

# Lost in Paradise! Open-World Landscapes as Baroque Pleasure Gardens

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While others see the landscapes depicted in open-world games as mazes or labyrinths (see, for example, Aarseth 1997), we argue in this brief abstract that these landscapes are rooted in Western concepts of the Baroque garden and the picturesque, and are thus constructed from a Christian-romanticized, eurocentric worldview. Their design perpetuates the colonial narrative of romantically charged conquest of the wilderness through exploration, expansion, and extraction. Therefore, in video games as in artificial gardens, the landscape is meant to be admired and appropriated by the player at the same time (see Bonner 2023).

During the 16th-18th centuries, European gardens, particularly Baroque gardens, served as a display of the power, taste, and wealth of their proprietors. Additionally, these gardens frequently incorporated elements based on both Christian and pagan concepts. Features like rich foliage, clear waterways, geometrical designs, and mythological or religious sculptures may be interpreted as symbolic or allegorical depictions of the pristine and harmonious state that existed before the Fall: a state of paradise. However, the trend of hiring garden hermits or decorative hermits (German 'Schmuckeremiten') as paid actors to simulate a life of seclusion reveals that landscape design was driven more by a romantically idealized aesthetic of connection to nature and withdrawal from the world, rather than an expression of religiosity (Lucci 2019). This culminated in the aesthetic ideal of the picturesque and 'accidental irregular' gardens, which aimed to convey experiences of beauty and sublimity by concealing the underlying artificial landscaping.

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Because of their symbolic and metaphoric design, Baroque gardens can be interpreted as narrative and playful spaces that share similarities with the digital landscapes found in open-world games. Charged with mythological narratives, the Baroque garden features artificial caves or grottoes, islands set in ponds, enchanted or rustic buildings. Using these *sites of interest*, visitors are subtly guided through environmental storytelling. Places that mimic sublime historicity, like crumbling old buildings, often in the form of ruins, promise historical wonders: ancient remnants of sunken cultures, full of dungeons and traps, where treasures can be plundered. This “longing for decay” (Fuchs 2017) is a phantasm of both the aristocracy and the entertainment industry in the 19th and 20th centuries. In our view, the “not only present, but prevalent” (Vella 2010, 2) ruin-image in video games as a cliché quotation from other cultural texts can be better understood when traced back to its roots in Baroque garden architecture.

In the decaying splendor of Baroque garden ruins or later pleasure gardens, the ornamental hermit breathes authenticity - the mediation of the incommunicable - in the designed setting, evoking the role of non-player characters (NPCs) in video games. Functioning as a narrative persona, the hermit solely possesses a function predetermined by his lord. In this context, the function serves as a personality while the actual personality is suspended by their service role. In-game, hermit NPCs are often limited to the role of quest givers due to their programmed routines, acting both as an element of landscape animation and as embedded servants to the player.

Baroque Gardens are enclosed by sunken walls called Ha Has, creating seamless views that incorporate shepherds and farmers into the garden’s visual narrative as a living, moving backdrop. This design choice keeps the rural scenery beyond the manicured gardens visually accessible yet physically separate, similar to the boundary at a video game map’s edge where animations repeat in a loop, and the terrain is off-limits to players without exiting the gameplay area. Andri Gerber (2019) highlights the importance of obscuring the boundaries of game worlds and garden landscapes. This blurring aims to make the transition between the cultivated interior and the uncultivated exterior seamless, with unauthorized access points such as modding and glitching representing metaphorical keys to these otherwise restricted areas (Hawranke 2019).

Moreover, the contradiction and dichotomy between the constructs of nature, wilderness, and artificiality is evident in both Baroque garden designs and the virtual realms of digital open worlds. The idea of static, frozen nature, which creates national identity in its idealized representation, reduces the wilderness to its visual value and renders it ahistorical (Bonner 2023). While Baroque gardens strive to mimic nature and, to a certain extent, wilderness, they distinctly demarcate themselves from the very elements they seek to emulate. Conversely, digital open worlds merge all elements into a showcase of the anthroposphere, where the code-based hyperrealism knows no non-artificiality and at the same time claims a realism of its own (Bonner 2023). Consequently, the digital wilderness is always a staged garden. In some cases, paths may navigate through it, yet the dense underbrush remains impenetrable (*SpellForce 3*, Grimlore Games 2017), while in others, it is entirely open for exploration (*Kingdom Come Deliverance*, Warhorse Studios 2018). The digital gardens of open-world games thus present an unambiguous playground that beckons civilization, extraction, and plunder. The wilderness serves as a backdrop where humans, especially the male adventurers of the last few centuries, find challenges. It is the domain of mythopoeists, a playground where expeditions go missing and need to be rediscovered; a stage where romanticized concepts of *errors* and *terrors* materialize.

The idea of a playground deserves thoughtful consideration. Class, race, gender, sexuality, and nationality, along with many other aspects, are deeply intertwined with nature and its dramatic transformation over the past five hundred years (Moore 2016). This relationship extends into the concept of playgrounds, which embody not only the spirit of playfulness but also the dynamics of control and domination. The presence of physical playgrounds reflects societal class divisions, encapsulating not just nature but also the essence of play. Originally, these spaces were developed to redirect worker's children from the hazards of the street, coinciding with the rise of automobile use. This brings to the forefront the necessity to scrutinize access to digital playgrounds and the rules that dictate their use.

For us, it is essential to stop playing along and to seek alternatives to the romantically regressive, Eurocentric and capitalist concepts of the garden as a hedonistic amusement park for colonial power fantasies. What can we learn, for example, from the concepts of gardens and gardening in non-European cultures, such as the Chinampas in Mexico? And how might such a garden concept be translated into *gamescapes*? How can we avoid old dichotomies and find a utopian paradise for all that knows neither exteriority nor exclusion? The reflections presented here are intended as a starting point for a critical but also playful debate that does not necessarily follow the rules of classical academia and delves into the realm of game art. It is a call for participation for researchers, game designers, artists, and all those who have exposed the supposed paradises of virtual open worlds as a deception and are looking for not only new pathways, but also a new perspective on digital landscapes as playgrounds, beyond the hegemonic Baroque garden-induced notion of order, nature, and play.

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