Speaking of Time: Time-centric Language in Video Game Marketing and User Reviews on Steam

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INTRODUCTION
As scholarly interest in video games grows, the relationship between playtime, game development, and player experience is gaining due attention from diverse disciplines. While the topic of playtime as a symptom of pathologic play (Chen et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Yildiz Durak et al., 2023) may be the most discussed perspective currently, nuanced investigations are emerging in the study of play and time. From learning about temporality through time-based mechanics (Stamenković and Jaćević 2015), to how game design can disrupt the perceived flow of time (Nuyens et al. 2020), or how digital play can maintain daily routines (Roth, 2022), unique approaches that value temporality and play are coming to light. To contrast and contribute to these studies this research frames playtime as both a value for user experience and as an overlooked feature in video game marketing. By collecting data from both user reviews and marketing blurbs on Steam, this exploratory study delves into time-centric language as a measure to value playtime as a multifaceted element in shaping the presentation and reception of video games.

Steam's extensive userbase of active players, reviewers, and developers (Guzsvinecz & Szűcs, 2023) paired with over 50,000 games (many of which are also ported to consoles) make for a valuable resource of industry values and user experience (Clement, 2023). It is through the Steam Application Programming Interface (API) and Steam-approved data service, Steam Spy, that reliable and up-to-date data user and developer data can be accessed (Steamworks, 2023, Galyonkin, 2023). This popularity and access make Steam a rich source for studying playtime as well as reflecting the value of user reviews as a resource and motivator for online shopping (Wang et al., 2021). While marketing blurbs follow a modular template for developers to follow, user reviews present an inimitable source of unprompted player experience to contrast the professional motivations of industry reviews (Phillips et al., 2021).

Various presentations of playtime have long been observable on Steam (Saaidin & Kasiran, 2021) yet video game marketing and digital storefronts seem disinterested in categorising video games in relation to time-centric concepts. While previous exploratory studies have sought to improve Steam's recommender system (Cheuque et al., 2019) or rework user tags (Li, 2020), this study seeks to identify the significance of playtime through language to better value the temporal dimensions of digital play beyond the total play time accrued by users on the Steam platform. By utilizing Python

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for scraping data from Steam game pages and user reviews, this research will identify patterns in industry marketing and user experience that value the clear communication of temporal concepts and commitments.

Early analysis of data collected from set marketing blurbs on Steam ('Descriptions', 'About the Game' and 'Reviews' [industry reviews from sources such as *IGN* or *Destructoid*]), from a data set of 1000 games have revealed distinctions in marketing practices between base game releases and additional content. Using keyword searches such as 'playtime', 'hours', and 'session' there is a contrast in how base games are described in relation to downloadable content, remasters, and special editions over base game marketing information. While still in early analysis, this could speak to a marketing or game development norm to quantify additional content experiences temporally and base games spatially (levels, endings, etc.). These contrasting practices reflect a considered approach to audience engagement, appealing to untapped audiences with the mystery of new, spatial experiences in base games, and quantified, temporal expectations of longevity in additional content for returning players. There is also an early theme development to how these words are presented, largely being *procedural* (time taken to render or create), *temporal* (time taken to play), and *descriptive* (language used to set narrative or stakes). Beyond that, there is a consistent value in communicating that games receive patches and updates at a monthly frequency whereas content drops for seasonal, live-service games have a homogenised value of three months. In contrast, early analysis of user reviews depicts playtime as a consistent point for recommendation or warning others but not limited to a binary sentiment. That is games with longer overall playtimes are not inherently better, nor are shorter playtimes considered worse depending on context. Quality of play and framing of the experience through game marketing seem to be of significance with this element of user reviews.

This exploratory approach to identifying the use and value of time-centric language in video game storefronts is situated within a broader research project to better identify the relationship between play and time. This can be used to inform broader interactive valuations of apps, software, entertainment, and interactive technologies that we encounter day to day. By continually probing the connection between playtime, design, and user experience we can better understand how digital experiences of various lengths are valued and interpreted singularly and as a society.

BIO

Tom Byers is a PhD candidate from the University of Melbourne under the Faculty of Engineering & IT with research interests in player behaviour, community development, and playtime. He has worked professionally as an indie studio community manager and as a video game content creator for various platforms.

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