Capturing the Apocalypse

Umurangi Generation and Photography in Apocalyptic Video Games

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Present in many different genres and fulfilling a diverse array of functions, the remediation of the camera and its ludic affordances in digital games is of particular interest for video game scholarship, because the video game's procedural nature enables a dialogue between the two forms in which the possibilities and limitations of photography can be made overtly graspable. Beyond the ever more popular photography mode, the diegetic simulation of a photographic camera in video games can facilitate social critique through procedural rhetoric.

This paper engages with photography in apocalyptic videogames by providing an analysis of Origame Digital's 2020 game *Umurangi Generation* as a case study for an apocalyptic photography game in which photography acts as the central gameplay condition. *Umurangi Generation*, in its engagement with the (im)possibilities of indigenous resilience in the face of the apocalypse, shows that the photographic camera is inextricably tied to processes of meaning-making rather than passively recording a given event. Through interrelating already existing research on photography in video games with critical scholarship on crisis photography, this paper argues that video games like *Umurangi Generation* have the capacity to make procedural arguments about the potential of photography to construct a specific image of crisis by means of photographic framing.

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Apocalyptic Aesthetics in Crisis Photography

A 2022 Guardian article that showcases a collection of contemporary climate change photographs is headlined "'It was like an apocalyptic movie': 20 climate photographs that changed the world" (Schwarz). When considering the aesthetic references of the crisis photography shown in the article, the prevalence of apocalyptic aesthetics as a mode of communicating the effects of the climate crisis becomes apparent (Kember 2017; Hurley and Sinykin 2018). In fact, in climate crisis photography at large, the post-apocalyptic image has long become an aesthetic shorthand for communicating the destructive possibilities of unfettered climate change. Joanna Zylinska argues that, in news reporting and fine art photography alike, the photographic image has become "the dominant mode of representing the apocalypse in popular culture and art [...] show[ing] dilapidated landscapes, abandoned buildings and soon-to-expire civilisations" (2021, 1751). In the context of crisis photography, this apocalyptic image is utilised as a rhetorical technique; as a form of social critique that is not only emotionally evocative but also rhetorically effective, i.e. persuasive, because it seeks to emotionally orient the viewer's desire towards a specific, 'better' future. Thereby, it is deeply invested in the photograph's capabilities to affect across space and time.

Most notably through *Dead Rising*'s (Capcom, 2006) photojournalist protagonist, Frank West, the apocalyptic video game has shown a vested interest in engaging in this discourse about the complex interrelations between photographic communication and the rhetorical affordances of apocalyptic photography.[1] This article offers an in-depth analysis of Origame Digital's *Umurangi Generation* (2020), an apocalyptic video game which centres the gameplay mechanic of image-making through simulated photography, thereby remediating the photographic lens. After briefly outlining the role photography plays in video games at large, I turn towards a close reading of *Umurangi Generation* in order to think together the procedural rhetoric of its mechanics with its apocalyptic aesthetic and narrative. This paper argues that *Umurangi Generation* points to the performative nature of photographic framing through procedural and narrative means and that it, thereby, itself becomes a rhetorically charged and persuasive metaphotographic artefact that scrutinises the presumed neutrality of the photographic image in crisis. In this, it pays particular attention to the function of the remediated analogue photograph, spatiotemporality, and the different modes of gameplay encouraged by the game's systems. This paper shows that, in *Umurangi Generation*, the apocalypse functions as an aesthetic mode within which a procedural argument about the perceived epistemic authority of the photographic image (Cohen and Meskin 2004) can be made.

Photography Video Games

When trying to understand the nature of photography in the realm of digital games, one is confronted with a plethora of issues. Does photography always require a camera or a lens? What really counts and what does not count as a camera? If I use my phone's camera to take a picture of my computer screen, which is displaying a game, is that markedly different from screenshotting the game by using the 'print' button on my computer? In only one of the two cases, an actual photographic lens is involved and, yet, the 'screenshot artist' often speaks in the language of photography. Take, for example, the photographer and media scholar Joanna Zylinska's account of her first foray into screenshotting in gaming:

> A non-gamer taking first tentative steps into video game worlds, I was beginning to get involved in the photographic practice of in-game photography, aka screenshotting, a practice that involves the player 'cutting' into the media flow of a video game to collect mementos from it and make a record of the scenes visited. (2021, 192)

Zylinska likens screenshotting and in-game photography to one another, even though the 'camera' of the games she 'photographs' in is produced through fundamentally different processes than the ones of any real-world photographic camera. While the video game 'camera' is usually a metaphorical stand-in for the computational processes that produce a specific point of view in digital games (cf. Krichane 2021, n.p.), the 'screenshot artists' of Flickr emphasize photographic aspect ratio, lenses, lighting, and framing. How can we square this understanding of screenshotting as photography with the increasingly popular and fittingly named 'photo-modes' of contemporary video games which let the player-photographer control camera angle, saturation, and lighting? How do these forms of photography, in turn, differ from games that actually attempt to simulate a diegetic camera and, thereby, the phenomenology of photography, including the physicality of the camera, different lenses, and the experience of looking through a viewfinder? Can we even fit games like *Viewfinder* (Sad Owl Studios, 2023),

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[1] see also the photo-modes of *Death Stranding* (Kojima, 2019), *The Last of Us: Remastered* (Naughty Dog, 2014), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017) and the scrapbooking mechanics of *Season: A Letter to the Future* (Scavenger Studio, 2023).

in which the act of taking a picture manipulates the game world, within the same definitory frame as *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), where a diegetic camera is essential to the narrative, but the player never gets to take actual control of it? To account for the conundrum that 'in-game photography' can denote a plethora of different acts and representations in gaming and metagaming practices alike, Möring and de Mutiis suggest describing different types of 'photographies' in the plural to highlight the many "different approaches and modalities in which photographic and ludic elements interact and overlap" (2019, 71) in digital games.

Beyond providing a workable frame within which photography games can be conceptualised, such an impossibility of a singular definition points to video games' paradoxical capacity to be bound to the material realities of the media they simulate while, at the same time, blurring the delimitating lines between different forms of media. Even though the photography game, as a digital simulation, is not bound to the material constraints of photography, it has to simulate a practice that is, to some extent, guided by the affordances of the camera in order for the simulation to be recognisable as such. Any analysis of the photography game as genre, hence, needs to account for this "dialectic of medium specificity and hybridity" (Kim 2016, 7) by pointing to the medium-specific affordances which the game foregrounds in its remediation of the camera and the ones that are excluded from it. This is of particular interest in video games which simulate photography by means of a diegetic, often analogue, camera which is central to the gameplay condition (cf. Möring and de Mutiis, 75–78). In these games, the camera is present as a diegetic object which, in its phenomenology, simulates analogue photographic practice. The perceived indexical nature of such analogue photography, in its capacity to depict the empirical object, if not even the thing-in-itself, therefore stands in direct tension with the simulation that enables it to exist, for the remediation of the analogue can only be present in a simulated interface whose mechanical underpinnings are completely removed from the camera and any analogue photographic practice. Due to this paradoxical relationship, photography video games which remediate the analogue camera as a diegetic object are ideally suited to critique photography by representing photographic practice through a specific procedural rhetoric of photography, opening up a space within which the affordances and limitations of photography can be made apparent and negotiated.

In the following, I conceive of *Umurangi Generation* as an apocalyptic photography game in which narrative experience is enabled through the interrelation of two primary gameplay modes, a 'photography mode' and an 'explorative mode'. I argue that the interplay of these modes engenders an experience in which the photographic framing of apocalyptic events is up to the player, thereby drawing attention to the status of the photographic frame as in itself performative, always already interpreting. In *Umurangi Generation*, the analogue SLR camera[2] of the photojournalist becomes a narrative tool engaged in constructing the reality of the apocalypse which the game presents. This is communicated by a procedural rhetoric which enables the player to decide how to visually encode and thereby communicate the in-game apocalypse to a broader public.

Umurangi Generation

Umurangi Generation, published by Origame Digital in 2020, is a photography game which takes place in a New Zealand that, over the course of the game, transitions from pre-apocalyptic neoliberal dystopia into a post-apocalypse as the result of an alien invasion. The game was directed by the Māori game designer Naphtali Faulkner and features a score by ThorHighHeels.

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[2] 'Single-lens reflex camera'

Having been thrust into turmoil as Kaiju, alien invaders resembling bluebottle jellyfish, attack Aotearoa, the island's government and its citizens are living out their lives at the brink of collapse, with the United Nations deploying soldiers and 'peace sentinels' to defend the nation. The prime minister has fled the country, and the outbreak of a contagious brain parasite adds a further layer of dread and chaos to an already tense situation. The player takes on the role of a Māori photojournalist for the Tauranga Express who is, vaguely, tasked with documenting these events with their analogue camera, capturing the transition from apocalyptic anticipation to full-blown apocalypse through the photographic lens. While the player starts off taking pictures of mostly peaceful walled off cities and train stations, these spaces soon transform into deadly zones of war which already anticipate their own trajectory towards the post-apocalyptic ruin. Very quickly, it becomes apparent that the walls around the city are siege walls and that the train might be the only way out of the operational zone the player finds herself in. Equipped with different lenses and tasked with capturing a variety of objects such as 'three birds' or 'two body bags', the player explores the gameworld alongside their Māori friends and the chinstrap penguin, Pengi, who all seem comparatively at peace with their existence on the brink of collapse.

While the player navigates various settings which make graspable the immense pressure and oppressive occupation that New Zealand's population is under, the game continuously points to indigenous resilience in the face of crises. In-game graffiti add depth to this narrative by revealing a society in which a local resistance against the UN forces and their occupation of New Zealand is forming, reflecting a situation which is more multilayered than the "us versus them" dynamics of traditional of alien invasion fiction. While the invading aliens pose an apocalyptic threat, the goals of the resistance are oriented towards human-made structures of oppression, the UN's mechs being depicted in the visual language of familiar *kaiju* tropes just as much as the invading aliens. As the player photographs the different game-spaces, this tension is frequently spelt out through the imagery of climate collapse. Advertisements about making one's home flood-proof and graffiti about the rampant escalation from local environmental disaster to apocalyptic crisis litter the game-world, providing a counter-narrative to the appeasing UN propaganda and pointing out that, actually, nothing is okay. Naphtali Faulkner, *Umurangi Generation*'s lead designer, has correspondingly stated that

> the concept of the game's story and themes came from my experience with the [2019] bush fires that happened in Australia and the government's shit house job at not only reacting to them but ignoring the issue of climate change for years (Sims 2020).

In this light, the apocalyptic alien attacks function as a thinly veiled allegory for the neoliberal economic policies and practices that fail to appropriately address climate change and ultimately lead to total annihilation (cf. Byrne 2022). Through this, the game deals in themes of neocolonialism, reflecting a deeper tension that complicates the terms "invading aliens" and "human defenders". The UN's public messaging presents a fabricated narrative of victory against the alien threat through propaganda on posters and television broadcasts while the player's engagement with the actual gameworld reveals a complete failure of military and humanitarian aid. It also becomes more and more apparent that the Eva-esque peace sentinel mecha units, while impressive in appearance, seem to serve more as tools of oppression and propaganda than effective defence measures, as they not only fail to counter the alien threat but also cause significant civilian casualties.[3] The UN's deployment of these units, hence,

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[3] This is shown more explicitly in the game's DLC *Macro* (2020).

appears to be a superficial gesture meant to demonstrate action rather than provide meaningful defence against the invaders.

In the final levels of *Umurangi Generation*, the situation deteriorates significantly. There are reasons to believe that Tauranga will be abandoned by authorities, as the conflict with the alien Kaiju has resulted in decisive defeat; body bags are strewn about the gameworld.

Figure 1: A massive Kaiju perched upon a rock formation in front of the moon (Origame Digital, 2020).

The game's final level exhibits a shift in tone, away from the urban and the vivid colours of previous levels towards decisively non-human rock formations and a monochromatic red colour palette. Perched on a cliff sits a massive unknowable shadowy entity, in front of it the spirits of the player character's friends, mud crabs, and the already extinct huia. This framing transforms the understanding of the apocalypse from merely resulting out of an, albeit allegorical, alien threat to something more complex and culturally resonant. The creature's positioning suggests both physical dominion over the now post-apocalyptic gameworld and a deeper spiritual significance, challenging the purely militaristic interpretation of events that dominates the narrative (Fig. 1). The world has ended, and the player gets to take one final photograph. The game then transitions to credits, dedicating itself to the "Umurangi Generation: The last generation who has to watch the world die" (Origame Digital, 2020).[4]

Environmental Storytelling through Photography

Umurangi Generation makes use of simulated photography as a core gameplay element, requiring players to manipulate technical parameters including zoom, focus, and camera tilt to compose their shots, thereby replicating the phenomenology of looking through a physical camera and taking pictures (Fig. 2). This simulation extends beyond basic framing, as players must consider depth of field, focal length, and other compositional rules of photography. After capturing an image, players access a post-processing interface that enables modification of visual elements through filters, saturation adjustments, and colour grading tools, mirroring the techniques traditionally associated with the darkrooms in which analogue photography is

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[4] 'Umurangi,' meaning 'red sky' in Te Reo Māori, is a further nod to the 2019/20 Australian bushfires whose red skies were frequently communicated in the rhetoric of the apocalypse (Kwai 2019, Norman et al. 2021).

developed. Photography, through this, becomes the primary mode of engagement with the game world. The game's photography system functions simultaneously as a tool for documentation and artistic expression, requiring players to balance technical proficiency with creative decision-making. The combination of real-time compositional tools and post-processing capabilities creates a simulacrum of both the technical and creative aspects of analogue photography.

Figure 2: The game's 'photography mode' (Origame Digital 2020).

Umurangi Generation's apocalypse is relayed through purely environmental means, though its oppressive score and increasing difficulty add to the apocalyptic aesthetics. There is no narrative voice or cutscenes, only the narrative architecture of the gameworld (cf. Jenkins 2004) which the player interacts with through photography. Still, amidst the bricolage of intertextual references to *Godzilla* (1954), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), and *Jet Set Radio* (Sega 2000), the game's narrative undoubtedly revolves around the failure of neoliberal governance in the face of ecological and cultural crises of an apocalyptic scale. In one of the many articles Kaile Hultner has written about *Umurangi Generation*, they describe their experience of 'piecing together' the story communicated in the game's first level:

> Before you even start, in the tutorial you're warned against shooting photos of blue bottles, or Portuguese Man O' War, […]. Considering these are aquatic creatures typically, you might think "ah, this should be fine." Even if you miss the tutorial instructions to explicitly not take photos of these jellyfish, you won't be penalized in the game for taking a photo of, say, twelve blue water bottles, for example. But these fuckers are actually everywhere. They are strewn around the perimeter of the rooftop in concerningly large numbers. And suddenly you kind of start to piece this other stuff together: the big bullet casings, the chain-link fences in disarray, the possibility of this rooftop possibly being neglected because it's simply too dangerous to live or work this close to the ocean, the fact that we're simply able to be up here with a makeshift pool and a bunch of art supplies and shit – it all isn't because the aesthetic rocks (although to be clear, it does rock), it's because nobody else has time to notice some abandoned construction area. (2021)

This narration through level design is facilitated by the two modes of engagement with the gameworld the game engenders, an 'explorative mode' that consists of walking around the level and scouting spots to take pictures from and a 'photography mode'. The exploration is

motivated by 'photo bounties' which the player is asked to 'collect' and 'deliver' by first locating them in the gameworld and then capturing them. Some bounties require the pictures to be taken with a specific lens or extreme zoom. These bounties are structured in a way that draws the player's attention to specific parts of the game's narrative architecture. In the first level, for example, the player is tasked with taking a picture of 'the mountain Mauao', instantly locating the level in Tauranga by means of heteroreference to Mount Maunganui. Another bounty asks us to take a picture of 'two boomboxes' which can be found atop a house where our friends are taking in the rooftop views, conjuring up a sense of carelessness. In the level "Contact", which takes place later in the story but on the same rooftop, the space has been transformed into a battle zone in which players are tasked to take pictures of '2 body bags' and '4 first-aid kits'. This draws attention to how the space has deteriorated in the face of apocalyptic collapse. Throughout the course of the game, more and more markers of crisis seep into the photo tasks, but they rarely become ubiquitous. Even as the situation becomes more and more desperate, the game continues to ask us to take pictures of cheerful settings, localised resistance, and indigenous resilience. Just as much as the game wants us to photograph the violent end of the world, it also allows us to capture images with hopeful tones, highlighting the tension between apocalypse and endurance permeating all of *Umurangi Generation*.

The game's mechanics position photography as the essential connective tissue between gameplay and narrative progression, where the act of seeing and photographing the gameworld simultaneously becomes the means through which players uncover and experience the game's story. The narrative experience is, hence, enabled through a ludic framework which incentivizes the player to engage with the gameworld's narrative architecture. Levels function as narratively evocative spaces in whose mise-en-scène an apocalyptic story is embedded, its uncovering aided by the central gameplay condition of photography which necessitates a close scrutiny of narrative spaces.

Of particular interest in this context is the levels' representation of temporality, as they are painted as snapshots into the progression towards apocalypse, as dioramas in which time is static. Since the advancement of 'story time' only takes place between the levels, progress can never be brought about through engaging with the game world; the decline into apocalypse is staged through depicting specific moments in it. The train moving through dilapidated ruins in "Karangahake" will never arrive while we play the level, nor will we ever learn who wins the breakdancing competition in "The Metro". The different levels act as moments of crisis frozen in time that seem to exist outside temporal flow; the progression of story time halted in a space of intense crisis. In drawing from Piero's refiguration of the Bakhtinian "threshold chronotope" (2021), *Umurangi Generation*'s vignettes can be understood as spatiotemporal representations of spaces in constant crisis in which time is "essentially instantaneous […] as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal discourse of biographical time" (Bakhtin 1981: 248). In this chronotope, story events don't flow continuously; they leap abruptly from one distinct moment to the next, like pivotal frames in a film strip with the transitions cut out (cf. Helle 2021). Barthes' diagnosis that "in the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else" (1980, 4), hence, just as much applies to the levels in which the game's photography takes place as it does to the actual photographs the player takes. Until its final level, the game deals exclusively in this chronotope, in representations of moments on the threshold that can only be transcended by continuing to the next cataclysmic moment. Thereby, the game fosters an experience of playing and photographing at the threshold of collapse.

What is more, this encounter with spacetime at the threshold functions as a form of social critique, as the moments shown in the game are "moments in time that […] delineate the priorities and values of the people in a given space" (Hultner 2021). In the video game, the

threshold moment therefore enables a temporal aesthetics of dissonance between 'play time' and 'story time' (Pietro 2021, 4). *Umurangi Generation* utilises this dissonance to highlight seemingly impossible coexistences; of war and breakdancing, futility and resistance, social collapse and community building all at the same moment in time. The video game's combinatory employment of photography and traversable digital architecture enables a "dynamic coexistence of stasis and motion" (Kim 2016, 2) and the photograph becomes a snapshot of a snapshot, level and photographic image alike are "flat, reduced, rigidly rectangular like the view-finder, cropped out of space like a piece of grass, sliced from time like cheese or salami" (Gass 1977).

It is only between levels where 'story time' progresses, spaces devolve, and the apocalyptic threat intensifies; only through the stringing together of level-vignettes, it becomes possible for a fuzzy, yet thematically coherent, narrative to emerge. We may never be able to know the concrete story of the apocalypse that happens in *Umurangi Generation*, as there are no overt links between the moments the game depicts and, still, the *Leerstellen* between snapshots of evocative gamespaces bursting with markers of a society devolving into apocalypse give players ample opportunity to come up with possible causal links themselves.

Procedural Rhetoric and Crisis Photography

After having considered how photography as a gameplay element is central to structuring and guiding *Umurangi Generation*'s narrative experience, I now want to turn to the game's mechanics and their rhetorical affordances to return to the nature of the photographic image in crisis photography. Through giving the player total control over the framing of the photographic image and post-processing, the gameplay makes a procedural argument about the performative power of the camera in crisis reporting. The game's mechanics highlight that photographic framing, particularly in the context of photojournalism, is not neutral but rather always engaged in acts of interpretation, because it becomes more and more apparent that photography is inherently involved in processes of making (in-)visible particular aspects of a given apocalyptic situation. For example, when the player is tasked with taking a picture of 'two carbines' in "Contact", they are free to choose whether they photograph the two UN soldiers zealously fighting the invading Kaiju (Fig. 3) or the solider caring for his dying comrade, the carbine carelessly buried below him, while a frightened solider is hiding in the background, clasping a second rifle (Fig. 4). Based on which carbines the player chooses to depict, a different reality is mediated to the implied readers of the Tauranga Express: one communicates strength, the other weakness. While, in "Contact", both are present at the same time, only one is needed to complete the photo bounty and the tensions between the two, the dissonance at the threshold, is likely to be disregarded because either image will fulfil the requirements the game sets to complete the level.

Figure 3: Two UN soldiers using their carbines to shoot the Kaiju (Origame Digital 2020).

Figure 4: A UN solider desperately trying to resuscitate a fallen comrade while a second solider is hiding in the background (Origame Digital 2020).

Even once the player has decided to capture a certain aspect of the gameworld through the lens of the simulated camera, the perspective, choice of lens, and post-processing enable for images to communicate different realities even if the subject in front of the photographic lens does not change. In "Karangahake", a level that takes place on a narrow train which is at the same time moving forward and stuck in time, two bloody soldiers sit at a table next to the protagonist's friend, Micah. Through photographing this scene, the player can collect the '2 coffee & 1 downlight' bounty, though the mood that the image conveys can vary greatly. A full shot using the standard lens with minimal post-processing can depict the soldiers next to a poster longing for the urban metropolis they supposedly got injured defending (Fig. 5). While the situation the image depicts is dire, the bright blue box of 'Kaiju Flakes' cereal and the soldiers relaxing in the background serve to normalize the depicted reality by introducing markers of the everyday into the image.

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Figure 5: Shot with standard lens, slightly brightened in post-processing (Origame Digital 2020).

On the other hand, if the player chooses to photograph the scene with a fisheye lens, drastically increases saturation and makes heavy use of chromatic aberration, the scene becomes unsettling (Fig. 6). While none of the common objects present in the full shot can be made out anymore, the use of the fisheye evokes feelings of tension and urgency and its dramatic distortion, exaggerated colour, and deliberate visual dissonance, make the shot take on an almost expressionist quality. The intense red and orange palette and warping effects convey a heightened emotional state rather than being interested in 'realist' representation. Hence, two images depicting the same scene can frame the apocalypse in vastly different ways and communicate different messages about the impending apocalypse.

Figure 6: Shot with fisheye lens, exposure, contrast, bloom and saturation hiked up, chromatic aberration enabled (Origame Digital 2020).

It is precisely this which highlights that the meaning of the gameworld, communicated to the implied readers of the Tauranga Express by means of photography, has already been interpreted for them through the privileging of certain frames over others and through choices made in

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post-processing. By means of procedural rhetoric, *Umurangi Generation*, therefore, puts into question the notion of the photojournalistic crisis photograph providing unmediated access to the reality of any crisis. Through a simulated process, it highlights that

> the photograph, in framing reality, is always already interpreting what will count within the frame; this act of delimitation is surely interpretive, as are the effects of angle, focus, and light. […] In this sense, the frame takes part in the interpretation […]; it is not just a visual image awaiting its interpretation; it is itself interpreting, actively, even forcibly. (Butler 2005, 823)

The game's mechanics make graspable what often recedes into the background in the face of the naturalization of the photographic image, namely that it is itself actively involved in producing the perceived reality of a given situation by means of tapping into aesthetic registers such as the apocalyptic. Getting to make decisions about what is communicated and how it is framed points to the status of the photojournalist's camera as a powerful tool, imbued with epistemic agency, and itself always engaged in processes of meaning-making.

Umurangi Generation, through this, makes a procedural argument about photojournalism as narrative practice. Photography is not merely the dominant mode of engagement through which the player experiences the game's story, but it also functions as a meta-commentary on photography's role in constructing narratives about crises. The game establishes a recursive structural doubling wherein the player simultaneously experiences a pre-constructed narrative while generating their own through photographic documentation of it. This doubling creates a metaleptic relationship between the game's fixed levels—themselves static snapshots of environments frozen in various states of crisis—and the player's photographic products, which similarly arrest temporal moments within these spaces, already suspended in time. When players navigate environments at the threshold, simultaneously complete and incomplete, it becomes apparent that the interpretive act of photographic intervention is required to fully materialize their meaning in the apocalyptic context. *Umurangi Generation* demonstrates photography's performative power to call narratives into being—not simply recording what exists, but actively constructing them by means of framing, selection, and compositional choices. In the camera-centric gameplay, the player's diegetic camera becomes both a tool for uncovering the game's embedded narrative and an instrument that manifests new narratives through the act of documentation, illustrating how photography operates not as passive witness but as active participant in the creation of meaning within temporal and spatial contexts. By constraining player action exclusively to the photographic documentation of vignettes, the game structurally enforces the paradoxical position of the photojournalist—present enough to witness, record, and frame crisis but functionally powerless to alter its course. In allowing players to experience crisis environments as static dioramas, as aesthetic playgrounds rather than sites demanding intervention, the game makes an argument by means of the way apocalypse and spatiotemporality intersect, highlighting the ethical tensions inherent in documentary practice, where the act of bearing witness may satisfy journalistic objectives while simultaneously normalizing the photographer's non-intervention in the apocalyptic conditions they document.

The materiality of the analogue camera plays a key role in making this argument. It puts into question "the perceived proximity of analogue photographs to the floating signifiers of authenticity and truth" (Lum 2012) by highlighting that a specific visual rhetoric of crisis can intentionally be evoked by analogue photography and that the analogue photograph, just as much as the digital image, is susceptible to manipulation. Notably, this argument about the analogue is being made in the digital space by means of the remediated simulation of the analogue, not just through visual aesthetics but also through processes. *Umurangi Generation*,

therefore, functions as a metaphotographic artefact that makes its argument about the affordances of crisis photography through procedural representations.

Umurangi Generation's paradoxical relationship to urgency in the face of crisis complicates this further. While the base gameplay permits unlimited exploration of static environments without consequence, the game introduces an optional ten-minute countdown achievement that rewards speed and efficiency with tangible gameplay benefits such as access to additional camera lenses. This constructs two possible modes of play where players must choose between careful documentation and rushed completion, as trying to capture all photo bounties in ten minutes is no easy feat. In attempting to complete the countdown achievements, the game fundamentally changes in its usage of photography; the atemporality of exploratory play is dislodged and makes way for what, more than anything, feels like cinematic gunplay. Through urgency, the experience of crisis photography as a form of conscious meaning-making is undermined; there is no focus on composition or time to edit images to fit the mood the player-photographer wants to convey. Rather, the subjects in front of the camera become mere things to 'target', 'capture' and 'own'. Space itself becomes an objective to be traversed and memorised and, through this, transforms into something to be gained power over through the flawless execution of the game's mechanics. Photography, then, becomes the means by which power over the gamespace and its subjects is exerted; "just as in real life the ability to master the technology of the camera reflects the capacity of one to 'own' the experience" (Poremba 2007, 52). When trying to complete all bounties within the ten-minute countdown, the structural similarities between the gameplay of first person-shooters and photography games become apparent and the possible function of the camera as a tool for enacting symbolic violence is foregrounded.[5]

A further procedural argument can be found in the function of the game's economy. While *Umurangi Generation* implements a surface-level monetary system that evaluates photographs based on framing, composition, and subject matter and penalises players for capturing images of the harbingers of apocalypse, the bluebottle jellyfish, currency ultimately serves no practical purpose within the gameplay experience. This design choice creates a dissonant mode of play where players instinctively strive to maximize their earnings despite the currency's fundamental uselessness, revealing how deeply ingrained capitalist reward mechanisms have become in gaming conventions. The penalty for photographing bluebottle jellyfish becomes particularly significant not because of its practical impact, but because it challenges players' conditioned responses to monetary incentives. By establishing familiar economic feedback loops only to render them meaningless, *Umurangi Generation* invites critical reflection on how games typically reinforce neoliberal value systems through their reward structures and how such deeply entrenched structures condition specific modes of play.

Conclusion

Umurangi Generation highlights how photography games can not only simulate photography but also provide metacommentary on the representational function of photography itself by means of procedural rhetoric. By remediating the camera within the game world and making it the player's primary tool of engagement with the apocalypse, the game creates a recursive

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[5] Though beyond the scope of this article, further research on the interrelations between the violence historically enacted upon Māori through colonial camera lenses and photography in *Umurangi Generation* is needed. In post-colonial contexts, the game raises questions about who photographs whom, how power operates through visual documentation, and whether photography can be reclaimed as a tool for resistance and cultural preservation rather than exploitation through a colonial gaze. For more on the camera as an instrument of colonial power, confer Ranger, Terence. "Colonialism, Consciousness, and the Camera". *Past & Present*, Volume 171:1, May 2001, pp, 203–215.

relationship between the act of play and the act of representation, inviting players to reflect on how images construct meaning and mediate reality. The game simulates not only the technical aspects of photography but also engages in a discourse about the ethical, political, and cultural dimensions that inform how we document crises through the lens of the camera. Players participate in a procedural system that demonstrates how photography intersects with power, perspective, and the politics of representation. By simulating photography within the context of environmental catastrophe, societal collapse, and colonial histories, *Umurangi Generation* enables critical engagement with contemporary visual and ludic culture through the aesthetic and narrative lens of the apocalyptic. The game's procedural rhetoric invites players to consider who controls the camera, whose stories are told through images, and how photographic practices can construct dominant narratives about crises. It thereby uses procedural rhetoric to make critical arguments about photojournalism and crisis photography at large. By making the camera both subject and medium, photography games can create a space for reflection on how we document, interpret, and respond to crises through visual means.

About the Author

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