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After Wilding

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A speculative documentary about rewilding
and the future of British nature

by Joe Revans

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about rewilding and the
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Abstract

Rewilding is an approach to environmental restoration that seeks to repair ecosystem processes that have been disrupted by human activities. It differentiates itself from traditional environmental conservation through its future-orientated goals. Where conservation often aims to preserve historical landscapes by keeping them in stasis, rewilding has more open-ended ambitions that include building ecosystem resilience against the future impacts of climate change and the reduction of human management in the long term.

However, despite “the future” playing a central role in the practice of rewilding, it remains difficult to imagine what a future Britain that has been significantly rewilded

would look like. With the UK being one of the most nature depleted countries in the world and with narratives of the future being dominated by unavoidable environmental catastrophe, there are simply too few examples of wild nature to inspire our collective imagination.

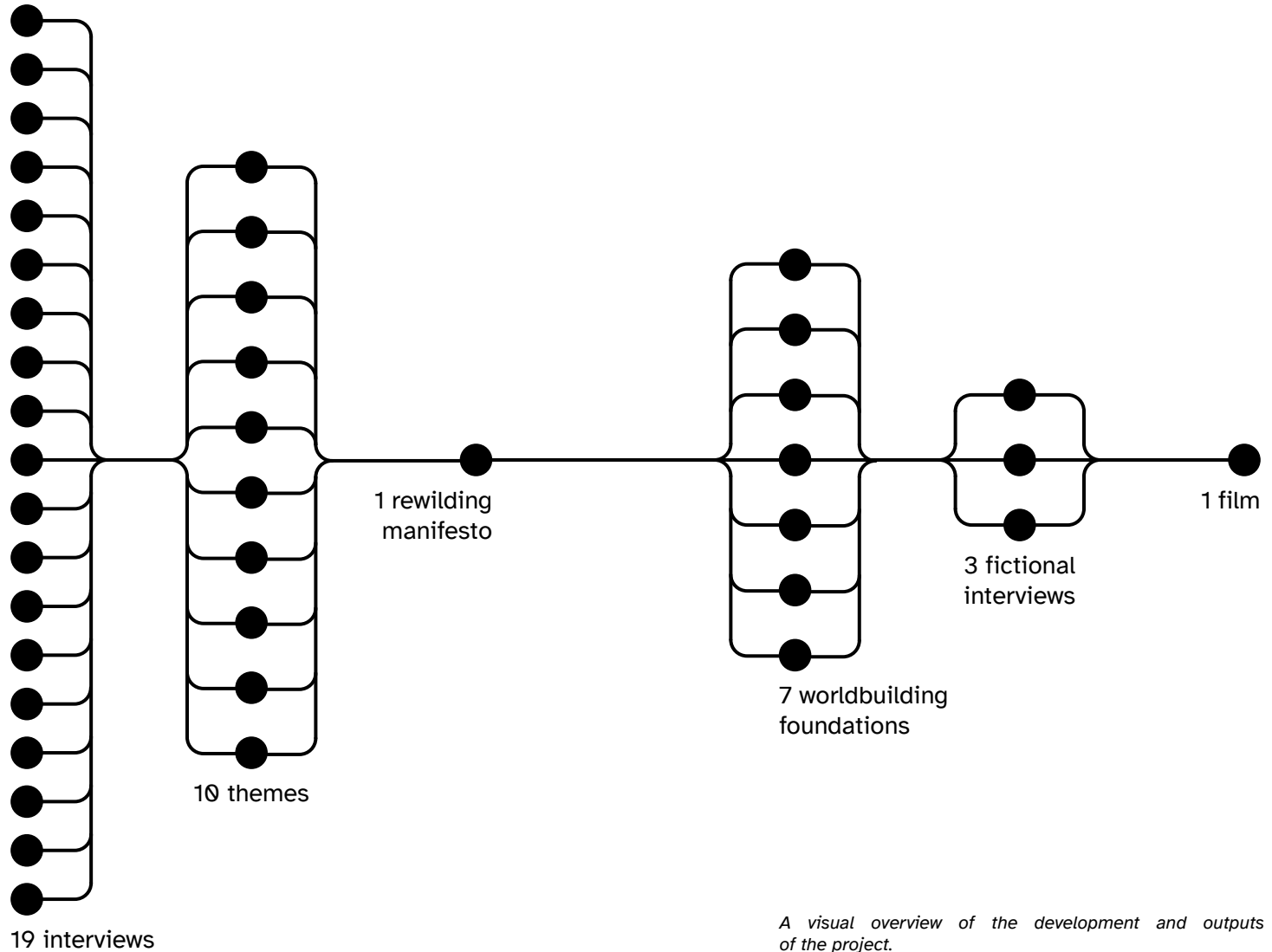
Developed over the course of a nine-month design residency at Maple Farm, a rewilding project in Surrey, England, *After Wilding* is a speculative documentary that seeks to address the imagination gap facing rewilders in the UK. The film, which is based on a series of interviews with the Maple Farm community, explores how the imagined futures of rewilding practitioners motivate their present-day activities. Built using machine learning image synthesis,

the film attempts to reconstruct the community's collective vision of what a rewilded Maple Farm would look like in twenty years' time.

Part documentary, part fiction, *After Wilding* presents a vision for the future of British nature that is both grounded and radically hopeful. It hopes to reclaim environmental futures from those who preach narratives of inevitable doom and reaffirm the possibility of practical socio-ecological, cultural and political change.



Scan here or visit
wildfutures.joerevans.com
to watch the film.



A visual overview of the development and outputs of the project.

Part I:
The Making of
After Wilding



“Reimagining the future as open for debate may provide an alternative to climate determinism and reductionism, and thus an alternative to the perception of unavoidably bad outcomes. Further, considering the already significant scientific and technological knowledge, and yet the insufficient political response to climate change, our futures will be shaped more by our choices than by our capabilities.”

- Rachel Harcourt et al. [1]

1. The Future as Material

Do you have the sense that the future is unavoidable?

Right now, it seems that visions of what the future could and should look like are constantly being invoked by politicians, scientists, journalists, activists, artists and designers in reaction to our numerous, interlinked crises* [2]. Think of all of the different policy roadmaps, climate scenarios, resource reserves, emission targets, precautionary principles, sci-fi movies, trend forecasts, etc. and you will see that multiple, often conflicting, futures are always present in our everyday lives [3]. ‘Futures’ are a form of social imaginary: a collective mental model that communities

* *The climate crisis, the ecological crisis, economic crises, political crises...*

use to understand and navigate the world [4]. Futures can be blatant or subtle. They can include and exclude. They can demand change or promote stasis. They can welcome debate or resist questioning. They can be authored with intent or emerge unexpectedly. It's a confusing moment to be a person, but a fascinating one to be a designer. Especially a designer who is studying Material Futures.

It's from this position of uncertainty that this project began. When trying to decide on a topic for my graduation project, I kept asking myself the question: how can I apply the skills I have acquired as a speculative designer to real-world environmental projects?

After Wilding is the result of spending a year trying to answer this question. It is about how 'futures', and the conversations we have about them, can be understood as

a medium for design. And it is about how designing with futures can support the activities of grassroots environmentalism.

So, I invite you to join me in retracing the journey I took into a wilder future and back again. Let's start by surveying the here-and-now, where a new environmental movement called rewilding is taking root.

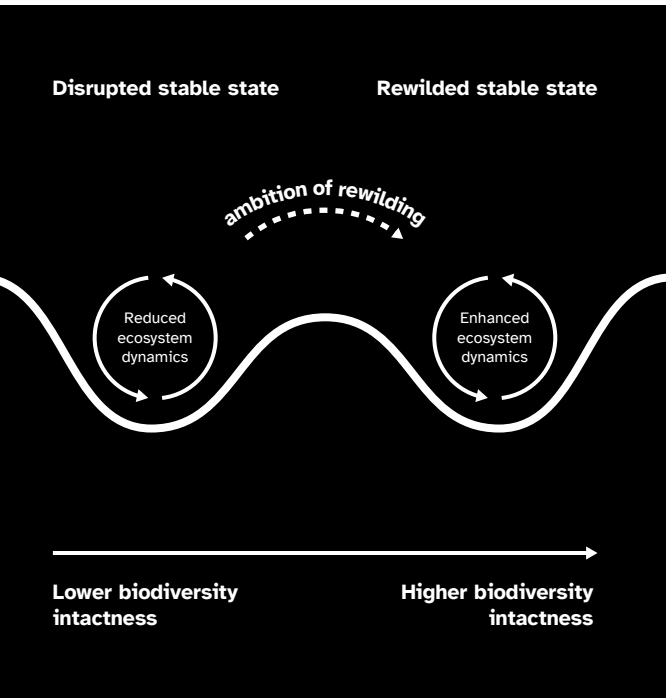
“Conservation asks for the protection of an existing ecosystem. Rewilding seeks to bring back and protect a ‘wild’ ecosystem that no longer exists, either in the physical world or in present memory. Rewilding, then, becomes a task of not just species introductions and land management, but also of historical immersion and retelling of narratives.”

- Forum for the Future [5]

2. The Lay of the Land

What is rewilding?

Rewilding is an emergent approach to land management that aims to repair degraded ecosystems through the reintroduction of organisms and restoration of ecological processes that have previously been disrupted by human activities [6–8]. Where traditional conservation seeks to preserve historical landscapes by keeping them in stasis, rewilding endeavours to set landscapes back into motion by repairing historical environmental harms [5]. In pursuit of this goal, rewilders make interventions to ecosystems and the human communities that live in them that are guided by the principles of reducing human management of the environment



Rewilding aims to restore disrupted ecosystem dynamics and move ecosystems towards a more diverse stable state.

in the long term, reestablishing ecological agency and building resilience against future threats to the ecosystem. Actions taken might include [8]:

- making direct, biophysical changes to

the ecosystem, such as reintroducing keystone species (e.g. beavers, bison, lynxes), to catalyse further changes to ecosystem dynamics [9–11];

- making procedural changes to the socio-ecological context, such as the removal of livestock from land or the modification of livestock rotations, to reduce grazing pressure on regenerating ecosystems [12];
- and supporting broader systemic shifts, such as moving rural economies towards payments for ecosystem services, so that communities can make a living by protecting their land rather than exploiting it [13].

But perhaps, more than a set of interventions, rewilding should be understood as a provocation for humans to renegotiate their relationship to the ecosystems they live within. Or, in the

words of environmental journalist George Monbiot [7]: “[Rewilding] is crucially different from the ethos of human domination. Rewilding is about humility, about stepping back.” However, the ambiguity of this provocation opens up a number of big questions that have the power to shape environmental policy and could lead to radically different versions of rewilding* [19,20]:

- how do collectively define ‘wild’?
- how should people and wild nature co-exist?
- which places will wild nature occupy?
- and what types of wild nature do we value?

* e.g. George Monbiot’s vision of a more dangerous, thrilling nature [7,14]; Isabella Tree’s vision of care, repair and ecotourism [15]; Rewilding Britain’s vision of vibrant rural economies [16]; Rewildog’s vision of offsetting corporate emissions through rewilding [17]; and the hill farming community of Powys’s vision of being dispossessed of their livelihoods by rewilding activists [18].

Rewilding’s imagination gap

With this ambiguity in mind, it is difficult to imagine what a future Britain that has been significantly rewilded would look like in practice. Due to environmental futures being dominated by narratives of unavoidable catastrophe [1] and due to the extreme levels of ecological depletion that serve as the UK’s starting point [21], there are simply too few examples of wild, British nature to inspire our collective imagination. This gap is compounded by the shifting baseline syndrome, in which each subsequent generation believes that the increasingly degraded environment that they inherit is normal [22].

And so, given the centrality of ‘futures’ within the theory and practice of rewilding and the current imagination gap facing rewilders, I felt drawn to investigate the topic more deeply.

Case study: Maple Farm & the Youngwilders

Knowing that I was interested in the overlap between design, futures and rewilding, the next thing I did was seek a rewilding community to learn from and collaborate with. For this, I reached out to the Youngwilders*, a rewilding collective run by a group of four recent graduates. Through their platform, they help to organise and facilitate community-led ecosystem restoration projects in the UK at the small to medium scale (*i.e.* below 100 acres). After hearing about my project, the Youngwilders team invited me to undertake a design residency at their upcoming project at Maple Farm in Surrey and I was happy to accept the offer.

Maple Farm** is a 30-acre site that is currently being used as an animal

* www.youngwilders.org/

** www.charitybuddy.org/maplefarm

sanctuary. To accommodate the horses and sheep that inhabit it, the site has been managed like a pastoral farm for many years. However, in the summer of 2021, Youngwilders and Maple Farm's landowner



The Maple Farm rewilding project is located in Surrey about 58 kilometres from Central Saint Martins.

initiated the process of rewilding the site with the intention of engaging local community groups and academic researchers in the process.

During my initial visits to Maple Farm, the Youngwilders team introduced me to the site and explained their early visions for it. While they were cautious about “over-designing” the ecosystem, in order to access funding for the project, they had drafted plans for four interventions on site:



The general landscape of Maple Farm in 2022.



Oscar, one of the Youngwilders, is welcomed by one of Maple Farm's current residents.

- a. facilitating the natural regeneration of an ancient woodland, which is adjacent to the site, across several fields;
- b. planting hedgerows across several fields to provide more cover and corridors for wildlife;
- c. creating an ephemeral wetland area that floods and drains as the water level of the River Lox, which crosses the site, changes;

- d. and enhancing an area of scrub on the site that is inhabited by a rare pair of breeding nightingales.

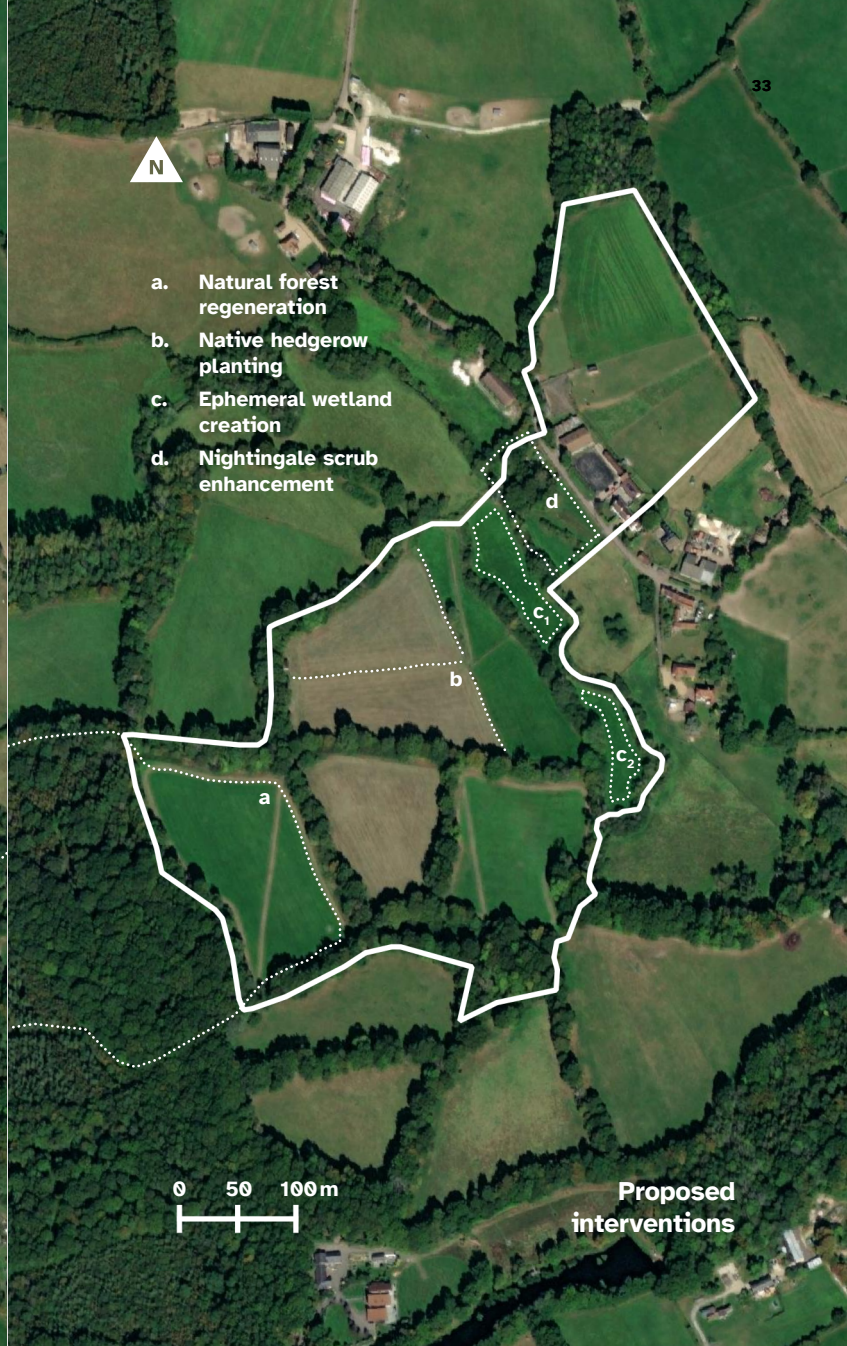
And so, having built a knowledge base about rewilding and the Maple Farm site, I was ready to meet the wider community and continue my research.



The abundance of invasive giant hogweed is one of the challenges facing the rewilding initiative.



The Youngwilders crew studies a habitat and bird survey map.



“The shortest way to engage in a domain for me has always been to make interviews. What I found in them weren’t only elements of knowledge, which are often abstract and replaceable, but a certain point of view grounded in reality.”

- Sylvère Lotringer [23]

3. Conversations with Rewilders

Interview day

To collect data about the Maple Farm community’s envisioned futures, I conducted semi-structured interviews during a hedge-planting volunteer day at the site. In addition to helping with the



Some of the hedgerow 'whips' that were planted on the volunteer day (photo by Kaye Song).

planting, I interviewed 19 other attendees: the landowner of Maple Farm, the four Youngwilders and 14 other volunteers. Each of these participants had different levels of familiarity with Maple Farm and the broader movement of rewilding.

The landowner

Interviewee: Colleen

Colleen bought Maple Farm in 2008 and has lived and worked on the site ever since. She is a keen animal rights activist who runs Maple Farm as an animal sanctuary, alongside running Charity Buddy, a registered charity that provides business support for animal welfare organisations. During the summer of 2021, she started working with the Youngwilders team to rewild Maple Farm.



Volunteers getting prepared to plant the hedgerow.

The Youngwilders

Interviewees: Anya, Jack (1), Molly & Oscar

The Youngwilders are a rewilding collective that was founded in 2020 by four friends as a post-graduation project. Through their work, they seek to support the development of small to medium scale, community-led rewilding projects in the UK. Maple Farm is their second project site.

The volunteers

Interviewees: Alice, Anna, Andrew, Ed, Jack (2), Jay, Joe, Joyce, Lola, Mia, Nicole, Tom, Vee & Yasmin

The volunteer group held a diverse mix of professional and educational backgrounds. Across the group, There was a broad range of familiarity with rewilding and environmental volunteering: for some, it was their first time engaging in rewilding



The planting team I was part of hard at work.

activities and, for others, rewilding was a regular hobby. Most of the group had travelled from London to Maple Farm; some had even travelled from further afield in the UK. Three participants described themselves as local to Maple Farm.

Interview questions

During the interviews, participants were asked questions about:

- their motivations for participating in the rewilding activities of the day;
- their perceptions of Maple Farm in the present moment (January 2022);
- their vision of what a rewilded Maple Farm would be like in 20 year's time (*i.e.* in 2042);
- how they imagine humans interacting with this future Maple Farm;

- and the sensory words they would use to describe this future Maple Farm.

In addition to these topics, the interviews with the landowner and the Youngwilders team included questions about Maple



Volunteers digging holes to accommodate the hedgerow plants (photo by Kaye Song).

Farm as a place and the wider rewilding activities happening there.

Key themes

To analyse the interview data, I conducted an inductive thematic analysis to interpret patterns of thought from the dataset. This method of analysis is understood as a creative process where the researcher actively constructs themes by interpreting the data using their understanding, intuition and related theoretical lenses [24–26].

Through this analysis, 10 themes were created and grouped into three categories: “today’s English countryside”, “perceptions of rewilding” and “the future wilds”.

Today's English countryside

This category contains themes that explore perceptions of present-day Maple Farm and the environmental status quo from which participants speculated.

Theme 1: Beauty and absence

"You hear bits of bird song, but there's no real life here, as it were."

- Jack (2)

Theme 2: Potential for more

"This land has great potential. One of its benefits is that it doesn't have a designation so there's no pressure from where you start."

- Molly

Theme 3: The typical look

"Looking at it, it looks like a normal open paddock type field. Normal countryside. Traditional English countryside."

- Andrew

Perceptions of rewilding

This category contains themes that explore perceptions of rewilding, the lens through which participants speculated about the future.

Theme 4: Rewilding is inspiring

"I guess I'm realising how depleted it is, what we take as nature and what 'natural' actually means. [Rewilding] is what a free wildlife would look like, in a way."

- Anna

Theme 5: Is rewilding enough?

"It makes me kind of sad to see that essentially the only action that is really progressing at any kind of pace is volunteer and charity led."

- Jay

The future wilds

This category contains themes that describe the rewilding futures that resulted from the speculative process.

Theme 6: Multisensory aesthetics

“If we’re walking down in the summer, I want to literally hear it buzzing with life.”

– Ed

Theme 7: Diversity, coherence and connectivity

“I think, compared to today, I would imagine seeing a lot more variation in terms of the different fields [... and] for the land to feel more coherent as one kind of thing.”

– Anya

Theme 8: A new beauty standard

“What the Victorians would tell you is a beautiful garden is not what wilding is. It’s much more ugly plants.”

– Yasmin

Theme 9: Centring other-than-human species

“Once these hedgerows grow, they’ll grow space for other things.”

– Lola

Theme 10: Are there humans in the wilds?

“I would love this to be a space where people can come and understand that there’s just so much depth and richness that we can easily brush over.”

– Vee

A collective future

The futures envisioned by the interviewees should not be dismissed as wishful thinking. Instead, they should be understood as articulations of the ideas, ideals, hopes and fears [27] that have motivated real people to contribute their time and effort to an environmental initiative. And, when all 19 accounts are read as a whole, they describe a collective vision for the future of British nature that is radically hopeful but grounded in realism. Beyond being a simple utopia, this vision is critically engaged with many of the discourses that surround present-day rewilding.

Interviewees imagined a multisensory future, which went beyond visual imagery, using their embodied presence in the landscape to amplify their imaginations [8]. In this future, ‘wild’ was not defined as a landscape devoid of humans but rather

as a landscape that centred on the agency and wellbeing of other-than-human life. Within this, biodiversity was understood as an ongoing process that would enable the ecosystem to continually change, and not as a metric to simply measure success. The place of humans in rewilded spaces was an area of debate. Humans were understood as a part of the ecosystems they live within and, as such, wholesale withdrawal of humans from wild spaces was not always seen as an appropriate (or viable) course of action. Instead, rewilding was understood as a process of repair that sensitively navigates the complex environmental, social, cultural and political contexts that ecosystems are a part of. In many ways, new ecological values were more central to their imaginaries than ecosystem dynamics.

But perhaps, what was most inspiring to me was the idea that the future was

still up for debate. Despite narratives of the future being dominated by unavoidable environmental collapse [1], the rewilding community of Maple Farm sincerely believed that an alternative was possible. However, this future is still a work in progress. There is always a need to critique, revise and refine social imaginaries such as futures. With this, two questions emerged: how can I represent the Maple Farm community's future in an informative and engaging way? and how can I use this representation to invite and incorporate constructive critique?



“Speculative Everything began as a list we created a few years ago called A/B, a sort of manifesto. In it, we juxtaposed design as it is usually understood with the kind of design we found ourselves doing. B was not intended to replace A but to simply add another dimension, something to compare it to and facilitate discussion. Ideally, C, D, E, and many others would follow.”

**- Anthony Dunne &
Fiona Raby [27]**

Section 4. A Rewilding Manifesto

To summarise the process of conducting and analysing the interviews, I decided to create a rewilding manifesto for Maple Farm, in the format of Dunne and Raby’s well-known A/B Manifesto for speculative design [28].

Playing on the temporality found within the interviews, the rewilding manifesto for Maple Farm juxtaposes “before wilding”, the community’s collective perceptions of conventionally managed land, against “after wilding”, their speculations for rewilded land. By presenting the before and after columns as a binary, the manifesto aims to aid in the comparison of the two approaches while also opening up space between them for further negotiation. Are

all of the comparisons mutually exclusive?
and could the inclusion of an alternative
disrupt the constructed binary?

The manifesto was developed iteratively
by sharing with people internal and
external to the Maple Farm community*
for critique and refinement. After many
rounds of revision, a 'version 1.0' of the
manifesto stabilised and was published by
the Youngwilders. Through the process of
making the manifesto, my understanding
of the community's collective future was
furthered. And the next steps for my project
became clear.

* Including: the Youngwilders, Material Futures
tutors, visiting tutors and other students.



[a] before wilding

the english countryside
the typical look
monocultures
fences that divide
overgrazed pastures
floodplains
life at the periphery
start-stop landscapes
quiet and empty
green and pleasant
fragmented
trampled flat
trimmed and strimmed
sublime beauty
status quo as end goal
highly managed land
biodiversity as index
human intervention
valued for productivity
land as community asset
a place for 'doing'

[b] after wilding

the local wilds
unexpected discoveries
mosaics
hedges that connect
regenerating woodlands
ephemeral wetlands
life everywhere
gradient landscapes
buzzing with life
overwhelming colours
coherent
verdant and textured
intermittently disturbed
difficult beauty
status quo as starting point
self-willed land
biodiversity as process
multispecies collaboration
valued for resilience
land as community member
a place for 'being'

a rewilding manifesto for Maple Farm, Surrey

by the Maple Farm rewilding community: Alice, Andrew, Anna, Anya, Coline, Ed, Jack, Jack, Jay, Joe,
Joe, Joyce, Lola, Mia, Molly, Nicole, Oscar, Tom, Vee & Yasmin

work-in-progress, version 1.0

[a] before wilding

the english countryside
 the typical look
 monocultures
 fences that divide
 overgrazed pastures
 floodplains
 life at the periphery
 start-stop landscapes
 quiet and empty
 green and pleasant
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 valued for resilience
 land as community member
 a place for 'being'

“There is nothing inherently less creative about nonfictional representations, both [fiction and nonfiction] may create a ‘truth’ of a text.”

- Michael Renov [29]

5. Documenting Speculations

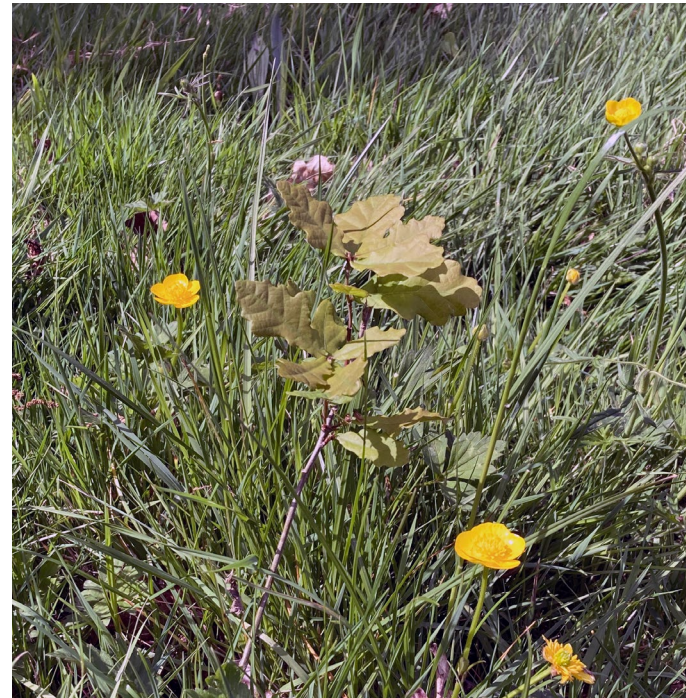
To me, the rewilding manifesto looked like a set of rules that could define the world of a speculative fiction story. However, instead of depicting a dystopian scenario, a story based on the future envisioned by the Maple Farm community could be understood as a “transformative narrative” [30]. These positive, bottom-up narratives contrast with conventional speculative fiction by articulating a vision of ‘where we want to go’ rather than ‘what we want to avoid’ [30]. While negative framings of complex issues, such as the climate and biodiversity crises, can be incredibly effective at grabbing attention, recent studies show that positive, solution-oriented stories are more effective at motivating real-world behaviour and

mindset changes [31,32].

With this in mind, I imagined a story set in a world where the future imagined by the Maple Farm rewilders is 100% true. In this story, set in 20 years' time, I would revisit Maple Farm and discover how it had been reshaped by rewilding. On this trip, I would meet up with three archetypal characters that are based on combinations of my real-world interviewees: *The Landowner*, *The Wilder* and *The Volunteer*, who would walk with me through the site and share their perspectives on its 20-year transformation. Quotes and themes would be extracted from the interview transcripts but shifted temporally so that, within the narrative, participants' speculations for the future would become observations of the present.

Instead of a work of speculative fiction, such a story would be more akin to a speculative documentary. It would

require a combination of methods used by documentarians to construct representations of reality and tactics used by speculative designers to construct discursive futures.



An oak sapling that has naturally seeded in the field.

“We could say a World is something like a gated garden. A World has borders. A World has laws. A World has values. A World has dysfunction... A World is a container for all the possible stories of itself. A World manifests evidence of itself in its members, emissaries, symbols, tangible artefacts, and media, yet it is always something more.”

- Ian Cheng [33]

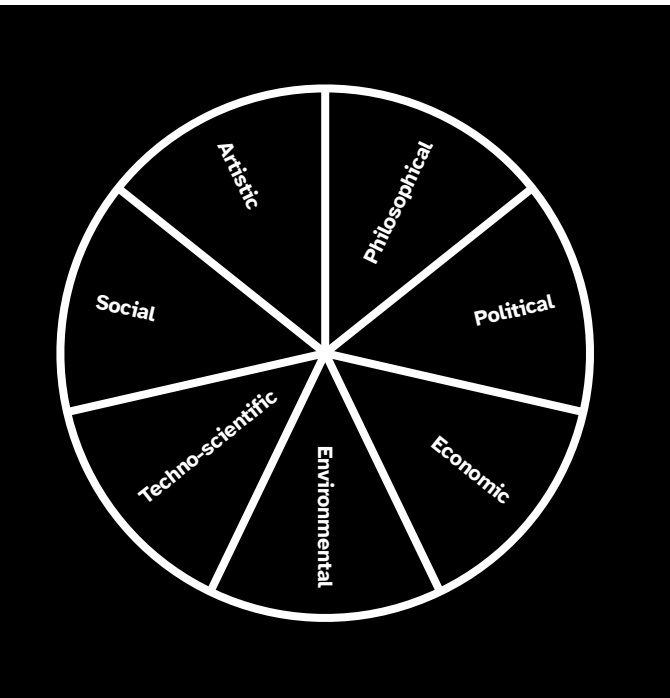
6. Worldbuilding the Wilds

Sketching the storyworld

In storytelling (be it fiction, non-fiction, speculative design, etc), worlds are the systems of logic that underpin a larger reality that extends beyond the bounds of individual stories [34]. Therefore, to tell the story of the speculative documentary in a compelling way, I first needed to build a compelling world in which the action would take place.

To design the world of *After Wilding*, I used the rewilding manifesto as a foundational document. Then, considering the Seven Foundations model of worldbuilding [35], I revisited the interviews, themes and my field notes to flesh out the philosophical, political, economic, environmental, techno-

scientific, social and artistic foundations of the world. During this process, I understood my role more as the curator of the community's speculations, rather than as the author of my own story. This



The seven foundations of worldbuilding (adapted from an illustration by Leah Zaidi [35]).

meant embracing the imperfections in the resulting storyworld. It needed to represent not only the clear signals found within the interviews but also the gaps and frictions. For this same reason, I chose not to introduce any additional wildcard disruptions to the storyworld.

Following this construction process, the world of the *After Wilding* story had the following foundations:

Foundation 1: Philosophical

The philosophical foundation of the storyworld describes the alternative values, ethics and aesthetics of nature that have been inspired by the rewilding activities at Maple Farm.

Philosophical signals include:

- Rewilded spaces are valued for their capacity to support diverse, multispecies communities.

- Rewilding catalyses societal conversations about how to renegotiate the relationships between humans and ecosystems.
- Rewilding valorises the agency of ecosystems and their other-than-human inhabitants.
- Rewilding inspires a broadening of the cultural standards of what a beautiful landscape looks like.

Foundation 2: Political

The political foundation of the storyworld describes how the distribution of power and agency between stakeholders has shaped the adoption and practice of rewilding at Maple Farm.

Political signals include:

- Rewilding activities are primarily driven by the private and charity sector, with limited support from the national government.
- Private landowners, therefore, hold significant power to enable or inhibit the rewilding of land in the UK.
- Within rewilding projects, methods are developed to centre ecosystem agency (and limit human biases) in decision-making processes.

And missing signals include:

- What structures are developed to govern rewilding projects?
- Do alternative forms of land ownership emerge to facilitate rewilding?

Foundation 3: Economic

The economic foundation of the storyworld describes how the flow of resources, capital and labour has impacted the rewilding activities at Maple Farm. Within the interviews, economic signals were less apparent. As a result, this foundation is less developed.

Economic signals include:

- Volunteers play a key role in providing labour for rewilding projects.

And missing signals include:

- How are rewilding projects funded?
- How does rewilding impact the wider job market?
- What resources will be required to facilitate rewilding activities?

Foundation 4: Environmental

The environmental foundation of the storyworld describes the biophysical and contextual space of Maple Farm and how this relates to the UK as a whole. Given the nature of this project, this is an important foundation.

Environmental signals include:

- Within Maple Farm, several key physical and procedural interventions are made to catalyse changes in the ecosystem.
- This results in Maple Farm being a more biologically and aesthetically diverse place.
- On a broader scale, rewilding becomes more commonplace across the UK.

- However, these rewilding projects encounter resistance due to the pressures of land-use competition.

And missing signals include:

- To what extent do the rewilding activities at Maple Farm reflect other projects?
- How do national and global trends (such as biodiversity loss and global warming) interact with rewilding?

Foundation 5: Techno-scientific

The techno-scientific foundation of the storyworld describes the physical and procedural interventions made to Maple Farm's landscape.

Techno-scientific signals include:

- Physical interventions are made to increase landscape connectivity (e.g. planting hedges and removing fences).
- Rewilders learn how to work with the seasonal rhythms of the ecosystem (e.g. establishing an ephemeral wetland fed by floodwater).
- New habits and mindsets are developed (e.g. not cutting the grass and not picking up fallen trees).

And missing signals include:

- How will rewilded landscapes be monitored?
- How will the success of rewilding projects be determined?

Foundation 6: Social

The social foundation of the storyworld describes the relational dynamics between different individuals and groups (including other-than-human species) in the Maple Farm community.

Social signals include:

- Rewilding projects seek to involve their local community in their development.
- A sense that landscapes are part of a community rather than owned by a community begins to develop.
- Rewilding fosters a broader community of interest that is not linked to specific projects.

And missing signals include:

- What methods are developed in

order to engage and empower local communities within rewilding projects?

- How do local communities and external communities of interest relate to each other?

Foundation 7: Artistic

The artistic foundation of the storyworld describes the significance and impact of creativity as a leverage point in the rewilding activities at Maple Farm. Due to the “creative” nature of this design project, this foundation is somewhat more meta than the others.

Artistic signals include:

- Rewilding is an inherently creative pursuit that involves working sensitively within a socio-ecological context.

- Narratives of the past, present and future are central to the theory and practice of rewilding.
- Pastiche representations of nature and science-fiction representations of the future are both ill-equipped to represent wild futures.
- Therefore, new aesthetic languages that speak to the temporal, site-specific and socio-ecological qualities of rewilding need to be developed.

These final two signals are of specific importance to the later development of the project (see Section 7), but for now we will continue to focus on the narrative.

Writing the script

Once the bounds of the world were in place, I was ready to start writing the script. Like the rewilding manifesto, the script was iteratively developed by presenting work-in-progress versions to people internal and external to the Maple Farm community*.

The story of *After Wilding* is split into three chapters. In each of these chapters, *The Researcher* (a fictionalised version of myself), visits an area of Maple Farm and interviews a community member about their perceptions of how rewilding has changed them, the site and wider society. The full script is included in part II of this book.

* Including: the Youngwilders, the Art and the More-than-human postgraduate reading group and MAMF tutors.

Interview with *The Wilder*: An ephemeral wetland

“Where do humans fit into rewilded spaces? Our goal with rewilding was to help repair ecosystems so they can operate on their own accord. So, we had to think really carefully about each and every intervention we made in the landscape.”

– The Wilder

The Wilder talks about the ephemeral wetland that they helped to create alongside the River Lox. They describe what small-scale rewilding is and reflect on the qualities of a successful rewilding project. They discuss the ways that more-than-human agency is centred in rewilding and how this is balanced with human interventions to the landscape.

Interview with *The Volunteer*: The hedgerow we planted

“This place is a good illustration of this new, more difficult beauty. It’s diverse and messy and textured and colourful and noisy. And, despite the hedges more-or-less following the same line as the old fences, where the fences made the landscape feel split up and divided, the hedges make the landscape feel more coherent and connected as a whole.”

– The Volunteer

The Volunteer talks about the hedgerow that they helped to plant across the site 20 years ago and how it has changed over time. They discuss how rewilding has inspired them and how it has changed their relationship with the environment. They also talk about power dynamics and labour in rewilding.

Interview with *The Landowner*: My bench in the forest

“The process has made me realise that this land doesn’t really belong to me. Well, it does, but you know what I mean. In a way, I belong to the land and I’m just looking after it for the moment.”

– The Landowner

The Landowner talks about the process of natural forest regeneration that she has observed from her bench in Barberry Field. She describes the factors that motivated her to rewild her land and how her idea of care evolved as Maple Farm transformed from an animal sanctuary to a rewilding project. She closes the film with her reflection that the site has changed from “a place of doing” to “a place of being”.



“For documentary, digitization figures simultaneously as threat and promise: it is a form of derealization against which documentary must assert itself, and yet it offers new tools for the creation and distribution of nonfiction images.”

**- Erika Balsom &
Hila Peleg [23]**

7. Uncertain Sounds, Uncertain Visions

Building in ambiguity

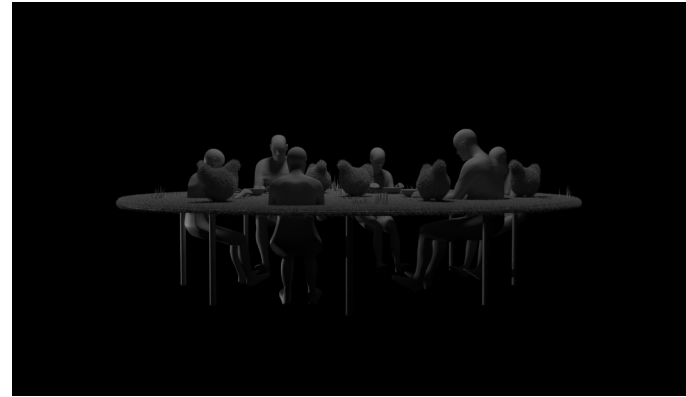
Speculative design has a number of methods that it uses to represent detailed future scenarios while also leaving room for ambiguity and interpretation. These approaches often centre around the construction of physical, rhetorical props that offer windows into a wider storyworld [27,36] [source]. Common aesthetic tactics used by speculative designers in the creation of these props include: a) abstracting the design codes of functional products; b) representing complex systems as models and dioramas; and c) decontextualising objects and scenarios by positioning them within uncanny non-spaces [27,36].



a) Revital Cohen & Tuur Van Balen's "75 Watts".

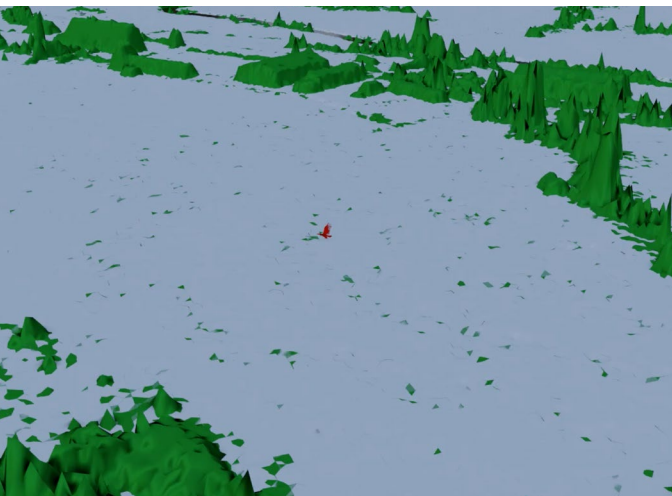


b) Sascha Pohflepp's "Model of an Induction Loop-equipped Chuck's Cafe Franchise".

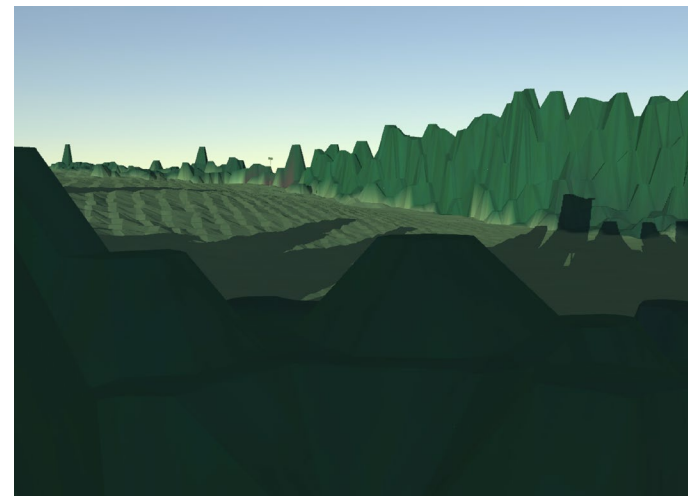
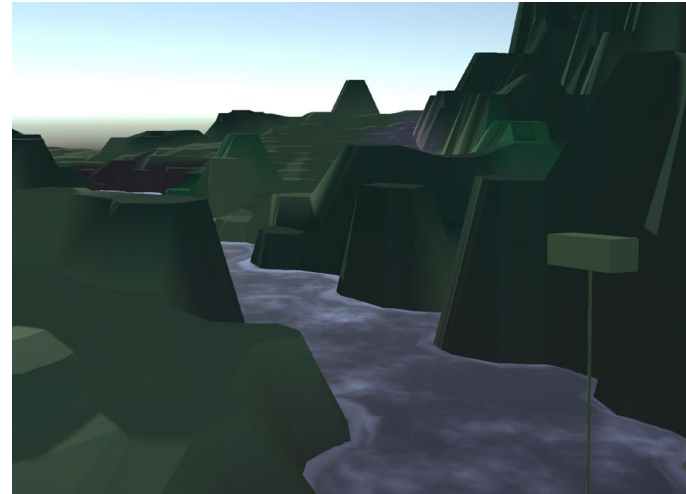


c) Wesley Chau's "Coop".

However, when trying to represent environmental speculations at the landscape level, these established tactics no longer work. Through experimentation I found that so much of an ecosystem's texture and vitality is lost in its representation that purposefully shearing away further detail or decontextualising the landscape weakens the rhetorical potential of the representation. I needed to find another aesthetic language to bring the rewinding future to life.



My early experiments with representing Maple Farm as a virtual video game world.



First-person perspective views into a hexagon-grid based video game representation of Maple Farm.

Synthetic images

For the visual component of the documentary, I recorded 360° footage of different areas in Maple Farm that participants had speculated about. I processed this footage using a suite of custom video rendering tools that were built using the Unity gaming engine^{*}. These tools allowed me to create and modify 360° sketches of these areas. I was then able to record first-person perspective footage from within these sketches using virtual camera rigs.

However, rather than outputting standard video game-style footage, the virtual cameras were

coded to output sequences of ‘semantic image segmentation maps’. Segmentation maps use pixel colour to describe the desired contents of an image (e.g. an area

^{*} www.unity.com/

of pixels with the RGB values [74, 170, 72] should be a tree or an area of pixels with the RGB values [197, 35, 0] should be water). They can be used, in conjunction with specific machine-learning image synthesis models^{*}, to create synthetic photographs of non-existent compositions. This process is somewhat like the opposite of machine vision: instead of the system attempting to interpret a photograph and describe its contents (*i.e.* creating a map), the system starts with a map and tries to dream up the photograph that it describes. Each frame of *After Wilding* is synthesised in this manner and sequentially animated^{**} to recreate the movement of panning a camera across the landscape. The synthetic visualisations of the future were

^{*} For *After Wilding*, I used both the SPADE [37] and OASIS [38] machine learning image synthesis models, which were trained on the COCO-STUFF dataset [39].

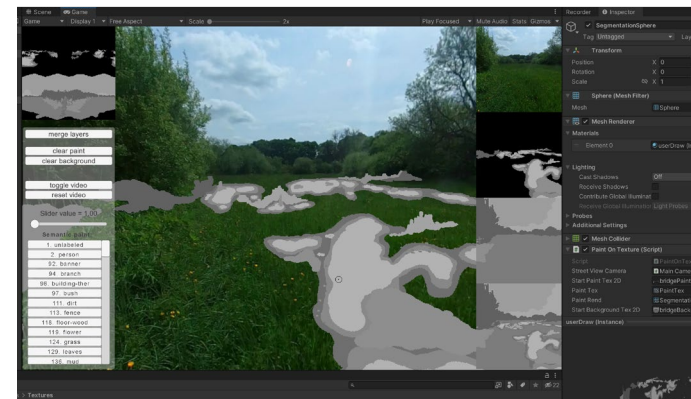
^{**} This process also involved machine learning: the original animation was generated at 6 frames-per-second and then increased to 12 frames-per-second using the Super SloMo video framer interpolated model [40].



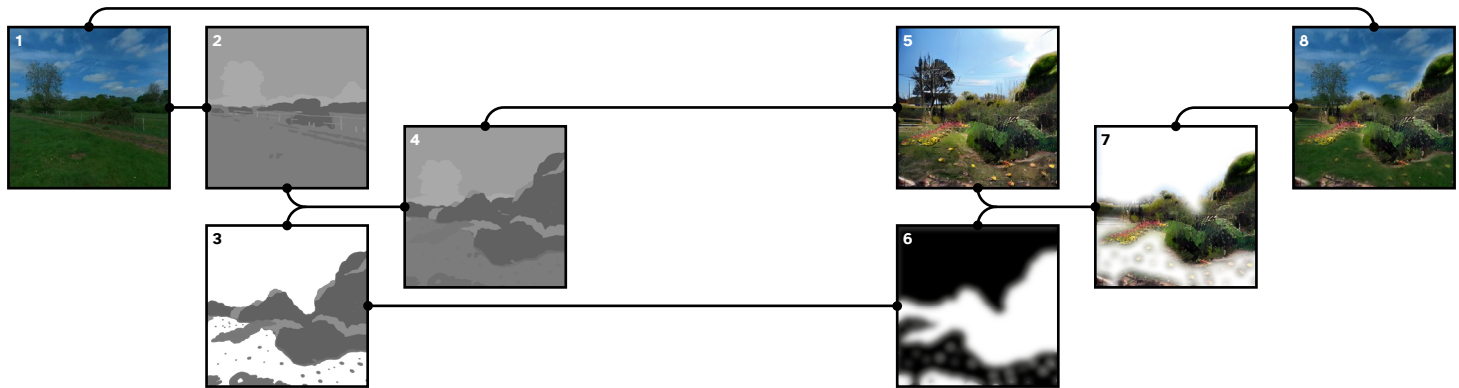
The original 360° footage that forms the base layer of the three scenes of the film.

then recombined with the original present-day footage of the site to re-ground them in reality.

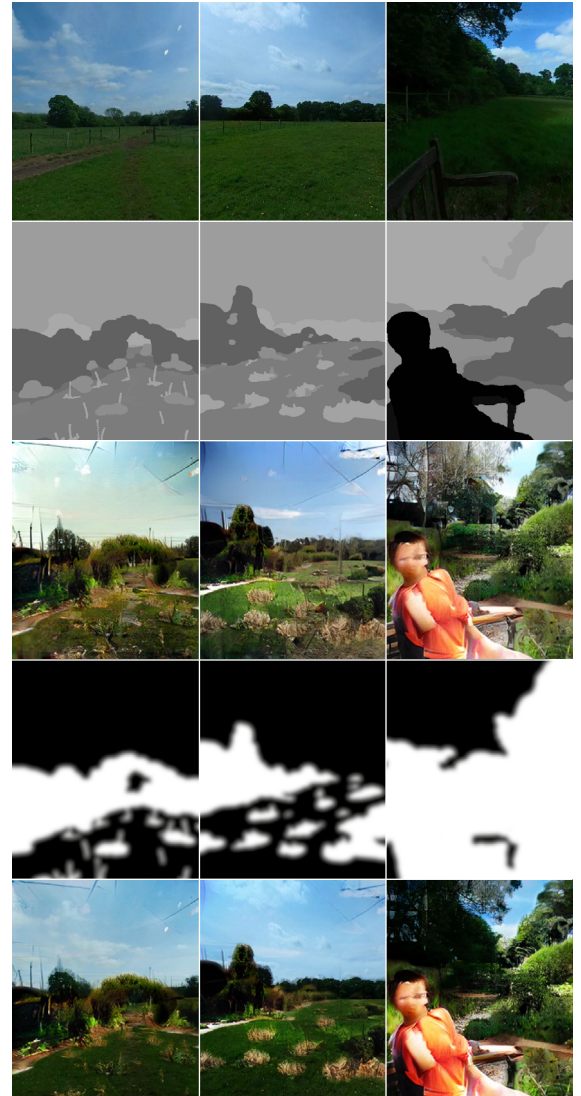
Due to each frame being synthesised in isolation, the resulting animation has noisy, textured and unstable qualities. The uncertainty and ambiguity of futures-thinking are embedded in the medium itself.



The 360° landscape sketching tool that I built in the video game engine Unity.



1. base image
2. real segmentation map
3. speculative segmentation map
4. composite segmentation map
5. synthetic image
6. alpha blending mask
7. masked synthetic image
8. final composite image





Constructed sounds

To bring the script to life, I worked with professional actors to create voiceovers for each of the interviewed characters. In the film, *The Wilder* is played by Stephen Dalton*, *The Volunteer* by Kezia Turner** and *The Landowner* by Amy Brown***. And, considering that *The Researcher* is a future version of me, I played the character myself.

To underscore the interviews, I created soundscapes combining audio footage from present-day Maple Farm with audio from more established nature reserves and online sound libraries. The soundscapes were designed to combine the sounds of species that are currently present in southeast England along with those that are missing.

* www.stephendaltonvo.com/

** www.keziaturner.com/

*** www.peppedproductions.co.uk/

“Twenty years ago, I visited this place as a part of my master’s studies to learn about the rewilding activities that were happening here. And now, twenty years later, I have returned to reconnect with three community members and to hear how rewilding has changed them and this place.”

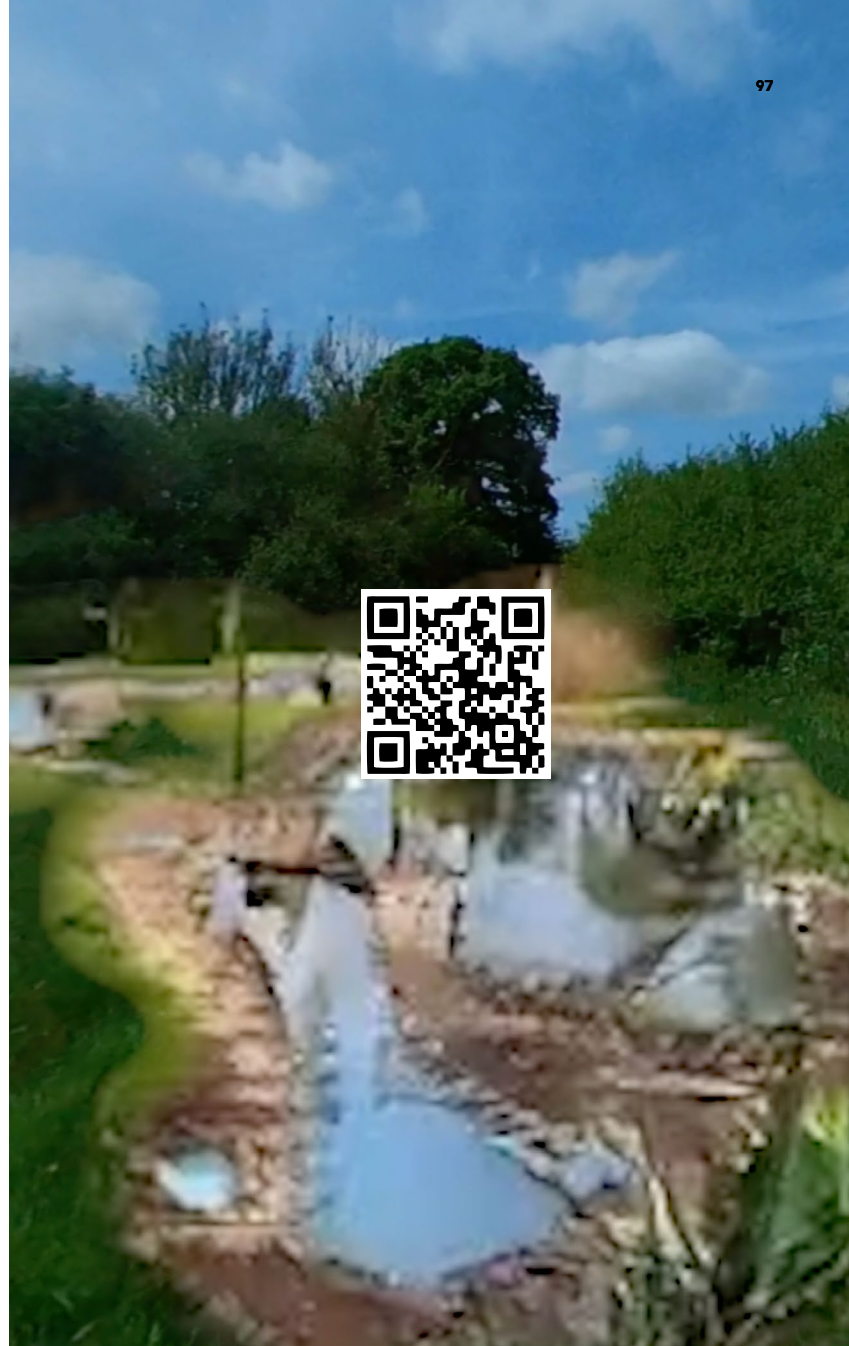
**- *The Researcher*
(script extract)**

8. *After Wilding*

With the visual, sound and narrative layers of *After Wilding* prepared, all that is left to do now is assemble them together. I’m looking forward to finishing the film in the upcoming days and presenting it to the Maple Farm community and the rest of the world at the Material Futures degree show. The Youngwilders team and I are also planning to screen the film at Maple Farm this summer as part of an open-air cinema event. I hope that the discussions generated by these internal and external events will promote critical reflection on the relationship between human communities and the ecosystems that they are a part of. And I hope that the real-world Maple Farm rewilding project gets a nice signal boost too!

You can scan the QR code opposite or visit wildfutures.joerevans.com to watch the film.

I hope you enjoy watching it as much as I've enjoyed making it.



“Changing narratives and thus changing imagined futures can transform ideas, attitudes, and institutions and are thus essential to effectuate societal change.”

-Sander van der Leeuw [41]

9. Towards a Wild Futures Working Group

I started this project searching for a way to apply the skills I have learnt as a speculative designer to the field of environmental sustainability. Nine months later, having completed a design residency at a local rewilding project, I now have a clearer picture of how this can be achieved. Beyond the *After Wilding* film itself, I see the true value of this project in the methods I have developed to engage environmental communities in futures-thinking. So, despite my time at Material Futures drawing to a close, I still see this project as a work in progress.

So what's next for *After Wilding*?

I have been accepted to present the film

and the wider research project at the Digital Ecologies in Practice conference in July in Bonn, Germany. And, with any luck, further opportunities to exhibit and discuss the project will emerge in due course.

In the longer term, I plan to use the knowledge I have gained by developing this project to launch an environmental futures research studio, which is tentatively named Wild Futures Working Group. The studio would collaborate with communities and institutions to develop creative ways of integrating holistic, sustainable futures-thinking into their present-day activities.

The future is still up for debate. I would like to contribute to keeping that statement true.



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Part II: *After Wilding* Script

After Wilding:

A speculative documentary
about rewilding.

Written by
Joe Revans

Based on
the envisioned futures
of the Maple Farm
rewilding community.

06/05/2022

Introduction: Return to Maple Farm

The Researcher:
Testing. Testing. 14th June
2042. 10:04am.

Welcome to Maple Farm, a 30-
acre rewilding project in
southeast England.

In 2022, twenty years ago, I
visited this place as a part of
my master's studies to learn
about the rewilding activities
that were happening here. And
now, twenty years later, I have
returned to reconnect with
three community members and to
hear how rewilding has changed
them and this place.

Interview with *The Wilder*: Repairing a Wetland

The Researcher:
Can you please introduce
yourself?

The Wilder:
Hi, I'm The Wilder. I'm a
founding member of a collective
that works with community-
centred rewilding projects in
the UK. We have been overseeing
the rewilding activities here
at Maple Farm since, erm, 2021.
It was our second ever project.
But we are less hands-on here
now, which is a good thing
because, when an ecosystem and
the community that cares for it
become self-sustaining, it's a
sign of a job well done.

The Researcher:

What was this place like when you started working here?

The Wilder:

Back then, Maple Farm had the “classic look” of the English countryside. The classic look of the southeast, that is. It was mostly open, grazing grasslands, with a few patches of woodland and scrub. It was split into lots of large fields with fences and hedgerows. And, because it was an animal sanctuary, there were, erm, horses and sheep here too, which used to eat or trample any trees that would naturally seed in the fields.

But we were quite fortunate in that there were already some, I guess you could call them either biodiversity assets

or nature corridors, running through the site: we had some established lines of oak trees, we bordered an ancient woodland and the River Lox runs through the site too.

So, it wasn't in a natural state, although it's hard to say what “natural” means, but it was a recovering place. It was a pretty amazing starting point, to be honest. And, erm, we were also lucky from a legal perspective. Back then, in England, land tended to be divided into “designated sites” or “sites of specific scientific interest”, which come with specific rules, but Maple Farm didn't have a designation, so we were able to be a little bit more experimental with our approach.

The Researcher:

So, the area we are in now has changed a lot since I was last here. Can you tell me how this wetland came to be?

The Wilder:

So, we call this type of ecosystem an “ephemeral wetland”. They used to be way more common before World War 2 when we drained a lot of the land during the Dig For Britain movement. They are areas of land that temporarily fill up with water when the river floods, usually in the early spring, and they retain that water until the start of the summer. It’s June now, so they are starting to dry up a bit. Maybe if we came back in a month they would be fully gone.

But let me tell you, these muddy scrapes are heaven for all sorts of wildlife. The first thing you’ll notice is the sound- you can simply hear how high the density of invertebrates is here. This place is literally buzzing with life! Loads of insects live in and around the water here and we get wading birds, like, erm, lapwings and redshanks, raising their chicks around the edges of the pools. Populations of wetland birds like these have been suffering for a really long time now, so we are super happy to see breeding pairs thriving here.

The Researcher:

So, was there a design process for making the ephemeral wetland?

The Wilder:

In a way, yes there was – although we tend to avoid the word design. Maybe it's better to think about it as a process of repair, but with the added complexity that we don't have a full picture of how the ecosystem looked before it was disrupted.

To make the wetland, we did have to take quite an, erm, interventionist approach – we had to recontour the land by digging a series of scrapes into the earth that could hold water. However, we wanted to do this in a way that limited the influence of our human biases about what a wetland 'should' look like. To do this, we used historical maps of the area to understand where the landscape held water

before it was drained and then we randomised the placements of the scrapes within those areas. We then organised a volunteer day to help dig the scrapes. To be clear, it wasn't our aim to strictly recreate the past. Instead, we wanted to use historical evidence to understand what ecological processes were disrupted to make the fields in the first place. And, of course, that was just a starting point. The layout of the wetland has changed over the years as the ecosystem found its own way.

The Researcher:

You've talked a bit about intervening in the landscape and trying to reduce the influence of human biases. Could you talk about how you found the balance between

the agency of humans and the ecosystem?

The Wilder:

That's a big question. Where do humans fit into rewilded spaces?

Our goal with rewilding was to help repair ecosystems so they can operate on their own accord. So, we had to think really carefully about each and every intervention we made in the landscape. But it was also important to remember that humans are part of the ecosystems they live in. In densely populated areas, such as southeast England, rewilding cannot mean depeople-ing. It's just not realistic. That's why small-scale rewilding projects, like Maple Farm, appeal to us. They can happen much closer to

population centres and they're more intelligible because you can walk around the site in a day. So, yes, we were keen for people to interact with it: we wanted people to see what a successful rewilding project could look like, we wanted to create a community that cares for the ecosystem, and we wanted this place to become a flagship for the local community.

Of course, there was a balance of play between access and ensuring the site didn't get too trampled but, in the end, we didn't have to worry about that too much. I'm happy to say that there are so many rewilded places in the UK now that, in general, people don't have to worry about overusing them.

Interview with *The Volunteer*: The Hedgerow We Planted

The Researcher:

Can you please introduce yourself?

The Volunteer:

Hi, I'm The Volunteer. I've been involved in the rewilding activities here at Maple Farm since 2022, erm, planting hedges and trees, digging scrapes, removing fences, and stuff like that. Just every so often, like, when I have a free Saturday.

The Researcher:

How did you get involved in the rewilding activities here?

The Volunteer:

Oh, it was a long time ago. I've always been into spending time in nature – especially foraging. And then I went to a university talk by The Wilder about rewilding and the project here at Maple Farm, so I signed up to help out. Back then, I was a student in London, so I jumped at the opportunity to get my hands dirty!

My first ever involvement in rewilding was the volunteering day when we planted the hedges here.

You were there too, interviewing people, if I remember right?

The Researcher:

Yes, that's right! It was my first time volunteering too.

It looks quite different here than I remember it. How would you say this place has changed?

The Volunteer:

So, we planted a huge mix of different species that would have been in a more, I guess, traditional UK hedgerow- and some oak trees too. Over the years, the, erm, 'whips' that we planted grew up and knitted together to form the nice, thick hedges that you see today.

As the hedges grew, they grew space for other things. Lots of birds, small rodents, rabbits and insects use it for shelter. And specific mushrooms, too, because their, erm, mycelium networks like to grow in the shade that the hedges provide. On a wider scale, the hedges

have helped to link up the site. They've brought together the woodlands from one end of the site to the other. And they've connected those woodlands to the river and wetlands too.

As you can see, the area around the hedge has also changed. Before, this space was a large, quite nondescript field. But now, it's a big patchwork of brambles, scrub, grass, meadow flowers and trees. It's an abundance of different plants at different heights. But, unlike the hedges, these aren't things we planted directly. These plants have seeded themselves.

Oh! And each year, the team brings pigs onto the site to disturb the landscape.

The pigs rootle through the soil and break up the denser areas of the thicket and, in doing so, they open up space for new plants to grow. I've heard that foraging can have a similar effect too, when it's done sustainably. It can apparently help spread the mycelium network, which is really interesting.

The Researcher:

How has your involvement in rewilding changed your relationship with the environment?

The Volunteer:

Before I got involved in rewilding, I had never really thought about the ways that humans should share the land with other animals. And, erm, I hadn't thought about the

ways we could change the land to make it more biodiverse. Instead, I would walk around the countryside thinking "Oh, this is so wonderful. It's nature. It's wild".

But it wasn't really. So much of the UK's wild land had been destroyed for livestock grazing, agriculture, etc. It's difficult because, for me, these agricultural landscapes are quite beautiful. But now I see more potential.

With that, I would say that my understanding of what a beautiful landscape looks like has changed. Wild spaces aren't what we think of as classically beautiful. I think that we inherited our idea of a beautiful garden from the Victorians, but that's not

what rewilding is. It's much more ugly plants. It's thorny scrub and stuff that isn't appealing but that has a lot of benefits. To me, this place here is a good illustration of this new, more difficult beauty. It's diverse and messy and textured and colourful and noisy. And, despite the hedges more-or-less following the same line as the old fences, where the fences made the landscape feel split up and divided, the hedges make the landscape feel more coherent and connected as a whole. Now, the features of the landscape flow into one another. There's a rhythm in the noise.

My involvement has also made me realise how complicated rewilding in the UK is in terms of politics. Sometimes

I feel a bit sad that, despite rewilding projects becoming more and more common over the years, most of the progress in rewilding has been volunteer and charity-led. The government has avoided investing in ecosystem restoration by, erm, relying on the charity sector, just like they have in many other important areas. And in addition to this, because so much of the land in the UK is privately owned, it's landowners who have ended up having the ultimate power to decide whether the country restores its ecosystems, or not. Which can be positive and negative depending on their interest.

Interview with The Landowner: ***My Bench in the Forest***

The Researcher:

Can you please introduce yourself?

The Landowner:

Hello, I'm The Landowner of Maple Farm. I'm the founder of a charity that has several projects that are either animal welfare-based or environmental-based. And the rewilding project here is one of them.

The Researcher:

What inspired you to rewild your land?

The Landowner:

Maple Farm is my home and,

before we began to rewild it, I was running it as an animal sanctuary – another one of my charity's projects. Around, erm, twenty years ago, I started to ask myself "What could I do with this land?" That's when somebody introduced me to the book *Wilding* by Isabella Tree and it blew my mind!

And I thought "Well, why can't we do something like that? It would be amazing!" So, I got in touch with The Wilder to guide the process and that's how it all began.

The first thing we did was change our own habits and mindsets. This was before any of the interventions like, erm, planting hedgerows or digging scrapes for wetlands

happened. So, that year, we stopped ourselves from cutting the grass to make hay, and from trimming the hedges to neaten them up. We stopped ourselves from chopping up fallen trees for firewood. And we stopped replacing fences when they fell down.

The changes were simple, but the impact they had was huge. After just one year, Maple Farm had already started to change. I noticed more how the tiniest change in weather and season affected the landscape and what animals I saw. I noticed more birds and, in the summer, more insects. The insects were just everywhere. It was crazy!

The Researcher:
Did you face any challenges along the way?

The Landowner:

For me, the biggest challenge we faced was the idea that we were wasting the land. In southeast England, there is so much competition for space. Farmers wanted the land so they could use it for grazing sheep, or whatever, and property developers wanted me to sell the land so they could build houses. But I always told them “No. Over my dead body!”

I just wanted to create a place for wildlife to have peace amongst all of the crazy building work, pollution and everything else out there. So, here at Maple Farm, although there is a footpath that comes through the site, there’s also plenty of space away from the path. I wanted to see that area being left for nature, so

the wildlife could flourish.
That's it really.

The Researcher:

We are currently in a forested area of the site. However, if I remember well, this used to be a field for grazing. Could you tell me a little bit about how this space has changed?

The Landowner:

Yes, that's right. This section of the site is quite special because it borders an ancient forest on two sides. We wanted to see more trees on the site, but we didn't want to intervene too much by manually planting them. Instead, we decided to encourage the spread of the ancient forest and it's been quite successful. You can see how the forest has reclaimed the field that used to be here.

However, it was quite difficult in the beginning because I had previously rescued a small flock of sheep which lived in this field and the next one over. The sheep have all moved on now, but back then, they would eat up any young trees that started to sprout, preventing the forest from spreading. So, we had to find a way to, erm, reduce the grazing pressure on the forest without displacing the sheep that I had committed to caring for. So, we decided to create a sacrificial field and fence the sheep into it.

In a way, it felt wrong, as we were so keen to remove fences elsewhere on the site, but it was a decision we made for the greater good.

And, on reflection, I think it was a good choice because of the speed at which the forest reclaimed this space – despite the occasional prison break from the sheep setting us back now and then.

Recently, we have been able to remove the fence around the sacrificial field and we are starting to see progress there too. Hopefully, if you come back in another twenty years, these two spaces will be one continuous forest. That's the goal.

The Researcher:

How did it feel to witness the rewilding of your land?

The Landowner:

The process has made me realise that this land doesn't really

belong to me. Well, it does, but you know what I mean. In a way, I belong to the land and I'm just looking after it for the moment.

So, I spend a lot of my time sitting on this bench. I put it here, many years ago, before the start of the rewilding project, and from it, I have watched the forest grow. You don't always notice the changes when you're walking, but if you sit, even if it's just 20 minutes, it's a grounding experience. I think we, as people, are so busy doing tasks and thinking about what's next. Rewilded places, like Maple Farm, are different. Rather than places of 'doing', they are just places of 'being'. They're places for enjoying the moment. They're just awesome.

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