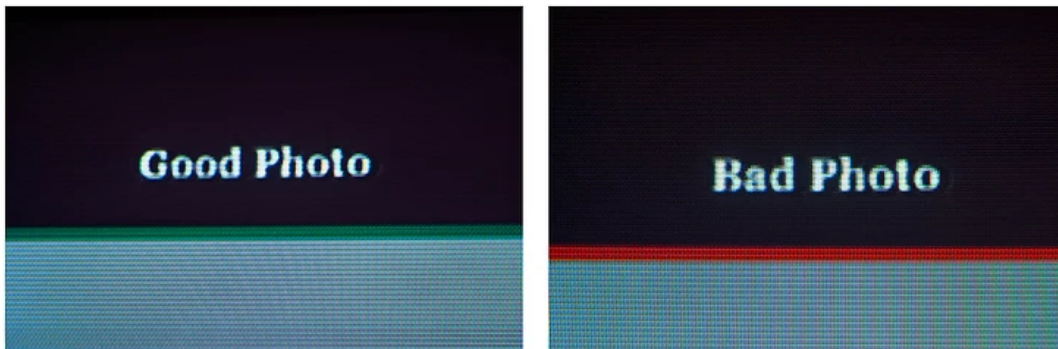


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# A Hidden History of Photography For Screenshot Photographers

Updated: May 29

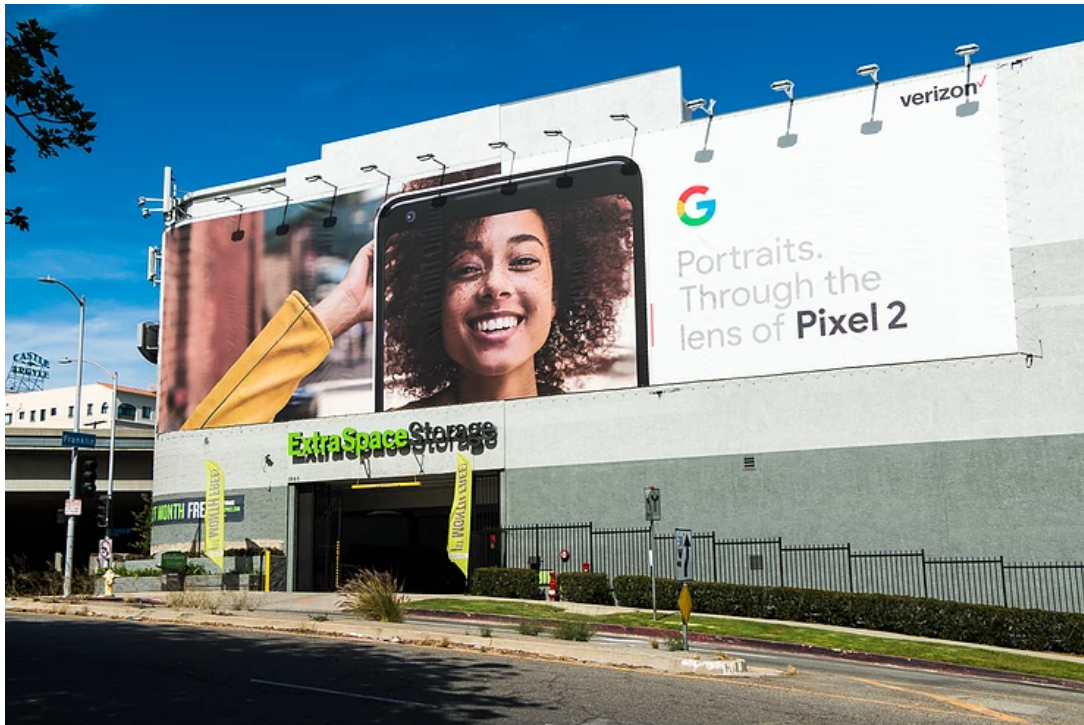
*Part 2: The History of The Camera Or The History of Photography?*By [Eron Rauch](#)

“Good Photo / Bad Photo 2008” - Eron Rauch

When I look back at those early, confusing, experiences with screenshots, I now suspect that the main reason I couldn't understand their relationship to “real” photography was because of the way the story of photo history is usually told. To put it simply, we usually tell the early history of photography as the history of the camera. The stereotypical feeling of photography's glorious dawn is almost always a mythical story recounting technical progressions in optics, mechanics, and chemistry; all things that are perhaps a bit hard to square with our virtual cameras.

Telling photo history in this way does make some intuitive sense at a cursory glance: After all what used to pass for a “shutter” was a hand removing a wooden cap from the front of a lenses and timing an exposure, often many minutes long, with a pocket watch, the subject clamped in place so they couldn't move. This arduous process resulted in a monochrome image that could barely be seen, could not be duplicated, and had to be developed with highly toxic mercury fumes which poisoned photographers. Two centuries later we ended up

with powerful cameras in all our pockets that make super-sharp images that fill billboards with glorious color. So, yes, understanding the lineage of technological advancements of the camera is clearly an important facet of history.



Billboard in Hollywood, California 2018 (Photo by Author)

But, like I found when looking at screenshots of *Norrath*, and later *Azeroth*, looking for ghosts of my friend, telling the history of photography as simply the history of camera leaves out a huge portion of the story, and quite specifically doesn't do much to explain the meaning of screenshots beyond why these games make a weird simulated clicking noise when you press the virtual shutter. (This also probably explains much of the antagonism expressed by the gear-obsessed online photography community toward screenshots.)

Instead of talking about the chemicals that were mixed and the increasingly sophisticated cameras that were made, we are going to look at three major historical figures—the two primary inventors of photography, William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis Jaque Mande Daguerre, as well as one of the first great, lasting artists of its early decades, Julia Margaret Cameron—and show you how their passions and interests inspired their photography and the kinds of photographs they were so excited to make. Each part of the series will explain some of their core interests, as well as showcase other photographers up to the present who have explored some of the same subjects and themes.







"Three Botanical Specimens" 1840 - William Henry Fox Talbot

Talbot, the inventor of the paper positive-negative process, was an English gentleman of the Enlightenment era. Outside of chemistry he was a committed botanist and amateur (and admittedly inept) landscape artist. Even before photography, he had a long interest in recording plant specimens in accurate detail, but also enjoyed making drawings of the picturesque landscapes he visited.





"Untitled (From Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp)" 2018 - Callie Rogers

Indeed, both of the first books of photography that came out in the early 1840s were compilations of photograms (direct prints using the object itself on photo paper) that shared their owners' plant collections. How similar that impulse is to what motivates your friends to show you a screenshot of their flowers in *Animal Crossing*!



"Boulevard du Temple" 1838 - Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre

On the other side of the origin story of photography, you have Louis Daguerre, creator of the eponymous daguerreotype, a direct-to-positive process on metal plates that dominated the early decades of photography. Before photography he was a well-known showman and set painter. Most importantly for our hidden history, he was one of the creators of the Diorama, which was a successful tourist spectacle in Paris.



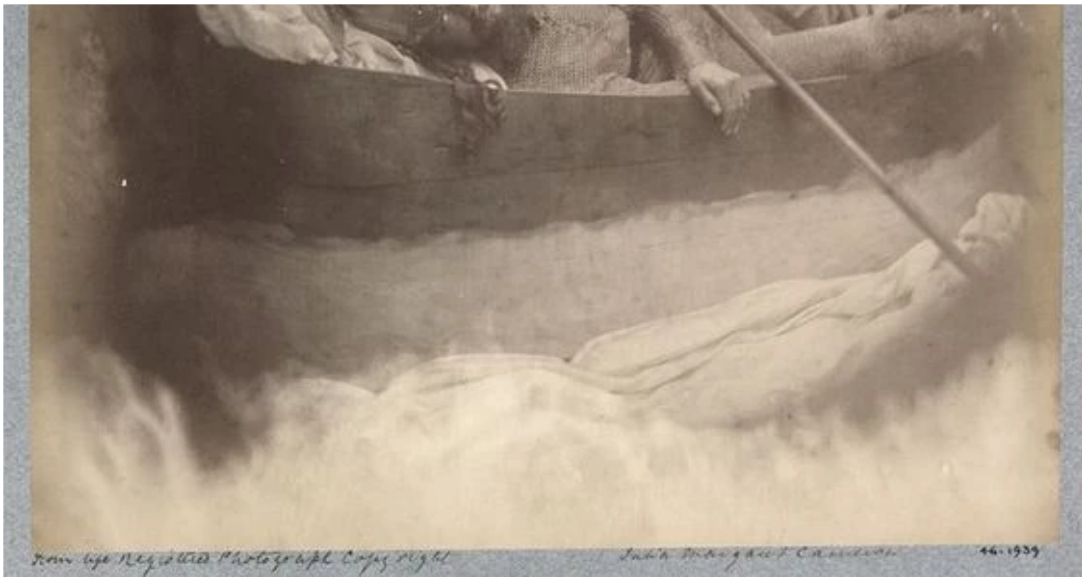
Diorama, which was a successful tourist spectacle in Paris.



“Untitled (From Skyrim Test Shoot)” 2018 - Eron Rauch

The Diorama was an immersive painted environment with all manner of lighting and theatrical tricks that let visitors visit a magical (analog) virtual world. Daguerre’s interest in photographic technology grew out of his work transporting visitors to make believe places. His work building and sharing imaginary landscapes is familiar to anyone who has marveled while staring out across the finely rendered landscape, river sparkling with morning light, in *Skyrim*.



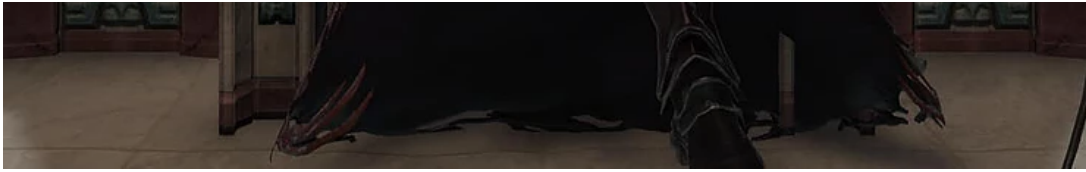


"King Arthur Wounded Lying In A Barge" 1874-1875 - Julia Margaret Cameron

So far we've covered images of things and places in screenshots and photo history. This leaves out a major part of the field: people. I've personally found this one of the most challenging subjects for making successful screenshots. But I had a moment of understanding when I realized that another project, a series about cosplayers, and other photography of fictional personas, can tell us a lot about making screenshots of avatars and digital characters. As early as the 1860s, Julia Margaret Cameron understood this tension between real and fictional in the space of a photograph.







"Beautiful Bad Guys (From Final Fantasy XIV)" 2018 - Alcuin Gersh

She repurposed, we now might say remixed, the favorite characters, costumes, stories, and people around her exploring the physiological work of Victorian England. Her love of photographing overt falsification was quite controversial to photographers that fetishized fidelity and realism, but also praised equally strongly by many open-minded artists since it was honest about how the meaning of all images, even photographs, were constructed, not found. And after all, what are the inhabitants of digital realms but a bricolage of symbols and signs?



"Untitled (Portrait Session)" Date Unknown - Anonymous

There are many ways to tell the early history of photography, each of which emphasizes a different aspect of its present and future. This severe bias toward understanding photography purely through technological progress—as though we can unlock the meaning of an image best by knowing if they used a 50mm or 300mm lens—has led to a whole spectrum of ways of understanding photographic meaning being artificially divided from each other.

Welcome to the hidden history of screenshot photography. If this history seems a bit mutant, a little hybrid, or otherwise runs afoul of the purists: that's not a bug, it's a feature that leaves room for all of us. After all, as Matthew Witkovsky, the curatorial chair of the lauded photography department of the Chicago Art Institute recently said, "It is precisely the

bastard history that counts most in photography.”

*In the next installment, we'll look at Talbot and this impulse to reproduce and share images of our world, including our screens.*

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