

Columns Max

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Gameplay

As you play Columns Max, pieces in the shape of a column appear at the top of the pit and drop toward the bottom. When a piece reaches the bottom, it stops moving and a new block appears at the top. While pieces are dropping, they may be moved left or right to control where they land. You will also notice that each piece consists of three small colored blocks. These small blocks that make up a piece can also be "rotated" while the piece is dropping, so that the top two blocks in the piece move down one position within the column, and the bottom-most piece jumps up to the top of the column.

By manipulating pieces in this way as they fall, it is possible to control the position of a piece and the layout of the colored blocks within it when it lands. The object of the game is to clear blocks out of the pit by creating matches, dropping pieces so that at least three blocks of the same color are lined up on a row, column, or diagonal. When three or more same-colored blocks are lined up this way, they will disappear and any blocks above them will fall down to take their place, making room for more pieces above. If these newly fallen blocks also form a match, then they too will be cleared in a 2nd level reaction. This process continues until there are no more matching blocks to be cleared. Watch out, though, because the game ends when the pit becomes entirely filled with pieces, so the more blocks you clear, the more pieces you'll have room for, and the longer you'll be able to play.

Controls

You can use the keyboard to move the pieces and rotate the blocks as they descend. By default, the controls are configured to use the keys J, K, L, and the space bar. J and L move the piece left and right, K rotates the blocks, and the space bar drops the piece. The default key settings are generally good for right-handed players, but may not be best for everyone. If you wish to change the keys used to control the pieces, the key settings can be modified using the "set control keys" item in the options menu.

Special Blocks

From time to time during the game, you may see a piece that contains a block with a special symbol on it. You will also hear an alert sound when a piece with a special block appears in order to help draw your attention to it. These special blocks can help you immensely if you know how to use them.

-Wilds

You'll recognize these blocks by the symbol of a jester or clown. A wild block can act as if it is any other color to help create matches of three or more same-colored blocks in a row. For example, getting two blue blocks and a wild block all in a row is treated the same as if there

were three blue blocks in a row: the three will be treated as a match and will be cleared. Wild blocks can even act as different colors at the same time to create multiple matches involving different sets of blocks. Try using this fact to clear as many other blocks as possible with a wild.

-Novas

Nova blocks are identified by a diamond symbol. When you drop a piece with a nova block, the nova turns itself and all of the blocks adjacent to it into wilds. This usually results a huge reaction in which dozens of blocks are cleared from the board. Because they are so powerful, nova blocks only appear relatively rarely.

Scoring

Matching blocks and clearing them from the pit is the primary way to earn points. The number of points you receive for clearing blocks increases if you eliminate more blocks at one time: the first block involved in a match is only worth 10 points, but the second is worth 20, the third is worth 30, the fourth is worth 40, etc. This means that the number of points you earn can increase dramatically if you can clear many blocks at once. For example, clearing six blocks at once is worth 210 points, compared to just 120 points for clearing three blocks and then another three later.

"Chain reactions" in which clearing the blocks involved in one match creates another match are another way to increase your score. In other words, if you clear one group of blocks in a match, and the blocks which fall down to take their place form another match, you've created a chain reaction. For any blocks that are cleared in a 2nd level chain reaction, the point values are doubled. Point values are tripled for a 3rd level chain reaction, and so on, so that the points from a multi-level reaction can really add up quickly.

You will also receive 5 points for each row that a piece falls when you drop it, as an incentive to play quickly and drop the pieces before they have fallen very far into the pit.

Lastly, you can get a 5000 point bonus if you manage to get three or more wild blocks in a match, but be warned: this is very difficult to do, as two wild blocks in a row almost always matches something else before you can get a chance to drop a third wild block.

Levels

The game begins at level 1, where the pieces fall relatively slowly and there are five different colors of blocks. For every 50 blocks that you clear from the pit, you will advance to the next level. At each new level the pieces fall slightly faster than the last, adding to the challenge. In addition, the number of different block colors increases to six at level 3, and increases further to seven different colors at level 8. You will always receive a piece with a nova block at the start of these two levels to give you a bit of help coping with the increased complexity resulting from the added block color. Should you reach level 10, the speed and number of block colors will not increase any further, but you will be hard-pressed to survive for very long at level 10 speeds and with seven block colors.

Correspondence

Columns Max is written by Steve Chamberlin, a part-time shareware author. If you need to contact me regarding the game, use the addresses below. As shareware is only a hobby for me and not my primary business, I cannot promise that I'll have time to reply to every email or letter I receive, but I will read and consider every one of them. Thanks!

e-mail:

Internet: granola@aol.com
America Online: Granola

U.S. mail:

Opinicus Microtech
Department CM
P.O. Box 578
Belmont, CA 94002-0578