Sort the Court MDA and Communication Design Analysis

In this report I will analyse the game 'Sort the Court' using the MDA framework. I will talk about how good communication design heightens the aesthetic and dynamic exploration of this game and creates a fun and enjoyable user experience. When using the MDA framework to analyse a game, it is important to hold two perspectives; the designers perspective and the players perspective. With this in mind I will give both perspectives, when appropriate.

When talking about communication design, it is important to have an understanding of the common vocabulary used in this topic. Since definitions for these words can vary from person to person I will give a list of definitions that will be used within this analysis.

- ➢ Communication Design-an umbrella term that consists of the combination of UI, UX and feedback used to communicate information to a player
- ➢ UI-a visual element in the game used to communicate information to the player
- ➢ UX-The users journey through a game or application.
- ➢ Feedback-a reaction from the game that is used to communicate information to the player. Usually caused by a player action.

The aesthetics of the game are listed below.

- ➢ Fantasy: The role playing of being a king/queen
- ➢ Narrative: the characters are often interlinked creating an overarching story beyond each individual character
- ➢ Submission: the game is short, easy to understand and does not demand high attention
- ➢ Challenge: there is an aspect of trying to create your desired kingdom by deciding how to respond

I will later discuss how the use of communication design helps elevate the level of the aesthetics felt by the player.

Mechanically, 'Sort the Court' is a simple game. The mechanics are making a decision by pressing the 'Y' or 'N' keys, these keys correspond to 'yes' and 'no' respectively. The goal is to increase the population. The 3 factors the player has to take into account is population size, wealth, and citizen happiness. Each interaction will effect at least one of these factors.

The UI is very clean and simple, there is a simple colour coding system using red and green. Green means you replied 'Yes' as well as one of the 3 factors saw an increase in its value. Red means you replied 'No' as well as one of the three factors saw a decrease in value. The UI also uses iconography to help the user by reducing words on screen. The icons used are simple and are each a different colour to further help the user distinguish them from each other. A thumbs up and down are also used to replace the words 'yes' and 'no'. The kingdom stat icons can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1 iconography of 'Sort the Court'

The colour coding and easy to access icons allow the used to quickly recognize the different symbols and see how their stats have changed. This contributes to the submission aesthetic, as the simplified UI allows players to have less concentration but still be able to follow. The big green/red thumbs

up/down is great feedback as it easily confirms that the players response to a character has been recognised.

After each decision round, feedback is sent to the player to indicate how the kingdoms stats have changed. This feedback consists of one of the above icons in figure 1 with either a '+' or a '-' before it, and then the relative stat value changes.

The game is also divided into days, and at the end of each day a summary of relevant information is given. To indicate the closing of a day, the background colour of the game goes from light to dark over a few decision periods. This visual feedback allows the player to know how many decisions left before the day end.

Feedback sounds are also an important aspect of communication. Each button click(Yes or No) has a distanced sound. These sounds are made up of hums are the sounds that we culturally recognise to mean yes and no. Sounds are also layered onto other forms of feedback, for example there is a coin drop sound when you gain money with the visual feedback of the money icon and a '+'. Sound and iconography feedback layering is also used for the Yes and No buttons.

Another form of layered feedback is the background visuals. As your wealth increases a pile of coins next to the thrown also increases in size. There is also a town in the background the increase in size as your population increase. This is layered with the UI numerical value of each stat. This can be seen in the figures below. This visual growth of city and wealth adds an extra weight and satisfaction which increases the players desire to achieve the goal of population increase.
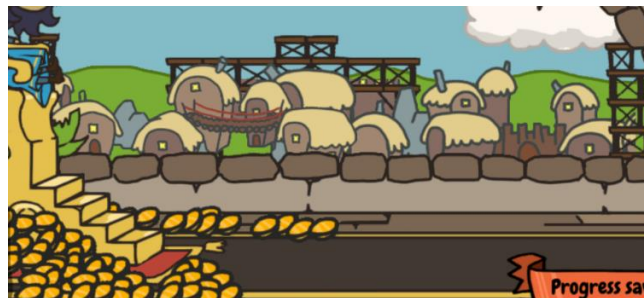

Figure 2: background feedback at start of game

Figure 3: background figure during a game

The game is very open ended in the beginning. There are very little instructions about what to do, you are told to grow the city but not how. You can try focus on balancing the kingdoms stats or gaining a high value of one, but you can't let the population get too low. This opens the game to a variety of dynamics, you can choose to be kind or a tyrant. The player is also not sure how each character is going to affect your kingdoms stats. From a UX perspective the player has to learn what numbers to expected in certain situations. Starting the player off with enough resources in each category to make mistakes and recover helps the UX journey to learn what is expected. The UI decision to hide the affect numbers of each character deepens the fantasy, challenge and narrative aesthetic as your decisions have more tension in them.

'Sort the Court' is comprised of multiple levels of communication design. This is made up of the UI, the UX and feedback given to the player. The clean and simple UI decreases the time it takes a player to understand what is happening. The simple and colour coded nature of the UI increase the submission aesthetic felt by the player. There are also multiple layers of feedback given to the player

at any given moment. The layers consist of sound, colour and art that all work to give relevant information to the player. This combination of simple and clean UI design along with layered feedback create an enjoyable user experience(UX) where the user can explore the dynamics of the game and get a sense of how things work in short period of time. This allows the player to deeper explore the dynamics of the game early on which adds to the aesthetic of fantasy and narrative.

Overall 'Sort the Court' has strong communication design which clearly shows the mechanics of the game, allowing early on dynamic exploration along with deepening the aesthetics felt by the player.

Image references:

All images were taken by the author of this report. These images were taken directly from the game 'Sort the court' available at https://graebor.itch.io/sort-the-court

The games authors are; Graeme Borland, Bogdan Rybak and Amy Gerardy.