Tetris: The Grand Master is the iconic Tetris game but with an achievable end goal. The game has you stacking blocks and clearing lines just like your usual Tetris game, but with gravity increasing and decreasing at set intervals to challenge the player, until reaching level 500 which is when gravity reaches 20G (making pieces immediately touch the ground when spawning) with the goal of reaching level 999. Each line cleared and each piece placed increments the level by one, and a line clear is required every 100 levels (to go from level 99 to 100, 199 to 200, etc., and from 998 to 999). Reaching level 999 in a certain amount of time and with a minimum score will grant the player the title of Tetris Grand Master, but doing so isn’t easy.

Originally an arcade game (but now available for play on the Nintendo Switch), Tetris: The Grand Master (also shortened to TGM) is a faithful Tetris game that manages to make Tetris work as an arcade game: since players pay for each game they play, TGM gives them a progression through levels (by changing the gravity) which challenges them, a grade which they can attempt to improve through multiple plays, all while keeping individual games under 15-20 mins in length.

Most solo Tetris games are either infinite, or stop the player after a certain number of line clears, incrementing gravity linearly with the number of line clears. TGM is original in its own way: not only are levels incremented by 1 for each piece placed and line cleared, the gravity progression is not even monotonic, leaving players a little breathing room by decreasing slightly at level 200 and just before level 500 (when the maximum level is reached for the rest of the game). This is ingenious game design, as it allows both newer and more experienced players to take advantage of this lower gravity to fix their stack (hopefully filling up holes) before the gravity bumps back up to bring back even more of a challenge. A newer player might then top-out at that point, but frustration with the game is kept to a minimum (since the game gave them a chance to fix their previous gameplay) which means players are more likely to try again and insert another coin.

TGM features a unique scoring and grade system. The grades go from 9 to 1, then S1 to S9, and finally GM. The only requirement for each grade (apart the GM grade) is score. While the specifics of the scoring system are relatively complicated, TGM heavily rewards Tetris clears (clearing 4 lines with a single piece) and combos, incentivizing the player to go for slightly riskier play styles. Additionally, if the player wishes to get the GM grade, they need to clear certain sections with both a minimum score (or grade, given they are directly correlated) and a maximum time. These requirements of score, time, and survival (to level 999), push players to make good stacking decisions (to survive) in a short amount of time (to pass the time requirements), all without letting them make easy decisions (to get a good score). Players can feel the progress they are making as they see improvements in each of these three areas. It leads to very satisfying and mesmerizing plays, as well as a very challenging but fair game, where players are forced to admit the mistake is theirs when they do not manage one of the three requirements.

TGM also features the Arika Rotation System (or ARS) based on the SEGA Rotation System which does not allow many rotations a player might expect, especially once the piece has touched the stack. (While the game does feature wall kicks, allowing pieces to be rotated even if touching the sides of the playfield, it does not feature any floor kicks, making many rotations impossible once the piece has touched the floor.) This can be frustrating, especially for a Tetris player used to SRS (Super Rotation System) which allows rotations in almost all situations. However, ARS requires the player to stack even more cleanly to have the chance to clear levels 500 to 999, which is much more of a challenge (especially given the game does not feature the “Hold” feature many newer Tetris games have) and can make for a very satisfying Tetris experience.

Overall, TGM is a nice arcade experience and a tight Tetris challenge. It also features a 1v1 mode, and although it is quite robust and can bring hours of enjoyment with a friend, it is nothing extraordinary as a multiplayer Tetris game; it is designed, first and foremost, as a single player experience. And at that, it succeeds brilliantly. Attempting to get GM on TGM requires thorough knowledge of the game, countless hours of practice, and a pinch of luck. TGM understood exactly what would make a challenging Tetris game, and managed to implement it incredibly well.