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From Screenshot to Art: The Legitimation of Virtual Photography in Gaming Culture

Abstract

Virtual photography, produced for example through in-game photo mode features, represents a phenomenon that has gradually become established within the medium of digital games and player culture, while simultaneously entering the discourse of visual and media studies. This study focuses on the question of to what extent virtual photography can be regarded as a recognized form of art and what kinds of relationships it maintains with the tradition of classical photography. The analytical point of departure consists of the Photo Mode Awards and The Virtual Photography Awards competitions, which provide a space for examining the aesthetic principles and processes through which virtual photography is legitimized as independent artistic expression. The research concentrates on the comparison and analysis of community and discursive practices that have emerged around virtual photography, and specifically around these award platforms. The findings suggest that virtual photography constitutes a visual genre that builds upon classical

photography, while also forming a distinct community and a further player subculture, thereby expanding both the forms of the medium and its media audiences. The study employs an exploratory case study framework to analyze the emerging field of virtual photography awards in digital gaming. By focusing on the Photo Mode Awards and The Virtual Photography Awards, the analysis is further enriched by primary data gathered through semi-structured interviews.

Key words

Photography. Photo Mode. Screen Capture. Screenshot. Virtual Photography.



From Screenshot to Art: The Legitimation of Virtual Photography in Gaming Culture © 2026
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Introduction

I always think of what a popular Spanish writer from the last century, a hunting enthusiast, said: "I am a hunter who writes." Well, in my case, I still think of myself as a gamer who takes photos. (Screenche,¹ personal communication, November 13, 2025)

Virtual photography has become an increasingly prominent phenomenon as a widespread creative practice within digital game communities. Scholars have long recognized the potential of photography within virtual environments. Book (2003) documents early usage of screenshots as digital tourist photographs in virtual worlds, underscoring photography's role in mediating experience and memory in simulated environments. Other scholars have traced some continuities and transformations in photographic traditions as photography expands beyond lens-based media. Schofield (2024) for example argues that virtual photography, ranging from in-game image capture to AI-generated imagery, remains deeply entangled with established photographic practices, particularly through the enduring role of framing in shaping authorship. This resonates with Kember's (2008) ontological perspective, which positions

¹ Authors' note: Screenche is a virtual photography artist, the winner of the Indie category of Photo Mode Awards 2024.

photography not as a fixed entity but as a process of becoming, sustained through memory and intuition.

A screenshot, as a digital image that captures the visible content displayed on a computer or device screen at a specific moment, is conceptualized by Moore (2014) as a form of virtual photography that operates within digital game cultures, serving as both creative practice and a means of constructing online identity. Some explorations even highlight experimental and pedagogical potential. Fuchs and Grimm (2023) demonstrate the educational promise of virtual photo studios designed for photography training in VR settings. Mago et al. (2023) also regard so-called "photo modes" as valuable tools for education in the field of photography.

The convergence of digital games and photographic practice is evident in titles that make image capture a core mechanic, requiring players to frame and record the virtual environment as the primary mode of play. This capture is not always strictly photographic, for example in the game *Eastshade* (Eastshade Studios, 2019), player captures are realized diegetically as paintings. This simulated photography is central to the gameplay condition which predominantly controls only the technical parameters such as distance, angle and if the subject is centred to progress in the game (Möring & de Mutiis, 2019).

Virtual photography is not a departure from but rather a continuation and reconfiguration of photographic traditions. However, virtual photographs as a depiction of a game's visuals are built from copyrighted assets, which raises legal questions. Whether they qualify as lawful derivative works depends on the image's originality and fixation, and on the game's license terms (EULA², ToS³), including any permissions for such uses (Aroni, 2023). Many contemporary digital games include built-in photo modes that explicitly encourage the production and dissemination of such images. However, artistic outputs in the form of screenshots or virtual photographs also emerge in titles without these features. Custom tools, e.g., unlocking free-camera movement via code interventions or mods, to achieve what nobody else could, may contravene EULAs, or violate anti-circumvention rules, meaning they can, in some contexts and jurisdictions, be unlawful.

Nevertheless, virtual game photographs themselves can be seen as derivative works, where players may own the copyright in their captures, but the depicted assets remain the publisher's IP.

² Authors' note: An End-User License Agreement (EULA) is a legal document that specifies the rights the user (licensee) has to use a piece of software or digital material, as permitted by the creator (licensor).

³ Authors' note: A Terms of Service (ToS) agreement is a legally binding standard form contract between a service provider and a user that governs the relationship for accessing and utilizing a digital service. »

This doesn't apply to screenshots of the original presentation of a game, or a cinematic cutscene, because of the framing, which cannot be varied (Bromley, 2020). Uses beyond personal display sit in a legal grey zone, largely governed by EULAs, licenses, and jurisdiction (Epic Fidelity, 2022). The ToS of many publishers prohibit commercially exploiting user-generated content (UGC) such as virtual photographs without their consent (Bromley, 2020).

Taken together, these legal and contractual conditions suggest that virtual photography occupies a position between tolerated fan practice, marketing infrastructure, and a form of use that may risk infringement. Official photo modes can be understood as one way in which publishers seek to stabilise this ambiguity, by offering technically constrained tools for image-making. They channel player creativity into forms that are easier to tolerate and showcase, mostly with the game's logo as a watermark to connect the UGC to the brand.

1 Virtual Photography in Games Is a Fan Practice, but Can also Be a Profession

Fan practices reveal virtual photography serves multiple functions: documentary practice for preserving gaming experiences (Urban, 2022), identity construction particularly for marginalized communities (van Heerden, 2025) and artistic expression, which is then shared and distributed among

the communities on social media and specialized platforms.

As Wojciechowski and Shelton (2022) point out, like other creative arts, virtual photography typically begins as an amateur practice and can develop into semi-professional or professional work. Practitioners are usually players rather than industry developers, translating gameplay into curated images and original digital artworks. Their practice draws on compositional conventions from photography, painting, illustration, and graphic design, employing a range of in-game and external tools to achieve specific aesthetic aims (Wojciechowski & Shelton, 2022).

Game developers themselves actively started to support this practice by incorporating photo modes into their titles. While the primary purpose of these modes was initially to increase player retention and engagement, they have ultimately evolved into a distinct form of artistic expression (Mago et al., 2023). Virtual photography remediates digital games by translating an intrinsically interactive, time-based medium into static, frameable images. The gameplay is remediates into a static scenery of landscapes, characters, and other subjects, often capturing moments visible in play only for seconds or even tenths of the seconds. These moments invite the players for a close inspection and also foreground the developers' craft in art direction, lighting, materials, and environmental storytelling, similar to how art books do with concept arts.

The virtual photographers themselves confirm this, as we interviewed two of the winning authors of last year's awards. Saskia (n.d.) and Screenche (n.d.) create photographs mostly spontaneously during their play. Screenche in a personal communication via Instagram (November 13, 2025) noted that he would like his work to be thought of as closer to street photography. The parallel with street photography appears particularly productive. As Lewis (2015) argues in his book, street photography is experiencing a highly favourable period, because the widespread availability of camera-equipped mobile phones enables people to photograph continuously in everyday situations. A similar development can be observed in virtual photography. Photo modes are increasingly incorporated into a growing number of game titles, and the number of users and players engaging in virtual image-making continues to expand. In this sense, Lewis's observation regarding street photography can be extended to virtual photography as well. The present moment represents a particularly significant period for its development, driven by advancing technologies and the emergence of active communities that form around these practices.

Contemporary photo modes offer controls that technologically extend well beyond framing and composition. Players, or rather virtual photographers, can adjust

subject pose and facial expression, as well as scene conditions such as weather, time of day, and lighting. Many titles also provide in-engine post-processing, for example exposure, colour grading or depth of field, allowing users to produce finished images without external editing tools. This practice could be seen as an education in photography (Fuchs & Grimm, 2023; Mago et al., 2023). Because these photo modes emulate most of the parameters of real-world photography, virtual photography functions as an educationally valuable training ground. It lowers financial and logistical barriers by removing the need for professional equipment and by providing on-demand access to subjects and settings otherwise out of reach for most individuals. For example, in *Gran Turismo 7* (Polyphony Digital, 2022), the players have access to high-fidelity image making regarding luxury automobiles in exclusive locations. Opportunities like these are rarely available to novice photographers, especially if we take into account the practically infinite time players can spend learning and trying new compositions and settings.

Professional photographers have produced videos that recreate their real-world photos within the game environment offered by *Gran Turismo Scapes*, a specialized photo mode with real-life backgrounds. For example, Larry Chen (2023), renowned car photographer, demonstrates how the game allows players to achieve results remarkably similar to real-world

photography. This particular video is sponsored by the publisher of the game (PlayStation) itself, which underscores the point made by Mago et al. (2023) that the primary purpose of photo modes in games is the increase of player retention and engagement. However, such videos are not limited to paid collaborations. Fans also produce and share them to enhance their personal prestige within the community, and as a means of self-presentation.

Beyond its status as a fan practice, virtual photography can also develop into a professional career, frequently emerging from amateur fan communities. Duncan Harris works as a screen capture artist, creating images for big commercial titles such as *Tomb Raider*, *Hitman*, *Crysis*, *Minecraft* and many others. His work is used in marketing and promotional materials or in books focused on games themselves, for example *Making Videogames: The Art of Creating Digital Worlds* (Harris & Wiltshire, 2022).

2 Methodology

Virtual photography in digital games serves multiple functions: it helps to promote game titles and also improves player retention. In certain games, it is implemented as ludic element and gameplay mechanic, and simultaneously functions as an educational tool, fostering visual and technical competencies in the field of photography. These roles contribute to the formation and maintenance of player communities

and to the institutionalization of virtual photography within the art field. This trajectory is accelerated by competitive and curatorial initiatives that symbolically elevate the practice, increase its visibility, and reward creators. Specialized communities have arisen around virtual photography, with competitions serving as a principal mechanism of support and legitimation.

The aim of this study is to discover how virtual photography and photo mode awards legitimize the practice of in-game virtual photography as a form of art. The study clarifies how player practice is transformed into an art practice and which institutions confer legitimacy upon it.

To achieve the goal, the study employs an exploratory case study design to provide an initial analysis (Chrastina, 2019) of virtual photography awards focused on the digital games medium. For this analysis we chose two award programs, the *Photo Mode Awards* and *The Virtual Photography Awards*. The research is supplemented with semi-structured interviews with the organizers and the winners of the analysed competitions.

Because we examine two award programs, the *Photo Mode Awards* and *The Virtual Photography Awards*, the design also has a light comparative element. Comparing two cases lets us see where they converge and where they diverge. The analysis draws primarily on

publicly available materials (rules, categories, judging descriptions, winner announcements, partner lists) and brief interviews with the organizers and winners.

For this study, the analysis of each award program is organized around three focal dimensions: honouration, categorization, and evaluation of the contributions.

- [1] Honouration examines practices and examples of how participants are rewarded for their work.
- [2] Categorization investigates how submissions are sorted and named and what are their origins or rationales.
- [3] Evaluation analyses adjudicatory systems and the members of which the jury consists.

3 Photo Mode Awards as a Case of a Virtual Photography Artification in Games

Virtual photography is increasingly institutionalized through dedicated platforms, curated showcases, and juried competitions that formalize participation and grant status. Events such as the Photo Mode Awards establish submission protocols, judging criteria, and award categories, transforming player-made screenshots into contestable artworks. These infrastructures provide visibility and gatekeeping, stabilize aesthetic norms, and create pathways from fan practice to professional



Figure 1: The Winner Photograph by the Artist Screenche in the Indie Category of Photo Mode Awards 2025
Source: Photo Mode Awards (n.d.)



Figure 2: The Winner Photograph by the Artist Frosent <3 in the Collection Category of The Virtual Photography Awards 2024
Source: Bromley (2025)

recognition, community, and exhibition beyond the game context.

The Photo Mode Awards started in 2024 with more than 1,700 submissions. In the next 2025 event there were more than 2,300 submissions, with twice as many People's Choice votes as the previous year, so the popularity is growing. Also, the number of partners from the industry is rising. Developers and publishers such as CD Project Red, Insomniac Games, Bend Studio, 505 Games, or Bandai Namco were partners from the first event in 2024. Bethesda, IO Interactive, Santa Monica Studio, PLAION, Sucker Punch, and others joined in 2025, which confers

legitimacy of virtual photography within games and enables its wider proliferation. The partnership of these giant companies, whose products are part of the works of the virtual photographers, justifies this practice and its communities even more. According to the Photo Mode Awards eligibility criteria, submissions must be created using a game's official photo mode or an authorized free-camera modification. This requirement not only defines the competition's boundaries but also sets a standard that favours approved tools and discourages unofficial mods. While the rule does not itself determine legality, it aligns participation with developer-approved practices

and may be invoked to argue that unsanctioned modifications could be unlawful.

Winners receive prizes from partners, typically including games and branded merchandise, but this is not the main benefit of the awards. Participants, and of course winners, receive a valuation of their work and talent. For some participants, even when winning is not a primary concern, recognition can provide motivation, reinforce confidence in their work, and encourage them to continue with the same level of enthusiasm, as was the case for the winner of last year's Indie category, the artist known under the pseudonym Screenche

(personal communication, November 13, 2025).

The awards also function as a reciprocal tribute to developers of in-game photo modes. Through the People's Choice Awards, people vote "to honour game developers behind the photo modes" across five categories mostly based on the genre, such as Action, Adventure, RPG, Indie, and Simulation (Photo Mode Awards, 2026, "People's Choice Awards" section, para. 1). The People's Choice further recognizes a "Creator of the Year", "for their ability to elevate virtual photography through both their personal artistry and the broader impact they've made on the community" (Photo Mode Awards, 2026, "People's Choice Awards" section, para. 8). The main categories of the *Photo Mode Awards* are People, Architecture, Action, Close Up, Indie, and Nature, each of which tries to capture the themes in the participant's own way, as Terms and Conditions claim (Photo Mode Awards, 2025). Each category has one winner and one runner-up. Winners are announced via a video presentation. In 2024, the organizers also produced a digital magazine showcasing finalist photographs across all categories and including a tribute to the winners.

The magazine also presents the judges, who are mostly from the partner gaming industry companies. Most of them are community managers, which raises the idea of communities, which the virtual

photographers definitely are. But the professional game capture artists, as we previously noted, are not missing.

4 The Virtual Photography Awards as a Case of a Virtual Photography Artification in Games

The last few years saw an increase in virtual photography in games, for which this is further evidence. The Virtual Photography Awards has taken place every year since 2020, starting with 1,140 submissions and 1,850 votes. The last published volume from 2024 had more than 2,600 submissions, which also confirms a rise in demand for competitions such as these. Many of the partner brands also participated in the previously analysed Photo Mode Awards, including 505 Games, Bethesda, Sucker Punch, Ubisoft, Remedy Entertainment and others.

For companies that sponsor even various initiatives of this type, participation can function as public-relations outreach, which promotes their titles while signalling support for independent, community-led projects, a stance generally viewed in a very positive light by the players and stakeholders.

These partners provide the awards with the judges, which, in comparison with the Photo Mode Awards, contain a more diverse mix of people from many positions and of different specializations. The judging panel is composed of a community manager, as in

the previous awards, including photographers, cinematographers, technical artists, even voice designers, producers and UI/UX designers and also several game capture artists.

The Virtual Photography Awards convenes a community panel, drawn from virtual-photography organizations and communities, to assess game's photo modes. In both award initiatives, the systematic evaluation of dedicated photo modes in games is one of the explicit components of the awards, the other one being the virtual photographs themselves.

The categorisation of the games and companies evaluated by the community panel, or so-called "Industry Award Categories", contain Best Lighting, Community Support, Photo Mode UX, Most Innovative, Best Subject and the main category "Best Photo Mode". For the "Virtual Photographer of the Year", the categories are Overall Winner, Environment, Creative, Detail, Portrait, Action and Collection, which is for a collection of photographs as a series of images.

The growing popularity and visibility of virtual photography, reinforced in part by these awards, creates new professional opportunities, including collaborations with game studios. As a result, this practice increasingly moves beyond fan-based artistic activity toward forms of professionalization. For example, the creator of The Virtual Photography

Awards, Bromley (personal communication, December 11, 2025), notes that game developers approached him after encountering his in-game photographs online, ultimately commissioning him to produce the majority of their press materials.

Conclusion

The legitimization of virtual photography as an art form is accepted within the circles of academia, professional commercial industry and also by the institutionalized trends of competitions and communities. The study attempted to point out on the practices such as the Photo Mode Awards and The Virtual Photography Awards, that further legitimise the virtual photography happening inside the digital games by the players. These initiatives show a rising popularity among the players and virtual photographers, evidence of which are the rising numbers of submissions and people's votes, and also among the game companies, which support these organizations and provide them with prizes and professional judges from the gaming industry.

[1] Participant honouration can be structured into two distinct categories of incentive. The first involves intrinsic rewards, specifically promotion, community recognition, and media visibility, which serve to motivate, inspire, and generate new professional opportunities for the entrants. The second category comprises

extrinsic rewards, wherein winners receive material prizes, including physical merchandise and game-related products, provided by partners and sponsors. The analysed cases provide the winners with both of these categories, intrinsic and extrinsic, such as game copies, artbooks and other types of gaming merchandise.

[2] The discrepancy in the analysed initiatives turned out to be mainly categorisation. Both established two-part evaluations of game photo modes and of virtual photographs themselves. While Photo Mode Awards categorization relies more on game genres leaning on digital games media conventions, The Virtual Photography Awards categories are more technically established with categories closer to the photography genre itself. As Bromley points out, they incorporated categories like Collection "which asks for a wider body of work with a common artistic theme" (personal communication, December 11, 2025).

The reason for these different approaches from the organizers could be their background and also the structure of the jury. While the Photo Mode Awards organizers claim in their bio that they are virtual photographers, the organizer of The Virtual Photography Awards also states that he is a game capture artist and real-world photographer.

The jury also consisted of several photographers and people with various specializations. Both awards focus mainly on virtual photography in games, but The Virtual Photography Awards is of more multimedia character.

[3] The evaluative process operates through a reciprocal model of appreciation. Specifically, the virtual photography community and associated organizations assess the quality of games and their integrated photo modes. Conversely, digital captures created by the community are judged by industry experts, primarily drawn from game studios and related professional sectors. This mutual evaluation demonstrates a communal practice where the gaming industry acknowledges the creative work of its fans, and the community, in return, recognizes the development and design contributions of the original creators.

The awards discussed in this study highlight their importance not only for the game industry and player communities, but more importantly as indicators of the ongoing process of the "artification" of virtual photography. By establishing evaluative criteria, organizing formal competitions, and providing institutional recognition, these awards contribute to the framing of in-game photography as an autonomous artistic practice distinct from traditional

photography. The existence of dedicated communities, alongside increasing forms of professionalisation within game studios, further reinforces this shift from a primarily player-driven activity toward a recognized creative field. In this context, the present moment can be understood as a particularly significant phase in the development of virtual photography, shaped by expanding popularity and rapidly advancing technological affordances. The awards analysed in this paper thus function as key mechanisms of legitimization, evidencing the consolidation of virtual photography as an emerging art form within contemporary visual culture.

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