Speedrunning: Transgressive Play in Digital Space

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In *How To Do Things With Videogames*, Ian Bogost argues that videogames offer "an experience of the 'space between points' that had been reduced or eliminated by the transportation technologies that began with the train" (2011, 49). But when we watch a speedrun of a game such as *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD 1998), what we instead see is a player determined to destroy as much of that 'space between points' as possible. It is a game that takes most players tens of hours to complete, but is finished in just over 17 minutes by the best speedrunners, utilizing glitches that manipulate the game's code to skip enormous chunks of both the narrative and the gameworld. Once an underground hobby conducted between users swapping footage on obscure internet forums, speedrunning has shot into the mainstream in recent years following the rise of livestreaming platforms and livestreamed events such as Games Done Quick and the European Speedsters Assembly. So what does speedrunning mean as a mode of play, and what can it reveal about the relationship between player and gameworld?

This paper will examine speedrunning as a transgressive mode of play. Building on previous work on this topic by scholars such as Rainforest Scully-Blaker, I will first aim to define speedrunning as a practice and then to explore its relationship with the space in the gameworld, the game's narrative, and with the ideological and representational implications that arise from them. To do this, I will bring in spatial, digital and videogame theorists such as Paul Virilio, Tom Apperley and Espen Aarseth, as well as work on other transgressive spatial practices such as parkour in order to see if and how they relate.

In defining speedrunning, I will primarily look at Scully-Blaker's definition: "*the practice of players or 'runners' attempting to 'travel' from a game's opening state at its first necessary button input to the game's conclusion at its last necessary button input in the smallest amount of time possible*" (Scully-Blaker 2014, emphasis in original). Crucially, this definition ties speedrunning to the real world, anchored on either end by a material start- and end-point outside of the game. This, I will argue, establishes speedrunning as a metagame and divorces the act of playing during a speedrunning from the narrative and gameworld in which the player is 'supposed' to be immersed. That is, play has a weaker tie to the narrative actions of the game. Killing enemies and bosses, using the avatar's abilities and so on are largely stripped of their narrative context and become instrumental, rather than representational.

To delve deeper into this, it will be useful to use Aarseth's implied player model: "The game houses expectations for a player's behavior, which is supported by an interface, and represented in-game by an avatar (but not the latter in all games)" (Aarseth 2007, 132). Crucially, Aarseth views the implied player as "a boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation to the playing person's

freedom of movement and choice". I will also turn to Apperley here, who makes a similar argument. Using Ted Friedman's concept of cybernetic subjectivity, Apperley claims that "the players are insinuated into the rhythm of the game through the process of play; they must 'fit' into the rhythm of the game and not vice versa," and in this way "the player is also forced to accept the ideological underpinnings of the game as absolute" (2010, 24). What speedrunning offers at this point is a way of playing outside these limitations. Playing outside of the limitations of the implied player or the game's rhythm is, Aarseth claims, "a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself" (2007, 132). Speedrunning, I will argue, is a demonstration of that. It is an example of a mode of play that allows players to remove themselves from the game's inscribed ideological framework, and possibly even make it anew. The player makes the game.

These ideas seem to run parallel to those offered by theorists of parkour. Matthew D. Lamb talks about parkour as a "dialectic struggle" (2017, 43) between traceur (a practitioner of parkour) and the architectural space inscribed with social meaning. "Thus, parkour is not only a tactical use of strategical architectural space through bricolent appropriation but is at once a tactical (mis)use of my body as a site of strategic power," he concludes (2017, 43). By reducing the spatial environment to objects and obstacles devoid of social, cultural or narratological meaning, the traceur and the speedrunner find a means by which they can rewrite, reappropriate or ignore entirely the inscribed space. Lamb says that "put plainly, parkour is about unrestricted movement in an environment constructed to restrict movement" (2014, 108), denoting an inherent subversiveness to the practice. Speedrunning read through the lens of the implied player model does the same. Speedrunning is about unrestricted movement in a digital environment constructed to restrict movement ludically, spatially and narratively.

I hope to tie these ideas together in order to reach a better understanding of speedrunning in the context of narrative, space, and the player's relation to those through play. As speedrunning and other forms of non-standard play gain traction amongst players, it is important to think about what these modes of play mean and why players are drawn to both playing and watching them. Furthermore, I believe that through non-standard modes of play like speedrunning, we can gain a better understanding of games as objects and computational structures, allowing us to see more clearly the lines of ideology and representation inscribed in gameworlds, their stories and their presentations.

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