2022

What Is "Speedrunning?" Industry, Community, Identity

Riley Scott Kelfer
Colby College

WHAT IS "SPEEDRUNNING?" INDUSTRY, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY

by

RILEY KELFER

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Senior Scholars Program

COLBY COLLEGE
2022

Abstract

What drives interaction in online contexts? How do "internet communities" form, and how do they generate a sense of interpersonal closeness? I address such questions through a cultural analysis of video game "speedrunning," an emergent online community that some commentators have noted for its remarkable commitment to compassion and mutual advancement. While several game scholars have explored the narrative and temporal implications of the live-streamed and recorded speedrun, few have directed their attention to the ways in which video game speedrunning, as a community of dedicated practitioners and spectators, is informed by historical precedents and contemporary social processes. How can we understand the appeal of online community membership in this moment? What about our current social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances drives this interest in participatory internet culture? I place the term speedrunning within its proper historical and cultural contexts as it indicates an emerging industry, a paradoxically competitive and collaborative community, and a basis for participants' identity. To this end, the project has three objectives: 1) chart the industrial, technological, and cultural developments that facilitated the emergence of speedrunning as both a topic of interest and a viable activity, from internet forums and early media sharing practices to group messaging and livestreaming services; 2) identify the pathways of communication and media(-ted) exchange that have allowed a community to form around a shared articulation of the activity and its goals; and 3) explore how the communal dynamics of speedrunning rehearse and reproduce specific styles of conduct within internet-age collectives.

Table of Contents

I know of no other way of dealing with great tasks than that of play. . .
— Nietzsche[1]

Acknowledgments

Animating this project is a paradox that will trouble some readers: the desire to think seriously about leisure. Questions of methodological and intellectual legitimacy have attended these sorts of endeavors almost from their inception, formally speaking, in the foundational works of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, E. P. Thompson, and others in the 1950s and 60s. The field of Cultural Studies has likewise continued to represent, for some, a radical and thus indigestible form of interdisciplinarity, and its primary mode of analysis a cheaper, "popular" alternative to "real" scholarly work.

My aim is not to refute or affirm these perceptions. I do, however, see something of an opportunity in the criticism offered by Michael Berubé in his 2009 editorial, "What's the Matter with Cultural Studies?" where Berubé declares that "the popular discipline has lost its bearings."[2] I would venture that there is more value in the loss of bearings than Berubé is willing to admit. Although this sort of inquiry, to borrow from Tennyson, risks spinning "forever down," my hope is that, along the way, it also finds some "ringing grooves."

At the same time, of course, I have been inexpressibly fortunate to have forces in my life that help to mitigate the spinning: my family and my closest friends "from home"; my readers and role models, Professors Aaron Hanlon and Kerill O'Neill; Provost Margaret McFadden, whose office covered the cost of my initial research materials; my dear friends and instructors on campus, who have seen me through the spinning in all its speeds and forms; and Professor Seth Kim, whose friendship I cherish and whose mentorship I can only aspire to deserve. It is because of these people that, when this project loses its course, I can say after one who deeply wants to wrestle with difficult questions:

"If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me . . ."

[1] From *Ecce Homo*, published 1908, trans. R. J. Hollingdale.
[2] Bérubé, Michael. "What's the Matter With Cultural Studies?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Sep. 2009, https://www.chronicle.com/article/whats-the-matter-with-cultural-studies/

Introduction. **What is "Speedrunning?" Industry, Community, Identity**

What drives interaction in online contexts? How do so-called "internet communities" form, and how do they generate a sense of interpersonal closeness? In this project, I seek the ground to address such questions through the cultural analysis of video game "speedrunning," an emergent online community that some commentators have noted for its remarkable commitment to compassion and mutual advancement.[3] While game scholars have demonstrated the viability of the live-streamed and recorded speedrun as an object of analysis, few, by comparison, have directed their attention to the ways in which video game speedrunning, as a community of dedicated practitioners and spectators, is informed by historical precedents and sustained by contemporary social processes. To this gap in the recent scholarship, I supply the additional questions: How might we understand the appeal of online community membership in *this* moment? What about our current social, political, economic, and cultural situations drives this interest in participatory internet culture? I think these considerations suggest an answer to the broader question that serves as title for this project: what is speedrunning? And yet even these considerations defer, I think, to the somewhat blunt but important question raised by so many of my interlocutors these last months: What is *the point* of speedrunning?[4]

While I do hope to address this question of purpose, my immediate goal is to place the term speedrunning within its proper historical and cultural contexts as it indicates an emerging industry, a paradoxically competitive and collaborative community, and a basis for participants' identity. Thus, the practical objectives of this work are to 1) chart the industrial, technological, and cultural developments that facilitated the emergence of speedrunning as both a topic of interest and a viable activity, from internet forums and early video sharing practices to group messaging and livestreaming services like Discord and Twitch; 2) identify the pathways of communication and media(-ted) exchange that have allowed a community to form around a shared articulation of the activity and its goals; and 3) explore how the communal dynamics of speedrunning rehearse and reproduce specific styles of conduct within internet-age collectives. These objectives overlap and are mutually reinforcing: one cannot expect to understand the dynamics of online communities without understanding their historical precedents and the technologies that enable communication among members of that community. Likewise, to articulate the ideas, behaviors, and methods of a group in the terms of that group (what is known as an emic perspective in the social sciences) requires a discussion of the structures, technological and discursive, by which that community coheres.

As the following sections will outline, this introduction has several aims. First, it is necessary to establish some core terminology, beginning with the idea of a "speedrun" itself. I next offer a review of prior scholarship on speedrunning and an elaboration of my own research

---

[3] See, e.g.: Koning, Joe. "Play It Faster, Play It Weirder: How Speedrunning Pushes Video Games Beyond Their Limits." *The Guardian*, 28 Sept. 2021; Gibson, Ellie. "Why I Started Streaming Video Games on Twitch at the Age of 43." *The Guardian*, 4 June 2021; Shapiro, Ari, and Pablo "Dayoman" Munoz-Snyder. "'Speedrunners' Are Beating Video Games In Record Time For Charity." *All Things Considered* for National Public Radio, 7 July 2021.

[4] As much joy as it is purported to bring them, speedrunners themselves wrestle with this last question. As a since-deleted Reddit post from February 2022 puts it, "What's the prupose?... [sic] (in a good way)?" u/Hugosimpon. Post in r/Speedrun. *Reddit*, 3 Feb. 2022.

objectives, which are calibrated to address underdeveloped areas in the contemporary literature. This brief review pays close attention to the theoretical methods employed in these early investigations, noting scholars' preoccupation with the ludological and narratological implications of the video game speedrun as opposed to the social phenomenon of speedrunning, a trend representative of Game Studies in the last twenty years.[5] Third, I offer an outline of the project that introduces the main points of each chapter as well as their organizing principles. Lastly, if not necessarily, I offer a brief justification for the study of gaming, and of speedrunning in particular. This final section may be productive for readers whose engagement with games and gaming in recent years has been limited, though it also functions as a call to action. Doubling as a broader disavowal of the narratology/ludology debate, the section urges readers to consider the resonance between gamic interactivity and contemporary social models.

What is Speedrunning?

This obvious but useful question drove the bulk of my preliminary research, and indeed, it stems from a common concern among scholars that the study of gaming lacks a standard vocabulary.[6] Although one can easily acknowledge the basic morphological difference between the terms "speedrunning" and "speedrun," game scholars have paid comparatively little attention to the former. The common understanding of speedrunning, the community, is often expressed by means of the object it produces, the speedrun. "Competitive Speedrunning" is a section on the Wikipedia page for "Speedrun" — not the other way around. Thus wikipedia contributors have defined the product of speedrunning:

> A speedrun is a play-through, or a recording thereof, of a whole video game or a selected part of it (such as a single level), performed with the intention of completing it as fast as possible. While all speedruns aim for quick completion, some speedruns are characterized by additional goals or limitations that players subject themselves to, such as collecting all key items, playing blindfolded, or attempting to achieve goals that are [not usually desirable within a game].[7]

This brief definition of the speedrun glosses over numerous potential areas of inquiry (e.g. who are the "others" being entertained?; how are "rules" conceived, and why do players "subject themselves" to them?). More basically, too, it obscures intentionality, for while "goals and limitations" may appear stable in larger speedrunning communities, the process by which objectives become standardized is rather messy. Not always determined by individual runners

---

[5] See Frasca, Gonzalo. "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology." *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf, Routledge, 2003, pp. 221-235. Also see Jesper Juul's response to Frasca, which declares of the ludology debate that "the story doesn't begin with a word, it begins with a discussion": Juul, Jesper. "The Definitive History of Games and Stories, Ludology and Narratology." *The Ludologist*, 22 Feb. 2004. Web.

[6] See especially Costikyan, Greg. "I Have No Words & I Must Design: Toward a Critical Vocabulary for Games." *CGDC Conference Proceedings*, edited by Frans Mäyrä, Tampere, 2002, pp. 9-34; Konzack, Lars. "Rhetorics of Computer and Video Game Research." *The Players' Realm: Studies on the Culture of Video Games and Gaming*, edited by J. Patrick Williams and Jonas Heide Smith, McFarland, 2007, pp. 110-130.

[7] Wikipedia contributors. "Speedrun." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Accessed 2 April 2021.

or suggested by a game's systems, speedrunning objectives tend to emerge sporadically (e.g., as propositions or points of controversy) and are solidified by the community through the course of discussion. For this reason, when contributors seek to define the personal and communal functions of speedrunning, the definition appears reductive once again:

> Players speedrun mainly to challenge themselves, to entertain, to compete with themselves and others, and to attain mastery over a game's systems in a way that would not be possible in an ordinary playthrough. Players performing speedruns, called speedrunners, often record their attempts. These recordings are used to entertain others, to verify the completion time, to certify that all rules were followed, and to spot ways to further improve the completion time.[8]

There is much to be added to this definition. For one, it is important to note that speedrunners are not the only locus of activity within the speedrunning community. In fact, all members of the community may be said to contribute to speedruns not only through acts of play but also by means of their spectatorship, through their synchronous and asynchronous communication with each other and with runners, through displays of social and financial support, and in various other ways that the project's three chapters discuss in greater detail.

For the purposes of this project, I have taken the term "speedrunning" to signify an emergent industry, an online "community" or participatory culture, and a potential basis for identity in the internet age. These categorizations largely correspond to the substance of the chapters, although I am building arguments for each way of understanding the phenomenon throughout. To offer a sketch of these arguments:

- Speedrunning is an *industry* in that it generates profit for individuals and corporate parties whose earning is both supported and regulated by the elements of an industrial infrastructure. The exchange of capital occurs on the corporate level via the hosting of speedrunners on media sharing platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, and Discord, and on a private level through spontaneous, real-time donations (called "subs" on Twitch), creator-support services like Patreon, and sponsorship deals for popular runners.[9]
- Speedrunning is a *community* in that it unites a group of people with diverse personal interests and skills under a common interest in gaming culture. Members of the community fulfill different roles, including speedrunner, spectator, and sponsor. These roles frequently overlap: the financial sponsors of a particular speedrunner are almost always spectators, and these sponsors may also perform speedruns. Beyond financial sponsorship, members fulfill numerous roles that support speedrunners and the speedrunning community. For example, some spectators might perform game research, video analysis, content promotion, and real-time chat moderation services, reinforcing the sense of a broader community through forms of productivity peripheral to "play."

---

[8] Wikipedia contributors. "Speedrun." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

[9] It is important to note that platforms like YouTube (owned and operated by Google) and Twitch (a subsidiary of Amazon) make money in a variety of ways, but a major part of their revenue comes from advertisers. Speedrunning contributes to the profits of YouTube and Twitch by drawing internet traffic to these platforms, and thus viewers to advertisements.

- Speedrunning offers grounds for participants' *identity* within communities in that the unique methods of speedrunning, as well as the social stratification and division of "labor" in its communities, its unique vocabularies, and participants' self-reflexive acknowledgment of their culture, suggest a coherent way of thinking about one's place in a collective. In particular, the behaviors of speedrunners and their fans tend to reinforce a sense of identity founded upon the seeking and sharing of specialized knowledge and the reconfiguration of technologies and methods for the benefit of the community. These behaviors also seem to cultivate modes of communication that balance self-awareness against a keen sense of the internet's composite nature.

Lastly, an overarching goal of this project is to understand how acts of competition and collaboration function within and give shape to each of these categorizations. For while the ambitions of speedrunners are concrete and personal (they can be "measured" in terms of time and ascribed to a particular runner), they are also abstract and composite in that they seek to grow the community's knowledge of a game and its systems. Throughout the chapters to follow, I will contend that the culture of mutual support, generosity, and knowledge-seeking from which these communal goals arise is best understood as the legacy of the intersecting histories of gaming and the internet.

Speedrun(ning) in Scholarship

Among game scholars, the study of speedrunning as it emerges through its mediated representation, the speedrun, is a well established point of departure. Indeed, much of the preceding scholarship has examined speedrunning not through a cultural/historical lens, but largely through "narratological" and "ludological" analyses of speedruns. Narratological interpretations foreground the narrative or story-like elements of a game under the assumption that games, like texts, can be "read" using similar methods. In taking this approach, many narratological interpretations risk spurning the specific affordances of games as an interactive medium, which is the primary basis for ludological or play-oriented analyses.

To this point, what work scholars have done on speedrunning evinces a clear preference for its implications on game narratives and design. In this area, James Newman, Fraser McKissack, and Lawrence May offer some representative accounts.[10] In an essay preceding Newman, McKissack, and May's work, too, Rainforest Scully-Blaker draws on ludological accounts by scholars like Felan Parker, Henry Lowood, and Seb Franklin as a means of locating the essay's narrative concerns within a broader discussion of interactivity.[11] Scully-Blaker

[10] McKissack, Fraser, and Lawrence May. "Running With the Dead: Speedruns and Generative Rupture in *Left 4 Dead 1* and *2*." *Games and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2020, pp. 544–564; Newman, James. "Wrong Warping, Sequence Breaking, and Running through Code: Systemic Contiguity and Narrative Architecture in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* Any% Speedrun." Bringing Together Japan Game Studies and Digital Humanities, special issue of *Journal of the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2019, pp. 7-36.

[11] Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. "A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space With de Certeau and Virilio." *Game Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2014, gamestudies.org/1401/articles/scullyblaker. For the work of Scully-Blaker's ludological interlocutors, see especially Parker, Felan. "The Significance of Jeep Tag: On Player-Imposed Rules in Videogames" *Loading…* vol. 2, no. 3, 2008; Franklin, Seb."'We Need Radical Gameplay, Not Just Radical Graphics': Towards a Contemporary Minor Practice in Computer Gaming." *symploke*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2009; Lowood, Henry. "High-performance Play: The Making of Machinima." *Journal of Media Practice*, vol 7., no. 1, 2006.

regards this integrated approach as "a first step" toward the discussion of what he calls "speedrunning proper," (i.e., as an interactive/ludic practice that *also* has narrative implications).[12] While it employs a compelling 'bait-and-switch,' opening with questions of narrative architecture and closing with the interactive implications of speedrunning as a rehearsed practice involving the player's "heightened presence in . . . gamespace," Scully-Blaker's article does not consider the role of player-to-player interactivity and sociality, and thus, ultimately, retreads the familiar path of narratology/ludology.[13]

To my mind, the notion of "speedrunning proper" implies modes of participation that go beyond the act of play and beyond the narrative disruptions of the speedrun itself. While prior scholarship has tended to ignore this context, there is some precedent for thinking about speedrunning in communal terms. Fanny Barnabé, for one, has questioned the nature of these participatory roles in two recent articles on the significance of competition and creativity in gaming culture. In a 2015 piece on the productivity of gaming fans,[14] Barnabé regards fans' amateur creation of artwork and other materials peripheral to the act of play itself as a form of *détournement*, a term popularized in part by Guy Debord as the 'misappropriation' or 'hijacking' of a media product for novel social contexts, such that it is made to "mean" something new.[15] In using the term, Barnabé follows the work of Henry Jenkins in ascribing to these fans a sense of agency and political relevance often denied them in popular discourse. In another piece from 2018, Barnabé wonders, specifically, whether the video game speedrun should be regarded as a competitive, creative, or simply a "playful" practice.[16]

Like Barnabé, my goal is not to perform an object-centered analysis of the speedrun. Instead, I aim to emphasize the conditions from which speedruns emerge: that is, from video game players acting under and in accordance with a technologically equipped industry that makes the sharing of content possible and profitable; as members of a community with complex social roles, attitudes, and mechanisms; and as adherents to a discernible formulation of identity, or a system of thinking shared by the majority regarding the goals, methods, and "culture" of speedrunning. In this regard, I follow the intervention at the core of Garry Crawford's 2012 survey *Video Gamers*, which seeks to more formally introduce cultural studies to a discipline that has overwhelmingly focused on games themselves.[17]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this shift toward a more serious consideration of gamers as agents of change and cultural production is a point of particular interest for gaming-related industries that stand to benefit from the broader cultural acceptance of gaming. As the online scorekeeping, adjudication, and event-organization service Twin Galaxies puts it:

---

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Barnabé, Fanny. "Les détournements de jeux vidéo par les joueurs. Une incarnation du play." *RESET*, vol. 4, 2015.
[15] Debord's formulation of *détournements* recalls Dick Hebdige's foundational work in his 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, where Hebdige defines subcultural formation as a "process whereby objects are made to mean and mean again as 'style.'" See Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Routledge, 1988.
[16] Barnabé, Fanny. "Le Speedrun: Pratique Compétitive, Ludique Ou Créative? Trajectoire d'un Détournement De Jeu Vidéo Institué En Nouveau Game." *Digital Interfaces*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 441-459, 2016.
[17] Crawford, Garry. *Video Gamers*, Routledge, 2012.

> "The video game industry has remained culturally focused on video game products as the central element of importance - and while video games can be masterful works of art themselves to be honored, Twin Galaxies has always maintained and supported the idea that the video game PLAYERS are what truly matters - and that their talents and accomplishments should be the primary focus of cultural recognition and appreciation!"[18]

While during earlier stages of this project, I thought a more theoretically robust approach would provide my firmest basis for understanding internet culture, I have found statements of purpose like this one to be just as instructive. As such, perhaps similar to Barnabé, the methodology I have found to best suit the questions I pose about online communities like speedrunning involves a great deal of formal analysis. In this way, taking after Carly Kocurek's pioneering work on arcade culture, this project engages deeply with the rhetorics of advertising and the communal discourse of speedrunners and speedrunning fans themselves.[19] At various moments throughout the chapters, I borrow, question, and critique this language for the attitudes it suggests. In some cases, similarly, I engage in an extended analysis of discrete moments of discourse such as Reddit posts and replies, YouTube comments, and statements made during livestreams and speedrunning events that I find to be illustrative of broader trends within the community.

Project Outline

In addition to the brief overview of methodology offered above, I here provide an outline of the project's three chapters as a means of orienting readers to the principles organizing my work on a macro level:

- Chapter One employs a media-historical approach in order to identify the technological and cultural systems that precede and lay the groundwork for video game speedrunning in the United States. Here I contend that the overlapping histories of arcade and early home gaming in the 1970s and 1980s reveal socio-cultural developments that are relevant to the contemporary phenomenon of speedrunning. Similarly, tracking the emergence of a gaming culture oriented around personal computers (PCs) and the rise of the Internet from the 1980s through the 2000s, the chapter centers the role of technologies that afford more "instantaneous" media distribution and greater social connectivity. Following Crawford's account of video gaming as a complex social culture extending beyond games themselves, these brief historical case studies seek to establish speedrunning as the outcome of converging diachronic phenomena that span cultural, technological, and economic dimensions in the U.S.[20]
- Chapter Two draws on the discourse of Community Studies in order to begin tracing the "shape" of speedrunning as an online community that actually comprises hundreds of

[18] "What Is Twin Galaxies?" *Official Book of TG Guidelines*, 2 Dec. 2021. Accessed Apr. 2022.
[19] Kocurek, Carly A. *Coin-operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood At the Video Game Arcade.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
[20] Crawford, *Video Gamers*.

smaller and more narrowly focused collectives, each taking its form around a variety of communal roles. The diversity of these roles and their corresponding "products" is presented as evidence of the increasingly blurry boundary between postindustrial labor and leisure activities.[21] Acknowledging the risk in "utopian" descriptions of speedrunning, the Chapter attempts to balance Henry Jenkins' model of a "participatory culture" that seeks communal advancement through various modes of contribution against the industrial realities of online gaming as a source of already immense and growing profit for corporations.[22] Lastly, paying continued attention to the affordances of the technologies discussed in Chapter One, I posit this tension between online speedrunning communities and the corporate interests that allow for their formation as a microcosm of social life under a postindustrial economy.

- To further develop the social, political, and economic implications of online participatory culture, Chapter Three explores how participants in speedrunning communities both model and reflect on their behaviors within the community. Introduced in Chapter Two, the modes and styles of discourse most frequently employed by speedrunners and their fans are here laid under more formal analytical scrutiny to identify an emerging suite of online communal rhetorics. Considering the often contradictory nature of online "sociality," the chapter takes particular interest in the tension between the collaborative and competitive impulses that drive interaction in online speedrunning communities. Taking the project into more abstract territory, I suggest after Carly Kocurek's work on video game arcades that online speedrunning communities can serve as a training ground for contemporary neoliberal attitudes that extol individual achievement and competitiveness in the name of collective advancement.

Having located my analysis through Chapter Three "within" the logics and vocabularies of online speedrunning communities, this final movement of the project closes with a discussion of the perceptions of speedrunning "without." I here contend that the contemporary presentation of gamers (including speedrunners) in media suggests a troubling paradox. Identifying in contemporary journalistic media an alternately deprecating and admiring image of gamers as the impassioned, self-driven scions of neoliberal society, I draw a connection to the 21st century American political climate. With this, what may appear a somewhat digressive conclusion to the project, I attempt to locate the popular discourse on gamers and their communities within the much larger mire of anti-intellectualism and productivity-oriented modes of thinking in the contemporary United States. These ongoing points of controversy have at stake the delegitimization of "obsessiveness" in sectors perceived as less manifestly productive — a criticism leveled at both gamers and academics. This final section also underscores the risk of entrenching false perceptions of alterity and corresponding attitudes of exclusionism through the comparative 'evaluation' of leisure behaviors.

---

[21] See, for example, Se Young Kim, who draws on the work of Jordan Pruett: "For Pruett, video games are no longer postwork leisure nor preparation for work—instead, they are a substitution for work, a medium that helps its users negotiate the reality of unemployment." Kim, Se Young. "Surviving Digital Asia: PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds and the Affective Economy of the Battle Royale." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, 2021, p.130.
[22] Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. NYU Press, 2006.

Why Study Gaming?

As a closing gesture to this introduction, some justification for the study of video games and their associated communities may be necessary and useful. Thus, I will briefly suggest that it behooves us to research games because:

- From an industrial/economic perspective, video games no longer represent a niche market. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA), in *Video Games in the 21st Century: The 2020 Economic Impact Report*, has calculated the domestic economic contributions of video games and their associated markets to be in excess of $90 billion USD. According to the same report, the gaming industry has supported over 400,000 U.S. jobs through the COVID-19 pandemic.[23]
- Gaming can, similarly, no longer be considered to have niche cultural or demographic appeal. The ESA's *2020 Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry* offers convincing evidence that we have become "A Nation of Gamers": as of 2020, an estimated 214.4 million people in the United States played at least one hour of video games per week. This figure includes 64% of adults (ages 18 and over) and represents a split of 59% of gamers identifying as male and 41% identifying as female. If we take "gaming" in a broader sense, too, the phenomenon of *gamification* — described as the "intentional process of transforming any activity, system, service, product, or organizational structure into one which affords positive experiences, skills, and practices similar to those afforded by games" — may be said to bring gaming into the lives of those who don't otherwise engage with "games" in the conventional sense.[24]
- The growing popularity and profitability of eSports, another gaming subculture turned industry, is raising important questions about sports entertainment, media distribution, generational marketing, and globalization. The study of games and gaming subcultures like eSports or speedrunning can grow our understanding of these global processes and their underlying social, industrial, and ideological mechanisms.
- As a medium, games operate on multiple registers simultaneously. They incorporate visual, acoustic, and narrative elements, as well as a responsive or interactive element that the cinema, the written word, and the plastic arts lack. The study of gaming and its associated cultures unlocks and is contingent upon new ways of understanding how art makes meaning. For some, this point means that gaming can function as a heuristic, suggesting practical, culturally informed approaches to the problems of daily life and decision-making. In "From *Mario Kart* to Pro-poor Environmental Governance," Andrew Reid Bell tries to do something like this, using Nintendo's beloved racing franchise to extrapolate a way of thinking about a more global approach to environmental action.[25] For many, Bell's analogy will appear somewhat contrived, but as a mode of thinking about leisure, I stand firmly in support of the exercise.

---

[23] "Report: Video Games Contribute $90 Billion+ to U.S. Economy." Entertainment Software Association, 3 Dec. 2020, www.theesa.com/press-releases/report-video-games-contribute-90-billion-to-u-s-economy/. Accessed Apr. 2022.
[24] Hamari, Juho. "Gamification." *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by George Ritzer, 2017. Web.
[25] Bell, Andrew Reid. "From Mario Kart to Pro-poor Environmental Governance." *Nature Sustainability*, vol. 4, 2021, pp. 376–378.

As for why we ought to study gaming *communities*, and speedrunning in particular, I urge my readers: look to your own hobbies. In what contexts do you happily put in more energy than you need to? What social opportunities have emerged as a result of your interests? As our political circumstances grow more contentious by the year, the failures of public welfare, legislative stagnation, and senseless violence intervening, it may be more important than ever to find alternative grounds for our affiliation. By momentarily pulling ourselves from the arenas of our confrontation, and in finding new forms of connection founded on our common capacity for enthusiasm, we might find in our shared "interests" the stuff of a more enduring social integument.

***Chapter One*. From Leaderboards to Log-ins: A (Pre)History of Speed**

> For probably about a year and half . . . I would put anywhere between two to six hours of practice, probably five days a week, if not more, into *Super Metroid.* It just was my hobby. It encompassed everything I did outside of my full-time job — you know, back when I had a full time job.
>
> — Brandon "oatsngoats" Jacobson, popular speedrunner and streamer[26]

How did we get to the point where young people — predominantly young men — were both able and eager to commit hundreds and, in some cases, *thousands* of hours of their time to an activity as "niche" as speedrunning?[27] It seems likely that an array of cultural developments, including the popularization of a home gaming culture, young people's growing facility with computer technologies, and the new forms of sociality afforded by the internet and social media, produced some of the circumstances necessary for an activity like speedrunning to emerge. While future chapters will address questions relating to speedrunning's communal structure and the kinds of behaviors it values (e.g., the question of participatory "eagerness"), the primary task of this chapter is to chart these cultural developments and the technological advances that undergird them.

At least two salient qualities of speedrunning — its synchronicity and its sense of "intimacy," or social connectivity — are the products of vast, complex networks of technology and labor: in short, a series of comprehensive infrastructures that allow for the rapid transfer of images, information, and communications between speedrunners and interested spectators. These are the same kinds of networks that underlie the "seamless" technological experiences 21st-century consumers are enjoying at an ever-increasing scale including, for example, cloud computing technologies, wireless connectivity, and the "instant" media provided by an ever-growing suite of video streaming services. In "The Infrastructures of Streaming," Ramon Lobato urges us to see past these sorts of linguistic deceptions — terms which suggest polish, accessibility, and immediate gratification — and to remember that "Internet television [and online media, more broadly] never *just* works but must be *made* to work, through a vast complex of engineering, maintenance, pipes, pits, and governance—in short, infrastructure."[28]

Interestingly enough, however, the vocabularies of video gaming and its associated infrastructures have not always suggested a deception to the degree we see with other media. From its early days, the terminologies of gaming marked the activity as something materially and spatially contingent: the arcade "cabinets" of the 1970s, home game "consoles," and even

---

[26] "Controller Byte Interview with OatsnGoats." *YouTube*, uploaded by DanteCrysis, 25 Apr. 2016, youtu.be/ZX3XixSHSuU

[27] The way one Reddit user poses the question reveals a parallel concern for monetary cost/gain: "Why do speedrunners spend their own money on airplane tickets and hotel costs to go to a [Games Done Quick fundraising event] to speedrun a game if they do not get compensated for running a game at a GDQ? Is it to gain exposure for their Twitch streams so they can get more money from more subscribers for their Twitch stream or what?" One commenter, u/jayceja, replies: "It's a holiday where they get to do something they love and hang out with other people who love the same thing." u/metalreflectslime. Post in r/Speedrun. *Reddit*, 25 Mar. 2022.

[28] Lobato, Ramon. "The Infrastructures of Streaming." *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*, NYU Press, 2019, pp. 73–105: 73-4. Emphasis original.

the "arcade" itself all suggested the video game's relationship to public and domestic spaces. In the arcade, too, "leaderboards" tethered the achievements of the most competitive visitors to that space. Within the mutual history of gaming and the internet, however, we can see how even these foundational terminologies have been adapted to an environment of increased immediacy and connectivity.

Walter Day, whose Odyssean effort to record high scores from arcade cabinets across the United States resulted in the first national scoreboard, is in many respects the representative — if somewhat mythologized — figure of this transitional moment.[29] Under Day's example, the social and informational affordances of the Internet would come to transform leaderboards, once confined to the arcade cabinet, into web-based bulletins requiring users to "log in" in order to upload and verify their achievements among players around the world. In a similar fashion, the lock-and-key format of game "cartridges" and their corresponding consoles that formerly indicated a paradoxical separateness/complementarity of game and gameplay device has gradually made way for new methods of online game distribution and even "virtual consoles" — technologies which demonstrate the further integration of video games within Internet-era modes of consumption as well as the spatial diffusion of gaming from brick-and-mortar gaming parlors to a more nebulous and portable cyberspace.

In the age of wireless connections, cloud storage, and slick, streamlined user interfaces, the infrastructure underlying these changes is increasingly difficult to "see," yet deeply infused with political, social, economic, and spatial significance. As Lobato explains in the context of streaming services like Netflix, thinking about media in infrastructural terms involves

> longer-term, larger-scale social and technological transformations that lie well outside the boundaries of media studies. These include the history of electrification and lighting, which provide the basic conditions for domestic leisure as we know it today; heating, air-conditioning, and other forms of climate control, as well as modern plumbing and sewerage, which have helped to create a modern idea of home as a space of comfort protected from the natural elements; modern architectural forms premised on the separation of private and public space . . . and social practices of family rearing that welcome technology into the home.[30]

Accordingly, this chapter attempts to trace a genealogy of speedrunning that centers not only its operative technologies, but also the developments in game distribution and industry that allowed for such a unique phenomenon to emerge. Following Lobato's suggestion, too, the chapter considers how gaming has developed in cultural thought in such ways as to produce new social practices oriented around gaming, of which speedrunning is emblematic.

At the same time, of course, it is important to note that the history of infrastructural development, broadly defined, is deeply imbricated with political considerations and questions of financial access, cultural permissibility, and geographical inequality. To use the example of streamable media again, Lobato explains that the infrastructure supporting Netflix is quite literally built on pre-existing systems of a geopolitical bias. This "digital divide"— the existence of barriers that impede stable internet access (and therefore Netflix access) on the basis of class,

---

[29] "About Walter Day." *The Walter Day Collection*, 3 Feb. 2022, https://thewalterdaycollection.com/about-walter-day.
[30] Lobato, Ramon. *Netflix Nations*, 103.

age, and nation — in fact emerges from the original 'hardware' of global enterprise: the existence or absence of telegraph networks, which provided the basis for the construction of telephone lines and coaxial cables, in many cases continues to demarcate the internet 'haves' from the 'have-nots'.[31] Accordingly, while I hope to introduce some of the implications of these networks on 21st-century life, it is also important to acknowledge the ongoing compartmentalization of global societies into the infrastructurally "weak" and "strong": those for which technological "speed" — the kind that is necessary for speedrunning — is systematically supported and taken for granted, and those for which it is temporally, spatially, or politically conditional. To follow Brian Larkin,

> the difficulty here is that much of the work on the transformative effects of media on notions of space, time, and perception takes for granted a media system that is smoothly efficient rather than the reality of infrastructural connections that are frequently messy, discontinuous, and poor. Technologies of speed and the infrastructures they create . . . [set] in motion other types of flows that operate in the space capital provides and that travel the routes created by these new networks of communication. The organization of one system sets in motion other systems spinning off in different directions.[32]

For these reasons, if the account offered in this chapter appears reductive, it is at least partially due to my focus on the history of online gaming cultures in the United States, where access to the infrastructures of speed is enjoyed as both the inheritance of the nation's colonial past and the perceived 'evidence' of its global cultural primacy and technological advanced-ness.[33] By the same token, my hope is that the narrative this chapter constructs is one that elucidates the means by which the existing advantages of a society "flow," to use Larkin's term, centrifugally from structure to structure, increasing access for a privileged few while denying it to others. It is an essentially similar process, I contend, that produced the present-day demographics of the speedrunning community, which emerge from conditions favoring the interactivity of the financially advantaged and, as Kocurek explains, the cultural permissibility granted to young male gamers in the United States and denied to others.

I first explore the intersecting histories of arcade and early home console gaming in the United States of the 1970s and early 1980s, out of which emerged not only a lucrative market for games and gaming devices, but also an acceptance of the home as a space for video game play. I next consider how the advent of personal computers and the World Wide Web through the following decades allowed for similarly novel methods of play, dynamic approaches to game distribution, and greater interactivity not only between gamers themselves, but between gamers and game developers, as well. The sections following examine the specific affordances of this technological infrastructure, especially insofar as it creates opportunities for real-time media transfer and increased social connectivity. These "infrastructures of speed" have ramifications for the way we think about both audiences — that is, as dynamic and engaged collectives

---

[31] Ibid., 82.

[32] Larkin, Brian. "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy." *Public Culture*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 289-314: 292.

[33] Similarly, this project does not fully account for the uptake of speedrunning as a leisure activity around the globe, as well as its origins in an international gaming market. For example, it bears emphasizing that much of speedrunning's current popularity is owed to the success of Japanese imports including, most notably, Nintendo's *Metroid, Super Mario*, and *Legend of Zelda* series.

experiencing media simultaneously — and media technologies themselves — as malleable platforms that can be configured not only by their programmers, employed by major corporations, but also by the consumers/users of their media. In this way, the chapter is concerned with both the ways in which the historical or inherited technologies of speedrunning generated new spatial and social relationships and the notion that the speedrunning community itself has helped to shape its contemporary technological and cultural conditions.

Cabinets and Consoles: From the Arcade to the Family Room (1972-1983)

In *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*, Carly Kocurek is careful to note that much of the historical work surrounding early video game culture is unproductively reduced by a "neat history" that gives primacy to events like Atari's release of *Pong* in 1972, the subsequent adaptation of arcade titles to home consoles throughout the 70s, and the two major recessions of the video game industry occurring in 1977 and 1983.[34] Kocurek's book takes up the important project of not only fleshing out and complicating that history — a task not possible here — but also couching it within the larger-scale societal developments of the period. With the qualification that Kocurek's project remains the more fully realized historical account of this so-called "golden age" of gaming, I want to briefly discuss some of the ramifications of this important period in gaming history for the emergent history of speedrunning. In particular, this section contends that the arcade and early home gaming cultures of the 1970s and 80s inaugurated technological and cultural developments that are crucial to the phenomenon of speedrunning today. These developments include, most notably, the establishment of widespread popular interest in video games, the exploration of public and domestic spaces as domains for play, and the constant reconfiguration of gaming technologies — engineered by both the industry and players themselves — to meet and anticipate trends of engagement in a world where video game play was becoming a socially acceptable and economically viable form of leisure.

From Atari's initial success with *Pong* in arcades to the Magnavox Odyssey series of home gaming consoles, the early years of gaming suggested a dual personality to the video game phenomenon. On the one hand, arcades provided a novel space for socialization and represented the lucrative expansion of a pre-existing but until then economically questionable culture of coin-operated gaming in public. For this among other reasons, Kocurek designates players' engagement with early arcade spaces as a kind of play "at the cultural vanguard," a phrase which paradoxically intimates both the far-reaching impact of gaming on American society in the 1970s and early 1980s and the notion that gaming occurred, at least in these early years, at the fringes of mainstream culture.[35] Arcades were spaces where some young people — primarily men — began to construct not only a community around their play but the beginnings of an "identity," as well. For Kocurek, the arcade primed this "wired generation" for a world in

[34] Kocurek, Carly A. "The Microcosmic Arcade: Playing at the Cultural Vanguard." *Coin-operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood At the Video Game Arcade.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, pp. 1-35: 3.
[35] Ibid., 1.

which technological competence was becoming increasingly relevant to social and economic success:

> The video game arcade . . . exposed thousands of youths to computer technologies years before computers became commonplace in offices, classrooms, and homes across the United States. . . . The arcade may have been an entertainment space for youth, but it was also a training ground: the first place a generation encountered computers and learned what it meant to play, to work, to live in the age of computerization.[36]

On the other hand, after a somewhat shaky start in 1972, the success of the so-called "first generation" home gaming consoles suggested that the home could be an equally appealing and lucrative space for game play. Most notably, these early consoles introduced hardware improvements such as swappable game cartridges that purported to bring gaming out of the arcade cabinet and into the living room as "the family's best foul-weather friend."[37] As with arcades, however, the home gaming industry was fraught with concerns about the supposed health ramifications of games, their influence on the behavior of young people, and their economic and cultural sustainability. According to Mark J. P. Wolf, for example, the fact that technology had in just a few years advanced enough to bring the games of arcade cabinets into the home to support home video gaming bespoke rapid obsolescence as much as it did progress. In this way, Wolf explains, consumers' excitement for future technologies was stifled by a stronger concern for the cultural and economic staying power of gaming that would contribute to the first "crash" of the video game industry in 1977:

> although the crash of 1977 had less of an impact than the Great Crash of 1983, it . . . demonstrated how unbridled enthusiasm within the industry would not necessarily be followed by consumers, who were becoming more careful and looking ahead to what technology was on the horizon, rather than adopting every new system and advance as it appeared. Continuing miniaturization and the rapidly dropping prices of calculators and other electronics industry products led many to expect that further technological advances would happen, making them seem less impressive or at least less surprising. In this sense, then, the crash of 1977 was an important turning point in the history of home video games, and one that would influence its later development.[38]

Thus, the 1977 recession indicated that the risk of playing at the bleeding edge of a cultural trend like gaming came with consequences, at least to the savvy "adult" consumer. At this point, too, the success of home consoles was largely reliant upon the popularity of the adapted arcade titles that comprised much of the Odyssey's and other early consoles' catalogs. Gaming at home in this way represented an awkward "return" to the arcade even as it inaugurated a new realm of play.

Although Atari's release of their first home console, the successful Atari 2600, seemed to indicate a boost in consumers' interest in home gaming following the 1977 crash, it was still heavily dependent upon the still-booming arcade industry. The 2600's appeal lay in its streamlined use of game cartridges (which incorporated multiple games into a single swappable

---

[36] Ibid., 3-4.
[37] See, e.g., Magnavox Odyssey promotional film. Super-8 for dealer use, 1972, https://youtu.be/jLGBtkKPj2U
[38] Wolf, Mark J.P. "The Video Game Industry Crash of 1977." *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf, Wayne State University Press, 2012, pp. 81-89: 88.

unit) and a catalog of many popular Atari-licensed arcade titles that would grow to include over 400 games by 1991.[39] Yet the lack of exclusive home gaming titles marked the 2600 as a mere extension or displacement of the arcade.

Furthermore, both spaces — the arcade and the home — continued to beg questions of financial accessibility. The 2600 launched at 199.99 USD in 1977, equivalent to over 900 USD in 2022. Although Atari justified this price tag with the promise of "more games, more fun" — which was not only a way of touting the console's pioneering ROM cartridges but also a suggestion that the console would hold its own against future technologies with a regularly updated catalog of games — the system's cost marked home gaming as the province of the upper middle class.[40] As Kocurek explains, the expenses associated with arcade play similarly limited their appeal to those outside of particular demographics and created unease among adults:

> The cost of arcade gaming, like the cost of earlier coin-operated amusements in preceding decades, made it suspect to moral guardians and also placed the games in an emerging marketplace of amusements and experiences. This discomfort highlights how the video game arcade represented the emergence not only of the new technology of the computer but of a new credit-heavy, deindustrialized, service-based economy.[41]

Coupled with concerns about gaming's long-term economic viability and an oversaturated home console market, the costs of gaming in the home and the arcade primed the industry for its biggest recession to date, the 1983 crash that felled most home console companies and signaled the end of the arcade's golden age.

To some, it seemed that arcades had survived the crash because they offered a more 'unique' experience than the home console. One commentator suggested that home gaming, like other commodity crazes of the 1970s, had lost its "glamour."[42] A writer for the New York Times expanded on this sentiment, emphasizing that a loss of interest in gaming would be the industry's downfall: "[C]hildren, fickle as ever, have cut down their game playing for the most child-like reason of all: boredom."[43] In a move that would once again turn the downtrending industry into a booming market, Nintendo sought to address these concerns about the home gaming experience by emphasizing the quality of their console's games. More significantly, perhaps, the success of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) marked a departure from the arcade-to-home game porting model and standardized the third-party game development, playtesting, and marketing strategies that characterize the gaming industry today. Under Nintendo, and later Microsoft (with its newly acquired Activision Blizzard), Sony, and other corporations, home gaming continued to flourish while interest in arcade-style gaming became increasingly 'niche' and its dedicated gaming parlors less ubiquitous.

To complicate this history, it is worth noting that, as early as 1983, the expansion of the home gaming market ran parallel to developments in the personal computer industry that

---

[39] "History of Consoles: Atari 7800" *Gamester81*, 22 Jun. 2013, gamester81.com/history-of-consoles-atari-7800-1986/
[40] Atari 2600 commercial on NFL Today. NFL, 17 Dec. 1977, https://youtu.be/YJNbhekKShI
[41] Kocurek, "Microcosmic Arcade," 12.
[42] Kleinfield, N. R. "Video Games Industry Comes Down to Earth." *The New York Times*, 17 Oct. 1983, p.A1, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/17/business/video-games-industry-comes-down-to-earth.html.
[43] Ibid. To substantiate this claim, the author cites the opinion of a 12-year-old gamer jaded by the abundance of invader-type games available on his home console.

would open up further opportunities and spaces for gaming in the home. In many ways, it seems, it took the new forms of connectivity offered by the Internet for the home to become a truly appealing space for video game play. Accordingly, the following section takes the example of computer software development and distribution as a case of gaming's movement from the cultural "vanguard" to a broader social phenomenon that connected gamers while preserving the home as a space of play.

The *Doom* DNA: From Disk Storage to Shareware (1980s-2000s)

As the dominant site of video game play began to shift from arcades to the home, distribution and advertising methods had to adjust accordingly. Since the 1980s and 1990s, the appeal of mail-order catalogs and dedicated, brick-and-mortar games stores has waned significantly in contest with streamlined and ever-improving electronic marketplaces. Even in its early days, however, the course of digital distribution from floppy disks to downloadable software and, later, to the popularization of both vertically integrated and third-party game distribution platforms (including, for example, the PlayStation Store, Nintendo eShop, and Steam), reveals a relatively rapid development of commercial methods suited for the internet age — which is also, in some ways, an emphatically domestic age. As Crawford explains:

> Video games and the internet are both products of the same era and environments, and their developmental histories are closely intertwined. For instance, early video games, such as *Spacewar!* (1962), were distributed across fledgling computer networks which enabled programmers to play, modify and redistribute games. This sharing and collaboration in video game development, in turn, provided one of the first non-military and non-corporate uses of the Internet, which helped cement the usefulness of this new technology beyond the domains of work and war. Today the internet continues to play a significant role in the development of video games as well as video game culture.[44]

This shared history dovetails with the integration and optimization of the internet as a meeting place for gamers and game "fans" *by* these very individuals, who were gradually growing their technological talents as they explored the web in its early stages. Meanwhile, the advent of shareware and its logical extension, the modifiable *Doom* files that further involved consumers in the process of content "production," created a precedent for developers to network with their fans directly, without the need for large-scale ad campaigns and public relations.

Described by its pioneer Andrew Fluegelman as "an experiment in economics more than altruism," shareware (also known as "freeware") is a mode of digital distribution by which consumers can freely access certain parts or functionalities of a piece of software with the option to pay for access to full functionality.[45] In the years following the video game industry crash of 1983, shareware saw great success under distributors like Educorp, which released its software on floppy disks and encouraged users to share the software with friends and family. Although this practice ran directly counter to the efforts of the Software Publishers Association and their much-ridiculed 1992 "Don't Copy that Floppy" campaign against user copyright infringement,

---

[44] Crawford, *Video Gamers*, 121.
[45] Fluegelman qtd. in Magid, Lawrence J. "PC-Talk." *PC Mag*, vol. 1, no. 4, Aug. 1982, p. 143.

shareware nonetheless proved an effective means of generating consumer interest and revenue in the educational and business sectors.

With the development and popularization of the World Wide Web throughout the 1980s and 1990s, disk storage was gradually rendered obsolete as internet users gained access to web sites that could provide the same software without the floppy disk, in the form of downloadable digital file packages. Founded by Scott Miller in 1987, Apogee Software Productions (now 3D Realms Entertainment) established shareware as a viable and lucrative method of video game distribution. In Apogee's early years, Miller published portions of his games via bulletin board systems (BBS), a rudimentary, pre-Web method for uploading and downloading software.[46] Once users completed the freely published segments of the game, the BBS would provide instructions for payment via mail-order, by which means users could receive access to the complete game.

Miller's distribution method, which would come to be known as "the Apogee model," was employed to even greater success in collaboration with a small but talented team of game developers, then employed at Softdisk in Shreveport, Louisiana. In 1990, Apogee published *Commander Keen in Invasion of the Vorticons*, the first major project of id Software co-founders John Carmack, John Romero, and Tom Hall, to financial and critical success.[47] The game itself is notable for an innovative feature developed by Carmack that allowed personal computers to simulate the side-to-side motion of a character through a changing game environment (also known as "side-scrolling"). More importantly, though, *Keen*'s success signaled a shift in the gaming landscape more broadly: it was an early indication that 1) personal computers could approximate the experience afforded by home game consoles like the popular Nintendo Entertainment System and 2) via shareware, game distributors could tap into the powerful, albeit non-commercial discourse of fans to generate interest in their products. It was on these principles that id Software was able to proceed with arguably their most significant project: *Doom* (1993). Based on a marketing strategy contrived in part by Jay Wilbur, then de facto CEO and manager of the development team, id performed little advertising at their own expense, and instead allowed excitement for the game to build both online and through the efforts of other software retailers with which id had supplied copies of the game's first segment.

While *Commander Keen* and Miller's projects with Apogee broke new ground with their innovative approach to commercial games distribution based on the sort of "experimental" logic suggested by Fleugelman, going a step further, *Doom* tapped into an entirely new way of thinking about video game consumption by fully leveraging the potentials of shareware and early internet BBS to anticipate and invite player participation in the design phase.[48] Unlike Nintendo, which following the 1983 crash employed more hands-on methods such as extensive playtesting and to this day maintains a staunchly proprietary stance on their projects, id doubled down on video game fans' capacity to generate not only interest in their product but

---

[46] Lee, Joel. "How We Talk Online: A History of Online Forums, From Cavemen Days To The Present." *MUO,* 23 Oct. 2012, www.makeuseof.com/tag/how-we-talk-online-a-history-of-online-forums-from-cavemen-days-to-the-present/

[47] See, for example, Plante, Chris. "Apogee: Where Wolfenstein Got Its Start." *Polygon*, 27 Feb. 2013, www.polygon.com/features/2017/10/26/16511514/wolfenstein-origins-apogee

[48] See Maher, Jimmy. "The Shareware Scene, Part 4: *Doom*." *The Digital Antiquarian: A History of Computer Entertainment and Digital Culture*, 5 June 2020, www.filfre.net/2020/06/the-shareware-scene-part-4-doom/

content *for* it, too.[49] Carmack programmed *Doom* in such a way that users could build on id's work by manipulating certain game files, including those dictating the organization of levels and the appearance of enemies and environments. By preserving the core functionalities of the game's engine (i.e., the suite of programs and software features that allow the game to run effectively), these so-called "WAD" files allowed tech-savvy players to perform a limited version of game development now known as "modding" (short for "modification").

For a later *Doom*-related project, id went so far as to invite some of the community's most talented modders to collaborate on an official expansion to the game.[50] This would mark one of the first occasions on which amateur gamers were able to formally turn their passion into a functional product that was cycled back out to the broader gamer community. More generally, though, these early days of PC gaming indicate the development of a gaming culture from one that primarily valued ludic skill (i.e., the ability to succeed in a game, as indicated by arcade cabinet leaderboards) to one that appreciated a technical knowledge of game systems and design. Indeed, it was around a later id Software project, *Quake* (1996), that one of the earliest and most influential speedrunning communities would take form.[51] In this way, coupled with the kinds of business practices that invited gamers to reconfigure their games, the internet laid the groundwork for a more widely participatory gaming culture and encouraged the development of technical skills that, as in the case of *Quake*, would often be turned to serve the interests of that culture.

Of course, participation in these early days was limited by users' access to a personal computer, for one, and further by the luxury of a lifestyle that permits users to be "productive" in their leisure time. Moving into our present day, while certain forms of gaming continue to be perceived within the domain of "boyhood," shifts in the gaming industry and culture have produced new orientations toward gaming. As Kocurek explains,

> The spread of gaming from young male obsession to a nationalized experience of media culture has coincided with changes in the industry, including an increase in affordable video game consoles, the proliferation of home computers, and the rise of social media games played through platforms like Facebook.[52]

With shareware and the modding communities of the 1990s, gamers had their first opportunity to take part in the amateur production of game-related media. Even if the actors involved have changed, these passionate enclaves of the early PC gaming era are a clear precedent for contemporary online gaming communities like speedrunning, where members generously share about their discoveries and produce resources for the benefit of the collective. Likewise, an

---

[49] For an in-depth discussion of Nintendo's industrial and legal practices, see Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, "Electronic Frontiers: Branding the 'Nintendo Generation', 1985-1990." *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2003, pp. 109-27.

[50] For more on *Doom*'s cultural impact and biographies of id founders John Carmack and John Romero, see Kushner, David. *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture*. Random House, 2003.

[51] Discussed in more detail in this chapter's concluding section, this community would come to be known under the leadership of speedrunner and Speed Demos Archive webmaster Nolan Pflug as "Quake Done Quick," a moniker which survives today as the inspiration for the Games Done Quick charity events founded by Mike Uyama in 2011.

[52] Kocurek, Carly A. "The Future is Now: Changes in Gaming Culture," *Coin-operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood At the Video Game Arcade.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, pp. 189-201: 195.

activity like speedrunning could only emerge with the support of technologies that allow for the dynamic exchange of media and information between Internet users.

The following sections, which mark the chapter's final movement, go beyond the case studies of shareware, home console gaming, and arcade culture to a more granular account of the complex speedrunning infrastructure, including the technologies that provide for the simultaneous experience of media on Twitch and the many peripheral platforms that allow users to connect with each other beyond the act of play. Likewise, it is at this juncture that the "pre-histories" offered by this and the preceding section transition into a more concrete effort to place speedrunning's present qualities within its relatively young technological "history."

Instant Media: Twitch.tv and the Technologies of Immediacy

In an interview conducted by speedrunner and YouTube creator Patrick Barrett, Darbian, a streamer known primarily for his speedruns of the *Super Mario Bros.* games, explains: "My introduction to speedrunning was also my introduction to Twitch."[53] Seemingly unaware of the pun, Darbian locates the origin of his speedrunning within not only the platform itself, where speedrunning gained popularity through the now widely noted Games Done Quick fundraising events, but also the history of "twitch" or reaction-based gameplay from which the platform derives its name. Many arcade and early home console games were built around this model, which tests a player's real-time coordination and reflexes, as opposed to the turn-based strategy model, which imitates tabletop games and accordingly produces slower-paced gameplay. Because of its focus on real-time media sharing and discursive connectivity between spectators and broadcasters, Twitch was from its inception an apt platform for showcasing the fast-paced gameplay at the core of speedrunning.

As we know it today, Twitch emerged from the framework of justin.tv, a reality tv livecasting project which brought audio and video of founder/broadcaster Justin Kan's life to tens of thousands of fans and enabled viewers to chat about the broadcast in real time. Following the success of Kan's project, justin.tv was relaunched in 2007 to allow other users to broadcast video, and by 2010 the platform was drawing tens of millions of viewers each month.[54] In 2011, on account of the popularity of its gaming broadcasters, justin.tv created Twitch, accessible as a separate website, to host gaming-related content. Viewership on Twitch quickly surpassed that of justin.tv, and since the company's rebranding as Twitch Media Interactive in 2014, Twitch has become one of the most trafficked websites worldwide.[55] Such an explosion of interest in streamable audio and video was made possible by a range of developments in webcams, multimedia frameworks like Adobe's Flash Player and Apple's Quicktime, and emergent video on-demand (VOD) services like YouTube that famously encouraged amateur media creators to "Broadcast Yourself" as early as 2005. Coupled with the increased availability of desktop computers and more reliable broadband (high-speed) internet

[53] "Speedrun Interview #8! Feat Darbian." *Youtube,* uploaded by PB Speedruns, 5 Jul. 2020, youtu.be/tTbkM4fUuhM
[54] Steiner, Christopher. "The Disruptor in the Valley." *Forbes*, 8 Nov. 2010, wayback.archive-it.org/all/20130406151154/http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2010/1108/best-small-companies-10-y-combinator-paul-graham-disruptor.html
[55] Web traffic data from SimilarWeb, retrieved Apr. 2022, www.similarweb.com/website/twitch.tv/#overview

access in the early 2000s, too, these technological advances laid the groundwork for a now pervasive culture of "instant media" in the United States.

More remarkable than the immediate transfer of media, however, is the fact that Twitch and its predecessor justin.tv gave so much "autonomy" to their users, who displayed a remarkable degree of facility with the early systems of streaming. Yet the sense of freedom that came with broadcasting one's life to viewers around the world begged a range of questions about privacy, safety, and sociality in the digital age. Indeed, the growing popularity of reality television in the late 1990s and 2000s and a broader cultural fascination with selfhood at the turn of the century — evident in popular films like *EDtv* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999), and *The Truman Show* (1998) — seem to have given these questions even greater urgency in the context of young people's use of fledgling streaming services and social networking platforms like Myspace. In 2012, for example, Judith Donath indicated the deep divide between hers and the Internet generation's conceptions of privacy when she suggested that some users of Myspace might later regret their debonair attitude toward sharing on the Internet: "The more warnings they have that this is dangerous, in some ways it makes it more appealing. . . . In 15 years, when they are older and risk-taking is less interesting, they may be much more reticent about what they say."[56]

For the last few decades, these kinds of concerns have followed technological advancements in a fairly predictable way. Despite their explosive popularity in the 1970s, for example, video game arcades quickly revived deep-seated concerns about gambling culture, children's education, and the targeting of young people as a market demographic. Similarly, whereas the reality television phenomenon of the 90s and 2000s may have seemed 'safer' in the hands of big-budget production studios and commercial broadcasting networks like CBS — where survivors, houseguests, and idols all bore the credentials of adulthood — the media circulated on Youtube and streamed live on Twitch frequently carries the mark of the amateur and the minor. As uncomfortable as this reality may be, it seems clear that years of young people's exposure to and experimentation with self-broadcasted media have normalized these practices and continue to embolden thousands of amateur streamers to 'take up the camera.'

Captive Audience: The Technologies of Connectivity

In many ways, what justin.tv/Twitch offered to its amateur media creators — especially those creators focused on game-related content — was a natural extension of Nintendo's famous promise to users of their groundbreaking NES console: "now you're playing with power." To recall Kocurek's phrase, too, the case of these pioneering gamer-streamers and their associated spectators would seem to be another example of the ways in which people interested in games placed themselves at the "cultural vanguard." Unsurprisingly, though, speedrunners are not always regarded as such. Some commentators have filed speedrunning away as a "marginal" variation of eSports, seemingly drawing a connection between the two on the grounds of

[56] Qtd. in Sydell, Laura. "Live From San Francisco, It's Justin Kan's Life." *NPR,* 11 Apr. 2007, www.npr.org/2007/04/11/9516623/live-from-san-francisco-its-justin-kans-life

competition alone.[57] Yet there is little evidence to suggest that speedrunning and its interested spectators represent a mere offshoot of competitive gaming.

Indeed, what I am suggesting with this series of narratives on the history of games distribution, hardware, and streaming platforms is for a more holistic understanding of gaming's socially imbricated history. If eSports and speedrunning share a major nexus within that history, I suppose it lies in the arcade phenomenon of the 1970s and 80s; from there, however, accounts of the intersecting histories of the internet and gaming suggest that speedrunning emerged somewhat more messily and mundanely, as motivated individuals (often "amateurs") configured from novel internet technologies the means to share media and to connect with their peers. For while eSports has from the work of its self-proclaimed "patron saint" and businessman Walter Day to its present iterations on broadcast television carried a degree of officiality, speedrunning has consistently represented a more grassroots, ad hoc phenomenon.[58]

Day may have been instrumental in taking leaderboards online with Twin Galaxies, but it was young gamers who molded the online scorekeeping concept to fit their interests. As *Quake* speedrunner Nolan "Radix" Pflug reflects, while the *Nintendo Power* magazine had advertised something resembling a speedrunning competition in the mid 1990s, it was the realization that he could host leaderboards on his own webpage and grow connectivity among fellow runners that led Pflug and a friend to create Speed Demos Archive in April 1998:

> The Super Nintendo game Super Metroid has a timer displayed at the end, so I felt the need to see how fast I could do it. I can't remember if I only did this because *Nintendo Power* had a competition, but regardless I sent in a picture of my time to the magazine. I was upset when my time wasn't printed. . . . [T]his led me to start my own website when I found a few quake demos in December 1996 on ftp.cdrom.com.[59]

Pflug's recollection of the speedrun's early days will be of interest because it indexes an approximate starting point for the phenomenon, yet I would contend that it is significant for another reason: Pflug identified an absence in the official or corporate 'infrastructure' for an activity he loved, so he carved out a space where individuals like him could collaborate.[60] It is in this impulse to not only connect with people who share one's interests, but also to configure new spaces and create resources for doing so, that I identify a continuity within the histories of gaming, the internet, and speedrunning's culture of collaboration and communal advancement.

---

[57] Fickle, Tara et al. "Asian American Gaming." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, 2021, p. 25.
[58] "About Walter Day." *The Walter Day Collection*, 3 Feb. 2022, https://thewalterdaycollection.com/about-walter-day.
[59] "Nolan 'Radix' Pflug." *Speed Demos Archive*, 31 Aug. 2009, quake.speeddemosarchive.com/quake/interviews/nolanpflug.html
[60] Even as corporations like Twitch seek to streamline their services in accordance with the desires of their users, this willingness to look beyond what a platform offers is a relatively common practice among speedrunners. As one Reddit user reflects in a since-deleted post from July 2021, "Twitch is not always the best for finding communities," whereas user-managed speedrun sites and internet fora are excellent for this purpose. In other cases, too, when an existing tool proves inadequate for runners, a member of the community with the relevant experience will frequently step up to either reconfigure or design all-new software for the use of their community.

This trend toward user-calibrated interactivity recalls early theorizations of the internet's potential to produce new social contexts. In a 1999 article for *Print* magazine, for example, web designer Darcy DiNucci famously prophesized the coming of a new, more dynamic internet, what she termed "Web 2.0." According to DiNucci, the Web of the 20th century was "only an embryo" slated for enormous growth and proliferation from a network of "static screenfuls" to one of enhanced user-to-user and screen-to-screen connectivity, "a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens."[61] If DiNucci's vision of an internet at once organic and ethereal appears somewhat affected, her predictions as to how the internet would come to define our lives will strike the contemporary reader as remarkably prescient:

> the Web's outward form—the hardware and software that we use to view it—will multiply. On the front end, the Web will fragment into countless permutations with different looks, behaviors, uses, and hardware hosts. . . . It will still appear on your computer screen, transformed by video and other dynamic media made possible by the speedy connection technologies now coming down the pike. The Web will also appear, in different, guises, on your TV set (interactive content woven seamlessly into programming and commercials), your car dashboard (maps, Yellow Pages, and other traveler info), your cell phone (new, stock quotes, flight updates), hand-held game machines (linking players with competitors over the Net), and maybe even your microwave . . .[62]

For DiNucci, the multiplicity of linkages (technological, spatial, social) afforded by a more interconnected Net suggested both a kind of growth and fragmentation, a diffusion across screens as well as a keener awareness of the partitions represented by those screens. Ultimately, though, DiNucci doubles down on the growth analogy as a means of highlighting the possibilities that arise from fragmentation: "the process will be long and unpredictable . . . an organic system of mitosis, mutation, and natural selection that we can only regard with wonder."[63]

By now this brand of technological optimism may seem rather cliche, though from the vantage of speedrunning there is much to be gained from DiNucci's biological analogy. For one, it acknowledges the vast connectedness that the internet is imagined to represent while suggesting the importance of interactivity within discrete cells as part of that larger system, a concept Chapter Two takes up in greater detail. Indeed, we are already at a point where, in accordance with DiNucci's model, the internet has become something like a nourishing and even essential "ether." The facility with which speedrunners navigate the various platforms their communities span suggests an environment where the internet and its technologies have become almost incidental to the practices carried out through it. Put differently, this facility is just one example of the way decades of technological developments and reconfigurations have

---

[61] DiNucci, Darcy. "Fragmented Future." *Print*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1999, pp. 32; 221-2: 32, web.archive.org/web/20111110143942/http://darcyd.com/fragmented_future
[62] Ibid., 32.
[63] Ibid., 222.

come to be seen as natural, air-like, and indispensable to young internet users, who are themselves masters of reconfiguration.

This is the final component in a genealogy of speedrunning as I see it: the coordination of experiences through and across platforms and screens by way of increased "connectivity."[64] This coordination, and its uptake by eager internet users, is part and parcel of Twitch's 2019 marketing campaign, which mounts the knowingly phrased claim that "You're Already One of Us."[65] A topic discussed at length in Chapter Three, the sense of being just a step away from connecting with people like oneself is crucial to the perception of speedrunning as a culture of openness and generosity. As the present discussion has alluded, too, this is a perception that the controlling interests behind social media and internet-based technologies are keen to maintain and disseminate.

I want to close this chapter by returning to the idea of gaming "spaces" introduced in the context of the video game arcade and early home consoles. For the world DiNucci envisions suggests the eventual dissolution of those boundaries, such that the arcade and the home might find a way to coexist, spatially speaking, within contemporary technologies of connectivity. Indeed, inasmuch as our smartphones can replicate the experience of the arcade cabinet, they can also take us "home" through the emulation of classic gaming consoles. In this way, in the intertwined proliferation of internet- and gaming-capable devices, we can see a paradoxical affirmation of the private and a return to the public. Although it was never a 'clean' binary of home/arcade to begin with, home consoles being at their inception a way to bring arcade games into the family room, it seems clear that the internet has further complicated our sense of the spaces within which gamic and social interactivity can occur.

I see this convergence in the history of gaming and the internet as a critical step toward the formation of something resembling an online "community," a notion that the following Chapter explores at length. In particular, Chapter Two builds on the idea introduced here that the intersecting identities of the late 20th century gamer/internet-user produced among contemporary speedrunners and their fans a penchant for creativity, an eye for technological reconfiguration, and a habit of collaboration.

---

[64] See also Nieborg, David B. and Thomas Poell. "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, no. 11, Nov. 2018, pp. 4275–4292.

[65] Bijan, Stephen. "Eight Years After Its Launch, Twitch Is Getting a Slightly New Look." *The Verge*, 26 Sep 2019, www.theverge.com/2019/9/26/20885219/twitch-redesign-accessible-logo-font-color-glitch-purple-twitchcon

Chapter Two. Corporate Engine, Social Fuel: Proprietorship Vs. Participatory Culture

> Everything we do needs to be in service of making sure that the folks that are on our platform — our community — really feel like they matter.
>
> — Byron Phillipson, executive creative director at Twitch[66]

In "Play it Faster, Play it Weirder: How Speedrunning Pushes Video Games Beyond Their Limits," Joe Koning seems thoroughly inspired by the social potentials of speedrunning. "For me," Koning writes, "speedrunning is a display of the best side of the internet, a welcome relief from a place that is often horrible. The best world-records are achieved by individuals, but are held together by the glue of community."[67] On its "Knowledge Base" page, speedrun.com is similarly optimistic, describing itself as "a toolset for building communities" and "a way to highlight all facets of the speedrunning community. From marathons raising millions of dollars for charity to competitions and races to those who help route and find the game-changing glitches, the speedrunning ecosystem is robust and every contribution matters."[68]

Despite this somewhat utopian image of a "speedrunning ecosystem," it seems likely that the earliest instances of speedrunning, broadly defined, were solitary acts of ambition. Without the technological and social infrastructures which have since allowed runners to share their accomplishments with an interested audience, that is, completing a game quickly was both the act and the end in itself. If much conversation between practitioners occurred, it was limited by the niche quality of the activity, the entry cost of a home gaming console or personal computer and its associated titles, and the lack of a dedicated online space for discussions about gaming. Indeed, it is probable that some of the earliest acts resembling a "speedrun" did not even involve a timer, but simply strove to demonstrate mastery over the mechanics of a particular game for the practitioner's own satisfaction.

Speedrunning could not be said to resemble an "ecosystem," nor a site of "contribution," until contemporary technologies allowed for both the standardization of the practice (e.g., by way of online scorekeeping and adjudication systems as well as dedicated timing or "livesplitting" programs) and the interaction of multiple agents (e.g., through online bulletin boards and messaging systems). Today, speedrunners and their fans both use and circulate for the benefit of new practitioners a comprehensive suite of these technologies, including media players and editing software,[69] video capture cards (introduced in the early aughts),[70] web-based

---

[66] Qtd. in Bijan, Stephen. "Eight Years After Its Launch, Twitch Is Getting a Slightly New Look." *The Verge*, 26 Sep 2019, www.theverge.com/2019/9/26/20885219/twitch-redesign-accessible-logo-font-color-glitch-purple-twitchcon

[67] Koning, Joe. "Play It Faster, Play It Weirder: How Speedrunning Pushes Video Games Beyond Their Limits." *The Guardian*, 28 Sep. 2021, www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/sep/29/play-it-faster-play-it- weirder-how-speedrunning-pushes-video-games-beyond-their-limits

[68] "What Is Speedrunning?" *Speedrun.com*, updated 2022, www.speedrun.com/knowledgebase/what-is-speedrunning

[69] See, e.g., u/allin07. "Good videoplayers/videoeditors for retiming runs?" Post in r/speedrun, *Reddit*, 26 Oct. 2021, www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/qgku7q/good_videoplayersvideoeditors_for_retiming_runs/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf

[70] Some of the earliest speedruns (then called "speed demos") captured game footage using recording software built into *Quake* itself. In the early 2000s, the advent of capture cards, devices that record game footage in real time through the computer or the game console itself, proved a crucial component to the growth of early speedrunning communities beyond the id Software titles. For example, Speed Demos Archive lists Nathan Jahnke as the individual

archives and scorekeepers (e.g., Speedrun.com, SpeedDemosArchive, TwinGalaxies), and an array of social media platforms geared to address various social needs and modes of discourse: livestreaming networks (Twitch), video-sharing platforms (YouTube), user-led and message boards (Reddit), and group communications services like Discord.

As Chapter One contends, the advent of online leaderboards, message boards, shareware, and eventually these more specialized technologies brought with it new opportunities for participation beyond the realm of play. For one, through these new technologies it was gradually revealed that many players not only desired to compete over "records" beyond the arcade cabinet, but that an interest existed among non-players to observe this competition. The notion of a speedrunning "community," it seems, gradually took shape as practicing individuals and interested spectators exchanged their knowledge, shared about their achievements, and reconfigured existing technologies to suit their common interest. These technologies served in some degree to restore, simulate, or expand upon the social and discursive potentials of gaming in the arcade era and the early years of gaming on home consoles and personal computers. Beyond spectatorship and the practice of gaming itself, discourse became the primary integument of online speedrunning communities. As a result, to understand the phenomenon of speedrunning from a sociological perspective entails an examination of the means by which its actors communicate and define themselves.

This chapter attempts both to articulate the shape speedrunning has taken 'beyond the screen,' in the form of an interested community of practitioners and spectators, and to chart the tensions that emerge between speedrunners and the corporate interests that sustain and benefit from their play. Intrinsic to this discussion are concrete questions of identity and size: Who speedruns? Who spectates? How many members comprise a "large" speedrunning community, and by what mechanisms did such a community take form? At the same time, I am interested in some other, more abstract questions: Where does a "community" begin, and where does it end? What qualifies as "activity" in that community? How do speedrunners conceive of their status among fellow players, and from where do they derive their desire to perform? To what extent do the concerns of "industry" penetrate these "communities?"

I begin with a brief gloss of the relevant vocabulary surrounding gaming communities in order to establish the core terminology for the rest of the chapter. Next, I attempt to etch out the basic structure of an individual speedrunning community, beginning with the various roles members play within it. Of particular interest to me are the ways in which different community members engage in participatory and even "productive" practices as part of their community. Finally, I explore the idea that the activity of these fans/players/spectators is enabled by privately owned technologies and services that might as soon be struck down if corporate interests deem player "productivity" a hindrance to their own commercial success. This tenuous symbiosis of social and corporate interests offers a microcosm of our contemporary moment, in which access to information, communication, and other internet-mediated processes appears increasingly subject to the inclinations of a proprietary minority.

---

who introduced capture card technology to the website's creators in 2004. For the benefit of new runners, the site now provides a comprehensive suite of guides covering the technicalities of video capture and livestreaming. See especially: "Knowledge Base." *Speed Demos Archive*, updated 17 Oct. 2019, kb.speeddemosarchive.com/Main_Page

Terming the Community

In *Video Gamers*, Garry Crawford notes that the study of gamers as cultural participants remains a rich, albeit largely untapped, field of study for academics interested in contemporary social patterns.[71] Some scholars, including Gonzalo Frasca and Jesper Juul, have signaled their interest in video game players through a field of study called "ludology," which explores the ways in which games engage their consumers interactively.[72] Yet this approach is limited by its emphasis on the act of play, and Crawford suggests that a truly *social* study of games involves looking beyond these isolated interactions between a player and their game.[73]

Crawford's concerns with a ludological approach to game studies would seem to point emphatically to speedrunning, a sector of gaming culture that fundamentally alters its participants' relationship to play, as a valuable site for sociological research. Similar to esports, for one, speedrunning both generates audiences and capital and facilitates sociality in a way solitary gaming cannot. It also complicates our notion of video gamers themselves, as many of those interested in speedrunning do not even have to "play" games in order to "participate." Indeed, with speedrunning, "interactivity" takes on an entirely different significance beyond the way many scholars currently deploy it, as a means of describing gamers' engagement with a medium that synchronously accommodates and responds to their inputs. As Chapter One contends, speedrunning — at least as much as esports — offers a means of understanding contemporary consumers of media as not only audiences but also interactive communities brought 'together' by the shared experience of instant media and through technologies of discursive connectivity.

Etienne Wenger's landmark account of communal membership and participation, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, offers a strong basis for understanding speedrunning as a community, and more specifically an aggregation of communities.[74] For one, Wenger offers the important clarification that a "community" describes not simply the people who we live or work with, but the people who engage in activities and negotiate meaning with us. Inasmuch as it invites a more inclusive understanding of group sociality — that is, going beyond the realm of the political, economic, and identity-based distinctions we often use to classify ourselves in our contemporary moment — Wenger's notion of "communities of practice" is the primary way in which I deploy the term "community" here.

This conception of communities allows for a more complex understanding of the ways in which single person can exhibit "multimembership" — that is, membership in more than one community of practice — and through this represent a nuanced and irreducible "nexus of perspectives."[75] Assuming this perspective of communities serves to deconstruct the false hierarchies of influence that place the significance of other political, economic, and social

---

[71] See: Crawford, Garry. *Video Gamers*, Routledge, 2012, 1-3.
[72] Frasca, Gonzalo. "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology." *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf, Routledge, 2003, pp. 221-235; Juul, Jesper. "The Definitive History of Games and Stories, Ludology and Narratology." *The Ludologist*, 22 Feb. 2004. Web.
[73] See: Crawford, *Video Gamers*, 2.
[74] Wenger, Etienne. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
[75] Ibid., 105.

roles/acts above that of play. Furthermore, as Wenger suggests, a person's identity cannot be isolated as emerging from any one of the communities to which that person belongs: rather, "whether or not we are actively trying to sustain connections among the practices [of our multiple communities], our experience of multimembership always has the potential of creating various forms of continuity among them."[76] By fully accepting the notion of multimembership, we can acknowledge the ways in which even our leisure activities influence and are influenced by other facets of our subjectivity.

Wenger's model of multimembership is also useful for a discussion of speedrunning because the idea of a single speedrunning community belies the reality: in fact, thousands of communities formed around individual games constitute the broader phenomenon of video game speedrunning. Thus, in the following sections, I offer a model for thinking about speedrunning communities in a more atomistic sense. By examining the structure of individual speedrunning communities, I contend, it is possible to extrapolate a sense of the kinds of exchange — technical, discursive, and monetary — that hold each community together.

Communal Roles: The Shape of Speedrunning

It is possible to frame an isolated speedrunning community — that is, the community formed around members' engagement with a particular game — in the terms of its two major roles: practitioner (or speedrunner) and spectator. The extent to which these roles overlap varies greatly between communities, but in general their relationship may be visualized as a central cohort of "expert" practitioners — the people performing speedruns that generate attention from the community — situated within a more diffuse, peripheral "community of interest" — the people watching runs and/or producing materials in support of runners based on a common interest in the activity and a commitment to the goals established by the community (Fig. 1).[77] In accordance with Wenger's model of communities of practice, practitioners are here taken as people who "share a concern or a passion for [what] they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" and who, through their practice, exhibit a "collective competence" in their activity.[78] Meanwhile, some spectators share practitioners' interest in speedrunning, but do not perform speedruns themselves, and instead contribute to the community by sharing knowledge, by producing aids for the benefit of speedrunners and other interested spectators, or by supporting runners directly through their spectatorship and various other forms of financial patronage. Yet the boundary between even these two basic roles is permeable: practitioners frequently spectate; spectators often perform runs. For this reason, it

[76] Ibid., 105.
[77] Henri and Pudelko, building on Wenger's work in *Communities of Practice*, describe a community of interest as "a gathering of people assembled around a topic of common interest. Its members take part in the community to exchange information, to obtain answers to personal questions or problems, to improve their understanding of a subject, to share common passions or to play." They note that, compared to communities of practice, communities of interest exhibit weaker levels of intentionality and social bonding. See Henri, France and B. Pudelko. "Understanding and Analysing Activity and Learning in Virtual Communities." *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2003, pp. 474-487: 478.
[78] Wenger, Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner. "Introduction to Communities of Practice: A Brief Overview of the Concept and Its Uses." *Wenger-Trayner.com*, 2015, wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/

can be difficult to precisely quantify the relationship of practitioners to spectators within a single speedrunning community.

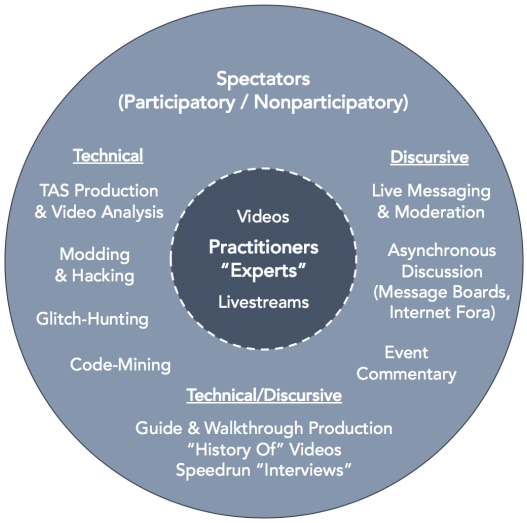

Fig. 1. Overview of Speedrunning's Major Roles (in bold) by Communal Contributions

In many cases, however, it is clear that the visibility of practitioners — and the figurative "weight" their screen name carries — far exceeds that of spectators. A practitioner's ability to magnetize viewers seemingly has much to do with the size and popularity of the community for which they actively perform. In larger communities — including, for example, those formed around "classic" games like *Super Metroid* (1994) and *Super Mario 64* (1996), as well as more contemporary popular titles like *Minecraft*, *Hollow Knight* (2017), *Celeste* (2018), and *Metroid Dread* (2021) — the visibility of top practitioners often becomes amplified under the degree to which their achievements stand unchallenged by many other competitors. Among smaller communities — those engaged with more "niche" games — the boundary between practitioner and spectator may be less obvious, with comparatively few runners, each keenly attuned to the activities of their rivals. The result in these smaller communities is often a spirited, call-and-response kind of competition, but a general lack of knowledge about the game among potential spectators greatly diminishes the chance that runners will attract large audiences.[79]

Among larger communities, meanwhile, a relative abundance of talented practitioners paradoxically produces both limits to the entry of new practitioners and opportunities for practitioners to distinguish themselves by other means. For example, while less experienced runners in large communities are less likely to generate viewership to the same extent as expert runners — some of whom attract to their livestreams thousands of fans each day — streamers

[79] Often these smaller communities have the chance to interface and gain broader recognition through multi-community events such as the annual "Niche-athon" coordinated by speedrunners of the *Metal Gear Solid* games (1998-present) in collaboration with the For the Love of Gaming (FTLG) Reddit community, described as "A place for positive discussion of games. All the love and dedication to the hobby you love with none of the cynicism." See: https://www.reddit.com/r/fortheloveofgaming/

deemed charismatic or who structure their streaming content heterogeneously can attract a great deal of viewers even if they are not themselves the most skilled runners. In fact, viewership statistics suggest that a charismatic runner of middling skill is more likely to maintain a successful channel than a highly skilled, record-holding runner whose day-to-day stream varies little with regard to content. These differences in streaming viewership generally correlate to an even more drastic difference in YouTube (recorded video) viewership.[80]

In this way, individual practitioners in both large and small communities frequently come to overrepresent the larger body of players performing runs. Although their role as the foremost entertainers of the community does not fully eclipse spectators' interest in less-viewed runners — many of whom retain dedicated followings — the most popular streamers and video-makers tend to function as the linchpin of the broader speedrunning community. Their far-reaching (or community-bridging) appeal constitutes a common ground on which spectators of varied personal interests tend to converge. In the next section, I consider two such personalities who, taken alone, might distort our impression of the "average" member of the broader speedrunning community. At the same time, of course, these celebrity exemplars are an essential part of the broader coherent interest in speedrunning outside of more specialized communities focused on a single game. The productivity of these popular individuals also helps form the matrix for engagement between speedrunners and the internet at large.

Speedrunning's "Products": The Speedrun as Livestreamed and Recorded Video

Brandon Jacobson, otherwise known by his screen name "oatsngoats," is a popular streamer on Twitch, where he currently streams his speedrunning attempts for various games in the *Metroid Series* as well as a game called *PowerWash Simulator* (2021). As a former world-record holder in the perennially popular *Super Metroid* Any% category and a frequent guest at speedrunning events like the Games Done Quick fundraising series, oatsngoats is, arguably, as close as the *Metroid* speedrunning community has to a "household name."[81] He achieved his first world record in the category in 2016, with a completion time of 42 minutes and 10 seconds. When a YouTuber by the name of DanteCrysis asked Jacobson how "difficult" it was to achieve his winning time, the runner replied in terms of the time he committed to reaching that goal: "For probably about a year and half . . . I would put anywhere between two to six hours of practice, probably five days a week, if not more, into *Super Metroid.* It just was my hobby. It encompassed everything I did outside of my full-time job — you know, back when I had a full

[80] This information is readily available through any of several third-party websites that collect and organize statistics on Twitch usage, including twitchtracker.com and twitchmetrics.net. For an entertaining and well-researched account that wrestles with these discrepancies in popularity across platforms as well as questions of content 'heterogeneity,' see: "The Rise of SmallAnt: How One Speedrunner Took Over YouTube." *YouTube*, uploaded by InkThinks, 14 Mar. 2021, youtu.be/CN2zkvZ4jSs. Indeed, despite admitting that his talents could not match those of world record holders, Tanner Ant, the speedrunner in question, was nonetheless named "Speedrunner of the Year" at the recent user-organized Streaming Awards.

[81] The term "Any%" is shorthand for a speedrun category that privileges the fastest possible completion of a game at the expense of narrative continuity. When possible, speedrunners in Any% runs bypass entire segments of the game, greatly shearing down the completion time associated with runs that seek 100% narrative completion.

time job."[82] Two years later, oatsngoats reflected on the kinds of insights he gained having spent, to that point, upwards of 10,000 hours with *Super Metroid*.[83] More remarkable than this figure is the lack of a reaction from Jacobson's "couch," or the group of runners who provide additional commentary on performers' runs during GDQ events: at least outwardly, nobody displays disbelief at the estimate. Jacobson's partner for the run, *Legend of Zelda* speedrunner Andy Laso, simply nods in acknowledgment.[84]

Jacobson is no exception to the rule: successful speedrunners spend an extraordinary amount of time perfecting their skills, even if most runners never have the opportunity to perform at the popular Games Done Quick events. Yet seemingly few members of the broader speedrunning community express disappointment at the idea that their hard work will not "pay off" in the form of the exclusive, real-time performances of which Jacobson is a veteran. Indeed, some members seem entirely content with the notion that they can do something to benefit their respective communities, or otherwise improve their own times. As MKarma, a top runner in the small (fewer than 100 active members) community dedicated to speedrunning *The Hobbit* (Sierra Entertainment, 2003), happily declared in a recent Reddit post: "I spent 7 months making this [video] about the community I love."[85]

Conversely, another prominent speedrunner and content creator by the name of Summoning Salt, who attracts a much wider audience with his "World Record Progression" series of YouTube videos than he ever did as a runner of *Mike Tyson's Punch Out!!* (1987), still commits hundreds of hours each year to speedrunning the game. Salt admits in a Reddit "Ask Me Anything" (AMA) thread from October 2021 that his success on YouTube, while unexpected, has opened up a new opportunity in his life: "For years I thought of it as a hobby that makes some money. Recently it's gotten to the point where I think it's foolish to not try it full time. That's what I'm planning on doing."[86] Similar to oatsngoats and other successful runners who have been able to make a career out of performing speedruns for their audiences, creators like Summoning Salt have demonstrated that content peripheral to speedrunning itself can draw enough attention (in the form of donations, subscriptions, and viewership itself) to generate not only income, but even a livelihood for motivated creators.

Summoning Salt and oatsngoats are only two examples of speedrunners turning their interest into something resembling "productivity." In Jacobson's case, the primary (or most profitable) 'output' consists of live performances via streamed video and/or live speedrunning events, whereas Salt's products consist of, primarily, pre-recorded and edited videos that assemble and comment upon the performances of others. Of course, not all members of the broader speedrunning community can be considered as successful as these two individuals. Nor

---

[82] "Controller Byte Interview with oatsngoats." *YouTube*, uploaded by DanteCrysis, 25 Apr. 2016, youtu.be/ZX3XixSHSuU

[83] "Super Metroid/ALttP Combo Randomizer by Andy and Oatsngoats in 3:16:22 - GDQx2018." *YouTube*, uploaded by Games Done Quick, 12 Nov. 2018, youtu.be/yWNGWrZ8wec

[84] Ibid.

[85] "The Hobbit World Record History." Post in r/speedrun, *Reddit*, 15 Oct. 2021, www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/q8w9ay/the_hobbit_world_record_history_i_spent_7_months/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3

[86] u/TheSlyGuy1. "I'm Summoning Salt, a YouTuber and Punch-Out record holder." Post in r/speedrun, *Reddit*, 16 Jul. 2021, www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/olrx4x/hey_everyone_im_summoning_salt_a_youtuber_and/

are videos — livestreamed or recorded — the only "products" of speedrunning. In the following sections, I discuss in greater detail some of the many products of speedrunning's participatory culture, as well as the associated roles that members play in producing them.

Complicating Spectatorship: Technical Work, Discourse, and Resource

In December 2021, building on another community member's project to comprehensively reverse-engineer *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) in the form of over 16,000 lines of annotated, human-readable code, game developer Dan Salvato developed a flowchart visualizing one of the game's algorithms.[87] Salvato's work, which drew on his prior knowledge of computer programming, attempted to make the logic of the disassembled code more accessible to those who lacked his own background. This "*Super Mario Bros.* Tile Collision Flowchart" is just one example of the kinds of (profit-less) technical work members of the speedrunning community — in this case, an award-winning independent game developer only peripherally "interested" in speedrunning — perform to enhance others' experience of the phenomenon and open avenues for further productivity (Fig. 2).[88] In another instance, a member of the *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988) community developed a tool that allowed runners to more effectively practice a particular segment of the game. A popular speedrunner of NES/SNES games, Darbian, lauded the contributor's efforts in a 2020 interview,[89] and himself used the tool to develop a new strategy for the *SMB2* speedrun.[90] In this case, too, someone familiar with technical skills used their knowledge to create a resource for the benefit of their community, even though they derived no tangible benefit (e.g., pay or job opportunities) from the "work" involved.

[87] "SMBDIS.ASM." *GitHub*, uploaded by 1wErt3r, 9 Nov. 2012, gist.github.com/1wErt3r/4048722
[88] u/dansalvato. "Tile Collision in SMB1 - The Inner Workings." Post in r/speedrun, 11 Dec. 2012, reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/ree6wz/this_flowchart_shows_the_specific_programming/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf
[89] "Speedrun Interview #8! Feat Darbian." *Youtube,* uploaded by PB Speedruns, 5 Jul. 2020, youtu.be/tTbkM4fUuhM
[90] "New Tatanga Strat." *Twitch*, uploaded by Darbian, Oct. 2022 www.twitch.tv/videos/1189898210

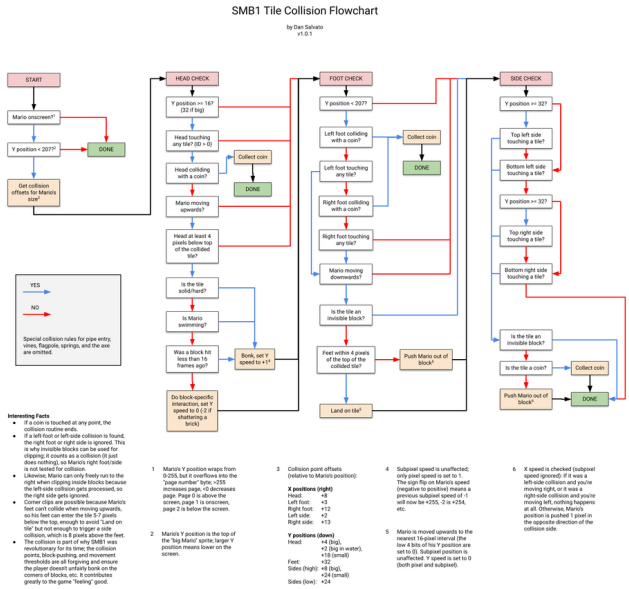

Fig. 2. "Tile Collision in SMB1 - The Inner Workings." Flowchart by Dan Salvato.

More so than some of the better documented cases of gamer "productivity," such as the creation of fan fiction and artwork, speedrunning invites the contribution of people possessing more "technical" knowledge about games. These contributions ought to be considered an equally important part of what Burn calls the "expansive embroidery of the game and its components,"[91] or what Crawford simply calls "video games' extended culture."[92] The technologies discussed in Chapter One, as well as the increased accessibility to programming knowledge attendant to the development and expansion of the Web, "extended" gaming culture by affording gamers new means of engaging with their fellow practitioners, ranging from the technical to the more straightforwardly discursive (e.g., answering spectators' questions, moderating real-time as well as asynchronous chat, and providing adaptive commentary for runs during speedrunning events). I further discuss the implications of this technical activity, including the way in which it blurs the line between "leisure" and "labor," in Chapter Three. For now, though, I turn to consider some of the discursive potentials of speedrunning.

Created in April 2011, the subreddit r/speedrun is the current largest online forum dedicated to speedrunning, with over 200,000 members, and the primary hub for general discussions about speedrunning. Here, runners make announcements sharing their achievements, video creators post links to their work on YouTube, glitch-hunters share about their discoveries, and inexperienced runners and spectators pose a variety of questions. Any user can initiate discussion in the form of a "thread," or a vertically aggregated chain of comments. In the context of r/speedrun, many popular threads feature news about the latest speedrunning events, controversies, and achievements, whereas less popular threads tend to offer individual users' questions or opinions, and feature titles like "I've been wondering what

[91] Qtd. in Crawford, *Video Gamers*, 120. Also see Burn, Andrew. "Reworking the Text: Online Fandom." *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, and Play*, Cambridge: Polity, pp. 88-102.
[92] Crawford, *Video Gamers*, 120.

role I'll fit into in the community,"[93] "GDQ desperately needs a live audience again,"[94] and "Could we get a resources list going of speedrunning commentators?"[95] The platform also features an information sidebar that provides "resources for newcomers" (in the form of, for example, community-generated FAQs and a glossary of speedrunning-specific vocabulary), software suggestions for timing and livestreaming, video archives, and links to other speedrunning-related sites. With the help of these features, r/speedrun has become streamlined as a space of not only asynchronous discussion, but also a site for resource-gathering that anticipates the interests and questions of newcomers. Similarly, as later case studies will exhibit, r/speedrun serves to propel further discourse and establish new social connections by shuttling Reddit users to more specialized sites of discussion, both on and off the platform itself.

As a user-managed forum, subreddits like r/speedrun maintain a degree of structural coherence and civility with the help of Reddit's "moderator" feature, which provides a framework for vetting posts and removing content. Community members who have successfully applied to serve as moderators ensure that posts meet the expectations for the forum and remove posts that break either the universal rules established in Reddit's content policy or more localized rules developed by the community and moderators themselves. Moderators also have the power to categorize user posts with "flairs" that indicate subject matter and "pin" announcements, which typically feature links to current event livestreams or document changes to the forum's rules. A tool called "Public Mod Logs" keeps a running account of all moderator actions, and users can appeal or flag actions they deem unfair.

In this way, r/speedrun serves two remarkable functions: for one, it cycles news and personal achievements from isolated communities into a broader, more comprehensively networked speedrunning community, and complementarily, it facilitates the movement of news, knowledge, and interested participants themselves into individual communities. These functions are made possible by both the "freedom" the platform offers in allowing any Reddit user to contribute, as well as the infrastructure for effective "governance" by means of user-moderators. Discourse occurs in a more "intimate" fashion via Discord, the widely preferred means of communication for members of an individual speedrunning community, and the primary place to/from which users and information are shuttled on r/speedrun. On Discord channels dedicated to the speedrunning community of a particular game, community members can chat in real time (by both voice and text), make announcements, and discuss the finer points of their strategies with other experienced runners, glitch-hunters, and other knowledgeable contributors. In some senses, then, these Discord channels represent an intermediate between the largely asynchronous discourse of Reddit and YouTube and the real-time discourse afforded by livestreams on Twitch.

---

[93] The original post from 17 Oct. 2021 was deleted by the user, but replies to their eponymous question are still accessible via www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/qacdzj/deleted_by_user/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf

[94] Same as above: replies accessible at www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/ogjw2p/deleted_by_user/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf

[95] u/non-troll_account. "Could we get a resources list going?" Post in r/speedrun, *Reddit*, 15 Sep. 2021, www.reddit.com/r/Speedrunning/comments/pp45lb/could_we_get_a_resources_list_going_of/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf

Beyond Reddit and Discord, synchronicity opens up an entirely new suite of communal roles and pressures, as well as the opportunity for community members to grow stronger bonds through the sense of "closeness" afforded by real-time social interaction. On Twitch, for example, live chat moderation services give reliable community members the authority to maintain civil conditions in the ongoing "Twitch chat." Through this moderation, runners grow trust for their moderators, whose work becomes an increasingly essential resource as chatrooms grow in size. Tanner Ant (also known as "SmallAnt1"), an increasingly popular speedrunner and variety streamer, regularly has two to three moderators supervising his chat, which attracts thousands of viewers each weekday. In other cases — especially among lesser trafficked streams — the Twitch chat itself can become a resource for streamers. In December of 2020, for example, I observed Ant lead a cohort of viewers to join the chat of a streamer named DemiOfTheNorth, whose streams rarely exceeded a handful of viewers. In this more laid back environment, Ant's community respectfully engaged with the streamer on the terms of her own skill, providing both encouragement and advice. Demi thus formed a temporary community with her impromptu viewers, who further became a "resource" for her by means of the real-time Twitch chat.

Finally, speedrunners and their fans may be seen engaging with each other in spaces far removed from these more official platforms and their associated social contexts. In addition to the example of Speed Demos Archive offered in Chapter One, these motivated individuals have established other sites for the purpose of sharing information. While no comprehensive account of these sites is feasible here, it is worth remarking on a quality common to these user-managed networks: their commitment to informational generosity. In a play on the speedrunning parlance of the "100%" category, for example, one site created for the circulation of *Super Mario 64* speedrunning strategies bears the title "SM64 100% Credit."[96] Taking care to note the originator of each idea, as well as the ways in which subsequent users improved upon the original, the site's contributors emblematize the same ethics of mutual growth, support, and attribution that can be seen at all levels of the speedrunning phenomenon. More than just performers and spectators, speedrunners and their fans have in this way organized themselves around patterns of conduct that complicate the supposed distinctions between leisure, labor, and daily human interaction.

Corporate Engine, Social Fuel: The Spectator as Agent

In his Introduction to *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006), Henry Jenkins is deeply concerned with these sorts of distinctions, tracing the emergent academic interest in fan culture to changing conceptions of audiences and media consumption. Espousing "an alternative image of . . . media consumers as active, critically engaged, and creative," Jenkins suggests, allows us to see fans as "textual poachers," or "rogue readers," who assimilate, exchange, and reinterpret media objects through their productive participation as fans.[97] For Wenger, too, it is important to note that "participation" necessarily implies "the possibility of mutual recognition"; that is, the

[96] See: sites.google.com/site/sm64ideas/bob
[97] Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. NYU Press, 2006, 1.

ability to establish meaning and even identity through the recognition of others.[98] As a historical moment and a development in our conception of sociality, Jenkins terms this broader understanding of (re)active spectatorship and fandom "participatory culture." Today, participatory culture touches seemingly all aspects of commercial life, from broadcast media to physical collectibles markets:

> "Media producers monitor Web forums . . . planting trial balloons to test viewer response, measuring reaction to controversial plot twists. Game companies give the public access to their design tools, publicize the best results, and hire the top amateur programmers. The amateur subtitling of and circulation of anime arguably helped to open the market for Asian cultural imports. And meetup.com formed as a way for collectors to trade Beanie Babies."[99]

Yet as Jenkins is well aware, these sorts of relationships between consumer and corporate interests are rarely stable. Nintendo, for one, is notoriously protective of its properties, and has taken swift legal action to preserve a monopoly on their catalog by striking down emulation software, or programs that allow users to play licensed games without owning a digital or physical copy. At the same time, the company has so far tolerated the recurring appearance of their games at speedrunning events like the Games Done Quick fundraiser, presumably because these events generate a great deal of free advertising for Nintendo's suite of classic games.[100]

Nonetheless, within Jenkins' model of active fandom, the spectator/fan is an empowered participant whose relationship to the professional producers of media is complicated by their multifaceted role as consumer, amateur media producer, advertiser, and networker. Through their viewership, discourse, and direct support of runners through donations and patronage, speedrunning spectators likewise exhibit a collective agency that can challenge corporate expectations for conduct online. Although their viewership directly benefits platform-owning corporations by generating site "traffic" and the attendant potential for revenue through advertising, alternative methods of sponsorship allow some spectators to become quasi-financiers for their favorite runners. The generative potential of spectators as a collective is evident in not only the monetary success of events like GDQ, but also more quotidian events like mid-stream "donation trains" and Patreon subscriptions.

Even so-called "lurkers" — viewers of speedrunning streams and videos who neither contribute their voice in the form of chat messages, forum posts, and live commentary, nor directly finance runners — are an integral part of speedrunners' continued viability as performers. These spectators account for the vast majority of the viewers of the most popular (i.e., revenue-generating) speedrunning streams, and thus, according with Twitch's streamer licensing agreement, help speedrunners achieve the viewership metrics necessary to profit. The impact of "nonparticipatory" spectatorship is similarly more pronounced on YouTube, where speedrunners frequently implore their viewers to subscribe, "like," and comment on their videos in order to reach the necessary threshold for pay. In this way, speedrunners are in some sense beholden to *all* of their spectators — both those who would willingly signal their support

---

[98] Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 55.
[99] Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, 2.
[100] Indeed, the company appears to be "cashing in" on this renewed interest in classic games by means of their own, official emulation services, the pricing for which recently generated some criticism online.

by means of corporate-designated metrics of success (i.e., likes, views, and subscriptions) and those whose *potential* contributions runners seek to capture in the pursuit of compensation.

From a social standpoint, too, spectators are the "fuel" for motivated practitioners. As Wenger asserts, "the experience of meaning is not produced out of thin air, [and] neither is it simply a mechanical realization of a routine or procedure," but instead constructed through interactions with the collective.[101] What might appear to be incredibly "mechanical" for speedrunners — that is, performing the same inputs in a game thousands of times to hone their skills — is transformed drastically within the context of their communities. With an engaged community of viewers, even the repetitive visuals and motions of speedrunning become infused with the possibility for new discussions — new negotiations of meaning in the form of, for example, the unique vernaculars that develop between runners and their dedicated spectators. A runner's "interaction" with the game is in this way thickened by the "reaction" of their audience, and further by their own reactions *to* the audience. Through real-time discourse, a runner and their viewers share in the active, engaged production of "new" scenarios and experiential constructs from the most tediously repetitive of game actions.

Perhaps more significantly, live audiences have demonstrated their potential to collectively navigate and defuse tense situations during streams. 43-year old comedian and mother Ellie Gibson, who started livestreaming *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020) in January 2021, reflects with some astonishment on her spectators' support during an uncomfortable situation:

> I feel safe here. I've streamed for more than a hundred hours now, and contrary to what I would ever have predicted, there have been only a few slightly dodgy incidents. . . . [One] time, someone simply wrote, "You're hot." I was immediately unnerved. I know how quickly these things can escalate from seemingly innocent comments to graphic filth, followed by can't-you-take-a-joke and hideous threats. My mod[erator]s weren't around, and I wasn't sure what to do. Ignore it, and hope he goes away? Make light of it, and risk encouraging him? Shut it down, and get accused of overreacting – which maybe I was? As it turned out, I didn't have to do anything. "You're right, she does look a bit hot actually," said one of my regulars. "Yeah Ellie, maybe turn the central heating down?" wrote someone else. And just like that, with grace and humour, they gently but firmly let the bloke know this wasn't that kind of party. I think that was the first time I realised I'd accidentally created a community. I understood it wasn't about me or my performance, but my relationship with the audience, and their interactions with each other. I began to encourage backseat gaming – inviting (or sometimes begging) people to give me tips on beating the boss or finding the sodding rusty key for the chapel dungeon. I was no longer playing this game on my own. I had a team.[102]

Without the engagement of her community, the situation might well have escalated into a faar more uncomfortable scenario. Indeed, I have witnessed many streams — even those not supported by dedicated moderators — display evidence of community members stepping up to protect streamers from other spectators' toxic comments and to enforce stream policies.

---

[101] Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 52.

[102] Gibson, Ellie. "Why I Started Streaming Video Games on Twitch at the Age of 43." *The Guardian*, 4 June 2021, www.theguardian.com/games/2021/jun/04/why-i-started-streaming-video-games-on-twitch-at-the-age-of-43

Yet for all of the ways in which its communities may appear, for some, a welcome haven from the more "toxic" or "restrictive" corners of the internet, the presence of overriding corporate interests — namely, the ability to profit from the activity of these motivated individuals — will always undermine the notion that speedrunning is somehow more "autonomous" than any other sector of the internet. What game designer Melos Han-Tani suggests about the implication of esports athletes and spectators in a broader corporate framework is worth reasserting in the context of speedrunning and the corporate-owned technologies that permit its existence: "one company usually maintains, controls, and profits from esports . . . Everyone playing (or watching!) the esport is loosely also a worker for the company that makes the game."[103] Despite the real — and much advertised — potential for platforms like Reddit, Twitch, Discord, and YouTube to encourage creativity, collaboration, and interpersonal engagement, the ultimate "authorities" in speedrunning are its corporate proprietors. Indeed, when these media giants deploy the kind of community-oriented rhetoric exemplified by this chapter's epigraph, we can be reasonably confident that their language is calibrated to serve 'the bottom line.'

As discussed in Chapter One, multiple corporations cash in on speedrunning via the various sites of the community's production. In particular, Reddit, Amazon (parent company of Twitch), and Google (owner of YouTube) profit directly from the "communal" activities of speedrunning. Within the context of these media giants, it is difficult to imagine that speedrunners and their associated spectators could produce any meaningful form of "resistance" to corporate interests. Yet in some contexts, as Toby Miller explains, the mass media has been conceived "as a new opportunity and site for mass participation in making meaning, a breakaway from high-cultural dominance and feudal patterns of owning and controlling culture."[104] In this vein, Chapter Three expands on the foundation built in this chapter in order to chart some of the ways in which the collective action of speedrunners and their spectators can serve significant social and conceptual ends beyond the generation of capital for their corporate "engines."

[103] Fickle, Tara et al. "Asian American Gaming." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, 2021, p. 21.
[104] Miller, Toby. "Class and the Culture Industries: Introduction." *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller, Blackwell, 1999, p. 546.

Chapter Three. Eminent Anonymities: Generosity, Masculinity, Legitimacy — Online

> GDQ is how I know that video games are worth it. The friendships, the camaraderie, the generosity, the drive… I've never been prouder of any community.
> — Message from a donor during Awesome Games Done Quick 2020's final event

Two years ago, in an essay that sought to apply postmodern theories of identity to the *Legend of Zelda* video game franchise, I was fascinated by the notion of something Tison Pugh termed "counterplay," or the potential for players to assert their identities through actions that contested the designed constraints of video game play. According to Pugh, the *Legend of Zelda* games offer players the liberatory opportunity to "rewrite heteronormative storylines" through a sort of narrative elasticity emerging from the silence of the games' protagonist, on the one hand, and the freedom with which players could navigate the game world, on the other.[105] Couching my own work within certain thematic elements of the series, I questioned whether the tension between a player's intentions and a game's narrative design Pugh described had any bearing on the "maturation" of the player. Following Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity I posed a pair of questions that I acknowledged at the time to be "philosophical wormholes": "Who are we when we play? If not ourselves, who do we become?" As tricky as these questions are to confront through research, they are still operative in this discussion, on some level. Here, however, I have tried to approach them from a slightly different angle. Thus, while Chapters One and Two investigated the cultural, technological, and social bases for speedrunning, this Chapter shifts the discussion from questions of origination and causality — where speedrunning 'came from' and how it has developed — to questions of signification and consequence — what does speedrunning "mean" to its practitioners? How might it "change" them? If it does not directly condition their behavior, how does it expose them to ways of thinking that have economic, political, and broader social significance?

In retrospect, speedrunning, as an activity that profoundly disrupts gamic narratives, would seem to provide even more fertile ground than the *Legend of Zelda* for studying the subversive potentials of playing 'against the grain.' A few scholars have already explored the kinds of formal disruptions produced when gamers perform speedruns, and indeed, many of the *Zelda* games that were of interest to Pugh have enjoyed an afterlife among speedrunners. For example, James Newman's 2019 article "Wrong Warping, Sequence Breaking, and Running through Code: Systemic Contiguity and Narrative Architecture in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* Any% Speedrun" is deeply concerned with the implications of this temporally troublesome form of play.[106] Fraser McKissack and Lawrence May are similarly fascinated by the sorts of narrative mutations that arise from speedrunning, which they consider a practice of

---

[105] Pugh, Tison. "The Queer Narrativity of the Hero's Journey in Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda Video Games." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 48, 2018, pp. 225-251: 242.
[106] Newman, James. "Wrong Warping, Sequence Breaking, and Running through Code: Systemic Contiguity and Narrative Architecture in The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time Any% Speedrun." *Bringing Together Japan Game Studies and Digital Humanities*, special issue of *Journal of the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2019, pp. 7-36.

"generative rupture" that challenges the constructedness of a game's story in favor of a new architecture designed by the player: "The speedrun is itself a form of collapse, where scripted meaning and intentionality fall away, replaced by the chance and ephemeral story of an emergent, optimized engagement.[107] Exploring further the significance of these narrative mutations to player's identities as they are constructed through play, they suggest that the "queer potentials" of speedrunning stem from players' ability to destabilize "a 'chrononormativity' of game play."[108]

Though not to disavow this pathfinding scholarship, I want to push the way we think about speedrunning in a different direction. Whereas these preceding accounts centered their analysis on the ways in which speedruns trouble games' intended architecture, drawing a relationship between narrative mutations and the behaviors of the player, I want to reverse the polarity of that discussion, looking instead to questions of communal environments, interpersonal engagement, and behavioral conditioning. Moving beyond the instance of the speedrun itself, with all its narrative and chrono-logical implications, this chapter is concerned with the ways by which speedrunning, as a social activity that spans modes of engagement beyond merely "play," helps to condition its participants' behaviors, online and off.

One of the dangers of the resulting discussion lies in the bipolar nature of identity studies. "Identity" is itself a fraught and intangible phenomenon, and its study can lead to essentialization on one extreme and chaotic overdetermination on the other. Whereas an essentialist account of identity might suggest that, for example, one's familial circumstances constitute the only meaningful arena for self-making, post-Freudian accounts employing the notion of overdetermination are often mired by the impossibility of acknowledging — let alone cataloging — all the minute interactions that dynamically contribute to the development of an individual's behavior. After the work of Gubrium and Holstein, I contend that a compelling study of identities in the postmodern world seeks a middle ground between these extremes.[109]

Such a study welcomes the notion that our selves are complex composites constantly negotiating between various socially, politically, and economically conditioned ways of being. Within this model, we need not consider every human activity and experience of equal importance: the diachronic whole of one's family "life" doubtless conditions one's behavior to a degree incommensurate with, say, one's experience of a singular familial "event." However, we are by the same token urged to consider whether the spheres in which we interact — communal, occupational, political, familial — are as clearly demarcated as we might suspect. Within the dizzying postmodern world of informational, affiliative, and visual multiplicity, these interactive categories are confounded by the technologies of mass sociality and connectivity.

To explore how an activity like speedrunning might condition its practitioners on the level of subjectivity, personality, and identity is to wrestle with these abstractions and to navigate their attendant risks. My hope is that this final chapter serves to identify some points of departure for thinking about the formation of identities through culture, as well as to

---

[107] McKissack, Fraser, and Lawrence May. "Running With the Dead: Speedruns and Generative Rupture in Left 4 Dead 1 and 2." *Games and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2020, pp. 544–564.
[108] Qtd. in Fickle, Tara et al. "Asian American Gaming." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, 2021, 25.
[109] Gubrium, Jaber F., and James A. Holstein. "Grounding the Postmodern Self." *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1994, pp. 685–703, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4121525

substantiate through the example of speedrunning prior research on the interconnectedness of cultural identities within the broader realm of social, political, and economic self-making. Drawing from the case studies assembled in Chapters One and Two, the present discussion collects my observations on the social bases for and outcomes of speedrunning as an activity that integrates competitive and collaborative aspects at all registers of the online community experience. Seeking the vocabulary to describe how individuals' identities both make and are made by these online spaces,[110] the discussion draws on thinkers representing various critical eras and vantages.

At bottom, this chapter offers the argument that online communities serve as a site where the paradoxes of postmodern society remain comfortably unresolved, producing subjects who are — for better or worse — more prepared to navigate the often profoundly contradictory circumstances of a postindustrial and neoliberal world. Through gestures that are simultaneously collaborative and competitive, through the cultivation of online personae which are at once personal and anonymous, and through the preservation of ostensibly "autonomous" online spaces under conditions which are, in reality, controlled by private interests, participation in online speedrunning communities reinscribes the foundational dissonances of contemporary neoliberal life in the United States.

These eminent anonymities, the subjects of speedrunning, are at all registers of their engagement with an internet community conditioned to value their own productivity among peers through both technological systems of validation (e.g., likes, followers, subscribers) and communal displays of appreciation. Although online spaces are sometimes heralded as providing opportunities for self-stylization and social connectivity, these systems are less liberating than they may appear.[111] Within this environment, even gestures that would seem to counteract the status quo — what Foucault calls "counter-conduct," or gestures of resistance that emerge outside or on the margins of political and economic life — only serve to reify dominant modes of conduct that are hegemonically constructed by the social collective and the corporation.[112] By privileging certain individuals through systems of achievement, distinction, and validation, speedrunning reveals itself as yet another index against which neoliberal subjects may be measured and evaluated. At the same time, and remarkably, this milieu appears to produce individuals who are to be admired for their inclusiveness, communal hospitality, and interpersonal sociability.

Building on topics discussed in the preceding chapters, the following sections continue to wrestle with the influence of speedrunning's communal dynamics on its practitioners, the persistence and contemporary development of gendered expectations for gamers, the affordances and limitations of social media technologies, the intrusion of economic logics into spaces of leisure, and the perceptions of gamers circulated by the mass media. Spanning social,

---

[110] See: boyd, danah michele. *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*. 2008. University of California, Berkeley, PhD dissertation.

[111] See, e.g., Miller, Daniel et. al. "Visual Images." How the World Changed Social Media, UCL Press, 2016.

[112] Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-1978*, edited by Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell, London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007. For a compelling treatment of the social potentials of counter-conduct, see Death, Carl. (2010). "Counter-conducts: A Foucauldian Analytics of Protest." *Social Movement Studies*, 2010, vol. 9, no. 3.

cultural, technological, economic, and political realms, these phenomena interpenetrate to produce the environment in which speedrunners and their fans carve their niche.

In particular, the first two sections are concerned with two ostensibly opposed behaviors common among members of online speedrunning communities: acts of generosity and collaboration, on the one hand, and masculinized performances of mastery on the other. While I suspect that these behaviors have a common provenance in the social-competitive formulations of arcade culture proposed by Kocurek, I would suggest that the desire for communal advancement and collaboration is a phenomenon as much influenced by practices common in the early days of the internet, which favored attitudes of technological exploration and guidance. The third section locates these behaviors within the broader diffusion of neoliberal principles in the United States at the turn of the century, focusing especially on the ramifications of entrepreneurial 'obsessiveness' for speedrunners and their fans. The project's final section, following this transition to an etic perspective, discusses online speedrunning in the terms of its perception/construction within contemporary media. Drawing a throughline from anxieties surrounding subcultural activity in the 1990s and early aughts, I propose that while outright fear toward gamers has seemed to diminish, vestiges of this attitude remain in the tendency among present-day commentators to regard these passionate individuals with some suspicion. Following Henry Jenkins' reflections on the commonalities between academics and fans, I contend that these perceptions spring from a common basis in American anti-intellectualism, which is here understood as a means to systematically delegitimize activities deemed threatening to conservative conceptions of productivity in a postindustrial nation.

Identity Among Peers: Modeling Generosity and Collaboration in Online Spaces

In her survey of media studies at the turn of the century, Lisa Nakamura explains that, "for the past twenty years, digital media have been posited as a way for individuals to exert more control over their own identities through media making and distribution."[113] Indeed, while we may take for granted the idea that our participation in collectives helps us construct ideas about ourselves, for many scholars, the advent of the internet has revived old questions about how we construct our identities through interactions with each other. Recently, some scholars have paid increased attention not only to the way our self-making processes are changing under the pressures and affordances of online sociality, but also to the notion that technology's relationship to its users is more dynamic than we might have previously believed. As Dana Boyd argues in her dissertation on teens' engagement with social media platforms, for example, the relationship between our use of Internet technologies and the implementation of behaviors "learned" online involves a great degree of exchange and active "reconfiguration":

> While teenagers primarily leverage social network sites to engage in common practices, the properties of these sites configured their practices and teens were forced to contend with the resultant dynamics. Often, in doing so, they reworked the technology for their purposes. As teenagers learned to navigate social network sites, they developed potent strategies for managing the complexities of and social awkwardness incurred by these sites. Their strategies reveal how new forms of social media are incorporated into

[113] Nakamura, Lisa. "Media." *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, New York University Press, 2014, 167.

> everyday life, complicating some practices and reinforcing others. New technologies reshape public life, but teens' engagement also reconfigures the technology itself.[114]

These emergent communities conditioned by "the intersection of people, technology, and practice," what Boyd calls "networked publics," aligns with the image I sketch of speedrunning in Chapter One, as the legacy of an internet culture that favors — and, in some cases, rewards — exploration, independent skill-building, and the sharing of resources and methodologies.[115]

In online speedrunning communities, which cohere around a shared interest and practice, ideas about proper behavior are circulated in various ways. While explicit instructions for conduct are rarely passed from member to member, users do communicate their preferences in their everyday exchange on message boards, fora, and in the comments section of speedrun videos and livestreams. These users may be seen identifying with (and against) each other individually, through targeted discursive engagements (e.g., "direct messages" and replies to specific users within comment "threads"), as well as collectively, through the more community-facing processes of "posting" their thoughts, questions, and achievements within dedicated message boards and other social media spaces. I observe these behaviors as cultivating an atmosphere that welcomes the broad dispersal of knowledge and achievements throughout the larger speedrunning community. Discursive generosity, mutual support, and a culture of communal invitationalism form a throughline across the various online spaces within which speedrunners and their fans interact, including the corporate-owned YouTube, Reddit, Twitch, Discord, as well as user-operated websites and internet fora.

In order to illustrate the ramifications of these community-oriented engagements on broader speedrunning culture, and thus its individual subjects, this section offers two brief case studies of speedrunners producing and disseminating knowledge for the benefit of other runners and fans. Chosen from the handful of examples that emerge each day on Reddit forums like r/speedrun, the following example of one runner's generosity illustrates some of the qualities common to this collaborative culture, including users' keen awareness of their various audiences, a desire for communal growth, and a fundamental interest in connecting with other users.

In September 2021, a member of the *Okami* (Capcom 2006) speedrunning community made a "cross post" (i.e., a post that appeared in two separate Reddit forums) sharing about a trick they discovered the previous night. They claimed that the successful implementation of the trick could save up to two minutes in the *Okami* Any% speedrun category.[116] Embedding a video that demonstrates their work, the contributor also uses their post to explain in detail the technical basis of the trick, taking care to define such community-specific terms as the "Unskew Boost" and "Corner Skew Glitch" for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the particularities of *Okami* speedrunning.

A few points are remarkable here: first, that the user opted to cross-post their findings (and to do so the morning following their discovery) reveals no desire to hoard information, but rather an enthusiasm for the advancement of the Okami speedrunning community. While the user, who is currently the fourth-place record holder for the category to which their discovery is

---

[114] boyd, *Taken Out of Context*, 2.
[115] Ibid, 2.
[116] u/Auride. "New trick to save 2 minutes in Oni Island in New Game." Post in r/speedrun. *Reddit*, 2 Sep. 2021.

relevant, could have used this information to improve their own record in secrecy, they chose to share it almost immediately, and thus to make the advantage available to both their immediate and potential competitors. Of similar significance is the dual rhetorical nature of the post, which reveals an awareness of the two audiences before which the post would appear: a smaller audience that would be familiar with the game and its technicalities (r/Okami) and a broader one that would benefit from additional context and explanation (r/speedrun). Bridging the significance of the discovery for both the immediate *Okami* community and the larger speedrunning community, the post closes on a friendly and invitational tone: "[The demonstrated trick] is pretty precise, but it's fast to retry and saves a lot of time, so it will definitely be incorporated into future top-level speedruns. If you want to learn more about Okami speedrunning, check out our leaderbord [sic] site and Discord server!"[117] Lastly, it is worth noting that Reddit is only one of several sites through which this user shared about their discovery. Providing in the post links to their Youtube channel, Twitter account, Twitch channel, the *Okami* speedrunning Discord group, an *Okami*-dedicated wiki, and the speedrun.com leaderboards for the game, the user may be seen employing language tailored to the particularities of those platforms and their associated audiences.

The depth and variety of the descriptions offered by this particular user represent the kind of generous or 'centrifugal' discourse common to active members of the broader speedrunning community. Displaying an acute awareness of their multiple audiences, community members frequently disperse their latest discoveries throughout the various internet spaces with which they are affiliated. By inviting fellow users into increasingly niche communities of interest, and by duplicating the news of their achievements across platforms, speedrunners and speedrunning fans exhibit both their esoteric gaming knowledge and their facility in navigating the internet's many and overlapping discursive arenas. Furthermore, displaying a kind of sociality founded on the dissemination of knowledge in manners both highly specialized and broadly inclusive, these users model an eagerness to not merely capture fellow users' attention, but also and more significantly to extend the conversation beyond their immediate interlocutors.[118] Not proprietary about their achievements, these young gamers seem thrilled by the thought of generating further social engagement around the activity they love.

A second, more 'visible' example of this collaborative culture of exposition takes the form of speedrunning "history of" videos, which are made public by individual video makers (typically, YouTubers) but are frequently created in concert with the community they detail, with runners contributing 'insider' knowledge and providing footage for the videos. While the appeal of these videos seems to be founded primarily on the showcase of individual runners' mastery, they also tend to convey a strong sense of communal engagement. By chronicling the

---

[117] Ibid.

[118] Especially on YouTube, runners tend to provide generous descriptions of their strategies and anticipate the questions of new viewers. See, e.g., "Slime Rancher Any% Glitchless Speedrun in 12:58." *YouTube*, uploaded by ThePigKing, https://youtu.be/punHV0Ob__s. For a particularly generous FAQ, see also the work of the popular speedrunner, Werster: "Pokemon Soul Silver Glitchless FAQ." *Pastebin*, updated 15 Mar. 2021, https://pastebin.com/vtaerv1k. Of particular note is the way Werster invokes his appreciation for veteran viewers' complementing his own labor by sharing his meticulously assembled knowledge to new viewers: "It'll probably take a while for a lot of people watching to pick up the meaning so I will appreciate everyone who explains how this works (correctly) in chat to new people."

efforts of many different runners within certain speedrunning communities, these videos often construct narratives oriented around dedicated individuals who, with the help of their fellow runners, repeatedly push the limits of what was thought possible with their gameplay.

Youtube creator and speedrunner SummoningSalt, the speedrunning "historian" *par excellence*, attracts millions of viewers with his highly stylized videos, which masterfully employ music, editing, and suspenseful narration to ratchet up viewers' appreciation of these achievements. Through these videos, speedrunners such as Matt Turk, Matthias Rustemeyer, Arcus, Darbian, and many others have achieved recognition far beyond their immediate communities. Other creators, such as Bismuth, Abyssoft, and Karl Jobst have found success with videos formally similar to those of SummoningSalt. What this still-expanding culture of speedrunning histories amounts to is a kind of "second life" for speedrunners, whose successes are broadcasted to the larger community through David-and-Goliath style narratives of achievement against long odds. Narrative spectacles notwithstanding, in reinforcing the notion that the best speedrunners tend to display a strong commitment to both their games *and* their communities, these speedrunning history videos disseminate and amplify attitudes of communal engagement and contribution.

Although we might expect this narrative exaggeration of speedrunners as competitors to raise the stakes of individual achievement, these speedrunning histories seem to have an even stronger effect in drawing new runners to pre-existing communities and fostering camaraderie among runners who collaborate on the videos. Regardless of the acclaim they receive, too, video makers are sure to offer their gratitude at the conclusion of their videos, with many noting the exceptional kindness and cordiality of the contributing community. In doing so, these videos — themselves the products of a creative act and a considerable investment of time — further model behaviors of communal dedication, productivity, and generosity.

"Dreamboats," Flex Shows, Boys at Play: The Dramatics of (Techno)Masculinity

Within online speedrunning communities, the desire to demonstrate mastery over a game would seem to suggest a stark counterpoint to the communally conditioned generosity of users who wish to grow their respective communities. Waxing 'performative' rather than 'informative,' some users are evidently motivated — at least in part — by the competitive validation of holding records and being acknowledged for their skills. In contrast to the more intangible gratification inherent in sharing one's knowledge with an interested audience, the frequent exhibition and dramatization of talent among speedrunners seems to accord with and grow from the systems of validation built into social media platforms. Beyond the times they submit to speedrun.com and other leaderboard sites, that is, particularly skilled speedrunners find in social media and media-sharing platforms like Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube the opportunity to further enshrine their personal accomplishments. View counts, likes, comments, "upvotes," and subscribers thus come to suggest a kind of shorthand for a user's status in the speedrunning community. In this way, the act of personal achievement through play becomes an opportunity for a public performance of gamic — and, as is often the case, 'masculine' — prowess. Beginning with a return to Kocurek's work on arcade culture for historical context, this

section examines the competitive impulse that paradoxically undergirds and runs counter to the attitudes of collaboration and communal inclusivity discussed in the previous section.

The likely antecedent for this celebration of the technological skill of young white men in their 20s and 30s — speedrunning's most 'visible' demographic — is the competitive arcade culture Kocurek discusses in *Coin Operated Americans*. Analyzing press materials from the arcade's golden age, Kocurek argues that popular perceptions of the 1970s and 80s video game arcade were a driving factor in the gender dynamics of gaming as we recognize them today:

> "The gendering of gaming started long before it became a public concern in the 1990s, but there was nothing natural about this process. Rather, it resulted from a constellation of factors: the greater relative freedom of young boys to move through and participate in public culture; the alignment of computer and video game technologies with both military interests and competitive male-dominated sports; the subsequent affiliation of video gaming with violent thematic content; and the ongoing association of technological skill with masculinity. As the video gaming industry exploded in the United States during the 1970s and early 1980s, the medium became a point of articulation for anxieties surrounding broader cultural and economic changes. In particular, the medium ushered in heightened concerns about the state of American young men, who were coming of age in an era of rapid computerization and increased economic insecurity."[119]

Broader assumptions about gender in the mid-to-late 20th century were both troubled and reified by the emergence of this arcade "culture," which had its basis in those same cultural and economic conditions but was often treated as if it were something "new" and thus somehow unaccountable. Not challenging the prevailing attitudes toward masculinity in the economy and the workplace, this arcade culture — one of leisure — also legitimized male competition and, according to Kocurek, bred attitudes resembling "technomasculinity," or the association of technological talents with maleness.[120] In the context of larger-scale societal developments, including the mechanization of labor and the rise of the internet, the exhibition of technological skill during "play" came to represent a male sensibility analogous to social and economic viability.

In this way, for Kocurek, the competitive conditions of arcade gaming echoed the ongoing solidification of neoliberal principles in an increasingly technological economy. In their "play," young men were developing the competitive sensibilities that, while reviled by some commentators, fundamentally reflected the economic development of the nation:

> Gameplay in arcades privileges and values individualized competition, technological fluency, and a type of consumer spending often likened to gambling; it also reinforces what have become prevailing ideas about masculinity. As the United States has shifted to a technologically driven service economy, these values have become more broadly diffused through culture.[121]

---

[119] Kocurek, Carly A. "Introduction." *Coin-operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood At the Video Game Arcade.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, pp. xi-xxvii: xiii.
[120] Ibid., xvii.
[121] Kocurek, "Microcosmic Arcade," 4.

Speedrunning communities would appear to represent a continuation and, in some cases, an exaggeration of this trend: observation of communities' most celebrated runners and the discourse surrounding them traces an image of the speedrunners as technologically savvy young men who possess both digital finesse and a masculine capacity to "break" the very design of their games through narratively and temporally subversive acts of play. As previous sections have indicated, too, the visibility of runners' 'talent' often directly corresponds with the financial success of runners and with their ability to make an occupation out of their 'leisure.'

Masculine displays of domination (over games, competitors, and even 'time' itself) abound in larger speedrunning communities, in which top-level runners have the potential to attract hundreds of live spectators for their attempts. In what is at once an almost "dialogic" behavior reinforced by the frequent interchange of records by talented runners and a 'one man show' before a live audience, runners' highest achievements reveal a corresponding pressure to perform (male) "greatness."[122] On a micro-level, we can observe runners and their audiences celebrating over the successful execution of a trick, such as the aptly named "dreamboat" technique used in some of the immensely popular *Minecraft* speedrun categories. Performing these "clutch" maneuvers both produces personal satisfaction and nets the admiration of spectators. As a runner known as Chrixiam explains it: "[his] favorite thing about running the game is probably just the feeling of being really successful at tricks in the game, especially really difficult tricks. . . . And also the feeling of just having a consistent run up to any point that doesn't have any major mistakes."[123] Another runner, popular for his blindfolded speedruns of *Super Mario 64*, reinforces this sentiment, describing the satisfaction of achieving a new "PB" (personal best time) during a highly attended GDQ event: "Clutches and Backups like that are always really cool to hit . . . There is always something that goes wrong so its really just a main part of a blindfolded speedrun to be able to adapt correctly in these situations. If it actually works out well though . . . its really satisfying."[124]

As the communal significance of the achievement grows, so too does the corresponding performance tend to grow in visual, verbal, and physical dramatics. Upon completing a world-record run for the ever-competitive "120-Star" category of *Super Mario 64*, for example, one runner by the name of "cheese" explains repeatedly, "I don't know what to do," implying that their gamic achievement requires a corresponding performance before the video camera. Pausing briefly as if in contemplation, the runner, wide-eyed and baring his teeth, proceeds to tear off his shirt. The thumbnail for the livestream's corresponding YouTube video boldly declares the runner's world-record-holding status alongside this image of his celebration. In this way, the thumbnail compositionally balances the runner's technological achievement against his hypermasculine exhibition of strength and skin (Fig. 3).[125]

---

[122] See Fickle, "Asian American Gaming," 25.
[123] "How Speedrunners Broke *The Hobbit*." *Youtube*, uploaded by MKarma, 15 Oct. 2021, youtu.be/WJndaDpohSY
[124] u/Bubzia. "I Just PB'd in Blindfolded SM64 - 70 Star Live at GDQ! AMA." Post in r/speedrun. *Reddit*, 10 Jul. 2021. www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/ohtcbc/i_just_pbd_in_blindfolded_sm64_70_star_live_at/h4spfng/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3
[125] "NEW Super Mario 64 120 Star WORLD RECORD in 1:37:50 by Cheese." *YouTube*, uploaded by cheese speedrunning, 1 Mar. 2022, youtu.be/DlXj5o-kGfk

Fig. 3. Speedrunner "cheese" Performing Male Greatness. Screen Capture from speedrun.com.

In accordance with the connection Kocurek draws between male technological skill and the neoliberal economic viability, it seems that the elated whooping, showboating, and shirt-tearing of a runner at the culmination of their latest world-record run is made socially 'permissible' by the fact of the time runners invest in practice. Often celebrating runners' victories over competitors, live chats and comment sections frequently display appreciation for runners' dedicated "grinding," thus couching the discourse of achievement within that of entrepreneurial focus and deservedness. Lauding runners as enterprising individuals who "labor" arduously for their accomplishments, the discourse surrounding speedrunners like cheese reinforces the timeworn ideal of male competence, industriousness, and economic success. Speedrunning thus inures its practitioners to recognize their identities as "both/and": as masterful male competitor/performers boasting technological skills, and as pseudo-intellectual "fans" eager to accumulate and share their hard-won, esoteric knowledge.

Neoliberalism and Its Discontents: The Costs of Competitive Collaboration

As an association of enterprising individuals who autonomously circulate the products of their labor (including the kinds of "resources" discussed in Chapter Two), speedrunning seems to both attract and produce neoliberal subjects motivated by a keen desire for communal progress through self-advancement. It is within this fundamentally political/economic apparatus that the enthusiasm and initiative of speedrunners and their spectators — part of the "how did we get to this point?" query introduced in Chapter One — might be best understood. While many runners seem content with their relative anonymity and more solitary pursuit of improvement, for others, the existence of networks of runners who share that passion raises the "stakes." Indeed, among particularly enterprising runners, recognition by their communities can result in actual compensation and even stable "employment" by companies like Twitch and YouTube. This pathway from a more flexible kind of entrepreneurialism in one's leisure time to the full-time sponsorship or employment by corporations represents the neoliberal ideal of an

individual "goal-oriented, self-directed, committed to acquiring skills and competences for self-advancement" who uses their acquired talents to achieve a market-viable career while retaining a degree of "autonomy" in their labor.[126]

In its alchemy of competitive and collaborative elements, reflected discursively in the way members value both individual productivity and collective betterment, speedrunning reinforces achievement- and success-oriented attitudes toward one's leisure experience. The online video game scorekeeping and adjudication platform Twin Galaxies describes one of its primary goals in precisely these terms, mingling the rhetorics of evaluation and "appreciation" under the umbrella of economic opportunity: "Once a player's performance is evaluated, Twin Galaxies provides competitive leaderboards and built in tournament systems for the performance to be measured against, recorded into, recognized and appreciated. All leaderboard and tournament results feed into a statistical worldwide ranking system, which can be the basis for the potential creation of future economic opportunities for the individual players themselves."[127] In this way, by transferring the ideal of self-determined labor into the realm of play, speedrunning resembles neoliberal capitalistic models in which no subject or endeavor is considered "unproductive."

Within this environment of success, productivity, and victory, an important question remains: "how do you deal with losing?"[128] One of the most poignant reflections on the affective costs of speedrunning comes from a community member seeking advice about his "loss" of a world-record time to a competing runner. For while some members of online speedrunning communities may comfortably consider their work as "contribution" to a larger project, it is clear that, for others, record-holding carries the pressure of a zero-sum game.

To some degree, of course, these attitudes are not mutually exclusive: within contemporary neoliberal societies, one individual's "loss" is ransomed with another's great success, thus legitimizing competition as a means of contributing to the collective. Likewise, among many speedrunning communities, members frequently encourage even the most dominant runners to keep improving their play or to search for new mechanics. One Youtuber espouses this model rather directly in a video on speedrunning "bounties," a phenomenon whereby runners establish financial stakes for the completion of specific objectives. Praising the successful "grind" of a runner who, holding no previous records within the community, was able to claim both fame and capital through his domination of a particular category, the narrator remarks: "What an amazing feat in a field where veterans sometimes seem to have an insurmountable advantage."[129] Even more emphatically, perhaps, the successful video maker SummoningSalt models this eye for experience, success, and "advantage" in his July 2021 AMA thread. When I asked whether his participation in online speedrunning communities had

---

[126] Gooptu, Nandini. "Neoliberal Subjectivity, Enterprise Culture and New Workplaces: Organised Retail and Shopping Malls in India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2009, vol. 44, no. 22, pp. 45-54: 45.
[127] "What Is Twin Galaxies?" *Official Book of TG Guidelines*, 2 Dec. 2021. Accessed Apr. 2022.
[128] u/ZodiacPaladin. "How do you deal with losing a record if you know you can't get it back?" Post in r/speedrun, *Reddit*, 27 Mar. 2022, www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/tphsl9/how_do_you_deal_with_losing_a_record_if_you_know/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf
[129] "The Bounty To Break Melee's Sub-3-Minute Barrier." *YouTube*, uploaded by Practical TAS, 16 Nov. 2021, youtu.be/5j5WDDSXGyI

resulted in any "unexpected lessons," Salt's two-part reply deftly balanced the passion of the modern day fan/creator with the canny, opportunistic eye of the neoliberal entrepreneur:

> From speedrunning itself - if you're going to put a lot of time into something, it's important to enjoy it. I'm spending hundreds of hours per year playing Mike Tyson's Punch-Out to hopefully set a record - the record alone might not make all the time worth it, but since I genuinely enjoy the process, it ends up being more than worth it.
>
> From making videos - I think a big key to success in life is finding something nobody else has done before and getting really good at it. In early 2017 I recognized there was nobody making videos about speedrunning history even though the info was readily available, and thought it could be fun to try putting it together and making it entertaining. Nobody had ever done that before, and as a result I was able to make it big doing that.[130]

Nine months later, the creator's shrewdness appears to have paid off, when the self-made Salt announced his transition to YouTube "fulltime" (Fig. 4.).

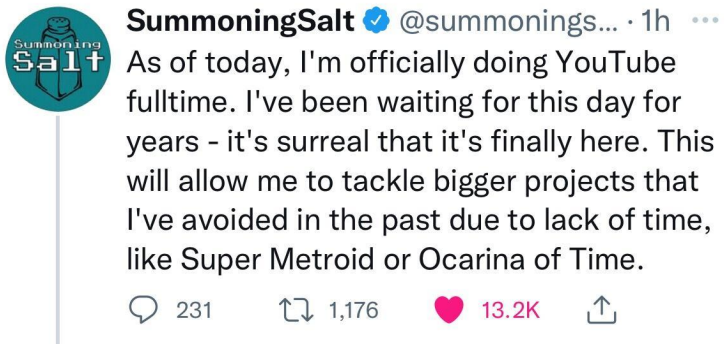

Fig. 4. Creator SummoningSalt Officially "Makes It Big." Screen Capture from Twitter.[131]

If we follow SummoningSalt's logic, it should come as no shock that so many discrete speedrunning communities should emerge from this neoliberal climate which values talent and individual specificity while constantly pushing its subjects to surpass each other. This is at least one way to understand the fact that, according to speedrun.com, there are nearly four times as many distinct games with verified speedruns (23,144 as of April 2022) as there are registered players for *Super Mario 64*, the site's most populous community at 5,972 runners. Factoring in the existence of multiple categories for a particular game and the fact that only a fraction of registered players are considered "active," the very structure of speedrun.com suggests that

[130] u/TheSlyGuy1. "I'm Summoning Salt, a YouTuber and Punch-Out record holder." Post in r/speedrun, *Reddit*, 16 Jul. 2021, www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/olrx4x/hey_everyone_im_summoning_salt_a_youtuber_and/
[131] Thanks are due to Harry Kolb for both notifying me of this announcement and providing the screen capture.

many speedrunners have attempted to follow in SummoningSalt's footsteps by "finding something nobody else has done before and getting really good at it."[132]

I understand this enormous diversity of speedrunning games and categories as evidence of the paradoxical disenchantment/empowerment of neoliberalism in practice. The irony of this system is its all-encompassing entrepreneurial logic: where we do not or cannot succeed, neoliberal society expects us to locate a niche for ourselves in the form of an irreplicable and market-viable skill set. As we have seen with "exceptional" individuals like Salt and oatsngoats, the demonstration of these skills can propel the young entrepreneurs to re-enter the stratum of competition which their pioneering acts might once have presumed to escape. In this way, the most popular and skilled speedrunners and speedrunning creators, in their perfection of skills initially developed through "leisure," can be corralled into yet another capitalistic milieu demanding of their labor and productivity. In turn, even though they represent the vast majority of all active speedrunners, individuals who are deemed to lack talent and entertainment value or who lack the prestige conferred by record-holding may be left feeling profoundly isolated in their "loss."[133] Evidently, though, some runners manage to remain optimistic. As one community member explains in their reply to the individual who lost their world-record to a new competitor: "One thing you learn quickly with speedrunning as well is that you will go far beyond any limit you first think you have, and the biggest enemy you have in speedrunning is not the game or its difficulty, but your own mind."[134]

Fear of the Fans: Subcultural Passion and Legitimacy in the Contemporary United States

As Kocurek explains in the context of 1970s and 80s arcade culture, the image of the obsessed gamer has troubled American media and politics for decades, yet expressions of outright 'fear' toward subcultural activity may be traced more emphatically in the wake of the horrific Columbine High School massacre perpetrated by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris on April 20th, 1999. In media responses to the shooting, for example, much would be made of the fact that Harris, at 15, was not merely an avid 'player' of id Software's groundbreaking first-person-shooter, *Doom*, but also an active 'producer' of custom levels for the game. As evidence emerged following the shooting, rumors circulated that Harris and Klebold had actually rehearsed the massacre using a "Columbine level" designed by Harris.[135] At the same time, of course, reporters for ABC news believed they had uncovered a rather different 'motive,' albeit similarly grounded in notions of a "dark, underground . . . movement" troubling the safety of children and families nationwide:

> Well, since yesterday we've heard a lot of speculation about the two suspects and their group the Trench Coat Mafia, with police saying the boys may have been part of a dark,

[132] Ibid. Chris Patterson makes a similar suggestion regarding speedrunning objectives "so niche that [they lower] the competition threshold." Qtd. in Fickle, Tara et al. "Asian American Gaming." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, 2021, p. 25.
[133] u/ZodiacPaladin, "How do you deal with losing?"
[134] Ibid.
[135] "Eric Harris's Doom WAD Levels." *Lost Media Wiki*, updated 3 Nov. 2021, lostmediawiki.com/Eric_Harris%27s_Doom_WAD_levels_(partially_lost_Doom_WAD_levels;_1990s)

> underground national phenomenon known as the Gothic Movement and that some of these Goths may have killed before.[136]

In the scramble to either locate or convincingly speculate upon the shooters' motivations, media reports in the aftermath of Columbine tended to converge on one notion: the two were "deeply involved" in an unnatural, alternate culture founded on the idolization of violence and taboo.[137] As the massacre's originator, Harris in particular was offered as an obsessed individual ready to deploy what he learned from violent media and from his participation in a fringe subcultural faction. Harris was an anomaly, but ABC's report and so many others were careful to suggest that he was also a representative.[138]

Fast forward twenty years, and while the plainly stated fear of gamers, fans, and their associated subcultures appears to have diminished, the mass media continue to emphasize the perceived obsessiveness and social alterity of gamers. Washington Post columnist Petula Dvorak, for example, has gained some notoriety among r/speedrun users who have noted her condescension toward gamers in a January 2022 piece about GDQ founder Mike Uyama, titled "His mom didn't nag when he was a lost 20-something playing video games in her basement. $35 million later, she's glad she didn't."[139] Dvorak's prior articles on gaming have frequently put the activity in scare quotes, often balancing what seems to be genuine concern for her own son's well-being with a tone of dramatized resignation at 'the way things are going.'[140] In framing the GDQ piece as a narrative of mother and son, too, Dvorak draws on hackneyed notions of gaming's generational impermissibility: "Mom was ready for it, no matter how weird. Susan Tenenbaum was used to her child's outside-the-box way of existing in the high-achieving D.C.-area bubble."[141] Writing in regard to her own son's gaming aspirations just a year prior, Dvorak had posed the question rather directly ("this is a hobby, not a career. Right?"), and lamented what she seemed sure her child — without her own firm parenting, that is — would become: "a pale, flabby, blue-hued version of her sweet son, wired into the digital world, friendless, unemployed and surrounded by pizza boxes and empty 2-liters of diet soda."[142]

In many ways, as represented by Dvorak, this perception of gamers as deluded individuals whose gluttonous hobbyism distracts from more 'productive' pursuits evokes the climate of anti-intellectualism in America. As Henry Jenkins notes in his Introduction to *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, the fan identity — and, by extension, that of the gamer — lies not far

---

[136] "The Goth Phenomenon." *ABC News*, broadcast 21 April 1999, www.acolumbinesite.com/links/goth.html
[137] Ibid.
[138] For a report that contests this typification of the shooters, opening with the claim "they weren't goths or loners," see Toppo, Greg. "10 Years Later, The Real Story Behind Columbine." *USA Today*,13 April 2009, usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-04-13-columbine-myths_N.htm
[139] For Reddit users' reactions to Dvorak's GDQ piece, see u/rafaelloaa. "Washington Post Profile of Mike Uyama, GDQ As a Whole." Post in r/speedrun, *Reddit*, 18 Jan. 2022, www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/s7e6tb/washington_post_profile_of_mike_uyama_gdq_as_a/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf
[140] For more of Dvorak's denigration/resignation, see especially: Dvorak, Petula. "The Summer of Pale." *The Washington Post,* 26 Jul. 2018; Ibid. "Fortnite for Moms." *The Washington Post*, 6 Apr. 2020; Ibid. "I'm trying not to hate this." *The Washington Post*, 11 Oct. 2021. For a more evenhanded account of speedrunning's charitable potentials, see Hanifie, Sowaibah. "Australian Speedrunning Marathon Gaming Event Held in Adelaide Ahead of AVCon." *ABC News Australia*, 21 Jul. 2017.
[141] Dvorak, Petula. "His Mom Didn't Nag." *The Washington Post*, 13 Jan. 2022.
[142] Ibid. "My Son's Clever Plea." *The Washington Post*, 26 Nov. 2015.

removed from the academic identity, also characterized by passionate intensity and specialization but frequently denounced for its perceived elitism and lack of tangible productivity.[143] Writing in 1963, Richard Hofstadter defines anti-intellectualism more specifically as "a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life."[144] Despite favoring values like creativity, dedication, and collaboration, speedrunning, as a pseudo-intellectualistic fan culture that champions the circulation of esoteric knowledge, may be subject to similar suspicions and resentments.

Yet there may be an even stronger reason why gamers continue to be perceived in this way: as Kocurek articulates so well, these individuals are in many cases developing skills that are perceived as not only marks of entitlement, but also, and increasingly, as an economic 'threat' in the digital age. In their comprehensive gloss on the topic, contributors to the nonprofit think tank and social justice project Studio ATAO explain that "at its core, anti-intellectualism is a reaction to changes that threaten existing claims to knowledge, privilege, and access to power."[145] My speculation here is that gaming, as an activity that has increasingly led to real-world opportunities and occupations for its practitioners, produces a similar reaction founded upon similar anxieties.

Where do we go from here? ATAO contributors believe that meaningful change starts with a simple imperative: "normalize and accept the idea of not knowing everything and embrace it as motivation for ongoing growth and learning."[146] If this project registers as somewhat utopian, it is because my engagement with online speedrunning communities this past year has suggested that such a shift in attitude might be possible. At the very least, the kindness I have witnessed — and that I, in several cases, received firsthand — makes me hopeful. Not to scoff at what speedrunners have already accomplished, either, it bears repeating that total donations during GDQ fundraisers since 2011 are approaching US$40 million.[147] "All that," Dvorak is keen to remind us, "in jeans and t-shirt."[148] If we manage to set aside her cynicism, there is yet something profound in that reflection. Progress need not begin and end with the button-down, the office building, the workday.

---

[143] Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. NYU Press, 2006. Noted film scholar David Bordwell corroborates this point in his online article "Studying Cinema," remarking that "in intriguing ways the specialized discourse of fans runs parallel to that of academics." Bordwell, David. "Studying Cinema." *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, 2000, davidbordwell.net/essays/studying.php

[144] Qtd. in Huang, Edric et al. "Understanding Anti-Intellectualism in the U.S." *Studio ATAO*, 4 Sep. 2020, https://www.studioatao.org/post/understanding-anti-intellectualism-in-the-u-s

[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid.

[147] "All Events." Donation log for Games Done Quick, updated 2022, gamesdonequick.com/tracker/

[148] Dvorak, "His Mom Didn't Nag."