Walden, a game
Wildlife Encyclopedia

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Background

Walden, a game: A Survival/Walking Sim game based on the book by Henry David **Thoreau**, which chronicles Thoreau's **experiment** of **living simply** and **self-sufficiently** in the Woods around **Walden Pond**. By immersing himself in **nature**, Thoreau hoped to gain a deeper understanding of nature, society, philosophy, religion, etc.. Thoreau serves as the narrator, protagonist, and player character of the game.

The Journal: Thoreau keeps a journal which the player can open at any time. Any voice-over **narration** and some collectible text **excerpts** are recorded in the journal for the player to re-read at any point. It also includes a map and a list of quests.

Observation: A mechanic that allows the player to zoom in at any time. If the player uses the **Observe mechanic** on an object, **excerpts** from the book or gameplay **hints** will unlock, which are added to the Journal.

The Woods: The **primary setting** for most of the gameplay experience.

The Town of Concord: The second of the game's two locations. In town, the player can find some **free survival supplies** and purchase additional survival supplies and **permanent upgrades**. Many **quests** are started in the Town of Concord.

Self-Reliance: The game's makeshift **hard-mode**, which involves **staying in the Woods** and not entering the **Town of Concord**. This type of playthrough encourages an experience **more aligned with the goals of Thoreau's experiment**.

Root Problems

Two key aspects of *Walden, a game's* design **undermine its own narrative and philosophical themes**.

1. **Mechanics:** Although the purpose of Thoreau's experiment was to **immerse himself in nature** and learn from it, the game lacks a way of **encouraging the player to Observe their natural surroundings**.

2. **Quest Structure:** There is **only one quest line** that is fully completable in the Woods, which drives players to enter the Town and discourages Self-Reliance—for lack of content, not added difficulty—thus **contradicting Thoreau's philosophy**.

Proposed Solution

Add the **Wildlife Encyclopedia** to the player's Journal and a quest to complete the Wildlife Encyclopedia. By using the **Observe mechanic** on a **new target** (i.e. plant or animal), an entry for the Observed target gets **filled out** in the Wildlife Encyclopedia.
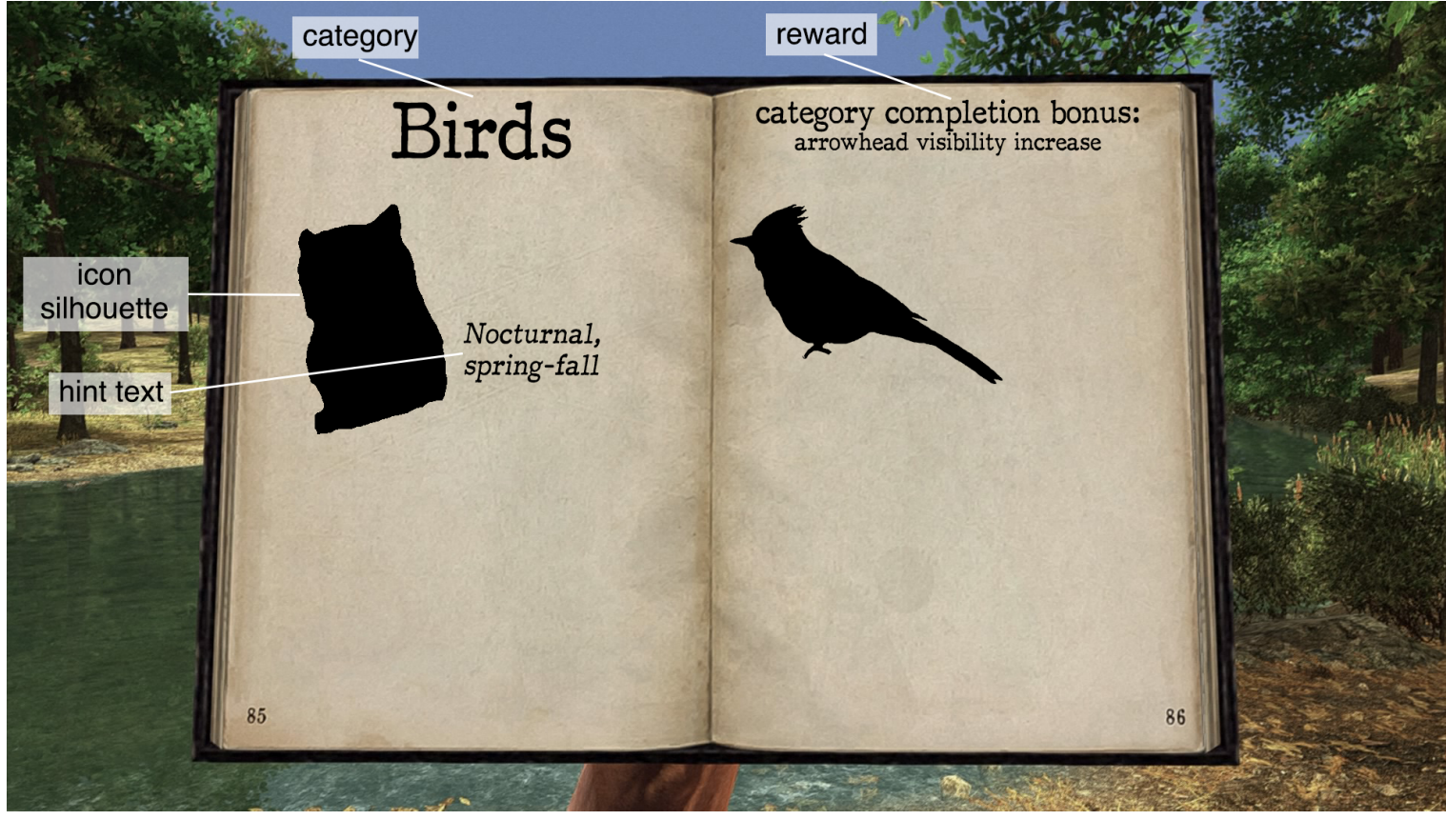
Each entry in the Wildlife Encyclopedia starts out with **an icon silhouette** and **empty space for text fields** next to it. The player can **collect hints** for finding the target, which get logged beside the icon.

Upon Observing a target for the first time, the **icon fills in** and the **text from the Observation UI** is **added to the Wildlife Encyclopedia**.

Categories and Rewards

The Wildlife Encyclopedia supplies additional incentive to Observe all wildlife targets in the game, but some players may become **discouraged by the size of the task**. **Subgoals** and further **integration with the core loop** will ensure that all players have a reason to engage with the Wildlife Encyclopedia.

Categories (e.g. Fish, Birds, Trees, Bushes) break down the Wildlife Encyclopedia quest into more **easily attainable goals**. **Rewards** given for **completing a Category** incentivize players who don't plan to complete the full Wildlife Encyclopedia to **engage with the feature** in order to make other quests and the survival loop easier. Rewards apply **gameplay bonuses** related to their respective category like raising the catch rate of the fishing mechanic upon completing the Fish category.


Hints

As the player starts filling out their Wildlife Encyclopedia, **progress** towards the goal will naturally slow as the player Observes the targets that are more common and spawn closer to their house. To **prevent stagnation** and **player frustration**, the player may collect **hints** for how, when, and/or where to **find targets** that have not yet Observed by talking to Emerson (the main NPC), or reading books in Emerson's library.
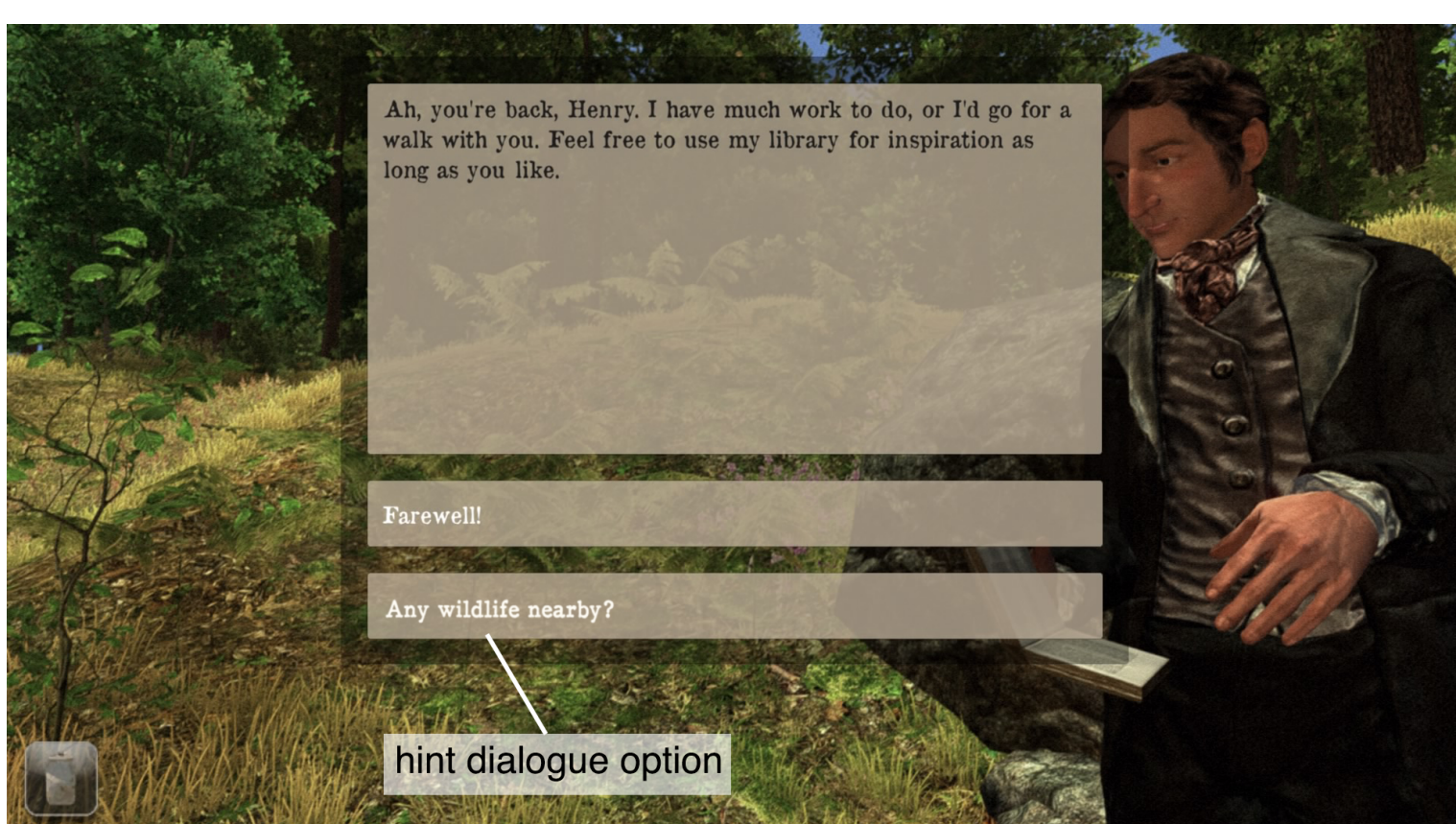
By selecting the hint dialogue option, Emerson will **share information** about a target that has not yet been Observed, similar to the existing quest flow. Hints are **gated** on in-game time of year, progress towards other quests, and Wildlife Encyclopedia completion progress to prevent the player from spamming these dialogue options.
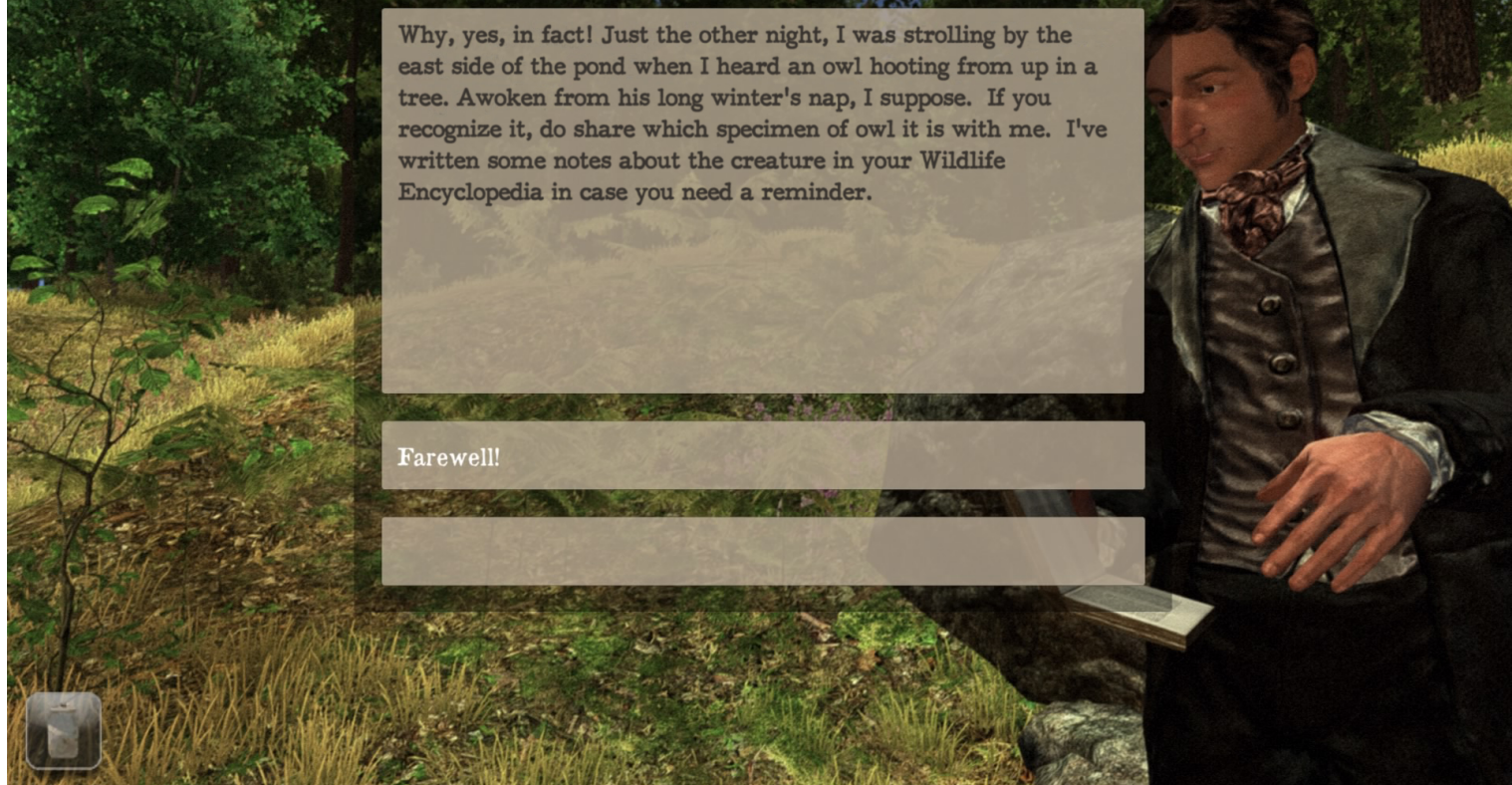
Benefits

1. **Observation mechanic:** **Incentivizes** more engagement with an under-utilized **existing mechanic**

2. **Role-playing:** Encourages players to **engage with and chronicle the local wildlife**, which are activities that are **true to Thoreau's real experiences**

3. **Simplified Journal:** By **separating text** related to the Observation mechanic from the rest of the Journal, the **Journal** will become **more focused**, devoted exclusively to major excerpts delivered in Voice Over narration.