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A Hidden History of Photography for Screenshot Photographers

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Part 5: Fantastical Characters and Imagined Selves
By Eron Rauch

"Sir Henry Taylor as King David" 1866 - Julia Margarette Cameron

Invented places have been the subject of photography long before we took to making screenshots in the digital lands of video games, as we discovered while looking at the Diorama of Daguerre in the previous installment of Hidden Histories. But what of the inhabitants of these fictional realms? If you're anything like me, you might have found photographing glitches or landscapes a naturally welcoming inroad to screenshot photography. However, I'll admit I've had a harder time trying to figure out what makes for a successful photograph of avatars, NPCs, monsters and other created characters in video games.

"Untitled" 1860s -Anonymous

It feels like part of my unease is that we tend to assume the value a photograph of a person, especially in the genre of portraiture, is primarily in some real truth the photographic encounter might reveal. That sort of leaves us in a weird place dealing with 3D assets though. Perhaps it is enough to treat them as sculptures, as new stone gargoyles and white marble Greek gods, a subject beloved by photographers since the beginning of the art form. Yet, our relationship to video game characters, especially the ones we play as, is a bit

Yet, our relationship to video game characters, especially the ones we play as, is a bit different. Especially with the rise of Steam workshop, machinima, and programs like Ansel, we're increasingly given tools to reimagine, remix, and reshape these new mythical beings in unprecedented ways. But we have compass to navigate these choppy waters: outside of the portrait canon of furrowed brows and intense stares, photography has been involved in trying to picture characters, mythical and magical, since its early days.

"Parting of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere" 1874 - Julia Margarette Cameron

There are a great number of portrait photographers from the early decades of photography, but the one artist who is still widely beloved is the unlikely success story of Julia Margaret Cameron. Born to British parents in India, she moved back near London where she tended house while her husband traveled, and only came to photography late in her life. When she was gifted a camera by her children, she found her calling and as the Metropolitan website recounts, approached it as seriously and rigorously as any art form. While perhaps her most

well-known work is of intimate brooding portraits of the Victorian luminary thinkers and artists in her circle, it is her images of myths and stories that still inspire artists and forge new fans. I think these images of her friends and family in costume, posed like classic paintings of Arthur and his court, Biblical stories, and classic mythology, are so successful because they retold (or as we'd call it now, remixed or mashed-up) these familiar magical stories in novel ways for its Victorian, modernizing, audience.

"Vivien and Merlin" 1874 - Julia Margaret Cameron

While certainly Lancelot and King David are well known, with a litany of tropes of exploits and foibles, there is an interesting subtle aspect of Cameron's photography that helps the images feel more alive than many others from the Victorian era: her willingness to diverge from rigid traditions of technique. While many other photographers of her era prioritized perfect sharpness, exposure, and focus, she valued making impactful artistic images

foremost, and as such found that the "imperfect", such as soft focus, motion blur and dense shadows, could be very useful in drawing viewers into her portrayals of myths and stories. In her time, it led to charges of sentimentality or even naiveness, but in my mind it is a grand achievement to take these massive, popular, characters, and develop an idiosyncratic personal style that would transform them again into something surprising and affecting.

"Untitled Film Stills" 1977-1980 - Cindy Sherman

One of the most famous living photographers works in this same uncanny valley of playing with characters, the tropes of public stories, and identity. Cindy Sherman started her career with a body of work, *Untitled Film Stills*, that is so ubiquitous in the art world that I initially loathed to talk about it. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that approaching it from the viewpoint of screenshot photography might help make it fresh again. In this series of images, Sherman makes self-portraits as faked film stills from non-existent movies. These aren't recreations of any specific film or character, nor are they traditional self-portraits that give us special access to the artist. Instead, they are almost more like she is demonstrating the way we all borrow bits of and remix our identities from the stories and images we share. What I hadn't quite grasped before is that there's a kind of B-list, borderline generic, quality to the images, like they come from some world-tree slush pile of fantasies. It is a quality that reminds me so much of the feeling of being a player in *World of Warcraft*, where you've accomplished a few heroic deeds, but are still in a mish-mash of gear. Clearly a hero, but still one of a 30,000 other players on the server wandering through the marsh as heroic music swells and your girlfriend asks from the kitchen if we're out of coffee.

"Second Beauty Composite Jane Fonda, Jaqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields and Meryl Streep" 1982 - Nancy Burson

Nancy Burson is an artist who has used computers to explore even deeper into these collective unconscious divisions between celebrity, fame, beauty, and myth. Her work, somewhat unassuming at first, reveals its wonderful weirdness in its titles. Using the same software the police use to create renderings of victims who have aged, she merges the faces of certain types of celebrities into ghostly, digital models of generic desires. Here, we don't have a portrait of a specific person, but a digital hybrid of Jane Fonda, Jaqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields and Meryl Streep. Made in the early 1980s, they remind me so much of the character creation sliders that are increasingly popular in AAA games. Even the real is ripe for reimagining as a character in the digital age.
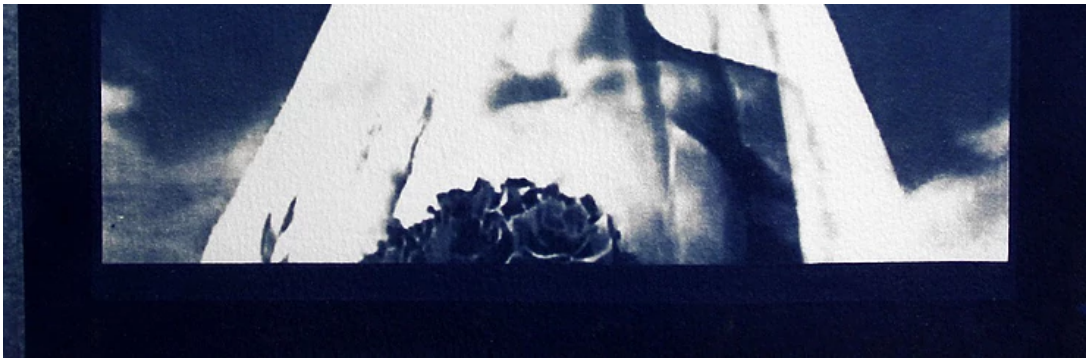
"Heroines with Baggage (Detail)" 2013 - Angela Washko

A contemporary artist, Angela Washko, has explored some of the ramifications of Burson's thinking about digital composites and glamor using video games and video game characters. Titled *Heroines with Baggage*, this 2013 multimedia project spans video and installation, with one core photographic component being a large grid of cyanotype prints (like the work of Atkins in part 3 of our history) of screenshots. Unlike the fanciful play of Cameron, these photos of fictional characters freeze and present scenes from famous games that highlight the often limited roles female main characters are given to play in stories. The creepy universal vacancy of the characters, much like Burson's combination, is highlighted by the flatness and extreme contrast of of the cyanotype printing. But I don't see the work as negative, since one of the interesting aspects of the project is the overt manner in which Washko highlights the material handwork of making the prints. The prominence of the brushed edges and uneven washed blues hint that we can use photography as a means to become aware of the limitations of the characters we share, and that ultimately help us imagine richer, more diverse, stories.

"From Kamaitachi" 1968 - Eikoh Hosoe

But not all stories come from multi-million dollar media empires. What of more straight-forward, or maybe we should say traditionally, fictional characters? Myths, folktales, and legends often have long histories of telling and retelling, which Japanese master photographer Eikoh Hosoe's book *Kamaitachi* explores in its portrayal of a classic Japanese tale. His work is similar to Cameron, but instead of intimacy and misty magic, his project explodes with deeply virtuosic performances and photographic technique. The main character, a spirit, is played by Tatsumi Hijikata, one of the great dancers in the *butoh* tradition, known for its intense gestures and violent choreography. He races through fields and scales architecture with his kimono flowing. All the while Hosoe brings every technical skill he has learned in decades of photography to bear, with jarring angles, vast panoramas, and dramatic printing lending a feeling of the darkly mythical to the series. Even though they are from the 1960s, you can see the connection forward into the Dutch angles, flared poses, and extreme shadows that would come to define anime and manga styling.

"Last Departure" 1996 - Mariko Mori

Another more contemporary Japanese artist who has explored some of the same visual styles and tropes we see in video games is Mariko Mori. Her early photographic work is similar to Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* since it features images of her dressing up in recognizable but generic versions of women characters from anime, manga, and video games. But while Sherman's work casts the whole world as a vast movie set in our minds, Mori took these idealized characters and thrust them back into the muck of the real world. Like a gleaming alien visitor from an advanced, seemingly permanently chipper, civilization, she stands guard over an sweaty arcade, welcomes visitors to the littered red light district, and rides the beige subway. The photographs strike a balance between irony and earnestness, between our dream of the future and the reality of the present—a tension always at play in our experience with the sophisticated, stylized, simulations of video games. Increasingly, and instructive for our purposes, as her work progressed, she started using CG and other 3D VFX in her work to realize her hybrid realities.

"Christopher" 2014 - Siri Kaur

Siki Kaur is another photographer who is fascinated with the way we bring aspects of fictional stories and characters to interact with our daily lives. Her 2014 project *This Kind of Face* features large-scale portraits of well known celebrities and superheroes, but on closer inspection turn out to be professional impersonators. These images are less overtly jarring

than Mori's anime interventions and less whimsical than Sherman's celebrity dreams, but they touch on an aspect of character and identity that is quite useful for us as screenshot photographers to think about: the practical details of how people transform themselves into characters (successfully or not). Yes of course, clothing and accessories, but also those identifiable quirks in pose, grooming, expression, and attitude. Kaur's work digs into the details of how we construct and know characters, real or imagined.
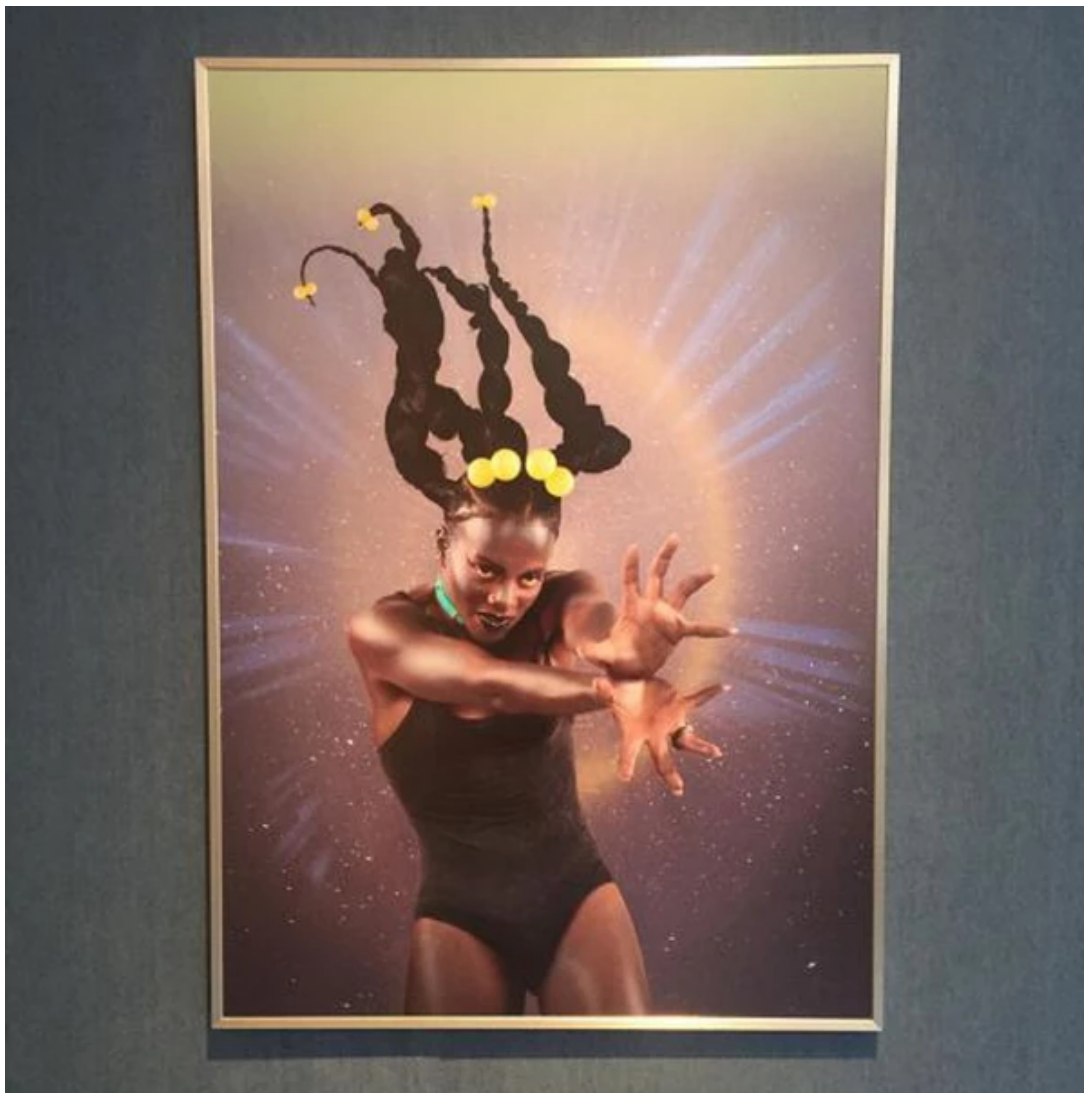
"Untitled (Lil' Marvel)" 2015 - Juliana Huxtable

With the massive success of *Black Panther*, there has been a broadening interest in the historical reimagining of afro-futurism, and the work of Juliana Huxtable incorporates a similarly incredibly wide array of science fiction, fantasy, video games, comics, as well as performance art, celebrity music culture, and fashion. Shifting identities like the shimmering waver of an attuned voice, she unabashedly claims her body as repository for any and all stories she wants to try on. Her photographic collaborations, which often obscure the lines between art direction, modeling, and the traditional act of using a camera, are fascinating in the context of screenshots, because it channels every style and technique into a dreamy, super-real picture of our media subconscious. Or to put it a bit more simply, I think her work is so interesting in relationship to taking photographs of digital characters, because it so

wildly blends together everything in and around our experiences with video games and other media. It's hard to show in a single still image, but from fanfiction to cosplay to DJ remixes to social media to selfies to avatars to VR, Huxtable's work (and life!) shows that far from being separate distant pieces, these are all part of the consolation we call "self" in 2018.

Ultimately, that's maybe one of the threads that link all the artists in this section of our Hidden Histories. Stories aren't passively sitting around, they are always in use by people. While it maybe isn't a magic bullet for taking a good photo of a wizard wandering through a castle in *Guild Wars 2*, whenever we're making photographs of characters in video games, like Cameron's reimagining of Merlin, it seems like the more we can hone in on our specific interest in the character, and the unique way we deploy that character and integrate their story into our lives, the more likely we are to transform it into something worth sharing.

Chapter 6 is going to be the final part of the series. But worry not, adventurous screenshot photographer, far from being a dull rehash of what we talked about, I'm going to use those extra words to share a few of my other favorite photographers that don't fit so neatly into any of these three main categories. After all, as I mentioned at the beginning, there are a lot of ways to tell the history of photography, and though we're near one ending, there are many paths still to trod!

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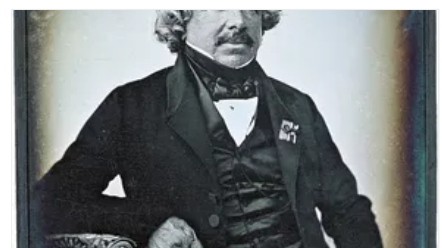

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