CMSC 498M: Chapter 12
Casual Games

Source: IGDA Casual Games Whitepaper (July 2006).

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

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 gameplay 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.
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.)

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)
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.

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.
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 your 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.

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
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)

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 (Codeminion/Oberon)
- QBeez 2 (Skunk Studios)
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)

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)
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)

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 Saенко)
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)

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)
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.

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.
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).

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 though a series of character class upgrades.
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.

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.
Summary

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- Narrative and characters.
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