Sara Eshak | Infinity Nikki

Juan | Black Myth: Wukong

Evey | The Last of Us Part II Remastered

Eddy | Ghost of Tsushima

Bianca | Horizon Forbidden West

Mik Bromley | Star Wars Jedi: Survivor

Jack Dean | Deathloop

Jean Choukroun | Control

Photo modes have increasingly become an integral part of many of the most celebrated games of recent years. These are just a few examples of the talented virtual photographers' work we're featuring in this month's in-depth feature. Turn to p. 88 for the full story.
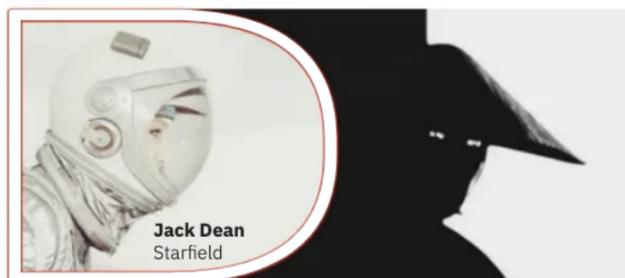
LIGHTS, CONTROLLER, ACTION!

What once was a niche novelty is now a gaming standard. Photo modes are changing the way we engage with games, and the community is growing.

BY JACK DEAN

Zoom in

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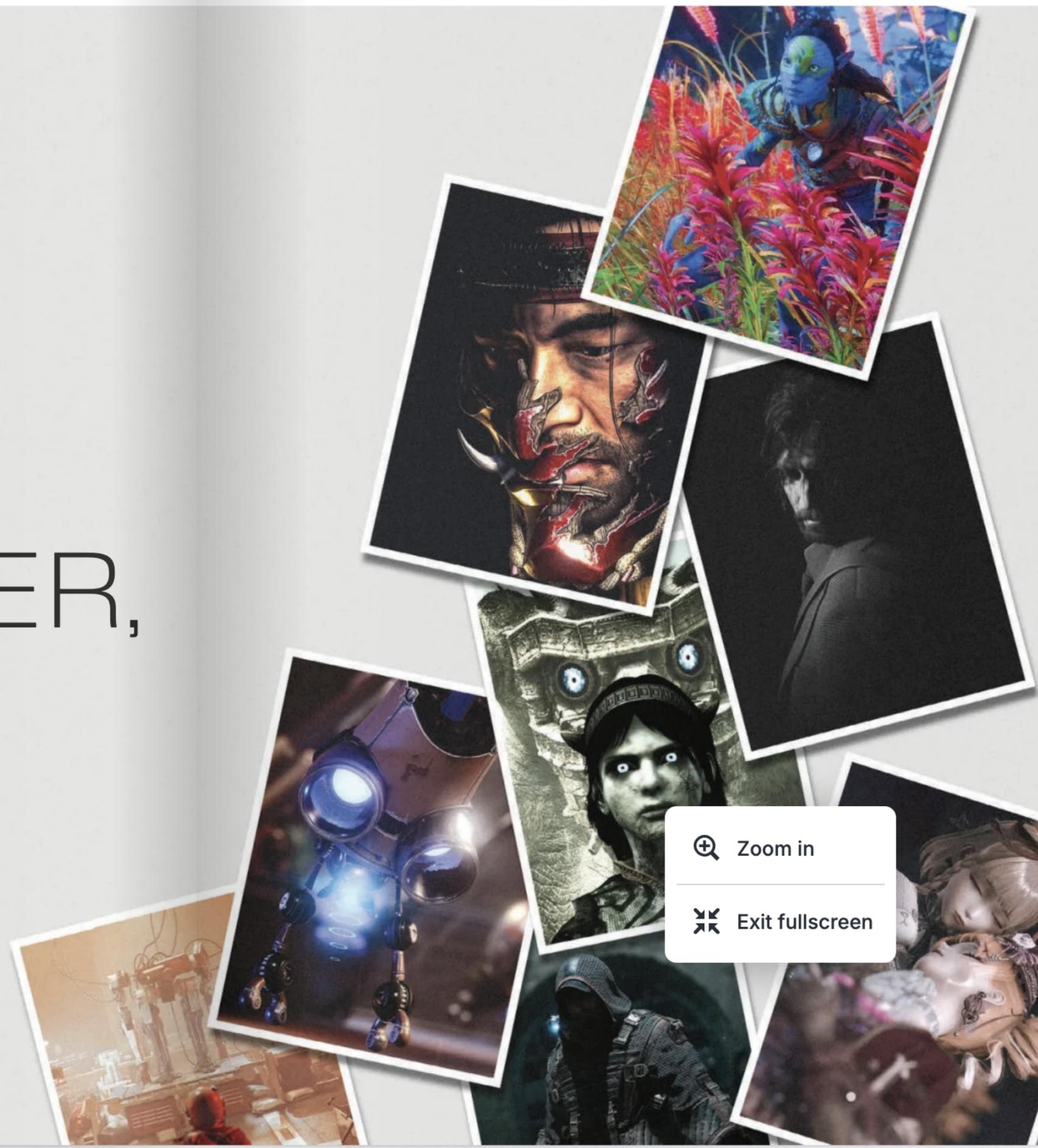
Eddy | Ghost of Tsushima

Jack Dean
Starfield

hotographers often say, "The best camera is the one you have with you." For modern fans of video games, that camera happens to be a controller. Thirty years ago, the term "photo mode" would've meant nothing to gamers. Game designers and industry pioneers first created games for the act of play in the digital space. As the industry grew, games evolved to include engaging narratives and lore. Today, we find ourselves entering game worlds that have such fidelity and striking art direction that any given frame of a playthrough can be frozen, printed, and hung on a wall. This leaves both gamers and developers with a small quandary: how can we create something even more out of these meticulously created worlds?

The answer has become abundantly clear with the explosion of the photo mode. Photo modes are changing the way we engage with games and are inspiring a community of virtual photographers (VPs). Let's take a look at where this popular feature began, and where it's going. Throughout this brief history, we'll hear from numerous VPs and how they've come to harness this burgeoning feature to express their own creativity and create visibility for the games themselves.

To be clear, a photo mode does not describe games that feature a camera as a means of gameplay, like MachineGames' Indiana Jones and the Great Circle. This game has the player pick up an in-game camera and take photos to solve puzzles – this is not a photo mode. A true and dedicated photo mode allows the player to pause the game world and control a detached, free-floating camera to compose and frame a shot. Although that is the basic idea, photo modes offer massive differences in tools and functions from game to game. You might, for example, play Arkane's Deathloop and have the ability to stage external lights, change the avatar pose, adjust the depth of field, or even take the camera hundreds of feet away from where you paused. Some games add a photo mode as an afterthought, providing minimal features. "Real-life photography requires adapting to unpredictable circumstances [...] Virtual photography requires adapting to the photo mode of the game you're playing," virtual photographer Juan (@second-capture) explains.

Jean Choukroun | Marvel's Spider-Man 2

THE FIRST PHOTO MODE

One of the first games ever to include a proper photo mode was Sony's Gran Turismo 4 on the PlayStation 2. Series creator Kazunori Yamauchi stated in a 2004 PlayStation Magazine interview, "Personally I love cars, but I also love photography. Including a photo mode was actually part of my dream for the GT franchise." Yamauchi's passion and innovations remain integral to the GT series and racing games as a whole. There are VPs who devote their entire virtual portfolios to in-game car photography. But while Gran Turismo 4 was one of the first to include such a feature, its accessibility was limited and only for the devoted few. Exporting and keeping images was cumbersome at best. According to that Yamauchi interview, players saved the low-res 480p image onto their PS2 memory cards and then could play it as a slideshow on their TV or transfer the image to a USB drive and print it off – not the most elegant way of sharing images with the world. That year was a big step for photo modes. A decade after Gran Turismo 4 showcased the potential of the new feature, the world of virtual photography was about to explode.
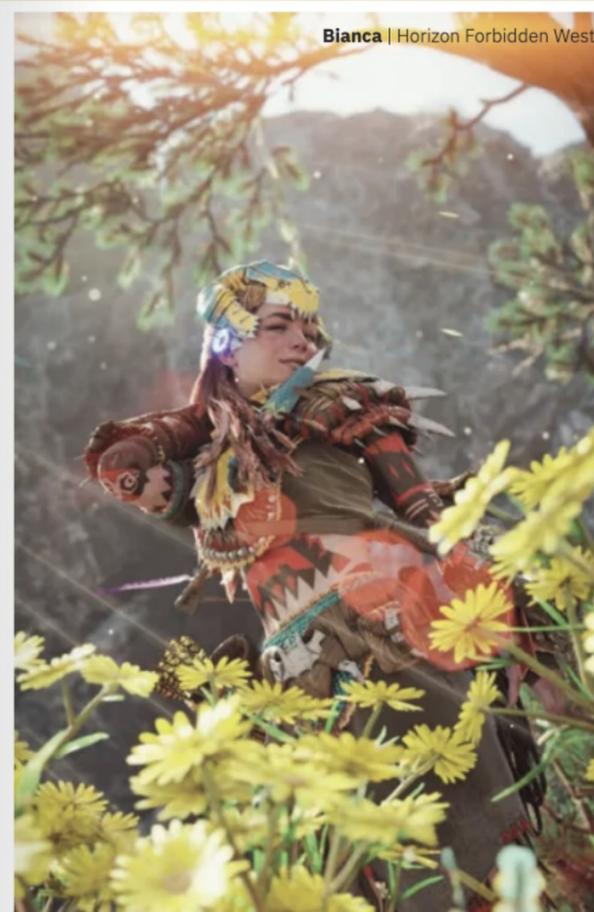
Bianca | Horizon Forbidden West

Eddy | Marvel's Spider-Man 2

THE SHARE BUTTON

By the time the PS4 and Xbox One launched in 2013, the landscape of the internet had changed drastically. We had Twitter, Instagram, and more. Gamers were forming communities, sharing fan art across hundreds of games, and a virtual photography community was slowly forming. What helped this along was Sony's inclusion of a Share button on the new DualSense 4 controller. This button would later be adopted by Xbox controllers as well. Like Gran Turismo 4, Sony was at the forefront of developing the widespread popularity of photo modes. This dedicated button was designed to capture screenshots and video footage from any game played on the console. Sony made it seamless to snap a photo with the tap of a button and then instantly share it online. This hardware feature encouraged gamers to share what they were looking at with their friends and followers. Today in 2025, a share button is on all major gaming controllers, and new tools are being developed all the time to make the process of capturing and distributing images even easier. Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo all have methods of taking photos on the console and transferring them to the user's smartphone for easy access.

Sharing a screenshot of a developer-made cinematic is one thing, but creatively adjusting the game for your own photography is something entirely different. Shortly after the 2013 console launches, more games began adding formal photo modes. One of the first to take off in a major way was in Infamous Second Son.

In 2014, Matt Durasoff, a senior software engineer for Sucker Punch, was a major figure in the development of the photo mode. According to a 2014 PlayStation Blog interview, Durasoff claims the motivation to add it came from fans posting screenshots from the game. Instead of adding a simple feature to hide the UI, the team developed an extremely comprehensive virtual camera and pioneered many settings that are now part and parcel of any standard photo mode, even by today's standards. Durasoff mentions something important in this interview, pertinent to the importance of a photo mode: "We're proud of our artwork, and I think whatever helps show that off is important."

His comments hit at why photo modes are so vital in today's gaming landscape. This feature isn't just a mini game or a means of letting players make pretty images they alone can look back on. Studios and developers can utilize the mass market appeal of providing a photo mode and let players, essentially, do a bunch of free image distribution. There are only so many billboards and pre-roll ads a developer (especially a small one) can display their game on, but what happens when developers give players photographic tools to beautifully capture their world?

A perfect harmony of creativity between the developers and virtual photographers. Virtual Photography often sells a game for people. I know for myself and many VPs that if a game has a photo mode, it immediately goes on our radar. "There have been countless times where I have seen captivating photos being posted of games that I have never heard of, and it has directly influenced me to buy and play games that I never would have otherwise," VP Eddy (@SpideyTwoShoes) says.
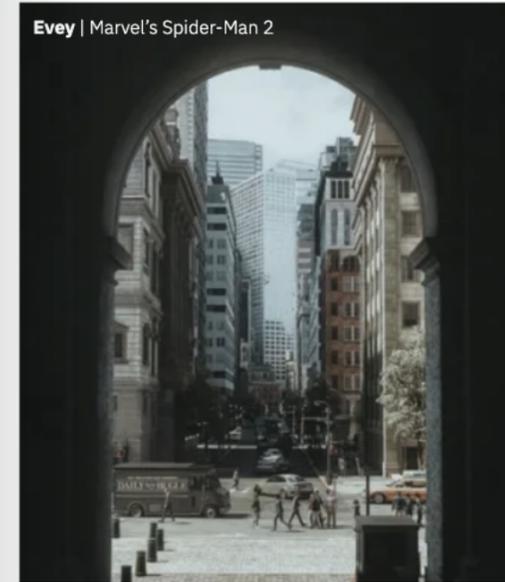

Sara Eshak | Infinity Nikki

Mik Bromley | Gran Turismo 7

Bianca | Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora

Evey | Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Jean Choukroun | Star Wars Outlaws

Sara Eshak | Infinity Nikki

GOING PLACES

Gaming has become a medium that takes players to places in ways no movie or novel can. Not to diminish the power of films and books – they have their strengths. But the interactivity of video games is what really makes players feel like they are somewhere new. A recurring opinion voiced by each of the VPs I spoke to was that the photo mode is the only way some photography lovers get to capture locations they haven't been to or the ones they physically cannot access. Jean (@jchouk.bsky.social), VP and Technical Artist at Ubisoft Paris, speaks on this: "One of the things that draws me to VP is the ability to shoot things I never would be able to in real life. From Spider-Man doing flips in the snow [...] from ancient Egypt to the twin suns setting on the dusty plains of Tatooine. VP allows me to get wrapped up and lost into worlds beyond ours."

There's something magical about this sentiment. There are plenty of reasons one might not get to travel the world and take photos of new locations. You might not have the luxury of leaving your hometown, but being able to freely explore and photograph the worlds of video games can fill that creative need. Ubisoft is particularly adept at using photo modes to transport players. Not only have they been including photo modes across all of their titles for nearly a decade, but Ubisoft is a studio that sets games in real-world-inspired locations. Stepping into 800s England in Assassin's Creed Valhalla or speeding down a Los Angeles highway in The Crew 2 are just two of the dozens of worlds Ubisoft reimagines for players.

THE GROWING COMMUNITY

Many companies are even beginning to hold competitions for players to submit virtual photography. Ubisoft's latest competition had the winners showcased at a formal exhibition gallery, lending credence to the photo mode as an innovative art form. Virtual photography has become one of the most accessible forms of fan art that honors the developers' hard work. "Virtual photography has now become part of the broader fan community alongside fan art, let's plays, and cosplay," VP Sara (@Sarokey) says. "Developers love seeing their work highlighted in the photos we take, showing details that the average player might never notice, but we do. We notice everything, and we love capturing it. More and more games now include photo modes because developers want to see what we can create."

The VP community helps drive this medium. Swaths of gamers have formed around this hobby, and they have only grown over the years. One example we can look to is the Virtual Photography Awards, organized by Mik Bromley through his independent outlet The Fourth Focus. Bromley gathers panels of judges that include developers in the industry, and submissions come flooding in from all over the world. Bromley is a virtual photographer himself and speaks on the vitality of photo modes as an art form. "The medium has grown into an accessible and inspiring creative outlet that can massively increase people's engagement with the games they play. This has naturally led to a lot of rich and supportive community initiatives that could arguably make it now the leading form of video game fan art."

Another example of great community engagement is the efforts made by independent magazine outlet The Photo Mode. This team of VPs (and real-life photographers) curate, produce, and write about all things photo mode with a specific focus on community. It collects vast amounts of material from all kinds of VP artists and publishes their work. One of The Photo Mode's contributors, Bianca (@UVioletra), shares what she loves about engaging with photo modes. "You have control over time and space in a way you can't in real life. You can freeze the exact moment you want, move the camera through impossible angles, and play with lighting without physical limits. But the principles are the same: composition, framing, color, emotion. Virtual photography gives you freedom, but it still demands the same eye and discipline as real photography." Bianca taps into something here that I have seen and felt personally. For some, virtual photography can act as a gateway into learning real-life photographic technique. The solitary nature of the medium allows players to take their time and experiment in ways they wouldn't always be able to if they were doing a real-life photoshoot. ∎
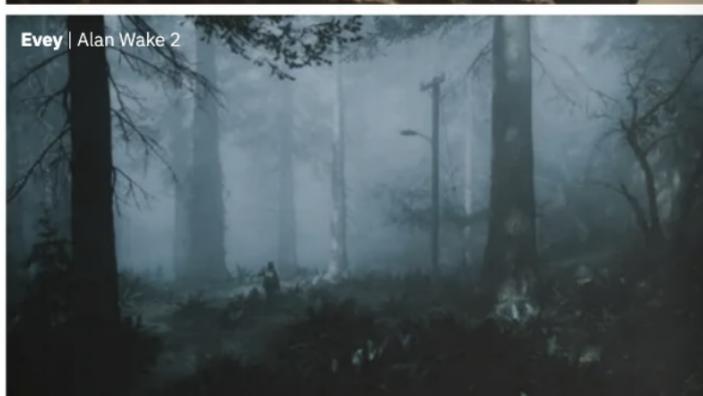

Mik Bromley | Death Stranding Director's Cut

Jack Dean | Ghost of Tsushima

Juan | Star Wars Jedi: Survivor

Evey | Alan Wake 2

Juan | Cyberpunk 2077

THE FUTURE OF THE CRAFT

The photo mode has come a long way since Gran Turismo 4, and it continues to improve and show prominence in the gaming world. Photo modes still have room to grow and be featured in the industry. Speaking for myself and many other VPs, adding a photo mode category in The Game Awards would be huge. Showcasing the ways in which players and developers can come together to create art through games is something to be celebrated. The feature is already popular enough to warrant it, and highlighting that will bring more virtual photographers into the community, more sharing of the developers' hard work, and more appreciation of games as an art. There are plenty of places this feature could go, so I asked virtual photographers what their hope is for the future of photo modes.

" The way that the graphical fidelity and rendering resolution is so often limited to those used to target gameplay performance. I don't need 60 fps in the photo mode, I just want the maximum level of detail and will gladly wait 10x longer to render the final shot at higher quality. It's true that adding this sort of thing and maintaining accessibility will become a balancing act, but much like how real photography caters for point-and-shoot and fully manual cameras, there's room for both.
— Mik Bromley | 🦋 𝕏 ▶ @TheFourthFocus

" I also hope we keep getting weird photo modes that feel quirky and maybe don't have all the same features as all others, but really exude personality.
— Jean Choukroun | 🦋 @jchouk.bsky.social

" In the long term, I hope photomodes are treated as a standard part of game design, not just an add-on. I'd like to see them as another creative layer that developers build with intention, the same way they design levels or characters.
— Bianca | 𝕏 @UVioletra

" I'd love to see photo modes integrated with in-game social features, such as community galleries or collaborative photos. Not every player is on social media or aware of virtual photography, so having a dedicated in-game space to view and share shots could be a great idea.
— Juan | 𝕏 @secondcapture 📷 @secondcaptures

" An ideal photo mode could have unlimited custom lighting, props, an array of weather and environment effects, and interchangeable subjects so you can spawn a character into a scene.
— Eddy | 𝕏 @SpideyTwoShoes

" Anything that gives players more creative freedom to tell their own story within the game world. Maybe one day, a basic photo mode will become a staple in every game.
— Sara Eshak | 𝕏 @Sarokey

" There's still room for even more recognition, and I hope studios continue to support it at the same level as other forms of content creation.
— Evey | 𝕏 @wistfulembrace

Jack Dean is a freelance writer and photographer who runs the Photo Mode Review YouTube channel