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Pixelscape: natural beauty and critical videogaming

The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound, and little is needed to prompt one to associate this wound with the violence that the artwork – a pure artifact – inflicts on nature. (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 61)

As a player of the immensely popular and influential massively multiplayer online role playing game *World of Warcraft*, I have marveled at the radiant beauty of an object such as an in-game waterfall and taken a “screenshot” to commemorate it. This practice of commemoration reveals how intricately technology and natural beauty are intertwined; homage is paid to nature through technology itself. The question remains, however, whether this homage constitutes a contemplative relationship or simply a recognition of novelty.

Typically, the beautiful images do not give pause for further reflection on the mutually constitutive relationship between nature and technology, but are simply taken for granted. Synthetic worlds may also function as an exercise in hyperreal overindulgence, creating extravagant virtual panoramas simply because it is possible. Through a careful study of Adorno’s writings on the art object, I will consider how a player might utilize virtual landscapes as objects for thinking through the possibilities of both new media and the environments in which we live. I will utilize Adorno’s writings as a guide for investigating virtual spaces and to suggest ways of exploring synthetic worlds as objects of criticism and deep contemplative potential.