

Maker's Report

The Bower of Bliss explores a central tension in early modern literature: can pleasure exist for its own sake, or must it always serve an external purpose? In Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the Bower represents autonomous pleasure (beauty without moral instruction) and it must be destroyed because it refuses to justify itself through virtue. My game recreates this tension through a productive contradiction: it presents itself as autonomous pleasure (a garden exploration game with satisfying interactions) while simultaneously serving a pedagogical purpose, teaching about early modern attitudes toward pleasure.

The game's meta-narrative operates on multiple levels. During exploration, players experience autonomous pleasure tending flowers, activating fountains, and talking of other characters. There are no scores, timers, or explicit goals in the game. The Palmer's commentary seems dismissible. But at the choice moment, the game reveals its instructional framework: Palmer demands players "do what is right," exposing that this was always a moral test with a predetermined correct answer.

If players choose to destroy the Bower following Spenser's logic, the game itself progressively breaks. The entire system will collapse. Players don't just read about the loss of autonomous pleasure; they experience it as the game becomes unplayable. If players preserve the Bower, the game remains exploratory, showing what's possible when pleasure needs no justification. (But eventually, the player runs out of things to do within a limited and defined bower.) The game represents both material phenomena (gardens, physical destruction) and immaterial ones (philosophical debates), using the crumbling of a digital system to make abstract historical concepts tangible.

The choice of video game as medium is deliberate. Early modern writers like Spenser faced a similar challenge: how to create pleasurable texts (epic poetry, entertaining narratives) in a culture that viewed pleasure-for-its-own-sake as morally dangerous. Spenser's solution was to say that *The Faerie Queene* existed to "fashion a gentleman in virtuous and gentle discipline." Video games today face similar pressures as we see an increase of gamified media for productivity (Duolingo's streaks), educational value (serious games), or self-improvement (fitness trackers).

Pixel art invokes nostalgia for early gaming. Unity's systems (sprites, particle effects, audio) become the (pleasurable) immersive experience that breaks down during destruction, making the abstract concrete. The garden setting references Spenser directly while creating universal experiences of exploration and care, then forces players to destroy what they've tended.

This game targets two overlapping audiences: literature students studying early modern texts and gamers interested in metanarrative experiences. For literature students unfamiliar with games, the interactive format makes Spenser's abstract philosophical arguments experiential. You feel the loss of the Bower rather than just analyzing it textually. For gamers unfamiliar with *The Faerie Queene*, the game reflects on how contemporary anxieties about "productive"

versus "wasteful" leisure have deep historical origins. The pedagogical value exists in the collision of the two: the game only fully makes sense if you understand both the historical context (why Spenser's culture feared autonomous pleasure) and the medium (why breaking the game is meaningful). By forcing players to choose whether beauty needs justification, the game shows how early modern debates about legitimate pleasure continue shaping how we value games, rest, and joy today.