

From Movable to Still Images. On the Pictorial Practices of Screenshotting Game Cultures

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INTRODUCTION

Screenshotting games has become a pervasive pictorial practice for players as well as publishers. Most AAA games now afford a photo mode that freezes the gameplay to encourage players to take pictures of virtual environments and character models. On the one hand, screenshotting is used to share specific situations in games with others, e.g. to capture achievements and easter eggs or to criticize bugs and glitches, on the other hand, screenshotting acts as user-generated advertising on social media and is used by publishers to promote their games in online stores. Either way, screenshots are digital images of *and* about games, in the sense of what Mitchell (2005, 211) calls “metapictures of media” that reflect and even theorize, in this case, the mediality of games. At a crossroads of different digital media where movable images, i.e. games, turn into still images, i.e. screenshots, these metapictures materialize and impart knowledge about the digital medium they are from and about, e.g. about its gameplay, graphics, user interfaces, player characters, playstyles etc., providing an insightful perspective on game cultures.

This may be the reason why screenshots have attracted interest from game studies, intersecting with the emerging field of screenshot studies (Gerling et al. 2023). However, as most studies focus on what defines in-game photography and how games afford taking pictures (e.g. Giddings 2013; Rizov 2021), a qualitative analysis is called for that empirically explores the pictorial practices and aesthetic forms of screenshots in their sociocultural contexts in order to scrutinize how these still images are used to observe game cultures. How screenshots of games are produced, presented and

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received is still underexplored, aside from a few initial contributions (de Mutiis 2023; Poremba 2023).

With our praxiographic project, we want to contribute to this ongoing research by exploring how games are screenshotted and then presented in form of still images. Therefore, we identify, collect, and analyze pictorial phenomena of screenshots that are taken in 360° digital environments, e.g. by communities like the *Society of Virtual Photographers*, art projects like *Down and Out in Los Santos* or several subreddits like *r/easteregg*, *r/screenshotsarehard*, and *r/Trophies*.

By praxiographically analyzing visual artefacts (Bueger/Gadinger 2018, 152), our aim is to probe for pictorial practices that materialize in screenshots and theorize games. In accordance with Möring (2023, 217), “the way a game is played is inscribed in the making of in-game photographs” and can therefore be reconstructed by analyzing screenshots. This implies that “screenshots [...] are [...] documents of a game culture and belong to a specific cultural scene” (Gerling 2018, 156), meaning that screenshots capture the media aesthetics of games as well as the practices of playing, materializing game and play in one digital image.

TRANSFORMING MOVABLE IMAGES

At this cross-media crossroads, games are selected, captured, and then turned into screenshots, transforming movable images into still images that can be seen but not acted on anymore, disrupting all practices of playing – at least for a moment. The former “space-image” is now an “image-space” that may showcase an illusion of spatiality, e.g. through central perspective and/or shading, but does not simulate “the experience of motion as navigation” anymore, as Günzel (2008, 172) notes.

However, these still images now afford new pictorial practices, e.g. cropping, storing, and circulating the picture. Hence, screenshots win on mobility, compensating for all the respective losses in navigability and operativity. Generally, screenshots are taken to facilitate the circulation of games. Virtual worlds are screenshotted to capture instances that are otherwise not easily accessible and communicable, e.g. seeking sights in open-world games, recording temporal events like earning achievements or trophies, coming across glitches or bugs. Presenting screenshots on social media is a “communicative practice” (Frosh 2019, 84) to share these game cultures with others.

PRESENTING GAME CULTURES

Screenshots fulfil various functions as cultural content for online communication. By collecting and coding about 1.500 screenshots for our project, we identified three major presentation practices, namely documenting, advertising, and criticizing, that are most commonly used to exhibit game cultures online:

- Documenting: Screenshots are used to document pictorial environments and events that are otherwise fast-moving and ephemeral (Frosh 2019). For example, during the corona pandemic, street photographers such as Nick Fabian, Craig Whitehead, and many others took screenshots in games instead of photographs outdoors to avoid infection. The game became a place to capture the behavior patterns of NPCs. The street photographers shared their screenshots on Instagram under the hashtag *#virtualstreetphotography* to

present personal moments with virtual people in games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018).

- Advertising: Screenshots are used to advertise digital products with promotional pictures that are frequently manipulated to appeal to consumers. Promotional pictures that exaggerate a game's graphics are commonly called "bullshots" (Švelch 2021, 563), a portmanteau of 'bullshit' and 'screenshot'. Game publishers may hire professional screenshot artists such as Guillaume Peronnin, Petri Levälähti or Sebastian Gestblom to create promotional pictures that favorably showcase the visual design of game environments and character models.
- Criticizing: Screenshots are used to criticize games through "the media-reflexive practices of pictorial picture critique" (Pauliks/Ruchatz 2021, 119). With screenshots, users exhibit and emphasize pictorial flaws of games on social media. For example, in the case of *Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy – The Definitive Edition* (Grove Street Games 2021) and *The Last of Us Part 1* (Naughty Dog 2023) users compared screenshots of the remastered version to the original game to complain about weird-looking in-game models and other graphical glitches.

CONCLUSION

At the crossroads of digital media, movable images are standing still, meaning that screenshots capture and showcase the media aesthetics of games but lose movability over mobility. By subtracting playability, screenshots foreground and showcase the pictoriality of games, condensing continuous space-images into image fragments. An in-depth analysis might investigate how screenshots compensate and simulate movability, e.g. by being serialized, displaying motion blur etc. Screenshots are used to highlight different media aesthetic aspects of games, e.g. documenting the beauty of virtual environments, advertising a game's graphics or criticizing bugs and glitches. While these are the most common forms of communicating with screenshots online, there are further presentation practices at play that can be explored, e.g. when screenshots are presented in art galleries or scientific papers.

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