

ARTISTIC IN-GAME PHOTOGRAPHS AS MEDIA OF CARE

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I propose to look at artistic in-game photographs (e.g. Poremba 2007; Giddings 2013; Gerling 2018; Möring and De Mutiis 2019; Švelch 2021; Zylinska 2023; Gerling u. a. 2023) through the lens of care ethics. The central argument is that many works from the brief history of artistic in-game photography can be understood as media of care because they exhibit specific care structures and participate in contemporary care discourses—thematically, structurally, or materially.

The COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly elevated public perception of video games as media of care, making them visible to broader audiences as spaces for social connection, political protest, and self-care during lockdowns like e.g. *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* (Nintendo EPD 2020). This research extends this understanding to photographic practices within games, demonstrating how in-game photographs articulate pressing social questions and make marginalized interests visible.

The analysis combines game studies, photography theory, and feminist care ethics, building on work in existential phenomenology (Leino 2013) and care ethics (Fisher and Tronto 1990; Puig de la Bellacasa 2011; The Care Collective 2020). The most popular definition of care then is „a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher and Tronto 1990). On the basis of this definition, I distinguish two major care structures (Möring 2022):

Existential Care is derived from a game’s gameplay condition (Leino 2009, 2013) and the structurally inscribed responsibility of players for their freedom as players and the successful continuation of a given game. Access to the game’s image world depends on the survival of the player character or fulfillment of the gameplay conditions. In viewing this as an existential care aspect not merely of the game but also the game’s visual level allows me to extend Möring’s notion of the „Conditional Cyberimage“ (Möring 2023). This care structure is fundamental to most forms of in-game photography, as photographers must first keep their avatars alive to access

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photographic locations. This is even the case when they use a photo mode that allows to suspend the gameplay condition.

Relational Care, derived from Puig de la Bellacasa's „Matters of Care“ (2011), describes how games become embedded in care ecologies extending beyond the ludic context. In-game photographs become nodes where different interests intersect and marginalized concerns receive attention and visibility.

For this paper I aim to analyze key works of artistic in-game photography through media-aesthetic and photography-theoretical analysis, including: Joanna Zylinska's *Flowcuts* (2020, 2021) from *The Last of Us Remastered* (Naughty Dog 2014); Pascal Greco's *Place(s)* (2022) from *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019); *The Edge of the World* (Maximova 2021); Marie-Lena Höftmann's *Women of Sekiro* (2020) from *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (From Software 2019); Thomas Spies' *Americana* (2019), and Lorna Ruth Galloway's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations in GTA V* (2016).

The analysis identifies several categories through which artistic in-game photographs function as media of care:

Pandemic Images: Works like Zylinska's *Flowcuts* and Greco's *Place(s)* were created during COVID-19 lockdowns when physical travel became impossible. These photographers turned to post-apocalyptic game worlds to continue their practice, creating a form of reverse escapism—engaging with temporarily unreachable realities through virtual photography. Their depopulated landscapes reflect the fragility of care relationships and the precariousness of life under neoliberal capitalism, particularly as critical infrastructures collapsed during the pandemic.

Marginal Spaces: Natalie Maximova's works document the edges of virtual worlds—spaces that should remain invisible, breaking the illusion of perfectly staged photorealistic 3D environments. These media-reflexive works can be understood as acts of care for the medium of video games itself, showing its artistic possibilities and distinguishing it from stigmatizing discourses.

Social and Economic Critique: Höftmann's *Women of Sekiro* addresses gender representation, making visible the few women in the game who are literally marginalized in hard-to-reach background areas. Spies' *Americana* thematize precarious working and living conditions, pointing to the algorithmic nature of both virtual and real-world labor.

Environmental Critique: Galloway's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations in GTA V* combines media reflexivity with environmental criticism through its choice of charcoal screen printing, pointing to the harmful effects of carbon and fossil fuels—the very resources that make video games possible.

This research establishes care as an analytical category for examining artistic in-game photographs, demonstrating how structural conditions of gameplay become effective in photographic practices. It shows how in-game photographs participate in global care discourses around climate crisis, social inequality, and precarity, while problematizing the paradox that video games themselves are part of the criticized exploitation structures. Artistic in-game photography extends far beyond documentary or aesthetic functions. As media of care, these works articulate urgent social questions and give visibility to marginalized interests.

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