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A Walk in the Woods

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A Walk in the Woods

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Matthew Paul Macari

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

Dedicated to my parents, Margaret and Fred Macari, and my brother, Daniel.

Special thanks,

To my advisors, Matthew Sargent and Sarah Hennies, without whom this project would have no direction.

To members of my boards, past and present, including Angelica Sanchez, Kyle Gann, and Erica Lindsay.

Also to Thomas Mark and John DiMarco, who always give help - no questions asked - to students wandering through the electronic wing of Blum Hall.

And to those without whom this project would be impossible - including but not limited to, Vivienne Potee, CeDaniel Sumpter, Annie Dodson, Aidan Samp, Alessandro Mucin, Zeke Morgan, Tess von Brachel, Margaux Suinat, Sam Crocker, Cedrick Rule-Becker, Charlotte Pinney, May Pocsy, and Lauren Ceres.

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1. Artist Statement

"I am surrounded by images that remind me of family vacations to New Hampshire and horizons common in colder temperate climates. There are dense forests of conifers on immense mountains, surrounding me. The forests are cold and dark, but as I look up, I can see a soft, majestic midday sky. These images spark something inside me that I had only ever experienced in joy walks through the woods or from cinematic scenes of a film. The alienness of this landscape becomes apparent when the caravan arrives at a small fort on the frontier. As I observe the dilapidated towers with grim-looking guards, I feel a Tolkien-esque darkness that has seeped into everything, tainting the beauty of the surrounding environment. Do you know the opening scene of The Shining? It's like that. The mixture of these sights and sounds radiated from the screen, hypnotizing me into complete immersion..."

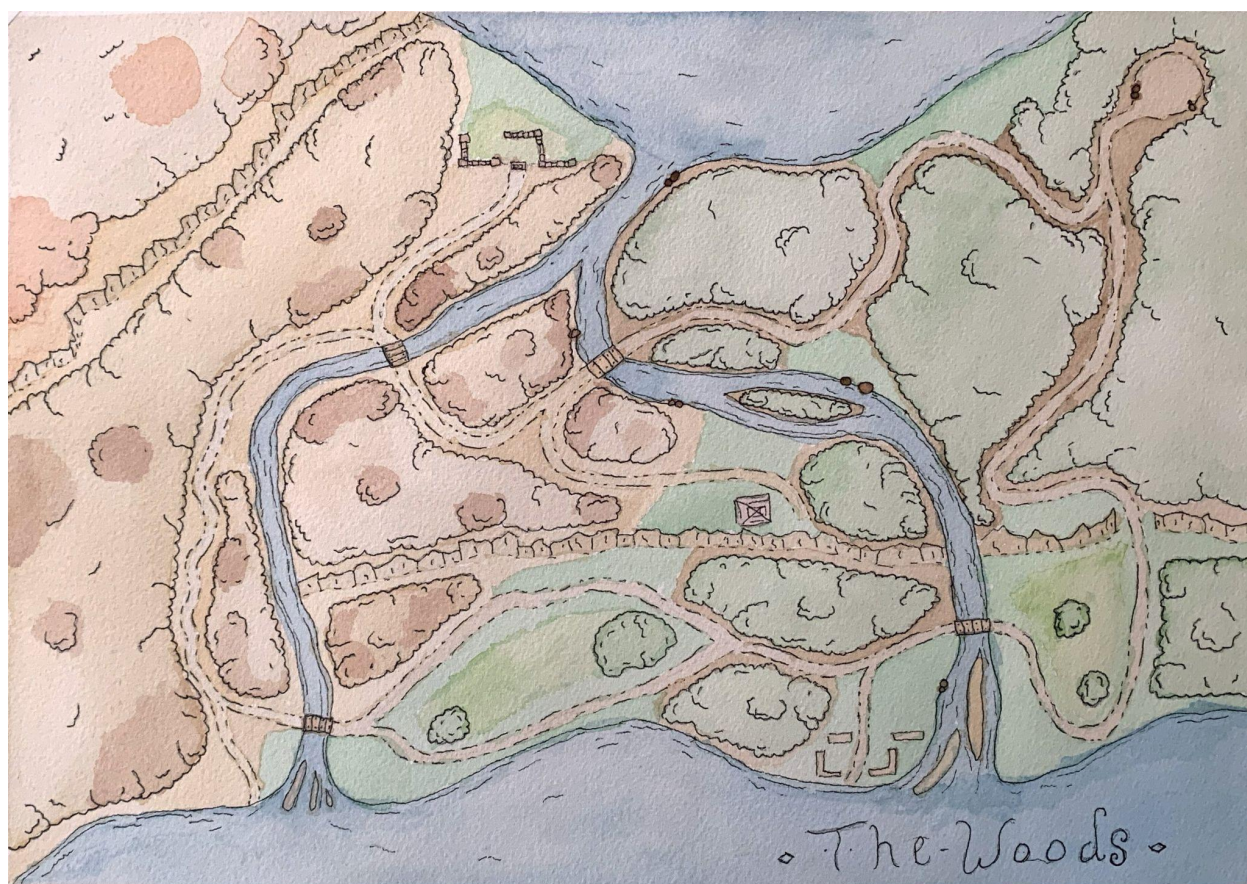
- An excerpt from my college application essay.



I began working on *A Walk in the Woods* at a time when violence was the main thing on my mind. Whether it was the violence of domestic civil strife, the violence of wars abroad, the economic violence seen in a post-covid America, or the silent, constant violence of the pandemic years prior, all that I was told to look forward to had been clouded by the continuous frames of war which we, as Americans, have been rigorously acquainted with in recent years (the war on terror, the war on drugs, the war on covid, etc.). There was a time when I had looked forward to writing chamber music for concert halls, releasing my first album, recording rock bands, and finishing unreleased projects; none of these ideas were ever fully realized due to the negativity which I had afflicted myself with. So rather than look forward, I found it necessary to look back at the places where I had once found inspiration, as a way to start over.

A Walk in the Woods is a piece of experimental multimedia consisting visually of images of the Hudson Valley processed through mid-90s computer graphics and aurally of field recordings, monologues, musical motifs, and songs. All of these elements are combined with the use of a game engine to create an interactive experience reminiscent of the MS-DOS video

games of the mid to late-90s. Working on this project allowed me to both turn away from the discouragement caused by my unrealized musical plans and return to a place where I had once felt comfortable exploring my curiosity in the topics of media, games, literature, and nature. In pursuing this project, where music is only a fraction of the finished product, I have cast aside my biases toward any specific artistic medium and instead created an experience that (I hope) is greater than the sum of its parts. It has allowed me to incorporate all of my interests into one artistic pursuit: Whether that be studio recording, watercolor painting, journaling, hiking, meditation, composing chamber music, coding, or stargazing, it can all be found here, in *A Walk in the Woods*.



A watercolor painting of the *Walk*'s map, used as concept art for the game.

I should also mention that this was not my first time centering an artistic project around the concept of walking in the woods: The inception of this game really was a back-to-basics moment for me: In high school, I had made a fairly simple video game loosely based on Vivaldi's Four Seasons, titled *La Journee*, where the player was given a small wooded area to walk around in and experience the different visuals and music of each season. Then, in my college application essay (see above), I gave a first-person account of the first time a video game had given me an emotional response akin to consuming a piece of fine art. So this return to the woods really was a return, and I knew that these were times before that I had accomplished considerably ambitious (for me) tasks. I had hoped to tap back into that headspace, and I believe I successfully did.



A screenshot from *La Journee*, one of my previous multimedia experiences.

I do not intend to stay in the woods forever. Truthfully, that is the ultimate goal of this project: I have returned to the wood to again clear my mind, find inspiration, and finally release a

statement I am proud of. And at the end of the experience, when you have seen all I have to offer, just before you are cut off from the artificial world of *the Woods*, the narrator says to you, “You can’t stay in the woods forever, you know. There’s supposed to be solace in knowing your pilgrimage has come to an end; the dinner bell rings and it’s time to emerge once again out of the great unknown, to run up the steps of your back porch, back to the cozy confines of modern life, where priest or porridge can be found waiting... It’ll all still be here waiting for you, need you ever return for a moment of clarity. Of pointlessness. I may be here, or I may not, but you will not be alone. Voices are always here to guide you. But remember, if you do ever return to this peaceful land, this serene land, remember: It will never be the same again.”

A Walk in the Woods will be hosted for the foreseeable future at

www.awalkinthewoods.online

2. “A Night of Dances and Fugues”

The medieval ideal was thus achievable only by coordination of the duple demands made by cantor and musicus, the first that music's sounding manifestations should have sufficient technical possibilities to intrigue the performer and composer, the second that the aural results should have the proper theological and philosophical foundations to allow for the appropriate metaphysical deductions.

- Albery Seay, *Music In The Medieval World, Vol. II*



My first-semester concert was titled “A Night of Dances and Fugues,” a misleading name when considering the content of the music. I wanted to curate a concert of chamber pop music that had the instrumentation of a popular music/rock show but with the pacing of a classical concert. This meant that between songs there would be no pause unless there needed to be page turns, just as would be done between movements of a classical cantata or symphony. To fill in these gaps, the band would play an improvised piece based on the harmonic content of the previous song. These improvised interludes would happen four times throughout the 50-minute concert, once in between each of the five main pieces. Also to promote an academic context toward the work, I had printed concert programs that included the order of pieces, their origin (in my albums or other composers’ work), and a booklet of all the lyrics and texts referenced.



Three variants of the poster for “A Night of Dances and Fugues”

The band, which I had named T.O.N.E., or “The Orchestra Never Ever,” (a play on Bard’s TŌN, The Orchestra Now), consisted of both a modern rock ensemble and classical instrumentation. There were three guitars, bass, drums, piano, violin, and cello, and among those musicians, there were also four singers. This combination of classical and contemporary instrumentation allowed for a wide variety of musical timbre and style, which I had attempted to utilize for the diverse selection of songs.

Besides the improvisatory interludes, we played four of my original songs, an arrangement of a John Dowland lute song, and an improvisation based on the writings of Gildas, Bede, and Geoffrey of Monmouth. My songs had come from a variety of projects; the first two, “Prelude” and “Fugue,” had been written for my moderation but never before performed live. The next, “David,” was an epic poem set to music, from the time I had studied the Bible in the classes of Bruce Chilton and Mary Grace Williams. And the last of my original compositions was “They Go On Pilgrimage,” a song I had not yet released but already knew was going to be an important part of my future plans. You can even see on the program under this title, “from *A Walk In The Woods* (tbd.).” Even then I knew that this performance, if planned correctly, could be used to inform my choices for the project I would be pursuing just one semester later.

Ultimately, the concert came and went. Due to our limited rehearsal time, I felt that the instrumentation was under-utilized; the whole show’s mono-timbre became cloudy and stagnant. Also, I learned that audiences like applause and space to do so between songs. This was the last information I was given before going off to start *A Walk in the Woods*, so I had to do my best to move on and let it be a lesson to apply in the coming months.

A Night of Dances and Fugues

Matt Macari & T.O.N.E. (The Orchestra Never Ever)

1. Prelude
from *Requiem - Unreleased* (2021)
Words & Music by Matt Macari
2. Interlude #1
in G major
Featured soloist: Aidan Samp - percussion
3. Fugue
from *Requiem - Unreleased* (2021)
Words & Music by Matt Macari
4. Interlude #2
in D minor
Featured soloist: Alessandro Mucin - keyboard
5. David
a sonata on the 1st Book of Samuel
Words & Music by Matt Macari
6. Interlude #3
in E major
With texts by Gildas, Bede, and Geoffrey of Monmouth
Featured soloist: Zeke Morgan - violin
7. They Go On Pilgrimage
from *A Walk In The Woods* (ibid.)
Words & Music by Matt Macari
8. Interlude #5
in B minor
Featured soloist: Tess von Brachel - cello
9. Can She Excuse My Wrongs?
from *The First Book of Songs* (1597)
by John Dowland

Cast not in order of appearance:

Matt Macari - lead artist		Aidan Samp - percussion
Alessandro Mucin - keys		Zeke Morgan - violin
Tess von Brachel - cello		Margaux Suinat - guitar
Sam Crocker - guitar		Cedric Rule-Becker - bass
Charlotte Pinney - camera		May Pocsy - camera

The first page of the program for “A Night of Dances and Fugues”

3. Throwback Music & The Beatles' Postmodernism

“Do we not read from day to day, that this or that new opera is a masterpiece because it contains a goodly number of fine arias and duets, the instrumentation is extremely brilliant, &c., &c.? The aim which alone can justify the employment of such complex means, the great dramatic aim, folk never give so much as a thought. Such verdicts as these are shallow, but honest; they show exactly what is the position of the audience. There are even many of our most popular artists who do not in the least conceal the fact that they have no other ambition than to satisfy this shallow audience.”

- Richard Wagner, “Art and Revolution”



In one of my advising meetings with Matt Sargent in the fall of 2022, I bemoaned how artists who I had once considered to be the vanguards of new popular music had fallen so low as to release material that I found in no way innovative or helpful toward the oversaturated scene of throwback music. After further discussing my grievances with the series of albums I had anxiously awaited in the Summer of 2022, only to be disappointed upon hearing their release, Professor Sargent posed a question: I had felt the 60s-70s pastiche album of the 2010s had been played out to the point of complete derivativeness. That’s the negative. Now what’s the positive? What’s the opposite of the *70s album*? What can you do to turn away from the *70s album*?

I had no idea how to approach filling in the positive of this question, so I turned to literature. I hoped that by reading academic analyses of the albums that had shaped my understanding of music, I could find the goal at the center of all this *stuff*, all this *art*. So I went to the only place I knew to look for meaning in popular music, the nineteen sixties: As David Brackett puts it in his book *Interpreting Popular Music*, “Arguably, a new mode of listening to pop music arose in the 1960s. No longer simply ‘product’ for working-class and/or teen audiences, certain types of pop metamorphosed into music that could, under the right conditions,

produce something of ‘timeless value’” (Brackett 160). With the Wagnerian ideal of music for the masses no longer catering to “this shallow audience,” popular music had the potential to reach a mass audience while promoting valuable art, not just entertainment. And who would usher in this monumental change in popular culture but the Beatles?

The release of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* in the summer of 1967 was met with a scathing review by Richard Goldstein at the New York Times. A testament to the public’s apprehension toward narrative album form, the sentiments expressed in this review would quickly be replaced. Only a few days later, the Village Voice published its own *Sgt. Pepper’s* review and response to Goldstein’s article. In it, Tom Phillips makes the monumental claim that, “the Beatles have scored a genuine breakthrough with ‘Sgt. Pepper.’ Specifically, I think they’ve turned the record-album itself into an art form, and a form that works. To explain: unlike all past long-playing records that I know of, this one has a metaphorical structure, very much like a work of fiction” (Phillips 1). The introduction of “a form that works” seems to be the gunshot sent ringing through pop musician’s minds for the remainder of 1967, into 1968. Everyone seemed to want a piece of the proverbial Beatles pie; from the Rolling Stones’ *His Satanic Majesties Request* to the Kink’s *Village Green Preservation Society*, the top names of British pop music were quick to hop on the magical Beatle bus. American artists were close behind, too, as the Beach Boys had released *Pet Sounds* before *Pepper* but with little initial success in the States, leaving their heads spinning while the Beatles’ formula for the concept album sent shockwaves through the halls of every recording studio at home and across the pond.

Musicians’ sudden focus on emulating the success of *Sgt. Pepper* built even more anticipation for the Beatles’ next release. Their time away in India left a void in popular music

that the above artists, among others, attempted to fill, but the question remained: What were the Beatles going to do next? Were they going to set the Bible to music, or write their own? (Osteen). The answer came nearly a year and a half after the release of *Pepper*, and it came in the form of The Beatles' self-titled, *The Beatles*. Commonly known as the White Album, it was the band's first double LP. Gone was the overarching narrative structure, gone were the bright colors and child-like graphics, and gone were the fictionalized, cartoonish Beatles of the *Peppers-Mystery Tour-Submarine* era. Instead, record store-goers were greeted with a white cover, plain except for a serial number and slightly embossed lettering spelling out "The BEATLES." The inside contained a list of song titles, a poster of the lyrics (complete with spelling and printing mistakes), and portraits of the band. John Littlejohn, in his article, "Sgt. Pepper and the White Album: The Establishment and Dissolution of the Album Form," points out that, "Some critics and fans consider the White Album a regression after the highs of 1966 and 1967... Here, however, the band did not attempt to refine or redefine the album form. Instead, they rebelled against it" (Littlejohn 3). That which the Beatles had built up with *Pepper* had become the current paradigm for popular music, so there was only one thing left to do: Tear all the walls down.

That is not to say that the White Album undoes the progress of its predecessor, but rather it is a step beyond the modernism of the novel-esque *Pepper*. So if not an undoing of *Sgt. Pepper's* advancements, where does that place the White Album? Many see this as pop's first mainstream example of a post-modern form, an analysis that addresses what came before without diminishing the goal of *The Beatles*:

“Jeffrey Roessner argues that the Beatles’ postmodernism allowed them to ‘contest the commodification of rock music’ and ‘redefine the relationship between artistic style and political relevance’. In other words, by employing parody and pastiche so prominently, the band admitted that rock, having been co-opted by corporate interests, was no longer subversive. In this way, the album’s refusal to fulfill listeners’ expectations militates against corporatism and conservatism” (Osteen 4).

This coming from an album where everything that the Beatles are is fully on display - their headshot portraits included in both the inner sleeve and as print-outs, lyrics on display for songs about the band’s emotions on their meditative retreat, all contained within plain white cardboard, with no colorful graphics or psychedelic metaphor to obscure their words - the genuineness of artists emerging from the other end of artistic breakthrough rebels against pop music’s expectations while being one of the most widely consumed pieces of media in history.

So, having considered the pop album through the achievements of the Beatles, I was only left with more questions. Notably, if the Beatles had both built up and dissolved the modernist, linear concept album, why were - and are - so many artists content with upholding it for decades beyond its introduction? I do not mean to diminish the value of other great concept albums that had come after 1968. Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon*, Kate Bush’s *Hounds of Love*, and Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp A Butterfly*, just to name a few, are albums that have undoubtedly expanded audiences’ perception of the *album as art form* and increased their ability to digest such expansive concepts. My issue does not lie with these artists, nor am I concerned with leaps in pop music that avoid the “concept” altogether. But this line of thought brings me back to the confusion I have upon considering the current state of alternative music, rock, and *throwback*

music of the 2010s-present: If so much has been done for the past 55 years to build the artistry of the album, would creating a self-contained, modernist art piece not be the bare minimum when writing a series of songs to press on wax? If the Beatles had done so much work to build up and consequently move beyond the modernist album, would not the goal of a musician emulating their style be to - at least - fit that music into a post-Beatle form, rather than release a collection of unrelated songs with themes and production as though they were released in 1973? These were not as much questions for current artists as they were questions that I had for myself. And I knew I needed to - at a minimum - provide *an* answer to them, even if it were not *the* answer.

4. Deciding on the *Walk*

“Almost every one made verses or sang them. Heroes in the midst of battle sang as they advanced, like Harold Hardrada at Stamford Bridge; Vikings, as they drave their ships through the gale or stormed a town on the river... Warriors chanted their deeds of the day in the hall or the camp at night, as Woden's chosen did in Valhalla. The old chiefs sang the glory of their youth. Their very swords and spears were thought to sing... Then, the wanderer who came into the hall to claim hospitality sang his stave of thanks, or versed for the chief in the high seat, who he was. The king himself often broke in with his tale, and seized the harp as Hrothgar did in Heorot. Even the preachers afterwards, like Ealdhelm, sang ancient songs in the public ways to draw the people round them. In the women's chambers, also, the old lays were sung... The player beat the harp in time with the thoughts and images of his song; his voice rang out the alliterated words and the accented syllables of the verses. Gesture accompanied and exalted the things described. The listeners often joined in, moved to excitement, and a whole chorus of voices filled the hall, the monastery, or the farm-building.”

- Stopford Augustus Brooke, *The History of Early English Literature*



Having considered the album form, my first instinct was to avoid verse-chorus-verse pop music entirely until I had a good concept. So I settled on spending some time with what Cage would consider music: I grabbed a portable recorder, and I went off to the woods.

My instinct to go off and get field recordings was not really rooted in the history of the practice, nor was it from my experience with musique concrete or the like. Rather, the early English texts I had quoted in “A Night of Dances and Fugues” had a deep connection to nature, and I wanted my music to auditorily reflect the texts of Gildas, Bede, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chaucer, Donne, etc. Thus, I set off to create a score for 88 minutes of uninterrupted field recording, the length of a double LP. If I could write about 44 minutes of music, the length of a standard LP, it seemed appropriate to gather double that duration of sound if it were to be a backdrop for the whole thing. A score was necessary if I wanted to replicate these “performances,” which had been my intention. If I could get the same walk recorded in different weathers and times, I could use MaxMSP or a similar program to create an algorithmic field

recording generator. This algorithm could then be accessed by performers or listeners as the backdrop for the later musical project, with the audio being different each time but the rhythm of the walk still following the overarching time constraints. You can see these timings below:

Chart of Walk Times: Sept 16 th		
	Location	Approx. Time
→	Walk from lot	1:30
1.	Stop at top of falls	4:30
2.	Descend steps	1:00
3.	Stand at mouth of falls	4:30
→	Continue on path	1:30
4.	Ascend hill	4:30
5.	Hit at top of hill	4:30
6.	Continue on path	4:30
7.	Stop at old ruin	4:30
8.	Descend from ruin	1:30
9.	Stop on ravine path	4:30
10.	Continue past field station	2:00
11.	Stop at the marsh	4:30
12.	Follow delapidated path	5:00
13.	Stop at the two bridges	4:30
→	Continue on path	1:30
14.	Make turn to south bay	4:30
15.	Stop at south bay	4:30
→	Turn around	1:30
→	Continue on path	3:00
16.	Turn to the rock	4:30
17.	Stop at rock	4:30
18.	Sit in the chapel	4:30
19.	Get awake in the garden	4:30
20.	Cross the field	5:00

Chart (cont.)		
	Duration	approx
→ descend path	4:30	8:00
21. Stop at the brook	3:00	8:30
22. → Continue to peninsula	3:00	9:00
23. Stop on peninsula	3:00	9:30
→ look your heart	3:00	10:00
TOTAL: 99:00		
time stopped: ~ 59 min		
time traveled: ~ 31 min		

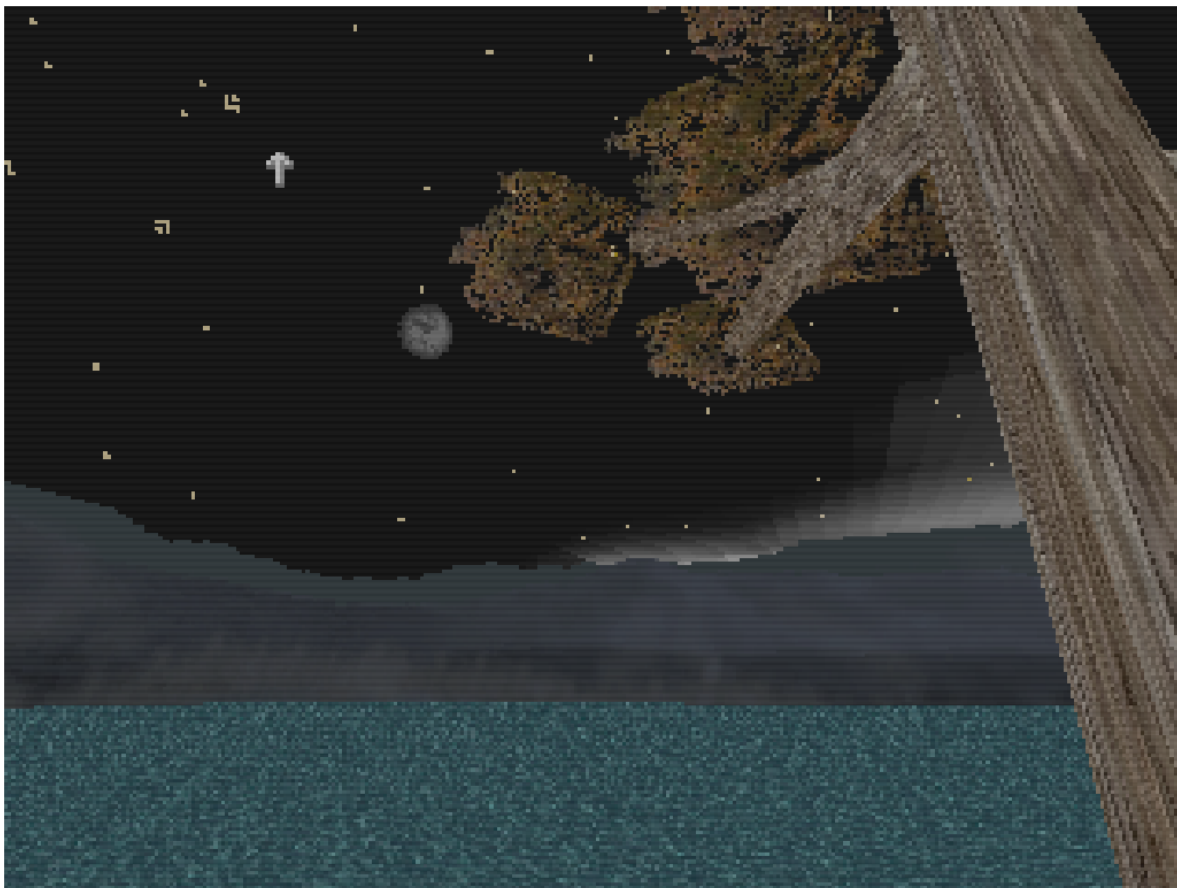
@ June, do action		
	Time	Action
1.	0:00	Begin walk
2.	1:30	Stop at top of falls
3.	6:00	Continue to mouth of falls
4.	11:30	Go to top of hill
5.	18:30	Continue to old ruin
6.	26:30	Descend toward ravine
7.	30:30	Go to the marsh past station
8.	39:00	Head toward the bridges
9.	48:30	Make a turn to south bay
10.	55:30	Go to the rock
11.	63:00	Wait by the garden
12.	72:00	Travel to the brook
13.	81:30	Continue to peninsula
14.	88:00	End recording

The first two written scores of the field recordings.

Although I was satisfied with the concept behind these walks, the results were varied. On top of that, I had to do an hour and a half of hiking at least twelve times, ranging from early morning to late at night, in the hot summer and in pouring rain, and in places where bears were known to be getting ready for hibernation. Needless to say, this quickly became a discouraging chore. Beyond the varying conditions, the quality of the audio was not to my liking; often, I would encounter other hikers or the sound of a plane passing overhead. These all ruined the illusion of a pristine, pre-human nature that I had hoped to capture. So I had to go back and think of a new way to achieve this fictional vision of nature.

Enter the video game. If a *non-human* version of the woods did not exist, then I could just make one. I could have complete control over a virtual world - an abstracted version of reality -

where field recordings could be perfectly curated by the environment that I designed. Or, better yet, this virtual environment could be a playground for the listener, where their actions could change the audio emitted from the game engine, so each player could have a personalized experience, visually and aurally. And that's how I settled on *A Walk in the Woods*. It's not really an album because it was never meant to be. It became an interactive field recording generator that happens to have a soundtrack consisting of pop music and short classical guitar cues.



Early development screenshot from *A Walk in the Woods*.

Method / Design Documentation

“Because of the way the sound propagates through an acoustic space, you cannot run away from sound as easily as from the visuals... You cannot ‘close your ears.’”

- Adam Sporka, *Music Design for Game Development Studios*



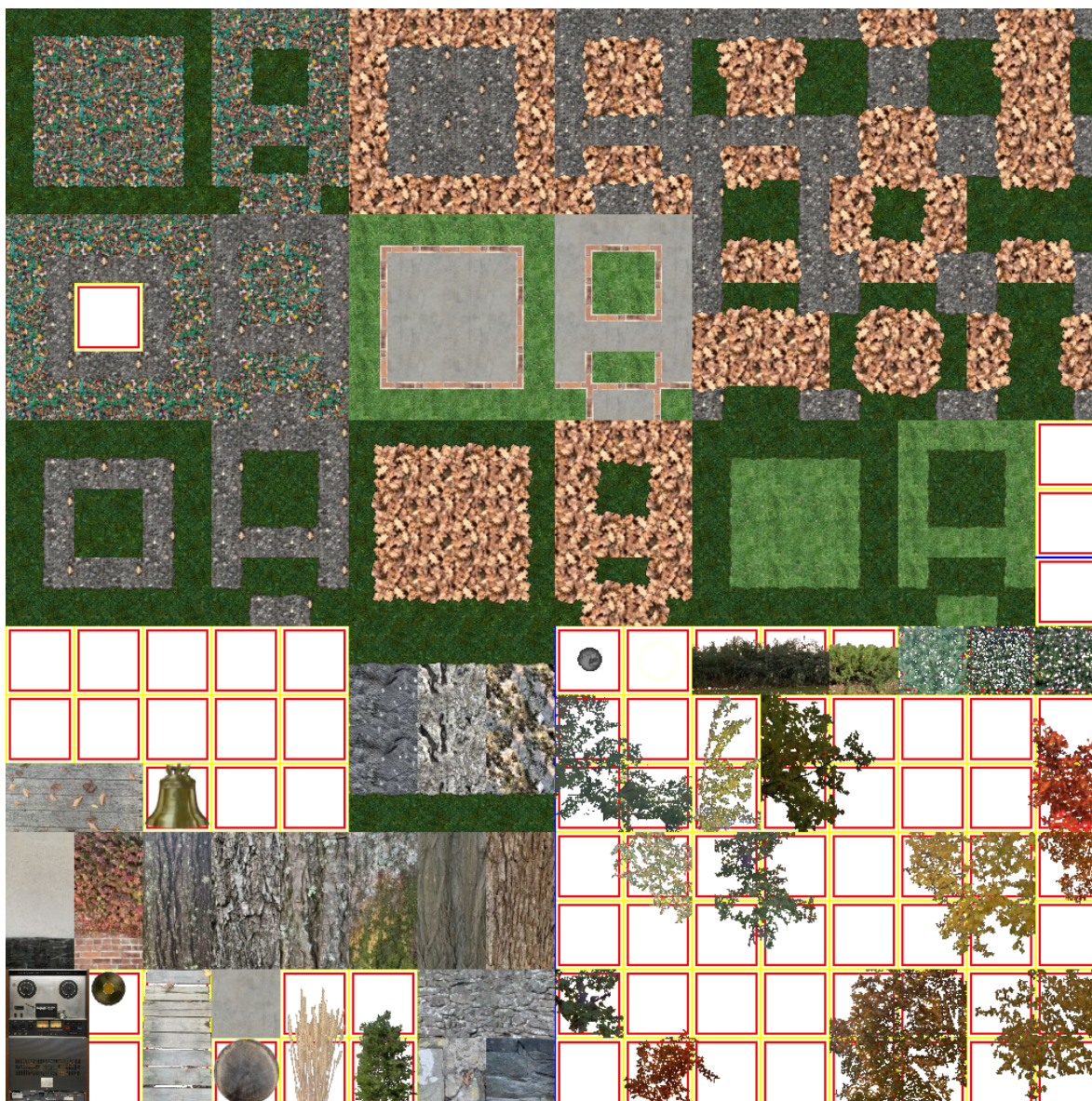
I began by deciding on an engine. Unless I wanted to learn a completely new programming language or game engine, I was limited to two options: MaxMSP or Gamemaker Studio 2. Although it does not have the most professional-sounding name, I settled on Gamemaker. I had studied MaxMSP in Matt Sargent’s classes for a few years at Bard, but I found that the workflow of the visualized code worked better for algorithms made for the musicians’ side of the creative process.¹ I was creating an algorithm for players to interact with, and I found that GMS2, being a traditional game engine, was more focused on accessibility for users. Gamemaker is not set up out-of-the-box for 3D graphics, but it does have 3D functions built into its scripting language. So all it took were a few weeks of implementation and I had a lightweight 3D game engine ready to process audio in real-time with a target platform of HTML5. The engine could handle DSP with its native signal routing functions, and all of that could be done in-browser (as long as I had a hosting domain).

The next choice I had to make was the level at which I wanted to focus on computer graphics. With *Sgt. Pepper* in mind - an album that McCartney on many occasions has mentioned

¹ This statement is somewhat inaccurate now that Cycling74 has released RNBO for Max, an addon that allows for Max patches to be exported as C++ and Javascript code. But this did not happen until a few months into my work in Gamemaker, so I’ll have to save that for a future project.

the ties to Liverpudlian childhood - I thought back to the games that my generation would have the strongest nostalgic association with, and I settled on the MS-DOS² CRPGs³ of the late nineties and early oughts.

Luckily, I had taken many pictures on my walks, and these were converted into textures for 3D models:



Spritesheet for *A Walk in the Woods*.

² Microsoft Disk Operating System

³ Computer Role-Playing Games

The top half of this sprite sheet serves as a tilemap for the ground that the player walks on. The below images are individual textures for 3D models, which I imported and used to design all the objects in the game with the program Model Creator for Gamemaker. All of the above images were taken with an iPhone camera on my walks in the Hudson Valley. They have been downscaled and implemented with incredibly outdated 3D technology, a choice that is the core of the game's aesthetic. Everything is low-fidelity, so much so that I found it beneficial to downscale the render of the entire project to 300 pixels by 240 pixels (the resolution of an average CRT). I can't help but think this all looks like the computerized memories of my childhood.



A pre-release development picture from *A Walk in the Woods*

Audio was related, but I abandoned the lo-fi approach. The game engine has an audio emitter system that I used for the field recordings; I separated the audio I had gotten on my few successful walks and paired it with other examples found on freesound.org. Since each part of the environmental audio was separate, the game can keep some sounds persistent - water, wind, rustling leaves - and others can be faded in and out based on the time of day - birds chirping in the day, insects making noise at night, etc.

These two elements, visual and field recordings, then became a backdrop for the musical project I was *finally* inspired to create. I wrote seven monologues and seven songs related to the walks I had in the woods, and I took two themes from each song to make fourteen short motifs of classical guitar music. All of these are played back with a simple algorithm, but there is a considerable amount of “silence” between each piece of composed audio. Here, the player gets to experience the field recordings that their choices and movements are generating. All of this is controlled just by the user’s mouse clicking arrows on the screen, so I’ve kept the user interaction as simple and accessible as possible. That’s about the best I can do to describe *A Walk in the Woods*, so if one wants to know how all these elements come together, they may just have to play it themselves.

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