

PlayStation Photography Towards an Understanding of Video Game Photography¹

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Abstract The remediation of photography in video games has been growing in the extent of its integration into gameplay, and so merits further discussion. In this chapter, I propose videogame photography to be a continuation of photographic discourse and that its technological and practical specificities can be understood through a discussion of existing knowledge of photography. My goal is to avoid an essentialist view of photography and discuss its remediation in video games as a continuation of photography in general. Moreover, I claim that narrative is of great significance for conceptualising and understanding the remediation of photography in digital game worlds. Finally, I propose a model that builds on current understandings of gamic action and narrative in order to typologise game photography and provide a basis for future research.

Keywords Video game photography, gamic action, perspective, remediation

Video Game Photography

Video game photography is the practice of creating images of game worlds—through incorporated readymade in-game tools, hardware mechanisms (e.g. Nvidia's Ansel), modifying the game or even photographing one's screen. This practice is growing in popularity in one of the most widespread media in contemporary society—video games—and it needs to be positioned in the history and discourse of photography. The aim of this chapter is simple and twofold: first, I argue that photography is more than a practice of producing images and is, in fact, a discourse that requires a context

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in which to operate; second, I claim that video game photography (henceforth, VGP) should be understood in terms of gamic action and narrative in the sense of Alexander R. Galloway's work on games (2006). I posit that VGP, much like traditional forms of photography, is a discourse that is central to our understanding of video games, the use of perspective, and the production of images. In my argument, I will indicate some of the similarities between what will be referred to as traditional, camera-based photography and video game photography. Ultimately, the point is not what the differences and advances in VGP are but what it can tell us about photography as a whole. To do this, I propose a model of understanding VGP (see also Rizov 2017).

Video Game Photography, Aesthetic Logic, and Narrative

Academic work on the field has been limited in number (Poremba 2007; Giddings 2013; Moore 2014; Rokošný 2018; Gerling 2018; Möring and de Mutiis 2018), but efforts have already been made to discuss VGP's ontology (Giddings 2013) and its practice and relation to traditional forms of camera-based photography (Poremba 2007). Most recently, Sebastian Möring and Marco de Mutiis (2018) have proposed a model for understanding VGP in relation to the gameplay condition of a given game. Cindy Poremba has astutely observed the parallels between video game environments and conceptions of the photographer as what Susan Sontag describes as "a tourist in other people's reality" (2008, 33). Furthermore, Poremba examines the forms that the remediation of the photographic medium in video games take, as well as their significance in game space. She does this with an attention to "the fun of successfully constructing the look of a professional photo" (Poremba 2007, 56).

Poremba defines an important distinction: when it comes to the remediation of photography in video games, the actual environment is of little consequence. That is to say, 'actual' photography is not necessarily *about* reality; the fact that it is considered 'indexical' is, as Jacques Rancière points out (2004, 33), a historical shift in discourse. Similar to Olli Leino's discussion of the notion of "the gameplay condition" (2009), if one is looking at games, one must look at the player. Thus, if one is looking at VGP, one must look at the video game photographer. Understood this way, the successful remediation of photography in a video game can be understood as one of practical considerations, and as such is to be determined by the extent to which the photographic actions are carried across into virtual space, rather than the verisimilitude of the virtual. As Poremba makes the parallel to violent shooter games:

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) (Poremba 2007, 56).

Although my primary concern here is not the enjoyment of photographic practice, Poremba points to the *success* of photography's remediation as lying in its practical choices and affordances. Her understanding prioritises photography as a practice, and its material and technological operation—i.e. whether it is based on a photosensitive apparatus or not—as only secondary. By following this approach, I build on Rancière's example of refusing "one of modernism's main theses: [that] the difference between the arts is linked to the difference between their technological conditions or their specific medium or material" (2004, 31). Thus, I argue that photography "was not established as an art on the grounds of its technological nature" (ibid., 33) but rather, it has been formulated as a discourse under what Rancière calls "an aesthetic logic of a mode of visibility" (ibid., 34). In other words, photography is more than just a practice of creating images but an intersection of material reality, aesthetic codifications, and social relations.

In this sense, I posit that the morphing of photography into VGP is to be understood as a continuance, not a rupture, of this aesthetic logic. The symptoms of this 'mode of visibility' have been present for a long time and are only exaggerated in the context of the virtual. For example, according to Vivian Sobchack, photography, broadly speaking, can be understood as a mode of "unprecedented *visibility*" that has been intimately tied to the hegemonic cultural logic of capitalism at any given point in time (emphasis in the original, 2016, 96). In this sense, photography has also been deeply linked with a colonial regime of othering and is intimately interwoven with what Jean-Louis Comolli describes as "a geographical extension of the field of the visible and the representable: [...] the whole world becomes visible at the same time that it becomes appropriatable [sic]" (Comolli as cited in Sobchack 2016, 96). Put simply, photography itself is premised on an unequal relationship between photographer and the subject in the first instance, expressed chiefly through the subject's lack of control over the circulation of their images (Azoulay 2019). For the sake of my argument on VGP, it remains important to stress that the camera remains a tool for the privileged in the process of subordination, control, and their reproduction (see Rizov 2020a). On one level, VGP perpetuates the logic of unprecedented visibility by contributing to the rise of virtual photography (understood here broadly as any photography that happens in a digital environment), thus allowing photography to colonise and function in a new space—the game world. On another level, VGP continues this aesthetic logic

through its operation of photographic techniques rooted in the history of said colonial practices. With regards to the latter aspect of this continuity, Solomon-Godeau claims that the camera is linked to “mastery, possession, appropriation, and aggression” (1991, 181). This continuity in VGP is evident; for example, the camera becomes a weaponised tool, such as in *Bioshock* (2k Boston 2007), or the avatar simply taking photographs of their environment, such as in *Watch Dogs 2*'s (Ubisoft 2016) trophies rewarded for tourist selfies.

An exploration of the use of photography in video games from a purely gamic point of view is bound to omit its discursive aspects. Undoubtedly, “*games are actions*” (emphasis in the original, Galloway 2006, 2) and, according to Espen Aarseth, they are “both object and process [...] they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they *must be played*” (emphasis added by the author, 2001, n.p.). However, in order to properly understand the significance of a given action, an awareness of the context in which their meaning is enacted and negotiated is necessary.² As Galloway points out, gamic action is inevitably immersed in a “total world of narrative action” (2006, 7), or diegesis. In terms of the work of Paul Ricœur, this world of narrative action is a form of video game emplotment, which “permits an intuitive grasping together [...] of otherwise heterogeneous elements” (Dowling 2011, 5). By exploring the convergence or complete divergence of gamic action and narrative, a game world may be properly understood through its “*incessant changeability* in which, it seems, everything ultimately remains the same” (emphasis in the original, Bown 2017, 9).

The photographic remediation in video games remains an underexplored issue precisely in relation to its narration of action—in this case photographic action. For instance, while Möring and de Mutiis propose a model of the “types of photography in video games” in relation to Leino's notion of “the gameplay condition” (2018, 74), I propose a typology that privileges action and narrative/diegesis as central concepts. Möring's and de Mutiis's focus on the gameplay condition tends to privilege a distinction “between practice-based and content-centred approaches” of remediating photography (ibid., 77), which, I argue, fails to engage meaningfully with the persistence of photographic discourse in VGP.

Namely, an approach to understanding VGP that ignores the role of narrative is likely to omit from its discussion the plurality and nuance of photographic discourse. The mere enumeration of photographic terms or camera affordances that are present in VGP ignores the context in which they are usually understood, as well as the role

2 One cannot help but think of novelist Juan Pablo Villalobos' Quesadillas (2013) and the moment in which Orestes, the main character, encounters an Atari console: “The world was ruled by a band of incredibly dull Aristotelians. I didn't understand where the fun was other than in verifying that the device always did what you told it to. Was it the paradox of having invented a contraption whose fantasies served to verify the rules of reality?” (ibid., 42)

they play in a video game's narrative. For example, the role of photography in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018; henceforth, RDR2) is much more complex than its relation to the gameplay condition. Namely, photography is a central part of the game's historical portrayal of the Wild West and the social changes that industrialisation brought at the turn of the nineteenth century (for RDR2 in relation to its historical accuracy, see Rizov 2020b). This expresses itself in eight distinct, but not exhaustive, instances: a) in the game's loading screen, which shows a fast-forwarded development process of a photograph; b) in the game's use of a pinhole camera (with anachronistic affordances—i.e. impossible at the time shutter speeds, aperture settings, and thus exposure time, etc.); c) the game affords the player to be photographed by an in-game photographer in a studio reflective of the period; d) in the game's conveyance of photographic history³ through a series of collectible cards; e) in a quest centred around helping out a landscape photographer; f) an advert in a shopping catalogue; g) the self-portrait option of the in-game pinhole camera; and h) the pause menu (» *Fig. 1*).

Although images 1a to 1h are directly linked to the gameplay, image 1a can be seen as the suspension of gameplay, or a pre-gameplay condition of the game in the form of a loading screen. Nevertheless, the example of image 1a contributes significantly to the experience of the VGP practices, or gameplay affordances, behind images 1b–1h. Namely, 1a sets up the world of RDR2 as both something to be photographed and something that *could* be photographed. This way, the loading screen directly simulates a sped-up development process of a photograph, as well as informs the engagement with the game that the player is afforded. This is also relevant on a narrative level, as it frames the game's world in relation to a (photographic) discourse of historicity that is deeply interwoven with the colonial undercurrent of the industrialisation of the Wild West.

With this in mind, photographic remediation in video games should be understood as more than the practice of photography or the content of photographs as Möring and de Mutiis argue (2018, 77), but also as being deeply related to photographic discourse and the *use* of the photograph as “an object in a context” (Sontag 2008, 82). This is not a new view in photographic theory. Alan Sekula has referred to a photograph's indeterminate meaning, arguing that “any photographic message is necessarily context determined” (2016, 4); John Tagg has asserted that photography has no identity of its own (1988, 63), and any understanding of it would inevitably vary according to the discourses and power relations that invest it (see Edwards

3 The series of collectible cards that lists the number of technological innovations of the nineteenth century evoke the broader narrative of industrialisation and its role in the transfiguration of the Wild West. This point, more broadly, reflects the role that photographic discourse (as a technology-based medium) can be central to understandings of history and progress.

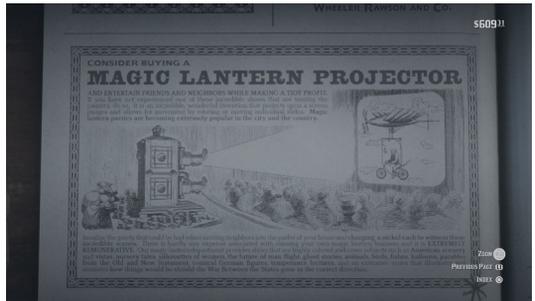


Fig. 1 *Red Dead Redemption 2*, remediations of photography: (1a) top left, loading screen; (1b) top right, in-game camera photo; (1c) second row left, photographer studio portrait; (1d) second row right, collectible card; (1e) third row left, photographer quest cinematic; (1f) third row right, magic lantern advert; (1g) self-portrait using in-game camera; (1h) pause menu.

2001, 11). Put simply, image 1a, although not part of the gameplay, *is* part of the narrative, and as such, it informs the gameplay condition of vGP in RDR2. Moreover, images 1b–1h further reinforce the point that photography is both a tool in the world (where photography is something that happens *inside* the game’s world and narrative) and a discourse that shapes the interaction with the game. Whether RDR2 is a colonialist fantasy is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it should be noted that it certainly exhibits the feats of one—the open world, both currently being warped by industrialisation and in places untouched by humans, is nostalgic and indicative of photography’s anxiety about the passing of history and its failure to document its changes (Edwards 2001).

RDR2’s articulation of photographic discourse, although complex and comprehensive, is not entirely exceptional. Games such as *Life is Strange: Episode 1* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015), *Firewatch* (Campo Santo 2016) or *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* (iNK Stories 2016) all engage in remediations of photography that, to various degrees, engage with the materiality of photographic practice, as well as its reflective aspect. In *Life is Strange*, the player is merely prompted to make the binary decision whether to take a photograph in the first place. In *Firewatch*, the avatar is given a disposable camera (again, with no practice-based technological considerations much like real-life use of a disposable camera) and the player is even afforded the option of getting the photographs taken in-game printed as ‘actual’ photos. In *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*, the role of photography in the Iranian revolution of 1979 takes a central position in the game’s narrative—to the point that the avatar is a photographer. Here, most interesting is the use of photographs as material and social objects that are rooted in history. The main protagonist is prompted to take photographs that simulate historic photographs of the events of 1979 in Tehran, thus firmly rooting the *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*’s iteration of vGP in a historical discourse of documentary photography and pedagogy.

On the basis of this, I propose an understanding of vGP that is based on the notion of photographic action and photographic discourse. Following Poremba’s framing of vGP as consisting of “strategy, discovery, and skill” (2007, 56), this understanding acknowledges photography as more than a technology-based medium. To do this, I draw on Max Weber’s constructivist formulation of ‘social action’: “Such behaviour is ‘social’ action where the meaning intended by the actor or actors is related to the behaviour of others, and the action is so oriented” (2019, 79).

With this in mind, photographic action is to be understood as action where the meaning of the practice, i.e. the strategy, discovery, and skill is related to the affordance of photographic capture. In the case of vGP, it is important to note that the gameplay condition of games should be understood as always potentially photographic. Instances of vGP play, understood this way, are not “transformative play” as Möring and de Mutiis claim (2018, 81) but rather a substantial indication of the degree to which video

games and photography are interwoven, as well as the value of the notion of *photomEDIATION* (Zylinska 2016). Moreover, Weber's formulation goes on to clarify that social action is, in fact, organised and that there are "structures that condense and perpetuate contingent actions into enduring social processes" (Tribe 2019, 75). The manner in which those are to be understood is the goal of the next section.

The Model

In order to explore the interplay between narrative and action, I will provide a model that examines their convergence and divergence. In order to do so, I will rely on Galloway's model of gamic action, in which he provides a typological classification by using both narrative and action (2006). An emphasis on action, i.e. where a video game is "an *action-based* medium" (emphasis in the original, *ibid.*, 3), helps to distinguish between agencies on the level of the machine and the operator. For instance, to quote Galloway: "[W]inning *Metroid Prime* is the operator's act, but losing it is the machine's" (*ibid.*, 5). Although the two actions manifest as "a unified, single phenomenon" (*ibid.*), the distinction on an analytical level can prove useful. Furthermore, the actions, either by the machine or the operator, acquire different significance in relation to the narrative. Following Galloway's work, I use the terms diegetic and nondiegetic to account for this—"the diegesis of a video game is the game's total world of narrative action" (*ibid.*, 7). For example, one can distinguish between a move act (a diegetic operator action) that the player has fulfilled and an ambience act that is algorithmically determined to play out as long as the game is running (a diegetic machine action). As can be seen in Galloway's model, both actions occur in the diegetic world of the game but originate in a different agency (» *Fig. 2*).

On this basis of gamic action, I propose a similar understanding of the remediation of photography in video games. Photographic action can be either built into the world, or extrinsic to it only achievable by hacking; it can be built into the diegesis or "total world of narrative action" (Galloway 2006, 7) of the world, or be built into the game itself but not the diegetic game world (» *Fig. 3*). For example, the contrasting examples among the games mentioned are *RDR2* and *Life is Strange: Episode 1*; in the former, the player has access to a photographic camera at will (once they have gained access to it in the storyline), while in the latter, the player can enact photography only when prompted.

In terms of nondiegetic action, photographic remediation becomes slightly more complex. For example, instances of nondiegetic, machine photographic actions are done through a supplementary photo mode built into the game (for example, *Control* (Remedy Entertainment 2019)), but are not part of its narrative action. In

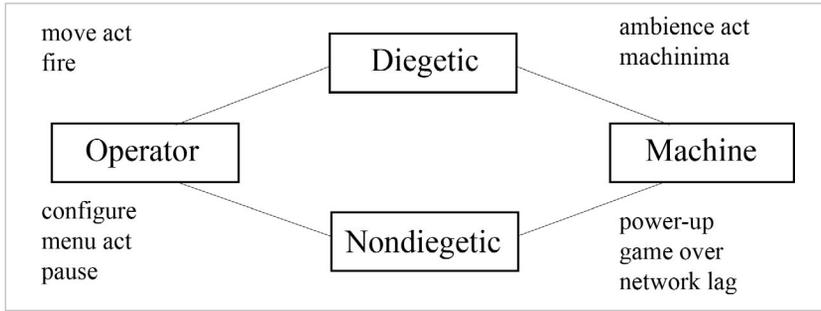


Fig. 2 Alexander R. Galloway's diagram of diegesis and action.

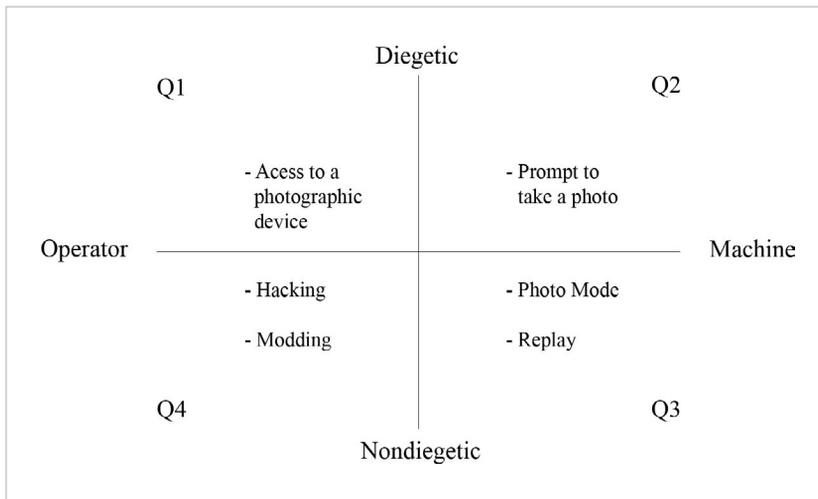


Fig. 3 Adapting Galloway's model (» Fig. 2) in relation to video game photography.

order to access the photo mode, the operator must suspend the video game by pausing it, and through what Galloway calls a “menu act” (2006, 37) to enter a photo mode. This classification of the photo mode may appear somewhat contradictory in terms of Galloway's graph (» Fig. 2) as it requires an operator act in order to access what is an essentially machine act. Although it might appear that a photo mode is an act that is precipitated by the operator, here I make the distinction between an operator-initiated machine-integrated act and an operator-initiated machine-extrinsic act. To make this clear, it is necessary to understand the example of the convergence of operator, nondiegetic photographic remediation—namely, modding, and hacking video games with the purpose of producing images (» Table 1). While Galloway seems to assume that gameric actions occur only in the game, I highlight instances in which the game script is made to stop running with a nevertheless gameric action

Table 1 Photographic Gamic Action. Elaborating the model through examples (graphic by the author).

Type of Action	Description	Shape of Action	Quality of Action	Emblematic Examples
Diegetic operator act	Avatar possesses photographic device that can be used at will.	Free Play	Optional	<i>Watch Dogs</i> series, <i>Red Dead Redemption 2</i> , <i>Firewatch</i>
Diegetic machine act	Operator is obliged to do a photographic gamic action in order to progress in-game.	Predetermined Play (Process)	Mandatory	<i>Life is Strange</i> , <i>1979 Revolution: Black Friday</i> , <i>Pokémon Go</i>
Nondiegetic machine act	Built-in photographic mode accessible only through suspension of game diegesis.	Code	Operator-precipitated, game-integrated	<i>Horizon: Zero Dawn</i> , <i>Forza Horizon 3</i> , <i>Control</i>
Nondiegetic operator act	Suspension of game code running with purpose of modifying game for image production.	Hack	Operator-precipitated, game-extrinsic	Duncan Harris, Leonardo Sang, K Putt, Nvidia's <i>Ansel</i>

in mind, e.g. through modding a game. Following the definition of photographic action with regards to VGP proposed above, the manipulation of a game, such as editing files, rendering the game unplayable in high resolution, is, in fact, indicative of photographic practice, and strategies of implementing the latter into the context of video games. VGP practitioners such as Duncan Harris, Leonardo Sang or K Putt engage in this exact practice. The typology demonstrated in this section is one in progress and is to be updated with further historical study of the medium of video games. The table above illustrates an elaboration of photographic gamic action and emblematic examples.

Final Remarks

The fact that a photograph is a discursively constituted object is an important point to reiterate. It is tempting to assume that this points to the equivalence of either kind of photography. One might even draw parallels to films and to be more precise, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (US 1954). It is due to the main character's immobility, as Sontag recounts, that he must record what he sees with a camera; precisely, because he is deprived of the ability to act, he feels it "even more important to take pictures. Even if incompatible with intervention in a physical sense, using a camera is still a form of

participation” (2008, 8). In vGP terms, using a camera is still playing the game, just as much as it is photographic action.

Photography constitutes, and is constituted of, this aspect of the ‘mode of visibility’ that is political and central to understanding the current conjuncture’s “regimen of truth”⁴ (Fontcuberta 2014, 7). Importantly, the photographer is the chief driver of this expansion of visibility. In Sontag’s words, “[t]he photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences or find new ways to look at familiar subjects—to fight against boredom. For boredom is just the reverse side of fascination: both depend on being outside rather than inside a situation, and one leads to the other” (2008, 33).

To make another point concerning video games and *photomediations*, vGP is the convergence of observation and action in experience. It could be said that photography, in its current, non-virtual form, even outside video games, has become an in-between act. One no longer consumes without the mediation of said consumption; one no longer experiences unless one’s presence is made visible; and so on. The very medium of video games can be understood as a mediation of action; vGP, in this case, is particularly telling. Although ontologising the technological difference might be particularly tempting, in this paper I have followed Comolli’s formulation of cinema as a ‘machine of the visible’ and tried to apply this to the instance of vGP, where: “If the social machine manufactures representations, it also manufactures itself from representations—the latter operative at once as means, matter and condition of sociality” (1980, 121).

Thus, we arrive at the ontological point about vGP—video games themselves are a fundamental remediation of the photograph, the image. The significance of vGP does not lie in its move beyond the image, or the abandoned purity of the original light-image but in its fundamental and ontological reification of images, to the point where one no longer talks about “realities understood in the form of images [but] realities understood *to be images*, illusions” (emphasis added by the author, Sontag 2008, 119). Ultimately, to echo Sontag once more, video game photography reveals to us that we are tourists in virtual worlds (*ibid.*, 44).

4 As noted, vGP is a continuation of a mode of visibility which photography originated in the 1840s and, as such, vGP is just an exacerbation of traits that are already inherent in photography. This mode of visibility is no longer tethered, in its current iteration, to the idea of evidence and to quote W.J.T. Mitchell: “images are no longer guaranteed as visual truth” (2015, 49). Yet, as the photographer Joan Fontcuberta asserted: “the products of the camera are materials that [...] take on [...] a symbolic value that we do well to analyse in attempting to judge the regimens of truth that every society assigns itself” (2014, 7).

Figures

Fig. 1: Screenshots by the author, Rockstar Games 2018.

Fig. 2: Galloway 2006, 37.

Fig. 3: Graphic by the author.

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