"ANY% NO SKETCH GLITCH": SPEEDRUNNING FINAL FANTASY VI AND EXPANDING "WELL PLAYED"

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Abstract

This paper seeks to look at expanding the idea of well play in a community that gathers around a game and redefines the goals of the game for themselves in competition. Focusing specifically on *Final Fantasy VI* (*FFVI*), we can see that the practice of speedrunning reflects deep gaming literacies, the commitment to community goals and norms, the creation of new games out of the elements of existing ones, and a transition from casual to serious leisure activity. Speedrunning *FFVI* reflects redefinitions of the boundaries of what we consider the games we put under study, as well as the role of "well play" in our understanding of them.

Introduction

Historically, the "Well Played" format has focused on the ways we can understand the "well play" of a single game through an analysis of its design and how players experience it. Understanding different *kinds* of "well play" have thus been secondary issues for this community, and often sidelined in favor of discussions of the gaming artifact and the designed nature of

it. In this paper, we wish to shift this discussion somewhat, and look at a type of well play that spans hundreds of games, systems, and genres: The "speedrun." A speedrun is a form of play where the player attempts to complete the game, from beginning to end, in as short a time as possible using various tricks, glitches in the game, and efficiency tactics.

In speedrunning *Final Fantasy VI* (*FFVI*), we can see an expansion of well play that illustrates a dedication to learning through productive failure (Kapur, 2008) and a commitment to "serious leisure" (Taylor, 2012). The social task of speedrunning is one wherein players compete to take apart a "well' designed game, and remake new competitive play experiences from it. As players fail productively and in a persistent social context, they illustrate that members of a game's participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) are able to redefine what counts as "well play," and can give us a window into how gaming literacy evolves in a productive, appropriative social context. Speedrunning also gives a window into the practices of a group of players that value competition and collaboration equally as part of engagement with games, and, we suspect, as part of process of learning with games. As we will show through an analysis of speedrunning in *FFVI*, speedrunning captures an exciting tension between the designer(s)'s original presumed intent and the active engagement of game players as well as the movement from a casual pastime to a serious leisure activity that for some even becomes a primary vocation.

(A note for the reader on the use of first person and the joint-authored nature of this piece. "I" will refer to the first author (Cook) and their experiences playing, watching, and learning how to speedrun *FFVI.* The second author (Duncan) contributed to the piece by contextualizing the experiences of Cook in a broader landscape of research and the relevance of these experiences.)

Final Fantasy VI

Final Fantasy VI is a game that I have been playing since its US release in 1994. I was totally enthralled by the storyline that was far beyond the story of any games I had played to that point, which had mostly consisted of simple goals such as; save Princess Peach (*Super Mario Bros.*), or defeat the evil wizard, Werdna (*Wizardry*). In *FFVI,* the game starts with the play in control of Terra, a Magitek soldier of the empire searching for a magical being called an "esper" in the town of Narshe. The town resists fighting you every step of the way. Finally, when Terra and her two solider mook (low level soldier) companions reach the esper, the soldiers are killed while Terra interacts with the esper in an unknown manner. She wakes up in a house in the town, where she is helped to escape by a treasure hunter Locke. From there the story spans into a rebellion versus the empire saga, with the player's party traversing the world in order to save it. The part that sealed the deal in terms of the game's longevity and significance for me was that after beating the Atma Weapon on the Floating Continent, one did not get to face Kefka, the presumed final boss, but instead has to *run* from him as he upsets the balance of the world and destroys most of it with fire and lasers. The second half of the game focuses on one's band of companions trying to find each other in order to take one last fight to Kefka, as the world lays in ruins around them.

While *Final Fantasy VI* is neither the first game to be speedrun, nor is it the most often speedrun, it serves as a useful game to look at with speedrunning in mind. It offers many categories of runs that showcase different features of the game and different understandings of various mechanics and glitches. Furthermore, *FFVI* offers insights into how games are routed, and how the community works together to not only push the limits of the game, but to form a deep understanding of how and why various glitches, bugs, and sequence breaks work at a technical level. This allows the runner to apply knowledge of one bug in a different

situation because of the technical understanding that is not present in some other games. As a long time player, I was at least familiar with some of the programming issues with the game. As will become significant for this analysis, I was aware of a significant glitch around the skill "Sketch," that I had never explored since it had the possibility of erasing my save files. The transition from being an expert-casual player to one who is dipping into the world of speedrunning is marked by my changing understanding of the game. I went from knowing that there are certain bugs in the game, to understanding the bugs at a technical level and being able to exploit those bugs in ways that are advantageous to my play.

Learning to Run *FFVI*

Two years ago, a friend turned me on to an online charity event "Awesome Games Done Quick" (AGDQ; https://gamesdonequick.com/), and Summer Games Done Quick (SGDQ; see Figure 1, below). During these events, speedrunners run their games live in order to raise donations for charity. Games Done Quick's mission is to bring together high level speedrunners to raise money for the Prevent Cancer Foundation and Doctors Without Borders. I had never encountered speedrunning, and had not yet experienced communities of speedrunners with personalities running the games. I saw that they were running *FFVI* as the capstone game for the event and watched the entirety of the six hour run. The thought that the game could be beaten in six hours was a completely alien idea to me, and as a consequence, I started watching the *FFVI* speedrunners on their Twitch.tv channels and studying how they could beat the game in such a short amount of time.

Figure 1: A screen capture from the YouTube broadcast of the SDGQ 2014 finale game, FFVI. The runners are known as "Essentia" (second from the left) and "Puwexil" (third from the left). (Image taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsZELoI33T4)

While watching, I noticed several practices that speedrunners participate in that may help them push games to their limits. First, they clearly *collaborate* with each other, sharing notes, having open practice sessions where they invite each other to watch, and giving each other advice. Second, they often try to *experiment* with new strategies, new routes through the game, and new ways to use glitches within the game. They rely upon *shared knowledge* about the mechanics and details of the game which allows them to understand how to best use the various exploits and glitches within the game. These clearly overlap, but also present distinctly different community practices, activities, and resources that inform the learning of how to speedrun *FFVI*. Finally, at the highest levels of speedrunning there is competition between runners that serves to push the runners to perform at their highest levels and does not display, in my experience, the same degree of toxic interaction that I have found in other competitive environments.

These speedrunners view the game differently, no longer is the game a simple form of leisure or escape, it is now more akin to serious leisure that T.L. Taylor discusses in her 2012 book

about the professionalization of e-sports. While speedrunning has not achieved the general recognition or professionalization of e-sports many of the practices are similar. While it is unlikely that a game like *Final Fantasy VI* may become more than just a game or make a living, and it is regardless a venue for competition with some similarities to commercial e-sports. The game becomes less a idle recreation, and more a series of challenges that need to be overcome as quickly, and more importantly, as safely, as possible. Speedrunners show similar levels of dedication to professional e-sport athletes, in that they practice for hours each week, and are dedicated to honing their craft.

I decided to try my hand at speedrunning *FFVI,* and, as of this writing, I have yet to complete a full run of the game. I have failed close to a hundred times, with each failure teaching me something new. As Kapur (2008) posits, each failure has been productive and taught me something new and added to my skills and prepared me to handle other situations that arose later in the game. In Kapur's (2008) study, he found that those students who had been given ill structured problems to begin with had greater persistence on later ill structured problems than did students who just received well-structured problems. The speedrun itself is certainly an ill structured problem when compared to regular play of the game — according to Kapur, the more one works on ill structured problems, the more strategies and more success one has in further ill structured problems. While there is a linear storyline that must be followed in *FFVI*, there are many parts of the game that are skipped, avoided, or otherwise ignored by speedrunners. When learning this run, I have relied heavily upon videos of runs from other more experienced runners, as well as written notes that elucidate specific equipment and magic choices.

The first time I attempted a run, I failed on the very first battle, but did not realize I had failed for at least 20 minutes. For the first few battles, the goal is to have Terra gain all of

the experience from the battle. One does this by exploiting the runaway mechanic and having the two soldier mooks in the party run away. These battles are basically un-losable; however, if one does not win in the correct way, the rest of the run is affected. When I failed at this, I didn't think about how much that one mistake would snowball into wasting a significant amount of time about fifteen minutes later in the run when I was not able to kill certain enemies because I was at too low of a level. I had not even considered the impact of a battle that I had not given conscious thought to since the first time I had played the game. For each battle, there is a set amount of experience points that are distributed evenly among all of the party members that are still alive and in the battle when it ends. There is a way to get the two mooks to run away from the battle leaving Terra alone to get the full amount of experience points. I started to look at the game itself differently. No longer was it just one of my favorite games that I could play on autopilot for simple enjoyment and nostalgia. Now it was a challenge that I had to overcome. I came to understand the game in a deeper and more complex way. Battles required a conscious decision to fight or not. Do I need the experience points or should I save the time? Do I really need to take the minute it would take to go into town and shop for the new armor or should I skip it? When should I go into the menu to make changes? All of these were choices that had not been conscious choices in my play before, but now I now recognized as essential.

I reset the game. The next time I reached the first battles, I tried to use the runaway mechanic, and failed. I reset again. I took a moment to watch a video of a run before I went back to make another attempt. The third time, I successfully ran away properly and Terra gained the experience points she needed. This moment showed me that there are reasons behind certain choices that I didn't fully understand at first and my *failures* helped me to understand the runaway mechanic to a depth I had never achieved before. After the initial stumbling blocks

around the first three battles, I hit fairly smooth sailing for about two hours. I was not on a particularly good pace, nor was I embarrassing myself. I even had a couple of people watching me stream on Twitch.tv. I started to slip back into my old mindset of complacency. I know this game, I have this under control, though I suspected I was about to fail again.

The next major boss, a battle against two cranes, was coming up, and I feared that I was going to fail again. This battle requires performing a trick to manipulate a set of spinning slot reels to get a certain combination (7-7-7) which kills all of the enemies on screen instantly called "Joker Doom." This was a trick that I had the declarative knowledge to understand (had seen performed many times, and could explain the set up) and ostensibly knew *how* to perform, but had never done so. To the shock of no one at all, I failed again and had to reset as the cranes killed me before I had a chance to try the trick again. I tried this battle ten times that day before I decided to stop, realizing I needed to practice this one particular trick many times.

What was beginning to change for me was my depth of understanding within the game. No longer would being a casual player who could play through the game automatically be enough. I needed to understand the game and how the various systems within the game interact with each other. For example, understanding that (7-7-7) would kill the enemies and that if I used a certain item (echo screen) in battle that I could set up the trick was enough. I needed now to know why it worked. Using the echo screen in battle advanced the random number seed in the game by 28, which was the number that is needed to allow Joker Doom to happen. However, failing at the slots advances the random number seed as well. Now I need to understand what seed I am on, how to manipulate that seed and why certain actions are performed if the trick is missed. My understanding moved from I can tell someone how to do this trick, to I can perform this trick and explain the systems behind it as to why it works.

It is not simply adequate to have some abstract understanding of the game, or some static gaming literacy and knowledge to be a successful speedrunner. It takes a deeper understanding of the mechanics of the game that are often hidden or otherwise obscured. Nowhere in the game is it explained that Terra's level has an impact on the level of the next characters to join your party. Nowhere in the game is the random number seed explained or even visible normally. Speedrunners experiment and fail often to figure out these hidden rules of the game in order to be successful, and through this experimentation and failure gain access to the code and systems behind the game's playable exterior

Glitches, Bugs, and Exploits

As an example of understanding *FFVI*'s systems, there are four times when the cast of characters is broken up into more than one group that the players can switch between to complete the dungeon, or guard their leader. Switching between parties in the game is instant, and can be triggered as a character is moving from one tile on the map to another. However, when one combines this with the fact that certain tiles are coded to trigger certain events (such as boss battles or cut scenes), one can skip those events, or walk through non-player characters by switching groups as one is moving onto the trigger tile. When one switches back to the party on the trigger, the trigger does not fire as it is coded to fire upon entry of the tile, not upon standing on it or exiting the tile. This combination of an understanding of how characters move along the map tiles along with the understanding of how certain tiles are triggers for events came together for the community recently and allowed for two major bosses to be skipped that previously were thought to be unskippable.

And so, we can see that one of the most critical elements of a speedrun is the sophisticated use of exploits, glitches, bugs, and mistakes that made it into the final game. These can capitalize

on the interaction of multiple gaming systems (as in the above example), as well as the exploitation of outright bugs in the game. When I played *FFVI* as a child, I read in *Nintendo Power* and other gaming magazines that one should *not* use the ability Sketch because it could break the game and erase my save files — certainly, the worst fate for a kid who has dedicated hours upon hours to the game! However, in the era of game emulators, players of *FFVI* have honed their understanding of this glitch through repeated safe failure finding the ways that previously disastrous glitches could serve a useful purpose for players attempting to speedrun the game.

In particular, glitches can be used to help redefine paths through a speedrun, but also how they illustrate collaborative community practices in doing so. Speedrunners have taken a certain glitch in *FFVI* — the "Sketch glitch" — and spent a great deal of time and effort cracking it open. As a glitch is an uncorrected bug wherein the game executes code that it was not intended to, this can lead to a variety of situations including hard locking or freezing, "soft locking" where the game is stuck and cannot go on but the player can still interact with the game, or other unintended consequences. It is the unintended consequences that are most exploited by speedrunners.

For instance, in *FFVI*, using the skill Sketch, an effective speedrunning approach is to insert a certain spell in the 28th slot of the magic menu that causes the game to execute code that can fill your inventory, or transport you to different locations within the game. With careful manipulation, this glitch can bring a player past several dungeons and bosses, saving a great deal of time on a potential speedrun. Using emulators, players were able to iteratively test the glitch dozens of times, changing one aspect at a time in order to determine what aspects of the game affect the glitch, then shared the results online with other runners. There are dozens of trial and error moments that helped to determine that it was, in fact, exactly the 28th slot of the magic menu that impacted the glitch, not the 15th item, 4th item, or

an item one's inventory or another factor. The Sketch glitch is a bizarrely specific glitch, but one that led to significant impact on the *FFVI* running community. This is perhaps the most "differently well" form of play within the *FFVI* speedrunning community, insofar as the runners are taking a glitch that for many people ruined their casual play experience and using their understanding of it to improve their own play.

In speedrunning communities there are several categories for running, which illustrate the impact that this single glitch has had on the competitive practices around speedrunning the game. These come from a deep understanding of the game and community debate and discussion about what should and should not be allowed for a given run. Since some glitches or bugs so fundamentally change the gameplay experience and route through the game they have crafted different categories of speedrun. For *FFVI,* these include runs that allow or disallow the Sketch glitch and require different amounts of completion of the game. "Any%" is a category where the runner completes the game however they can getting only what they need along the way, and there is no restriction on how much content of the game may be skipped. This is further broken into two categories: With and without the Sketch glitch. Atop this, there are 100% versions where one needs to recruit all characters and gather all of the magical stones called espers. There are also glitchless versions of Any% and 100% runs, which disallow any forms of glitches. This allows for several different possibilities for a run, and allows for choice when it comes to which skills or set of skills will be used.

In Mia Consalvo's *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (2007), we see that gamers often use knowledge of gaming exploits and "cheats" as ways to broker participation in gaming communities. Gamers employ such knowledge as "gaming capital," akin to Bourdieu's social capital. In the community of speedrunners of *FFVI*, the knowledge of cheats, bugs, and glitches is a form of legitimate gaming practice and, we argue, problematizes how perspectives on these subversions of the

design of the game can transform our understanding of what constitutes the "game" here. Where is the "game" in the speedrun of *FFVI?* Is the game *Final Fantasy* itself, or the attempt to get a quicker speedrun, or the experimentation that leads to the finding of new glitches? Or is it the social enterprise that drives the entire community of speedrunners to probe, prod, and further break apart the "well played" *Final Fantasy VI* toward new aims?

As the speedrunning community creates categories for competition as long as competitors adhere to those rules, we argue that they self-organize around *multiple* forms of "differently well play" — completing 100% of the game, completing the game with the Sketch glitch, or completing the game without the Sketch glitch, just to name a few. Speedrunners impact other players and the social community of the game when they find a new trick or a new glitch, and can radically alter the route through a given dungeon or the entire game, and thus redefine what *FFVI* is for multiple groups of players, and multiple skill levels.

And, there are some interesting contrasts with Consalvo's work here. Specifically, Consalvo (2007) argues that speedrunners "cheat" to achieve time compression, focusing on the goal of the player to simply complete a game in the context of a presumed form of "well play" (defined by the presumable goal of the game, defined by its designer). People play games, in Consalvo's framework, in order to complete a designed system, and experience "the game" as it was intended to be played by whomever created it Speedrunners are clearly not exploiting glitches for the same reasons, or at the very least, these forms of time compression have very different social consequences. Speedrunners of *FFVI* are not compressing time to get to the story faster, or to see what happens next — they already know what happens next. They compress time for the express purpose of compressing time in a *"secondary game"* of sorts (the speedrun), which reframes ostensible "cheating" in that they are breaking

the rules of the game as defined by the game's designers, toward the competition a new game that serves the social purposes of the speedrunning community. They are sidestepping the intended and expected rules of playing the game as defined by the designer in order to redefine the goals of the game for their own purposes as a community.

The Social Context of Speedrunning

Speedrunning can thus be looked at as the product of a deep gaming literacy born out of engagement within a gaming-related community. Zimmerman (2009) refers to gaming literacy as the understanding of systems, play, and design, and clearly these forms of gaming literacy are put into practice by effective speedrunners. The runners of *FFVI* spend time playing the game, but also watching and discussing the game and strategies with each other. They work together — and compete — effectively to further their gaming literacy and the meaning(s) that they construct out of these game activities revolve around how to complete it the fastest within a given category.

Not only do speedrunners work individually to develop their own gaming literacy practices, they share this information with other runners, as well as their viewers who may become runners. Many speedrunners do not see their viewers as simply observers or audience members to interact with (and for some actually a source of income), but as potential fellow runners and future participants. The audience is not simply passively taking in the experience that the runner shows them, but are actively interacting with the runner and the other audience members. For example, in the winter of 2014, a major speedrunner of *Final Fantasy* games (known online as "Puwexil") hosted an event that was a relay race between four teams to complete three *Final Fantasy* games as quickly as possible (Puwexil, 2014a). During this race, there were many viewers who participated in the stream by watching and talking. Later that year, in the fall, Puwexil hosted another relay race between four teams and the

same three games (Puwexil, 2014b). While some of the runners were the same, there was at least one runner who saw the first relay race and decided to take up speedrunning and was able to participate, and do quite well, alongside several current and former world record holders.

How they evince gaming literacy is shown by the speedrun itself. *FFVI* is a game designed to be played over many play sessions and many days and to take tens of hours. The speedrunners play with the rules and expectations of the game, and turn them on their head, with multiple potential intents, including social affiliation with others in the speedrunning community, and perhaps other subversive goals. By finding the most efficient ways to go through each dungeon, and defeat each boss and in some cases, avoid them entirely, they are playing the game in ways that may not have been originally anticipated.

Finally, we should note that speedrunners exhibit game *design* literacy, in part in how they construct various categories for their runs. Since these are all user defined categories they have to choose what constitutes completing the game, and when to start the timer as well as what bugs or glitches can and cannot be exploited within the run. In a way they are creating a new game for each category of run. There are potential differences in gameplay, both in terms of how long, and in terms of what parts of the game are experienced between an "Any%" run and a "100%" run, to the point that they are nearly different games. When a new glitch or bug is found the community is faced with deciding what category the glitch should feature in: Will it be allowed in established categories or does it change things enough that it gets its own run category? This is how distinctions between "Any% No Sketch," and "Any% Sketch" came about and there is the possibility that new categories will be created in the future.

The community of speedrunners around *FFVI* supports each other in their productive failure efforts. Not only are runs that are going well streamed online for an audience, but also practice

runs, and a great number of failed runs as well. The audience has come to expect that sometimes the runner fails, and that this is acceptable and a part of the learning process. Runners watch each other, both as a way to learn and try to refine their own practice, but to also support their fellow runners during their potentially-productive failure. Sometimes, it is the audience who is interacting with the runner via text chat that will point out aspects the runner may have missed. Not only do they support each other, many of them compete with each other for the world records in various games and categories.

Often, when a runner is done streaming for the day, they may encourage their current viewers to "raid" the stream of another runner to show support for the other runner, while potentially also providing a show of one's fanbase reach. It appears that while there is competition for the record there is also a sense of collaboration to see how far the game itself can be pushed. At the end of a recent world record run, the runner "TheLCC" discussed with his viewers where they should go next, stating that "once we soft lock the ending we will go there [to watch another stream]" (TheLCC, 2014). Even after setting the world record for *FFVI,* TheLCC brought his viewers to another runner's stream, bringing the popularity of his stream as a world record holder in a popular game with other streamers, while also perhaps displaying in a new venue one's impact as a streamer.

Conclusion

Speedrunning video games is a space where a community has gathered and redefined the very nature of what it means to play these games. The communities of speedrunners have created rules, structures, and competitions to support a multitude of goals, elevating the game to "serious leisure." These players illustrate a large and deep gaming literacy, as well as a commitment to productive failure and collaboration, creating spaces where not only is competition a potential motivator to improve, but it is also something that brings people together.

Speedrunners, we argue, have taken a single player game and made it into a communal experience rife with performance, with the subversion of original design goals, and deeply imbued with gaming and computational literacy.

Finally, we wish to note that the practice of speedrunning illustrates that there is more than one way to play a game "well," and to push this community to consider how speedrunners problematize the notion of "well play." Speedrunners have crafted and refined a different form of "well play," one that privileges their community goals and norms over the narrative, mechanics, and dynamics of the original game's designer(s). Speedrunners share this revised sense of "well play" with others in their communities, work on demarcating and categorizing its different forms collaboratively, and use their play not only for entertainment, but also as a vehicle to enact change upon the world through fundraising (the "Games Done Quick" events). Speedrunning has not only helped players rediscover old favorites, but to potentially motivate players to improve upon their understandings of game mechanics, bugs, glitches, and exploits both within *FFVI,* but also within other games as well.

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