

MDA Analysis: Communication Design – Threes

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Threes! Is a puzzle game developed and published by the independent game development team Sirvo. The game was released on February 6th, 2014 for iOS and was later ported over to Android, Xbox One and Windows Phone, as well as a version playable in an internet browser. In *Threes!*, the player slides tiles around the board which have different numbers on them – sliding certain tiles into each other combines them into a single tile with a higher number value. When the player can make no more moves, the game ends and their score is calculated based on the number values of the tiles they have at the end of the game. (Sirvo, 2014) The following analysis paper will look at the game using the MDA Framework (which stands for Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics) developed by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek - specifically in relation to its elements of Communication Design. (Hunicke et al, 2004)

Mechanics, according to the MDA Framework, are the core components that make up the game such as the data and algorithm that was used in its creation. This means Mechanics also includes the basic actions which the player is allowed to take within the game, as well as the controls which are used to perform these actions. (Hunicke et al, 2004) The Mechanics in *Threes!* Are simple: the game is played on a 4x4 grid, and begins with a few tiles of the numbers 1 and 2. The player slides these tiles around the board to try combine them; this is done by sliding the two tiles into each other. Combining a 1 and 2 gives the player a tile with the number 3 on it, combining two 3s gives the player a 6, two 6s give a 12. Etc.

Each tile gives a certain amount of points that is 3 times more than the points value of the tile before it. So, for example, a 3 tile will give three points, but a 6 tile will give nine points, and so on. 1 and 2 tiles do not give points. The game is over when the board fills up and the player is no longer able to make any moves that would combine tiles together – after this point, the players total score is tallied up from the tiles they have made. The Communication Design aspect of the game does not really apply to the game's mechanics here, except for text at the bottom of the screen which will tell the player what to do in a specific situation, such as pressing the spacebar to start the game or moving the arrows to continue after the game has ended (these are examples from the PC version, but similar ones can be found in other versions).

The Communication Design aspect of *Threes!* Can be found mostly in the game's Dynamics section. Dynamics of a game refer to the ways in which the mechanics react and behave according to the player's input as well as the other mechanic's behaviour, and this can be seen in a few different ways. (Hunicke et al, 2004) During gameplay, new tiles are added to the board in the direction that the player just moved in, and the player is able to see the colour of the tile which is about to be added (1 tiles are blue, 2 tiles are red and other tiles are white with yellow at the bottom). These tiles are added into a row or column where they will be most useful: if a red 2 tile is to be added, it will usually be put in a row with a blue 1 tile so they can be easily combined. Similarly, a white tile will be placed in a place where it can be combined with another white tile. Tiles may also be added to rows where other tiles have just been combined.

There are 13 white numbered tiles for the player to find in the game: each one has a yellow face and a “personality” which is introduced in a little bio the first time that tile is unlocked. The personality of the tile characters has no affect on gameplay, but their faces play into the Communication Design aspect of the game. Depending on a white tile’s proximity to another tile of its type, its facial expression may change slightly. For example, two 3s on opposite ends of the board will have the same normal facial expression. If those two tiles were next to each horizontally from each other, they would turn their faces to look at each other. If one of those white tiles was behind the other vertically, they would both open their mouths wide. The same concept applies to white tiles of higher values, as well. This does not occur in the Windows browser version of the game.

The player is almost expected to use these two aspects of Communication Design to strategize the best way to play the game. The mobile versions of the game also allow the player to preview a move by swiping in a direction but not lifting their finger before moving back to where they were. This is yet another example of Communication Design being found in relation to the game’s Dynamics, as the player is able to see which tiles would be combined together, where the other tiles would move to and which tiles would be added where. There is also small text at the bottom of the screen that will occasionally give the player small hints, such as “Remember to clear your 1s and 2s” or “The game will end when the board fills up”. All of these elements are designed to communicate to the player different factors that they must consider when deciding their next move.

Aesthetics, according to the MDA Framework, refers to the emotional responses which are evoked in the player upon interaction with the game’s mechanics and dynamics. (Hunicke et al, 2004) In terms of the aesthetic experiences of *Threes!*, one of the most important aspects of its Communication Design comes when the player unlocks a new tile. Upon combining two tiles to form a new one which the player has not seen before, they are shown a sort of unlock screen: confetti fills the screen, celebratory music and sound effects play and the player is shown the tile they have just unlocked alongside a short bio introducing their name and who they are. When the player sees this, they may be filled with feelings of accomplishment as the game tries to tell them that what they just done is truly an achievement.

This can also make the player feel more inclined to keep playing and may motivate them to get better at the game, so they can unlock the rest of the tiles and feel like they are accomplishing even more. During gameplay, the player may experience one or more of the following aesthetics which are described in the MDA Framework: Sensation (due to the quick, easy and addictive sliding gameplay), Challenge (due to the strategy involved and the possibility of unlocking new characters) and Submission (due to the game’s simple and repetitive nature). (Hunicke et al, 2004) Sound usually also plays into Aesthetics in games, and is an important part of Communication Design. Each character tile in *Threes!* will make a unique sound upon either entering the board or seeing another tile of their type.

The Communication Design aspect of *Threes!* takes prominence within the game’s Dynamics, followed by its Aesthetics. The Mechanics of the game do not really showcase any elements of Communication Design. The game uses its Communication Design in an effective way to make the game more addictive to play, which will keep players coming back.

References:

- Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., & Zubek, R. (2004) MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research. Pp. 1 – 5. Available at:
- Threes (iOS/Browser) [Video Game]. (2014). Sirvo.