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19 Games Done Quick, Organizational Presence, and Speedrunning Identity

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Speedrunning is a digital gaming practice in which players try to finish games as quickly as possible. In the past ten years, speedrunning has seen a meteoric rise in popularity, not only as a play practice but also as a spectacle. Many speedrunners practice and perform on Twitch.tv, a live streaming service that allows players to broadcast their runs to anyone with an internet connection. As the speedrun community formed and grew, so did organizations and websites devoted to its achievements and events. This chapter concerns one such organization, Games Done Quick (GDQ), a nonprofit group that raises millions of dollars annually for charity through hosting and live streaming speedrunning marathons. While GDQ produces programming throughout the year, including smaller marathons and weekly showcases, two major events—Awesome Games Done Quick (AGDQ) in January and Summer Games Done Quick (SGDQ) in June—serve as the cornerstones of their fundraising. During AGDQ and SGDQ, speedrunners meet en masse at hotel conference centers, and players showcase their runs to one another, and to viewers across the world, over several days.

Over the past decade, the growth of live streaming on Twitch.tv and the growth of speedrunning have been essentially symbiotic. Speedrunners were some of the earliest practitioners of live streaming: this drew speedrunning audiences to Twitch.tv, just as regular Twitch audiences were drawn to popular speedrunners. This relationship continues to benefit both parties. Live streaming is now ubiquitous in speedrunning, to the point where the majority of speedrunning records are documented and verified via live streams, as are thousands of hours of practice and record attempts. Meanwhile, speedrunning streams, and GDQ events in particular, remain some of the most popular attractions on Twitch. AGDQ and SGDQ now

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regularly attract hundreds of thousands of viewers and raise millions of dollars for their two partnered charities, Médecins Sans Frontières (known in English as Doctors without Borders) and the Prevent Cancer Foundation. Due to the reach and influence of its two major marathons, GDQ shapes how speedrunning is perceived and understood, both inside and outside speedrunning culture. Many new fans are introduced to speedrunning through AGDQ and SGDQ, and thus GDQ codifies their experience with the subculture: "[I]n the minds of many, speedrunning is GDQ" (Wallach 2019). In this chapter, I will trace the origins of the organizational presence of GDQ and explore how it has asserted its influence on the speedrunning community through a complex network of actors and infrastructure. Over time, the GDQ organization has gained sufficient power to influence how we understand speedrunning.

Organizational Communication

I use an organizational communication framework to understand the relationship between GDQ and the speedrunning community. Recent organizational communication theories argue that organizations do not exist as a unified "thing"—rather, they come into existence through the organization's actions, images, and policies (Fairhurst and Putnam 2004). Every time an organization attaches their logo to a letterhead, sends out a tweet, recruits or rejects a member, or performs a task, it is making itself present—bringing itself into existence. As such, these different elements are typically called "presentifications" (Fairhurst and Putnam 2004). This theory implies that organizations can be incarnated in multiple ways, and, in fact, that "being present . . . implies continuous negotiations over how the organization should be (made) present" (Cooren, Brummans, and Charrieras 2008, 1346).

By using this framework, I am not capturing exactly what GDQ is, but instead creating a map of the forces that the organization exerts when it makes itself present. In their codifying study of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Cooren, Brummans, and Charrieras (2008) discovered that MSF's different presentifications were often in tension with each other, or even contradictory (2008). Their study focused on the presence of MSF in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and they gathered data on everything from MSF-branded jeeps to conversations between MSF representatives and local community leaders.

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I applied Cooren, Brummans, and Charrieras's methodological framework to GDQ, recording and evaluating its various presentifications. Their study also provides evidence that MSF managed to influence the "organizational presence" of entities beyond itself; it changed the operation of the Congolese medical system and how it was perceived by its patients. I argue that GDQ has achieved the same thing in the speedrunning community, altering how this community is understood and how it operates. Finally, by pleasant coincidence, MSF has a direct tie to GDQ: it is the recipient of all the funds raised by GDQ's SGDQ marathons. This highlights another similarity that helped steer my research. Both MSF and GDQ were formed for an altruistic purpose, and conflicts often arise between altruistic goals and the practicalities of their execution. Alongside these useful similarities, the largest difference between GDQ and MSF is also worth highlighting: namely, GDQ operates primarily online. Although GDQ does have a nondigital presence during its marathons, audience members may experience GDQ's presentifications entirely through its live streams. GDQ's presentifications are geared toward executing a handful of intensely complex live events with high technical demands. The organization must coordinate their roster of speedrunners; their consoles, emulators, controllers, and gaming apparatuses; the audio and video feeds for the live stream; and a digital donation tracker and chat room. A live event of this scope—especially one trying to raise money from viewers—must also meet the demands of an audience and provide an entertaining spectacle. GDQ's presentifications are complex, public, and technologically extensive. The need to meet these demands sometimes creates moral tension with GDQ's altruistic goals and with community-minded speedrunners.

My primary resource is the extensive online archive of GDQ videos: every single GDQ marathon has been uploaded, in its entirety, to YouTube. This includes much of the pregame and postgame commentary, as well as the panels at more recent events. GDQ events are the primary arenas where GDQ makes itself present, and everything from the layout of the Twitch interface to the rules and restrictions are relevant presentifications. GDQ's social media presence is also carefully curated; most notably, the GDQ Twitter account, @GamesDoneQuick, tweets updates throughout its events and the speedrunning off-seasons. GDQ also presents itself through branding, logos, and a mascot. For perspectives on GDQ that were less curated, I sought articles, ethnographies, and direct interviews with speedrunners, both in

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academic work and the popular press. Several speedrunners have also shared their own opinions on the history and social utility of GDQ—and on speedrunning in general—on independent YouTube channels. The work of Karl Jobst and SummoningSalt, two veteran speedrunners who have taken to making YouTube documentaries about the history of their practice, proved particularly invaluable. In reviewing these archives, I was guided by a handful of primary research questions: How has GDQ presented itself over time? Do these different presentifications create tension with each other? Finally, have these presentifications affected how speedrunners understand their practice and their community?

2010: Origins of the Organization

GDQ began on New Year's Day, 2010, on a couch in the basement of the speedrunner Mike Uyama. This first iteration of the event, then called Classic Games Done Quick, was meant to be a panel at a larger convention, MAGFest, before it was relocated to Uyama's basement. Considering the technical difficulties and the unexpected change of scenery, the marathon—which, even then, raised money for charity—was a surprising success. The decision to raise money during the live stream was inspired by other gaming charity marathons, including Desert Bus for Hope (Wallach 2019). This first success encouraged Uyama to repeat the occasion the following year, and from there, GDQ grew exponentially both in viewership and donation totals. By 2015, GDQ was incorporated as a nonprofit.

Although the organization has grown massively, certain aspects remain the same as its earliest incarnation. The primary goal of GDQ's events is still to raise money for charity: GDQ now organizes impromptu marathons for disaster relief (such as 2020's Corona Relief Done Quick (CRDQ), done to provide aid for those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic). The other decade-long consistency is "the couch." As each runner streams their run during GDQ events, they are accompanied by a couch (panel) of two or three commentators, as well as a host who will announce incoming donations and read their accompanying comments. Some games are accompanied by incentives, which encourage donors to spend money on extra challenges, bonus games, or cosmetic elements of speedruns. Both of the two major GDQ marathons typically last five days, with runners continuing to play overnight. Due to demands from their affiliated charities, runners

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who participate in GDQ streams are prohibited from swearing or making overtly political statements. Some games with violent elements or cursing are permitted at GDQ, but players will often warn viewers to look away or cough loudly to cover curse words in dialogue. As performers speedrun, they are expected to narrate what they are doing, explaining the game's glitches and strategies to the GDQ viewers.

2011–2014: Finding Their Feet

The format of the Classic Games Done Quick panel held promise. One year later, GDQ hosted their first independent marathon, AGDQ. This event deviated very little from the mom's-basement tone established by the Classic panel, but this was the point in history where the original panel's choices started to become the marathon's conventions. The signature couch returned. Some of the names on the roster of AGDQ 2011 (carcinogen, sinister1, Essentia, PJ) became recurring GDQ figures. The first TAS (Tool-Assisted Speedrun) showcase—a TAS being a theoretically perfect speedrun performed by emulation tools—occurred at SGDQ later that same year. Equally notable were the differences between the 2010 panel and the 2011 marathon. The word "Classic" had already been removed from the event's name, to signify that speedrunners could run games of any generation. AGDQ 2011 underlined this by opening with *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, a game that had been released a scant seven months earlier. These early decisions of presentification—including TAS showcases, newer game speedruns, and the couch—signified a very particular kind of inclusivity, best described as an inclusivity of taste. All games were welcome; all attendees and viewers were received with the casual friendliness of an after-school local area network (LAN) party. AGDQ had yet to incorporate or acquire any official sponsors; at this point, it was still quite ragtag and homegrown, and this was a key part of its appeal.

This all-aboard attitude toward speedrunning was not necessarily the same across the entire community. Prior to the live streaming era, "[speedrunners] were few and far between, scattered randomly across the internet" (Jobst 2020b). They typically congregated in game-specific communities such as those around *Goldeneye 007* or *Mario Kart 64*. Of these prelive stream clusters, the *Goldeneye 007* community, also known as "The Elite," remains quite active, and its operation provides an interesting point of contrast to modern speedrunning groups. The Elite catalog prestigious records in

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Goldeneye 007 and *Perfect Dark*; the front page on its website boasts that it is "where the world's best gamers play." The Elite ranks players using a points system based on how many records each player attains, and because of this points system, "joining the Elite" is a more formal process than taking up speedrunning as a hobby. The moniker emphasizes prestige and selection—these speedrunners are "the elite" players among the masses. The Elite was built to cater to these specialists and their internal competition.

I mention The Elite because it provides an ideal contrast between what a speedrunning resource looked like prior to the live stream era. The Elite is not necessarily exclusionary, but through its website, ranking system, and even its name, it emphasizes different values. It leans toward competition rather than openness. Historically, in speedrunning, the valorization of skill took priority over inclusion. Speed Demos Archive stored recordings of prestigious speedruns across genres, but submitting to the archive involved an intense process of verification and adjudication. Speedruns were rejected if they did not look impressive enough to be shown in the gallery. While these groups were not seeking to exclude, they were not overly concerned with inducting newcomers, so the barrier to entry into speedrunning remained high. Speedrunning began to develop its own increasingly technical language, and it had no obvious centralized hub of definitions or guides. In the opinion of *Goldeneye 007* speedrunner Karl Jobst, the barrier between speedrunning reaching a point of broad appeal was the knowledge gap between speedrunners and the average viewer:

> [S]peedrunning needed a voice; an intermediary that would communicate complex ideas to the masses in a way that was easy to consume. Originally, this voice would come in the form of commentary during speedruns, like those seen at Games Done Quick (Jobst 2020b).

This "voice" is the first of the major shifts in speedrunning introduced by GDQ. Jobst's video essay uses a clip of Narcissa Wright speedrunning *Ocarina of Time* at AGDQ 2013, which is widely recognized as the codifier of the GDQ commentary style. In this run, Wright narrates both the history of the game's speedrunning techniques and the complex glitches she executes. Previous to Wright's run, commentary was more sporadic and tended to involve couchmates asking questions of the players as the game progressed; but even in their unrefined state, these explanations were part of GDQ's format. This stylistic choice renders speedrunning accessible to almost any viewer: regardless of how much you know about speedrunning,

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or even the game being played, you can enjoy a GDQ speedrun. This is a particularly important development for a charity event, which benefits from appealing to as many viewers as possible. The development of a GDQ narration style was all but a necessity before it could achieve the widespread reach that it currently enjoys.

Another facet to this shift—speedrunning's transition from a niche hobby to a spectacle with broad appeal—comes from the platform employed by GDQ: Twitch.tv. Live streaming was in some ways a necessary ingredient for a fundraising marathon, as commentators were able to track donations live, read donor comments aloud, and encourage more participation from the audience. As early as SGDQ 2011, viewers could donate to "incentives" that would affect the speedruns directly. Sometimes these incentives were cosmetic choices, such as picking a character skin; sometimes they affected gameplay, forcing the runner to complete extra levels or challenges. This was another way to take advantage of the liveness of the event: keeping viewers engaged via a bidding war or surprising them with a bonus incentive. This active engagement with an audience is, in the modern day, a well-established aspect of professional live streaming, recognized by both streamers and researchers. However, this kind of affective labor was very different from the way that speedrunners were accustomed to playing, which was typically alone and off-camera. Speedrunners were already experimenting with live streaming independent of GDQ, and they were some of Twitch.tv's earliest attractions (Jobst 2020b). Yet these early streamers were less familiar with, and less engaged in, the kind of audience interaction that characterized GDQ (and would come to characterize live streaming as a whole). Siglemic, a popular *Super Mario 64* runner from these early years, would often live stream record attempts with no camera or microphone and would still draw audiences of tens of thousands (Jobst 2020b). This type of skill-focused, low-interaction speedrunning still happens on Twitch, but it coexists alongside speedrunners who are more audience-focused—and, at least twice a year, it coexists with the extremely audience-focused position of GDQ.

While I have positioned GDQ as "audience-focused," the organization had yet to do any critical reflection on who constituted that audience. At this point in its existence, GDQ had no pressing reason to think about any other kinds of inclusivity beyond its initial gestures toward the inclusivity of taste, and as such, it was not exempt from the misogyny, homophobia, racism, and transphobia that still permeate online gaming spaces. The

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earlier iterations of AGDQ and SGDQ imposed no hard limits on language, which led to the famously foul-mouthed runner Werster using racial epithets during a *Pokémon* speedrun at AGDQ 2013. Neither was the speedrunning community outside of GDQ as inclusive as it imagined itself to be. When Narcissa Wright—a *Legend of Zelda* series speedrunner responsible for some of the most remarkable and influential speedruns in history—came out as transgender in 2015, the bullying and harassment that she suffered was so severe that she briefly deleted her Twitch account and removed herself from the community. The veteran speedrunner Trihex has also been at the center of a bigoted controversy, one which has spread to larger live streaming culture. A 2012 photo of Trihex is the source of Twitch's "TriHard" emote. While it is typically a benign expression of joy or excitement, it is also one of Twitch's very few emotes depicting a Black person. As such, the emote has become a shorthand for racists, who spam it whenever Black players appear on streams, or to make racist associations when laden signifiers like "watermelon" or "stealing" are mentioned (Winkie 2017). Trihex has released a statement claiming that he does not think the emote itself should be banned, but he is frustrated by its use as a racist symbol. Currently, no ban on "TriHard" has gone into effect, placing the burden of managing racist uses of the emote squarely on the shoulders of individual streamers and moderators (Winkie 2017). Conversely, players with bigoted views were able to establish themselves in speedrunning with minimal investigation or pushback. *Goldeneye 007* speedrunner Ryan White—a long-serving member of the Goldeneye Elite—was found spewing racist and misogynistic rhetoric in a private Discord server in 2018. GDQ would be confronted with these issues openly before long, as its exploding popularity would bring it into contact with larger public organizations.

2015–2021: Hitting Their Stride

The AGDQ marathon of 2014 was the first marathon to break $1 million in donations, more than doubling the total from the previous year. One year later, the unofficial GDQ organization became Games Done Quick, LLC. It received increased recognition from its charity partners—Médecins Sans Frontières and the Prevent Cancer Foundation—who began to send speakers and representatives to GDQ events. Reporters began to cover the fundraising "phenomenon." GDQ was quickly growing into a major cultural force, and

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with that shift came new challenges to the organization's presentification. With every shattered donation record, it became more and more difficult to maintain the "dad's basement" aesthetic of the early GDQ events.

One particular shift caused by GDQ's growing popularity was its ability to transform its performers into professional live streamers. Through many of its presentifications, it allies itself with charity and community, not with competitive gaming or professional development—but in practice, it is a significant economic force in the realm of streaming. It can make careers. The *Pokémon* speedrunner Keizaron gained 10,000 followers from a single GDQ run, which was enough for him to begin streaming full time (Wallach 2019). Live streaming is incredibly competitive, and GDQ may provide streamers with the boost in visibility that they need to earn and retain followers. However, a seat at GDQ is not a guaranteed catapult to fame. Furthermore, not every speedrunner is interested in performing the kind of social labor—or, for that matter, playing the kinds of games—expected of variety streamers (Wallach 2019). GDQ is also now large enough to be acknowledged by game developers; there are a handful of cases of developers hiring speedrunners straight out of GDQ to playtest their games (Wallach 2019). GDQ's popularity, and its willingness to serve as a platform for its performers, have given it a considerable economic and cultural foothold in digital production. This is not to say that speedrunners cannot become popular without GDQ, but GDQ has an unmatched ability to put its thumb on the scale.

Furthermore, GDQ demands performances of its runners that emphasize the showmanship skills of traditional live streaming. In a sense, GDQ has changed what it means for a speedrunner to be "good" at speedrunning. Forest Scully-Blaker's ethnographic research on speedrunners found that they identified two different kinds of "good" speedrunners—those with the best times, and those with charisma. GDQ's current submission criteria advocate for a balance of both, and also underline its self-consciousness of its own considerable cultural role:

> Your run is not only a representation of yourself, but a representation of the speedrun community to a wide audience . . .
>
> . . . We will take into account the content of the video you are submitting in its entirety. This includes the commentary of anyone featured in it . . . Has the runner performed a run at our event before? How did it go? . . . Is the game entertaining on its own merits? Does that entertainment value translate to a wider audience? (Games Done Quick Game Submission Guide)

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In evaluating not only the quality of play, but also the "entertainment value" of the games, the "commentary" of the runner, and the runner's previous "performances," GDQ emphasizes the need for their runners to be at least somewhat appealing to an audience. In emphasizing "representing" the community, it also suggests that speedrunners have an obligation to make a good impression. Some very popular GDQ runners, while not unskilled by any means, are more renowned for their comic flair or performance talent. Jokes, playfulness, and positivity are a major draw of the event. The runner tomatoanus brought cardboard props to his AGDQ 2020 run of the *Fallout* series and had one of his couch members put on five pairs of pants at once to demonstrate a glitch. The run garnered 1.1 million views on YouTube—well above average for GDQ runs. The *Ratchet & Clank* speedrunner Xem is a trained opera singer, and GDQ often includes donation incentives for him to sing after his runs. In YouTube comments and Twitch chats, runners are praised for remaining optimistic or keeping the crowd entertained. The representative character of GDQ may no longer be the geeky, welcoming basement-dweller of CDGQ, but rather the stylishly sarcastic Keizaron, who self-deprecates his way through his *Pokémon* speedruns behind a pair of ironic indoor sunglasses.

This showmanship is somewhat curated by GDQ, which has implemented increasingly strict regulations on what kind of behavior streamers can exhibit during their runs. Overtly political messages are not allowed, nor is cursing, in an effort to keep the streams family friendly. GDQ's rules on inclusivity of taste and its no-cursing rules sometimes come into amusing conflict, as alluded to previously: it is not uncommon to see violent, f-bomb-heavy horror games run by streamers restricted to G-rated dialogue. This particular paradox is usually managed by the streamer's own jokes, warnings to "cover your eyes, kids," and well-timed coughs. Managing cursing is one thing, but GDQ was soon confronted with a more insidious challenge.

As mentioned previously, bigotry and hate speech are as endemic to speedrunning culture as they are to gaming culture at large. In the past five years, however, GDQ has cracked down on bigotry with surprising strictness. While only a handful of streamers have been banned from their events, they are typically for egregious uses of hate speech or violations of the safety of GDQ attendees. These infractions do not need to occur on GDQ premises or even during a GDQ event. Trihex, the same streamer whose face is depicted in the TriHard emote, was banned for using a homophobic slur

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during a solo Twitch live stream. Ryan White—the *Goldeneye 007* speedrunner mentioned previously—was banned after private chatlogs of him using white supremacist vocabulary were leaked. While these two runners were apologetic, others—such as the *Final Fantasy* runner Luzbelheim, banned for a misogynist slur in his Twitter bio—have been more aggressive or resistant. As the other runners were banned for homophobia, misogyny, and white supremacy, these bans are in some sense an acknowledgment of the vicious treatment that many minorities receive in gaming communities, even in speedrunning. Some runners have criticized GDQ's bans as overzealous and the application of them as unclear. The case of Trihex—someone who both has been the victim of bigoted behavior and used homophobic slurs—highlights the eternally complex execution of such bans. In terms of presentification, the strict bans are vocal statements that the contributions of marginalized players are fundamental to speedrunning, and the safety of those members is paramount.

Beyond its bans, GDQ has actively tried to practice inclusivity in more impactful ways that typically require labor and time. GDQ hosts another marathon, Frame Fatales, specifically to promote speedrunners who self-identify as women in a subculture that is overwhelmingly dominated by men. In June 2020, the organization donated its Twitch subscription revenue to the NAACP as a show of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. GDQ tends to be swift and uncompromising in its response when marginalized members of the community are in crisis. Within two days of a shooting spree in Atlanta on March 16, 2021, that targeted the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, GDQ condemned the violence on its Twitter account and pledged upward of $10,000 to the cause (Games Done Quick, 2021). Even some of its more mundane presentifications are made to be inclusive: the GDQ mascot, introduced for SGDQ 2019, is a gender-neutral velociraptor named Velocity.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to say how much impact GDQ's bans have over the culture of speedrunning as a whole—particularly because, by coincidence, most of the banned runners had large followings outside of GDQ and retain those followings after their bans. Still, GDQ has repeatedly reaffirmed their rejection of hate speech and bigotry, and to a much greater extent than many other gaming subcultures. The objections of those who are dissatisfied with the bans have not made a notable dent in GDQ's attendance, viewership, or donation totals.

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Conclusion

In the same way that it is an oversimplification to see GDQ as the singular force pulling the strings of modern speedrunning, it would also be an oversimplification to deem GDQ an unequaled force for good in gaming subcultures. Neither is it a tyrannical cultural force to which speedrunners must submit if they wish to be popular; it is not all-powerful, and it would likely be passed over by speedrunners entirely if it did not facilitate their cultural needs. There has been some noise to the effect that GDQ is no longer a sufficient arena to promote speedrunning culture. Some runners (including Jobst) are eager to explore the possibilities of competitive speedrunning events or live, record-breaking challenges (Jobst 2020b). The development of these events will be interesting to watch. Part of the success of the charity marathon format was its natural overlap with some of the speedrunning community's untapped values. Speedrunners often characterize their communities as, first and foremost, friendly, inclusive, and fun (Scully-Blaker 2016, tomatoanus 2020). Those values were reified by GDQ in many of its presentifications and echoed back to the speedrunning community.

Of course, competition is also a part of speedrunning—leaderboards and world records would not be so meticulously maintained otherwise—but competition does bring with it a different set of values. Perhaps the competitive elements of speedrunning will continue to coexist with its fundraising events, or perhaps it will open up new dialogues about the values of speedrunning altogether. Organizational communication scholars ask us to picture organizations not as dictators of a culture, but rather to see cultures and organizations in dialogue with one another. In the case of GDQ, these dialogues are often carried out publicly and organically, and always with an eye toward their ever-expanding live audience. As we have seen, GDQ frames speedrunners as performers. For their own organizational purposes, they favor speedrunners who are skilled, well informed, and charismatic on camera; they have elected to ensure that their culture is as accepting of minority gaming populations as possible; and they have presented speedrunning as something that can and should be performed in a live setting. These characteristics did not necessarily emerge organically from speedrunning as a practice, but rather from GDQ's presentifications of speedrunning as a live spectacle. Neither are these characteristics hard and fast rules for anyone wanting to be a speedrunner, but even if they are contentious, they

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do influence our image of what a speedrunner "should" be. Due to GDQ's vast and persisting cultural power, the worlds of the live streamed performance and the speedrunner have become inexorably intertwined.

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Real Life in Real Time

Live Streaming Culture

Edited by: Johanna Brewer, Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, Christopher J. Persaud

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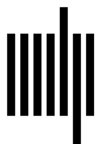

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