Speedrunning for Charity: How Donations Gather Around a Live Streamed Couch

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Games Done Quick (GDQ) is both a week-long video game speedrunning marathon and a successful charity event, raising more than $1.5 million USD in each of its past five events. To understand GDQ’s success as an online charity event, we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with GDQ speedrunners, attendees, hosts, and online viewers, analyzed past donation data, and conducted 72 hours of in-person participant observations at a live GDQ event. We found that central to every GDQ event is “the couch” which reconstructs the environment of a living room. Viewers do not simply donate to support the charity or in response to the technical prowess and ingenuity of speedrunners, but to actively interact with and be part of the couch experience, the ideal social milieu of speedrunning. Building upon previously identified motivations of why viewers donate to online live streamers, our work contributes to understanding how collocated gatherings can reinforce and amplify the cultural and social aspects of online subcultures (even heterogeneous ones) to encourage charitable giving. This opens opportunities for design that evoke a visceral level of engagement with charity events similar to that observed at GDQ.

CCS Concepts: • Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI); Empirical studies in HCI; • Applied computing → Computer games.

ACM Reference Format:

1 INTRODUCTION
Video game live streaming, where anyone can broadcast gameplay to an online audience, is a rapidly growing phenomenon. Twitch.tv, the largest video game live streaming platform, has consistently averaged more than 50,000 daily concurrent live streamers with more than 1 million unique viewers [47]. This is part of a larger movement away from traditional media (e.g., radio, television) and towards online platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitch) [35]. The appeal of online live streaming stems from its ability to offer immersion, immediacy, interaction, and sociability, thereby creating engaging content between streamers and their viewers [15].

In concert with live streaming’s rise is an emerging market for streamers to profit off of their content. Twitch has incorporated both traditional forms of tipping such as direct donations or...
subscribing for a set monthly price, as well as novel methods such as “cheering,” where viewers can tip in “bits”—Twitch’s proprietary digital currency—in real-time via chat. In 2017, Twitch’s “cheering” program brought more than $12 million USD in spending in just 10 months [41]. Recent scholarship has begun to investigate the socio-technical systems of live streaming viewership [15, 16, 34, 42, 46] and motivations behind monetary giving to live streamers [22, 52].

This boom in online live streaming has also coincided with growth in online charitable giving. Common forms of online giving come in the form of direct giving on a charity’s website and social media platforms such as Facebook Fundraising [11]. Online live streaming, in particular gaming-related streams, has also generated significant charitable giving. An independent survey revealed that independent online content creators collectively raised over $20 million USD in 2018 for charity, of which $12 million USD were specifically from gaming-related channels and content [33].

Both charitable work and live streaming are well-studied areas in HCI- and CSCW-related communities. Previous research has examined the online work of nonprofits [45, 50], systems of computer-mediated charitable giving [29, 38, 53], and crowdfunding [31, 40, 51]. Studies have also examined the practice of online live streaming subcommunities [10, 25, 26] and viewer motivations and interaction with live streams [15, 16, 46].

One of the largest and most successful charity efforts in the video gaming community is by Games Done Quick. Games Done Quick live streams speedrunning, a niche form of video gaming, and viewers can donate over the span of a week to this charity event. Games Done Quick has raised more than $19.3 million USD [48] for charity in its nine-year history, becoming the largest donors to both Prevent Cancer Foundation and Doctors Without Borders, their two main beneficiaries [23]. Drawing in hundreds of thousands of viewers and raising millions of USD, Games Done Quick lies at the intersection of charitable work and live streaming.

Our research takes GDQ as an exemplar for successfully leveraging live streaming technologies to support charitable fundraisers. How does GDQ succeed in raising substantial donations in such a short time-span despite featuring an ostensibly niche subculture of gamers? In this paper, we make the following contributions to elucidate the socio-technical systems around large and in-person streamed events—such as Games Done Quick—that have both entertainment and charitable goals:

- Viewers’ motivation to donate to live-streamed charity events overlap with motivations to donate to individual live streams and online crowdfunding campaigns previously identified in literature, particular those identified by Wohn et al. [52], demonstrating a commonality in donation motivation across various fundraising mediums.
- GDQ’s entertainment value goes beyond merely showcasing virtuosic game play by constructing the performance of a highly idealized, exclusive, and sanitized version of “the couch”—a place where speedrunners, commentators, and other members of an inner circle sit to speedrun. Despite being a massive event, donations allow viewers to interact with GDQ in an intimate manner that alludes to its cultural roots in casual video gaming in the living room.
- Structurally, GDQ’s success in donations lies in its ability to deftly rotate through diverse subsets of the speedrunning community, capitalizing on multiple fanbases and, thus, potential donors.
- This work examines the factors contributing to the success of Games Done Quick in curating the engagement of the speedrunning subculture for a charitable cause. These factors suggest opportunities for designs to support crowdfunding and other charities by integrating similar
strategies utilized at GDQ. We highlight how supporting interactions with virtual and exclusive “digital hearths”—public, dynamic, diverse, and entertaining forms of sociality—can powerfully incentivize donations.

2 BACKGROUND

To set the stage, we now describe our fieldsite—the speedrunning community and its flagship event, Games Done Quick.

2.1 Speedrunning

Speedrunning is a type of solitary video gameplay where the objective is to complete a game as quickly as possible, often utilizing glitches and exploits found in game [39]. For example, whereas it takes most people about 2 hours to complete the original Super Mario Bros., speedrunners can complete it in 4 minutes and 55 seconds\(^1\). Speedrun attempts, shortened as “runs”, are timed and often streamed online on Twitch. Speedrunners have congregated around virtually every conceivable game from classic retro games such as Super Mario Bros. to more recent games such as Spider-Man for the PlayStation 4, indie games such as Celeste, and obscure games such ZZT for Microsoft DOS. Each game has its own speedrunning subcommunity, typically gathered virtually on Discord, a gaming-oriented social media platform. Together, these so-called speedrunners, or “runners” for short, constitute a vibrant gaming subculture around specific games.

The practice of speedrunning has caught the attention of humanistic and anthropological scholarship. Previous research has examined the community and cultural aspects of speedrunning, such as how speedrunning provides an “expansive gameplay” experience by developing additional rulesets to create new gameplay [5] and aesthetic experiences [7]. Speedrunning has also been described as a form of “transformative gameplay” that discovers and capitalizes on experiences unintended by the game developers [17]. Studies have shed light on how “cheating” has been redefined and altered by speedrunners [2], and how speedrunners place large commitment towards rules and goals set by the community [5]. Speedrunning has gained international popularity with runners located across the United States, Japan, Europe, and Mexico. Although Games Done Quick is the most well-known speedrunning event in the United States, Japan and Europe have their own speedrunning events: Real Time Attack and European Speedster Assembly, respectively. Games Done Quick is by far the largest gathering of speedrunners globally.

2.2 Games Done Quick

Games Done Quick (GDQ) is the premier, professional event for runners to congregate and showcase their skill. It is a week-long, 24-hour speedrunning marathon where upwards of 150 games are run and live streamed on GDQ’s official Twitch channel. GDQ holds their speedrunning marathon twice a year. In early January, GDQ takes the form of Awesome Games Done Quick (AGDQ) to benefit the Prevent Cancer Foundation, and in late June, GDQ holds Summer Games Done Quick (SGDQ) to benefit Doctors Without Borders. Viewers can donate to GDQ online via their official donation webpage and can write messages to be read on stream. In 2018, GDQ events averaged more than 100,000 viewers and collected more than $4.5 million USD in raised funds [48].

The vast majority of the audience view GDQ online on Twitch. Anyone can physically attend the GDQ events but each event is limited to a total of 2000 participants (excluding staff). To run a game at GDQ, speedrunners submit runs for an upcoming GDQ to showcase; however, only a small subset of submitted runs are accepted into GDQ events (e.g., AGDQ 2019 accepted less than 9%\(^1\)).

\(^1\)The up-to-date leaderboard of Super Mario Bros. speedruns can be found on https://www.speedrun.com/smb1
Fig. 1. A screenshot of the SGDQ 2018 Super Mario World run. The stream showcases both a camera of the live event (left) and the speedrun gameplay (right).

of 1748 run submissions). Attendees can volunteer for positions at GDQ to work as, for example, hosts (explained below), stage technicians, photographers, makeup crew, and enforcement.

A typical GDQ marathon plays out as follows: the speedrunner will run through a game live at the event. As the runner plays through the game, the runner along with what is colloquially called the couch (left side of Figure 1)—comprised of other speedrunning members seated behind the runner—will provide commentary to explain the run for the stream and live audience in the event venue (a prototypical example of the live stream is shown in Figure 1). At select times during the run, the host, seated off camera, will read out donations messages as they are received. Typically 2,000—3,000 donations messages will be read throughout each GDQ event. After the run is complete, the broadcast will cut to a waiting screen (Figure 2) while the volunteers setup the hardware required for the next run of a different game. During this down time, the stream will play sponsored advertisements, read additional donation messages, showcase raffles prizes, and conduct interviews with the upcoming runners.

3 RELATED LITERATURE
GDQ is a live-streamed event that successfully combines entertainment with charity fundraising for online and offline audiences. We build upon the literature on technology with charity organizations, individual motivations behind donating online, and design opportunities for supporting donor engagement by—through the example of GDQ—examining how online live streaming mediums support charitable giving at a large and broad scale, and identifying, more generally, design opportunities for online live streaming technologies to play a role in charity events.

3.1 Technology and Charitable Organizations
The integration and design of online technologies for charities and non-profit organizations has been a topic of interest across CSCW, HCI, philanthropy, and gaming disciplines.

Technologies have been shown to have a positive effect on charity organizations. Unencumbered by physical distance, internet technologies have allowed charity organizations to reach a wider audience and operate on a larger scale [38, 53]. By cost-effectively reaching large populations, they arguably operate more efficiently than traditional fundraising methods such as direct mail or door-to-door strategies [36].
Researchers have begun to identify factors that organizations should consider to adopt online technologies for improving their operation, outreach, and legitimacy. Previous work identified the lack of support for nonprofit volunteers from social computing technologies and, to remedy this, suggested a design trajectory towards bridging organizations with the public [50]. Researchers, examining the use of online communication technologies by 150 nonprofits, have developed a technology-assisted donation lifecycle model to allow nonprofits to develop close relations with their donors [14]. Philanthropic crowdfunding campaigns now rely on technology for their legitimization and success by establishing a clear online identity, transparent reporting of raised funds, and using social media for outreach [45].

### 3.2 Motivating Online Donations

Studies have identified factors that encourage individuals to donate online. The amount and likelihood of donating has been shown to increase when people know others who have donated [28]—this effect is more pronounced if the acquaintance shares characteristics such as being in the same social group [29]; this impact of social ties extends to crowdfunding campaigns [31]. Other significant factors that encourage donations—specifically in crowdfunding—include timely recognition by the campaigners [1], timing of contributions (e.g., early on, in the middle, or during the last-second stages of a campaign timeline) [40], and donors’ trust in the legitimacy and credibility of the campaign via endorsements and project descriptions [1, 21]. Studies on donations in more recent technologies such as live streaming have shown that viewers are motivated to donate because of emotional attachment, desire for interaction, and participating in charitable efforts, yielding insight into online “masspersonal” communication platform behaviors seen in live streaming [52].

As our work shows, incentives to donate in GDQ are closely coupled with more general motivations identified by scholars to watch and engage with live streams. Researchers have found that people engage with live streaming for its authenticity as an entertainment medium [46], its ability to form and foster communities around shared interests [16] (e.g., around speedrunning), and for experiencing authentic practices of a subculture that may otherwise be difficult to access [25]. Work has also found that the interactive elements of online live streaming offers immersive real-time sociability [15], such as allowing viewers to send donation messages to be read on stream or
participate in bid wars to immediately effect what the streamer does in-game [42], both widely observed at GDQ events. Also relevant to our work is research focusing on the altruistic use of live streaming to provide a space for educational and collaborative opportunities (e.g., free online streams that mentor viewers on programming) [10, 25, 26]—this has parallels to how GDQ provides its viewers with entertainment and pedagogy while acting as a collaborative medium between viewers and charity beneficiaries. Lastly, third-wave live streaming identifies a growing form of intimate streaming focused on the individual self such as teens’ personal lives [24]. GDQ has parallels to third-wave live streaming; however, rather than being individualistic, it is a collective phenomenon where multiple speedrunners’ personas and their communities [34] are gathered to both perform speedrunning and impel the audience to action, such as donating to a charitable cause.

3.3 Designing for Donor Engagement

Several strategies to promote donor engagement and retention have been proposed and studied. Leveraging the impact of social ties mentioned above, new collection strategies using social networking and social credibility have been proposed to increase charity engagement [53]. Crowdfunding project strategies using different funding models (such as all-or-nothing return rules or direct giving models) [51] or using key phrases in project descriptions [30]—strategies employed by GDQ—have been identified to impact the efficiency and productivity of project funding. Voting, polling, cheering, donation incentives, participant lotteries, and other interactive live streaming mechanisms, all used in GDQ events to promote donations, were found to be both enjoyable and compelling for entertainment and have design implications for a more interactive and engaging live streaming experience in the gaming industry [42]. Other studies have prototyped novel designs for interactive donation systems. Traditional donation boxes augmented with interactive technologies (e.g., use of animated characters expressing appreciation, music-synced LEDs, virtual LED holograph projections) were found to encourage donations [44], while other visualization strategies, such as conveying how much food a donation would provide, were found to be fun and motivating, leading to more charity donations [4]. Our work examining how donors are motivated by strategies employed by GDQ expands upon the design work for charity events to enhance audience engagement and promote donations.

4 METHODS

To holistically understand GDQ as an event and the motivating factors behind why viewers donated to GDQ, we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews [27] with key GDQ participants: runners, hosts, online viewers, and in-person attendees. Our participant group is comprised of six runners (R1–R6), four hosts (H1–H4), five online viewers (V1–V5), and three attendees (A1–A3). All runners and hosts, by virtue of their involvement with the event, also shared their experiences as attendees. Runners and hosts to be recruited were identified by viewing Summer Games Done Quick 2018, the most recent GDQ event at the time of data collection. Online viewers and attendees were recruited from dedicated speedrunning Twitch streams and Discord channels. Informants were also recruited through snowball sampling by asking participants for referrals to other potential participants. Our inclusion criteria was to have attended in-person or viewed online, Summer Games Done Quick 2018.

Interviews were conducted over Discord, a gaming-oriented social media platform consisting of 14 million daily users [9] where users can create servers to host chats (text and audio) around topics of interest (e.g., for speedrunning Super Mario World or for a specific speedrunner’s fanbase). Discord was found to be the preferred medium for speedrunners to communicate. Audio interviews averaged 56.4 minutes (SD = 18.6 min., min = 29 min., max = 97 min.). Our participants had
been following speedrunning for an average of 7.17 years ($SD = 2.71$) and, of the 13 participants who have attended GDQ events, have attended an average of six GDQ events ($SD = 3.5$). Four participants have attended more than 10 GDQ events.

The semi-structured interview protocol included questions such as how they were first introduced to speedrunning and GDQ, how they were involved with GDQ, their experience of and motivations behind donating, and identifying memorable moments, donations, and activities at GDQ. If informants had their own Twitch channel, they were also asked to elaborate what strategies they used to gain more subscribers and donations and how they advertise GDQ on their stream. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

To familiarize ourselves with GDQ, we watched past videos archives on GDQ’s official YouTube channel, including the entire livestream of SGDQ 2018 that took place 6/24/2018–7/1/2018. Online observations were taken on 25 different runs, totaling approximately 20 hours of observations.

The first author did in-person participant observations at AGDQ 2019 from 1/6/2019–1/13/2019 in Rockville, Maryland. Observations were conducted over seven days which included attending informational panels held by the staff and volunteers. Field notes came in the form of unstructured observations, temporal mapping (e.g., observing behavior of the host, runner, and audience over time), and spatial-temporal mapping (e.g., movement of audience members around the couch and event venue).

In addition to interviews, publicly available donation data from SGDQ 2018 was scrapped and analyzed to identify common donation message sentiments. This data set totaled 35434 donation included each donations’ timestamp, donor name (mostly pseudonyms or anonymous), amount, and message.

Interview transcripts, observation notes, and a selection of donation messages from GDQ’s donation tracker were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Transcripts were coded through open coding by each author to identify emergent themes and axial coding was used to examine cross-cutting themes. These codes and themes were iteratively developed through multiple meetings to establish a standardized codebook. During these codings, memos surrounding codes were written and refined for the findings of this article. Codings used in memoing include donation motivations, donation significance, audience interactive elements, social interaction and significance, social support, viewing appeal, viewing motivation, and successful elements of GDQ runs.

4.1 Limitations

Our sample size of 18 informants across runners, online viewers, and attendees falls within the standard sampling ranges of human-computer interaction which overlaps with the CSCW discipline. Triangulated with participant observations and donation message logs, we believe GDQ is a rich case study that points towards more alternative, promising forms that technologies can take to foster intense periods of fundraising for charities and other non-profits. However, we do acknowledge that our sample may miss crucial voices of GDQ. For example, attendees only represent 6.25% of the entire donating population—the vast majority of GDQ donors do not attend the actual event. Our sample size does not provide enough granularity to distinguish differences in motivations between donors who do or do not attend GDQ.

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2https://www.youtube.com/gamesdonequick

3https://gamesdonequick.com/tracker/
5 FINDINGS
Through our informants and participant observation at AGDQ 2019, we find that donors are motivated by traditional means such as wanting to support charity efforts or having an acquaintance associated with the event. However, we also find that a large motivating factor for viewers to donate revolved around “the couch”—a physical manifestation of GDQ’s social roots. We first detail how GDQ highlights the couch to signify the social significance of the speedrunning milieu and how it establishes legitimacy and trust from its viewers. Both activities serve to motivate charitable giving. We then elucidate how different facets of the couch—a source of entertainment that showcases gameplay and commentary, and a hub for social gatherings for both the speedrunning community and online viewers—strongly motivate donations.

5.1 Recreating and Repurposing the Living Room

5.1.1 “The Couch”. During its nine-year history, Games Done Quick has grown from a few hundred viewers to amassing hundreds of thousands of viewers. GDQ has kept one consistent element throughout its 19 events: the couch. GDQ’s format of positioning a couch behind the runner alludes to speedrunning’s informal, grassroots history as well as paying homage to GDQ’s origin story. Early speedrunning was conducted at home in front of television sets around the living room [39], similar to the couch format seen at GDQ. The GDQ couch was birthed in this living room environment. During a panel with Mike Uyama (the founder of GDQ), two other original GDQ organizers (Romscout and Breakdown), and Uyama’s mother, Mike Uyama explained that they resorted to using his mother’s basement due to last minute changes in plan. The basement was furnished with a single couch where the speedrunners would run games, eat pizza, and fall asleep on stream. Uyama’s mother described it as “just a bunch of teenagers around a couch playing video games.” The couch has since become a staple in subsequent GDQ events. Uyama and Breakdown elaborated on the motivations behind bringing back the couch to each GDQ event:

Uyama: Basically what we want...[is] kind of a, gamers casual playing on the couch vibe, not too serious. Or, I guess, people nowadays say “esports.” That was just what we were really trying to bring along with future events.

Breakdown: I think the couch still helps keep a more casual-ish vibe. Like a home-y feel, just playing games with your friends. Just projecting that forward [to future events], that kind of environment.

The couch is an intentional symbol for home-gaming and casual gaming, focusing on the friendship and camaraderie among the speedrunning community. Although GDQ has grown to be an event with more than 2,000 attendees across hundreds of different speedrunning communities, the couch has remained an enduring symbol of GDQ’s roots and unifies the disparate speedrunning communities.

5.1.2 Staging the Couch and its Backup. The couch is the predominant feature of GDQ live streams. Sitting front and center is the runner of the current game, easily identifiable by the holding of a controller. Directly behind the runner is a couch consisting of friends and select members of the speedrunning community hand-picked by the runner to provide commentary or moral support. In this paper, when we refer to “the couch,” we adopt the meaning in the speedrunning community—it interchangeably refers to the physical couch and/or the members sitting on the couch. An example of this can be found in Figure 3.

Starting from SGDQ 2015, GDQ added a backup couch (or back couch), a second couch behind the main couch where anyone can sit and gather around, be in the camera view of the stream, and watch
Fig. 3. SDGQ 2018’s Super Mario World speedrun live stream view. From front to back: runner, couch, backup couch, and audience.

Fig. 4. The backup couch (with extra chairs pulled up) at AGDQ 2019 during the Super Mario Sunshine Lockout Bingo Race. Television circled in red. The runner and the couch is on stage off-camera to the right.

the stream directly from a restream TV. A clear example of the backup couch is shown in Figure 4. The backup couch’s function is analogous to that of a traditional living room around a television. Temporal observations [32] at AGDQ 2019 revealed people partaking in the backup couch engage in mild forms of social interaction such as browsing their phone or whispering and giggling with each other, but they were mostly focused on watching the run on the television—activities typical in ordinary living rooms. A1 explained that they join the backup couch with their friends to spend more time together and to support those friends who are running a game and/or are on the main couch.
In addition to serving as a prop to accentuate the causal atmosphere of gaming, the backup couch also expands the stage view from just a runner to a multitude of members. The couch and back couch help to “fill up the camera behind the runner to make runs look more active, and to include more members of a game community (or just friends)” (H1). This is in contrast to how speedrunning is typically structured on individual Twitch.tv streams—a single runner alone in a room. The backup couch thus further reinforces and makes visible the domestic atmosphere Uyama and Breakdown envisioned with the main couch, establishing the homely mood of speedrunning.

5.1.3 Sanitizing the Couch for GDQ. GDQ is vigilant on their conduct and public image to maintain its reputation with its partner charities. At AGDQ 2019, Matt Merkle, the director of operations for GDQ, explained that the Prevent Cancer Foundation and Doctors Without Borders are 501(c)(3) organizations—nonprofit organizations allowed for tax exemptions by the US Internal Revenue Code. As GDQ is the acting representative for the charities, any wrongdoing or public misconduct by attendees at GDQ reflects badly on charities and may jeopardize the charities’ status as a 501(c)(3) organization due to strict policies on retaining this status. Organizers of GDQ prohibit its attendees from using inappropriate language or content (e.g., profanity, sexually suggestive material, political or religious statements). Attendees are reminded time and time again before and throughout the event to follow GDQ’s code of conduct and has dedicated volunteers to enforce these rules.

This enforcement of proper conduct is stressed most heavily on the couch and runner. Informants who have run games at GDQ or have been part of the couch are hyper aware of this strict enforcement. When H4 was first accepted to volunteer as a host, they noticed that they had a habit of swearing a lot on their own personal stream; thus they started “self-training” by challenging themselves to a “swear-free stream”. H4 describes this challenge to be “where…if I swore on stream I had to do [a small punishment]...just to make myself not swear on stream. And that really helped a lot.” R4 explains that as a runner you need to be cognizant of your behavior on stream: “you always gotta kinda remember in your head, people have done dumber things during their GDQ runs...there’s people who have said things that get them removed from the event.” Infamous cases of individuals being banned for violations include: Bonesaw577 for profanity use on stream, RWhiteGoose for sexist and anti-semitic comments, and BubblesDelFuego for drug use on GDQ premises.

GDQ’s strict enforcement creates a sanitized version of the couch. R1, V1, and A2 all informed us that GDQ has a reputation of being “anti-fun” and too “business-like”. However, GDQ’s sanitization establishes itself as a family-friendly event where the viewers and attendees’ safety is prioritized. The couch is thus void of toxic behaviors often observed in gaming communities where trash talking is often misogynist [43] or racist [19].

5.1.4 The Performance of the Living Room. Despite GDQ’s appearance as a “home-y” environment of gamers around a couch, from a backstage production standpoint, GDQ is a highly choreographed event. The stage set for the couch and runner is brightly lit with professional softbox lights; there is a makeup station to put anti-shine on the runner and couch members before they go on stage; and there are stations for audio mixing, video mixing, broadcasting, photography, social media, and filtering through donations. At AGDQ 2019, there was a power outage at the event venue. However, GDQ had backup batteries prepared for all the vital equipment to allow the stream to continue uninterrupted. The stage set and backstage setup at AGDQ 2019 is shown in Figure 5.

The audience, through use of donation messages, explicitly recognize the effort put into the production of the “couch performance” by thanking the staff, organizers, and volunteers for their work behind the scenes. In SGDQ 2018, more than 4,500 donation messages (12.6%) directly expressed gratitude toward the work put behind the scenes such as “Thanks for the event! Will donate more later this week.”; “...Thanks to all the staff and runners!”; and “Thanks to the organizers, runners, commentators, and volunteers for all you do to make the GDQs such a great event.” These donation
messages of gratitude are indicative of how GDQ successfully resonates with its audience through the homey atmosphere created by the couch.

5.2 GDQ’s Legitimacy as a Charity Event

Although the couch and other aspects of Games Done Quick alludes to its roots to draw in the speedrunning subculture, our informants elaborated at length on their motivation to donate to support Games Done Quick’s laudatory mission to raise funds for charities. In this section, we highlight the actions GDQ, as an organization, takes to visibly signal to its viewers and potential donors that it is a legitimate and worthy charity. This dual reinforcement of its ties to the speedrunning community and its charity goals was alluded to in our interviews, and we saw how it visibly manifested itself throughout the GDQ event for attendees. In this sense, GDQ’s actions align with previous work on how traditional organizations rely on their legitimacy as charities to garner donations [1, 45].

GDQ widely broadcasts their charity mission, defining their event as “Speedrunning Marathons for Charity” on their homepage. During the week of the actual event, the bottom banner of the live stream (see Figure 1 and 2) continually displays the logo of its charity beneficiaries to serve as a constant reminder for the audience. Hosts are also required to read a short pre-written description of the charity beneficiaries on-stream at set intervals. H2 describes the process:

If [the producer] want[s] you to plug a certain thing like, “Hey we haven’t talked about what we’re raising money for in a while, can you talk about [Doctors Without Borders],” and there’ll be a little blurb that you’ll have to read about them. (H2)
The notion of GDQ as a charity event is deliberately propagated through its attendees and is similar to how crowdfunding campaign backers promote projects via collective endorsements [21]. H1, a long-time GDQ attendee, advertises this on their personal Twitch channel in the weeks leading up to GDQ, calling it “a week-long speedrunning charity marathon.” Similarly, A2 tells their coworkers about GDQ “and see[s] if they can watch it and donate,” and H3 noted that they will “advertise [GDQ] as a charity event, like video games for a good cause. It can get people to watch.” In addition to building a strong brand as a charity event, GDQ also establishes transparency by publishing every donation they receive on a website for public viewing.

To further solidify GDQ’s legitimacy and commitment to charity, GDQ invites representatives from the charity beneficiaries to their event for publicity. Representatives from the Prevent Cancer Foundation (PCF), wearing bright green uniforms for easy identification, attended the entirety of AGDQ 2019 to show their support and held a panel discussing two project grants funded by GDQ’s contributions. At the end of the week, the managing director and others from PCF attended the finale to give a final word of thanks on stream alongside Mike Uyama and Matt Merkle, the director of GDQ operations (see Figure 6). By always having PCF visible and easily recognizable at the event, GDQ continually broadcasts their close relationship with and dedication to the charities they work with.

GDQ’s dedication to charity was a motivating factor across all our informants to donate to GDQ. H1, H3, and A2, all long-time attendees of GDQ (more than 10 times), regularly donated $20–$50 each event, with the exception of A2 who donated between $100–$200. Informants, from those who donated regularly (V2, R1, R2, R4, R5, R6, H2, and H4) to those who donated sparsely to GDQ (V1, V4, V5, A1, and A3), all reported “wanting to contribute to [GDQ’s mission]” (H1). R4 explained they were not hesitant to donate because they knew they were “[donating] for a good cause,” and V4 explains that “the fact that the money is going towards a foundation with very respectable work and just going towards a good cause” is what urged them the most to donate. Donation messages in our data set similarly echoed our interviewee’s call to GDQ’s identity as a charity. A total of 1,457 donations (4.1% of all donations) received in SGDQ 2018 had messages expressing support towards
the Prevent Cancer Foundation such as “Keep fighting the good fight against cancer” or “I am so happy to be able to donate to such a great cause every year”.

5.3 Bridging Entertainment Enjoyment and Charitable Giving
GDQ has established itself as the flagship speedrunning event by showcasing top speedrun gameplay and commentary. Many of the viewers donate to GDQ to celebrate this entertainment in the form of skillful speedrunning and the commentary that accompanies it.

5.3.1 Celebrating Expert Gameplay. GDQ’s success as a charity is tied to its position as the premier venue for seeing a variety of high-level speedrunning. Typically, only runners at the top of the speedrunning leaderboards will have successful applications. R1 remarked that only when they held the world record for a speedrun did they feel qualified to apply for a GDQ despite their technical skill already being GDQ-ready half a year prior. This high standard for GDQ is well understood by runners. R2 expressed tremendous nervousness about their run, recalling having “nervous anxiety about not doing the run well”, especially regarding “this one trick that I had been failing which I was worried about so I was just nervous about just dying [in the game] and messing up the runs.” R4 also shared the same sentiment of “being especially nervous” and telling themselves “man, I gotta get this run under my belt so I can do it really well.” All of our informants detailed how runners put in months of grueling practice to achieve perfection because “you only get one shot at a GDQ run” (R1).

The high-level technical execution showcased at GDQ produces a visual spectacle for its viewers. V3 and V5 identified the entertainment provided via speedrun expertise as the most important factor for a speedrun at GDQ. According to V3, a run is entertaining when it showcases “cool mechanics” such as interesting strategies and glitches, while V5 finds a it enjoyable when it is “a really high skill run,” explaining “if the runners are really good, it can make the run interesting.”

Some of GDQ’s greatest entertainment value comes from moments when the speedrunner displays unbelievable skill and precision through performing pixel perfect or frame perfect tricks. **Pixel perfect** refers to a trick that can succeed only if the runner aligns the character at a precise position down to pixel-level accuracy—any misalignment will result in a failed trick. **Frame perfect** refers to a trick that will only succeed if the runner does button presses at an exact frame of the video game—often 1/24ths of a second or even 1/60ths of a second, depending on the gaming hardware. H3 recalls a notable instance of display in skill during the Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars speedrun where the runner had to perform 100 consecutive **super jumps**—a feat wherein the runner has to consistently press a button 100 times without fail within a three-frame window, a 0.05 second window of time. This feat is so difficult that H3 had to orient a sign saying “DO NOT CLAP” towards the audience throughout all 100 super jumps to prevent distracting the runner, and after completion, the audience exploded into applause and cheer.

Masterful speedruns like the above is a prime generator of donations from the audience. During AGDQ 2019’s Sonic The Hedgehog 1 run, the runner, Dr. Fatbody, pulls off a series of pixel and frame perfect tricks flawlessly and received thunderous applause each time, culminating in a standing ovation at the end of the run. Afterwards, despite being only a 20 minute run, Dr. Fatbody received a total of 45 donation messages praising him on his amazing run such as “That was an amazing Sonic 1 run by Dr. Fatbody” and “Dr. Fatbody deserves my dollars.”

5.3.2 Appreciating Commentary. Technical execution by itself is not enough to make a run entertaining. Runners and viewers also donate to show appreciation when the couch provided insightful commentary on a run. R1 explains the intricacies of providing commentary at GDQ:

You have to convey [information] to people who have never seen, potentially never seen the game before...and even to people who have seen the game before who have
never experienced a speedrun of it. You have to explain this is how this works, this is why this works, and this is potentially how you do it if it’s something simple and why it’s faster. (R1)

The vast majority of the audience are not avid followers of speedrunning, and even speedrunners themselves are not experts in all the games being showcased. Due to the nature of speedrunning being “transformative,” transcending normal gameplay experiences [17], and breaking intended gameplay rules [37], commentary is necessary to explain strategies employed by the runners and clarify technical details about the game. V2 explains how commentary “[makes] sure the viewers understand what is going on, the sheer amount of all the things that are going on.” R5 recalls providing commentary for a difficult portion in a Mega Man game, explaining the gameplay mechanics of that level (cycles of water level rising and lowering), hazards (spikes that kill the character), movement techniques (air dashing, wall climbing), and strategies (damage boosting, invincibility frames) all used in the run to ensure the audience understands what is happening in the run. Commentary like these are commonplace at GDQs and is conducted in conjunction to the live speedrunning gameplay.

There are occasions where the commentary is sub-par and, even with flawless execution by the runners, ruined the viewing experience for the audience. R1 recalls a Super Metroid run where the commentary was handled unprofessionally:

The guy they had on the couch admitted at the start of the run that he didn’t know the game, he never played it, and they just got him to commentate, there wasn’t anyone else...He just made a bunch of bad jokes throughout the run because he didn’t have anything to say about the game. It was really confusing...and it’s a run I remember as being just bad because there was no commentary and no explanation of anything going on. (R1)

This lackluster commentary creates disharmony on the couch and deters viewers. An infamous moment in GDQ was during SGDQ 2014’s Tomba 2 run by CavemanDCJ when a member on the couch was repeatedly making fun of the game, and CavemanDCJ said “I would really prefer if you’d be quiet.” Uncooperative and uninformative commentary is met with criticism by the runners and viewers alike. Quality commentary is just as integral to the GDQ experience as the gameplay.

Runners at GDQ are well aware of this duality and will plan ahead to ensure their run satisfies both components. R2 was cognizant of their quiet personality and thus selected two couch members to “handle the tricks and specific information about that because it’s hard for me to explain while I’m doing it...the people on the couch were mostly explaining tricks.” R4 had a similar approach, explaining:

I’m not a super energetic person when I am playing games to start with. I usually don’t say a whole lot unless people are talking to me. Going into the run, I knew I would be relying on the people on the couch behind me to do most of the commentary. Just because that’s just how I am. (R4)

R3 also delegated the responsibility of commentary to the couch members, noting “I didn’t really plan on doing commentary so I could focus on the run more” and how “having two runners [of the game] on the couch...was really helpful.” This delegation of responsibility of commentary to the couch allows the runner to fully concentrate on the run’s execution, thereby ensuring the run is up to GDQ’s high standard of gameplay and at the same time allows the couch commentators to plan ahead on when and how to provide explanations for the run. This coordination between the runner and the couch is akin to the meshing of play-by-play and color casters in traditional sports and esports broadcasting [20]. All informants who ran games at GDQ identified this meshing of execution and commentary to be essential for a successful GDQ run.
Donation messages often express appreciation when commentary is handled properly in conjunction with gameplay. V3 was especially impressed by TrevPerson’s commentary during his Pokemon Black/White 2 run at AGDQ 2018 when TrevPerson mentioned the player can surf, or swim, into a particular tree (an unintended oversight by the developers), explaining “the surfing tree is memorable because it’s ridiculous.” This sharing of deep knowledge of a game, whether it’s deep understanding of game mechanics or trivia such as the surfing tree, has become a staple in GDQ commentary and often inspires viewers to donate. In SGDQ 2018, there were 297 donations explicitly complimenting the commentary provided by the couch such as “The skill, endurance, and commentary are amazing!”, “Super great to see you at a GDQ event, loved your commentary,” and “Loved watching great commentary, a great audience, and a great cause for the GREATEST game of all time.” There are instances where the commentary is appreciated above the speedrun itself. During the seven hour-long run of Final Fantasy VI at SGDQ 2018, the runner, Puwexil, provided detailed commentary throughout the entire run explaining strategies, hidden mechanics, and even fun trivia about the game. Donation messages such as “Puwexil’s commentary and knowledge is second to none and it’s always a pleasure to watch him play this game” and other messages praising Puwexil were received and read on stream.

5.4 The Social in and Around the Couch

Games Done Quick provides a rare opportunity for an otherwise online community of speedrunners and their fans to physically meet. This gathering of the community and friends resonated strongly with viewers and is most prominent around the couch. Social interactions between the couch and audience can be achieved through messages—for example, we saw messages like “greetings from the back couch” or “greetings from the audience” read. In response, the runner or main couch acknowledged these donations by saying “hello” or even looking backwards and waving. In addition to these short exchanges between the audience and the couch, more intimate interaction was observed through donation messages conveying couch banter and jokes. GDQ’s deliberate allusion to its roots in family rooms allows for visitors to not only watch but also participate themselves in the social aspects of GDQ speedrunning. 

5.4.1 Associating with the Couch. As GDQ moves through its long list of games to showcase, each new runner brings a new cast on the couch, drawing in their own community of friends and fans to watch their gameplay and commentary. A3 and H4 explains how their donations are directed to friends who are on the GDQ stream:

So, I figure if I am going to donate...I will donate and shout-out my friend [who is running] and wishing him luck. (A3)

During events I try to [donate], if friends of mine are [on stream] or someone I know is [on stream] I’ll try to do something like, give a shout-out or a joke. (H4)

Runners were always appreciative of these donation messages: when A3’s message was read aloud, their friends on the couch “got a big smile on their faces.” These donations can reinforce the homely feel of GDQ and the couch, especially when the donations are from family members—R4 and R5 both had donation messages from their mothers saying “I love you” read out loud on stream. They responded with embarrassed laughter that was met with appreciative applause from the audience. 

It was also important for virtual viewers without a direct relationship with speedrunners to visibly voice their support via donations at GDQ. V1 explains that they donated to GDQ since “it was the only way to show my support to [the runner I follow].” Similarly, V2 explained that they donated because “[the runner] is really the only one I actively watch [on Twitch], so that was really my motivation because it was [that specific runner].” These parasocial donation messages hold
significance to runners. R3 and R4 shared how they appreciated hearing donation messages from their fans at SGDQ 2018:

A few [fans from my community] donated just saying “good luck on the run.” (R3)

A lot of people who watch my stream and know me in the community, they donated too. It was really nice hearing the donations. Hearing the donations, I’m thinking, “Oh yeah, I know who that is.” That was really cool. (R4)

Such messages illustrate how viewers are often driven to donate when they are associated or acquainted with the runner or the couch—a motivator echoed in literature [28, 29, 52]. However, we found that donors often push further than just donating and writing a message; donors seek acknowledgement from those they directed their message to. R1 recalls receiving “a lot of” Discord messages after their run at GDQ asking whether they heard their donation message, and R1 would express their gratitude for each donor that reached out, strengthening the parasocial relationship between the runner and their fans.

Donation through association is actively supported by GDQ organizers. Volunteers who’s job is to filter through donations and hosts are instructed to prioritize particular donation messages for the runner. Pre-run, hosts talk to the runner to get a “whitelist” list (e.g., family members, close friends, community members) of donors that, if seen, are fast-tracked to be read aloud. During SGDQ 2018, H2 noted that “a lot of [the runner’s] subscribers were donating [during the run],” explaining “[these donations] are usually good ones to read.” H4 recalled coming across a donation message from a well-known community member of the game being run and recognized the significance of this person’s donation. H4 read this message at the next available opportunity, which caused the runner and couch to burst into laughter, cheering, and applause. These messages from special individuals are often preempted by the host announcing something similar to “we have a special donation from...” before reading the message to command attention from the audience, couch, and runner.

Due to the large number of donation messages GDQ receives, all participants understood that the chances of their message being read was low. As a result, having messages being read becomes a special moment. When A1’s first donation message was read on stream, “their heart kind of just skipped a beat.” The first author also vividly recalled his own enjoyment upon hearing his first donation—a shoutout to the runner—being read out loud on GDQ. These moments carry significance for the donor because it establishes their presence, albeit virtually, at the event, showing support to the runner or couch. A1 explain how they deliberately use their donation message as a mechanism to achieve this:

I always make sure [to donate] during a friends’ run to give them that extra support like “Hey, I’m here, I’m watching”...I will only donate when my friends are running. (A1)

Similarly, R5 told us they have donated to every single GDQ event since 2012, explaining that they “just donate during the Mega Man [games], because usually there is people I know and [I just donate] when people I know are up there...I just feel connected [to them] so I donate.”

Although a donation being read is special and a rarity, it is still an accessible and inclusive entry point for viewers to partake in the couch experience. Informants who have volunteered as a host often bring up a misconception about donating: your chances of having your message read on stream is more likely if you donate more money. Donations of $1,000 or more are prioritized by hosts due to their ability to generate excitement from the audience; however, hosts are aware that the vast majority of donations are in small amounts—micro-donations. The range of donation amounts received during SGDQ 2018 was between $5 to $10,000, but median and mode donation was $25. A little more than 25% of all donations were between $5 and $10. Therefore, hosts actually seek out messages from small donation amounts to read. During the host volunteer orientation
at AGDQ 2019, the orientation leader explained the concept of a golden donation, describing it as donations with messages that mention “first time donor,” “it’s not much, but here’s $5,” or other messages of similar sentiment. These are “golden” because they are easily relatable for the vast majority of the audience, encouraging the average viewer to donate, even if it is a small amount. This levels the playing field for all viewers: you do not need to donate a lot for a chance to have your message read—a simple $5 donation has just as much significance to GDQ as a $5,000 donation and is just as likely to be read on stream.

5.4.2 Engaging with the Couch. In addition to using donation messages to show support, donors also used messages to partake in jokes about games around the couch, similar to the whispering and giggling that we observed around the backup couch. During the The Legend of Zelda Wind Waker HD run at AGDQ 2019, the runner had to play through a battleship mini-game where a character in the game would shout “Kaboom!” after each hit shot. The runner had to play through this mini-game multiple times, resulting in many repeated “Kaboom’s.” The couch soon started shouting “Kaboom!” along with the game, and even the backup couch and live audience joined in. Eventually, even the online viewers also joined in on the fun. During this mini-game, the host read donation after donation all with “Kaboom!” written in them, as if they were also on the couch joining in on the joke. During the 90 minute speedrun, GDQ received more than 700 “Kaboom”-related donation messages.

Other times, viewers use donations to join in on conversations and banter between the runner and the couch. For instance, R3 ran a game involving four characters of different colors. R3 recalls expressing their preference for a purple character, and, as a result, the couch and the runner started a small argument about the best color. The viewers eventually joined in on the argument:

There was a couple people talking [on the couch] about the best [colored character], because there’s four colors of [the character]. So some of [the viewers] were donating saying “Oh red’s the best’ and all that kind of stuff...And if anyone said that red was their favorite I would say they’re wrong <chuckles>. (R3)

Similarly, A2 recalls during the Pepsiman run, an old Pepsi-sponsored video game, viewers started “donating with #pepsi...and a lot of random people just got in on the joke and started talking about Pepsi versus Coke [in the donation messages].” Sometimes, engagement from the viewers can be unexpected. H4 was on a couch for friend’s run at GDQ and started talking to the runner and the other couch members about potatoes, and “for some reason, people started [donating] jokes about potatoes and stuff like that.”

Other times, jokes and other banter will be requested to encourage viewers to donate. H3 recalls a runner who was missing his shoes, so they “challenged the [viewers] to come up with as many horrible shoe puns as possible”. At AGDQ 2019, the host Mr. Game and Shout announced on stream that he likes tongue twisters and challenged the viewers to send him tongue twisters to read. It was well-received through laughter from the audience for each one read.

These donation messages, ad-hoc or not, illustrates the desire for online viewers to take part in the living room environment GDQ has created with the couch. Friends, family, or fans of the runner or the couch will donate to have their support be heard and acknowledged, and viewers donate to engage with the couch in jokes or banter. Thus, we see that viewers are incentivized to donate by their social desire to be part of the couch via their donation messages.

5.4.3 Movement Around the Couch. The couch, being the central focal point of the GDQ live streams, caters to a diversity of viewers. As GDQ transitions from game to game throughout the event, speedrunning communities of the showcased game as well as general fans come and go with each game change. In our observations at AGDQ 2019, we observed that attendees often gathered
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around the backup couch prior to the start of a run, and remained there during the entire duration of the run. After the end of the run, the runner and the main couch exited the stage; the backup couch disbands in full around the same time, leaving the couch vacant. A new group of attendees, in anticipation for the upcoming run, would then congregate around the now empty backup couch.

Although the couch, as the main event, showcases a diverse set of game titles with their respective but exclusive cast of competitive runners and commentators (cf. Section 5.1.2), the backup couch showcases a diverse set of attendees and fans mixed in with notable speedrunners of the game. At AGDQ 2019, the first author joined the backup couch of a game he closely followed for four years and observed both notable members (e.g., world record holders or high profile runners) and casual fans (e.g., attendees like the first author) of that speedrunning game community sitting alongside him. Thus, GDQ makes public its diverse subset of attendees through non-restrictive access to the backup couch—without joining the main couch, one has the opportunity to establish a clearer affiliation with a particular speedrunning community.

Live audience members and online viewers followed the same ebb and flow of the backup couch for similar reasons: different populations associated and resonated with different games, runners, and couch. This was demonstrated through donation messages—for example, “Had to donate during Super Metroid…” or “I’ve been looking forward to this Final Fantasy IX run all week…”.

6 DISCUSSION

From our findings, it is evident that the motivations behind why viewers of GDQ donate depend greatly on circumstance and the person. Wohn et al.’s [52] significant work on online live streamers, largely video game streamers, identified six key motivating factors behind viewer donations. Our findings have some parallels with their findings. For brevity’s sake, we refer to online live streaming simply as “live streamers” and the GDQ live streaming event as just “GDQ.” Donors to both live streamers and GDQ are motivated by the value of the created content (as shown by donation messages thanking the GDQ staff and volunteers) and philanthropic causes (as some live streamers raise funds for charity, albeit on a smaller scale than GDQ). Viewers respond well to entertaining (e.g., expert gameplay) and educational (e.g., learning about strategies or hearing insights on speedrunning) content. Moreover, donors are also motivated by their emotional attachment to the live streamer, runner, and the couch, as well as using donations as a form of interaction with both live streamers and GDQ.

Building upon this work, we examine donation motivations unique to the gaming marathon live streaming environment through the case of GDQ’s fundraising success—a singular event showcasing speedrunning and its subcommunities. Our fieldwork suggests that events such as GDQ construct and perform their grassroots as intimate, social gathering spaces; in the case of GDQ, this space is the living room, physically exemplified by the couch. GDQ deftly repackages and broadcasts the couch to the on- and off-line audience’s delight to create a desire within the audience to partake in the couch. Viewers watch not only the intricate runs themselves but the “action” on the couch as well. Donations are a crucial means by which to participate in this action. To compliment this, GDQ’s schedule showcasing ~150 games rotates through numerous and different casts on stage—runners and the couch. Each change in cast will attract different sets of viewers who want to participate in the new social milieu around the couch, creating an ebb and flow of viewers gathered around both the backup couch and on Twitch. This movement of viewers allows GDQ to cater to the largest possible population of potential viewers, presenting to them opportunities to participate in a wide variety of couches via donations. We suggest that the implications of the couch lie in informing the space of fostering charities or non-profits.
6.1 Desire to Join the Couch

We first examine how GDQ creates an exclusive rendition of the homely living room environment—a digital hearth—around the main couch, which then creates a desire for social belonging in the viewers.

6.1.1 The Specialized Digital Hearth. The intentional recreation of the living room by placing the couch front and center at GDQ as well as providing the backup couch is a clear statement by GDQ and its organizers that it is focused on the community, not just the runner. However, more so than a symbol, the couch is an exemplar of a digital hearth, a space for communities to gather and interact. Voida and Greenberg [49] used the concept of the digital hearth [12] to describe the Nintendo Wii console as a central gathering place that encourages social interaction for a diverse population of gamers across age, gender, expertise, and gameplay preference. Moving the console and its family room out onto the stage, GDQ, we argue, uniquely reconfigures the digital hearth into entertainment consisting of two gathering spaces: 1) the couch on the main stage with the runner and the couch, and 2) the backup couch behind the main couch with the re-stream television of the speedrun (cf. Section 5.1.2). Thus, the GDQ is not simply a digital hearth but makes the digital hearth itself a form of social entertainment, something that is watched via live streams and motivates viewers to donate to engage with the stream.

The main couch is limited to the runner, a privileged position at GDQ, and the couch members are hand-selected by the runner. Since runners are top-performing runners of their respective games and the couch are experts of the speedrun, the main couch is presented as a gathering space for the top members of the community. When R4 was accepted into SGDQ 2018 at a prime time slot, where there would be a peak in viewership, he described this as an “honor,” illustrating how joining the couch is highly desired among runners. The couch is thusly a digital hearth that gathers sparse subcommunities of speedrunning spread across different games—a specialized digital hearth. The specialization of the digital hearth creates a desire in the speedrunning community and audience to join the couch.

This desire is demonstrated through the gathering of attendees around the backup couch. Attendees who want be involved with a run at GDQ, but were not hand-selected by the runner to be on the main couch, gather around the backup couch as proxy instead. The backup couch is in line with the use of the digital hearth by Voida and Greenberg [49] as a gathering place for a diverse population of speedrunners—other runners, friends, fans, or attendees are all free to join. At AGDQ 2019, our fieldnotes revealed that during high-profile runs such as popular games (e.g., Zelda, Mega Man, Super Mario) or games during key moments of the event (e.g., opening run, finale), the backup couch would overflow with attendees pulling extra chairs up next to the couch or even sitting on the floor around the backup couch, all wanting to be part of the couch experience. This gravitation of audience members towards the main couch exemplifies their desire to be part of the couch, wanting, as A1 and H2 put it, a more “legitimate” experience.

6.1.2 Virtually Joining the Couch. Attendees of GDQ have the option to join the backup couch at any time if they so desire; however, online viewers are obviously unable to physically join the backup couch. Instead, online viewers utilize donations to fulfill their desire to join the couch through donating to GDQ.

To illustrate this dynamic, we categorize viewers of GDQ events into a hierarchy of five viewing experiences: 1) runner, 2) main couch, 3) backup couch, 4) live audience, and 5) online viewers. The runner and couch are the most sought after experience; online viewer is the most accessible experience for the general population (Figure 7).
Attendees in the live audience gather around the backup couch to partake in a more exclusive viewing experience (denoted by the left arrow on the left of Figure 7). Although they may be in close proximity to the main couch, members of the backup couch nonetheless often sought ways to “join” the main couch. For instance, live audience members—including those sitting on the backup couch—sent short greetings via donation messages (cf. Section 5.4) that were read on stream, allowing donors to be publicly present on the stream. Hence, donation messages provide a mechanism for attendees to join the main couch. Moreover, for online viewers, donation messages are the only way for them to approach the exclusive viewing experience of the couch.

Thus, donation messages provide viewers a chance to take a virtual seat on the main couch—to be part of the virtual version of the couch and participate in the social milieu of the GDQ couch. Due to the massive amount of donations received at GDQ, only a small percentage (4–6%) of donations are read by the host; however, during the rare moments when the host does read a donation, it establishes the donor’s virtual presence on the main couch—“promoting” them up the hierarchy to a more exclusive viewing experience (illustrated by the arrows on the right of Figure 7), satisfying their desire to be part of the main couch. Since the chances of being “promoted” are slim, it retains the exclusiveness of the main couch, even for virtual members who joined via donations.

In summary, the format of GDQ’s couch creates an exclusive rendition of the digital hearth, sparking a desire from both attendees and online viewers to participate. The closest experience of the main couch is achieved through donating to GDQ and having the donation read out loud on stream, establishing your virtual spot on the main couch.

6.2 The Rotating Cast of the Couch, Backup Couch, and Viewers

The speedrunning subculture consists of communities of specialists around particular games. GDQ succeeds in maintaining a singular identity that bridges across these subcommunities through the curation of the couch—the simulated living room. The couch is akin to a performance stage whereby a rotating cast of runners and their games showcases their runs. We argue that this rotating cast is
a significant driving force for donations. Whereas individual streamers garner donations mostly around singular games, as indicated by our informants’ strategies in encouraging donations or subscribers on their personal streams, GDQ capitalizes on funnelling donations from multiple, dedicated audiences into a single pool by gathering these disparate subcommunities to a single couch.

As the couch at GDQ rotates through different casts of speedrunners and couch members (denoted by the upper rotating set of triangles in Figure 8), viewers of GDQ rotate in tandem as different populations resonate with different games and runners (denoted by the lower rotating set of trapezoids in Figure 8). This movement of viewers across different games was observed through the physical gathering and disbanding of attendees around the backup couch across each run as mentioned in Section 5.4.3. This assemblage of the runner, couch, and community members unique to each game enables the continual live streaming of multiple, new performance plays [34]. Such performance attracts viewers across various speedrunning subcommunities and gaming communities in general, maximizing GDQ’s set of potential viewers and, by extension, donors (denoted by the pool of “potential viewers and donors” at the bottom of Figure 8).

The couch performance format of GDQ transforms the digital hearth into one that is also presented on stream as a form of social entertainment. This, in conjunction with the event showcasing numerous speedrunning communities and their games spanning different genres, popularity, and franchises, create a unique social dynamic optimizing donations: Each upcoming game attracts a set of viewers anticipating the run. This anticipation is accentuated by the upcoming opportunities to donate, have their message be read on stream, and virtually join the upcoming couch (denoted by the red portion on the right of Figure 8). When the upcoming game is rotated in and takes center stage at GDQ, the couch—an exclusive digital hearth—generates desire from the viewers to join this unique social milieu. Viewers who want to take a virtual seat on the couch are given the opportunity to do so through donating to GDQ. Those who are lucky enough to have their donation
message read by the host on stream are promoted from just being a normal viewer to becoming an “honorary” member of the couch, fulfilling their desire for social belonging (denoted by the black portion at the center of Figure 8). When the run ends, the couch and the viewers disbands; however, those who who took a virtual seat on the couch retain their status as having been part of the exclusive social milieu of the GDQ couch even after the couch disbands (denoted by the blue portion on the left of Figure 8).

Although viewers have varying motivations to donate as identified by Wohn et al. [52] and supported by our findings, we argue that the ever-present desire for viewers to take part on the couch, whether explicitly or not, in conjunction with GDQ’s far-reaching pool of potential viewers and donors is a significant underlying driving force behind GDQ’s consistent success in raising money for charity.

6.3 Accessible Exclusivity

As described above, Games Done Quick is built upon layers of exclusivity; the position of the runner and the couch is a highly sought after experience. Even the backup couch has its restrictions: while anyone can join, the backup couch is limited to the physical attendees of GDQ; informants who had never attended a GDQ all express their desire to attend one. One potentially problematic aspect is that with donations so tied to offering opportunities for virtual audiences to interact with the speedrunning community, GDQ thus marginalizes those who do not donate or have limited funds to donate. However, as mentioned in Section 5.4.1, GDQ deliberately ensures that first-time donors and micro-donations will be read on the stream, leveling the playing field for all viewers to partake in the GDQ couch.

6.4 Designing Backup Couches for Charity Events

Although we cannot be certain that GDQ intentionally created two different couches with the intent to foster donations as depicted above (Figure 7), nonetheless we find that the reasons people donate to GDQ echo aspects of speedrunning that GDQ and its community consistently emphasize, which are represented by the couches. Audience members gravitate towards the couch, whether physically by joining the backup couch or virtually through donations. Designing successful charity events such as Games Done Quick not only requires considering the same design opportunities to motivate people to donate to live streamers [52] but need to also, we argue, take into consideration the underlying motivation for participants to engage with and join the communities they identify with.

We see our research as part of an ongoing discussion in CSCW on socio-technical systems supporting non-profit agencies and crowdfunding [14, 18, 31, 40, 51]. Our work continues the broader conversation into how nonprofits and charity organizations navigate the online medium and open design insights into benefactor-beneficiary interactions unique in computer-mediated platforms. Drawing from Games Done Quick as a success story, we encourage both scholars and charity organizers to consider integrating avenues of interaction similar to those utilized at GDQ events and as we have conceptualized above. Below we detail three design considerations to enhance charity live stream engagement for implementation or future exploration:

- **Offer diverse motivations to donate:** Donors have varying motivations to donate. GDQ allows the audience donation opportunities to efficiently cater to each of the six motivating factors for viewers to donate to individual live streamers as identified by Wohn et al. [52]. Our work suggests that live streams of charity events also need to address these motivations as a foundational basis for encouraging donations. This includes providing avenues for donors to support the event, show gratitude (e.g., for the entertainment, learning opportunities), and
engage with community members they associate with. Doing so ensures viewers can address their own motivation(s) to donate and prevents the possibility of alienating potential donors;

- **Identify and provide opportunity to satisfy social desire:** GDQ allows donors to satisfy their desire to take part in the main couch—a specialized digital hearth—by donating and having their donation message read aloud live at the event. We encourage organizers to evaluate their event, target population, and participating community to identify sources of social desire unique to their event. Identifying the social desires and providing the opportunity to satisfy these desires can provide a strong underlying motivation to donate. Design should leverage the public, dynamic sociality afforded by interacting with performing and entertaining digital hearths to incentivize donations.

- **Provide opportunity for different communities to take the spotlight:** At GDQ, the couch provides a space where different speedrunners and their community have the chance to showcase their run to the audience. Additionally, GDQ transforms the digital hearth with the couch and speedruns into a form of social entertainment specific to each game community, attracting different viewer populations, maximizing publicity and exposure. We suggest charity event organizers provide opportunities for heterogeneous communities to establish, present, and foster their own digital hearth that also broadcast their support for charitable causes. Doing so will not only draw in viewers who associate with the community but also attract potential donors from these communities.

7 CONCLUSION

Games Done Quick has found great success as a charity organization, raising millions of USD for charity twice a year. Drawing from participant observations, interviews with key stakeholders, and analyzing donation data, our findings show that viewers of GDQ are motivated to donate to support laudable charity goals, celebrate gameplay skill and commentating on speedruns, and socially interact with the live-streamed event. We also identify a significant motivating factor for viewers to donate: the social milieu of the couch. Harkening back to its humble origins in living rooms, the couch at GDQ acts as a specialized digital hearth wherein participation around the couch is highly sought after by viewers. Here, the digital hearth itself becomes a form of entertainment and an opportunity for social engagement that is live streamed. Viewers can virtually join the couch by donating and having their donation message read on stream. The rotating cast around the couch brings in different subcommunities of speedrunning, pooling diverse donations that vie for access to the couch. We envision future work will study the inner-workings of the GDQ organization itself—its processes, actors, history, and culture—to better understand technology’s role in charitable fundraising and its relationship in brokering charity organizations.

The social milieu of the couch is not unique to GDQ. Other charity live-stream events (e.g., Desert Bus for Hope, GTLive Charity Stream, Project for Awesome) all centrally feature a couch on their streams. Opportunities exist for designs to support crowdfunding and charity organizations via infrastructures like those built for GDQ around their own “couches” to stimulate participation through donation. We hope this work encourages further study into how we may integrate entertainment technologies such as live streaming to foster actions for public good by a diverse, or even niche, set of online consumers.

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