

## ABSTRACT

SCHMALZER, MADISON. *Transition Games: Speedrunning Gender*. (Under the direction of Dr. Andrew Johnston).

*Transition Games* argues that playing with the rules of videogames can give frameworks to think about the make-up of other systems of rules, such as the rules of gender. Through play we may find we don't have to play in the ways videogames' (technologically and socially) programmed rules tell us to. The practice of speedrunning, or completing goals within videogames as fast as possible, becomes a glitch in the rules of videogames that reveals standard orientations towards constructed rules, while also becoming a trans practice of discovery hinting at other methods of self-determination that also resituate our embodied experiences of temporality.

The first chapter, "Seeing the Looking Glass: The Stakes of (In)Visible Rules," lays out some of the stakes to cultural rules and demonstrates how videogame rules become entangled with them. I unpack the ways that rules become invisible and how that invisibility gives the power to escape scrutiny, thus maintaining control. The stakes of rules are most clearly demonstrated through an analysis of far right and trans exclusionary radical feminist rhetorics of harassment and policing of rules and boundaries surrounding videogames and gender. A queer erotics of control is then developed to clearly demonstrate how we become controlled by rules, how that control can (at times) become manipulative, but also control can be thought of as pleasurable and creative when we submit to rules that adhere to our desires.

Chapter 2, "Category Extensions: Glitching the Rules," argues that rules, whether of videogames or of gender, can be resituated as a trans tool of self and communal determination using speedrunning as a technocultural practice that offers us hints at alternative modes of relationality to rules in all aspects of life. It first works through the concept of counter-powers, forms of power that are outside the control of hegemonic sources of power, before deploying the figure of the

technocultural glitch as a means to resituate power. It ends with a case study of the development of rules and categories in one speedrunning community, *Hades*, to demonstrate how cultural glitches can form counter-powers that allow for new rules and categories to unfold.

Chapter 3, “The Reset: Red Splits, Losing Time, and Starting Over,” shifts to a focus on the temporalities that unfold from configurations of rules as well as the embodied experiences that are produced from these temporal arrangements. It arises from and engages more directly with the author’s personal experiences with transition and speedrunning. Embodied reality becomes the theoretical lens through which trans temporalities are understood. In particular, the reset is positioned as one temporal moment of transformation that arises from the configurations of speedrunning’s rules and technologies. The reset is central to all videogame play, but it is also a temporal moment all too familiar to trans players. By putting reflections from the author’s time speedrunning *Spyro Reignited 2* and transitioning in conversation with one another, she uncovers some of the ways that playing with technology has become a particular trans practice of temporal manipulation, and how exploration of trans identity can shape the ways videogame technologies as well as the technologies of sex and gender can be understood.

Finally, Chapter 4 “Playing Tool-assisted: Syncing with a Techno-Body,” continues the focus on temporality by looking to a temporal mode, that of synchronization. This chapter asks: how do trans people (de)sync with the media of bodies forming some kind of stable (or flickering) subjectivity? And how do those subjectivities synchronize with other media forms like videogames? This is accomplished through an analysis of the author’s time speedrunning *Undertale* as well as close examination of trans authored texts.

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Transition Games: Speedrunning Gender

by  
Madison Schmalzer

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Madison Schmalzer is an interdisciplinary media scholar. Her interests lie at the intersection of digital media and social identities, and her research examines topics that expose how gender, sexuality, and disability are imbricated in material infrastructures.

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## Preface

“Despite everything, it's still you.”

*Undertale* (2015)

I want to open by situating this project.

This dissertation about videogames and gender is really about many things, but first and foremost it is about me. Not because of any of the biographical elements to it (even though there are many included, particularly in Chapters 3 and 4), but because I wrote this to work through my own thoughts about gender, my relationship to technology, and my place within certain, what I'll call here, “technocultural circles.” The ideas I generate are intrinsically tied to my situation. Of course, all writing, academic or otherwise, is about the person that wrote it. It's just a matter of whether the writer recognizes that or not. At the same time, this one seems particularly tightly tied to me as it is (perhaps ill advisedly) heavily informed by my own grappling with dysphoria and the processes of transitioning. In fact, this text, as well as the videogame play I focus on, *is* that grappling. I began thinking about this work in early 2017. I began writing it in earnest in 2019, and the current version was completed in the summer of 2022. That time frame coincides with coming out to friends and family, changing my name and (attempting to) change my identity, as well as starting the slow process of medically transitioning. It also coincides with me learning to speedrun, joining speedrunning communities, and streaming my attempts on Twitch.tv. So, this project, my transition, and speedrunning are tightly entangled for me on a personal level.

And I think it is important to acknowledge that this arises out of my grappling with gender and subsequent transition. Many accounts of transness deal with these early stages of transitioning (to the point that they are overrepresented in virtually any discourse about trans people). There are

many reasons for this. We can chalk a lot of that up to the many, many issues involved with living in a cisnormative society that violently polices the boundaries of gender (especially the act of crossing those boundaries) while also having voyeuristic fetishes regarding trans bodies that have become understood as taboo and scandalous. The supposed crossing (before and afters, #transtimelines, lipstick in the mirror, The Surgery, etc.) is the location that those fetishistic drives (literal and figurative) are most focused. But trans people, I think, write about it for another simple reason; it's because dysphoria and transition are all many of us can think about during these phases of our life. I am no different. And I mean, *it is* a big momentous deal. Transition is truly life changing, and the pain of dysphoria (as well as the host of material and mental issues that arise from it, exacerbated by the transphobic society we find ourselves in) can become all consuming. I'm not trying to downplay that. But I do feel the need to contextualize. My writing takes the shape and authoritative tone of academic writing, but it's written by someone who has been figuring her shit out in real time while drafting. It does not engage in too much depth with, say, the issues involved with being an aging trans person; the creation, maintenance, and protection of trans communities; or, more generally, the specifics of the material and political needs of trans people broadly. It lacks the depth and clear cited perspective that comes with time and some of the retrospection distance enables. There is so much more to trans life than transition, but I am writing in the midst of major changes that have taken up most of my mental bandwidth. This is both a reckoning with those major changes and also a part of moving on from them. Yet I believe *Transition Games* is still a useful piece of writing. It was useful to me as I grow and heal, and my hope is that it is useful to other trans or questioning people that may encounter it that are figuring their shit out too.

So, this is a personal piece of writing, and that extends beyond the somewhat myopic scope of the trans issues engaged with. This is also written by a white, able bodied, middle class, trans woman. In this piece I suggest that cis people have a privileged position of "naturalness" or

“defaultness” that they (by and large) do not reflect on, and I would be remiss if I didn’t point that out about myself in other dimensions of identity. If for no other reason than lack of engagement, anything written by a white, able-bodied, middle-class person is necessarily about race, ability, and class whether we want to admit it or not. While I do my best to step outside of myself, include intersectional critiques, and don’t abdicate any responsibility that writing a work like this entails regarding care for others or the implications of my theoretical positions, my writing and thinking is still informed by my positionality. Trans people are not a monolith and there are specific political and material needs throughout the wide variety of trans identities whether that be in regards to gender, sexuality, disability, race, or class. A hyper focus on one group inevitably ignores certain important imperatives.

And, with that, this is also about videogames. I deeply love videogames. In particular, speedrunning (one of my central focuses going forward) is very dear to me. If you are a fellow speedrunner: hello! I hope this project resonates with you. And if you aren’t a speedrunner (at the risk of being too sentimental in an academic text) I would like nothing more than to make you, dear reader, see how fantastic it is and fall in love with it as well, but speedrunning isn’t for everyone. And that’s okay. While this work is situated in very specific discourses surrounding trans politics, trans identities, and videogame practices, in some ways any media practice can stand in for speedrunning in this work. I am thinking through how we use media and technology as a means to construct ourselves and our culture. How the media and technology we engage with can become a critical lens to understand the world, ourselves, and how we fit into larger structures. So, whatever it is that you love to do with media and technology can stand in just as well. The specifics will inevitably change. My conclusions about gender and videogames cannot be cleanly mapped onto all media and technology. But, from a methodological standpoint, similar questions can be asked.

Instead of speedrunning, how do your hobbies, your passions, the media and technologies you engage in shape who you are and help you see the world, relationships, politics, or self differently?

So, with all that out of the way, let's talk about videogames, shall we?

## Split 1: Routing the Run

## Introduction: *Gender Transition*% Major Glitches

Gotta go fast, gotta go fast

Gotta go faster, faster, faster, faster, faster!

Got ourselves a situation

Stuck in a new location

Without any explanation

No time for relaxation!

“Gotta Go Fast,” opening theme to animated television show *Sonic X*

As the title, *Transition Games*, suggests this is about gender transition as well as games. It is a call to transition games, that is, to change them. To take their rules and warp them, to make them something else. I, and many others, do that when we speedrun. We change the rules, and in changing immaterial rules of engagement we change hardware, software, and embodied relationships to games as well. Orientations towards play become transformative. At the same time, the subtitle is *Speedrunning Gender*. I turn the critical lens that speedrunning has afforded me to rethink games and turn it back on other systems of rules, like gender. How do we speedrun gender? This has little to do with going fast. As we will see in upcoming sections, speedrunning is a long, slow process. I am instead asking how speedrunning, as a process and collection of practices that transforms games, can become an orientation towards gender. How do we take gender’s rules and warp them to our desires? And in doing so, how do we alter the metaphorical hardware and software gender operates on, as well as our embodied relationships to gender?

Just as speedrunners glitch past narrative, bosses, entire levels, and sometimes the whole game in their long, arduous quests for speed, let's not mince any more words and skip straight to my arguments:

I argue that speedrunning reveals the contingent rules that make up videogame play. Speedrunning is many things, as we will come to see, but for now let's start with a definition from the speedrun live-streaming website *SpeedRunsLive*'s glossary of terms: "Speedrun: Playing a game with the intent of completing a goal as fast as possible." Speedrunning, by necessity, requires the imposition of rules onto play. What constitutes the "goal?" When, exactly, is the goal completed? When does the game start? All of these rules and more need to be established.

Playing with the rules of videogames, I argue, can give us frameworks to think about the make-up of other systems of rules, such as the rules of gender. Videogames in effect become a metaphor for gender, and vice versa. Through play we may find that we don't have to play in the ways videogames' (technologically and socially) programmed rules tell us to. Practices like speedrunning are a glitch in the rules of videogames. Glitches draw our attention to the interfaces that produce media. Speedrunning deals intimately with glitches, but glitches are not only found within technological systems; glitches can crop up in any system. In the case of cultural glitches attention is drawn to the systems of power that produce subjectivities and culture broadly. Speedrunning thought of as a glitch is a means to reflect on the constructed nature of videogame rules, which can lead to critiquing and altering those rules (rules that are built off of many exclusionary ideologies as I discuss in Chapter 1). But the glitch also creates spaces for desires to unfold including desires for modes of embodied play as well as for forms of relationality. In the same way, trans identities are a glitch in the rules of gender that reveals the artifice of gendered rules while also allowing for desires for embodied existences, relationality, and subjectivities to unfold. In short, both speedrunning and the various practices that produce trans subjectivity can be understood

as practices that index desires as well as give the tools to produce counter-powers that allow us to meaningfully act on those desires.

With that in mind, I think speedrunning beside transition to see how, through shirking of standard sets of rules, both practices can shape temporal understandings of the world as well as our embodied subjectivities in ways that speak to (as well as produce and fulfill) desires. I find similar temporal structures in speedrunning and trans lives, namely those of the reset and a focus on synchronization, and I ask how reorientations towards those temporal moments can be useful in bringing about the kinds of subjectivity and relationality trans people (and speedrunners) desire.

Speedrunning, I am arguing, is a technocultural practice. I mean a few things by this. To call speedrunning a practice is to emphasize the labor that goes into producing speedrunning. Speedrunning is not any one instance of gameplay. It is an engagement with certain actions that have come to be understood as constituting the historically and contingently constructed categories we now know as speedrunning including playing games, documenting strategies and technological configurations, establishing (and altering) rules of engagement with games, moderating platforms like Twitch and Discord, and more. This is where the technocultural part comes in. Speedrunning is a manipulation of technologies, but it is also the negotiation of cultural rules that make certain actions legible to other practitioners through the formation and maintenance of communal relationships that provide the space of legibility.

In the same way, transition and performances of trans identities are also technocultural practices. Transitions don't just happen. They consist of repeated actions and implementations of embodied technologies that, taken together, become legible as a transition within (and against) matrices of cultural rules that have taken much labor from many people to produce. As I will delve into below, there are many queer and trans speedrunners. And with that, I would like to merge the two concepts: speedrunning, I argue, is a trans technocultural practice. That's not to say that (all)



practitioners understand speedrunning in the terms I am laying out. However, I do think that there is something particularly trans about speedrunning's reconfiguring of rules and use of technologies to alter temporal and embodied relationships.

### **Setting the Terms**

The arguments I work through in this project deal intensely with the definitions of categories. Accordingly, I need to lay out a few definitions here at the top. First, I understand the term “trans” to be a general label that includes any gender nonconforming subjects broadly speaking, which, put another way, is any subjects that defy hegemonic conceptions of gendered existence. This includes nonbinary, intersex, gender fluid, and many other descriptors. The way I understand the term is nearly synonymous with colloquial uses of “transgender.” But I use trans intentionally to draw attention to the fact that trans identities are not just about gender. Trans identities are often negotiations of gender, sex, and sexuality at the same time. Thus, I believe, the term “transgender” can often foreclose the complicated interplay of negotiating cultural productions and performances of gender; altering embodied, sexed realities; production and navigation of relationality regarding sexuality (in addition to many other kinds of relationality); as well as how all three come to bear on one another. I should note that I most directly and commonly deal with trans identities that would fall under the narrower category of “transsexual,” or those whose transness involves interfacing with medical institutions and interventions to alter their embodied sex. My use of this term in no way indicates that medical intervention is necessary to “really” be trans as some people (wrongly) claim. While this term may sound outdated to some, I think that it is a useful descriptor to clarify some of the specific medical practices I will be discussing in relation to transition going forward. Also, my focus is on transsexuality for one reason: that is who I am. That is my embodied reality, and thus how I have come to build the theoretical arguments I lay out.

Despite this focus, my argumentation is still applicable to trans people more broadly. I understand that transition does not necessarily involve medical intervention, nor does it necessarily involve interfacing with established or hegemonically understood understandings of gendered categories. On a more basic level, to be trans does not require transitioning at all. However, none of these factors negate the interfacing with cultural rules as well as the ways embodiment is experienced within these matrices of rules that I delve into throughout *Transition Games*, which I understand to be central to all trans subjectivities. I also want to note that any terms related to gender sexuality that I employ are always in flux. I argue in upcoming sections for the malleability of rules, definitions, and categories to fit the desires of those interpolated into them. So, I do not make firm boundaries around these definitional borders, nor do I anticipate that any terms used will always mean the same things as I use them to refer to here. As the history of trans terminology I delve into in Chapter 2 attests, language, concepts, and categories related to trans identities have shifted many times over the last century or more. The practices of transness and the rules surrounding them are not stable, and I make no attempts to rein them in.

To label “trans” as “gender nonconforming” requires some engagement with the concept of “gender” as well. What is gender? The answer to this is slippery. One of the primary difficulties in discussing gender is that it can’t really be pinned down to one thing. It is many things at once. I will tackle this definitional question many times throughout *Transition Games* including from a historical perspective; in regard to its tight connection to sex; as the biopolitical control of sex; as a technological construction; as a performative, habitual collection of acts and gestures; and as an embodied feeling. But for now, let's just say that gender is many things at the same time. It’s an embodied sense of ourselves; it’s matrices of rules that dictate how differently sexed bodies must live; it’s how our bodies are policed and power is exerted over them; it’s our proximity to certain forms of power; it’s how we move through the world; it’s a foothold for capitalistic exploitation; it’s

how others reflect our subjectivity back at us; and it's the collection of practices and technologies that we repeatedly engage in to produce certain forms of embodiment and relationality.

The final term I must delve into is "speedrunning." I've already labeled it as a technocultural practice that involves playing videogames fast, but the particulars of those practices arise out of specific historical and technological configurations. In the next section I delve into a cursory (and dramatically incomplete<sup>1</sup>) history of speedrunning that is meant to give an overview of these practices.

### **Speedrunning History: The Timer, Leaderboards, and Live Streaming**

Speedrunning could be defined as playing a videogame as fast as possible. But that simple definition does not capture the complexities of speedrunning. Speedrunning consists of specific practices, technologies, and cultures that arise out of material and historical configurations. In this section I will briefly summarize a history of speedruns that touches on some important aspects of the cultural and technological practice that are important for my project going forward. This is assembled somewhat piecemeal from my research through archival documentation, conversations with speedrunners, and most prominently Eric Koziel's (2019) historical account of speedrunning in *Speedrun Science: A Long Guide to Short Playthroughs* which provides me an excellent trajectory to frame speedrun's development around. However, this is but one way to tell a speedrunning history.

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<sup>1</sup> Some notable exclusions to this history are the separate practice of Tool-Assisted Speedrunning (TAS), which was highly influential in shaping the landscape of speedrunning. For more on TAS's history see Nathan Altice's (2015). *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer/Entertainment System Platform*. MIT Press. I also do not delve into the development of individual speedrunning communities (or groups of runners of specific games). I touch on one community's development in Chapter 2 that gives some context to their formations.

Speedrunning is many things simultaneously to many people. It is made of many different communities that each have their own individual historical trajectories. So, I necessarily paint in broad strokes and only touch on a small part of speedrunning's rich history. My focus, here, is on how certain technological developments shaped speedrunning with an attention to three technologies. Specifically: the timer, leaderboards, and streaming platforms. Additionally, we will see that speedrunning is also very much concerned with control over those technologies and the creation of rules of engagement with them.

In one sense speedrunning begins with the introduction of a timer into a videogame. Once there is a timer, the goal shifts away from high scores, surviving as long as you can on precious credits, or advancing through a narrative. The goal of play instead becomes to go as fast as possible, and to (paradoxically) play as little as possible. The most obvious place to look for this is in racing games, which have a long history in arcades predating videogames proper. However, most early arcade "racing" games do not actually include a timer, instead featuring scoring systems or challenging players to play as long as possible without crashing. Take for example, electro mechanical games such as Kasco's *Mini Drive* (1959) which consisted of a mechanical car on a conveyor belt. There is a road drawn onto the belt and it is up to the player to drive the car left and right with a steering wheel to stay on the road. The longer the player stays on the road the higher their score becomes. Rear video projection became popular in the late sixties with racing games such as Kasco's *Indy 500* (1969), CCM's *Speedway* (1969), and SEGA's *Grand Prix* (1969). These machines projected visuals onto a screen as well as a spinning plate to create the illusion of cars racing past on a track and were controlled with a steering wheel. These games counted scores based on how many opposing cars were passed before "crashing" into the other cars. As videogames shifted to cathode ray tube screens there was an even greater proliferation of racing games, some early iterations of these games included Atari's *Space Race* (1973), Taito's *Speed Race* (1974), and *Crashing Race* (1975).

Again, however, these games are score based, and their core gameplay mechanics don't revolve around completing a race as fast as possible. One of the first coin operated racing games to feature a timer is Kee Games's *Drag Race* (1977) (which is more commonly known because of its clone released by Atari as *Dragster* for the Atari 2600 in 1980). Gameplay consisted of accelerating and shifting gears of a drag car. The car is timed as it advances towards the end of the track, but two players can also race against one another meaning that the goal is to finish faster than an opponent, not necessarily to drive the time down. More prominently, Atari's arcade title *Pole Position* (1982) put the player in the position of an F-1 race car driver. It featured a qualifying race where players had to finish under a certain time to then go on to race other computer operated drivers at Fuji Racetrack (although I should note that it still contained a scoring mechanic). The introduction of the timer here and the explicit goal of going as fast as possible seems like a logical place to look to for the origins of speedrunning. However, this is an incomplete picture.

As we see, even in the genre of racing games, games do not always contain a timer (which is likely one reason why speedrunners are, in general, completely ambivalent to whether a game "should" be played fast). In general, there is little in the design of a game's ludic elements that leads to it becoming a speedgame. But the lack of a timer, specifically, poses a challenge: namely, that an external timer is required to time a run. If an outside timer is introduced, then formal rules need to be adopted to ensure consistent timing. Additionally, while racing games are commonly speedrun, the introduction of a timer does not mean that any engagement with these games is, by necessity, speedrunning in the sense that I am using the word to indicate a particular technocultural practice.

Just as important, is the speedrunning leaderboard. Speedrunning, technically, can be done in isolation. No other runners are necessary to play games fast, however, tracking times is a key aspect of speedrunning. To speedrun requires an attention to tracking run times and a drive to improve those times. This is both a personal drive and a communal one. Leaderboards' foster personal

competition and the desire to rise up the board, to be sure. But leaderboards are also a public archive of the speedrunning community's achievements in a game. Any time on the boards, not just the top one, are a representation of the speedrunning community's accomplishments. But just as with timers the leaderboard needs to be maintained by someone, and whoever oversees admitting runs on to the leaderboard gets to set the rules for inclusion, including rules around timing.

We can trace the leaderboard back to arcades that feature high-score screens on individual machines as well as boards that track high scores within the arcade. However, these kinds of boards are isolated to geographically proximate communities. In the 1980's *Twin Galaxies* rose to prominence as the de facto arbiter of video game high scores, and to a lesser extent times, tracking players achievements from all over the world. That means that *Twin Galaxies* was able to set the rules for inclusion onto their boards, which were, by and large, biased against using glitches of any kind contrary to the desires of actual gaming communities.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, runs did not require video proof for inclusion on the boards, which, as we will come to see, is an important aspect of modern speedrunning leaderboards and something that is essential for speedrun community formation.

Speedrunning leaderboards would undergo a radical shift in the early 2000s (and accordingly speedrunning culture as we know it today would take shape). This is, in large part, because of a slew of technological considerations. Let's take a step back to the introduction of home game consoles and personal computers. Videogames moving from the arcade into the home allowed players to play games outside of the monetary and social restraints of a public arcade. This also meant that players could have much more intimate understandings of games because it was easier to log more hours

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<sup>2</sup> See Eric Koziel's (2019) chapter "Speedrun History" for more on *Twin Galaxies*'s interactions with speedrunning communities and rule formations.

with games. There are fewer barriers to improving skill when games are in the home, and players are also able to play around with games in more ways once their quarters aren't at stake. This is vital to creating an environment that would facilitate "challenge runs," or playthroughs of games that imposed arbitrary limits on play to increase difficulty.

One game that was very popular for challenge runs was the first-person shooter *Doom* (1993). *Doom's* impact on speedrunning cannot be understated. While speedrunning existed prior to *Doom* in a limited capacity, as Eric Koziel points out, the introduction of par times and demo files led *Doom* to be particularly apt to spur on speedrunners. Par times are a time the game sets as a goal for players to complete levels under. This naturally encouraged players to attempt beating levels quickly. While par times incentivize players to play the game fast, we've already seen that the inclusion of a timer is not enough to facilitate speedrunning by itself. Demo files were the other key component that allowed players to share their runs with others. Early internet networks could not handle the distribution and downloading of large video files, so sharing gameplay footage over the internet was practically impossible. However, demo files are a documentation of only the inputs done over the course of a run that can then be played back to recreate the run. Since there is no audio-visual information inherent to demo files they were easy to share online, and thus player's actual runs could be viewed by others.

Since players could share their runs and accomplishments, they could demonstrate their skill in the game to others with things like Damageless Runs. The greatest differentiator of skill, however, became completing these runs as fast as possible. You can only take so little damage after all, but you can always go faster. So, websites like COMPET-N were created that housed online leaderboards for many different categories of these speedruns. Importantly, accompanying the times on the boards, were also the demo files. This means that cooperation is inevitable. Twin Galaxy's leaderboards encouraged players to hoard strategies to themselves. A public leaderboard that

includes demo files means that everyone will inevitably reveal all their strategies because runners can simply watch runs and emulate them. This encourages players to cooperate and share their insights, which leads to community formation around routing runs.

In 1996 *Quake* was released, which was another first-person shooter featuring demo files. *Quake* generated its own large speedrunning scene, and its own websites and leaderboards were made: Nightmare Speed Demos focusing on speedruns of the nightmare difficulty and Muad'Dib's Quake Page for easy difficulty. The two however merged in 1998 creating Speed Demos Archive (SDA). SDA became a very important website in the trajectory of speedrunning history. While *Quake* and *Doom* were very popular speed games speedrunning was gaining popularity in other games, even if their scenes were smaller than games that could be easily shared online. The owner of SDA, Radix, performed a run of just such a game: *Metroid Prime* (2002) in 2004. With SDA at his disposal, he had the relatively rare ability to upload his lengthy video to the internet. The introduction of a *Metroid Prime* run opened the door for allowing runs of other games onto the site. This, again, led to the imposition of rules by the authority hosting the leaderboard, or in the case of SDA only the top time was displayed. In this case, SDA's rules were initially created solely by Radix. This had many implications. The first is that Radix was only familiar with speedruns of certain games, meaning he was only able to verify the veracity of runs of those games. Implicitly, then, leaderboards for a few games were able to be hosted on the well trafficked website. To remedy this, Radix outsourced his verification to other people. Verifiers were solicited to assure that runs followed the proper rules.

However, this did not really change the fact that there was still a single source of authority over the rules of inclusion for many games. As more and more runners emerged on the scene rules subtly changed over time to meet player's demands, but eventually SDA would wane in its influence. There are many reasons for this, one of them being the inability to change rules to meet the needs of



the many idiosyncrasies of a wide array of games. It was simply too unwieldy to have one source of authority over so many different heterogeneous groups. Additionally, speedrunning doesn't only require leaderboards to facilitate a thriving scene. It also requires documentation of strategies, routes, technical information, and a great many other resources that allow new runners to get into running as well as experienced runners to devise new ways to go fast. So, another reason for SDA becoming less central to speedrunning was its inability to be a centralized resource for the proliferation of speed games.

Another major change to speedrunning came when live video streaming was introduced first with Justin.tv in 2007 (which would later create its dedicated gaming streaming service, Twitch, in 2011), as well as SpeedRunsLive in 2009 (a platform developed by trans speedrunner Narcissa Wright and Daniel "Jiano" Hart for streaming and synching speedrun races). Eric Koziel makes an excellent observation regarding the impact streaming had on speedrunning. While SDA was the primary site for speedrunning content for a long time, there was a focus on the artifact (the recording of a world record or personal best) as being the entire goal of speedrunning because all that anyone saw was the final products posted to SDA. With the dawn of streaming more people were able to watch the long grinds and evolution of runs. Instead of speedrunning being thought of as just the end product, it shifted to being a process. And with this, along with the easier access of speedrunning streams, came a proliferation of materials and resources to learn how to speedrun. Partially because of the proliferation of speedrunning communities with individualized needs for their rulesets and resources and partially because of the rise of live streaming, speedrunning would accordingly shift away from the centralized model of leaderboards.

In effect, live streaming drove even more people to speedrunning, and this put further strain on a centralized authority for leaderboards. Additionally, there was an increased improvement in runner's ability to record and upload video (namely, through the advent of and widespread adoption

of YouTube). So, in 2014 Speedrun.com (SRC) was launched with a decentralized model of leaderboards. SRC allows moderators of every game that is hosted through the website to maintain complete control over their leaderboard, and thus their rulesets. This autonomy is pivotal for the flourishing of speedrunning and will also be pivotal to my arguments throughout Chapters 1 and 2. While SRC is excellent for housing the archive that is speedrunning leaderboards as well as being a repository for guides, it is not conducive to conversations about speedrunning. So, the actual development of rules, teaching about runs, development of strategies, or, in short, community activities happen primarily on the social media platform Discord within specific servers for every game. I should note here that there are many implications to communities being siloed to individual Discord servers that are worth discussing from archival, accessibility, and inclusivity stand points that I do not have the room for in this cursory overview.

For my purposes going forward, I want to draw attention to the ways that certain technological configurations have helped produce modern speedrunning as we know it today. As we have seen, speedrunning has little to do with how games prescribe modes of interaction, although it is not always completely irrelevant such as with *Doom*'s par times. However, with the use of outside timers, speedrunning as a cultural practice is intensely concerned with the authority over the timer and the whole host of other rules that come with speedrunning. Control over the leaderboard is the site where these rules become contested. Because of the media used to produce the leaderboard, specifically recordings of runs, boards are transformed from a focus on solely hyper competitiveness and towards sharing of strategies and archives of communal history. This is further emphasized by live streaming's prominence that further helps to make the isolated activity of speedrunning into a practice of discovery, embodied play, and relationship building through the communal act of streaming runs. It is these historical trajectories that I am referring to when I talk about the practice of speedrunning. It is not just playing games fast, and it is not just the fastest run. It is a

collaborative process of dissecting games, of individually using communal knowledge to improve your own runs, of mutual support, and of creating rules that allow for as many kinds of desires for play as possible.

Some notes on terminology: “speedrunning” can be used as a verb that describes the act of playing games fast within certain constraints. It can also refer to the communities that take part in that practice. So, at times when I refer to speedrunning I am talking about the loose assemblage of communities and practices that I have laid out in this section. A “speedrun,” used as a noun, refers to any one performance of speedrunning. This is also sometimes more simply referred to as a “run” or an “attempt.” A “speedrunner” or “runner” is someone who speedruns. Additionally, a speedrun must also be of a “category,” which is a particular ruleset that must be adhered to. Typically, a category’s rules include methods of timing, versions of games that are allowed, what counts as completion, and how players are allowed to engage with the game.

### **Speedrunning Inclusion**

Bo Ruberg (2019) makes the claim that, despite the camaraderie that speedrunning communities foster, “when it comes to issues of gender and sexuality, the politics of speedrunning culture are far from perfect” (pg. 194). This is unambiguously true. Speedrunning is a subset of gaming culture broadly (which is inextricable from wider cultural landscapes), and the same issues found there of misogyny, transphobia, racism, and a whole slew of other exclusionary ideologies can be found in corners of the broader speedrunning scene.

At the same time, speedrunning communities are not monoliths. I have just laid out a very general and cursory historical account of speedrunning’s development, however the decentralized nature of speedrunning means that different communities (primarily centered around particular speedgames) have their own histories and cultural make up (something I dig into at the end of

Chapter 2). I am very uncomfortable labeling speedrunning as a whole being imbricated into the exact same issues as videogame culture broadly. Especially with the prevalence of all women speedrunning communities such as the Frame Fatales speedrunning Discord and charity marathons, many queer and trans speedrunning spaces that primarily organize through Discord, the focus on inclusivity and safety of queer people at high profile speedrunning charity marathons like Games Done Quick (GDQ), and the inclusive environment fostered by many speedrunning communities that I have been a part of. To be sure this is not a perfect situation. There are many issues of harassment and poor inclusion in speedrunning that are extremely important to take very seriously, and there have been many high-profile instances of harassment in speedrunning communities (in addition to many more cases that will never see the light of day). I am not dismissing them, nor do I mean to imply that speedrunning communities are completely disconnected from the broader issues of misogyny and harassment I discuss in Chapter 1. At the same time there are many people putting in a lot of work to make speedrunning a safe and diverse space and making blanket statements about speedrunning feels like a dismissal of the labor they put in (and the results they have achieved).

With that in mind, my experiences of speedrunning spaces have been uneven. While some communities have been, to put it mildly, a boy's club with all the casual (and overt) misogyny that implies, others have been unapologetically and vocally queer. I have no quantitative data about the makeup of speedrunning communities, but anecdotally many speedrunning communities have a higher percentage of women and queer people than I have encountered in other gaming spaces. Ruberg refers to Reddit threads that ask, "Why are there so few women who speedrun?" (pg. 194). I contend that this perceived lack of women speedrunners does not seem to be true in practice (at least compared to other gaming communities that focus on competition). Instead, I would argue, the perception about the lack of women in speedrunning stems from the comparative lack of women speedrunners in high profile charity speedrunning marathons (as well as the issues involved with

“power gamers” discussed below). Comparative lack of representation in high profile speedrunning showcases is a complicated issue that is not necessarily (or at least primarily) rooted in a lack of women speedrunning nor women being rejected from inclusion in these marathons at high rates. Instead, it comes from many women not applying to take part in these highly public events. This is (from discussions with women speedrunners) often due to the higher scrutiny that women face in these kinds of public displays both in their play and their appearance that comes from the misogyny found in opening themselves to gaming communities broadly. From conversations with women speedrunners I have found that they tend to feel less comfortable speaking in public forums like Discord servers where community formation occurs. So, women tend to be less visible in speedrunning spaces generally. This speaks to the ways that speedrunning still has much work to do to create inclusive spaces where everyone feels safe and welcome (work that is well underway by many people), but it does not mean that women avoid speedrunning itself.

The same goes for queer and trans people. Some of my thoughts that would eventually turn into this project appeared in an article for the gaming website *Polygon* (2020). The article titled “Speedrunning *Undertale* Helped Me Understand my Gender Better” began with the following line: “I’m a trans woman, and I’m also a speedrunner.” A Facebook user commented under *Polygon*’s posting of the article: “First sentence and you’re already repeating yourself. Bad start.” It is hard to interpret whether this is meant to be malicious or not, but it does (humorously, in my opinion) point out the pervasiveness of trans people in speedrunning. In the same way that Reddit threads often ask about the lack of women in speedrunning, many threads crop up asking why so many trans

people speedrun.<sup>3</sup> The speedrunning scene is extremely diverse. Again, that is not to paper over the very real issues that are still all too pervasive, but I do want to acknowledge the labor and care that many put into speedrunning communities and the fact that inclusive, safe environments are the product of small communities of practitioners intentionally putting in the work to create that space.

### **(De)Gendering Speedrunning**

We might understand speedrunners as a kind of power-gamer, to borrow TL Taylor's (2006) term. Power gamers are characterized by an obsession with efficiency and instrumental play. Speedrunners meticulously break down the inner mechanics of games, iteratively test strategies, track statistics across mass amounts of runs, and dedicate countless hours to testing, routing, glitch hunting, practicing, and running. Taylor discusses the gendered valences of this orientation towards play noting that there is nothing inherently gendered about being a power gamer (pg. 73). However, there are barriers that tend to leave women out of this form of gaming. One is the time that is required. Disproportionately, domestic tasks and childcare tends to fall to women leaving little time to dedicate to power gaming. The other is that the overly ambitious orientation toward play required of power gamers is typically coded as masculine, thus dissuading some women from participating because they do not want to be seen as masculine. These social barriers, both rooted in our

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<sup>3</sup> For some examples see the following threads accessed May 31, 2022:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/5qsy36/serious\\_why\\_are\\_there\\_so\\_many\\_transgenders\\_in\\_the/](https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/5qsy36/serious_why_are_there_so_many_transgenders_in_the/);

[https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/aejvc9/is\\_there\\_a\\_lot\\_of\\_trans\\_people\\_in\\_the/](https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/aejvc9/is_there_a_lot_of_trans_people_in_the/);

[https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/7p1211/genuine\\_question\\_about\\_trans\\_runners/](https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/7p1211/genuine_question_about_trans_runners/);

[https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/s1v6fj/question\\_about\\_gdqspeedrunning\\_community/](https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/s1v6fj/question_about_gdqspeedrunning_community/).

patriarchal society, code power gamers as masculine and thus create a barrier to women's participation.

Power gaming also has a close connection to what Amanda Cotes (2020) calls "core," which describes play styles, games, and players. Cotes draws out many valences of this term, but I want to dwell on her connection of "core" games being "hardcore." Or, in other words, games and gameplay that are central (core) to gaming (aka "real" games) are ones that are "hardcore" (i.e., focuses on difficulty and mastery). Cotes links conceptions of hardcore to a history of masculinity that is tied up in roughness, aggression, and dominance (including sexual dominance over women). Core is in opposition to "casual," another descriptor of play, games, or players that is more concerned with fun and frivolousness. These kinds of play have been understood as a feminine engagement with games, and, accordingly, casual games and casual play have been sidelined to the peripheries of gaming culture.

While understandings of these orientations towards games have become socially constructed along gendered lines, I want to make the distinction that Taylor makes. There is nothing inherently gendered about these modes of play. It is social factors that stem from the patriarchal society that we find ourselves in that genders modes of play. While the hyper optimization of hardcore gamers has historically been the domain of cis het men it need not stay that way. Many people want to engage in these ways, and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. It isn't the desire to be hardcore that is the problem; it's the structures of power that define values and impose barriers to entry. Speedrunners use the term "casual" in normal parlance in a different sense than Cotes. Casual play, for a speedrunner, is simply a descriptor that means a player is playing a game in the ways that adhere to "intended" modes of play. Or, in other words, a casual player isn't speedrunning. There is no value statement here. "Casual play" for a speedrunner is no more or less "core" to gaming than any other form of play. The term simply differentiates between multiple ways to play. This is central

to my arguments going forward. To speedrun, to be a hardcore power gamer, is another way to play that simply adheres to one kind of player desire just as casual play indexes other kinds of desire.<sup>4</sup>

I acknowledge the various social reasons that certain players are allowed to participate in gaming culture while others are excluded or face discrimination. I am not dismissing the very real implications to these cultural understandings, but I want to begin working through accounting for other ways to play and forming new ways of thinking about games that can begin to get us outside of these same old paradigms that gaming culture has established. This is particularly important considering the trans players I am discussing. What would it mean to label a form of play “masculine” when so many trans women engage in it? It would be incredibly insulting to claim that trans women are drawn to speedrunning because of a desire to engage in hyper masculine forms of play or that they are performing a masculine dominance in their play practices. I also want to note how uneasy I am with the unquestioned negative valences of the deployment of “masculine” as a descriptor that I often see in relation to modes of videogame play. Masculine play is only a problem insofar as it is imbricated in patriarchal structures. Masculinity isn’t the problem. It’s patriarchy and the misogyny that patriarchy requires that generates certain kinds of masculinities to be produced while also denigrating femininity.

Speedrunning seems to fit outside of typical conceptions of queer play as well. Ruberg contends with this issue in their treatment of speedrunning as a queer practice that upsets chrononormative engagements with videogames (something I engage with at length in Chapter 3).

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted here to conversations with PS Berge as well as their conference presentation “‘But First We Need to Talk About Parallel Universes:’ Vectorizing Trans Power in Videogames” for their elucidation of the ways in which the labeling of games and gameplay practices as masculine power fantasies has ignored and erased trans play and trans players as well as the potential queerness in these practices.



Ruberg asks: “If playing in the mode of queer temporalities involve lingering, creating queer space by disrupting progress, and dwelling in moments that others pass by, then how can speedrunning be queer? (pg. 195).” Speedrunning is all about moving fast, ignoring reflection, narrative, or any representation at all. It is hyper concerned with operationalized completion of goals and conceiving of games as mechanical systems to master, devoid of any erotic or pleasurable engagements. Where’s the queerness here? Ruberg argues (and I agree) that queerness can be found in the cycles of failures that goes into speedrunning and the destruction of normative temporalities. I also contend that there is queerness in the rejection of (and subsequent self-constitution of) rules of engagement. Thinking like a speedrunner means that playing casually becomes a valid choice. It is a set of rules you can play if you want to, and speedrunning’s community generated rules become another way to play. This control over rules and autonomy over play is unquestionably queer regardless of how certain modes of play, such as so-called hardcore play, have historically been culturally constituted.

### **Triangulating *Transition Games***

*Transition Games* arises out of a need to account for trans play in game studies. There has been much written on queer game designers and the “queer games movement;”<sup>5</sup> queer representation in games;<sup>6</sup> and reading games through a queer lens.<sup>7</sup> Often work is focused on

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<sup>5</sup> Ex. Anna Anthropy’s (2012) *Rise of the Videogame Zinester*, Bo Ruberg’s (2020) *Queer Games Avant Garde*.

<sup>6</sup> Ex. Adrienne Shaw’s maintenance of the LGBTQ Video Game Archive can be found at: <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/> as well as Shaw’s (2014) *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*.

<sup>7</sup> Ex. Ruberg and Shaw’s (2017) edited collection: *Queer Game Studies: Gender, Sexuality, and a Queer Approach to Game Studies*.

unearthing the queerness in games,<sup>8</sup> themselves, or on the representations of certain kinds of queerness in games from a cultural or literary perspective.<sup>9</sup> These tend to miss key insights when it comes to trans engagements with games. To play (with games or gender) is, primarily, an embodied act.<sup>10</sup> To exist in a trans body is a particular orientation towards our lived realities that is also embroiled in cultural rules of engagement. This is why I am concerned with “trans play” here, of which speedrunning is but one example. This focus is an effort to account for an embodied trans engagement with games. I take this embodied play as the foundation for developing orientations towards games that can lead to forms of meaning making, subjectivities, and community formation.

To talk about trans play is to focus on interfacing: interfacing between individual players and rules; interfacing between communities and modes of play; interfacing between bodies and technologies; interfacing between games and culture; and interfacing between player and body. And a focus on these various locations of interfacing is to also grapple with the disjunctions in the

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<sup>8</sup> Ex. Ruberg’s (2018) *Videogames Have Always Been Queer*.

<sup>9</sup> I want to stress that representation isn’t an unquestioned good. We are at a historical moment of intense visibility for trans people following the so-called “trans tipping point” in 2014 (Steinmetz, 2014) and especially in light of increased policing of and legislation against trans people. This visibility is (as Reina Gossett, Eric Stanley, and Johanna Burton (2017) phrase it) a trap. To be seen is to open oneself to violence and policing that disproportionately affects low income and BIPOC trans people. To be seen as a trans woman, specifically, is to face both the dangers of being seen as trans and as a woman. Any other marginalized subject positions only increase the danger.

Additionally, fascist movements have been emboldened in recent years to the point that there are open calls to eradicate trans people from public life through legislation that range from dictating where we are allowed to exist to calls that are tantamount to genocide. Accountings of trans representation is not fully equipped to deal with this reality and can sometimes exacerbate danger.

<sup>10</sup> For more on queer physical connections to games see: Marcotte, Jess. (2018). “Queering Control(lers) Through Reflective Game Design Practices.” *Game Studies*, 18(3). Retrieved from <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/marcotte>. For treatments of embodied connections to games from an affective perspective see: Anable, Aubrey. (2018). *Playing With Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, University of Minnesota Press. And for a phenomenological perspective see Keogh, Brendan. (2018). *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*. MIT Press.

interfaces. How things don't fit together well. How we do not connect to cultural expectations of play, gameworlds, hardware, and our own bodies. This requires many perspectives, but central to all of them is the "bad feelings" that these imperfect interfaces produce. In "Reading Like a Depressed Transsexual" Cameron Awkward-Rich (2017) draws from disability studies to conceptualize trans subjectivity as inextricably linked to these bad feelings, as not something to push past but to use as a critical lens to understand the world: "one must expect that there will always be a residue of bad feeling, an unavoidable fact of being embodied, of being a self in a world inevitably split by difference" (pg. 826).<sup>11</sup> I take up this call as a way to understand the various difficult, messy, and painful (material and immaterial) interfaces involved in videogame play and trans life.

This project finds itself caught between many different discourses. It is indebted to media studies broadly, in particular, cyber feminist thinkers such as Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway who theorize the body as a cybernetic circuit that is in constant flux and open to change. Trans thinkers like Paul Preciado pick up on this thread and serve as another important touchstone that helps to think through the ways power has created particular bodies. Accordingly, I also draw heavily from Michel Foucault's understanding of how power becomes constituted and produces spaces of possibility. Disability scholars such as Elizabeth Ellcessor have given me the language to work through disjunctions between design and embodied users. Games studies scholars such as Seth Giddings, Helen Kennedy, Nick Taylor, and Shira Chess have helped me to think through the ways that gameplay is constructed through a confluence of factors including technological configurations, spaces of play, and embodied engagement with games. And most importantly trans artists, thinkers,

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Gawain Lucian Lax's (2021) conference presentation at *Digra* titled "Beyond the Bodyfucked: Mapping a Politics of "Trans Game Studies" who also uses Awkward-Rich's line of argumentation to call for a split between trans and queer games studies.

and videogame players have demonstrated to me important lessons about how we connect with structures of power as well as technological assemblages to create spaces where new subjectivities become legible and new forms of embodiment unfold.

But problematically, I find myself in uneasy tension with feminist and queer discourses that are not fully capable of accounting for trans identities (something I engage with more fully in Chapter 2). Cameron Awkward-Rich, Cael M. Keegan (2020), and Thomas J Billard and Eriqee Zhang (2022) all eloquently lay out the position trans studies finds itself amongst these discourses, which were useful to me in articulating my own position. On the one hand, very broadly speaking, feminism is concerned with issues of subordination along the lines of sexual binaries. It is interested in the ways that men exert power over women. Queer theory on the other hand, is interested in the destruction of binaries of any kind. Antinormativity and subversion are the names of the game in queer theory.

But neither of these discourses are equipped to really engage with trans people. Feminism has difficulty accounting for the complex ways that power functions in regard to trans identities that do not map cleanly onto a binary. Trans men and trans women's proximity to structures of patriarchal power (or any kind of power) is complex and cannot be fully accounted for in a schema that does not account for change and takes its objects of study (i.e., "men" and "women") as a priori existing. Additionally, nonbinary people are completely unindexable along traditional feminist lines. Feminist theory so often necessitates gendered categories to exist, but trans studies, as Keegan notes, frustrates feminism by asserting that gender isn't real in the ways it conceives of it. At the same time though, trans studies must assert to queer theory that gender *is real* in other ways. Trans people are not always concerned with destruction of gendered categories. Many trans folks find an affinity for certain gendered categories that allow them to exist according to their desires as well as provide safety to move through the world. Trans does not aim to destroy these categories so much

as it is concerned with the ways that structures of power come to be established, how we navigate those structures of power, and how we create spaces of legibility where subjectivities outside of and within gendered binaries can exist.

At the same time, I am deeply indebted to queer and feminist thinkers. This is not a case of antagonism, and I don't relish being in the position of arguing from the negative. But this is an acknowledgment of the ways that trans studies exists beside these other disciplines. I draw from them extensively even as I critique them, and hope that going forward they are able to draw from trans studies to gain more nuanced approaches to the ways that gender, sex, sexuality, and play is constructed and operates within and against matrices of power.

With this in mind, Ruberg (2022) has, rightly, called for the development of a "trans games studies," and, I understand *Transition Games* to be, at least in part, a response to this call. Ruberg offers up some guidelines to achieve this goal. One of these is: "a trans game studies must confront the complexities of its relationship to queerness" (pg. 204). Throughout this project I attempt to do just that by drawing from queer studies and positioning my arguments both against and within discourse that stem from it. Additionally, they suggest: "trans game studies must acknowledge a wide range of approaches to exploring transness and games" (pg. 203). To that end, I attempt to resist disciplinary boundaries alternatively drawing from media theory, queer theory, feminist theory, literature, autoethnographic work, and disability studies as well as positioning trans artists and videogame players as generators of theoretical perspectives in their own right. After all, Ruberg also proposes that, "a trans game studies must center trans voices and acknowledge trans embodiment as a powerful form of meaning-making" (pg. 203). So, I draw from movies, personal essays, memoir, anime, music, poetry, novels, and community generated rules to see how trans people have come to articulate their relationship to transness through technology and within cultural rules. I also heavily draw from my own embodied experiences of speedrunning and transitioning. I understand my time

speedrunning, transitioning, and engaging with speedrunning and trans communities as a form of theory in and of itself. I understand trans game studies as one that is concerned with the ways players construct forms of embodiment and subjectivity within (and against) structures of power. Understanding the complexities of these concepts requires a deep engagement with a lived reality, so I center myself in parts of this project. I am careful to point out that this in no way implies that my experience of transness (or videogames for that matter) should stand in for the multiplicities of trans experiences. However, I have come to understand myself, my body, and the world in different ways through the various practices that I discuss over the course of *Transition Games*. This is meant to be a way to demonstrate and grapple with the messy complexities of my subjects, while also gesturing towards methods of meaning making that should be characteristic of a critical trans engagement with games.

## **The Route**

To perform a speedrun, you first have to route the run. That is, plan out the strategies and movements you'll use to get through the game. A part of this planning is breaking a run up into splits, or individual sections of a run. Splits are timed individually allowing runners to track their progress through the run and know on a minute scale how their current pace compares to past runs. When runners complete one of these sections, they "split," or, instruct the timer to stop timing the previous split and move on to the next one, advancing through the splits as they go along. Splits also refer to the list of sections that appear sequentially on the timer. This list serves a few purposes, but one major one is that it is a kind of a map of the run. For runners and viewers (who are literate in how to read splits) the splits locate the runner temporally and spatially giving information about where the run has gone, where it will go in the future, and how much time there is left to save.

I break *Transition Games* into splits as well to serve as guideposts through this run. These splits are one part of routing my movements through argumentation. We are coming up at the end of the first split: “Routing the Run.” I’ve introduced some of the core concepts that I will be dealing with: trans identities and speedrunning. I’ve also introduced my basic line of argumentation: that speedrunning can be thought of as a trans practice of self-determination by taking control of rules and struggling to sync our experiential temporalities to the assemblages of videogame technologies.

The next split, “‘The Rules! The Rules!’: (Re)Negotiating Rules,” is invested in a close examination of the formation, policing, and restructuring of rules, and is further split (sub-split) into two chapters. In “Chapter 1: Seeing the Looking Glass: The Stakes of (In)Visible Rules,” I argue that rules, whether of videogames or of gender, can be resituated as a trans tool of self and communal determination using speedrunning as a technocultural practice that offers hints at alternative modes of relationality to rules in all aspects of life. But first, I lay out some of the stakes to cultural rules and demonstrate how videogame rules become entangled with them. I unpack the ways that rules become invisible and how that invisibility lends them the power to escape our scrutiny, and thus maintain control. I delve into the connections of societal rules surrounding gender to the rules of videogames, demonstrating how the enforcement of standardized rules of engagement with videogames implicitly reinforces hierarchical and misogynistic societal conceptions of gender. To do this work I analyze the vile policing of gendered boundaries by far-right trolls as well as trans-exclusionary feminists. Finally, I argue that while rules are exertions of control, that control does not always have to be in the service of malicious actors. To that end, I develop a queer erotics of control to clearly demonstrate how we become controlled by rules, how that control can (at times) become manipulative, but also control can be thought of as pleasurable and creative when we submit to rules that adhere to our desires.

In “Chapter 2: Category Extensions: Glitching the Rules of the Game” I first work through the concept of counter-powers (or forms of power that are outside the control of hegemonic sources of power) before deploying the figure of the technocultural glitch as a means to resituate power. Glitches, whether in videogames or culture, have the power to reveal the constructed nature of rules and create spaces where new rules can be created that allow those interpolated into those rules to express desire. I also delve into the skepticism I have regarding the glitch being deployed by queer theory, as well as skepticism in the ways in which some feminist scholars have understood gender as a glitch in the technologies of sex. I work through historical constructions of the rules of both gender and sex to tease out the limits on how we can understand gender as a glitch before discussing the work that gender *can* do as a glitch. I then discuss that work in the context of speedrunning and other cultural practices such as music production. Finally, I end with a case study of the development of rules and categories in one speedrunning community, *Hades* (2020), to demonstrate how cultural glitches can form counter-powers that allow for new rules and categories to unfold.

Split 3, “Real Time Attack,” is also divided into two chapters. This split shifts away from rules directly and instead focuses on the temporalities that unfold from configurations of rules as well as the embodied experiences that are produced from these temporal arrangements. It arises from and engages much more directly with my own personal experiences with transition and speedrunning. My embodied reality becomes the theoretical lens through which I come to understand and explain trans temporalities.

Chapter 3, “The Reset: Red Splits, Losing Time, and Starting Over,” looks to one temporal moment of transformation that arises from the configurations of speedrunning’s rules and technologies: the reset. The reset is central to all videogame play, but it is also a temporal moment all too familiar to trans players. Transition can feel like a reset, a kind of starting over in so many ways.



By putting reflections from my own time with speedrunning and transition in conversation with one another, I uncover some of the ways that playing with technology has become a trans practice of temporal manipulation for me, and how my exploration of trans identity has come to shape the ways I understand videogame technologies as well as the technologies of sex and gender. To do this I first work through theoretical understandings of videogame and trans temporalities linking them both to the concept of “the reset.” In the second half of this chapter, I turn to accounts from my time speedrunning as well as my time transitioning. These threads are written as discrete accounts, but through the interwoven presentation I show how these practices are entwined, temporally as they happened concurrently in my life, but also entwined in their mutual formations of my orientations towards technologies and time. I draw attention to the ways temporal engagements with videogames, like the reset that is so common in speedrunning, can impact our understandings of other temporalities in our lives and vice versa.

The final chapter, Chapter 4 “Playing Tool-assisted: Syncing with a Techno-Body,” looks to a temporal mode, that of synchronization. I ask: how do trans people (de)sync with the media that is our own bodies forming some kind of stable (or flickering) subjectivity? And how do those subjectivities synchronize with the other media forms we interact with? I use the concept of synchronization to describe how we come to control our bodies without lag. How the immaterial and material merge to create subjectivities through media. I explore multiple ways that videogames forefront synchronization through an examination of the concepts of identification and interfacing, as well as how these concepts are understood from a trans perspective. I draw from a wide range of sources (literature, music, memoir, anime, personal essays) to show how the concepts of synchronization suffuse into trans life, before I demonstrate how these kinds of concepts play out in specific gaming practices. Videogames are not abstract technologies, after all. People play them. Modes of play, as opposed to a focus on designed interactions, impact how we synchronize with

technology (or not) and how our bodies may be altered through those engagements. So, I end by focusing on speedrunning *Undertale* (2015) to tease out the specifics of speedrunning's engagement with bodily synchronization. Through this analysis I argue that certain videogame practices bring bodily synchronization into stark relief while also allowing trans players to feel and explore a kind of synchronization that can inflect on (and reflect) trans subjectivities.

And with that, let's split.

**Split 2: “The Rules! The Rules!”: (Re)Negotiating the Rules of the Game**

## Chapter 1: Seeing the Looking Glass: The Stakes of (In)Visible Rules

“Eventually you can’t help but figure out that, while gender is a construct, so is a traffic light, and if you ignore either of them, you get hit by cars. Which, also, are constructs.”

Maria, the narrator of Imogen Binnie’s (2013) *Nevada*

In games, rules are everything. We don’t have games without them. Rules limit what we can and cannot do and give meaning to play.<sup>12</sup> A deck of cards, a soccer ball and field, a computer program. They have no intrinsic meaning until we map rules onto them. There are any number of things that can be done with each, but those actions are not meaningful until they are limited by rules: how to deal and count points, how we are allowed to move the ball and where the limits of the playing field are located, how we maneuver through levels in a videogame. Rules bring games to life through defining interactions, and in doing so become central to any engagement with play.

But rules are not only found in games, of course. Society is rife with rules, explicit and implicit, for nearly everything including how we perform gender. These rules are formally encoded in laws,<sup>13</sup> arise out of medical discourse and standardization,<sup>14</sup> and can be found in more subtle

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<sup>12</sup> In Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen’s (2003) survey of definitions of the word “game” by scholars of games and play they find that almost every definition defines games as “proceeding according to rules that limit players.” Both rules, and their limitations, seem to be central to the concept of “game.”

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of recent anti-trans legislation as well as analysis of the insufficiency of antidiscrimination laws see Florence Ashley’s (2018) “Don’t be so hateful: The Insufficiency of Anti-Discrimination and Hate Crime Laws in Improving Trans Well-Being,” *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 68(1).

<sup>14</sup> The American Psychiatric Association’s DSM-5, which is, in the APA’s words the “standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals in the United States,” still lists

cultural forces.<sup>15</sup> They attempt to dictate who we can love, what clothes we can wear, how we express emotions, where we are allowed to use bathrooms: all of these things and more make up the rules of gender that limit the possible actions we are able to take as well as give our actions gendered meaning. Wearing a dress is not inherently masculine nor feminine. It is only within the rules of gender that it takes on meaning. In a similar way, the set of characteristics associated with being “assigned male at birth” are not intrinsically masculine or feminine, but they have been assigned meaning by cultural rules. So, a trans woman, for example, is often judged against society’s rules for men. Femininity is punished in this set of rules. That doesn’t mean that rules can’t be broken. They can. We can and do defy gendered cultural rules all the time. But rules persist, nonetheless. Any breaking of gendered rules is still firmly within the matrix of the dominant ruleset and thus inflects on how the transgressor will be perceived and treated. We may think of transness or gender nonconformity as breaking rules, but, nonetheless, the standard rules still hold a lot of sway to control our lives.

There are real implications, whether in culture broadly or in regard to videogames, to these rules. Not everyone is able to set them, and not everyone is able to break them. This chapter explores the power of rules and other interrelated concepts: boundaries, definitions, and categories. I am interested in teasing out some of the connections between videogame rules and societal rules (in particular of gender), and through this analysis I aim to show how the setting of videogame rules are

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“Gender Dysphoria” as a mental disorder. While medical health professionals continue to assign gender at birth based on visual diagnostics. See Davis, G. et al. (2016), “Giving Sex: Deconstructing Intersex and Trans Medicalization Practices,” *Gender and Society*, 30(3) for a thorough accounting of the way medical professionals define sex and gender along essentialist and pathologizing lines.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Warner’s (1999) *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* excellently explains how the societal force of shame shapes categories of sex into “normal” and “deviant” proscribing the rules (and laws) of how we are allowed to engage in sex.

one small part of the policing of gendered rules more broadly. In the same way that rules constrain, proscribe, and limit so to do each of these concepts. But that characterization is somewhat incomplete.

I argue that rules, whether of videogames or of gender, can be resituated as a trans tool of self and communal determination using speedrunning as a technocultural practice that offers us hints at alternative modes of relationality to rules in all aspects of life. But first, in this chapter, I lay out some of the stakes to cultural rules and demonstrate how videogame rules become entangled with them. I unpack the ways that rules become invisible, how that invisibility lends them the power to escape our scrutiny, and thus maintain control. I delve into the connections of societal rules surrounding gender to the rules of videogames, demonstrating how the enforcement of standardized rules of engagement with videogames implicitly reinforces hierarchical and misogynistic societal conceptions of gender. To do this work I analyze the vile policing of gendered boundaries by far-right trolls as well as trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). Finally, I argue that while rules are exertions of control, that control does not always have to be in the service of malicious actors. To that end, I develop a queer erotics of control to clearly demonstrate how we become controlled by rules, how that control can (at times) become manipulative, but also control can be thought of as pleasurable and creative when we submit to rules that adhere to our desires. In doing so I set the stage to argue in upcoming chapters for the development of rules and categories that produce new forms of relationality for those interpolated into them.

## **Defining Rules**

Before I can begin this project about restructuring rules, I first need to delve into what rules are and what they do. From this discussion other interrelated concepts will come to the fore, namely: categories and definitions themselves. So, let's start with a definition. Katie Salen and Eric

Zimmerman (2003), in their thorough analysis of game design, offer a sufficiently broad definition that can serve as a launching point. They define rules as “the organization of a designed system.” Rules are aimed at prescribing order: a chess board must be set up just so, softball players must bat in a certain order, *League of Legends* (2009) teammates must select different champions, etc. Rules' ordering function comes about, in part, by imposing limits. Take for example Bernard Suits' (1978) famous definition of games:

To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.

He states this more directly as: “playing a game is the voluntary effort to overcome unnecessary obstacles.” In games, rules serve as a means to limit efficient completion of tasks, and meaning is made through these limitations.

Put another way, rules can be thought of as a kind of definition. They limit (define) possible meanings and actions and prescribe certain meanings to an object or action. But definitions themselves are also extremely important to rules. The terms “pawn,” “move,” and “board” all need to be accurately defined before any rule of chess can be meaningful. We usually think of definitions as precise, but they are never as precise as we imagine once they are in the world. Any definition is necessarily provisional, relational, and contextual. When we define something, it only takes on meaning in a certain context that is subject to change depending on literacies, cultural understandings, and contextual situations it is used in. “Pawn” could mean the chess piece as well as the act of giving an item to a broker for money, or it could even be metaphorically employed to refer

to someone who is being manipulated. Definitions and the rules that are built from them, then, are necessarily ambiguous. Definitions can never fully capture the nuances of actual communication.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of games, this means that when put into play the definitions that characterize rules are never all that firm. This is acknowledged by some rules. Take the International Chess Federation's official rules (which they elevate to the level of "laws") that draw attention to the ambiguity of rules framing it as a positive for the game:

The Laws of Chess cannot cover all possible situations that may arise during a game, nor can they regulate all administrative questions... Too detailed a rule might deprive the arbiter of [their] freedom of judgment and thus prevent [them] from finding the solution to a problem dictated by fairness, logic and special factors.

These rules are a demonstration of the fact that there are necessarily things left out. Everything cannot be accounted for, so, even if they are not codified formally, there are still rules that govern play. Take Stephen Sniderman's (1999) example in tennis: "The "casual" game of tennis that my buddies and I play is really based on an enormously complex set of "rules"—assumptions, traditions, and conventions—that govern our behavior on the court (whether we are consciously aware of it or

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<sup>16</sup> Ex. Saussure's (1916) famous use of "arbor," Latin for "tree," illustrates this perfectly. "Arbor" refers not to a specific tree but to the concept of tree, which is to say everyone has their own personal manifestation of the concept. Every deployment of "tree" will then have slightly different connotations for different people. Definition helps us to bridge the gap between individuals to facilitate communication, but it can never fully encompass all of the nuances of "tree-ness" in every particular context.



not).” There are "unwritten rules," as Sniderman calls them, that fill in the gaps that formal rules do not.

One way to think about how rules exert and create power is in relation to categories. Rules define, and through that definition they form categories. Categories are formed based upon rules, while at the same time they are governed by internal rules. Michel Foucault (1966) delves into this phenomenon in *The Order of Things* where he is concerned with how order is established via certain systems: taxonomies, classifications, categories, etc. The order achieved by these systems, Foucault writes, “is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language” (pg. xx). Any category has its own laws (i.e., rules, or as Foucault dubs them “ordering codes” (pg. xxi)) that govern its operation and maintenance, but the “hidden network” is the set of rules that form the order itself. And those rules dictate how anyone interpolated into those categories can act. As Foucault writes:

The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical order with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home. (pg. xx)

In short, rules create order. They exert power to group things into categories, and then determine how those things should behave. In chess the categories are established like white and black pieces, players, audience, judges. These categories group like things together based on taxonomic rules, but the categories also prescribe rules for these objects and how people should behave. We see this regarding gender as well. Categories, and the rules inherent to them, such as “woman,” “gender,”

“sex,” “normal,” “cosmetic,” and so on have implications on how we are able to live our lives and express our genders.

We will begin to see in upcoming sections that categories, like rules and definitions, are never as fixed as they appear. However, pointing out that these concepts are contingent constructions that are subject to alteration does nothing to undo the very real power they have. Additionally, I will show how rules, definitions, and categories are not just applicable to games. The rules of games are intertwined with the rules of gender (and vice versa). As Salen and Zimmerman’s definition of rules attest, any system is subject to rules whether that is boardgames, legal systems, traffic laws, casual conversations on a street corner, or sex and gender identities. For trans people specifically, these categories (as well as the rules that create and govern them) become extremely important in how we are able to navigate the world.

### **(In)Visible Rules**

McKenzie Wark (2007), in *Gamer Theory*, makes a fairly bold claim: that reality has come to resemble a game. She writes:

Everything has value only when ranked against something else; everyone has value only when ranked against someone else. Every situation is win-lose, unless it is win-win—a situation where players are free to collaborate only because they seek prizes in different games. The real world appears as a video arcadia divided into many and varied games. Work is a rat race. Politics is a horse race. The economy is a casino. Even the utopian justice to come in the afterlife is foreclosed: *He who dies with the most toys wins*. Games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life. They are now the very form of life, and death, and time

itself. These games are no joke. When the screen flashes the legend *Game over*, you are either dead or defeated, or at best out of quarters. (pg. 006)

Videogames, for Wark, are an allegory. They become a way of thinking about the world differently, and in doing so the world comes to reflect the logics of games. In an age where videogames have increasingly become the dominant cultural form this is truer than ever. Wark extends the metaphor of games to the economy, the workplace, school, academia, religion, the justice system, politics, and (most troubling in my estimation) the military industrial (or entertainment) complex. I also want to extend this metaphor, but at the outset I want to hedge against overextending it. So, let's start with defining "games" for our purposes here.

The definition of "games" is not neutral. It is necessarily political, strategic, and rhetorical, and its definition (as I will delve into in this chapter) has been historically used to discriminatorily dictate who plays and what counts as play (as well as map exclusionary and often sexist boundaries around academic fields). To that end I start from a broad definition so as to include as many understandings of games as possible. I borrow Alexander Galloway's (2006) straightforward definition: "A game is an activity defined by rules in which players try to reach some sort of goal." This is a formalist definition that is only concerned with certain elements being present to qualify as a game. So, any system bound by rules and navigated with certain goals in mind can be understood as a game. But this hardly defines anything. Instead, it endlessly proliferates to all aspects of society.

To that end, if we can apply "game" to nearly anything, we should be aware of what the label of "game" does and does not do from a functional standpoint to ensure there is intention behind using this label. First, I reject many connotations the label of game may imply. "Game" does not imply that something is not meaningful. It does not imply that there are no stakes to the game, nor that those stakes are evenly distributed. It does not imply that rules are applied consistently between

players. Some may have the power to break the game's rules, set new rules, ignore rules, or opt out of a game and play different games altogether. But, drawing from Galloway's definition, defining something as a game illuminates certain aspects of the object as well. Calling something a game draws attention to the ways subjects interface with rules. This includes the ways rules are set, the power they have to control (or not), the ways they are broken, how they unevenly affect players in the game, etc. In other words, to call something a game is to privilege the contingent, historical production of a system's rules as well as how those rules are navigated and experienced. As we will see, this is not completely theoretical. Many cultural practices are engaged with as if they were games and are understood as games including the serious issues of misogynistic and transphobic harassment I discuss later. I don't use the label of game to trivialize anything. Instead, I use it as a means to analyze how these phenomena function.

Of course, it isn't as simple to use the term "game" in the singular. No game is played in isolation. There are always other games played around, within, against, about, (and any other prepositional configurations you can think of) games.<sup>17</sup> Any game's rules are but one constructed way to play among many. Accordingly, there are many ways to play videogames. There are rules of engagement with videogames that are typically taken for granted: that games are meant to be played, that we should try to win, that we should accept the game's metrics for winning, that we should use a narrowly defined set of standard controllers, etc. These standard rulesets come from many places. Regarding videogames it is marketers and designers, for example, who have a vested interest in

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<sup>17</sup> This line of argumentation is indebted to Patrick LeMieux and Stephanie Boluk's (2019) concept of "metagaming."

standardizing engagement with their games.<sup>18</sup> This creates consumers that have trained literacies in certain forms of engagement with games, which keeps players entrenched in the ecosystems of progressions of next generation consoles and controllers. But these are actually just one rule set amongst many. Players actively create alternative rulesets, and thus alternative games, that are developed, disseminated, and enforced within communities.<sup>19</sup> Speedrunning is one of these modes of play that shirks standard rules, creating its own rule sets that do not adhere to cultural standards. Speedrunning completely reconfigures rules to produce a different game out of the raw materials of videogames. But, despite speedrunning or any other alternative ruleset's relative popularity, the standard rules still hold much sway to define "normal" and dictate culturally held beliefs.

However, because of their pervasiveness, standard rules often remain unnoticed and unacknowledged. These standard rules stand in for "games" more generally, entirely circling all forms of play within their logics. This can often go completely unacknowledged, but sometimes we may have an inkling that things could be otherwise. Let's return to a series of questions Wark opens *Gamer Theory* with:

Ever get the feeling you're playing some vast and useless game whose goal you don't know and whose rules you can't remember? Ever get the fierce desire to quit, to resign, to forfeit, only to discover there's no umpire, no referee, no regulator to whom you can announce your

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Anna Anthropy's (2012) *Rise of The Videogame Zinester* or David Parisi's (2015) "A Counter Revolution in the Hands: The Console Controller as an Ergonomic Branding Mechanism" for analysis of the ways controllers are designed to create consumers with particular embodied literacies in devices that brand them as consumers of particular products.

<sup>19</sup> TL Taylor's (2006) seminal *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, particularly sections on "power gamers," remains one of the best documentations of the ways videogame communities create complex rulesets for themselves complete with specialized language, rituals, and norms.

capitulation? Ever get the vague dread that while you have no choice but to play the game, you can't win it, can't know the score, or who keeps it? Ever suspect that you don't even know who your real opponent might be? Ever get mad over the obvious fact that the dice are loaded, the deck stacked, the table rigged and the fix—in? (pg. 1)

We could read *Gamer Theory* as a feeling towards new rules. The first step in that process is becoming aware we are playing games at all, with contingently constructed rules, and thus there may be alternative rulesets to play with that may bring about new modes of existence.

I am reminded of Ursula le Guin's (2014) words regarding capitalism's pervasiveness here: "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings." The first step to undoing the pervasive, powerful, and dispersed forces of capitalism is to realize that it is possible to be outside of it. To see the metaphorical water that we are swimming in for what it is: one set of rules among many. This is obviously far, far, far from the only step in undoing any structure of power (much less the vast interconnected forces that make up modern capitalist society), but it is an important first one. And to facilitate this realization, she goes on to say: "resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words." In the same way, I argue that games, with their tight connections to rules, can be a tool to imagine new societal rulesets as well. Games, then, become both a means to model rules as well as a metaphor to understand the complex ways that rules create and exert power, and how they may be different.

Wark sums this metaphor up saying: "so this is the world as it appears to the gamer: a matrix of endlessly varying games—a gamespace—all reducible to the same principles, all producing the same kind of subject who belongs to this gamespace in the same way, as a gamer to a game (pg. 10)." I take a slight step back from Wark here. Videogames and the metaphor of games I am

extending to society at large do not function exactly the same. There is history and specificity to both. But, none-the-less, drawing from the rulesets of videogames allows us to see the world as an array of games that adheres to standard rules producing the same subjects, and it takes a ludic understanding of the world to begin to grasp this reality.

The use of the term “matrix” is intentional in this quote. Wark’s argumentation is heavily inspired by the film *The Matrix* (1999). The questions she opens her book with are reminiscent of Morpheus’s monologue to Neo about his lingering anxieties about the true nature of the world:

Let me tell you why you’re here. You’re here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain. But you feel it. You’ve felt it your entire life. That there’s something wrong with the world. You don’t know what it is but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I’m talking about?

Neo responds, longingly, with “the Matrix?” Wark picks up on the blind struggle that Neo feels and puts it more directly into the language of games and rules. The original movie also gestures at this same idea. The Matrix is a constructed reality that draws many comparisons to the large gameworlds and virtual reality of contemporary videogames, but, more explicitly, while training Neo in hand-to-hand combat in a virtual construct Morpheus tells Neo: “What you must learn is that these rules are no different than the rules of a computer system. Some of them can be bent. Others can be broken. Understand?” The world we live in and how we move through the world is governed by rules, the same as a videogame operating on a computer system. Both Wark and Morpheus tell us that it is imperative that we understand that those rules are constructed and flexible. We can make new rules, play new games.

There is, perhaps, limited applicability in the metaphors of unseen code, gameworlds, and rules mapped onto the complexities of our lived realities. We do not (at least to the best of my knowledge) live in a computer simulation, and there are real and powerful implications to societal rules that can't be ignored even if we become aware that they exist. At the same time, there is something particularly trans in the persistent, nagging feeling that we are playing by rules that don't quite fit how we want to play. The feeling that the world's rulesets have been constructed in ways that don't account for...something. Something that is hard to put our finger on if we aren't fully aware that there are rules at all.<sup>20</sup> It is hard to directly see standard rules for what they are after all, and it is impossible to critically reflect on our desires for new futures when we don't understand we are playing a game.

### **Taking the Red Pill**

*The Matrix* (as well as Wark) uses the metaphor of “the red pill” to describe the awareness of these constructed rules. The red pill has its origins in a trans allegory of coming to comprehend the ways that sex, gender, and desire are controlled according to white, capitalistic, binary, and heteronormative logics, and it is a figure of personal and cultural revolution.<sup>21</sup> A revolution that promises to lead to liberation for queer people. However, the metaphor has been co-opted by somewhat diffuse yet overlapping groups of people that go by many different descriptors: men's

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<sup>20</sup> The directors of *The Matrix* series Lana and Lilly Wachowski have famously come out as trans since the release of the original Matrix film, as did Wark in the intervening years since *Gamer Theory* was written.

<sup>21</sup> More specifically “the red pill” is a stand in for feminizing hormones. Premarin, the estrogen that would have commonly been prescribed to trans women in the 1990s, often came in a distinctly red pill (although other colors existed based on dosage). Interestingly, the most common color of pills prescribed currently are blue.



rights activists (MRAs), incels, the alt-right, alpha males, pick up artists, groypers, anti-woke, anti-Social Justice Warriors (SJWs). There is some variation in the specific beliefs or primary concerns of these different factions, but they are all subsumed under common tactics that includes misogynistic, racist, antisemitic, homophobic, and transphobic harassment.

They also share common homes on the internet including the subreddit r/TheRedPill,<sup>22</sup> which describes itself as: “Discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men.” In September 2018 Reddit quarantined it preventing posts from the subreddit to appear on user’s feeds or searches unless they are specifically subscribed to it and warning anyone that navigates to the subreddit that it is dedicated to “shocking or highly offensive content.” Since the quarantining there seems to be a decrease in the subreddit’s overall influence (Copeland, 2020), however, there are still many havens online for these people to organize and spread their toxicity including other subreddits, 4chan, kiwifarm, and personal websites.

But more to the point, detached from the subreddit of the same name specifically, “the red pill” being adopted as a widespread metaphor in these circles is interesting. The metaphor still holds in some ways, however perverse from the origin it may be. They believe they have awakened to a “truth” about the rules of society’s structure. One that, to simplify it, they believe oppresses cis het white men. Of course, this is all a fiction they tell themselves because this is, as everything is, a part of the game they are playing. The rampant misogyny and harassment are about re-establishing the standard rules. To them it is all about the rules of the game: a game they believe they have the

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<sup>22</sup> For more on anti-feminist movements on the internet see Ging, Debbie (2017). “Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere,” *Men and Masculinities*, 22(4). For more direct connections between the so-called “manosphere” and gaming communities see Taylor, Nick (2018). “I’d Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Gamerbro: How Masculinity Mediates Research on Digital Play,” *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 34(64).

absolute and unquestioned right to win. It's about defining a ruleset that keeps them in the winning position.

So, as Wark tells us, "Perhaps the gamer is always battling otherness, in an unstable relation to alterity, to blurry edges and fuzzy boundaries that threaten to overwhelm the self" (pg. 96). Rules, definitions, categories, and other forms of boundary making are the means by which games become legible and hold power. To shift the rules of the game, you must alter definitions. And to keep the game as it is you must fiercely police boundaries.

### **Contesting the Rules and the Game**

To that end there is an existential anxiety regarding categorical boundaries in the interconnected groups that I will generally label under the umbrella of anti-feminists (although "fascists" would also be an appropriate descriptor). This anxiety can be found in the policing of the rules of society broadly: the traditional rules surrounding masculinity and femininity most prominently. And that policing also extends to videogames. There are, apparently, right and wrong ways to play videogames, and for many people speedrunning falls outside of the "right" way to play, which has consequences for people who play those games.

The morning of Oct 16, 2021, Twitter user @bronzeswords posted a thread that began "I was thinking about why so many in the radical left participate in 'speedrunning.'" This user describes themselves in their bio as "center-left. Pro-beauty. Pro-freedom. Anti-bullying. Anti-feminism/SJW." To anyone well versed in the far-right's veiled language of dog whistles and euphemisms this bio and username clearly places this individual in the same groups I have been alluding to already.

Throughout this thread the user bemoans how “woke” Games Done Quick (GDQ), an extremely popular speedrunning charity marathon, has become before setting up and posing the following rhetorical question:

A "speedrunner" may well spend hours a day at their craft, but this is ultimately a meaningless exercise, since they will ultimately accomplish exactly that which is done in less collective time by a casual player. This is thus a waste of effort on the behalf of the "speedrunner". Put more simply, they are spending their work effort on something that someone else has already done (and done in a way deemed 'correct' by the creator of the artwork). Why do they do this?

To understand the minutiae of the thread’s attempts at answering why people with affinities for what they deem the “radical left” participate in speedrunning requires a deep understanding of online far right discourse and the online “manosphere.”<sup>23</sup> But the minutia of their argumentation is not why I bring the thread up here. The reason I mention it specifically is because it is a well-known example in speedrunning circles of attitudes towards speedrunning found in gaming culture more broadly. Shortly after posting, the thread quickly spread throughout speedrunning communities as a meme. Part of the reason that it could be dismissed is because these kinds of sentiments are commonplace. Most speedrunners are used to people claiming that speedrunners aren’t “really” playing the game, that glitches should be banned because they are “cheating,” that speedrunning is a

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<sup>23</sup> The “manosphere” is a collection of online spaces dedicated to toxic masculinity. For more see again Ging, Debbie (2017), “Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere,” *Men and Masculinities*, 22(4).

“waste of time.” And, even though this particular thread has become somewhat of a punchline, it is still an excellent example of attitudes found in gaming communities that, I will show, have real repercussions for players while uncovering the attempted misogynistic enforcement of definitions of both gender and videogame play.

In general, these kinds of claims serve to police the boundaries of play, prescribing how people should interact with games creating standard and deviant modes of play. Any deviation to the standard is a perversion, a waste of time, or isn't really playing the game at all. Of course, this implies that there is an authoritatively correct way of playing. In this case, as it often is, the “creator” or “developers” are invoked as being arbiters of these norms, and the speaker is positioned as having access to the creator's intentions. It should go without saying that we've already been down this road with literature and authors.<sup>24</sup> However, creators are not always the source of authority. There is also, for example, appeals to textual authority,<sup>25</sup> to skilled players' opinions,<sup>26</sup> and to the somewhat nebulous “meta.”<sup>27</sup> These kinds of appeals are nothing more than a smokescreen. After sixteen tweets in which they liberally cite transphobic Canadian psychologist and pseudo intellectual Jordan

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<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthe's (1967) “The Death of the Author” in the tradition of reader response theory famously destabilizes the author as the privileged site of authoritative meaning.

<sup>25</sup> Ex. Mia Consalvo (2007) shows how players define “cheating” against what they presume is the creator's intent based upon a game's design and other paratextual elements.

<sup>26</sup> Ex. Chris's Paul's (2018) *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* demonstrates the pervasiveness of the “myth of meritocracy” in gaming culture. Bryce Stout (forthcoming) also shows how in *Super Smash Bros. Melee* competitive communities “top player privilege” gives more skilled players more power to formulate rules (and also gives greater leeway with abuse of those rules).

<sup>27</sup> Ex. TL Taylor (2006), in *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, demonstrates how expert players are expected to play based on standardized (and optimized) strategies that come to be defined as a “meta.”

Peterson,<sup>28</sup> @bronzeswords concludes with this: “I am not saying that 'speedrunning' is bad, but rather that, thinking about the topic philosophically, there are dangerous elements within it.” What these “dangerous elements” are is not made explicitly clear except for gestures at the bogeymen of “the radical left,” “wokeness” and “communism,” but I suspect even these typical far right punching bags aren’t really what are at stake for this person specifically and others that think like them.

The actual genesis of these kinds of attacks lies in the fact that speedrunning undermines the ontology of videogames and videogame culture, which are both, by and large, deeply rooted in misogyny, transphobia, racism, ableism and the exclusion of marginalized people in general. The current standard rulesets for videogame culture broadly are actively hostile to a wide swath of people and ensures the place of privilege for white, cis, hetero, able-bodied men. Policing the rules of interaction with videogames, in turn maintains the stability of the rulesets that surround videogames. Videogame culture is, in part, built from the rules of videogame play. In effect, these rulesets blur. The rules of how we play videogames, then, are tightly tied up in the rules of videogame culture, and in an age where the world can be thought of as a game, the definitions of videogames can also affect the cultural rules more broadly, of which gender is a central component.

### **Defining the Game**

There is a large-scale game being played out over the past few decades wherein many players are attempting to define the rules of certain categories: to define videogames, videogame play, and videogame players. This game plays out in many arenas including the publicized harassment found

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<sup>28</sup> Jordan Peterson’s meteoric rise to fame in far-right circles comes off the back of his transphobic refusal to correctly gender his students while teaching at the University of Toronto, which garnered interest (and thus a platform) from far right media outlets such as Infowars and Breitbart media.

in sexual harassment lawsuits at major videogame publishers or the now infamous gamergate, but also in more private and subtle places like Discord servers, game lobbies, the closed doors of videogame company boardrooms, marketing campaigns, videogame narratives and mechanics, or Twitter threads.

But the definition of videogames is not solely what is at stake in this game. In the minds of many, to redefine what a videogame is, is to implicitly redefine gendered relationships and perhaps even redefine binary patriarchal conceptions of gender. This is not just limited to issues of misogyny. Videogame culture is also deeply rooted in racism, transphobia, ableism, and exclusion of marginalized peoples broadly. Speaking about harassment in the context of videogame communities, Katherine Cross (2012) explains:

What they get wrong is precisely this false belief that online prejudice is easily compartmentalized or categorized into, say, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, or ableism when really it flows freely between these various bigotries. Online Islamophobia, for instance, often conceals a vicious sexism and/or anti-Black racism; one has to analyze the whole in order to understand its individual parts in toto.

To redefine videogames is to redefine the concept of videogame player, and to do that we may have to reconceptualize how we define categories. The game is all about categorization, but the specifics of categories are slippery.

So, it may be perplexing to see a Twitter thread about speedrunning linking the act of playing videogames fast to “wokeness” and far left politics, but it makes perfect sense when we realize that the game behind defining videogames is not solely (or even primarily) about videogames. Videogames become a proxy for other categorical definitions. If the standard metagame of

videogame culture is built off of and tightly intertwined with misogyny and a host of other exclusionary ideologies, then it follows that redefining videogames calls into question the hierarchical ideologies of videogame culture. Put more simply: if the definitions of videogames change then the identity categories that form the ground for videogame culture may also have to change. And this is seen as a threat by many that benefit from the current ruleset.

Zoe Quinn (2017), one of the central targets of the hate campaign now known as “gamergate,” describes how that particular campaign was understood as a game. She writes:

I’m a game designer for a reason. Games are, at their core, just systems, and systems are the terms in which I think. Unfortunately, I’m not alone—people participating in online abuse treat it like a game, too, seeing who can do the most damage to a target they see as a dehumanized mass of pixels on a screen, more like a monster in a game to be taken down than an actual human being with thoughts and hopes and weaknesses and moments of brilliance. But although what was done to me was heinous, those responsible for obliterating my old life have overlooked one important thing: I’m better at games than they are. (pg. 11-12)

It is, in many ways, depressing to hear Quinn describe the years-long harassment she faced as a game. It implies that her harassers attack her for fun or sport and that she must bend to and master the arbitrary rules of game-like systems to simply exist in the world. However, Quinn has a slightly different take. She finds this orientation towards the hate campaigns to also be liberating to a certain degree. If cultural production is a game, then it is possible for her to outplay her opponents. She can outmaneuver the other players in the game. And, of course, games are not just flippant activities. Games matter. Games should be taken seriously. When Quinn compares harassment campaigns to

games, that does not trivialize anything. We see how the realization of rules of systems can become a powerful tool.

Looking back from our current moment, gamergate is not at all unlike other forms of harassment. In many ways it is not remarkable at all. Just another data point in larger trends of right-wing radicalization and the global acceleration of fascism. Also, the particulars of Quinn's experiences are mired in the details of extremely personal harassment from an ex who spread lies and divulged personal information to the masses in calculated ways so as to drum up as much hate directed at Quinn as he could. However, we can still see from that moment the anxiety of maintaining borders and categories that permeates much of (videogame) culture today. Harassment campaigns are a part of a "grand meta-game" as Megan Condis (2014) phrases it, but the end goal of that metagame is simply maintenance of the standard rules, which includes removing marginalized people from gaming culture as well as encircling modes of play in the standard as well.

In addition to the intensely personal nature of the attacks on Quinn, trolls also attacked the success and positive coverage that her game *Depression Quest* (2013) received. *Depression Quest* is described on its website as:

an interactive fiction game where you play as someone living with depression. You are given a series of everyday life events and have to attempt to manage your illness, relationships, job, and possible treatment. This game aims to show other sufferers of depression that they are not alone in their feelings, and to illustrate to people who may not understand the illness the depths of what it can do to people.

A not insignificant portion of the campaign against Quinn was directed at her because of the acclaim this game received. It is a game that pushes the boundaries of what is typically thought of as a



videogame eschewing things like combat and conflict to instead focus on personal healing and mutual support. This is outside of the typical ruleset for videogame development. False accusations were circulated that the positive press was because of sexual favors, not the merits of the game itself. This is, first and foremost, a gendered attack. Games outside of the standard that are created by and directed towards a diverse audience (read: not middle class cis het white men) are summarily dismissed or outright attacked. We see very clearly the ways that the rules of a videogame are interpreted as a stand in for gendered categories more broadly. The shifting definitions of how we play comes to be understood as an attack on the boundaries of masculinity.

Speedrunning also changes the rules of how we play videogames, so it also can be understood as a contested site of cultural struggle. That struggle is, in part, one of acceptance of trans people, who, sadly, have also become a proxy in the same way that videogames have. Trans rights is, and has been for the entirety of my life, an issue that has been a contested struggle for the very definitions of gender. The same moves we see in the rules surrounding the definitions of videogames can be found in the moves of the so called “transgender issue.”

### **TERF Wars**

The kinds of attacks I’ve mentioned already are not solely endemic to the right. Alleged feminists also have the same anxieties surrounding gendered boundaries and mobilize in similar ways as their compatriots on the right that belong to anti-feminist movements (if there is a meaningful difference between the two at all). A salient, high-profile example comes from children’s author J.K. Rowling who has come to be known as a mouthpiece and figure head of the hate movement that goes by “Gender Critical” but are better known by the acronym TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists). On June 10, 2020, Rowling posted an open letter titled “Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues” to her personal website. Over the course of

this 3,669-word screed Rowling lays out why she and many people, “some...working in fields dealing with gender dysphoria and trans people,” are

deeply concerned about the way a socio-political concept is influencing politics, medical practice, and safeguarding. They’re worried about the dangers to young people, gay people and about the erosion of women’s and girl’s rights. Above all, they’re worried about a climate of fear that serves nobody – least of all trans youth – well.

So then, what is she (and evidently so many others) deeply concerned about? In her words: either “trans activism” or the “trans rights movement.” I will not go through her entire letter nor her (and other people in her movement’s)<sup>29</sup> similar statements by debunking each of her claims (something that has been done at length by others).<sup>30</sup> I bring this letter up for a similar reason as I do the Twitter thread above. It is a particularly well-known elucidation of commonly held beliefs that,

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<sup>29</sup> A spat of anti-trans books have been released since Rowling’s initial manifesto that cite Rowling directly including Abigail Shrier’s (2020) *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*; Julie Bindle’s (2021) *Feminism for Women: the Real Route to Liberation*; Kathleen Stock’s (2021) *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*; Helen Joyce’s (2021) *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*, and Holly Lawford-Smith’s (2022) *Gender-Critical Feminism*. A lucrative cottage industry has sprung up around stoking trans panic and anti-trans sentiment, and from a quick survey of titles it is clear to see that in these books transness is positioned as a threat to children, ontologically immaterial (and thus “not real”), and anti-feminist. All core arguments to Rowling’s original manifesto.

<sup>30</sup> Among the most thorough and well researched debunking of Rowling’s post from a lengthy Twitter thread by Andrew James Carter, Twitter handle @Carter\_AndrewJ, that meticulously refutes each of Rowling’s claims. Link: [https://twitter.com/Carter\\_AndrewJ/status/1270787941275762689](https://twitter.com/Carter_AndrewJ/status/1270787941275762689). Also see: Talia Mae Bettcher (2018) provides a thorough response to Kathleen Stock’s similar claims from a philosophical perspective that highlights the intellectual laziness of gender-critical ideology: <https://dailynous.com/2018/05/30/tables-speak-existence-trans-philosophy-guest-talia-mae-bettcher/>.

while it tries to veil its true purpose behind claims of “concern,” actually reveals the central issue that is at stake for anti-trans sentiment. She writes:

It’s also clear that one of the objectives of denying the importance of sex is to erode what some seem to see as the cruelly segregationist idea of women having their own biological realities or – just as threatening – unifying realities that make them a cohesive political class.

The concern, then, is really ontological. It is about defining the rules of categorization surrounding the concepts of male and female. Rowling linked her diatribe on Twitter with the accompanying text “TERF wars.” Her pun is illuminating. She, and the exclusionist ideology she supports, are hyper concerned over struggles of boundaries and territory. The boundaries of categories, and the rules that govern them, are at the core of their anxieties.

This is not remotely new. Anti-trans activists have for decades objected to the rights and very existence or validity of trans people on the grounds that they erode the categories of sex and gender to the detriment of the gains made by feminist movements.<sup>31</sup> They feel that if the category “woman” is rendered a contingent construction that does not a priori exist as such, then the work feminist movements have made that, by and large, have been built off of “woman” as a category in opposition to “man” would also be rendered illogical. “Woman,” for them, becomes a meaningful category because of its oppression at the hands of “men.” This hierarchy is necessary to support the

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Stryker (2008), in *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, documents this phenomenon in the US tracing it to at least the early 1970s where it was common in the radical feminist movement to characterize trans women as men infiltrating women’s spaces and trans men as women who have been duped by the patriarchy. These sentiments led to exclusion of trans people from queer spaces as well as outright violence against them.

oppression that, to TERFs, unites women as a group, and (they argue) trans people undermine this brand of feminism. Instead of reworking their categories to accommodate a more nuanced understanding of sexed and gendered categories, TERFs dig their heels into the standard rules, and in so doing take part in similar moves of harassment that we've already seen in game communities and amongst the far right.

The fear mongering around trans women is often rooted in understanding trans women to “actually” be men in disguise, showing the concerns for policing definitions and categories. Men are positioned as a kind of evil. Trans women are just men that attempt to cross the border, but in reality, are foxes in the hen house. Rowling demonstrates this: “‘woman’ is not a costume. ‘Woman’ is not an idea in a man’s head.” Essentialist and harmful stereotypes about men are projected onto trans women and mixed with a dose of misogyny: trans women are deceivers looking to gain access to cis women’s spaces to harm them; we are hypersexual fetishists; we are violent, we are looking to prey on children, to turn them trans in order to indulge our fantasies; we are hysterical and won’t listen to common sense reason.<sup>32</sup> These conceptions are also built off of racist understandings of women that position white cis women as delicate and in need of protecting while black trans and non-binary people are often positioned as masculine and thus dangerous.<sup>33</sup> There is not nearly the same outcry about trans men from this group. The TERF worldview understands women, regardless

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the deployment of these transphobic tropes in media see Julia Serrano’s (2007) *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*.

<sup>33</sup> For more on the intersections of racism and transphobia see Melissa, Rashawn Ray, Ed Summers and Neil Fraistat (2017). “#SayHerName: A Case Study of Intersectional Social Media Activism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(11), 1831-1846. For more on the different experiences of discrimination and violence between black and white trans people in America see Meyer, Doug (2012). “An Intersectional Analysis of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People’s Evaluation of Anti-Queer Violence,” *Gender and Society*, 26(6), 849-873.

of other identity markers like race or class, as an oppressed class. To them, it makes sense to want to gain access to the dominant category, so there is a kind of perverse sympathy exhibited towards trans men. When trans men are discussed, they are de-gendered, characterized as defenseless girls that have been tricked into dangerous ideologies. Their treatment of trans men is just as misogynistic as their treatment of trans women.<sup>34</sup>

The categorical definitions of sex and gender, male and female, are essential to maintain the rulesets of gendered and sexual relations. Trans rights, like videogame culture, are another proxy. "Reasonable concerns" are employed as a tactic in this game to divert attention away from what is really at stake: to maintain the standard. A standard ruleset that is built out of, among other things, misogyny. Misogyny then, is, in part, a move in a game that aims to take control of the rules themselves.

### **Who's Really in Control?**

I want to dwell on that concept for a moment: control. Rules imply control. Rules dictate what we can and cannot do, and videogames are really all about control, no? Players move characters through virtual worlds as if they were puppets, controlling their every move from across the screen.<sup>35</sup> Or perhaps it is more intimate than that. Perhaps players merge with their virtual counterpart,

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<sup>34</sup> The most blatant example of this line of reasoning comes from Abigail Shrier's (2020) *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* which does not understand trans men and boys as their actual gender. Instead, Shrier uses inflammatory language to position girls as under attack from men that "seduce" them into "irreversibly damaging" themselves through the processes of medical transitioning.

<sup>35</sup> For a thorough treatment of the logics and politics of this control see Liam Mitchell's (2019) *Ludopolitics: Videogames Against Control*.

becoming them in a way, and in doing so their actions become the character's actions.<sup>36</sup> On a less representational level, we play videogames to win. Tied up in the drive to win is the imperative to go beyond controlling only the messy construction of our bodies connected to virtual ones, we must also master systems of rules (control them) in order to deftly overcome challenges and maneuver through the constraints of the game.<sup>37</sup>

But that begs the question: who is really in control? If we, as players, are at the mercy of the videogame's rules, why do we typically privilege the player as the one who is in control? To think about control in a slightly different way, let's reframe the concept of control through a kind of queer erotics of videogame play.<sup>38</sup> Through this, I want to dramatize both the control that players give up as well as the pleasure that comes from relinquishing control, at least as it pertains to one particular orientation towards play. I also want to draw attention to the agency that players gain in their choice to give up control.

A description of my time playing, say, the classic side-scrolling platformer *Super Mario Bros.* (1983) could look something like this: I rhythmically press buttons over and over exactly where and when the game tells me to. The game doesn't directly tell me, but I know its language that stems

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<sup>36</sup> Brendan Keogh (2018) in *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* argues that control in videogames is "flickering," yet by touching games we "feel" the world of the game. Through that sense of feeling we take on an "embodied textuality," merging in an unstable way with the videogame.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Paul's (2018) *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* demonstrates how winning is central to the logics of game design and gaming culture broadly.

<sup>38</sup> This thought experiment is indebted to trans game designers such as Anna Anthropy whose, for example, *Mighty Jill Off* (2008) dramatizes the control of videogames through the lens of controlling a submissive partner climbing an incredibly tall tower to lick her dominants boots. Attention is drawn to the ways that we as players desire the control the game gives which makes us do any number of arbitrary tasks simply because we are told to do so. And importantly we, like the titular sub Jill, crave being told what to do.

from its rules and mechanics. If it puts an enemy in front of me, I know that it wants me to attack or avoid it. If it scatters coins on the ground, it wants me to collect them. If it puts a flagpole at the end of the level it wants me to slide down it. So, I do. The game tells me to do something, and I say “yes.” Yes, yes, yes. The game wants me to jump, and I jump. Well, I don’t jump precisely. I touch the controller. I touch it just how the game wants me to (or at least I try to). Not only do I jump or stroke a controller, but I want to jump or stroke. I want to do whatever the game tells me to, and I want to do it just right. I want to be the best at it. Tell me I did a good job. Give me those achievements. Those points, power ups, extra lives. The progression to the next level, and when I let the game down, punish me. Not too harshly, please, but I need to be punished. How else will I know how to make the game happy? So, punish me, take a life from me. Send me back to the beginning of the level and make me wait just a little longer for that ending. I don’t decide if I’m good enough to get that ending, it’s the game that decides if I’ve devoted enough of myself, and it’s the game that decides whether or not I finish.

I consent to all of this.<sup>39</sup> A kind of contract is signed when we play games that says the game will take over control of our bodies and our desires. We like to talk about videogames in terms of

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<sup>39</sup> Consent is a tricky concept when it comes to players overtly eroticizing videogames. For example, Ana Valens (2020) article “What Playing Fall Guys With a Sex Toy Means for Sex, Tech, and Consent in Games” touches on the gray areas that come from hooking a vibrator up to a videogame which responds to actions in the game. In an online multiplayer setting players do not have the ability to consent to this sexual act which they likely do not view as sexual. Similarly, the phenomena of “Healsluts” taps into the eroticism of the healer and tank roles in multiplayer games turning it into a BDSM scene wherein the act of healing the tank is an expression of submission. Players cruise game lobbies to find potential partners using certain ingame skins and emotes to indicate willingness to engage in the practice. Again, other players in the lobby do not have the ability to refuse consent in this scenario. For more on Healsluts see Luke Winkie (2016). “Overmatch ‘Healsluts’ Turn Playing Support Into an Erotic Experience.” Kotaku.com., and for more on the ethics and radical, transformative potential of public sex see Califia, Pat (1994). *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*.

“agency,” but what agency do we have when we play? The masculine coded techno fantasy of domination is pervasive in discourse about videogames. We want to be strong and powerful, to make choices, to “beat” the game. But it’s all just an illusion. When we subscribe to the markers of success and progression that games set, we have willingly relinquished much of our agency in the hopes the game’s whims will bring us pleasure. And despite the deep fears so many cishet men (who shape so much popular discourse surrounding games) have about losing control (being associated with femininity and being penetrated) it’s clear they still enjoy the submissive pleasures videogames bring them. Not all the time, mind you. Sometimes we might say that a game is “unfair,” for example. Maybe a level is unreasonably hard or there aren’t enough clues to figure out how to solve a puzzle. Or perhaps a game is predatory. It may be addictive and employ unfair monetary constraints on play.<sup>40</sup> The game broke the unstated contract. It is making us do things that cross the line between pleasure and pain (in ways we don’t like).

Regardless, the kind of description of videogame play I’m laying out here echoes arguments by scholars like Nick Taylor and Shira Chess (2018) and Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy (2008) that upend typical discourse about videogame play. Typical characterizations of play emphasize players mastering videogames and other opponents, often in explicitly sexual terms like, as Chess and Taylor point out, so called “teabagging” and rape metaphors. But mastery, power, and domination suffuse into most popular discussions of videogames more broadly. We violently move through space overcoming enemies and getting stronger as we do so. Or descriptions of “good”

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<sup>40</sup> Loot Boxes are the most widely publicized way that videogames become predatory through their addictive design that has been classified and regulated as gambling by some countries including Japan, Belgium, and the Netherlands. For more on addictive design practices see Schüll, Natasha Dow (2014). *Addiction By Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*.



controls are ones that allow us to effortlessly exert our control in the gameworld.<sup>41</sup> But as Giddings and Kennedy point out, these kinds of characterizations of mastery are not the only pleasure in playing videogames:

‘Mastery’ is only one pleasure among many, that activity and passivity are not opposites in videogame play but fluctuations in the circuit, and thus that a new conceptual language is needed to attend to both the operations of nonhuman agency and the human pleasures of lack of agency, of being controlled, of being acted upon (pg. 30).

Surprisingly lively computers have a lot of agency to act when we play videogames, but it is not just the computers that exert control over us. It is also the rules.

Having said that, it is not as simple to say that we are solely controlled when we play. It is actually a complicated negotiation of agency between specific players, the technological construction of videogames, and cultural rules of engagement. My above description of gameplay is not universally applicable to all players or instances of play, even of *Super Mario Bros*. It describes a kind of standard ruleset that dictates how I might be subsumed in a game’s controlling apparatus if I submit to the disciplining force of a particular ruleset (remember, players still have some agency in this arrangement). It is rules in concert with the technological construction of the videogame that create the rules of this game. Those rules are culturally defined as much as they are defined by the game itself: the imperative to win and progress; aversions to death; understanding that, say,

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the ways effortless and invisible controls become associated with “good” controls see Schmalzer, Madison (2020). “Janky Controls and Embodied Play: Disrupting the Cybernetic Gameplay Circuit.” *Game Studies*, 20(3).

accumulation of wealth in the form of coins or acquisitions of power represented by power-ups are desirable; that left to right is the direction of progress; the expectations that we should accept the game's definitions of success as meaningful. All of these things and more allow me to interpret the mechanics and audio-visual output of the game as meaningful. This is where the rules of the game are really produced. At the intersection of cultural values, technological configurations, and the player's orientation towards those configurations. Footholds of control are found in rules, yet we must always submit to rules. That is not necessarily a bad thing. It can be pleasurable to submit to rules. And, after all, it is rules that make any game possible in the first place. Actions become meaningful only in the context of rules.

However, we don't always realize we are submitting and sometimes our choice is stripped from us. As I have already discussed, standard rules recede from conscious awareness. Liam Mitchell (2018) discusses the ways that some first-person shooters produce rules that are on the nose hyper-masculine violent power fantasies. These games, Mitchell argues, are "transparently power fantasies" (pg. 30), which means they are limited in their ability to affect the player. We realize what kinds of logics of control are present in these scenarios to the point that some may argue that they actually become critiques of power fantasies in and of themselves (pg. 30). But what of other games that lull players into a sense of control, while actually interpolating the player into its logics? Take Paul Preciado's (2019) description of Candy Crush, which he characterizes as a "disciplining of the soul" (pg. 53). Candy Crush, as Preciado describes it, causes players to be interpolated into its logics of endless progression, updates, and microtransactions that are conditioned into us by its location on our phones and its use of visual stimulation and simple mindless swiping that becomes a kind of monetized endless masturbation. We begin to "think like a computer," to borrow a phrase from Ted Freidman (2013), in that the programming of the game causes players to adopt the programmed logics of the rules. Preciado goes as far as to claim that "when we download an app, we don't install

it simply on our mobile phone, but directly onto our cognitive apparatus” (pg. 55). In other words, games’ rules control us. From our physical bodies to our patterns of thought, we just don’t always realize it, and thus we may not be able to consent. After all, as Foucault (1981) demonstrates, power is able to maintain itself because its mechanisms remain hidden: “secrecy is indispensable to its operation” (pg. 86).

There is a contradiction here. I am arguing for the necessity of submission to rules and the control they bring, while also arguing for agency. That agency comes from consciously consenting to particular arrangement of rules, and also allowance for the agency to create the very rules that we submit to. So often that agency is taken from us, whether it is in the form of videogame culture and design I’ve already discussed, or in the form of assigning gender at birth. We are violently interpolated into a set of rules we never agreed to and are forced to live in a society that’s culture (as well as medical and legal system) does not account for us. This is largely an invisible process for many. For example, Florence Ashley (2021), in discussing Quebec laws regarding trans people, notes that, codified in law, trans is a marked identity while cis is not. They write that “trans people [are depicted with] superficiality of identity. We identify, they are” (pg. 453). I would venture to say that is something that can be extended more broadly. Cis remains an invisible category. An invisible standard mode of play that adheres to an invisible set of rules that only become visible when those that don’t want to (or aren’t able to) play are forced to. We are set up to lose this game from the outset. To facilitate a new set of rules the very formation of rules needs to come to the fore, and those rules must be created by the very people that are beholden to them.

Rules, as we have seen, are powerful cultural forces. They dictate how we live our lives and are often violently policed. But they need not always be forces that rigidly foreclose opportunity. Rules can also be productive forces that (as I’ve already shown with the pleasure associated with them) bring about new modes of relationality. Restructuring them to bring about these possibilities,

however, is a matter of first realizing they are there, allowing us to play. In the upcoming chapter I will turn more directly to the technocultural practice of speedrunning to demonstrate how the creation of rules can lead to community formation and production of new subjectivities. As speedrunning is already entangled in a trans aesthetic of glitch, this is meant to be a gesturing towards new orientations towards rules that our practices of play can help reveal.

## Chapter 2: Category Extensions: Glitching the Rules<sup>42</sup>

“Walls are just suggestions.”

Speedrunning proverb

Spend enough time with videogames and you realize something fundamental about how they work. That is, namely, that they don't. All kinds of glitches inevitably crop up: textures tear, games crash, save files are corrupted, controllers desync with systems, internet connections are laggy, the list could go on and on. Marketing campaigns love to emphasize the visual fidelity of games, how they produce immersive worlds and breathtaking vistas, but when it comes down to it videogames aren't virtual worlds (or at least they are not solely virtual worlds). They are software run on a computer, and they are open to all of the bugs and glitches that implies. Glitches are jarring. They direct our attention away from diegetic gameworlds and cause us to reflect on the construction and operation of the system as a whole. How the hardware and software produce the game, or in those instances fails to produce the game properly.

Speedrunning is invested in these glitches because speedrunners only care about the game insofar that it is a system to produce certain modes of play. Glitches, for a speedrunner, are a tool that allows for particular engagement with the game. The glitch does not break gameplay, it transforms it. It is not something that stands in the way of play, instead it allows speedrunners to

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<sup>42</sup> “Category Extensions” refers to the practice in speedrunning communities of developing alternative or less standard sets of rules that are typically housed on separate leaderboards than the main categories giving a space for less conventional or experimental forms of play to be explored.

move through the game's programming in radically different ways than a player that understands the game as a representation of diegetic worlds.

At the same time glitches are not confined to the technological. A glitch can appear in any system including cultural systems of rules. Speedrunning is one such glitch that draws our attention to the system of rules that create videogame culture. I argue that trans identities are another such glitch in cultural rules surrounding gender (and as we have seen in the previous chapter videogames and gender's rules are tightly intertwined). In the same way that a speedrunner's use of glitches produces new modes of play, this chapter maps some of the ways that the glitches of speedrunning and trans identities can be thought of as productive forces as well. This chapter is interested in finding pathways towards altering rules, categories, and definitions to generate spaces of trans legibility, community formation, relationality, and subjectivities. I argue that one way to do this is through the technologies of videogames and the rules of engagement with them. I deploy the glitch as a figure that resituates technological configurations, but I am not arguing that glitches completely destroy rules and boundaries. This would be an argument that would be typical of queer theory with its emphasis on deconstruction and antinormativity.<sup>43</sup> A trans understanding of glitch, as I am using the term, is more concerned with developing counter-powers that allow for producing subjectivities and forms of relationality to unfold according to our desires.

To that end, in this chapter I first work through the concept of counter-powers, before deploying the figure of the technocultural glitch. In the same way that I am somewhat skeptical of

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<sup>43</sup> I am drawing here from both Cameron Awkward-Rich's (2017) and Cáel M. Keegan's (2020) articulations of trans studies as a disciplinary field. They both argue that trans studies is at odds with queer theory in that trans people are not (at least primarily) interested in destroying categorical understandings of gender. Instead trans studies is more interested in producing the material conditions for trans people to express and live as the genders of their choice.

the glitch being deployed by queer theory, I am also skeptical of the ways in which some feminist scholars have understood gender as a glitch in the technologies of sex. So, I work through historical constructions of the rules of both gender and sex to tease out the limits on how we can understand gender as a glitch before discussing the work that gender *can* do as a glitch. I then discuss that work in the context of speedrunning and other cultural practices such as music production. Finally, I end with a case study of the development of rules and categories in one speedrunning community, *Hades* (2020), to demonstrate how cultural glitches can form counter-powers that allow for new rules and categories to unfold.

### **Counter-Power and the Magic Circle**

Rules (and other methods of delimiting movement, action, thought, etc.), which glitches are poised to undermine, do not just foreclose possibilities and oppress subjects interpolated within them. They also create the possibility for meaningful action. The magic circle is what this is called in the context of games, but as games come to inscribe all of reality the concept of the magic circle has relevance to all facets of contemporary life. The term comes from Johan Huizinga (1938), but Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) describe the work the magic circle does well:

Within the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players. Before a game of Chutes and Ladders starts, it's just a board, some plastic pieces, and a die. But once the game begins, everything changes. Suddenly, the materials represent something quite specific. This plastic token is you. These rules tell you how to roll the die and move. Suddenly, it matters very much which plastic token reaches the end first. (pg. 107)

In this example it is the rules that give meaning to actions. The limits of rules can create new ways of existing, moving, desiring, and relating to the world and ourselves.

In the context of gender, categories (and the rules inherent to them) can produce possibilities as well. Foucault (1978) famously questions the restrictive nature of sex, which gender is to a large degree an extension of. He is skeptical of what he calls “the repressive hypothesis” and voices three doubts about its validity. I would like to dwell on his second doubt:

Do the workings of power, and in particular those mechanisms of power that are brought into play in societies such as ours, really belong primarily to the category of repression? Are prohibition, censorship, and denial truly the forms through which power is exercised in a general way, if not in every society, most certainly our own?

I see here a similar logic to the magic circle. The power that enforces sex as a category, for Foucault, does not inhibit. Instead, it produces subjectivities that are beholden to certain forms of power and control. I am struck by Hil Malatino’s reading of this passage. They argue that political imperatives that are embroiled in the rhetorics of “repression, constraint, and liberation” (pg. 36) miss the key insight that power does not (at least primarily) restrict. Malatino notes that, in practice, struggling against these power structures from the perspective of the negative often manifest in “dropping out, substance abuse, traveling, too fragile-living situations” that serve the function of “blockages on the way to produce radical alternative spaces rather than enabling their construction” (pg. 36). I also understand this as a queer approach to power, one that is interested, solely, in dismantling systems of power. However, there is no dismantling systems of power without establishing new ones. How do we rethink power as something that we do not just resist and undo, but as something that we produce so as to allow for new spaces of possibility?



Additionally, to my ear thinking about gender as solely restrictive sounds an awful lot like dysphoria. I do not mean dysphoria in the clinical sense of a categorization (diagnosis) that has been used to violently and racistly gatekeep access to trans healthcare. I mean dysphoria in the sense that it is a personally felt discomfort in the ways our body and entire subjectivity is gendered and sexed. Dysphoria has many roots. It can be produced in consort with the rules of gender that create and interpolate us into categories that may not fit our desires or coercively and violently dictate how we must live our lives. But is that all gender does for us?

I, personally, experienced intense dysphoria during my time presenting and moving through the world as if I was a man. However, the category “woman” allows me to relate to people, my body, and the world at large in ways that are more freeing, bring me joy, and allow me to engage in community formations in radically different ways. It is my legibility as a (trans) woman that produces these modes of relationality. My transness and my location in the category of woman does not deconstruct gender as a concept, but it also does not solidify existing categories of sex and gender. It reveals those categories as being contingently constructed, permeable, and malleable, and through the reconfiguring of these constructed categories we can bring about new futures for ourselves. In other words, gendered and sexed categories are not solely limiting, they also produce possibilities.

To this end Malatino asks: “how could a counter-power be developed that enabled different subjective productions that are resistant but not caught in purely negative, critical, and contestatory relations to the biopolitical regulation of sex, gender, and sexuality” (pg. 36). This is a call for developing “becomings,” borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), that don’t reproduce hegemonic forms of power. Trans, intersex, and gender-nonconforming subjects broadly can do this work of creating legible subjectivities. Importantly, though, they are not legible to the dominant forms of power. They exist outside of these categorical rules, becoming a glitch. This work is not

primarily mired in destruction of existing rules, categories, and the power that enforces them; it's invested in creation of new forms of power.

### **Gender as a Glitch**

Faced with crises of categorization, of definitions, of rules, and of the hostile games formed from and around them that I have discussed in the previous chapter, what are we to do? Whether we like it or not we are embroiled in a vast game. How do we create our own rules and categories while navigating and surviving these hostile attempts to enforce violent and dehumanizing rules on us?

Let's return for just a moment to *The Matrix* (1999), which I discuss at length in Chapter 1. At the end of the film our hero Neo delivers the following line directed at the computer program that operates the virtual world of the Matrix, but also (in a meta sense) it is directed at the audience: "I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. I'm going to show them a world without you. A world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible." This implies a world without definitions and categories, and this is a tantalizing sentiment. There are many calls similar to this that envision a world free from the constraints that are placed upon us by hegemonic power structures such as those found in queer theory with its emphasis on deconstruction and antinormativity. Queer theory, broadly, is suspect of any kind of boundary and aims to dismantle these structures. Similarly, Legacy Russell (2020), drawing from traditions of queer theory as well as feminist thought, envisions a "glitch feminism" that is interested in tearing apart the categories that structure ourselves (gendered binaries, analog vs. digital selves, racist standards of beauty, boundaries between technology and bodies, etc.) and advocates embodying a glitch that is illegible and unnamable in the context of our current white cis-normative society. In so doing, she argues, we shed limits, shatter binaries, and resist control. She argues that

bodies and subjectivities that are not indexable by the dominant white, capitalist, monogamous, cishetero society become glitches that do the work of tearing down oppressive systems like gender.

I am extremely sympathetic to the methods Russell and others employ in envisioning radical new modes of being in regard to the messy formations of subjectivities surrounding glitched technologies. I am particularly partial to Rosa Menkman's (2011) definition of glitch in *The Glitch Moment(um)*. She describes glitch as a

break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within (digital) communication systems that results in a perceived accident or error. A glitch occurs on the occasion where there is an absence of (expected) functionality, whether understood in a technical or social sense. (p. 9)

Glitches are not confined to technology; they can also be found in the realm of the social.

Additionally, glitches require a dominant system to be compared against. A glitch is only a glitch if there is an otherwise functioning system.

Whit Pow (2021) positions the glitch as a trans mode of being in the world, a world that interpolates trans people into systems of rules against our will. Trans people's lives, especially those of BIPOC trans people, are dictated by institutional systems (of government, law, medicine) that do not account for them. Trans existence becomes a glitch in the supposedly functioning system. From even seemingly simple actions like getting medical care, moving through workspaces, applying for a passport (or taking part in videogame communities) we are acutely aware that there are actually many layers of mediating rules in these mundane actions that don't quite work right. The system is buggy. Glitchy. And we are that glitch. A glitch that reveals the structures we are interpolated within, shows them to be inadequate, and gestures towards possible new futures.

But glitches can also be integrated and operationalized by the system.<sup>44</sup> While I find glitch as a practice to have some transformative potential, I remain skeptical as well. Glitches are not inherently radical and are often subsumed into dominant structures. It may be instructive to take a step back to account for the historical construction of gender here, which has at different moments in history been characterized as a disruptive glitch in the construction of sex.

Many scholars have reproduced the genealogy of gender as a category in regard to its invention in the clinic,<sup>45</sup> but it is instructive to briefly investigate this history here to highlight the fact that gender appeared as a kind of reconfiguring of sex (a glitch in a system of control) and quickly became a disciplining exertion of biopower that is tightly tied to the regulation of normative sex. What once may have been thought of as a glitch becomes integrated into normative structures. Gender has its roots in the research of psychiatrist and sexologist John Money who (along with Ehrhardt, Joan, and John Hampson) became the first to use the categorical term “gender” in the 1950s. Money interrogated and medically investigated “hermaphroditic” children with ambiguously sexed genitals evaluating them on “seven variables of sex” that accounted for a variety of competing

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<sup>44</sup> In media broadly this occurs very often with the integration of glitches into everyday aesthetics. For example, Jacques Attali (1985) in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, argues that “noise” comes to eventually be understood as sound, and then, with some ordering by tools: music. The dissonant and unstructured, the glitch, becomes integrated into the controlled and mundane. Additionally, the concept of “rainbow capitalism,” serves as an example of how societal glitches become coopted and bent to the whims of a capitalist society as it reduces queerness to nothing more than a market demographic to sell to, slogans to chant, and visual icons of queerness (rainbows, representation, etc.) instead of something that enacts structural change. See: Falco, A., & Gandhi, S. (2019). “The Rainbow Business.” *Eidos*, 9(1), 104-107.

<sup>45</sup> This history has been explored by many historians of gender and sex. Some notable accounts I draw from include: Suzzane Kessler and Wendy McKenna’s (1978) *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*; Anne Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*; Susan Stryker’s (2008) *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*; Jemima Repo’s (2018) *The Biopolitics of Gender*; Julian Gill-Peterson’s (2018) *Histories of the Transgender Child*; and Hil Malatino’s (2019) *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*.

theories for determining a “true sex.” These included: “assigned sex and sex of rearing, external genital morphology, internal accessory reproductive structures, hormonal sex and secondary sexual characteristics, gonadal sex, and chromosomal sex” (Malatino, 2019, pg. 164-165). The final category Money created had nothing to do with the biological body: “gender role and orientation, established while growing up.” Gender, for Money, includes all manners of comportment, desire, thoughts, speaking, gestures, fantasies. In effect, no manner of existing in the world escaped Money’s medical diagnostics. Money conjectured that gender was produced at a young age through a complex interplay of sexed factors. To produce normative, and thus “healthy,” subjects Money performed surgeries and administered hormones to produce bodies that he determined were appropriate to produce a gendered sense of self that adhered to the proper sexed category for the patient. Naturally, these gendered categories were predicated on normative understandings of maleness and femaleness.

Feminism as well as queer theory has, at times, attempted to use gender as a means of resistance through the decoupling of gender from sex, which then denaturalizes gender and is meant to allow for multiplicity of modes of being. This is an attempt to deploy gender as a glitch that undermines essentialist categories of sex. However, we see at the outset that gender is in many ways a reification of sex that also functions as a means for the state, medicine, and social norms to violently exert a normalizing power while also serving as an “apparatus of biopower” that “was instrumental to sedimenting Western postwar capitalism through the management of sex” (Repo, 2015, pg. 3-4). Gender becomes the means by which economically productive bodies are (re)produced through the production of different sex desiring bodies and the calcification of the nuclear family as the center of American life. Which is all another way of saying gender is a means to produce and control sex. At its very outset gender was invented as a means to coercively and

violently control intersex bodies, and indeed any sexed bodies deemed by the biopolitical matrix of power to be outside of the standard.

So, gender's status as a socially constructed category that is detached from sex does not inherently make it radical. Denaturalizing or destabilizing gender does not necessarily free it from biopolitics as gender is tied up in the production and maintenance of sex, which, by extension is a tool to regulate a neoliberal capitalistic society. Jemima Repo (2015) convincingly shows the ways that, by borrowing Money's theories of gender, feminist thinkers have, at times, unwittingly become embroiled in the same problematic paradigms as Money that then reified certain conditions of power and knowledge (ex. Focusing solely on the same white subjects Money worked on; conceiving of the white middle class family as a point of contestation that, in effect, reified the nuclear family as the center of cultural and economic production; acceptance of the normal/abnormal paradigm). Clare Hemmings (2011) also aptly demonstrates how the deconstruction of gender that feminist scholars have advanced has been co-opted by neoliberalism as another means to create new market segments to further capitalist interests. More generally, to accept a difference between sex that is rooted in nature and gender that is cultural is necessarily to accept that the cultural is open to control by a state apparatus. And, by extension, this is also the acceptance that sex is fixed, and thus medical transition is a fiction. This serves as a means to control trans people's ability to self-determine our sex through medical interventions. The focus of power simply shifts from controlling sex directly to a more subtle form of power that aims to control gender.

Isabel Fall's (2020) science fiction short story "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter" is an instructive meditation on the ways gender can be stripped of its radical potential and operationalized by hegemonic structures. The story takes seriously a decades old "joke" circulated in online spaces. The archetypal version of this so-called joke is directed at trans people and goes something like this: "If you identify as a [insert gender], then I identify as an Apache attack

helicopter.” This is meant to show that trans people’s gender is a ridiculous fiction. It attempts to point out that if we can change our gender and “identify” as something else, why can’t we change to be anything including a piece of military machinery? Jokes are sapped of their humor from over-explanation, but rest assured this one was never funny to begin with. The joke is tired and tiring in its incessant repetition and staying power over the past decade or more.

But Fall treats it as a thought experiment, a line of flight that shows the shortcomings in understanding gender as a glitch that by necessity dismantles oppressive structures. In the short story the main character and narrator, Barb, has been augmented by the military to have the gender identity of an attack helicopter. Early in the story, Barb explains the logics that lead to the possibility of transitioning to a helicopter:

My body is a component in my mission, subordinate to what I truly am. If I say I am an attack helicopter, then my body, my sex, is too. I’ll prove it to you.

When I joined the Army I consented to tactical-role gender reassignment. It was mandatory for the MOS I’d tested into. I was nervous. I’d never been anything but a woman before.

But I decided that I was done with womanhood, over what womanhood could do for me; I wanted to be something furiously new.

To the people who say a woman would’ve refused to do what I do, I say—

Isn’t that the point?

The military industrial complex in this future has adopted the languages of feminist bodily autonomy and queer self-determination and has operationalized them to produce efficient killers whose entire being, their very gendered identity, is the mass of steel and weaponry that carries out orders without question including the atrocities of shelling schools depicted in this story. After committing these heinous acts Barb points a finger at us:

Generations of queer activists fought to make gender a self-determined choice, and to undo the creeping determinism that said the way it is now is the way it always was and always must be. Generations of scientists mapped the neural wiring that motivated and encoded the gender choice.

And the moment their work reached a usable stage—the moment society was ready to accept plastic gender, and scientists were ready to manipulate it—the military found a new resource. Armed with functional connectome mapping and neural plastics, the military can make gender tactical.

If gender has always been a construct, then why not construct new ones?

And why not? If feminist and queer theory's claims of gender's performativity and/or constructedness are stripped of lived realities, the labor of producing gender, and most importantly the material needs of actual trans people then these kinds of claims are not so easily dismissible. Why shouldn't these claims be coopted and mixed with a brand of science that tries to explain queerness, to find the genetic configurations, prenatal hormone cocktails, and early sense impressions that cause people to be queer? Historically, these kinds of lines of inquiry have led to



eugenicist imperatives that aim to exterminate queerness of all stripes, but why wouldn't they be deployed to produce new genders? And on the surface of it, isn't producing new gender identities or gendered relationships a very feminist and queer notion?

Fall's story pushes these kinds of ideas nearly to absurdity, but we see the same kinds of moves in our current moment. Take for example Joe Biden's (2021) executive order that reversed a Trump era ban on transgender people serving in the military. This change was met with praise from many on grounds of inclusion, diversity, equality, and self-expression. To be sure no one should be prevented from participation in public life because of gender, sex, sexuality, race or any other facet of identity, and there is a long history of military segregation on these grounds in America that indexes bigoted cultural biases of the times. But is it not concerning that the language of feminism is deployed to facilitate the military's meeting of recruitment quotas? Instead of tearing down the violent, oppressive power of the military industrial complex or critiquing and aiming to fix the material conditions that make military service a necessity for so many, some feminists cheer on the inclusivity of the executive order. Detaching feminist concepts (like gender or inclusion) from the values and material conditions of their exigence allows them to be coopted. They are no longer glitches, they simply become a part of the system without altering it.

That is not to say that there is no value in poststructuralist conceptions of gender or feminist theory more generally. What it does mean is that glitches are not inherently revolutionary, or more specifically, glitches mobilized at deconstructing categories do not necessarily undo matrices of power and often are subsumed into the very apparatus they are deployed against. A glitch is only a glitch so long as it is an aberration. What we once thought of as a glitch is so often indexed, controlled, domesticated, and used to advance the same rules, definitions, and categories that were already in place, reestablishing the standard structures of power. So, while glitches have some power

to disrupt, they must, by necessity, continue to change in order to hold that power, and they must always be situated within a normative/non-normative relationship with a dominant system.

This leaves me with a few questions about paths forward. Is gender a dead end as it pertains to revolutionary potential? Must gender only be a means of control? What about the issue of categorization, boundaries, and rules that are employed as disciplinary forces against marginalized people? Are these kinds of policing of categories a necessary element to the biopolitical power of gender (and sex)? In the next section I want to argue for a kind of glitch as well, but not a glitch that is aimed at tearing down the concept of gender or directly resisting the repressive and controlling functions of gender. I attempt to reorient our understanding of the concepts of rules that are endemic to categorization generally, which also have instructive correlates regarding gender and videogames. Through this reorientation I hope to gesture towards methods that allow us to produce transformative futures as opposed to being locked in a dialectical struggle with dominant forms of power.

### **Writing New Rules: Technological Trans Aesthetics**

“Trans” can be thought of as a category that enables certain modes of existence and forms of relationality. Similarly, to “gender,” “trans,” as a term, has a long history that has shifted significantly over time and included different subjectivities within its boundaries. Trans is not a stable category. Susan Stryker (2017) provides an excellent cursory history of the development of terminology relating to gender nonconforming people that I primarily draw from here. She demonstrates that over the course of the nineteenth century, for example, we see many different terms crop up in medical and psychiatric fields for gender nonconforming people: urnings, eviration, defemination, mujerados, *conträre Geschlechtsempfindung*, *Geschlechtsumwandlungstreich*, *sexo-aesthetic inversion*, *eonism*, *inverts* and the list goes on (Stryker, pg. 52-53). Many of these different

concepts did not distinguish between what we would now label as homosexuality and trans sensibilities showing that sexuality, sex, and gender have always been tightly linked.<sup>46</sup> It was not until 1910 that German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term “transvestite,” which sticks with us today, albeit with a different definition (Stryker, pg. 39). Hirschfeld used transvestite to describe a wide range of gender nonconforming behaviors, while “Transsexuality” was subsumed under the umbrella of transvestitism and referred to having a connection to the feelings, emotions, or aesthetic sensibilities of the opposite binary gender than was assigned at birth. Transsexual did not gain widespread use until the 1950s when German sexologist and endocrinologist Harry Benjamin began using the term in the wake of Christine Jorgenson’s highly public transition (Stryker, pg. 38). Benjamin used the term to distinguish between those that wore the clothes (vestments) of another gender and those that sought out medical means to change their sex. The word “transgender” has a more recent history coming into usage in the 1970s as a way to denote someone who socially transitions, but would usually forgo medical intervention, making a distinction from transsexuals (Stryker, pg. 37). In the 1990s transgender came to encompass a wide variety of gender variance: ex. transvestite, transsexual, gender queer, nonbinary, etc. However, more recently transgender has ironically come full circle often referring to people that have historically been referred to as transsexuals. “Trans,” as it is used today, is a term that is indebted to this ever-shifting history and varied terminology encompassing gender nonconforming identities broadly.

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<sup>46</sup> See Julian Gill-Peterson’s (2018) introduction to *Histories of the Transgender Child* for more on the historical overlap between the categories of homosexuality and trans as well as chapter six in Robert Beachy’s (2014) *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* titled “Weimar Sexual Reform and the Institute for Sexual Science” for more on the overlapping ways sex and gender were treated by medical institutions.

As this cursory history attests to, there is not something we can point to as a unifying “transness” or “trans aesthetic” because the concept of trans encircles so many varying and shifting subjectivities. Additionally, attempts to trace or codify trans aesthetics as a category so often are actually only dealing with a white trans aesthetic, which then inevitably colonizes the whole of trans experiences.<sup>47</sup> With that in mind I want to gesture towards one loose unifying feature of *a* trans aesthetic (among many possible) here, which we have already seen is what Russell understands as her central source of resistance to the gender binary: the glitch. Russell describes the glitch as “an error, a mistake, a failure to function. Within technoculture, a glitch is part of machinic anxiety, an indicator of something having gone wrong” (pg. 15). Trans existence itself becomes a glitch in standard modes of gendered and sexed categorization, which both reveal the typically invisible rules of the standard metagame while also calling into question the authority of those rules. The glitch also becomes a way to short circuit the programmed rules that are codified into our technoculture and form new pathways for connection.

For example, trans musical artists like SOPHIE, Laura Les of *100 gecs*, Kim Petras, Arca and many others have intentionally used glitch in their music to create new genres, new categories, of music dubbed hyperpop. This genre (if we can really even call this loose collection of aesthetic sensibilities a genre) could be described as an over-the-top deconstruction of contemporary pop music. It is hard to pin down the exact characteristics of hyperpop, but in general it features harsh compressed sounds, intense energy, and a vibe that is at once ugly, abrasive, overly distorted, and

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<sup>47</sup> Ex. Cael Keegan (2016) shows how queer white film makers gentrify stories of queerness from the global south stripping them of authentic representation of trans people of color and failing to grapple with issues important to these groups such as AIDs activism. See: Keegan, Cael (2016). “History, disrupted: The Aesthetic Gentrification of Queer and Trans Cinema,” *Social Alternatives*. 35(3).

simply noisy. Hyperpop as it has been constructed as a category becomes a glitch in popular music that gives voice to trans people.<sup>48</sup> This is literal. The use of autotune allows trans femmes to achieve the voices they desire, but it also creates a language to communicate through. Hyperpop's trans roots are no surprise. It takes the existing conventions of pop music and glitches, hacks, and mods them so that they are something barely recognizable as music, yet simultaneously creates a new sonic language. "Trans" understood as a glitch becomes a mode of existence for trans people who often view their bodies as a glitch in conventional sets of cultural rules. The glitch does not destroy gender, sex, bodies, music, or anything else. It simply creates a new set of rules.

Similarly, speedrunning is a glitch in the standard games of videogame culture that simultaneously is invested in the aesthetics of technological glitches, and at the same time is itself a glitch that produces new modes of play and community formation. Speedrunning does not undo existing categories. It just reveals that the standard is a construction, while being hyper concerned with creating new categories that facilitate play, community, and other forms of relationality that meet the desires of speedrunners. Trans speedrunner Narcissa Wright's (2015) poem "All the Categories Are Arbitrary" posted to her YouTube channel is a particularly affecting elucidation of linking transness to the practices of speedrunning which restructure rules and hardware to fit the player's desires.<sup>49</sup> Wright speaks the poem over footage of the final moments of a run of the *Legend*

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<sup>48</sup> For more on hyperpop's origin as an embodiment of trans aesthetics see Marsh, Ty (2020). "Exploring the Trans Roots of Hyperpop." *Orange Mag*. <https://orangemag.co/orangeblog/2020/10/15/exploring-the-trans-roots-of-hyperpop>. For more on hyperpop as the creation of a trans space and language see Lynch, Brooke (2021). "Hyperpop Transness," *The Cooper Point Journal*, 29.

<https://www.cooperpointjournal.com/2021/04/29/hyperpop-transness/>.

<sup>49</sup> See chapter one of Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux's *Metagaming* (2018) titled "About, Within, Around, Without" for an additional excellent analysis of Wright's poem.

of *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) Any% (OoT Any%). The footage is slowed down, emphasizing every crucial frame that has been agonized over across so many runs and by so many runners. The poem opens in media res:

as oot any% shifts back to vc-j, my mind wanders to the ess adapters  
 and to the virtual console, that doesn't crash when gim is performed  
 and to the old kakariko route, resetting the console to save time  
 and to the timing method, the arbitrary start and end points  
 my mind wanders...

“My mind wanders” serves as a kind of refrain. This is a reflection on speedrunning as a large community, speedrunning as a personal practice, Wright’s role in speedrunning communities, and how her personal transition fits into all of it. Her mind first wanders to a detailed accounting of the hardware, software, and glitches that go into creating an *Ocarina of Time* Any% speedrun:

to the homebrewed wii, the region freed wad,  
 to the replacement joystick, to the hori mini pad,  
 to the rubber band, tape, and grease  
 my mind wanders...

to the practice, the process, the savestate  
 to the gameshark, the game saver, the gecko code  
 to the cheating, the splicing, the policing  
 the audio waveform

my mind wanders...

to the timer, the inconsistency, the dropped frames

to the bitrate, the capture card, the interlacing

to the emulator, the graphics plugin, the deadzone

the deadzone...

the ess adapters are subtle, invisible, already in use

i see the grand decentralization of it all

my mind wanders...

to the ique player, the fast memory card, the old gamecube laser

to the ps2 disc speed, the sloppy port, the hd remaster

to the pal cartridge, the patched glitch, the japanese text speed

to the turbo controller

This listing highlights the ways that the run has shifted over the years, incorporating new discoveries and tricks that require different hardware and orientations towards the game. Through these shifts languages developed, such as abbreviations like “gim,” which stands for: “Get Item Manipulation.” This term takes on meaning within a particular community of practice where it indexes not only a technological configuration or manipulation of software and hardware, but also a shared history that Wright traces. The language of speedrunning is not just the abbreviations or indeed the words themselves. The development and implementation of GIM (as well as the development of rules surrounding it) are contained within the acronym. Similarly, the “the old Kakariko route,” “the

homebrewed wii,” or “the fast memory card” take on historical, emotional, and strategic significance for runners. This communal history and language come about because of the category: “oot any%.” It is the category, the ruleset, that gives meaning to this collection of objects. A legibility comes from shared rules and categories. The rubber bands used to lock a joystick into a precise position, the minute dropped frames, the rate that a PlayStation 2 disc spins, the speed at which Japanese text is written to a screen all become meaningful and legible within the history of *OoT Any%* speedrunning.

About halfway through the poem there is a change though. She abruptly exclaims: “the rules, the rules!” Her mind wanders to the rules, as it inevitably does for any speedrunner (and trans person). She immediately follows this with the lines:

all the categories are arbitrary  
perhaps marksoupial<sup>50</sup> said it best:  
do whatever you want, there are literally no rules

But it’s clear that Wright doesn’t really believe that there are no rules (just look to the highly structured form of the poem<sup>51</sup>): it’s just that the rules can be whatever she (or a community) wants them to be. There is freedom in ignoring established rules, but there is also an immense amount of work and risks. The importance that she puts on the rules, and the “life she pours” into them attest to their lasting significance. Her mind wanders:

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<sup>50</sup> Marksoupial is a speedrunner primarily known for running *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (1997) for the Sega Saturn.

<sup>51</sup> Thank you to Andrew Johnston for point out the poems rigid structure.



to the traveling, the marathons,  
sexually harrassed, fleeing, hiding  
reclusive, paranoid, getting high  
playing smash, destroying my wrists  
my mind wanders...

to the life i poured into it all  
working in a frenzy, managing a community  
disrupting speedrunning  
building upon it, something new and greater  
and then it fell in upon itself  
jiano<sup>52</sup> saw it first; i was foolish  
it couldn't be unified; all the categories are arbitrary

Once speedrunning understands rules as arbitrary, it can shift, as she muses: “i see the grand decentralization of it all.” There may be disagreements. There may be dangerous factions that need to be guarded against. There may be fracturing and multiplicity. There may be violence. There may be personal risk and pain. And, as Wright mentions, there was immense harm that she sustained over her years in the speedrunning scenes. The arbitrary categories are not inherently liberatory or freeing, and it can't be unified. There are rules and cultural practices that are outside of our control,

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<sup>52</sup> Jiano is a speedrunner best known for co-building the website SpeedRunsLive with Narcissa Wright.

and it takes an immense amount of labor and care to create, manage, and maintain any one category and to keep those within it safe (at least as best we can). A tremendous amount of work goes into establishing categories containing rules that serve those that are interpolated into them as well as forming a space of legibility for players to come together. But that work is how we develop some kind of productive counter-power.

She ends her poem shifting away from speaking about speedrunning specifically to her own transition. Her mind no longer wanders. This part is spoken in the moment and seems to be built from the reflections she has had on speedrunning:

finished painting my nails, doing my makeup  
put on some mascara, roll up my thigh highs  
all the categories are arbitrary

slip on a skirt, buy a new dress  
feel the pain from the laser  
all the categories are arbitrary

leaving the clinic, bottles in my hand  
spironolactone, estradiol  
all the categories are arbitrary

She connects the work, dangers, hardware, software, and rules of speedrunning directly to her own trans identity and the technologies and pharmaceuticals that produce it, while also making a parallel between the two via the repeated invocation of arbitrary categories.<sup>53</sup> Speedrunning, for Wright, becomes a glitch in the categorical rules of videogames in the same way that her transition glitches and plays with arbitrary categories of gender. Speedrunning, and the glitches inherent to it, becomes a language to understand transness through and a means to create new modes of relationality, no matter how tenuous and costly those relations may be. And transness becomes a new kind of language and means to make herself legible just as *OoT Any%* is.

Speedrunning is often characterized as a kind of violence, wherein the worlds, narratives, and scripted sequences are destroyed, torn apart, or done away with via the use of glitches and an obsession with speed.<sup>54</sup> I want to push back on these characterizations somewhat, because, while there is something to them, they miss important components of speedrunning as a practice including the labor, physicality, and emotions chronicled by Wright's poem. But also, this characterization, to my understanding, misses the care that goes into speedrunning. There is a kind of joy that is found in playing with a game at the level of code or generating jarring visuals and unexpected movement through the act of speedrunning, which is similar to the aesthetic characteristics of something like hyperpop. Speedrunning, then, embodies a kind of trans sensibility that aestheticizes and revels in

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<sup>53</sup> The edited collection *Transgender Marxism* (2021) edited by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke is an excellent collection that draws attention to the material labor that goes into transition and forming trans community.

<sup>54</sup> For these kinds of orientations towards speedrunning see, for example, Scully-Blaker, Rainforest (2014). "A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space With de Certeau and Virilio," *Game Studies*, 14(1). and McKissack, Fraser and May, Lawrence (2020). "Running With the Dead: Speedruns and Generative Rupture in *Left 4 Dead 1* and *2*," *Games and Culture*. 15(5). 544-564.

the technological glitch. Speedrunning is not a violent destruction. It is a creative celebration. Game designer Bennet Foddy (*IGN*, 2020) phrases it incredibly well:

The role of the speedrunner is the exact opposite of the game designer. A game designer painstakingly carves a beautiful sculpture out of wood. First, chiseling it out of a raw block, and then gradually rounding off any rough edges making sure it works when viewed from any angle. The speedrunner takes that sculpture. They look it over carefully from top to bottom from every angle and deeply understand it, and they appreciate all the work that went into the design. All of the strengths and all of the weak points. And then, having understood it perfectly, they break it over their knee. Well, that's why I love speedrunners.

There is destruction, but that destruction is joyful, deeply respectful, and there is something to love about inventive and creative methods of tearing apart and reconfiguring games, which I find to be similar to the kinds of aesthetic sensibilities that I am tentatively putting under the umbrella of a “trans glitch aesthetic.” And “reconfiguring” is important. From the raw materials of a videogame (the hardware and software primarily), a new way to play is created in the same way that the materials of gender (bodies, clothing, mannerisms, relationships, laws, cultural assumptions, and so on) come to be reconfigured to create new gendered subjectivities. Sure, we may smash things over our metaphorical knees, but we create something new from the fractured pieces as well.

To say that speedrunning dismantles the logics of a game we must necessarily accept that the game should be understood through the lens of standard rules first and foremost, which is not ideal as it gives power and a place of privilege to the standard rulesets. This rhetoric is caught up in the same logics it supposedly undoes. Conversely, if we accept “the game” as being whatever set of rules a community of players inscribe, then speedrunning is simply another ruleset among many.

Speedrunning then becomes a glitch that reveals the contingent construction of videogames and the rules that govern them, while becoming an alternative assemblage of rules and orientations towards the technological configuration of games in similar ways that transness becomes a refusal of hegemonic rules and the creation of alternative modes of existing.

To that end, speedrunning and transness are tied tightly up in the creation of liberatory categories, rules, and definitions, not the full sale destruction of them. As Mackenzie Wark (2007) puts it:

To the extent that the gamer theorist wants to hack or “mod” the game, it is to play even more intimately within it. The gamer theorist is not out to break the game. The point is not to reduce the game to the level of the imperfect world outside it. Like any archeologist, the gamer theorist treats these ruins of the future with obsessive care and attention to their preservation, not their destruction” (pg. 16).

It may be possible to completely dismantle the matrices of rules that govern our lives, including sex, gender, or rules of engagement with games. However, neither speedrunning nor transness do this work by virtue of their existence (nor are they necessarily interested in doing that work). They *can*, however, do the work of hacking, modding, and glitching so as to reconfigure the rules. This is an act of creation. It creates alternative categories and rules that render our actions as legible to others and produce alternative subjectivities for us to embody. Importantly these categories and rules are not stable nor impermeable. They shift with the needs of those interpolated in them, which can

include the need to avoid the legibility that categories offer.<sup>55</sup> Legibility is a two way street after all. It enables relationships, but it also becomes “a condition of manipulation” (James C. Scott, 1999).

### **Speedrunning Rules: Defining a Category**

I understand the technocultural practice of speedrunning as a particularly trans orientation towards formations of categories, rules, and games. Speedrunning attempts to take some control over rules, becoming a glitch, in order to produce new categories and new sets of rules that reconfigure standard understandings of rules which we are coercively interpolated into. In this section I will delve deeply into the formation of categories of one speedgame *Hades* (2020). I choose this game in particular because I have spent much time within this speedrunning community involved in running the game and, peripherally, helping to form rules. But I do not claim that the *Hades* speedrunning community is unique by any means. The opposite, in fact. I use this specific example as emblematic of the practices of speedrunning communities more broadly.

Speedrunning is predicated on categories. In the context of speedrunning, the category takes on a very specific definition. A category is a ruleset for completion of a speedrun. Nothing is taken for granted when it comes to categories. Since speedrunning shirks standard rules of engagement with games, we can assume nothing about our interaction with the game. Categories are required to take the materials of videogames and create a mode of play that is legible to others and allows for the creation of communities of practitioners to develop around those rules.

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<sup>55</sup> The collection *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton is an excellent examination of the double-edged sword visibility (and thus legibility) becomes for trans people, but especially black trans people.

The categories themselves index communal desires and are rooted in their own historical progression. For example, one common differentiation in categories is between “Any%” categories and “100%” categories. Any% categories typically have very few limitations on what needs to be done to complete a game. A starting and ending point are designated and any glitches, exploits, and bugs can be used to reach the end goal. 100% categories task runners with completing all of the challenges a game offers up to them to count as completion. The persistence of these two terms tells us something about the formation of categories broadly. Any% and 100% refer to games that track progress in percentages. In, say *Super Metroid* (1994), it is simple to look at the game’s percentage tracking as an arbiter of credible completion. However, many games do not track percentages, yet the categories are still widely used. So, what counts as a 100% run needs to be explicitly defined in games that do not specifically track this information. The continued use of these percentage-based terms despite their lack of direct referent is a demonstration of the ways that speedrunning, as a practice, has come to define certain modes of engagement with games that are rooted in historical practices and the work of definition done by communities of runners.

Importantly, even though speedrunning emerges from a rich history, speedrunning conceives of categories as malleable and open to redefinition by communities of invested runners. Any% and 100% categories are the most common categories, but not all communities want their categories to map cleanly onto them. In this section I want to break down the formation of categories in a game that does not use these stock categorizations: *Hades* (2020). I have run *Hades* for around 2 years at the time of writing. I’ve invested nearly 1000 hours running the game and I have been present in community spaces giving me some insight into the rules themselves as well as the desires of the community that has formed them. However, the *Hades* speedrunning community existed for multiple years before I was involved in any capacity, so I also spoke with community

leaders that had been around since well before the game's official release regarding early category formations to fill in crucial gaps.

*Hades* belongs to the genre of roguelikes (also commonly referred to as roguelites). The game stars the son of the Olympian god Hades and prince of hell, Zagreus, who attempts to escape the underworld to meet his mother Persephone. It tasks players with battling their way through a procedurally generated set of chambers filled with enemies. Each chamber also contains randomly generated rewards that make Zagreus more powerful to aid in ultimately facing and defeating Zagreus's father and escaping. If Zagreus fails along the way, however, he is washed down the river Styx back to the depths of Tartarus and must start over from the beginning bereft of any of the boons that were accumulated along the way. At the same time there is a "meta" system as well, as it is commonly referred to. All progress is not lost after a death. There are resources that can be spent to make Zagreus more powerful, boost a weapon's effectiveness, or add chambers of respite amongst the hostile hoards. Finally, escaping hell is not necessarily the end of the game. Narratively, when Zagreus finally escapes, he finds he cannot live on the surface. He gets a limited time with Persephone in which she gives him a snippet of information about the larger narrative before the Styx takes him. So, the story plays out over the course of many successful escape attempts.

In the context of speedrunning this game we must first define what a complete run looks like for a category, a task that is not easy. A traditional Any% category would start with a completely new file of a game, but the end is somewhat nebulous. Does the first completed escape count as the end? The credits roll after ten completed escapes, perhaps they count as the end? However, starting the game from the very beginning is quite difficult without any of the meta upgrades that are available on subsequent runs. It also takes quite a bit of luck to get the proper upgrades over the course of the run to be able to complete the first run (to say nothing of going fast). And any additional requirements to make it a 100% category would be even more onerous. This style of



category would not be all that enjoyable for most runners. The Any% vs. 100% distinction does not map cleanly onto the ways that runners want to engage with this game, so a different language and rulesets have to be developed to allow for engagement to be produced.

Luckily, there are other roguelike speedrunning communities to draw language and rules from. For instance, categories that start from the beginning of the game are labeled, like many other roguelikes, under the umbrella “Fresh File.” They require starting from a clean save file that has never been played before. More popular categories were created, however, that center on any single escape attempt detached from requirements put on the meta or narrative progression of the game. So long as there is a group of players that want to define their play in a particular way a category can be developed to accommodate, but (comparatively) *Hades*’ single escape categories have over 800 runners while the Fresh File categories hover around a few dozen. There are many other *Hades* speedrunning categories including ones that require multiple consecutive clears in a row, but I want to focus in on the rules of one of the single run categories here: “Modded Any Heat Unseeded v1.37+.” Through a breakdown of some of the rules we can begin to see more clearly how speedrunners make rulesets that allow for the formation of communities and identities within those communities.

While I am using the entirety of the category name “Modded Any Heat Unseeded v1.37+” for the sake of specificity, colloquially this category would be referred to as “Modded Any Heat” and often simply “Any Heat.” Any Heat was the first established category (as well as being the most often ran), so it is evidently both the most intuitive and also indexes the desires of the most speedrunners. With that in mind, to begin this analysis let’s start with the “Any Heat” part of the category name. The *Hades* speedrunning leaderboard found on speedrun.com lists the following rules for “Any Heat”:

1. Achieve Victory using any amount of heat (0 or more).
2. Use the In Game Timer (turn on "Always Display Timer" through settings). Do not block it with alerts or anything (it's in the top right).
3. Must be a single, continuous run. No game quit-outs (Alt-F4s, give-ups, quits or crashes) mid-run.
4. Any Mirror, Weapon/Aspect or starting Keepsake can be used. You are encouraged to unlock all of these, but it is not necessary.

The first rule refers to the amount of difficulty modifiers, which the game calls “Heat,” that are allowed. The category Any Heat gets its name because there are no restrictions on Heat usage. This is in contrast to other single run categories: 32 Heat (the second category developed), 40 Heat, and 50 Heat, which require the requisite level of Heat to be used. These categories are subsumed under the umbrella category “High Heat.” We see here another example of the ways that categories proliferate in speedrunning allowing for a multiplicity of rulesets and categories. The specific levels of Heat are somewhat arbitrary. 32 Heat gets its specific value because there is an in-game reward for clearing an escape attempt at that level of heat, but 40 and 50 Heat are fairly arbitrary being selected simply because they are round numbers that offer differing and unique challenges. These breakpoints were chosen by players to accommodate a variety of runners that desire different kinds of experiences and also took much longer to develop. 40 and, more so, 50 Heat were, for a time, thought to be difficult challenges that could not reliably be completed at all, much less quickly. But as players got better at the game, it became viable for runners to attempt speedruns so eventually they became official categories themselves.

The community found that even though Heat was designed to make the game harder, some Heat makes their runs faster, so a metagame formed around the amount of Heat to equip in the Any

Heat category. When playing Any Heat runners *can* attempt to speedrun *Hades* with any amount of Heat that they see fit. Neither a speedrun category nor engagement with a competitive category is necessary to speedrun the game. Playing outside of the rules and established metas, however, does not become meaningful in the same ways that playing within these categories and strategies do. The categories create rules that allow for communities to devise strategies, compare times, compete, share each other's successes and failures, and to support one another. The categories provide the ground for competition, personal improvement, and communal problem solving. Finished runs, whether it is a top time or not, are never the work of one person. It is the hours a community invests and the information and support they afford one another that creates those runs, and it is the categories that allow for these kinds of relationships and practices to unfold.

In some sense categories have the power to shape what is and is not an acceptable way to play and divert players to running within particular metagames. However, speedrunning communities understand categories to be necessarily provisional, open to change, and also open to addition. Categories are added all the time because players opt to play in new ways. For example, in *Hades* there are 6 weapons that can be used in the game. The weapon that is used in an escape attempt must be selected before starting, so for a category like Any Heat only one weapons is used. Some players began intermittently attempting to complete "All Weapons" runs, which would add the rule that escape attempts needed to be cleared 6 consecutive times in a row using each of the weapons once. Because there was a desire for this category, and people devoted time to playing it, it then became a formal category with community drafted rules. Following from this, other runners were drawn to All Weapons because it tested a wide variety of skills over the course of a run but felt that the run time was too long, and they didn't enjoy being forced to play some of the weapons. Again, players began playing a slightly different metagame where they would only use 3 of the weapons, and because of this practice another category appropriately called "3 Weapons" was

developed with formal rules drafted. With the proper orientation towards expanding categories, metagames can flourish encouraging deep communal exploration of existing categories as well as experimenting with new potential categories. No single category prevents another from coming into existence, after all.

Other descriptors in the Any Heat category name like “Unseeded” and “v1.37+” hint at communally constructed values towards the game. *Hades* had a particularly long period of open access. Over the course of 2018-2020 Supergiant iterated on the game with many patches that took into account player feedback as well as player data collected through the game. Version 1.37 is the current (and likely last) patch the game has received, and it is noteworthy that different versions of the game are considered different categories. This is aimed at fairness, so that all players are playing with the same set of equipment, so to speak. It is also directed towards accessibility. If there were no differentiation between patches in the category rules, then it could be necessary that players play on an earlier version because of optimizations in speed. Breaking up the categories allows people to avoid having to seek out and download earlier patches that can be difficult to find and allows players to more meaningfully interact with the speedrunning community.

Being a roguelike, *Hades* has a lot of randomness involved in it from the layout of chambers, to enemies that are encountered, to the boons received, and so on. This randomness is achieved through a random number generator (RNG), which selects a starting “seed” at the beginning of every run to determine how random events will resolve themselves. Knowing the starting seed can allow runners to manipulate the RNG to give them favorable results at every turn. Categories, then, are split into “Seeded” (where players are allowed to be aware of the starting seed and thus use RNG manipulations) and “Unseeded” (where players need to show that the seed is unknown before a run starts). Seeded runs will always be faster because of their ability to control the game’s random elements. They demonstrate intense planning and manipulations, but they are also often viewed as

tedious to perform, requiring extremely precise inputs. They also remove much of the on-the-fly decision making many runners enjoy about speedrunning this game. It is interesting to note that for the long period of time that the game was in early access there was no distinction between seeded and unseeded. Making a distinction at all actually came out of the development of the All Weapons category. All Weapons was created, in part, because players wanted a speedrun that approximated the random nature of playing the game casually that the current Any Heat ruleset did not allow for because seeding was allowed. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to maintain a consistent seed and route between escape attempts so having a multi-weapon run forced players to deal with RNG, except for the first run which could still be feasibly seeded. Runners did not enjoy that the first escape attempt in an All Weapons would, optimally, still be a seeded run so rules were put in place to ensure players could not know which seed they were on when they started. These rules were eventually ported over to Any Heat categories because players found that they desired this unseeded ruleset, finally making the split between Seeded and Unseeded Any Heat.

The two categories allow for both kinds of play to occur, because with no distinction then Seeded would effectively be a requirement to meaningfully engage with the metagame. There are magnitudes more runners of Unseeded categories than Seeded, which is interesting in the context of speedrunning more broadly which revels in the production of the fantastic through manipulation of computers on a technical level. But the *Hades* speedrunning community generally shies away from categories that produce these kinds of runs, also expressly banning the usage of various glitches such as “Codex-tech” and the “fishing in lave exploit” in the overarching Game Rules. We see here that while a particular speedrunning community may be influenced by the historical trajectory of speedrunning more broadly, there is a level of self-determination in specific communities that can run contrary to larger trends and different technological configurations of games lend themselves to different modes of engagement.

Finally, I want to discuss the descriptor “Modded.” As is the case with many games, there is a thriving modding scene for *Hades*. Mods take many forms, but the mods that this category are referring to are the “Hades Speedrunning Modpack,” which are a set of (constantly evolving) mods created by community members.<sup>56</sup> While these members coded the mods, they did not make them in isolation. The mods were built with community input and index the community’s desires for certain forms of play. Moderators in the *Hades* Speedrun Discord distributed surveys along with accompanying documentation that summarized the benefits of the positions asked about in the survey. The accompanying document, titled “Modded Category Proposal,” mentions that the mods were proposed because of frustrations amongst runners with the luck heavy state of the metagame: “Plenty of prominent runners and community members have voiced a desire for a modded category recently, due to frustrations with RNG, grinding, etc.” I should note that, while the creation of the mods is framed here as being initiated by people that hold positions of distinction in the community (due to skill or formal community leaders like Discord moderators), the only requirement for participation in the anonymous survey (and thus creation of the mods) was being in the Discord server to be able to access the links. Also, the “Modded Category Proposal” was created with the intent to bring anyone up to speed on the current discussion. It reads:

The goal of this document is to outline the various positions on what should and should not be in this mod, so that we can make as informed a decision as possible. This will be most useful for people who haven’t followed the ongoing discussions.

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<sup>56</sup> The version of the *Hades* Speedrunning Modpack that I run on as of writing this is version 1.2.0 Credits for coding and doing the actual development of this modpack go to *Hades* modders and speedrunners Ellomenop, Museus, cgull, paradigmsort, erumi321, Magic\_Gonads, and PonyWarrior.

It also encourages anyone to discuss changes in the Discord as well as test the mods themselves through a publicly available beta build. There are many issues regarding ability to safely engage in public conversations and ability to be taken seriously in those conversations that can be raised in regard to processes like this that disproportionately affect marginalized people. However, the additions of anonymous polls as well as materials summarizing proposed changes do some work to alleviate these concerns (even if they cannot be completely dismissed).

The survey itself opens with the question “What should be the goal of a speedrunning mod?” and then delves into questions addressing specific mechanical changes to how the game functions like potentially removing certain enemies or guaranteeing the game to offer certain rewards. But we see in the initial question an attention to the desires of the community by asking runners’ how they imagine the possibilities that modding provides. The three options provided to the question were generated from positions that arose in early Discord discussions. The goals are as follows:

Option 1: To only remove toxic RNG

Option 2: To optimize minor RNG and gameplay elements, in addition to removing the toxic RNG

Option 3: A combination of both

The Modded Category Proposal provides the following merits to Option 1:

Leaving the minor RNG preserves the “original game” feel while removing the most problematic parts...It also avoids redundancy; if a future ‘overhaul’-centered mod happens, it can cover the optimization wants.

In this description we see a forward-looking perspective, as well as a grappling with what the game being played actually is, or more accurately what do runners want it to be. Is there something important to runners in regard to making the game resemble the original, or is nothing off the table in regard to changes? The following merits are, in part, provided for Option 2:

Removing the worst RNG may...make room for some smaller things to hurt more...

Reaching in this direction can give us more liberty to solve the more complex or subtle problems of the game.

Here we see an understanding that now that the game is being modded, there are no limits to the ways they can keep altering it. The game can be endlessly tinkered with if runners want to.

Ultimately, the community fell somewhere between the two options. They concluded that the “original feel” was important to them. There are limits to modifications that they felt comfortable with, but those limits go well beyond simply removing only “toxic RNG.” Also, there is an understanding that the mods can continue to change (and they have). New features have been added since the original mod pack was released (with similar community input and scrutiny) and the rules change along with those changes.

The introduction of modded categories also produced other communal relationships through new types of play that emerged through them. Specifically, because some of the more egregious swings of luck were removed from categories, racing against other runners (aka playing at the same time as another person competing to get the best times) became more viable with the use of mods. *Hades* speedrunning has a long tradition of racing, but mods open the door to tinkering with the game in other ways to create unique rulesets tailored for competitions like races. An already rich racing scene flourished with the introduction of mods, and new kinds of community practices



developed out of them like weekly community races. It is the rules alongside the willingness to view the game as malleable and open to self-determination that opens the possibility space for these kinds of relationality to come into existence.

We see in this lengthy (yet dramatically incomplete) analysis of one speedrunning community's formation of categories and rules a particular understanding of rules as being productive of a certain kind of play that both reflects communal values as well as taking part in creating the community's culture. Additionally, it understands any category and the metagame that is formed from it as a contingent construction that is open to altering by a community of practitioners. This attention to category, rules, and modification is not confined to *Hades* speedrunning. It is emblematic of speedrunning as a whole. Speedrunning categories are influenced by other rulesets, for instance in the inheritance of Any% and 100%, but adopting existing metagames is always a choice. We can choose if we want to "preserve the original game feel," or if we want to forge new paths through the creation of new categories and rules. Rules are not immutable, and neither is the software and hardware we play on. We opt into categories and the rules they provide because they allow us to exist in ways that we desire. Categories are only useful if they create possibilities for those that are interpolated into them. And new categories become glitches that can change our orientations towards media, technology, and culture.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis is meant to gesture at an orientation towards the production of rules that serve the interests of those that are interpolated into them. When mapped more directly onto gendered relations the issue of power arises more clearly. Who has the power to define cultural rules? On a structural or institutional level, it is rarely those most affected. And there is considerable organization around policing and enforcing the rules of existing games.

At the same time, I believe there is real power in technocultural practices like speedrunning that play with rules. It makes rules hyper visible, refusing to allow rules to fade into the background. Playing with these rules, reconfiguring them in order to produce new kinds of being, can give us the language and concepts to apply to other sets of rules so long as we understand them as being just as in flux as our bodies and relationships are. On a smaller, more intimate level, we can also forge communities of like-minded people that have the agency to create rules that we mutually play by. Transness has such a long history of being defined by the outside, by medicine, psychiatry, law, and the normalizing power of culture that can manifest in things like harassment. Even if it is confined to those that we are proximate and in community with, playing with rules, I believe, is a glitch that can create counter-powers that bring us together in ways that can be transformative to those invested in and interpolated by rules.

With that let's shift focus. In the next split I turn to some of the implications of these rules on the temporalities of videogame play and how those alternative temporalities inflect on and reflect the temporalities of trans life and our embodied relationships to ourselves and other technologies. So here, we split.

### Split 3: Real Time Attack<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Real Time Attack (RTA) refers to a timing method in speedrunning that uses “real time,” or an outside timer that is always going as opposed to “loadless” or using “in game time” (IGT). RTA can also be used to describe a speedrun that is done live by a human player as opposed to a Tool-Assisted Speedrun (TAS), which is a playback of pre-programmed inputs.

### Chapter 3: The Reset: Red Splits, Losing Time, and Starting Over

I was *transitioning*. Is it done yet?

I asked. It seemed the thing to say.

I worked to be somebody else. And now

I am, it seems I want to change my mind.

As if I could redeem that past instead

Of simply screeching *Memory! Revenge!*

Cat Fitzpatrick (2016), excerpt from “about healing,” a sonnet from “May Day: thirteen sonnets twelve years too late” in *Glamourpuss*

Videogames pervade my life. They are interwoven into my day-to-day routines, relationships, and identity, and through their pervasiveness they structure my relationship to temporality. That is what media does, after all. All media transforms temporal relations. However, there is a specificity to these transformations. Media doesn’t affect everyone in the same ways.<sup>58</sup> Different bodies, identities,

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<sup>58</sup> Grant Bollmer (2019), in chapter three “Spaces and Times” of *Materialist Media Theory: An Introduction*, describes temporal (and spatial) transformations as foundational to the very definition of media while also locating those transformations contextually: “At a foundational level, media transform spatial and temporal relations, to such an extent that the physical transformation of time and space is one way we can define how media act...Yet...how media transform time and space is not uniform; media do not shape all bodies equally. They don’t enable all bodies the same extension in space, to maintain the same presence over time, or to move at the same temporal pace” (pg. 79).

and socioeconomic classes are affected by media differently. This is, in part, because, while media transforms our temporal relationships, users also transform media.

So, I can't simply lump all videogames and all instances of videogame play together into one homogenous group. Videogames do not exist in a vacuum. People interact with videogames. The particulars of those interactions are informed by a certain kind of disciplining by the videogame software and hardware as well as various paratexts and cultural contexts.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, they are also informed by how I choose to play. The kinds of play I engage in are not solely determined by the game's design, marketing, and material construction. They are also determined by my identity as a player as well as my material reality that determines how and when my body is able to engage with videogames.

In short, to understand videogame temporality we cannot look solely at games. We must also look to the temporal structures of a player's life. While videogame temporalities structure the temporalities experienced by players, so too do players alter the temporalities of videogames. There is a feedback loop here: a cybernetic circuit. This cybernetic construction reveals that we and the technologies we connect with are malleable. Alternative temporal orientations can reveal themselves through our body's tenuous connection to videogame technologies, and all the while our bodies are malleable constructions that change over time based on technological intervention. This chapter is interested in this reciprocal relationship. If identity is tied up in the ways that we play and connect with videogames then how do we uncover the specificity of temporal engagements with videogames

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<sup>59</sup> Seth Giddings (2005) employs actor-network theory to show how gaming technologies have significant agency to shape play. Mia Consalvo (2007) introduces the concept of "paratext," borrowed from formalist literary theorist Gerard Genette (1980), to describe the ways that texts outside of the videogame itself (advertisements, strategy guides, online forums, etc.) are influential in shaping experiences with games.

as well as how videogames impact our understanding of our changing material and temporal realities?

To begin this work I look to one temporal moment of transformation: the reset. The reset, as I will attempt to show, is central to all videogame play, but it is an especially prominent temporal structure in speedrunning. It is also a temporal moment all too familiar to trans players. Transition can feel like a reset, a kind of starting over in so many ways. By putting reflections on my own transition and time speedrunning in conversation with one another, I aim to uncover some of the ways that playing with technology has become a particular trans practice of temporal manipulation for me, and how my exploration of trans identity has come to shape the ways I understand videogame technologies as well as the technologies of sex and gender. To do this I first work through theoretical understandings of videogame and trans temporalities linking them both to the concept of “the reset.” In the second half of this chapter, I turn to accounts from my time speedrunning as well as my time transitioning. These threads are written as discrete accounts, but through the interwoven presentation I hope to show how these practices are entwined, temporally as they happened concurrently in my life, but also entwined in their mutual formations of my orientations towards technologies and time. I want to draw attention to the ways temporal engagements with videogames, like the reset that is so common in speedrunning, can impact our understandings of other temporalities in our lives and vice versa.

### **Part 1: Resetting Time**

“On this ground, time flows normally. But time stands still while you are in Lon Ranch or in a town. If you want time to pass normally, you'll need to leave town. Well, well, which way are you going to go now? Hoo hoot!”

The owl Kaepora Gaebora to Link in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*  
(1998)

### **Videogame's Temporal Frames**

The temporalities of videogames are never straight forward. Being a fundamental aspect of digital media generally, there have been many investigations into the temporalities of videogames. One prominent thread of these investigations that is foundational to game studies comes out of literary theory, in particular Gérard Genette's (1980) narratology. Narratology splits a fictional text into two levels: story and discourse. Story refers to the telling of events in the order they are described in the text and discourse refers to the ordering of events as they would happen in the fictional timeline. Jesper Juul (2005) parallels these concepts in videogames with "play time" and "fictional time." Fictional time, for Juul, is the passage of time within the diegesis of the game, while play time is the player's experiences of the events. Juul notes how complicated this seemingly neat taxonomy becomes when mapped on to actual games. Play time, in particular, becomes layers of competing temporal flows: the passage of days and nights in a gameworld, the halting cycles of pausing or loading saves, the advancing of turns, the option to fast forward through cutscenes, etc. Juul notes that this classification is a somewhat provisional and incomplete taxonomy of temporalities within videogames, but I think it is a good starting point to investigating temporality.

Additionally, many other scholars have either directly employed and expanded on Juul's categories<sup>60</sup> or alternatively have followed Juul's lead by creating their own taxonomies of videogame temporalities.<sup>61</sup>

Notably, José Zagal and Micheal Mateas (2010) expand Juul's two categories and the concept of temporal taxonomies more broadly into a generalizable tool for analyzing time in videogames that they call "temporal frames." They note four different common temporal frames, two of which map onto Juul's terms: "real-world time" being analogous to "play time" while "gameworld time" is analogous to "fictional time." The remaining two frames they introduce are "coordination time" and "fictive time." These categories, however, are not all inclusive of every temporal frame. The concept of temporal frames is meant to be a malleable tool for the analysis of the idiosyncratic nature of videogames and play practices.<sup>62</sup> What the concept of temporal frames as well as other investigations of the temporal structures of videogames reveals is that there are many simultaneous temporalities

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<sup>60</sup> For example, Chris Hanson's (2016) *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games* complicates Juul's taxonomy to investigate the cyclical, recursive, and branching nature of videogame temporalities that is rooted in features like the save, quit, and reload.

<sup>61</sup> For example, Alexander Galloway's (2006) *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* develops an understanding of videogame temporality that is rooted in gamic actions that are grouped by being either diegetic or nondiegetic (again borrowing terms from Gérard Genette) as well as being executed by the operator or machine. Galloway argues that different combinations of these types of actions produce different temporal relationships or experiences. Diegetic machine acts, for instance, are related to "ambience acts" that are meditative and characterized by suspended play within the diegetic world while nondiegetic operator acts are associated with the temporalities of menus and configuration that exist outside of the gameworld.

<sup>62</sup> I should note that while Zagal and Mateas allow for a wide range of experiential temporalities they exclude the temporalities of a computer's individual state changes claiming they are not "relevant to players." I contest this particular point. Some players and play practices demand attention to computational temporalities, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter.



present at any moment during videogame play,<sup>63</sup> and those temporalities are highly idiosyncratic to the particular configurations of gaming technologies, gameworlds, fictions, and contextual embodied relationships with games.

While these temporal frames are, by necessity, presented as discreet experiential or structural flows of time, they are never quite separate. Drawing from Sarah Sharma's (2014) work on temporality, I understand temporalities as always circulating around one another, rerouting some temporalities and forming the environment for other temporalities to flow.<sup>64</sup> It is possible to isolate temporal frames for analysis, but it is not possible to extricate those frames from their relationships to one another in practice. Fiction, rules, mechanics, technical and computational interfaces, sociocultural dimensions, and player's embodied lives all come to bear to create a complex assemblage of different temporalities at vastly different scales and differential speeds.

The concept of "temporal frame" is also important to understand because it emphasizes that temporalities are always from a certain perspective. The player and the computer, for example, experience the temporal flows of any instance of gameplay very differently.<sup>65</sup> In fact, the player may

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<sup>63</sup> For more on the variability of temporalities in videogames see Ford, D.N., and McCormack, D.E.M. (2000). "Effects of Time Scale Focus on System Understanding in Decision Support Systems," *Simulation & Gaming*, 31, 309-330. as well as Barreteau, Olivier and Géraldine Abrami (2007). "Variable Time Scales, Agent-Based Models, and Role-Playing Games: The PIEPLUE River Management Game," *Simulation & Gaming*, 38(3).

<sup>64</sup> Sharma dubs her methodology "power-chronography," which borrows from the work of Doreen Massey's in geography that "stresses differentiated subjectivity as opposed to the so-called universal and inevitable time-space compression" (pg. 9). This method is also concerned with the power that produces temporalities. As I understand this, temporalities should be understood in subjective, relative ways that take into account all of the various actors that produce temporalities in specific, contextual moments.

<sup>65</sup> Drawing from materialist media theorists including actor-network theorists in game studies such as Nick Taylor (2011) and Seth Giddings (2005), a history of technofeminist thought (specifically Donna Haraway), and the development of so called "object-oriented ontology" in games studies

be completely unaware of the incredibly rapid process that the computer undergoes from moment to moment.<sup>66</sup> And the computer is likely indifferent to the ways that the player does or does not understand the temporalities of its process that are likely masked by the interfaces of game worlds. So, the perspective of each of these actors would yield wildly different accounts of temporalities, but even inability to perceive or indifference to does not mean that there is no impact. The temporalities of the computer create the possibility space for the player's experiential temporal frames, while the player's temporalities are the exigence for the game's technical specs in the first place. They impact one another, but both must be understood relationally, especially when discussing concepts like speed or beginnings and endings.

This chapter, however, is not concerned with temporalities in the abstract, so perhaps it is better to talk about these concepts in relation to actual, experienced temporalities. Let's turn to the reset.

### **Resetting Videogames**

To reset is to start over. To begin again. It implies a reversion to a past state, as well as a redoing. Put another way, a reset is one point in a cyclical series. Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann (2014) claim that seriality is central to videogames. They note the endless march of sequels and game systems, levels and worlds that mark progression in games, and gameplay loops that form the basis of ludic engagement, as a few ways that seriality becomes important for understanding

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(linked to games directly by Ian Bogost (2012)) I understand the computer as an active and lively participant in the production of videogame play.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Hansen's (2015) *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* is a particularly thorough investigation of the ways that modern computational media operates outside of human perceptual awareness yet still impacts how we perceive and interact with media.

videogames. On an even more basic level, computational seriality is baked into the “operative level of code and algorithmic form.” Code operates on cyclical, serial processes that initiate 1000s of times a second over, and over, and over, and over.

To reset requires a starting state. The definition of an initial state, however, is simply a particular orientation towards the serial cycles. There is no definitive first state, but when we define something as a reset, we identify a particular moment of rupture as well as another moment that is returned to. We can define this process as a single cycle, but that initial moment is not by necessity a beginning. It is also a moment nested in other serial cycles that becomes meaningful only because of a particular orientation towards the moment of resetting.<sup>67</sup> While resetting implies a return, it does not necessarily wipe the slate completely clean. The serial nature of the reset means that every reset must be different from the previous one, if only because every instance of a reset is a count plus one, incrementing the amount of resets. And, in doing so, even in an attempt to start over from scratch, there is always a trace of the previous attempts.

Let’s delve a little more deeply into some of the ways that resets are integral to videogames. Resets are built into videogames: literally. Older videogame consoles such as the Atari 5200,

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<sup>67</sup> I would like to draw a parallel here to Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) “hyper reality” developed in *Simulation and Simulacra*. The hyper real is “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.” (pg. 1) It depends on a march of simulations: endless cycles of reproduction. Baudrillard argues that it is impossible to rediscover the absolute level of the real, or the original. However, we try to get to the real, or want to believe that we have: “What every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to overproduce, is to restore the real that escapes it. That is why today this “material” production is that of the hyperreal itself. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is no longer anything but its scaled-down refraction (thus hyper-realists fix a real from which all meaning and charm, all depth and energy of representation have vanished in a hallucinatory resemblance). Thus, everywhere the hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself” (pg. 25). This becomes the importance of the definition of a starting point in resets. The reset relies on a single moment in time defined as the original, even if there can never be a definitive first point in time.

Nintendo Entertainment System, PlayStation 1, and Nintendo 64 have reset buttons built into the hardware. A simple press of a button would restart the entire system. As consoles have become more complex this functionality has generally been relegated to the console's software, having an option in the system's menu to reset.<sup>68</sup> Regardless of the method of execution, easy access to resetting seems to be a standard element of videogame design that has been present in some form for generations of videogame development.

Cycles govern a game's operations at a more technical level as well, and mechanics and gameplay loops are built around these cycles. Every increment of a CPU is called a cycle. My laptop that I am writing this on, for example, runs at 2.6 GHz, which is 2.6 billion cycles per second. So, actions are checked for and carried out once every cycle, before resetting back to checking for an action again, and so on. Frame rate is a manifestation of computational cycles that is more readily apparent to players. Games update their visuals on screen at a set rate, before refreshing and redrawing the visuals again to give the illusion of motion. Many videogames also tie in game actions (and thus inputs) to frame rates as well. The game's actions and the players inputs are necessarily tied to the rhythms of the refresh rate.

The audiovisuals built from these cycles display a game world and its challenges, and our interactions with that output creates yet another serial cycle. We perceive the audiovisual output and direct our hands to press buttons in response. Those inputs send electrical impulses through the

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<sup>68</sup> Some features straddle the line between resetting through hardware and software by including the ability to reset through a particular button combination that is programmed to reset the game, but not the entire system such as the *Final Fantasy* titles on the PlayStation 2 that will reset to their title screen when the R1, R2, L1, L2, Start, and Select buttons are pressed at the same time. Additionally, not all reset features function the same way. Some, for example, simply kill all active code and return the system's operations to the processes connected to initializing the software. Other resets may completely cut power to the system, shutting it down, and reinitializing it from power on.

wires and circuits that update the game's state, which is again perceived as audiovisual output, starting the loop over from the beginning.<sup>69</sup>

These kinds of loops are embedded in the level of ludic engagement with games.<sup>70</sup> There are rhythms to playing videogames. Any game is made of repetitive actions.<sup>71</sup> Let's take the well-known *Super Mario Bros* (1985) for the NES. There is a set number of actions we can perform: mostly running and jumping. The game revolves around repeating these actions. Whenever you successfully complete them to progress through the game, the game asks you to do it again, with a slight variance that can be likened to a reset. You start over from the beginning, but it's not quite the same. Whether you died and are trying the same challenges again or have bested a level and are moving onto new areas, there is a count plus one. We see the count plus one literalized in the progression through the game. Level 1-1, 1-2, 1-3, castle in 1-4, "Our princess is another castle," on to world 2 where similar challenges lie with a castle on the horizon again. We move, but in a way we start over with the progression through the next world.

Because of the design of computers and the nature of repetition in games, resets are a necessary part of videogames, but some games aestheticize the reset and bring it to the fore. Let's take the example of *Hades* (2020), which I speedrun and discuss at length in Chapter 2. *Hades* is built around cycles of death and failure. It belongs to the genre of "roguelikes," which are games that are

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<sup>69</sup> This can be thought of as a cybernetic loop, drawing from the fields of cybernetics and informatics. For more on these loops in videogames see Schmalzer, Madison (2020). "Janky Controls and Embodied Play: Disrupting the Cybernetic Gameplay Circuit." *Game Studies*, 20(3).

<sup>70</sup> For a formal treatment of gameplay loops from a design perspective see Guardiola, Emmanuel. (2016). "The Gameplay Loop: A Player Activity Model For Game Design and Analysis. In *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology* (pp. 1-7).

<sup>71</sup> For a treatment of the centrality of repetition in games see Coyne, Richard (2003). "Mindless Repetition: Learning From Computer Games," *Design Studies*, 24(3), 199-212.

typically quite punishing on the player. They are characterized by a distinct gameplay that penalizes any death by sending the player back to the beginning of the game, possibly with slight upgrades in character abilities for subsequent attempts. *Hades* stars the prince of the underworld, Zagreus, who attempts to escape his father's home by clawing his way out of hell. This game based around ancient Greek mythology feels Sisyphean: attempting to escape, getting further than before, just to be sent all the way back down to the pits of Tartarus where you reset from the start and try again, and again, and again. The game's themes and gameplay mechanics work together to bring serial cycles and the necessary resets that come with it to the surface.<sup>72</sup>

Not all games attempt to bring attention to the loops of resets, however.<sup>73</sup> *Spyro 2* (1999), which I will discuss at length in this chapter, is a 3D platformer. On the surface, it's a game about movement and exploration. Games of this genre task the player with collecting various objects. *Spyro 2* has 14 talismans, 64 orbs, 10,000 gems, and 16 skill points to collect. Collecting all of these requires looking in every nook and cranny of the game's 25 levels, which in turn requires mastering *Spyro*'s movement including his charging and gliding abilities. There are still gameplay loops like any

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<sup>72</sup> Videogame designer and critic Mattie Brice (2011) would call this “ludonarrative resonance,” borrowing and repurposing game designer Clint Hocking's (2007) term “ludonarrative dissonance” that describes the ways that a game's narrative and mechanics are somehow at odds with one another in their creation of a cohesive gaming experience. Ludonarrative resonance, conversely, is the harmonious union of the two. This also has similarities to Ian Bogost's (2007) concept of “procedural rhetoric” that argues that the procedural elements of a videogame (the rules, mechanics, and computational processes) make rhetorical arguments. These arguments can be reinforced by the game's “skin” (visual elements) as well as the narrative components of a game.

<sup>73</sup> Madison Schmalzer (2019), in “The Ontology of Incremental Games: Thinking Like the Computer in Frank Lantz's *Universal Paperclips*” argues that videogames often draw attention to and aestheticize their own computational operations. This, however, is not universal. Some games attempt to mask their own

other game, but it is not aestheticized in the same way that a game like *Hades* does. Instead of cyclical temporalities, *Spyro 2*'s temporalities are more linear, like those of an epic quest.<sup>74</sup>

I'm being a bit too general here though. Just as I can't lump all videogames into one understanding of temporality, we can't lump all instances of play together either. Let me provide a concrete example. I've been playing videogames for a long time. I have vivid memories of receiving a PlayStation 1 with *Spyro 2* on Christmas morning in 2000, days before my 11th birthday. I plugged it into the CRT television in our family room immediately. The feeling of seeing the bright colors and hearing the eccentric music for the first-time sticks with me to this day. I was mesmerized by the whimsical world, and I wondered what was waiting for me to discover.

I played *Spyro 2* for a few hours that Christmas morning, but my dad didn't realize a memory card was required to save progress on the system. So, when I came back to it the next day, I had to start over from the first level: Glimmer. The next day I beat Glimmer again. And again, the next day, and so on. Before I could leave the first world, I would have to power the system down for the day just to start fresh again. It was months before my parents got me a memory card, and by then I had reset the game and faced Glimmer's challenges dozens of times. I intimately knew every detail of the level.

The material reality I faced as a child impacted my engagements with *Spyro 2*, and thus altered how I experienced the game's temporalities. To me, *Spyro 2* was cyclical. It didn't present a long journey across a fantasy land as much as it did a race to see how far I could get in the time I

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<sup>74</sup> Epic poems often contain long arduous journeys: Dante's descent into hell, Satan's ascension to Earth, Odysseus's return to Ithaca, etc.. These are not strictly linear in their temporal orientations in that they usually constitute a journey out into the world followed by a return home (something that *Spyro 2* also contains in its epilogue). However, this differs in the serial cycles of a game like *Hades* in that we only play through one cycle, not the progressive loops of resets.

had available to play. It meant I became very familiar with certain parts of the game, while I never saw others. My entire experience of the game was shaped by the temporal constraints my configuration of hardware imposed (as well as the leisure time I was afforded as a young child).

This is no different than any engagement with videogames. For example, Shira Chess (2017) discusses the ways that mobile, time-management games (like *Diner Dash* (2003)) fit into many women's lives where play time is limited to brief moments scattered throughout a busy day spent managing professional responsibilities, childcare, and other domestic tasks. Material circumstances (which are impacted by cultural understandings of gender roles) lead to gameplay that is oriented towards efficiency to maximize sparse leisure time. So, women's typical relationship towards time informs their understanding of the game's temporalities and, Chess argues, vice versa. The temporal structures of time-management games also speak to the same temporal realities women often face. Speed comes to the fore here as a gendered orientation towards play and leisure. The game's temporalities and the temporalities of day-to-day life are situated within one another, but also inflect on each other. The game's temporalities cater to an already gendered subject, yes, but the game also genders the player by hailing them into gendered temporal flows.

I want to draw attention to player agency here. In this example Chess is attempting to understand the ways that videogame designers and marketers produce games for women. So, she is discussing a necessarily abstracted cis het, middle class, white, able-bodied mother because that is what the industry generally understands as the entirety of the category "women." In reality, markers of identity only hold so much descriptive power. Even ostensibly similar players may bring radically different material realities to and orientations towards play. While *Diner Dash's* temporalities may gender players in certain ways, that is not always the case. We do not (and sometimes cannot) always accept a game's disciplining. Mechanics, rules, marketing etc. may be a strong force, but sometimes we play differently. Sometimes, in other words, we play queerly.



## Resetting Gender

Like videogame temporalities, the temporalities of a queer life are never straight forward either, and very often they are characterized by resets. Repetition is at the heart of Judith Butler's conception of gender "performativity," for example. Butler describes the process by which gender comes into being: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (pg. 43-44). Gender, for Butler, has no "natural" ontology. It is only through repetitive actions that categories that we come to understand as "genders" are created. Gender categories then prescribe how actions are interpreted as gendered as well as attempt to prescribe the possible set of gendered actions an individual can make. And, on an individual level, our repetitive actions that adhere to particular gendered categories, in part, interpolate us into genders.

Even "transgressive" gendered actions are subject to interpretation through the lens of dominant gendered categories. Which is not to say that transgression is impossible nor that it has no power in resetting the cycles that have solidified into dominant gendered categories, just that the cycles of everyday life are always enmeshed in existing cultural practices and understandings. Gender, after all, is not arbitrary. It has been contingently constructed. Any resetting of gender will necessarily be enmeshed within or work against that construction.

It is out of the scope of this chapter to attempt to explain how gender categories have been constructed historically, which is something I explore more fully in Chapter 2. Even if we narrow our discussion to modern American contexts this question is much too vast, but it may be useful to

briefly mention gender's connections to "sex" here. Sex is often characterized as an immutable ground that gender is produced from. Many scholars have shown this to be a fiction,<sup>75</sup> but, even more compellingly, the very existence of trans people shows that sex is mutable. It is far from stable. It is, itself, a fiction that has been produced through medical, political, and social forces.<sup>76</sup> Following from Butler's writings, there has colloquially been an understanding that sex and gender are two completely separate concepts,<sup>77</sup> but that is not exactly the case. Neither gender nor sex are free floating signifiers. They are intimately connected to one another. Butler suggests that gender is the "very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (pg. 11). Whether or not we accept this claim, it seems clear that gender and sex are tightly linked concepts. Gender is internally felt by many trans people, and trans people's encounters with others are often, at least initially, mediated through readings of bodies as sexed, which is then understood as gendered.<sup>78</sup> Gender is then partially constructed through the ways our sexed bodies are constructed as well as

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<sup>75</sup> For some treatments of the connections between sex and gender see: Suzzane Kessler and Wendy McKenna's (1978) *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*; Jemima Repo's (2018) *The Biopolitics of Gender*, and Hil Malatino's (2019) *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*.

<sup>76</sup> In chapter four of *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and biopolitics* titled "History of Technosexuality," Paul Preciado (2013) recounts the history of the development of sex via the establishment of sexual difference that is rooted in visual logics of sexopolitics and produced through various technologies.

<sup>77</sup> I argue that there is a common misconception of Butler's "performativity" that links gender to a "performance" in the sense the word might be used in regard to an actor. This is then extrapolated to argue gender is "an act," it is immaterial, and thus not "real." This, however, misses the main insight that gender is intensely material and has very real implications on those interpolated into genders.

<sup>78</sup> See TJ Billard's chapter "Passing" and the Politics of Deception: Transgender Bodies, Cisgender Aesthetics, and the Policing of Inconspicuous Marginal Identities" found in *The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication* for a thorough analysis of the politics of passing for trans people which include the risks associated with having sexual characteristics that do not match presented gender as trans people (especially trans women) are often positioned as "deceivers."

how we personally experience our bodies and subjectivities as gendered, while the body also becomes sexed through certain conceptions of gendered subjectivities.

As we can begin to see, it is difficult to disentangle sex from gender, and sex is just as caught up in repetition as gender is. On the macro level sex is established in the same way as gender: the repetition of established norms in society crystallizes into categories that attempt to prescribe the possible actions of certain bodies. Repetition is also important in producing sex on an individual level as well. One dose of estradiol does not alter a body enough to cross the arbitrary border that culturally separates male from female,<sup>79</sup> which is a large part of many trans feminine people's transitions. A transition can involve forming new serial cycles in regard to both sexed and gendered actions. It is only through cycles of repetition that changes take place, changes that may be one small part of larger cycles over the course of a life.

Serial cycles are always a part of everyone's lives: Breath in, breath out; wake up, go to sleep; workweek, weekend, etc. In the same way that repetitive actions come to be constituted as defined categories of sex or gender, dominant repetitive temporal cycles crystalize into what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls "chrononormativity." Chrononormativity describes rhythms that become so familiar as to feel natural and thus "normal." They are embedded in the minutia of day-to-day life, but they are also embedded on a larger scale in the progressions of lives, particularly those that adhere to chrononormative temporalities. The typically circulated cycles for a white middle class

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<sup>79</sup> From the perspective of the established medical standards that line is quite tangible. According to my own lab reports of hormone levels Testosterone should be between 264-916 ng/dL while Estradiol should be between 7.6-42.6 pg/mL. These levels are for adult cis men. Strangely and frustratingly, I am not given information from medical providers about what levels a cis woman's hormones typically would be at. Needless to say, my testosterone is typically well below these levels while my Estradiol is typically over twelve times the recommended levels.

person (which often stand in for the standards for everyone) go something like this: we move through childhood and into our teenage years. As we do we go from elementary to middle and on to high school. Somewhere along the way, our bodies change. We go through puberty and into adulthood, get a job, get married, have children, retire, die, and the next generation carries the temporal cycles into the future. These cycles govern individual lives as well as form a logic that serves as the basis for societal structures of power.

It is important to note that any reproduction within a serial cycle is distinctly unique. It exists at a different time and space as any other instance, and this is what gives it power to form norms.

Let's take, say, a depiction of a white cis het middle class family in a sitcom that would be a reproduction and representation of chrononormative temporalities. This may be a simple repetition of normative temporal structures. However, that particular depiction is one more depiction, a count plus one, of gendered and sexual politics that reinforces conceptions of "normal."

Chrononormativity relies on seriality, both in the temporalities that inform its logics as well as its crystallization as a hegemonic structure.<sup>80</sup>

But, despite societal norms, some people are out of step with these normative rhythms. Queer people's lives "wound," in Freeman's terms, these temporal structures, revealing them to be contingently constructed temporalities that, broadly, govern lives according to the interests of capital. One way this happens for trans people, on an individual level, is through transitioning.

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<sup>80</sup> This is also similar to Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of "Habitus" which is the inscription of certain ways of thinking and moving that come from repetitive disciplining from society. He writes: "social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds' through 'cultural products' including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life" (pg. 471). Whether it is from media depictions, schooling, cultural norms, or laws we are led to accept certain societal structures (like gender, the nuclear family, normative temporalities generally, etc.), but the power to establish these structures only comes from repetition.

Transitions are often felt as a reset. They are a starting over of sorts. An attempt to forge a new path forward that is out of sync with “normal” temporal cycles. However, resets are not sudden, easy, nor clean breaks. They are always tightly tied to the past, can take a long time, and can be painful and hard work. There is invariably something lost when we reset. Resets simultaneously look forward and backwards. They are a moment that brings us back to a previous state, while promising a different future. A future that is built off of the labor that led to the reset taking place, even if it attempts to leave the past behind, for better or worse. Resets can bring about a better future, but they also can force us to give up things from the past like safety, comfort, or progress.

## **Part 2: Transitioning Through the Reset**

“Link, give the Ocarina to me... As a Sage, I can return you to your original time with it... Now, go home, Link. Regain your lost time! Home... where you are supposed to be... the way you are supposed to be...”

*Zelda to Link at the end of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998)*

### **Resetting a Run**

Let’s reset here.

Videogame temporalities are never straightforward. They are messy flows of temporalities that move at different paces and operate at different scales. No temporality is separate from another: the rapid state changes of the computer, the markers of progression through a game, the gameplay sessions that happen over days and weeks, these and more temporalities are all entangled. The reset is a moment of rupture within these temporal flows. A moment of synchronicity where temporalities

reset and begin their uneven flows anew. In this section I will dramatize the reset through descriptions of my time speedrunning *Spyro Reignited 2* (*SRT 2*, 2018), which I put beside reflections on my own transition. These narratives account for separate temporal engagements with the world and technology, yet they exist beside one another both on the page and in my own life. They are necessarily entangled, and through an entangled analysis of both I hope to tease out some key features of the reset that becomes central both in videogame play and in trans lives.

I'm fairly deep into a run of *SRT 2*. This is a remake of the original *Spyro 2* that I played when I was younger. This version attempts to faithfully recreate the original with improved graphics. It's a reset of the old series that draws from the series' past while also looking forward to engaging new players. I'm running the Any% category, and I've come to one of the most difficult tricks in the run: Level Storage. Pause. Continue. Pause. Continue. I cycle in and out of the pause menu as Spyro the purple dragon falls one frame at a time and the world of *Spyro 2* lurches forward a thirtieth of a second by a thirtieth of a second. Pause. Continue. One frame advances. Pause. Continue. One frame advances. Pause. This time the pause menu is different. While Spyro falls into the pit that leads to the boss level, the menu displays the option to "Exit Level." I've cycled the game forward, frame by frame, and paused it on the exact frame that Spyro is supposed to enter the level. By pausing at this exact moment, I prevent the level from actually loading, but the pause menu still updates as if the level loaded as normal. Selecting "Exit Level" confuses the game. In this liminal state, this single frame between zones, it doesn't know what to exit from or where to exit to. It defaults to a backup protocol that places Spyro at an arbitrary location. We call this a "Wrong Warp," but, unfortunately, this Wrong Warp can put Spyro at one of two locations. One location allows me to complete Level Storage, which is essential to continuing my speedrun, and one location doesn't. When it comes down to it, there's a 50% chance I can finish the run.

In this run I'm on PB pace, or personal best. This is the fastest I've progressed this far into the run, and I am on pace to reach my personal goal of sub-26:00. Level Storage is one of the hardest tricks to execute in the run, and the "Wrong warp" is the most precise part of the whole trick. It requires extreme precision to pause the game just before I enter the boss fight. If I wait just one frame too many my run would be lost because I would enter the boss level without warping, losing too much time to bother with continuing. But I timed my inputs correctly and now it is out of my hands. The game is in charge of where I go from here.

When my timer reads 23:04 the load screen appears. The loading screens show Spyro flying with a distinctive colored sky in the background for every individual level. A purple sky will indicate that the game has warped me to the correct level. Spyro flies silhouetted by an orange sky. I didn't get the coin flip. The game decided to warp Spyro to the wrong place, forcing me to reset and start over from the beginning.

This anecdote is not at all an uncommon one in speedrunning. Promising runs are lost all the time for any number of reasons. Runners miss an input, make a poor decision, and sometimes luck just isn't on their side. More broadly, resetting is a central aspect of speedrunning. Runners track their times meticulously breaking a run into discrete sections called splits. Splits allow runners to compare small chunks of their current run to past performances on the fly. They are able to see exactly where they lose time and preempt where they have time in future sections to save. While running, runners are able to assess how well they are doing and if they are likely to beat their previous times. With the vast amount of information at their disposal, as well as embodied experience from running a game over an extended period of time, runners are very aware of how their pace measures up to their goals, and when they are off pace, they reset. Different runners have different tolerances for when they decide a run needs to be reset based on many factors: how much time they have to play in a session, how low their goal time is, how much they value practicing

sections of the game, etc. However, it is fair to say that across speedrunning as a whole, the vast majority of runs started don't make it to the end.

### **The Loss of Resetting**

Regardless of how common resets are, they can still be difficult. I invested a lot in the run described above. The time spent actually running this attempt should not be discounted. Those were 23:00 minutes of intense concentration, and, as the run advanced into its later sections, intense emotions.

To the left of my laptop that runs the game I have a pc monitor that is home to my OBS recording software, Twitch chat, and splits. My attention is always divided between these two screens, tracking my time. I see the green splits that indicate this run could have been the one before the failed trick that put me in the red. I stream my attempts on Twitch.tv. Three other *Spyro* speedrunners are in the chat. They are just as familiar with what the splits mean as I am and offer words of encouragement. They also know that the Wrong Warp and Level Storage lie in my path. As I cleared levels, I felt a mixture of apprehension, nervousness, and cautious hope that makes the eventual reset all the more difficult.

These emotions are particularly intense because of my time spent with the game. My splits keep track of how many times I've attempted runs of this category. It currently reads 170. Most of those attempts don't leave the first few levels because my time isn't fast enough to justify continuing. Some play sessions consist of nothing more than repeatedly starting over in Glimmer like I did when I was young. It is rare that I get very deep into a run. I've put many hours in and lost a lot of runs to get 23:00 minutes into this particular one. It is the weight of all the lost runs that came before that gives this moment the emotional charge when it dies, and it is why it is so difficult to see this run go.



To reset is always to give something up. Even if we have no choice but to reset and if a new run promises a better time, it is still painful to lose something. Even when resetting a subpar run, I give up my time invested in the run and the hopes I had for it when I started. When I see that orange sky, I know the run is lost. At 23:10 I clear my timer, clear the save file, take a breath, and start over from the beginning. Quit game. Clear splits. Clear save file. Reset from Glimmer.

### **When and How Transition Happens**

Let me reset again and turn to another type of reset: my transition. I transitioned alongside the cycles of resetting *SRT 2 Any%*. But it is not so easy to say when, exactly, I began transitioning. There are milestones that are important to me, personally, that I could point to like coming out to my partner, beginning hormone replacement therapy, or legally changing my name. But labeling those moments as the beginning of transition doesn't quite feel right. I didn't "become trans" at those moments, although all of those moments made me legible as trans to other people or institutions.

What about the hundreds of hours of research I did about clothing, laws, support, medications, etc. leading up to medically or socially transitioning? And what about the experimentation I had done for years, largely in private? Shaving my body, trying on clothes, exploring sexuality? I spent many years online, creating feminine personas for myself in forums and IRC chat rooms. Are these kinds of practices not a part of transitioning? It seems to me that transition did not start at any one moment. And now, years into the process we call transition, I am still changing. I am still playing with identity and presentation. All of these things, and more, facilitate a break in normative temporal cycles and I cannot pinpoint a specific time where they began nor when they end. So, what do we mean when we say that we transition? If transition spans a

lifetime, how can I say that “I’ve transitioned?” As if it is something that I put in the past with clearly delineated temporal bounds.

And yet, I *have* transitioned.

Jules Joanne Gleeson (2021) distinguishes between two ways transition happens: through “purposefully varying the encounter between the individual and society’s gendered expectations” or through “reciprocal recognition” within trans communities (pg. 71). These two vectors are useful to understand how someone performs the actions of transition as well as how they are recognized by others to have transitioned. I have expended much time, effort, and money to take some control over “the encounter” as Gleeson dubs it, or the “evaluative moments” that happen when we come into contact with the “broader world” (pg. 72). Through an accumulation of gestures, clothing, hair and makeup styling, and pharmaceutical alterations people I encounter in my day-to-day life have come to recognize me as a woman. But getting to that point has been a gradual process, and for much of the past years I have been uncertain how any individual I interact with will gender me. There was no hard line that I crossed where everyone suddenly began gendering me correctly based solely on their perceptions at the moment of the encounter. In fact, while I get gendered correctly the lion share of the time, there are still moments where I’m presumed to be a man. I find it difficult to modulate my voice to a register that would be read by most as feminine. So, on the phone or at a drive thru restaurant I cannot take control of the encounter, for example.

Other times I am struck by how the encounter is simply out of my hands. An encounter requires at least two participants after all, and while I can attempt to influence the other’s perceptions of me through my presentation, I can never really be sure how I will actually be perceived. I have been misgendered in a skirt and full face of makeup and gendered correctly with stubble and a baggy hoodie. This affects my safety first and foremost. I can never be assured that I will not be read as trans in any particular situation, which limits the spaces I feel comfortable moving

in. This also affects my self-confidence. Being misgendered, even unintentionally, invalidates the time and work I have put into transitioning. I should also note that I am aware of the ways that my whiteness affords me some amount freedom of movement, safety, and ability to perform femininity in the eyes of a cis cultural imaginary that has constructed a link between whiteness and femininity while blackness is linked with masculinity.<sup>81</sup> The encounter, whether it is along gendered, sexed, or racial lines, is in many ways very much out of our hands.

This highlights how understanding transition solely as a change in the encounter has limited utility. To be sure, it is still the exigence for many people's transitions and is wildly important to many (myself included) particularly early in a transition and in regard to safety. However, grounding our understanding of transition through the negotiations of interactions with a predominantly cis public will always be lacking in its power to understand how transitions happen and how they are recognized.

Trans communities, or as Gleeson notes "circles" as more accurate, do the work of sharing information and support as well as creating spaces, aesthetics, and practices that are legible as trans. I, personally, owe much to trans circles that I have found largely online.<sup>82</sup> There is a long history of

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<sup>81</sup> You need to look no further than the accusations against black women athletes (most famously Serena Williams) who face claims that they are "actually" a man to see that there are different standards of femininity for white and BIPOC women. Additionally, while trans women face higher instances of violence generally, black trans women are targeted at much higher rates making it clear that the intersection of misogyny, transphobia, and racism is particularly deadly in America.

<sup>82</sup> The Queer Digital History Project is one place to look for an archive of these online communities that including message boards and newsletters sharing information for trans people dating back to 1992 (<http://queerdigital.com/tuarchive>). But many forms of online community formation is more ephemeral, being housed in IRC channels (which have more recently migrated to Discord servers). Henry Giardina's (2019) "An Oral History of the Early Trans Internet" found at Gizmodo.com provides many personal accounts from trans people that used these forms of communication to connect with other trans people.

trans people, who are often alienated from more conventional in-person communities, finding one another through the internet. I take active part in trans speedrunning communities, for example, that organize mostly through Discord. Speedrunning is, of course, discussed in these spaces. People help others learn about runs and encourage them in their pursuit of their best times. But these are also spaces where information is shared in regard to navigating transition and beyond. One extremely common practice is pooling communal medical knowledge to help guide people through the process of accessing hormone dosages, methods, and treatments that work for their particular goals. Even for those lucky enough to have access to healthcare, trans healthcare is notoriously ill equipped to assist trans patients, and the medical field broadly has historically been hostile to trans patients.<sup>83</sup> Whether because of indifference, incompetence, or antagonism the healthcare field has more often than not been a hurdle for trans people to overcome rather than an aide in their transition. In lieu of trusted doctors, trans communities take it upon themselves to collect information and give advice.

More generally, these are spaces where transness is understood, which can be difficult to find in gaming communities,<sup>84</sup> even ones that are by and large more accepting such as the broader speedrunning scene. Trans circles are spaces that communally define what it means to be trans, assist

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<sup>83</sup> Susan Stryker's (2008) *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* provides a good general account of the ways that the medical establishment has perpetuated violence against trans people, pathologized transness, and gatekept access to trans healthcare. More recently, trans healthcare has improved in degrees but across the board the doctors are still ill equipped to help trans patients as one study by the Center for American Progress (2021) found that 1 in 3 trans patients had to teach their doctors about transgender individuals in order to receive appropriate care.

<sup>84</sup> For an overview of studies that show the incredibly high rate of transphobic cyberbullying in online gaming communities see: Pescitelli, Aynsley (2018). "MySpace or Yours?: An Exploratory Study of Homophobic and Transphobic Cyberbullying of Post-Secondary Students." In *Cyberbullying at University in International Contexts*. Eds. Wanda Cassidy, Chantal Faucher, Margaret Jackson. Routledge. For information on the prevalence of transphobia in gaming representation: Flint, Emma (2021). "Why Do Games Still Struggle With Trans Inclusion?" Wired.com. <https://www.wired.com/story/trans-enby-representation-video-games/>.

one another through the transition process, and create a space that recognizes and validates expressions of transness.

But this does not really answer our question. Transition may happen through these vectors, but to think through the temporalities of transition and the reset, we need to know *when* transition happens.

## **RNG and HRT**

Reset again.

I'm now on attempt 171 at sub a 26-minute run in *SRT 2 Any%*. I don't even leave the first level before I decide to reset.

When playing casually, to get through the first level, Glimmer, you have to collect gems to pay the greedy Moneybags so he will open a bridge across a gap. But doing that is quite time consuming, so instead I do a trick called a "torch jump" that involves performing an extremely precise jump to stand on an ornamental torch that gives me just enough height to jump across the gap without opening the bridge. The torch jump is very early in the run, so I have a lot of practice with it. However, it takes quite a bit of precision to get Spyro to land on the thin geometry, and because it is so early there is not much lost if I reset when I miss the jump on my first try. I do exactly that on attempts 171 and 172. In the span of roughly five minutes I've reset three times. I attempt another run that gets a little farther but doesn't get to the point where I have another shot at the coin flip that is Level Storage. I call it a night. I'll start again tomorrow.

JN Hoad (2021) describes transition as "a roll of the dice" (pg. 168). There is always uncertainty in every action we take, but transition, and the actions leading up to it, can feel especially risky and unpredictable. We don't know how seemingly innocuous actions can lead us somewhere else. As Hoad explains: "How a single word like 'genderqueer,' a drunken confession to a friend, a

friendly workshop on pronouns, can set off a chain of consequences -- radicalization, hormones, drag -- cannot be accounted for in advance” (pg. 168). But it also can feel like a dice roll whether we will be accepted by friends and family or not, what we will look like after taking hormones, how transition will affect our employment opportunities. It’s out of our hands. Transition is about taking control of our bodies and our lives, but in doing so we leave so much up to chance.

In speedrunning it’s called “RNG.” RNG stands for “random number generation.” RNG is a technical process wherein a game creates random values that determine how variable elements of the game will resolve themselves. Computers are deterministic machines. Consistent inputs lead to predictable outputs. Videogames attempt to give the illusion of variance, however, in order to provide the illusion of life and an organic game world, uncertainty and excitement, challenges, or any number of other reasons. RNG controls much of the behind the scenes in videogames, but in speedrunning the term doesn’t always refer directly to the technical instantiation of a random number generator, although it often does. More broadly speedrunners use RNG to simply mean “luck,” which is central to the temporalities of speedrunning and transition alike.

RNG accounts for many resets. I either hit good RNG or I don’t, like with the Wrong Warp in my *SRT 2* run. An accumulation of bad RNG, or one major instance of it, can be a disaster on the clock. At the same time, the very act of running a game in pursuit of a goal is RNG. Whether a run itself contains any random elements, there is no guarantee any individual attempt will yield a good time, much less finish. Runners are imperfect. Mistakes inevitably happen in any run. We cycle through attempt after attempt to hit the one outlier where everything comes together: our bodies synchronize with the game’s demands and the game synchronizes its RNG with us.

When we start the run, we know that we are contending with RNG. We attempt to master our bodies and by extension the technical systems of the game that form the cybernetic construction,<sup>85</sup> but the game and our own bodies are not perfectly under our control. If they were, speedrunning would be trivial. Every run would be perfect. There would be no chance. Every reset is another roll of the dice. They are aimed at improvement, but improvement is never a guarantee.

I started HRT at 9:00 AM on June 10, 2020. My initial dose was 2 mg Estradiol taken sublingually twice daily and 50 mg spironolactone taken orally once daily. In America, this is a fairly common starting combination and dose of medications prescribed by medical professionals for someone seeking a feminized appearance. However, dramatic changes are uncommon from these starting doses, which are generally increased over time.

The morning of June 11th I went for a run, not a speedrun, a jog along the creek that flows past my apartment. When I got back home, I sat down and cried. I had to pause to consider why, exactly, I was feeling this rush of emotions. HRT was supposed to make me feel euphoric, like a different person. I had dreamed of this day for years, but now that it was here, I still felt melancholic and gray. I felt just as detached as I had always felt.

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<sup>85</sup> This understanding of videogame play comes, in part, from Donna Haraway's (1991) "Cyborg Manifesto" wherein the boundaries between human and machine are eroded which undermines the ontology of other concepts like gender. I am partial to this concept, but (following in Seth Gidding's (2005) lead) I use the term "cybernetic" here as opposed to cyborg (which I do in Chapter 4) to emphasize both the feedback loop that we enter into with the technologies of games as well as the fact that we never fully merge with a game. Speedrunning attests that we will never be perfectly synchronized, as the perfect run never exists in reality. But there are also those that cannot synchronize with systems because the games are not made for their bodies. Again, see Schmalzer, Madison (2020). "Janky Controls and Embodied Play: Disrupting the Cybernetic Gameplay Circuit." *Game Studies*, 20(3).

Self-reflexivity does not come easy for me. Learning to feel, process, and understand emotions is perhaps the most difficult and important part of my transition. But not because of any gendered understanding of how men and women stereotypically express emotions. Dissociation had been a coping mechanism that helped me navigate the world as a cis man. Revealing my true self to anyone would cause the entire facade that was my life to crumble. I learned from a young age to build a wall and suppress anything that would betray myself to the world. Jules Gill-Peterson (2021) goes as far to say that dissociation is a distinctly “Trans Method.” She describes its use saying: “You have the capacity to not be yourself to the extent that it will ensure your survival. I can’t think of a greater power, heavy though its cost may prove to be, especially over time.” I had to hide things, even from myself, as a means to endure living in the necessary constructed identity that I needed to construct because of the rural, conservative areas I grew up and lived in that were hostile to any form of queerness.

Being honest with myself about my transition meant acknowledging my apprehensions. Yes, I knew medically transitioning was necessary for me, but I hadn’t fully confronted what all of the potential losses would be until that very morning when I was running. And I didn’t know where the changes would lead me. The future was uncertain. From a young age I played sports, and through high school and college I was a multi-sport athlete. Weight training was a habit for me. These activities shaped my body as well as my relationship to my body and the world around me. On one hand this was a source of anxiety and discomfort, shaping my body into something that I detested, and, on the other hand it was, in part, just another part of larger coping mechanisms that allowed me to move through the world easier. At the same time, through habitual movements, I was accustomed to that body. It provided me with many advantages and was the result of years of repetitive and difficult work.



Feminizing HRT has little to no physical effects in the short term, particularly at the low doses I was taking at the time. However, over longer periods feminizing hormones typically cause loss of muscle mass. Day one of hormones was not going to do much of anything to my body. But as I ran, I allowed myself to feel present in my body, something that I typically avoided. I reflected on how I felt about the prospect of altering my body, of taking a chance on how my body would look and move as I got further into my transition. I had no idea how I would look, and how my appearance would affect how people would treat me. If I would face discrimination. If I would be hired for jobs. If I would be able to love my own body after changes. I found I still desired the changes, but I had not yet acknowledged the loss that would come with it and the uncertainty of the future effects. I let myself feel all of this then. My body had served me well up to that point. I was thankful to be where I was that day, and in that moment, which I thought of as a reset at the time, it was okay to look back and acknowledge the past that moment was built off of and the security that I was giving up in order to move forward, no matter how uncertain and full of chance that future may be. Resets always require this roll of the dice. We can never know what life will look like after them.

### **Cracking Eggs**

The questions still linger: When does transition happen? Where's the reset? Let's reset this discussion of transition to an earlier stage of life.

To transition, to reset, we first need to recognize that we have the desire and ability to transition. These recognitions can happen in many different ways, and it is rarely simple. Shon Faye (2021) notes that transitions require support, which, according to Faye's reporting on the state of institutional support as well as general sentiments towards trans youth in American and British contexts is generally improving so that young people are more often able to successfully transition and lead happy lives in their true gender. However, we are still a part of a cisnormative society that

does little to inform children and parents about trans identities, and trans rights are constantly under attack. Any improvement is precarious and built off of the labor of activists that resist the actions of fascist movements that are actively trying to eradicate trans people with trans youth and BIPOC trans women being the most directly affected.

Most children develop an innate sense of gender between the ages of 3 and 5 (Ruble, et. al. 2007). This tracks for me personally, but there is more than one way that we know things. We can feel, innately, that we *should* be one way, yet the world around us tells us the exact opposite. I knew the desires were there, but I didn't know that I had the ability to transition (nor did I have the language and concepts to understand transitioning), which leads to dissociation and suppression of the original desire.

In trans discourse this is often, somewhat chidingly, called being an “egg.” Grace Lavery (2020) sheds light on the logics of the egg by developing an “egg theory.” The most central belief of the egg “is that they (he, she, ze, etc.) cannot transition” (pg. 384). Living in a cisnormative society can produce shame, fear, material hardships, and uncertainty about transitioning. We may be influenced by and develop in the context of cisnormative society, but we don't always remain eggs just because of the outside. We can internalize these lessons and tell ourselves we can't, or even worse, become unable to even imagine, articulate, and grapple with our transness at all. There are a whole host of reasons, both real and imagined, that people believe they can't transition, but chief among these is an inability to recognize that we want or need to transition. This is what we characterize as being an egg.

But you really only become an egg retroactively. Once you “hatch” then you were, and always have been, an egg up to that point. As Lavery puts it: “An egg is displaced in time, ‘retconned’ back into one's own being; a protocol for a new, and newly incommensurable, sense-making procedure” (pg. 384). Transitioning doesn't just reset the future; it can also extend back

resetting how we understand our past selves. It's common for trans people that transition later in life to look back at their life and ask how they didn't realize. I, for example, was extremely uncomfortable with my body hair and shaved my chest, underarms, and legs for years. I loved how feminine this made me look and feel, but I didn't really understand that to be my motives at the time. I could list embarrassing anecdotes of my obliviousness from egg days for some time, but it is clear to me now, in retrospect, that I have always had desires even if I didn't fully understand them, act on them, or realize I was acting on them.

I would like to complicate this a little more. We can both know and not know that we are trans at the same time. Dissociation allows us to take up this precarious position between knowing and not knowing. Of having the information but suppressing it so we can live our lives and navigate the world. So, with that in mind, It is also not as simple as to say that I spent my life pre-transition being "socialized male" as some argue. I had a particular orientation towards gender that caused me to perform in ways that allowed me to pass as a cis man, but that does not mean I ever had the experience of a cis man. Masculinity was a costume that I wore and role that I begrudgingly played out even if I wasn't able to fully grapple with why I kept playing along nor why it didn't feel right. My experience growing up is not comparable to a cis man's who would have a completely different orientation towards seemingly similar experiences.

The moment of the "egg cracking" could just be the point of reset I've been looking for though. Cracking an egg is a moment of realization, where things click into place. There is a clarity regarding desire. We shed our protective shells and stand naked and vulnerable, not in front of others (at least not yet). Cracking an egg is a moment of honesty with ourselves, perhaps for the first time. We are able to start over and imagine a new future.

At the same time there's a teleology to egg discourse that is not ideal. In this characterization of transness, because I understand myself as a trans woman now means that necessarily I must

always have been a trans woman, or at the very least it was inevitable that I would eventually transition. The use of the term “egg” feels descriptive of my personal experiences at this moment in time, but what about in the future? Sex and gender are fluid. For many they shift and change multiple times over a lifetime. I’ve already changed my sex and gender once, what if my understanding of myself changes again? Do I then, again, reach back from the present and retrace my life to fit into my new understanding of myself? Do we say that I stepped out of one egg and into another? And what of care for those that “detransition?” We so often leave behind people that explore transness and then step away from it due to lack of support, access to resources, hostile environments, or simply realizing that they do not want to exist in a trans body and identity. Their experiences are so similar to our trans siblings, yet they are rarely included in trans circles while those hostile to trans people attempt to use them as a political tool against us and our right to self-determination.

There is simply too much surety to the egg metaphor that denies fluidity and also fails to recognize the chance and precarity that characterize so many trans lives. We are assemblages of technologies interfacing with other technologies.<sup>86</sup> That interfacing creates connective cybernetic circuits of interactions. We are not self-contained organisms. We cannot extricate ourselves from our environment (and our environment can’t extricate itself from us). Changing configurations on the individual or societal level surely undermines the fixity of these categories. And isn’t that what

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<sup>86</sup> This phrasing is similar to what Paul Preciado (2013) would label “technogender,” or an understanding of the body as a “techno-organic interface, a technoliving system segmented and territorialized by different (textual, data-processing, biochemical) political technologies” (pg. 114). Our own bodies are constructed of many different kinds of technologies that interface with the technologies that surround us to produce particular subjectivities.

transition or speedrunning does? They are changes in the technocultural construction of gender and videogames that reveal the contingent, constructed nature of the categories.

“Cracking an egg” may be an important part of some’s transition, but it is not the whole or even the beginning. It is one moment among many that are a part of cycles of resets that, over time, create the reset that is transition. The figure of the egg is useful, but it also can foreclose the possibility that we are still changing, growing. Transition is one reset among many that make up a life. Over privileging one moment as the point of rupture fails to give attention to the long, hard work that goes into transition and ignores the possibility that any one event is a small part of the whole. Any reset is made of many resets. Cycle after cycle. Frame after frame. Input after input. Run after run. Reset after reset.

### **The Technologies of Resetting**

I reset attempt 201. On run 202 I’m back on PB pace, the first time since run 170 two weeks ago. But the Wrong Warp and Level Storage still stand in my way. Pause. Continue. Pause. Exit Level. Purple sky! The coin flip has gone in my favor. The Wrong Warp sent me to the correct place, and I’m poised to complete Level Storage. A cut scene plays before the boss fight.

At the same time, thanks to my successful Wrong Warp, I’ve sent Spyro to just outside the entrance to the level “Metro Speedway.” I can’t see Spyro or the gameworld because of the cut scene that plays over it, taking up the whole screen. Still, I must navigate an invisible Spyro through the invisible gameworld into the entrance of Metro Speedway. I have these movements memorized, or at least my body does. My hands know exactly what to do, but they are a little shaky. I hold R2 for a moment to center the camera behind Spyro. Not so that I can see, all that’s on my screen is the cut scene playing out anyway. The camera controls are so that my directional inputs will be oriented consistently based on the camera’s directions. Down and right on the directional pad for a moment,

then I hold down. When I see the saving icon in the bottom right corner, I know I've successfully entered Metro Speedway.

Speedway levels are special. They are timed courses where you are tasked with destroying objects as fast as you can before time runs out. You also are given two powerups in these levels: the ability to fly and the ability to "Supercharge." I am trying to trick the game into having the speedway level loaded in the background as I play the rest of the game, which will give me access to the speedway powerups where I'm not meant to have them. These powerups will allow me to skip huge sections of the game by flying right over them.

The menus are also different in speedways, and I have to navigate one without seeing it because of the cutscene that is still playing. I press Options to pause the game. X to select quit. I know that the menu cursor now hovers over the option to retry the speedway. I have a fraction of a second to move my right thumb the .5 inches from the X button at the bottom of my PlayStation 4 DualShock Controller which will confirm the "retry" option to the triangle button at the top. The triangle input will end the cutscene loading the boss fight at the same time the game attempts to retry the speedway leaving me in the boss's arena with the powerups.

I press X to select retry. My thumb moves up the controller and I press triangle. But I slip slightly. I'm not quite fast enough. My nerves got the best of me. I load into the boss fight without the powerups. Quit game. Reset splits. On to 203.

Speedrunning aestheticizes the reset, failing, starting over. It takes any game and makes it about the work of giving something up, rolling the dice, pushing forward and turning our play and the game into something that we desire. Most videogames are not really "meant" to be speedrun. When I run *SRT 2* I transform it. I break it and turn it into something else. The exploits I perform, like the Wrong Warps, shatter the illusion of spatial continuity and reveal the game's levels to not be

located in any sort of Euclidean space but instead they are indexed in databases. If I can get the game to point to the values I want, I am free to move between them as I see fit.

So too does the game's temporality shatter. The temporal frames of epic quests are no longer relevant to my speedrunning. I'm instead concerned with the micro processes of the game, with every thirtieth of a second, endlessly refreshing. And I am also concerned with the march of resets. Of seeing Glimmer again and again. And of training my body to sync to those cyclical temporalities so that I have the ability to perform the various manipulations, exploits, and glitches in the run. The reset makes my actions possible.

The reset has changed the game, and it has changed me. On a physical level I have become attuned (to borrow a term from James Ash (2013)) to the run. The run's temporalities are ingrained in my fingers and joints. A trans understanding of our bodies is one that recognizes them to be malleable. They are constructed technologies that connect with and incorporate other technologies into them. To use Paul Preciado's words, we are "technobodies," which are "not passive living matter but a techno-organic interface, a technoliving system segmented and territorialized by different (textual, data-processing, biochemical) political technologies" (pg. 114). Speedrunning is one of those technologies for me.

As I change my body through pharmaceuticals and a whole host of gendered technologies, speedrunning also changes me, but not just in physical ways. Videogame temporalities, like all media, come to bear on the ways that we engage with the world and understand it. For me, speedrunning is a particularly trans temporal mode. The temporalities of the reset that are so central to speedrunning have helped me reflect on the temporalities of my own life. On another level transitioning changes our relationship to gendered technologies while speedrunning changes our relationships to videogame technologies. But it's even more complicated than that. Speedrunning and transitioning are a part of the same assemblages that make up our lives. We cannot neatly segment elements of

ourselves. So, speedrunning can alter our connections with gender, and so too can transitioning inflect on videogames.

I am arguing that videogames could be an analytic tool, a technology of discovery, that allows us to play with technologies that structure our temporal relationships. Simply by playing differently, by experiencing alternative temporal orientations towards games, we can discover both desires and paths towards action that could alter our lives. Or, at the very least, it can help us think through these concepts through metaphor and circles of similar people who are grasping for words to describe similar experiences that we are.

### **Slow and Fast**

I lie on a table. My face is repeatedly zapped. Zap. Zap. Zap. I pay a lot of money for this service, and I am fortunate that I can afford it (for now at least). This is my fifth laser hair removal treatment. I am attempting to remove my facial hair permanently. Shaving everyday leaves my face irritated, and even with shaving there is a shadow. I am hopeful it will only take eight sessions of treatment. (I now know that many more than that won't be enough.)

My technician is rhythmic. Zap. Zap. Zap. Every zap is a sharp, acute pain accompanied by the smell of burning hair. Working methodically around my face she zaps every inch. When she's done, she rubs ointment on it. It's red and sore the remainder of the day and into the next, but with each subsequent treatment, the pain is slightly less. Or maybe I'm just more used to it? I'm not quite sure.

I look in the mirror. It is hard to see physical changes. They happen so slowly, but for the first time I notice the slight curve of my flank. Am I starting to get hips? I'm extremely excited by this small update. At this point I had been on HRT for about 8 months. Every morning and every night I take multiple pills, the estradiol and spironolactone are still the staples of my treatment, but



I've added progesterone to the cocktail as well. I've adjusted the doses multiple times to try to maximize my results.

The medical side of transition can be shockingly slow. Much of transitioning is simply waiting. Waiting for appointments. Waiting for paperwork. Waiting for medication to do its thing. Amassing the proper levels of estrogen and suppressing testosterone through the ritual of taking my pills every day. Again and again. Countless pills. It's all so repetitive.

An acquaintance online told me that taking the medication at the same time every day will help it work faster. I don't know if it's true. Trans women share a lot of anecdotal medical advice in online spaces, and I'm thankful for most of it. They have been more knowledgeable than most medical professionals I have had interactions with, but I can't confirm this little tidbit. I set alarms on my phone for 9:00 Am and 9:00 Pm anyways for my ritualistic cycles every morning and night.

Socially it's not exactly a quick thing either. Both gender and sex are performative after all. And that performativity is built on repetition. Performing femininity is necessarily built from habitual changes over time. I practice walking and "varying the encounter." I try to move through the world in ways that feel more comfortable to me, but the world also makes me move in different ways. There are major ways that movement has changed for me, but I'm most struck by the small, mundane changes that take time to master. I find that greeting strangers is a completely different experience when I am read as a woman. I'm met with smiles instead of slight head nods. I'm not given as much space. People are more open to talking with me (and are more open to talking over me). I have to relearn how to navigate these ordinary interactions and sometimes I'm still caught off guard with how a stranger treats me. The longer into transitioning I go, the easier and more normal these situations become.

At the same time there is a kind suddenness to transition.

## The End of the Cycle?

Purple sky! Run number 212. Pause. Quit. Retry. Triangle.

My fingers don't slip. I'm in time. The cutscene ends. I defeat the boss easily with the speedway's Supercharge powerup. I enter the last world of the game at 23:09. I have just under 2 minutes to glitch into the final boss and defeat him to meet my goal of sub 26 minutes.

I use my newfound ability to fly freely, which is thanks to the Level Storage exploit, however there is a height cap. I perform a trick that requires slight, precise inputs on the joysticks and directional pad at the same time to make the game think I'm flying down under the height cap while I continue to gain height. I use that height to navigate around the game's geometry and right into the loading zone for the final boss, Ripto's arena. I enter at 23:45.

I use the Supercharge powerups to quickly dispatch the first phase of the fight at 24:09. There is a cutscene that plays between phases that removes my powerups, so I must do this part the "intended way." I use powerups that are randomly dropped in the arena to damage the boss. They drop quickly and close to me. The RNG is in my favor. This phase proves trivial. At 24:59 I'm on to the last phase of the fight.

After a short cutscene, at 25:18 I gain control of Spyro for the final aerial showdown. I launch fireballs at the flying boss. I land an early volley of quick hits, but at 25:52 I lose track of his movements. I only need to land one more hit. I search around. He was behind me! He launches himself right over me. I pull up and fire a fireball. It hits! I reach for the timer's controls on my computer's keyboard. The timer stops at 26:00.17 It took me more than 00:00.18 seconds to move my hand from my controller to the keyboard. Which means I did it. After 220 attempts, 219 resets, over a year of learning, practicing, and attempts, the ever so slightly less than 26 minutes of this run went by incredibly fast.

This run went by fast, but it started as just another in a long string of resets that finally reached my goal. It was only because of the slow, serial, cyclical of resets before it that it was possible. Desire stretched over time led to an accumulation of micro actions that resulted in this moment. A run is built off of thousands of discreet button presses, individual electrical impulses traveling through circuits that make up the computer's hardware, frames advancing one after another, progressions of splits starting again over and over, iterative communal testing and discussions and labbing routes that lead to fractions of seconds forming minutes and hours and days, weeks, years and 25:59.60 completed at 10:34 Pm on September 16th of 2020.

But this sudden moment is not the end of speedrunning. After this run is complete, I clear my splits. I step away from this category, satisfied with the time (for now), and I begin learning a new category. And the resets start again.

Transition, too, is built off of discrete actions. Incrementally adjusting hormones levels over weeks, months, and years; employing technologies of gender like makeup, clothes, sex toys; practicing gestures and voice training day in and day out. From one perspective, this is a slow assembling and accumulation of elements. But from another, it is quite sudden.<sup>87</sup> To the outside world changes can be shocking and abrupt. And it can feel this way to transition too. No matter how much time and work invested it can be incredibly jarring (and affirming) the moment you are finally recognized in the ways you have been working towards. But this is not the end. Transition is cyclical. We take steps forward and back and repeatedly start over. The temporalities of transition

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<sup>87</sup> Look to all of the claims surrounding the pseudo-scientific conspiracy theory dubbed “Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria” (ROGD) that come from transphobes to see how from one vantage point, which does not take trans identities seriously, transition can seem like incredibly sudden and without precedent, or even a social contagion that rapidly spreads through the population.

are neither fast nor slow and neither are they a straight line. Transition is a reset made of many resets that are facilitated by technologies and webs of associations that those technologies enable.

Videogames can be one of those technologies among others that reorient us towards temporal structures and can reveal queer ways of playing with games and with gender, sex, and our identities.

#### Chapter 4: Playing Tool-assisted: Syncing with a Techno-Body<sup>88</sup>

“We use “body” to give material form to an idea that has no form, an assemblage that is abstract. The concept of a body houses within it social, political, and cultural discourses, which change based on where the body is situated and how it is read. When we gender a body, we are making assumptions about the body’s function, its sociopolitical condition, its fixity. When the body is determined as a male or female individual, the body performs gender as its score, guided by a set of rules and requirements that validate and verify the humanity of that individual.”

Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism*

Im-ma-ma-ma-material, immaterial

We're just, im-ma-ma-material (I could be anything I want)

Immaterial, immaterial boys (anyhow, anywhere)

Immaterial girls (any place, anyone that I want)

Im-ma-ma-ma-material, immaterial

SOPHIE, “Immaterial”

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<sup>88</sup> “Tool-Assisted” refers to a speedrunning practice, Tool-Assisted Speedrunning or TAS, that uses tools like slowdown, frame advance, save states, or memory watch to painstakingly program the inputs of a run that are then run back automatically.

It's no grand revelation that western culture is built from binaries. These binaries tend to stratify things based on ontological status. Immaterial or material. Virtual or real. Fake or authentic. 0 or 1. (Feminine or masculine). One of the most important philosophers of these ontological binaries, in my estimation, is the pop music artist SOPHIE. Madonna got us halfway there, we *are* living in a material world, but that world is immaterial (im-ma-ma-ma-material). That doesn't mean we aren't (or the world isn't) "real," nor that physical material doesn't "matter." It does mean that even if we never create representations of ourselves in virtual spaces or are tracked and inscribed in massive amounts of metadata, we are all still already digital constructions. Our physical bodies move through the world as virtual, malleable avatars. SOPHIE, in "Faceshopping" sings:

My face is the front of shop

My face is the real shop front

My shop is the face I front

I'm real when I shop my face

She tells us that she becomes "real" by constructing herself. Her face, the very thing that mediates her interactions with the world, must become digital, as if it is made of modular bits and pixels arranged just so. But we don't have to "shop" our face to see how this works more broadly. Everyone's body is a media through which we connect to the world. How could it be otherwise? SOPHIE sings in "Immaterial":

Without my legs or my hair

Without my genes or my blood

With no name and with no type of story

Where do I live?

Tell me, where do I exist?

We're just...

Im-ma-ma-material, immaterial

Immaterial boys, immaterial girls

If media is an “extension of man<sup>89</sup>” our bodies are the most basic and necessary of those extensions. SOPHIE argues that we don't live without them (perhaps self-evidently), but more importantly the maintenance, perceptions, experience, and control of that physical media is tied up in the virtual. Genes, names<sup>90</sup>, and stories<sup>91</sup> are necessary virtual, immaterial constructions to the point that we don't exist without them. Or, at the very least, they strongly inflect on our material existence by mediating our relationships with others. The extent that they impact the material and who has

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<sup>89</sup> I'm using Marshall McLuhan's (1964) subtitle to *Understanding Media* here to gesture at the ways media studies understands media as a prosthetic extension of our bodies. This will, however, be problematized later in this chapter.

<sup>90</sup> Names are especially powerful for trans people. Changing a name is a symbol of changing identity, a sign to the world that we have taken control of our identity, and also a means for them to see us as our real gender. But it is powerful for our own sense of self as well. Old names are tied up in old identities, ones that, by and large, we had little say in constructing. A new name is a way for us to conceptualize ourselves as someone new. It is a core to build ourselves around, and in doing so distance ourselves from our often painful pasts that we put to rest, hence the label “deadname” should not be taken lightly.

<sup>91</sup> Cael M. Keegan (2020): “Trans\* studies has long been concerned with narratology—with the project of locating narrative structures that will adequately allow for the existence of trans\* bodies and becomings. These concerns arise directly from the epistemic and political needs of transgender people, some of whose lives have only recently begun to count in the accounting of which lives matter. The need for a “good story” is the need for a schema in which one can appear as other than a problem: a good story is one in which we can say something other than *but...* We could approach trans\* studies as one such story—a story that seeks to illuminate the experiences of transgender people and give an account of our claims to sex and gender, without which we cannot fully appear as other than a problem in someone else's narrative.” (pg. 387)

control over these immaterial constructions is another story. Take, for example, genes, which literally, physically exist. They are observable and classifiable by medical science. However, they do not have a direct one-to-one correspondence with the production of sexed bodies. Yet, genes (in particular the chromosomal configurations of XX and XY) become virtual signifiers that stand in as a representation for our supposed “physical” sex and gender. In effect, the immaterial understanding of genes (and rhetorical and political deployment of that understanding) exerts physical control over bodies. In this case that exertion often looks like harassment and attempts to pass discriminatory legislation controlling where people are able to move and how they are able to control their embodiment (through medical intervention and other forms of self-determination). So then, bodies mediate us, and our bodies are mediated by these medical-biological, linguistic, and discursive constructions as well. We are all already second order simulacra, reproducing material bodies and virtual subjectivities within matrices of discursive, medical, and political power. It’s hard to disentangle the material and immaterial, if it is even possible to disentangle them at all.

Gender, as I’ve hinted at already with my invocation of chromosomes, is one of those virtual matrices that is always laid over us shaping our bodies (or “shopping,” implying other matrices of capitalist exploitation). “Technogender” is the term Paul Preciado (2013) uses to describe the various ways that gender is technologically created through both material and immaterial means. He writes:

Gender is constructed in industrial networks of biopolitical materialization; it is reproduced and reinforced socially by its transformation into entertainment, moving images, digital data, pharmacological molecules, cybercodes. Pharmacopornographic female or male gender exists before a public audience, as a somato-discursive construction of a collective nature,



facing a scientific community or a network. Technogender is a public, scientific, community network biocode. (pg. 118)

This is the conception of gender I am concerned with in this chapter, but I would like to extend this from the cultural implications of the term “gender” to techno-bodies. Or, put another way: cyborgs. If gender is produced (and produces us) through a vast array of physical and virtual exertions of power, then so too are our bodies. Our bodies, Preciado would agree, are shaped through exertions of power through “pornographic” imagery in the form of culturally circulating images that produce desire as well as pharmaceutical maintenance of those standards (and this maintenance is, of course, aimed at producing and maintaining capital).

However, in this chapter I am less concerned than Preciado is with the specifics of how dominant forms of gender (or bodies) are produced within certain biopolitical regimes. Instead, I am interested in the experience of producing a body and subjectivity with gendered bodily media, particularly in relation to the negotiations of the immaterial and material for trans people. Trans people tend to be, as SOPHIE demonstrates, acutely aware of the disjunction between the material and immaterial. Of the ways that physical bodies are media objects themselves that circulate in uneasy tension with other media and are interpolated into gendered matrices of power. We cannot take the body for granted, as if we all control our bodies and move through the world effortlessly. To that end I am indebted to disability studies as well as trans thinkers and artists that allow me to

think through how any effortless movement is built off of a privileged position wherein normative bodies are positioned as “natural.”<sup>92</sup> But they are just as constructed as any other body.

Synchronization is the term I will be using to describe how we come to control our bodies without lag. How the immaterial and material merge to create subjectivities through media. I ask: how do trans people (de)sync with the media that is our own bodies forming some kind of stable (or flickering) subjectivity? And how do those subjectivities synchronize with the other media forms we interact with? Videogames specifically are a fruitful media to discuss the construction of virtual/physical or (im)material bodies. In this chapter I explore multiple ways that videogames forefront synchronization through an examination of the concepts of identification and interfacing, as well as how these particular concepts are understood from a trans perspective. I draw, however, from a wide range of sources (literature, music, memoir, anime, personal essays) to show how the concepts of synchronization suffuse into trans life. I also demonstrate how these kinds of concepts play out in speedrunning, which I argue forefronts the concept of synchronization. Videogames are not abstract technologies, after all. People play them. Modes of play, as opposed to a focus on designed interactions, impact how we synchronize with technology (or not) and how our bodies may be altered through those engagements. So, I interweave accounts of my time speedrunning *Undertale* (2015) to tease out the specifics of speedrunning’s engagement with bodily synchronization. Through this analysis I argue that certain videogame practices bring bodily synchronization into

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<sup>92</sup> I am indebted to Elizabeth Ellcessor’s (2016) work in this piece in regard to assumed user positions in *Restricted Access: “Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation.”* Ellcessor argues that, through design, certain bodies and abilities are consistently privileged. These particular users are then understood to be “natural” eluding the ways that seamless interactions with media is always designed and the “natural” user is a construction that only serves to other people that haven’t been designed for.

stark relief while also allowing trans players to feel and explore a kind of synchronization that can inflect on (and reflect) trans subjectivities.

### **Cyborg Synchronization**

To synchronize is to bring two or more (physical or virtual) entities into temporal harmony with one another. Musicians settling into a groove, a car's pistons firing in tandem, workers on an assembly line executing their tasks with trained precision, a timer that stops exactly when a sprinter crosses the finish line. The term "synchronization" also has vestiges of becoming one. We have many metaphors that hint at this. To be "in sync" is also "to be of one mind," or to operate as "a well-oiled machine," or to "mesh." This last one is another way of saying "enmeshed." Even if two synchronized entities don't completely become one, they are very tightly entangled with one another like the interlaced threads of a net(work). This also implies that synchronization is not solely a temporal phenomenon, there is also a spatial dimension. Two entities merge, becoming one (though tenuously, as we will see) through their temporal entanglement. This can imply a synchronous telepresence, whether that is via communication over networked computers (as is the case in online gaming) or between player and virtual world. In both of these examples we can understand the synchronizing of multiple agents (players, virtual characters, as well as the interfaces and networks of infrastructure that connect them) as producing a kind of dispersed subjectivity, which will be explored more fully throughout this chapter.

Videogames rely on synchronization to create the experience of play: the networked computers of online play being able to communicate quickly, the communication between players that must relay information efficiently, the computer's internal clock coordinating the billions of computational processes per second, or games' demands which require players' inputs be precise. To play videogames is to *play with* videogames. And to *play with* suggests a mutual creation. *Playing with*

requires a negotiation wherein players must cooperate with the game's hardware, software, and rules to make meaningful actions. To do this well, necessitates players synchronize with games.

Synchronization's opposite is the thorn in any online gamer's side: lag. Lag prevents simultaneous communication or movement. To be laggy is to have two temporal flows that are out of step with one another. Lag generates a disconnect. Neither temporalities nor spatial dimensions can merge if there is too much noise in the cybernetic feedback loops of information that produces synchronization.

Game studies, as a field, has put its finger on the importance of synchronization to videogame play, it's just that the word is rarely directly used. To that end I offer up two terms that have been central to game studies: identification and interfacing. In upcoming sections I will show how synchronization is important to these concepts as they are concerned with bringing material and immaterial in sync with one another producing the cyborg game playing body. I use the term cyborg here in the same sense that Donna Haraway (1991) famously uses the term. Cyborgs are "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organisms" (pg. 156). To be a cyborg is to bring machine and organism into synchronization, but it is not only concerned with physical materials. Haraway writes: "The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (pg. 156). To be a cyborg is to synchronize physically with hardware, but to also embody the virtual, bringing the immaterial and material into some kind of synchronization and transforming reality in the process. As we will see that synchronization is tenuous at best and the result of certain privileged material conditions, but, with these caveats in mind, I am arguing that the videogame player is a cyborg in all these senses of the word.

Cyborgs, for Haraway, are also a feminist figure that tears down essentialist ontological boundaries. But cyborgs aren't just theoretical figures. Haraway writes: "our time, a mythic time, we

are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (pg. 157). More specifically: to be trans is also to be a cyborg, to consciously be aware of the ways our bodies and subjectivities are laggy. By struggling against this lag we reject the boundaries between genders and sexes (as well as the boundary between gender and sex itself), between virtual and real, and immaterial and material. Centering the desire for (as well as (in)ability to acquire) particular kinds of synchronization that offer up cyborg subjectivities could be said to be a particularly trans understanding of videogame play. And just as cyborgs are not simply rhetorical, neither are trans people.<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, I am interested here in the lived experiences of trans people as it pertains to embodied perceptions of and enacting of gender interfaced with the technologies of videogames.

As the title of this chapter “Playing Tool-Assisted” suggests, I co-opt a term to describe this interfacing: “tool-assisted.” Tool-assisted speedruns (TAS) are a different practice from the kinds of speedrunning I have been discussing in previous chapters (which are referred to as real-time attacks (RTA) for differentiation). Both TAS and RTA have intertwined yet unique historical trajectories.<sup>94</sup> They typically share similar communities of practitioners, and their orientations towards videogames both conceives of videogames as software we are free to glitch to create play that fulfills desires indexed by community generated rules. But it may be useful to describe TAS in relation to RTA runs to emphasize the differences between the two. RTA speedruns are performed in the moment. A player inputs commands as they try to finish the game as fast as possible. TASs, on the other hand

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<sup>93</sup> Shon Faye’s (2021) book, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* offers an excellent repudiation of trans people’s treatment in some feminisms and queer theory and far-right political movements alike as solely rhetorical pawns in service of advancing political agendas. Faye’s book also provides sustained engagement with the material needs of trans youth and elderly trans people.

<sup>94</sup> See Eric Koziel’s (2019) chapter “Speedrun History” for more on TAS and RTA’s shared history.

are not concerned with human runners performing runs live. In fact, the end product of a TAS is not performed by a human player at all. A tool-assisted run consists of preprogrammed inputs that play like a player piano. This allows for perfectly precise inputs that achieve incredible feats that aren't possible in RTA runs. TASers create these strings of inputs with the help of outside programs (i.e., tools) that can do things like slowing the game down, visualizing the game's memory as it updates in real time, or creating save states that allow TASers to quickly reload and iteratively test optimizations.<sup>95</sup> However, for my purposes, my focus is not on the specifics of TAS practices or community formations. Instead, I simply use the technological practices of TASing as a framework to conceptualize constitutions of embodiment and subjectivity. I use the concept of "tool-assisted" as an analytical tool to understand the ways that all videogame play, as well as the bodies that engage in that play, are constructed through technological interfacing. In the same way that the practices of TASing create runs through various tools, so too is all speedrunning and gendered, embodied existence formed using tools. We will see the ways that videogames (and a whole slew of other technologies: cosplay, anime, hammers, drugs, bicycles) become tools that assist in creating gender for many trans people, but also the ways that software like Livesplit; technological manipulations such as the Punch-Card Exploit in *Undertale*; and hardware such as the mouse and keyboard do similar work in constructing the embodied experiences of speedrunning. Also, I will argue, speedrunning itself can become a tool that constructs orientations towards technologies broadly, whether of videogames or gender. In other words, Speedrunning becomes a tool that assists in

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<sup>95</sup> For more on the practices of TAS see Nathan Altice's (2015) *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer/Entertainment System Platform* as well as Madison Schmalzer's (2021) article "Breaking the Stack: Understanding Videogame Animation through Tool-Assisted Speedruns."

creating technological configurations that allow for the synthesis of material and immaterial that comprises the synchronized cyborg body I discuss.

Before I continue, I also want to note Aubrey Anable's (2018) excellent critique of the ways cybernetics is deployed in game design and game studies, which I will also extend to my discussion of synchronization. Anable cautions against conceiving of videogame play as simply a merging of player and game through cybernetic feedback circuits. She argues that discussing videogames as if we perfectly, seamlessly connect with games and are fully immersed in the flows of information is "not a meeting of different types of matter with their unique properties and affordances; rather, it is a collapsing of language to render bodies and machines as operating in the same ways" (pg. 45). This is an important point to keep in mind going forward. Synchronization (and the figure of the cyborg) implies a tight connection that may be difficult to disentangle, blurring boundaries. And to be connected necessitates that there is some amount of change in the actors involved, but I want to hold on to difference and specificity as well in the upcoming analysis of bodies, gender, and videogames.

### **Synchronizing Speedrunning**

Speedrunning is, in some sense, about the desire for synchronization. Rules regarding synchronizing the timer (the technology that enables speedrunning) are among the most important to precisely define. Starting the timer is an act of synchronizing the timer with the game, of synchronizing every individual run with each other, and of drawing the player's body and subjectivity into the practice of speedrunning.

The first game I speedran was *Undertale* (2015). The category I ran was called Neutral, and its rules for timing read: "Timing starts on "YES" on name confirmation and ends when touching the door after Photoshop Flowey." When I select "YES" I also simultaneously press the button on my

keyboard mapped to starting my timer. Other games I run have “auto splitters,” which are programs community members have created that automate the process of starting and stopping the timer, ensuring the synchronization of the beginning of the run with the timer’s start. Regardless of whether I manually start my timer or if it is automated, when the timer begins, I am connected to the game. That’s not to say that I’m connected to the game’s diegetic elements. I skip most of the game’s narrative content via glitches, and I feel no affective connection to the main character while running. Instead, I (attempt to) synch with the run’s technologies: the timer, the strategies I have learned and practiced, the various technical tricks and glitches I execute, the social practices of performing a speedrun, etc. And through this connection I also connect with the game’s technologies (hardware and software configurations), “the run” as a cultural and communal practice, and my body in different ways than I do outside the magic circle of the run.

One of the technologies that facilitates these connections is the software I use to time my runs: Livesplit, which is the most popular timing software in speedrunning. My Livesplits display information about past runs broken up into small sections called splits. Splits allow me to literally see on a granular level how my current run compares to past attempts. Because of the concentration necessary during a run there is a visual color-coded shorthand to reading splits. Red splits are behind pace, green splits are ahead, and the fastest a split has ever been completed is gold. These colors allow me to gather information quickly. There is an immediacy to my connections to the timer, and by extension there is an immediacy to connections to past runs. My splits are an immaterial ghost of my past self, after all, and I can tell how closely I synchronize with those times with a glance. Of course, synchronization isn’t the goal here. I want to be faster than the past iterations. I desire the green splits. I want to leave my ghost behind. And to do that I have to sync with not only the game’s technologies, but also my material body in the present.



The next section delves into this desire for bodily synchronization that is fore fronted in speedrunning but is an element of all videogame play. It is also, I will demonstrate, a particularly powerful desire for trans players. I demonstrate this desire for bodily synchronization by working through the concept of “identification” as it pertains to game studies. I ask how videogames speak to a trans desire for identifying with bodies and through this identification players can take on desired subjectivities. This analysis will help set the stage for showing how speedrunning becomes a means to fulfill desires for acquiring certain bodies.

### **Identification and Desire**

Identification is a pervasive concept in game studies and popular discourse about the pleasures of videogame play alike. The concept of identification implies that we (to some extent) connect with a character. By identifying with a character, we synchronize our subjectivities with them, and in some way become them (or them us). I want to approach this concept from a trans perspective to tease out some of the usefulness of the concept while complicating it through the introduction of different kinds of trans desire.

Helen Kennedy (2002) provides one foundational treatment of the gendered connections of player and player character as it pertains to identification. Kennedy focuses her analysis on the reception of the main character of the *Tomb Raider* series: Lara Croft. Kennedy investigates the implications of a male (presumably cisgender male) player playing as Lara, who she argues could be understood to be “transgendered” through their play. A queer embodiment would take place wherein the player merges with Lara through the control they exhibit over her. Subjectivity is dispersed between player and Lara, confusing the clean boundaries surrounding identity categories. Kennedy notes that we can understand this player/Lara construction in a few different ways. One is that Lara takes on male drag wherein performances of masculinity can become detached from the

necessity for a male body. The other is that Lara becomes a female drag performer with her overly exaggerated depictions of femininity that performs for the male player. Kennedy goes on to argue that these queer readings do not have any “real consequences in the gaming culture” for male players. Lara simply becomes an overly sexualized object of desire, and Kennedy notes: “there are no male-authored fan sites which deal with the question of ‘how it feels to play as a woman’ and it is hard to imagine that there ever could be.”

These kinds of accounts may not have circulated widely in popular gaming circles of the time, but that does not mean that this kind of orientation towards gameplay does not exist. And, more to the point, the “male-authored” part of that statement elides the slippery nature of gender. It may be that “male” players who use videogames to see how it “feels to play as a woman” may not actually be “male players” at all despite how they may be perceived/present at the time. I am not implying that to play as a different gender is to become trans or that it necessarily indexes repressed desires. What I am saying is that male players using videogames to explore femininity is not something that is generally acceptable in gaming communities that are dominated by toxic masculinity leading to trans players avoiding publicly disclosing their feelings about play. And this grappling with gender is often understood/expressed after some clarity is obtained and the player no longer understands themselves as their assigned gender. So “male players” may not always be “male players” anymore when they discuss how they experience their control over characters in videogames as an expression of trans subjectivity.

The most compelling elucidation of players using player characters to explore gender that I have encountered comes from Juliana Huxtable’s (2017) poem “Untitled (For Stewart)” found in her collection *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*. Huxtable describes the thrill she experienced as an, ostensibly, young boy playing as hypersexual female characters, particularly amongst her male peers. She writes: “I discovered using my virtual pussy to straddle the beefy trapeziuses of anthropomorphic cyborg

attackers, that the awkward shortcomings of pubescent life could be overcome one pelvic headcrush at a time” (pg. 23). Huxtable portrays the power and sexuality of fighting game characters like Chun-Li as something that she embodied through her play, even if that connection was “virtual” and “artificial.” The virtuality of the entanglement does not make it any less powerful and affective for her. It is, in part, the images of these women from popular science fiction films and videogames that Huxtable connects with, emphasizing their “hyper-pornographic bodies” and mentioning: “I went to every LAN party in hopes that I could witness [the boys] lose battle after battle to hyperbolic depictions of the same figures they would later jerk off to.” But solely looking at them is not what makes this strong connection. She goes on to write:

Like Motoko Kusanagi, my womanhood was entirely artificial, save for my mind and the tingling sensation in my spine present at the revelation of a new level, especially one unlocked as a secret—each time my artificial lungs lifted into the air as if I was *Æon*, bravely denying vertigo of its effect as I spread my Amazonian legs and take in the rapidly moving air that traces the fantastical skyscrapers of Bregna. (pg. 23).

While playing in the virtual space she acquires not only a “virtual pussy” but artificial lungs as well as legs and indeed an entire body that moves effortlessly through the world. Huxtable sees herself as a cyborg in these moments, comparing herself to the cyborg protagonist of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and the sexy, acrobatic, and deadly spy who is the protagonist of *Æon Flux* (1991). And as a cyborg she exhibits agency over the virtual representations through the videogame’s technologies. It is the merging of human and machine (as well as material and immaterial representation) that produces the ability for a young Huxtable to pilot the body she desires.

Nonetheless, Kennedy's overarching point is still well taken. In certain scenarios identification may not necessarily be the best way to understand our connections to videogames and videogame characters. Most of the cis het men she discusses do not identify with Lara nor do they reflect on how their play could in any way assist in them taking on a transgender identity. In many instances of play theories of identification from cinema, such as Laura Mulvey's (1975) work on the male gaze, is much more applicable to orientations towards videogame avatars. This is an emphasis on desire over identification, something that Gerald Voorhees (2014) argues is always a key component in regard to player/avatar relations. Voorhees employs Adrienne Rich's (1980) "lesbian continuum" and Eve Sedgwick's (1991) concept of male "homosocial desire" to draw attention to the ways that, on some level, queer erotic desire is always a component in relating to videogame characters. Voorhees's take on the issue is illuminating. There is a queerness to videogame play that is often overlooked or outright denied that can be found in the queer desires players express towards their characters.

However, there is more than one kind of desire that is useful to analyze here. For example, what Huxtable expresses is certainly tied up in erotic desire, the characters she describes are sexualized, but it is not a desire to be with these characters: it is a desire to *be* these characters.<sup>96</sup> There can be a kind of gender euphoria that comes from playing as a character. This is not limited to

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<sup>96</sup> An extremely uncharitable interpretation of these passages would be to invoke the discredited pseudoscience of Ray Blanchard's (1989) "transsexual typology" that sifts trans women into the category of "autogynephile" if they supposedly transition because of arousal at the thought of their bodies being female. This treats trans identities as a fetish (while not so ironically projecting researchers' own misogynistic, fetishistic desires onto them). I bring this up because it is a very common concept that is often batted around when any trans woman displays sexual enjoyment in their bodies (or potential bodies), and I would like to be clear here that it is disgusting, false, and thoroughly unscientific.

trans or questioning people. In the same way we can understand, say, a cis het man having erotic desire for a male character, so too can we understand that same man performing masculinity and virtually embodying a body he desires through playing as a cis male character as well. Trans people don't have a monopoly on gender dysphoria and euphoria after all. All kinds of products, operations, and practices are aimed at affirming cis people's genders: laser hair removal, weight training, Viagra, plastic surgery. The list could go on, but it seems clear that cis people are just as concerned with performing, embodying, and maintaining their gender as trans people are. It's just that cis people's gender is culturally understood to be "natural," and the role these various practices and technologies serve in producing that gender is thus overlooked. I am not ready to throw out identification as a concept, and, while I also embrace desire, I want to expand the types of desires we understand the relationship between player and avatar as indexing as well as the types of subjectivity that those desires enable.

While I draw a comparison between cis and trans desire for embodiment through videogames, I want to emphasize that these desires manifest out of different material circumstances that shape players' orientations towards games differently. Additionally, there are vastly different stakes and policing of cis and trans gender affirming care of any kind. Power works on vastly different scales regarding this issue. Additionally, trans people tend to experience their embodiment differently. Trans people often express a disconnect between themselves and their own bodies that cis people don't typically experience. Samantha Allen (2013), for example, argues that open world games speak to the freedom of movement that cis gamers enjoy: "for cisgender gamers, the supreme motility of open world games often functions as an exaggeration of a freedom of movement that they may already enjoy in the physical spaces of non-game worlds." At the same time, Allen continues, games like Anna Anthropy's (2012) *Dys4ia* intentionally restrict movement and through their mechanics create an experience of dissociation arising from a body that doesn't quite move

right. The ways she is able to move through the world inflects on how she understands bodily movement in videogames. Allen desires games that represent the kinds of bodily relationships she feels regarding the limits she feels on her movement.

Conversely, the desire to perfectly control a body seems to be a very strong desire as well for trans people. Nat Steele (2021) writes about her experiences playing as Master Chief in the *Halo* series. She begins: “When I was a child, I hoped to grow up to become a soldier. This is not uncommon among trans women. To live within dissociation is to live wearing armor.” For Steele it is not the violence associated with being a soldier nor anything directly gendered that made her feel a connection to Master Chief: the connection to her trans identity comes from him being a hyper component, scientifically modified cyborg executor of clearly defined duties which, in essence, becomes nothing more than the image of his armor in the cultural conscience. When, in later entries in the series where Master Chief gets more detailed narratives, Steele notes that she no longer feels as strong of a connection to him. He becomes a (cis het male) individual instead of an allegory of perfecting one's bodily movements while also embodying protective armor. She writes that “people (mostly white men) are the ones who get ‘human stories,’ marketable stories. Trans people like me get allegory, allusions, and headcanons...trans people have to find ourselves in stories that weren't written for us.” Accordingly, as we will see in upcoming sections, trans people find themselves reflected in other kinds of media and cultural objects, not just videogames.

But there is a particular kind of dispersed subjectivity that comes from identifying with videogame characters. I want to dwell on the instability of that subjectivity during play for a moment, whether understood in terms of desire or identification, is always unstable. Jenny Sundén (2012) provides an excellent example of the ways that we connect to and tenuously become videogame characters, engage in circuits of desire, and move between contextual subjectivities while we play. Sundén describes her time playing *World of Warcraft* (2004) with her lover, who she primarily

interacted with through the game. Most of their interactions were mediated through their virtual representations. She writes of the confusion between the virtual and the physical:

For how can you put into words the feeling of suddenly being out of breath, of sensing a quickening of the heart only by seeing a particular avatar at a distance? Or, as a woman put it after our very first encounter in the game, “I felt my heart racing when I saw you” (where the “you” suggests a collapse between the body of the player and that of the avatar). (pg. 167)

Subjectivity is dispersed here and so is the desire she feels. She continues:

I experienced firsthand the sensation of desiring someone through the game interface. An already enticing, immersive game experience was all the more charged through the ways in which desire and physical attraction came to circulate through the game. I would see “her,” the muscular orc woman, with her white tiger, come running toward me (or Bricka) across the dunes, the sand spurting from under foot and paw. Bricka’s heart would skip a beat. Or was it mine? Does it matter? (167)

We see again a confusion of subjectivity. Bricka is the name of Sundén’s rogue troll. She questions who is doing the desiring: is it the woman playing the game or is it Bricka? And who is the one that is being desired? Who is “her?” The virtual orc certainly induces physical reactions. Sundén seems to have fallen for both the character and the woman, or, perhaps, there isn’t much difference between them.

Identification in videogames, then, is never stable nor does it ever fully subsume our subjectivities. And with that in mind, I can't help but notice how the "like" and "as if" ring out loudly in Huxtable's poem. She merges with her virtual counterparts, performing extraordinary feats and expressing sexuality, but that connection is still somewhat limited to the level of metaphor. I have already labeled the assemblage of players' connections to videogame systems and virtual representations as a cyborg in the sense that Donna Haraway uses the term. Recalling Haraway's conception of the cyborg, it is "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organisms" (pg. 157). Cyborgs are physical assemblages of technology, but they are also social constructions: "The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (pg. 157). This is what Huxtable describes as she imagines herself as the powerful, sexy women in the videogames she plays. She is a cyborg, but important to the figure of the cyborg is the instability of its boundaries. Haraway argues that there is "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" (pg. 158). Understanding gender as a kind of metaphor within the videogame playing cyborg construction does not mean it is not "real," that it has no power, nor that it does not affect the subjectivity of the player. It simply means that subjectivity, identification, and circuits of desire within the cybernetic system are incredibly complicated and open to fluctuation. Subjectivity can shift and change from moment to moment, player to player, game to game, and (as we will see later in regard to speedrunning) between different play practices.

To illustrate this point, I want to touch on the difficulty of pronouns in these cybernetic constructions. Pronouns normally directly refer to a specific person or group of people, but we find that when we are talking about videogame players, it is not clear what a pronoun refers to nor what pronoun to use because of the distributed subjectivity of the cyborg construction. Sundén's language is confused, for example. She has difficulty distinguishing between player and player character. "Her" could refer to her lover, the character, or perhaps both at the same time. The boundaries



between game and player are slippery and indeterminate. And to make this more complex, these boundaries change from moment to moment. I would like to bring up an anecdote that sticks with me of my partner, Bethany, playing *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (*BotW*, 2017) as an example. At this time, Bethany had been playing *BotW* in the evenings for a couple of weeks and I knew she was attempting to complete a lengthy side quest to find all of the collectable “Koroks.” As I enter the room and see her, sitting in a lounge chair, playing I ask her what she’s up to at that moment. She responds: “I found a Korok on top of another mountain so I’m climbing this mountain to see if there’s a Korok up there.” While she’s explaining herself, she guides the player-character, Link, near a cliff to avoid a large Stone Talus enemy. However, she has misjudged how far away the enemy can reach her, and from off screen Link is struck by a large boulder the enemy has hurled. Link is knocked off the cliff and falls down the side of the mountain for a comically long period of time. As Link tumbles Bethany exclaims: “Link! What are you doing?! Get up! Grab something! What is he doing?!” After the lengthy fall Link lands in a river and the game over screen appears. The shift between “I’m climbing this mountain” to moments later referring to Link in the third person is shocking to me. At one moment she conceived of herself and Link being one entity, but this is quickly severed when Link begins falling and she no longer controls Link’s actions (or perhaps does not want to take blame for the mishap). Either way, these kinds of linguistic turns reveal that the cyborg construction of videogame and player is fluid, and by extension so is identity.

### **The Speedrunning Interface**

The interface is the location that these blurry boundaries are starkest. The interface facilitates transitions; it mediates a spatial and temporal shift. Cyborgs are formed from these interfaces, the spaces where technology, biology, and discursive practices come into contact. There are all kinds of interfaces when it comes to videogames: interfacing between players and rules; interfacing between

communities and modes of play; interfacing between bodies and technologies; interfacing between games and culture; and interfacing between player and body. Speedrunning, itself, is one of these interfaces. The immaterial rules of speedrunning become another interface that mediates our physical engagement with games. The rules inscribe modes of engagement that produce speedrunning as a practice as well as certain orientations towards technologies.

Alexander Galloway (2012) argues that interfaces are a part of a “control allegory” (pg. 30). Interfaces prescribe certain modes of engagement and, in doing so, also affect our physical movements as well as our subjectivity. But the interface is also a stark reminder of difference. The interface allows for connection, transition, and control but it also separates (even if that border is blurry). Interfacing (as I demonstrate below) can never be seamless, and because the interface is the very cite of connectivity, then synchronization is never perfect either.

An interfacing of bodies is also crucial to the identification that I’ve been discussing. The body, as we’ve seen, is dispersed between material and immaterial instantiations. The body is made from our physical biological realities; virtual representations of our selves in the form of language, rules, and other’s perceptions of us; the technologies we connect with; and the rules of engagement between these that serve as an interface. But let’s take a step back here. There is a fundamental interfacing that is hanging over this. What of the interface between body and desire?

Let’s turn back to *Undertale* for a moment. There are many glitches necessary to speedrun *Undertale*. One of the most important and game breaking is the Punch Card Exploit (PCE), which allows for wrong warps and cutscene skips. PCEs require a very quick series of inputs while positioned on pixel-specific spaces. On top of this, for some tricks, if I’m not fast enough with my inputs, the game will soft lock and I have to start over from the beginning of the run. Executing all the PCEs required to complete a run, to say nothing of going fast, demands that I synchronize with my body and by extension the interface of the game. That is to say, my bodily movements need to

become synchronized with the desires I have for precise movements (and those desires are interfaced with the imperatives of speedrunning). This is not easy at first. I don't have the literacies built up and I feel alienated from my own body fumbling over my fingers trying to press the correct buttons fast enough. However, PCEs become rhythmic when performed properly. There is a satisfying cadence to the inputs that helps me synchronize my timings. After performing thousands of these maneuvers, the rhythmic inputs become ingrained in my body, and I am able to directly feel the bodily, sensual, and temporal experience of performing them. It is in these moments that I feel the game (the run? It is hard to differentiate). I don't feel the character's movement (I'm not really even controlling a character. A PCE is primarily a manipulation of the game's menus). Instead, I feel present in my own body. I interface with my body, and by extension my body interfaces with the keyboard and the coded processes that I am manipulating.

This next section expounds on this idea of interfacing with our own bodies to show how trans people can often understand bodies as a collection of interfaces and how this orientation towards bodies affects videogame play.

### **Interfacing With Bodies<sup>97</sup>**

In the same way that we interface with technology, such as videogames, it seems to be a common phenomenon that trans people regard their bodies not as something natural to themselves, but something we interface with, something we pilot and struggle to sync with (and by extension sync with the world more broadly). Take for example the figure of the monster. Lucian Clark (2016)

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<sup>97</sup> This section draws heavily from and builds off of a previous article: Schmalzer, Madison. (2020). "Janky Controls and Embodied Play: Disruption the Cybernetic Gameplay Circuit." *Game Studies*, 20(3).

interviews trans people in regard to their connection to, and cosplay as, monsters. Similar themes emerge among these interviews, namely that the interviewees understand their bodies (and the way that they are forced to exist within them) as out of step with how they would like to exist, which they connect to monsters like vampires or werewolves that also can't fit into societal norms. One interviewee, who goes by Kestor, explains: "It's not just my gender that interfaces with monstrosity, but it's a key point of connection. Because of the disconnect with the shape I am in other people's minds and the shape I am in my own." "Interfacing" is an interesting word here. The body and gender become an interface to connect with the world. They are technologies that produce modes of being and can interface with other material and immaterial technologies. That interface introduces friction, noise, lag.

Interfaces, are not solely directed outward, they are fundamental to how we engage with our own bodily existence. In "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" Susan Stryker (1994) expresses her "deep affinity between [her]self as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's (1817) *Frankenstein*" (pg. 247). She boldly claims: "I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster" (pg. 246). Mirroring the monster's monologues in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, Stryker also issues a declaration of her "transgender rage":

"Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie" (pg. 247).

Stryker's language makes a distinction. She suggests that she existed within a body, the body was not her; and it was not congruent with the body she desired. In other words, she interfaced with her

body, and also altered that interface. Through “unnatural processes” of “medical science” and “technological construction” she creates a new body for herself, and in so doing creates some kind of congruity between her body and desire, between the material and immaterial. She also suggests that all bodies are unnatural and constructed. She goes on to say:

You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself. (pg. 248)

This is directed at a cisnormative society. The need to make this statement reveals the different orientation towards embodiment trans people may experience compared to cis. Namely that no body is natural. We are always stitched together through discursive practices of language and culture, exertions of power from political and legal institutions, and medical discourse and interventions. Bodies are pieces of media that are always created through material and immaterial technologies, and our self (our subjectivity) may be incongruous with the constructed piece of media that is our body (as well as how that body moves through society). Thus, monsters.<sup>98</sup>

This incongruity between body and self is literalized in other media such as the figure of the mecha, or giant piloted robots. Take for example the trans reading of the anime *Neon Genesis*

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<sup>98</sup> I want to note that the figure of the monster is a fraught one for trans people. While the invocations of monstrosity that I address here are one of defiance and taking control over embodiment, Susan Stryker notes that the perception of trans people as monsters has directly led to the destruction of many trans lives as well.

*Evangelion* (*Eva*, 1995) (again, more “allegory, allusions, headcannons”). *Eva* centers on a group of kids that are tasked with piloting giant biological weaponized mechs in order to save the world from the threat of the mysterious and hostile angels. I’ll let Willow Maclay (2021) describe its importance in some trans communities:

[*Eva*] is a favorite among certain sects of the trans community, to the point where it’s an inside joke among us that Shinji Ikari is an egg [a closeted trans person]. His closed-off-ness, his discomfort in his own body, and his frustration at being excluded from the love of his own father in favor of teenage girl Rei—they all give this reading ammunition.”

But the trans reading does not stop there, the discomfort the protagonist Shinji feels extends to his difficulty and reluctance to “sync” with his mech (as the anime dubs it). Willow goes on to describe this:

I think when we’re talking about the ways that trans people relate to images, stories, or specific characters, it’s rooted in the fracturing that comes with adolescence. Puberty sucks for everyone, but for trans people it can genuinely feel like a violation. For many of us, that central disconnect, which becomes more pronounced in adolescence, acts as a huge instigating factor for why we might gravitate to films or television about characters experiencing something akin to a personal apocalypse—like those teenagers in [*Eva*].

The disconnect, the inability to sync with our own bodies, becomes a central theme to trans readings of *Eva*. The mechs are supposed to feel like natural extensions of the teenagers’ own bodies, but just as puberty comes on with its host of hormonal changes and development of secondary sexual

characteristics that would leave a trans teen alienated from their own skin, they are tasked with piloting (and attempting to become one with) these terrifying monstrous humanoid figures. The most terrifying parts of the anime are when the mechs take control, subsuming the pilots into them and violently rampaging. The disconnect between bodies is felt most strongly at these moments, and also the visceral horror at the possibility of fully syncing with the mechs that represent bodies they do not desire. It is at these moments that control is most out of the pilots' hands, they cannot control the body they are supposed to interface with, yet they are stuck inside of them. And that is an almost perfect allegory of dysphoria.

However, these mecha stories are not confined to readings devoid of trans people. Trans authors have picked up on this theme and more explicitly worked with it. Gretchen Felker-Martin's (2020) *Eva* inspired mecha novella *Dreadnought*, for instance, deals more directly with similar trans themes of the horrors of embodiment through the teenage piloted militarized mechas (the titular "dreadnoughts") tasked with protecting the world from hostile threats, however it also asks how interfacing with technology may allow us to produce the bodies we desire, no matter how monstrous they may appear to the outside world. *Dreadnought* pilot Leah, for instance, has an extremely troubled relationship with her body due to her weight and how she is treated because of it. She understands her mech, Gemini, as her actual body: "*That's my real body*, Leah thought... *That's my blood*" (pg. 13). She is perfectly "in sync" with Gemini and has the highest "biofeedback compatibility" that allows her to become "perfect" and "beautiful" in her violent movements. Being able to synchronize with that mechanical body is her ultimate goal.

There is a dichotomy here. For Huxtable with the hypersexual fighting game characters, Steele with Master Chief, and Felker-Martin's giant mechs there is a desire to interface perfectly with an idealized (and in these examples competently violent) body. But Allen's reading of open world games, trans readings of *Eva*, and trans people's relationship with the monstrous is not so much the

desire for perfect control, but an acknowledgment and playing with the ways that interfacing with our bodies is messy, especially so for trans people. Regardless, my point is that desire for synchronization in interfacing with bodies becomes extremely important for trans people and that desire fundamentally changes how trans players interact with videogames. The desire for synchronization (and its opposite, the pain of alienation and lag) inflects strongly on trans understandings of videogame identification.

The synchronization I am discussing, it would seem, is (at least in part) a matter of interfacing competently and effortlessly, and this is especially important when it comes to videogames. To have any semblance of connection to a character our influence needs to seamlessly extend into that game world. Steve Swink (2009) argues that this contributes to “game feel.” Game feel is “the tactile, kinesthetic sense of manipulating a virtual object. It’s the sensation of control in a game” (xiii). It is a kind of telepresence that comes from directly controlling moment to moment action, and this feeling of control, for Swink and other game designers, is designed into a game. It is something that is intentionally produced through a confluence of controls, audiovisuals, and mechanics. In effect, this conception of game feel is concerned with a masterful design of the interface that allows for a particular kind of synchronous interaction.

And to be sure, there is a lot of work that goes into this intentional kind of “invisible design”: the design ethos that users should be completely unaware of any mediation.<sup>99</sup> For example, Dave Parisi (2015) discusses the design of console controllers, which have, by and large, been fairly consistent in their design across generations of consoles. These conservative changes help to

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<sup>99</sup> For more on invisible design and an extended critique of it in games see: Marcotte, Jess (2018). “Queering Control(lers) Through Reflective Game Design Practices.” *Game Studies*, 18(3).



generate what Jess Marcotte (2018) would call a “control literacy” or “the player’s ability to pick up and use a given controller or any other set of learned conventions for controlling a game.”

Controllers are consistently created in similar ways so as to foster a particular literacy in players, reducing any friction in learning how to use them. This is a strategy that Parisi dubs “ergonomic branding.” A controller’s design is literally branded into players hands, allowing seamless interfacing. To be good at videogames is, as Graham Kirkpatrick (2009) puts it, “at least partly, a function of not looking at or thinking about our hands” (pg. 131). The player’s use of the controller, and the in-game actions that extend from it, becomes seamless and the interface unnoticed.

In effect, through effortless interactions with a controller, expert players are able to synchronize with the game and videogame system. When we play videogames we enter into a kind of cybernetic circuit<sup>100</sup> consisting of flows of input and output between player, inputs, and technological feedback. The control we exert through these cybernetic interfaces extends our influence into a gameworld, and we take on a kind of dispersed subjectivity that is up to the negotiation of particular technological and representational constructions. Players become “attuned” (Ash, 2013) to the micro demands of a game on a subconscious level. James Ash for example, discusses the ways that players “feel” whether they are potentially in another player’s sight lines in first-person shooter games. From many hours of intensive play, players are able to quickly assess where they are likely to be attacked from and adjust their play accordingly. There are many factors that contribute to this feeling: familiarity with map geometry and an awareness of where the

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<sup>100</sup> I directly take this invocation of “cybernetic circuit” from Brendan Keogh (2018). *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*. MIT Press. However, I am also deeply indebted to Katherine Hayles (1999) analysis of cybernetics in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. U of Chicago Press.

character's model is located in relation to it; the metagames surrounding common strategies and how enemy players are likely to move through the map; mechanics related to enemy spawns and movement abilities; information about enemies relayed by teammates; etc. However, the assessment of all of these things is preconscious. For the expert player, it need not rise to the level of conscious awareness, instead it is a feeling. And feeling, as I understand it, is a lagless form of knowing (or at the least has reduced lag compared to other modes of conscious thought) and suggests that the interface literally extends players' perceptual faculties into a game. Player and game merge. So, because of this lagless connection players' bodies and cognitive processes synchronize with the game's world, mechanics, and metagames. Or, in Ted Freidman's (1999) words players "think like a computer." All of this is facilitated by the direct, invisible interface.

But this only describes a certain orientation towards play and is only relevant to certain players. Players are able to become expert because controllers are created with their bodies in mind, and they have been afforded the time to develop control literacies over many hours of play. For some, interfaces never become invisible and controllers (as well as the player characters within the game world) never really become prosthetic extensions. There is any number of reasons that players may not actually sync with videogame interfaces, and thus the typical narratives of prosthetic extensions that I've described are often not applicable. Lauren Cruikshank (2019), for example, explains that "actual prosthetic realities involve learning curves; pain, frustrations and triumphs; hard-earned remappings of mental models; and much experimentation and adaption on the part of both technology and user in order to function." Actual prosthesis is never seamless, or, at the very least any seamless extensions are built off the back of much work. On top of this, as I explore elsewhere (Schmalzer, 2020), videogames do not always function as they are supposed to nor how we'd expect them because of glitches, faulty hardware, or unconventional design. Our embodied realities are messy, and so are the interfaces and technologies we engage with.

To portray interfaces as seamless extensions of our bodies is an incredibly privileged position, and this position coincides with a particular understanding of the ways that we interface with bodies. Or, more specifically, the belief that we do not interface with our bodies at all. But connecting to the body is always already a virtual media experience. We need not be wearing a VR headset to understand our bodily existence as virtual reality. It is just that certain lived realities (as well as subject positions) make this more obvious. After all, what of the pain of moving our bodies? What of bodies that can't move in the ways we want them to (or that technology or society demands)? What of the slow, clumsy process of learning how to move? What of those that exist in a body that does not conform to their actual gender? What of the slow process of changing that body? Of altering it with technologies and pharmaceuticals? Of learning how to move and inhabit a completely different bodily existence? One that we may synchronize better with but does not synchronize with the demands of a cisnormative society. To experience dysphoria is to fail to interface with our own bodies. But to transition is also to undergo the difficult work of changing the interface, learning how to interface with it, and navigating a world that is not made to interface with us. Trans identities serve as a kind of glitch in bodily existence that reveals the cybernetic circuit. Understanding the body as unmediated and under our direct control leads to understanding technology in the same way. But many cannot help but be hyper aware of the interface of the body and the ways they do (or do not) synchronize with them.

Through the parallels I am drawing here I do not mean to suggest that trans bodies (or minds) constitute a disability nor that there is a perfect parallel between disability studies and trans studies, even if they both speak to each other in important ways. Neither am I trying to invoke a

“cartesian dysphoria”<sup>101</sup> wherein the healthy body is mutilated to fit the diseased mind’s dysphoria. In fact, I am not subscribing to any cartesian duality of body and mind. Our mind is just as much a part of our bodies as is the virtual matrices of gender that is physically inscribed into us. My focus here however is not directly on ontology. I am instead most concerned with phenomenology. I am talking about perception and the ways we experience our embodied existence. What I am drawing attention to is the ways that synchronization with videogames is often difficult (and sometimes impossible), and this parallels the ways that interfacing with our own bodies can be just as difficult. We are not minds (of any gender) wrongly trapped in a body. But we, as subjects, have desires that do or do not align with how bodies move and interface. So, what I am arguing for is an awareness that the mediating effects of the various interfaces we interact with (controllers, screens, hands, eyes, etc.) has implications on how we play (as well as who plays), how we understand our connections to games, how we do or do not “feel” games, and how we may desire synchronization with games.

### **Concluding: *Speedrunning. Gender***

Connecting to my own body (and by extension manipulating the technologies of speedruns) was part of a major breakthrough for me personally. Feeling a connection to my body and its ability to make changes in the world (or to change itself) is important and difficult, and it is a first step in synchronizing (with) bodies. Practices involving interfacing with technologies seem to be a way that trans people feel that same synchronization. Speedrunning, I am arguing, is one of those technologies, but I have come across countless accounts of trans people using various technologies of the body to come to some kind of understanding of the ways that they interface with their own

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<sup>101</sup> This is hannah baer’s (2019) term from her excellent *trans girl suicide museum*.

bodies, and through that come to understand their transness. A few examples: T Fleischmann (2019) writes about their time fixing fences for a living that lead to a realization that they have control over their own body:

It was only a year or so, however, before learning how to swing a hammer let me think *I am the one who makes my body different* and before I knelt in dirt and placed my hands on rocks and decided to start dropping little blue pills beneath my tongue when I woke, to take more control over my future body. (pg. 12)

hannah baer (2019) writes about her use of ketamine and how it affects her understanding of her bodily connections:

If i tune into it, i can feel the muscle memory working to keep my limbs and digits moving, feel the muscles in my legs twitching to keep my unwieldy trap frame upright, even as I sway and swirl, i can watch myself do what i do, watch and feel my body, it's the most cinematic thing in the world. Which is important for being trans, to be able to watch yourself, to feel your body differently. Do you get it. k makes me so aware of my body in certain selective ways, if and only if i choose to put my attention on it. (pg. 29).

In Imogen Binnie's (2013) classic trans novel *Nevada*, the character Maria explains the way that her bike allows her to feel connected to the material world and her own body within it, despite the intense feelings of dysphoria and dissociation she experiences:

You know I love my bike. I've just been thinking, I don't think my bike is just this thing that sits outside the bookstore rusting, or inside the kitchen, rusting. That bike is, like, the only way I know to really be in touch with my life, with the world outside myself. (pg. 72)

Feeling our own bodies is powerful. It is a lagless form of communication with ourselves that opens up possibilities for other kinds of synchronization. Feeling allows for the development of a control literacy with our bodies, as well as taking steps to alter the very interface itself. Controllers are not made with every body in mind after all. The controller's interface can get in the way of synchronization with a virtual world (or perhaps any world). But some control interfaces we can change. Swinging a hammer day in and day out, experimenting with drugs, cycling, playing fighting games, becoming a monster, and rhythmically executing thousands upon thousands of PCEs are (some) ways to bring body and desire into synchronization. Technology (virtual and physical), in other words, is a tool that can allow us to make changes to the technological constructions of our bodies. It is not that we are subsumed into the logics of the technology; it is just that technology allows other kinds of socio-technological relationships to unfold. And videogames are one such technology.

The little blue pills I drop under my tongue get me closer to synchronizing with the body (and identity) I desire. Transitioning is not just the act of changing my body. It also alters the ways my physical body is interpolated into the virtual matrices of gender. The more I synchronize with the concept of "woman" the more that the world treats me in different gendered ways. But I don't "identify" with womanhood like I might identify with a videogame character. I simply am. There is no telepresence, no interface (or at least the interface is minimized after I begin to bring my identity and body into closer sync). But no matter how tightly I synchronize with womanhood to the point that I understand the two as ontologically merging, there is always noise in that connection. The

noise comes from my own self-doubts (of which there are many), but it also comes from outside of my homeostatic cyborg construction. My womanhood is laggy by the standards of cisnormative society (and indeed, I should note, many trans people desire this lag between the standard and their embodiment. To avoid synchronizing with the dominant gendered binaries). It took me many years to come to “woman,” and it is less real to many for it. I constructed my womanhood out of pharmaceuticals, and names, and clothes, and online chatroom personas, and videogames, and a whole host of other material and virtual practices (the same as any woman, if we are being honest). I am a glitch in a world that presumes natural congruence between bodies and their pilots. Of course, gender is not the only factor at play in how I am allowed to synchronize and how much feedback I receive from the noisy world around me. My position as white and middle class cannot be stressed enough in regard to my safety and ability to move through the world how I desire, after all.

Synchronization can be understood at vastly different scales depending on our orientation. Near the end of the *Undertale* Neutral run there are two bosses I need to fight. The first of these is more difficult: Asgore. Damaging Asgore is simple. Every phase of the battle I select to fight there are four lines that scroll across the screen. To do the most damage possible, and thus end the fight as quickly as possible, I need to stop the lines by pressing spacebar when they are at the precise center of the screen. This window to deal increased damage is only one frame (1/30th of a second) long. Depending on how well I do at this task dictates how many phases of the fight I need to do. This section requires intense concentration to synchronize my input with the game’s demands (in addition to the run’s demands or the immaterial set of rules that governs my engagement with the game). This synchronization is both prolonged as well as extremely short. There is a repeated build up while the line moves across the screen followed by the punctuated attempt to sync my input with the line’s precise position. Synchronization happens in regard to these individual button presses, but because of the interface of the run with its rules of engagement, I also synchronize with the

temporal demands of the run as well. The timer is always ticking and every action I take (including waiting) is necessarily a part of the run itself.

Synchronization extends over time and is compressed into fractions of a second. My best *Undertale* Neutral run was completed in (the rather lackluster compared to other runners) time of 1:07:30. The act of completing that speedrun was a matter of synchronizing on the macro and micro scale. But that synchronization is never perfect, even for the best runners. It is possible to defeat Asgore in 11 rounds of damage dealing. In my run I managed to end the fight in 17. I am not able to perfectly synchronize my body, but I desire and strive for that perfection. Synchronization is the very exigence of speedrunning, and speedrunning reveals how that synchronization is always impossible. Meticulously tracked splits remind us of every fraction of a second we are out of sync; we can never perfectly merge with another.

But it is the desire and the striving that is important, and, in fact, imperfections allow speedrunning to exist at all. If perfect runs were possible speedrunning would lose most of its appeal. The messy interfaces of our bodies and the game mean that we are compelled to struggle with the run, to try and mold the game's technological configurations to our desires and our bodies to the configurations. Speedrunning is a long process though. It may not be useful to only look at an individual run, or the fractions of a second that make up individual actions. Any run is built from the many, many runs that come before it, both by an individual and others within a speedrunning community. "The grind," the long march of resetting attempts in hopes of improving the time, is another orientation towards the temporality of speedrunning. At the end of the grind we hope to attain a brief moment of synchronization that is a personal best. To transition is also to grapple with uneasy synchronizations. To bring our bodies into sync with our desires and extending that synchronization over time is difficult. The difficulty is not the same for everyone, and often the difficulties stem from the matrices of gender, race, class, and other forces outside of our direct



control. However, by incorporating and synchronizing virtual and physical technologies with our bodies we come to produce new kinds of subjectivities, new bodies, and new, better modes of living our lives. The technologies of videogames are one of many technologies of gender, and because of videogame's engagement with synchronized cyborg constructions they become a tool to enunciate, imagine, play with, and embody new forms of subjectivity for ourselves within the matrices of power afforded to us by virtue of our material realities as well as socio-political positionality.

End splits.

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