

Running with the Dead: Speedruns and Generative Rupture in *Left for Dead 1* and *2*

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speedrunning, emergent narrative, flow, time-image

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we make a case for the distinct narrative conditions that arise when ‘speedrunning’ the zombie narrative in Valve Corporation’s cooperative first-person shooter games *Left 4 Dead* (2008) and *Left 4 Dead 2* (2009). James Newman writes that as the name implies, “the practice of speedrunning [...] is concerned with completing videogames in as speedy a time as possible,” which often involves avoiding the intended, or embedded, narrative of the game (128). Newman also points out that “the document of the journey is a vital element of the speedrunning endeavor” (132) and this paper’s source material revolves around two live speedruns recorded at the biannual *Games Done Quick* charity marathon. The *Games Done Quick* event provides a suitable case-study for the liveness, and ‘being-there-ness’, of the run, the clarity of the self-imposed rules, and the ongoing commentaries of the runners themselves as they provide a play-by-play of their techniques.

In his discussion of speedrunning through game spaces, Rainforest Scully-Blaker argues that speedrunning “transcends the logics of the gameworld” to “become a game all its own (Scully-Blaker).” While this can certainly be the case with the *Left 4 Dead* series – runners replace the embedded narrative with one of playful exploits, glitches and shortcuts to beat the clock – we find that speedrunners of *Left 4 Dead* are often experiencing a concentrated version of the zombie apocalypse that even the game developers could not have foreseen. The speedrun introduces a new experience for players, predicated around the pursuit of unimpeded flow and constant movement, mimicking to an extent the affective effort of zombie films to represent the desperate sense of flight as human survivors flee – down alleyways, through hallways, on roads, across fields – and the successful, almost rhythmic, negotiation of time and space becomes the keys to survival.

We will employ concepts from Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 1* and *2* to frame our discussion of how the player’s narrative body, space, and time – in and out of the zombie

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2017

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apocalyptic gameworld – are impacted by the optimizations and exploits of the *Left 4 Dead* series’ zombie narrative. The optimized movements of the speedrunner’s avatar in the gameworld resemble the centrality of the sensory-motor schema defined in Deleuze’s action-image, where it is the movement of the body that provides narrative coherence (19). And yet, the optimized movements of speedrunners rupture the coherence of the gameworld, and the actions of the in-game characters, as players clip out-of-bounds into disconnected and empty spaces, or ‘any-space-whatevers,’ to experience emergent, disjointed, narratives that privilege the journey through the game (13). Far from breaking the tropes of the zombie narrative, we find that speedrunners engage with the genre’s structural foundations.

Matthew Weise uses the phrase ‘procedural adaptation’ to explain how video games simulate the ‘logics’ of film subgenres into an interactive medium (236). The intended story experiences of the *Left 4 Dead* series encountered by casual players of the games are designed to simulate recognizable spaces, themes and narrative arcs found in the zombie genre. Speedrunners, however, engage with a more structural level of procedural adaptation than these generic tropes might provide. Allan Cameron argues that the figure of the zombie is “not simply remade through media but also functions itself like a type of medium” (70), and captures the creature’s capacity to operate as a narrative tool in the idea of *contingency*, wherein film and video technologies allow for the “irruption of chance and the ephemeral” (80). Zombie narratives depend to such a considerable extent on the collapse of sense and intentionality, that the medium’s “perception itself becomes infected, and is transformed into a kind of magical, contagious contact” (Shaviro 25).

The speedrun is itself a form of collapse, where scripted meaning and intentionality fall away, replaced by the chance and ephemeral story of an emergent, optimized engagement with the game’s core narrative architecture. The zombie invites storytelling modes that embrace chaos and decay as “the breakdown of the body and the image become[s] interchangeable” (Cameron 88) and theme and form collapse together. Video game speedruns and the web 2.0 platforms that host them as livestreams amplify the way zombie media already work to purvey chaos and disorder with a sense of immediacy (Cameron 80–81). While the zombie story pre-programmed for players is largely bypassed, speedrunning through the *Left 4 Dead* series’ environments is a generative act of rupture that activates narrative tropes of the zombie genre that remain deeply embedded in the games’ virtual spaces and narrative architectures.

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