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CHOSEN GAME: *Threes* (Sirvo LLC, 2014)

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MDA Analysis – Assignment two

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For a game's system to be fully understood by the player, good communication and feedback design is required. It is necessary to have effective user interface (UI), art, sound, music and motion design to fully create recognisable moment-to-moment gameplay. Threes (Sirvo LLC, 2014) will have its communication and feedback design analysed within the Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics (MDA) framework by Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004) in this essay.

Threes (Sirvo LLC, 2014) is a number matching mobile game that requires the player to combine numbers, initially ones and twos, then after matching numbers can be combined. The tutorial-like beginning has the player following short and simple instructions. Hints are displayed at the bottom of the screen, such as "Look up to see what's next" and "It's over when the board fills up!", clearly explaining to the player the "next" feature and the lose condition.

The core mechanic is the swiping and merging of numbers. Initially, the game gives very clear instructions through the UI above the board as to what to do, such as telling the player to combine ones with twos, with an added "whoosh" sound effect and voice over such as "Hello" to reward feedback for a successful swipe. Along with the hints displayed at the bottom of the screen in a non-assertive grey colour, two equal card's yellow faces will turn to face each other, indicating the possibility to match them together. These number's faces also help create a pictorial mental connection. Furthermore, if the highest card on the board is created again, they will all bounce while the other cards stay stationary – giving the player a clear visual indicator of where they are and that they should aim to match them to increase their score. Lastly, the game notifies the player if their attempt at swiping is not possible by playing a "Nope" sound effect and matching the cards bounce in place.

Another mechanic that aids the player in combining cards effectively is the "next" feature situated above the board. Using only symbolic representations of the cards such as a red rectangle symbolising a two card, the player can decide from which wall they wish to add this next card from by swiping away from their desired wall. Although the vagueness of the mostly frequent unnumbered white cards in the "next" block does not give the player much information, it still effectively communicates enough information for them to make an impactful decision. The "slow swipe" also aids in giving the player clarity on their swipe before

the commit to it. The ‘slow swipe’ allows the player to hover cards over each other to see what cards will combine, and the player has a choice to swipe back before releasing their finger.

Once a player’s board is full and cannot be swiped anymore, the player is rewarded with a flurry of sound effects and texts showing the adding of the numbers on the board to the score. The player is further rewarded if they achieve a new high score with a confetti animation and cheering sound effects. This positive feedback encourages the player to keep playing as they wish to be rewarded with more praise.

The dynamics of Threes (Sirvo LLC, 2014) mostly derives from the “next” feature, the “slow swipe” mechanic and the hints. The hints mostly help at the beginning of the game, alerting the player of the different features such as the “next” and “slow swipe” – acting as a key to opening the strategic possibilities of the game.

The “next” feature enables the player to solve stagnant cards that might be clogging up the board and lessen the amount on the board. The feature aids in combining ones and twos since the player is aware of their colours, thus giving them full transparency, but the blank white cards mostly do not provide the player with numerical information as to still pose a challenge to the player. Sometimes the card might display a value such as “6” and this can greatly help improve strategizing, enabling more precise decisions.

The “slow swipe”, mentioned only through the hints, allows for less careless swiping. It lets the player see the outcome of a swipe before committing to it, and acts as a safety net. By removing the consequence of wasting a swipe, this feature can greatly remove challenge if used to its full potential. It is a look into the future, and thus a player can check all possible swipes before choosing the best option. This is balanced out by the lack of clarity of the “next” feature, thus not completely informing the player of what or where exactly the next card will be.

The simplistic gameplay coupled with the effective communication design allows for the aesthetics of the game to be that of mostly positive emotions. The sound design is used to reward the player with positive audible feedback when combining a card, and a feeling of satisfaction. The celebratory effects such as the cheering and confetti shower the player and encourage replay. The aspect of challenge creates determination in the player, and even if a player feels frustration for wasting a swipe, most of the time the game system as well as the communication design does not put the player down for it. The information communicated through the clean and simple UI at the beginning of the game is enough to avoid confusion and the player feels satisfied with their actions as a result.

Well-executed communication and feedback design can be seen in Threes (Sirvo LLC, 2014) through its layered feedback within its main mechanic of swiping, along with other features such as the “next” feature and the “slow swipe” to enable the player to utilize their swipes and increase their high score more effectively. The game achieves a good game feel through a clear and sufficiently transparent communication design.

References

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R. (2004). *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research.* In Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI. Available from: https://users.cs.northwestern.edu/hunicke/MDA.pdf

Sirvo LLC, (2014). *Threes* [Video game]. Xbox One, iOS, Android, Windows Phone.