Enacting Photojournalism in Videogames

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Martin Hand argues, "Photography may be everywhere, but it is not everywhere in the same way" (Hand 2012). In postmedia ecologies, where the core practices, technologies, and values of photography can detach from the materiality of a physical camera, photographies are assembled as a set of "integrated sociotechnical practices— practices which combine discursive, material and image-based elements in potentially different ways, framed by historically specific, diverse interests and contexts" (Hand 2012). In-game photography— the practice of taking photographic images within videogame environments—is no exception.

Although ostensibly a marginal form of player-creation activity, in-game photography has taken on a variety of shapes, even within its short span. One such shape is the performative enactment of photography practices (Poremba 2007; Gerling 2018; Möring and de Mutiis 2019), digital and non-digital, in game environments. In their most literal form, photographic enactments involve the recreation of specific aesthetics, styles, practices, and known photographs[1]. On the level of photographic practice, there are of course examples of photographic gameplay, in both stand-alone games[2] and as supporting elements or missions in games. We can also see a number of explorations that adopt the shape of photojournalism, contrasting the photographer's 'real world' and 'in-game' practices. A key part of this trope is the paratextual framing around the photography itself, typically in the form of an article contrasting the photographer's real-world practice with their (often first) encounters with in-game photography.

This paper will examine several of these photojournalism enactments(May 2021; Kojima Productions 2020; Nudd 2021; Raab and Gilbertson 2014), including projects by Gilbertson/Time (2014), Rowbottom/Kojima (2020), and Potter and Piccolmini/Activision (2021). Using an approach that combines both frame analysis (Kuypers 2009) and new materialist rhetoric (Gries 2015; Rickert 2013), it presents an analysis of both the active and ambient framing of this work and its paratexts, within a network of actors and agencies. This analysis is situated within postmedia and technical image discourse (Kim 2018; Manovich 2014; Flusser 2000; 2011).

Bridging enactments like these commonly serve as a means of validating (or refusing) photography within games as legitimate *as* photography. Although many engagements focus on first reactions and superficial observations, they stage an evaluation that occurs from within particular epistemic cultures, and as such reinforce distinct understandings of what matters to practice. Most importantly, these enactments allow real-world photojournalism to serve as a means of validating, and imparting value to, the virtual worlds of videogames. A game must be *worthy* of capture, and the measure

of that worth is in photographs. But we should be critical of viewing these enactments as necessarily warranting in-game photography, and attentive to the ways that such projects entangle corporate actors and structures of power (Möring and Leino 2016).

As in-game photography develops as a form, we can see an eclectic entanglement of agencies, platforms, and values, often emerging from different epistemic cultures (including photojournalism, professional, amateur and street photography) but oriented towards specific interests and contexts. These shapes are simultaneously familiar and alien, logical and discordant, but ones in which we might recognize a pattern of entities and stabilities that tend to emerge in particular instances of photography. By exploring the dynamics of these reassemblies, we can both better critique, and better envision, in-game photography in novel and transformative ways.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Examples include Kent Sheely's *World War II Redux* (2009) series, Roc Herms' (2015) re-enactments of Ai Weiwei's *Study on Perspective,* and Ollie Ma's *Open World (2016) series.*

[2] Such as the recent critical gem *Umurangi Generation* (Origame Digital, 2020).