

# Coming Out While Going Fast: Queer Conviviality in Speedrunning Live Streams

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic research of LGBTQIA+ live streaming speedrunners, this article demonstrates how by centering queer perspectives, we can catalyze meaningful social changes for all. Though for most people, beating the original *Super Mario Bros.* in under five minutes would seem unfathomably difficult, LGBTQIA+ speedrunning live streamers regularly accomplish this superhuman feat, while coming out to an audience of thousands at the same time. For queer and trans folks, broadcasting such a transgressive, transformational form of play is defiant demonstration of vulnerability; one that creates a comfortable space for a community to thrive, by cultivating a culture of *queer conviviality*. Following in their fleet-footed steps, this article explicates how, as game studies and human-computer interaction researchers, we might center those on the margins in order achieve truly communal goals.

## Keywords

speedrunning, live streaming, video games, conviviality, queer temporality, queer mobility, grassroots activism, representation, gender, sexuality

## INTRODUCTION

For most people, beating the original *Super Mario Bros.* in under five minutes sounds unfathomably difficult, so accomplishing that superhuman feat while simultaneously coming out to an audience of thousands may seem like an all but impossible task. Yet, that magical moment happens far more often than many folks realize, on live streams across the internet, and those unexpected sparks of queer exceptionality are powering a comfy revolution. This article explores how by publicly live streaming their blazingly fast gameplay, openly LGBTQIA+ speedrunners are cultivating a culture of *queer conviviality* that fosters meaningful material support for members of their community.

## Battling Historic LGBTQIA+ Erasure

Meaningful inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people in games currently lags behind queer representation levels seen in other mainstream media forms like film, television, and music. In 2005 when GLAAD began studying television programming in the United States, they found that less than 2% of the series regular characters on scripted broadcast primetime shows were LGBTQIA+; by 2015 that proportion had risen to 4%; and in the most recent study of the 2021 season, queer and trans folks represented a healthy 12% of regular television characters (GLAAD Media Institute 2022). Standing in stark contrast to that significant progress, Jared Talbert's survey of marginalized representation in gaming, found that amongst the more than 4,000 video games released in the United States from 2010 to 2015, only 63 titles, just over 1%, featured queer/trans characters or allowed

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players to engage in non-heterosexual interactions (Talbert 2016). While it is painfully clear that the LGBTQIA+ community has long been written out of games (Ruberg 2019), those archaic trends are finally starting to give way.

Such notable underrepresentation has been the subject of study for some time. At the turn of the millennium, Adrienne Shaw was already exploring the driving forces behind this LGBTQIA+ erasure by tracing the historic aversion of mainstream game developers towards positive portrayals of queer and trans individuals (Shaw 2009); and as research studies and public pressure piled up in the 2010s, game companies began acknowledging they needed to do better. But after decades of excluding players outside of the narrow category of cisgender heterosexual 13-34 year old white boys and men, the industry has found itself struggling to connect with the players it alienated. As Shaw presciently stated, “Simply adding diversity to games will not automatically make the gamer audience more diverse.” (Shaw 2011).

Though queer content in video games is finally gaining more prominence within mainstream titles (Shaw and Ruberg 2017), studios are still contending with their legacy of negatively stereotypical portrayals of LGBTQIA+ characters. Accordingly, positive reception of their new inclusive offerings is far from guaranteed (Guanchez 2020). Because major game corporations are largely to blame for the systemic issue of queer and trans mis/underrepresentation in the medium, their recent efforts alone will likely be insufficient to fully address such an entrenched pattern.

### **Rerouting Representation From End to Means**

The increase in authentic representation of LGBTQIA+ storylines within major titles is an important sign of progress, but merely encountering queer characters in more games does not suddenly render the whole medium universally inclusive. Plenty of mainstream offerings still fail to support queer playthrough options by, for example, not allowing a player to romance a non-player character (NPC) of the same gender as theirs. Unsatisfied with such limitations, members of the LGBTQIA+ community often take it into their collective hands to overcome this representational deficit by creating mods (patches modifying the original code) that enhance the range of actions and attributes available to avatars in a particular game (Howard 2019).

Player activism extends beyond the boundaries of the games themselves. In addition to upgrading the fantasy worlds they inhabit, LGBTQIA+ folks are tipping the balance of queer representation in public life by broadcasting their gameplay on live streams. This phenomenon is no accident; many LGBTQIA+ gamers are making the conscious choice to begin streaming because they are passionate about creating more equal representation for their community (Pellicone 2017). Importantly, though, this visibility is not an end in itself, but a means.

As Mary Gray argues in her exploration of queer rural youth, representation alone is not enough. In order to advance more meaningfully inclusive support of LGBTQIA+ folks, especially those outside the white upper middle-class urban-dwelling queer population that dominate public discourse and popular media, “We must push for something other than their right to visibility and recognition.” (Gray 2009, 174). She goes on to conclude that, “Collective rights to access information, health care, and spaces to gather safe from harassment ... are issues arguably more worthy of our political rage.” (Ibid., 175). As we shall see in this article, queer and trans gamers intentionally stream their playthroughs for the world to not only be seen, but to connect with one another, forge community bonds, and transform the status quo.

## Getting (There) Faster Together

Of the many groups playing a role in that sea change, the speedrunning community has emerged from the fringes of gaming as a leader in the push for inclusion. Speedrunning is the act of beating a game as fast as possible. In the early days of the practice, it was a very specialized and solitary endeavor, with dedicated players grinding games in isolation to capture perfect playthroughs on VHS cassettes. Later when internet leaderboards emerged in the 1990s, the playstyle began to gain modest interest in certain online circles. But it was the advent of live streaming—which allowed speedrunners and spectators alike to watch players engage in comparatively endless attempts to improve their times—that supercharged the rise of this once niche form of gaming (Kozziel 2019).

Speedrunning on its surface seems much like sprinting, an individual sport where contenders compete against one another to be the fastest to complete a course. It is perhaps counterintuitive then that speedrunners tend to view their fellow gamers as collaborators rather than competitors (Scully-Blaker 2016; Escobar-Lamanna 2019). Many of them, including those I have spoken to, explicitly emphasize that speedrunning is a fundamentally communal enterprise, stressing how the identity of the individual world record holder at any given moment is not as important as “how fast the game can go” (Brewer 2023). Working together to push the boundaries of possibility, to break beyond the limitations of the past, speedrunners are collectively ushering in a new era of gaming, one which is both fundamentally inclusive and deeply queer.

## Warping Boundaries by Queering Time

Theorist Jack Halberstam introduced the notion of *queer temporality* to describe the ways that LGBTQIA+ lives often follow trajectories which deviate from the predefined path of economic and reproductive labor that modern capitalist society compels us to follow (Halberstam 2005). Merely by allowing the timelines of their lives to unfold authentically, queer and trans folks find themselves engaged in an act of resistance against what Elizabeth Freeman calls the *chrononormative* expectations of the dominant cisgender heterosexual archetypes of family and productivity (Freeman 2010). Just as moving through life against the grain can be an act of queering time, so too can the manner by which a speedrunner traverses a virtual world in a way that “violates the intended progression” of the game.

Speedrunners carve new paths through game space in order to compress the time it takes to get from start to finish. By completing objectives out of order, creatively repurposing resources, and even glitching out of bounds, these players appear to rewrite the rules of the game before our eyes. This inherent queerness of speedrunning’s orientation towards the game world has been observed by other scholars as well. Building on Gaspard Pelurson’s work which reframes the “time-wasting” wandering that characterizes walking simulators as a form of virtual *flânerie* (leisurely strolling), Bo Ruberg argues that, despite its rapid pace, speedrunning also resonates with that subversive urban traversal practice of the late 19th century (Benjamin 1999; Pelurson 2019; Ruberg 2020).

The dandy *flâneurs* who ambled aimlessly through the gaslit streets of industrial age Paris, roaming far from their homes to find hidden wonders in the wide reaches of the cityscape, have become key historical figures in queer studies discourse (Ivanchokova 2011; Schers 2019). Crucially, it was not only the meandering pace of their movement which resisted the pressures of early capitalism, it was also the boundary breaking nature of their chosen paths that truly exemplified their queerness. Following in the fashion of *flânerie*, speedrunning is an aberrant practice not only because of the ways it enacts a queer temporality but also how it embodies a *queer mobility*.

## **Breaking Barriers through Transgressive Play**

Though I have drawn the parallels between the practices of *flâneuses*, early female filmmakers, and marginalized streamers in detail elsewhere (Brewer 2023), here I want to highlight more specifically how live streamed speedrunning is an inherently transgressive act, as a public performance of fleet-footed *flânerie*. Indeed, in crafting a succinct definition of the playstyle, Christopher Brewer defined speedrunning as a “transgressive practice that embodies the ideals of human excellence shared between members of [a] community seeking to achieve the same goal” (Brewer 2017).

As Nathan Jackson observed, live streamed speedruns are inherently transgressive because they break the boundaries between “rehearsal and performance,” drawing spectators into a queering of time. Speedrunners pull their audiences into an uncanny cycle that implicates them as “witnesses of iteration, ever the same yet each time different” (Jackson 2020). Here we can begin to see how a strangely intimate connection forms between the members of a community who participate in this agonizingly repetitious journey of chasing almost imperceptible refinements of movement towards the limits of perfection. As the former community manager of Twitch, Jared Rae, explained, “what speedrunning on Twitch does, and what watching these types of events live does, is it humanizes inhuman abilities. Because it’s not just about watching this flawless run anymore, it’s about going on the journey towards it with this player.” (Webster 2013).

While many of the speedrunners on this humanizing journey are straight cisgender men, LGBTQIA+ folks make up a significant portion of the community which is notably more inclusive than mainstream esports (Signor 2021; Marshall 2022). Performing the seemingly superhuman ability of speedrunning on stream, I would argue, is not all that different from living an openly queer or trans life and seeking acceptance from one’s peers, so it seems reasonable that there would be a strong affinity between marginalized gamers and misfit gameplay. Speedrunning events emerged, in part, as alternatives to the toxic culture typifying mainstream esports competitions. Just as the X Games arose as a foil to the Olympics, live streamed speedrunning showcases like Games Done Quick (GDQ) formed on the fringes as an alternative to the dominant meta. Accordingly, the speedrunning community has a tendency to embrace those who have been outcast; and so the LGBTQIA+ players and “gamer girls” often painted as “transgressive, disobedient, unsettling” figures in mainstream online game culture (Sundén 2009; Consalvo 2018; Cullen 2022), find themselves comparatively more welcome in this counterculture of collaborative boundary breaking.

## **Rewriting Outmoded Rules from the Margins**

Speedrunning rejects, and then reconstitutes, the rules of engagement. By changing the seemingly immutable rules of the game, speedrunners are able to reimagine the limits of possibility in order to make something new. As a style of play that is both transgressive and transformational, speedrunning mirrors many facets of coming out as queer or transitioning gender (Schmalzer 2022). When openly LGBTQIA+ gamers decide to stream their speedruns, they are engaging in a doubly powerful act of defiance; not only because they are making themselves visible and vulnerable to the world, but because they are modeling revolutionary new ways of seeing and being in society.

Echoing principles from the universal design movement, the collective activism of LGBTQIA+ gamers is often explicitly intersectional. This “big tent” approach towards inclusion is in itself radically transformative, and in their recent article, Hantsbarger et al. call for game studies and human-computer interaction (HCI) researchers to recognize both the advantage and the urgency of incorporating these queer perspectives in their work (Hantsbarger, Troiano, To, and Hartevelt 2022). They emphasize that our

collective goal should not be to contribute to the design of specific technologies or titles solely for LGBTQIA+ folks, but rather to infuse their ethos into interactive experiences designed for a broad audience.

By drawing on ethnographic research of queer and trans speedrunning live streamers, in this article I seek to aid in that endeavor. In the coming pages, I will explore how LGBTQIA+ speedrunners who live stream their transgressive, transformational form of play are not only promoting queer visibility, but also, crucially, fostering a *queer conviviality* that results in increased material support and meaningful social change. Finally, I will sketch a rough map for how other researchers might heed Hantsbarger's call to move queerness from out of the margins and into the mainstream of our work.

## **CHANGE DONE QUICK**

Since 2017 I have been conducting an ethnographic study of the ways in which marginalized streamers use platforms like Twitch to create comfortable spaces for their communities. Thus far I have observed thousands of hours of live broadcasts and interviewed dozens of women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and disabled streamers, to better understand how they cultivate safe and inclusive environments in the infamously hostile landscape of online gaming.

Early on in my research, I was struck by the fact that most of the welcoming streams I encountered centered around speedrunning retro, indie, and adventure games, rather than playing more popular esports focused on first person shooters and battle strategy games. Further, I was amazed that the premiere community-organized speedrunning event, Games Done Quick (GDQ), often prominently featured LGBTQIA+ gamers in their broadcasts. Narcissa Wright, famous for breaking both world records and glass ceilings in gaming, is perhaps the most well-known trans speedrunner to have taken that stage (Scully-Blaker 2016; Nelson 2020; Schmalzer 2022), but a passing glance at the latest GDQ runner list will evidence that she is far from an anomaly.

With the inkling that speedrunners were predisposed towards inclusive practices, I reached out to streamers in that community to learn more about how they were “keeping it comfy” for their chats (viewer audiences). During the course of my interviews, all of the LGBTQIA+ gamers that I spoke to spontaneously volunteered stories about coming out on stream; and frankly, I was deeply moved by that unexpected pattern. Consequently, in this paper I seek to show my scholarly respect for the admirably effective way they use affective labor to foster mutual solidarity and *queer conviviality* within their communities.

## **Coming Out on Stream**

All of the queer and trans speedrunners that I spoke with freely offered unprompted tales of coming out to their communities, but several of them also related to me the fact that it was on stream that they came out for the very first time, to anyone. Though aware that many queer folks first muster the courage to share their authentic identities in online communities, I was nonetheless surprised by the stories of such candid broadcast debuts; and how oftentimes the journey to that moment was a long one, and didn't happen until months or even years after a person began streaming.

One participant explained to me that he first began coming to terms with his own sexuality when he was creating content about the popular esports game Call of Duty (CoD), a first person shooter. As he realized that he was more interested in men than women, he also began to understand that most of the people in that community were “straight up homophobic.” Whenever he mentioned anything in support of gay folks, he would get attacked, and so he felt like he had to stay in the closet and keep up appearances by dating women. Inevitably that toxicity took its toll, and my participant

described how, despite his success and popularity, he was feeling “incredibly disconnected” from the CoD community.

Faced with persistent harassment, he began tuning into GDQ events for a breath of fresh air, and found himself awed by the skills of speedrunning champions like Narcissa Wright and Kitt Immel, who are both, incidentally, LGBTQIA+. These role models gave him the inspiration to switch up his style of game play, and start speedrunning the games they were known for (*Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Super Monkey Ball*). As his old regular viewers stopped returning and a new audience began to take shape around him, for the first time in his life, my participant finally felt safe enough to share his true self. He related to me:

“The first person I told I was gay was someone from my community on Twitch. And the first time I started to openly be me was with my [chat]. Then other people in there were like, ‘I’m in a similar boat,’ and it just developed into this really nice, cozy community.”

Living in the closet is a dark and lonely experience, yet it is often truly dangerous to come out when those around are unsupportive or hostile to LGBTQIA+ folks. Many online communities, especially in gaming, are not safe places for anyone who is openly queer or trans, and so spaces that are actually welcoming tend to shine like beacons of light. Uplifting coming out stories of acceptance tug at the heartstrings because they frame a new space of possibility for all of us. To be accepted as oneself is a universal human desire, so it seems magical to witness it happening for someone for the very first time, in real time on a live stream.

Sometimes though, those who witness a coming out are not even aware of the profundity of the moment. One participant told me about the first time they publicly embraced their gender. As a young trans woman who had been living life, both offline and online, completely in “boy mode,” she had never felt confident enough to come out to anyone. So when she began streaming speedruns of retro Nintendo games like *Mega Man*, she did so without using a camera or a microphone. Still, she chose to make her username explicitly feminine, and this decision set her on a distinct path. She recounted for me the precise inflection point where her life seemed to change:

“When [another streamer] referred to me using she/her pronouns in chat a light bulb went off in my head and I was like, wait a minute, I don’t have to be a boy on the internet. I had about 15 seconds to make a permanent decision for my online future, and I decided alright, I’m a girl on Twitch now.”

At that point, everyone in speedrunning took her for “a random cis girl who liked *Mega Man*” even though she was still presenting as male in her offline life. After a year of streaming in stealth mode, she planned a trip to attend GDQ, despite being nervous about how folks would react when she “went from being a cis girl to being a trans girl.” Much to her relief, when she arrived at the event most people were “chill” even if they were “caught off guard,” and happily “nothing really changed.”

Coming out publicly, whether on a live stream or in person, takes bravery, but doing it while beating video games in record breaking time evinces a kind of self-assuredness that often inspires others to become their better selves.

### **Acting as Authentic Representation**

For many queer and trans speedrunners, being open about their identities on stream helps them find acceptance and live their lives more authentically. As much as being true to themselves offers deeply personal validation, their authentic representation also

serves an important function in their professional lives. As Nancy Baym has detailed in her study of independent musicians, 21st century performing artists are compelled to share more details about themselves and their personal lives, both on stage and online, to socially construct a sense of authenticity that serves as the foundation of the connection with their audience (Baym 2018).

Such affective labor plays an equally crucial part in becoming a successful streamer, and thus they often both intentionally (e.g. by sharing personal details or chatting while off-stream) and unintentionally (e.g. by getting emotional, negotiating gameplay and technical failures, or handling harassment) cultivate a sense of authenticity through their performances (Consalvo, Lajeunesse, and Zanescu 2020). Many of the LGBTQIA+ streamers I interviewed spoke of the added pressure they felt to do their roles in the spotlight justice. As one explained to me about the first time she was featured at a GDQ event:

“I set a world record on that stage that day. After that Summer Games Done Quick, I jumped from 750 to over 2,000 Twitch followers, and things just spiraled from there. I became like the [most famous] trans speedrunner besides Narcissa [Wright]. I had all these people rushing into my Discord and wanting to watch my stream. Suddenly, I was this trans community icon.”

Being openly queer or trans on your own live stream channel while entertaining tens, hundreds, or even a thousand viewers, is doubtless a significant achievement. But earning a featured spot at the preeminent speedrunning showcase, where a hundred thousand people will tune in from around the world, is on another level. Such moments of high visibility can be transformative. As another participant explained about their GDQ debut:

“I did a speedrun at Summer Games Done Quick. Thousands of people saw me and were like, she’s trans, she’s doing this, and it’s really cool. After that run, I tried to become a better person. Listening to valid complaints. Changing my behavior. I feel a responsibility to be at GDQ, to keep giving that representation. And I feel bad whenever I [don’t get a run accepted] because I want to be able to just keep doing it for people.”

Echoes of this sentiment reverberated in many of the LGBTQIA+ streams that I visited. Queer and trans speedrunners frequently expressed a sense of obligation towards being responsible representatives of their communities. Understanding that marginalized folks like themselves face serious obstacles in life, they want to use the virtual platforms they create with their exceptional gameplay skills to better serve their communities.

### **Broadcasting Vulnerability, Curating Community**

As entertainers striving to connect authentically with their audience, coming out can be a catalyzing decision that dramatically boosts a streamer’s viewership. Nonetheless, it is a choice which is not without serious, even deadly, consequences. Marginalized streamers face significant harassment online—often enduring insults, slurs, threats, cyberstalking, hate raids (coordinated bombardments of negative messages from many viewers), doxing (revealing personal details like name, address, or phone number), and even SWATing (sending police in riot gear to a streamer’s home)—and thus sharing one’s true identity so publicly is in many ways an act of defiant vulnerability. One participant explained why they take such a risk saying:

“I bring vulnerability and genuinity to everything I do on Twitch. I think I connect with my community because I share my whole personality. The more

you share, the more vulnerable you are to attacks and trolls. But I feel if I'm open, I'm also really protected by everyone who cares.”

Such a willingness to boldly enter the toxic online fray seems to create an area effect of comfort that can galvanize a community; putting yourself out there can be an extraordinarily powerful thing. As we saw earlier in this article, when a streamer comes out, it often inspires viewers to share more about their own identities, which in turn encourages more like-minded people to join the community. So when queer and trans streamers gamble their safety, they are betting the folks they are holding space for will have their backs.

Even though broadcasting loud and proud can open a streamer up to even more harassment from trolls and haters than they would normally face, it is a choice each person makes consciously for themselves when they go live. When it comes to their communities, though, queer and trans streamers tended to be highly protective of their regular viewers and channel mods (moderators), and often expressed to me serious concern about making sure others were safe in their space.

That sense of guardianship towards members of their communities was a notable theme in many of my conversations, and one participant recounted an excellent example of this phenomenon when explaining how she tags her stream so that it is visible in searches as a queer channel. In describing how her community became one of the early adopters of this feature she said:

“For me the LGBTQIA+ tag is a beacon of goodness and safety, but I told my mods, if we get too much hate to handle, I can take it off. They're all warriors though, they're wonderful. I was so proud of them. They were like, ‘No, that's what they want. We can't let the haters win.’”

Though Twitch now offers a robust user-generated tagging system, this was not the case for the first decade of its operation. Early on, viewers could only search for streams using game titles or genre keywords, but eventually a single identity-based tag for queer streamers was introduced. This feature engendered both enthusiasm and outrage within the Twitch user population, and, especially at the peak of the controversy, streaming under an LGBTQIA+ tag not only made streamers more vulnerable, it also put moderators and viewers in the potential line of fire.

Facing real danger, navigating toxic tides, streamers and their audiences forge powerful affective ties with one another. These bonds extend well beyond the boundaries of computer screens and they can be so strong, they have the power to sustain lives.

### **Saving Real Lives Online**

All of the coming out stories that participants shared with me were quite moving, but one in particular brings mist to my eyes every time I have the privilege of recalling it. Explaining the circumstances leading up to that pivotal moment in her life:

“The day I came out on stream I had had a doctor's appointment because I was suicidal. I didn't want to be committed so I told them I needed to play video games for people online that night and they reacted surprisingly well. So I get back home, get on stream, and I'm like, y'all should know I'm transgender. I was suicidal yesterday and I'm gonna start transitioning.”

Even though she told me this story with a casual air, and despite the fact that I had heard her allude to it before on stream, it still hits me like a ton of bricks to think about



what terrible pain she was feeling in that moment, and what wonderful things she managed to do by surviving that experience.

Every year thousands of trans and queer folks, especially young people of color, die by homicide and suicide, so each precious life snatched from the greedy jaws of premature death can have a ripple effect on the community. Hanging on during dark times can light the way for others who are struggling, and many LGBTQIA+ streamers are acutely aware of how that silent solidarity can be life saving. Nonetheless, speedrunners offer their communities more than quiet comfort. They offer advice, share information, muster resources, and donate money for those who need help, and most regular viewers of such comfy channels are integral to perpetuating this culture (Brewer 2023). Providing not only moral, but also material support for vulnerable members of their communities, is an essential objective for these gaymers.

Live streaming has become an important new site for charity fundraising, and speedrunners are some of the most dedicated proponents of that practice. As much as it is a speedrunning showcase, GDQ is an event centered around raising funds for charity organizations, particularly Médecins Sans Frontières and the Prevent Cancer Foundation (Hope 2023). Other non-profit organizations like the American Foundation For Suicide Prevention work with live streamers to coordinate distributed charity campaigns because they raise awareness amongst the key 13-34 demographic they are targeting while reaching a vast and diverse population of millions (Mittal and Wohn 2019). This feedback loop becomes particularly powerful when LGBTQIA+ streamers use their platforms to raise funds for charities that directly serve the needs of their community. One participant illustrated this virtuous cycle when describing results of their collective action:

“There are more and more queer people being featured at GDQ. And I work for Power Up With Pride, a queer speedrunning marathon that’s really taking off. Our most recent event raised over \$14,000 for The Trevor Project. So I think we as a speedrunning community have made it clear that this is a more welcoming community for queer people than basically any other gaming community there is. Queer people see that, and they start to come in.”

All year long, you can hop onto Twitch and find LGBTQIA+ streamers soliciting charity donations from their viewers to raise money for causes like The Trevor Project (which focuses on crisis intervention and suicide prevention among queer youth), Trans Lifeline (a peer support hotline), the Human Rights Campaign, the Transgender Law Center, and GLAAD. Queer folks have cultivated a long tradition of community-based support, one solidified by surviving the crucible of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s; it is clear that this culture of mutual solidarity has adapted itself to the online world, and that it’s only growing stronger.

### **Powering Up a Comfy Revolution**

Queer and trans streamers do more than solely lending their support to existing charities, they also establish new organizational collectives that develop innovative community-based technologies and coordinate activist campaigns. These efforts are having real world effects by sparking broader popular discourse that leads to substantive change in platform policies and public infrastructures.

As mentioned earlier in this article, Twitch’s discovery system has transformed over time, and in the beginning, one could only search for streams based on categories like genre or game title. Speedrunners who had quietly been making waves on the platform, along with content creators focused on non-gaming activities like cosplay and comic arts, pushed for the platform to develop better ways to discover channels outside the

existing rigid categories; and in response, at the start of 2017 Twitch launched a custom communities feature allowing users to create their own identity-based groups (Perez 2017).

This well-received update soon became an essential method for discovering marginalized styles of play and connecting with users underrepresented in gaming and live streaming more broadly. So when Twitch removed this feature a year and a half later, replacing it with a set of predetermined categories, marginalized folks were unhappy at the sudden erasure they experienced (Grayson 2018). As the founder of Transmission Gaming, a trans streamer collective, Veronica “Nikatine” Ripley explained, “With that change, we lost a lot of our ability to directly search for and easily find people like us.” (Castello 2020). The rollout of the new categories included the single catchall LGBTQIA+ tag referenced by my participant, but many streamers were still upset by the vaporization of the nuance they captured with custom communities.

Though Twitch never issued a statement about why they nerfed this ability for marginalized streamers to connect, advocates reported they were told that such easy discoverability of trans, Black, and disabled streamers was eliminated in an effort to curb harassment. This rhetoric struck a particular nerve because of how hollowly false it rang; as public relations director of Trans Lifeline, Yana Calou, explained:

“What we actually know as experts in peer support is that when you have the ability to find and connect with community, you actually have much more resilience and support in dealing with harassment.” (Castello 2021)

Undeterred by being written out of the interface, LGBTQIA+ streamers banded together, and with Trans Lifeline’s support, built a tool to better serve the needs of all marginalized folks on the platform.

Peer2Peer.live launched in March 2021 as an alternative infrastructure for identity-based tagging and discovery, quickly making headlines in technology news (Castello 2021; Conditt 2021). Lead director, Steph “FerociouslySteph” Loehr, made clear to the public that she hoped their service would spur Twitch to start taking their moral responsibility—towards protecting the marginalized streamers whose creativity the platform profits from—more seriously, and implement substantive changes. Advisor to the project, Irene Nieves, mused about how such an altruistic, activist approach might pan out by saying:

“Maybe they hire us... and we build this out on their site for them, or at least act as consultants for that. Or Twitch just steals the idea and one day we wake up and everything we did and all of our hard work is nullified by Twitch doing it. I’m fine either way really.” (Castello 2021)

Two short months later, Twitch rolled out a new user-generated tagging system which encouraged streamers to “celebrate” themselves and their “communities” with identity-based tags, emphasizing new options including “transgender, Black, disabled, veteran, and Vtuber, among many others” (Twitch 2021a). The community had gotten its wish, in precisely the most inglorious way that Nieves foretold. Though the announcement of the new feature included shoutouts to several charity and community-based organizations, there was notably no mention of Peer2Peer.live, its creators, or Trans Lifeline. This systematic snubbing comes as no surprise, and so it did not dissuade LGBTQIA+ folks from continuing their mission to reprogram public platforms from within. Lucky that, because as streamer ReKitRaven summarized:

“As soon as we got those tags, hate raids started to increase, and there’s nothing additional in our toolbox that we can use to combat that because Twitch hasn’t given us anything.” (Grayson 2021)

The “hate raids” ReklItRaven references are coordinated bot-based attacks to spam hateful messages into marginalized streamers’ chats. This turbocharged type of harassment was already a prominent problem, and, in advance of Black history month, an inclusive group of LGBTQIA+ streamers had launched the Hate Raid Response toolkit in late January 2021 (Parrish 2021b). When the identity-based tags were introduced on Twitch in May without any new anti-harassment tools, the hate raid phenomenon exploded, so in early August ReklItRaven began a campaign by tweeting: “End hate raids. Add protections for marginalized creators. #TwitchDoBetter”. A short four days after that hashtag started trending on Twitter, Twitch announced they had patched a vulnerability in the automated chat filters that was allowing hate speech to slip past (Parrish 2021a). This gesture, though swift, was too small to truly address the issue, so streamers continued to push back by orchestrating a protest.

On the first day of September 2021, queer and trans streamers organized the #ADayOffTwitch strike, this time making national news headlines in the United States (Grayson 2021; Limbong 2021). With small speedrunners and big-name streamers alike participating, analysts estimated that their coordinated protest reduced viewership by a significant 12% (Chalk 2021). Within a month, Twitch launched a long-requested security feature for streamers to restrict their channels to only allow messages from users with verified phone numbers (Twitch 2021b). By continuing to assert pressure through the #TwitchDoBetter campaign over the subsequent year, they catalyzed further change for all; in late November 2022, Twitch released a comprehensive set of security tools including a “Shield Mode” to protect stream communities during hate raids (Taylor 2022). Though LGBTQIA+ folks face ongoing erasure in gaming, the general public is becoming aware of the way that their relentless push for substantive change benefits everyone. Such effective activism, especially when broadcast loud and proud in real time, can start to spread like wildfire.

When queer and trans folks come out while they are going fast, the bravery with which they blaze such authentic life trails sets an inspiring example that can motivate others to strive to become better versions of themselves. Though a genuine performance may be necessary for their professional success, LGBTQIA+ speedrunners aim to act authentically as responsible representatives of their communities which continually face threats to their safety. In the notoriously toxic landscape of gaming, the decision to broadcast one’s queer status is a defiant demonstration of vulnerability, one that serves to create a comfortable environment where members of a stream community can begin to forge powerful affective bonds.

Repeatedly running this risky course stream after stream—managing to keep the haters at bay while churning out top tier gameplay—carves out a safe space for queer folks and their allies to build networks of support and share knowledge. Putting a 21st century twist on the timeworn queer tradition of mutual solidarity, LGBTQIA+ streamers are using their unique talents to develop a host of online tools that provide peer support, raise funding for charity organizations serving their community, and enable campaigns to realize significant changes to networked platform infrastructure. Though their work may have gone largely overlooked by the broader public up until now, the rumbles of the comfy revolution that they have been sowing the seeds for may soon be felt by all.

## **CULTIVATING QUEER CONVIVIALITY**

Clearly we can see now that queer and trans speedrunners who live stream their gameplay do more than merely entertain audiences with their awesome skills. By

offering up earnest performances of their superhuman feats to the public, it seems LGBTQIA+ streamers are able to catalyze structural changes in our society, ones with distinctly inclusive inclinations.

*How are queer and trans speedrunners sparking a social revolution?* To begin with, their mere existence serves to push back against the chrononormative expectations foisted on us all. Pursuing the precarious livelihood of online content creation, and choosing to specialize in a counterculture style of gameplay, all while streaming loud and proud is a triple crown-worthy performance of queer temporality. Their counterculture life choices show that joyful paths are possible. As speedrunners, LGBTQIA+ folks break through game barriers with their playfully transgressive fleet-footed *flânerie*, and as streamers they reach across geographic, economic, and social boundaries to stitch together a patchwork community of peer supporters through their queer mobility. So if we are to fully illustrate the power of their performances, an intricate lens will be required to clarify not only how transgressive, but also how transformative, such streams can be.

By way of such a tool, I am offering this explication of *queer conviviality* as a framework on which we might build a better understanding of the phenomena at work. Philosopher Ivan Illich introduced the concept of *conviviality* in the 1970s to define a set of societal ideals diametrically opposed to the modern goals of industrial productivity (Illich 1973). This animating archetype is characterized by the notion that people flourish when they interact autonomously and creatively, with each other and their environment, to develop, maintain, and share community-based tools capable of satisfying their individual needs.

The influences of Illich's theory of *convivial tools* can be seen reflected in the work of early personal computer designers as well as that of open source software engineers and right to repair advocates. Similarly, speedrunners often develop, and freely distribute, software tools that augment, extend, subvert, and wholly reimagine both classic video games, as well as live streaming platforms themselves. But unlike the predominantly white cisgender heterosexual computer scientists running Silicon Valley, LGBTQIA+ streamers forge tools for their community from the margins. Their commonwealth is born from a *queer conviviality*: an orientation towards transforming capitalist-controlled communication technologies by collectively, creatively reprogramming their rules of operation to better serve marginalized people.

LGBTQIA+ speedrunners remix and reinvent the field of possibility for the benefit of all. Wielding a battle-tested operationally inclusive stance as a weapon of care, these content creators carve out safe spaces for vulnerable folks to communicate more authentically. Not only do they swap speed strats (strategies) during their streams, they also share vital information to one another about useful medical, legal, and financial resources available for queer and trans folks in different locations across the planet. By cultivating this culture of *queer conviviality*, I argue that these young streamers are setting a clear example of how marginalized folks can autonomously and creatively assert their "collective rights to access information, health care, and spaces to gather safe from harassment" that Mary Gray championed.

## CONCLUSION

If we want to heed Hantsbarger's call to move queerness from the margins to the mainstream of our work, then I propose we follow in the speedrunners' fleet-footed steps by adopting an orientation of *queer conviviality* in our research. Along with a growing contingent of my colleagues in HCI, I am of the mind that our work should do more than advance our careers as researchers; instead we ought to take a decided stance towards changing the status quo through our scholarship (Brewer 2022). One way we

can do this is by amplifying the structures that LGBTQIA+ speedrunners are already actively engaged in cultivating. Comfy queer spaces are not ones defined by their rejection or exclusion of straight cis folks, rather they are curated communities which refuse to tolerate hate or harassment of any kind towards anyone, and as such they function as big tents built on the margins, cozy places that welcome everyone into their centers.

Peer support services, coordinated charity campaigns, alternative technological infrastructures, and all the other tools of *queer conviviality* that we have seen in this article offer expertly designed maps that we would do well to study as we pursue our own quests of scholarly perfection. Though I have endeavored with my colleagues at AnyKey to offer an example of how other HCI and game studies researchers might amplify community-based efforts (Brewer, Romine, Taylor 2020), we can still do more to use our privileged role as researchers to boost the impact of the grassroots work we admire. While we must continue to interrogate and improve our participatory methodologies, here I want to conclude instead by emphasizing the importance of the bigger picture orientation that *queer conviviality* offers. Collaborating on a truly communal goal requires that we develop a shared understanding of whose shoulders we stand upon, and that we honor marginalized perspectives driving the forefront of social change, by centering them loudly and proudly in our work. As one of my participants inspiringly expressed:

“[Our] communal dream is to make a game go as fast as possible. It doesn’t matter who has the world record. Speedrunning culture is respect for your elders; and it’s in honor of them, you want to make it go faster.”

Let us all strive, then, to do our elders justice as we navigate this raucous rainbow road.

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