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 continues to evolve, the intricate relationship between playtime, game development, and audience sentiment is gaining due attention. While the topical frame 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, there is emerging nuance in academic interest in playtime. Unique perspectives such as the valuation of time-based mechanics (slowmo, rewind, etc.) as introductions to temporal concepts (Stamenković and Jaćević 2015) and user experience frameworks that note play as a disruption to perceived time through flow theory (Nuyens et al. 2020), all create unique cornerstones of temporal perspectives and play. To contribute to these and other approaches of time in play, this study frames playtime as both a motivator for audience behaviour and as a category for game design with the potential to impact the commercial viability of video games. By collecting data from both user reviews and marketing blurbs on Steam, this exploratory study delves into playtime as a multifaceted element in shaping the presentation and reception of video games.

Various presentations of playtime have long been observable on Steam through user information shared on comments and profiles (Saaidin & Kasiran, 2021) yet video game marketing and the features of digital storefronts seem disinterested in creating a set structure for 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 discourse and presentation beyond the total play time accrued by users on the Steam platform. By utilizing Python for scraping data from Steam game pages and user reviews, this research will identify the patterns and significances associated with playtime metrics to showcase the disparity in the current framing of playtime against the values of audience sentiment.

Steam boasts an extensive user base of active users who passionately engage and communicate on the platform to create rich user data for study (Guzsvinecz and Szűcs, 2023). This userbase is paired with an enormous catalogue of games, spanning different genres and sharing titles that are also released on consoles to make for a

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valuable resource that represents audience sentiment beyond Steam (Clement, 2023). It is through the Steam Application Programming Interface (API) and Valve approved data service, Steam Spy, that user and developer information can be accessed in a manner that ensures systematic collection of reliable and up-to-date data (Steamworks, 2023, Galyonkin, 2023). This popularity, access, and observable culture of interactivity make Steam a rich source for studying playtime patterns across various genres and development backgrounds.

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 'lifespan' there is an emerging 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, areas, sequences, 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. Similarly, 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 seems to be of significance with this element of user reviews.

This exploratory approach to identify the use and effect of time-centric language in video game storefronts is situated within a broader research project to better identify the relationship between play and time. The implications of this study extend beyond the realms of the gaming industry, offering valuable insights into user behaviour, engagement, and preferences in digital entertainment. Future research would explore the impact of playtime on other gaming platforms, delve into current motivational models of player engagement that ignore playtime (Quantic Foundry, 2023), and investigate the integration of playtime metrics in game design and development processes. By continually probing the connection between playtime and game-related dynamics, the industry can evolve, catering to the ever-changing demands of the gaming audience all while better understanding how digital experiences of various lengths are valued and interpreted by individuals.

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