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WSOA3003A MDA ANALYSIS 2: Threes!

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4. I have not allowed and will not allow anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own.

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Threes! (2014) is puzzle video game developed by an independent game development team consisting of Asher Vollmer, Greg Wohlwend, and Jimmy Hinson; where the player must slide numbered tiles on a 4 by 4 grid in order to combine them into multiples of three. The game's aesthetic design (comprising of sound design, visuals, and UI) is constructed to deliver easy to understand, harmonious visual and communication feedback, allowing for a pleasant player experience. This paper will analyse *Threes!* and how the game's visual and audio communication feedback creates a unique and comprehensible player experience using the MDA framework by Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek.

Threes! is a puzzle game developed in 2014 by an independent development team named Sirvo; consisting only of three people (Asher Vollmer, Greg Wohlwend, and Jimmy Hinson). To play, the player must slide numbered tiles on a 4 by 4 grid in order to combine them into multiples of three (Sirvo, 2014). At the beginning of the game, the player starts by combining a 1 and a 2 together to make a 3 (see Appendix A). As the game continues, the player must continue to combine multiples of three with each other by swiping up, down, left, and right (e.g: 6 with 6, 12 with 12, 24 with 24, etc). The goal is to continue growing one's score larger and larger until there are no moves left on the grid. The game was developed for IOS devices only at first and later ported to other platforms, but for the focus of this paper, was played on an Android device.

Threes! is an inherently simple game with simple mechanics, as well as a simple interface, but it is the way information is communicated to the player through this interface that keeps the game seemingly simple (and enjoyable) to the player. The MDA framework proposes that games are forms of arts just like any other used to invoke a specifically designed response from a player, and that to analyze specific features of video games one must break down the game in three major components (i.e Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics) in order to perceive the developers intent and overall retain a better understanding of the game itself (Hunicke, et al., 2004). The focus of this analysis will mostly be about aesthetics due to the nature of communication design and its concentration on sensory elements of games and user experience (Aakhus, 2007). *Threes!* has a simple interface: a 4 by 4 grid where players slide panels in different directions to get their desired result. It is a puzzle game with no specific theme, a simple colour scheme and simple interface. The tiles, however, are designed to be "sensory". All tiles in *Threes!* except for 1s and 2s (non-multiples of 3) are white and have faces marked in yellow with black eyes and a mouth in the lower half of each tile. The 1 and 2 tiles are blue and red, respectively to differentiate them from the multiples of 3s tiles. When

the player has two twin tiles adjacent to each other, they actually look at each other or make a happy, goofy face, communicating to the player that they can be combined (see Appendix B). After the player combines the two tiles, a new tile is born from the combination, and this new tile has a new face, introducing a new character to the. This communicates a new appearance and provides a new differentiation from the otherwise very similar tiles and allows the player to distinguish them much more easily. The higher the multiple of three, the more tile appearances are unlocked (see Appendix C), which are also regarded as unlockable artifacts/trophies to unlock during the course of gameplay, which then motivates the player to aim for higher score.

Another feature of the "sensory" tiles is their audio feedback. Apart from having unique faces, the tiles also have unique voices corresponding to their appearance. Every time a new tile is born, it forms a new tile with a new voice with different greetings ranging from a simple "hi" to a roar from tile 96. This type of feedback only plays when a new tile is born from two twin tiles never paired before and further differentiates the tiles from each other as well as giving notice to the player that a brand-new tile is on-screen. This improves game feel; it gives the player the sense that the tiles are sensory, immersing the player further into gameplay. What reinforces this is the moments between play when the game is open, but the player is not actively touching the screen. When this occurs, the highest numbered tile makes a noise emulating boredom or urgency (depending on which tile is the highest). Some tiles will sigh, some will say "come on, move already", communicating to the player that they have not touched the game in a while. This depicts how the game communicates with the player to keep playing the game, or at least to warn them that the game is still running in the background. All these elements make the game easy to understand and allow for a good amount of replay value.

In conclusion, *Threes!* is simple game with sensory elements aiding in understanding the game more and immersing the player in gameplay. The game is simple enough to play and understand through is basic, but solid visual and audio design and it is the way that these elements communicate information with the player that allows for a pleasant gameplay experience.

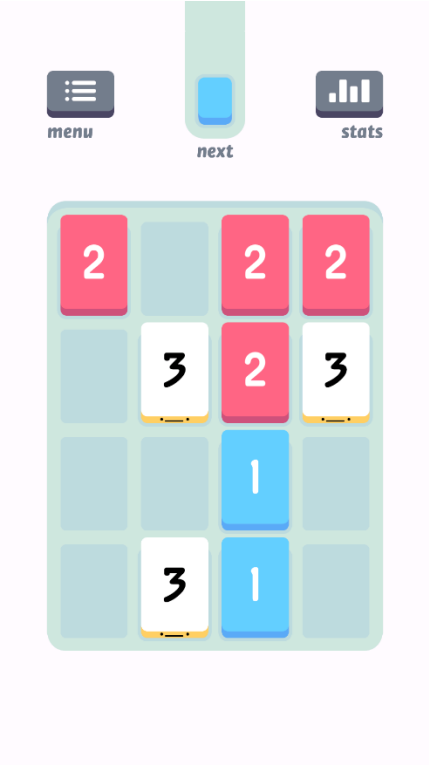
References

1. Aakhus, M., 2007. Communication as Design. *Communication Monographs,* 74(1), pp. 112-117.

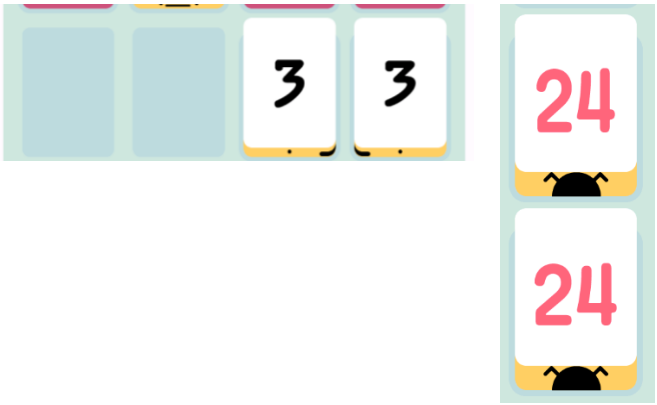
2. Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M. & Zubek, R., 2004. *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research.* s.l., s.n., pp. 1-5.

3. Sirvo (2014) *Threes!* [Android] Android. California: Sirvo.

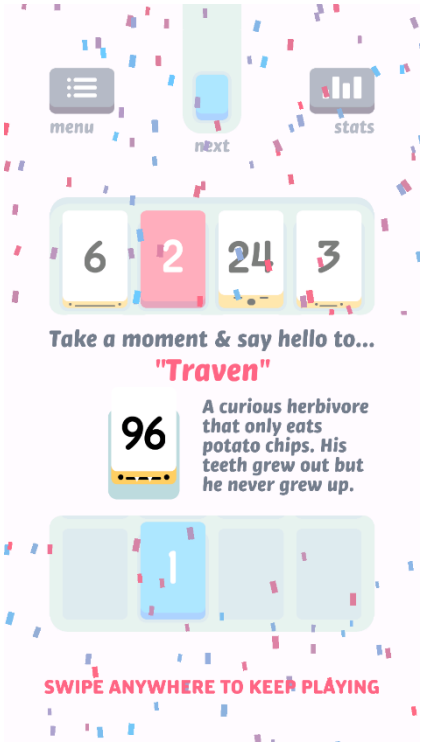
Appendix List



Appendix A: Threes! grid with 1 and 2 tiles next to each other to



Appendix B: Two 3s tiles "looking" at each other, indicating the possibility to merge.



Appendix C: new tile unlocked.