

From Home to Stage: How Speedrunners Negotiate Performance, Relation to the Audience, and Spectacle in Live-Streaming Speedrun Marathons

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Abstract *This paper explores how speedrunners conceive of performance, negotiate their relationship with the audience, and articulate competitive and mediation objectives within the framework of the spectacle of live-streaming speedrun marathons. Based on seventeen semi-structured interviews with practitioners performing various roles in the French charity event SpeedDons 2022 (speedrunners, commentators, entertainers, reviewers), this research will show how they must navigate between competing representations of the practice and contrasting systems of norms.*

Introduction: The case of *SpeedDons 2022*

As Schmalzer (2022, 12) points out, ‘speedrunning is many things simultaneously to many people’, and giving a simple definition could never fully reflect its nature. However, it is useful to start with a generic definition in order to understand the concept and the commitment involved: Speedrunning consists in completing an objective within a video game as quickly as possible. Historically, this objective has most often been to complete the whole game. Speedrunning can also be seen as a ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) in which players share a passion and learn from each other in a ‘supportive environment’ (Newman 2008, 129). Koziel (2019) sums up the speedrun process in three main steps: investigation, routing, and execution. While, in the early days, only the results were published, streaming technologies have now made the various stages of the process visible, ‘making speedrunning a journey shared with viewers rather than a completely isolated practice’ (Koziel 2019, 116). In this respect, *Twitch* has become, over the years, an indispensable tool for speedrunners wishing to share their practice.

Twitch is the largest video game live-streaming platform and the scene for all kinds of charity events, of which speedrunning is a long-standing ambassador. Charity marathons can be themed around anything (Sonic games, awful games,

Nintendo games, etc.) and they consist in offering content on *Twitch* over several days, while appealing to viewers to donate for charity. Since 2010, Games done Quick (GdQ), has been ‘one of the largest and most successful charity efforts in the video gaming community’ (Sher and Su 2019, 2) and, since 2021, the second most important marathon is *SpeeDons*, which is held in France. In 2023, *SpeeDons* raised over €1.2 million for *Médecins du Monde*¹ and became the first non-GdQ speedrunning marathon to raise a seven-digit sum for a cause. The analysis presented in this paper is based on the second edition of this event, which was held from 15 to 17 April 2022 in the Palais des Congrès, Paris (France).

Figure 1: The setting of the French speedrun charity marathon *SpeeDons* (2022) at the Palais des Congrès. Photo: Alexandre Lemarquis.



SpeeDons was born under the impulse of the charity *Médecins du Monde*, which wanted to organise a video game event to raise funds, with the help of the French streamer MisterMV.² With his past as a speedrunner and his popularity in the French-speaking streaming world, MisterMV opened the event to a relatively mainstream audience while bringing his expertise to the organisation of the marathon. The event also benefits from the expertise of the association *Le French Restream*, which broadcasts the GdQ in French and has been organising marathons since 2017, according to its website.³ Some of the association’s members worked on the

1 An international non-governmental medical organisation working all around the world and based in France.

2 <https://www.twitch.tv/mistervv>.

3 <https://lefrenchrestream.fr/>.

planning and MisterMV was the main host of the event. For fifty-five hours, nearly sixty speedrunners performed live on stage at the Palais des Congrès at SpeeDons 2022. The organisation of such an event requires significant human resources, carrying out various technical, organisational, or performance-related functions.

In this article, we will focus specifically on four of these functions: reviewers, commentators, entertainers,⁴ and speedrunners. The reviewers are responsible for selecting the speedruns (and their performers) from among hundreds of submissions and then drawing up the event's schedule. The commentators perform a function similar to their counterparts in conventional sports: In other words, they explain what is happening on the screen. Entertainers are responsible for filling the time between speedruns or during a performance: for example, they read out donations received or indicate that certain targets have been reached. Finally, the speedrunners are the ones who perform on stage.

In this paper, we will attempt to provide a better understanding of the practice, of the relationship speedrunners cultivate with the concept of 'performance', and of the different goals they have when they participate in this particular type of event. To this end, we conducted seventeen semi-structured interviews with SpeeDons 2022 participants. These interviews aimed to determine how our informants characterised their experience in the contexts of speedrunning in general and of the SpeeDons 2022 marathon in particular. They were analysed using a mixed method, combining a first phase of flexible coding (Deterding and Waters 2018) applied to all the interviews, followed by an in-depth thematic approach of four interviews particularly representative of the four roles mentioned above (which will therefore be widely quoted in the following pages, under the aliases INFO1, INFO2, INFO3, and INFO5). The coding has made it possible to bring out certain thematic recurrences (properties) in the practitioners' discourses, which we exploit in these pages in three ways. First, we will use our informants' responses to understand what exactly is encompassed by the concept of 'performance' in the context of the speedrun marathon. Second, the articulation of the properties identified in the interviews will allow us to construct different categories, which we will show are organised into three sets of oppositions that structure the practitioners' experience: *impressing* the audience while *bringing* them into the community; *making* the viewers *understand* and *making* them *stay*; *promoting* and *breaking* the game. Finally, we will present a last recurring category of the interviews (the act of *comparing* speedrun with other forms of performance) to show how it is used by practitioners to situate their practice in tension between several systems of norms.

4 'Ambianceurs', in French.

Speedrun marathons and the concept of ‘performance’

Speedrunners are extremely free in the way they perform: They can join a community and speedrun according to rules set by that community; they can also create their own constraints, the only limit being their imagination. The domain presents a wide variety of player profiles, and the rules governing the practice may vary considerably between communities or contexts. This diversity in the way practice is conceived was reflected in the responses of our informants, particularly when asked if there was a difference between speedrunning at home and speedrunning on the Palais des Congrès stage.

Figure 2: Speedrunners (foreground), commentators (middle) and audience (background) at Speedons (2022). Photo: Alexandre Lemarquis



1.1 Speedrunning at home versus speedrunning on stage

Speedrunning is an amateur practice – the amateur being ‘the one who loves, who acts out of passion, whose desire to earn money is unknown and whose level of competence is indeterminate’⁵ (Hurel 2020, 6). However, although the practice is rarely lucrative, the term still covers a variety of profiles, from occasional speedrunners to highly invested streamers and event organisers. Besides, speedrunning is experienced differently by different individuals: Some do not wish to share their perfor-

5 Original text: ‘celui qui aime, qui agit par passion, dont on ignore s’il est aussi porté par le désir de gagner de l’argent et dont le niveau de compétence est indéterminé’, translated by the authors.

mances while others livestream all their attempts; some will be satisfied with a time that they themselves have determined, while others try to obtain national or world records. Nevertheless, to contextualise our research, it is worth recalling the selection criteria for *SpeeDons 2022* in order to understand the profiles of those whom we interviewed. As one of the reviewers of the event explained:

I think that the first requirement is that the run must be of a high level [...]. The runner, in any case, must have a good level, meaning that he must be well ranked in relation to the world records, or even have the world record himself, even if this is not really a requirement in itself.⁶ (INF05)

The speedrunners selected for *SpeeDons 2022* are therefore players who are close to the world records. Most of them are very invested in their practice and regularly try to improve their 'PBs' (personal bests) – usually streaming these attempts. We asked them about the possible differences between speedrunning at home – a regular activity – and speedrunning on stage – a much more occasional activity – in the context of a marathon, and many responses related to the preparation of the event. Without exception, our speedrunner informants trained by performing 'no-reset runs':

When you are speedrunning at home, you reset when you make a mistake, you start from the beginning because you missed something. You can train yourself to ... Even if every possible disaster happens during the run, you continue. That way, you are in 'event condition', you are in '*SpeeDons* condition'. (INF03)

As this quote explains, a no-reset run is a speedrun where the practitioner finishes no matter what and does not restart from the beginning. They choose to prepare in this way because, at *SpeeDons*, speedruns are required to occur in an estimated time that speedrunners must respect to ensure the rhythm of the event. Training to perform no-reset runs is part of this effort to respect the estimated time. These restrictions are inherent to the smooth running of a marathon, but, at home, speedrunners are much freer. They can stream dozens of attempts, start over again as they wish, etc. The context therefore has a decisive impact on the way practitioners conceive of their activity – and this is reflected in the way they prepare: They do not go to *SpeeDons* to set records but to ensure an attempt within a given time. What makes their activity a 'performance', then, differs depending on the setting in which they perform.

6 All interview transcripts are translated from French to English by the authors of this text.

1.2 How the context frames the performance

The protean aspect of the concept of performance has been studied since Richard Schechner, the founding father of performance studies. The main prism for analysing performance originally focused largely on the arts and the aesthetic dimension, before opening up to broader fields such as culture and sociology (Féral 2013, 205). Schechner (2002) distinguishes several situations in which performance takes place, from everyday life to artistic representation, human relationships – professional, social, intimate, etc. – and play. This diversity makes the definition of ‘performance’ complex, as Jean-Marie Pradier (2017, 287) writes:

[T]he *lexeme performance* belongs to the vocabulary of several disciplinary fields for which it feeds the plural theoretical fabric: linguistics, philosophy, engineering, the science and techniques of physical activities and sports, the performing arts – in particular theatrical studies – aesthetics, anthropology, business, organization and management studies. As a result, publications, conferences and works referring to “performance theory” do not all deal with the same issue.⁷

The speedrun, as a sequence of ‘actions that *display themselves*’ (Féral 2013, 207), clearly illustrates this definitional tangle, especially since it encompasses and intertwines the definitions of performance as an artistic format and as an effective way of conducting actions. However, Schechner (2002) explains that ‘whether in the primary sense of “excelling or exceeding the limits of a certain standard” or in the sense of “investing oneself in a spectacle, a game or a ritual”, to perform is the result of certain actions’ (Féral 2013, 206). These actions are: *being*, *doing*, *showing doing*, and *explaining showing doing*. In the context of speedrunning, *being* can be both implicit and explicit. When using a platform such as *Twitch*, *YouTube*, *Discord*, *Speedrun.com* or performing at charity events, speedrunners are expected to behave in a certain way, respecting the policies of the relevant spaces. Conventions also exist regarding the attitude to adopt towards the community (whether or not to share information, whether or not to get involved, etc.), the spectators (whether or not to answer their questions) and other speedrunners (whether or not to play fair, value their work, etc.), but they are actualised in specific ways by each individual.

7 Original text: ‘[L]e *lexème performance* appartient au vocabulaire de plusieurs champs disciplinaires dont il nourrit la fabrique théorique plurielle: la linguistique, la philosophie, l’ingénierie, les sciences et techniques des activités physiques et sportives, les arts du spectacle vivant – en particulier les études théâtrales – l’esthétique, l’anthropologie, les sciences de l’organisation et de la gestion des entreprises. De ce fait, les publications, colloques et travaux qui se réfèrent à « la théorie de la performance » ne traitent pas tous de la même question’, translated by the authors.

Doing emphasises the act of speedrunning, i.e., the achievement of the goal set by the speedrunner according to their own abilities. *Showing doing* consists in publishing or displaying the *doing*. We should note that the means of *showing doing* in the field of speedrunning have undergone a major evolution in the form of streaming, which has diversified not only the *doing* experience, but also the spectators' experience. Indeed, it is now possible to follow a speedrunner's attempts live and, as a result, failure has become a component of the viewer experience, whereas, in the past, speedrunners only published their successful attempts.

Finally, *explaining showing doing* defines the field of action of performance studies – the explanation of the performative potential of an action being itself understood as a form of performance. Speedrunning is an interesting case, in this respect, in that *explaining showing doing* is an essential part of the activity, since speedruns are generally accompanied by explanatory comments (which may be oral or take a paratextual form). Here again, the democratisation of streaming has led to an evolution in the manifestation of this accompanying discourse, since *showing doing* and *explaining showing doing* often happen simultaneously. A viewer can use *Twitch*'s chat to ask the speedrunner for an explanation, and the speedrunner is free to respond or not – echoing the *being*. In a charity marathon such as *SpeedDons*, these different facets of performance have led to the formalisation of different roles embodied by practitioners: The speedrunner is initially tasked with the *doing*; the commentator is responsible for the *explaining showing doing*; and the entertainer is in charge of the *showing doing* (or even of a fifth layer: *displaying the explaining showing doing*, as they introduce, enhance and frame the work of commentators).

Speedrunning – and speedrun marathons in particular – therefore fall squarely within the domain of performance studies, in that they encompass several frames of action and of 'twice-behaved behaviour' (Schechner 2002, 29) that relate to different aspects of the concept of performance. More specifically, our informants' discourses resonate clearly with the definitions of the notion as developed in the work of Marvin Carlson (1996), as taken up by Marleena Huuhka (2020).

According to Carlson (1996), there are three definitions for performance (display of skills, patterned behaviour, and keeping up the standard) which were then synthesised by Huuhka (2020, 61). 'Display of skills means literally consciously showing off someone's – or something's – skills' (Huuhka 2020, 61, emphasis in original): For speedrunners, it will be a matter of demonstrating the different skills or 'psychomotor game capital' (Krywicki and Dozo, 2022) they have acquired to master the game and perform actions requiring extremely precise execution. 'Patterned behavior means behavior that is distanced from the person doing it' (Huuhka 2020, 61, emphasis in original), which encompasses performing tasks in a particular way. It means playing the role of the speedrunner, following a 'score' or a method to ensure its function and objectives. Finally, 'keeping up the standard refers to the quality of something' (Huuhka

2020, 61, emphasis in original) and is a judgement with all that implies in terms of subjectivity.

The speedrunners interviewed are generally engaged in regular speedrun practice and motivated by the idea of beating their personal best – a performance never being an end in itself but always a step towards the next record (Barnabé 2017, 182). When they speak about their practice in a personal context, they are thus led to talk about performance through the prism of *display of skills*. They are particularly hard on themselves, as indicated by the principle of learning to accept mistakes through the example of the no-reset runs. However, this discourse changes when speedrunners speak about their participation in *SpeeDons*: Although they are required to have a certain level, they are not expected to perform perfectly in this particular context.

By training to perform no-reset runs, speedrunners prepare themselves to deliver a performance conditioned by the event and its organisation. While they insist on the ‘impressive’ aspect (*display of skills*) of their performance, their respect for the estimated time shows that they are also playing a role (*patterned behaviour*) to which they attach great importance. At *SpeeDons*, the performances are in the name of fundraising, and the individuality of the practitioners cannot be expressed as much as if they were at home undertaking a record-breaking attempt. This leads to two consequences. First, marathon speedruns are *showcases for the practice* but do not represent speedrunning as it may be experienced every day. Second, this distinction brings a hierarchical distinction to the way practitioners analyse their time at *SpeeDons*:

Runs during a marathon are much more about entertainment than performance. [...] By contrast, when we're trying to get a PB, we go for performance first and then, in a second step, entertainment. (INF08)

You have to be able to balance playfulness, entertainment, and performance. If I had to put the three in order, I think it would be: play, entertainment, and performance, in that order. (INF04)

These quotes show that the distinction between speedrunning at home and speedrunning at a marathon brings about a paradigm shift in the analysis of the performance. Patterned behaviour becomes more important in the context of the marathon and coexists more broadly with the display of skills.

Another shift emerged when we asked our informants their opinion about the success of the event. According to INF05, who is also a reviewer, *SpeeDons 2022* was ‘a huge success’ and, in relation to this topic, the third definition of the notion of performance – *keeping up the standard* – was clearly most relevant. *SpeeDons* is an event that raises money for charity: Care is certainly taken in selecting the best speedrunners (*display of skills*) to propose a demonstration (*patterned behaviour*) to an audience,

but, in the end, this organisation serves to provide a quality event (*keeping up the standard*) during which viewers are invited to make donations. For instance, for the organisers, maintaining high standards is also about paying attention to the influencers that are invited to participate as entertainers:

I also think that you have to keep a certain ethic. I'm not in favour of inviting just anyone under the pretext of making donations, because I think that when you're in the charity world, you have to have a minimum of ethics. (INF05)

To summarise: When practitioners discuss their practice, all the meanings of Carlson's concept of performance are activated simultaneously. However, their prioritisation varies according to the performance context. We will see that these frameworks for interpreting performance also vary according to each speedrunner's positioning in relation to conflicting goals.

Speedrunners' relations to the audience: Conflicting goals

Besides reordering the priorities that usually govern the practice of speedrun, the diversity of the vocabulary that our informants use to refer to what is shown at SpeeDons ('show', 'showcase', 'entertainment', 'spectacle', etc.) also indicates the existence of several competing frameworks from which the performance is conceived and experienced by practitioners, as well as the difficulty of defining this concept unanimously. As Darshana Jayemanne points out more generally about video games:

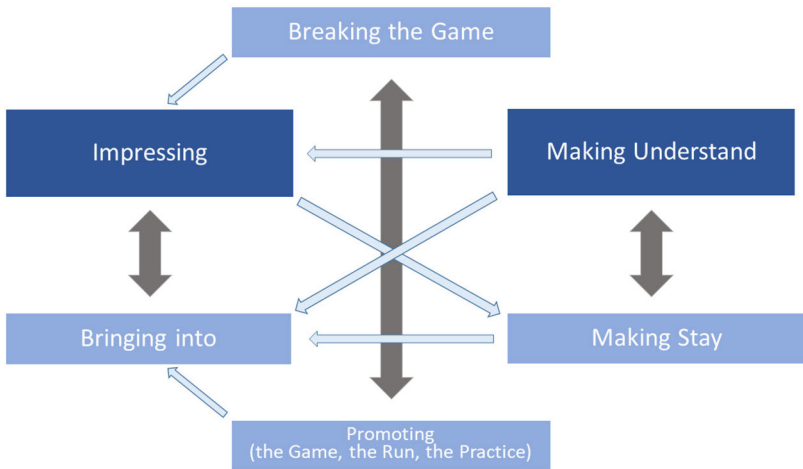
Performance in games is not a concatenation of basic units, but a complex multidimensional weave. [...] The efforts to which players have to go in order to define elite performances points towards the difficulty of developing a satisfactory theory of videogame performance as an overarching concept (Jayemanne 2017, 5–6).

This difficulty in establishing the notion of performance is particularly apparent when our informants explain their personal goals as performers in the context of the marathon or talk about their relationship with the audience. Indeed, while some of their goals and motivations reinforce each other, others come into tension or even contradiction, and each practitioner has to negotiate with these conflicting objectives in a specific way.

We have formalised how these goals are expressed in the interviews in the following diagram (see Figure 3). The boxes designate the categories synthesising the main properties expressed by our informants in relation to the theme of the marathon

(and the larger size of the categories *impressing* and *making understand* illustrates their prevalence in their discourses). The single arrows (in blue) indicate a reinforcing relationship between two categories; the double arrows (in grey) indicate three structural oppositions organising the practitioners' experience.

Figure 3: Model representing the relationships between the goals expressed by our informants.



We will draw on these three oppositions to describe how each practitioner uniquely navigates the different agendas, and we will show that the tensions encountered can often be related to a difficult compromise between the regime of the spectacle, a will to transmission or education, and the experience of speedrunning as a form of transformative play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 301).

2.1 Impressing vs bringing into the practice

When our informants explain their role in the event or describe the type of show they wish to propose, they all converge in the need to produce an 'impressive' performance. Being able to showcase a 'high-level speedrun' is a condition for the very existence of the marathon, and guides the work of the reviewers as well as that of the commentators, entertainers, and speedrunners.

Delivering an amazing performance is an integral part of the speedrunner's role, as INF10 explicitly summarises:

My role in the event, an objective that I had in mind, was to perform. I told myself: “I have to show my level”. [...] “I have to impress”, a bit. That’s what put a little pressure on me... it was like: “I have to be impressive, I have to show I’m up to it”.

The objective of captivating the public also guides the programming of the event, since the runs are selected to offer particularly difficult challenges, which the majority of players would not be able to achieve:

What viewers can expect is I think something impressive [...], to be captivated, in a way, by what they are going to see and by the runs. [...] Speedons is clearly focused on impressive runs. Something really very difficult to achieve. [...] You go to see Speedons, you pay your seat at the Palais des Congrès to really see something you cannot do. It’s like when you go to see a [...] great musician [...], it’s really to see something impressive. (INF02)

Stressing the challenge of the run is an integral part of the role of commentators and entertainers, who have consciously developed various rhetorical techniques in order to contribute to creating narrative tension (Baroni 2007) through their commentary (for example, by using announcement strategies such as warning the audience that ‘something crazy is going to happen’; INF17). Since the difficulty of executing the actions in play are not always visible on the screen, the role of the commentators is also to reveal this difficulty and to make the audience understand that they are supposed to admire the skill on display:

Sometimes, you see something that you think is benign – a simple jump, when in fact it is very, very precise. [...] And for my part, what I really like to do, when I see a run like that, is to feel the difficulty. (INF02)

We think it’s pretty important to remind people that, even if it looks smooth and everything, what the guy on stage is doing is a crazy thing. There are not many people who will be able to do it. And so, yes, we try to highlight the runner so that people realise that what he’s doing is not normal gameplay, that it’s difficult, that there are hours of training behind it. (INF14)

This set of motivations form, in our model, the category *impressing*, which is one of the most hierarchically decisive in our informants’ discourses. However, this category clashes with another shared goal: that of democratising the practice and bringing the novice audience into the community.

Indeed, the ambition to democratise speedrunning – which is broadly perceived as a form of ‘high performance play’ (Lowood 2006) – is always present, between the lines, in the way our informants consider their roles. For instance, when INF02

prioritises what they want to convey to the public through SpeedDons, they place in second place (just after the need to ‘impress’) their focus on popularisation and inclusiveness. Bringing new participants to try speedrunning is part of the motivation that gives practitioners their taste for their practice, as illustrated by this quote from INF03: ‘For me, to grow the community like that, to inspire people to try speedrunning, it makes me super happy.’

However, this goal of convincing newcomers that they are capable of trying speedrunning comes into tension with the principle of captivating the audience and making them feel that what they are watching is exceptionally difficult. Practitioners express awareness of this tension, as their attention to bringing the public into the practice is often expressed as a means of deconstructing the elitist image of speedrun – which is a direct consequence of the *impressive* nature of the performances:

There’s an interesting thing about speedrunning [...]; it’s that anyone can be a speedrunner. [...] It’s not reserved for just an elite, as you might think at first, just by seeing the world record. (INF08)

I always assume that it’s someone’s first marathon. [...] There’s always someone on the chat who’s going to watch a speedrun marathon for the first time and won’t understand what’s happening on the screen. And if you don’t give that person the respect they deserve and explain things to them, it’s also their last speedrun marathon [...]. Everybody can be a speedrunner. Absolutely anyone can be a speedrunner. And, to convey that, you have to open the door. And it’s also the role of the host and the commentator to be the wedge. (INF01)

The spectacular nature of the performance can therefore be an obstacle to learning the practice and, thus, to the very existence of the community. Practitioners navigate between these two constraints with a high awareness of the need to maintain a balance between valorisation and desacralisation of performers, especially in the work of commentary: ‘Our goal was not to tell people, “This is hard, this is hard, you won’t be able to do it”, but rather, “This is hard: He is very good”.’ You have to realise that he is good’ (INF14). This negotiation of the opposition between *impressing* the public and *making them enter* the practice is the first ambivalence that marks the specificity of the SpeedDons spectacle.

2.2 Making understand vs making stay

The second tension revealed by the interviews is that between the will to *make* the public *understand* the techniques used by speedrunners and the will to entertain them in order to *make* them *stay*. Indeed, as an extension of the desire to bring

the viewers into the community, our informants manifest that their goal is not just to show a performance that would be visually impressive or entertaining, but also to transmit knowledge about speedrunning. For instance, according to INFO8, everyone in the audience should be able to understand what they are watching – regardless of their initial game literacy (Zagal 2011) – to the point that it is preferable to sacrifice time and lose a record than to miss the opportunity to explain something.

This focus on transmission is fundamental, because without some understanding of the run, the previously mentioned objective of *impressing* actually cannot be achieved:

And if we don't explain to them why what they're seeing is great, and why what they're seeing is exceptional, well, it's a bunch of pixels that are going into each other, and then sometimes the character goes "zip zip" and we don't really understand why. But if there's someone explaining to you: "[...] well, all of a sudden, it becomes exceptional". (INFO1)

Similarly, the ability of practitioners to explain the runs is also a condition for *bringing* new members *into* the community, which they see as a particularly important goal for a mainstream show such as SpeedDons, which attracts a wider and more diverse audience than more specialised speedrun events. This central and structuring dimension of knowledge transmission (which implies that 'the mere consumption of speedrun videos already constitutes an entry into the practice,'⁸ Barnabé 2016, 449) shows that speedrun is conceived by its practitioners as a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991), since learning is not considered as a peripheral activity, but as 'a way of participating in social practices, a status, a way of belonging to a community, a way of "being in it"'⁹ (Berry 2008, 13).

However, the desire to educate about speedrunning must negotiate with the need to entertain the audience, to please them in order to convince them *to stay* (and thus increase the chances of collecting donations for the charity): 'We're on a charity marathon, the objective is that... well, people stay, people advertise, people are interested, people watch and so people donate' (INFO8). Indeed, although a minimum level of understanding could be seen as a means to promote audience engagement, the highly technical nature of the explanations required to understand the detailed operation of each run is perceived as an obstacle to this objective of entertaining and capturing public attention. Getting the audience to stay is actually

8 Original text: 'La seule consommation de vidéos de speedrun constitue déjà une entrée dans la pratique', translated by the authors.

9 Original text: 'Une façon de participer à des pratiques sociales, un statut, un mode d'appartenance à une communauté, une façon « d'en être »', translated by the authors.

the reason that specifically motivated the creation of the role of 'entertainers' in French-speaking speedrun marathons. According to INF01, their function is mainly to prevent spectators from leaving the show between runs, by linking performances and 'keeping the energy high'.

In order to reconcile the objective of offering an entertaining show, capable of capturing the attention of the public for a long time, and that of transmitting technical knowledge about the runs, the practitioners have set up a formal division of roles, which is also reflected in the work of the commentators. Indeed, they consciously assign themselves two kinds of roles: the technical expert and the 'candid commentator' (INF01) or 'troublemaker' (INF17), whose function is to act as an avatar for the novice audience, for instance by asking naive questions about what is happening on screen.

This combination is what allows the event to maintain a 'good balance between technique and fun' (INF01). We see here that the goals pursued by our informants sometimes reinforce each other (making the runs understandable can help to make them spectacular), and sometimes conflict (giving too much explanation risks spoiling the show). Coordinating spectacle and mediation requires speedrunners to formalise techniques and to interpret roles that are consciously developed by the practitioners.

2.3 Breaking the game vs promoting the game

Finally, the different motivations of our informants concerning *SpeedDons* are traversed by a third tension, which concerns the practice of speedrunning more generally, independently of the marathon format. Indeed, when asked what motivates them to perform, many cite their love for a particular game and their desire to promote that game, to show it in order to make people discover it. However, this motivation comes into tension with a foundation of speedrunning as a practice and as a spectacle: the pleasure of breaking the game, of radically transforming it, of showing it in a completely unexpected state.

Sharing their love for a game is both an incentive for speedrunners and a 'responsibility' for the commentators:

Being able to share my love for the game, it's really cool. [...] I know that there are people who may not be aware that this game exists, who may have discovered it through my run. If I can make people want to just play the game casually, well that's good enough. (INF12)

It's my job to showcase the run, it's my job to showcase the game. [...] Even the worst game ever, you can showcase it in a super interesting way and you can present it in a super interesting way. (INF01)

Being a mediator between the public and the games is therefore part of the role that practitioners assign themselves, but this mission is not facilitated by a principle that is at the heart of the speedrun and the foundation of its 'transgressive' (Scully-Blaker 2016) or 'subversive' ethos (Hemmingsen 2020): the pleasure of *breaking* or twisting the game, of 'turning games upside down' (INF15), of 'bust[ing] the game as best we can' (INF12), in order to produce a visual spectacle worth watching. In speedrun, there is, in short, 'an almost perverse pleasure to be derived from reducing games of this scale and complexity to their barest [...]' (Newman 2008, 129).

Nevertheless, this pleasure is less destructive than transformative: In our informants' narratives, it originates in the desire to renew a game that, by dint of being loved and replayed, no longer leaves room for the contingency (Malaby 2007, 106) necessary for the development of a playful experience. Indeed, the existence of room for uncertainty (Henriot 1989, 239) or of calibrated contingency is a condition for the emergence of play. In other words, games must allow that every situation 'could have been otherwise' (Malaby 2007, 107). 'Without this room for freedom, the ludic mechanics are blocked' (Solinski 2012, 163), as one of our informants expressed clearly:

The simple fact of knowing it by heart, because, for example, it is our favourite game sometimes, can be boring because you already know everything by heart. So adding an extra goal [...] is a practice that is in fact an aspect of playfulness. (INF02)

Breaking the game is thus a way for practitioners to enhance their enjoyment of the video games they already love (Hurel 2020, 174) and to develop techniques to experience them in new ways. By doing so, they make room so they can continue to play despite the loss of ludic uncertainty that is entailed by the repetitiveness of practice. Speedrunning's ability to renew the aesthetic experience of video games (by altering the way players feel and interact with them) is actually what leads Emilie Reed to associate the practice with a form of 'Neo-Baroque performance' (Reed 2022, 101).

The radical transformation of games is put to the service of spectacularisation (the exploited glitches are often presented as 'visual'), but sometimes requires adjustments so as not to contravene the objective of *promoting* the games shown. For example, INF03 explains that they prefer long-run categories to still be able to show the game: 'It's a bit of a mix between "I'm trying to go fast" and "Let's not wreck the game in five minutes," though, we still do all the dungeons, just to see a little bit of the game anyway'. Here again, we see that each practitioner has to negotiate in a specific way between several goals (sometimes articulated, sometimes contradictory), which inscribe the speedrun marathon in several frames of reference and several regimes of experience: the (transformative) play, the mediation (introducing games or new ways of playing), and the spectacle.

A composite performance drawing on multiple spectacle frameworks

This collision of frameworks also manifests itself in another recurrence in our interviews: the tendency of speedrunners to *compare* their practice to other domains of performance – in particular, music, theatre, competitive sports, and art – in order to situate it (and to *make it understandable* to the outside audience we were forming as interlocutors).

The comparison between gaming and theatre is not new (Homan and Homan 2014), and, in the case of a staged performance play such as *SpeedDons*, it is perhaps not surprising that five of our seventeen informants mention having had experience in theatre and situate their speedrun practice as a continuation of that experience (the theatre having prepared them to perform on stage). The same transfer of skills applies to music: ‘As soon as you start to run, it’s a bit like when you make music [...]: When you’re on stage, in fact, you don’t think about it too much, you think about the piece’ (INF05). More broadly, even those who do not practice these disciplines compare speedrunning to theatre and music to explain the tension between what is planned and the need for improvisation:

A speedrun is really like a musical score, like a piece of music that you are going to play. So the route is going to be your score. The way you played, that’s going to be your performance. (INF08)

Even if it’s very repetitive, it’s never the same thing. I’ll draw a parallel with theatre: People often ask me [...] “Aren’t you tired of doing the same show a hundred times?” I’m like: “Well, no, because even though it’s the same show and the same text, the same thing never happens twice in a performance”. (INF07)

However, this parallel with theatre is not unanimous among our informants, some of whom also use the comparison with other forms of spectacles to explain what makes their practice unique. For instance, INF17 explains the qualities of a good entertainer: ‘You have to have a little bit... not an ability to improvise, but not to be afraid to be in front of a camera without support and therefore to have a little bit... not to “improvise,” it’s not theatre, but I mean, to know how to tell things’. Later, they also characterise *SpeedDons* as a form of ‘content event’, as opposed to other forms of performances that leave more room for *mise en scène*: ‘I mean: we’re not part of a spectacle, actually. *SpeedDons* is not a spectacle, it’s a speedrun marathon.’

Similarly, the fields of art and sport are also used as reference points to which speedrunning is positioned as ‘both close and different’. Speedrun is compared to

sport¹⁰ – particularly athletics – on account of its competitive dimension (INFO8), its difficulty (INF13), and in terms of the similarity of the format of sports and speedrun commentary (INFO4, INFO6 and INF17). INFO2 discusses this in particular detail, using it to defend the idea that there is a fundamental incompatibility between speedrunning and art – contrary to the positions of other practitioners or researchers, for instance in Jonathan Hay: ‘the endeavor of speedrunners to produce optimal gameplay through practice reveals an artistic pursuit of perfection’ (Hay 2020, 8). According to INFO2, speedrunning is defined by a search for optimisation and by the application of an objective ‘method of play’, which brings it closer to sport, but opposes it to art – art being perceived as the domain of subjectivity and emotion: ‘the practice of speedrunning is absolutely not an art for the simple fact that it is a competition, like a sport. [...] The danger of considering it, let’s say, as an artistic practice, is to produce something not optimised, just because it is beautiful.’

Nevertheless, this comparison between speedrunning and sport is not absolute, and the same informant uses another comparison with theatre to describe the particular setting of the marathon:

When we do a speedrun show, when we do a speedrun marathon, let’s say, with a schedule, with different ‘acts’ [...]. Yes, it’s obvious that it possesses an artistic aspect. But, once again, it is because [...] we make sure that the runner must produce, not a personal record, for a speedrun marathon, he must not produce a time performance, he must produce a run, a presentation, a demonstration of his speedrunning [...]. That’s why, for me, a marathon run presentation is much closer to a showcase, a show, than to a speedrun in itself. (INFO2)

From this perspective, the context of the marathon transforms the codes and meanings of speedrunning by making it a staged representation of the practice. Such a conclusion, though, collides with the idea that *Speedons* is a content event rather than a staging.

Overall, practitioners refer to different domains (sport, theatre, music, etc.) to try to make their practice understood and to situate it in the cultural field, but these comparisons lead to conceptual back-and-forth rather than a consensual framework: The speedrun marathon requires scenography and improvisation as in theatre (or as in a ‘sports show’; Rock 2023, 24), but it is not completely a spectacle; it requires a search for optimisation and competition that brings it closer to sport, but this goal is subordinated to a staging that distorts the competitive objectives. The resistance of these competing comparisons to any simplification actually manifests the fundamentally composite nature of speedrun performances.

10 A comparison that is also regularly made in research (Rock 2023, 22–26).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the views that speedrun practitioners have of their practice and of the specific spectacle that is the charitable marathon. We saw that speedrunning brings into tension several regimes of performance and feeds on several competing frames of reference (theatre, sport, music, art), which is expressed, in our informants' discourses, by an attachment to a complex interlocking of objectives, codes, and norms that sometimes contradict each other: to convey knowledge about the game while making it unrecognizable, to captivate the audience while convincing them that they are capable of replicating the feat, to make the performance readable while captivating the audience's attention so that they enter the community and stay.

Speedrunning, in other words, activates all the meanings of Carlson's concept of 'performance' at the same time and produces a form of hybrid, unsteady, chaotic spectacle, where we cannot identify one system of norms that would prevail over the others: Speedrunning is not completely a(n) (e)sport, because the negotiation of rules, the improvisation, and the staging moments are too important and integral to its structure; it is not completely an artistic performance, because the performers constantly bring back the activity to competition and optimisation, or to fun and playful frivolity (Brougères 2012, 124) as a way of distancing themselves from any artistic *ethos* that might be imputed to them; it is at the same time a regulated high-level competition and a disorganised amateur practice, etc. In other words, the constant competition between different systems of norms revealed in the experiences of our informants is precisely what preserves speedrun marathons from developing a dominant, hegemonic framework. Unlike esports, for example, which have quickly become vertically structured, speedrunning is a practice whose codes, rules, and modes of organisation vary from group to group, from context to context, and are constantly re-discussed.

Besides, the transmission of game literacy (Zagal 2011) and the inclusion of the public in the practice is an objective that constantly reappears in the discourses, in one way or another. This goal of transmission is articulated to the spectacular performance and determines it – so much so that commentators and speedrunners have formalised narrative or rhetorical techniques to articulate the goals of performance and those of transmission (such as playing the role of the candid commentator, using announcements or storytelling to produce suspense effects, etc.). The whole specificity of speedrun as a performance is to consistently hold together these different frames of experience: the competitive display of skills (source of spectacle, but difficult to read for a new audience) and the popularisation (necessary to enter the show, but potentially anti-spectacular).

In this respect, speedrun can benefit from being conceptualised not only from the angle of performance, but also from that of performativity, in the sense that prac-

tioners bring the practice into existence in a way that is always singular, ambiguous, fluid, and unstable: As play acts, performatives are not “true” or “false”, “right” or “wrong”. They happen’ (Schechner 2002, 127). Indeed, the interviews revealed an unstructured approach to the practice. Speedrunning is not a uniform object, but one that is intertwined in complex ways and that carries different meanings depending on speedrunners and contexts. This specificity must make researchers take into account the protean nature of the practice and the difficulty of considering it as uniform. The risk would be to study speedrunning as a homogeneous whole, everywhere and for everyone, whereas the practice is constantly evolving, diversifying, and becoming more complex.

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