

Collecting, displaying and not playing: Steam sales and digital game collections

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Digital game downloads have become the most common form of PC videogame purchase worldwide, changing how we buy and display videogames. A major market force in this digital distribution movement is the Steam platform. Steam exhibits a dominance of the videogame marketplace; 92% of PC games are now sold digitally and 75% of those sales take place through the Steam platform's digital distribution store (Edwards 2013; Chalk 2014).

A key phenomenon of the Steam platform is the periodic Steam sales that take place several times a year. These sales often occur around major dates such as the New Year, summer holidays, or Halloween. During these times, many games are sold at heavily discounted prices, ranging from 10%–90% off. For Steam users, these sales have become a topic of frequent discussion. There are forums and 'best value' lists written up on websites such as reddit.com and 'memes' and in-jokes have emerged around the inability of Steam users to resist the low prices being offered during these sales. Some users view Steam sales as a major contributor to the fact that they own more games than they have ever played; an extensive personal collection they will never get around to fully playing.

This paper will engage with detailed fieldwork examples in order to offer insight into the intersection of purchasing, collecting and displaying digital content on the Steam platform, with particular attention being paid to the phenomena of Steam sales. It aims to call attention to the perception of many Steam users that they own many more games than they have, or indeed will aim to have, played. In order to develop such insight, this paper will deploy a microethological analysis (Giddings 2014) of Steam usage in Melbourne (Australia) households. Seth Giddings (2009) posits 'microethology' as a methodological tool for observing the relations that occur when humans interface with digital media (2014). A microethological approach is well poised to unpack everyday interactions as it calls attention to the two-way feedback loop between person and device, user and platform. In the case of this paper's focus on moments of purchase and collection, a microethological analysis is particularly well suited as it emphasizes specific events and elements to explore the 'material and aesthetic chains of cause and effect or feedback' (Giddings 2009, 149).

For the fieldwork discussed in this paper a microethological approach involves close synchronised analysis of data from Steam library 'tours' and face to face interviews, incorporating both on and off-screen interactions. Such analysis allows for a thick description of Steam sales in the Australian context and also calls attention to the notion of 'collecting' and 'displaying' in a digital environment. Within digital contexts, Gregory Steirer offers a useful starting point for collection (2013). Steirer delineates between the various phases of collecting; pre-acquisition, acquisition and

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ownership (Steirer 2013). For digital collectors, the phases of pre-acquisition (the searching for) and acquisition (the moment of collecting) are as engaging as the ownership phase (Steirer 2013). In the case of Steam purchases, the Steam sales offer users a chance to quickly and economically bolster their ‘collection’, often creating frenzied bouts of purchasing games that are ‘too cheap not to buy’ as one participant put it. Many of these games purchased by participants on Steam with bought with apparently little to no immediate intent to play, a phenomenon that this paper will unpack in detail through microethological analysis.

The notion of digital collections has become a powerful part of videogames, with in-game achievements, completion guides and item lists common in many games and their surrounding communities. Likewise, physical collections of boardgames have filled many cupboards and console games are oft displayed on bookshelves. Such collections are not cheap. Paul Van der Grijp argues that the economic and temporal investment into a personal collection can be seen as ‘pleasant sacrifices’ toward a personal project (Van der Grijp 2002; Van der Grijp 2006). This paper seeks to explore the notion of pleasant sacrifices in a digital space, examining player/collector perceptions of purchase, collection and display in their digital Steam Libraries.

This paper’s structure will begin with a brief overview of literature into microethology and collecting. A second section aims to outline the methods undertaken and will be followed by a detailed discussion of several case studies. The paper will conclude with suggestions of how this research correlates to Steam sale engagement around Australia and wider trends of digital distribution. Finally, it will offer some potential future questions for research in this area in light of the emergence of competing games stores such as EA’s Origin, the GOG Galaxy client and the Epic Games Store.

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