

Environmental Hostility and Regional Specificity in the Post-Apocalyptic Noongar¹ Landscape of *Broken Roads*

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INTRODUCTION

In Australia, colonial views of the environment posit land as an exploitable resource to be farmed and mined, “untouched” wilderness to be tamed through landscaping and city-building, hostile wastelands to be traversed cautiously, and property to be owned—all the while refusing to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ dispossession and displacement in these processes (Collingwood-Whittick 2008). Literature is beginning to reveal how these tropes are being reproduced and inform landscape representations in videogames (Barnes 2021; Bird 2021; Brazelton 2020; Magnet 2006; Murray 2018; 2024), and to address implications of videogame representations of the environment on the real world and vice versa (Abraham 2022; Aghoro 2025; Chang 2011; 2019; Nelson 2023; op de Beke et al. 2024). This includes a growing understanding of videogame landscapes as highly ideological sites, urging increased attention to the analysis of colonial tropes in these representations (Murray 2018, chap. 3; 2024; Magnet 2006).

This paper contributes to this research by examining colonial undercurrents—and possible departures from such—in landscape representations in the Australian narrative-driven role-playing game *Broken Roads* (Drop Bear Bytes 2024). *Broken Roads* is set on post-apocalyptic Noongar Country, in the distinctly Australian landscape of the Wheatbelt Region of Western Australia. Specifically, I argue that representations of environmental hostility reproduce colonial tropes of alien, “exotic” landscapes, while a focus on regional specificity challenges these tropes. The tension between these contrasting interpretations also highlights the inherent complexity in performing (de)colonial readings of videogame landscapes.

To examine coloniality in *Broken Roads*, I build on Murray’s (2018, chap. 3) view of “landscapes as ideology” (142) and Magnet’s (2006) notion of the “gamescape” (142). Both argue that landscapes in videogames are intentionally constructed within—and representative of—a specific set of values, ideals and relations, and thus work to “naturalize” (Murray 2018, 142) these. Grounded in the idea that real-world and representations of landscapes encode notions of power relations (Mitchell 2002; Nelson 2023, 3), the gamescape in *Broken Roads* functions as a lens through which to examine

social and cultural relationships with the environment in Australia's settler-colonial imaginary, where "landscape has always occupied a central place" (Collingwood-Whittick 2008, 59).

Drawing on the gamescape, literature on Australian landscape representations in other media and decolonial game studies, I will offer a close analysis of the gamescape in *Broken Roads*. The game's post-apocalyptic setting and representations of heat and drought mirror early colonial ideas of "exotic" environments as alien, hostile and uninhabitable (Horn 2017, 8). Furthermore, as this hostility is conveyed textually rather than visually or mechanically, a sense of distance is created between the characters/player and the landscape. Rather than enabling the player, through their avatar, to build a relationship with the landscape, it functions as a backdrop for the narrative and character movements, again signifying a colonial, detached rather than relational conceptualisation of the environment (Barnes 2021, 79).

However, *Broken Roads* also departs from colonial tropes. It is precisely through the detachment of the player from the landscape that colonial views of the land as something that exists to be consumed and reshaped are defied, for example, through a very limited capacity to exploit natural resources (Brazelton 2020). More importantly, *Broken Roads* focuses on the regional and cultural specificity of Noongar Country. For instance, consistency in the visual rendering of the landscapes across the game world favours regional specificity of Noongar Country over the spectacle a host of "exotic" landscapes may provide (Bird 2021). Additionally, Indigenous representation is intimately tied to the representation of landscapes in videogames, which have commonly erased Indigenous peoples from virtual environments, or have opted for generic, stereotypical and culturally disconnected representations (Bird 2021; Lagace 2018).² The inclusion of playable and non-playable Noongar characters, Noongar language and references to Noongar culture and knowledges in *Broken Roads* highlights cultural specificity and asserts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' survivance in the environment of the post-apocalyptic future—another space that is dominated by colonial tropes of erasure, dispossession and extinction (Topaum 2025).

In settler colonial contexts such as Australia, ongoing, critical work is required to reveal how coloniality as ideology informs our creation and understanding of cultural texts, and to investigate possibilities and limitations in departing from a colonial understanding of the world. Working from a settler-migrant position, I acknowledge that this can be an unsettling and challenging task, however one that we must participate in. Through my analysis of landscape in *Broken Roads*, I hope to demonstrate some of the many nuances and contradictions inherent in such an enquiry.

ENDNOTES

¹ Noongar Country is located in the south-western corner of Western Australia, where Noongar people have lived and taken care of the land for at least 45,000 years. Noongar people are made up of fourteen language groups, each of which has deep connections to a different geographic area (South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council 2025).

² I acknowledge the tensions inherent in discussing Indigenous representation through the lens of landscape, especially in the Australian context, in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' treatment has been likened to that of animals (Wewer 2018). However, excluding Noongar people from a discussion of Noongar Country also risks replicating colonial practices of separating and erasing First Nations peoples from their lands. Thus, while I will discuss Noongar representation in the context of regional

specificity, I endeavour to do so with care, and within the limitations of my settler positionality.

BIO

Ambrin Hasnain (she/her) is a PhD student at the University in Melbourne on Wurundjeri Country. With a strong interest in decolonial theory and anticolonial movements, Ambrin is interested in understanding how coloniality informs everyday practices, creative expressions and cultural products. Her PhD project examines colonial and decolonial tropes and practices in Australian video games. She has a background in English literature, cultural studies, and arts and cultural management.

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