Foto photochopped **museum**

Still Searching...

## 5. Screenshot or It Didn't Happen

By Jacob Gaboury

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I now find myself with the dangerous task of speaking to the present, and addressing how the seventy-year history of this complex and overburdened practice has been refigured, repurposed, and reimagined. Perhaps unsurprisingly there is no single answer, as the screenshot has become altogether diffuse in contemporary digital culture, and is used for any number of everyday tasks. This move from the spectacular to the mundane is perhaps most visible in the growth of mobile screenshots, which allow for the capture and circulation of the intimate ways we use and are used by our computational devices. 1 This growth is in part a response to the limitations of modern smartphone platforms for things like multitasking and navigation, necessitating the use of screenshots as placeholders for dynamic information that might otherwise be lost in the refresh of a social media feed, or as a way to capture a moment that could not otherwise be copied, pasted, or shared.
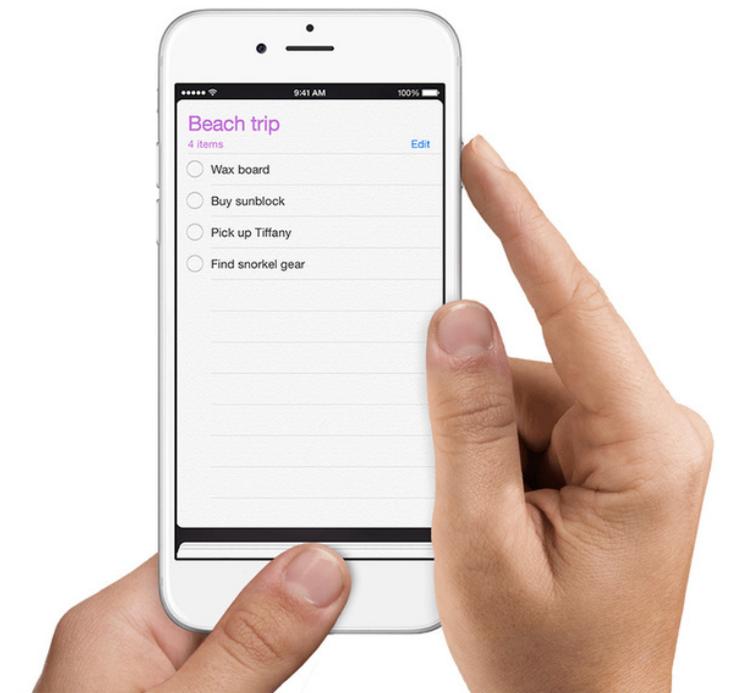
Apple mobile screenshot instructional image for iPhone 6S (2018)

While the contemporary screenshot is no longer a physical operation that takes place outside the computer itself, the practice of taking a screenshot still functions in much the same way. On a mobile device the screenshot is one of very few operations that requires the press of a physical button, such that the act of taking a screenshot still seems to sit on top or outside the interface itself, indifferent to

the operation of any particular application or program. 2 This externality allows for a huge variance in cultures of use across applications, and the ease with which a screenshot can be taken has made for a massive growth in the number of screenshots that we produce and view today. Perhaps due to this mundane, everyday quality of the screenshot as a vernacular object, it is increasingly granted the evidentiary and indexical claim once ascribed to analog film and photography. Much as in vernacular photography, screenshots capture and fix a single moment in an otherwise dynamic landscape, and for this reason they appear largely unmediated, and have come to serve as arbiters for the veracity of computational actions. When words are not to be believed, screenshots may be offered up as proof. Or, to put it another way, *Screenshots, or It Didn't Happen.*

This phrase may be familiar to some, or perhaps its more explicitly photographic counterpart: "Pics or it didn't happen." While a definitive history is beyond the scope of this post, the phrase seems to originate on web forums and image boards for digital gaming in the early 2000s, where players bragging about actions performed in-game would be asked for screenshots in order to prove the veracity of their claims. Once again the screenshot here serves a clear function in a culture of performative play, but it is also clearly a product of the ability – relatively new or at least newly accessible at the time – to digitally capture and share events in a game in this way, as a screenshot. 3

Screenshot taken of the author's former *World of Warcraft* guild on completing the Molten Core raid dungeon, ca. 2006

While this practice may be, at best, subcultural, this reframing of the screenshot as proof or evidence has only grown in prominence in the past two decades, particularly with the rise of social media and the ability of celebrities, politicians, and others to edit or delete embarrassing, incorrect, or illegal statements after the fact. 4 Screenshots, in this sense, serve an archival impulse. They are a way of proving an action was taken or a statement was made, a way of securing a response in case of its deletion. This gesture seems particularly relevant given our current political climate, but it is also central to the larger project of digital history, as these are the images that will make possible any claim to the existence of cultures, objects, and practices that have been mediated through the screen of a computer. 5

This impulse to capture and preserve that which appears on our screens speaks directly to a final linguistic transformation in the history of this technology, in which the screenshot is entirely abstracted from the material logic of a camera or printer to become a software operation that saves an image file in a standard format that may then be copied, uploaded, repurposed, and shared. This transformation is clearly exemplified by the most recent synonym to emerge for the screenshot as a process or action, the comparatively recent "screen grab." Here we have moved beyond the skeuomorphic or secondary mediation of an existing form, and are left with the naturalized and immediate gesture of simply grasping an image from the face of the screen itself – an operation so entrenched in our engagement with these media that it may be thought of as little more than an extension of the hand and the eye to grab and keep that which it sees.

Screenshot repurposed as protest sign, "Muslim Ban" Protest, Battery Park, NYC 01/29/17

In this final transformation the screenshot becomes fully naturalized as a technique for the remediation of our computational environment, and yet this seamless and unremarkable quality also points to the surprising challenge of the screenshot as a historical object. While contemporary screenshots may seem inconsequential outside the initial moment of their capture, they are nonetheless central to the very possibility of preserving a visual archive of our historical present. Just as the earliest screenshots made visible the very first interactive computers some sixty years ago, each of the embarrassing, mundane, stupid, and arbitrary screenshots we capture every day are crucial evidence of the way we live our lives with and through the screens of our computers. To be sure these are imperfect objects that can only capture a fraction of the deeply contextual frame from which they have been drawn; but they likewise make accessible the aesthetic and sensual dimensions of computing that might otherwise be lost or overlooked. Engaging the history of the screenshot in this way asks that we begin to surface this unique function as a method for fixing, preserving, and rearticulating those media environments that make up our computers, and that we take seriously the visual everyday of our digital culture.

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