

Introduction

The aim of this analysis is to discuss the game *Sort the Court* (Borland, 2015) using the MDA Framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek, 2004) as well as discuss how communication design fits into the different areas of the MDA framework and how it is implemented in the game. *Sort the Court* is a civilisation management, simulation game where players have to make decisions, which influence the three different statistics of their kingdom, by answering yes or no questions. The kingdom statistics involve Happiness, which measures the happiness of the people in the town, Population and Money. The player loses the game if one of the kingdom statistics decreases past a certain level.

The MDA Framework (Hunicke, *et all*, 2004) is a framework which discusses and suggests a way for game designers to construct as well as analyse games in an iterative nature. The framework suggests that elements on games can be separated into three different categories, which are Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics. This framework was constructed to help the designer understand the iterative design process better as well as suggests that all these elements are reliant on each other and the player.

Communication design and feedback are shown through different elements within game systems, which show the player what is happening in that specific moment in the game. The feedback is a result on the player's input in the system and helps the player understand their input as well as the rest of the system. Communication design and feedback are shown in different elements, depending on the type of game being played. Some of these elements include UI (User Interface), Sound and Music, Art and Animations, and many other elements.

Mechanics

Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004) define mechanics as the different actions that the player-character can do, aided by the player, and are implemented by the game's designer.

There is only one main mechanic in *Sort the Court*. This is clicking on the yes or no options for every decision that the player can make in the game. This can also be done by pressing the **Y** or **N** keys on a keyboard. This action is done when the player is asked as yes or no question, where the result can influence the kingdom statistics. This decision is communicated to the player by small icons showing yes or no, which the player can click on or press the respective key.

Another mechanic in the game is when the player needs to read more text from the NPCs (non-playable characters). This can be done by either clicking on the text or by pressing the **Space Bar**. This is also done to continue with the rest of the game or to introduce the next character as well as the next situation/decision that the player has to make. This is communicated to the player by showing a small icon at the bottom in the character's speech bubble that the player can click on or click the appropriate key.

Dynamics

Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004) define dynamics as the actions that happen during gameplay because of the player's actions as well as the output of the system. This means that the dynamics are caused by the mechanics as well as the player's choices and actions.

There is only one dynamic in *Sort the Court* which is strategy. Players have choose what type of monarch they would like to be during the game, thus allowing them to play with a certain mindset or strategy to

achieve their desired monarch. If a player decides to be a queen or king that prioritises their kingdom first, then every single decision that the player makes will strive to make sure that the kingdom has high statistics and the people are happy. If the player chooses to be a monarch whose sole purpose is to make as much money as possible, the decisions they make will be influenced by that mindset even though the game will not last long if the other kingdom statistics are neglected. There are also elements of Risk within this dynamic as players are forced to make tough decisions which could have dire consequences on any of the kingdom statistics.

This dynamic is communicated to the player after every decision that the player makes as there are small boxes fall from the top left of the screen which indicate whether the kingdom statistics have dropped. The game designers made use of little icons that represent each of the statistics, a house for the population, a smiley face for the happiness of the people, and a coin for the money. There is either an addition or subtraction sign which is followed by a value on the boxes that fall from the top of the screen indicating which and by how much the statistic has increased or decreased. Another element that indicates when the player has gained money is the fact that coins drop on the top of the screen as well and create stacks of coins which surround the throne. These coins stop falling after the money exceeds over three thousand coins, but they disappear every time money is spent. This is known as layered feedback to add more emphasis on that certain action.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics can be defined as the emotions that a player feels during gameplay which are normally a result of the game system and how the player interacts with the system (Hunicke *et al*, 2004).

Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004) state that there are common core aesthetics that are present in games. One of these core aesthetics is Narrative, which can be interpreted as game as drama (Hunicke *et al* 2004). Although *Sort the Court* does not have a proper storyline or any cinematics, it is clear that there is a link and a small backstory to the kingdom as well as the characters in the kingdom. There are characters that linked to each other, for example families as well as pets and owners. This is communicated to the player as all the characters have names and that some characters mention others in their questions with the player.

Another one of the core aesthetics is Fantasy, which can be interpreted as game as make-believe (Hunicke *et al* 2004). This is seen in *Sort the Court* as the game deals with mythical creatures and fantastical characters. Some of these include dragons, witches, etc. It is communicated to the player via the visual depictions on these characters.

The designer of the game defines *Sort the Court* as a simulation game, which is meant to simulate an aspect of reality. In the game, this can be seen through the resource control aspects and evokes a sense of responsibility in the player. This is communicated to the player by the fact that the kingdom statistics are constantly increasing and decreasing based off the player's decisions as well as when the player must make tough decisions.

Conclusion

Sort the Court is a game that can be seen as a good example of communication and feedback design as the information is easy to understand in a short amount of time as well as communicated in a simple way as to not confuse the player. The information that is communicated to the player reflects what is happening to the system. Using the MDA framework to analyse the game and how communication design and feedback are implemented in each aspect of the MDA Framework allows for a better understanding of the conscious decisions that the designers make in order for the player to fully understand the system and what is happening in that system at a specific moment in time as well as explaining it as explicitly as possible while still being simple.

References

Borland, G. (2015). *Sort the Court*. [Video Game]. Microsoft Windows. Graeme Borland.

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., Zubek, R., (2004). MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research. In Proceedings of the AAAP Workshop on Challenged in Game AI. Available from: <https://users.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf>