Exponential Backlogs, or a Short Game Manifesto

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ABSTRACT

Popular opinion dictates that the creation of “long video games”—in which gameplay lasts dozens of hours—is a virtuous goal; long games promise a good return on monetary investment for players and perpetuate a “more is better” system of one-upmanship in gameplay and game development. Why, then, should we feel compelled to reconsider the “short game”? How do the advantages of making and playing short games involve questions of fair labor practices, ecology, access, and inclusion, and what kinds of recent games provide models for best practices?

In video game production, the extensive length of a given game is perennially viewed as a virtue in and of itself. Specifying how many dozens of hours it might take to complete a game on the back of its commercial packaging has been a regular selling point since the console era of the 1980s and continues with the packaging of
contemporary games to this day. In video game reviews, critics use extended length as a key indicator that the consumer is receiving a good value for the purchase price. In user reviews of games on the game distribution platform Steam, short gameplay length is often a key complaint in not recommending a title to other users. This “more is better” mentality pervades a culture of game production that is also releasing more and more titles at an increasing rate. Extended gameplay for each title becomes a point of competition that can extend the average total possible hours played in a game across the board. The combination of an increase in game production and increased gameplay time per title results in a staggering number of options for how players of video games spend the finite budget of gameplay time they may have. The problem of gameplay surplus has led to some novel approaches for consumers to manage these options.

On the sales and distribution side, one solution to the problem of gameplay surplus is the advent of the games bundle. It’s now a standard sales practice for producers, typically months or years after initial release, to offer their game in a bundle with other titles at a price greatly reduced when compared to the launch value. Humble Bundle, a leader in bundle sales sites, offers post-release games at a pay-what-you-want scale with a set minimum. Even if one pays more than the minimum price requirement, the overall price per game is still a fraction of its original price. Bundles are often offered within a special sales time window that motivates consumers to buy a bundle of titles containing games they are interested in, regardless of whether they plan to play any of the rest of the bundle. Sometimes it can seem like a worthwhile proposal to go ahead and buy a whole bundle even if the consumer doesn’t have any interest in any of the games simply because the overall price is so low, and the player might be interested in those titles later. Additionally, platforms like Humble Bundle and Steam have frequent sales on individual games, and discounts can be surprisingly low, also driving sales with the sense of time-based opportunity. This highly mercurial marketplace is far less than ideal for game studios, but when your title loses purchase value exponentially post-release, this near giveaway of older releases can seem like an acceptable proposition. The old title is at least earning some revenue as opposed to none, and it might serve to drum up interest and attention for newer releases, perhaps gaining marginal promotional value in a highly saturated market that is difficult to stand out in.

Access to cheap games through online sales and bundles has led to a new predicament for users of sales platforms, and along with it a new piece of gamer jargon: the “backlog.” Quite simply, users
often purchase many more games than they can play, creating a signal and noise problem not within a marketplace, but their own game libraries. With so many titles populating the lists of what one has purchased through platforms like Steam, Humble Bundle, or itch.io, it can be difficult to remember what you have purchased or to figure out what you wanted to play in the first place. A new genre of website has developed as a novel reaction to this phase of the problem: the Steam calculator site.

There are now several websites that run analytics on your database of game purchases within Steam, such as howlongtobeatsteam.com/#/, steamleft.com, and steamdb.info/calculator/.

These Steam calculator sites access a user’s Steam account through their login and password and then deliver an estimate of how long it would take the user to complete their entire library. The results are commonly measured in months or even years of nonstop consecutive play. Another calculator, steamtime.info, not only calculates your remaining Steam library playtime but also places it on a leaderboard across other users who have signed up for the site. This is a very genuine expression of what the world of games does when confronted with a data-based problem: create another game out of it. Another site, steamadvisor.com, sifts through your Steam backlog to suggest what is good to play in it by cross-referencing your own game licenses with consumer reviews and popularity ratings. While I think both are interesting tools, the very existence of a competition between who has too many video games to play and automated digital valets to help recommend your games to you can also be read as expressions of a system in which the glut of games produced clearly exceeds the finite hours humans have to play them.

In addition to sales and audiences, the restrictions on time in video game production is a problem that has been raised—and re-raised—for decades. In 2000, Salon.com published a story titled “How do game developers hack it?” detailing the eighteen-hour days and in-office sleepovers required to keep up with John Romero’s so-called “death schedule” in the production of Daikatana. This same article is referenced in the notorious document, anonymously published the same year, known as “The Scratchware Manifesto,” a call to arms for video game labor to rise up and no longer accept the grueling work conditions that systematically sap creative minds and energy out of the industry. After issuing complaints against studio management, the Scratchware Manifesto doesn’t propose labor unions or better working conditions, but instead valorizes the independent production of “scratchware”: small games produced by no more than three people and sold for no more than $25. The overall tone is strident, but the proposal is both prescient
and influential, as it models the way many indie game producers operate today.

It’s not difficult to find similar complaints throughout the industry’s history. Famously, in 2004 an initially anonymous LiveJournal post attributed to EA Spouse (and later attributed to Erin Hoffman) described the substantial emotional and physical toll of crunch on her spouse, who worked at EA and became a lightning rod for discussion of abuses of video game labor.⁵ The post eventually led to some successful class action lawsuits, yet the culture of crunch prevailed. In another famous example, in 2010 a group identifying as “Determined Devoted Wives of Rockstar San Diego Employees” published an open letter describing the demoralizing work conditions their spouses endured at Rockstar during the crunch period of Red Dead Redemption.⁶ The document brought some brief attention to the issue, but exhausting work conditions persist to this day.

In more recent examples, overwork in the video game industry has been addressed in both scholarship and the popular press. In Casey O’Donnell’s Developer’s Dilemma: The Secret World of Videogame Creators, the problem is categorized by an all-too-familiar piece of industry jargon: “crunch,” the state of extended daily work hours being declared essential, ostensibly to meet important strict deadlines for trade shows or releases.⁷ O’Donnell provides a detailed rationale for how a lack of internal organization and cross-industry information sharing perpetuates crunch, and ultimately concludes, “There exists a culture of overtime that is simultaneously requirement, expectation, and simply a product of passion.”⁸ More than just creating objectionable working conditions, O’Donnell argues, this culture keeps the game industry in arrested development. While outlining the flaws of perpetual start-up culture, O’Donnell states games studios are willing to “trade sustainable industry for the negligible possibility of making it really big.” Outside of academia, Kotaku news editor Jason Shreier reported stories of tumultuous video game production in his book Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made, and in his accompanying New York Times op-ed, “Video Games Are Destroying the People Who Make Them,” he concluded simply:

Those of us who cover the video game industry can see that the current conditions are unsustainable. Too many of the people who make games have left for more lucrative, less stressful industries. Too many who have stayed have suffered the physical and mental consequences. Game developers need to insist—to their bosses and, most important, to themselves—that health comes first.⁹
Over this cyclical history, the issue has flare-ups, goes silent, and then is brought back up to popular attention years later with no substantive changes in the labor practices of games studios.

Anxieties over time and the lack thereof concerning video games can be so familiar and normalized for both producer and consumer that the individual stages are seldom articulated together as a broken system: game studios perceive they must release many long games. They don’t have enough time to produce them, which takes a direct toll on the health and personal lives of video game laborers. Then games are released and purchased by games consumers who have too many games to play and not enough time to play them. In short, the video games industry is currently designed to produce a great deal of waste in terms of time, money, and human effort. It might seem like a problem of how we spend our labor and leisure time, but if one also considers the energy necessary for powering personal devices and the servers required to sustain the 24/7 availability of game distribution platforms, as well as the materials and fuel required to print and distribute physical media, this is very much a carbon footprint problem as well as a consumer economics and human resources problem. That which feels very normal from within the world of games can easily be seen as volatile and laden with problems of waste from an outside perspective. Furthermore, the fact that two of the most notable examples of the issue being brought to public attention come from whistleblowing spouses—in these cases, predominantly women—concerned for the livelihood of their partners strongly suggests that the problem of human labor hours is kept afloat by gendered, domestic labor that receives no real attention or compensation for the strenuous demands of this field. It’s important to remember that video games don’t exist in a vacuum and that the problem doesn’t stop outside of a perceived niche of “core” gamers. At the core of this problem is an unquestioned premium placed on long gameplay.

I don’t have a grand proposal of systemic reform that will curb contemporary capitalist practices that drive these side effects of waste. I also unequivocally do not want to propose the elimination of long-game production, as many enduring and valuable experiences in games media occur in longer titles (even if we see these problems of time waste in the aggregate). However, I would like to propose that we question the unmitigated premium on long games within the creative community that produces, consumes, and writes about video games. We might not need to change video game production practices in the short term at all, but simply have better recognition of other kinds of game production that are already in play. It can be both subtle and critical to focus on what is
commonly known as the “short game” as a cultural category and not simply a designation of a game’s length.

The colloquial categories around video games classify titles according to genre, play style, or size of the studio or production budget. When classifying by genre, one is describing games in terms of mechanics, not scope. This creates modularity in which a game of any scale or duration can be compared to any other similar game of different scale or duration. But with extra value ascribed to length, short titles are not often considered worthy release goals for studios and are either overlooked or evaluated out of context by critics and players.

Across other types of media, producers and audiences rely on a common language to describe works and establish expectations. In fiction, the short story and the novel; in painting, studies, diptychs, murals, etc.; in theater, the one-act and the two-act play; in cinema, the short film and the feature film. When used, these shorthand terms can quickly provide a general sense of how much time an author is going to need to invest, how many resources are necessary for resolving the idea, and what kind of norms can be expected by the audience.

There are no such distinctions in video games. To establish a similar term for the field, I propose the adoption of the simple and self-explanatory term “short games.” Like shorts versus features in cinema, short games don’t necessarily need to be defined theoretically, but instead in practical terms of duration. For the sake of agreement across the film industry, for instance, professional organizations like the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Screen Actors Guild have provided hard parameters for what is considered a short or feature film. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences specifically rates the dividing line between the two categories at forty minutes. The Screen Actors Guild specifies the cutoff at thirty-five minutes. Even when the quantitative boundaries of definition differ, the fact that the same terms are used by different parties in the same discipline codifies the different categories as meaningful and thus creates different cultural conditions for production and reception. While the quantitative cutoff could be considered arbitrary, the shared acknowledgment of terms refines a discipline’s idea of itself. I suggest that we consider a short game any game with an average, or intended, playtime of ten hours or less. Conversely, any game with an average, or intended, playtime from ten to possibly hundreds of hours could then be considered a long game. It would be advantageous for a professional video game organization, such as the International Game Developers Association, to codify specific language to this effect. Then that
language could be applied in numerous other contexts, such as the Independent Games Festival and Game Developers Choice Awards categories, which are designations that celebrate excellence in different production departments.

The term makes no claims on mechanics, play style, production budget, or position in the industry. There is no upper limit of how much one could spend on the production of a short game, but as a category it creates a space where low-budget entries are received in an appropriate context. It’s also agnostic as to what kind of studio you are: solo, indie, and AAA developers alike can all create short games. In fact, we can already point to mini-games as short games that ship with long games, in a manner similar to short films being distributed with features.

The establishment of the term “short games” doesn’t require novel innovation in games production. Instead, it creates a cultural context for so many titles that already fit evenly into it. For titles associated with the “indie” scale of production, examples of short games are numerous. Cardboard Computer’s hit *Kentucky Route Zero* began as a single short game released as the first episode in a series in 2013. The main story experience ranges from one to two hours and sets expectations for how a player could likely play future installments in an evening-length play session. Paloma Dawkins’ cartoon psychedelia first-person game *Gardenarium* can be completed in under an hour. Each of Robert Yang’s self-published games about sexual politics and intimacy can be played through in a matter of hours or less. Outside of the indie space, audiences are already primed for experiencing a whole story arc during one evening of entertainment. Hideo Kojima’s *P.T.* is roughly an hour and is now considered a canonical classic. The irony here is in its very title, which stands for “playable teaser,” meaning that *P.T.* must try to present itself as only a snapshot, and incomplete, even though it’s become a highly influential and beloved title.

Unlike a revolutionary proposal like the Scratchware Manifesto, short games do not demand the deconstruction of any other kind of text or mode of production. But it does change the landscape of dominant notions of taste, which culturally speaking can be a more revolutionary proposal than changing production practices wholesale. However, their recognition does a lot of work toward establishing cultural awareness of the diverse scale of video game production. All stakeholders—from gamer, to indie dev, to AAA executive, to blogger—have something to gain from the recognition of short games, and the language we use will be a clearer reflection of video game production as it already exists.
BIO

Chaz Evans is a media artist, art historian, educator, and curator. His work deals with software, performance, and histories of art and technology and has been exhibited at such venues as ACRE Projects, Hyde Park Art Center, Evanston Art Center, and the Chicago Artists Coalition. Evans’ writing has been published by Routledge, the Journal of Games Criticism, and the A.V. Club. He is director of exhibitions and programs at the Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery. He has taught courses on creative programming, web art, and games. He is assistant professor of media arts in the School of Visual Arts and Design at the University of South Carolina.

NOTES

8. Ibid., 141.


