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The aesthetics of speedrunning: Performances in neo-baroque space

Abstract

Speedrunning describes activities related to the development and performance of strategies to complete games quickly, and is a valuable source of historical and technical information, while producing specialized aesthetic explorations of a videogame's environment. Most research on speedrunning emphasizes its metagaming or documentary function. However, speedrunning also changes the aesthetic experience of gameplay, both for players and in spectated performance. Aesthetic investigation informed by art historical perspectives, such as Angela Ndalianis' theory of the Neo-Baroque and H.S. Becker's study of Art World formations, offers new insights into the experience of speedrunning and how discontinuous and disjointed simulated space is experienced and appreciated as aesthetic phenomena by players and spectators. While Nidalianis has applied her theory to videogames, among other types of contemporary entertainment, further investigating speedrunning performances through this lens extends her analysis and problematizes the idea of a videogame as a singular aesthetic work, instead drawing attention to alternative aesthetic experiences videogames can offer.

Keywords: speedrunning, gaming community, performance, aesthetics, metagaming

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Speedrunning sits at an intersection between competition, fandom, and emulation and hacking scenes. While speedrunning demands deep knowledge of the game, and manual dexterity to varying degrees, most speedruns primarily rely on a collaborative and cumulative process through which many speedrunners and fans of the game discover and investigate new strategies or "strats" for cutting hours, minutes, seconds, or even frames off of a run, and then asynchronously practice and perform these runs, with the best times reviewed by the community and ranked on a leaderboard. While record attempt speedruns may be required to be performed on certain standardized versions of games or hardware, and include visually displaying these elements in their documentation, speedrunners also often use emulated versions of games, for their increased reliability and accessibility compared to obsolete hardware, as well as the ability to explore glitches more systematically, record states and move through the game frame by frame (Janik 2020). These legally gray practices, usually tolerated by game companies but not necessarily condoned or acknowledged, may seem like cheating from an outsider perspective, but are representative of various sub-categories of runs within the community (Scully-Blaker 2014).

Most speedruns can be sorted into 100% or Any% categories. While 100% runs plot how to most efficiently collect or complete every element within a videogame, Any% runs chart the fastest way to get to the last button input required of the player, usually before the credits sequence. Tool-Assisted Speedruns (TAS) are also a common subset within speedrunning communities. These are runs performed with precision often surpassing human ability, where inputs are instead plotted out beforehand to be replayed by a bot. Initially contentious, this type of run has earned its own block at Games Done Quick (GDQ) events, where speedrunners gather to perform a marathon livestream of runs to raise money for charities, and has also contributed strategies to the improvement of what are alternately classified as real-time attack (RTA) runs, or runs performed live by a human player (Boluk & LeMieux 2017, pp. 182–183). Analysis of speedrunning has primarily focused on the unique community of practice surrounding it, events organized to represent speedrunning to a broader public, and the models it provides for archiving games and types of play that may no longer be accessible. While studying the community, its practices, and how it presents itself to a broader gaming culture is valuable for better understanding videogame fan activities as well as challenging misconceptions about the attitudes and motivations behind speedrunning and emulation communities, this approach neglects to analyze the records of performances the community grew around in their own right. Additional research has identified the ways particular speedruns create emergent narratives that diverge from and alter the narrative sequence, experience, and themes of a game's scripted elements, as well as how the combination of digital space and collective behavior

patterns of speedrunners can create new haptic and spatial "digital textures'" within a game's programmed space (McKissack & May 2020, p. 5; Janik 2020). The novel aesthetic pleasure and excitement of witnessing a compelling speedrun is what often fuels the communal fan practices and events. These performances of unconventional play also affect players' and audiences' aesthetic experience and appreciation of the videogames in question.

Videogaming in general is a practice that involves engagement with technology and specific communities and social practices. However, for those who play and watch others play, it is also an aesthetic experience. Speedrunning involves fragmenting the totality of space or narrative presented in a videogame, allowing the player to skip areas, complete levels out of order, and discover unconventional ways of moving through the game, by breaking the game into parts that can be rearranged. This paper focuses primarily on Any% runs based on the categories identified by Rainforest Scully-Blaker in his analysis of the practice (2014), because this is where the Neo-Baroque qualities associated with contemporary forms of digitally-mediated entertainment most strongly assert themselves. Visually, but also in terms of the haptic play and rules involved, Any% speedruns differ most dramatically from what is considered "standard" player experience. It is therefore important to investigate aesthetic qualities of speedruns, and what they reveal about contemporary experiences of digital space, including their potential to offer functional alternatives to "prescribed narrative scripts that can facilitate new modes of play from which emergent narratives can thrive," alongside new aesthetic experiences and values (McKissack & May 2020, p. 18). Analyzing speedruns in light of the perspective developed in Angela Ndalianis' work, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (2004), will allow more aesthetic qualities of speedruns to be defined, and supports the argument that analyzing speedruns for their aesthetic qualities usefully problematizes the idea of a videogame as a single aesthetic object.

What is speedrunning?

In general, speedrunning is concerned with finding the fastest way from the first required input of a game (such as pressing the start button) to the last (usually what triggers a closing cutscene). While playing the game more skillfully with practice is an element of speedrunning, more often greater leaps in records and discoveries of new strategies to reduce times take place at a technical level, where runners will repeat short sections over and over or investigate the game's code to discover exploitable glitches and predictable patterns behind seemingly random events or enemy behaviors. This practice not only draws on skill and experience

then, but also generates a different experience and understanding of the videogame than play oriented around simply completing the game.

Henry Lowood discusses the inherent archival properties of speedruns, beginning with the play recording capabilities of *Doom* and *Quake*. The ability to record and share gameplay over the Internet was built into these games in the form of demo files. These lightweight files were not videos, but "sequences of commands or scripts that tell the game engine what to do, essentially by repeating the effects of keyboard and mouse input in the same sequence as the player did when playing a game" (Lowood 2011, p. 115). Sharing and watching demo files led to competition between players who wanted to demonstrate their abilities, finishing levels with impressive speed or skill. As video sharing and streaming sites became more popular and easy to use, games without this feature gained communities of similar competition and experimentation. James Newman (2012) examines speedrunning's status, alongside walkthroughs, cosplay, fanart, and fanfiction, as a similarly important space of fan productivity and discourse. He notes that repeated, attentive play as well as delight in glitches and imperfections of favorite titles in a collaborative environment has led to discoveries and knowledge of version differences that game developers may not have official record of (Newman 2012, p. 131). Since these observations were made, speedrunning has grown as a fan practice, with the biannual event Games Done Quick steadily attracting larger audiences since its establishment in 2011, and a growing variety of Twitch and YouTube channels, online platforms where players can both livestream and save recordings of their gameplay, chronicling increasingly diverse games, and types of speedruns.

In addition to its communities' embrace of a game's instabilities and imperfections, which may only frustrate or confuse other players, speedrunning, while it involves high-level competition over slight improvements in run times, differs from eSport for its less toxic and competitive social setting, noted by Lucas Cook and Seth Duncan (2016, p. 177). The sharing of strats and practice of giving credit for developments in the history of a run do not make head-to-head competition a primary element of speedrunning. Events serve as a showcase of new or interesting practices in the community rather than the ultimate product of speedrunning as a whole. Runs setting a world record or even personal best are a rarity at such events because runners see this environment as a chance to demonstrate to potential future speedrunners in the audience (Obrist, Smith & White 2013, p. 132).

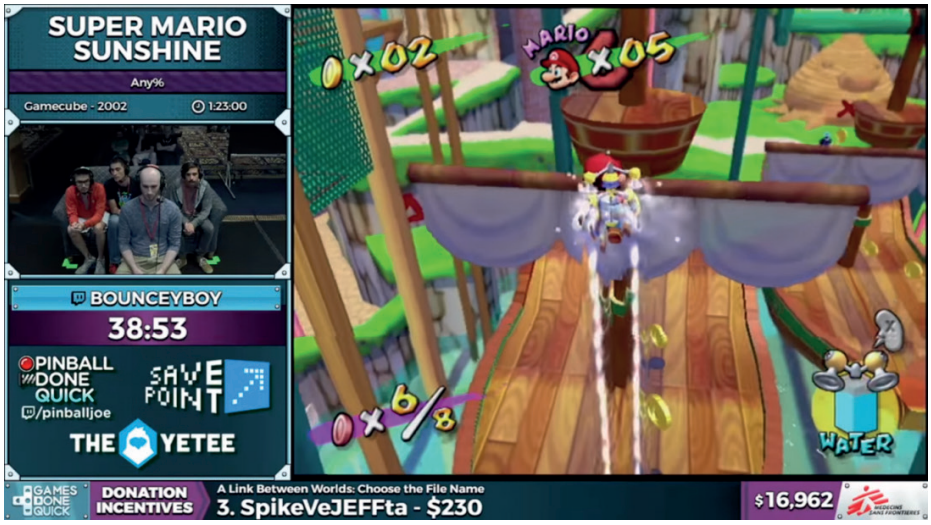


Figure 1. Screencapture of BounceyBoy playing *Super Mario Sunshine* at SGDQ 2016

At events, the runner typically explains the community's history of exploring the structure of the game in question, giving credit to community members who discovered particularly impressive "strats" or exploitable game glitches as they play. This divides the speedrunner's attention in a way that is not common to broadcasted eSport, where complete concentration on the game being played is the expected posture of competitors. The viewer's attention is similarly divided between shout-outs, commentary, charity and sponsor logos, and a ticker of upcoming events and donation totals in addition to the gameplay. Record-setting speedruns are more often perfected recordings of solitary runs to which commentary is added later, once the runner is satisfied with an iteration of the run, which may be one out of many thousands of attempts. At events, by contrast, live commentary helps viewers to appreciate and make sense of the way the speedrun strats the player performs manifest onscreen, and allows a space for expressing the speedrunner's discernment. This discernment becomes evident in how "participants often attempt 'marathon safe' strategies that balance expedience with dependable, predictable tricks and glitches," and indicates an eagerness to communicate the appeal and interest of speedrunning as a visual and experienced phenomena in an effective way, rather than simply achieving a record time (McKissack & May 2020, p. 4).

Seb Franklin (2009) focuses on TAS videos that play directly with the videogame's underlying code through these glitches as a "tactics of abandonment," allowing users to work outside of the intended usage of technology to expose and exploit the coded space. Similarly, Patrick LeMieux (2014) sees TAS as playing with the serial interface, subverting expectations of videogames by transferring the site of play to a direct

mediation between humans and circuit input/output. He studies the response of players to one of the earliest TAS videos, a run of *Super Mario Bros. 3* uploaded by a runner named Morimoto in 2003. In the run, due to automated and perfected bot inputs, Mario appears to zip through levels faster than physically possible, never missing a jump and traversing the levels with inhuman efficiency. LeMieux describes the comments as dumbfounded by this "spectacle" of both "virtuosic yet alien" play. He cites commenters who post shocked responses like "I think some things are better left alone or untold so they don't shatter peoples' hopes and dreams." Some draw on stereotypes to explain the play style, stating "teh japanese are :alien:" (LeMieux 2014, p. 14). While TAS videos are now embraced by the community rather than facing the rejection and racism Morimoto's video received in the early 2000s, the wonder at seeing a game broken beyond recognition through an intimacy with the code and the use of clever exploits is still a strong part of the aesthetic appeal of speedrunning. Exploration of these limits, leading to the discovery of new techniques and creation of new ways to play the "metagame" of speedrunning, stokes the creativity of speedrunning communities, where "there is a plasticity to speedrunning categories, which tend to multiply and transform as the metagame evolves through the community's collective research, discovery, and exploitation of new techniques for playing each game" (Boluk & LeMieux 2017, p. 44).

Based on this existing research about speedrunning communities, the outcome of speedrunning can be described as a curated performance of a specific trajectory through the game space, a trajectory that is made up of a series of collaboratively discovered player actions, and therefore, is presented to the community of peers and online and in-person audiences as a distinct product with specific deliberate aesthetic qualities as well as individual innovations, determined by communal activity in these networks. Rainforest Scully-Blaker's spatial analysis of speedruns (2014) considers some potential qualities, introducing a distinction between "finesse" and "deconstructive" runs. The finesse run roughly maps to the 100% category within the speedrunning community, where the runner simply finds the most efficient route between all goals of the game. He relates this practice within space to de Certeau's concept of the tour, which is the active navigation of a space, contrasted with the map, which works from an outside perspective (Scully-Blaker 2014). 100% tours of games respect the boundaries established by the game narrative. For example, Mario cannot walk through walls in *Super Mario 64*, and must have so many stars to access each progressive iteration of Bowser's lair. Meanwhile, deconstructive runs can be equated to the community concept of the Any% run, which allows for the use of glitches and sequence breaking to skip major sections of intended gameplay. According to Scully-Blaker's framework, these runs break down the narrative boundaries de Certeau discusses within the space of the tour with Virilio's concept of the violence of speed. This break is an example of

where the unique aesthetic qualities of speedrunning that are compelling to the community emerge, and elements of the Neo-Baroque aesthetics become most apparent.

Figure 2. Screencapture comparing the same ending cutscene depicted in a recording of a 100% run (left) and Any% run (right) of *Super Mario 64*

The Neo-Baroque

Angela Ndalianis (2004) deploys an aesthetic framework that connects emerging tendencies in contemporary entertainment media to shifts in culture that defined the historical Baroque. The Baroque period, usually defined as spanning the late 16th through 17th centuries, contrasted with the Renaissance that preceded it. While the historical Baroque manifested in visual art, architecture, literature, theatre, and music, the Neo-Baroque Ndalianis describes has manifested in media associated with contemporary entertainment, such as amusement parks, blockbuster films. and videogames. The main characteristics which connect the Neo-Baroque to the historical Baroque are the breaking of the frame, an inherent interest in dazzling the viewer, and a concern for virtuosity (Ndalianis 2004, p. 7). While Ndalianis notes videogames already fit within this aesthetic framework, because they are not strictly linear or static works, the appreciation of Any% runs in speedrunning importantly pushes the experience of a videogame further into Neo-Baroque aesthetic qualities.

Analyzing speedruns through a Neo-Baroque aesthetic framework therefore builds on existing perspectives on speedruns, which generally do not delve into their aesthetic qualities, or do so only from a player-centric perspective. This neglects to address their surrounding culture of reception which, while playing a large role in the production and performance of speedrunning, also attracts many who do not personally participate in speedrunning or even play the specific

game being performed. In this sense, it is useful to read the aesthetically engaged and discerning culture around speedrunning as a sort of "art world," the term used by H.S. Becker to describe the network of roles and activities involved not just in the production of individual artworks, but the social contexts in which the work is received, and the development of critical and aesthetic innovation that comes out of this process. Within an art world, aesthetic values are "characteristic phenomena of collective activity" where "the interaction of all the involved parties produces a shared sense of the worth of what they collectively produce" (Becker 1982, p. 39). Individual innovations that are initially controversial or rejected, such as particular Any% strategies or TAS, can be accepted as having aesthetic values through gradual incorporation into this process, which in turn changes the overall aesthetic values of the collective. Therefore, examining the aesthetic values of speedrunning communities as a process within an active and changing art world expands on the original cultural insights of Neo-Baroque aesthetics.

Ndalianis describes the emerging qualities of Neo-Baroque aesthetics by first analyzing the shift in aesthetics from the Renaissance to Baroque period. The program of the Scrovegni Chapel by Giotto (1305) offers an example of Renaissance principles in visual aesthetics. The fresco series presents the passion of the Christ, with each episode set in a discrete, geometrically proper window that recedes from the frame. The frames progress in bands around the chapel, and the viewer is expected to go from one frame to the next, stopping to view each from the viewpoint presumed by the use of perspective. Giotto's style and early use of perspectival frameworks influenced painters through the 15th and 16th centuries, who refined these techniques.

The beginning of a shift to Baroque style manifests in a work such as Caravaggio's *Seven Works of Mercy* (1607) because it presents a cluster of thematically linked episodes in a single, non-perspectival space. The space generated by the painting envelops the viewer with its rendering of harsh light and dark, where there is no clear narrative or order of events, and figures reach dynamically from the shadows. While this painting was also made for a chapel where the ideal viewer would be in a single, privileged position, it is not a series of linear narrative incidents or a list of ideas that are core to Catholic beliefs, but an overwhelming expression of many at once. Caravaggio's work also notably differs from Renaissance works for its virtuosic attention to dynamic light and shadow, as well as frequently gory, frightening, and scandalous treatments of Christian themes. The change from Renaissance to Baroque era representations of space represents, as Ndalianis argues, a move away from the rigid and hierarchical mathematical perspective and symbolic meanings that contained Renaissance work in a singular perspective, instead going outside of the frame, presenting a loss of static totality and equilibrium, replacing it with "instability, fragmentation, polydimensionality and change" (2004, p. 19).

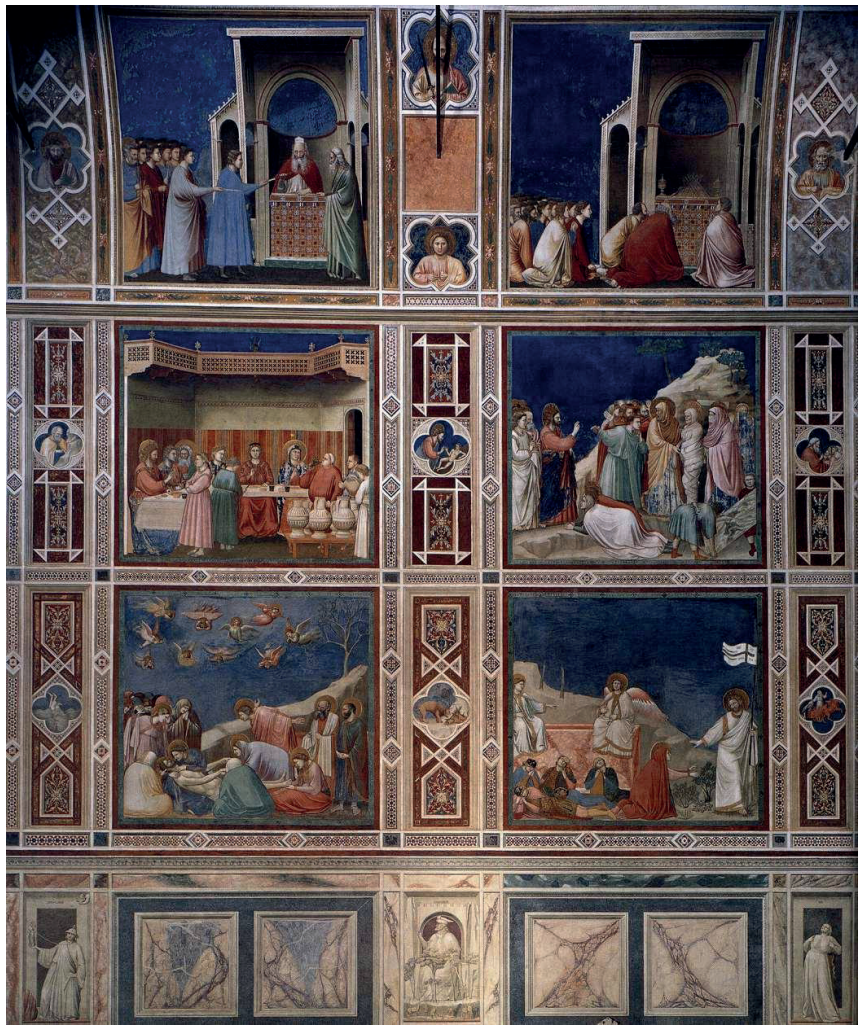
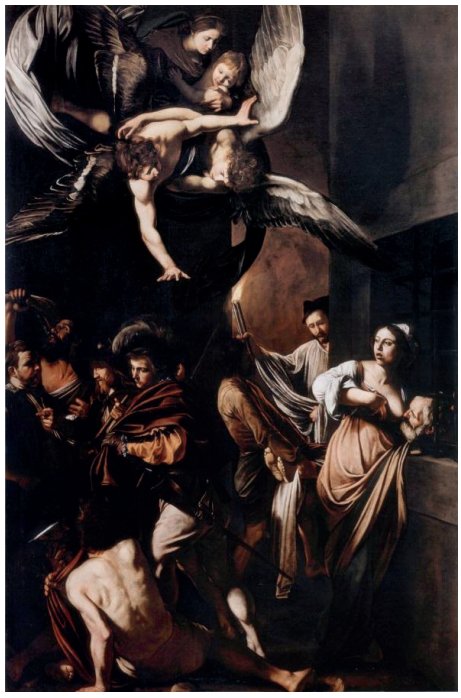


Figure 3. Giotto di Bondone, detail from the Scrovegni Chapel fresco program, 1305

Baroque illusionistic ceilings, especially Giovanni Battista Gaulli's *Triumph of the Name of Jesus* (1674), represent the height of breaking free from the architectural frame. Figures float over the established architectural settings and sculptural installation blends with illusionistic representation that invades the viewer's subjective space, not merely providing a porthole to a simulated view. Baroque ceilings emphasize indeterminacy between architecture and image, structure and representation, by bringing points where the two spill over into each other fully into the viewer's attention as they move through the space below.



Figures 4 & 5. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Seven Works of Mercy*, 1607 (left) & Giovanni Battista Gaulli, *Triumph of the Name of Jesus*, 1674 (right)

The Neo-Baroque emerges in the contemporary era from a similar shift in visual and narrative representation that is exacerbated in the 20th and 21st centuries by multimedia conglomerations and new technology. 3D movies or immersive digital environments break the frame in a more literal sense, but more often in digital games, the frame is figuratively broken through the simulation of multiple narrative compossibilities. Ndalianis cites the Baroque philosopher Gottfried Leibniz's use of the term, describing the things that can exist together without contradictions to make up a world. In the religious context of the Baroque, Leibniz uses this concept to argue that God has created the best compossible world, but within the Neo-Baroque, informed by societal shifts towards secularism and the theories of quantum mechanics and multiple universes, one compossibility is no longer privileged, and instead multiple compossibilities may coexist.

The existence of multiple compossibilities rather than one authoritative perspective already exists in digital games because the player's movement and viewpoint within the space is individualized and unlikely to be exactly replicated by another player even in casual play. Videogames are often described as different from films or literature because of this, but James Newman (2008, p. 137) argues

that "many videogames that appear to present . . . variable structures highly contingent on gamer performance and choice are, in fact, structured in such a way that the completion of specific sequences in a prescribed order is essential for progress to continue." He goes on to note that subverting these requirements through glitches and sequence breaking "reveals much about the pleasures of gameplay as an exploratory activity," expanding the nonlinear possibilities of the games speedrunners deconstruct (p. 140).

Videogame aesthetics and speedrunning aesthetics

Simon Niedenthal (2009, pp. 2–3) notes that there are three core meanings of "aesthetics" in relation to videogames. First, similarly to other forms of media, the aesthetics of a videogame include the sensory phenomena the player encounters. This includes visual information and sound, but also haptic sensations of play and sense of space, as well as the rhythms of play. Videogame aesthetics can also include what videogames have in common with other aesthetic forms, allowing for generalizations or comparisons, and a third type of aesthetic experience derived from the game, which can be based on sociability or emotions that are part of the experience of play. Speedrunning affects these aesthetics in multiple ways, often breaking with normative visuals, depictions of space, gameplay rhythms, community practices and emotional responses expected from videogames, and creating specific networks for the production and appreciation of these aesthetic experiences, and so the aesthetics of speedrunning should be analyzed in their own right.

The speedruns produced by the exploratory activity of the speedrunning community reveal an extension and expansion of the Neo-Baroque qualities found in games, and challenge typical and desirable aesthetic traits of videogames. Digital games generally remain conservative in how they depict space. They typically resort to existing perspectival approaches that simulate, sometimes within the programming itself, a single, unitary visual framework, based on techniques using mathematical and geometrical relationships codified during the Italian Renaissance (Arsenault & Larochelle 2013, p. 2). Further, Michael Nitsche (2008, p. 50) notes that the player's movement through game space, both audiovisual and defined by systems, creates the meaning the player gleans from the game. Rather than being determined in the videogame's rules or visually mediated space at the level of environment design, the cognitive connections that give a game its plot and meaningfulness happen in the space as intuitively understood by the player, or what the player describes as the "fictional space."

Nitsche specifically notes that play which goes along with the videogame's intended design and nonconformist play both infuse the space with meaning

(2008, p. 50). Speedrunning frequently skips narrated portions of gameplay, where meaning is explicitly given to the character and events progress in a designed sequence, leading to the generation of an entirely different meaning within the game space for player and audience. The movement of the player through this space defines their aesthetic experience. The violent frame-breaking of unconventional play, such as Any% speedrunning, foregrounds issues traditional approaches to aesthetics face when applied to videogames. A videogame is not a single aesthetic object but a system allowing for a multiplicity of aesthetic experiences, some of which can be vastly different from one another.

In addition to providing the illusion of a window into a space represented by the 2D screen, the simulation of a sensible, if not entirely realistic, world that feels logical and predictable is the frame containing most videogames, and it is procedural, visual, and narrative. Speedruns, especially Tool-Assisted and Any% runs, do not maintain the typical illusion of a coherent space and set of rules for the player to act in. Speedrunning that utilizes sequence breaking, unconventional movement strats, and glitches breaks the frame of the videogame form in a similar way.

Once these framing devices are broken, the illusion of the digital game as a designed, singular whole fragments, and its reality as a set of assets controlled by code, with no inherent representational meaning except by their relation to each other, assembled by the player, becomes apparent. In this case, the game becomes, in Ndalianis' words, a "bewildering excess of symbolic material, image liberated from storytelling function" (2004, p. 221). Narrative and space, both intimately connected in gaming, as Julian Kücklich (2007) argues, are influenced by exploits, such as sequence breaks and clipping, "stripping the game space of its representational qualities" and "revealing its functional architecture" (p. 120).

The breaking of the frame is vividly demonstrated in Torje's (as of June 12, 2016) record-breaking Any% run of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. Assets and code are broken free from the narrative and implicit rules of the game when he uses a major sequence break to teleport to the final tower level. The run ends when he lands the final blow to Ganon as Young Link in an area typically only accessible by Link's adult form. He also saves even more time during the tower escape sequence by clipping into out of bounds areas, a common speedrunning strat which typically "means moving through empty spaces, falling into black abysses or existing just outside the populated map space," in ways which allow digital space and game time to be witnessed separately from intended player movement or narrative linkages (McKissack & May 2020, p. 8). In a single area of the game, this run not only disconnects game assets from narrative function and content, but also defies the perceived function of walls, revealing them as only a suggestion, in some cases, according to the underlying code. Seeing Link clip through apparently solid surfaces and float through out-of-bounds space has

visual similarities to glitch art, and the runner and audiences' aesthetic response based on skillful, subversive uses of technology can also be closely related to the use of glitches in such artworks.

When a viewer or user notices and critically engages with a glitch, it "reveals both the material foundations and processes of digital media," according to Michael Betancourt (2014). However, glitches are just as likely to be "tuned out" by the average viewer. Glitches like those harnessed to create the effects in glitch art, and the ones used by speedrunners to skip areas or go out of bounds, are not a technical failure as commonly assumed, but simply technology acting in a way that is interpreted as functioning incorrectly by the audience in relation to its normative function. These glitches necessarily have to be repeatable, and hence are an existing part of the game code that simply does not maintain the implicit rules or structure within the simulated game space. Therefore, runners investigate the technological form of digital media, and draw attention to the windows into this form glitches produce through sharing strats and delivering oral histories and commentary on these discoveries during runs.

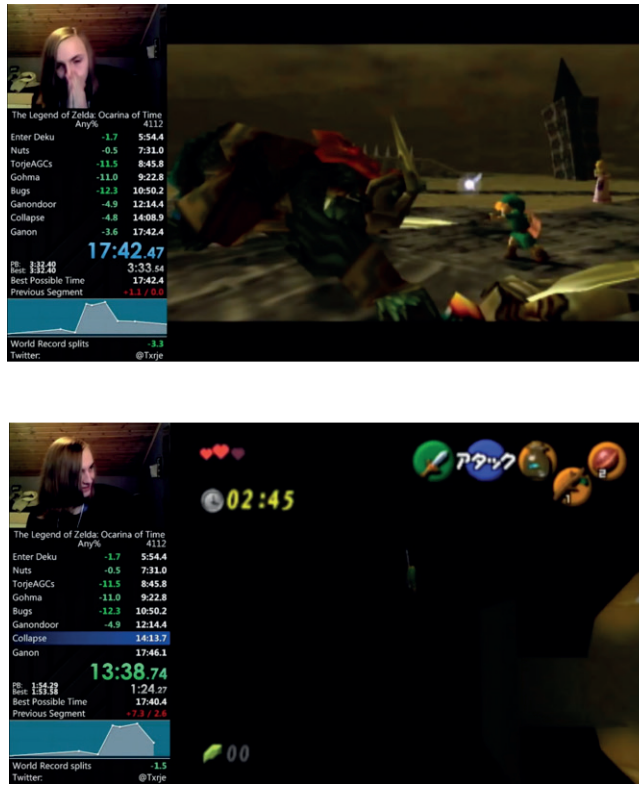


Figure 6. Screencapture of Torje defeating Ganon as Young Link (top) and going out of bounds (bottom) in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*

Ndalianis (2004, p. 126) references savvy users of the PC game *Phantasmagoria* who go directly to the game's files to access cinematics and graphics in any order as one way of playing with the polydimensional and reconfigurable nature of digital games offered by their technological form. This allows players to separate the visual spectacle from the rules and narrative of the game, if they know how to play with the underlying technological structure. This form of play is not referenced within the videogame itself, which encourages a certain style of normative play, and must be uncovered with technical knowledge and experimentation. Reconfigurations allowed by the multiple expected and unexpected paths available through a game open up new aesthetic possibilities, through what may be considered "nonsensical" or "bad" gameplay, or not gameplay at all. Ndalianis' existing analysis of unusual types of play predates the visibility speedrunning currently has in the gaming community, but still demonstrates how speedrunning techniques can reconfigure the fundamental aesthetic experience of the game and the simulated space.

Conclusion

Speedrunning practices that involve glitches, exploits, and sequence breaks give the player a toolbox of fragments from which to construct a new aesthetic experience, which they can then perform in real time. This experience divorces almost completely from the videogame as marketed to or discussed by non-speedrunners, but within the gaming community it has become an alternate but equally significant aesthetic experience for the runners and thousands of spectators who demonstrate knowledge sharing, discernment, and appreciation about particularly entertaining, elegant, or humorous runs. These art world participants are oriented around finding increasingly obscure and impressive ways to shave seconds off existing world records, setting the rules and developing aesthetic values for new runs and categories, while also responding to new or transgressive experimentation in this area.

Often players use these new tools to collaboratively manipulate and rearrange fragments to perfect a sequence of maneuvers that finishes the game in record time; however, there are also growing communities built around using the fewest button presses to clear levels, or to stretch the limits of the reconfiguration possibilities afforded by glitches. Lord Tom's TAS video of *Super Mario Bros. 3*, for example, is less about completing the game and more about incorporating strange and humorous reconfigurations of graphics and code through "frame perfect" inputs (inputs that only have the desired effect within a game during a single frame of gameplay or a similarly short window outside of human reaction times, therefore requiring a bot) for the sake of entertainment, as well as showcasing deep technical understanding and virtuosity. By using arbitrary code execution glitches which

allow for changes in the code of the game itself, Lord Tom's TAS run results in visuals that appear nonfunctional, incorrect, and inexplicable within the expected Mario universe, causing items and abilities to respond in seemingly random or humorous ways. The run also changes the text in iconic scenes, such as when Mario finds Princess Peach at the end of the game, replacing the usual dialogue with graffiti-like self-referential humor, similar to the experiences created by the *Phantasmagoria* players who use the reconfigurable nature of the game file structure to create humorously "bad" gameplay or absurd scenarios in contrast to the horror narrative of the game's scripted sequences.

Figure 7. Screencapture of LordTom's Tool-Assisted Speedrun of *Super Mario Bros. 3* at AGDQ 2016.

Because it is reliant on an existing videogame, already seen as the object of most academic investigations into videogames, the speedrun itself, as well as the reception and appreciation of speedruns, are often considered relevant only in relation to other perspectives on gaming culture, such as the study of fan communities or videogame conservation. However, speedruns are worth attention for their own sake as well, because of their relation to contemporary digital aesthetics, and what the practice can reveal about our shifting aesthetic experiences in an increasingly digital age. Analyzed alongside the maximalist aesthetics, rupturing or combination of standard framing devices, and nonlinear narratives that indicate the return of Baroque ideas in other media, such as film, speedrunning emphasizes videogames' connection to larger Neo-Baroque aesthetic trends in contemporary art and entertainment, while also pushing beyond, heightening,

and revealing the structures behind these traits, experimenting and recombining them in new ways. For this reason, in addition to a rigorous close reading of a game, as well as a productive fan practice, speedrunning is valuable as a rich creative and aesthetic experience even outside of these contexts, for both player and viewer. Speedrunning demonstrates an intimate engagement with glitch aesthetics, delighting in recording instances of a videogame's unexpected behavior. Speedrunners also use these glitches as tools to move through digital space in new and unforeseen ways, and audiences seek them out, to more fully realize and appreciate videogames as polydimensional and reconfigurable expressions of the Neo-Baroque aesthetic.

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