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Speed Runs, Slow Strolls, and the Politics of Walking:
Queer Movements through Space and Time
Invited talk for Prof. Soraya Murray's "Video Games as Visual Culture" course

To play a video game is move in a particular way through space and time. Every genre, and indeed every game, represents time and space differently. Whether a player moves in 2D space, 3D space, or even one-dimensional space (as in the game *Line Wobbler*) contributes significantly to the experience and meaning of the game.

The ways that video games construct time are likewise diverse. Some games use time to mark the end of multiplayer matches. Others use time to judge achievement. How long a game takes to complete is closely tied to the economics of games and to the perceived divide between so-called "hardcore" vs. "casual" games and gamers. In this way, time in video games has serious implications for identity as well as gameplay.

Space and time are compelling and expansive frameworks through which to understand video games - yet they have rarely been a focus for games scholarship. Here, I am proposing one way of understanding time and space in video games: through queer theory. I am particularly interested in how time and space can be elements of what I call "queer play" – which is a form of queerness in games beyond representation. To explore this, I look at two forms of play: speedruns and walking simulators.

What I find fascinating about speedruns and walking simulators is that they stand at the intersection of temporality, spatiality, sexuality, gender, agency, and resistance. Though moving unusually fast and moving unusually slow may seem like opposites, they both represent challenges to dominant standards of time and space. My message here extends far beyond speedrunning and walking simulators though. Looking at queer temporality and spatiality sheds light on how games can resists dominant norms of being more broadly.

Queer Temporality and Spatiality

Over the past decade, queer time has been a focus in the work of theorists like Jack Halberstam, Heather Love, and Elizabeth Freeman. This work is founded on the idea that our concepts of temporality are social constructs, and that there is a deep relationship between heteronormativity – the straight, "normal" way of being -- and time.

Freeman calls this "chrononormativity" – the idea that we are supposed to live according to a "coordinated, carefully syncopated tempo" of life events, many of which are tied to gender and sexuality, like getting married and having kids. Halberstam calls this "repro-time" --

the idea that it is "natural and desirable" to have children and to have them on a certain timeline.

In contrast to these heterosexual notions of temporality, queerness does time differently. Freeman writes that the queer "turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, and sideways to forms of being and belonging." Instead of complying with repro-time, "queer subjects often prefer to live aslant to dominate forms of object-choice, coupledom, family, marriage, [and] sociability" and appear "thus out of synch."

Queer time and space are also fundamentally linked. Writes Halberstam, "A queer adjustment in the way that we think about time, in fact, requires and produces new conceptions of space." By rejecting hegemonic constructs of time and space, queer space and time resist and thereby destabilize chrononormativity.

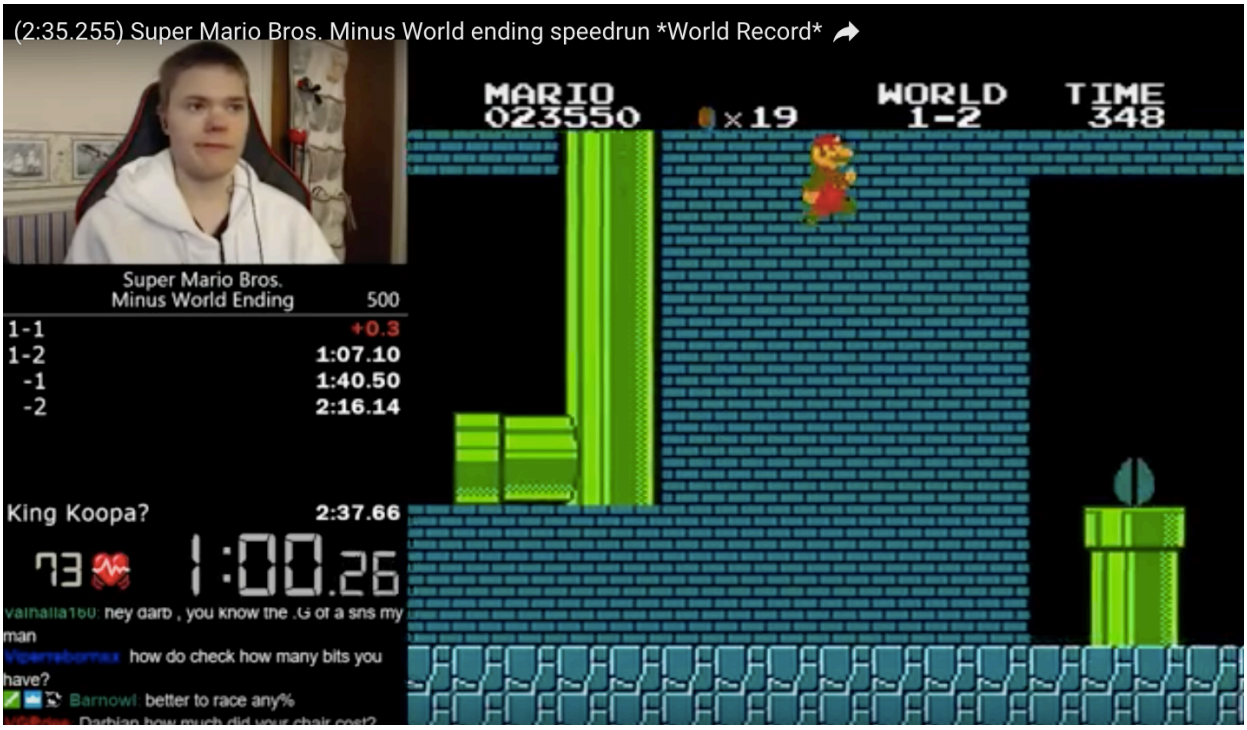
Chrononormativity can also be found in video games. This comes up in two main ways. First, a game can reproduce social norms of time from outside the game. For example, a game might use a traditional narrative about advancing from childhood to adulthood.

There are also forms of chrononormativity that are specific to video games. The medium of video games has *its own standards for temporal and spatial progress*: how long a certain type of game will take to play, how quickly a player is meant to pass through an area. In the context of video games, chrononormativity names a set of foundational logics that have come to shape how games are designed and experienced in relation to time and space. These logics are today so deeply engrained in games that they have become all but invisible. However, we have the opportunity to identify these logics and make them visible.

What Is Speedrunning?

Darbian is playing *Super Mario Bros*. He doesn't know it yet, but he is about to break what is, as of December 2, 2016, the world record for completing the game's first world. As soon as the game begins, Darbian hits the ground running. At first, he doesn't realize that he is making record-breaking time. He chats casually with his viewers. With perfect timing, he proceeds through the levels. There's no doubt that he has memorized this game by heart.

One minute and three seconds into his speedrun, he hops on top of a sideways-facing warp pipe. At first, it looks like he has made a mistake—but instead of losing seconds, he lands on an invisible platform, a glitch in the game, that allows him to run straight through a solid wall and save himself considerable time (figure below). Now Darbian has begun to realize that he is on track for a world record. He is wearing a biometric device that monitors and displays his heart rate on screen and his pulse begins to rise. "Let's do it," Darbian says. He leaps through another glitch in the last underground level, and hits the final screen with an enormous grin.



This is an example of a speedrun. Speedrunning is the practice of playing a video game as fast as possible. To do this, speedrunners use their detailed knowledge of a game and its glitches to traverse game spaces far more quickly than the game's developers intended.

Different players undertake speedruns with different objectives at different times. Players may attempt to finish a particular game level, to reach the game's final credits, or to collect all of a certain item. While any video game can be speedrun, speedrunning communities focus on some games more than others. Top speedrunners often play on live video streaming sites like Twitch. Speedrunners also perform at community charity events. Speedrunning can be described as what Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux call a "metagame" -- a secondary set of game-like practices that operate according to their own rules and treat video games as raw material for new modes of play.

In some sense, speedrunning communities are more inclusive than other parts of game culture. Speedrunners often work together and share information about achieving faster and faster times. However, when it comes to gender and sexuality, speedrunning culture is not perfect. Speedrunners are still overwhelmingly male.

Speedrunners don't tend to describe themselves as "subversive" or "queer," but they do enact alternative forms of player agency. For example, speedrunners can transform supposedly bad video games into "beautiful" ones, in the words of one speedrunner, because they value the things that traditional players find undesirable -- like glitches. In this way, speedrunnning raises important questions, like "What is the right way to play a game?" and "Who determines what makes a game worthwhile?"

Speedrunning as Queer Play

When it comes to time and space in video games, speedrunning can be understood as a queer gameplay practice. This is because it rejects chrononormativity. By definition, speedrunners play faster than they are supposed to. Because they play so fast, speedrunners also stand in a queer relation to game space. They speed through areas where they are meant to be cautious or to explore. Speedrunners transform open game environments into racetracks. In this way, speedrunners set their own terms for what it means to exist in time and space within a video game.

Let's look at another queer theory quote and you'll see what I'm talking about. Here is how Freeman describes chrononormativity: "Corporations and nation-states seek to adjust the pace of living in the places and people they take on: to *quicken up* and/or synchronize some elements of everyday existence, while offering up other spaces and activities as *leisurely, slow*, sacred, cyclical, and so on and thereby repressing or effacing alternative strategies of organizing time." Pay attention to these words – "quicken up," "leisurely," and "slow."

Speedrunning actually disrupts these cultural divisions between the fast and the slow. Playing games is often seen as a slow, leisurely activity. When a slow activity is drastically sped up—that is, when video games are played at top speed—the result is a mode of play that resists the dichotomy between what is imagined as fast, productive time and slow, wasted time. By transforming gameplay into something entirely un-leisurely, speedrunning creates an "alternative strategy of organizing time" within video games and refuses to comply with the prescribed "pace of living"—or, in this case, the pace of playing.

Other key elements of speedrunning can also be understood through queer space and time. Consider the practice of using glitches to improve play times. Scholars like Edmond Chang have argued that the glitch represents a site of queerness within video games: the place where code breaks and the game world reveals its cracks. Speedrunning communities have complicated this idea of the glitch by embracing glitches as features (rather than bugs). When speedrunners like Darbian use glitches to hop between game spaces, they are finding alternative ways to move through the game space. By literally walking through walls, these players change the temporality and spatiality of the game in significant ways—circumventing major steps on the chrononormative timeline of gameplay.

Speedrunning also requires what could be called queer forms of knowing. A successful speedrunner needs detailed knowledge of a game – its spatial layout, the timing of its enemies, etc. By playing a game or a level again and again, a speedrunner commits these elements to memory. That memory can't just exist on the level of thought, though. It has to penetrate into the body, becoming an intuitive sense of where to move and when. This can be seen as a non-heteronormatie intimacy that develops between the player and the game.

In a video recorded during the Summer Games Done Quick marathon, for example, we see speedrunner KosmicD12 perform a run of *Super Mario Bros* (figure below). KosmicD12 explains his precise movements. It quickly becomes clear that he knows every inch of the

game. A sofa has been set up for KosmicD12 to sit on while he plays, replicating the environment of playing at home in one's living room. The overall scene is intimate, warm, and domestic.

Queer theory gives us new ways to look at speedrunning, but speedrunning also gives us new ways to think about queerness. It shows us that going too fast can be a way to resist chronormativity.

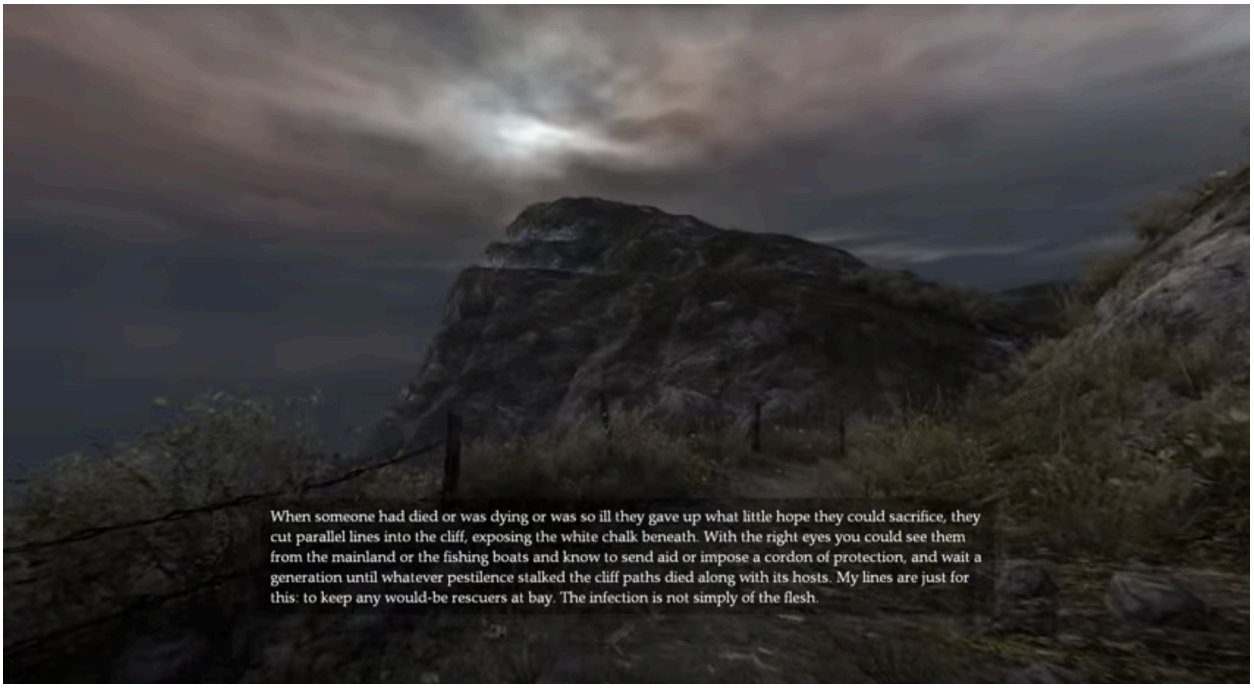
Speedrunning also productively complicates the imagined divide between queer temporality (moving backwards and sidewards) and narratives of linear progress. The speeding subject, as a queer subject, does move forward -- but at a pace that overwhelms the temporal order, rushing to the end of the chrononormative timeline and revealing it to be short-lived, short-sighted, and ultimately insufficient.

The Gender and Sexual Politics of Walking Simulators

Now we've talked about speedrunning – but what about walking simulators? While "walking simulators" have been the subject of debate in games culture, they've rarely been taken seriously from a scholarly perspective.

The term "walking simulators" describes a category of games that tell stories through player movement and environmental exploration. Game-makers rarely label their own games "walking simulators." "Walking simulator" is usually a label applied to a game by disapproving reviewers, players, or critics.

Though the gameplay of each of these games differs, walking simulators generally don't include combat mechanics or competition. Instead, they invite players to learn about the narrative world around them through scenarios such as walking through a young woman's new family home, as in *Gone Home*, or hiking around an island with a mysterious past, as in *Dear Esther* (figure below). Often, what drives these games are emotional, interpersonal challenges. To the extent that they can be called "walking simulators," these games could also be called looking simulators, lingering simulators, or observing simulators. Rather than speed players along from challenge to challenge, they invite to build a slower and more contemplative relationship with the games' rich visual and material environments.



"Walking simulator," as a term, came into common usage around 2012. Though some indie designers have spoken in favor of the label, "walking simulator" is still largely seen as derogatory. Calling a game a walking simulator is a way to mock it, suggesting that the entire game can be reduced to little more than a simulation of what is imagined to be the most boring and easy of activities: walking.

Yet this seemingly simple insult offers a window into what types of movement through space and time are valued in mainstream games culture. Let's deconstruct it. First, it shows us that movement itself is considered insufficient to constitute meaningful gameplay. Second, it suggests that the movement found in so-called walking simulators is too slow. Almost all critiques of walking simulators focus on this first idea, that a video game should have more challenges in order to count as a game. However, the juxtaposition between walking simulators and speedrunning reveals that this second idea—that walking simulators move too slow—is of equal importance.

What divides "walking simulators" from all other games, what divides games that are derided from those that are accepted, is pace. After all, speedrunning is generally considered a valid and laudable mode of play by mainstream gamers – whereas walking simulators are seen as disdainful. Even this imagined divide between slow and fast must be brought into question. To assume that walking is so easy as to be banal, or to claim that the steady clip at which most characters in walking sims actually do walk is "slow," reflects an ablest worldview that takes for granted normative expectations about the speed of the body in motion.

Slow Strolls through Queer Time and Space

I believe that "walking simulator" is a term that is ripe for reclamation. Walking simulators offer opportunities to enact resistance and queerness through play.

The mechanisms of walking simulators as *walking* games can be directly tied to longer histories of queer figures in motion -- like the flâneur. As represented in nineteenth-century French literature, the flâneur slowly strolls the urban streets. His purpose is not to get from one place to another, but to meander and observe. The flaneur is tied to queerness through associations with dandyism and cruising. In many ways, the figure of the flâneur parallels the player-character in a walking simulator. Amidst the bustle and speed of the modern city, the flâneur is notably for his slowness. He is goal-oriented only to the extent that his goal is to wander. This movement stands in marked contrast to chrononormative expectations – both outside and inside a game.

These parallels between walking simulators and the queer figure of the flâneur are far from coincidental. Walking simulators disrupt the chrononormativity of video games. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam writes that "inaction and passivity" can be recategorized

as “weapons of the weak” that enact resistance by “stalling the business of the dominant.” Inherent in the use of the term “walking simulator” as an insult is the belief that these game are unacceptable because they are characterized by inaction and passivity—i.e. that nothing substantial, in terms of gameplay, really happens in them. Yet, this is precisely what walking simulators do with that supposed inactivity: they stall the business of the dominant. I mean this in a way that is literal as well as figurative. By moving slowly, by lingering longer than game chrononormativity deems correct, the player-characters in these video games stall time and space. They take pleasure in tarrying as they pass slowly from area to area, often stopping to observe, refusing to rush through a game world or play according to a traditional tempo.

So what ultimately do walking simulators have in common with speedrunning? These forms of play both enact alternative relationalities to space and time. Both speedrunning and walking simulators resist the standard logics that determine how players should move through video games and at what speed.

Through notions of non-normative time and space, it is also possible to imagine video games more broadly as enacting queer temporalities and spatialities. Even games that are played neither too fast or too slow can be understood as queer in their relation to hegemonic logics of time and space, as those logics exist outside of video games. Much of mainstream culture still considers video games to be a “waste of time.” What if, as with the word “queer” and the term “walking simulator,” we were to reclaim the notion that video games waste time? At the same time, video games add additional layers of complexity to the vision of chrononormativity put forth by queer theorists. In video games, players are often given multiple lives. In video games, dying and starting again, over and over, is actually part of the narrative of normative progress. As compared to the expectations of society at large, this represents a distinctly non-chronormative vision of movement through time and space.

Through queer theory, both speedrunning and slow strolling emerge as queer ways to play video games. They also suggest other emergent ways that players can play with time and space in games – and how players can use this kind of play as a mode of resistance.

With that idea in mind, I want to close with one specific example of this kind of emergent queer play, which demonstrates with particular poignancy the personal and political power of choosing to go slow.

In a recent conversation, a game designer with a long history in the games industry told the story of how she goes hiking in *Halo*. *Halo* (Bungie et al, 2001-2015), is a popular AAA first-person shooter series. The culture around *Halo* is distinctly “hardcore,” hyper-straight, and hyper-masculine. This game designer, by contrast, does not play *Halo* to fight. Instead, she reports that she uses the multiplayer online features of the game to go for long walks with her friends through the wooded terrain of *Halo* levels. In these moments, the spaces of the game, which are designed to maximize possibilities for clashes between players, are instead repurposed for slow, virtual strolls through nature. The time of gameplay is used

not for violence or confrontation but for observing the carefully rendered landscape and conversing with friends.

In its peaceful re-appropriation of the game, hiking in *Halo* represents a subversive act. Strolls through the countryside take on a notably political valence, recalling the walking of labor walk-outs and protest marches. Even in this most heternormative of video games, queer movements through time and space offer profound opportunities to play with alternative ways of being in the world.