

## Is Video game photography, true photography?



Figure 1. Petri Levälähtis, *Sleeping Dogs*, 2022



Figure 2. Jonathan Bayer, *Dagenham Docks*, 2003

In this is essay, a comparison between conventional and the newly emerging 'videogame' photography will take place. I will be comparing the similarities and differences in technical methods, emotive / social

commentary, whilst ultimately trying to determine if they are equal as pieces of art and to answer the question is video game photography, is true photograph? Alongside this, I will be relating the theory of Freud's 'The Uncanny' to the images, as well as any other supporting articles and videos. The two images I will be comparing are by Petri Levälähtis, a videogame photographer who uses modifications within game engines to take uncanny resemblance of the real world, specifically a piece from a series image from the game *Sleeping dogs* created by *United Front Games* and published by *SquareEnix* games (Figure 1). Contrasted with the work of Jonathan Bayer, around their landscapes from the book 'Eye of the Estuary', which documents the famous Thames estuary in how it supports the UK in terms of work, housing and to a degree tourism (Figure 2).

A major difference between the two pieces is the importance and connotations of both pieces, in the photograph from Bayer they have documented an industrial scene in Dagenham Docks. This conative of the support that the estuary provides in terms of jobs for locals, the viewer can then begin to understand the importance to a local civilization this water network has. In contrast to this the image from Levälähtis doesn't have this strong social connotation to it. Despite "The feeling of something uncanny is directly attached" (Freud, 1919, p.10) to this image, as it depicts a near realistic impression of downtown Hong Kong. Achieved through the creation of *United Front Games*. I don't believe it has the same punctum of social context, as it the image is simple a representation of generic time and space. Unlike Bayer's image that specifically documents a time and place that will simple never exist in the same fashion ever again. On the other hand Levälähtis work could simple be replicated by anyone with the correct equipment. However, Levälähtis counters this when commenting about their own, in the YouTube video 'The art of videogame Photography' by user *eurothug4000*. They state, "I'm always looking for in-game effects that "break" the rendering of the game" (Levälahtis, 2020, 10:24) thus the artist can begin to begin to create something that differs from other videogame photographers work, yet this is just a small niche in frankly an already controlled environment.

Leading on from this when looking at both photographs the keen-eyed photographers can tell which has been created using DSLR and which has been created in game engine, this is best described by Freud (1919, p.10) "With the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth". Mainly evidence from the colour present in Bayer's works, these detailed colours as of current yet can't be fully achieved in game engine. For example, the light smoggy sky helps depict an industrial scene with ease, whilst the light blue sky is conative of early summer morning. In terms of the work of Levälähtis is the use of a brown tinted filter, which is used to mask any the fact the game engine can't produce as rich and diverse colours, thus its poorly used to hide the fact that it's a CGI (computer generated image). This doesn't have any strong connotation to the scene, it doesn't help depict anything. Levälähtis could have inserted a smog effect

which could have then been conative of tightly packed population of people but not doing so it has left the image with no great connotation to be drawn from. Despite this many are still tricked by good game photography. A prime case of this happening was highlighted in a 2020 article from *Gamespot*. This incident in question being a local American news channel: *News Channel 21*, had posted screenshots from the western style game *Red Dead Redemption 2* by *Rockstar Games* in the news channels "'Out & About' nature photography segment." (Williams. H, 2020). Photography despite how abstract the image is a representation of the real world! There seems to be little difference between the real world and the virtual to point some can't tell the difference. Yet the fact that people can identify the mistake of the news channels, highlights the fact that in-game photography has a long way to go before it becomes truly uncanny.

Yet there are techniques present in both images take on conventional photography techniques. Bayer has thought out this book has used a wide-angle lens to achieve a strong and bold landscape composition, with a higher aperture to get an amazing depth of field. In turn creating a powerful documenting landscape, that gives detail in terms of variety of form across the different subjects, this feeling of vastness or the construction of this dock being a large stretching facility, and great texture highlighting the age of the dock. The same principles have been applied in Levälähtis work, they focused on lighting, composition, aperture and shutter speed 'settings' to capture a very traditional urban scene. By Shooting at un-upward angle, they give scale to the buildings, as well in conjunction with the vehicles to further bring attention towards the height of the surrounding buildings. Using a precise aperture, they have been able to focus the attention of the viewer to the buildings. Whilst a punchy contrast brings darkens the shadows and strengthens the highlights give great depth and dimensionality. In the words of Freud (1919, p.2) "Something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny", the viewer begins to question if its reality or CGI that they are seeing. By utilising these techniques that are fundamental to traditional photography, it promotes the notion that videogame photography isn't too dissimilar to real photography.

Bayer has chosen this specific composition in their work, in which they must crop out certain details that they deem un-worthy of printed outcome. Alongside this have likely used postproduction software to make minute adjustments to the image, they can't alter the location of the dock, or alter drastically the lighting of the dock other than repeating a shoot on another day to attempt to achieve better light. As a result, has meant they have achieved a specific view of the subject with a near perfect exposure of the subject. Besides this Bayer has little control over the scene, thus a near truthful representation of Dagenham Docks is created. On the other hand, Levälähtis has ultimate control over the scene, best seen in a video article on Arte; The art of gaming-Videogame photography (Asche. F ,2017) we can see a user alter the

scene and character using console commands and mods. Levälähtis, has been known to use similar controls within their own work to completely alter a scene in seconds, changing time of day, lighting, weather and so on they can warp scene to their command. This has let them achieve this mid-day scene with a cloudless sky with ease, simply changing the controls of game engine to create there truly desired outcome. Through this “innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful” (Freud,1919, p. 14), both practitioners warp their images to illustrate certain subjects. Yet it may have taken Bayer days, weeks, months possible years to achieve such a shot, one that may never be replicated. It is best summed up by the Guardian Journalist J. Jones (2012) “Any definition of art that robs it of this inner response by a human creator is a worthless definition”. As Levälähtis through enough trial and error has achieved this in easily a fraction of the time, in fact anyone with enough skill could achieve. As a result, it could be argued that videogame photographers are simply a small cog in a large digital world not a artist. For this reason, the work of Bayer has greater punctum in their work as what has been achieved may never be achieved again, it is symbolic and indexical of a time and place that will never exist in the same fashion again.

In conclusion, both artists create photographs with different mediums, as well differing genres. As evidence in this essay, the impact video game photography has on the viewer seem to lack the context and commentary, that real world photography natural provides. Yet, videogame can make beautiful and engaging art that can be respected to the same degree as real-world photography, so yes video game photography is true photography. But it still has a long development before it can truly be uncanny from the real medium, though that it is scarily becoming more acute and closer to the real-world evidence by fooling distributors of news. However, the work of Bayer and the like, will always have the benefit of creating images that by the nature of the medium are representative of the real world and will always be conative, indexical and symbolic of their context.

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