5. Becoming Camera in Virtual Photography
A Player-Game-Camera Triangularity

Natasha Chuk

The physical-digital hybrid conditions of everyday life in the twenty-first century create new opportunities to experience and record the world around us, shifting how we perceive and engage with landscapes, both corporeally and virtually. Video games offer digitally built 3D environments that are interactive sites which continue and virtually extend our lived experiences in the physical world, like dreams or the imagination, except they are photographable and can be experienced in real time *as* intradiegetic photographic imagery that come together through our interactions with and within the virtual world. This is possible through the technical proficiency of in-game cameras and improved photorealistic graphics, which together remediate the digital camera and traditional photographic practices, offering many of the same existing creative possibilities and sensibilities and introducing new ones, and produce life-like staging grounds for play and interaction. As a result, the development of photo mode and the rise of in-game photography signal a post-photographic practice that reinforces the idea that interactive virtual environments are viable sites for meaningful experiences and thus worthy of photographic expression and documentation.

This chapter explores how the development of photo mode and the practice of in-game photography in the video game *Death Stranding* reflect our changing relationship to landscape, and both retain and remediate aspects of traditional photography and the landscape photography genre. It details how the game lends itself to an immersive sensation whereby it both looks (through visual representation) and feels (through simulation) like a physical environment, which is traversable, dynamic, and photographable using photo mode, the feature in video games that allows players to photograph the in-game world. This combination synthesizes the human (player) gaze and the virtual (camera) gaze to collapse the distinction between photographer and

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apparatus, and thus it places participants in the role of gamer, photographer, *and* camera device, forming a player-game-camera triangularity. Together with the game's photorealistic sophistication of 3D modeling, graphics, and animation, an effect of physicality of the virtual landscape is produced. The combination of awe-inspiring qualities in the game's simulation of both landscape and photographic camera gestures toward the technological sublime, an aspect of fascination and wonder generated by interacting with game worlds and the photorealistic in-game landscape photographs. The resulting post-photographic images are "softimages," malleable computational images activated by game play, which can then be fashioned, recorded, and edited into virtual photographs. The photographic series *Place(s)* by fine art photographer Pasco Greco is the result of these combined affordances in the game *Death Stranding*.

Remediation and the Enduring Appeal of Open Landscapes

Sheltering in place, mandated during the global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, ushered in a rethinking of how—not only to socialize—but also how to explore and traverse open spaces online, effectively traveling to other places through our imaginations and with our avatars instead of our bodies. This type of psychic activity existed before most of the world was trapped in a mandatory quarantine, but the overall appreciation for virtual escapism noticeably grew when meeting in person was deemed too risky or impossible. This moment coincided with new developments in web3 environments: in particular, the explosion of NFTs and the rise in customized metaverse gatherings. But even before this, the steady visual and procedural development of the open worlds of interactive virtual environments and video games had facilitated the ability to virtually wander and experience the physicality of digital objects from one's position in front of a screen. The appeal of a fabricated landscape predates pandemic-related shutdowns and the solace found in digital environments of the internet and video games.

Thus, there was a precedent for the creation and success of the adventure game *Death Stranding* (2019), whose impressive visual verisimilitude, affords experiences which continue and virtually extend beyond our lived experiences in the physical world. Digitally rendered land, water, and sky look and feel tangible because of technical improvements over time and the photorealistic sophistication of 3D modeling, graphics, and animation.

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As new technologies build on existing technologies; they demonstrate a process of remediation. For computer researcher Jay Bolter and new media scholar Richard Grusin, every medium is in a relation of remediation with previous media. As they write:

> It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real. A medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media.[1]

The interactive 3D environments of video games appropriate techniques, forms, and social relevance from many previous media. *Death Stranding*, with its convincing ability to appear (through visual representation) like a physical environment, remediates photography and the landscape photography genre. By producing the feeling that it is a physical environment populated with physical objects (through simulation and interaction), it adds a new sensation of being situated somewhere between the physical and virtual through the mechanic of traversing a dynamic, photorealistic digital landscape. Both digital and photographic landscape imagery build on a broader history of landscape imagery. As geographer Tim Cresswell observes, the concept of landscape at the time of its emergence in Renaissance Venice and Flanders "combined a focus on the material topography of a portion of land (that which can be seen) with the notion of vision (the way it is seen)."[2] The digital environment of *Death Stranding* and a player's experience of hybridity between the virtual and physical encourages a changed relationship to landscapes and physical environments. In such virtual environments, landscapes are valued, and exploration is encouraged, but materiality is relegated to the experience of virtual presence facilitated by the game's camera perspective.

Images created using the photo mode function of *Death Stranding* reimagine analog *and* digital landscape photography by dematerializing the presence of the photographer. Prior to the digital and networked era, the natural world was mainly experienced and recorded through analog means: writing, painting, drawing, and photography. The origin of landscape photography coincides with the emergence of the concept of landscape, dating back several centuries

1 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediations: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 64.

2 Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 25.

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and spanning various geographic regions, which indicates its own remediation of other visual forms that fictionalized and indicated an interest in depicting the natural world. As art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes:

> To produce something visually recognizable *as* landscape was, therefore, to manipulate a set of pictorial devices that distinguished the natural world as such—*natura naturens*—from other related categories: forest, countryside, wilderness, garden, park, pasture, prospect, view, and so forth. This genre-fication of landscape, begun in the Renaissance, eventually permitted for the representations of particular kinds of landscape—mythological and classical, romantic and realist, rural and suburban, and, increasingly important in the nineteenth century, the identifiably national.[3]

When photography arrived at the height of romanticism in the mid-nineteenth century, it was situated somewhere between two poles of protection and loss. On one hand, photography—its own form of preservation—closed the gap between nature's beauty and the mechanical future in a gesture that contained both. On the other, photography joined other technological forces—the train, the telegraph—in annihilating time and space through speed and reorganization, and in doing so signaled a fictionalization of the landscape. As writer and activist Rebecca Solnit writes:

> One way to describe this transformation of the world whose great accelerations came in the 1830s, the 1870s, and the age of the computer is as increasing abstraction. Those carried along on technology's currents were less connected to local places, to the earth itself, to the limitations of the body and biology, to the malleability of memory and imagination.[4]

Photography was among the first to abstract the world in dramatic visual fashion, showing it in fragments selected by angles, framing, and proximity in a blatant distortion of space and time. With its politics of perception reflecting a technical feat, it mechanized a new rendering of the natural world. Technical improvements of photography over time, and particularly the transition from

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3 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Framing Landscape Photography (2010)," in *Photography After Photography: Gender, Genre, History*, ed. Sarah Parsons (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 107.

4 Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking Press, 2003), 22.

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analog to digital photography, encourage a remediation of the medium as well as of abstraction itself. Landscape photography and interactive digital environments come together as synthetic images in *Death Stranding*, a combination that engages a post-photographic sensibility of further increasing abstraction, fostering new ways of representing reality, and allowing us to not only imagine but also embody, manipulate, and record alternative environments which result in a new a kind of landscape photograph and gesture toward the technological sublime.

Virtual Placehood within In-Game Photographs

Rather than merely simulate interactive environments, video games demonstrate a remediation of photography. Both in terms of the visual aesthetic of photographs and through the in-game mechanic of photo mode, a video game's virtual camera refashions previous digital and analog cameras. The concept of the technological sublime is used here to describe the combination of awe-inspiring qualities in a game which create a feeling of admiration and wonder generated by the interaction with a photo-realistic game world and landscape, and through having the ability to at once participate in and be removed from the game world while photographing it. *Death Stranding* achieves the status of the technological sublime in at least three ways: through a player's ability to traverse and interact with the virtual game world, which represents and simulates physical landscapes to produce a sense of virtual placehood; through having the ability to interact with the game world to allow the photographic composition to come together; and through being able to pause the game action to produce a photograph from it.

The concept of the technological sublime can be traced to the American culture historian Perry Miller, who alludes to the idea in passing when describing the "technological majesty" of new technologies, like the steamboat, which received near religious veneration following their introduction into American society during the mid-nineteenth century.[5] The technology historian David Nye expanded on the idea by drawing on aesthetics and the history of the sublime in art and philosophy and applying it to the continuing appeal of awe-inspiring feats of advanced technologies throughout American history. As he writes:

5 Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), 303.

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> The American sublime drew on European ideas in the fine arts, literature, and philosophy. In art history, the concept of the sublime is often applied to paintings that are unreal, monstrous, nightmarish, or imaginary. In architecture a sublime building usually is vast and includes striking contrasts of light and darkness, designed to fill the observer with foreboding and fear.[6]

While Nye proposes the idea that the American technological sublime represented an ideal that helped bring together a multicultural society, the term is useful in the context of describing the photographic and technological feats of *Death Stranding* as a representation of an ideal that is not uniquely American and that offers a reimagining of the landscape through new ways to access, interact with, and record it. As he writes, "In a physical world that is increasingly desacralized, the sublime represents a way to reinvest the landscape and the works of men with transcendental significance."[7] *Death Stranding* encourages a similar way of rethinking the landscape through the technical tools that achieve experiences, sensations, and aesthetics never previously imagined, and sometimes with uncanny results as we experience movement through sight and simulation over corporeality. It urges a reconsideration of how place and space, physical and virtual, and body and avatar are understood to produce a sense of virtual placehood, or the hybridity between physical and virtual described earlier. As architecture historian and theorist Carl Haddrell writes:

> By 'corporeal,' we may include subject matter that deals with real locations and buildings and how they create space and place, or how our understanding of them is determined by the influence of space and place. In contrast, 'virtual' space and place may be conceived of as notions of such, constructed as representations or commentaries upon the theme 'space and place.'[8]

Death Stranding, with its extensive photo mode mechanic, is the brainchild of video game *auteur* Hideo Kojima. The game is set in a vast, open world, where

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6 David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 2.

7 Ibid, XIII.

8 Carl Haddrell, "Introduction: Dialectics of Space and Place across Corporeal and Virtual Topographies," in *Dialectics of Space and Place across Corporeal and Virtual Topographies*, eds. J. Jordaan, C. Haddrell, and C. Alegria (Freeland: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2016), ix.

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the solitary player-character Sam confronts a melancholic, dystopian near-future landscape representing both a fractured United States and a tortured natural environment. Tasked with journeying on foot across the country to deliver supplies, the game builds on the kind of movement and environmental interaction one expects of a walking simulator game. As the player-character, you traverse the vast game space and witness the devastation of the land caused by mysterious invisible creatures called Beach Things (BTs), acid rainfall, and the fallout of mini nuclear explosions. Much of the game is spent walking across an empty, sometimes mossy, and other times rocky and infertile terrain. The sky is perpetually overcast, suggesting a permanent layer of dust has settled over the area. The ability to support new or existing life no longer seems possible in this world, which appears and sounds empty for kilometers in every direction. Much of the game is spent wandering through this desolate environment to the beat of your own heavy footsteps and the squeaking sound of your bulky metal gear. Cross-country treks during the first few hours of the game take place in near real time, adding to an immersive feeling of isolation and increasing anxiety. It is Earth, but it feels like an unpopulated planet you are doomed to walk.

The game's high production value contributes to a cinematic feel, placing players in a location with a twisted combination of aesthetics from science fiction and western filmmaking genres. The two styles coalesce into something that looks and feels otherworldly yet familiar. Video games of this caliber are dependent on photographic images as source material for the creation of 3D assets and motion capture technology used on physical actors whose likeness and movements become the basis of their avatar counterparts. Because of the game's uncharacteristically slow pace, as the player character you experience a prolonged amount of time in the game simply walking around, able to study the surroundings without distractions or interference. Mountains appear monumental, occasionally interrupting the empty horizon line. The onset of a heavy fog feels like the closest thing you will get to a warm embrace. The lifeless atmosphere preys on your vulnerabilities, steadily overpowering you. It is at once intimidating and wonderful. One might say sublime. Despite its post-apocalyptic brokenness, it is a divine landscape that is at times reminiscent of the unpopulated dramatic landscape and beauty of Iceland or Greenland. Given the game's highly textured visual and sonic environment, it is easy to feel like you are walking around a real (physical) place.

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5.1 Pascal Greco, from the series Place(s), 2021.

Courtesy of the artist.

The Swiss-Italian photographer and filmmaker Pascal Greco's in-game photography project *Place(s)* (2021) emerged at the junction of the Covid-19 global pandemic, a canceled trip, and the expansive and sublime landscape of *Death Stranding* (Figs. 5.1 and 5.2). Greco's plan to visit Iceland to continue a photo project he started was thwarted by the ensuing lockdown. Like many others who looked to the digital world for escape, exploration, and to embark on a journey, Greco found inspiration in the virtual landscape of the big-budget sci-fi adventure game. It is possible his familiarity with analog and digital photography were the inspiration for recognizing similar photographic possibilities using the game's photo mode, and the environment of *Death Stranding* served as the basis of a new kind of hybrid experience of traveling to an otherworldly, yet familiar, place. He, too, found the landscape in this game to be reminiscent of Iceland, which contributed to his desire to make in-game photographs of its virtual environment in lieu of a trip to the Nordic country. His in-game photographs were assembled and published into a book, for which a description of the images on his website reads:

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> Using the game and its constraints as a playground for experimentation, I undertook a meticulous yet playful photographic process, translating my approach to photography to the making of digital images. In the same way my Polaroids had previously challenged the stereotyped representations of the country, the images that have emerged frame aspects of the landscape that usually remain unseen…Place(s) embraces its codes and plays with the ambiguity of an anonymous landscape made familiar. As digital images, they question both in-game and traditional photography by setting a point where the two meet and intertwine.[9]

5.2 Pascal Greco, from the series Place(s), 2021.

Courtesy of the artist.

The results are images that depict a virtual place and objects that resemble corporeal locations and topographies, and as photographs, they easily pass for photographic images of corporeal locations and topographies. Greco's images are crisp and lifelike, owing to the virtual camera's large depth of field. They

9 See Pascal Greco's website at https://www.pascalgreco.com/places

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show minute details of rock textures, water, foliage, grass, and sky. Given the range of possibilities afforded by the game's extensive photo mode, this is not surprising, but as a result, it is not immediately obvious these images depict a 3D game world and not Iceland, Greenland, or another corporeal location. This is fascinating as it shows how advancements in photo mode and our changing relationship to landscape usher in both a new type of photography and a new type of photographer.

From Virtual Cameras to Becoming Camera

In-game photography is a post-photographic practice emerging from synthetic image-making practices that have grown and evolved alongside the development of video games as a medium. It is difficult to trace this history to a definitive originating point because the technical ability to record content inside a digital environment has been explored across numerous stages. A combination of a hacker's ethos and open-source software characterized video game cultures of the 1980s and 1990s, which led to creative experimentation and technical advancement of video games and computer software. Modifications, or game mods, are changes made by a player to a video game's appearance, functionality, or behavior. Machinima, or animated films, are made using video game content as source material. Players proudly circulate all manner of both creations online. Making still photographs from these environments was not yet the norm in the early days, but these practices showed possibilities for recording in-game experiences and sharing them outside of the game.

The development of in-game, virtual camera technology helped to synthesize player-characters' movements with camera controls, across top-down/isometric, first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. Nintendo's *Super Mario 64* (1996) was one of the first games to include an interactive camera system split into two views: one that focused on the player-character and the other (guided by rudimentary AI) on the surrounding environment. Video games sometimes incorporate photography simulation by requiring players to take photographs during gameplay. A Nintendo game called *Pilotwings 64* (1996) included a "shutter bug" mission, requiring players to take an in-game photo to complete the mission. This intra-diegetic task furthered the goals of the game, and photos were stored in the game's photo album along with images from other missions. Nintendo took this idea further by introducing in 1998 the Game Boy Camera,

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a camera accessory for the handheld Game Boy video game console. This cartridge-based addition turned the Game Boy into a camera, allowing some basic photo modification, storage, and the option to print with an additional accessory.

Umurangi Generation (2020) is a more recent example of the growing relationship between photography and video games. Developed by the indie studio *Origame Digital*, it is a first-person simulation game, which takes place from the perspective of a photographer. The object of the game is to take photographs using specific lenses to explore a dystopian future environment, then evaluate the photographic results—their use of color, composition, and content—using an expressive grading system. The expansion to the game offers additional camera features, like shutter speed, aperture, and ISO adjustments, plus new means for players to move around the digital world, such as on roller skates. The less subtly named *Photography Simulator* (2023), developed by Madnetic Games, is also a first-person simulation game involving a professional photographer tasked with exploring the wilderness and producing images with ever increasing sophistication to advance their career, achieving wealth and fame along the way. Regardless of their narrative frameworks, these games represent photography as a primary gameplay element and use an impressive photo mode mechanic, a more highly developed virtual camera. Photo mode both relates to gameplay and is used to document the player's in-game experience through a remediation of a digital camera, offering a wide variety of camera options while also introducing the idea of a player-game-camera triangularity.

Video game photo mode has advanced in such a way that the camera has achieved the level of technical proficiency and quality of images of a digital camera, and the player and system collapse into what digital media theorist and artist Joanna Zylinska refers to as a new *para-photographic* genre.[10] In video games, players control a player-character (the protagonist) and assume the game's overarching gaze to view and interact with the game world both as the player-character and as a player. The game's gaze *is* the player-character's gaze, but as players, we also have the freedom to switch functions within this overarching game-camera gaze. We can experience the world as a player-character; assume the gaze of a non-playable character (NPC), and thus gaze *at* the player-character; and examine the world as an outsider using photo mode, which simultaneously pulls us out of and further into the game world.

10 Joanna Zylinska, *Perception at the End of the World (or How Not to Play Video Games)* (Pittsburgh/New York: Flugschriften, 2020), 7.

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Photo mode is different from screenshotting using one's device, which is a form of photographic recording but engages an external function rather than an in-game mechanic. By offering camera capabilities as part of a player's in-game gaze, photo mode thus collapses the photographer, the camera, and the game world into a triumvirate relation.

This player mechanic encourages players to shift across these three perceptual planes, keeping in mind aspects of the camera's gaze are performed or actualized through virtual movement by the player within the game world. This augmented perceptual capacity feels like an extension of the avatar's vision, especially when the player-character utilizes the first-person perspective, which secondarily projects a perceptual abstraction of physical weight and movement through a virtual space. But the camera in *Death Stranding* hovers in a third-person or over-the-shoulder perspective, meaning the world is not visualized through the character's first-person view, rather as a bodiless companion who *also* controls the character. This position has no real-world equivalent, having an omniscient presence which is tethered to a fictional character in a fictional world. In this way, the player, or rather the player's virtual body, is the apparatus: the camera that sees and possesses the ability to record. The player *becomes the in-game* camera while also retaining their humanness and capacity to simultaneously read and critique the world during their engagement with it, gesturing toward a state of epic intersubjectivity. This effect is reinforced in *Death Stranding* by the player character Sam's tendency to refer to himself in the third person through internal dialogue.

To activate photo mode, the in-game action must be paused. Through this, the fictional components of the game, which are tied to controlling the player-character, are suspended, in a manner of leaving the "set" to explore independently with the intention of photographing it. Again, the virtual camera has a duality, acting as both the player's eyes in the game world and their recording device, meaning they see the world through both mediated and photographic vision. *Death Stranding*, like other games, allows players to control how the photo is rendered, unlike taking a screenshot through one's device, which offers no customizing options except cropping. Photo mode offers a player-photographer many choices in terms of framing, composition, and lighting, such as rotating the position of the camera, changing the depth of field, adding color filters, and using the grid function to line up objects in the frame, among others. Photo mode allows players to photograph the environment as well as the characters in the game, and virtual cameras also have features that exceed what physical cameras offer. Characters' facial expressions and poses can be

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controlled by the player's camera settings, turning photo mode into a virtual photo studio and the photographer into a prop stylist and set designer.

During play, the player's physical body remains stationary, save for the controls, while the virtual body hovers over the moving player-character. The virtual gaze extends through and beyond layers of mediation: merging with the camera apparatus through the interface of the computer screen, the 3D visual and sonic game environment, and the various game mechanics that produce object-oriented effects. To be sure, this complex technical system not only shapes but rewires our understanding of our mind's interiority as it relates to the external forces that expand our perceptual range. This is what literary critic N. Katherine Hayles refers to as a new model of subjectivity.[11] In this relation between a player-character and camera as a kind of *kino eye*, the corporeal body remains an active agent in a material-digital synthesis of great complexity. The player absorbs the distance produced by this abstraction without resistance. Photo mode reinforces the game world's logic while bridging material and digital entities. This lends the player the feeling of being present in the game world, sensing and seeing it as their own. Adopting the machine vision of a camera, a player experiences the world through the affordances of this mediation: zooming, cropping, arranging, and otherwise adjusting the virtual world's objects within the frame. In this situation, the photograph is a kind of truth or reality of time and experience in a (virtual) place. Moreover, the tether between player and player-character and game world creates an index between the physical body and the player's in-game experiences.

Other factors contribute to a sense of being in a place, not just a space. Media theorist Alexander Galloway argues:

> Representation refers to the creation of meaning about the world through images. So far, debates about representation have focused on whether images (or language, or what have you) are a faithful, mimetic mirror of reality thereby offering some unmediated truth about the world, or conversely whether images are a separate, constructed medium thereby standing apart from the world in a separate semantic zone. Games inherit this same debate. But because games are not merely watched, they are played, they supplement this debate with the phenomenon of action. It

11 See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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> is no longer sufficient to talk about the visual or textual representation of meaning.[12]

In another text, Galloway makes a different comparison using photography and film: "If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions." Then he adds, "With video games, the work itself is material action. One plays a game. And the software runs."[13] Traversing the space of video games is thus an active performance of the software itself. The space becomes a place through which a player's actions as player-character, camera, and photographer are synthesized into a sensation of presence without corporeality.

Fixing the Softimage

The affordances of highly developed photo mode in games like *Death Stranding*, *Umarangi Generation*, and *Photography Simulator* demonstrate how technical, imaginative, and aesthetic conditions come together so that the fictional game world can be a place where players have real experiences through wandering, discovering, and traversing the landscape, then taking a photograph of these experiences, sights, and encounters as validation of the impact those experiences have on virtual wanderers. In these simulated interactive virtual environments, wandering around can be as awe-inspiring and fulfilling as wandering around the countryside. The environments we interact with, digital or material, seem to be in waiting, always at the precipice of becoming images, ready to be locked down, examined, and shared. Being able to easily switch from gameplay to contemplative spectacle and ultimately photographing the environment describes this post-photographic condition.

Like any photograph, in-game photographs signal that a living witness was present. In-game photography engages this combination of documentary and landscape photography, but it is also the result of a complex consolidation of

12 Alexander R. Galloway, "Social Realism in Gaming," *Game Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (November 2004). Available at https://gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/ (accessed September 12, 2023).

13 Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

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affect and mechanics toward a different form: the *softimage*. A remediation of a so-called *hardimage*, or a fixed representation of the world, softimages are algorithmic images which are, as image theorist Ingrid Hoelzl asserts "not only malleable, i.e. infinitely recomputable, but [are themselves] program (or part of a program)."[14] In a sophisticated combination of 3D modeling, graphics, animation, and photo mode, the video game offers feedback on the level of visual perception and, behind the screen, on the level of computation. The world is calculable *and* calculated through player participation, only *in part* a readymade world awaiting our arrival.

Though players effectively absorb the distance between themselves and the player-character, there is a learning curve to negotiating the sometimes-conflicting variables that require synthesis: the corporeal body and the virtual gaze, oscillating between verisimilitude and accessing the game's nested menus, and engaging in a single-player environment with interlaced cooperative play elements are a few examples. Each of these presents a paradox that forces the player to accept the duality necessary to engage the game world's logic. While the in-game world appears to be at the player's virtual fingertips, it also seems dependent on interlaced approximations. Our engagement with the world through sight, sound, and movement make the approximation of touch possible in video games through haptic visuality, which, as media archaeologist and historian Erkki Huhtamo writes, "confronts the issue of the physicality of touch indirectly, through a corporeal operation involving the eyes and the brain."[15] The ability to photograph these environments adds another layer of mediation and technological sublimity while also validating the environment's materiality.

The logic of *being there* remediates the fictional reality of freezing a moment in time in traditional photography. The result—images made from photographing a physical *or* a virtual place—elicits comparable results. Visually, Greco's images of mountains, grey skies, and heavy fog in *Death Stranding* are indistinguishable from landscape photographs depicting physical places. They share the same signs and significations. They share the indexicality of any photograph, reflecting a specific time and place. While in-game images involve layers produced by the cognitive assemblage of mediation toward softimages,

14 Ingrid Hoelzl, "Postimage," in *Posthuman Glossary*, eds. R. Braidotti and M. Hlavajova (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 361.

15 Erkki Huhtamo, "Haptic Visuality and the (Physical) Touch," in *MediaArtHistories*, ed. O. Grau (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 73.

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they share the same function of recording a landscape by a witness to an uninhabited place that is difficult or impossible to access.

Conclusion

Death Stranding is an example of a video game whose photorealistic digital environment, 3D graphics, animation, and in-game photography are rooted in traditional photographic image-making practices and technical qualities. Photo mode remediates the technical adjustments available to any photographer-player through a simulation of photography's affordances. Many of the performance features of analog and physical digital cameras are computationally refashioned by its in-game camera, allowing players to make and edit pictures, adjust light, add filters, and crop images. The results are depictions of the game world that both resembles and reimagines the landscape photo genre, as Pascal Greco's series *Place(s)*. The sophistication of photo mode produces softimages, computationally rendered perceptions of the digital world which come together and shift through player-photographer interaction. This engagement is a new sensation that introduces the idea of a player-game-camera triangularity. Players construct the photographable world through play, and the pause function in photo mode creates the opportunity to step outside of the environment, while remaining tethered to it, to *become* camera. What resembles visual trickery in photo mode is both inherited and deviates from its predecessors, as is the photographic evidence and the feeling (and memory) of *being there*. The assemblage and complexity of technical functions enables the player-photographer the hybrid experience of psychically being and corporeally not being present in the world, as they traverse and explore photorealistic environments and pause to make pictures. This practice gestures toward the idea of the technological sublime and the awe-inspiring, fascinating work of new technologies.

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