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### The Positive and Negative Aspects of Competitive Video Game Speedrunning

To speedrun a video game is to “beat the game” or fulfill predetermined criteria as fast as possible. Some other terms necessary to define are outlined below. “TAS”, or “*Tool-Assisted Speedruns*” are defined by *TASvideos* (a site where these speedruns are hosted and judged) as “*a speedrun that is made with use of... features that help the playing that are not available in regular playing. Common examples of tools: Slow motion, pause, and frame advance (Never letting the game to go too fast to handle.) Precise timer (A frame-by-frame counter of movie length, that helps comparing different paths.) Re-recording (Ability to undo unwanted actions and retry.) Hex-editing (Copying and editing of input stream segments.) Autofire (Also called “turbo”, as found in some game controllers. Automatically repeating pressing of a button.)*” (Feos) These runs are typically faster than those completed by humans and are judged in separate categories. “GDQ”, or “*Games Done Quick*” is an organization that organizes events throughout the year for speedrunning “marathons”. These events involve multiple runners and multiple games being run one after another, streamed live on Twitch, a video game streaming site. “*Awesome Games Done Quick*” takes place in January, and “*Summer Games Done Quick*” is in July, with other, smaller, events occurring throughout the year. “*Any%*” refers to a general goal of reaching the end of a video game. This term originates from the video game “*Metroid*”, in which a literal percentage point was given to indicate full completion of all objectives, and the

game could be beaten with various ending percentages. Other categories for speedruns include 100% (completing all objectives offered in the game), low% (finishing the game with as low of a certain value as possible, such as collectibles, points, or in-game currency), and game-specific conditions, sometimes followed by a “%” (such as dead%, where you have to die as fast as possible, or Glitchless, meaning that no bugs or glitches in the game may be used to speed up gameplay).

## ORIGINS OF SPEEDRUNNING

As long as video games have possessed scoring mechanics, there have been players hoping to achieve the highest possible score. However, the first home video game that emphasized competing for *faster times* was the 1980 port of arcade game “*Drag Race*”, by Activision for the Atari 2600 game console called “*Dragster*”. A Guinness World Record was awarded to player Todd Rogers for achieving a time of 5.51 seconds. Rogers is credited as being the first professional video game player (Moultrie) and introduced the gaming public to the concept of competitive speedrunning.

The speedrunning community grew further with the release of *Doom* and *Quake*, PC games from 1993 and 1996, respectively. These titles had the ability to save “demos” of playthroughs as a file that could be distributed and seen by others. The file would record each button press and play them back on any copy of the games, creating a small file that could be downloaded and viewed more easily than a video in the early days of the internet. Through these demos, players could document their fastest times on the internet and compete with players around the world (Brewster). Various websites were created in the 1990s that were designed to serve as leaderboards for speedruns, such as *Quake Done Quick*, *Compet-n*, *Nightmare Speed Demos*, and *Speed Demos Archive*. Japan’s speedrunning scene was also starting to gain

popularity in the 1990s, with groups of students sharing video game strategies online or in comic book form, as well as performing live speedruns for events.

In the 2000s, *Speed Demos Archive*, *TwinGalaxies*, and *GameFAQs* were the main hubs of western speedrunning discussion and record hosting. Players discovered that some games could be played out of order using glitches or extreme skill, and many players focused on “routing” games so that large portions of gameplay could be skipped. This routing has proved incredibly successful for many games, such as the *Metroid* series (Chen, 684), and *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, where an early speedrun clocked in at 5 hours compared to the 17 minute time that currently holds the record (Brewster).

Another development of speedrunning was the introduction of the TAS. In 1996, two *Doom* players posted demo that had been reverse-engineered to allow the game to be played in slow-motion, but the demo in real-time, giving them a nearly perfect run. This strategy raised much controversy among the community, but in 1998, it was agreed that TAS would become its own category to allow speedruns to break past barriers of human error. There were still many complaints among runners that allowing for TAS would confuse viewers, or that people would submit TAS under regular categories in order to cheat. However, the consensus today is that the TAS has its place in speedrunning, and it even is featured in speedrunning marathon events such as *GDQ*.

In 2009, Narcissa Wright (formerly Cosmo Wright), created many platforms for speedrunners, including a way for runners to race each other. This has also become a popular event style for marathons and live streamers. She also hosted a site dedicated to *Legend of Zelda* speedruns that caused many players to migrate over from *SDA*. Communities began to decide their own rules and host on their own sites as opposed to following one governing speedrunning body.

Around 2013, speedruns streamed live on the site *Twitch.tv* began to gain popularity, getting over 10,000 live viewers on some runs. Today, *Twitch.tv* is very commonly used as a way to showcase speedrunning, try for records, and entertain viewers. A live or marathon viewing experienced has been likened by many fans to the experience of watching live sports (Chen, 685), which can explain the massive growth of speedrunning as well as its neighbor, eSports.

2014 once again saw a centralization of the various speedrunning communities that had split off from *SDA* with the creation of *Speedrun.com*, which is still used as the main source for most leaderboards and forums in the speedrunning community.

#### POSITIVE ASPECTS OF SPEEDRUNNING

Since 2008, when *The Speed Gamers* organized the first of these marathons, speedrunners have shown off their feats of gaming live for an audience in person and online as a way to fundraise for charity (Bisceglia, 27). 2010 saw the first *Games Done Quick* marathon, held in a basement, raising \$10,000, and featuring 55 straight hours of gameplay (25). A founder of *Games Done Quick* stated in a 2015 article that charity is now an integral part of speedrunning because, without charity, “*you would come away feeling happy that you met new friends, but you would not have an overwhelming sense of accomplishment and community pride.*” (27). Since its creation, *GDQ* has raised over \$9 million for *Doctors Without Borders* and *Prevent Cancer*, and every event but one has seen an increase in donation totals.

*GDQ* has also made an effort in recent years to increase inclusivity within the speedrunning community, starting events such as “*Frame Fatales*”, a marathon organized by women and featuring exclusively female runners, as well as a series for Disability Month featuring runners with disabilities and raising funds for the charity *AbleGamers*.

Speedrunning, unlike eSports, is not necessarily dependant on the most high-end equipment. In fact, in order to encourage those with financial limitations to continue running games, many PC games are timed using timers that pause during loading, preventing those with a faster system from gaining an advantage. Many strategies and breakthroughs are discovered as a team effort among many runners, which began in some of the earliest internet speedrunning communities. Many of these forums have adopted a democratic system for determining rules and adapting them when the community sees fit. In this way, the speedrunning community is an interesting microcosm of sport, allowing purists and boundary breakers to coexist through many different speedrun categories. This also allows for more potential record-holders to emerge, to find their niche category and perfect it, or even to create a brand new category for the community's discretion.

#### ISSUES WITH SPEEDRUNNING

*GDQ* and the speedrunning community at large are not without major controversy. Todd Rogers, the holder quite possibly the first speedrunning world record, lost his title as both the fastest runner of *Dragster* and longest holder of a video game record in early 2018 after a computer scientist determined that his supposed record time was, in fact, impossible to achieve within the game (Alexandra). Many other runners, especially those in the early days, when videos and demos were easily manipulated, have had their times removed for various reasons.

Many people in the speedrunning community have also expressed discontent with some of the business decisions of *GDQ*, claiming that it has fed into corporate interests and attempted to make the marathon more advertiser-friendly. *Twitch's* chat function has been heavily censored, locked behind paywalls, and prevented users from hosting the stream on their own channels due to claims of hate speech. Several speedrunners have been banned from attending

the marathon, and without clear rules that could provide concrete evidence for a ban, these runners have turned to other marathons or moved to their own streams exclusively (Glink). In *GDQ*'s attempt to become as accessible as possible, it has frustrated some fans who are now forced to watch what they say on stream, even when they play M-Rated games.

## CONCLUSIONS

Speedrunning has some murky beginnings, but over time has come to represent a sense of community. While *GDQ* has become a commodified event, focusing on being appealing to a mass market and being politically correct to include its fans within marginalized communities, those who don't support the event still have plenty of places to build a community. The quest to make charity synonymous with speedrunning, as well as give those typically poorly represented in the gaming community a chance to show their skills, is admirable but can turn some fans away with its sugar coating and censorship. However, this sort of branching off has been seen before with the SDA forums splitting and recombining into Speedruns.com. With far more media attention being focused on the competitive gaming scene, along with improved strategies to detect and deter cheating, speedrunning appears to have a bright future, especially for those who enjoy the safety of the *GDQ* stream.

(1,706 Words)

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