

MDA Analysis of Threes!

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Created as a mobile game in 2014, *Threes!* by Sirvo Studios is a mechanically simple game that uses many layers of design, and clear communication to the player to keep up engagement. Using the analytical framework of MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics) this essay will be investigating the primary aesthetics of *Threes!*, the dynamics and mechanics which give rise to these aesthetics, as well as focusing on the use of communication design and feedback and how this relates to the MDA framework (Hunicke, Leblanc & Zubek 2004). For this essay the version of *Threes!* being analysed will be the free browser based version made available in 2015, while this version lacks some of the graphical features of the premium mobile version, it contains the complete core gameplay loop and the most important features of feedback.

At its most basic level, *Threes!* is a game of tile matching, with the twist being that matching tiles doesn't discard them but instead creates a new tile which is the sum of the previous two matched tiles. So a 3 tile + a 3 tile becomes a 6, which can only be matched with another 6. A twist is added to this also with the two most basic tiles, the 1 and the 2, which match with each other instead of with themselves. With these two basic mechanics the tile matching formula is very different, and alongside the limited grid of 5x5, there is little room to maneuver as the game goes on. Players also don't move individual tiles but instead move every tile in the same direction, but tiles on the edge or blocked by non-matching tiles aren't moved. A new random tile is added with each of these moves, from the direction opposite of where the player moved, moving into any free space. Lastly the board itself is randomised at the start of every game, meaning there is no single set solution to getting the highest possible score.

These simple mechanics together create a variety of dynamics, especially the counter move of that while the player may make a match on a turn, a new tile is always added, creating pressure and forcing the player to try and match tiles every turn to keep space on the board to move around. Having no set win conditions or special tiles that

make the game easier, focuses the player on the puzzle element of the game and solving the current set of problems. Overall these various mechanics and dynamics feed into an aesthetic of challenge, with each move seeing the player making tough decisions with future ramifications for any mistakes. But also an aesthetic of discovery also exists in *Threes!* with the visual elements and feedback which will be discussed next.

The visual feedback used in *Threes!* is suitably simple for the game format but also does a good job informing the player. Each tile has a unique appearance, with lower ones being very mundane but as the number of the tiles increase there are unique designs, in the form of little faces and accessories, that appear. This is reinforced by a system where upon gaining a tile for the first time it will be introduced as a character with a name and a little back story, which is something that really adds to the aesthetic of discovery, with players being pushed by this to get higher numbers not only for the score, but to see all the characters in the game. So not only do players get higher combinations, and a higher score, for mastering the game but also this extra level of characterisation which adds to the sense of discovery and feedback. It also simply serves as a good visual distinction between tiles of different values.

Overall *Threes!* is a simple puzzle game, but the reason it has been quite successful is because of its playful use of feedback, and the solid core mechanics which make it challenging but not frustrating to play, and keeps the playing going to discover more about the game as they get better at it.

References

Hunicke, R., Leblanc, M.G., & Zubek, R. (2004). *MDA : A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research*.

Threes. (2014). Los Angeles: Sirvo.