

## 6. In-Game Photography

### A Remediation of the Picturesque

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In 2011, the developer studio Bethesda released the official trailer for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. In the opening scene, the camera moves from the sky to the high and snowy peaks of mountains, allowing the viewer to experience the perspective of a dragon. Later, the game character can be seen standing on the edge of a cliff, revealing a panoramic view of the mountainous landscape. The brief 37-second Official Announcement Teaser for *The Elder Scrolls VI* in 2018 depicts a comparable viewpoint: the camera pans across a wide area, featuring cliffs that rise in the distance and a seascape that stretches almost endlessly to the right. After the opening sequence of *Skyrim*, much of which takes place in a dungeon, a player finds themselves facing a vast world for the first time: standing at the foot of a mountain, a path unfolded before me leading down into the next valley, with snow-capped cliffs looming on the horizon in the distance. It is a scene for which we could hardly find a more appropriate description than “picturesque” (Fig. 6.1).

This is only one example of a modern trend in computer games, featuring the emulation of the traditional photographic and pictorial style known as picturesque, which is being extended and remediated in the form of in-game photography. Thus, I aim to focus on the remediation of the picturesque in in-game photography and its sharing on various digital social platforms. I hypothesize that picturesque in-game photographs cannot be considered merely subjective expressions of what a particular individual finds picturesque or worthy of capture and that there could, therefore, be a potentially infinite number of them. This is because a consensus has formed within virtual environments and gaming communities as to which places are picturesque and which should be captured, creating a hierarchy in the valuation of given photographs. For on social platforms, a specific aesthetic norm has formed, which those who share their

in-game photographs try to follow to get a positive response from the game's fan community.

*6.1 In-game photography of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim taken by Martin Charvát.*



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In the first section, I focus on the definition of the picturesque and, in particular, its remediation within the digital virtual environment of video games. I draw heavily on the work of Eugénie Shinkle, who has described precisely how video games seek to trigger both the player's sense of immersion in a given environment – which they achieve by striving for a “natural” landscape – and the “aesthetically pleasing” feelings that players intend to evoke by trying to capture different landscapes in the game world. In the following section, based on an analysis of Reddit forums, I discuss the ways in which the picturesque genre is established, reinforced, and shared through the use of in-game photography. I also aim to show that games implement mechanics that support and affirm the dissemination of in-game photographs and their evaluation. The final part of the chapter focuses on the relationship between in-game photographs and their function as an empowering gaming experience. Making one's character and achievements known to others logically occurs through the sharing

of visual material that corresponds to the remediated aesthetic genre of the picturesque.

## Preliminary notes on the concept of picturesque

The English writer and printmaker William Gilpin introduced the concept of the picturesque into aesthetics in the second half of the eighteenth century. He used it to describe the specific quality of the English landscapes, which offered places that were intended to delight the eye, evoking images ranging from moors and plains with clouds gathering over them to the ruins of old settlements to the pristine natural corners that have withstood the passage of time and have thus far managed to resist human modification or destruction.<sup>1</sup> Their essential characteristic was a certain roughness and unrelieved or skeletal nature. Not only did Gilpin's notes encourage hiking expeditions and the "hunting" of landscapes, but he also described how searching for these natural sights could be both a thrilling adventure and a leisurely activity. In other words, Gilpin defines picturesque as "a kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture," offering visual pleasure.<sup>2</sup> So, Gilpin's traveler, once he was captivated by a natural scene because it looked like a painting, would pull out his sketchbook and try to capture the scene. However, this did not mean he should try to translate the natural landscape into a picture-perfect form, just as a landscape looks. The artist was free not to transfer certain elements of the landscape into the image, or he could modify them at his discretion. For the landscape, which originally resembled a painting, had to be transposed into the painting to meet the criteria of the picturesque; it is, therefore, much more an expression of the landscape as a whole and not necessarily of the individual objects that are depicted.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the first affect that the traveler experiences when looking at the landscape is transformed into a specific form of perception that also entails a

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1 Ron Broglio, *Technologies of the Picturesque: British Art, Poetry, and Instruments 1750–1830* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008).

2 See for example John Sager, "A Disputant of the Landscape: Redefining the English Landscape in 'To Autumn,'" *The Criterion*, article no. 4 (2023), unpagged; Elizabeth Scarborough, "Urban Ruins and the Neo-Picturesque Landscape," *Aesthetic Investigations*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2023), 5–18; Dabney Townsend, "The Picturesque," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 55, no. 4 (1997), 365–376.

3 Sager, "A Disputant of the Landscape," unpagged.

specific mode of observation marked by the recognition of the observer's position. As art historian David Marshall explains:

The picturesque represents a point of view that frames the world and turns nature into a series of living tableaux. It begins as an appreciation of natural beauty, but it ends by turning people into figures in a landscape or figures in a painting.<sup>4</sup>

What happens, then, is that the landscape is a condition for the possibility of the picturesque. At the same time, the picturesque, as a particular artistic genre, reshapes the landscape or amplifies and reinforces the pleasing qualities of the landscapes by embedding them in the image while subjecting them to given aesthetic criteria (adherence to picturesque standards, framing, and imaginative alterations),<sup>5</sup> while attempting to evoke the appearance of naturalness: “[P]ictoresque art conceals its artifice and its means of carving space.”<sup>6</sup> This means, among other things, that the aesthetics of the picturesque encloses human activity, overshadowing the artist as such, but also the human ability to transform the landscape, while images are, after all, the result of human activity. This tendency is also present in the case of eighteenth-century picturesque landscape gardens because they “set the inherent disorder of nature and natural forms against the order imposed by human artifice. Though intended to emulate the work of nature, the landscape was carefully constructed to resemble a picture, giving a legible structure to a space whose exact boundaries were otherwise unclear.”<sup>7</sup> The picturesque landscape, even in the case of gardens, continues computer game theorist Eugénie Shinkle, is shaped by interrelated constitutive elements. The first of these is the “viewing position,” the second the “horizon line,” and the third the “vanishing point,”<sup>8</sup> where their combination creates a specific visual experience in which the eye moves from the foreground through the center of the scene to the background horizon, which usually dis-

4 David Marshall, “The Problem of the Picturesque,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2002), 414.

5 Sager, “A Disputant of the Landscape,” np.

6 William J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 16–17.

7 Eugénie Shinkle, “Of Particle Systems and Picturesque Ontologies: Landscape, Nature, and Realism in Video games,” *Art Journal*, vol. 79, no. 2 (2020), 60.

8 *Ibid.*, 60.

appears into the sky, surrounded by mist or with the rising sun looming over it.

Not surprisingly, Shinkle describes the relationship between the picturesque and the landscape in some considerable detail, as she argues that computer games attempt to create “naturalistic representation of landscape”<sup>9</sup> in a virtual three-dimensional environment: “Realistic game landscapes are ordered in a way that would have been familiar to the eighteenth-century landscape designer: space is divided into foreground, middle ground, and background, with nearby features and landforms providing the structural basis of the scene and distant ones furnishing its general context.”<sup>10</sup> The connecting feature is the “modelling” of the environment. Software for creating virtual worlds commonly works with both “geological” and “biological” data<sup>11</sup> to make the environment as close as possible to the normal and everyday human perceptual situation. Although Shinkle works with the notion of “realism,” particularly in the case of flight simulators, it is also applicable to those computer games that we might categorize as (not only) fantasy, which in many ways work with the logic of the picturesque. Whether we are thinking of the medieval setting, full of crumbling ruins, lakes and picturesque corners in *Lords of the Fallen*, *TES V: Skyrim* or the *Dark Souls* series, they all work with the fact that the environment is to some extent “realistic” or familiar: the player moves in a landscape that also corresponds to “our” world, although there are different fauna and flora, or special types of enemies. These differences are due to the basic fact that virtual game worlds are created by a mixture of digital code, algorithms, software operations, and human decisions regarding implementing the laws of physics in the virtual environment.<sup>12</sup>

We return to Gilpin’s theses about the importance of the meaning of the whole and the possibility of transforming the scene to make it act as an “image” and be aesthetically “pleasing,” and last but not least, to “imaginative alterations.” Let’s illustrate what I mean with an example from the game *Elden Ring* (Fig. 6.2), where the player’s character is standing on a grassy knoll in a location from about the first third of the game. In front of them, a lake dotted

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9 Ibid., 59.

10 Ibid., 61.

11 Ibid., 64.

12 See for example Anne Balsamo, *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Eddie Lohmeyer, *Unstable Aesthetics: Game Engines and Strangeness of Modding* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

with trees opens up, and on the horizon, in the distance, a castle tower rises, with a few ruins behind it and the huge root of a golden tree. Even though this is a virtual environment, all the objects and items partially mimic objects one might encounter in the real world. And at the same time, the entire setting is carried by the aesthetics of the picturesque. The horizon disappears into the fog, the player is confronted with the passage of time and decay, and at the same time, is given the impression that he is a completely insignificant entity in the game world, that any step he takes towards the unknown is imbued with the risk of death. Simultaneously, the whole scene is “aesthetically pleasing” because it contains a picturesque “roughness,” and the whole arrangement of the landscapes gives the impression of “naturalness,” even though it was put together with the help of software and algorithms. This is an example of how videogames “inherit many of their aesthetic qualities from a deep lineage of representational media and visual techniques.”<sup>13</sup>

### 6.2 In-game photography of *Elden Ring*; taken by Martin Charvát.



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The deliberate adoption and construction of a specific visual aesthetic by developers and game designers rely heavily on already-established genres and visual schemes. Working with the aesthetics of the landscape and making sure the main character is visible and positioned appropriately is reflected in the

13 Benjamin Nicoll, *Minor Platforms in Videogame History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 45.

structure of the game environment. The world of *Elden Ring* is rich in cliffs, foothills, rocks and other places for the player to discover, explore, “hunt” and enjoy the attractive scenery or capture it photographically. There is a recursion between the reception of the picturesque genre, its transposition and the game activity that confirms, disseminates, and reinforces this transposition.

## In-game Photography: Remediation of the Picturesque

The “hunt” for picturesque landscapes is manifested not only at the level of personal gaming experience but also through its sharing in the form of in-game photography. In her groundbreaking 2007 paper,<sup>14</sup> digital media researcher Cindy Poremba explores in-game photography through the perspective of David J. Bolter and Richard Grusin’s remediation theory, which describes how different media interact with one another. Bolter and Grusin distinguish “immediacy” and “hypermediacy” as two remediation strategies,<sup>15</sup> and show how these strategies have been implemented in different media throughout history, specifically in digital media. As in the case of photography, because it can freeze external “reality” and is the product of a camera apparatus, they associate it with “immediacy” because the medium gives the impression that the resulting image is a “natural” capture of the scene. At the same time the position of the artist as someone who merely pressed the camera switch is relegated to the background. From the perspective of remediation theory, in-game photography, “the younger medium, the video game, remediates photography by means of simulation.”<sup>16</sup>

In this sense, in-game photography adopts “traditional” photography, because the player has to press dedicated buttons in order to capture the scene he likes; on the other hand, the “external reality” is the reality of the digital virtual world. This is why Sebastian Möring and Marco De Mutiis speak of simulation, which here has a double meaning: in-game photography is inherent

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14 Cindy Poremba, “Point and Shoot. Remediating Photography in Gamespace,” *Games and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2007), 49–58.

15 David J. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

16 Sebastian Möring and Marco De Mutiis, “Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography in Video Games,” in *Intermedia Games – Games Inter Media: Videogames and Intermediality*, eds. Michael Fuchs and Jeff Thoss (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 69–94.

to the simulated virtual environment, and at the same time, the ways of capturing the image “simulate” the ways in which the image is captured in our everyday world, including the reasons for immortalizing the scene in pictorial form. Alternatively, in-game photography is a retroactive mechanism for solidifying the impression of immersion in a virtual environment by performatively simulating a person’s “authentic” experience of the world. This remark essentially brings us back to the thesis of Eugénie Shinkle, who stresses that the goal of computer graphics is to create the impression of a transparent and natural environment that is perfectly arranged due to algorithmic operations. Whenever we are travelling, on holiday, or simply walking through a city and a scene catches our eye, we reach for the camera and take a picture. The same is true in the virtual environment; we try to get the most beautiful picture, we hunt for places that give us aesthetic pleasure. According to Seth Giddens: “As in the actual world, photographers capture significant places, events and individuals, and these images both look like actual world photography and are collected and displayed in albums and slideshows that draw their interfaces from the physical storage and display media of photographic albums and domestic slide projection.”<sup>17</sup>

In-game photography can be produced in several different ways. Whether discussing the availability of screenshot capture on consoles and computers or the implementation of a dedicated “photo mode,” wherein the game freezes and allows the player to select the desired viewpoint before taking a photograph, there are various options. The implementation of the “photo mode” in computer games by developers is partially motivated by the desire to provide players with a means to capture “memorable moments” and “visually impressive views.”

Let’s go back to the in-game photograph from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Fig. 6.1) for a moment. The whole virtual world is basically designed to induce in the player a tendency to capture various places photographically. Whether I am referring to the snow-capped mountain peaks that tower before the player, picturesque nooks and crannies, ravines with lakes, or simply meadows where wildlife roams among the trees and plants. Thus, progressing through the game need not be carried by the desire to finish it, to complete the main quest, but can easily become the goal of discovering all the nooks and crannies on

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17 Seth Giddens, “Drawing Without Light. Simulated photography in videogames,” in *The Photographic Images in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister (New York/London: Routledge, 2013), 45.

the vast map, creating your own in-game photographic collection of the most beautiful places, some of which, at least in our case, fit the aesthetics of the picturesque.

And we can even mention cases where the game itself is a meta-commentary on the picturesque, if we follow Gilpin's definition, as "kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture." In *Darks Souls I* to reach one optional location (Painted World of Ariamis) the player must step into a painting of a snowy landscape with a dark castle towering over it. This picturesque painting on one hand is a capture of a virtual location that the player initially thinks is just one of the references to the past of the game world, and then this virtual and picturesque location unfolds before him in all its beauty, he can move freely in it and even try to create such in-game photography that would match the scene in the painting.

The concept of remediation is thus able to describe the shift that has taken place in the processing of the visual scheme originally associated with painting, adopted by photography and then co-opted by the modes of production and design of video game worlds that emphasize the creation of a "natural" environment.

### **Sharing of in-game photography: adherence of the picturesque aesthetics**

Of course, it is common to create in-game photography for your own enjoyment and include it in your own digital album. However, as Poremba notes, the successful discovery of stunning scenery during a memorable gaming experience, its capture in the form of in-game photography and subsequent sharing on various social media platforms, is fairly common among gamers.<sup>18</sup> It is evident that the enjoyment of a graphically striking landscape in a game is not based solely on subjective feelings or impressions but that the visual format of the presentation also acts as a guide to how one interacts with and navigates the virtual environment.

The sharing of in-game photographs by players on social networks and online forums, particularly on specialized forums such as Reddit, has created a new form of picturesque in-game photography based on the remediation of the picturesque genre, as it can be seen on Reddit forums for discussions

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18 Poremba, "Point and Shoot," 52.

on *TES V: Skyrim*, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, *Elden Ring*, and *Dark Souls* games. For the analysis the two filtering criteria were applied: a) posts from the last twelve months (October 2022 – October 2023) and b) the most popular posts. In-game photographs were prevalent in all cases, and those that followed the picturesque aesthetic received high rankings. Characters standing on mountain tops at sunset, dressed in unique armor, characters standing before a huge castle or characters preparing for an expedition into an unknown wilderness. Apart from occasional instances of users displaying their equipment and physique or comparing themselves to others by inquiring about a particular player's "build" or criticizing their choice of weapons and outfit, emphasis is placed on the picturesque feel of the scene as a whole. However, occasional ironic posts can be found where players share images of themselves wearing absurd outfits set against picturesque backgrounds to give the impression that the attire grants desirable abilities, such as fire resistance.<sup>19</sup> Another example of using the aesthetics of picturesque in video games is the in-game photos of characters positioned on the horizon at sunset. These images are not intended to demonstrate a player's game proficiency nor their character's equipment, but rather to exhibit the boundless graphical potential of the game and its visually stunning and "magical" qualities.<sup>20</sup> In-game photos are used as evidence to adhere to the "picturesque" standard.

The *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* subreddit features posts that transport readers back to Gilpin. As the game is rooted in a historical context, players strive to associate their virtual gaming experience with actual travel encounters. Users share photographs of their Greek trips and juxtapose them with the in-game depictions of the locations.<sup>21</sup> One can often come across comments expressing the desire to visit Greece after playing the game. Such comments tend to receive positive feedback (upvotes) or are accompanied by personal stories about trips to Greece. These comments reflect social and economic disparities, as for some, travel itself may be an unattainable aspiration. This is why scenic

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19 Psychadelico, "r/darksouls3," *Reddit*, March 2023 (accessed October 20, 2023) [https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls3/comments/zhqk7a/dont\\_laugh\\_this\\_gives\\_me\\_fire\\_resistance/](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls3/comments/zhqk7a/dont_laugh_this_gives_me_fire_resistance/)

20 rocklou, "r/AssassinsCreedOdyssey," *Reddit*, March 2023 (accessed October 15, 2023) [https://www.reddit.com/r/AssassinsCreedOdyssey/comments/131t166/odyssey\\_is\\_magical\\_on\\_an\\_ultrawide\\_screen/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AssassinsCreedOdyssey/comments/131t166/odyssey_is_magical_on_an_ultrawide_screen/)

21 Red\_Dead\_Razor, "r/AssassinsCreedOdyssey," *Reddit*, October 2023 (accessed October 17, 2023) [https://www.reddit.com/r/AssassinsCreedOdyssey/comments/15febkm/kep\\_hallonia/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AssassinsCreedOdyssey/comments/15febkm/kep_hallonia/)

in-game photographs are coded discursively by an approximation of reality. For instance, in the case of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, a user referred to shared in-game photography as “Had to stop and take a photo.”<sup>22</sup> The player character walks through a clearing, and a stone bridge emerges from the forest. While the game emulates a fantastical “reality,” essentially the in-game photography is more lifelike than actual reality. Or as theoretician of new media Lev Manovich remarked, the digital image sometimes is “too real.”<sup>23</sup> This is because it attains complete “perfection” via simulation.<sup>24</sup>

The aesthetic norms<sup>25</sup> determine the rating (upvote or downvote) of particular in-game photographs and always consider the perspectives and preferences of a specific group. Thus, the validity of a particular expressive scheme, specifically the aesthetically pleasing in-game photographs, is determined by the positive evaluation it receives from the fan community.<sup>26</sup> This sends a clear signal to other players, compelling them to conform to this scheme in order to succeed within the community, garner admiration, increase visibility, and enhance their virtual identity. Or, adhering to norms subjectifies the player, who attempts to capture an ideal scenic shot of their character wearing legendary yet aesthetically pleasing gear. Meanwhile, these norms are presented as exemplary, worthy of emulation by the development studios themselves. Thus, under this pressure, the player restricts the game's potential, folds themselves into a particular character, anticipating a positive evaluation of their snapshot, and is subjectified to the expected valuations of a particular fan community.

In *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, the latest addition to the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, there is an amalgamation of social media platforms, gamification, the aspiration for positive reviews, and the platform and game experience itself. Furthermore, there is a normative obligation to capture photographs in specific locations within the virtual environment. *Mirage* ultimately designates points of

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22 WeezyWally, “r/AssassinsCreedValhalla,” *Reddit*, August 2022 (accessed September 20, 2023) [https://www.reddit.com/r/AssassinsCreedValhalla/comments/khcmgs/had\\_to\\_stop\\_and\\_take\\_a\\_photo\\_this\\_game\\_is/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AssassinsCreedValhalla/comments/khcmgs/had_to_stop_and_take_a_photo_this_game_is/)

23 Lev Manovich, “The Paradoxes of Digital Photography,” in *Photography after Photography* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1995), available: [http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/004-paradoxes-of-digital-photography/02\\_article\\_1994.pdf](http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/004-paradoxes-of-digital-photography/02_article_1994.pdf)

24 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 27.

25 Jan Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value As Social Facts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1970).

26 Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers: Media Consumers in a Digital Age* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

interest on the game map where users have taken photos (“daily concept art,” “community photo,” or “personal photo”) (Fig. 6.3) and uploaded them onto the fan and game platform, along with the number of likes or hearts they have garnered.

*6.3 In-game photography of Assassin’s Creed: Mirage game interface taken by Martin Charvát.*



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This creates a motive for other players to visit the location and possibly take a photo. Consequently, the aesthetics of the picturesque are reinforced by the points of contact established within the game. The most highly rated photographs are those featuring the figure standing atop a mountain or tall urban structure, gazing into the distance as the sun sets. These interactions reinforce a particular aesthetic norm expressed on dedicated webpage to *Mirage’s* in-game photographs.<sup>27</sup>

27 The dedicated page can be found here: <https://www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/assassin-creed/mirage/photomode/trending>

## In-Game Photography: Identity, Experience, Upvotes

Not only are the techniques of capturing in-game photography intended to strengthen the player's experience, but they also serve "as a useful tool for managing a player's identity on social media."<sup>28</sup> To some extent, capturing a particular moment can be seen as a fundamental aspect of creating a player's virtual identity within their chosen game. In the aforementioned games, players take on a fixed position within the virtual world and story as a character who possesses the skills to solve problems and become a renowned warrior. The protagonist's progress is structured by "cores," i.e. essential nod points of the story as defined by French semiotician Roland Barthes,<sup>29</sup> which must be traversed to advance the plot. The game allows players to choose their approach to solving complex scenarios through dialogue options, akin to *TES V: Skyrim* or *Assassin's Creed Origins*, where players must choose which side of the conflict to support, or *Elden Ring*, where some dialogue options either lock or unlock key game mechanics such as levelling (if players do not accept Melina's offer at the beginning of the game, they will not gain access to key tools used in the game). All these different decisions also unlock different story endings in the long run, where, in the case of the *Elden Ring*, the "secret" ending is tied to a rather tricky and difficult side quest. Consequently, the game can only be completed by selecting from a predetermined set of options, whilst each game contains both explicit and implicit rules that maintain its cohesion. Nonetheless, every singular playthrough of a game is distinctive; while players' decisions and choices may overlap, the gaming encounter relies on diverse individual factors (whether I am playing a game for the first time, whether I am new to the genre, whether I am an experienced player, what types of games I favor, etc.).

The sense of individuality and identity formation is enhanced in games from the outset due to the diverse range of character customization options available before the player enters the virtual world. The player can select their gender, appearance, eye hue, hairstyle, character archetype, as well as their heritage (and ethnicity), and finally, their "profession" or "class," which determines the characteristics and basic skills they will have at their disposal. There is no issue with creating an in-game character that closely resembles their real-

28 Möring and De Mutiis, "Camera Lucida," 78–79.

29 Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," in *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1975), 237–272.

life appearance, and naturally, the player has the freedom to customize their character's appearance in any way they wish.<sup>30</sup>

A popular form of roleplaying game involves players imposing self-imposed restrictions. This includes developing a detailed backstory, character traits, and other defining characteristics influencing their behavior in various situations. Let's stay with the *Elden Ring* for a moment. Either at the beginning of the game or during the game, the player decides (however intuitively) what "build" he chooses (bleed, faith, intelligence, strength etc.). On *YouTube* and other video game content-sharing platforms (*Twitch*), there are plenty of tutorials on how to make the most of a build or what types of talismans and weapons are ideal for a given build. This creates the framework within which the player moves through the game. However, this framework is not unchangeable, there is a wide range of variations and combinations on improving a given character. A radical and specific version of the player experience is then the variant of different game runs where the player imposes restrictions on themselves, for example, the so-called "no hit run"; no enemy can injure them in a fight. Or, more commonly, in games like *TES V: Skyrim*, it adheres to an established and predetermined opinion and moral compass based on the "race" the player is playing. For this reason, too, he or she "has" to make decisions that he or she would never have made if he or she were playing as another character: for example, he or she will not steal from Non-Player Characters (NPCs), even if this closes off certain quests or prevents him or her from obtaining unique items.

A favorite category of posts on gamer's Reddit forums is the introduction of the character itself, a description of its "lore," and the restrictions the player imposes on themselves. This is where the importance of in-game photography comes into play. Sharing them on social forums extends and manages players' in-game and virtual identities. It is essentially an index of the character's existence in the game world, while at the same time, its visual presentation adheres to a picturesque aesthetic genre. Whether they are accompanied by the headline "rate my setup" or "this is my [name of the character]," not only are commenters invited to rate the overall appearance of the character and its

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30 See for example *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, eds. Hilde Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Rob Gallagher, *Videogames, Identity and Digital Subjectivity* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2017); Poppy Wilde, *Posthuman Gaming: Avatars, Gamers, and Entangled Subjectivities* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2023).

equipment, but they are also happy to comment on additional descriptions of the character, such as whether its background makes sense in the game lore, or helps to add to, enhance, or completely change the background of the character.

Sharing in-game photography from this perspective aligns with the principles of modern “post-capitalist gamification” prevalent in digital media.<sup>31</sup> This way, players not only play the game and win awards within the gaming ecosystem but can compete for social media attention. In this context, philosopher and psychologist Shoshana Zuboff employs the term “affective computing” to describe generating a specific emotional response.<sup>32</sup> In our case, this emotion manifests as a sense of affirmation and recognition from within a given community, alongside the enjoyment or satisfaction of achieving a goal. The players’ drive to produce and share (picturesque) in-game photographs is motivated by the desire to receive upvotes, to show off their equipment or detailed manufacture of the character’s personality and lore. And, as we have seen, the visual genre is predominantly the picturesque one.

## Conclusion

In this chapter,<sup>33</sup> I provided an interpretation of how the classical art genre is being transferred to the digital environment of video games. In particular, I was concerned with describing the changes and transformations that the picturesque as an aesthetic category has undergone. I used the notion of remediation to trace how, thanks to the recursive relationship between different media, a certain visual norm is constituted, which is then reinforced by the activity of sharing visual material on online social platforms. Furthermore, in-game photography functions not only as an expression of pleasure, but also as an index

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31 See for example Rey P. Jessie, “Gamification and post-fordist capitalism,” in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, eds. Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 277–295; Nathan Hulsey, *Games in Everyday Life: For Play* (Leeds: Emerald Publishing, 2019).

32 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), 285.

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of the existence of a game character, where the sharing of photographs has significance as an extension and management tool of the player's identity in order to become a member of a given fan community on social media. In seeking to fit in with other fans, the user must conform to already established visual and narrative norms.