

On the Lookout for Escapists: How *Firewatch* Sheds Light on American Escapism

The pervasive thought of escapism has held American culture hostage for generations. From the immortal Romantics – Wordsworth, Emerson, and Hawthorne, to name a few – to succeeding Transcendentalists like Thoreau, to contemporary legends like Christopher McCandless, Americans have demonstrated their idyllic vision of escapism into the untamed wilderness through literature, cinematography, and even console games. *Firewatch* is a videogame produced by indie developer Campo Santo that conveys the story of Henry from Boulder, Colorado, who escapes to the wilds of Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming and procures a job as a fire lookout to forget his woes as the husband of an estranged wife with early onset dementia. The game follows the experiences of Henry and his radio-interfaced supervisor Delilah as they together venture to briefly escape their individual realities through work, small talk, and even paranoia of some colossal conspiracy. This game carries the popular theme of natural escapism that frames works of literature as classic as *Walden* and cinematic successes as modern as *Into the Wild*. The noticeable pattern among *Firewatch*, *Walden*, and *Into the Wild* is that they all enlist nature as an effective, and quintessential, means of escape. Whether it be Thoreau's cabin, McCandless's bus, or Henry's fire tower, they all establish a residence in the solitude of nature, unencumbered by the demands of daily life and the burdens of urban society. Escapism conducts these men, albeit for different reasons, and nature possesses them. Yet what characterizes *Firewatch* from its identically-themed homologues is its intrinsic message of negligence: Henry abandons the reality of his declining marriage to live out a fantasy in Wyoming, even conceding that he should be home tending to his wife Julia, and is ultimately impelled by circumstances to return to Colorado. *Firewatch*, in its discreteness, illustrates that problems are inescapable even amidst nature, and that neglect entails consequences.

Firewatch demonstrates the favorable connotations of nature and solitude in American culture through the dialogue of Henry and Delilah. When Delilah pries into Henry's personal life – for she discloses from the beginning that “People take this job to get away from something” – he acknowledges that he ought not to be in Wyoming but betrays nothing further; Delilah, tactful as she is, responds with, “Well, in the meantime you are here, and it's beautiful, and escaping isn't always something bad.” Moments later, when confronted with his first real challenge as a fire ranger – scaring two lawless teenagers into compliance with the law – Henry imparts a message of readiness that reflects the theme of renewal in nature: “I came out here for a breath of fresh air and some adventure.” In fact, Henry alone does not utilize nature as an escape: Delilah took the job to avoid her ambiguous relationship and her commitment troubles, and Ned Goodwin, another character critical to the plot, engaged the job as an escape from his PTSD, which Delilah alludes to during one of her conversations with Henry. Henry's and Delilah's early conversations, and confident remarks on the merits of nature and fire watching, testify to the American notion that escape is wholesome to the individual. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau swears this sentiment when he writes, “There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still” (Thoreau 173). He expounds this statement with a testament of his own: “Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself” (Thoreau 118). In effect, Thoreau's exaltation of Walden Pond and its surrounding foliage explains Americans' infatuation with nature, especially those that can duly be called escapists. Christopher McCandless, the subject of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, was an avid reader of Thoreau; he carried a copy of *Walden* in his portable rucksack library (Krakauer). In his “declaration of independence,” under which he signs his pseudonym ‘Alexander Supertramp’, McCandless

inscribes a message reminiscent of Thoreau's philosophies: "Two years he walks the earth. . . Thou shalt not return, 'cause "the West is the best." . . . No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild." (qtd. in Krakauer). What this demonstrates is that, in behalf of such Romantic writers as Thoreau, Americans possess a deep-seated affection for the wilderness, which Campo Santo manifests in *Firewatch* through Henry and Delilah, who catch their "breath of fresh air" as fire lookouts in the Wyoming wilderness. Yet sentimentalism is not the only cause behind this American phenomenon. Eco-psychological research indicates a restorative quality maintained within nature.

Dr. Kalevi Korpela of University of Tampere in Finland, and his assistant Dr. Henk Staats of Leiden University in the Netherlands, have compounded evidence from various eco-psychological studies to illustrate the emotional and psychological profits of spending time alone in nature among assorted age groups. For example, the psychologists cite a 2002 study by Herbert Schroeder, a social scientist and former employee of the Northern Research Station of the Midwest, noting, "Respondents reported the sense of being away from the civilized world . . . entering a whole different world from the usual daily life, escape, and solitude enabling them to relax, refresh, meditate, reflect, and experience a sense of peacefulness within themselves" (Korpela and Staats 356). Schroeder's study constitutes individual surveys from one hundred fifteen participants describing their "special places" where participants experienced serenity, restoration, excitement, and the awe-inspiring beauty of nature (Schroeder 2002). Korpela also cites one of his personal studies from 2002, in which he found that "[a]dults with high negative mood are more likely than those with lower negative mood to choose *natural* favorite places over other favorite places" (Korpela and Staats, 357). Korpela's and Schroeder's research indicates a psychological appeal to nature, illustrating the causes for this American phenomenon,

but further research produced by Dr. Stephanie Westlund clarifies the effects. Dr. Westlund studied the experiences of four volunteer veterans in their respective natural environments, expounding how their experiences counterbalanced their PTSD. Concerning sensory experiences, each veteran mention feeling “increased mindfulness and a feeling of being more fully present in the world” (Westlund 166). One veteran relates the unprecedented ambience of nature: “you’re on a different clock when you’re outside” (qtd. in Westlund 166). This is perhaps one reason Ned Goodwin, himself a “PTSD’d a-hole”, sought escape in the Wyoming wilderness: it afforded him a renewed consciousness and a scope of life unattainable for a traumatized veteran in urban settings. Moreover, Westlund analyzes the veterans’ sense of security in nature; one such veteran comments on how nature functions as an emotional outlet for him: “with being outside, that [negative] energy has a place to go” (qtd. in Westlund 167). Ned Goodwin found relief as a fire lookout, and his climbing experiences purposed as a conduit for his own negative emotions. Further, Ned’s son, Brian Goodwin, who accompanied his father during his vocation, illustrates Westlund’s two supplemental points: that the veterans discovered a renewed sense of purpose in nature, and that they retrieved “social support and camaraderie facilitated within more-than-human [natural] settings” (Westlund 168-170) to offset the loneliness and social isolation often suffered by soldiers with PTSD. Brian embodied both Ned’s renewed sense of purpose and his social support; in bringing his son out to Wyoming with him, Ned rediscovered a purpose – training his son to climb – and effected a support group among Brian and Delilah. Thus, one perceives a psychological service of nature that vindicates Henry’s, Delilah’s, and Ned Goodwin’s reasons for roosting in Wyoming’s lookout towers like birds of a single feather.

Yet their error lies not in their actions, but in their motivations: they sought to escape and forget their real lives, but Ned Goodwin incarnates the consequences of neglecting responsibility. Proceeding toward the end of the game, Henry, as he unravels this elaborate ruse threaded by Ned Goodwin throughout the game to lead Henry and Delilah astray, happens upon a cassette recording of Ned's voice at the foot of a crag, where Ned has been bunking since his son, Brian, died in a cave climbing accident not twenty yards away, his body left to the elements for three years. Henry learns that Ned devised a conspiratorial plot to keep the other lookouts off his tracks while he hibernated within his cave, staving off responsibility and avoiding the corpse that was once his son: "You know, I thought about going back, having to answer questions and having to get him put in the ground, but I didn't see the point." Ned even forges a defense, recognizing that he would be held accountable for his own heap of tragedies: "You guys don't know anything about raising kids, alright? . . . It ain't Andy and Opie walking down to the lake to fish every afternoon. . . But you gotta know I didn't kill him, alright? We were climbing. I was teaching him. He just. . . didn't sink his anchor the right way." What Ned fails to realize is that accountability does not evaporate with one's escapism. In fact, this is the most explicit reason why Henry finds Ned's recording and learns his notorious history: to remind him that escape is ephemeral, and even perishable. Henry elucidates the adverse nature of escape when he tells Delilah of Ned's whereabouts: "He's gone. Deeper into the Shoshone." Ned functions as Henry's harbinger, a warning against evading his incubus, lest he wants to become like Ned, slumping further into depression and paranoia, and eternally decamping to deeper and lonelier wilderness.

That is not to say that escape entails only injury and consequence. Theodore Roosevelt himself, an archetype of the American West, was an escapist. On Valentine's Day in 1884, Teddy Roosevelt lost his mother to typhoid, and his wife to kidney failure only hours later

(Silvestro). He first sought escape in his germinating political career, attending the 1884 Republican National Convention in Chicago where he contended with the nomination of James G. Blaine for candidacy until he did a complete about-face and endorsed Mr. Blaine, losing the support of reformers in New York (Silvestro). At this point, believing that his political career had reached its terminus, Roosevelt boarded a train to the Badlands of present day North Dakota, where he would remain on a ranch for the next four years (Silvestro). Roosevelt spent his days of escape herding cattle, riding horseback, managing a Dakota ranch, and hunting everything from Dakota bison to Wyoming Grizzlies, but more importantly, escape served as his cardinal reason for ranching in the Dakota wilderness, with the hope that in time, he would “forget his sorrows and mend his broken health” (Silvestro). In his Badlands experience, Roosevelt evolved into a Herculean cowboy with new vigor that restored him each day; he “had finally . . . the health and strength that had long eluded him” (Silvestro). Roosevelt, though escape he did, found himself in the wilderness and “had met and conquered the challenges that had brought him to the Badlands” (Silvestro). On the other hand, Roosevelt never quite escaped his grief from losing his wife and mother in a single day, maintaining that he was “beyond any healing” and that “[t]ime will never change [him] in that respect” (qtd. in Silvestro). Even so, if not for Roosevelt’s Dakota journey, he would not have become the politician and president the nation remembers him as: the “Cowboy Candidate”, the steely determined and devoted conservationist who founded the Boone and Crockett Club that preserved such American treasures as Yellowstone National Park for generations of future Americans to escape to and console themselves amidst Nature and her bounty (Silvestro), not the least of which are the fictional protagonists Henry, Delilah, and Ned Goodwin. Ned thus miscalculated not when he took the job with his son, but when he neglected to confront the tragedy that stole his son from him. When his idyll converted to an alarming

reality like adverse alchemy, he escaped, this time into despairing fact: that his son was dead and that he had left him to rot in the belly of a perilous cave. Meanwhile, Henry and Delilah, despite that they were driven out of Wyoming by two wildfires that converged in Shoshone, took the Roosevelt approach, and confronted their demons: Henry, his tarnished marriage, and Delilah, her evasive tendencies and poisonous alcoholism. When the stories of Henry and Roosevelt, and Ned and McCandless, are braided together, one can perceive a schematic parallel that reflects model American escapism: Henry is to Roosevelt as Ned is to Christopher McCandless. Whereas Henry mirrors effective escapism demonstrated by men such as Theodore Roosevelt, Ned embodies all the earmarks and symptoms of the neglectful American.

In effect, nature's virtue is also its siren song. It lures in men and women like Henry, Delilah, and Ned Goodwin with the pretense that one's pain will be caught on a breeze and whisked away, that the idyllic mirage of nature, shaped by men like Henry David Thoreau, never ceases to console the escapist. *Firewatch* lavishly conveys the hazards of escapism through its gorgeous graphics that progressively become more blackened in smoke from the two fires that burn through the game until all that remains is a thick haze that signifies the consequence of escape – for Ned in part started the fire – and the necessity for a homecoming, a return to civilization, as the fire drives Henry home to Colorado. Through the adversity of Ned Goodwin, *Firewatch* issues a message not just to Henry, who could have become a splitting image of Ned had he lingered much longer in Shoshone, but to its audience as well. Perhaps this explains why the game ends on such an abrupt note with little closure: it is Campo Santo's way of insisting that life does not always have closure, and that the settlement of one's own conflicts happens by means of confronting them. Henry finds the will to return home to reconcile his marriage with Julia; at which point, there is no story left to tell, as Henry has harked back to reality, too soon

for the fallout of escapism to make its presence felt. Nonetheless, escapism into nature effects a cure to one's physical and emotional ailments, as researchers authenticate in their studies and American escapists like McCandless, Roosevelt, and Thoreau attest to in their practice, in which case *Firewatch* conveys a more versatile meaning: escapism has its merits, but they manifest themselves most markedly once the escapist departs from nature and reassumes his role in life. Perhaps what distinguishes Henry from Ned Goodwin is the discernment that Henry conveys awareness of his escapism, whereas Ned tries to affect an air of placidity without confessing why he needs it. Henry knows what he is running from, and this knowledge issues an escape from his escapism. Meanwhile, Ned becomes like Christopher McCandless, a disillusioned hermit punctured by reality, that same reality which he sought to escape but failed to outdistance. In view of this, *Firewatch* intimates that every escapist needs a fire to drive him out of the wilderness, lest he wishes to burn with it.

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