

CMGT2324 EL
Narrative Design

A Quest Board as
Representation of Narrative Design
for “Hickory”

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1 Why a Quest Board?

My initial concept of *Hickory* included a combination of narrative and gameplay elements that showed to be difficult to combine. For example, did I want to include a big variety of level design options regarding goals and obstacles appearing, within an environment that overall stayed the same or at least predictable. That environment also, in narrative, had to support an interesting and plausible action space for a tribal community, and allow for side plotlines and main plot to be experienced in parallel (As in branching strings and pearls).

Overall, I needed a mechanic, which funnelled all this information for the player to make a clear and informed decision on their own gameplay and story progress. For that, I took inspiration from the *Quest Board (QB)* of the *Monster Hunter* series.

In the following, I will explore the narrative and gameplay perspective on what the QB in *Hickory* is, while looking at the way it exposes the player to information explicitly and implicitly. Furthermore, I will visually present a possible structure of the QB, and its assignments attached to it.

1.1 Narrative Perspective

The QB, on a functional level, is an exposition tool for game information towards the player. It explicitly shows a snapshot of the stories current state, by providing assignments explaining the current conflicts, what is at stake, and what the goals are to avoid loss.

QB's implicit messages in combination with the narrative can be seen within the following aspects:

1. *From functionality to theme*

The QB's functionality supports the games' theme. For every plot relevant assignment there is a reward, which either explicitly or implicitly makes the player character stronger, as well as explicitly or implicitly the entire village. As an example, for a side plotline the player must find and retrieve a plant for the village's craftsman, which is growing at dangerous heights. From growing and farming this plant at the village, the craftsman builds a drawbridge as a layer of defence and provides the player with a spear upgrade, making it a grappling hook. These changes can then also be seen

in the physical game world itself. Another example includes the cleansing of a spiritual site. As a result, the player is explicitly given an implicit reward in form of a stronger community, can however explicitly use this site to upgrade the enhancement toolkit. Additionally, villagers can now be seen using the site for rituals and chanting. The implicit message from the QB's functionality being "We work for each other not just ourselves"

2. *From QB structure to village growth and proactivity*

With story progression, the structure of the QB also changes. The completion of main and/ or side plot unlocks new types of assignment categories. From starting off with just a "Optional" and "Assigned" tab, players will have the option to choose from a "Special Assignments" and "Timed Assignments" tabs as well later. This structural change also brings with it new assignment types from new villagers, foremost those, from the plot that unlocked the extra category. What players see is a change in the QB and assignment structure, which is implicitly explained by new ChakaChakas (Because player saved them) that want to engage in the villages progress.

3. *From QB visuals to village progress*

Another explicit observation that players can make is the change in the visuals of the actual physical QB game object. At the start of their small village, it is merely a wooden board, hanging at a pole in the town centre. As the player makes progress in the main story, its physical appearance changes first to a well-crafted square wood piece, then to a wooden structure with decorations around it, and finally to a fully-fledged QB with a strong stone foundation. In this visual journey, the journey of the ChakaChaka tribe is commemorated, as it goes from unorganized and vulnerable to strong with a sturdy foundation. Themed assignments support the visual progression of the QB. The implicit message being: "With my help, the village is going forward".

4. *From QB existence to societal structure*

The existence of the quest board itself and how it is used by the village tells something about the tribe's societal structure. Players can observe ChakaChakas of all occupations hanging assignments, while only NPCs and the player character take them off for completion. It shows a clear distribution of tasks per role in society. An expression of this is the player

observing one warrior ChakaChaka hanging a task itself, because it is too scared of spiders. It tries to do it all sneaky and without anyone noticing, giving the player the impression that not following your roles demands is something to be hidden from the tribe. The implicit message of the board and its interactors being, that everyone has a clear role to play in the survival of the tribe.

5. *Special assignment availability implies character interaction*

Special assignments are always connected to side plotlines. They have multiple plot points, which in themselves each are represented by an assignment. Their rewards are unique, in a sense that they give access to one-time rewards, like mechanic upgrades or new levels. What makes them special however, is the requirement of personal interactions with NPCs. In the previous example (4.), the player witnesses a warrior putting up a task it is too afraid to do itself. During that plotline, the player character and NPC have more extensive dialogue, work together to achieve the goal of the assignment, and a unique mechanic is introduced when two or more ChakaChaka are close to each other. The implicit message to explicit special assignments is: “Others are counting on me”.

6. *From goals to actions*

Assignments portray the task via a goal description and a short briefing. While the goal and the briefing both explicitly mention what to do, actions a player might take to reach those goals are only implied. If a goal says: Defeat the spider general; and the briefing mentions a spider migration to the Grasslands due to heavy rains in the Upper Tree, which effects are also observable in the Grasslands; the player can already make deductions on what type of movement style they might go for, regarding the level, the impact of weather conditions, and amount of combat heavy gameplay.

1.2 Gameplay Perspective

From a functional perspective, the QB provides the start of the core gameplay loop. This is the place, where players come to play a “round” of *Hickory*, by either taking on one of the conditional or expedition assignments. The following gameplay elements can be observed to be essential to the QB:

1. *Start of the gameplay loop*

Explicitly, players come to the QB, pick an assignment category, then an assignment, and then go fulfilling it. While they can read the goal, analyse the briefing, or interpret the visuals, implicitly the QB acts as an information funnel for gameplay and represents the start of the gameplay loop.

2. *Meaning of actions*

Players, while interacting with the QB, will have a variety of assignments to their choice, as well as be able to see their progress on main or side plotline(s). This choice of gameplay options didn't just appear out of nowhere but was the result of the player interacting with villagers, progressing the player character, and acting overall, therefore giving their past actions meaning (And QB state implicitly as well).

3. *Choice of progress*

When confronted with different assignment types, players have the option to choose one to their liking. If the player doesn't feel like story progress today and rather want to change the players or villages visuals, they can go for an assignment rewarding currency. If they want a change from the classic gameplay loop, players can go for a special assignment, which introduces additional unique mechanics for their respective plotline. The gameplay feature allows players to choose their own progress, and this choice implies freedom and autonomy.

4. *Controlled exposition*

As the player makes progress, the QB expands in functionality by adding new categories and new assignments. The player is, however, not instantly introduced to the full scale and instead experiences its growth step by step. The implied message being that demands and challenges for the player will grow with their capabilities and mastery of the game.

5. *Timed Tasks*

Timed tasks randomly appear and disappear from their respective section on the QB. They are unique and randomized combinations of goals, levels, weather effects, enemies, and briefings. Players can manipulate to some degree elements of those tasks, but the randomness is the key here. With 7 levels, 10 usable assignment types, unique level mechanics, weather conditions, and a multitude of enemy types, there is bound to be something unexpected. The existence of those randomized timed tasks implies a huge amount of novelty in gameplay, as obstacles and goals constantly switch around and players must adapt their play style.

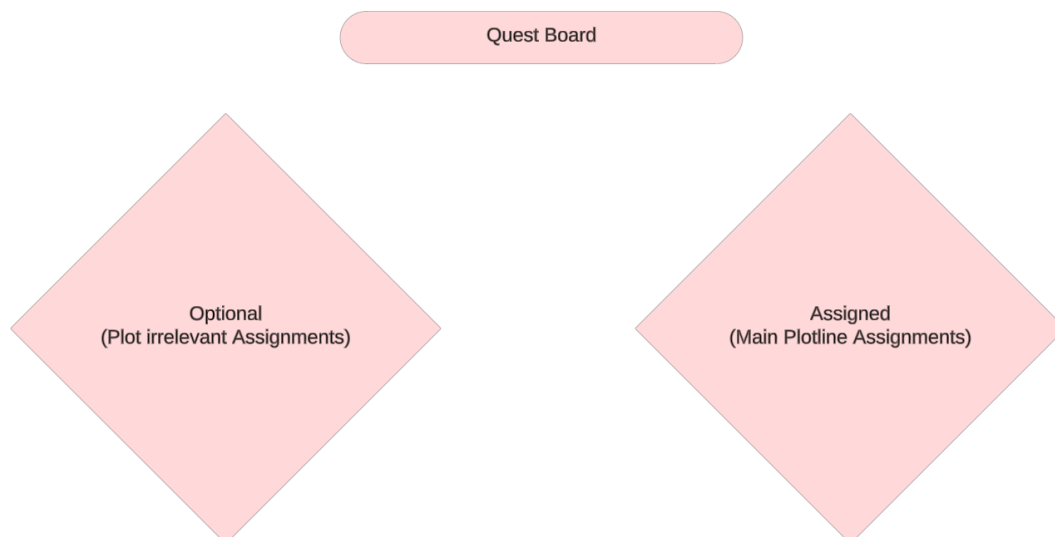
2 Visual Representations

2.1 Visual Structure: Quest Board

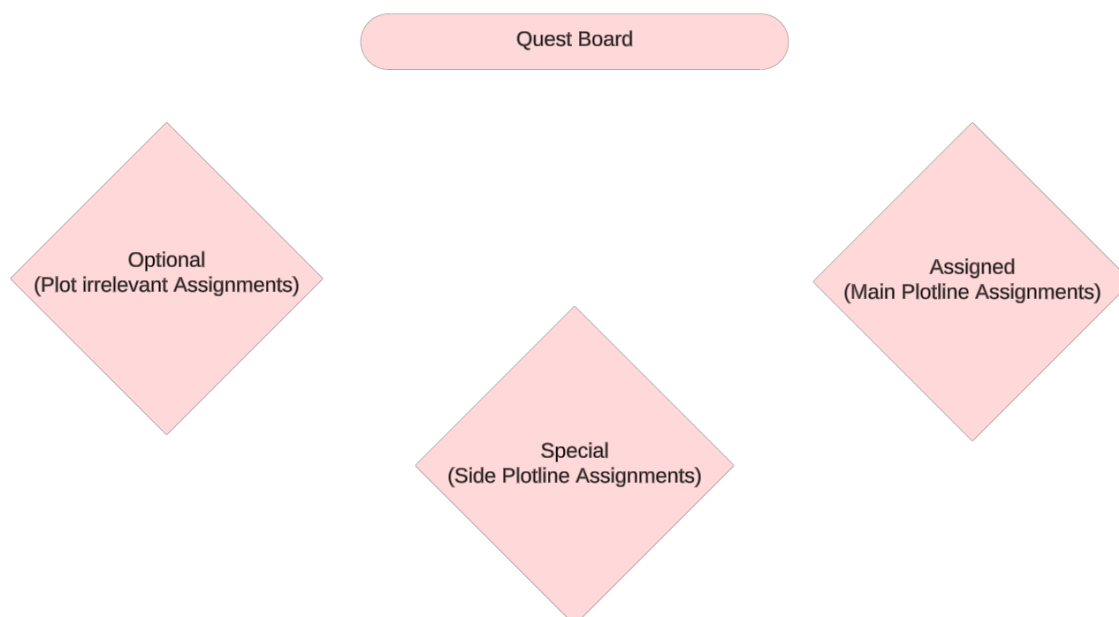
As previously mentioned, has the quest board different structures based on the player game progression. In the following, there are rudimentary representations of their structure. I left the visual progress out, but you can imagine their composition as following:

1. Stage: Broken wood piece
2. Stage: Either broken wood piece, fixed square wood piece, fixed square with decorations, or fixed square with decorations and sturdy wood foundation
3. Stage: fixed square wood piece with decorations and sturdy stone foundation

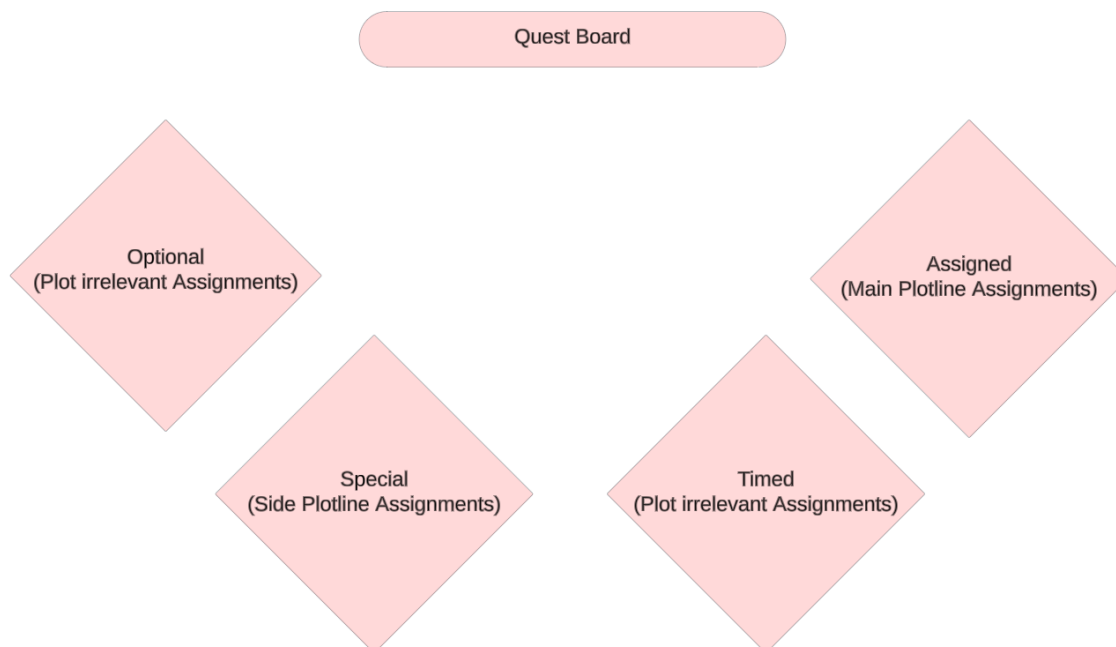
In stage 1, players can choose from either plot irrelevant or main plot assignments.



In stage 2, players have the option to additionally choose from side plot assignments.

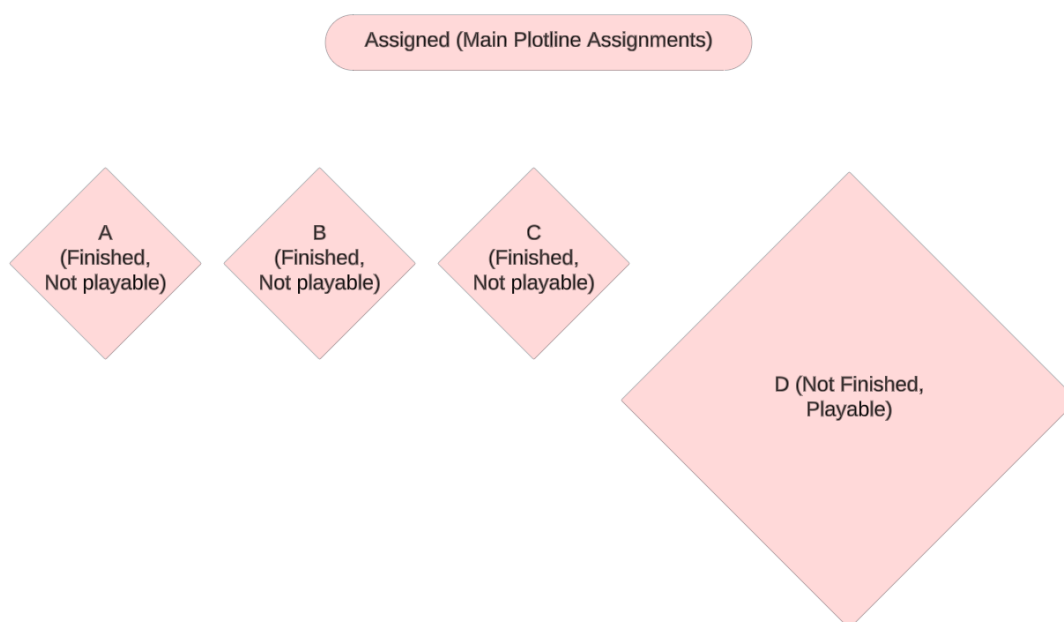


In stage 3, players have unlocked all categories and can access timed assignments as well.

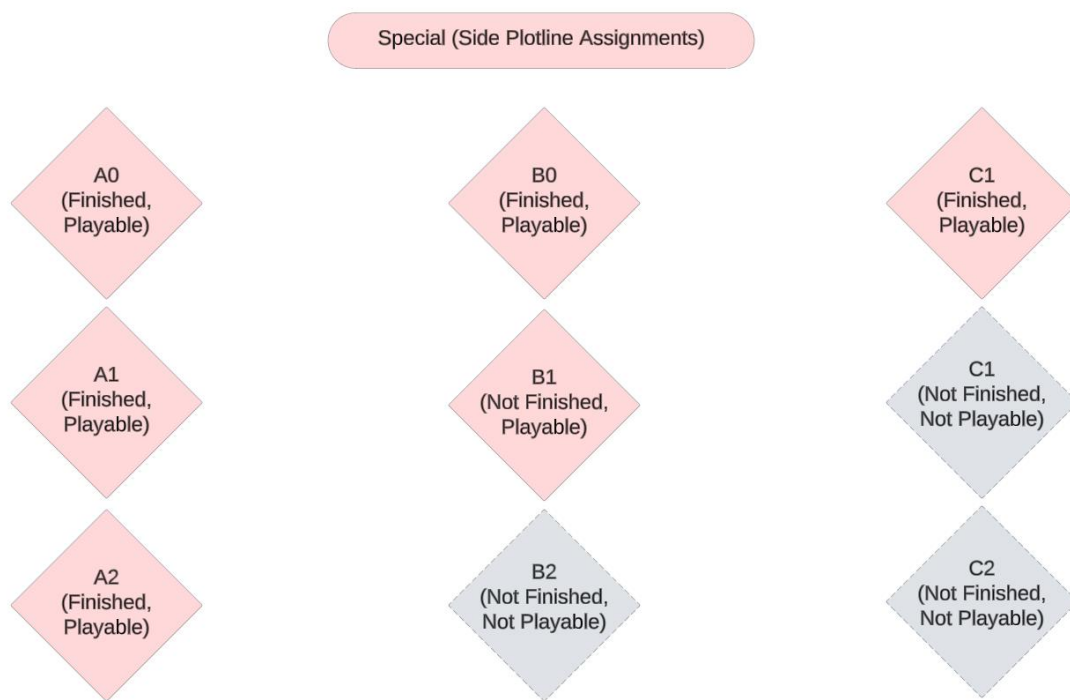


When one of the categories was chosen players are presented with one of either category representations:

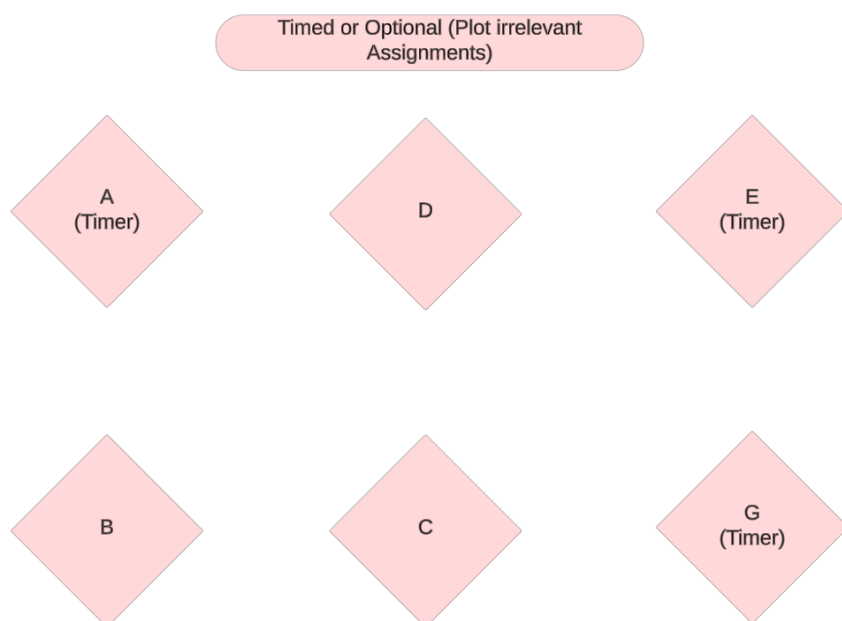
Assignments in the main plotline can only be played once but are visible after completion.



Assignments for the side plotline are only visible after completion of their previous assignment, stay visible and can be played multiple times. However, rewards only count once.

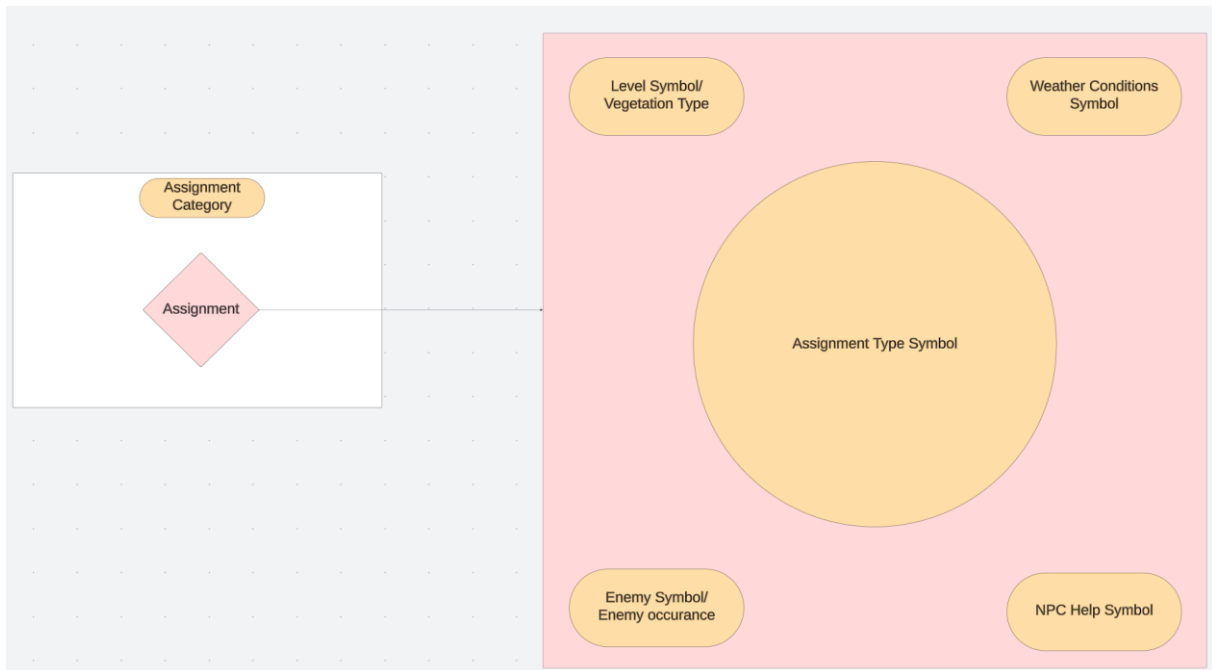


Timed or optional assignments can only be played once and disappear after their completion.



2.2 Visual Structure: Assignment

Assignments, as presented visually in their categories, have a multitude of visual cues, which provide the player with information for an early decision (without them having to open the assignment).



These cues are symbols with implications for the assignment of which the following exist:

1. *Assignment Type Symbol*

Positioned in the middle of the assignment, this symbol is a distinctive picture representing the goal or condition (Retrieve item, explore territory, defeat enemy, ...).

2. *Level Symbol/ Vegetation Symbol*

Positioned at the top left, this symbol represents what level the assignment takes place in, and what vegetation to expect (Normally connected to a unique level mechanic usable by the player).

3. *Weather Conditions Symbol*

Positioned at the top right, this symbol shows whether weather conditions have had an impact on the level and in what form (Heavy rain, Sunshine, Frozen Water, Drought, ...).

4. *Enemy Occurrence Symbol*

Positioned at the bottom left, this symbol shows a unique picture to identify an enemy type that is prevalent during this assignment. Based on its duplication amount, it either indicates few, a usual amount, or plenty of enemies. This doesn't exclude other enemy types from appearing in the level but makes them rarer in comparison.

5. *NPC Support Symbol*

Positioned at the bottom right, this symbol indicates whether there are other NPCs present during the assignment. These NPCs can be of various types, such as other ChakaChakas or friendly Bumblebees, which introduce an NPC specific interactive mechanic to the assignment and are indicated by a unique picture representing them.

Once a player decided on an assignment based on this initial information, they can open it up and take a closer look at it. Now the assignment has a name and explicitly states the assignment type as well as its goals/ conditions. Furthermore, the briefing presents the conflict and motivation for this assignment. It is written from the perspective of a villager asking for help, describing what the need from the player character, where it is the player must go, and what to expect in terms of obstacles or unique mechanics. This is written in a descriptive form focussing on the villager's emotions (E.g., what they saw, feared, thought).

Finally, the rewards are mentioned, which in case of unique rewards (Only achievable once) is also described from the perspective of the villager. In cases this reward is currency or an enhancement option they are explicitly stated.

3 Assignment Types & Mechanics

Assignment Type	Gameplay Linearity
Optional	Non-Linear
Assigned	Linear
Special	Linear
Timed	Non-Linear

Assignment Mechanic	Implicit Goal	Player Experience	Narrative Example
Retrieve Item	Locate and safely return an Item	Discovery and exploration of map, playing with limited controls	"We need some Lilly Bug nectar! Be aware, you cannot jump"

			anymore, its to sticky!”
Timed Run	Reach a position as fast as possible	Mastery of traversal skills and enhancement kit	Another ChakaChaka challenges you to a racing minigame.
Rescue Mission	Find a lost ChakaChaka and return it safely to the village/ camp	Solving puzzles and fighting enemies. Feeling intelligent, dangerous, and like a good person.	“One of the scouts hasn’t returned from the Upper Branches. Watch out, its spider season!”
Boss Fight	Defeat a Boss Character	Enjoying the thrill of the fight, as patterns need to be remembered and skills optimally used	Threat to village.
Defend Object of Interest	Fight off waves enemies to protect something	How long can the player hold out? Fast paced decision making and constant action.	Something draws attention from unwanted guests. Defend either important territory/ locations like farms or outposts, or NPCs.
Escort NPC	Make sure an NPC makes it safely to the destination	Making use of unique NPC interaction mechanics, exploring the possibilities, and enjoying the variety	Builders want to construct an outpost in the Undergrowth. They need someone to protect them on their journey.
Elemental Interaction	Use the masks elements (Enhancement	Player feels smart, as they take their time to	The weather is playing crazy, and flora and fauna

	toolkit) to solve elemental puzzles	solve complex elemental puzzles	alike suffer from it. Reverse strong weather effects or make conditions liveable again.
Special Assignment	Individual	Individual	Individual
Assigned Assignment	Individual	Individual	individual