

# Speedruns as assemblage: Witnessing reterritorialization through developer reaction videos

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## INTRODUCTION

Speedrunning has grown from humble beginnings as a relatively obscure subculture of videogaming (Scully-Blaker 2014), an offshoot of the tournaments and magazine competitions that encouraged players to submit their highest scores in the arcades, to a mass audience spectacle in the era of streaming platforms (Johnson and Woodcock 2019). As videogames become more technically complex, speedruns have become more technically demanding and spectacular in their execution. In the present era, videogames are enjoyed as much to be watched, as to be played (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 47).

As part of the spectacle, speedrunners challenge and reconfigure the relationship between developer and player by radically circumventing boundaries set in place to organize the user experience within a game. In this paper, we address the potential of speedrunners' actions to deterritorialize and reterritorialize videogames, a set of simultaneous movements described by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as the means by which "a set of relations is undone or decontextualized" and the formation of new, unanticipated, relations and actualizations are enabled (Sterling and Harrison 2020, 30). We explore this by analyzing the relationship between player, developer, videogame text and the online platforms on which speedruns are typically shared, as a form of *assemblage* (as established by Taylor 2009). Ciara Cremin argues that "we learn by videogames, grow by them, enter into assemblages with them" (2016, 54), and that in recognizing videogames as assemblage we must also understand their *rhizomatic* nature (2016, 55). This is to say that they and their textual meanings are multiple, heterogeneous and constantly seeking to recreate themselves (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 21). We extend this argument that videogames are assemblages, by addressing the configurations – or 'lines of flight' emerging from the rhizomatic text, to return to Deleuze and Guattari's terminology – that arise when the experimental play of speedruns, the spectacle of streaming videos on YouTube, and the commentary of videogame developers are brought together. We seek to explore the distinct assemblage

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that speedrunners enter into, and how the multiplicity of videogame texts is demonstrated through the reconfiguration and reassembly of a speedrun.

We conduct textual analysis of a number of videos of speedruns contained in the YouTube series *Devs React to Speedruns* (IGN, 2019-2020), as well as the *Developer Commentaries* series made available through the popular *Games Done Quick* video on demand website (Games Done Quick, 2014-2020). In these videos, developers of games observe and reflect on the ways speedrunners engage with their texts. The videos in this series offer an opportunity for developers to comment directly on speedruns, watching in real time as the games they have carefully designed and developed with certain play approaches in mind are meticulously picked apart and completed within fractions of the intended play times. Our analysis suggests three key tendencies across the developer reaction videos: discussions that contrast the time it takes speedrunners to complete their games with the development effort (and seem to indicate a preferred, commensurate temporal relationship between player and this labour), discussions in which speedrun techniques are analyzed as systemic affordances (reasserting the primacy of the development process) and, considerations for how the developers ought to reinstate control over their product (through patches, engagement with the speedrunning community, or other means for mitigating the exploits that underly speedruns).

Analysis of these developer commentary paratexts thus highlights the fractures and reconfigurations the assemblage of each videogame has been subjected to. We illustrate from our analysis that the relationship between the speedrunner and the videogame is akin to Deleuze and Guattari's "block of becoming", or "a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man's-land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points" (2004, 293–94), within which the original text is transformed into something incomprehensible to the creator. By deconstructing the boundaries set in place, in effect, an act of textual sabotage, the speedrunner reforms a videogame into an experience that no longer resembles the creation of the original designers, in turn setting off a chain of multiplicities that ripple through the videogame as assemblage. This video dataset also bears witness to an ongoing process of negotiation and reconfiguration that takes place as developers themselves work to define, once more, the aesthetic, programmatic and textual territories of their games. While the speedrun reterritorializes the producer as audience and the speedrunner as videogame developer, the rhizomatic nature of the videogame means that developers are able to again renegotiate this territorial relationship.

Our analysis situates speedruns within a complex arrangement of desires that challenge assumptions of how videogames ought to be enjoyed and consumed. As Boluk and LeMieux observe, the practice of speedrunning "questions the very ontology of videogames" and challenges the presumed definitions of game texts, where their boundaries begin and end, and how hardware and software interact to generate experience (2017, 43). At stake in speedruns are the mechanisms through which the videogame assemblage can be arranged, and desires fulfilled. When developers themselves are confronted, through reaction videos, with the realization that their videogames are not immutable objects to be enjoyed strictly on their terms, they are offered the chance to revel in the spectacle of deterritorialization as their videogames are thoroughly deconstructed before their eyes. Reterritorialization emerges a means by which the desires of particular actors – whether the developers, users, or streaming audiences – are afforded the ability to repeatedly renegotiate textual meaning and function, driven by the desires and ambitions of the given moment.

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