The Polymediated Experience of Broadcasting and Consuming Highly-Skilled Video Game Gameplay

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores how the increase in accessibility of live broadcasting platforms for players of video games, such as Twitch.tv, affects the ways highly-skilled game players are using their gameplay to create content to be consumed by others. For players and viewers who commit to beating a game as quickly as possible, or speedrunning it, preference for this type of content leads to both groups coming together in community around their shared gameplay interests. This paper applies the polymedia theory of Madianou and Miller (2013) and the concept of polymediation (Calka, 2015) to explore how these groups experience gameplay in a mediated setting.

Through ethnographic observations at a major speedrunning broadcasting event and a public chat server, and follow-up interviews and *Super Mario World* gameplay, three ways in which this type of gameplay content is mediated are analyzed. First, it is mediated through the deliberate, audience-focused additions of technological and gameplay-enhancing content. Second, it is mediated through a purposeful separation of casual gaming for entertainment from "serious" gameplay as a craft. Finally, it is mediated through the engagement and collaboration of an inclusive gameplay-centered community.

Keywords: polymedia, polymediation, mediated experiences, gameplay, speedrunning

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iii

Acknowledgements iv

Chapter

1: INTRODUCTION 1

Playing a Game For Oneself vs. Playing a Game For Others 3

The Polymediated Experience 4

2: LITERATURE REVIEW 7

From Single-Player to Mediated Experience 8

The Community Around Gameplay: Streaming, Congregating, Creating 11

The Relationship Between Broadcaster, Viewer, and Game 13

Content Creation and Modification 14

Polymedia Theory 17

3: METHODS 22

Phronetic Iterative Method 22

Researcher Standpoint 23

Methods 25

4: GAMEPLAY MEDIATED THROUGH THE TECHNOLOGY AND TRADITIONS OF BROADCASTING 34

Producing High-Definition Broadcasts Using Standard-Definition Consoles 34

Visual Augmentation 36

Commentary and Verbal Augmentation 38

The Audience in Attendance and the Audience Actually Watching 41

The Labor of Mediating Gameplay 44

5: GAMEPLAY MEDIATED THROUGH PURPOSEFUL PRACTICE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP 48

Purposeful Gaming Spaces and Casual Gaming Spaces 48

The Conversational Framing of “Gameplay” 54

Playing Games for Professional Development 56

6: GAMEPLAY MEDIATED THROUGH COMMUNITY COLLABORATION AND CONTENT CREATION 61

Extending the Community Beyond Video Broadcast 61

Sharing Successes and Celebration of Improvement 64

Shared Technical Exploration and Speedrunning Advice 66

Fan Content Fueling the Broadcasting Cycle 72

7: CONCLUSION 75

Theoretical Contributions 75

Limitations and opportunities for future research 77

References 80

Appendix 87

A. Interview Guide 87

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The earliest memory I have of playing video games was as a three-year old, playing *Super Mario Bros.* for the Nintendo Entertainment System at my grandparents' house as they watched me show off the present they had just purchased for our family. Even though the gift was technically for my parents' anniversary, I was the one the family turned to in order to show what the system was capable of producing. Looking back on the decades of gameplay that followed as I grew up with video games as a constant in my activities, this initial performative aspect of gameplay has always resonated with my understanding of the action of playing a game. While I certainly enjoyed the idea of playing games for my own entertainment, I always desired to play in front of an audience, especially once I felt confident that my gameplay was good enough to impress others (or, at least, impress myself).

In addition to being eager to play games for others, I also remember the first time I watched a particularly high-level gameplay video of a retro game I had played growing up. In 2007, a YouTube user going by "Proton Jon" uploaded a playthrough of what I believed, at the time, to be an impossible level of *Super Mario World* that he referred to as "Super Kaizo World." The combination of humorous comments and incredulity of Jon as he played, as well as the astonishing gameplay being performed, mesmerized me and led me to watch the entirety of Proton Jon's YouTube library at the time. I never attempted to play the game myself, and I felt no particular desire to do so; watching Jon play the game for me was entertaining enough.

High-performance video gameplay has served as content for broadcast media since *Starrcade*, a television game show that incorporated arcade cabinet gameplay into a trivia game that aired on TBS and appeared in syndication from 1982-1984. Due to the lack of communication platforms available to individuals, however, the method for sharing gameplay of

note, whether because of a high score or achievement, was to record the gameplay as it was played and to share the recordings with others to watch on their own time. With time and innovation, however, platforms emerged that allow for users to personally share their gameplay achievements directly with others via the internet and peer-to-peer networking. The onset of YouTube allowed those previous recordings to be uploaded to a space allowing for on-demand viewing for any interested user, and forums and bulletin boards provided spaces for users to come together and share their scores, times, achievements, and strategies. With the creation of the livestreaming Justin.tv platform, along with its subsequent version as Twitch.tv, these gameplay sessions were able to be performed live.

Upon signing up for an account with Twitch, a user is provided with a channel – a means by which to upload live footage and have it streamed in real time. While the content of the footage is up to the individual user, the marketing and existing userbase focuses on footage of the playing of video games. Visitors to the Twitch website are then able view these streams in real time, as well as interact with other viewers and the broadcaster through a live webchat unique to each channel. Twitch users, if they choose, can ‘follow’ a broadcaster to receive updates and notifications whenever that user starts to broadcast, and they can ‘subscribe’ by paying a regular monthly fee that is split between the website and broadcasters to receive exclusive content and visible recognition amongst the audience.

As platforms for the broadcast of individual video game experiences expand, individuals who perform technically high-level gameplay are finding new opportunities to use their skill at games in a previously-impossible way: as real-time content to be consumed by others. This type of gameplay is presented in a variety of formats for viewers to engage with, one of which is speedrunning. Speedrunning is a specific type of playthrough where the goal is to go from the

beginning of a game to the end as fast as possible using any means necessary and available to the player within the game. While the activity of speedrunning, and the metric of completion time as a sign of skill, predates the availability of livestreaming, new technical advancements and the expansion of internet accessibility has provided speedrunners (those who participate in the activity) a means to perform these playthroughs live to a viewing audience as broadcasters.

The goal of achieving a game at the best possible level, be it high score or fastest time or other metrics, motivates participants of all activities to set aside any initial desired gratifications, such as diversion or socialization (Sherry et al., 2006) and focus exclusively on the competitive aspect of achieving the most optimal result. As this shift occurs, some high-level players are using their playing sessions as the basis for content creation and broadcasting their gameplay digitally for others to interact with and consume as media.

Playing a Game For Oneself vs. Playing a Game For Others

The interaction a user has with a video game when they sit down to play is a personal one. Even when joined with others in a physical, intimate setting, the experience is direct between the player(s) and the game. Even though the game is taking place through technological means, the gameplay experience is directly controlled by the player, and the actions taken by the player directly translate to reactions within the game. The game itself is the experience.

When consuming media of gameplay, in contrast, such as on a platform like Twitch, a viewer may be joined by thousands of other people interacting with someone remotely playing a game that the audience has no direct connection in controlling. The viewer moves from being an active participant in controlling the outcome of a game to a passive observer. Rather than the direct experience of controlling the game outcome, viewers of gameplay footage are engaging with a mediated experience – defined by Davis (2000) as the application of a technical medium

to transmit information – of the game. Despite the game itself being contained within a technological framework, the use of livestreaming to broadcast gameplay to a viewer shifts the experience of the game from a direct one to a mediated one. When that mediated experience happens, how is it different from the direct experience of playing the game? Is it different at all?

Additionally, the experience of viewing a video game on a digital broadcasting platform introduces an element otherwise not present in the act of viewing gameplay: an audience of peers who are also interacting with the gameplay. By engaging in chat servers attached to individual channels, broadcasters and audience members are able to directly engage in conversation regarding the content being played live, and audience members are also able to directly engage with each other as they collectively watch a chosen third party perform gameplay. Does that interaction, both broadcaster-to-audience and audience-to-audience, affect the ways in which audience members consume the gameplay content? Does that interaction impact the way that broadcasters play their games, and, if so, in what ways?

The Polymediated Experience

An answer to all of the above questions can be found in the application of polymedia theory and the concept of polymediation. Polymedia theory (Madianou and Miller, 2013) explains that people are able to flow freely between different communicative media based on the relational and social outcomes desired and not based on technical limitations or availability. The concept of polymediation, as defined by Herbig, Tyma, and Herrmann (2015), examines the role that both media and media producers play in building the environment described by polymedia theory, and serves as a “discursive entry point” to understanding and discussing what is happening at the convergence of online broadcasting, video game gameplay, and the interactions an audience has both with a broadcaster and itself. When a person chooses to

engage with others over a specific, and then by continues that engagement by communing with other audience members seamlessly across different media, the person participates in a shared, expansive, multi-channel mediated experience - a “polymediated experience” - that allows for mass audiences to consume content and participate communally.

This paper applies polymedia theory and the concept of polymediation and the polymediated experience to determine how, if at all, the consumption and broadcast of gameplay – specifically, performative, highly-technical skilled gameplay such as speedrunning - is a mediated experience. To accomplish this, I conducted ethnographic observations, both in person and through digital platforms, and interviews with speedrunners, broadcasters and audience members to learn how they interact with the high-level gameplay of *Super Mario World*, the players of that game and with each other regarding gameplay and other topics. In the analysis of the findings from the observations and interviews, overarching themes emerge that describe how both the performers and viewers of *Super Mario World* speedrunning and technically-advanced gameplay interact with each other and with the game they play in a way that, as outlined in polymedia theory, prioritizes the social and relational outcomes of the interaction over any technological or medium-specific motivations.

In Chapter 2, I review the existing literature on the consumption and performance of gameplay, as well as the literature on mediated experiences and polymedia as it applies to video games and gameplay. In Chapter 3, I review the methods used in conducting and analyzing research, including the incorporation of Tracy’s (2018) phronetic iterative method to outline the qualitative research methods used to collect, code, and interpret data. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 each highlight a different way that the consumption of high-performance gameplay becomes a polymediated experience when broadcast live: through the incorporation of additional elements

to the video and audio elements of gameplay, through the development of a purposeful and craftsmanship-style approach to speedrunning and performative gameplay when compared to other types of gameplay, and through community engagement that spans multiple media and incorporates inclusivity, mentorship, and iterative content creation all centered around *Super Mario World* gameplay. Finally, Chapter 7 serves as a conclusion, highlighting the theoretical contributions made by the thesis and the limitations and opportunities for future research presented by this project.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written regarding video games and video game gameplay (hereafter, all references to "gameplay" will be assumed to refer to video game gameplay unless otherwise stated), and the active and passive consumption of gameplay as a new vessel for audience engagement (Aarseth, 2003; Gandolfi, 2016; Ramirez, Saucerman, and Dietmeier, 2014), a platform for new forms of sporting events and spectatorship (Burroughs and Rama, 2015; Edge, 2013; Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017), and as a way to construct new social spaces around shared interests in playing games (Sjöblom and Hamari, 2017; Voida and Greenberg, 2009; Williams, 2006).

Consalvo (2017a) writes that, as the industry of video games adapts to technological advances and social changes, more emphasis is needed on single-player experiences being shared in community through platforms such as Twitch. Her assertion for researchers to focus on the gathering of audiences, both in person and online, to share in a single-player experience is accompanied by studies on the growth of the Twitch platform and implications of that growth on individual video game broadcasters (Dargonaki, 2018; Walker, 2014) and on audience members (Gandolfi, 2016; Sjöblom and Hamari, 2017). Often in these studies, audience members (those who are watching a gameplay livestream) and broadcasters (those actively playing games on a livestreaming platform) are discussed in symbiotic terms, with streamers being defined both by the games they play but also the ways in which they interact with their audience members. In turn, audience members are discussed as having an influence on the actions and behaviors of the streamer they watch (Ramirez et al., 2014).

Thus, audience and broadcaster come together to co-create content that serves as both the foundational media text that facilitates the experience (Consalvo, 2017b) and the experience itself. As these experiences become readily accessible, the viewers of a specific game and/or

gameplayer are able to build a community around their shared interest that, through content creation (Sotamaa, 2010) and transmedia engagement, becomes a polymediated environment that fulfills both the broadcaster's and the audience needs for participating in the activity.

From Single-Player to Mediated Experience

The argument that the viewing and performance of high-skill gameplay are mediated experiences is based on writings and research on transmedia mediatization (Jansson, 2013; Lacalle and Simelio, 2017), the transformation of spectator sports from an active experience to a mediated one through television production (Mullen and Mazzocco, 2000), online communities built around content derived from media sources such as books or television series (Ramirez et al., 2014), polymedia theory (Calka, 2015; Madianou and Miller, 2013; Tyma, 2015), synchronous s gameplay in person (Consalvo, 2017a; Voida and Greenberg, 2009), and synchronous gameplay through digital connections (Ramirez et al., 2014; Williams, 2006). Functionally, the evolution of media platforms has allowed for those platforms to shape the way society views media, and in turn, affects how society behaves in reaction to consuming that media.

This changing societal behavior caused by media, labeled *mediatisierung* (translated from German into English as *mediatization*) by scholar Ernst Manheim (Jansson, 2013), requires careful study as society begins to incorporate more mediated experiences into its everyday function. As McLuhan said in *The Medium is the Message* (1964), such an introduction of new, technologically driven media experiences are "a huge collective surgery carried on the social body with complete disregard for antiseptics" (p. 12). The new opportunities provided by this "surgery" requires attention to the concept of mediatization, defined by Jansson (2013) as the way "other social processes in a broad variety of domains and at different levels become

inseparable from and dependent on technological processes and resources of mediation" (p. 281). As media inserts itself, via smartphone, Internet connectivity, and other technological advancements, into more aspects of society, these aspects of life become mediated experiences (Tyma, 2015).

Ijsselstein and Riva (2003) state that a mediated experience comes as a result of indirect exposure to media, rather than direct consumption. For instance, a person reading a book is directly consuming that text, while another person listening to the same book as an audio recording is indirectly experiencing the media through someone else's interpretation. As more of these kinds of opportunities become available to society through technological advances, the importance of understanding how audiences interact with these experiences and with each other also increases.

The broadcast of gameplay, both competitive and recreational, provides an avenue to that increased understanding of mediated experiences. These new forms of content are now open to being mediated, and can be used to convey a sense of place and of things that are not physically present (Ijsselsteihn and Riva, 2003), in many of the same ways and with the same potential motivations of traditional content such as television broadcasts of American football (Mullen and Mazzocco, 2000). However, while traditional sports broadcasts are taking real events and mediating story and drama into them (Mullen and Mazzocco, 2000), a video game is already a curated experience that has narrative elements incorporated alongside the gameplay elements. By broadcasting the speedrun of a game, the player is subverting the narrative elements intended by the game developer and shifting the intended experience to one exclusively focused on gameplay. How does that experience differ for the player compared to directly experiencing the game?

The answer to that question lies in the ways in which the broadcasters and the audience members consider the game being played as a text to be consumed. “A medium itself” according to Kwak (2012), “doesn’t necessarily determine where and how the medium will be used” (p. 503). In this vane, when a speed-focused gameplay broadcaster is using a game not for its intended purpose but instead as a purely gameplay-focused experience, the parts of the game that exist beyond the gameplay (plot, graphics, setting, character) are de-emphasized by the player unless they specifically contribute to the goal of finishing the game in a specific time. Cutscenes, which provide exploration and depth to the game narrative, are seen as obstacles to be skipped, and landscapes are studied not for what they contribute to the setting of the narrative, but rather for opportunities to be exploited for time saves. In this framework, narrative takes on significantly less importance in comparison to gameplay.

Game scholars approach gameplay as the player’s “actions, strategies, and thoughts” (Aarseth, 2003, p. 2) and as a core component of the structure of a game. Notably, this approach to gameplay is considered both a key factor in a game’s creation but also fundamentally the same across a wide variety of genres and structures. “Take away the game-world” remarked Aarseth (2003), “and what is left is literally the same game skeleton, give or take an algorithm” (p. 4). In this way, the gameplay serves as a representation of McLuhan’s (1964) electric light, spelling out other content but largely ignored as an independent medium with its own message to share.

If the gameplay becomes the primary media artifact of focus, that makes the gameplay itself a media text, and examination of that text requires an application of media scholarship. Using van der Hoven and Arnott’s (2012) description of media as the co-creation of conditions “within which humans experience themselves” (p. 283) as a lens, an analysis of the gameplay mediated experience incorporates the ways in which audience members come together not only

to watch others play games, but actively influence how those others play. Media scholars have performed this type of analysis for other platforms , and reviewing that analysis leads to how it can be applied to Twitch and other platforms for broadcast gameplay.

While this type of analysis-by-extension provides insight into the motivations of broadcasters and audience members, it uses gameplay as a "bridge" to discuss other, more understood aspects of media, such as audience gratification (Gandolfi, 2016, pp. 69, 77). The gameplay itself, despite being the substantial text of the mediated experience, is not treated as mediated content. Some media scholars are attempting to evolve media studies to incorporate new types of interactive mediated content such as gameplay. This evolution, according to Couldry (2004), would change the understanding of media to be "the open set of practices relating to, or orientated around media" (p. 117) and would shift the focus from the medium itself to the behavioral patterns that arise as a result of direct or indirect contact with media. Such an approach would be in line with the history of media, which has seen a rapid and extensive change as technology and social taste has grown and adapted (Tyma, 2015, p. 13).

The Community Around Gameplay: Streaming, Congregating, Creating

Much of the scholarship around the community created around gameplay as a media falls into three categories: streaming gameplay on platforms such as Twitch (Dargonaki, 2018, e.g.), the social congregation of the audience outside of the broadcast channel (Payne, Keith, Schuetzler, and Giboney, 2017; Ramirez et al., 2017; Sjobolm and Hamari, 2017; Taylor, 2016), and the creation and modification of content to further enhance the gameplay experience (Agirre, Arrizabalage, and Espilla, 2016; Sotamaa, 2010). With Twitch, currently the most visible platform used for the purpose of livestreaming of gameplay (Dargonaki, 2018), players are able to use their internet connection to stream their gameplay, as well incorporating verbal and

(depending on internet connection and equipment) video footage live on a publicly-accessible web channel (Consalvo, 2017a; Jungar, 2016).

Gandolfi (2016) identified three primary motivations for players who choose to broadcast their play on a livestreaming platform such as Twitch, as well as the subset of players that act on those motivations. First, there is a subset of streamers who use their gameplay to establish a community and a relationship between themselves and their audience members, as well as between audience members. The second subset of players view their gameplay as primarily performative and use it to entertain their viewers. Finally, players such as speedrunners and professional e-sports athletes use their broadcasts to both achieve and display a high level of in-game skill and achievement.

An increasing meta-motivation to participation in game broadcasting is to make money through live broadcasts. Beyond the subscriber revenue available on a platform like Twitch, streamers are able to receive direct donations from viewers, as well as sponsorships from corporations and advertising revenue from the platform. All of these revenue sources are based on the broadcaster's ability to gain, retain, and develop loyalty within an audience, and broadcasters who wish to gain income from their stream incorporate strategies and methods for audience growth into their content. Social factors, according to Sjobolm and Hamari, are "the strongest determinant of following streams and subscribing" and are therefore "an immensely important aspect of the consumer experience of streaming" (2017, p. 9). For some streamers, the gameplay serves merely as a tool to build an audience to entertain and/or connect with. In those instances, the interactivity between the player and the game, a relationship that Jungar (2016) feels is the defining aspect of the unique of video games from other media, is deprioritized in favor of the interactivity between a broadcaster and their audience members and the interactivity

within the audience of a broadcaster.

The Relationship Between Broadcaster, Viewer, and Game

As Twitch and other streaming platforms continue to expand as a media practice, the participation of audience members within these streams increasingly resembles other online communities and fandoms (Lacalle and Simelio, 2017), with Dunn (2015) making the comparison to how sports fans engage with similar fans online and with teams and players through social media. Further studies done on the social engagement with communities on Twitch argue that, if participation within a community is measured through paid subscription, social engagement within the community was a stronger indicator of participation than the actual consumption of content (Sjöblom and Hamari, 2017).

Aarseth (2003) notes in his study of game streaming that unfamiliarity with the game creates a lack of understanding for an audience member that can lead to misinterpretations of the actions happening and the community's reaction to them (pg. 3). However, if he is correct that gameplay is largely a "skeleton" (p. 4) of the same set of principles and actions wrapped in different game worlds and ideas, then familiarity with that overarching set would lend familiarity with any individual usage of that skeleton in a wide variety of individual games. Additionally, there are instances where the audience has gathered to watch a game player beat a game at a high level, such as a speedrun or high-score attempt. Does familiarity with a game matter if the mediated experience being sought is that of high-level gameplay in general?

Added to the relationship between the broadcaster and their audience is the question of the relationship between audience members who congregate around a specific game's gameplay. Rather than subscribing to a central broadcaster who may play a variety of games for a variety of reasons, what happens when a community of players seeking high-level gameplay in a specific

game is built around the mastery and shared experiences of playing that specific game? In this case, the question would be the inverse of Aarseth: if unfamiliarity with a game leads to confusion within a streaming environment, what does hyper-familiarity lead to? This question begins to lead away from the streaming aspect of gameplay as media and towards a new area: content creation and modification.

Content Creation and Modification

While game streaming is rising as a media practice (Gandolfi, 2016), communities around specific games are also coming together to expand these games through processes of content creation and modification building. Content created around video games and shared within a community can span a wide range of artistic media, including fanfiction and original art. This type of engagement is indicative of high levels of media consumption as a whole, even if the number of engaged community members creating the content represents a small percentage of the audience (Agirre et al., 2016). The motivations behind sharing content are expansive, but a focus on strictly the content created to share with players of a common game to better gameplay of said game provides a narrower field to analyze.

Some of this community-generated content directly relates to improvement and betterment of the gameplay elements, in what Mason (2013) describes as a response to the removal of necessary information for game understanding from manuals and in-game guides. However, when communities are built around the specific gameplay of a singular game, the content creation that comes from that community is not limited to just information on how to play the game as intended, but extends to information that advances the opportunity to perform high-level gameplay in ways that are either beyond the scope of the original game design or exploits found by players seeking advantages. When a gameplayer engages with this type of

content, they are demonstrating an interest in gameplay that transcends the original mechanics and design of the game being discussed. In this sense, they are behaving, as Dunn (2015) says, as a fan of media: “When he or she is not engaged with the original media, the original object of their affection, they are still seeking it, thinking about it, acting on it, commiserating over it, even synthesizing it” (pp. 112–113).

This content creation, beyond gameplay guides and tutorials, extends to modifications, or mods: games that are created by taking and rearranging or introducing new elements to pre-existing games (Sotamaa, 2010). This is done either through tools created and distributed by makers of the pre-existing game for the explicit purpose of modification or through community-generated tools and the disassembly and recoding of elements of a game without creator permission. A fair comparison to make is to associate mods with fan fiction, which allows fans of media to create and reshape “characters, plotlines, and relationships” of the entity they partake in (Calka, 2015, p. 21).

For some streamers and audience members that focus on high-level gameplay, however, the act of modifying a game is not about advancing any specific plotline or developing a character, but rather expanding and opening new opportunities for gameplay through the reconfiguration of in-game assets (Games Done Quick, 2018). Often, these mods, sometimes referred to as “romhacks” for the way they access the original code of a game file, serve as new gameplay content that supplements the game and is made with the foundation and mechanics of the original game. Notable examples of mods across different gaming genres include *Defense of the Ancients*, a mod for Blizzard’s *Warcraft III* that is credited as the first multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game; *Auto Chess*, a mod for *DOTA 2* that is credited as the first “auto battler” game; and the *Kaizo Mario World* romhacks of *Super Mario World* that serve as the

namesake for the “kaizo” genre of intricate, aggressively difficult platforming games.

Mods such as those listed above demonstrate a way that the relationship between content, creator and consumer (Calka, 2015, p. 20) begins to complicate itself, as the mod (which previously would have been considered a supplement to the original game) takes the primary focus as the game being featured. When this happens, Consalvo (2017b) notes that the original game becomes “raw material from which creators shape new and very different play opportunities…the mod takes center stage, and the game is the supporting actor” (pp. 179–180). As the audience’s focus shifts from the game to a gameplay-focused mod, the linking characteristic between the two texts is not a character, setting or storyline, but gameplay mechanics. When viewed from the perspective of gameplay mechanics and gameplay-centered accomplishment as the desired experience of modification, the logical extension of Sotamaa’s (2010) characterization of the modifier as “petty producer” in line with fan fiction (p. 243) is that gameplay elements are as appealing to audience participation as character or story elements.

As evidenced above, the interactions between the broadcasters and viewers of speedrunning and other high-skilled content on livestreaming platforms raise questions that extend beyond the act of playing a game or watching someone play a game. As broadcasters seek to develop a regular audience for the purpose of generating revenue, and as audience members engage with the gameplay to the level of creating original content to explain and extend it, the gameplay, and an appreciation for it, becomes a common thread between individuals engaging with each other in Twitch chats and in other forums. Polymedia theory provides an opportunity to understand how those individuals interact with both the gameplay and each other across these forums.

Polymedia Theory

In order to shift the focus from the media and messages of content (in this case, gameplay) to the patterns of behavior around the broadcast and consumption of media, a theoretical framework is needed that holistically incorporates elements of media studies, interactive communities, and audience interaction. That framework is provided by polymedia theory, defined by Madianou and Miller (2013) as the ways individuals exploit the affordances provided by communication technologies to consume and manage their mediated emotions and relationships. In other terms, polymedia states that, when access to a range of technological affordances provides more opportunities to communicate, people can "no longer be referred back to issues of either access, cost or media literacy by either of those involved in the act of communication" (p. 176).

Different than transmedia, which is the "circulation of media content between various platforms" (Jansson, 2013, p. 287), polymedia is less of a storytelling construct than a natural result of participating in a culture that has technological affordances. In a polymediated environment, audience members do not just naturally shift between media as necessary in order to best communicate with broadcasters and each other, but a failure to choose the correct medium is seen as an error on the part of the one making the choice (Madianou and Miller, 2013). In the case of gameplay, broadcasters and audience members flow freely between different channels based on what they are interested in doing – consuming, playing, creating, teaching, learning, or any other possible motivation for community engagement.

Instead of a transmedia story, which is crafted and shared by a storyteller across different platforms, this polymediated experience fundamentally includes the desired social outcomes of those participating in it. In other words, the experience becomes about not just how an individual

reacts to media, but also how other people react to media and the discourse that results from those individual reactions. Tyma, Herbig, and Herrmann (2015) expand the definition of the theory and refer to the process of moving toward this type of media environment as "polymediation" defined as the "process of and product resulting from media producers – who can be everyone and anyone with access existing within a converged media state" (p. xx).

Calka (2015) writes that the process of polymediation contains several defining elements that can be observed. In order for polymediation to occur, the media in question must be ubiquitous; that is, it must be readily accessible at any given point in time. Next, polymediation requires fluid authorship, meaning that the ownership of the mediated experience must be shared amongst those that contribute to it. Participants in polymediated environments need to be able to engage in both a fragmented and unified performance of identity; while they may present themselves differently on different platforms, each of those platforms' performances must constitute the individual's self. Finally, much like the individuals are able to present both segmented and unified identities, the community must also be able to present itself in both segmented and communal forms.

Polymediation, as well as the end result of a polymediated reality, is both an active change made by audience members engaging in new channels of communication and the natural evolution of how "media convergence, content creation, gatekeeping, narrowcasting, online identity, social networks" (Tyma, Herbig, and Herrmann, 2015, p. xx) and other technological advancements affect the media consumption behavior of society. If media continues to be defined as "any means by which messages may be transmitted" (Hartley, 2002, p. 142), then the continued technological innovations that offer new ways to connect people in ways that can be communicative will continue to force scholars and non-scholars alike to reconsider and revise

the ways in which we approach and understand mediated communications. Where once the only interaction with television broadcast was over the airways, technology has allowed for "hybrid processes that enable spectators to combine the use of digital media…with watching television" (Lacalle and Simelio, 2017, p. 450). The same is true for gameplay.

As media channel accessibility grows, media studies scholars are advancing the ways they approach media and the concept of media studies as a whole. Couldry (2004) argues that media studies should be treated "as sociology or cultural anthropology" rather than as an observational and reactive field (p. 117). Specific to video games, Walker (2014) argues that "streaming represents a sea change in how players can share and collaborate, adding new sorts of social interactivity to an experience that was, for so long, solitary" (p. 437), and Aarseth (2003) asserts that games are "games much closer to the ideal object of the Humanities, the work of art. Thus, they become visible and textualizable for the aesthetic observer, in a way the previous phenomena were not" (p. 1). As gameplay becomes part of a polymediated experience, the ability to observe and textualize how audiences play and socialize around specific games expands from focusing on direct experiences to online, mediated venues and platforms.

Taking the Opportunity

In viewing the effects that livestreaming has had on the ways audiences and players engage in gameplay and with each other, unrealized opportunities to apply observational research to media audiences present themselves to scholars interested in taking them. Gandolfi (2016) notes that, as a whole, media structures are "more multi-centric and open to bidirectional relations" (p. 67), and Agirre (2016) argues that just using technological methods to measure media audiences is "insufficient when it comes to choosing more active behaviors" (p. 143), which include content creation and community engagement. Qualitative research provides a

method to engage with audiences regarding those active behaviors, and livestreaming and interacting with gameplay provides a unique venue to perform that research.

Studies have been performed on various aspects of the Twitch platform and the act of livestreaming (Deng, Cuadrado, Tyson, and Uhlig, 2016, e.g.), but calls for future research on the subject are still voiced by scholars. Walker (2014) notes “a great dearth of academic work on live streaming - and the articles which do exist take up largely administrative positions and concerns.” (p. 438). Tyma, Herbig, and Herrmann explicitly reference video games as a subject that requires further examination as it relates to polymediation (2015, p. 166). Likewise, game scholars recognize the evolution of gameplay and call for additional research on how the evolution of media affects gameplay and gaming (Consalvo, 2017b, 2017a; Taylor, 2016; Williams, 2006).

Pulling away from the topic of video games and looking more holistically, the subject of games as polymedia and the possibility of gameplay as a polymediated experience reveals additional gaps in the broader fields of media studies and game studies. Madianou and Miller (2013) write that polymedia is best understood by “understanding media as defined by their relationship each other” (2013, p. 175), and understanding the ways that the channels used by gameplay audiences relate to each other can potentially be extrapolated to understanding other polymedia environments. Further, Williams (2010) argues that there is “simply too much change, too much newness, and too many unknowns to leave the social analysis of games to headline writers and policy makers” (p. 13). Any assumption that video games are the only media that fit that description is a denial of technological advancement and the evolution of media consumption behaviors. By applying the concept of the polymediated experience to gameplay, I hope to provide an example for other scholars of emerging and rapidly evolving media to lead

the discussion on how media consumption and engagement habits are evolving as both variety of channels and access to technology grow.

Ultimately, these gaps in the literature can be partially addressed by an analysis of the behavior of audience members within these polymediated environments. Walker (2014), in his analysis of streaming, calls scholars to action by stating “We have to ask how our actions - how is our play - pushed, pulled, restricted, encouraged and transformed. And to whose benefit?” (p. 441). This study seeks to answer Walker’s call for effects on gameplay while extending the scope of the initial call to include the effects on the gameplayer and the audience as well.

The existing literature on gameplay, mediated experiences, online communities, livestreaming, content creation and polymediation directly leads to the fundamental question that I seek to answer in this study: how, if at all, is the consumption and broadcast of highly-skilled gameplay a mediated experience? Additionally, the literature notates the worth of, and the need for qualitative research methods in addressing this specific topic. In the next chapter, I will outline the methods of research and data analysis used to answer this question.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

After a review of existing literature, I adopted the following research question to serve as the primary driver of my data collection and analysis:

RQ: How, if at all, is the consumption and broadcast of highly skilled gameplay a mediated experience?

To answer this question, I adopted the phronetic iterative method developed by Sarah Tracy (2018) to perform audience ethnographic observations through a combination of in-person observation, digital observation and semi-structured interviews with audience members and broadcasters. In this chapter, I first will explain the decision to use Tracy's iterative approach to the design and analysis of my research question and study. Next, I will detail my relationship to the project and the subject matter. Finally, I will outline the logistical steps taken to gather, code, analyze, and verify research data in order to understand the ways, if any, that gameplay can be a mediated experience.

Phronetic Iterative Method

Tracy (2018)'s phronetic iterative method serves as a balance between purely inductive, or emic, methods and deductive, or etic, methods. The word "phronetic," borrowed from the ancient Greek word for "practical wisdom" is meant to highlight the search for meaning making of "any given social phenomenon" through the analysis of an "examination of contextual knowledge" (p. 62).

Tracy outlines the method into three steps for developing a research study. The first step is an explicit engagement with what the data is presenting as well as theoretical understanding. This step requires both an application of prior literature and theoretical concepts to the data, as

well as a thorough and detailed analysis of the context affecting the findings of the research. Second, the researcher must define the question that the researcher is attempting to answer. This question, which I have defined for my study as my primary research question at the beginning of this chapter, must be specific and must address the issue at the center of the researcher's intended observations. Finally, a study using this method should determine the dialectical relationship between what the data is presenting and the defined research question. Once a specific question is determined, the study must find how the data being studied directly and specifically answers this question. I do this in my analysis chapters, where I directly answer the research question by providing three ways in which the consumption and broadcast of highly-skilled gameplay is a mediated experience.

To accomplish these steps, Tracy (2018) proposes a model where the researcher is alternating between etic and emic analysis after collecting data. After securing a specific research question, data collection and analysis should happen as soon as possible, with the researcher taking organizational processes and theoretical questions into account when assembling the data set. While the analysis is happening, the researching alternates between considering the theoretical framework and ontological background (etic) and the information presented by their data (emic) to start noting the main ways in which data points fit into addressing the overall research question. This process is designed to be fluid, with findings of one data analysis session influencing the direction and aims of further interviews or observations.

Researcher Standpoint

In presenting my own standpoint on my subject, I hope to explain how my inherent biases affect my data analysis. While I do not consider myself to be an active streamer or content creator of the type of gameplay I am analyzing, I do consider myself to be an active and engaged

member of the audience consuming it. After my own personal introduction to the topic and the content, I now believe that the majority of the content that I consume originates from online platforms such as Twitch. While not exclusively tuned into *Super Mario World* speedrunning, I have found myself increasingly involved in the community surrounding that specific game and its iterations. Since beginning this research, I have concurrently taken on an active role in leading and organizing events on behalf of the community, and I have also been asked to provide commentary on multiple occasions. To that end, I have personally become very invested in actively and daily engaging in the community across multiple channels.

This level of interaction was not intended nor designed as part of the study but resulted as a direct consequence of my personal involvement and investment within the community. Prior to my attendance at the Awesome Games Done Quick marathon, I would have considered my level of involvement within the community as moderate but not substantial and certainly not worthy of recognition by others. I gradually became more invested following the completion of data collection to the point where I am now tasked with the administration of a community Twitch channel and the organization of races and other communal events. While I do not believe the results I derived from the data were impacted by this involvement, I do feel that my experience allowed me to bring personal insight into the data collection process.

I did not grow up playing *Super Mario World*, nor do I associate my own video game experiences primarily with one game over any other, but I recollect the game being on the periphery of my gaming history from an early age. Through my personal media consumption habits and this research, I now have more of a familiarity with the modifications and romhacks made of the original game than I do of the source material itself. Because of this familiarity, I was able to use my knowledge of the community to inform my research question, observations,

and interview guide construction.

Methods

This thesis used qualitative data collection through ethnographic observation and interviews in order to analyze the lived experiences of audience members and broadcasters as they interact with and perform high-skilled gameplay in broadcasted settings. In this section, I will expound on the choice of ethnographic observation and outline the fields in which ethnographic observations took place. Next, I will discuss the recruitment of interview participants and the interview process taken in the course of this research. Finally, I will discuss the analytic and verification process I employed for data collected through this research.

Ethnographic observation. I chose to conduct interpretive ethnographic observations, both in person and in mediated environments, as a means of collecting data to answer the research question. The subject of the research for this study is a group of participants, and the research question looks to determine ways they individually and corporately behave and interact with both media and one another. An ethnographic observations of the participants as they engage in their activities and with each other (Aktinson and Hammersley, 1994) was my selection for gathering data based on these factors.

Since the subject of the study are active participants of an activity, I adapted an active involvement in both the in-person event and in the online community (Mackellar, 2013). This allowed me to notate my observations in a variety of settings that non-participants would not be given access to, as well as credibility within the community to engage and question participants on their actions and thoughts. I did not have to deceive community members or make false pretenses about my participation in community spaces in order to achieve active involvement.

In-person observations. Ethnographic observations were conducted at the Awesome

Games Done Quick (AGDQ) speedrunning marathon, held from January 6-12, 2019 at the Bethesda North Marriott Hotel and Conference Center in Rockville, Maryland. AGDQ is a production of Games Done Quick, LLC, an organization founded in 2015 to organize and hold gameplay marathons in order to raise money for charity. Marathons under the Games Done Quick moniker have been held since 2010, and the most recent event – Summer Games Done Quick 2019 – raised more than $3 million in donations for Doctors Without Borders from 50,906 individual donations (Congton, 2019).

For the event, gameplayers were encouraged to submit video recordings of themselves completing a game as fast as possible to the organization for consideration to be included in the event. Following submissions, the organization selected participants, built a continuous weeklong schedule spanning six days, and publicized the schedule as well as a location and date for the marathon to occur. Non-participants were invited to register to attend the marathon and view the event in person or watch the broadcast of the marathon on the organization's Twitch channel – twitch.tv/gamesdonequick – throughout the course of the event.

In order to conduct observations in person at the event, I registered as an attendee under the screen name associated with my participation on Twitch – doctor_no. I then applied for a position as a volunteer. I was accepted as a volunteer for the check-in table and enforcement team. The motivation behind volunteering was three-fold: to establish good faith in my participation in the event beyond data collection, to serve as a method to interact and observe staff members, and to reduce research costs as volunteers do not pay a registration fee. Finally, I contacted Games Done Quick staff members to obtain consent for data observation as part of the approval process for the University of Southern Indiana's Institutional Research Board.

Between January 6 and January 12, 2019, I completed a total of 24.75 hours of formal,

in-person observations in all major spaces publicly available at the event. Locations within the hotel that observations took place in included the Grand Ballroom, White Flint Amphitheater, and White Oak, Brookside, Oakley, Glen Echo and Linden Oak conference rooms. While I was formally observing, I used a Rocketbook Everlast notebook to record jottings, which allowed me to easily scan my jottings into my laptop and erase the book for a fresh start with each observation session. Following each session, I used the scanned jotting images to formally transcribe field notes for the purposes of analysis. Transcriptions of my jottings taken during observation resulted in 38 single-spaced pages of formal field notes.

Observations included both audience study (Bird, 2009) of event attendees who were engaging with gameplay, both the marathon content as well as non-marathon gameplay, and participant study (Mackellar, 2013) of gameplayers chose to participate in the marathon and attendees serving as commentators for the active players.

Mediated ethnographic observation. In addition to formal, in-person observations of the event space, I conducted formal observations of the Twitch broadcast of the AGDQ charity marathon. These formal media observations were done by viewing a closed-circuit broadcast of the marathon stream on hotel televisions, the marathon stream from within the physical stream room, and viewing the marathon's official Twitch broadcast on my personal laptop and Android smartphone.

Over the course of the event, a total of 2 hours of the broadcast were observed in this mediated setting. In some instances, such as observation of the very beginning of the marathon, in-person observations and mediated observations were conducted concurrently from the stream room to document the differences between the physical and mediated experiences at a precise moment. This was done through the Twitch.tv mobile application's feed of the Games Done

Quick channel. Field notes for these mediation observation sessions were recorded and transcribed in the same method as in-person observation sessions and are included in the 38 single-spaced pages of formal field notes. When combined with the time spent on in-person ethnographic observation, a total of 26.75 formal hours of observation was conducted at AGDQ.

Digital ethnographic observations. To understand and observe how audience members interact with each other regarding the consumption and broadcast of gameplay, I conducted digital ethnographic observations (Kozinets, 2015) of participants of a Discord chat server centered around the gameplay of *Super Mario World*. Discord is a service that allows for individuals and communities to create chat servers, moderate access, and build channels centered around topics of the administrator's choosing. This Discord server was chosen for observation because of the involvement of several high-performing gameplay broadcasters as administrators, the size of its member vase, and its activity level both in the server and as a community in other online spaces such as Twitch.

Transcripts from the server were pulled from six different channels for the week of January 21-28, 2019 using a DiscordChatExporter open source software tool created by Alexey Golub. The following channels were chosen for their activity level and topic: #help, #pbs-and-runs, #romhacking, #speedrunning and #tas. The software tool scraped the publicly available chat logs from those respective channels over the designated time frame and exported the logs to CSV files. Those CSV files were then double-checked against the chat history available in Discord for verification and superficially changed to increase readability. When exported to PDF, the files produced eight (8) single-spaced pages of data.

Interviews. After the collection of data from the in-person and mediated observation settings, I wanted to confirm how certain participants experienced both events from the AGDQ

marathon and from their interactions with broadcast gameplay in general. In order to do so, an interview guide was written to directly follow up on events that occurred at the marathon (the interview guide is included in Appendix A). Those events included reviewing with event participants on the experience they had as player and attendee, and with non-attendees on their experience with the marathon stream. Additionally, insight into general experiences with the broadcast of *Super Mario World* and related user-generated content speedrunning was sought from both audience members and broadcasters.

The interview guide was semi-structured in order to allow for follow up on questions based on the role and the experiences presented by participants. It included questions on the participant's opinion on the event as whole, their experience with their own part of the event (if any), their experience with the content being broadcast, and their experience as members of a community around this type of content. Broadcasters were also asked their experiences with gameplay as it relates to their performance and production.

Four interviews were conducted through voice call functionality available through Discord and recorded using a webapp named Craig, a voice-recording plugin for Discord voice calls. Following the conclusion of recording, the audio of all four interviews totaled 3 hours, 52 minutes. Interview recordings were transcribed using the Rev.com transcription service, resulting in 81 single-spaced pages of transcripts. These transcripts were all cross-referenced to the original recording in order to clarify jargon and other terminology that the transcribing service did not recognize, and direct references to the name of the participant were removed to protect their identity.

Participants. AGDQ reached their predetermined registration cap of 2,200 attendees. This did not include the number of participants who were running, volunteering, or serving as

staff for the event. With those numbers included, in-person attendance at the event was estimated at 2,500 individuals. Because of the Games Done Quick Privacy Policy, exact demographics of attendees are unavailable. Formal observations notated a wide diversity of age, and gender at the event, with an apparent predominance of non-Hispanic white attendees, runners, volunteers and staff.

Because the Discord server chosen for study was public, participants were able to come and leave the server at their leisure and were only identified by their username and any other internet presences they had connected to their Discord username. For that reason, exact demographics and participant numbers are unavailable for the Discord server. In the transcripts collected for the purpose of this research study, a total of 61 unique participants were identified across all five channels that were analyzed.

Four total interview subjects were recruited through contact established at the AGDQ marathon and through recommendations from contacts established at AGDQ. The four subjects were all white men between the ages of 25-30. Of the interview subjects, two participated as runners at the event, one participated as a commentator only, and the fourth did not attend the event in person but watched it from his home through Twitch. All four interview subjects broadcast gameplay on personal Twitch channels – two of the subjects do it as a hobby or as recreation, while two of the subjects use their Twitch broadcasts as a primary source of income.

Data Analysis. All data documents – field notes, chat server transcriptions, audio recordings, and interview transcripts – were stored on a secure OneDrive folder associated to the University of Southern Indiana by the author and were only accessible by the author. All documents were imported into the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software, which was used for both organization of documents and for data coding.

Analysis for this thesis was conducted according to Tracy's (2013, 2018) phronetic iterative method: I began with initial, first-level coding of data points that distills a segment of data into words and short phrases. As these codes were assigned, I incorporated analysis of my theoretical foundation – polymedia – as well as my experiences and informal observations to organize and gather these first-level codes together. I then assigned second-level codes, or themes, that served to synthesize the first level codes into theoretically-sound answers to my research question. Throughout the coding process, informal memoing and jotting was employed to help organize my thoughts and track patterns and observations while analyzing the data. These memos and jottings were not recorded as official parts of the data set but were kept on note-taking apps and verbalized in conversations with mentors and colleagues.

First-level coding started following the final collecting of interview transcripts on April 1. A first attempt at coding data focused strictly on the physical elements of the observation field notes – technology, attendee behavior, physical movement and analysis of the usage of space. After initially coding field notes in this way, an attempt to apply theoretical elements of polymedia to the first-level codes revealed that I had failed to take into consideration ways in which broadcasters and audience members interacted, both with each other directly and in mediated settings through gameplay and gameplay-related streams. Because I had focused on technological and physical engagement, I had neglected to incorporate key parts of polymedia theory that address the performance of identity and the authorship of content. This led me to restart my coding process, shifting from analyzing strictly interactions between individuals and media to incorporating an analysis of how individuals used media to interact with each other.

At the conclusion of first-level coding on August 1, a total of 652 initial codes were developed and logged in the Atlas.TI software. Examples of prominent first-level codes include

"effort to maximize stream quality" "streaming as labor" "casual gameplay" "attendee motivation" and "attendee motivation." These 652 codes were then analyzed, consolidated, and iteratively coded into 10 second-level codes: adding content to gameplay; attendee behavior and motivation; consumption of gameplay streams; game as community; internet audience focus; separation of casual and serious gameplay; strategic decisions for stream content; streaming as a business; technological modification; and traditional media elements added to broadcast. These second-level codes were then sorted into three final categories: the purposeful practice and craftsmanship of gameplay, community collaboration and content creation, and the incorporation of technological and traditional broadcasting elements.

Ensuring quality. In order to ensure the development, execution, and analysis of this study were credible and trustworthy, I used the "big tent" criteria for quality developed by Tracy (2013) as overarching goals to aspire to attain in my research. These criteria are: a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, a significant contribution, ethical actions and meaningful coherence. By performing a thorough literature review, consulting with advisors throughout the research process and strictly adhering to Tracy's (2018) phronetic iterative method, I ensured that this study had a worthy topic, contained appropriate rigor for the scope of the project, has transparency in methods and researcher inclinations, is ethically sound, and achieves both a significant contribution and meaningful coherence.

To achieve credibility, I shared and received affirmation of my findings from members of the community both in-person and over mediated channels such as Discord and Twitch chat. I also triangulated my research by incorporating multiple methods of data collection. As a result of the efforts to ensure quality, this study's findings both resonate with transferable findings and significantly contribute to how polymedia theory can be applied to better understand media.

Because analysis resulted in three overarching themes with several components included in each, I will send the next three chapters going over each of them in detail. Collectively, they directly address the research question established at the beginning of the chapter and work together to show the ways in which broadcasters and audiences of gameplay come together to engage with their games and with each other.

CHAPTER 4: GAMEPLAY MEDIATED THROUGH THE TECHNOLOGY AND TRADITIONS OF BROADCASTING

When *Super Mario World* was released in North America in 1991, the predominant method of consuming gameplay for spectators was to physically be present while another person was playing the game. No interactive elements existed to connect platforms, and the internet was not commercially able to stream video from a game console to interested viewers. With the technological advances that have come in the near-30 years since release, it is now possible for players to play the same game from their home while personally broadcasting their gameplay to a potential audience of hundreds of thousands of viewers. With that ease of access to audience members, gameplayers seeking to attract a wide audience are also able to incorporate additional elements and contextual aspects to further enrich and attract viewers. These technological and contextual evolutions mediate the ways in which audience members consume that gameplay, both from a personal broadcast perspective and from a professional broadcast perspective.

Producing High-Definition Broadcasts Using Standard-Definition Consoles

As communication technology has improved, both in terms of the visual resolution of televisions and in terms of internet connectivity, players seeking to broadcast their game have found adversity in ensuring their retro technology is visually comparable to modern games and up-to-date consoles. This is a concern because the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, the console on which *Super Mario World* was designed to be played on, does not come with modern audio/visual components. This is a common source of questions from new participants on the Discord server, and answers vary depending on the personal preferences of the individual but can be summarized as a choice between investing in modifying their existing Super Nintendo with modern technology, purchasing a new console designed to emulate the Super Nintendo's hardware components with hi-resolution output or using software emulation.

Of note, a common consensus observed by participants in the Discord server and attendees at Awesome Games Done Quick was that, if at all possible, the optimal choice involved playing on the original hardware, as evidenced by this example:

> One of the runners was told by event organizers when they arrived that their setup would not be acceptable for the marathon because of the preference of the organizers to use traditional console setups This meant that, in order to play the game on the GDQ stream, they would have to leave their Super Nintendo Classic (a version of the console released in 2017 that emulates the original game and has built-in high-definition video output) home setup aside and use a traditional setup that they were unfamiliar with. This was causing them great stress, because they were unaware of how the new technology and new setup would affect their ability to remember patterns and timings in the game that he was running, which required intricate button presses at specific moments in order to achieve a high quality speedrun.

All of this belies the fact that, on the stage of Awesome Games Done Quick, the runners are all playing on unmodified, original hardware. The limitation is made in order to ensure that runners are able to play in as unmodified a state as possible, but there is ironically a significant amount of modification required on the part of the marathon's broadcasting crew to achieve this state. The game console is both plugged in to a TV for the runner while also plugged into an HD upscaler, a device that takes the graphics from the hardware and raises it to modern visual expectations. All of this is then fed into a video and audio mixer, where it is combined with additional elements and balanced between runner, commentary, and game sound. Finally, this mixed signal is sent to a high-performance personal computer, where it is loaded into custom-built broadcasting software and streamed to Twitch's servers for public consumption.

Visual Augmentation

Technical expertise and advancements make it possible to broadcast the gameplay, but additional mediation is added to the broadcast in order for viewers to have a stronger understanding of what is happening on the screen. These elements of mediation take the form of both visual and aural additions to the gameplay content that, when taken together, communicate both the skill of the runner and the ways in which the viewer can comprehend and replicate the gameplay being shown. The mediation is done with a specific focus towards new and unfamiliar audience members who may be watching for the first time and are unaware about the game being played or the player serving as the provider of content.

Visually, gameplay broadcasters are deliberate in making their broadcasting setup as interesting and as informative as possible through the addition of contextual information. For some players and events, this includes basic info about the game (name, console, year released, etc.) and character art. Other observed visual elements added include input displays to help showcase the actions taken by the runner, cameras showcasing the hands of players as they are playing, branding for the stream being represented and a timer to allow for an easy way for the audience to measure the progress and success of the game being played.

While many of these elements are added by video production software, the physical setup use by Games Done Quick showcases the sheer amount of resources used to produce their stream:

> The stream was being held in the conference center's largest ballroom, which had been fully opened save for one corner that was walled off for a hospitality area. On a stage in the center of the room, a couch was positioned in front of four cathode-ray tube (CRT) television sets – the preferred set of choice when playing on retro consoles because of the

> quality of image and the elimination of any input lag when a runner is playing their game. In addition, there are two computer monitors configured to be used for games being played on a Windows-based computer, and two widescreen high-definition television sets used for modern, HDMI-equipped video game consoles. Behind the TV was a large bank of studio lights giving the stage a professionally-lit appearance on camera. To stage left of the game setup, a full audio and video studio had been installed, with state-of-the-art production equipment being calibrated in preparation of the start of the stream the next day. Further to stage left, a miniature studio set was being assembled for interview, prize highlights and other filler segments throughout the marathon. This set, while sparse, was configured like a studio panel, with a branded backdrop featuring the GDQ logo and four tables arranged to resemble a news or sports show. To stage right of the main stage, a table was set up on-stage that featured a computer workstation and audio connection that the marathon host would sit at to read donations, make announcements and serve as the transition point between segments. Off-stage to the right, a backstage area was setup featuring computer stations for volunteer donation screeners and a makeshift green room for upcoming runners and commentators to get stage makeup applied and prepare to set up for the stream.

To a viewer with no additional context, this presentation results in an unassuming shot of people playing video games, while a small group sit closely behind to provide comments and advice. In reality, the setting for the event is a massive stage of studio lights, up to six monitors at a time, and a tech team of up to six people constantly adjusting and monitoring the stream to ensure that it is producing at a high-quality level. While the mere act of feeding video from a retro game console to the Internet is a mediation in itself, this amount of additional

content and attention to detail further mediates the broadcast by ensuring the presentation consumed by the viewer is as high a quality as can be constructed and presented.

Commentary and Verbal Augmentation

Along with the augmentation provided by the technical incorporation of visual elements, runners and producers of streams of content mediate their gameplay through the addition of oral commentary. This commentary serves many purposes depending on the audience being targeted, but a common theme through these purposes is to provide access to the gameplay and the game being played that would otherwise not be available to viewers unfamiliar with the content they are being presented with. By providing this access and this additional entertainment element, the gameplay is further removed from the original experience and becomes part of a larger mediated viewing experience. This experience is showcased by a race observed during the first day of the event:

> As the race begins, the two runners do not offer any commentary as to what they're doing instead. The commentary burden falls on the three people that have been chosen to sit on the couch behind them. As the race progresses, each person takes up a different role in commentary. One of them serves as a generalist that sets the tone and calls the effective play-by-play for the race as it's happening. Meanwhile, the other two who are more prominent within the speedrunning community for Donkey Kong are able to provide color commentary - an expert analysis on the things that are happening as they happen on screen. This is a race in which multiple things could happen and do happen in terms of tricks made and missed, and the color commentators are able to provide, in real time, the effects that each hit or miss has on the overall race. Additionally, they are able to provide

> excitement and investment for non-racers or players of this game in order to understand when good things happen when bad things happen.

At any given time during an individual speedrun performed in the marathon, the viewer was hearing at least three different sources of audio: the game audio, any commentary provided by the runner themselves, and any commentary provided by the commentators accompanying the runner. The runner and couches could hear each other and dialogue between them was commonplace and expanded upon the technical explanations to include inside jokes, passing remarks, shared concern for upcoming technical sections, and general conversation. This all happened in a way that allowed the audience to hear and react to the conversation, and served to enhance the experience in a way that is outlined in these observations from the same race of *Donkey Kong Country*:

> As the crowd gets more and more excited as the racers reached the end, and as the commentators re-emphasize just how hard and how impressive these things that are being done on screen, I find myself not necessarily rooting for any one of the racers, but more in terms of just rooting for success. Rooting for them to finish what they started and pull off something impressive. They do. The crowd gives a standing ovation at the conclusion of the second runner. It feels like we've all experienced something impressive and important together, like there's a sense of accomplishment just for being there. I'm not sure I could have felt that if I were just watching these two people play video games by themselves. I think the only reason I felt this way is because those two players had the backing of expert commentary in a community that was willing to go above and beyond to highlight, celebrate, and promote this game being played at this level. If I had just watched them play without this, I would have been impressed, but I'm not sure I would

have been inspired. This race in person was very inspirational, much in the same way that a high-level sporting event can be inspirational, even if there aren't stakes placed on it.

This focus on entertainment presented itself in an observed private practice session for one of the *Super Mario World* games being played as part of the marathon, as a runner and his chosen commentators prepared for their featured time on stream:

> After 10 minutes of stopping and starting, [experienced runner providing support] eventually took control and advised [runner] to run the game as if it were the actual marathon and allow the commentators to practice talking about what's happening on screen, as well as what's coming up and other things that were interesting or of importance for the audience to know. Once this started, it became clear that the other commentators had not practiced nor really understood what was going to happen. [Commentator 1], as part of their commentary, revealed that he had never actually beaten the game in question. Throughout the run, [runner] struggled with the concept of stopping and starting, as well as with preventing himself from saying anything that he would later regret or be told by GDQ was against the rules or inappropriate. About four levels into this stunted commentary session, [experienced runner] stepped up and provided a running commentary for one level that served as a model for the other commentators to learn from. Unlike the other commentary, which was primarily joke based or just reacting to what was being done on screen, [experienced runner] was proactively explaining the tricks that were being used, specifically in a way that the audience could both relate to and be impressed by. Things like 'spin jump frames,' in which a specific jump move in the game allows Mario to bounce on an otherwise a deadly obstacle, as well as the amount of time allotted in order for specific moves to be performed the way the creator intended them to be performed.

> Aside from this one levels worth of commentary, [experienced runner] primarily sat back and observed. At times, they looked back at [companion] and rolled their eyes in frustration or muttered under their breath something about how the commentary wasn't actually good or existed at all.

This irritation from the experienced runner came from a perceived lack of professionalism on the part of the commentators, and they elaborated on why that was important to them in a follow-up discussion:

> GDQ turned me on to the whole notion of gaming with commentary in the first place, and I just loved it because it was everything I always thought it could be. Here were all these other people that could do that really, really well. That kind of professionalism, in that it's fun and it's delivered in a way that the audience can actually understand it.

These additions of commentary, whether co-shared with the player or strictly observing and expounding on the gameplay being presented, mediate the viewing experience for the audience member by providing a new layer of information and engagement that is otherwise unattainable in a direct gameplay experience. However, the commentary also further contributes to a polymediated environment by providing a way for a one-way broadcast of media to incorporate community participation, audience engagement, identity and gameplay performances, and a fluid authorship of experience. An interesting distinction, then, is the choice of audience that the broadcast focused its time, attention, and messaging towards.

The Audience in Attendance and the Audience Actually Watching

Throughout the venue, the signal used to stream the event live on Twitch is also used to show the marathon in hotel rooms, event spaces and as monitors for technical crew and in-person audience members. This entire setup is designed to ensure that the anticipated large number of

viewers across multiple media platforms will have access to the highest possible quality stream. That anticipation turned out to be prudent:

> Once the marathon got underway…I noticed that the amount of people watching on Twitch had new almost doubled to 96,120 viewers. If the marathon was not the most watched broadcast on Twitch prior to the start of the marathon, it certainly was much closer to being so now.

While this technical setup does not alter the original gameplay, it does mediate the consumption of that gameplay for everyone, even attendees who are viewing the event in person. In fact, the stream room itself seemed to be set in a way that leaned into this in-person mediation:

> The majority of the space in the ballroom was set for an audience, but the seating was significantly wider than optimal for viewing the physical runners and commentators onstage. Five banks of chairs were positioned throughout the ballroom, and those chairs faced three large projector screens positioned in a way that was intended to supplement the viewing of the actual gameplay with that of the broadcast stream. Additionally, sound checks revealed that the audio for the broadcast would also be played within the hall for in-person attendees to hear. Despite the use of the largest ballroom and the content within the room being the nominal reason for the event's existence, there were not enough chairs to incorporate seating for all 2500 attendees. The impressions I had received prior to the event from Mario community members and other attendees of past GDQ events led me to believe that this was because that the percentage of in-person attendees actually coming to the stream room was small, and that most attendees would be spending their time elsewhere throughout the conference center.

While attendees were practicing, socializing, or engaging in casual gameplay in other spaces of the conference center, the stream broadcast carried on without bothering to wait for attendees to pay attention to it. Donation readers, when announcing upcoming runs and events, made references to Twitch chat and to the online audience actions, and runners and commentators addressed the online audience primarily. Rather than take offense at this, the attendees had other opportunities to pursue:

> Between the practice room, the tournament room, the casual gaming room, the room dedicated for Smash Brothers, and the board game room, several of these rooms have either TVs or projectors with the stream displayed on them. But no one in these rooms this engaging with the stream at all. If anything, the event in this space serves as a passage of time, or a way to monitor progress rather than an event to engage with and consume. By knowing the schedule and by being able to track the current progress of whatever run happens to be going on at this time attendees are able to have a general sense of the progress of things and if they need to be certain somewhere at a certain place and time. The marathon gives them the opportunity to do that. That said, this is a marathon that almost 100,000 people are watching, engaging with, and donating money towards. Well, those audience members are engaging directly with the experience. The people actually physically at the experience use it as a clock.

The community of attendees is able to break from the marathon and spend time communing in a smaller group, while still maintaining their connection to the larger community engaging with the marathon stream. This allows the marathon production staff to focus their time and efforts to serve the much larger audience that is viewing them remotely. If an attendee wants to engage with the larger group, they have the option to either pull the stream up on a device or

view it in multiple spaces throughout the venue. This is a sign of media ubiquity, one of Calka's (2015) elements of polymediation and an example of the free flowing nature of engaging with the community that is defined by polymedia theory.

The Labor of Mediating Gameplay

For individual broadcasters who use their gameplay as a source of content for their channels, this technological, visual, and aural mediation of their play focused for remote viewers is a crucial factor in their perceived success in generating viewership and, by extension, revenue. When taken with the effort necessary to maintain and cultivate community, streamers take on the burden of providing all of these mediations at once, which in turn also mediates their gameplay experience by filtering it through the labor deemed necessary to have a broadcast channel.

From a technological perspective, once all of the equipment required to broadcast gameplay in high-definition is acquired, it is up to the individual to build a visual look and brand that best welcomes in an audience and informs them as to the aspects of the game being played. That look and brand may include securing lighting necessary to present well on screen, graphical elements and iconography that serves as a representative of the broadcaster in chat servers and other forums, ensuring high-quality audio setup and actively mixing audio levels, and connecting all of this in a workflow that also provides a high-quality feed to the platform being streamed to. While much of this is not necessarily mandatory in order to be present as a streamer on a platform, streamers that seek to use their channel for growth are observed to put purposeful effort into these areas to ensure a high-quality experience for viewers.

In addition to the technological efforts, individual broadcasters perform efforts that serve to promote themselves and to improve their platform outside of the scope of the act of broadcasting itself. For streamers in attendance at AGDQ, the time they had outside of the

marathon and outside of the camera was spent networking and promoting their content to other attendees through the distribution of business cards, stickers, and other forms of visual branding. This is revealed through the ending of a conversation I had with a streamer in the GDQ practice room:

> Before they left, [Streamer] reached into their bag and handed me a sticker. On the sticker was a cartoon drawing, commonly referred to amongst Twitch viewers and broadcasters as an emote, that was unique to [Lemur]. Emotes on Twitch are specific graphics created by broadcasters that are available only to people that subscribe to them on Twitch. Because they are used as an incentive to entice viewers to subscribe, emotes try to be as expressive as possible, while also serving as a sort of branding for the person who is providing them. Popular streamers are instantly recognizable in other channels through their emotes, and getting a physical sticker of an emote at GDQ reinforced with me that this is a brand for a lot of these people. They want to be recognized from across the room, and one of the ways that they do that is through the creation of popular emotes. Just like how in Twitch, if you subscribe to a channel, you can use that channel's emotes anywhere you want to on Twitch. It's a way for a broadcaster to differentiate themselves from competition, and a way for the community to come together graphically through shared usage of emotes to designate certain elements. For me, it was a nice keepsake to remember the conversation that I had with [Streamer], but also a reminder that some people that do Twitch broadcasting do so in a way that is more than just a hobby. They approach it as if it is a personal branding opportunity.

This networking and effort toward raising individual profiles in the community extends beyond in-person events and is observable in the Discord servers and forums shared by the

community. In addition to channels dedicated to highlighting the broadcasters live on Twitch at a given moment, streamers cultivate their own servers and communities online in the attempt to foster a shared community strictly around their content. This is not meant to supplant the community as a whole; many streamers participate in the joint groups and also serve as leaders and mentors within the *Super Mario World* community servers. Rather, this effort is a continuation of networking and profile-raising efforts done in person. As one streamer described their efforts:

> I spend a lot of the day with Discord open and Twitter open and chatting with various people in the community. Getting an idea of what romhacks are out and what I should be playing and doing for my stream. It's not something I can put a number of hours that I spend on doing it, because it’s just something I talk about as anyone would a normal conversation…There's a ton of that, but a lot of that I would call that passive work. I would say that about ninety percent of the work that isn't gameplay into my stream is that kind of passive work. The other ten is me actively looking to improve my stream in certain ways, be it improve my capture, set up alerts, get some work done.

The totality of this labor, much like the effort put into the broadcast of other types of content, is purposefully hidden from the audience in order for the content to shine as brightly as possible. Viewers can come to a stream and be presented not only with gameplay in a visual form not accessible by normal means, but with visual and aural augmentations that allow the viewer to experience the game in a new way. Audience members with little experience are able to participate and enjoy the content, while audience members experienced with the game can use this type of content to heighten their enjoyment through exposure to high-level gameplay. One

streamer summarized the rationale behind putting in effort to make gameplay presentable and digestible by directly comparing it to a different type of mediated experience: televised sports –

> For people who say, "Wow, that was amazing!", I'm like, "Yeah, this is pretty easy" and people are like, "Yeah, *easy*." I'm like, well, I was being serious. It is kind of easy. I think that you definitely could get to that point with just sufficient knowledge, but I think experience helps. Like, people that watch a football game or a hockey game or whatever. Fans of sports and stuff can really get into the meta and be correct and be like, "Look at that pass that Wayne Gretzky made. It was perfect. He went through two defenders and he did that one maneuver that the pros do." And they know all that stuff because they've learned about it and they've watched it a lot. Maybe tried it for themselves a little bit, but for the most part have participated as a spectator or a non-professional.

Polymedia theory, and the idea of polymediation, argues that media producers that seek to attract and retain an audience must focus on satisfying the desired social and relational outcomes of that audience. For the Games Done Quick broadcast team and for individual gameplay broadcasters, this focus leads to significant, non-gameplay investment in ensuring that audiences not only have access to high-quality video and audio footage, but also access to information and context about the game and the game player through visual augmentation and verbal commentary. In the next chapter, I outline how this focus also affects the approach taken toward the gameplay itself.

CHAPTER 5: GAMEPLAY MEDIATED THROUGH PURPOSEFUL PRACTICE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

The practitioners that perform speedrun and other high-performance gameplay on broadcast, as well as the audience members and community participants that consume this type of content, separate the type of gameplay they do for personal enjoyment from the gameplay they do for professional performance and for the purposes of their broadcast. This delineation between "fun" gameplay and "serious" gameplay takes multiple forms and is noticeable by several characteristics: (1) in the ways that players approach games and the space where the games are played, (2) the mental effort put in by broadcasters and players to select and improve their gameplay content to attract, retain, and cater to audience members, and (3) the differences in language used to describe gameplay among players and consumers.

Purposeful Gaming Spaces and Casual Gaming Spaces

Within the Awesome Games Done Quick (AGDQ) event space, the transition between the upper ballrooms and the lower-level conference room spaces also served as a transition between motivations in gameplay and in gameplay consumption. This physical, spatial transition highlights the transition in how attendees, both those performing and those in attendance but not performing on stream, transition between approaching the playing of games as a craft to be honed and shared and as a stress-relieving social activity with no expectation of performance or success. Within each area, attendees approached, discussed, observed, and critiqued gameplay in very distinct ways, and the ways in which they do so toward "serious" gameplay constitutes a way that gameplay is mediated in its consumption.

Upstairs, in the space closest to the location where the stream was being filmed, there was a large, designated practice room:

> The room as a whole was lined front to back with about 8 to 10 long, conference-style tables, with chairs on each side. On each table was about 10 to 15 old, cathode ray tube television sets, with audio-visual and RGB inputs. All of them had been provided by the event staff specifically for use by speedrunners. Along the perimeter of the back half of the room were modern gaming computers configured to allow people to walk up, enter their gaming software credentials, and begin playing. Further in the back of the room, there were additional monitors that were meant to be used for modern consoles and other high definition gameplay devices… When given the chance to focus on the game that they were playing, the overwhelming sense of the attitude towards the games was that of work. People that were playing were playing for time, and they were playing to try and better their skills. Multiple people had either their cell phones or their computers out with stopwatch apps, tracking the time that they were spending on each section of the game that they were playing. While there was lighthearted joking, most of the activity was kept to discussions about the game or silent focus on what was happening at hand. For the most part, if you didn't know someone, you left them alone. Amongst the crowd was a small group of runners who would be featured throughout the week of the marathon that were practicing specifically the game that they would be running later on that week. Other people, even though they weren't running in the marathon, were approaching games in the practice room very strategically and seriously. Just because they weren't running the game in the marathon didn't mean that they weren't speedrunners of that game.

One way that the gameplay in the stream and in the practice room was differentiated was the emphasis on time and on the way time was used to measure success or failure:

> Several players who had games that were being timed either by cell phones or by computers would stop once they made a mistake, completely reset the game, and start from scratch. They were doing this because, at that point they knew that they had failed their mission to run the game as fast as possible and wanted another shot at making that run happen. Other players had game techniques such as save states, which allowed them to continuously loop a specific part of the game in order to practice the same tricks over and over and over and over again. On the other hand, players that were playing games in the practice room specifically for fun didn't worry about how long it was taking them to play it or didn't worry about making mistakes or doing things sub-optimally. When you saw a speedrunner make a mistake. It was often accompanied by groaning, visible signs of discomfort and anger - at times, verbal swearing. People were taking this stuff very seriously and it shows.

This emphasis on performance, optimization and repeated practice flies in stark contrast to the gameplay taking place in the lower level of the event space. This space was broken up into multiple smaller rooms and included a designated casual space set up in a similar way to the practice room, a room dedicated to the play of *Super Smash Brothers*, a room dedicated to tabletop gaming, a tournament room available for any group who organized a side tournament, and an arcade. Throughout all these spaces, gameplay and interaction between gameplayers cared not for ensuring a certain time was met or the play was perfectly optimized. Instead, attendees used these spaces, and the games within them, as a way to escape the seriousness of the practice room and stream and as a way to explore, socialize, and play games for relaxation, not performance.

The arcade served as the starkest contrast to the practice room's mentality of dedicated

focus, repetition, and honing of skill:

> The room is not a large one, but it is strategically lined with a variety of arcade cabinets with a handful of machines in the middle of the room. Notably, the selection of arcade games prominently featured Japanese-exclusive arcade games…In addition to these Japanese-exclusive games, the arcade featured several prominent American arcade classic games, including *Tempest*, *Robotron 2020*, *Tron*, and a *The Shadow* pinball machine…Because there are so many arcade machines that are native to Japan, attendees enter the arcade with a sense of wonder at the new experiences available to them. Rather than attempt to strategize and master techniques of a new game in order to perform it at the highest level, there is much more of a "pick up and play" element to the gameplay being performed in the arcade. There are multiple reasons for this: many of the instructions for the games are in Japanese, and while the minimum instructions to succeed are in English, there is a sense of mystery as to the exact ruleset; the games are set on free play, so there is no investment in starting a game and no loss in ending a game early out of boredom or frustration; and the general attitude about the arcade seems to lend to the idea of exploring and experimenting with a new game…People who were in the room were not passively standing or unsure of what they were doing. If an attendee was in the arcade, they were either playing a game, observing a game with the intent to play, or waiting in line for a chance to play a specific game. Additionally, participants were engaging in friendly competitive banter with their teammates and competitors in multiplayer games and in Skee-Ball. It was a boisterous room, very different than the focused stoicness of speedruns and the speedrunning audience in the practice room and marathon room.

Even the high-level gameplay was different within the arcade. Rhythm games, where players perform actions timed to the beat of a music track, were often populated by players who performed at the highest difficulty with little noticeable mistake:

> I ran into [attendee], who I knew from my previous interactions was skilled at piano in addition to their participation in the speedrunning community, who was playing *Jubeat* at its highest difficulty setting, requiring multiple button presses and complicated rhythms. I asked him how they were able to be so good at this game when they only had access to it, at most, twice a year. They smiled, shrugged, and said "But when I have access to it, I play it a *lot*." They also drew a connection from their background as a trained pianist to their ability to process the screen and perform complicated button presses. They were applying skills acquired outside of video games to their playing, and were doing so at a very high level.

Despite being much quieter and less sensory-stimulating, the board game and tabletop game room featured a similar sense of relaxation. One of the only rooms without a clock or a way to track the progress of time, the board game room was nothing more than a series of tables and a library of provided and donated games managed by a volunteer staff member:

> This room truly felt like it was an oasis from competition and from seriousness for the people that were playing. The more I think about it, the more I think the term library makes sense. While people here are quiet, they are also in personal, small group conversations. There don't seem to be a lot of strangers walking in and sitting down at a table together and playing a board game. Most people come in in groups, ask for a specific game or type of game, and then go sit and play it together. It is very casual, it is very stress-free, and it is very non-competitive in the sense that, while the rules of the

> game may be to pick a winner, no one playing the game is seeking to exhibit dominance or take pride in a victory over the other. The focus here is more on fun and relaxation rather than an achievement speed and success. There is no timer here.

This free, consequence-less gameplay is a different activity altogether than the rigid, consequence-laden gameplay happening on stream and in the practice room. While the arcade and tabletop games serve as entertainment and socialization, the practice room gameplay presents as a combination of a gym and a ready room for performers. While it would be an oversimplification to refer to one as "play" and the other "work," one speedrunner offers this interpretation of their speedrunning gameplay:

> It's a craft, it's music, it's an art, but…art is just a cop-out word. It is an art, but what do you mean by art? What's an art?...But, yeah. Is it a craft? Absolutely. Or like stage magic, it could be like Penn and Teller. It's also, it's kind of got a thing with skateboarding, BMX, extreme kind of sports with tricks and stuff. Also, just like athletics. I get the sports, the e-sport comparison even though I kind of balk at it, I get it because it can kind of be like a sport like basketball or, you know, sports. Athletics, Olympic kind of stuff.

A key point to include in this discussion is the designation of "upstairs" and "downstairs" as serious vs. casual gameplay spaces, as well as any physical space's connotation, being the result of the designation of the room by the AGDQ staff and not the room itself. If the staff had determined that downstairs would have the practice room and the upstairs had the arcade and board game room, nothing about the behavior displayed in either room would change as the room itself moved. The things that carried weight with the attendees were the connotations that the labels carried. The physical space became a host for an attitude and an environment, and that attitude and environment left when the event was over.

The Conversational Framing of "Gameplay"

When gameplayers were interacting with games for "work", the language used to describe the games being played took on a different connotation, and the means in which players discussed games and gameplay changed to focus less on aspects of the game that are meant for enjoyment and instead focus more on the technical elements that comprise its gameplay. This change in focus transcended channel and was adopted by both broadcaster and audience in a way that allows for all participants to exchange information about gameplay that is of interest to the goal of high-performance playing and streaming.

One of the ways this exchange happened in person was when a player was introducing a game to another player for the first time, such as this example from a breakfast conversation:

> As conversation came up, one of the speedrunners began talking about a game that he decided to invest a lot of time into developing the speed run for - *Diddy Kong Racing* for the Nintendo 64. This is a game that I myself had remembered owning as a child growing up and was familiar with the general concept and the general layout of the game. Other people at the table were not familiar and turned to this other speedrunner for introduction and then an explanation as to what the game is and how it is played. What was notable about this conversation was that instead of talking about the game from a character perspective, a storyline perspective, graphics and sound, or traditional metrics used to measure the quality of video games, this person was using terms and showing off their knowledge of specific strategies and techniques that a speedrunner would be interested in as it relates to a game. For instance, this person was talking about specific tricks you can do to break the game's boundary line, so that you can go "out of bounds" and go around corners faster because the game doesn't realize you're not actually on the track. None of

> this information was something that I was familiar with growing up, and it certainly wouldn't have impacted my decision whether or not to purchase the game had I known that you could use these tricks to go faster. However, because this audience was gathered for specifically speedrunning as a hobby and interest, and potentially a revenue generating action, these players were interested in learning this game specifically so that they can learn how to run it in a fast way. It was a very enlightening perspective into what a speedrunner looks for in describing a game, learning a game, and searching for a new game to play.

This shift of focus appeared in both conversations between broadcasters and conversations between audience members. In discussions between new and experienced players of *Super Mario World*, the conversations about the game as it related to learning to play revolve around the specific tricks necessary to optimize the game for time, not to beat the game for the sake of the story. In these conversations centered on *Super Mario World* gameplay, technical gameplay terms like "clipping" (a glitch where the player can go through walls and blocks), "cape tech" (different skills possible with a specific power-up within the game), "P-speed" (the fastest speed a player can travel on their own), and "splits" (designated points during the run used to track progress and time) were used as jargon with an expectation of knowledge held between all parties in the conversation. However, the times in observations where a person inquired about the meaning of a specific term of phrase, other members of the community were quick and eager to explain the terminology and show how it applies to *Super Mario World*.

As players shared their success and failures with attempting the game, they framed those playthroughs not in the context of the game, but in the context of the time taken to accomplish things within the game. One broadcaster described it as "sharing my experience completing a

game that is very hard with people. I get joy out of people completing something that was very hard, and I hope that the joy that I get out of completing something very hard is appealing to other people as well."

Playing Games for Professional Development

With the approach to gameplay as serious enterprise aimed for optimization and conversationally framed in the context of that optimization, the players who perform this type of gameplay, both as part of a marathon like AGDQ or on a personal stream platform, treat the preparation of this gameplay as labor necessary to ensure that they are able to perform their gameplay at the high level expected of them by their audience and by their own competitive nature. This labor, while not exclusively focused on the physical playing, includes a significant amount of physical activity honing and perfecting the coordination and timing of specific button presses at specific times. It also includes the labor of incorporating mediated elements, such as the addition of commentary or the incorporation of additional broadcasting elements, into their gameplay performances. These two types of labor combine to mediate the gameplay experience of the consuming audience through skilled performance and through insightful analysis. A spreedrunner of a modified version of *Super Mario World* commented:

> You play the games because you have a passion for them, and because they're a lot of fun, and everything, but when you get an obsession with a world record grind or something, it's not like you don't want to be doing it. It's not work in the sense that you don't want to be doing it. It's just you want to be doing it less for the reason that you're just having some fun with a video game because it becomes more and more of a lust for me, anyway, for trying to compete with myself or compete with anyone who is above me on a leader board.

For gameplayers seeking to hone their gameplay into a high-level performance, there are digital and physical tools and techniques available to turn the experience of playing a game from a casual activity to an active exercise. In the practice room at AGDQ, players would use custom variations of their game consoles that allow them to reload games from a saved state on command, allowing for repeated practice. Active discussions were held about the health benefits of compression gloves for players' wrists and thumbs after repeated playthroughs led to pain in their tendons. In one instance, a runner had hooked their original Super Nintendo Entertainment System into a computer running a disassembly program, allowing for pixel-perfect feedback on the movement of their character.

All of this labor is done to maximize the gameplay skill of the player for the benefit of the audience, as this conversation with a male-presenting streamer over lunch at GDQ shows:

> While discussing the games being played at the marathon and what he played, he avoided a commitment to a specific game and commented that he wasn't sure if what he was currently playing was suitable for the audience. When I followed up in asking what he meant by that, he detailed how he isn't sure that his play of certain games is attractive enough to an audience to maintain and build viewership, and he was going to experiment with different games (known amongst Twitch broadcasters as a "variety stream") in order to find a combination of gameplay that satisfied his motivations while also built an audience. This attendee didn't speak as if these were unique problems – in fact, the tone of the conversation was similar to that of meeting someone at a conference who works in a different company and comparing how your various employers approach problems and management. For this attendee, his stream was his business, and growing his business meant having a better understanding and relationship with his audience while playing

> games in a way that attracted new audience members to his channel. The product his business delivered was a stream of gameplay, and improvements of this product meant an improvement to the business.

When asked about the balance of high-level gameplay and appeasing the audience, one broadcaster described their approach to this mindset the following way:

> I've seen in myself that I have to usually grind like run after run after run after run to start seeing noticeable improvement and really start to remember what I'm supposed to be doing, and really get it drilled into my own head. Specifically on Twitch where it's such a cutthroat market in the speed running game where it's…always the dudes are always the fastest and doing the best. Like those are the guys that are having people watch them. I've always thought about it like if you want to sell your stream with gameplay alone, you better be the number one guy or one of the number one guys, and I don't think I'm incapable of getting there. I just don't think that's where I'm headed.

This "grind" showcases how treating gameplay as media in a polymediated environment means producing the best possible gameplay in order to satisfy an audience that has the agency to choose the content that best meets its aims. For the specific instance of *Super Mario World* and its various modifications, the audience members consuming content of that game looks to broadcasters to produce a high-level gameplay experience that they can consume, iterate upon, and provide back to the broadcaster in the form of new game content to play and experience. In order to achieve that gameplay, broadcasters must treat their gameplay less as a hobby or as an amusement and more as a performative skill that requires development, maintenance, and constant improvement. As summarized by a broadcaster and *Super Mario World* content creator:

> There's a lot of people out there that the gameplay is secondary. They're playing a game,

> they might not really even be caring about what they're playing. They're kind of just playing just to be streaming for whatever reason. But then there's some people out there who take it really seriously and they take pride in their gameplay. There's a lot of people out there who really strive to get better and they're proud of what they're capable of and things like that. I don't know if I would consider game play as an art form, but I think it is sort of like a craft. It's something that you work on, you get better at it. It's like a personal improvement sort of thing.

References to this type of performative skill as a "craft" are not meant to imply that gameplay lacks aesthetic value (Hartley, 2002), but intended to draw parallels to other creative activities that are both designed and performed by an individual that "is someone who exercises personal control over all the processes involved in the manufacture of the good in question" (Campbell, 2013, p. 27). In this instance, the good being produced is gameplay, and the speedrunners that produce the gameplay are doing so with control over their movements and personal investment in the outcome.

These players, in taking a game and building both a crafted product and communal standards around the gameplay of that game, are participating in a polymediated environment around the game by elevating the gameplay to a place where a community of media producers and consumers engage with that gameplay not just in direct experience, but communally across technological and communicative platforms. Through gameplay, they are joining together to co-create new experiences without a solitary author – a key identification of a polymediated state according to Tyma (2015) and to Calka (2015). The labor involved in producing gameplay at a high level, the environmental and communal approaches to the differences between "casual" and "serious" gameplay, and the conversational elements shared amongst community members all

serve as evidence that both audience members and broadcasters are actively joined in producing this shared experience. In doing so, they also produce a polymediated environment centered around the game they play.

CHAPTER 6: GAMEPLAY MEDIATED THROUGH COMMUNITY COLLABORATION AND CONTENT CREATION

Gameplay of *Super Mario World*, as well as the community-created mods of the original game, can be consumed without engaging with a broader community, through platforms such as YouTube that offer video on demand. As observed at AGDQ, however, the communities based around specific games develop and build relationships around their shared love of a game and of that game's specific gameplay. Even if individuals have never met in person prior to attending the event, their nametags allow for others to recognize and welcome them through their shared experiences in Discord servers, Twitch chat, fan forums and other online community platforms. This community, both the people that comprise it and the content that comes from their interactivity, mediates their consumption of gameplay through the way they introduce new participants to the community, encourage gameplay growth and technical advancement, and create "romhacks" to extend the gameplay opportunities far beyond the original *Super Mario World* game.

Extending the Community Beyond Video Broadcast

For individuals who are interesting in becoming part of the online community around speedrunning *Super Mario World*, their entry point is usually a recorded video of a specific runner performing a singularly successful or notable playthrough of the game.
Multiple community members cited one specific run – a speedrun of the modified version of *SMW* named *Kaizo Mario World* by a player named Dram55 – as the catalyst to their participation in the community, with one speedrunner and broadcaster describing his experience through direct cause and effect:

> "I was living by myself at first job out of college, and there was just…that first summer (2014) every night, I needed something to entertain myself. I hardly had any new friends.

> I was in a new city. I had already known about YouTube, so I discovered, I don't know how, probably the YouTube algorithm gods, I discovered Games Done Quick that summer. Therefore, I followed the likes of Dram55, CarlSagan42, Trihex, Caleb Hart, Big Jon, and so on. And, if you go through my following page, you can see are the first names that I followed. That got me into Twitch right away. I don't remember if Twitch or if GDQ linked their Twitch on YouTube or not, but I was like, 'Man, they're, like, announcing it like its live or something. I wonder where they broadcast this.' And sure enough, it was Twitch. By the end of 2014, I was pretty deeply invested in watching Twitch, and I made my account in February 2015 after watching AGDQ 2015. It's no coincidence that ADGQ that got me into streaming was the one where Dram ran *Kaizo* 1, and there was an 11-exit race[1] as well."

Individual performances attracted viewers to the performer, which then lead to interested viewers connecting amongst the wider community through shared digital spaces such as Twitch and Discord servers. With no dedicated space to advertise community boards beyond individual's platforms (as part of a Twitch channel layout, for example), the growth of communal servers is tied to a participant's willingness to ask for and seek out groups that do not revolve around a singular broadcaster or event. In these communal servers, such as the one dedicated to *Super Mario World,* these invested participants join with other invested participants to share information and resources for their shared interest. There is a limit to the number of servers a Discord user may join, but membership in one server does not remove membership in any other server a person may join.

Within these servers and on Twitch, individuals are identified solely by their chosen username. No other identity is requested by the community, which allows for participants to

present their chosen identity exclusively through username and photo avatar. This use of username-as-identity extends beyond online spaces into the Awesome Games Done Quick Event:

> Unless specifically requested, the badge each attendee receives does not feature their actual name. After confirming their identity with the check-in table, registrants get their badge that features their level of participation (staff, runner of a game in the marathon, event volunteer, general attendee, etc.) and their chosen screen name/pseudonym that associates with how they refer to themselves online on platforms such as Twitch, Discord, Twitter, and Instagram. This use of screen name as primary identifier extends beyond usage on badges – attendees address each other almost exclusively by screen name. This proves to be a social transition for some attendees – on multiple occasions, I both introduced myself as my first name before shifting and correcting myself to use my screen name. Likewise, multiple members of communities that I am familiar with introduce themselves by their real name before correcting themselves and using their screen name….At no point during this observation had I asked anyone about their gender identity or their gender preferences. Because everyone was going by screen name, they were able to choose the identity that best fit their desired presentation. As such, you saw a lot of people who appeared as if they were wearing clothing and styling themselves according to the gender identity that they see themselves as in a way that suggested to me that they do not have the ability to do so in the course of their everyday lives. Whether it was facial hair, long hair versus short hair, ill-fitting clothing, or just the way they carry themselves, no one brought it up. No one called it out, and everyone was accepted for who they were and who they presented themselves to be. Gender did not play a factor in

> how people identify themselves from a game perspective. As such, people were free to present themselves as they perceive themselves to be. Additionally, multiple rule signs posted around the event space included explicit restrictions on bathroom policing and gender harassment. While it was not spoken aloud, nor was it explicitly stated by the event staff, this event was meant to be gender affirming for all attendees.

This showcases Calka's assertion (2015) that two elements of polymediation are the presence of opportunities for both unity and division of identity and community. Individuals take on their identity and, while they present it differently based on platform, adopt it entirely when participating in the community. Communally, each chat server that is part of this network exists in its own space, and each is independently set up for its own purpose, but the members of these servers participate in common dialogue across multiple channels. In cases where a server participant is not in common servers with others, opportunities and invitations to join other servers are frequent and non-committal.

Sharing Successes and Celebration of Improvement

Beyond the sharing of information relevant to the community, these community servers also provide a corporate space for people to share their successes in playing the game. Success sharing often comes in the form of PBs, or personal best times completing a game or category of playthrough, which is a quantitative way to measure a player's skill level at speedrunning any specific game. This metric additionally provides players a way to measure personal skill growth, and the sharing of that growth is welcomed by the community and encouraged by both experienced and novice runners.

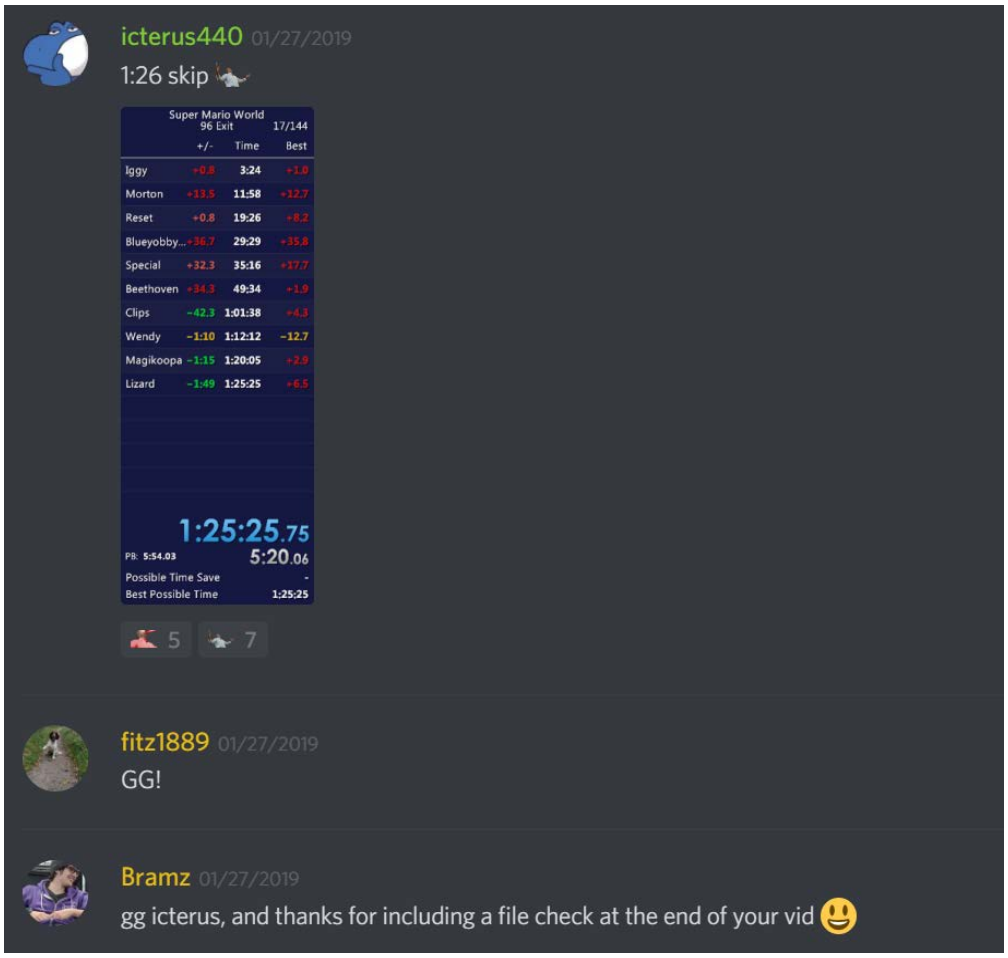

Figure 1 - Screenshot of Discord server - #pbs-and-runs

In Figure 1, the participant icterus400 is sharing his latest PB with the community's channel for such content within the *Super Mario World* Discord server. The image shared is a screenshot of his time as measured by Livesplit, a timer software commonly used by speedrunners to measure in-game time. Underneath is a section for "reactions" – an opportunity for other server members to express a reaction to a post without typing a response. The two reactions to this post, used by five and seven channel members, are communal in-jokes representing congratulations – images of Jeb Bush during the 2016 Republican Presidential Primary that have been given the image name "BigJeb." Underneath, two channel members express their congratulations with "GG" ("good game" – a shorthand for well-played and

congratulations that sees common usage across internet game communities). Though not captured in this screenshot, three other channel members also explicitly contribute their congratulations to icterus400 in a similar way.

In this space, there is no leaderboard nor a record of any particular participant over another, and no example of shaming or belittling a player because of a perceived lack of skill was seen during observation. The time being shared in Figure 1 (1 hour, 25 minutes, 25.75 seconds) is the 30th fastest time recorded (Speedrun.com), and Bramz, a community moderator and one of those offering congratulations and appreciation in Figure 1, has recorded a time significantly faster (1 hour, 23 minutes, 27 seconds). Despite the skill gap connotated by the difference in personal best, Bramz extends support and equal space for celebration to icterus400. This pattern of community expectation setting by example is common throughout all observed channels during the period of time observations were collected.

Shared Technical Exploration and Speedrunning Advice

In another space within the *Super Mario World* Discord server, newer players and more experienced players come together for the sake of providing guidance, tutoring, and deliberate technical advice on running the game for speed. This type of content is not limited to specific mentors; those with the most experience and the best performing times are engaging with new channel members on granular questions for the sake of growing the community and welcoming new runners into the fold. For these new participants, this channel of content is a bridge to becoming more involved within the community.

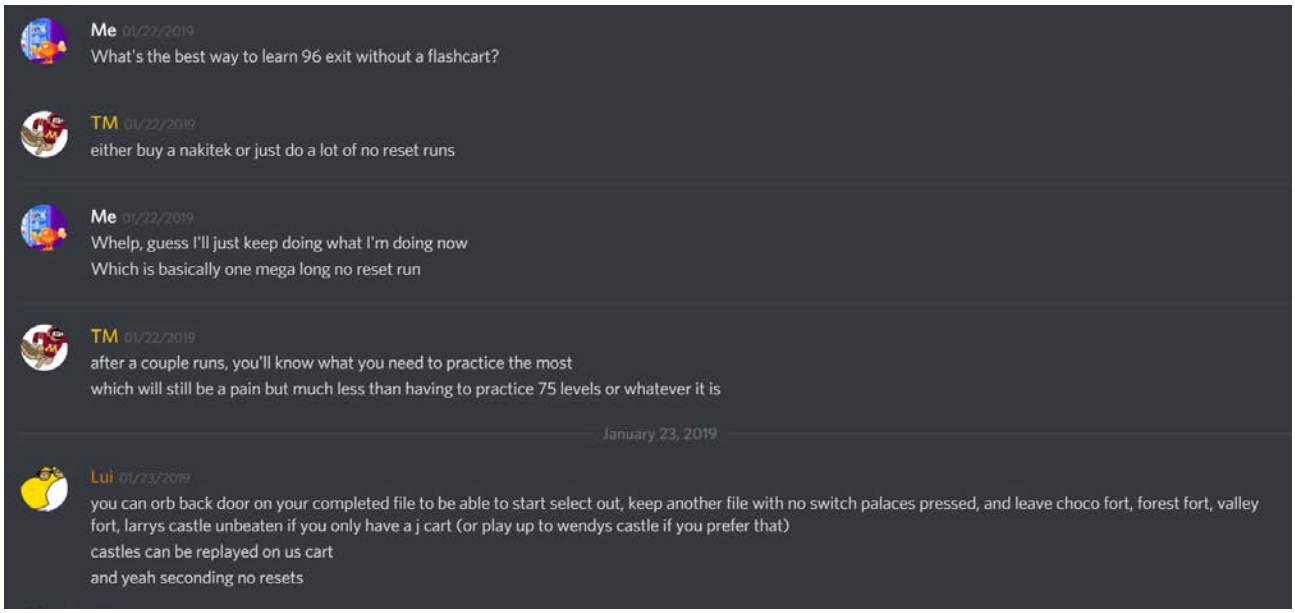

Figure 2 - Screenshot of Discord server - #speedrunning

In Figure 2, the channel member identifying as “Me” has come to the channel with a request for advice on a fundamental question: advisable ways to begin learning “96 exit” (a category of *Super Mario World* that requires the player to achieve every possible level completion in the game) without the use of a flashcart to make practicing more accessible. The two channel members that are the first to engage with Me are ‘TM’, a community leader and moderator, and “Lui” the world-record holder in the category Me is seeking to learn how to run. The advice both give are variations of continual practice, with Lui providing additional technical options to allow a player to optimize their game file for practice purposes.

Similar conversations between runners took place in person at the Awesome Games Done Quick marathon:

> Multiple people were able to notice and recognize people from a distance. And not just recognize who they were by screen name, but also recognize the game they would’ve been playing on the television they were sitting at, even though they weren’t able to see it

directly for themselves. No one turned away conversation, and whether they were seeing someone they hadn't seen for forever, or meeting someone for the very first time who they recognize by screen name, or addressing a fan who was either coming up to introduce themselves to the player or ask questions about the games being played, at no point did anyone turn away conversation or not respond when addressed by either stranger or person that they were familiar with…Ultimately, what's happening is a whole bunch of people sitting around and playing video games. There is a shared excitement that comes from large gatherings of people who all have similar interests. Beyond interest, though, there is a shared understanding of the motivations behind and the allure of speedrunning video games. People sharing stories about their personal bests, cheering for runners when they accomplish a very hard trick in their game, empathizing with runners who make mistakes or fall prey to bad luck in a specific section of a game. All of these things are not unique to one game or another. Because of that, even if someone does not have a direct experience with a game that is being played by someone else, they know what it's like to succeed and they know what it's like to fail. And they know what both of those things look like in general. That shared understanding and empathy for the other members of the community allows people from very wide ranging types of games to come together and celebrate each other.

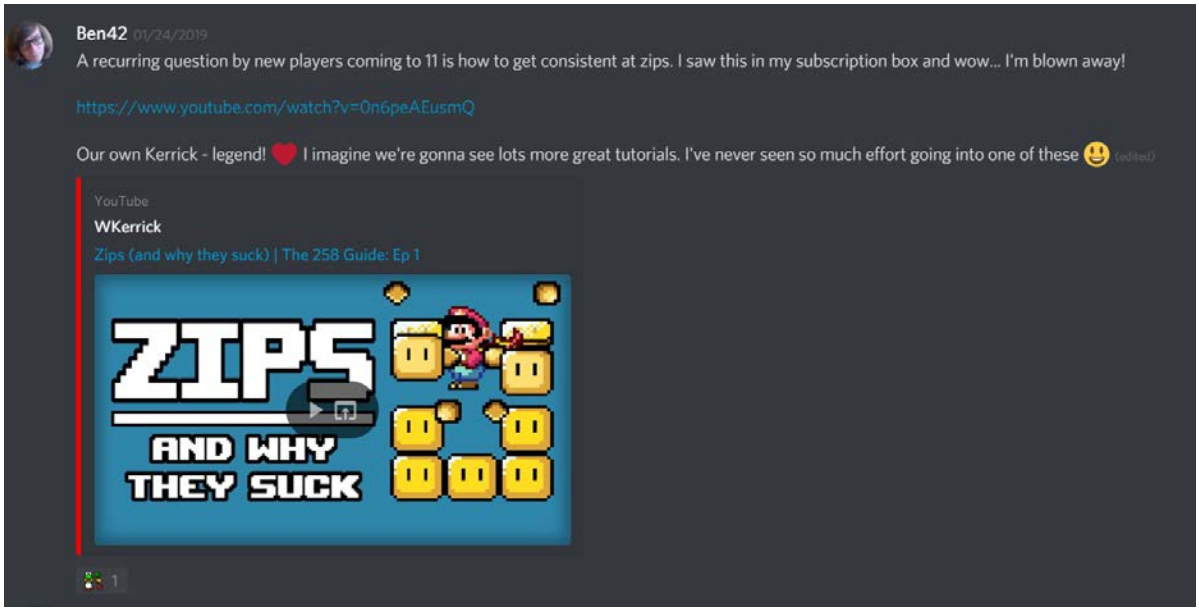

Figure 3 - Screenshot of Discord server - #help

In Figure 3, Ben42, another community moderator and respected member, is sharing a community-made tutorial video created by another community member regarding a specific speedrunning technique used in *Super Mario World*. This tutorial is tied directly to a question that Ben has received from new players seeking to learn ’11 exit’ speedruns (a category which asks the player to beat the fewest levels possible to reach the final boss). In response to that question, a community member named WKerrick took the time and effort to make a video to share with the community that provides a detailed look at this specific technique.

Similar game-specific and speedrun-specific tricks and mechanics are shared in other contexts; several runs shared as personal bests make mention of achieving a specific, community-identified mechanic or trick that allowed them to improve their run time. As observed at Awesome Games Done Quick, some players specifically went out of their way to let other attendees sit in on tutorial sessions on specific mechanics in a setting that resembled a masterclass or private lesson. This type of teaching happens across the entire *Super Mario World* community, between all levels of skill, and reinforces the idea that anyone interested in

participating in the community can contribute gameplay to the larger group.

Modification and Content Creation

Above and beyond the discussion of speedrunning techniques of the original game and celebrating the accomplishments and improvements of community members in playing *Super Mario World* strictly for time, the community around *Super Mario World* also actively creates romhacks (gameplay modifications) of the game itself in an effort to provide new challenges and gameplay experiences for both beginner and advanced players seeking to engage with gameplay. One such romhack was on display at Awesome Games Done Quick as a preview for the community:

> This romhack, which is named [NAME], is meant to be a direct sequel to the original game that is being run this Saturday. [Creator]'s intention was to make a hack of similar difficulty while at the same time working on improving the aesthetic as well as increasingly the visuals, audio and gameplay. A teaser trailer for this game had been released on YouTube about a month before the marathon, and it was a game that other members of the community were very much eagerly anticipating…. At the core of it, [Creator] wanted people to play this game in order to provide feedback, so that they can make it better. It wasn't complete – custom music was still not added to it, as well as several visuals that had not been fully patched out. Credits had not been customized to thank the people that contributed to the game. Other than that, though, the levels were as they was intending them to be, and they wanted players to play them and let them know what they thought…This was a way for him to work with the community to develop the best possible game, so that once it was time to fully release it, everyone could have a better experience and audience members would have a better experience watching people

play this game.

Since the observations took place, the romhack that was viewed at AGDQ was published in full on SMWCentral, a website and community forum for the creation and dissemination of fan-made *Super Mario* World content. As of August 10, 2019, SMWCentral has 1,155 unique hacks available for free download to anyone, provided they have a legal copy of *Super Mario World* to apply the modifications to, and thousands of individual graphics, songs, code modifications, and other additions available for creators to use.

Of the two *Super Mario World* runs featured as part of the AGDQ marathon, both of them were romhacks of the game rather than the original game itself. The first was a race of a hack named *Quickie World*, by a Mexican member of the community known as Valdio, while the second was a speedrun of a hack named *Super Gracie World*, by a creator known as White_Moth. Both of these games are designed to be "kaizo" difficulty, a Japanese word for "rearranged" used within the community to denote a specifically punishing type of creation that is visually impressive to see performed at a high level. In addition to their difficulty level the combined time estimate for completion of these two games was 40 minutes compared to *Super Mario World*, leading to an opportunity for the marathon to feature exciting content for the general audience without sacrificing a larger block of time.

This fan-created content is not meant to overwrite or replace the original game; in building these custom modifications and expansions, the community is taking the gameplay experience from *Super Mario World* and building upon it. Rather than creating content that advances the narrative of the game in a new direction (such as through written fanfiction), or repurposing parts of the game in the creation of separate work (such as through sampling in music), these hacks are taking the gameplay from the original game and reshaping it into a new

thing while maintaining its core integrity

In essence, the act of modifying *Super Mario World* in this way is a type of fanfiction in the style that Dunn (2015) describes it in relation to polymediation: new, community-driven and community-created suggestions for ways in which the game should be played. The community's investment into preserving the core gameplay mechanics of *Super Mario World* – the physics of the game and the general style of levels and obstacles presented to the player - while moving to improve the graphical, musical, and difficulty of the original game is directly comparable to an online fandom preserving the core characteristics of a fictional character while writing new settings, environments, and plot devices for which that character can interact. In this case of *Super Mario World* romhacking and modification, the fanfiction of the community revolves not around the characters but the gameplay. The community has taken hold of the gameplay and is fluidly and collectively authoring new content with it and through it.

Fan Content Fueling the Broadcasting Cycle

For players who use their gameplay of *Super Mario World* as content for their personal broadcasting channel on Twitch, as well as marathon producers such as the organizers of the Games Done Quick events, this type of new content born through fan-made modification provides a duel benefit of engaging with creators in their community and unique, additional gameplay above and beyond the core game. In addition to showing high-level gameplay within a context of the core game, it allows for the channel to add visual and gameplay variety. As one broadcaster said

> I think you can only show the 'vanilla' *Super Mario World* so many times…before it gets repetitive and interest is lost in it. I think romhacks are a great way to keep *Super Mario World* in GDQs because…it keeps the interest without getting old, but it also shows a

> huge display of skill from various runners in the community. I really think the…thing that pulled me in to it was just the crazy display of skill that some people have.

This display of skill, established as a key draw for both returning and new audience members to individuals who use their gameplay as a source of income, relies on staying both impressive and new to the eyes of the viewer. Without this fan-made content, broadcasters would have to recycle the existing gameplay in ways that still maintain the draw to audience members. Because of this source of new content, broadcasters encourage their audience to participate in the creative process of modifying the game, in addition to making their own custom creations to display on stream.

Within the community, this process leads to the prominence of not only players of games, but modifiers of games. These modification specialists may not possess the mechanical gameplay skills that other players have, but the modifications they create garner attention from broadcasters for their enjoyability and their ability to draw an audience. This leads to praise and recognition for the creator, but also a community demand for more content to continue the influx of new material. One creator described it this way:

> "When I first got into it, there was three or four games outside of the main original *Kaizo*[5] series and that was it. Now there's 100-plus games and it seems like everybody and their mother is working on something at the moment. So, I really think it's awesome how there's such a wide variety of things coming out now and so many different people getting interested in creating things. But it also makes it harder for individual creators and games to stand out and players and streamers because there's just so many now."

As there is content for those looking to get started in the playing of *Super Mario World*

for speed within the community Discord server, there is also content for those looking to get started modifying the game and creating their own games to be shared and played amongst the community. Additionally, creators sometimes stream their creative process and the modifying of their game on Twitch to a live audience, engaging with their audience members on the creation of their works. This creation - gameplay - creation cycle is fueled by community discourse, broadcaster interest, and the want of the audience to consume high-quality gameplay in new and engaging ways.

As broadcasters and audience members, engaging with each other under assumed identities across multiple platforms seamlessly, come together to advance gameplay in both individual skill and content creation, their interactions and the media they use to conduct them form a polymediated environment. This process highlights several ways in which this community represents a polymediated environment: the persistent identity maintained across all technological platforms, the simultaneously unified and fractured network of chat servers within the community, the co-creation of community-generated content intended to advance and expand the content landscape available to the community, and the iterative cycle of gameplay content creation by members of the community and gameplay content consumption and reactions from the community as a whole. Gameplay serves as the media that provides the common relational link tying them together and driving the social and relational aims they communicate with each other in order to achieve.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have used ethnographic observations and interviews to determine the ways in which the consumption of high-level gameplay of *Super Mario World* is a mediated experience for audience members and broadcasters in digital communities focusing on that gameplay. In the preceding three chapters, I present an analysis of the data gathered through ethnographic observation and interviews shows three aspects of how the broadcast and consumption of high-skilled gameplay is a mediated experience. First, it is mediated through the deliberate incorporation of visual modification and audio commentary with a focus on appealing to the online viewer. Second, it is mediated by the treatment of performative gameplay as a separate craft to be honed by players intent on using it to engage with the larger community. Finally, it is mediated through the community's inclusive approach to the fluid authorship of gameplay content and content creation.

Theoretical Contributions

These findings directly answer the call of Tyma, Herbig, and Herrmann (2015) to apply the concept polymediation to video games and provide a practical example to highlight each of the elements of polymediation identified by Calka (2015). Ubiquity is shown through the constant availability to individuals in Twitch streams, Discord servers, and content related to gameplay of *Super Mario World*. Fluid authorship is shown through the means in which skilled runners and content creators provide opportunities for gameplayers of all skill levels to partake in and contribute their own unique gameplay to the broader community to consume. The paradox of identity can be observed by the ways in which the screen name serves as both a fracture of an individual's identity and as a complete representation of it. Finally, the community's ability to both divide and unify simultaneously is shown through the proliferation of individual Twitch

channels and Discord servers that feed into a larger community of players and audience members.

As observed at AGDQ, the players of these games are able to provide this content to their audiences because they take their gameplay seriously. By extension, though, the audiences also take gameplay seriously. Through chat servers, content creation, and in supporting both new and prominent players, the importance placed in high-quality gameplay is apparent among those invested in *Super Mario World* being played at a high level. This joint-dedication, then, is a crucial element that allows both broadcaster and consumer to freely interact across medium without confusion. That communal interaction across technological platforms, one of the defining elements of polymedia, is the engine that drives the creation of content, the quest for continued improvement, and the entertainment behind watching a streamer play a game at the highest level. Where Madianou and Miller (2013) used familial ties to define polymedia, we can find the same behaviors in this community bound not by family, but by a shared interest in a common media: gameplay.

The use of polymediation to understand the interactions of common game players provides a new approach to studying groups of video game players, extending work done by game scholars to understand the ways these groups interact with the games they play (Churchill and Xu, 2016; Consalvo, 2017; Griffiths and Light, 2008, e.g.), Expanding beyond game studies, these observations suggest that further application of polymedia theory to additional digital communities, such as fans of a common television show (Lacalle and Simelio, 2017), will contribute to our understanding of media consumption, digital interpersonal communication, and the relationship between games and the people who play them.

This study joins other studies of streamers and communities on Twitch (Wulf, Schneider, and Beckert, 2018, e.g.) in adding academic rigor and the application of theory to the study of speedrunning audiences, and, by extension, non-e-sports gameplay that still strives to be perceived as high-performance. The observation of gameplay as a craft, and as something to be performed as much as to be personally consumed, presents an opportunity to extend Aarseth's assertion that gameplay elements are universal (2003) and how those elements can be identified and potentially mastered at a generalized level.

Video game content creation as a field of study provides an opportunity to distill and easily view elements of polymedia due to its clearly defined platforms for both broadcast and community interaction. In applying polymedia theory to video game content, the communal behavior and relationship with the gameplay both highlights and expounds on tenets proposed by Tyma, Herbig, Herrmann, (2015) and Calka (2015). This study directly answers the call those authors made to see how polymedia presents itself within video games and shows that the concept is theoretically sound and observable within this subset of the media audience.

This research applies polymedia theory to understand and further explore the ways in which game communities interact with and influence the games they collectively play, broadcast, and consume. Serving as a bridge between media studies and game studies, this study offers explanation and observation that the two fields can and should come together to best understand and explore the ways in which video game content is being performed, broadcast, and consumed by a mass audience.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

A limitation in this research study was the lack of engagement with viewers and non-broadcasters in an interview setting. Of the four interviewers performed, all four were with

individuals who actively broadcast themselves playing *Super Mario World.* No viewers were directly engaged and asked to contribute their thoughts to the research project, even as their behavior was observed, both in person at the AGDQ event and through the content in the Discord server. The combination of limited interview sample size and sample scope limits the study's ability to speak directly to how audience members understand, if at all, these mediations and how they affect their viewing habits.

An additional limitation of this research study ties directly into an opportunity for future research studies: the specific focus on the gameplay of *Super Mario World*. Due to research scope and familiarity with the subject material, I deliberately chose to spend effort focusing exclusively on this subset of the larger speedrunning community. While this allowed me to make observations as well as connect with broadcasters and runners in ways that a broader scope would potentially have not allowed, it is false to assume that all of the conclusions in this study are broadly applicable across all video game-centered communities. Future scholars have the opportunity to replicate these methods at future events and additional online communities to determine the ways in which different games and game communities interact with each other and with their gameplay content.

Other opportunities for future research come from applying different methodologies to the subject of video gameplay content creation and consumption. This study was deliberately qualitative in design, but it is by no means intended to imply that there is no room for quantitative analysis of audience members. To highlight one such opportunity specifically, opportunity exists to measure the wants and gratifications of audience members to engage with speedrun-centered content through surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

While these potential studies are exciting in their own right, they also come together to offer excitement for the potential of the application of polymedia theory to studying gameplay-centered communities. Future studies will be able to apply this theoretical foundation to communities surrounding games and gameplay of all genres and platforms. Additionally, scholars are able to incorporate additional qualitative and quantitative methods to determine how, if at all, consumption of gameplay is mediated in a way that is explained by polymedia theory. Based on the results of this research, I predict that these studies will lend new perspective and detail to our understand of how the consumption and broadcasting of high-level gameplay is a polymediated experience, and the community of broadcasters and audience members that engage with that gameplay participate in a shared, polymediated environment.

In conclusion, polymedia theory and the concept of polymediation provide examples of how the broadcast and consumption of highly-skilled gameplay is a mediated experience for both the broadcasting gameplayer and the audience members watching the broadcaster. Both the broadcasting and viewing experiences are mediated through the technological affordances and augmentations used to focus on a wide audience not necessarily familiar with the game in question. They are further mediated by the approach of both player and viewer to the performative gameplay as a skill and craft to be exhibited, and the separation of this type of gameplay Finally, they are mediated by an inclusive and supportive approach to community that allows for interested participants to engage with each other in ways that promote new players to join and engage with the larger community. These elements directly point to the concept of polymediation and serve as an exemplar for how the concept can be directly observed in digital communities centered around a shared media interest.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide
AGDQ Follow-up interview

Opening Statement
I want to thank you for participating in this research interview. I am conducting research on the ways in which the broadcasting and consumption of speedrunning-related game content make up a mediated experience. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, and I am interested in your honest opinions. I will keep your comments confidential and your name, screenname, and any reference to your participation in AGDQ that can be tied to you directly will not be associated with any reports. You can stop this interview at any time if you no longer wish to participate in the study. Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

AWESOME GAMES DONE QUICK IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE
How was your experience with the 2019 Awesome Games Done Quick marathon?

Do you think the event as a whole was a success? Why, or why not?

Do you think your individual part in the event was a success? Why, or why not?

Was this the first time you participated in a Games Done Quick event?

- **If so, how did your participation compare to your expectations?**
- **If not, how did this experience compare to your previous experiences?**

How much work would you say you put into your participation?
Do you think your work was worth it?
What tools did you use to perform your work? Do you think you could have performed as well as you did without those tools?

BROADCASTING
How much does the work you put into your participation into AGDQ coincide with your normal work as a Twitch broadcaster?

When you broadcast on Twitch, what are you trying to accomplish?

Do you feel that your gameplay on Twitch accomplishes that?

How, if at all, do you differentiate playing video games off stream versus playing video games on stream?

Do you treat your gameplay as work?

Beyond gameplay, what types of work do you put into creating your stream experience?

Why do you do that work?

Do you feel your stream would have the audience it does without that work?

CONSUMING AND COMMUNITY

When you watch a stream, what are you watching for?

Do you consider yourself a member of a community with other audience members in streams that you watch?

If so, where do you congregate with that community outside of streams? What do you talk about?

How do this community affect the way you approach the game/games you play?