

Plagiarism Declaration and Assignment Cover Sheet

ESSAY COVER SHEET

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Topic: MDA Analysis on Communication Design within *Sort the Court*

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Plagiarism declaration

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2. I have used the author date convention for citation and referencing. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this essay from the work or works of other people has been acknowledged through citation and reference.
3. This essay is my own work.
4. I have not submitted this work, or a substantial portion thereof, for assessment previously.
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Communication design is a term broad term but in relation to games and similar media a more applicable term is feedback. Within this media there are multiple and layered formats for communicating data and the game state. The most common are the UI, the graphical elements that comprise the game which communicate data. The UI does not refer to the art assets such as the avatar and HUD but the combination and interaction between these assets and the data systems of the game form the UI. The third main element to be discussed will be cinematography or motion design, this allows the player to view and process information from moment to moment, this is generally be connected to camera work or the camera as a character. These three elements are the main components that will be focused on for this MDA analysis of *Sort the Court* (2016).

*Sort the Court* Is an indie game created by Graeme Borland, the player takes the position of a ruler who must then either agree or disagree with the suggestions and plans of their court and subjects. Agreeing or disagreeing will prompt the city to expand or decrease in size, gain, or lose happiness and gold. The game is not an infinite loop it does contain multiple endings based on the choices the player makes during their playthrough.

The game's representation of data is, on the bottom left of the screen the player has a real-time display of the population size, happiness, and available gold. When a character interacts, they will ask a question or give a proposal that the player will respond to with either a yes or no; depending on the choice this will decrease or increase certain resources. The main source of data communication or feedback within *Sort the Court* originates from the visuals used. While there is music and audio cues they do not play as large a part within the challenge aesthetic of the game.

*Sort the Court* is mechanically simple, various scripted interactions with the player that affect the resources based on a yes/no statement or a single bool. This is simplification that focuses on the face mechanics without diving into a deeper mechanical analysis. The two options that exist for every situation presented create multiple dynamic which led to aesthetics by presenting a simple set of choices. These aesthetics are detailed in the MDA approach written by Hunnicke et al (2004), the word aesthetic is not used to define a visual layout but the emotional responses that arise from the player's interactions with the system. The system challenges the player to maintain a high number of each resource, or the player may choose to focus on balancing certain resources to achieve one of the multiple endings this results in the aesthetic of challenge. Submission describes a game as a pastime, *Sort the Court* is not meant to be a highly competitive and complex game but rather presents the player with a narrative that they may immerse themselves in as their choices impact upon it. These two aesthetics are not the only ones present but are the best suited to discuss the feedback presented.

As each choice is made the three small HUD elements that represent the available resources change, they may change drastically, or it may be minimal, but it still informs the player what future decisions are possible and which they will be forced to decline based on their resource cost and which ending the player is aiming for. This small feedback loop: the player pressing either yes or no, the changing of the numbers and the next request all combine to create the aesthetic of challenge as described previously. The player still maintains the choice of how much the system will challenge them, will they take it seriously or not be concerned by any large changes or even the completion of the session whether it was positive or negative. This

is the second aesthetic of submission; the game as a pastime (Hunicke et al. 2004). A third aesthetic that could be discussed is that of Narrative or the game as drama. This aesthetic allows the player to interact within the world as a participator instead of an observer, since the ruler character is the player's avatar there is a connection between the player that is more than the player simply being a tool to input a yes or no. The interaction between the player and game allows for an expression of emotion by the player that in turn allows for the feedback to be both meaningful and impactful on the player's future decisions.

## References

Graeme Borland (2014) *Sort the Court*. [Digital Game]. [Mac/PC].

Hunicke, Robin & Leblanc, Marc & Zubek, Robert. (2004). MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research. AAAI Workshop - Technical Report. 1.