

Review: *How to Be a Games User Researcher*, by Steve Bromley. 2021. Self-Published. 173 pp.

Joe Todd

University of Waterloo, Canada

Steve Bromley is a user researcher who has led research studies for some of PlayStation's top titles, including *LittleBigPlanet 3* (Sumo Digital, 2014), *Ratchet and Clank* (Insomniac Games, 2016), and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017). As a working professional, Bromley helps academics and industry members alike start their careers and become games user researchers. Bromley's previous work, *Building User Research Teams* (2020), teaches readers to foreground research significance, set up user research labs, and how to develop a growing team. His latest book, *How to Be a Games User Researcher* (2021), explains how to conduct research and start a career in games user research (GUR). Bromley delivers an accessible account of his experience working in the industry and targets his work toward a wide audience that includes students, academics, user experience researchers, as well as game designers and developers.

Bromley's book is divided into three main sections: 1) how games get made, 2) how to run GUR studies, and 3) how to start a career in GUR. Part 1 of his book, titled "How Games Get Made," serves as a clear introduction to where games user research fits within video game development and the game industry. As Bromley explains, user research is about evaluating design decisions and understanding the impact of these decisions, rather than making them. According to him, "user research studies can help make higher-quality experiences, by ensuring players understand what they are meant to do, are able to do it, and that people enjoy that experience" (p. 14). Bromley highlights that working within GUR is rewarding because researchers are often at the forefront of technology and get credited in-game for their work.

User researchers are involved to various degrees throughout a game's development cycle. Bromley outlines this cycle as follows: before green light, pre-production, production, launch, and post-launch. Bromley

Press Start 2022 | Volume 8 | Issue 2

ISSN: 2055-8198

URL: <http://press-start.gla.ac.uk>



Press Start is an open access student journal that publishes the best undergraduate and postgraduate research, essays and dissertations from across the multidisciplinary subject of game studies. Press Start is published by HATII at the University of Glasgow.

writes that the game concept and ideas are defined before the green light. During this phase, researchers can test a vertical slice, a high-fidelity representation of how the game feels to play, to help understand the developer's ideas. Bromley states that these are used to demonstrate the core gameplay and to attempt to predict how long production will take. Bromley continues by suggesting that during pre-production, studies can ensure that features are understood and are experienced as intended before entering production. During the production phase, Bromley explains that user researchers will focus on the difficulty and balancing of the game through playtests, observations, and surveys. Finally, in discussing the launch and post-launch stages, Bromley introduces the concept of games as a service (GaaS). GaaS is understood as continual content updates that occur months or even years after launch. These updates, according to the author, create an opportunity for the research process identified below to continue to improve the quality of the game and the experience.

To improve the user experience, Bromley argues that user researchers must establish strong relationships with game designers (including level, narrative, and sound designers), various artists, producers, programmers, quality assurance testers, tool makers, and more. By meeting with colleagues within the studios, researchers can understand what others are working on and what study will be the most useful at a certain time. He emphasizes the importance of keeping the research team in the loop so they can prioritize the most relevant and impactful studies.

Toward the end of the chapter, Bromley highlights that because of expensive marketing campaigns, studios often subject their workers to crunch in order to release a game on time as a result of poor planning. Bromley states that crunch leads to more mistakes, more work, and more features being dropped. He later writes: "when you are young and childless, getting home at 2 a.m., or sleeping in the office can be fine. This becomes impossible if you have care responsibilities and can have serious impacts on people's personal lives" (p. 154). The author acknowledges that crunch is still common in many large studios due to their expensive marketing budgets and prepares his readers to expect it if employed in the games industry.

The largest section of the book, Part 2, is titled: "How to Run Games User Research Studies." The discussion of various methods within this chapter is particularly useful to any researcher looking to expand their toolkit and versatility. Bromley clearly maps the research process, from defining research objectives and designing the study, to analysing and presenting the data. While the methods discussed are simplified, Bromley introduces the research process while referring his readers with more experience to the book *Games User Research* (Drachen et al., 2018) for a more in-depth look at all the methods mentioned.

As Bromley explains, the research process begins by defining the research objectives before deciding on the methods. This should be done collaboratively with other team members so they can make changes based on the findings once complete. Bromley identifies two types of methods: behavioural and experiential. Behavioural methods explore what players are doing in-game and whether they can perform and understand tasks. These methods use observation, accessibility testing, and analytics. Experiential methods, on the other hand, find what players may think about the game via interviews and surveys. If studies are done without users, researchers can use expert/usability reviews or post-mortems (i.e., post-game feedback from fans, critics, and commentators). Bromley concludes by explaining how to analyse the data from the findings of the session and present it in a way that is meaningful and actionable to the game developers.

Part 3, "Starting a Career in Games User Research," opens with a discussion on the struggles to get started working within GUR. According to Bromley, many game studios do not employ user researchers because they are still not recognized as "an essential part of the software development process" (p. 124). Bromley writes that when studios outsource at concluding stages, they typically look for one senior-level executive, making it harder for junior researchers to get involved. Larger studios like Ubisoft, Electronic Arts, and Microsoft often advertise junior roles. Unfortunately, because most GUR jobs are found in parts of Canada, the east and west coasts of the United States, France and the south of England, Bromley mentions that moving may be necessary.

Bromley further highlights multiple ways young researchers can get involved in GUR. He discusses master's and PhD programs in various disciplines such as human-computer interaction, media studies, and psychology. These programs generally involve researchers running studies with real participants and analysing findings. Often, research in these programs can expand to external industry partners, showing the potential to work outside of academia. However, Bromley states that academics will find that GUR requires projects to be completed by tight deadlines, and have their language and findings be accessible and direct. Other routes to a career in GUR, according to Bromley, include pursuing a different user research job in another industry, a different job in games such as quality assurance, or personal projects to enhance one's CV.

The book concludes with a discussion of the downsides of working within the game industry. While Bromley states that working in the industry can be rewarding, he highlights certain issues to avoid disillusionment and disappointment. These include salary considerations, lack of positions and their location, crunch, and the toxicity and sexism of gamers and various fanbases. The author acknowledges that this behaviour "can be very difficult for women working in the industry who

can be subjected to a lack of respect from both colleagues and gamers” (p. 154). While the fanbases are discussed as misogynist and sexist, Bromley, unfortunately, does not mention these problems within big studios. Despite these problems, Bromley highlights the active GUR community and how folks interested can get involved in the International Game Developer Association Games Research and User Experience Special Interest Group (IGDA GRUX SIG), which promotes conferences, mentorship, Discord discussions, and a website with helpful links and job postings.

Overall, Steve Bromley provides an introductory and accessible look into GUR and what it takes to succeed in the game industry as a user researcher. This book will be helpful to young academics within game studies who are looking at career possibilities beyond academia. For readers without previous research experience or an unfamiliarity with the methods used within the game industry, Bromley provides an outline of the research process with examples from his own experience that are easy to understand. He offers his readers industry-related sources and practical experience for those looking to start a career in user research. Additionally, Bromley adds a discussion on how researchers can show their skills on a CV, as well as tips on how to practice GUR outside of academia. *How to Be a Games User Researcher* should be read by students and young professionals who are concerned about their present and future within game studies and are considering working in the industry.

References

- Bromley, S. (2020). *Building user research teams*. Self-Published.
- Bromley, S. (2021). *How to be a games user researcher*. Self-Published.
- Drachen, A., Mirza-Babaei, P., & Nacke, L. E. (Eds.). (2018). *Games user research*. Oxford University Press.
- Guerilla Games. (2017). *Horizon zero dawn* [PlayStation 4]. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Insomniac Games. (2016). *Ratchet and Clank* [PlayStation 4]. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Sumo Digital. (2014). *LittleBigPlanet 3* [PlayStation 4]. Sony Computer Entertainment.