

Territories of Play  
N°1 Ludic Surveys of Nowadays

# GAME OVER A MANIFESTO FOR SPEEDRUNNING ARCHITECTURE

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In a parallel movement, Humankind has over the centuries reached for new knowledge about its surroundings and fought for the control of these. Human societies have belligerently expanded their physical boundaries and searched for territories to establish control and push their economies. The notion of “territory”—which has become once more very fashionable these days—in this context describes the control—mostly political but also economical—that is exerted over an environment. The latter is both mental and physical, as it is not only constituted by real boundaries, but also through imaginaries and narratives.

This movement towards the discovery and occupation of new territories has led to the extension of scales, and the invasion of originally unmappable territories, such as oceans and the space. It was fueled by technological innovation which, in an unprecedented acceleration, allowed for the occupation of both the infinite small and the infinite large. The short movie by Charles and Ray Eames, *The powers of ten* (1977) shows in an exemplary manner, how these two different directions of reduction and enlargement are tightly connected and are both part of the same process of mapping and occupying unknown territories.

With the progressive rising awareness about an ecological catastrophe and the finiteness of our resources, this constant acceleration—both spatial and technological—has led to a weird tension: while the trust in technological salvation is still at large, we have come to realize that we live in a contained and limited environment on which we depend. We have thus literally reached an “end” within this expansive movement. We can observe how different forms of “containers” used to describe our context, have replaced each other, from “Earth” to “World” to “Planet”. Each of these implied a different point of view on the relationship of humans to their environment and its finiteness, not least advocating for a larger scale. German philosopher Martin Heidegger once made the difference between “Earth”—“Erde”—as something untouched and “pure” and “world”—“Welt”—as something that only exists once human start manipulating the earth. Along this line, Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently argued for the necessity to extend our perspective from the global to the planetary, as the former is a human-centered construction, while the latter “decenters humankind”. By this, Chakrabarty also questions the issue of authority and influence on the planetary and on the destruction of our planet. The concepts of “anthropocene” and “capitalocene” are indicative of this need to know who is the culprit: the former blaming humankind, the second capitalism. While there have been

quite some discussions on the use and advantage of each of these terms, the former has been criticized because of the risk to “depoliticize”, while the latter because of the risk to “de-humanize” the climate crisis. That is, it appears too easy to blame capitalism and at the same time, it is questionable how an abstract notion of “humans” is to blame for this. One is reminded of the rhetorical question Martin Heidegger once asked, about the age of nature in relation to the obvious lifespan of a building, and the fact that nobody asks this question. There are things that appear given, that have to be questioned.

## Game Worlds

Video games are wonderful allegories of the actual and can help us understand our condition and to question it. They can help us to navigate in these difficult times, beginning with the limitations of game worlds and the attempt to create seamless and endless environments for the player. There is a whole economy of means in games, that mirrors the scarcity of the planet’s resources and could teach us the value of things, that we cannot endlessly consume. Game worlds are limited in their boundaries, and the resources and items the player can collect are not endless. Furthermore, the player actively takes part in the shaping and transformation of a world and has to understand the complex relationships behind the game. This alone makes video games so valuable in the context of acceleration and acknowledgment of our finite world. While the player is very well aware that the items he can collect, are limited (otherwise the game would be too easy), the game tries to direct and address him, so to avoid acknowledging limits and borders. It is not by coincidence, that with increase of CPU (central processing unit) and GPU (graphical processing unit) but also with techniques such as the “frustum culling” where only what is displayed on video is rendered, the sizes of worlds—think of the development of the maps of GTA over the years—and the graphical quality has dramatically increased. Yet they are not endless, even if they want to suggest so.

Obviously, there is also a real economy behind every game, that wants players to spend money into its virtual economy. The former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis worked once for the game firm Valve to study the in-game economy of its games and was able to test some theory of economics such as the theory of arbitrage. But games want more than your money, they want your time. Online games in particular are often cost-free or almost,

and make their money through advertisement or in-game purchases. In order to work, they have to keep the player focused on playing and to forget time. They want to keep the player entertained and to make him/her believe that he/she is moving freely, while in fact he/she is totally controlled by a system, that avoids being revealed. The player must live in the illusion of being in control of a character and to try to win a game, overcoming obstacles. In this process, the player has no time to reflect upon how he is controlled by the game and its mechanics. More and stronger opponents will appear, and the pace of the game will increase. While he is trying to control the territory of the game, he becomes himself a territory for the game. Whatever extension of the virtual world is done, the player will always been caught in this system. The game territory thus suggests players being in control over their character, while they are following a path left by the game. As such, games are definitively powerful allegories, both for what they allow you to understand, for how they make you believe of what you can influence and for how they influence the player.

## Against the game

It is not surprising that subversive strategies that go against this mechanism of control of the game and are that susceptible for the “unprogrammed”, have become more and more popular, from in-game Photography to the search for glitches and mistakes. Glitches are interruptions of the game flow, which can occur on several levels, mostly in previous coding. Rosa Menkman defines them as follows: „I describe the ‘glitch’ as a (actual and/or simulated) break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within (digital) communication systems that results in a perceived accident or error. A glitch occurs on the occasion where there is an absence of (expected) functionality, whether understood in a technical or social sense. Therefore, a glitch, as I see it, is not always strictly a result of a technical malfunction.“ One of the most recent and worst examples being *Cyberpunk 2077*, which was released in December 2020 with massive glitches and malfunctions, which had to be corrected by a patch. These were immediately discovered and used by artists and media theorists, that opened up the potential for a completely different experience of the game.

There is a whole subculture of gamers, that collect and document glitches or even redesign games. This approach has been termed “countergaming” as it goes against the programmed intentions of the game. Another way to name this approach to video games is “transformative play“. The most extreme form of transformation is “modding”: here a video game is basically taken as a basis and is totally transformed. The artist Joan Leandre has taken the game *Re-Volt* (1999) and transformed, in a way that the player has almost no influence on the game. It basically becomes unplayable.

Transformative play appears to give the player the chance to free themselves from the constraints and mechanisms set in place in the game and to play in a way that might not have been foreseen. In this context I would highlight one type of “transformative play” which is “speedrunning”. Speedrunning implies the attempt to play a game as fast as possible: “Speedrunning is when an individual attempts to beat part or all of a video game as quickly as

possible. This can include individual levels, specific objectives, or unique limitations as decided by the community or player”.

There exists a vast community of players and basically all types of games are used to attempt to play them as fast as possible. There are different types of speedruns: “Glitchless speedrun”—where you are not allowed to use glitches and interruptions—“100% Speedrun”, where basically everything is allowed, but you have also to solve all side quests—, to “any% speedrun”, where you only have to complete a game. The result is that you can play a game like *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), which usually lasts around 25h, in less than 7 minutes. Stephan Günzel describes speedruns as “topological ideal trajectories” as the player looks for a perfect path through the folded space and time of games. The game environment here is not anymore a virtual twin of reality, but has a new spatiality of its own.

Speedruns thus appear to be very powerful tools to play against the game, in particular in relation to its economy of time: if the game wants you to keep playing as long as possible, speedrunning with its acceleration goes against this form of control and allows you to subvert its economic logic. Furthermore, the attention is directed towards the end and not to the game play itself. That is, you are not seduced by the game itself, but concentrated to reach its end.

## Speedrun as accelerationism

Speedrunning could thus be put in relation to a recent economic theory, which has caused quite some controversy: “accelerationism”. On the backdrop of the evident failure to suspend or arrest the economic acceleration with all the downsides it implies, Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek published in 2013 the “Accelerate manifesto for an Accelerationist politics”. Facing «ever-accelerating catastrophes», the two authors suggested that any attempt to slow down these processes will not stop the acceleration, but that one has to embrace this acceleration. Not for the sake of some techno-utopia, but to improve the situation: “Technology should be accelerated precisely because it is needed in order to win social conflicts.” While this description only scratches the surface of the position of Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek and while there have been many critical comments on their manifesto—which should be considered as such, that is a manifesto—accelerating a negative process, in order to gain control and direct it, could be read as a description of speedrunning. While the analogy obviously stops by the fact that any game has an end and capitalism and society not (yet), the act of playing against the game, against its attempt to capitalize our time, seems quite a pertinent comment to the manifesto. Instead of slowing down and resisting to something which, history has taught us, cannot be resisted, maybe we should try to go faster, accelerate a system based on speed and bring it in our control.

## Speedrunning architecture

Now, we should finally ask ourselves what good could this discussion be for architecture. Architecture at the moment is under siege: on the one hand it is called to save the world from the climate crisis, by adopting sustainable processes

and materials—as if it was not the industry that has led us to this condition (and architects playing a role in that)—and on the other it is endangered by digitalization and by architectural technocrats and bureaucrats, who are transforming architecture through digital norms and methodologies into a quantifiable problem. The architectural discourse has turned in the last years to an issue of innovation, progress and performance. Everything is turned into a possibly bright future, ignoring the present. While architecture had originally absorbed digitalization only anecdotal, to create ghosts of utopian architecture, nowadays BIM, VDC and digital processing announce a tragic transformation: architecture becomes a matter of optimization and performance. A procedure which was already announced by the tragicomic notion of “smart cities” is now scaled down to architecture, with the goal to minimize accidents, tensions and unpredictable moments. But the very process of design is fueled by these moments and tensions and cannot be reduced to a smooth process without losing its inherent qualities. Control is given to algorithms. Architecture, as usual, reacts by complaint: through critical books and articles against these processes, but not really undertaking anything. Architecture traditionally was cautious against progress and change: based on critiques of modernity such as Husserl *Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936) or Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), Alberto Pérez-Gómez’s book *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (1983) can be seen as seminal for this attitude. But if we don’t undertake anything, architecture will be taken over by technocrats and technology firms, who will neither solve our problems, nor save the world, but destroy architecture as we know it. The question then is if it could be possible to “speedrun” architecture, the most stable and movement-resistant discipline of all.

#### Game over

We are living in a constant fear of the end of our world, with some small hope that technology might help us out, well knowing that technology and our behavior is a big part of the problem. Playing video games might help us to exorcise this fear, by experiencing over and over the end of the game, but there might be more in it. By speedrunning games, we appear to be regaining control over the mechanics behind the games and thus we seem to be able to embrace the end of the game, as long as we believe it be in our control.

There is an aesthetics of catastrophe we could refer to. In the great novel *Crash* by J.G. Ballard published in 1973 and the mesmerizing movie by David Cronenberg in 1996 based on the book, there is a fascination for accidents and car crash, aroused with sexual fetishism that gives a new quality to something tragic. While this might appear to be simply a perversion, speedrunning seems to suggest us that there are other qualities we have to look for in the process of acceleration.

Speedrunning BIM, smart cities or VDC might and probably will lead to the annihilation of architecture. But it might also be, that we need this annihilation to regain control over it and foremost to understand its very limits. At the moment these phenomena appear to be limitless and projected into any future, and we are simply going along. By accelerating them, we might be capable of showing their limits and boundaries and by that also the mechanisms behind them. We have no other way to face them. We need to speedrun BIM, accelerate its potential, find the ideal trajectory to shortcut it event more, until it will fold over itself and configurate in a new and unexpected way. Instead of complaining about this technological acceleration, we should embrace and enjoy it and whatever will come out of it, regaining control over the territory of architecture.

The pleasure resides not in playing the game, but in seeking an end of it.