a raised awareness of the world's ideology, as well as the desire to discuss one's findings in a larger community. This peer-to-peer spirit, as has been explained, leads to a digital defiance with the neoliberal network. The skeptical hunter has left the game to team up with fellow hunters, asking evermore questions. (9)

Similar to *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015), *Firewatch* continues to be discussed long after its release in websites like Reddit (r/*Firewatch*) and game-related forums. The problem-solving paradigm extends out of the game. Much of the narrative's subplots are speculated upon using objects from the game, such as the "Notes & Documents". Mirroring how lookouts communicate, through notes left in drop boxes with keys and number codes or private conversations on walkie-talkies across vast expanses of wild space, *Firewatch* fosters a community with insular qualities, not isolated but separate in its discussions of the game from other game-driven communities. Considering the systems and progressions, *Bloodborne* has an end, a form of closure, but there is no end to resolve the question of its meanings. In addition, the possibility to continue from the start, a system often called New Game+, further echoes the cyclical, endless character of dialogism.

Another example of ludonarrative dialogic can be found in *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012), a first-person action game with a significant emphasis on player choice. *Dishonored* is diverging from other games which feature violence as the only option to achieve victory, displaying that in any situation, there is the possibility of alternate actions

should they be designed for the player. The game allows the player to choose how they tackle the game, predominantly using stealth and cunning or straightforward violence and lethality. Exploring each level/stage can alter objectives or provide additional options that lead to victory, further contextualizing the goal for that stage and opening up a variety of approaches. The game balances the lethal and stealth approaches by using small adjustments to the gameworld in response to player choices, the Chaos system. If the player relies predominantly on lethality, increasing chaos, the game responds by populating subsequent missions with more obstacles that directly reflect death, such as rats, bloodflies, and weepers (people affected by the rat plague). Conversely, approaching the game in a stealth-based non-lethal way decreases chaos. Varying degrees of chaos have consequences outside of gameplay. The entire gameworld shifts to respond to chaos: Corvo, the player character, is discussed differently by NPC's, the environments he encounters can change dramatically, and the general reactivity of NPC's changes.

Dishonored places the responsibility entirely in the player's hands. Chaos is shifted by voluntary actions, killing enemies or sparing them, and finding more civilized ways of removing their power. Corvo can either become a tyrannical serial killer or a cunning shadow operating out of sight. Rather than concerning itself with ludonarrative harmony or dissonance, *Dishonored* creates a narrative in which, regardless of player actions, every approach is feasible within its narrative structure. The narrative story changes based on player actions, becoming one of justice or revenge. Unlike *Firewatch*, choices bear consequences in *Dishonored*, but like *Firewatch*, the choices players make are deeply moral and personal. Gaming literacy is also relevant when considering how well a player can read the environment and recognize the consequences of their actions; *Dishonored* accommodates varying degrees of gaming literacy by affording a straightforward approach to gameplay. The discourse aspect of the narrative also sees change according to player actions. Players who tackle the game in a straightforward manner, using lethality, see Corvo (themselves, by their actions) be treated and spoken about accordingly as a crazed killer. Conversely, players who take the non-lethal approach generally receive more positive reactions from NPC's and more positive outcomes in situations where multiple options exist; the game's ending changes contextually from a bloody revenge story to one of righteous justice and redemption.

Ludonarrative dialogic games' design is heavily dependent on high context communication, a concept developed by Edward T. Hall. Hall argues that culture is communication and vice versa (*Silent Language* 218) and that the relevance and

expectation of context differs between cultures: high context cultures depend heavily on implied context as opposed to low context cultures, which necessitate direct and explicit communication, often sacrificing nuance (*Beyond Culture* 105-116). Regarding mechanical extensions, Hall's name for the tools and medium-extensions of humanity, the author notes:

> Like all mechanical extensions, most photographs and all TV images are low-context. Pictures taken through lenses give a macular view of things. One of the consequences is that the viewer never knows what's going on off camera. This makes it possible to trick him, as in the case with all low-context systems, like the trout going after the fisherman's lure. (*Beyond Culture* 121)

Videogames can employ one or both systems of communication at once. Quest logs, for example, which track the player's progress across the objectives required to progress as well as optional side objectives, are almost always low-context forms of communication. They are exceedingly explicit in what the player must do, often indicating the area, the NPC's involved when dialogue is necessary, objects required to complete the quest, among others. The necessity for explicit communication exists to avoid frustration, as games are largely goal-oriented. *Firewatch* maintains elements of low-context communication, such as visual indicators of how to use items within the game's UI and prompts on the top of the screen for objectives. In addition to the low-context communication, there is also plenty of high-context communication. The cultural and historical references belonging to American culture that are left unsaid shape much of the communication between Henry and Delilah, inform the player on Ned's background, contextualize Brian's character and help unravel Ron and Dave's story. The very notion of environmental storytelling implies high-context communication, requiring the player to decipher meaning from the surrounding space. The relationship between wilderness and regeneration, as well as its reformulation into escape, is communicated in high-context, through interpretation and exploration.

Ludonarrative dialogic games focus on the importance and effect of choice and engage with the player's gaming literacy, using intentional design and purpose-made mechanics to challenge player perception and to invite discussion on the perception of narrative events. *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), for example, replaces choice with interpretation, completely removing any form of written or spoken dialogue from its game. The player controls a Wayfarer, a hooded figure with a scarf capable of interacting with its environment in order to reach the Mountain. The player must progressively solve

puzzles, interact with unidentified online players who join their session and NPC creatures, observe the environment (which often has pictographic murals), and deduce/discuss the hidden meaning of the game. Similarly to how *Firewatch* returns players to the beginning of Henry's situation, the end of *Journey* circles the player back to the beginning; upon ending the game, as the credits roll in the background, a star shoots from the top of the Mountain and makes its way back to the endless desert at the very start of the game, indicating a cycle of regeneration or death and rebirth.

Duncan Fyfe, writing for *The Campo Santo Quarterly Review* and categorized as an ombudsman, suggests that despite Henry's journey through the Shoshone ending abruptly and seemingly without resolve, what it communicates to the player is of even greater importance:

> And what does Henry do? Go see Julia? It kind of feels like it's up to you — in the sense that it's open to interpretation, not that it's your choice to make as a player. You can express a preference, but *Firewatch* ends before you can commit Henry to anything. There's something to it ending where it does, I think, to *Firewatch* decoupling the player from Henry where it does. You are with Henry only as long as he distracts himself from his actual life. He grew close to Delilah and will never see her again, and the same is true of you. Contrary to what *Firewatch* says in its opening, you're not Henry. Not really. Henry has his problems. They're not yours. Henry has to face them on his own. Maybe you do too. (Fyfe n.p.)

The ending is flawed by design, indicative of the limitations of regeneration through solitude and the wilderness's capacity to serve as a place of freedom or escapism. Photography provides a final piece of evidence that suggests the core of the narrative and invites the players to discuss if they, like Henry, were even the protagonist to begin with. The disposable camera that Henry finds and the player can use to record the environment throughout the game is, during the credits, revealed to have belonged to Ned and Brian, containing photographs of them. From the very beginning, *Firewatch* is about fear, anxiety, and escape, the role of the wilderness in that escape, and how, symbolically, games become the places where players escape to. Every aspect of *Firewatch* culminates in the reading of the ending, a deeply personal experience. The ending sequence itself provides one small alternative: if Henry waits instead of boarding the helicopter to escape the fire, the game simply fades to black and transitions to the credits, implying that never returning or suicide can be considered. Regardless, the player never meets Delilah, Ned is gone without ever being seen again, Brian's dead body becomes another scar for the characters to bear, and reality, Henry's reality, is restored – the summer adventure is over

and Julia needs help. Ned's escape from Vietnam is replaced with an escape from the reality of his loss. Delilah is nearly speechless at the discovery of Brian. Who will the players be, in their own lives, an uncaring Henry that moves past his commitment, a Ned who hides and neglects his responsibility, a Delilah which cannot cope with the consequences of her lax attitude, or a renewed figure which recognizes that we cannot ever truly escape the world? The player is not Henry, they never were.

Various aspects of *Firewatch*'s design challenge well-established ludically engaging conventions, working in tandem with its narrative to subvert expectation and challenge players in new ways. These design aspects are like controlled burns, destroying expectations and creating new ways of engaging with the player in the same space in a cyclical fashion. The minimalist user interface (UI) and limited game mechanics attempt to integrate action and choice into the narrative, presenting intradiegetic elements whenever possible and intruding the bare minimum to provide a more immersive experience. The branching dialogue is a deceptive presentation of a firm narrative structure, as it provides players with some deeply personal choices but no consequence in the form of altering Henry's path. Other design-related aspects, such as the environmental storytelling, a process that "fundamentally integrates player perception and active problem solving, which builds investment." (Worch and Smith 26), the use of subplots to keep the player engaged alongside Henry, and the rapport the player/Henry builds with Delilah, forming a close friendship without ever meeting her, continue to distract the player from the reality presented in the prologue.

Firewatch lulls the player into accepting Henry's escape as an entertaining, paranoia-fueled detective investigation narrative while simultaneously reminding the player/Henry, through small events which progressively fade away, that Julia will still need to be taken care of once the summer is over. Regeneration through solitude is a lofty ambition for Henry, as is the regeneration found through escapism the player might hope for. *Firewatch* constrains player agency and plays with aspects like masculinity, vice, perceptions of space and responsibility precisely because it establishes, through ludonarrative discourse, a clear intent to question the player's stances on these issues. Micromoral scenarios do not affect the ending, existing only as reflections of the player, constrained and bound to Henry's identity and situation. In reality, what Henry and the player seek is not regeneration through solitude but regeneration through escape, a brief respite from reality. The American Frontier, now in its digital form, obliges.

CONCLUSION

Despite its short length, simple mechanics and deceptively linear nature, *Firewatch* is a complex game, subverting expectations of narrative implications and integrating foundational myths of American identity into its anxiety-driven protagonist and deceptive plot. *Firewatch* is notable for its commitment to a careful tightrope act, foregoing ludicity and highlighting its narrative. Its design integrates players as much as possible by minimizing the amount of extradiegetic elements in the UI, like the simple act of looking at a map or using a walkie-talkie. The design methodology extends to various aspects of the game and its power becomes self-evident when coupled with a narrative focused on isolated spaces, solitude in wilderness and a heavy dose of problem-solving. Using a historical background helps to create a foundation which promotes player investment and empathy, entangling the fiction of *Firewatch* with sociocultural perceptions, expectations and realities. Expectations play an important role in player experience as a target for subversion. The result of this subversion of expectations is a videogame that plays closer to a traditional narrative in terms of its rigidity while still allowing for, and highlighting the importance of, exploration and environmental storytelling.

Among the various design choices that Campo Santo took, the relationships and interactions between Henry, the Shoshone Forest and the two major NPCs, Delilah and Ned, are of particular interest because they illustrate how the developers opened a dialogue with Philip Connors' *Fire Season*, tackling American myths, the lookout experience, National Forests and Wilderness Areas, and evolving them to a new medium and audience through gamification[14]. The player shares Henry's perspective, a person fleeing from society and the burden of responsibility. Henry is not a blank slate, but the player can reflect on the sort of individual they wish to be as Henry during his stay as a fire lookout, through a set of dialogue choices. This limitation is likely to be constraining for players aiming to build an identity but it does promote emotionally and ethically meaningful moments via micromoral scenarios. Delilah is an uncommon NPC, brimming with personality without falling into any expected roles, clichéd or otherwise, and without ever requiring an avatar to interact with. In addition to Henry, Delilah and Ned Goodwin's actions and situation provide ample commentary on the concept of regeneration through

[14] Gamification, "a process of enhancing a service with affordances for gameful experiences in order to support user's overall value creation" (Huotari and Hamari 19) and "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Deterding et al. 9)

solitude, adapted from Slotkin's notion of regeneration through violence. Wilderness itself provides a structure for player experience and molds several narrative aspects.

Having considered the concepts of 'game' and 'narrative', their intersection seems only limited by design implementation. Evidently, some games intertwine their mechanics and narratives more closely, creating a progression that is bound by both processes. This is important when considering the concept of a shared framework for several reasons. In seeking to emulate or recreate certain mythemes, videogames may present with similar plot points, analogous mechanics and characters fulfilling similar roles or belonging to similar archetypes; these similarities can fall into cliché as players develop familiarity to tropes and mechanics. Games that draw from the same mythemes may also generate similar ludemes, resulting in the possibility of analyzing games belonging to different genres under the umbrella of a shared framework.

Heuristic studies on two interconnected works across two forms of media requires a multidisciplinary approach and a series of considerations. How old and new media interact, how videogames differ when they stand by themselves or are inspired by other works, and what that relationship adds or subtracts to the end user's experience are factors worth considering. What influence does Joseph Campbell's monomyth have on *The Legend of Zelda* franchise (or the *Final Fantasy* franchise, or *The Elder Scrolls* franchise), and conversely, what does the franchise return in the form of commentary to Campbell's formulation? What elements of H.P. Lovecraft's cosmic horror prove significant in the player experience of *Bloodborne,* and how does *Bloodborne* evolve the subgenre in a new medium that features interaction and, in this example, complex combat mechanics? What is new in the relationship between old media narratives and the new media videogames they inspire: *Heart of Darkness* and *Spec Ops: The Line*, *Atlas Shrugged* and *Bioshock*, *Frankenstein* and *The Wanderer*. In addition to these, what of the cultural importance of games that create fiction from history such as *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* or *Assassin's Creed*. How do they balance ludicity and narrative progression given the game systems and mechanics which the player interacts with? In short, we should be looking at videogames as new creations deserving of new theory while also comparing and contrasting their formulations of genres, myths and tropes in old media.

Further consideration of ludonarrative approaches suggests that some videogame genres are more prone to feature game design with narrative progression when a sequence of events requires player action to progress said narrative (Karhulahti's storygames). When narrative progression is not optional, the player co-authors their journey, even if it

is predetermined in both space and time, through specific encounters, exploration, or any other factor. Aarseth's ergodicity is key in analyzing the player's relationship to the game when progression is non-linear, and emergence can characterize the problem-solving paradigm. Methodology is then determined on a game-by-game basis, rather than by overwhelmingly general genre conventions. Interactivity and its consequences are features which are not present in classical narratives (physical text-on-paper format) and open game narratives to player influence or agency. Denying this agency can be meaningful, as is the case in *Firewatch*.

Regarding historical and cultural aspects, many parallels can be drawn between Connors and archetypes of the West through his description of a lookout's job, attitude towards wilderness and others. Likewise, the lookout is an extension and evolution of the American within nature, a continuation of the East and West dichotomy, and an effort to avoid progress when it proves harmful and jeopardizes collective memory. Connors continues to play off of the established thought framework of Turner's work, referencing aspects of Western life like cowboys, the dichotomy of East and West, characterizing wilderness as both "sylvan tranquility" and "predatory savagery" (Connors 171). While evolving the framework's basic building blocks, gnawing at the myths that have damaged and threatened the last physical bastion of pre-Columbus American environments and the Frontier, Connors advocates for a new way of looking at the remnants of the Frontier.

Connors and the fire lookouts like him are living anachronisms, as is the wilderness they watch over. A fire lookout is a true representative of an old way of life, just as an idealized and mythicized agrarian or ranching way of life is iconic of the Westward expansion and the Cowboy is of the West; the lookout is one who diagnoses the land with the often necessary malady of fire that has been prescribed for centuries by native populations. Despite this, the sages in the mountains remain mostly invisible to the public, absent from modern cultural narrative frameworks, and are now dwindling to extinction as progress makes their work redundant. Their methodology reflects the evolution of attitude towards the American landscape, from an early need to use natural resources by stripping the land to an ecologically conscious approach in alliance with fire and protective of the natural environment and its cycles.

The Wilderness Areas that lookouts watch over are an enduring testament to the difficult and dangerous terrain frontiersmen and settlers needed to traverse and eventually tame. The American land is largely a construct idealized, executed, and promoted to exalt its people and justify their violent and destructive actions during the period of expansion.

Myths regarding the American territory proved immensely influential and helped shape national identity, perpetuated through literature and painting. Reassessing the myths, which characterized the land and permeated culture into an incredibly influential *ethos*, in a modern framework allows for a more critical assessment of their impact. *Fire Season* shows a more nuanced, carefully considered modern approach to land management while still being respectful of older traditions and aware of the importance of these myths. Wilderness spaces are the last remaining pockets of the original frontier, shrines to American natural, political and economic history. Their importance goes beyond the ecological.

Firewatch continues this new conception of the Frontier, not as a space to be tamed but as a space one can surrender to and integrate. Addressing this in light of *Fire Season* presents some methodological challenges. The most pronounced when writing this text was describing how *Firewatch* uses and translates the contents and themes from Connors' work. This process required descriptions of game mechanics and environments aided by screenshots but may still fail to properly relay the effects and experience of actual play. Additionally, while the specific framework of *Firewatch* is heavily dependent on player's gaming literacy, it also requires a cultural literacy to read the context of its environment in light of the history and importance of wilderness in the United States of America.

Firewatch's own transformations suggest that further study is required on the notion of regeneration associated with space, in particular the finding that people tend to associate natural spaces with reinvigoration. Do gameworlds contribute to that feeling, as real primordial nature environments do, which *Firewatch* evidently tries to recreate? If so, do these virtual spaces generate place attachments as referenced by Korpela and Staats (363)? Could videogame spaces possibly integrate something similar to a taxonomy in nature writing like the one proposed by Thomas Lyon in *This Incomparable Land*: field guides and professional papers, natural history essays, rambles, solitude and back country living, travel and adventure, farm life, and man's role in nature. These categories range from a more historical and scientific context to a literary, philosophical approach; he adds "the types […] listed tend to intergrade, and with great frequency" (20), thus no single nature writing text is exclusively bound to its prescribed category, indicative of its dominant component. Taxonomically, *Fire Season* accompanies the likes of *Walden* in the solitude and back country living category but draws heavily from other categories, from both ends of the spectrum. Ludonarrative analysis, in addition to an analysis of

visual culture, could contribute to a creation of a virtual nature taxonomy. This taxonomy could reflect a spectrum, from videogames that are concerned with a certain historical accuracy and addressing myths and realities to others with greater emphasis on ludicity and a different form of interacting with and representing natural environments.

Fundamentally, walking simulators require further research, as does any culturally entangled game, with a particular focus on establishing shared frameworks with other works, whether or not in other mediums, and their ludonarrative process. The notion of shared frameworks, couched in the analysis of fundamental units like ludemes or Bogost's unit operation, their contribution to procedural rhetoric, and their transformative process is still tenuous but can be expanded and systematized with more videogame examples. Similarly, ludonarrative discourse, born from Hocking's initial observations of ludonarrative dissonance and broadened by dialectic and dialogic can be further expanded with more examples and be used as part of the ludonarrative toolkit.

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