

**Why Speed Matters:  
Collective Action and Participation in Speedrunning Groups**

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## **Abstract**

This major research paper focuses on the practice of speedrunning a videogame and how speedrunning's interactive and cooperative nature establishes groups through alternative forms of social interaction and participation. In challenging traditional ideas of a hegemonic, unified community, I seek to bring in theories outside of community formation to present different ways to think about and with community formation. By interviewing speedrunners, I highlight how speedrunning does not form concrete communities with rigid social structures, but instead assemblages of individuals that co-create through a collaborative practice. Looking at social groups in this way can help us better understand how people in these groups can remain an individual collaborating with other individuals without being forced to conform to predetermined social expectations or structures.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction: Starting the Run.....	1
The Strats: Analytical and Experiential Frameworks .....	6
The Run: Interview Results.....	29
Conclusion: The Final Time.....	43
Bibliography.....	47

## List of Figures

- Figure 1:** Screenshot from BrownMan, “!store | Soul Silver Randomizer | @RayNarvaez Jr.” Twitch Video.....3
- Figure 2:** Screenshot from Games Done Quick, “Super Metroid Reverse Boss Order by ShinyZeni in 1:06:02 – AGDQ2019.” YouTube Video.....18
- Figure 3:** Screenshot from Games Done Quick, “Bloodborne by heyZeusHeresToast in 1:37:49 – AGDQ 2018 – Part 149.” YouTube Video.....19

## Introduction: Starting the Run

Videogames are important. Videogames are meaningful. These are ideas new media and game theorists, as well as videogame players, have been arguing for since shortly after the Magnavox Odyssey – the first home videogame console – was released in 1972. Videogames undoubtedly have a history as rich and nuanced as film or any other recent form of creative expression. “Whether it is their capacity to stimulate participation in an Internet-connected age or their role as a platform for entertainment, intervention, authorship, and subversion, computer games – indeed, all games – are highly relevant to the twenty-first-century imagination.”<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the practice of speedrunning, a very particular approach to playing videogames, and how speedrunning groups offer a unique social construction which can challenge traditional ways of understanding social interaction and community formation. I will refer to these groups as groups and not communities. I do this to highlight the various sub-groups present within the practice of speedrunning and to downplay the notion that a unified, overarching speedrunning community exists, suggesting in its place there is only a connecting practice and way of playing a game.

Speedrunning is a player trying to beat a videogame as quickly as possible. Sometimes this means becoming very technically proficient at a game, playing through levels and chapters as quickly as possible. Other times it includes exploiting the game’s code to utilize glitches to skip entire sections of a game. Both ways of playing involve

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 251.

looking for and developing strats – strategies for optimizing a playthrough or run of a game in order to save as much time as possible. This can result in the completion of a 30 plus hour game in a matter of minutes. There are many aspects that make speedrunning unique and interesting to study: the formation of groups from the ground-up; the multiplicity and fluidity of roles within that group; individuality felt within a greater collective; the social bonds and relationships formed within that collective; and the ability to bring a large group of people together to undertake time consuming tasks for no measurable monetary or traditional social gain.

Virtual communities and the sense of sociability felt therein have been the subject of a large body of academic literature in recent years. This scholarship primarily consists of trying to understand how people experience a virtual community in opposition to a more traditional face-to-face locative community. Stemming from David McMillan and David Chavis' theory of face-to-face communities being focused around the experienced sense of a community, most studies try to determine what provides this sense of community in a virtual setting, or try to understand why people join the community.<sup>2</sup> This research has extended in recent years to analyzing engagement in online communities through the same experiential lens. Studies of engagement in online videogame communities often look at a more recent development in gaming and new media – the practice of livestreaming a videogame – due to its communal and participatory nature.

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<sup>2</sup> David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory," *Journal of Community Psychology*, no. 14 (1986), 6-23.

Game livestreaming is the act of a streamer broadcasting a video feed of themselves playing through a videogame in real-time to viewers over the internet. Usually a streamer will use an open-source software program such as Open Broadcast Software (OBS) to capture the gameplay and directly upload the feed to Twitch – a site dedicated to broadcasting livestreams with a primary focus on videogame livestreams. This feed is often accompanied by a smaller overlay of a webcam feed of the streamer and any other graphical overlays (usually used to display the streamer’s social media handles as well as donations and new subscribers). Twitch also incorporates a chat feature, which allows viewers to interact with other viewers as well as the streamer – who will often respond to messages or questions while they are playing – in a live chatroom setting (figure 1).

Although Twitch’s recent rise in popularity has helped speedrunning grow as a practice, Twitch acts merely as an interface for speedrunners to engage with and is not central or crucial to the practice itself.



**Figure 1:** Screenshot of BrownMan’s Twitch stream of *Pokémon Soul Silver* (2010) from April 23, 2019. On the right side of the image is Twitch’s chat feature, while the left section is comprised of the streamer’s overlays with live gameplay in the middle.

With this research, I want to primarily understand why people watch and engage with these speedruns and their surrounding groups, and what people’s roles are within those groups. More crucially, I want to investigate what they can offer new media and gaming theorists in terms of changing the framework surrounding community,

membership, and community formation instead of continuing to shoehorn these groups into traditional notions of online communities and connectivity. I believe speedrunning groups demonstrate an assemblage which is based on the level of the individual. This allows for creative collaboration and co-creation across groups without eliminating personal difference or heterogeneity.

My methodology is to challenge the traditional community theory used to study online groups. Instead I will turn to several other areas of study to build a more fluid framework that accounts for individuality and difference within collaborative online groups. From this framework I conduct a series of qualitative interviews with various speedrunners. I try to allow for the responses from interviewees to stand as conclusions in and of themselves, as the aim of this paper is to investigate how individuality is manifested in a collective online group centered around gaming and the act of play. I hope this approach will help create a broader way of looking at these types of groups and collectives from a more experiential, individual perspective which is not hindered by ready-made frameworks used to try to understand these groups and practices.

The intention and motivation for writing this major research paper comes from a highly personal desire to alter the conversations people have around both videogames and online communities focused around videogames. I suppose this paper has been in the writing process for over 20 years when, as a child, I began playing videogames and making friends over a mutual love for certain games. It must also be noted that there are innumerable varieties of online communities and groups: chat rooms, forums, video streaming services like YouTube, live-streaming platforms such as Twitch, and MMO

(massive multiplayer online) videogames, to name only a few. To claim or even attempt to develop a methodology with which to analyze all types of online groups (even those specifically focused around videogames) would be impossible. Thus, there are numerous gaming communities or groups that will not be discussed within the confines of this research paper, as my focus is speedrunning groups specifically.

However, that does not mean there is no connectivity with other types of online groups. Part of my hope upon finishing this research is to allow readers to inject their own subjective experiences and knowledge into this analysis and find ways to understand their place within a larger social group. To some degree I do not consider myself the sole author of this paper, but a contributor to groups whose experiences already constitute a rich body of material worth examining. This research paper is an attempt to enter into a discussion about subjective experiences had by both myself as well as members of the groups which I look at; to identify an emotive, personalized and yet at the same time collective and communal experience without placing people as predetermined cogs within a greater structure of social interaction. I conceive of this paper not strictly as an analysis consisting of a thesis, interviews, data collection, and a definite conclusion, but also as a system of operations, a network of discussions spreading into the ever-expanding field of videogames and online communication.

I have attempted to structure this paper like a speedrun. In the first section I lay out previous community theory and set up my paper (the run) and the theories I engage with – the strats I will take during the run – at the outset. I expand on traditional community theory used when studying online communities and specific extensions of it

into new media. I also introduce speedrunning more thoroughly and suggest why I believe it can help us begin to understand these groups from a less deterministic, less formulaic framework. In the second section I look at where my interviews could take my conclusions and these theories – in other words, I run the game. I bring in findings from my interviews with runners to support these ideas with more concrete examples. Finally, I expand my arguments – and conclude the run – beyond the confines of this research paper and its focus on speedrunning communities, allowing readers to find ways to apply this framework to various other areas of online interaction.

### **The Strats: Analytical and Experiential Frameworks**

Ideas of social play have circulated around different groups of thinkers as well as videogame developers in an effort to understand what effect play can have on people in social settings, and if videogames are as isolating as the lone gamer stereotype has for so long perpetuated. The general consensus among game and play theorists is that social play differs greatly from isolated play, and that people experience their games differently when playing with other people. Playing against or cooperatively with other players addresses people's needs for interaction in ways that single-player play can not, to the point that "Game researchers have found that emotional responses change when players compete against real people rather than computers."<sup>3</sup> It has also been theorized that this feeling of interactivity and sociability is increased when playing with people you know

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 43-44.

(such as friends and family).<sup>4</sup> However, what happens when we play single player games with each other; when we play a game designed for solo play in a collective and/or cooperative setting?

Spectating while other people play videogames has always been a fundamental component of gameplay. Despite the recent influx of technologies and platforms dedicated to this practice, watching others play games is not a new phenomenon. Whether it was watching and waiting at an arcade machine or passing a single controller between friends on a couch, spectating as a form of multiplayer interaction has always been present in gaming.<sup>5</sup> It is also agreed upon by game theorists that this is a highly rewarding and enjoyable social experience, with pleasure being gained from “participation in gameplay with others, or from being a spectator of one.”<sup>6</sup> Whether it entails sharing knowledge or secrets about a game – especially before the internet and gaming forums – or having a second pair of eyes watching the screen helping you solve in-game puzzles, gameplay has always involved a collective process. Despite initial stereotypes, games have always been about sociability and cooperative engagement. And in large part, this process and engagement is attractive because we know what is going to come next in a videogame, and we know “exactly what our friends and family members are getting themselves in for.”<sup>7</sup> This sharing of a player’s previous knowledge with

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<sup>4</sup> Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 366.

<sup>5</sup> T.L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Aki Jarvinen, “Understanding Video Games as Emotional Experiences,” *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, ed. Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2009), 106.

<sup>7</sup> McGonigal, *Reality is Broken*, 88.

another player – whether it be in a real time environment (face to face or over a live stream with a chat feature) or through an asynchronous chat forum – is a kind of collective engagement in large part made possible because of knowledge collaboration.

Knowledge collaboration is a popular area of discussion in studies looking at online message boards and communities as they exemplify a trans-local sharing of information that does not have to take place in real time. This means that one user can leave a message, and either one minute, or one month later, another user can respond. This opens up countless new avenues of connectivity and interaction. Most studies around online communities, not necessarily specific to videogames, find that location does not define community. Instead, behavior within a social setting does, and that, “virtual community members begin enacting community-like behaviors (e.g. help and support) and processes initially in order to achieve some other goal (e.g. to share information about a hobby).”<sup>8</sup>

Studies focusing on online and videogame-centric communities will typically focus on one of two things: first, a sense of community felt by members; and second, how forms of play and creation involved in videogame communities can be exploited by platforms and game companies as a form of free labour.

A highly cited and influential analysis of online communities and the sense of community felt by their respective members is McMillan and Chavis’ “Sense of

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<sup>8</sup> Anita L. Blanchard and M. Lynne Markus, "The Experienced 'Sense' of a Virtual Community: Characteristics and Processes," *Database for Advances in Information Systems* 35, no. 1 (2004): 69.

Community: A Definition and Theory.” It looks at the dynamic processes in communities as crucial to developing an idea of community not defined by location. This idea, that dynamic non-linearity allows unique opportunities not present in traditional locative communities, is prevalent in many studies surrounding online communities.<sup>9</sup> Due to these new dynamic processes, communities can no longer be defined as a group of people within a specific location or even by traditional societal or communal roles and hierarchies, as their non-locative nature often dismantles these structures. They are replaced by structures created by members of the community. In the online, in-game world of an MMO or other multiplayer game, this means that it is up to players to collaboratively “use the conditions of the world to establish their own cultural conventions and institutions.”<sup>10</sup> The experience of feeling that you are a part of a community becomes the main area of focus. In their study, McMillan and Chavis identify four elements which work together to create a sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection.<sup>11</sup>

Membership is defined as an individual’s feelings of being a part of a group; of being a member. This includes, most importantly, boundaries which separate members from non-members. These boundaries provide members with feelings of security – a protection of group interests – and allows members to identify with other members of the

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<sup>9</sup> For studies in which these ideas are both directly and indirectly present, see Banks and Humphreys (2008), Bruns (2008), Faraj et al. (2011), Grabher and Ibert (2014), Gulbrandson and Just (2011), and Spilker et al. (2018).

<sup>10</sup> Castronova et al, “Synthetic Worlds as Experimental Instruments,” *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, ed. Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2009), 287.

<sup>11</sup> McMillan and Chavis, “Sense of Community,” 9.

group to create a sense of personal investment. There is a clearly delineated group with which a member can identify or feel a sense of belonging. Identification is a key factor, and, “may be represented in the reciprocal statements ‘It is my group’ and ‘I am part of the group.’”<sup>12</sup> Influence is defined more concretely as the desire members have to be able to influence or produce effect on a community, while simultaneously allowing a community to influence them to conform. This allows for group cohesiveness and validation for members through conformity and influence, as “influence of a member on the community and influence of the community on a member operate concurrently.”<sup>13</sup> Integration and fulfilment of needs is simply defined as reinforcement and the desire for reward as well as rewarding other people. Finally, shared emotional connection is discussed as a very broad and nebulous feeling, but at its base relies on the fact that all members can identify with a shared history, and that shared experiences strengthen communal bonds.<sup>14</sup>

These notions have been taken up by new media theorists in an attempt to understand what makes an online community exactly that: a community. However, rarely is McMillan and Chavis’ model challenged. It is altered or adjusted to suit the digital medium being studied, but the focus of how community is formed is never expressly challenged. I find this model of research lacking because although the nature of a sense of community can be experiential and subjective, it places importance on the influence

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 13-14.

these communities have over members to conform and perform certain predetermined actions, trying to delineate a sense of community as a co-created product of those actions.

In their attempt to understand a sense of virtual community, Anita Blanchard and M. Lynne Markus begin to challenge this framework but inevitably fall into the same model of looking at virtual communities. Their criticism of McMillan and Chavis is that the study has never been challenged due to the complexity of the dynamic processes which McMillan and Chavis present as creating a sense of community. Additionally, Blanchard and Markus claim that,

What we do not know from the literature is whether the processes of SOVC [sense of virtual community] cause SOVC feelings, whether the feelings cause the processes, or whether the feelings and the processes emerge together. McMillan and Chavis' theoretical model implies the last alternative. We propose the processes come first...SOVC results from the continued production of these community-like behaviors. Because SOVC is intrinsically satisfying to members, they continue to perform the behaviors that create it.<sup>15</sup>

They ultimately disagree with McMillan and Chavis' progression to how a sense of community is felt. Instead of attesting that the feeling of being a part of a community occurs at the same time as the actions of members, they contend that the actions of members create a sense of community.

Both analyses assume that there are fundamentally two levels to a community: the individual and the larger social structure. The debate becomes what comes first, the individual's actions or the formation of the larger structure and feelings had therein. The

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<sup>15</sup> Blanchard and Markus, "The Experienced 'Sense' of a Virtual Community," 69.

argument in both is that there is a direct correlation between the definitive action of the individual and the sense of community within the overarching social structure. They are trying to understand a traditionally linear and chronological progression from the individual to the communal structure. In speedrunning groups, the dichotomy between individual and community is collapsed, and the community is formulated on the level of the individual. In this way the term community cannot be applied in this overarching sense to speedrunning groups because the focus of the groups are the individuals themselves as people and not only their actions as contributing to a larger structure.

In their text *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt look at the multitude as a communal network for resistance. The multitude is, “composed of a set of *singularities* – and by singularities here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different...the multitude, however, although it remains multiple, is not fragmented, anarchical, or incoherent.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, reducing this multitude to a measurable community reduces their differences into a single identity.<sup>17</sup> Traditionally this is what is done with online community studies, as the individual becomes first and foremost a member of a larger community.

There are also many actors and components at play within these groups, both human as well as different non-human technologies: videogames, software like OBS for

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 99.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

streaming, as well as hardware used for streaming and playing these games. Humans and non-humans composing a community are explained in actor-network theory as actants. “Society, organizations, agents, and machines are all effects generated through the interactions of actor-networks. A person, for example, can not be understood as an isolated entity; instead, he or she is always linked to a heterogeneous network of resources and agents that define the person as the specific person in question.”<sup>18</sup> Certain actants will often stand-in for and represent complex sub-networks, acting as a translation and a type of black-box or simplification. In a study of the operating system Linux as an open-source development community, Ilkka Tuomi gives a government body as an example, saying, “sometimes we can talk about ‘the British Government’ without having to know what are its exact processes and who are the people that constitute it.”<sup>19</sup> The labelling of a larger, overarching community or social structure in traditional community theory does not highlight the individual actants that constitute a community or group.

This kind of analysis, the reduction of a number of individuals – or actants – engaging in a collective practice to a single identity, is common in nearly all studies concerning online communities.<sup>20</sup> In these studies there is an assumed horizontality and a universal sameness within a community. Similar to a more traditional locative social structure, the individual is seen first and foremost as a member of a larger community.

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<sup>18</sup> Ilkka Tuomi, “Internet, Innovation, and Open Source: Actors in the Network,” *First Monday* 6, no. 1 (2001): 8, doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v6i1.824>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> One exception to this would be discussion/thread-based forum communities, as they do allow for individuality among responses. However, I do not focus on these communities as they are interactions among individuals online but are not as focused around a specific collective practice.

My challenge is that these studies and frameworks over emphasize conformity and eliminate individuality. They do not focus on the verticality of a communal group; differentiation and difference within a group that can encompass age, gender, and ability to name only a few. Speedrunning, however, offers us a way to think through collaboration and online community formation through the cooperation between a multitude of actants who retain their individuality within these groups.

Before discussing speedrunning and its relations to traditional community studies, it is important to first outline how I am defining community within the confines of this paper, and why I will refer to speedrunning groups, not speedrunning communities. I define community as a rigid overarching social structure which people are members of. Members of these communities are expected to perform predetermined actions of engagement which can be measured and understood through analysis. Conversely, groups will be defined as much looser assemblages which consist of a multitude of individuals. These structures are not concrete or absolute and can be ephemeral and loosely formed. In this context we can turn to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's notions of polyphony and precarity to better understand the nature of these groups and how I define them.

Tsing says that in precarity we are, "unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. We can't rely on the status quo; everything is in flux."<sup>21</sup> Without a stable

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<sup>21</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

communal structure, groups become a kind of assemblage, which are “open-ended gatherings.”<sup>22</sup> Within these assemblages exists what Tsing refers to as polyphony. Musically, polyphony is the opposite of monophony. Monophony is a single melodic line being played by a single instrument. This can extend to homophony, in which one melody is dominant, and all other accompanying harmonies and chords exist only to support that melody. In a homophonic composition, various instruments work and play together in unified harmony and rhythm, offering a stable sound. This is how I define a community; as a kind of stable homophony in which members are the accompaniment to the monophonic melody – the communal structure. Conversely, polyphony is, “music in which autonomous melodies intertwine.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, a polyphonic assemblage is, “the gathering of these rhythms, as they result from world-making projects, human and not human.”<sup>24</sup> My definition of a speedrunning group incorporates this idea of a polyphonic assemblage and not notions of a homophonic community, as found in traditional community studies.

Although there is not much academic literature written on speedrunning groups specifically, many of the studies on gaming communities center around modding: a similarly collaborative practice of engaging with videogames, but with distinct and important differences from speedrunning. Modding is when a player modifies – or mods – a game to create new levels, game modes, or change the physics and mechanics of a game to make it feel and play like an entirely new game. This can include anything from

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 24.

graphical updates, new control schemes, or using a game's assets and resources to create an entirely new spin-off game. This will often be done by a group of people who work together to take on various roles based on their technical proficiencies to create a mod. A mod can help extend a game's life by completely changing the core mechanics and gameplay of the game, creating a completely new final product to play.<sup>25</sup> These mods are typically open-sourced software; they are free for anyone to download.

The fact that they are typically open-sourced has become the main area of focus and, often, the main area of contention in analyses of modding communities and the practice of modding. The primary research is focused on Julian Kücklich's notion of playbour; a way in which leisure industries can sell and prolong the life of their products through what is essentially open-sourced labour masked as play or hobbies. This allows creators to exploit modders who are viewed by these leisure industry companies as participating in nothing more than an escapist hobby.<sup>26</sup> These modders are often exploited by these companies and ultimately provide a form of free labour through activities such as modding. This has led to research trying to pin down the specific monetary value of a game modification and placing a measurable value on the work undertaken by modders. Even though there is some disagreement about the value of the actions of modders, the same framework exists of looking at how these objects can add monetary value to a game or otherwise extend its life.

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<sup>25</sup> I personally have repurchased and replayed games in order to play them with specific mods installed.

<sup>26</sup> Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *Fibreculture Journal* no. 5 (2005): 4-5, <https://doaj.org/article/8c55373d52334369b1708c1f0ac07fee>.

I also argue that these studies – in which modding communities are being viewed as an overarching entity – exist because in modding communities the focus of the community is the larger group, not the individual modders. They simply contribute to creating a tangible end product. It is in this way that these communities fit into analyses around online community formation. Although there are sub-groups and smaller modding communities focused on specific games, the structure remains the same; an individual is reduced to a functioning part of a larger community whose actions can be measured and accounted for. It is a communal structure which does not incorporate the individual; only their actions towards a larger goal-oriented structure. Furthermore, the studies that look at modding communities hold the outcome or product in high regard. This is why so many debates and discussions emerge around ownership and the fact that most of these members are doing free work, essentially volunteering to perform hard labour with no real personal monetary gain. While the finished product is an important element of speedrunning, the intermingling of this outcome with the collective process of achieving that outcome is also a large part of what constitutes the uniqueness of these groups.

This overview of previous online community theories and counter-theories of fluid groups, multitudes, and assemblages allows me to look in detail at the development of speedrunning as a practice and how it specifically helps scholars of new media to rethink how we study collaboration and online communities.

Speedrunning is not a new practice in the videogame world. It started with the release of id Software's revolutionary first-person shooter (FPS) game, *DOOM* (1993).<sup>27</sup> *DOOM* was the first game that allowed players to record small demo files of their playthroughs. Demo files were data stores which would record all button inputs performed by a player, allowing them to be played back as a type of recording of the playthrough. Although there is no definitive start to speedrunning, as people could try to improve their own times before *DOOM* was released, these demo files spawned the first sites and forums dedicated to speedrunning.

Along with technological development in both online communication as well as in gaming itself, speedrunning as a practice has reached broader public attention. No longer only a niche interest for videogame players, the success of Games Done Quick (GDQ), a bi-annual charity speedrunning stream consisting of Awesome Games Done Quick in the winter and Summer Games Done Quick in the summer, demonstrates the mass appeal of speedrunning. Each GDQ



Figure 2: Screenshot of the Awesome Games Done Quick 2019 stream, moments before the final speedrun of the event.

consists of a week long, 24 hour a day livestream of non-stop live speedruns, sometimes with more than 200,000 people watching (figures 2 and 3).<sup>28</sup> Any one GDQ can consist

<sup>27</sup> For an in-depth and comprehensive look at the history of speedrunning, see retro (2018).

<sup>28</sup> Twitch metrics, "GamesDoneQuick," twitchmetrics.net, accessed January 17, 2019, <https://www.twitchmetrics.net/c/22510310-gamesdonequick>.



**Figure 3:** Screenshot of speedrunner heyZeusHeresToast running *Bloodborne* (2015) during Awesome Games Done Quick 2018.

of over 100 games, each of which will have its own speedrunning group. These groups work collaboratively to help develop new and better ways to speedrun that particular game. And this can be done for just about any game, old or new, widely played or not. While the age or popularity of a game may affect the ultimate size of the groups spawned, these factors are in no way limiting to whether or not a group of gamers, even just a few, can form a group and work together in a collective effort to find ways to speedrun a game.

Speedrunning, like modding, involves work. At times, it can be very laborious and is almost always an extremely time-consuming process. This includes endless practice – what is referred to as grinding – to improve personal best times on runs and be able to consistently perform a run as flawlessly as possible. And this labour differs greatly for any one person in a group. One runner may look for what are known as strats – strategies for optimizing a playthrough or run of a game in order to save as much time as possible. Sometimes this involves taking a new route through an area in a game. Other times it involves looking at a game’s code and data values to determine a very precise set of frame perfect inputs the player must perform in order to skip entire sections of a game, sometimes allowing a player to beat a multi-hour game in a matter of minutes. This multitude of roles allows for fluid identity in various groups; people may fill

different roles for different games. In addition, these roles ebb and flow over time, with people constantly adding to the conversation. The groups formed are fluid and focused around the changing interests and talents of individual members.

Interestingly, this is at odds with the way these games are often produced in the current videogame industry: through specialized, compartmentalized labour by a large staff creating for large software or technology studios like Ubisoft or Microsoft.

Although there are many independent games being produced, sometimes made by only one person, these are not the only games speedrunners play. New games from triple A game companies, like FromSoftware's *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019) and Nintendo's most recent installment in their Super Mario franchise *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017), can spawn dedicated speedrunning groups. While modders then work to achieve a similar end as these giant game companies and create a final, playable product – thus fitting into a similar structure and framework – speedrunners look to do the opposite and often break these games through collaborative participation. They are not creating a product of monetary value or in any way attempting to improve or perfect these games. They are trying to do the opposite and break these games as much as possible. The end goal and the rules for achieving that goal are co-created by these groups and runners.

There are also various points of entry for each member when learning how to speedrun a particular game as most games will have multiple categories. Categories can be thought of as the rules of a sport, as they dictate the goal and parameters of that particular speedrun. A variation on the category – on the rules – changes the way a runner would approach running a game. As an example, Nintendo's game *Super Metroid*

(1994) has categories for all items collected (100 percent game completion), any percent completion, any percent glitched, and reverse boss order, among others. These categories differ between games, but typically there will be categories for 100 percent completion, any percent completion, and glitchless (not breaking the game through the use of unintended glitches). Each category will have its own unique strategies and ways of playing.

There are other similarities between speedrunning communities and modding communities: both are focused around videogames, and members in both practices are working toward a common goal, often in a collective fashion. However, speedrunning offers a way to think about groups and community formation from a new perspective in part through ideas of the multitude. Negri and Hardt juxtapose the multitude to the concept of the people, saying “The people is one. The population, of course, is composed of numerous different individuals and classes, but the people synthesizes or reduces these social differences into one identity.”<sup>29</sup> Referring to or studying communities as overarching social structures reduces members’ differences into an identity of being a member of that community. This works to eliminate individual, polyphonic voices in these groups. Speedrunning groups allow runners to keep their individuality within groups without being forced to play games in ways determined by extrinsic forces since the goals of these groups are created within the groups and by individuals. Speedrunners

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<sup>29</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 99.

do not work towards being labelled as members of a community but as practitioners of a particular way of playing videogames.<sup>30</sup>

The main focus for a speedrunner and how they play games is improving on their own time in the games they run. This does not mean, however, that there is no communal participation or work being done. Speedrunners will work with other speedrunners to improve routes taken through a game or level in order to optimize runs. Unlike with modders, whose actions are to improve the value of a produced videogame, speedrunners' actions are focused around their own individuality. The games they run, the strats they find, and their own interactions with other speedrunners and speedrunning groups. In this way the community is focused on the level of the differentiated individual who engages in the communal practice of speedrunning with other speedrunners. Additionally, each person will run games slightly differently, or have different ways of executing strats – known as setups. Therefore, unlike with a mod which produces a measurable, quantifiable final product by the collective community, speedrunning's final product is an individual experience: an individual experience which is part of a greater body of work undertaken by a multitude of actants and produced collaboratively between different speedrunning groups.

What happens then when we focus on the practice of individual actions as a structure of these groups? We arrive at a definition similar to what Gernot Grabher and

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<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that this process of playing as a way of understanding and working through these groups is crucial. Because the act of play is how these groups come together and collaborate, they can not be fully understood by outside theory alone. They must also be thought of in terms of the practice these runners are undertaking.

Oliver Ibert lay out when analysing knowledge collaboration in online communities: “an informal group of people who share a common practice and voluntarily adhere to common rules,” with virtual communities simply being mediated by a digital interface.<sup>31</sup> The digital interface, although not entirely revolutionary, is unique. It allows for what Jane McGonigal calls, “playing alone together”, where players enjoy sharing the same online world, whether actively interacting with someone else or not.<sup>32</sup>

The interface can also be detrimental to these groups, however. Livestreaming on platforms like Twitch in many ways expands on McGonigal’s idea of playing alone together. Even though a viewer is assumedly alone while watching a livestream, they are still connected with other people. Even watching a stream alone becomes a collaborative, communal act, because, “live streaming is a rich illustration of the assemblage of play, whereby a variety of actors (human and nonhuman), infrastructures, institutions, and interrelations make play, performance, and work possible.”<sup>33</sup> This network of players, viewers, communities, and technologies – an assemblage of actants – allows people to not only watch but watch and create together. Watching a livestream of a game carries implications that the viewers are in a way playing the game as much as the streamer, in which the streamer, along with the chat, creates a “collective social experience.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gernot Grabher and Oliver Ibert, “Distance as Asset? Knowledge Collaboration in Hybrid Virtual Communities,” *Journal of Economic Geography* 14, no. 1 (2014): 100-101, <https://doi-org.ocadu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/jeg/lbt014>.

<sup>32</sup> McGonigal, *Reality is Broken*, 89.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, *Watch Me Play*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

Twitch also allows for participatory communities with viewers engaging in a shared activity.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Twitch allows for engagement in both small and large communities, carrying a different experience for those engaged with both kinds of streams. In a study of the practice of Twitch viewing and participation in relation to watching traditional television, Hendrik Spilker et al. used interviews with various Twitch users to determine that being able to switch between large and smaller streams is a key feature of Twitch, as larger streams serve as a more traditional form of entertainment while smaller streamers allow for personal communication with other viewers as well as the streamer.<sup>36</sup>

Live streaming and platforms such as Twitch would seemingly form a symbiotic relationship with speedrunning because of this collaborative participation while still focusing on the individual streamer (the runner). It is true that many speedrunners do stream on Twitch, and it has allowed the practice of speedrunning as well as older games to grow in popularity, with speedrunners carving out their own niche on Twitch.<sup>37</sup> It also offers a seemingly accessible entry point for newcomers to speedrunning. After all, I was first introduced to speedrunning by watching GDQ streams on Twitch.

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<sup>35</sup> William A. Hamilton, Oliver Garretson, and Andruid Kerne, "Streaming on Twitch: Fostering Participatory Communities of Play Within Live Mixed Media," Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, *ACM* (2014): 1315, <https://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2557048>.

<sup>36</sup> Hendrik Storstein Spilker, Kristine Ask, and Martin Hansen, "The New Practices and Infrastructures of Participation: How the Popularity of Twitch.Tv Challenges Old and New Ideas about Television Viewing," *Information, Communication & Society* (2018): 7-8, doi:10.1080/1369118X.2018.1529193.

<sup>37</sup> Mark R. Johnson and Jaime Woodcock, "The Impacts of Live Streaming and Twitch.tv on the Video Game Industry, Media, Culture, & Society (2018): 11-12, doi:10.1177/0163443718818363.

However, livestreaming and a digital interface do not always benefit speedrunning groups. Videogames and their practices have the potential to be – but are not always – unique and beneficial. Interfaces such as Twitch highlight this. It is the interface which can help to create and foster harmful practices and behaviours within these groups and spaces – often referred to in online groups as toxic behaviour. Lisa Nakamura looks at how the interface is used as a form of social structuring to perpetuate normative forms of being, stating,

the interface itself becomes a star, and just like other sorts of stars, it works to compel racialized identifications; interfaces are prime loci for digital racial formation...the interface serves to organize raced and gendered bodies in categories, boxes, and links that mimic both the mental structure of a normative consciousness and set of associations (often white, often male) and the logic of digital capitalism.<sup>38</sup>

Although the interface can increase the popularity of these practices, it does not revolutionize communal structure. The interface of Twitch actually serves to further cement more traditional social and monetary structures through questions of who can access these online platforms as well as who they promote on the front page of their site. Furthermore, the company has the power to decide which streamers get hit with content strikes and bans. Nakamura claims that theoretically the internet has, “room for everything if not everybody. Unfortunately, the more the Internet becomes a mass medium, the more likely it is to attract censors that now place limits on TV and the other mass media.”<sup>39</sup> This leads to channels and streamers who openly promote and engage in

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<sup>38</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 17, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oculocad-ebooks/detail.action?docID=334221>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

harassment going unpunished, while streamers will get banned for playing copyrighted music before their streams.<sup>40</sup> While a short ban may not seem impactful, streaming is the main source of income and employment for some of these streamers, and a ban could mean missing out on donations typically received during streams as well as the chance to continually grow a larger support base. These interfaces also often serve to promote and support who these videogames have traditionally been marketed to – middle class, white, straight men – and therefore have the potential to discourage new players from joining these groups.

The interface also runs the risk of acting as a translation of these complex sub-groups, and serves as a tool to generate social order. Tuomi outlines that these translations and black-boxing processes “not only hide the complexity of material components. Black-boxing also hides social networks and discourses.”<sup>41</sup> This occurs when Twitch becomes a translation of these online groups. It eliminates the exposure of smaller groups or individuals by hiding the multitude of voices within these groups. Instead, the interface gives clout and influence to those with higher standing in a traditional social structure: large game companies, streamers with access to better technology and connections to these large companies, and eSports streams to name a few. The focus on Twitch as revolutionary in new media theory could therefore be dangerous to studies surrounding relatively new practices like speedrunning as it could work to eliminate the individuality which is so present in these practices. And although Tuomi

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<sup>40</sup> For a look at channels that do not get banned despite regular harassment, see Dale (2017). For a look at bans for playing copyrighted music, see Grayson (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Tuomi, “Internet, Innovation, and Open Source,” 11.

offers great insight into Linux as a collaborative creation environment, it is a tool-developing community in which “social organization and tools co-evolve.”<sup>42</sup> This does not fit the context of speedrunning groups if tools like Twitch function to silence or subvert certain sub-networks and groups within this system of operations. Additionally, speedrunning was developed as a practice long before the invention of livestreaming and interfaces like Twitch.

In this context we can revisit Tsing’s notions of polyphony and precarity to better understand the nature of these groups and their relation to livestreaming. There can be no definitive translation for these groups because they are consistently in flux due to the changes in actants; both human and non-human. Whether it be a change to a category, a strat for a run, or a change in runners themselves, notions of the multitude extend to encompass all actants within these groups, and so they remain in constant flux. Although Tsing’s ideas may not expressly address online community formation, it is because of this state of precarity that research going forward with speedrunning groups – especially since it is in its infancy – can and should remain adaptable and modular. It should remain in flux. These groups, because of their multitude of individuals and polyphonic nature, can not be subject to any one readymade framework of research.

This kind of research is reflected in Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux’s 2017 text *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. In a section focused on speedrunning, they look at the individual experience of speedrunner Narcissa Wright, arguing the personal is crucial to studying

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 25.

these groups, making direct reference to Wright’s video of a spoken word poem, “all the categories are arbitrary.”<sup>43</sup> The video, as Boluk and LeMieux describe it, “deftly weaves descriptions of videogame hardware, speedrunning techniques, community history, personal biography, and gender identity together into another kind of metagame that challenges the default categories of the normative ways we play.”<sup>44</sup> Although their look at speedrunning is only a snapshot of a particular time in speedrunning’s history, this method of research must be more prevalent if we truly want to uncover what makes these groups unique and to challenge how we traditionally understand online communities and practices.

As is evident from the breadth of theories I have introduced, I am not attempting to develop an entirely new way of thinking about or through collective practices and groups. Rather, I am highlighting the fact that innovative ways of thinking through these collective groups exist but are not predominant in the field of online community studies. There are other possible ways of thinking through these groups which I have not introduced. If individuality remains intact in these groups, and community as we would traditionally understand it is focused on the individual and not only on their actions towards a larger communal structure, many areas of intersectional study open themselves up. For example, this is already happening with videogames, with many researches looking at the potentiality videogame creation and play holds for feminist, decolonial, and

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<sup>43</sup> Narcissa Wright, “all the categories are arbitrary,” YouTube Video, 2:50, December 17, 2015, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHA1qxsLH-0>.

<sup>44</sup> Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 50.

crip theory studies to name only a few.<sup>45</sup> My method of interviewing which follows in the next section is just one such way – the way I have chosen for my run – of thinking about the experiences of speedrunners, and how we can understand those engagements through theorists outside the realm of traditional community theory.

### **The Run: Interview Results**

The following section contains what I have framed as my run – responses I have collected from interviewing a group of seven speedrunners. I interviewed a range of speedrunners who speedrun various games in order to get perspectives from different groups. Through the selection of participants, I tried to encompass a diverse range of roles taken within speedrunning in order to paint a broad picture of how diverse and fluid these roles can be. Additionally, I wanted to highlight both streamers with smaller as well as larger audiences in order to not place a hierarchal importance on more well-known runners. I did not conduct these interviews with the intention of proving previously drawn conclusions about speedrunning or to create a measurable set of data on why these people are speedrunners or what they enjoy about speedrunning. These interviews are meant to serve as a research method in and of themselves, in that I want to find what makes speedrunning groups unique and worth investigating, and how they can differ from more traditional studies of online communities. Additionally, I hope to retain

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<sup>45</sup> See Callahan and Kuhn (2016), Kafai et al. (2008), Negin et al. (2017), and Royse et al. (2007).

the individuality of the runners' responses while highlighting the collaborative nature of these groups and the practice of speedrunning as a whole.

These semi-structured interviews were done online over Discord – an application that allows for text, video, and audio communication. All participants were asked the same five questions regarding their experiences and relationships to both speedrunning groups as well as livestreaming. The purpose of having these interviews be semi-structured was to maintain a thread through all interviews and to keep responses focused around speedrunning and community formation as well as these streamers' relations to speedrunning groups, while allowing individuals to set directions in the responses. Each streamer can be unique and occupy a unique space within larger speedrunning groups, and I wanted this experience and process of being in speedrunning groups – of working towards a larger collective meaning – to be reflected in my methodology.

## **2.1 – How They Got Started**

I decided to ask the runners how they got started with speedrunning to see if I could get a sense of what attracted them to the practice of speedrunning. I thought that, from my own personal experience, people would have started with simply running games. This did not necessarily turn out to be true. One runner told me that at first he thought he would do what he saw everyone else doing; running relatively short categories for well known games. However, he quickly began to construct his own routes through levels, even creating and completing the first recorded glitched run in the game he was running. Building off of this, another runner told me that he started with developing routes for

runs, but now just runs games using other people's strats. A third interviewee offered an even earlier look at how he got into speedrunning, saying that he would try to break and glitch games even before learning about speedrunning. This practice of wanting to push the limits of a game and not always play it as the developer intends carried into his becoming a speedrunner.

These responses work against the traditional method of understanding community as developed by McMillan and Chavis. Rather than performing certain predetermined tasks that would make them feel a part of a group, there is discordance and variation among the responses or rationale as to why and how these runners became speedrunners. Nearly every interviewee gave a different response as to how they first got into speedrunning and began their interaction with these groups. Although these responses only highlight a portion of that diversity, the various groups present within the practice of speedrunning allow for individual points of entry instead of demanding everyone start at the same place or on the same level.

## **2.2 – The Roles of Speedrunning**

I wanted my interviews to include runners who prefer running games, others who enjoy routing and optimizations, those who have switched from role to role, and those who are, as two runners put it, “all over the place with it.” Something that proved true, which is true in many online communities, is that there are no designated or fixed roles in speedrunning groups. I was never told by any of the runners that the roles in groups are set in stone or that it is expected certain people perform or fill specific roles.

It is crucial to note, however, that nearly all interviewees pointed out that although roles can be fluid, people often only perform one or two roles in which they feel comfortable. In multiple interviews I heard, “certain people are better at certain things” or that these roles are generally fluid, but that “people put an emphasis on certain things. It depends on the category.” Speedrunners have the ability to perform various roles in a single group or across a number of groups based on category or game. This could mean only running certain games but looking for optimizations and strats in other games. This was the case with one runner, who said he often does a lot of complete routing for games, but when collaborating with groups formed around Square Enix’s 2002 game *Kingdom Hearts*, only looks for slight improvements because the game has been released for so long and already has time-efficient routing.

Roles are therefore fluid and there is no hierarchy between roles – the runners did not delineate any one role as being more important or worthwhile than another. However, although there is the potential, the opportunity, and the support in this space to move between roles and perform different roles within a group, many runners perform specific roles within each group they are involved with. I believe that since there is no hierarchy among roles, people feel comfortable doing what they do and feel no pressure to perform multiple roles within one community. I was told that “different types of people take on different specialities” and that “people have such varied approaches to it [taking on roles].” This creates a differentiated social structure because there is no shoehorning or forcing of people into certain roles and allows for the freedom of choice among members of the groups based on their individual skills and interests. This counters McMillan and

Chavis' notions of conformity, as speedrunning groups allow for and encourage this individuality. Since there is a multitude of roles and actants within speedrunning groups, their structure does not demand conformity through the performance of uniform actions. On the contrary, these groups allow and encourage the individual to fill various roles of their own accord and volition.

### **2.3 – Personal Connections**

Given that online communities are sometimes viewed as isolating forces because there is no real social connection happening – real being defined as in person, face to face interaction – I asked all runners the same question: is it your experience that speedrunning groups are isolating or connecting forces? Would you say social relations/relationships are present, even if not in a way they would traditionally be understood or defined? Perhaps what was echoed most during my interviews was the insistence that these groups are as legitimate as face to face locative communities. Although I was not entirely surprised to hear this – I was interviewing people who are invested in online groups and who have developed social relationships through this form of communication – their insistence on legitimacy was at the base of almost all answers from interviewees.

One runner pointed to the importance instant messaging has in this regard, saying that, “despite not having face-to-face contact, having instant messaging simulates a face-to-face conversation which you would not get through more traditional e-mail correspondence.” Another runner posited a similar notion, saying “even with no direct communication, there is a back and forth through resources.” Many runners also brought

up the fact that their closest friends are from these groups, with one runner telling me that “speedrunning has helped me grow as a person, I’ve met so many new people” and another telling me “they are very much connecting. I met my girlfriend through speedrunning.”

These accounts help to uncover the personal side of speedrunning groups and allow me to look at them from a perspective similar to Boluk and LeMieux’s when examining Wright’s video. The personal biography as they describe it is crucial to include in theoretical studies of speedrunning groups, and in studies of online collaboration more generally. Accounting for personal history and differentiated experiences helps to open the intersectionality and individuality present within these groups. It also helps us think about speedrunning groups not only from a theoretical perspective but from one which incorporates the highly personal practice of playing and speedrunning a game.

## **2.4 – Personal Improvement**

Although none of my questions specifically addressed if speedrunners were concerned about personal improvement, some runners did bring the idea up. During one interview I was told that speedrunning is about doing it as fast as you can, and that “the core of speedrunning is not being better than other people but being better than yourself.” I found this concept fascinating. It was not something I had thought of going into the primary research phase of this paper. I had assumed runners would discuss trying to achieve world record times or climb global leaderboards. However, I never heard runners

mention this, but did hear them discuss personal improvement. One runner compared speedrunning to personal fitness, saying that speedrunning went from asking, “how far can I push myself to a point where I want to be proud of what I have done.” For him, speedrunning is truly about personal improvement and finding new ways to overcome challenges, asking “what do I want to push to?”

It was this insistence on personal improvement, and the lack of insistence on comparing your speeds or completion times with other people, which shifted my thinking about the individual as the key concept in speedrunning groups. Although it is a collaborative process, speedrunning is also a very personal process which is focused first and foremost on the individual; the runner. This does not negate the communal or collaborative aspects present in speedrunning. I had runners tell me that they have “never once found a community that doesn’t take you in with open arms” and that more communal and collaboratively created resources “expand the skill ceiling and lower the skill floor for newcomers.” These are collective structures which collaborate and create with each other, yet still support individuality and heterogeneity. Another runner framed these ideas in an interesting way, saying that “people are generally excited to watch their times be beat. There is a collaborative force between people to get the best run, not to beat everybody.”

This notion of runners being “excited to watch their times be beat” brings us back to Tsing’s concept of precarity. In a more traditional, progress driven social structure, it would assumedly be detrimental to personal improvement for an individual to watch their time be beat, as they would no longer be progressing at the same pace as those they are

competing against within the social structure. However, speedrunning groups are precarious. The runs that an individual performs are in flux and could be beat at any moment through a better run or the discovery of new strats and routes. Due to the shifting, precarious nature of these groups, many runners enjoy watching their run times be beat. Runners are aware of this precarity, and so are cognisant of the polyphonic nature which counters the traditional deterministic communal structure.

## **2.5 – Games Done Quick**

Some runners pointed to going to and running at GDQ – the bi-annual week long speedrunning marathon – as an experience which was memorable, with one runner saying that you “get to know some people better at events.” However, one interviewee offered me insight and perspective on GDQ which I had not thought of before. This runner told me that throughout speedrunning’s history there have been what could be considered community hubs. They claimed that, “GDQ started to become a hub, but is starting to leave that position. The practice has become too big.” This runner assists in organizing four smaller annual marathons claiming that while “wider audiences love watching GDQ, speedrunners love watching smaller marathons.” They also brought up the speedgaming channels, which are six Twitch channels that host open entry speedrunning tournaments. This allows more people to actually participate by running games at these events.

In order to run a game at GDQ, a runner submits a recorded run to the event organizers who view the videos and choose who will run at the marathon. The judging criteria include: “has the runner performed a run at our event before? Is the runner's time

a competitive time? If multiple people have submitted a run, is this runner's time the fastest of them? Has the game been in our events or other speedrunning events before? Is it a crowd favorite (donations / viewers / crowd sentiment)?”<sup>46</sup>

Although GDQ is often the focus on online articles or stories about speedrunning, this notion that it has gotten too big started to make me realize that it does not reflect the unique nature of speedrunning groups. If these groups are about smaller subsets of groups collaborating with each other, a model similar to smaller, open entry marathons seems to make more sense as it allows for some individuality among marathons and helps bring smaller speedrunning groups to these events. In this way GDQ becomes similar to Twitch as those who have a larger following and are a part of larger groups will have a greater chance of getting exposure and participating in GDQ, as they will bring in more viewers. It is not entirely designed for the speedrunning groups but for consumers in a more traditional sense, which is reflected in how they choose games/runners for the marathon, with the criteria being based on popularity, what will bring in the most viewers, and the best competitive times.

GDQ reflects Tuomi’s notion of a tool within these groups, as it stands in for certain sub-groups and runners. These marathons and events also develop and co-evolve alongside these social groups and practices. As the size and complexity of groups grow, so too do the size of these marathons. However, this also means they black-box and stand in as representations for these groups. Large marathons like GDQ can only stand in for

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<sup>46</sup> Games Done Quick, “Games Done Quick Game Submission Guide,” [gamesdonequick.com](https://gamesdonequick.com), accessed March 30, 2019, <https://gamesdonequick.com/submission-guide>.

one type of sub-group, and do not ultimately help to represent the diversity and individuality among other groups. The runner who brought up the smaller marathons said that, “even with the huge community [of a particular game], you can still play because it’s open entry.” Smaller, more independently run marathons reflect a coming together of individual voices which are each given space to play and organize an event that is less of a translation of a group and more of a sub-group in and of itself. A smaller marathon or gathering can act as another assemblage of voices within this network of relations.

## **2.6 – Speedrunning and Livestreaming**

Many runners claimed that Twitch is not essential for speedrunning – as speedrunning existed before livestreaming – though it does help greatly in expanding the reach of speedrunning. One runner told me that without Twitch, he would not have started speedrunning. The increase in popularity Twitch brings was often echoed, with runners telling me that, “speedrunning doesn’t need Twitch, but it’s popular because of Twitch” or that it has “gotten a lot easier to get into running because of [Twitch].” One runner also attributed this rise in popularity through Twitch to the fact that without it “you would only see people’s best runs and not their failed attempts.” The process of failing and watching other runners fail is central to an iterative communal practice like speedrunning because the focus is not to create a functional final product. A modding community or modder will work towards a finished mod that needs to be playable. There is a universal assumption of functionality. Conversely, speedrunning uses the failure

inherent in an iterative practice to contribute to the communal process of finding new ways of running games and improving times.

It is important to mention, however, that not all of the runners I interviewed are frequently active streamers. One interviewee told me that he does not stream that much, and therefore personally felt streaming is not that important to speedrunning. He felt it was more of a formality because it is one of the platforms currently being used to showcase speedrunning, along with Discord and Twitter for interaction and communication. Others reflected that there were other services which allowed times and runs to be posted in a more traditional forum interface before Twitch such as Speed Demo Archives (a website which hosts downloadable speedrun videos) and that livestreaming and video on demand (VOD) sites like YouTube have “taken over those forum platforms.” Therefore, similar to GDQ, Twitch is not reflective of these groups and often serves more as a hub and resource to expand the reach and popularity of speedrunning. It is an interface which speedrunners and viewers engage with. Although speedrunning has grown with Twitch’s rise in popularity, it is not crucial or central to the practice of speedrunning.

## **2.7 – Does it Need to be Videogames?**

Something else I learned from these interviews which surprised me was that many runners believe that videogames are not actually necessary to form a group like a speedrunning group. Speedrunning does allow for unique communal properties, and videogames do allow for a specific group of people to come together and form these

groups. One runner told me that because it is focused around runners, “some communities are centered around the best runner. Whether that is good is debatable, but you don’t really see this with other hobbies.”

However, as another runner put it, “videogames are the catalyst that bring like minded people together” rather than what these groups need to be based around. This led me to think about the practice of speedrunning as a practice that can span any hobby or activity instead of looking at the videogame as the central focus of the run. Originally, I thought videogames could be the focus of this research, with mention of speedrunning communities as a product of those games. However, hearing runners talk about videogames as only a catalyst was eye opening to say the least.

One particular interview offered me great insight into these ideas. The interviewee brought up the fact that marginalized peoples are, “not a large community within speedrunning.” They additionally brought up that it is “white male dominated because of the marketing of videogames” and that videogames gear the practice of speedrunning to these groups. This made me think about the interface being harmful to the practice of speedrunning because it mediates it through the traditional marketing of these platforms and games. Nakamura argues that the interface not only organizes through gendered and racial normativity, but also through the “logic of digital capitalism.”<sup>47</sup> It is crucial to remember that videogames are no longer a niche, and that the videogame industry made over \$43 billion in revenue in the United States alone in

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<sup>47</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 17.

2018.<sup>48</sup> Videogames and their markets organize players through traditionally capitalistic means and, by extension, through traditional notions of community. Because of this organization we often hear the videogame marketing industry grouping people into gamers vs. non-gamers, gamers who play competitively vs. gamers who play single-player games, or console gamers vs. computer or PC gamers.

Ultimately, I realized that videogames function similarly to Twitch. Although both may be actants within these groups and assemblages, they also at times serve to organize these groups into more traditional social structures and models. Although Twitch does help to expand this practice, and videogames do bring like minded people together to form these groups, this structure is not always beneficial to everyone.

## **2.8 – The Sub-Groups of Speedrunning**

An idea that many runners shared was that the practice of speedrunning is comprised of many sub-groups, with one runner telling me “there are sub-communities. People siphon off into their own games, series, or a handful of speedrunning teams. Even in [these] smaller communities, people can be engaged.” Another runner told me that people often, “refer to the speedrunning community but it’s usually more so a set of small communities.”

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Shieber, “Video game revenue tops \$43 billion in 2018, an 18% jump from 2017,” Techcrunch, published January 2019, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://techcrunch.com/2019/01/22/video-game-revenue-tops-43-billion-in-2018-an-18-jump-from-2017/>.

The same runner who mentioned the marketing of videogames also brought up this concept of sub-groups, commenting that “I’ve never felt like a speedrunning cohesive community exists. There are smaller groups usually based on specific games.” This runner considered this a benefit of speedrunning, because it allows any type of group to form within speedrunning, despite the typical exclusion of marginalized people. This opens up the possibility to have “a community within a community. A counter to the hegemony.”

Instead of looking at the overarching speedrunning community, I was forced to think about how that community is organized, about sub-groups, and if there is an actual speedrunning community. These interviews helped me realize that although at surface level there may be a larger practice of speedrunning, there is not a fixed communal speedrunning structure. The individual does not become a cog within a larger system of communal operations but instead a locus within their own sub-groups, working collaboratively with other groups to create their own space online through the practice of speedrunning. They are a voice within a polyphony of voices constituting an online assemblage, coming together through and around the practice of playing a videogame in a very particular way.

## **2.9 – Ending the Run**

My method of conducting interviews was how I decided to perform my run and organize this paper. These interviews offered me insight into how speedrunners feel about the practice of speedrunning. This allowed me to think about speedrunning groups

from a more experiential framework and helped uncover opinions and perspectives I would not have found through studying theory alone. However, my method was not perfect. Because I conducted much of my primary research before conducting my interviews, I formulated my interview questions based off knowledge from my initial research, which mostly consisted of traditional community theory. After conducting the interviews I realized that responses from runners were often countering ideas I had come across in my research, and so I reached out to other areas of study to find new ways to think about what runners were telling me – to find new strats – instead of trying to force those responses into a predetermined, readymade, and inappropriate framework.

### **Conclusion: The Final Time**

In reference to anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, Donna Haraway tells us, “It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.”<sup>49</sup> It not only matters what we think about communities and groups, but also how we think about them and what thoughts think these thoughts.

In this paper I have looked at traditional sociological and ethnographic disciplinary approaches to community formation and community engagement, both online and offline, and why I believe they are lacking in the context of speedrunning. Because

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<sup>49</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 35.

of their disciplinary nature, they do not adapt to new contexts, are highly inflexible, and often reproduce themselves with little to no variation when looking at a new problem. By following traditional disciplinary methods, researchers are “disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilations... We must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching.”<sup>50</sup> In order to become undisciplined and find new methods of research, we must often look outside of traditional areas of study. My initial goal with this research – before even starting to write – was to find a new way of looking at these communities and groups. After conducting interviews, I learned I would not find these new ways of thinking within traditional community theory.

This desire to find other ways of thinking about online communities and groups led me to look to other fields of study including critical environmental studies, political thought, and actor-network theory to build a more appropriate, malleable, and modular framework to study speedrunning groups from. My initial intention developed into wanting to find ideas of communal gatherings or collaborative work outside of social structures. As I stated in the first section of the paper, these ideas do not deal directly with speedrunning, videogames, online interactions, or even community formation in the traditional sense. However, they often deal with ways of thinking and ways of thinking through things. Speedrunning was my point of focus to highlight alternative ways of thinking about participatory collaboration in social groups.

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<sup>50</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

With this newly constructed framework, I was able to revisit my interviews and rethink how I thought and think about speedrunning groups and the experiences runners shared with me. By revisiting and working through my interviews in different ways, I was able to borrow the structure of a speedrun. I continued to conduct more research, develop new strats, and challenge my own thoughts – my final times. However, this structure was not always set in stone for me.

I proposed and began research for this paper with the intention of writing on the effect speedrunning and streaming communities could have on disability studies; how they have the potential to offer people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) unique kind of social structure in which they, the members and co-creators, have agency not possible within traditional societal structures and institutions.<sup>51</sup> I initially wanted to focus on disability studies because it is an area of study that is highly relevant and meaningful to me. Disability studies is only one example of the directions this kind of research could potentially take. While conducting my research and writing this paper, my notions of what academic research can and should be changed. I realized that whatever future directions this research does take, they must be personally meaningful to the researcher. This way the researcher can understand communal groups and co-creation from a more experiential and less disciplinary perspective.

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<sup>51</sup> For studies looking at disability theory and social barriers, both online and offline, see Dolmage (2013), Finke et al. (2018), French and Swain (2012), Goggin and Newell (2003), Moore et al. (2005), Pasek (2015), and Withers (2012).

To conclude, revisiting the idea of structuring this paper like a speedrun, I hope that although my run is finished, people will continue to find new strats and ways to optimize the run – ways to improve my research and come at these topics from new and innovate frameworks to break away from the traditional ways of studying community; ways to take these ideas and this type of research across a number of fields and areas of study as well as various kinds of online and locative communities. Above all, my hope is that this research, like speedrunning a game, will never truly end but always adapt and modify itself based on new discoveries and insights.

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