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A Hidden History of Photography For Screenshot Photographers

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Part 1: How I Found PrtSc In Azeroth, Or, An Introduction
by Eron Rauch



"This picture... This memory..." 2006 - Eron Rauch

Screenshots. Virtual photography. Screen captures. Snaps. In-Game Photography.* Whatever you may call it, the act of making images of video games is an intimate part of the grand history of photography. But I also know this statement is controversial to many people in both the photography and video game communities, who assert that whatever screenshots and their ilk might be, they are D.N.P.: Definitely. Not. Photography.

For just a moment, let's leave aside trying to police the boundaries of certain artistic traditions. After all, we're all here because we have an honest passion for making something we intuitively call photography—even if we don't quite know how to define why that is, let alone trace its family tree into the 1800s.

Let's start our journey with that nebulous agreement: when we wander out into *Skyrim*, *Forza*, *Assassin's Creed*, or any other game, and press F12 on your keyboard, Y on your controller, or even take a picture of the screen with a cellphone camera, it's all part of this thing called photography, and photography has a long history, both weird and wonderful. This series will show you a new version of that history, highlighting how what we're all doing in this community is a valuable part of that deep historical conversation. It will also demonstrate how that knowledge might be useful to you when you make your images.



Assassin's Creed: Origins Promotional Image - Ubisoft

To start I want to share how I got interested in screenshots as photography, since it explains much of my desire to figure out this hidden history. I was in Minneapolis, finishing my senior year of a photography degree. My frenzied schedule packed with classes, making art, working a part time job, and other nerdy stuff like running anime clubs meant I hadn't played many video games since, well, maybe *Mechwarrior 2* back in high school?

Not being much into video games would make what I was doing in the computer lab at that moment all the weirder. I was entranced, clicking through countless web galleries of blocky, pixelated fantasy landscapes from a video game. What brought me to seek out this curious corner of the internet? It was a mystery. Back during high school, a friend had suddenly gone missing. One day he never showed to class and never came back, and no one knew why. I had always wondered what happened to him.





"Untitled (Everquest Landscape With Figure)"- Anonymous

Years later, a rumor drifted my way to where my friend had gone: He had supposedly dropped out of high school to play a video game. A game called *Everquest*. As it was described to me, it was a whole online fantasy world filled with magical landscapes, ferocious dragons, and heroic adventurers—who were all other real people! Scrutinizing these *Geocities* sites filled with pictures made by players was a way to try to learn about this place I couldn't easily visit.

Something about this uneasy relationship between real and digital, between photography and screenshot in these pictures of Norrath piqued my interest. So, inspired by my favorite photographers (such as Daido Moriyama) who used their cameras to pry at the hidden places of the world around me, I figured "why not make photographs about this strange video game world?"

My first attempts were an awkward endeavor, to put it politely. However, that first disorienting experience of staring at those low-res snaps from *Everquest* stayed with me, even if I couldn't explain my interest. Over the years I returned again and again to projects that combine photography and videogames.





"Untitled (Shoreline With Boulder)" 2006-2010 - Eron Rauch

It often felt like I was wandering lost and alone in a vast wilderness between photography and video games though. Nothing I had learned in formal art history classes nor innumerable museum visits gave me any direct landmarks to understand what I was doing with these things that looked like photographs, and were shared and talked about like photographs, but also seemed to come from a totally alien art form.

Sure, it was easy to borrow a few technical details from my education. There are plenty of useful techniques that you can learn about composition, focus, and lighting techniques from great photographs or even *YouTube* tutorials. (This borrowing of techniques and styles is still mostly how the screenshot community interfaces with the history of photography.) But these repurposed aesthetic tropes didn't speak to why I was making these images in the first place. They gave me some additional visual vocabulary, which is of course useful, but didn't do much to figure out how to structure them into a coherent sentence or paragraph that had meaning. Making meaning is where history, community, and context is needed.





"Untitled (From DoD)" - Kent Sheely

Slowly over the following decade, through countless other projects, shows, a graduate degree, and working with many writers and artists like Rainer Sigl and Kent Sheely, I'd pick up the trail of the surprisingly many photographers and artists who had explored this space before me and realize I had amazing company. Screenshots are a conversation filled with fascinating people and dazzling art that go all the way back to the beginnings of photography. There is an incredibly rich but hidden history of photography, filled with screens, virtual places, and fantastical characters... if you know where to look.

Rather than wandering through the foggy moors of time and culture, alone and without direction, this series will give you some company and some artistic landmarks to enrich your journey. Looking at the hidden history of screenshot photography will help build a more diverse vocabulary to talk about our work; suggest new approaches and subjects; be an inspiration to take bold artistic risks; and to construct a more fertile cultural space for our work to grow and be shared.

This series is my way of sharing some that hidden knowledge I've collected in the decade I've spent exploring and making photography with, in, and about video games.

Next up, what exactly is the typical story of photography, and why does that story fail to help us understand screenshots?

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