
CMSC 498M: Chapter 12 Casual Games

Source: [IGDA Casual Games Whitepaper \(July 2006\)](#).

Overview:

- Casual game design elements.
- Casual game mechanics.
- Narrative and characters.
- Advergaming.

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What are Casual Games?

Core/Hardcore (Traditional) Games:

- Games developed for and delivered on a dedicated game console or PC that generally involve complex game controls and overall complexity in terms of game-play or and time investment.

Casual Games:

- Games that generally involve **less complicated game controls** and overall complexity in terms of gameplay or **lower time investment** required to get through game.
- Played for **enjoyment** and **relaxation** (e.g., while waiting). Short learning curve. Requiring a low level of commitment or involvement.

Growth:

- 2002: almost nothing.
- 2004: well over \$600 million in the US.
- 2008: projected to surpass **\$2 billion** in the US alone.

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Demographics

Core Games:

- Typical core gaming audience is **male** and aged **18 to 34**.

Casual Games:

- Tend to be both **women and men** between the ages of **35 and 65**, with a slight demographic skew towards women.
- Largest audience is **women** aged **35 to 50**.

Women in Games?

- There are **more women gamers than men** in the **25 to 34** age range (65% women vs. 35% men).
- Casual games have contributed to an **explosion of women on the video game scene**. (43% of all video gamers, by a 2005 survey.)

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Casual Games Common Genres

Puzzle Games:

- Magic Match, www.oberongames.com (Oberon Media/Codeminion)
- Mystery Case Files: Huntsville, www.bigfishgames.com (Big Fish Games)
- Tropix, www.gamehouse.com (GameHouse/Robot Super Game)

Card or Solitaire:

- Ancient TriPeaks, www.toybox-games.com (Toy Box Games)
- Hotel Solitaire, www.zylom.com (Zylom)
- Sudoku, www.gamedesire.eu (GameDesire)

Word Games:

- Big Kahuna Words, www.reflexive.net (Reflexive)
- Pat Sajak's Lucky Letters, www.playtonium.com (Adveractive/Playtonium)
- Super Wild Wild Words, www.gamehouse.com (GameHouse)

Casual Action:

- Cake Mania, www.sandlotgames.com (Sandlot Games)
- Diner Dash, www.playfirst.com (PlayFirst/ gameLab)
- Feeding Frenzy 2, www.popcap.com (PopCap)

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Key Elements of Casual Games

Simple and Meaningful Play with Transparent Rules:

- Players' actions must elicit **clear and understandable responses**.
- Rules of the game should be **intuitive and easily grasped**.
- Rulebooks are used only for reference.

User Interaction:

- **Visuals are simple**, so good game-play is key.
- User should know the **next step just by just looking** at the screen.
- User **input should be very limited**, ideally just the left mouse button.

Depth & Complexity: (or lack thereof)

- **Short learning curve** is essential.
- **Initial access** to the game should be **easy**.
- **Increasing difficulty** - same activity in a more challenging environment.

Showing Progress:

- Show the score (or strength, money, magical charm points, ...).
- Visual/audio **accolades** whenever the **score increases**.

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Key Elements of Casual Games

Rewarding Players:

- Casual gamers often seek **escape** from everyday life.
- **Constant rewards** make the player feel good.
- Add **bonus awards** for more sophisticated skills.

Forgiving Game Play:

- Give new players time to learn the **core interactivity**.
- **Familiar themes** based in real life or pop culture. Tip: Avoid sci-fi.
- Realistic or cartoonish? **Keep visuals simple**, but with "adult" focus.



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Narrative and Characters

Does a casual game need a story?

- Tetris, Solitaire, and Poker didn't need it.

It might be worth the effort:

- Story and character make an **emotional impact**. More than just a score.
- Easier marketing by building on known characters (e.g. Lara Croft).
- Great narratives create **strong brands** (e.g. people who tune into their favorite soap opera every day).

Raising the entertainment bar:

- Casual gamers' point of comparison is with **film** and **television**.
- Weak story and dialogue **cannot** be masked by cool visuals.

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Making a Compelling Story

Immersion:

- Put the player in the **story world**.
- Keep **technology invisible**; don't remind players they are on a computer.

Narrative structure:

- **Foreshadow**. Set up expectations.
- **Third-act twist**: Play with those expectations.
- Respect the **player's imagination**. Let them fill in missing details.

Seamless integration:

- Weave **interactivity and story** around each other. (Hard!)

Less is more:

- **Action is key**. Show; don't tell. Overlay dialogue with action.
- **Animation is expensive**. A comic strip may work as well.
- **Audio is cheaper than animation**. Use music form mood.

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Making Compelling Characters

Understand your character:

- Do you know **who your character is**?
- Define his/her **back story**, likes and dislikes, family history, strengths and flaws, pet peeves, quirks and catch phrases.

Evaluate the strength of a character:

- Do you **care** about you character? If not, your players won't.
- Will players **identify** with your character and his/her **aspirations**?
- Add **complexity**. Draw on your own experiences.
- Work with your artist. Use **appearance to convey personality** (but beware of offensive stereotypes).
- **Test it**. What appeals to you may not appeal to our audience.



I am Shiva,
the God of death.

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Casual Game Mechanics

Game Mechanics:

- Casual games are dominated by a surprisingly **small number** of game play styles.

Common styles:

- Matching Games
- Finding Subsets I (Puzzle Games)
- Finding Subsets II (Word Games)
- Shape Manipulation
- Casual Sports Games
- Break-Out Variants
- Card and Parlor Games

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Casual Game Mechanics

Matching Games:

- Grid of a limited variety of objects.
- Swap, drag, shoot, or transform these objects to **create patterns** of two or more, which then disappear.
- Special "power-up" objects clear larger parts of the grid or award bonus points for sets including them.

Examples:

- Chuzzle (PopCap Games)
- Luxor (MumboJumbo)
- The Da Vinci Code (Sony)



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Casual Game Mechanics

Finding Subsets I (Puzzle Games):

- Given a number of objects, a clock timer, and sometimes a steady increase in the number of objects.
- Find **groups** based on a particular criterion (similar color, shape, etc.).
- Finding groups earns points and/or delays the timer and/or advances towards goal.

Examples:

- 10 Talismans (NevoSoft)
- Magic Match (Codemission/Oberon)
- QBeez 2 (Skunk Studios)



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Casual Game Mechanics

Finding Subsets II (Word Games):

- Find groups based on **words**.
- More points longer words and/or using **uncommon letters**.

Examples:

- Acropolis (Gamehouse)
- Babel Deluxe (Zylom)
- Pat Sajak's Lucky Letters (U-Click/Playtonium)



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Casual Game Mechanics

Shape Manipulation:

- An empty container divided into different shapes, and a series of pieces that can fit into that container.
- **Fill up the container** by picking up, rotating, and placing pieces inside.

Examples:

- Mosaic: Tomb of Mystery (Reflexive)
- Puzzle Express (Hipsoft)
- Runic One (Puzzle Lab)



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Casual Game Mechanics

System Management:

- Player is in charge of a small **ecosystem** of interacting objects.
- Player may add, remove, or alter objects in the system to create particular effects and earn points.

Examples:

- Cake Mania (Sandlot Games)
- Plantasia (gameLab)
- Fish Tycoon (Big Fish Games)



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Casual Game Mechanics

Break-Out Variants:

- Player controls a **paddle**, and uses the paddle to ricochet a ball into a set of blocks.
- Goal is to **clear the screen of blocks**. Power-ups alter the game: speeding up and slowing down the ball, making the paddle sticky, increasing the number of balls on the screen.

Examples:

- Bricks of Atlantis (ArcadeLab)
- Magic Ball 2: New Worlds (Alawar Entertainment)
- Shattera (Alexey Saenko)



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Casual Game Mechanics

Casual Sports Games:

- Simple **sports games** that are very **forgiving** and generally accessible to the widest audience possible in terms of game controls and game objectives.

Examples:

- Backspin Billiards (Pixelstorm)
- Redline Rumble 2: Detonator (Atom Entertainment/Richard Smith)
- Saints & Sinners Bowling (Large Animal Games/Oberon Media)



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Casual Game Mechanics

Card & Parlor Games:

- A variety of traditional playing-card games and parlor game favorites.

Examples:

- Ancient TriPeaks (ToyBox Games)
- Mah Jong Escape: Ancient China (Playtime)
- Mahjong Garden to Go (Pogo)

Other Arcade Variants:

- This genre includes a variety of traditional arcade-style gameplay.

Examples:

- Cosmic Bugs (Retro64)
- Gold Miner Vegas Edition (Intermix Media)
- Tropix (Super Robot Brain)



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3 Facts of Life: Death, Taxes, and Advertising

Advergame:

- A web or downloadable game which delivers **advertising** messages.
- Found in instant messaging applications, banner ads, pop-ups, etc.
- **Different** from in-game advertising and product placement.

Premise:

- The user gives a brand their eyeballs for three to five minutes at a time, and the brand gives them an entertaining game (usually for free).

Cutting through Clutter:

- Average American is exposed to **thousands of ads per day**.
- Users are willing to spend time on ads they find **entertaining**.

Cost Effective:

- Typical advergames range from \$10,000 to \$35,000 and custom-built games with budgets from \$25,000 to \$500,000.

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Casual Game Design

Key Design Goals:

- Keep the player **engaged** and always **wanting more**.
- Get the player so involved he/she is willing to **upgrade** to the "premium version".

To accomplish this, the game must:

- have **depth**,
- **show progress**, and
- keep the **content fresh** for many hours of play.

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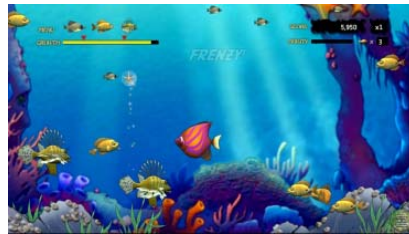
Casual Game Design Elements

Aspirational Fantasy:

- Environment surrounding the gameplay.
- Creates **immersive** experience.
- Example: Aloha Solitaire, play cards on a tropical beach.

Optional depth:

- Not part of the core gameplay.
- Add depth by allowing **different paths** to the end goal, or providing **multiple goals** in the game (e.g., task completion + scoring).
- Example: Feeding Frenzy: catching the bubbles give the player additional points (stars) or elements that enhance the player (thunder = speed bonus).



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Casual Game Design Elements

Showing Progress and Levels:

Level: Core play mechanics define a winning scenario for each level.

Meta game: The grand game connecting the levels. State is automatically saved.

Feedback: Clearly tracking long term progress is crucial.

World map: (Good) Visualize progress with each level.

High-Score Lists: (Bad) Requires player to start from scratch.

Examples:

- Big Kahuna Reef: tracks progress by showing species of fish that have been discovered
- Chuzzle: extensive use of trophies to track progress,
- Mahjong Towers Eternity: tracks a player through a series of character class upgrades.

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Casual Game Design Elements

Designing for Upsell:

- Give away the **free demo**, and get customers to **upgrade** from:
 - online version to
 - free download version to
 - paid premium version
- Motivations:
 - Deepening gameplay over time**: Experience should improve with time, not just more of the same.
 - Higher quality experience**: Full-screen, advertising-free, enhanced graphics and sound.
- How to limit?
 - Content limiting**: Just the first X levels.
 - Feature limiting**: Pay for internet listing of high scores.
 - Time limiting**: e.g, 60 minutes of play.

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Casual Community-Based Games

Casual Community-Based Games:

- A **group** of people experiencing the same game.

In-Game:

- Players to play against each other in the **same room** (multiplayer).
- Displaying a player's score to everyone playing in the room.
- Allowing **user interaction** during game play (full chat or canned messages).
- Tournaments or other incentive-based game play.

External (Post Game Community Features):

- Groups**: Rooms set up according to geographic areas or common interests.
- Recognition**: Leader-board, high score board, or player ranking system.
- Top Scores**: for different periods of time. (day, week, month, lifetime, etc.)
- Communication**: Message Board or Blogging area.
- Invitation**: Ask other players to compete.
- Goodies**: that can be won and sometimes sold.
- Longevity awards**: for spending extended periods of gameplay.

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Summary

Summary:

- Casual game design elements.
- Casual game mechanics.
- Narrative and characters.
- Advergames.