

A Case Study for Casual & Hyper-casual Mobile Games

Game List:

- Aquapark.io (Voodoo)
- Amaze (Crazy Labs)
- Paper Fold (Good Job Games)
- Twisty Road (Voodoo)
- Tomb Of The Mask (Playgendary)

Question 1: What are the similarities and differences between these games?

In order to systematically identify the similarities and differences among the five selected games, while taking into account their unique characteristics, I opted for utilizing a widely recognized analytical tool from the field of game studies. For this reason, I based my comparative analysis on the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) framework, a methodology that holds significant value within both academic and professional game development communities.

There are two primary reasons behind this decision. Firstly, I believe that employing a method already adopted by both scholars and designers offers a reliable and structured foundation for conducting research on games. Without the guidance of a robust framework such as MDA, devising my own comparative categories could lead to reduced consistency and conceptual cohesion. This is not to suggest that I lack confidence in my ability to develop independent classification schemes; rather, I hold the view that aspiring to become a true professional entails building upon established practices and critically engaging with their limitations to foster more refined approaches.

The second reason is the alignment between the conceptual definitions proposed by the MDA framework and my own interpretive boundaries regarding what constitutes mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics in games. As is often the case in disciplines with a strong social dimension, game studies lack a uniform consensus on the

precise scope of certain core concepts. Nonetheless, my understanding of these elements largely coincides with the definitions put forth by MDA. These two considerations have led me to regard the MDA framework as the most appropriate lens through which to conduct my analysis.

According to the MDA framework, mechanics refer to the rules, control mechanisms, player behaviors, and in-game assets that constitute the foundational elements of gameplay. Dynamics emerge from systems that shape player interaction and engagement over time; such as in-game economies, social interaction tools (e.g., chat functions), level progression systems, and customizable character features that facilitate player agency and personalization. Finally, aesthetics pertain to the experiential outcomes produced by the interaction between mechanics and dynamics. These are categorized into eight distinct experiential domains: *sensation*, *fantasy*, *narrative*, *challenge*, *fellowship*, *discovery*, *expression*, and *submission*.

First of all, I would like to compare the mechanics of these games, as mechanics constitute the fundamental building blocks of every game. In both *Tomb of the Mask* and *Amaze*, the primary mechanic used to complete levels is movement in rectangular spaces—specifically, directional inputs that allow movement to the right, left, upward, or downward. However, there is a key distinction between the two: while *Tomb of the Mask* features a linear progression across levels, the same cannot be said for *Amaze*. Both games employ a two-dimensional visual design, meaning that movement is confined to a fixed plane. Additionally, both games share the same movement principle: in *Tomb of the Mask*, the player-controlled character and in *Amaze*, the ball, move strictly along straight lines, but the distance of this linear movement is not determined by the player. The object travels in the chosen direction until it encounters the first obstacle or wall; thus, the player is not choosing a specific destination, but rather a direction.

In contrast to these two games, *Twisty Road* and *Aquapark.io* utilize three-dimensional level design, which also shifts the plane in which movement occurs to a 3D space. In both games, the main object begins moving with automatic momentum, and the player is provided only with mechanics to steer the object left or right—vertical movement (up/down) is not player-controlled. In *Aquapark.io*, there are

certain entities that either propel the character upward or reduce its momentum: sprinklers positioned above the slide launch the character off the track, while barriers slow down its speed. If the player does not intervene, the character progresses in full alignment with the slide's direction until encountering a sprinkler. This is not the case in Twisty Road, where success requires the player to maneuver in accordance with the winding road. Moreover, Twisty Road features no obstacles that disrupt the ball's motion; rather, it offers a rewarding element in the form of diamonds, which serve as an incentive to stay on the track. These diamonds can be used in the in-game shop to unlock various balls, gates, and roads.

While Aquapark.io also features a collectible currency for cosmetic upgrades, the method of acquiring these differs significantly between the two games. In Twisty Road, reaching the target gate at the end of the road is necessary to complete the level, but players can still retain the diamonds collected even if they fail to fully complete the level. In Aquapark.io, on the other hand, the game assigns a score to the player's in-race actions, and the corresponding amount of currency is only awarded upon race completion. Such actions include eliminating other racers and executing perfect (or imperfect) landings after being airborne. Both games have clearly defined endpoints, yet neither requires the player to follow the track throughout the entire race: it is possible to advance to further parts of the track by staying airborne for a prolonged time without touching any surface. What sets Twisty Road apart here is the time constraint imposed on airborne moments; players must ensure that the ball returns to the track before the timer runs out.

In Twisty Road, the player's core objective may vary between levels. For instance, one level may require collecting green cubes scattered across the road, while another may challenge the player to take shortcuts twice. Returning to Tomb of the Mask, the game includes a comprehensive in-game shop and a currency system similar to Twisty Road's. However, unlike the other games, Tomb of the Mask sells items that can directly affect level performance and alter gameplay itself. Although it shares certain similarities with Amaze in terms of map structure and movement, Tomb of the Mask is much richer in terms of interactive elements. Enemies, hazards, and traps activated from different directions directly impact player performance, much like the

mechanics in Aquapark.io.

The only game not yet mentioned is Paper Fold, whose core mechanic revolves around folding a piece of paper along designated foldable edges. This significantly distinguishes it from all the other games, as there is no movable object per se; instead, the player manipulates the form of a static object to reveal a hidden shape. Both Paper Fold and Amaze lack any in-game currency, which means that they do not feature a full-fledged shop system. In Paper Fold, completing levels unlocks new themes, while Amaze offers different types of balls. Unlike Paper Fold, Amaze also features additional modes that impose time or move restrictions. Similarly, Tomb of the Mask, like Twisty Road, includes endless modes where the game continues until the player makes a mistake.

Considering all these mechanics and dynamics, the games can be categorized aesthetically as follows: Aquapark.io and Twisty Road evoke the aesthetics of “challenge” and “sensation,” while Tomb of the Mask reflects “challenge” and “discovery.” In contrast, Paper Fold and Amaze primarily emphasize the aesthetic of “submission.”

Question 2: Who constitutes the target audience of these games?

The target audience for Paper Fold and Amaze likely includes young children, babies, preschoolers, or early primary school students, as well as middle-aged adults with light or occasional familiarity with games. These games do not require prior gaming experience or extended periods to understand and internalize game rules. They are accessible to individuals who do not usually engage with games or are unfamiliar with gaming culture. For young children, the games have an educational potential and can foster logical thinking. The charming and playful visuals in Paper Fold and the satisfaction of painting squares through the ball’s movement in Amaze may serve as simple sources of joy for younger players. For older adults, the main appeal lies in the sense of relaxation the gameplay offers. In general, people sometimes seek to distract themselves from their daily routines or sources of stress (such as work or professional obligations), and Paper Fold and Amaze can be particularly appealing in such moments.

Although the player base of Aquapark.io and Twisty Road may overlap with the groups mentioned above, I would also include children aged 10–12 in their target demographic. These games demand quicker reflexes and more developed motor skills, making them more suitable for players with such tendencies. From the moment the level starts, the object is in constant motion and requires the player to make rapid interventions in response to obstacles and dynamic situations; thus, success is closely tied to player skill. Consequently, the target audience likely consists of individuals who enjoy reacting quickly and find pleasure in fast-paced gameplay.

Even though I don't consider the player base of Tomb of the Mask to be more restricted than the others, I do believe it has the most dedicated player base. This is largely due to its recent release on a new platform. As of October 27th, the game has become available on Nintendo Switch, suggesting that its audience is more specific and experienced. According to research conducted by IGN, one of the world's leading video game media outlets, Nintendo Switch was the third most popular gaming console in 2021. This indicates that if a game is adapted to Switch, it likely enjoys a certain level of popularity among a specific player base. Considering that the largest segment of Switch users falls within the 20–25 age range, it is reasonable to conclude that Tomb of the Mask appeals to a somewhat different audience compared to the other games.

Another factor supporting this idea is the game's relatively complex gameplay. Although the core character movement is as straightforward as in the other four games, the effort and concentration required for success are considerably higher. Therefore, the Tomb of the Mask player base may not consist solely of hypercasual gamers; it may also include those who enjoy in-game challenges, appreciate the need for strategic planning, and take pleasure in using resources effectively. In sum, the game likely attracts both players who prefer low-investment, casual gameplay and those who are familiar with or enjoy the complexity and aesthetic qualities offered by games like Tomb of the Mask.

Question 3: What might be the core reason each game is played?

Before reflecting on each game individually, I would like to make a brief note. Much like other media products, I believe user-centered design plays a crucial role in the success of digital games. Evaluating a game's success solely based on in-game elements would be insufficient; analyses that do not consider how players feel during their interaction with the game risk remain incomplete. Therefore, in identifying the core reason for playing each game, I focused on answering the following question: "What is the primary feature that draws a player to this game?"

Additionally, I wanted to avoid a reductionist perspective when discussing the dynamics that make these games successful. I deliberately steered clear of oversimplified assumptions based on users' daily routines, such as "they want to kill time during their commute", and instead aimed to highlight the deeper motivations that lead players specifically to engage with these games.

Instead of relying on superficial causal relationships, I concentrated on identifying the primary motivations that most compel players to engage with these specific games, drawing on Nick Yee's 12 Motivations model as a theoretical framework.

- **Twisty Road:** In my view, the primary reason for playing Twisty Road is its capacity to generate excitement. Navigating narrow paths without dropping the ball, attempting to execute turns smoothly, or repositioning the ball back onto the path within 4.5 seconds after it veers off contributes to an exhilarating gameplay experience.
- **Paper Fold:** I contend that the most significant motivator for players engaging with this game is the simplicity of its objective: completion. Although collectibles have minimal impact on the gameplay experience, they offer players the opportunity to engage in collecting, thereby providing a pure sense of accomplishment. This, I argue, constitutes Paper Fold's strongest attribute.

- Amaze: Similarly to Paper Fold, I believe the fundamental reason for playing Amaze is the ease with which players can achieve completion. This characteristic often leads players in this category of games to outpace developers, completing all available levels and awaiting new content, driven by an insatiable desire for the satisfaction of finishing.
- Tomb of the Mask: It is highly probable that players find the challenge factor particularly appealing in this game. The necessity to repeatedly attempt levels after making mistakes, developing different strategies, appeals to players' desire for difficulty. Upon successfully completing a level, players experience a heightened sense of satisfaction, derived from the perception of overcoming a formidable obstacle.
- Aquapark.io: This game offers a distinct form of entertainment not provided by the other four games: competition. I find the integration of a relaxed, thematic summer aesthetic with a synthetic racing environment populated by AI opponents to be highly ingenious. In my opinion, the most compelling aspect of Aquapark.io is its encouragement of players to outperform other competitors through strategic maneuvers, fostering a competitive atmosphere.

Question 4: Which is my favorite, and why?

As playing games constitutes a significant part of my life, I have a clear understanding of what most satisfies me in this context. I place high value on narrative, artistic uniqueness, immersion, agency, and autonomy in games. Among the five games provided, Tomb of the Mask most effectively satisfies me in these dimensions. Allow me to elaborate on the aspects that resonate with me.

Firstly, the stage-based mode in Tomb of the Mask carries symbolic significance. While players may need to move downward at times based on required maneuvers, the endpoint of each level consistently positions the player significantly higher than the starting point, instilling a psychological sense of continuous progress.

Another aspect I appreciate is the spatial opportunities and advantages the game provides. Features such as an in-game shop with purchasable items, a chest-opening mini-game, and a quest system expand the game spatially, enabling players to form multifaceted connections with the game. Beyond fostering engagement, these elements encourage strategic planning during level progression, enhance agency, and provide players with a sense of control. The feeling of “I am responsible for the outcomes I achieve” is particularly gratifying to me, and this game effectively elicits that sensation.

Additionally, Tomb of the Mask is the most narratively adaptable among the five games, which is another reason for my preference. Agency extends beyond in-game actions to include the potential for imaginative engagement outside of gameplay. It is straightforward to construct a backstory, embellish the protagonist’s motivations, or narrativize traps and enemies’ intentions, all of which enhance my enjoyment.

Finally, the game’s retro, pixel-art aesthetic evokes nostalgia, which further appeals to me. Upon first launching the game, I exclaimed, “I recognize this game!” Its appealing sound effects, gameplay style reminiscent of Pac-Man, and high-contrast color palette make Tomb of the Mask the most aesthetically impactful game for me.

Question 5: What critical element could I remove from each game?

- Paper Fold: I would remove the visuals on the paper. Without images, the sequence or method of folding would lose all meaning, undermining the game’s core appeal.
- Amaze: I would eliminate the feature where the squares change color as the ball passes over them. This would introduce unnecessary difficulty, disrupting the balance between challenge and enjoyment, and diminishing the potential for meaningful satisfaction.

- Aquapark.io: I would remove the indicator showing the player's position in the race. As a competitive racing game, the absence of ranking information and guidance toward the primary objective would erode players' motivation.

Question 6: How would I describe the peak emotional state of each game?

- Twisty Road: Luckiness
- Paper Fold: Satisfaction
- Amaze: Relaxation
- Tomb of the Mask: Skillfulness
- Aquapark.io: Superiority

Question 7: What is the most prominent common feature between Paper Fold and Amaze?

The most prominent common feature between these two games is their reliance on a trial-and-error gameplay mechanic. While this may not appear to be the most obvious shared trait, other potential commonalities are either derivatives or consequences of this core principle. Rather than offering a generic response applicable to all hypercasual games—such as “minimalist interface” or “immediate accessibility”—I sought to delve into the essence of these two games. However, it would be remiss to overlook the inherent, instinctual appeal they share as hypercasual games.

By design, both games feature minimalist level designs and require only brief periods to complete levels. Additionally, the number of moves required from players is both minimal and inconsequential (assuming Classic mode in Amaze). There is no penalty for excessive moves; rather, the more attempts made, the higher the likelihood of discovering the correct sequence, as players eliminate incorrect approaches through experimentation. Furthermore, time progression does not influence gameplay in either game, nor is there any requirement for immediate action. The games remain static until the player initiates interaction, with all movement and progression dependent on player initiative and trial-and-error. In both Paper Fold

and Amaze, there is a single rule governing level completion, with no additional complicating factors. For instance, in Paper Fold, the objective is to fold the paper in the correct order to reveal a complete image, while in Amaze, the goal is similarly to guide the ball in the correct sequence to cover all squares. The enjoyment in both cases stems from activating problem-solving skills through trial-and-error to identify the optimal sequence and progress. Another outcome of this trial-and-error foundation is that, as levels advance, the difficulty scales in tandem with this mechanic. Although the games do not introduce radical shifts in difficulty, higher levels demand more frequent attempts and failures, reinforcing that the games' challenge is intrinsically linked to trial-and-error. These connections suggest that the most distinctive and prominent shared feature between the two games is their dependence on a trial-and-error system.

Question 8: In terms of product design, what could have been improved in Paper Fold?

When the game introduces a new theme, the initial visuals align with that theme, but subsequent images often deviate, minimizing the theme's integration into gameplay. To address this, I would ensure a consistent alignment between the paper's images and themes, elevating themes to a central component of the gameplay experience. Additionally, I would introduce a feature allowing completed images from higher-difficulty levels to be downloadable or convertible into WhatsApp stickers, potentially expanding the game's audience. Another enhancement I would propose is a mode limiting the number of moves, which, by introducing greater difficulty, could be complemented by realistic, artistically rendered visuals on the paper, making the challenge more inviting. Beyond these suggestions, I would not alter or add other features, as I believe the existing elements—such as the interface, music, sound effects, graphics, level design, and progress indicators—are already well-executed.