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# Point and Shoot

## Remediating Photography in Gamespace

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From photoblogs to cell phone cameras, digital technology is rapidly and fundamentally changing the cultural practice of photographic representation. At the same time, the remediation of photography, in both technical and cultural modes, is occurring in the digital game. Although conventions surrounding “the camera” have commonly played a role in some game genres, with increased frequency a more literal transposition of the photograph is making its way into the game: from x-treme stunt photography to the shift of the role of photographer from narrative context to play dynamic. How and why is the practice of photography now being performed virtually in the digital game? What does this redundancy teach us about both the cultural role of photography and the evolving medium of the digital game?

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Digital games are commonly mediated through a (more or less) ambient cinematic camera, careful not to draw excess attention, even as it manipulates and defines visual space. This camera’s-eye view of the game experience has been noted in Bolter (1997), Manovich (2002, p. 84), and Järvinen (2002, p. 116) and may even be considered a “cinematic cliché” (Thomas, 2005). When games integrate photographic “flaws,” such as lens flare and lens distortion, we have become so naturalized to viewing through the lens that, rather than detracting from the experience, this enhances a sense of realism. In many games, the player’s role is hybrid: as camera avatar, players not only navigate through the game world, they film it as well. Art artists Sandor and Fron (2001) state, “Like photographers standing before their subjects, engaging the camera in the game world can provide players with a feeling of creative control over the game’s destiny.” They liken the game camera to the player’s shadow, trailing behind and mediating the action.

Recently, much attention has focused on the appropriation of the game camera as a mechanism for creating animated films (machinima). Less common, perhaps, is the use of the camera to create still photos. At first glance, this makes some sense. Photography maintains a strong traditional link to the true event—the recording of the real. There is no real in the videogame (at least not in the traditional sense), so why would there be photography? On the other hand, the practice of photography

within digital games presents affordances and opportunities for representation and expression unique to the genre. Photography here manifests itself in both cultural and technical modes: remediating the screenshot in cultural practice and playing out the technical role of photographic production.

### Remediating the Screenshot

To what extent are screenshots photographs of digital games? These images often serve much the same function as the photo in physical environments: pointing out events and occurrences, documenting a sight seen. Roland Barthes' (1961, p. 5) description of the photograph as an antiphon of "look at this" or "see here" seems to apply to the screenshot just as well. Betsy Book (2003), from her work on "tourism" in virtual worlds, notes that virtual tourists take photos for the same reasons offline tourists do: to commemorate their travels, obtain a visual record of enjoyable experiences, and show evidence of their experiences to friends and family. These three reasons also manifest in still image production found in digital games. In documenting play experiences, players validate these experiences by extending real-world ritual to gamespace, committing game events to memory, and extending this production to social interaction. This can be seen in screenshot galleries documenting significant player milestones, memorable groups, outrageous stunts, and even unique and unusual glitches in the game environment.<sup>1</sup>

If, as Susan Sontag (1977, p. 57) suggests, photography constructs one as a tourist in other people's reality (and one's own), virtual realities are quickly becoming as legitimate as the corporeal world as sites for photographic voyeurism. Player photo galleries now present images of their "Trip to Thailand" and "Bill and Sue's Visit" intermixed with screenshots from *World of Warcraft*. If the process and ritual behind this image making is similar, the players themselves are validating the reality of their subjects simply by creating a document of these experiences. In this sense, players are taking real photos, just in virtual spaces. The image itself does not discriminate with regard to the perceived reality of its contents (and in truth, we could argue to the artifice of photographs constructed in actual space just as readily). Photos have become the norm for the way things are supposed to appear—our popular representational ideals increasingly based on a lens-centric aesthetic. If traditional photography allows us to "make real" (Sontag, 1977, p. 161) our physical world in this sense, the same process extends to these player snapshots. In fact, in the designed space of the digital game, these images have the ability, to some extent, to transfer the power to construct reality from the virtual world creator to the player—allowing them to capture and reframe the experience.

Screenshot galleries are not new; probably the most popular formal examples relate to Maxis' *The Sims*, a game that facilitates image capture and gallery building. Players not only used these tools for simple documentation but quickly seized

this as a narrative tool, creating everything from photo-essays to comics. Sandor and Fron (2001) describe this appropriation as “performance photography,” even though the resultant images are still contextualized in the work as screenshots. Katie Salen (2002) calls it “transformative play,” reappropriating the game to accommodate creative expression:

Players began to play *The Sims* in very unusual ways, in order to compose the exact “shots” they wanted. . . . Strategies for successful gameplay, such as keeping game characters happy, were superceded by strategies for positioning objects and characters in a scene.

In other words, the production of these still images extended beyond expected gameplay into independent player production.

Across games and play communities, there is an increased blurring between screenshot and photo aesthetics. To this end, the ability to remediate the game camera and manipulate point of view is essential: Players gain creative control over composition and subject and can thus make creative decisions in the work. This is significant because it allows players to create original works even within existing works that do not occur in other media (e.g., a film still is not often seen as a photo because it is recognized as part of a larger work and there is little creative control beyond the found object). Although the mechanism is sometimes crude, Book (2003) observes: “Just as there is an art to taking a good offline photograph, there is an art to taking a good screen capture. . . . Capturing a desired composition requires some degree of skill and technical knowledge of the online camera controls.” More often than not, the intent and result of these images relates back to photographic representation rather than real-world objects (photos as objects notwithstanding). The remediation of photo aesthetic can be seen in the composition of the shots (e.g., Book notes that many virtual-world screen captures recall the composition of tourist photographs, such as avatar “posed” in front) and can be inferred by the way the game interface is conspicuously absent in the displayed game images. The removal of visible interface elements is particularly revealing in terms of remediated photo aesthetics, as a more accurate visual depiction of a game image would be to contextualize the screenshot within the interface a particular game. Images without interfaces to some extent deny their origin, instead referencing how an image is supposed to look—like a photo. The resulting image is presented not as an inferior representation of our reality but as a realistic representation of an alternate reality. As noted by Lev Manovich (2002, p. 202), this is not so much referencing the real as referencing a representation of the real (in this case a photograph).

Glitch photography in particular has become an interesting blend of expressive and reference practice. Player images often present visually interesting or unusual flaws or glitches in the game errors found in the course of play or, in some cases, specifically created or recreated for the sake of the image. On one hand, glitch photography

demonstrates a Barthes-style “was here/saw this” aspect of basic documentation. The game flaw in itself is not necessarily an unusual event, but the form it takes can often inspire player image making. The images captured go beyond a simple recording, yielding unique and expressive flaws in the system. They demonstrate both a desire to share a unique subject and the ability to make creative decisions in its presentation.

There is a parallel relationship in motives and meanings between this kind of player production and what would commonly be seen as glitch artwork. According to Jonas Downey (2002), a glitch work involves “a personal awareness of computing and technology.” Part of the incentive of preserving these often ephemeral bugs lies in an affinity for the underlying code behind digital representation and a recognition and appreciation for its failures. According to Eman Moradi (2004, p. 51), glitches reveal the power of technology, and in exposing their underlying structure (a structure of which many gamers are aware), may be positively fetishized. The results of this exposition are experienced and appreciated in their own right, similar to how one might engage with an artwork. In the realm of glitch aesthetics, it is a “techno-fetishistic” or “exploratory” motive that tends to be more prominent than the actual subject or content (Moradi, 2004, pp. 14-15). This would appear to align with game glitch images that appear on gallery and game sites. The glitch images showcase the talent of the player to recognize and appreciate the artful glitch and speak to a greater technical appreciation that sees this as relatively unique and engaging. It may also allow players to demonstrate skill in recreating a specific aberration and/or to showcase their technical knowledge as to the source of the game flaw. It is important to note that even in these scenarios, it is the process of selecting a particularly appealing glitch, adjusting composition, and/or adding or removing elements to enhance the overall effect that attracts attention to the image and, by extension, the still image creator.

Sontag (1977, pp. 155-156) also notes that photography can be a means of appropriating or gaining power over the photographic subject. This idea of acquisition has interesting extensions into in-game photography. Sontag suggests several ways the photographer may extend and acquire a subject, including as a surrogate possession, as a consumer of an event or experience, and as information distilled from experience. In the case of game photography, player screenshots can be viewed as surrogate possessions in that they present a means of appropriation within the normally defined context of a constructed game experience. Many “trophy” photos players create to document particular victories or gatherings reflect the consumer viewpoint to the experience—in a sense, they are the receipt or passport stamp to show value has been received in return for hours of gameplay effort and careful character crafting in the nontangible game environment. Player screenshots may also be highly informational, although this would naturally present an even further reduction from real-world experience. Outside Sontag’s framework, I would suggest the mastery of the means to create images, be it through a computer’s screen capture function or through a more sophisticated in-game mechanic, also demonstrates the player’s power over the game subject, just as in real life the ability to master the technology of the camera reflects the capacity of one to “own” the experience.

What can make the association with in-game image creation and photography particularly contentious is that the photo is traditionally seen to have a particular and unique tie to the real. Barthes (1961) argues although we may question the interpretation of the photograph, what cannot be questioned is what appears in the image: At some point, the light that has created the images has come from the object represented. There is, in a sense, a cord linking the representation and the referent (p. 76). This had given photography a unique status over other systems of representation—a perceived indexical quality. However, it is not difficult to relate in-game screenshot or image creation to photographic practice, particularly in a postmodern sense, by highlighting the process and construction of the image and the importance of photo aesthetics. One of the hallmarks of postmodern photographic work is its focus on the practice and aesthetics of photography as opposed to photographs, designed to be seen rather than seen through (Batchen, 1997, pp. 215-216). The perceived reality of the photo now falls into question. Geoffery Batchen (1997, p. 207) notes the change is both technological (e.g., in our ability to construct images that simply look like photographs) and epistemological (relating to a change in culture, knowledge, and ethics). In particular, digitization abandons the rhetoric of truth maintained by the photograph and seeks other representational imperatives (p. 211).

These are some of the ideas in what is now referred to as post-photography. Even if a photo is not altered, the idea that photos can be altered dethrones the medium from its role as protectorate of the real. Furthermore, Batchen (1997) cites a cultural shift in our experience of the mediated world: the collapse of the real into its simulations, the hyperreal (p. 207). What is real and what is constructed is not only becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate, but culturally we are less inclined to make such a binary distinction. Tourists pose in front of a model of the pyramids in Las Vegas and get some sense of the thrill of travel without the inconvenience of actually going to a foreign country. Gamers can storm a recreated beach in a World War II game without the trauma of actual war. What all this does allow for is a reexamination of the role of the photo and new possibilities for what a photo can be—including, for example, a screen capture. That the photo is not of something real is a problem only if the photo is seen to operate according to the logic of transparency (Bolter & Grusin, 2001, p. 110). Player screenshots do not necessarily make any claim to be real photographs, and they do not have to. That they serve a similar function, accommodate expression and creative control, and co-opt the visual language of the photograph speaks to the essential photographic quality of these still images.

### **Photo as Play**

Photography is an inherently gamelike practice. Composition is rule based (albeit with rules that can be broken), and the act of photography is a strategic endeavor. Photography supports collecting and exploring: both popular activities in digital

games. To a certain extent, photography even involves “twitch” skills. Metaphorically, there is an extended metaphor connecting photography and the most popular video game dynamic, gunplay:

Shoot and shot are obvious examples of this. A snapshot was a shot fired quickly, and without careful aim. Cameras have triggers or firing mechanisms, though button and shutter (release) are less antiquated and less militaristic terms. People load cameras with cartridges or magazines of film; they cock shutters, and they fire off films. Gun-shy (of animals, nervous of gunfire or frightened by guns) predates camera-shy by some 40 years, and may have provided the model for its formation. It would be dangerous to take such analogies and connections too far, but the parallelism or deep metaphor can be extended a little, and seen in images of someone pointing his or her camera at someone else and aiming it, or of someone being the target of paparazzi, or of cameras being wielded, carried or slung over one’s shoulder, like weapons. (Moon, 2000)

This may sound trivial, but it has implications for integrating photography into games, allowing these games to work within the dominant paradigm while integrating an artistic rather than militaristic mode of interaction. Setting the logic of interaction through metaphor is such a familiar experience in computing that it brings its own transparency to the experience, with the potential to create the feeling of natural interaction with the system. However, it is important to recognize that even when reframing this context, an underlying power dynamic remains, a way of approaching particular subjects as things to target, capture, and “own.”

Traditionally, games that have integrated photography have taken what I would term a content-centered approach. With content-centered goals, players need to capture a certain image or object for maximum points (e.g., in *Pilotwings64*’s, 1996, espionage missions, Sierra’s update of *Leisure Suit Larry*, 2004, and certain missions in Rockstar Games’s *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). Purely content- (or target-) based photography games are generally removed from any meaningful photographic practice, although they can still incorporate finding and collecting behavior and allow for some creative control. For example, in *Pilotwings64*, players do have the option to deviate from the intended subject, however limited: Although your pictures are evaluated in terms of the content objectives, you can ignore this and take photos of whatever you want (these images going into an in-game photo album). Games may also co-opt the tools or form of photography in a way almost entirely abstracted from the practice. In one example, Techmo’s *Fatal Frame* series uses photography in a play context, but in these games, the camera is wielded more like a traditional weapon (it is used to blind enemies and magnify the game environment).

What are more interesting (for the sake of this work) are practice-based games, games that use the rules and practice of photography as a framework for play. One example is the children’s game *Pokemon Snap* (1999), for Nintendo 64, which includes an assessment of photographic technique, incorporating rules of amateur portrait and candid photography. At the end of each level, pictures are judged and given points based on size, pose, and technique (simple composition, such as centering) and

whether other “Pokemon of the same type are in the shot” (forcing players to attend to background-foreground issues transferable to real-world photography). There is also the incentive to attempt to capture images of characters in spontaneous action (Sandor & Fron, 2001), incorporating rules of informal photography rather than photojournalism. One possible limitation, in terms of exploiting the “gameness” of photography, would be in confining players on a track rather than giving in to a feeling of explore and find. This reveals a persistent tie to content-based games, where the track may serve to enhance experience by limiting frustration in locating content targets in a freeform environment. The use of photographic practice in Pokemon Snap as a play mechanic works particularly well within the Pokemon franchise (centered on collecting) while also constructing a “correct” way of viewing for the player with both practical and ideologic ties to the external world.

A more sophisticated example is James Thrush’s *Wild Earth* (2005), in which you play a photojournalist on assignment in the Serengeti (see Figure 1). *Wild Earth* innovates in several areas: The camera functionality is accurate and based on actual equipment, allowing a full range of options relating to depth of focus, exposure, and so on. The scoring mechanism is based on a blend of content (taking pictures of specific animals and objects in the environment) and practice (integrating some basic composition) criteria, adding a strategic element to the game.

Although the environment design attempts to capture some of the beauty and mystery of the Serengeti, there is in effect little comparison between the experience of the actual Serengeti or even necessarily the experience of photographing the actual Serengeti. Instead, the reward is with what accuracy the game-created images reflect real photos of the place. Technique and skill of production supercede expression in this intentional space, and the images created refer more to photos of places than the places themselves (in this way, they relate to the screen capture as photo). With this in mind, the ability to finely control the camera to manipulate the visual result is essential—allowing the player to exercise creative decision making in his or her image creation that may or may not support content goals but that certainly plays up the fun of creating interesting and pleasing photos. Players may not experience the pleasures of acquiring the environment to the extent a real photographic experience would provide. This is an experience not consumed, a possession already attained, and information already summarized. However, the mastery of the photographic process still extends power to the player. The design of *Wild Earth* also supports the thrill of discovery and exploration, allowing players more freedom in choosing their subjects and progression.

The role of photojournalist is also played in MIC Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s prototype *Eyewitness* (2002; unpublished). This documentary game recreates the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, with the player assigned to document atrocities committed. The game’s expanded evaluative framework for documentary gameplay remains unclear (because of limited access to the prototype)—for example, whether a player receives more points for certain types of shots or perhaps points for the recreation of an iconic shot (while confronted with the 30 other shots taken to yield that one). Still, what is interesting about this work is that through the photographic play dynamic, gamers

**Figure 1**  
**Stalking Photographic Prey in**  
**James Thrush's Wild Earth**

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deconstruct the process of photojournalism, getting under the hood in the game of constructed reality. This provides a kind of meta-realism, both real and a critique of the real (Manovich, 2002, p. 208). In constructing such an experience, it is also relevant to consider how photography both allows for participation and conversely creates alienation between the image maker and subject (Sontag, 1977, p. 167). This may be a particular issue with regard to documentary-type games, where the desire to engage a player in an interactive representation must be considered in light of the tendency for photography to distance one from the subject.

Through these examples, we can posit several advantages to co-opting photography as a play dynamic in digital games. As revealed in *Eyewitness*, this play structure can enhance photo literacy by bringing players behind the scenes to the construction of the photographic image. In *Pokemon Snap*, we can use the game to teach basic visual composition and ways of seeing. And in a game like *Wild Earth*, we can simulate technical and compositional strategies associated with fields such as photojournalism and can help develop a limited aptitude and appreciation for the field. In terms of the enjoyment of photographic practice, the relative reality of the gamespace is less important than the ability to master the strategy, discovery, and skill central to the fun of successfully constructing the look of a professional photo (much as similar skills present in traditional shooter games recreate the fun and excitement of cinematic gunplay, predominantly divorced from the reality of killing). Most importantly, the performance of

photography casts a critical perspective on the process of media production, opening up interesting possibilities in relation to social and activist content. However, we should also not ignore issues of power and control present in photography that may also extend into this gamespace. Games that do attempt to recreate the practice of photography present both an initial representation and a constructed experience of re-representing a photographic subject. This may manifest itself in how the game establishes and evaluates the rules of photography (e.g., in *Eyewitness* or *Pokemon Snap*), the social construction of the player-photographer (beyond tourist and/or photojournalist), and/or the presentation of so-called appropriate subjects for photography (e.g., *Wild Earth's Serengeti*).

## Conclusion

The remediation of photography, through both technical and cultural modes, presents important questions regarding the evolving role of photography and the maturing medium of the digital game. One of these is the potential for, and parameters of, “photographic art” in the videogame. When Jon Haddock’s *Isometric Screenshots* (screenshots recreating iconic photos using game-style graphics) was produced, it was the lack of expressivity in games that brought out the meaning in the work. It was the limitations of the visual vocabulary of games, in contrast to the expressive power of the photo, that provided a contrast to the sociopolitical content. As games grow more sophisticated, as they become both more photorealistic and more prone to spectacular and beautiful failure, does the expressive potential expand in the genre? This may be contingent on the ability for the game photographer to bring creative control to the work—that there remains in the game room to explore a basic gameness of photography and a post-photographic aesthetic of images that look like photos and reference photographic practice. Creative expression can occur both through the remediation of the screenshot and through the use of photography as a play structure. Although game photos remain a representation (through remediation) of the technique of representation, photography nonetheless carves out a space for itself within play, bringing new practice to the digital game.

## Note

1. Unfortunately, game companies are unenthusiastic about granting copyright permission for unofficial screen captures (particularly derivative and glitch images), even in the context of scholarly publication.

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