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Gotta go fast:
Measured rationalities and rational
measurements in the context of
speedrunning

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Abstract

This thesis studies the Weberian notion of rationality in the context of speedrunning and the speedrunning community. By contrasting the instrumental rationality of the speedrunning practice with the value-oriented rationality of the community, it crystallizes the difference between “performing the metrics” as an extension of community values and as a function of externally imposed constraints. The former is an expression of autonomy, while the latter an expression of heteronomy. This difference, it is argued, is found in many different areas of society, sometimes in the guise of “audit culture”, at other times as an unintended side-effect of established forms of practice. In either case, a return to communal values (e.g. the sociological imagination) is seen as an antidote to becoming an extension of someone else’s metrics; autonomy is not a function of performing to external specifications, but of being able to rationally choose which measurements to use and which to leave aside. Speedrunners, in their endeavor to go fast, express such autonomy, albeit implicitly. By analyzing YouTube videos wherein runners explain their tactics and methods, this thesis endeavors to make this aspect of autonomy ever so slightly more explicit.

Keywords: audit culture, autonomy, communities of practice, Diablo 2, Habermas, instrumental rationality, Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, Max Weber, Prey, speedrunning

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1. Introduction

Speedrunning is, in the simplest terms possible, to play a computer game with the intention of completing it as fast as possible. To attain this goal, seemingly unorthodox methods are applied, so as to remove every possible Planck unit from the sum total. Speedrunning is an extremely goal-oriented activity, where the goal of going fast overrides all other concerns. The only thing that matters is the reduction of play time, by any means necessary. The result is an activity that barely resembles an intuitive understanding of the notion of playing a computer game, yet which by definition still adheres to it.

This single-minded pursuit of minimizing the time an activity takes to perform is not new, by any means. Most famously, the time studies applied by Taylorism and similar strands of scientific management sought to find the most efficient way to perform, in minute detail, any given motion involved in industrial production. By studying how factory workers moved while performing their work, inefficiencies could be discovered and chipped away, be they on the individual or the organizational level. The result, over time, was a faster pace of industrial production, where unnecessary motions and other expenditures of time and energy were reduced to a minimum, ensuring maximum efficiency.

More generally, identifying a key variable and taking steps to ensure that the measurements associated with this variable increase is a wide-spread social practice. In finance, fluctuations in stock prices override many other concerns; laying off thousands of workers in order to increase quarterly earnings is standard procedure (Billger & Hallock 2005; Gunderson et al 1997). In education, performance on standardized tests (PISA foremost among them) becomes a vital basis for public policy; elections hang in the balance, depending on whether performance results show an uptick or a downturn (Bulle 2011; Engel & Frizzell 2015; Gaber et al 2012; Lingard & Rawolle 2011). In healthcare, funding is awarded to programs that can demonstrate immediate short-term performance gains, over programs that emphasize long term continuity of care and other intangible health benefits (Brown & Calnan 2010; Brown et al 2012; Nutbeam 1999). In academia, the paradigm of publish or perish is so entrenched as to be hegemonic – having contributed to the accumulated knowledge of mankind is secondary to having garnered

citations which increases one's h-index (Burrows 2012, Cerulo 2016; Eliason 2008; Sparkes 2007; Vannini 2006). There is, to generalize, a tendency to put the metric first and foremost, and rearrange the practices measured so as to achieve measurable results.

The list of examples can be made arbitrarily long, should we wish to maximize this particular variable. In essence, however, what we see is what Weber warned us about in the end of his *Protestant Ethics* (1976): the disenchantment of the world and the looming iron cage of rationality, the minmaxing “nullity [which] imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (p. 182). For any given preferred variable, efficient technicians and bureaucrats stand at the ready to make improvements; whether or not these improvements actually improve things that are not measured by this variable is an open question. Implicit in this famous passage from Weber is an imperative to resist and confront this tendency of modernity, to remain human in the face of the overwhelming momentum of an indifferent rationality let loose upon the world. Resistance is not futile; it is mandatory (Boltanski 2011).

Speedrunning is not uniquely situated in the trajectory of this modern tendency. The speedrunning community is, however, surprisingly open about how it goes about maximizing its preferred variable, and the methods employed to achieve that end. As such, a closer look at speedrunning will generate insights which can potentially be generalized to other instances where the same tendency is at work. It is, to jest, the fastest and most efficient way to go about theorizing and exemplifying these matters.

2. Research question

This thesis aims to further our understanding of Weber’s concept of rationality, by applying it to the loose community of computer game enthusiasts who refer to themselves as “speedrunners”, and the ways in which they approach their self-appointed task of going fast. The research efforts are guided by two main questions, who each shed theoretical light upon different aspects of this concept:

How can the aim of speedrunning be understood in terms of rationality, as posited primarily by Weber and Habermas?

How can the activity of speedrunning be understood as an act of claiming autonomy for the speedrunning community, in light of the previous question?

2.1 Delimitations and demarcations

Despite being a study of speedrunners, this thesis is not primarily about speedrunners or the speedrunning community, or their biographical and historical idiosyncrasies, respectively. Nor is this an instance of games studies, despite being a study about games. This thesis is firmly rooted in the sociological tradition following Max Weber, as channeled through Jürgen Habermas. Thus, there will be any number of topics, aspects and concepts from games studies that simply will not appear in the following text. This is not to say that these things are without relevance, only that they are not a good fit in a thesis that is essentially about the Weberian notion of rationality. The runners are seen as a specific instance of an overarching societal trend, and this is a study of that trend.

3. Background

Speedrunning is, in the simplest possible terms, playing a computer game with the intention of finishing it as fast as possible. This can be performed by feat of manual dexterity (e.g. being able to press the buttons fast enough to move forward with the desired velocity), thus spending as little time as possible in the process. It can also be performed by exploiting bugs and glitches (e.g. various forms in which the game act in unintended but predictable ways). Most commonly, it is done through some combination of the two, all depending on which game is presently at play.

To give a specific example: in the early entries of the Mega Man series, the goal is complete a series of obstacle courses and defeat a number of larger than usual end of stage enemies (commonly referred to as “bosses”). Being able to navigate the player character through the obstacle course with adequate dexterity is a prerequisite for going fast. It is not, however, the fastest way. By judiciously performing actions that cause the player character to get stuck in a wall, a player can zip past a level as the game tries to “unstuck” the protagonist. Since teleporting past an obstacle course is faster than traversing it, this is a common speedrunning technique. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for other games: if a glitch can be found that

greatly reduces the time spent in (or completely bypasses) a particular segment, then going fast is the way to go.

Attentive readers will have noticed that the word “speedrun” is a composite of the words “speed” and “run”. While speed is a relatively straightforward concept, a run is not. A run is a game session, counted from the time a player gets agency until the defined end of the game, and everything that happens in between. This makes it possible to talk about different types of runs (e.g. no-glitch runs, any% runs, 100% runs etc), with different rules, expectations and objectives. It also (akin to the literal activity of running) brings with it the implicit assumption that the whole activity is completed in one go.

Another important aspect of speedrunning is its competitive nature. A player who manages to finish a game faster than anyone on record thus far wins the honor of being the record holder for that particular game (however temporary this title might be). However, a run has to be made under certain conditions in order to officially count. For instance, it has to be recorded and uploaded to a video sharing site where everyone can partake of (and thus verify) it. Secondly, this recording has to contain a clock of some kind that testifies to the fact that things did indeed take as long as they did. The specifics vary from game to game, but the public nature of these proceedings make comparisons to sports competitions fairly easy to do. Being able to go fast on one’s own is all well and good, but it does not count unless it is performed in front of an audience, be it ever so virtual.

This combination of rule-breaking with a strong emphasis on veracity and verifiability creates a peculiar internal logic. On the one hand, abusing a glitch in order to reduce the playtime of a twenty-hour game to mere minutes is a perfectly legitimate thing to do in the eyes of the community. On the other hand, this only applies as long as other rules are strictly adhered to. Speedrunning is not a lawless free-for-all, but a highly structured social environment which prides itself of applying every tool of reason and rational thought towards the aim of going fast. If it works, it works, but it has to be shown to work in a demonstrably verifiable manner; this is measured instrumental rationality at work. And at play.

4. Previous research

Two searches were performed in the effort to survey the lay of the land. The first was a cursory search for uses of the term ‘instrumental rationality’ in conjunction with Weber and/or Habermas, in order to spot any recurring themes or trends from a broad sample. The second searched honed in on a particular term, ‘audit culture’, in an effort to go deep where the first search went wide. The term was chosen by virtue of the explicit use of metrics (and efforts to maximize them) associated with the term, and how these metric at times are at odds with the rationalities of those who are measured. From the vantage point of having conducted the first search, it seemed the best fit for what this thesis set out to do¹. In the following, I shall present the results of both searches, albeit with slightly more emphasis on the second round of results.

4.1 Initial survey

In the initial survey, I found that there are three notable trends (with some overlap) within the articles. These are a) studies of workplace organization in relation to instrumental rationality, b) critiques of the frameworks provided by the sociologists in question, and c) critiques using the frameworks in a straightforward manner. The main difference between these two last categories is the focus of the critique: in the first, the attention is brought to bear on the frameworks themselves, and in the second, the framework is used to analyze something else, without necessarily critically discussing the framework as such.

In the first category, emphasis lay mainly on problematizing the kinds of rationality applied in workplace situations, and thus problematizing the assumption that instrumental rationality was always at work. Faifua and Harding (2008) studied different workplaces with different kinds of ownership structures, and found that an analysis that honed in on merely economic metrics would miss key aspects of what actually took place in these sites. Brown (2012) studied workplaces in the UK public healthcare systems, and found that long-term efforts (i.e. building continuity for patients, or building ties to families and local communities) had a hard time

¹ The leap from the first search to the second is not obvious, and there are any number of other searches which could have been performed in order to further survey the scientific landscape (e.g. rationality in relation to sports, speed, computer games, etc). The reason for settling on audit culture as a search term is primarily biographical; after having performed the first search and gained a general understanding of how the concept of rationality was applied, I stumbled upon the term ‘audit culture’ and found it a perfect fit. The letter, as the saying goes, arrived.

getting funding compared to more short-term interventions that could produce immediate (but measurable) results. Brown noted that the focus on measurable improvements could potentially have detrimental effects on patient care over time. Calori (2003) discussed the tension between exploitation and exploration, where the former is tied to getting things done (in the sense of using available resources) and the latter is tied to learning on the job. Calori contrasts these modes to Habermas' concepts of strategic and communicative action, and concludes that room for communicative exploration has positive effects on learning. Lacerda and Vieda (2011) analyzes a number of NGOs, and discusses the trend that organizations, once in place, tend to drift in terms of their overall aims and converge toward instrumental rationalities. An organization that begins with a value-oriented goal might over time find itself in practice caring more about administrative or practical matters, whilst still professing to the same goals. Analyzing organizations thus has to take both stated and implicit (yet discernible through action) goals into account.

In the second category, we find articles critiquing Weber and/or Habermas and their respective theories of rationality. Peukert (2004) situates Weber in relationship to the economists of his time, and problematizes the notion of economic rationality by pointing out that, since it is impossible to know whether an enterprise is profitable (and thus rational) before it has run its course, it is impossible to apply the term in present tense. Wright (2002) takes Weber to task on his class analysis, and points out that it does not adequately account for class interests (or class struggles).² Woods (2001) proposes a fifth ideal type of rationality; though unconvincing, it warrants mentioning. Reckling (2001) critiques Weber's iron cage for being too deterministic, and contrasts it to the avenues of resistance afforded in the theories of Charles Taylor. While modernity brought about the loss of traditional forms of community, it also sparked new forms of community that can be harnessed for emancipatory ends. McPhilips (1999) modifies Weber's description of modernity to achieve such ends.

² Wright (2002) also notes that Weber's analysis of class has gotten an undue amount of attention by virtue of it being, for the longest time, the only non-Marxian alternative to Marx. This is not the place to expound further on this topic, but it is worthy of a footnote nevertheless.

Hindess (1998) contrasts both Weber and Habermas to Foucault. Specifically in terms of the application of power. A government acting on Foucauldian terms does not simply tell its subjects what to do. Rather, it analyzes the discursive and communicative practices of particular communities, and then introduces factors external to these communities which nevertheless cause them to act in the desired fashion. This requires an in-depth understanding of what these groups prioritize and how they go about securing the things they do prioritize – in short, an understanding of the local communicative and instrumental rationalities of these groups (as per Habermas and Weber respectively). Clammer (2008) maintains that postcolonial governments do not have these kinds of understandings in relation to indigenous and otherwise marginal populations, and thus impose their wills in terms of Weberian domination rather than Foucauldian power play.

In the third category, we find merely two articles. Jessop (2013) uses a Habermasian framework to analyze the opposition among 19th century Scottish philosophers to the mechanization of humanity within contemporary medical discourses; the “tendency” of the medical sciences being “to make all the operations of the mind mere mechanism” (p. 633). Sa’di (2015) analyzes protest actions and the rationales that are ascribed to them, and finds that protests are not undertaken with a merely instrumental mindset; protests happen even in circumstances where they are unlikely to generate the desired change, or when the likely outcome is punishment and further repression. It is tempting to connect these two disparate articles, but I shall resist the impulse.

An astute reader might have noted that these articles do not point unequivocally in any single direction or indicate an obvious way forward. They are, to echo Bauman (1995), bits and fragments; disparate articles in search of a trend. They indicate that something is afoot with regards to Weberian rationality, but not in any conclusive manner. A second dive into the literature is warranted.

[4.2 Second survey: audit culture](#)

The second literature review is rather unsophisticated, as systematic literature reviews go. It consisted of searching for the search string “audit culture” in the Sociological Abstracts

database, and then proceeding to read the articles one by one until there were no more articles. Of the 59 results, 24 were deemed relevant to this study. The other articles either used the term in a metaphorical way whilst dealing with other topics, discussed aspects which were adjacent but tangential to the topic at hand, or were unfortunately not accessible through our library.

The articles I found can be divided into four distinct but overlapping clusters: articles that a) describe the theoretical framework of the concept “audit culture”; b) describe the effects of audit culture more specifically, particularly with regards to the particular metrics used; c) discuss the relationship between academics and audit culture; and d) relate to audit culture in a slightly more indirect ways than the other articles.

Strathern (1997) outlines the general history of examinations in the context of the UK educational system. Strathern uses Emily Davies’ founding in the 19th century of a school for women with the express intention of preparing them for the Cambridge examinations as an example of early strategic use of examinations as a tool for change. By preparing these women to take – and pass with distinction – examinations that were traditionally the domain of men and their claim to intellectual superiority, Davies could affect social change by pointing to the irrefutable facts that arrived in the form of numerical test scores. The additional fact that these examinations were administered by an impartial (at least in theory) body, meant that there was no likelihood of tampering or exaggeration; the system itself guaranteed accuracy. This move, Strathern (1997) notes, is one of many dialectical swings between ‘ought’ and ‘is’; women ought not (by contemporary mores) be this intelligent, but they demonstrably are.

A number of articles similarly discuss audits as a technology, each with different inflection points (Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 1999, 2015a, 2015b). Drawing upon Foucault, they discuss recent changes within the UK system of higher education in terms of subjectivity and governmentality. The increased number of checks and controls on the institutions of higher learning introduced by the Thatcher government (and subsequent administrations) have had both dramatic and subtle effects. An immediate effect has been an increase in the amount of administrative paperwork required to fulfil obligations to various auditing organs; a less

immediate effect is what this increased demand to give an account of oneself does to both individuals and organizations. Decisions that were previously made by virtue of academic routine and praxis, suddenly come under scrutiny and are transported from the realm of long-standing tradition to having to be justified to external review boards which may or may not be aware of these traditions (Lincoln 2011). Merely being an academic is no longer sufficient; employees now have to measure up both collectively as a university (Burrows 2012) and individually as quantified competitors (Clarke and Knights 2015).

Strathern (1997) discusses measurements in relation to the dialectic of what 'ought' and 'is', and connects it to the idea of improvement. The general idea of measuring something – be it the academic prowess of 19th century women or 21st century academics – is to get an account of what is. Modern processes of institutional auditing are not merely interested in establishing what is, however; more often than not, there is an 'ought' involved. A university that shows the same numbers year after year has not succeeded in maintaining an acceptable level of performance; rather, it has failed to improve. The ever more pervasive requirement to give an account of institutional and individual actions become tied to this idea of constant improvement, and so it becomes part of the background noise of the academic practice; to paraphrase Keenoy (2005), the writing has gone from being on the wall to becoming the wallpaper, informing the context of academic work by framing it (literally as well as figuratively).

This dynamic leads to a very focused way of thinking. That which is, ought to be better. Given that most things are measured, and thus have a numerical value, there is a very clear route towards achieving improvement. Improve the measured numbers, and ought has turned to is – at least until the next round of measurements. Through the process of auditing, the seemingly neutral activity of measuring has turned into an instrument and technology of control. Where Davies tried to use these mechanisms to affect social change with regards to 19th century gender roles, modern governments use them to implement policy across institutions and within individuals. On both micro and macro levels, it becomes important to 'perform the metric'.

The second category of articles pertain to this increased focus on metrics, and various ways in which academics have critiqued these metrics and what they supposedly measure. Macdonald (2017) discusses the metric of how much 'impact' a particular study has had, and asks whether this metric actually measures what it claims to measure. Whether or not it does, the fact that it is being measured does provide (according to the author) a rhetorical opportunity to highlight the usefulness of one's studies, and to find institutionally approved ways to make them relevant to a wider audience. Page and Strathern (2016) also discuss the metric of impact, pointing out that 'impact' is an assumed good, and that this assumption leaves out an ethical dimension of research. Moreover, they underscore that impact might be at once both indirect and important, and that it might thus be forgotten as time goes on, making it difficult to measure. Herzfeld (2018) points out that social organizations are messy and difficult to capture, and that attempts to measure them make ontological and epistemological assumptions that may not hold upon closer examination. Richardson (2000) notes that peer evaluation is at the core of academic practice, and that non-peers (e.g. external auditors) by definition have to make less complex evaluations than those within the disciplines. Burrows (2012) describes various metrics applied to academics, pointing out systemic flaws of these metrics and their unintended side-effects upon those measured; Hoodkinson (2008) performs similar work with regards to the concept of learning and education, noting that learning is notoriously indirect, a sentiment shared by Jenlink (2017).

The third category of articles pertain to the increased presence of audit culture within academia, and the discussions it has sparked about how academics should respond to it. A common question, asked slightly different in different ways with different inflections, is: since we are academics, and social scientists to boot, are we not uniquely positioned to resist this change now that we have given it a name and analyzed its mode of operation?

Being academics, the responses are (as you might expect) varied, complex and difficult to make general statements about. One common thread is to make reference to a shared collective sense of self within the various disciplines, which can be harnessed for collective action.

Holmwood (2010) claims that the fragmentary nature of sociology has made it particularly vulnerable to the effects of audit culture, in part due to a lack of such a shared identity; Savage

(2010) rebukes this by outlining past, present and possible future iterations of this very identity. Burton (2016) posits the sociological imagination at the core of sociology, which unites despite the fragmentary nature of the discipline with regards to theory. Bunds and Giardina (2017) is a dialogue between an established academic and a young one, reflecting on what it means that the former can act on the basis of established (qualitative) norms of his discipline where his younger colleague can not. Cheek (2007) calls for a moment of hesitation, so as to allow a conversation on just what we as academics are doing and what we allow to happen by force of momentum whilst ticking the bureaucratic boxes. Sparkes (2007) asks the very same question, albeit in fictionalized form; what does it mean to not be defined by your CV in an environment that very much defines you through it?

This leaves four articles which have a slightly more indirect relation to audit culture, but a more direct bearing to this thesis. Murphy (2009) more or less retraces the same theoretical grounds re Weber and Habermas that are covered in the next chapter, albeit at greater length. Allen (2017) discusses the arms race between publishers and libraries within the field of academic publishing, noting how each step along the way is rational based on the metrics used on the inside but inscrutable (and unfortunate) from without. O'Connor (2016) describes the tension between the individualist ethos of skateboarders and the demands to become accountable with the growth of skateboarding as a sport, drawing attention to the tension between the autonomy of the skateboarding subculture and the commercial contexts it now inhabits. Shaw and Allen (2006), lastly, discuss audit culture and trust in the context of non-profit organizations, and the ways in which the established norms of these organizations can be channeled to challenge the tendency of measuring and documenting everything so as to look good in the eyes of donors and government agencies; the hope being to create a culture based on trust rather than proficiency at performing the metrics.

4.3 Summary – performing the metrics

The quickest way to summarize this would be as follows: over the last few decades, an ever increasing number of measurements have been imposed on modern institutions, so as to evaluate their present and potential conditions (Shore and Wright 1999). As these measurements have been tied ever closer to policy making and budget allocations, an ever

greater amount of attention and effort are devoted (on both individual and institutional levels) to ensuring that the numbers associated with these measurements are at acceptable levels. It has, for better or worse, become rational to focus on these numbers, rather than on endeavors that have traditionally been deemed core to the institutions of academia. Keenoy (2005) and Sparkes (2007) in particular underscore that something has been lost when the emphasis has shifted from research and education as goals in themselves to means of maximizing administrative values imposed from without. The bars of the iron cage are closing in, as it were.

At this point, it might be prudent to remind readers of the research aim of this thesis: to discuss different kinds of Weberian rationalities in relation to the autonomy of established traditions and disciplines. The articles references thus far have all, in one way or another, been related to this overall topic, albeit most of them in the context of academia under siege. The autonomy of the practice has been subsumed under the pressure to perform the metrics; instrumental rationality overtakes value-oriented rationality. This process has not gone unnoticed, as we saw in the different critiques leveraged against it; several calls have been made to return to the core of the academic respective disciplines in order to resist this tendency (e.g. Burton 2016, Cheek 2007). Nor is the process new (Clammer 2008, Hindess 1998, Jessop 2013), or limited to academia (O'Connor 2016).

The relation of all of this to speedrunning might seem counterintuitive, and it is. There is no direct link between audit culture and playing computer games. There is, however, a link between maximizing a variable and maximizing a variable³. Audit culture imposes a variable (several, in fact) on autonomous communities and asks – demands – that these communities perform the metrics, often in ways counter to what these communities would have done if left to their own devices. Speedrunners, on the other hand, perform the metrics as an extension of their own values. This is the difference between autonomy and heteronomy (Weber 2003, p 35). It seems something of a contradiction that one expression of instrumental rationality results in autonomy while another results in heteronomy; thus, the time has come to swiftly transition into a more general theoretical framework from which to analyze this contradiction.

³ A equals A, mutatis mutandis.

5. Theory

In this chapter, we will, step by step, operationalize rationality from an abstract notion to something that has a who and a where. We will do this by tracing the emergence of specialized professions and the possibility of them finding (or being assigned) a metric to perform. The first section will discuss the division of labor in some generality, and thus the emergence of specialized fields of knowledge. This will give us a theoretical grounding for the autonomy discussed above, and allow us to conceptualize just who is asked to perform the metrics. The second section will discuss the specialized nature of late modernity more specifically, emphasizing the interconnected and institutionalized nature of everyday life, and what is at stake with regards to the autonomy of specialized professions (e.g. academics visavi audit culture). The third section will discuss the Weberian concept of rationality and – based on the previous two sections – where to situate it theoretically and methodologically.

5.1 The division of labor

The notion of division of labor is by no means a novelty. Plato (2008) discusses it extensively in the *Republic*, laying out all the various kinds of functions (and by extension labor) required to make an ideal city function. While the particulars of his divisions might not be agreeable to us today (especially with regards to which kinds of poetry our future rulers should be exposed to), he did lay a foundation for thinking about a city as consisting of different groups of people performing different tasks. Others followed suit over the centuries since, with different articulations and preferences.

The most famous account of the division of labor was given by the Scottish economist Adam Smith (1970). A group of people making nails, he noted, would be marginally effective if everyone in the group made nails from scratch, going through the whole process on their own in parallel. They would produce nails, to be sure, but they would also be busy with the various other kinds of activities associated with the process. Smith exemplifies these other activities as follows: blowing the bellows, tending the fire and heating the iron. Moreover, seeing as a nail consists of a head as well as a length of metal, and that the making of each requires different tools, the nail maker would have to switch back and forth between these tools during the work, expending a significant amount of time in the process.

Smith (1970) does not make this observation as a critique of contemporary methods of producing nails in particular, but rather to lay forth a more general point about the division of labor. According to Smith, if the various steps could be performed by different persons, it would have two main consequences. First, it would mean less time spent on the part of the nail maker doing things other than the direct making of nails (e.g. blowing the bellows, switching tools). Secondly, it would mean that the persons performing each task would grow proficient at those very tasks, and thus able to perform them that much quicker than someone who (to use an anachronistic term) have to multitask⁴. These same gains in efficiency, Smith maintains, hold for any kind of activity, *mutatis mutandis*: indeed, he notes that many everyday items are produced in this fashion even in his own time, and that improvements are being made to this process of specialization every day.

Here, it should be noted that Smith (1970) gestures towards both of what de Certeau (1984) calls 'strategies' and 'tactics'. Strategies, according to de Certeau, are large-scale plans realized using collective resources and scientific rationality. Tactics, conversely, are personal courses of action performed within the frameworks left behind by previous strategies. (Riding a subway train is a tactic, while building a subway line is a strategy.) Smith implies that individuals develop personal proficiency with the skills at hand, and useful tactics for being a unit of production more generally. A similar progression is made on a strategic level, where rational actors will take the division of labor into account into the planning and construction of new places of production. Over time, the knowledge and productive capacity attained in such a manner will far outpace the production methods of yore, increasing the overall wealth of nations.

The reason for bringing in de Certeau (1984) at this point is to underscore that the division of labor over time initiates a learning process on both the micro and macro level. The fact that individuals become better at doing something if they do more of it is one kind of learning, which perhaps can be conceptualized as silent or personal knowledge (Polanyi 1962). The gradual emergence of collective knowhow with regards to how manufacturing is to be planned,

⁴ To paraphrase Byung-Chul Han (2015): multitasking is a step backwards in societal development.

managed and conducted is another kind of learning. While this collective knowhow may at times manifest in individuals, it is more accurately described as an attribute of organizations and branches of practice (Säljö 2000). This is the difference between an individual becoming a philosopher, and the gradual accumulation of knowledge in the discipline of philosophy. Both are important to consider, as any conceptualization of specialized knowledge becomes disconnected from the social situations wherein it occurs lest both individual and context are acknowledged. An individual becoming a master nail maker is of limited (tactical) interest; the emergence of a field of knowledge of nail making, with its own traditions and competencies, on the other hand, tells us that something (strategic) is afoot (cf Friedel 2007).

Fast forward, we find ourselves with Durkheim (2014) and his discussion of the division of labor. He contrasts mechanical solidarity with organic solidarity. The former is a solidarity born of similarity, such as in feudal or tribal societies, where most individuals live under identical conditions and thus share what Habermas (1984) calls a lifeworld. Given the shared frames of reference produced by these shared experiences, a problem that afflicts one person is likely to be understood by others, and thus seen as something to be concerned about. Moreover, given the similar life conditions of the individuals in question, a problem for one particular individual would most likely be something potentially afflicting others as well, making it imperative to formulate communal strategies for dealing with such problems, rather than delegating it to the tactical prowess of individuals.

Organic solidarity, by contrast, evolves in societies characterized by increasingly advanced divisions of labor. Here, the shared frames of reference of earlier societies are no longer in place. Instead, lifeworlds are fragmented into specialized fields of knowledge, as per the process laid out by Smith. Economists understand the world in terms of economics, sociologists in terms of sociology, plumbers in terms of plumbing – and so on. There is no reason to assume that a problem as identified by one area of knowledge translates into concern (or even garner attention) in another. Given this fragmentation of experiences and frames of reference, solidarity must form on the basis of something else.

Durkheim (2014) locates the source of organic solidarity to a shared set of laws, norms and regulations that grow forth in order to mediate between the various legitimate claims made by different parts of society. Society coheres not by reconciling the various lifeworlds – factory workers, doctors, academics, and so on – with each other, but rather by mediating cases wherein different groups make claims with regards to the same things. Each group can continue its work in parallel, according to their specialized worldviews, and as long as the process of mediation continues along lines most groups consider reasonable, society will continue to cohere. Organic solidarity is not rooted in an immediate understanding of other individuals or their viewpoints, but through an indirect shared understanding of how society is organized, and a trust that it will continue to function that way. A baker need not understand the professional woes of an accountant in order to navigate the bureaucratic aftermath of a minor traffic accident; there are pre-printed insurance forms to expedite the process of mediation.

5.2 Specialization for everyone

Modern life is heavily characterized by an advanced division of labor. Moreover, it is characterized by highly evolved scientific specializations into very specific disciplines and sub-disciplines. Each discipline seeks to expand its knowledge about its field in general, and each sub-discipline about its specialty in particular. The general trend, both in and out of science, is towards more and more knowledge-intensive specialization. Even the mediatory functions, as Durkheim (2014) conceives them, are specialized fields of knowledge: insurance, politics, law, and so forth. At every point of their daily life, individuals have to navigate a manifold of interlocking specialized systems which all provide for some aspect of their being in society. Most of these interactions occur on the level of routine, with little thought given to how much deliberation and effort went into designing these systems. Only when things go wrong are the technical aspects of the inner workings of any one particular system made phenomenologically (and perhaps also politically) relevant. Modern life consists of many things, and each and every one of these things have a complex web of supply chains and scientific expertise as part of their coming into being and continuing to be.

Each of these specialized fields of knowledge act in accordance with their own internal logic. Both in terms of local group dynamics and – more interestingly – a well-developed,

comprehensive set of refined assumptions and practices. The vocabularies of lawyers, dentists and engineers differ from each other, but the process of specialization is similar for each field. Each field also faces problems that they seek to solve to the best of their abilities, using the tools and expertise available to them. The nature of these problems are either obvious from the outset (e.g. doctors curing diseases) or emerging from the internal logics of the systems put in place to facilitate such problem-solving efforts. A hospital is an attempt to solve the problem of curing diseases, but the logistics of running a hospital differ from the logistics of immediate hands-on medical treatments. (Selinger and Crease 2006)

In this discussion of specialization and different fields of knowledge, the specter of relativism looms. It might be prudent at this point to stress the interlocking nature of these fields, their origins in the process of division of labor, and their primarily problem-solving nature. This thesis does not make the assertion that each field of knowledge makes autonomous claims to the only possible epistemic truth, to the exclusion of all other options. Rather, the expertise that has emerged in any given field represents the collective knowledge about how to solve a particular range of problems, and can be judged by their capacity to solve (or mitigate) these very problems. At some core level, those who talk the talk also have to walk the walk.

Beck (1992) problematizes this assertion in his discussion on risk society and the prevalence of potential dangers that can only be detected through the use of specialized knowledge. As the scope of specialized personal and institutional knowledge increases, so too does the ability to predict future events – good or ill. Inherent to the notion of specialized knowledge, however, is the fact that it is concentrated to only a few social actors. From the point of view of those who are not privy to the inside knowledge, any predictions made have to be taken on faith; the tools and concepts used by the specialists are by definition unavailable to lay persons. This presents a two-fold communicative problem. First, in that the specialists have to explain matters in plain terms to non-specialists, in such a way that the danger of a particular risk is communicated with sufficient urgency. Secondly, this creates a dynamic wherein specialists are put in a position where they have to dictate policy for non-specialists, being the only ones with the proper tools for the job. This dynamic goes both in situations where the danger is real, and in situations where institutions invent “problems” to solve in order to perpetuate themselves. The difficulty

in determining whether any given situation falls into either category presents, according to Beck, a challenge to the legitimacy of expertise; readers need only think of the phenomenon of climate change denial to get at the heart of the problematic.

Another problematization of the problem-solving capacity of modern institutions is made by Arendt (1963). In her account from the trial of Adolf Eichmann, she noted that the defendant repeatedly asserted that he was only doing his job. The fact that this job consisted of organizing and optimizing the train transports to the various Nazi concentration camps made little difference to him – he was merely following orders, solving the problems as they presented themselves (or were presented) to him. Speed was ever of the essence. Arendt notes that Eichmann was a simple man, average in every way, and that the banality of evil consists of people like him routinely performing mundane tasks without the burden of undue introspection.

Bauman (1991b) carries this observation forward, and notes that the holocaust was not carried out by fanatics motivated by intense sustained feelings of righteousness, but rather by ordinary people performing ordinary jobs in a routine and everyday fashion. Eichmann was just one of many. The holocaust was not a result of extraordinary circumstances, but of ordinary people performing their assigned tasks in an orderly and unspectacular fashion. Most of these tasks were so far removed from the death of anything as to be effectively morally neutral (organizing time tables, accounting or train maintenance work are not inherently good or bad activities), but the end result nevertheless spelled the death of millions. In essence, the holocaust was the weaponization of people going to work.

What is at stake here is the very autonomy discussed in the research overview. Arendt's (1963) Eichmann did not have much in the way of autonomy, and so his biographical fate (and its intersection with history) was a coincidental conjuncture that could have unfolded any number of other ways, all equally contingent. The specialized fields of knowledge we have discussed so far, on the other hand, not only make claims to autonomy, but also of being ethical subjects in the world. The intrusion of audit culture into academia produces both institutional (Burrows 2012) and personal (Sparkes 2007) side-effects which undermine autonomous communal

action in favor of attaining heteronomous goals to their maximum measurable extent. The same tendency, writ large, is at work in other fields as well.

This discussion might seem a dramatic turn of events in a text ostensibly about playing computer games. It would be prudent at this juncture to remind readers that this thesis is first and foremost about the modern tendency of finding a variable and maximizing it through rational means. The outcome of such rational maximizing efforts, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) stress at great length, are not guaranteed to be rational (or desirable) when considered in a larger context. The accumulated result of millions of local optimizations is not a sustained global optimization. Rather, the end result is reminiscent of what Weber (1976) formulated as an iron cage: modernity as a problem-solving engine working at full capacity, rationally moving ever closer to the brink through force of sheer momentum. The issue is not that the means of rational means are not employed, and that we simply need to find the last bastions of irrationality in order to finally solve the world once and for all; the issue is that we move asymptotically towards already having done it, seemingly without the situation improving.

Boltanski (2011) notes that critical sociology engaging in contemporary debates finds itself in something of a double bind. On the one hand, the labors of critical sociologists have to be relevant to the lived experiences of those partaking in or being affected by these debates (lest we end up with unread academic articles that do not, in fact, engage in the discussion). On the other hand, in order to remain sociological, these very same critical efforts have to situate both the problem and themselves in the wider context of sociological thought, thus bringing to bear a non-trivial amount of domain-specific historical assumptions that may or may not be relevant to the lived experience of those whom the debate ostensibly concerns. The solution to this dilemma is not to choose either-or, but rather (as Bauman 1991a characterizes it) to embrace the ambivalence and power through it.

Seen in this light, audit culture takes on the form of a mediator, as per Durkheim (2014). Because different areas of expertise are by definition the domains of experts, it becomes increasingly difficult for lay persons to evaluate the veracity of any particular application of expert knowledge. Having a regulatory body whose main function to perform just such

evaluations becomes a safeguard to ensure that everything is done by the book. Whether it be inspectors ensuring that the local diner follows health and safety procedures when preparing meals, or inspectors performing checks on the various steps of a nuclear reactor, there is a certain sense of security following from the fact that these kinds of investigations take place. It reduces uncertainty – if the experts have written a report stating that all metrics are within acceptable levels, then things are probably safe.

However, it does not remove uncertainty; it merely displaces it one step further up the chain of specialization. A critical sociologist, following Boltanski (2011), would have to pose the question of who watches the watchmen, and subsequently ask whether the metrics serve the purpose they claim to serve. Both as an internal exercise – taking fellow sociologists to task with regards to their practice – and as an external analysis of other practices. There are different ways of performing the metrics, ranging from having them imposed by others (Hindess 1998, Strathern 1997), to merely following orders (Arendt 1963), to having them reflect the autonomous values and priorities of your field of knowledge (Sloterdijk 1987). The difference is, to use an understatement, not subtle.

Thus, I suspect both speedrunners and sociologists alike might find themselves equally ill at ease with the presentation so far. Speedrunners might not see themselves as a recent iteration of a long-going trend inherent to modernity, and contest this characterization on the grounds of it not fitting with their lived experience. Sociologists, on the other hand, might wonder when we will actually get to the topic of speedrunning. Having thus critically annoyed everyone involved, it is time to turn to the concept of rationality.

5.3 Rationality and where to situate it

Weber distinguishes between four ideal types of rationality (or, more specifically, reasons for doing things). These are: instrumental, value-oriented, traditional and affectual. Instrumental rationality is displayed by those who adapt their actions with regard to the task at hand, available means, and potential secondary effects, so as to best achieve a stated goal. Value-oriented rationality is displayed in actions where the main purpose is not to achieve some effect, but to uphold some value or virtue (e.g. giving to charity, attending church, upholding a

principle, or adding aesthetic touches). Doing something on the basis of tradition simply means continuing to do something out of habit, be it a personal or communal habit. Lastly, actions conducted for reasons affectual are just that – emotional responses to situations.

As is his wont, Weber notes that actual actions in the world seldom conform wholly to either of these ideal types. Rather, they tend to display traits from two or three different kinds at once. The point of ideal types is to have a point of comparison when analyzing a specific case, so as to be able to gain insight in the process of determining whether a course of action has this or that rationale. Heavily routinized interactions might be both rooted in tradition and a result of instrumental rationality; noting this state of things tells us something about the situation we might not have considered prior to making the analysis.⁵

Habermas (1987) critiques Weber's account of rationality on a very specific point, and that is exactly where rationality is situated. Weber, as indicated above, ends up conceiving something of a deadlock – an iron cage where individual freedom is curtailed by the all-pervasive rational nature of society. Habermas points out that Weber, in a very subtle manner, shifts from thinking of rationality as something individuals do to something institutions do, without ever indicating or realizing that this shift has taken place. Thus, the deadlock is partially a result of conceptual unclarity; the rationality of institutions grammatically supersedes the rationality of individuals, leaving the latter without recourse to improve their situation. Habermas points out that once this unclarity has been resolved, it becomes possible to differentiate between institutional and individual rationalities, and to analyze the interactions between the two in a more productive manner.

In a sense, this returns us to de Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategies and tactics, as discussed above. Moreover, it allows us to discuss institutional activities as belonging to either of these categories; institutions are not strategic by default, and are as likely to act tactically as anyone else. This might seem a subtle point, but as Habermas (1987) showed, subtle

⁵ Ordering a meal at a fast food restaurant has these characteristics: on the one hand, it is so heavily routinized that it can be performed even in contexts without a mutual language. On the other hand, the scripts given to the employees are designed to encourage certain kinds of interactions and speed up processing. It is interesting to note that Habermas (1984) defines 'discourse' as a situation where the outcome of the exchange is uncertain, and that many everyday interactions do not fall into this category.

distinctions might have dramatic consequences. For one, we are able to differentiate between Eichmann's tactical use of instrumental rationality and the strategic application of value-oriented rationality of his superiors. While we shall not dwell on this particular historical example further than we already have, the implications are clear: being able to situate different rationalities at different levels (and in different agents) leads to a much more useful discussion than merely noting that rationality as an absolute unit is at play. We are able to, as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) puts it, revisit the iron cage.

In terms of this thesis, I situate rationality in what Wenger (1998) calls communities of practice. These communities may be formalized in terms of institutions, but may also be loosely organized around a particular activity. The defining characteristic of a community of practice is, as you might imagine, the practice in question, and the various activities that surround it. This harkens back to the discussion of specialization above (plumbers knowing plumbing, environmental sociologists knowing environmental sociology, etc), although Wenger is primarily concerned with particular local groups engaged in particular activities. A community of practice is, above all things, situated in material reality at a particular time and place. The local bridge club is a community of practice, as is a local law firm or university department.

The reason for invoking Wenger (1998) is primarily to operationalize Habermas' (1987) clarification on rationality. Being less confused as to where rationality is situated allows for clearer analysis, to be sure, but we need a middle ground between a single individual and an entire field of specialized knowledge ("system" in Habermasian terminology). Both because it is difficult to analyze the rationales of the entirety of a field of knowledge, and because individual actions tend to take place within local contexts. Moreover, the materiality stressed by Wenger gives way for an important methodological implication: we can analyze communities by looking at the various physical remnants they leave behind, in form of writing, videos and other artifacts. Situating the rational subject solves the methodological problem of finding out where to look for it.

6. Method

Methodologically, we are faced with the question of how to go about studying the community of speedrunners and their application of instrumental rationality. Given that rationality is something of a slippery concept, it needs to be operationalized in some way, so as to be rendered visible. The same goes for the word community. Where do these things manifest themselves?

Wenger (1998) writes that communities of practice leave physical remains of their activities, both intentional and accidental. This encompasses everything from the construction of building complexes dedicated to the practice in question, to the more ephemeral by-products such as marketing and documentation. These remains tell stories of what happened within the community, and what will continue to happen in the cases when they are still around. While Wenger heavily implies that participatory observation is always the best option for gathering information, analyzing these physical and discursive remains is nevertheless still a useful approach.

In the context of this study, the methodologically relevant remnants consist of YouTube videos and online documentation. Of particular interest are videos from the public GDQ (Games Done Quick) charity events, where speedrunners gather to show off new techniques, explain the craft to a general audience, and in general present the state of the art. Seeing as these videos contain both the activity itself and in-context explanations for why the runners do what they do, these videos will provide insight into both the theory and practice of speedrunning. Alongside studying these videos, various online documents (community guidelines, wiki entries, technical specifications etc) that the community uses for general reference will be looked at.

This approach has the merit of getting at both theory and practice at the same time. A potential drawback, as mentioned above, is that the empirical data is structured in emic terms, and thus have to be treated as such. That is to say, the actors and documents present their thoughts with the explicit aim of fulfilling the speedrunning goal of going fast, rather than in terms of sociological theory. There is a need to translate the data into etic terms, and to draw any conclusions only after this translation process has been completed. (Patton 2002)

An astute reader will most likely wonder why I did not opt for interviewing speedrunners as a means to overcome the aforementioned methodological drawbacks. I maintain that looking at these sources is sufficient for the purpose at hand, and that such interviews in any case would require performing these steps beforehand as part of the process of due diligence. It can not be understated just how explicit the GDQ showcases are in terms of ways and means. Interviews would provide me with more information than I strictly speaking need, given that this is not a study of biographical details or community lore.

In order to structure my viewing, I will follow Weber (1983) and create an ideal type. This ideal type is that of the ordinary player, who plays the game in a straightforward, intuitive linear fashion from start to finish, with a modicum of skill and without too much strategizing. This in order to create a point of comparison with the often counterintuitive techniques applied during runs; as Weber notes, very few actual persons actually act in the ways described in his ideal types, but useful information can nevertheless be gleaned by comparing actual courses of action with the conceptual ideal. As Becker (1998) wrote of his favorite rhetorical trope, the null hypothesis: it gives you an excuse to say that which would otherwise go with considerably more saying.

6.1 An ideal type of gamer

As indicated above, an ideal type is a theoretical characterization of something of sociological relevance that hones in on one or several attributes and describes them with some measure of specificity. When it comes to creating an ideal type of gamer, I will describe the following attributes: intent, rule-boundedness and rewards.

Our hypothetical average gamer approaches the game with an intent internal to the activity. More accurately, the intention is not governed by some external factor or demand that determines or ordains this activity for some reason. They seek out the game to *play*, in Huizinga's (1949) sense of the word: as an activity in and for itself, rather than in pursuit of something else. In other words, it is an activity characterized by being unforced and voluntary.

Secondly, our hypothetical average gamer approaches the game with an implicit acceptance of its rules and conventions. If there is a linear progression between beginning and end, this is the

path they will follow. If there is a standard way of overcoming the obstacles along the way, this is the way they will be overcome. In short, if there is a set of rules and expectations put in place, then these will be followed, the assumption being that we are dealing with the opposite of what Taylor (2006) calls a “power player”.

Lastly, our hypothetical average gamer seeks a narrow set of rewards from the activity of playing. These rewards can range from a sense of accomplishment (for having completed a difficult challenge), to a sense of narrative progression (in discovering how a storyline unfolds), to a sense of mastery (“getting good” at a game), to simply having fun (as per Csikszentmihályi 1990).

Again, this presentation of an ideal type – an ideal typical case, as it were – is not meant to be a normative description of actual players existing in the real world. The point of setting up this imaginary ordinary player is to give us a point of departure from which to analyze the speedrunners’ practices and activities. In other words, this is an exercise in clarifying our assumptions. Actually existing persons play games with a myriad of motivations, strategies and variations, the multitudes of which are impossible to encapsulate in a short general summary. However, with this analytical baseline established, we can move on to what the speedrunners are up to.

6.2 Ethical considerations

Seeing as the empirical material consists of videos uploaded by the speedrunning community for a general audience, there ought to be very few ethical concerns with regards to its use. The same goes for the technical documentation; barring an eventual sense of accomplishment for compiling a large amount of very specific information into an accessible database, very little of a personal nature is found therein.

6.3 Sample

This study looks at three particular games: *Diablo 2*, *Prey* (2017)⁶ and the *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. These were chosen on the basis of requiring different speedrunning techniques. While the sample is by no means all-encompassing – every game, like every book, is

⁶ Not to be confused with *Prey* (2006).

its own microcosm of internal logics and references – the selection is varied enough to hint at the strategies and tactics at play. Diablo 2 was chosen for its linear nature and the reliance on randomness in the runs associated with it. Prey was chosen due to the sheer speed at which it can be completed, and the literally world-breaking glitches used within the runs. Ocarina of Time was chosen due to the immensely complex nature of the glitches involved, and due to the sheer scope and size of a 100% run. Taken together, these games constitute a small but representative sample of speedrunning as an activity. The particular YouTube videos were chosen by virtue of being the latest iterations showcased at GDQ.

6.4 Why speedrunning?

An astute reader might ask – why choose speedrunning as the specific focus of this thesis? Why not center some other activity or community that is also situated on the same trajectory, such as those enumerated in the introduction? To this, I say that such investigations would indeed provide useful information, which would quite possibly be more immediately relevant to those particular activities and/or communities. The reasons for centering speedrunning in this particular thesis are threefold. First, speedrunning is at first glance an almost paradigmatic illustration of Weber’s ideal type instrumental rationality; there is a variable and an explicit aim to maximize it by any and all available means. Second, while the tendency to find a variable to maximize is present in other communities (e.g. as a result of audit culture), these communities may or may not be willing to discuss their variable-maximizing efforts as openly or explicitly as the speedrunning community, which might pose methodological or political problems⁷. Third, there is admittedly a certain novelty value to applying sociological theory to emerging forms of social activity.

⁷ As Patton (2002) makes a point of mentioning, not every social context is unequivocally positive to the prospect of letting loose inquisitive social scientists on their premises. The question of access is at times as much a matter of political negotiation as it is of asking permission – especially with regards to studies that literally question the motives of the research subjects.

7. Analysis

This chapter will analyze three games and the tactics runners employ in relation to them. It will then synthesize the findings into a more general understanding of the kinds of rationalities at play with regards to these (and other) activities.

7.1 Diablo 2 – harnessing randomness for fun and profit

Diablo 2 is a computer game developed by Blizzard North and published by Blizzard Entertainment in the year 2000, with an accompanying expansion released in 2001. It is a roleplaying game with different playable classes, who differ somewhat in gameplay. It is commonly described as a hack and slash game, due to the hordes of monsters the player characters navigates through (primarily with the verbs hack and slags) in their journey from starting a new game to completion. Along the way, the player encounters many places, characters and quests, each with their own (mostly implied) backstories and lore.

Our imaginary ideal player would play through the game in a cyclical fashion. Upon venturing out into the semi-randomly generated world, the player will encounter enemies. When encountering enemies, the player will engage in battle until running out of enemies, then moving on to the next group of opponents, and so on. Defeated enemies will occasionally drop items (weapons, armor, potions, gold, etc), which can be picked up and used. Defeating enemies will also generate experience points, which can be used to gain new combat abilities. Every once in a while, players will return to town to engage in commerce (e.g. selling and buying of items) and talking to townsfolk (in order to progress quests or gain information about the world). The player will then venture out in the world again, continuing to do battle and complete quests; this cycle continues until the final quest. The cycle then repeats on two substantially more challenging difficulty levels: nightmare and hell.

Despite being cyclical, this type of play is rather straightforward. At any given point in time, the next goal is dictated by circumstance. A quest says to go someplace, and thus there the player goes. Upon arriving, the player runs out of healing potions, and thus returns to town to acquire more. When buying potions, the player discovers that they are out of money, and thus the next goal becomes to slay more enemies for more items to sell. This process continues throughout,

informing every moment with a situational objective; if we were to oversimplify, we could say the game consists of overcoming these recurring obstacles, one cycle at a time.

The runner MrLlamaSC (2017) breaks with this cycle by – no pun intended – running past enemies, only ever engaging them to gather sufficient experience points to acquire particular skills or items, when the plot dictates it, or (as is at times the case) when it is not physically possible to run past them). Rather than engaging with the immediate situation as it presents itself, the runner beelines towards a particular destination, differing depending on whether it is a normal run or a hell run. In normal runs, runners beeline to the Forgotten Tower; in hell runs, where record times lie in the range of half a dozen hours or more, the path goes through the Den of Evil first. The reasoning behind this difference is that the extra skill point gained from clearing the Den of Evil is worth more in the longer term than the few minutes saved; there is also sufficient RNG in the map generation that these minutes are likely to be lost anyway by sheer force of mathematical averages. Additionally, completing the quest associated with the Den of Evil allows the player to “respec” their character (i.e. reallocate their accumulated skill points), thus allowing for different builds during the various difficulty levels.

RNG is both an acronym and a metonymy. As an acronym, it stands for Random Number Generator, which is a common feature of games and other computer programs where randomness is called for (e.g. a dice roll). As a metonymy, it stands for any situation wherein the outcome is not guaranteed and can not be accurately predicted beyond the level of probability. To say that something is RNG means that it may or may not happen, and that given enough iterations it will probably happen, but that it is still undecided whether or not it will happen in this particular instance. The opposite of something being RNG is that it is guaranteed, either by default or as a result of previous actions.

In the case of speedrunning Diablo 2, the notion of RNG takes the most direct form in the Forgotten Tower. At the bottom level⁸, there is a boss monster that is guaranteed to drop a

⁸ It is something of a running joke in this game that towers have basements larger and wider than they ever had height or surface area. Thus, the Forgotten Tower is an unremarkable ruined building that marks the presence of an extensive system of subterranean architecture. To paraphrase an in-game character with regards to a different tower: “why did they build a tower in order to imprison someone underground? That’s not how towers work.”

certain number of items upon being slain. Only the number of items is guaranteed, but the exact nature of these items is determined by RNG. Thus, runners play through this section several times, in order to up the probability that particular items are randomly generated, either in one go or accumulated over several attempts. These items are then used down the line to forge other powerful items that allows the player character to run and cast spells faster.

The RNG is also used to “shop” for items with particular modifiers. Every time a player leaves and reenters a town, the items for sale by the various merchants are randomly generated. In runs that require or are aided by particular items (e.g. a staff of teleportation), runners take time to go through the list of items for sale until the desired item appears. This might take dozens of attempts, each with the same probability of success as the last one; as the old adage goes, runners are attempting the same thing over and over again expecting different results.

The same principle, albeit with a higher success rate, is applied whenever a runner encounters a group of monsters that can not be easily run past or defeated. The kinds of enemies that are spawned in specific locations is randomly generated upon the start of a particular play session. By exiting the current play session and starting a new one, a new group of enemies (which is likely easier to run past or defeat) is generated in place of the old one. Exiting and restarting a game session also teleports the character back to town, which can be used to cut down on travel time.

One last example of RNG pertains to the individual knowledge of the specific runner in question. As we alluded to earlier, maps are randomly generated for each character, in such a way that no two playthroughs are identical. There are, however, patterns in the ways in which the maps are generated, which runners can recognize through familiarity and personal experience. Some of these patterns work through process of elimination (e.g. the exit to the next area can only be in three positions, so if it is not in the first spot there are only two places it can be), while others are more subtle and work on the level of intuition. The patterns are contingent rather than arbitrary, and can be learnt through experience, even though the exact mathematics behind them is not fully known.

A final note is the use of an easter egg for tactical purposes. By going through a series of improbable and counterintuitive steps, a player can unlock a secret cow level, filled with (as the name suggests) a large number of enemy cows⁹. Runners that have been slightly too successful at running past enemies and need to stock up on experience points, can enter this secret cow level to level up until they are strong enough to continue the run. This can be repeated as many times as deemed necessary.

7.2 Prey (2017) – “Walls are more like guidelines than actual rules”

Prey is a first person shooter developed by Arkane Studios and published by Bethesda Softworks in 2017. The game has elements of being a survival horror, and gameplay consists of exploring a space station which becomes more alien-infested as the story progresses.

Our imaginary ideal player is likely to follow along the aforementioned story in a linear fashion, listening to the voices telling them where to go and following the mission prompts as they show up on the screen. At any given point there is always an objective marker (often several) telling the player to go to a specific location to perform a certain action, which will in some way progress the story or reveal more information about the narrative world. While there is some variety in how a player might go about fulfilling these mission objectives, and just how much time they might spend exploring the world and the characters therein, the ultimate goal is to complete the sequence of story missions until there is no more story left. An analogy would be that a player experiences the game akin to a movie, albeit with more time to explore the scenery and more agency: as a sequence of unfolding events presented in an intended order.

The runner DrTChops (2018) does something unexpected at the beginning of the game. Rather than following the initial mission prompt – to suit up and get ready to go to work – he picks up a chair and places it atop the bathroom door. This allows the runner to jump atop the chair in order to glitch through the ceiling, ending up on the floor above, bypassing a portion of the story and saving a substantial amount of time. After moving through a series of rooms, the

⁹ Speaking of running jokes: rumor had it that there was a cow level in the original Diablo. The rumor persisted despite no one ever finding this level, and despite repeated attempts from Blizzard to convey that there was in fact no cow level. The most prominent of such attempts being a cheat code in the 1998 game Starcraft, consisting of the phrase “There is no cow level”.

runner then glitches into a wall in order to use it as a jumping-off point to trigger a bypass of another story segment. A short while later, the runner picks up a weapon that attaches solid matter to walls, allowing for additional sequence breaks as with the chair above.

In this introductory minute, the runner has introduced the two concepts of “sequence breaking” and being “out of bounds”. Sequence breaking means doing things out of order (e.g. jumping straight from x to z when the intended order is x through y to z). Being out of bounds means leaving the area designed for play, and so moving “outside” the game. The exact nature of these two concepts differ from game to game, where some games simply crash upon encountering either, while others allow for unexpected events to take place.

Prey, in particular, handles being out of bounds in a consistent way. The area that is in bounds is still rendered as it is intended to be, but the runner is able to move above it by walking on top of the walls, effectively bypassing many of the story beats and obstacles meant to introduce players to the narrative. The runner is also able to move vertically across the map, essentially falling past large portions of the game. The runner uses this vertical mobility to access story objects that trigger late game missions, and the aforementioned horizontal affordances to navigate through the map in order to reach the objectives of these missions with speed. To return to the analogy of this game as a movie: of the expected runtime of twelve to twenty hours, the runner only needs twelve minutes. Through sequence breaking and movement out of bounds, most of the story elements of the game are bypassed in their entirety.

Sequence breaks work due to the reasonable expectation that once a player achieves a certain goal or arrives at a certain place, they have taken all the steps necessary to get to that point. There is no reason not to assume this, and implementing a check to control for whether this assumption is true would introduce more potential bugs than it would solve. Thus, there is an ever-present possibility of ludonarratively dissonant moments where the in-game characters say “ah, yes, you did what I asked, good, let’s proceed”, wherein the player character only heard of these things just now.

7.3 The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of time – “The bottle is an incredibly powerful item”

Ocarina of Time is an action-adventure game developed and published by Nintendo for the Nintendo 64 in 1998. The game has elements of platforming, puzzle solving and open world exploration, following the adventures of Link as he traverses the world in his attempt to rescue the titular princess Zelda.

As with the previous two games of this analysis, our imaginary ideal player is likely to follow the story in a linear fashion, up until the point where the game branches out and allows multiple paths forward. As Link gains new abilities, it becomes possible to solve new puzzles (or old puzzles encountered along the way), meaning that the range of possible paths forward increase as time progresses. As more puzzles are solved and more abilities are unlocked, more of the story unfolds, giving the player more information about the fictional world and (as the case might be) more of a push to go to previously unexplored or unsolved areas of the game.

The runner ZFG (2018) hooks onto this last point by describing one of the main challenges of 100% runs of this game: pathing. Seeing as there are so many places to go, so many things to do and so many things to collect, each of which take a certain amount of time to do and get to, plotting an optimal course through it all becomes something of a project in and of itself. The preferred order has changed over time, as new glitches have been found opening up new routes, and as experimenting have shown that going a particular route rather than another confers a speed advantage. There is no established fixed fastest route, and it is interesting to note that this is the case for a twenty year old game.

Another challenge of 100% runs is the issue of sourcing. It is possible to use glitches to gain access to items before they are supposed to appear in the game, which technically means that a player can glitch themselves items until they have acquired all of them. For a while, these glitches were banned from 100% runs, seeing as this was not in the spirit of the category. This changed, however, by imposing a requirement to acquire items from the source; even if the player only ever got to these sources through the use of items gained from exploiting these glitches, it still counted towards the run. ZFG (2018) notes that the runners simply decided to adopt this rule change, stating that no one objected to it.

The glitch used to gain access to items is worthy of discussion by feat of its sheer complexity. By at specific times changing which object is in a particular part of the interface into the bottle, players can write new information into the game's memory, causing it to think that the player has certain items in their inventory. In effect, this allows for the players with knowledge of how this exploit works to summon any item at will, whether it be for convenience or for going fast. The *ZeldaSpeedRuns* wiki (n.d.) has a table for which memory addresses correspond to which items, and a more technical explanation for how to perform this counterintuitive feat of duplication.

Being thus able to create items out of thin air confers new challenges to the task of finding the optimal path through the game. It changes the equation from merely performing things in a certain order and using the increased set of abilities gained to do subsequent tasks, to a more complex calculation of figuring out if summoning a particular item at a particular time will allow for faster traversal of areas which would normally be off limits, but are now very much within reach, and if the abilities gained from these areas can be retroactively useful. It is, to wit, the traveling salesman problem, albeit with sequence breaking.

There are, of course, any number of minor glitches and tactics used by runners, and listing them all is a task outside the scope of this essay. Just to mention a few: runners tend to play with the language settings set to Japanese, due to this being slightly faster in terms of skipping dialogue. In a similar vein, by strategically dying just before a cutscene is about to be played, a runner can accomplish the double time save of skipping the cinematic and teleporting to a more convenient place to be (whilst still retaining items and story progression). By jumping and striking at walls in a precise manner, runners can cause the game to propel the player character backwards at great speed. Finally, rather than walking forward in an intuitive manner, runners either jump around or move backwards¹⁰, whichever is fastest in a particular situation.

¹⁰ Moving backwards in computer games is a very useful but counterintuitive tactic. At times, the game is simply coded in such a way that backwards movement is faster than its forward-facing counterpart. At other times, it can be used to avoid putting things in the field of vision, which can reduce performance drops in graphical-intense areas or, on occasion, avoid loading triggers which activate upon beholding certain items or features. In either case, it is a reminder that computer games consist of code which represents things visually on screens.

7.4 Synthesis

The community of speedrunners seems to be characterized by a peculiar duality of rationalities, in Weber's terms. On the one hand, their stated goal is to complete computer games as fast as possible, using all available means as efficiently as can be; seemingly, the epitome of instrumental rationality. On the other hand, there is no immediate tangible problem solved by being the fastest at speedrunning, and the whole endeavor is akin to a sport in cherishing the activity for its own sake and for its aesthetic properties; value-oriented rationality oozes from every pore. Yet the attempt to utilize instrumental rationality to the fullest extent possible has strange repercussions for the aesthetic sensibilities with regards to the medium of computer games as a whole. It deconstructs and reduces any given game to a set of mechanics, routes, bottlenecks and win conditions. In the name of aesthetics, what is traditionally seen as the aesthetic part of a game is shunted aside and treated as an inconvenient necessity. This is both a contradiction and an inevitable outcome; it is the expression of an autonomous set of communal values.

The different games highlight different tactics (de Certeau 1984) used at different times. The RNG manipulation from Diablo 2 shows that the focus has shifted from optimizing the cycle of combat-looting-shopping to a more long-term plan of action. This is underscored by the implicit and explicit knowledge runners have of the game, both in terms of intuiting where the exit of a particular map is to what weaknesses different bosses have. Actions are not undertaken to overcome local obstacles, but rather as steps towards attaining the bigger goal of going fast. This is particularly true of hell runs, where knowing how and when to respect is an integral part of the adapting to new circumstances imposed by the heightened levels of difficulty.

Prey – the little we saw of it – is an almost prototypical speedrunning game. There are vast quantities of game that are simply bypassed or ignored, and most of the gameplay takes place out of bounds, where very different considerations take precedence over what at a casual glance might be assumed to be designed or intended. The act of performing the metrics has become so efficient that the practice has morphed into something completely unrecognizable to those not cognizant of what is at play.

The elaborate planning and routing of *Ocarina of Time*, lastly, highlights the knowledge-intensive nature of the speedrunning endeavor. Every nook and cranny of the game are known, as is the time it takes to traverse them. On a superficial level, having the player character constantly moving backwards or intentionally dying at strategic junctures is strange enough in and of itself; on a deeper level, the mindset required to internalize and put into action the accumulated body of knowledge with regards to glitches, routes and experimental inventory manipulation is different enough from casual gameplay as to be a different category of activity altogether.

A defining characteristic of Weber's ideal types of rationality is that they are not bound to any substantive defined content. As ideal – almost platonic – forms, they are informed by the context within which they find themselves, and the actors performing meaningful actions within these contexts. By situating rationality in the community, as per Wenger (1998) we can overcome the contradiction inherent in Weberian rationality pointed out by Habermas (1987). There is an aesthetic, value-oriented rationality employed by what I have thus far referred to as the ideal type of ordinary gamers, and another value-oriented rationality employed by speedrunners. Neither of these are wrong or – worse – irrational, but they have to be understood as different methods of attaining the same type of goal defined by the same type of rationality. The fact that these approaches have a tendency to be mutually contradictory when compared across communities does not take away from their rationality – it merely underscores the situational nature of rationality as a concept.

More importantly, this allows us to sidestep the trap of relativism. There is not one kind of rationality in one community, and another in another, where the epistemological rules of the universe are different and incommensurable. Nor is there a single defined rational course of action, where all other alternatives are irrational. Rather, we have a framework from which we can refer to different practices with commensurate results; different communities try to attain the same goals, albeit with different means. By bringing this to light, we have gained useful information with regards to the object of our study: the speedrunner's relentless application of instrumental rationality does not undermine the gains they make in terms of aesthetics, but rather constitute it. Completing a twenty hour game in seven minutes is a beautiful thing, as is

the realization of an optimal pathing solution in Ocarina of Time or the improbable conjecture of unlikely events of a Diablo 2 run where everything randomly goes as planned. The fact that this beauty may or may not be scrutable from an uninitiated perspective is beside the point.

This emphasis on aesthetics also underscores the autonomy of the speedrunning community. Beauty is not something that can be mandated or decreed, but rather something that emerges as a property through sustained social practice. A speedrunner cannot convey why finding a new and faster way to go about things is an unequivocal good, nor outline the logical (to wit, rational) steps necessary to arrive at such a conclusion. But within the speedrunning community, they do not have to; these are the values they have freely chosen to adopt, in the interplay between measured rationalities and rational measures.

8. Discussion

As we saw in the theory chapter, the process of an ever increasing division of labor brought with it the formation of a multitude of specialized fields of knowledge, which may or may not be mutually intelligible. As we saw in the research overview, the autonomy of these fields is not guaranteed, and is subject to political intervention (primarily discussed in the form of audits). The degree to which a field is autonomous or heteronomous is an empirical question, whose answer differs across contexts and circumstances. Audit culture is an attempt to impose metrics which, by constraining and shaping the practices of the institutions measures, curtail the autonomy of these same institutions by making them commensurable (Strathern 1997). A measurement, once made, is comparable to other measurements made previously or thereafter.

In one sense, these measurements can be a check and balance on the different fields of knowledge, a way to ensure that they are still institutionally sound and perform the tasks they claim to perform; the imposed metrics accomplish the mediatory function as described by Durkheim (2014). In another sense, the imposed metrics can be a curtailment of autonomy and a redirection of efforts towards maximizing the measured variable. In academia, this takes the form of publishing a certain number of mandated articles per cycle (if only, as Clarke and Knights [2015] hint at, to get the bureaucracy off their backs, so the real work can commence),

or in ranking universities against each other (Burrows 2012; Shore 2008), nudging academic performance in a decisively competitive (rather than collaborative) direction. The same tendency is seen in other areas as well, *mutatis mutandis* (Shore and Wright 2015).

The case of speedrunning demonstrates what happens when performing the metrics is taken to an extreme. The entire character of gameplay takes on new dimensions, new considerations and a new set of assumptions. The aesthetic sensibilities of ordinary players are not shared by speedrunners, and vice versa; these are two very different ways of approaching the same object. Ironically, academics – who are ostensibly trained to become independent subjects capable of autonomous judgment and evaluation of the contemporary state of things and their role in it (Hoodkinson 2008) – fall victim to audit culture as often as anyone else (Sparkes 2007), thus ending up performing the metrics in a manner that can only be labeled heteronomous. Speedrunners, on the other hand, manage to claim the metric and turn it into their own – it is in fact the very core of their community, their reason for being. In this way, speedrunners are able to retain their autonomy, despite being under constant scrutiny and pressure to perform.

The lesson to take home from this is not that the speedrunners have the right idea, in that we as academics should abandon all hope and embrace the metric. Rather, it serves as an ideal type against which to compare and contrast our theory and practice. It is possible to perform the metric to the exclusion of all other things, thus accomplishing the academic equivalent of finishing a twenty hour game in seven minutes. It is also possible to insist that something will be lost by adopting such a methodology, and that there is an inherent value in taking the slower, more comprehensive route. Sometimes, knowing how the former can be performed can save time and generate useful insight into the various things we take for granted (walls are, after all, very substantial guidelines [Keenoy 2005]); at other times, knowing when the latter is appropriate leads to approaching the long haul with better preparation and readiness. The essence of autonomy is to not automatically choosing the one or the other, but to be able to make up your own damn mind about what to do and how to go about it – and why.

The humanities, in particular, are at the center of this problematic. On the one hand, they are being asked to justify themselves according to metrics that are very far removed from the autonomous values they hold and educate; there is a very clear gap between long-held values and institutional demands. On the other hand, those departments that manage to secure funding with reference to the useful skills gained by delving deep into our shared history – do so only by in an ever so gradual way renouncing these long-held values so as to approach the metric. In an era of declining funding, accepting heteronomy might be the only way to remain within the walls of academia. Again, the lesson is not to automatically go for either maximum autonomy or maximum heteronomy, but to think through the situation and face the fact that there is a choice to be made. Moreover, it is not clear whether performing the metrics or asserting the traditional values inherent to the humanities is the right course of action; ‘right’ and ‘rational’ are not necessarily synonymous.

Seen more generally, there is an abundance of societal contexts where systems are put in place that can – *mutatis mutandis* – be speedran. Take for instance the implementation of digital systems for selling train tickets, with different kinds of discounts for different routes and destinations. Someone motivated by enough interest (or budget constraints) can experiment with these systems to find edge cases where buying a discount ticket for a route that is longer than the intended itinerary is cheaper than buying the standard ticket outright. By mapping the edge cases of the system, an enthusiastic and/or frugal train traveler can game the system by buying long-distance tickets on the cheap for their short distance sojourns. An intuitive analysis of the situation would be that these persons are in some way cheating the system, and should be punished somehow. Those who do not conform to the ideal type average user are seen to cause havoc, and it is seen as necessary to put in place strategies to rein in these renegade tactics.

A more nuanced analysis – such as the one conducted in this essay – would reveal that these kinds of behaviors are inherent to societies characterized by high levels of division of labor. For any given system, there are those who possess expert knowledge in how to use them for unintended purposes. Figuring out how to reduce a twenty hour game to a mere seven minutes of playtime, or how buying a ticket for a train ride three times longer than the one intended

somehow ends up being cheaper than a standard ticket, are not extreme cases of deviant behavior; they are rational implementations of actually existing systems using the rules inherent to these systems. What differs is not rationality, but the ends to which it is used. In the case of the unexpectedly cheap train tickets, instituting a policy which insists that individuals do not act rationally is bound to end up in strange places, such as increasing personnel costs as inspectors are hired to ensure that everyone boarded where their tickets said they ought. Passengers would have to be audited, subtly transforming the act of riding public transit into a bureaucratic process where documentation has to be at the ready and properly formatted.

Another example is speed limits on car traffic. The purpose of a speed limit is not to ensure that everyone adheres to it with the utmost strictness, but to regulate the average speed in a given area. As long as most drivers adhere to the limits, the results align with reasonable expectations: fast on highways, slow in urban areas. Every once in a while, someone gets a ticket for speeding, albeit more as a reminder than as inevitability. The speed limits have their intended effect, where drivers and pedestrians both know how to navigate everyday traffic situations; they introduce a measure of predictability to what might otherwise be a fast-paced free-for-all.

Imagine, then, an omnipresent system of some sort that automatically detects and tickets drivers who drive too fast, albeit if only for the briefest of moments. It would, to be sure, perform the metric of ensuring that everyone adheres to the speed limits; those who do not adhere are reminded with acute precision of why they should do so from now on. It would also – and here is the key point of this entire thesis – shift focus from getting from point A to point B, to making sure that the velocity at all points in time are within the specified limits. Drivers would pay more attention to how fast they are going than to what is going on around them, and they would – as counterintuitive as it might sound – be perfectly rational in doing so. In performing the metric, as imposed from without, the previously automatic virtues of keeping track of the ebbs and flows (Csikszentmihályi 1990) of traffic become things that no longer go without saying. Strategies for ensuring that the metrics are performed translate into tactics which perform less than they used to.

Where does this leave us in terms of resisting the iron cage of modernity? If measured on a scale of clear answers and unequivocal advice per page, this thesis ranks very low indeed. If measured as a step in the direction of resisting – an ever so minor contribution to the collective knowledge of humanity – then I am going to go ahead and claim, with qualitative modesty, that it is definitely *something*.

9. Conclusion

Weber (1983) defines rationality as the reasons humans have for doing things, and draws particular attention to the difference between the ideal types of instrumental rationality and value-oriented rationality. The former pertains to means of getting things done as fast as efficiently as possible, while the latter pertains to ends in and of themselves (e.g. aesthetics). Habermas (1987) points out that Weber's definition suffers from a subtle flaw, in that it does not differentiate between individual and institutional rationality, and thus end up undermining the former whilst overemphasizing the latter. It is thus necessary to situate rationality in a context between individual and institution; this thesis used Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice to that end.

The speedrunning community manages to assert an autonomous set of values through the rigorous application of instrumental rationality. This has the semi-paradoxical result of making the value-oriented rationality of the community a function of the application of instrumental rationality; means become ends, and ends are also means. The act of deconstructing a game so as to be able to finish it with the utmost velocity, while incomprehensible when seen from the outside, becomes an aesthetic act when seen from the inside. The seeming collapse of Weber's different rationalities into each other gives rise to an internal logic which, if thought through, reinscribes the ideal types with the autonomous values of the community. The imperative "gotta go fast" becomes not only an instrumental advice, but an aesthetic virtue; it is at once both a measured rationality and a rational measure.

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