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Assignment 2: Communication Design MDA Analysis Essay

Game: Catan Universe

Word Count: 1382

Due: 5 April 2021 at 08:00

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This essay will detail and explore *Threes*, the award-winning 2014 puzzle video game, developed by Sirvo. Analysis of the game will be conducted using the MDA framework by Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004), first discussing the game's core components and mechanics, before moving onto its dynamics of strategy, and finally its aesthetics. All areas will be addressed with particular focus on the game's communication design, and how its various forms and layers of feedback facilitate the wonderfully whimsical experience that is the gameplay of *Threes*.

Communication design, in the context of video games, deals with the communication of vital or significant information about a game and its game state, to its player. The focus is on what information is being conveyed, and how that information is communicated to the player. The importance of information is closely tied to the mechanics of the game. The rules and systems that form the core of any game will determine what information or data is important to the player during play. Hence, to start off, this essay will be discussing the mechanics and core components of *Threes*.



Figure 1: Screenshot of *Threes*, featuring the various tiles.

Threes, developed by the indie game development team Sirvo, is a simple yet complex puzzle game in which players slide numbered tiles around a 4x4 play area, and merge them to form multiples of 3s (see Fig. 1).

At the start of the game, players have several randomly spawned tiles, assigned with a number (either 1s, 2s or 3s). All the tiles that are multiples of 3, can only be merged with another of the same number, to form a new tile with a number that is the sum of the original tiles' numbers (e.g., a 3 merging with a 3 would form a no. 6 tile). 1 and 2 however, can only be merged with each other to form a 3. As the player slides the tiles, a new tile will appear from the side the player slides away from (e.g., if one were to swipe from left to right successfully, a new tile will appear in an available space in the left-most column). At the top of the screen, there is a small visual indicator of the next tile that will appear when the player swipes. In

addition, by swiping slowly and not letting go, players can view the consequences of their swipe before they confirm the action.

The goal of the game is to obtain as many points as possible in a round of play. Each tile has a certain number of points assigned to it (with the exception of 1 and 2), and these points are tallied up, based on the tiles present on the screen at the end of the game. A round of *Threes* may end in one of two ways: either by running out of space on the board, and hence being unable to continue in the game, or achieving the difficult feat of merging the 12 288 tile (Sirvo, 2014).

Now, the essay will analyse how the game communicates information with regards to the various mechanics detailed above. Firstly, a player can slide tiles across the screen. The playing field is a clearly marked 4x4 space – that communicates the position of both the tiles, and the empty spaces around them (see Fig. 1). Upon swiping, tiles are animated to slide in the direction of the swipe to the next available empty space, or to merge with a number of the same value. Together with the animation, a soft, high-pitched sliding sound will trigger at each successful swipe, in response to the player's actions. On the other hand, the lack thereof of the sliding animation and/or the sliding sound effect (along with a voiceover “no”) indicates to a player

that they cannot slide in a certain direction. These various layers of feedback all serve the basic mechanic of swiping.

The second mechanic is merging tiles. The important information for this mechanic is differentiating between different tiles, so that a player can easily identify tiles and know what to do with them. For example, 1 and 2 are special numbers that can only be merged with each other. Hence, they are the only numbers with a non-white tile background. Colour aside, a tile's number is its most important aspect, since merging tiles is based on their numbers. Hence each tile has a large and very clearly drawn number on them (as well as small faces). The highest number present on the field is highlighted in red – to help it stand out and reinforce its importance to the player (see Fig. 1).



Figure 2: Screenshot of *Threes*, featuring tiles looking at each other.

In addition, tiles that can be merged with each other, will dance up and down when they are next to each other. Else, their little faces will draw together, to communicate their significance to the player (see Fig. 2, how the two 3s and the two 6s draw their faces to each other). Furthermore, when a tile is formed with the highest current number on the field, all tiles with that number will dance and exclaim with joy, to communicate that the player focus on merging them. A successful merge also has a very clear animation: the two original tiles will fade into one another and flip over, to form the new tile. The new tile will also do a little dance and exclaim with joy, to communicate that a merge has occurred.

All the above examples of communication design reinforce the merging mechanic of *Threes*. The focus is on communicating vital information about the tiles themselves through their appearances, and hint at possible merging options for the player through little actions by the tiles. These serve to help players keep track of the playing field and prioritise the higher-valued tiles.

At its core, the main dynamic of *Threes*, is strategy. The entire game revolves around the careful manipulation of the tiles that lie before the player. At any given moment, a player knows exactly which tiles they have at their disposal, and what actions are available to them in terms of swiping and merging. The only information not clearly available is the indicator for the next tile (see top of Fig 1.) This indicator will generally only show the colour of the tile (red, blue, or white), so a player may not always know exactly which tile will come next. That aside, all other information is very clearly communicated to the player and is always available to them.

In terms of aesthetics, there are two possible categories under which the game of *Threes* falls. First and foremost, *Threes* has the core aesthetic of Challenge. It is at its core a puzzle game, which challenges its players at every moment of gameplay with a constantly changing arrangement of tiles. Every action is important and will affect not only the immediate outcome, but also the state of the game in all subsequent turns. To achieve the greatest number of points, players must be strategic in their manipulation of tiles currently present on the field and pay attention to the possible new tiles that will soon appear. It is an unending competition against, not only the game, but the player themselves as they strive to beat their own high score.

A secondary aesthetic is Sensation. *Threes* features wonderfully whimsical background music and a myriad of wonderful sound and voice lines, that give life to the gameplay. Visually, the game comes in a pleasant palette of pastel colours, with charming little animated faces on each of the tiles, which add character and story to the little numbered rectangles. The game is a pleasure on both the eyes and ears.

In conclusion, this essay has analysed *Threes* by Sirvo using the MDA framework by Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek. The game's mechanics of swiping and merging are carefully facilitated by its various forms of communication design, through clean and charming animation, and pleasant sound effects/audio. The mechanics and communication design in turn support its main dynamic of Strategy, and its aesthetics of Challenge and Sensation. The communication design present in *Threes* is integral to the game in both the communication of vital information during play, and the creation of a pleasantly whimsical gaming experience for the player.

Bibliography

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