

Chapter Title: Remediating Green Practices: Landscape Photography and Nature
Documentary Filmmaking in Video Games
Chapter Author(s): Stefan Werning

Book Title: Ecogames
Book Subtitle: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis
Book Editor(s): Laura op de Beke, Joost Raessens, Stefan Werning, Gerald Farca
Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2024)
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.10819591.31>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



Amsterdam University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ecogames*

28. Remediating Green Practices: Landscape Photography and Nature Documentary Filmmaking in Video Games

Stefan Werning

Abstract

The chapter examines how contemporary forms of digital metagaming, specifically in-game photography and recording in-game wildlife documentaries, reenact and reinterpret constitutive practices of earlier environmental movements. The first part of the analysis explores how in-game landscape photography in *Red Dead Redemption 2* remediates earlier aesthetic traditions going back to landscape painting. The second part investigates fictional nature documentaries using footage from games like *GTA V* and *Destiny 2*, retracing how the focus gradually shifts from nature photography and documentary as (digital) “objects” towards replicable and inclusive practices. To conclude, the chapter briefly reflects on other epistemic ecopractices like the remediation of “community gardening” in games like *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: ecopractices, in-game photography, in-game videography, remediation, ecomedia literacy

This chapter examines how contemporary forms of digital metagaming, taking in-game photography and in-game wildlife documentaries as examples, remediate and reenact critical “green practices” (Lewis 2012, 315) and asks what their cultural implications are, specifically in terms of fostering eco(media) literacy. According to Tania Lewis, “green practices” include, for instance, tending to community gardens, permablitzing, as well

Op de Beke, L., J. Raessens, S. Werning, and G. Farca (eds.), *EcoGames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024

DOI 10.5117/9789463721196_CH28

as “the rise of “sustainability streets” and “voluntary simplicity” networks” (315). These types of practices arguably constitute individual performative acts of developing and applying ecoliteracy (McBride et al. 2013) as well as negotiating and performing “eco-identity” (Hoffman and Doody 2015, 104), but participating in them in real life is not always easy or even possible (particularly, as elaborated below, under unique circumstances like the COVID pandemic). Despite the individual focus of engaging in green practices, they are also relevant from a societal perspective, not least by playing a role in the emergence, propagation, and societal impact of environmental movements. For example, J. Keri Cronin (2011) documents the connection between nature photography and the rise of national parks. By creating and homogenizing a popular imaginary of nature (often in connection to national identity), landscape photography has galvanized public support and contributed to the fact that the wilderness industry of these parks also became economically sustainable. Similarly, Dawn Drake demonstrates in her doctoral dissertation how nature photography in contemporary media culture still contributes to “awareness” of and perceived “connectedness” to nature as well as our sense of “ecological self” (Drake 2014).

Despite not using the concept itself, Lewis (2012) already points to how these green practices are being “remediated” by investigating “green lifestyle practices on television” (317). Contrary to popular perceptions, she reassesses “so-called ‘reality-based’ lifestyle programs, from home renovation to cooking and eco-lifestyle shows, [as] intensified sites of social ‘play’ and experimentation” (317), emphasizing the everyday creativity and corresponding “ethic of experimentation and play” they bring into the “modern suburban contexts” that they originate from (319). Thus, rather than focusing on the TV program as “text,” Lewis foregrounds the element of practice, pointing to how a show like *Guerrilla Gardeners* is “trying to link itself to various forms of urban activism [such as] a ‘seed bombing mission’ around Melbourne at night” (320). Both shows Lewis discusses tackle the “relationship between lifestyle and citizenship” (324), which similarly suggests a more active, social, and involved viewing experience than one might traditionally associate with the medium.

Following this line of argumentation, the chapter at hand explores how digital games allow for remediating these critical “green practices” in virtual environments, and which implications this might have for the players, the goals of climate media education (using the concept of ecomedia literacy outlined by Lopez 2021), and the digital games industry. The analysis is informed by critical discourse analysis following Norman Fairclough’s terminology (as summarized by Philips and Jørgensen 2002), which differentiates

between three dimensions (or rather: layers) of discourse, arguing that 1) “texts” afford forms of 2) “discursive practice,” which in turn legitimize, inspire but also possibly preclude 3) “social practice” (68). This chapter focuses on the relationship between the first two layers, conceptualizing in-game landscape photography, specifically in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*, Rockstar Studios 2018), as well as in-game nature documentary filmmaking in games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*, Rockstar North 2013), as “discursive practice[s]” (68) responding to the games as “texts.” For that purpose, I draw on “the discourses and genres which are articulated in the production and consumption of the text” (69), in other words, material such as publicly available interviews, interview material from online photography and game journalism, academic sources and sample content, and screenshots and videos.

The discursive environment of (in-game) landscape photography

This section will briefly discursively position in-game (nature) photography on the basis of recent game media coverage, departing from the more technical term “screenshotting.” Screenshotting (in games) has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years, and it is often inherently framed as “virtual photography” (Moore 2014). Christopher Moore emphasizes its connection to the “performance of identity” (146), but also usefully points out how it can “remediate the photographic past” (147). For example, analyzing tags in a large *Second Life* Flickr group, Moore shows that often-used tags like “landscape,’ ‘light,’ ‘art,’ ‘pose,’ and ‘portrait’” (147) reference and reinterpret established photographic genres. Sebastian Möring and Marco de Mutiis (2019) define in-game photography as situated “between remediation and simulation” (70). The authors distinguish between four archetypes: simulated photography, photo modes, “artistic screenshotting” and “creative photographic interventions” via image modification (74). These are useful basic categories, but the examples below suggest that in-game nature photography can often encompass and even selectively combine all four categories. Therefore, this chapter instead advocates “importing” the aesthetics of real-world landscape photography as an established visual genre framework to analyze a small subset of in-game photography more holistically, specifically as part of “green media [in] popular culture” (Parham 2016, 2).

In mainstream discourse, in-game photography is often intuitively (and emphatically) hailed as an “artform” (Hobbs 2021). For example,

screenshotters arguably “explore and engage with video game worlds much like how artists of the past viewed the real world” (Gilmour 2015), which suggests that they develop and train specific forms of perceiving and interpreting in-game objects. This “artistic gaze” can be critical but might also lead to reenacting romanticized views, both on virtual nature as a primarily aesthetic phenomenon, or on virtual characters as quasi-human. Eminent screenshotter Duncan Harris characteristically argues that “(almost) every game character has a soul, even if the developer doesn’t realise it,” a claim that suggests a romanticized interpretation of the game as a technical object, similar to how artists have historically attributed spiritual qualities to natural phenomena they depicted. Contrary to these optimistic interpretations of in-game photography, professional (landscape) photographers still often seek to separate their craft from screenshotting, possibly owing to external pressure stemming from the fact that “the photography industry is under assault from many fronts” (Ahmad 2017). Wasim Ahmad consequently describes landscape screenshots as art but not photography, implying that because they are taken in nature, “with all of the danger and infinite variability that comes with it,” photographs are imbued with a distinct “aura.”

While not posing any actual “danger,” complex game environments similarly afford serendipitous discovery. For example, a screenshotter using *RDR2* points out how “in this game we can’t really predict how a scene will turn out” since the virtual environment requires waiting for “the right moment when various elements come together” (Gilbert 2019). Technical manipulation of images also applies in both cases and, thus, does not serve as a distinguishing feature. Screenshotter @in__the__frame admits to adding “sun burst and lens flare” (Gilbert 2019) to their *RDR2* photographs; similarly, landscape photographers like Ansel Adams have long experimented with technical properties like exposure (Kozak 2019) and perceived nature through the “lens” of photographic technique, the main difference being that these manipulations were typically not “previewable” in real time nor applicable in a nondestructive way as in the case of in-game photography. Personal virtues of the photographer-as-artist constitute another common framing, namely the notion of perseverance both with regard to material and conceptual difficulties, which connects screenshotting and real-world photography. Screenshotter Leo Sang admits that “people think there’s no struggle behind [in-game] photos and that they can’t be seen as art,” but also declares this interpretation rooted “in the past now” (Hobbs 2021), pointing to how it may take hundreds of screenshots to create an image that evokes an emotional response. In turn, discursive and material practices

of screenshotters have, explicitly or implicitly, contributed to bridging the “gap” between in-game and outdoor photography as evidenced, for example, by Eron Rauch’s images taken in *World of Warcraft*, which were “processed through a laser film burner and printed using a traditional gelatin silver chemical process so they looked like traditional 1800s view camera images” (Gilmour 2015).

As a medium to think about nature, in-game photography can be considered “real” because of the “double experience” of play (Frissen et al. 2015, 18–19). While the imaginary world of a play situation (like an in-game environment) is fictional, the player is still bound by material needs and constraints; in turn, the emotional and cognitive experience of a play situation can be as “real” as an experience derived from situations not marked as “play.” With reference to Cindy Poremba’s early association between in-game photography and Susan Sontag’s “tourist photographic ‘frame,’” Moore similarly argues that in-game photography is “capable of producing dynamic sensations and powerful reactions to the digital object rendered in the moment of interaction between human and machine” (Moore 2014, 149). Thus, like real-world landscape photography (and landscape painting before it), screenshotting should be considered a performative method (Heras and Tabara 2014), which, more than just producing representations, brings about change within the world or at least in the performer themselves. This implies that both professional and amateur screenshotters are “thinking through” in-game photography about the real world; for example, the project *Down and Out in Los Santos*, which “aims to engage in a sort of social-realism for the software-age, documenting poverty and the lives of the homeless within [*Grand Theft Auto V*]’s socio-economic hegemony,” is explicitly described as a “performative engagement”¹ with real-world issues through a virtual world. While the in-game characters are not actually suffering, photographing them can be an effective way to think cocreatively but also self-reflexively about poverty and destitution, by “unearth[ing] the viewer’s empathy and humanity through manipulative photographic tropes.” In that context, the screenshots themselves are rather “props” than “texts”; they can be understood with cultural scholar and filmmaker Mieke Bal as “theoretical objects” (Bal 2013). Bal argues that images can “articulate and embody thought,” even “perform an equivalent of speech acts”; in other words, they “respond ... to the look cast onto them” and “entice viewers to theorize” (51–52). For example, visually juxtaposing one’s previously taken in-screenshots allows for more concrete reflections on the player’s

1 See <https://downandout.in-los-santos.com/about>.

photographic imagination of a given subject matter and enables them to practice different approaches towards nature perception. Similar to how landscape photography constitutes an “embodied” (Klerk 2020, 202) mode of reflecting on nature and ecology, Bal’s notion of theoretical objects emphasizes the embodied aspect of (scholarly) reflection. Below, examples of both in-game photographs and video documentaries serve to unpack and elaborate on how this can apply to developing environmental awareness.

In addition to affecting the person performing it, in-game photography may also encourage viewers to reinterpret in-game environments as symbolic representations, specifically to reconsider the very common “environment as backdrop” (Abraham and Jayemanne 2017, 79) trope, which stems from how gameplay usually clearly differentiates between interactable objects and “just scenery.” Yet, without guidance or at least a space for critical discussion, in-game landscape photographers might also, more often than not, act as “gamer-tourists” (Salmond and Salmond 2016, 157), replicating a characteristic “tourist gaze” that frames (in-game) nature as a (virtual) space designed for consumption. Consequently, definitions of “ecostrategies” in the actual tourism industry, which frame natural landscapes as either “(i) a museum for external consumption, (ii) a factory for producing activities and products, (iii) a dedicated place to be utilized [or] (iv) a dedicated place to be contemplated” (Sandell 2016, 64), bear a striking resemblance to how Benjamin Abraham and Darshana Jayemanne distinguish players’ interpretation of in-game environments. Below, both the photographer’s (or videographer’s) and the viewer’s side will be explored further before discussing which conditions need to be met for these practices to have longer lasting implications outside of the games themselves.

Remediating landscape photography in RDR2

Landscapes constitute only one of several visual genres within contemporary in-game photography,² yet they are an unusually prevalent motif

2 Judging from some of the biggest online archives (such as *Dead End Thrills* or *Virtual Geographic*), other genres include portrait photography, architectural photography (<https://www.blind-magazine.com/en/stories/the-imaginary-worlds-of-in-game-photography>), advertising photography (<https://videogametourism.at/content/art-game-photography>), and medium-reflexive microgenres like emulating the material properties and aesthetic conventions of old black-and-white photographic films (<https://virtualgeographic.tumblr.com/tagged/Black%20and%20White>).

in *RDR2* screenshotting. The game offers different photo mode options. In the regular mode, an option titled “lens” (which zooms the image in and out in various steps) suggests a naturalistic approach to handling the camera in-game. Yet other design elements, like allowing players to freely customize “focus distance” and “blur strength”³ (which corresponds to focus range), prioritize convenience over realism. The game also features an in-game camera object, which remediates the embodied experience of setting up a historical camera, including the obligatory tripod, in the game environment. Furthermore, in the *Naturalist* expansion for *Red Dead Online* (Rockstar Studios 2018–), an “advanced camera” can even be bought from a historical catalog. Yet, the design affordances of the photo mode itself, for example, how the “simulation of photography is reminiscent of gunplay” (Möring and De Mutiis 2019, 75) are not the main concern in this chapter.

Tutorials on how to take aesthetically pleasing, “atmospheric and dynamic” photography in *RDR2* and its online counterpart (PhotographyGamer 2020) differ between black-and-white and color shots; while the latter also feature landscape scenes like a river at sunset or the player character on a cliff, looking out over a valley, the former usually foreground people. Many video tutorial creators like PhotographyGamer encourage players to recreate mid-nineteenth-century photography tropes, not least because *RDR2* features numerous predefined filters that add grain or vignette effects to evoke old film material. In comparison, landscape photography does not appear to be systematically facilitated by tutorials and similar paratexts at the time of writing.

One way to explore how *RDR2* affords the photographic imagination of nature is by following the developer’s commentary on inspirations for designing the game’s landscapes, specifically the Hudson River School (Goldberg 2018), a mid-nineteenth-century American art movement that expanded romanticist landscape painting to areas including the Hudson River Valley and adjacent mountain areas but also New England, the American West and, to a lesser degree, South America. Apart from its geographical focus, the movement iterated on themes like discovery, exploration, and settlement which informed contemporary “frontier” mythologies. It catalyzed American exceptionalism and has shaped popular framings of American cultural identity to this day, being superseded by other movements in the late nineteenth century but “rediscovered” in the second half of the twentieth

3 See <https://rockstarintel.com/red-dead-redemption-2-on-pc-will-have-a-brand-new-photo-mode>.

century.⁴ Yet, the Hudson River School also, as Peter Fedoryk (2018) outlines, facilitated early environmental movements in the United States with its polarizing but affectively engaging depictions of nature. While *RDR2*'s art director Aaron Garbut claims that the studio was “not looking to film or art for inspiration” because they “were building a place, not a linear or static representation,” he later concedes that, for example, “Owen Shepherd, [Rockstar North's] lighting director, looked to the pastoral and landscape painters like Turner, Rembrandt and American landscape painters from the nineteenth century such as Albert Bierstadt, Frank Johnson, and Charles Russell.”⁵ Thus, the game can be understood as a remediation of romanticist landscape painting using 3D game graphics technologies like fog shaders and volumetric lighting, whereas virtual photography in turn remediates landscape photography using these virtual environments as material. Moreover, collections of in-game landscape photos on fan websites like GTABase⁶ illustrate how players, for the most part assumedly unknowingly, intuitively “reenact” the Hudson River School's aesthetic categories in their in-game photographs (see Figure 28.1).

In addition to landscape paintings, in-game photographers in *RDR2* also remediate pictorial traditions of nature established in American Western cinema. In fact, Peter Cowie points to aesthetic continuities between the two media genres, arguing that the Hudson River School had been one of the primary sources of inspiration for directors like John Ford (Cowie 2004). Like the Hudson River School, Western cinema has been intertwined with environmental movements in the United States (Murray and Heumann 2012). Thus, more than remediating the films-as-texts, *RDR2* enables and even encourages players to reenact modes of “perceiving nature” informed by decades of movie Westerns. Many screenshots in the aforementioned GTABase collection consequently exhibit visual tropes reminiscent of Western cinema, including many sunrise/sunset scenes, visual framing of the scene through objects like cacti or power lines, slightly asymmetrical compositions and shots looking down over the in-game character's shoulder on hills or mountains.

Performing in-game landscape photography clearly draws attention to both virtual plants and wildlife in a way that regular gameplay usually does not. Edward Crowley, Matthew Silk, and Sarah Crowley (2021) have

4 See https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hurs/hd_hurs.htm.

5 See <https://www.polygon.com/red-dead-redemption/2018/10/26/18024982/red-dead-redemption-2-art-inspiration-landscape-paintings>.

6 See https://www.gtabase.com/red-dead-redemption-2/photos/?limit=30&thumb_limitstart=0.



Figure 28.1: In-game landscape photo from GTABase (see <https://www.gtabase.com/red-dead-redemption-2/photos>).

argued that playing *RDR2* may facilitate learning about real-world ecologies, including “animal behaviours and interspecies interactions” (1239). The authors point out how players’ success at identifying a species often appears linked to its “in-game utility value” (1229), but also emphasize that deeper learning engagement may be fostered by the “immersive qualities of the gameplay,” which may “provoke real emotional reactions” (1239). As a slower alternative to common playing styles, in-game photography can help intensify this effect and address the often-diagnosed lack of “plant and animal awareness” (Bakar et al. 2020), at least in the context of the game’s virtual spaces. This alleged “retraining of perception” due to a deceleration and defamiliarization of regular viewing habits has been previously attributed to independent ecocinema (Parham 2016, 177). However, animal or plant “blindness” does not merely imply not noticing flora and fauna around us, but also failing to understand their interrelatedness with and impact on their natural surroundings. Acknowledging these systemic aspects as well as transferring the newly developed ways of perceiving (virtual) nature into the real world arguably requires pedagogical and institutional support, as will be briefly elaborated below.

Another aspect that might require a critical context for in-game landscape photography to play to its strengths is the possibly problematic focus on “objectifying” nature inherent on “taking” and collecting in-game photos. This specifically applies when games incorporate this practice into their core gameplay, for example, by allowing players to upvote photos in *New Pokémon Snap* (Bandai Namco 2021), or into metagame events like the

“Naturalist Photo Challenge”⁷ in *Red Dead Online*, in which players compete for prizes. Both cases continue aesthetic traditions, in which the animal as “supposedly primitive Other was already being sought, displayed, and observed as entertainment,” as Melissa Bianchi argues in her chapter on in-game photo modes in this book. These potential ambivalences, as well as how they may be addressed within climate education contexts, will be briefly addressed after the following section, which explores in-game videography as a related, yet subtly different remediated ecopractice.

Remediating nature documentary filmmaking in *GTA V* and *Destiny 2*

Nature documentaries have been a mainstay of what is now often regarded as “green documentary” (Parham 2016, 193), which refers to the use of nonfictional film and television for the purpose of environmental and ecological education and, occasionally, persuasion. Especially the animal documentaries narrated by David Attenborough, starting with *Life on Earth* in 1979, have become iconic in contemporary popular culture and, with their focus on cinematic realism, have reframed our perceived relationship with animals, for better or worse (Gouyon 2019). The genre, culminating in recent Netflix productions like *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* (2020), has captured popular attention both through familiarity, by drawing on habitualized narrative patterns (including Attenborough’s recognizable narration), but also, paradoxically, the “never-before-seen trope,” referring to the search for surprising perspectives on familiar animals (Gouyon 2019, 102) and high production values. The examples below demonstrate how this “wildlife blockbuster” (205) subgenre is being reappropriated and reenacted in digital games as a performative practice.

The marine life documentary *Into the Deep* (8-Bit Bastard 2014), “filmed” in *GTA V*, is a characteristic example, and it evokes several tropes of the genre, starting with the title and establishing shot, the virtual camera right above the ocean surface, and moving on to the dramatizing use of music and the anthropomorphizing backstories of its animal protagonists. The same applies to its “companion piece” *Onto the Land* (8-Bit Bastard 2015), which documents the animals inhabiting the mountains and valleys of Los Santos and Blaine County in the game (see Figure 28.2). These examples could be analyzed

7 See <https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/k49a58878822k2/The-Naturalist-Photo-Challenge>.



Figure 28.2: Screenshot from *Onto the Land* (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsXsyepW6pM> at 3'51").

as “texts,” following the ecocritical perspective of authors such as Parham (2016), who refers to Bill Nichols’ documentary modes to identify motifs in “environmental and ecological documentary” (195). However, it appears more fruitful to consider them, like the in-game landscape photographs above, primarily as theoretical objects, that is, as objects with an agency of their own or as props in a performative practice of developing environmental literacy (as defined by McBride et al. 2013). For example, creating these “documentaries” requires a combination of “environmental sensitivity,” “knowledge of environmental issues,” particularly “cognitive skills” (7) and, given the media-reflexive function of the videos, also elements of “intuition [and] creativity” (16) associated more directly with ecoliteracy. The fact that these videos are being created both within naturalistic (see *GTA V*) and fantastical (like, for instance, *Destiny 2*, see Kimber Prime 2020) virtual worlds, suggests that, more than the game environment itself, the genre affordances of the nature documentary genre constitute the primary reference point for their creators. Videos like *Into the Deep* demonstrate how the Attenborough-style animal documentary has gradually transformed in the perception of participatory media users from a “mere” genre, in the traditional sense defined as a set of formal characteristics, into an inclusive, replicable practice.

This remediation of a media genre “as practice” rather than as a set of “objects” exhibits conceptual similarities with Manovich’s concept of deep remixability (Manovich 2007), which suggests, using examples like the lens flare in video games, that digital media allow for reenacting the

practices and material conditions of earlier media techniques rather than simply their aesthetic markers. More importantly, it evokes the notion of “genre affordances” (Alacovska 2017, 666), which Ana Alacovska mobilizes to claim that familiar formal and rhetorical elements of genres like travel guidebooks have been instrumental in the emergence of participatory media practices well before digital media. Accordingly, knowledge of how a genre “works” has allowed for media practitioners to collaborate in a decentralized manner on joint projects, and this body of shared knowledge facilitates the formation of communities of practice. In the case of *Onto the Land*, the documentary creators draw on the genre’s conventionalized portrayal of real animals and similarly rationalize the behavior of in-game animals. Commenting on a virtual rabbit on a mountain, they argue, for instance, that “being this high up has an advantage [because] a rabbit’s eyesight is very acute, and at this altitude they are able to spot approaching predators from much greater distances” (8-Bit Bastard 2015, 7’17”). The *D2* documentary, *Creatures of Destiny*, applies the same rationale to imaginary creatures like reptilian-bird hybrids (Kimber Prime 2020, 2’6”). Even though the behavior of the virtual animals documented on video is algorithmically defined, this practice arguably can performatively address similar complications within human–animal relationships and pose similar questions as real-world wildlife photography, for example, regarding the symbolic potential of “respecting” a (real or virtual) animal’s natural habitat, or how photographing wildlife functions as a self-reflexive practice (Brower 2009). For example, “playing slowly” to record animal footage or even waiting for specific behavioral loops to trigger clashes with the way the game would normally be played (that is the “orthogame” as elaborated by Hans-Joachim Backe in this book). Yet, how this embodied experience compares to real-world wildlife observation, and what reflections on our relationship with nature can be derived from that, usually will not become clear just from the practice alone. Therefore, the next section briefly discusses the context required for remediated ecopractices to potentially become transformational.

In-game photography and videography in the context of ecomedia literacy

The examples above indicate the epistemic potential of in-game photography and videography, but remediated ecopractices are not critical and self-reflexive by default. For instance, Duncan Harris dismissively notes

that his existing screenshot work in *Dragon Age: Origins* “was mostly just scenery” rather than the “combat shots” he is more interested in (Gilmour 2015). That is, a photographic reframing of virtual nature requires contextual knowledge and a space for discussion to facilitate a lasting “retraining our perception” as suggested above. Moreover, even though the virtual landscapes of *RDR2* have captured the popular imagination and media attention, online communities in which players would share and discuss their in-game (landscape) photographs are still few and far between,⁸ as photos are rather shared via Instagram⁹ than via platforms like Flickr, which host many traditional (landscape) photographer communities.¹⁰ Stable online communities could help draw attention to the ambiguities inherent in the practice, like the potentially constraining influence of tools. One of the first recognized examples of in-game photography, the collection of portrait screenshots *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* captured in *Second Life*,¹¹ utilized external software and was printed on canvas for exhibition in galleries. In comparison, many commercial games now offer dedicated photo modes, which are, first and foremost, marketing tools that incentivize users to document and share the visual appeal of the game’s environments or characters. And indeed, prominent screenshotters have argued that they find it more appealing “to capture a game’s natural environmental beauty ... because it’s a real contrast to what climate change is doing to our real world” (Hobbs 2021) than to critically engage with the “beautifying” impetus of many games’ photo modes.

To unlock the potential of in-game photography as a critical practice, Lopez’ notion of ecomedia literacy (Lopez 2021), which addresses the role of media in sustainability education, can be useful. It describes a “historical neglect of the environment in how media are taught and conceptualized” (4), including a neocolonial bias in specific media forms like “broadcast media [a]s a particularly Western mode of communication,” which stabilize the “status of Western culture as ‘gift giver’” (94). Instead, for in-game landscape photography and videography to have a societally transformative impact like early landscape photography requires a more inclusive approach supported by 1) active and self-sustaining communities of practice, 2) accessible and

8 As of writing, individual posts are still the most common occurrence; see, for example, https://www.reddit.com/r/reddeadedemption/comments/afzyaa/ingame_landscape_photography_by_me_ill_try_to.

9 See authors like Gilbert (2019), who refers to prominent *RDR2* photographer accounts like @mesopotamian_meow or @in__the__frame.

10 See <https://www.flickr.com/groups/13197975@Noo>.

11 See <https://0100101110101101.org/show-13-most-beautiful-avatars>.



Figure 28.3: Screenshot from a *WIRED* video on selecting wildlife images with photographer Steve Winter (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VVU0DIIWuE> at 3'14").

flexible tools (not least to challenge the corporate bias of photo modes), and 3) distribution channels/platforms that bring these images into the popular visual imaginary and provide a back channel, for example, to identify and outgrow overly romanticizing representational traditions. According to Margreth Lünenborg and Christoph Raetzsch “a multitude of participatory practices do not necessarily lead to a joint idea of what a movement is about or what its aims are” (2017, 17). Thus, we need to consider scaffolding strategies to provide this context.

This could, for example, be a workshop format in which participants are asked to reenact the perspective of a real-world nature photographer in a game. These categories (see *WIRED* 2021) include emphasizing the “emotional connection” by always showing the eyes, which need to be in sharp focus even with motion blur in the picture (see Figure 28.3), or selecting photographs that suggest characteristic “behavior” for the animal. Alternatively, participants could creatively engage with critical claims like Carolyn Kane’s argument that traditional landscape photography glosses over human interventions such as the by-products of “post-industrial consumer excess” (Kane 2018, 131) and perpetuates obstinate “demands for the American utopia” (126). This could involve aestheticizing waste as part of the landscape or leaving small, almost imperceptible irritations in images otherwise evoking the visual rhetoric of a natural “sublime.” Formats like these might enable discussions about which aspects are transferable and which are not, as well as how this practice might inform our everyday appreciation and stewardship of nature.

Outlook

The concluding section briefly addresses practical considerations and possible avenues for further research. First, it is important to acknowledge in-game landscape photography and videography as part of a larger, yet often marginalized spectrum of alternative playing practices, such as when players of *RDR2* follow nonplayer characters (NPCs) to observe their behavior.¹² The evident similarities to documenting in-game animals suggest that these practices do not simply constitute forms of thinking “through” the game about nature but also thinking “through” natural phenomena about the technical properties of the game and the computer, which Janet H. Murray (1997) described as an “enchanted place” (99), a “transitional object” (100) that we simultaneously seek to demystify and remain immersed in.

Second, as implied in the remarks about photo modes above, it is important to consider the economic context in which these remediated practices operate. This includes, most basically, the fact that “video-game photographers do not own their shots” (Hobbs 2021); rather, screenshots belong to the developer and cannot be monetized without their permission. Yet, corporate influence also manifests itself in more subtle ways. While many grassroots creations remain obscure, the documentaries of *8-Bit Bastard* were officially recognized by Rockstar Games on its news website.¹³ Duncan Harris from *Dead End Thrills* received privileged access to developer tools from the developers of *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003–) to “build several scenes from scratch using [the game’s] engine and assets, layering, scaling and manipulating effects purely for artistic ends,” but also resorted to “hack[ing] the post processing values of Unreal” (Gilmour 2015) to create more cinematic-looking shots of *Batman: Arkham City* (Rocksteady Studios 2011). These examples indicate how in-game landscape photography, especially as it may eventually outgrow its current niche status, is inherently part of the political economy of the broader games industry ecosystem. This also applies in the case of Kojima Productions co-opting landscape photographer Pete Rowbottom for a tutorial on landscape photography in the game *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019), which communicates important aspects of landscape photography to a broader audience but also inherently ties them to one particular game, with the global head

12 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrUJjgppMn4>.

13 See <https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/ak1911209053kg/the-five-states-red-dead-redemption-2-nature-documentary-by-8-bit-bast>.

of marketing and communications, Jay Boor, claiming that “the world of virtual photography [is] becoming increasingly intertwined with real-world photography,” and that it will be “interesting to see how those two worlds influence one another creatively” (Campbell 2020). Kojima Productions similarly utilize the genre affordances (see above) of and associations with the documentary, albeit from a corporate perspective; for example, Kojima staff asked Rowbottom, an award-winning landscape photographer, to create real-world photographs, which are then marked as “inspired by *Death Stranding*” in the video, thus tapping into the aforementioned discursive conflation but with the purpose of promoting the game and the realism of its virtual landscapes.

On the other hand, critical metagaming practices can also help carve out niches in the commercial games industry for new (micro)genres. Games like *Beyond Blue* (E-Line Media 2020), *Birding Simulator* (T-Bull 2022), or *Photography Simulator* (Madnetic Games 2022) capitalize on the growing popularity of in-game photography and the inherent “streamability” of the genre to be economically viable and gradually “condense” in-game (wildlife) photography into an actual game genre. This might incur the risk for the metagaming practice to “devolve” into a regular orthogame (see above) playing practice and to lose its critical momentum in the process, given how the “materiality and embodiment of social actions through tools, artefacts or media” (Lünenborg and Raetzsch 2017) contributes to the bodily “routinisation of actions” (21), which may be accompanied by a “cognitive routinisation” that counteracts the more transgressive, appropriate origins of these practices. For example, *Photography Simulator* procedurally foregrounds technical aspects of commercial photography¹⁴ like different lenses or gadgets like drones (see Figure 28.4), which may easily overshadow the intrinsic motivations and playful performativity of, for example, observing plants or animals in *RDR2*.

Finally, the findings in this chapter are intended to serve as a “blueprint” that can be adapted to investigate the remediation of other epistemic ecopractices in digital games. For example, games like *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016) and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020) remediate community gardening, one of the green practices discussed by Lewis (2012), within virtual environments. Despite not being “real,” cultivating these spaces may instill shared values, principles and “do’s and don’t’s,” similar to real-world communities of practice, including walking

14 See <https://petapixel.com/2021/09/14/photography-simulator-is-a-wildlife-photography-video-game-for-pc>.



Figure 28.4: Screenshot from *Photography Simulator* (see <https://www.zockerpuls.de/photography-simulator>).

slowly since “running ... can lead to you inadvertently stomping on flowers [and] ruin the host’s flowers for days” as well as avoiding the “tak[ing of] fruit or resources without permission” (Favis 2020). These examples illustrate how remediating community gardening, according to Lewis (2012), can be understood as one of many “everyday forms of green citizenship,” an interpretation of civic engagement linked “to creativity, community-building and romantic concerns about the art and aesthetics of everyday living” (316). August John Hoffman and Stephen Doody (2015) describe this impact as reinforcing “eco-identity” (105) by fostering “psychosocial well-being and resilience” (106), especially under the conditions of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The concept also has an inherently social focus, as it is defined by “understanding community needs” (110), “being able to help in one’s community” (111), and experiencing “community connectedness” (112). Research into these practices can be complemented with more individualistic interpretations of tending to one’s virtual garden in *New Horizons*, or the emergence of new personas like “the social player, the turnip trader, the gardener [or] the artisan” (Comerford 2021, 101). Such an angle highlights how “real-world” green practices have distinctly mediating characteristics themselves, in this case, the permaculture garden acting as a shared “medium” that allows for both internally and externally communicating values and motivations associated with ecological identity. Examples like in-game landscape photography thus illustrate that both embodied and remediated ecopractices should not be regarded as mutually exclusive but allow for informing, scrutinizing, and popularizing each other if approached from a comparative perspective.

Ludography

- Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. 2020. Nintendo. Nintendo Switch.
- Batman: Arkham City*. 2011. Rocksteady Studios. Warner Bros. Interactive. Multiplatform.
- Beyond Blue*. 2020. E-Line Media. Multiplatform.
- Birding Simulator*. 2022. T Bull. Microsoft. PC.
- Death Stranding*. 2019. Kojima Productions. Sony Interactive. Multiplatform.
- Destiny 2*. 2017–. Bungie. Activision/Bungie. Multiplatform.
- Eve Online*. 2003–. CCP Games. PC.
- Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V)*. 2013. Rockstar North. Rockstar Games. Multiplatform.
- New Pokémon Snap*. 2021. Bandai Namco. Nintendo. Nintendo Switch.
- Photography Simulator*. 2022. Madnetic Games. Madnetic Games, PlayWay. Microsoft.
- Red Dead Online*. 2018–. Rockstar Studios. Rockstar Games. Multiplatform.
- Red Dead Redemption 2*. 2018. Rockstar Studios. Rockstar Games. Multiplatform.
- Stardew Valley*. 2016. Concerned Ape. Multiplatform.

References

- 8-Bit Bastard. 2014. "GTA 5 Wildlife Documentary: Into the Deep." *YouTube*, November 22, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pcdxaJJniA&ab_channel=8-BITBASTARD.
- 8-Bit Bastard. 2015. "GTA 5 Wildlife Documentary: Onto the Land." *YouTube*, August 27, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsXsyepW6pM&ab_channel=8-BITBASTARD.
- Abraham, Benjamin, and Darshana Jayemanne. 2017. "Where Are All the Climate Change Games? Locating Digital Games' Response to Climate Change." *Transformations* 30: 74–94.
- Ahmad, Wasim. 2017. "It May Be Art, but In-Game Images Aren't 'Photography.'" *Fstoppers*, March 24, 2017. <https://fstoppers.com/originals/it-may-be-art-game-images-arent-photography-170382>.
- Alacovska, Ana. 2017. "The History of Participatory Practices: Rethinking Media Genres in the History of User-Generated Content in 19th-Century Travel Guidebooks." *Media, Culture & Society* 39 (5): 661–679.
- Bakar, Fatma, Çağrı Avan, Fatih Şeker et al. 2020. "Plant and Animal Awareness in Nature Education Perspectives: Where Is Blindness?" *International Electronic Journal of Environmental Education* 10 (2): 122–135. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/iejeegreen/issue/53893/554911>.

- Bal, Mieke. 2013. "Imaging Madness: Inter-Ships." *InPrint* 2 (1): 51–70. <http://arrow.dit.ie/inp/vol2/iss1/5>.
- Brower, Matthew. 2009. "A Rupture in the Field of Representation: Animals, Photography and Affect." *Photography and Culture* 2 (3): 317–25.
- Campbell, Alistair. 2020. "Landscape Photographer Explores the Rise of In-Game Photography." *Digital Camera World*, September 9, 2020. <https://www.digitalcameraworld.com/news/landscape-photographer-explores-the-rise-of-in-game-photography>.
- Comerford, Chris. 2021. "Coconuts, Custom-Play & COVID-19: Social Isolation, Serious Leisure and Personas in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*." *Persona Studies* 6 (2): 101–117.
- Cowie, Peter. 2004. *John Ford and the American West*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Cronin, J. Keri. 2011. *Manufacturing National Park Nature: Photography, Ecology, and the Wilderness Industry of Jasper*. Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press.
- Crowley, Edward J., Matthew J. Silk, and Sarah L. Crowley. 2021. "The Educational Value of Virtual Ecologies in *Red Dead Redemption 2*." *People and Nature* 3 (6): 1229–1243.
- Drake, Dawn. 2014. *Nature Photography and the Ecological Self: A Mixed-Methods Study*. *SAGE Research Methods Cases Part 1*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013518282>.
- Favis, Elise. 2020. "Animal Crossing Etiquette Guide: The Dos and Don'ts of Online Multiplayer." *Washington Post*, April 6, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/04/06/animal-crossing-etiquette-guide-dos-donts-online-multiplayer>.
- Fedoryk, Peter. 2018. "The Origins of the American Environmental Movement: Hudson River School Naturalism in the 19th Century." *New Errands: The Undergraduate Journal of American Studies* 6 (1). <https://doi.org/10.18113/P8ne6161106>.
- Frissen, Valerie, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange et al. 2015. "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media, and Identity." In *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, edited by Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange et al., 9–52. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Gilbert, Ben. 2019. "Red-Eye Redemption: How *RDR2* Inspired a Posse of in-Game Photographers." *TechRadar*, May 25, 2019. <https://www.techradar.com/news/red-eye-redemption-how-rdr2-inspired-a-posse-of-in-game-photographers>.
- Gilmour, David. 2015. "The Art of Video Game Photography." *Vice*, July 18, 2015. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/8qxp4/the-art-of-video-game-photography>.
- Goldberg, Harold. 2018. "How the West Was Digitized: The Making of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2*." *Vulture*, October 14, 2018. <https://www.vulture.com/2018/10/the-making-of-rockstar-games-red-dead-redemption-2.html>.
- Gouyon, Jean-Baptiste. 2019. *BBC Wildlife Documentaries in the Age of Attenborough*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Heras, María, and J. David Tàbara. 2014. "Let's Play Transformations! Performative Methods for Sustainability." *Sustainability Science* 9 (3): 379–398.
- Hobbs, Thomas. 2021. "Are These Stunning Photos of Imaginary Worlds a New Artform?" *BBC Culture*, May 24, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210521-are-these-stunning-photos-of-imaginary-worlds-a-new-artform>.
- Hoffman, August John, and Stephen Doody. 2015. "Build a Fruit Tree Orchard and They Will Come: Creating an Eco-Identity via Community Gardening Activities." *Community Development Journal* 50 (1): 104–120.
- Kane, Carolyn. 2018. "The Toxic Sublime: Landscape Photography and Data Visualization." *Theory, Culture & Society* 35 (3): 121–147.
- Kimber Prime. 2020. "Creatures of *Destiny*: A Nature Documentary (MOTW)." *YouTube*, February 29, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkcAHEQQFn4>.
- Klerk, Anneke de. 2020. "Photographer–Camera–Place Relations: Reflections on Postphenomenology and Landscape Photography Practice." *Visual Studies* 35 (2–3): 201–215.
- Kozak, Anastasia. 2019. "Translating Nature: Manipulation of Natural Landscape in Contemporary Digital Photography." In *Mediating Nature: The Role of Technology in Ecological Literacy*, edited by Sidney I. Dobrin and Sean Morey, 129–144. London: Routledge.
- Lewis, Tania. 2012. "'There Grows the Neighbourhood': Green Citizenship, Creativity and Life Politics on Eco-TV." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15 (3): 315–326.
- López, Antonio. 2021. *Ecomedia Literacy Integrating Ecology into Media Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lünenborg, Margreth, and Christoph Raetzsch. 2017. "From Public Sphere to Performative Publics: Developing Media Practice as an Analytic Model." In *Media Practices, Social Movements, and Performativity: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Susanne Foellmer, Margreth Lünenborg, and Christoph Raetzsch, 13–35. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Manovich, Lev. 2007. "Deep Remixability." *Artifact* 1 (2): 76–84.
- McBride, Brooke Baldauf, Carol A. Brewer, A. R. Berkowitz et al. 2013. "Environmental Literacy, Ecological Literacy, Ecoliteracy: What Do We Mean and How Did We Get Here?" *Ecosphere* 4 (5): 1–20.
- Moore, Christopher. 2014. "Screenshots as Virtual Photography: Cybernetics, Remediation, and Affect." In *Advancing Digital Humanities: Research, Methods, Theories*, edited by Paul Longley Arthur and Katherine Bode, 141–160. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Möring, Sebastian, and Marco de Mutiis. 2019. "Camera Ludica: Reflections on Photography in Video Games." In *Intermedia Games—Games Inter Media: Video*

- Games and Intermediality*, edited by Michael Fuchs and Jeff Thoss, 69–94. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501330520.ch-003>.
- Murray, Janet H. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Murray, Robin L., and Joseph K. Heumann. 2012. *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral: Western Cinema and the Environment*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Parham, John. 2016. *Green Media and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Philips, Marianne W., and Louisa Jørgensen. 2002. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. London: Sage.
- PhotographyGamer. 2020. “The Virtual Photographers Guide #5—*Red Dead Redemption 2*.” *YouTube*. October 17, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDiyabaXsmc>.
- Salmond, Michael, and Jacqueline Salmond. 2016. “The Gamer as Tourist: The Simulated Environments and Impossible Geographies of Videogames.” In *Tourism and the Creative Industries*, edited by Philip Long and Nigel D. Morpeth, 151–163. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Sandell, Klas. 2016. “Ecostrategies: Presentation and Elaboration of a Conceptual Framework of Landscape Perspectives.” *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal* 64 (1): 63–80.
- WIRED. 2021. “How a *Nat Geo* Photographer Selects the Best Images from a Shoot.” *YouTube*, December 22, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VVUoDIIWuE>.

About the author

Stefan Werning is an Associate Professor for New Media and Game Studies at Utrecht University, where he initiated the Utrecht Game Lab and organizes the annual Ecogames summer school. He previously worked as an assistant professor at the universities of Bayreuth and Bonn and as a research assistant at the Fraunhofer Institute Media Communications in St. Augustin. While completing his PhD dissertation, Werning has worked in the digital games industry, most notably at Nintendo of Europe and Codemasters (2006–2009). He has been a visiting scholar and fellow at the Center for Comparative Media Studies at MIT, and his latest book, *Making Games*, was published in the Playful Thinking series at the MIT Press in 2021.

