

A Historical Perspective on Speedrunning: Evolution and Impact of the Informational Aspect upon Speedrunning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This presentation will focus on a historical perspective on speedrunning, a practice that consists of completing a video game as fast as a player can. The practice went into an important change of paradigm in the 90s. At first, a performance was an information transcribed into a document such as magazines. Then, speedrunners started to share their runs thanks to digital technologies including the web, and a performance became a document like a *demo* file from the 90s *DOOM* games or simply a video. Nowadays, modern artifacts such as Twitch or Discord are exploited by speedrunners for producing and sharing information through different mediums (YouTube videos, Google Drive, private messages, etc.). Finally, I argue that the informational aspect of the practice – such as producing and sharing information – is the very heart of any speedrunning community.

Keywords

speedrunning, history of video games, online community, information economy

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Speedrunning a video game is a practice that consists of completing a video game as quickly as possible. Schmalzer (2022, 2) points out that definition does not capture the complexities of speedrunning and its evolution. The practice has undergone several major changes since the 70s, from its technological aspects to its own nature. For example, it is possible to speedrun a video game without completing it according to *speedrun.com*. As they mentioned it, speedrunning can include individual levels, specific objectives or unique limitations as decided by the community or the player. I would define the practice as accomplishing an objective within a video game according to a time reference that is specific to each speedrunner and within a performance framework defined by a community or by the speedrunner.

The first mentions of speedrunning in an academic context are from the late 2000s. Newman (2008) was the first to lay the foundations of speedrun studies. He considers the practice to be inseparable from the collective: a performance is always part of a collaborative context. As we mentioned earlier, the practice went through important changes and the collaborative aspect is one of them. These changes are brought by digital technologies, but it causes more of an evolution than a revolution (Coavoux 2018, 39). It is by observing forum, digital traces, that Newman arrives at this conclusion. Since his book *Playing with videogames*, other researchers have taken an interest in the practice, demonstrating the multidisciplinary potential of speedrunning. The practice has been discussed through philosophical perspectives (Hemmingsen

2020 ; Schmalzer 2022 ; Scully-Blaker 2014), through technological aspects (Groß et al. 2022 ; Hay 2020 ; Lafond 2018 ; Newman 2019) or through literature and its rhetorical components (Barnabé 2017).

To sum up my research, I would say that I try to understand how speedrunners transform their experience playing a video game into informational expertise. In order to do so, I have studied the history of speedrunning by insisting on its informational components. Koziel (2019) has taken an interest in that history in a global aspect and Schmalzer (2022) has put the emphasis on the technological components such as leaderboards, timer or streaming platforms. Content creators have also published videos about it and – even if it is not an academic work – the expertise from the fans is precious because, thanks to the Internet, anyone can compete with experts (Flichy 2010, 8). My proposal is divided into three axes. In my first part, I will study the first speed-based performances – what I call proto-speedrunning – and how it went from a performance to an information. It was necessary to consider the performances of the players as information likely to be published. This part is based on a simplified Shannon-Weaver model of communication (1998): a message (the performance), a channel (Activision's Newsletters ; Nintendo Power magazines, etc.), a receiver (any fans *reading* those channels). Then, in my second part, I will discuss how the practice has operated a change of paradigm because of the web era. Performance is no longer just an information transcribed into a document but performance becomes a document. It is an approach based on Meyriat (1981) perspective where anything can be a document as long as someone is extracting information from it. At some point, players began to organize the speed-based competition themselves. In order to do so, players shared their performances and anyone had access to the files. Finally, in my last part, I will discuss some modern artifacts that are used by speedrunners such as *Twitch* or *Discord* and how they are built around producing and sharing information. This part is made possible by the seventeen semi-structured interviews with SpeedDons 2022 – a French marathon of speedruns – participants I have conducted during August and September 2022.

Speedrunning can be seen as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) where players share a passion and learn from each other in a supportive environment (Newman 2008, 129). 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 part of it' (Berry 2008, 13). I conclude by saying that information, from creation to reception, is the very heart of any speedrunning community. By choosing an informational perspective, I also tend to open my conclusion about information in a video-game based community ecosystem. Access to information is a crucial and dominant part of the practice for speedrunners but also for viewers. A good example would be video game speedrun charity marathons like Awesome Games Done Quick or SpeedDons where commentators and speedrunners try to explain the performances. As Barnabé (2016, 449) mentions it, the consumption of speedrunning videos already constitutes an entry into the practice in the sense that it requires, on the part of the receiver, a certain investment. That access could be presented as a form of cultural mediation which is a set of actions aiming to bring an individual or a group into contact with a cultural or artistic proposal (Aboudrar and Mairesse 2022, 3).

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