Analysis of Sort the Court relating to Communication Design using MDA framework.

Sort the Court is a basic game in which the player must manage a kingdom and its resources, namely population, happiness, and gold. This is done through a set of decisions or questions that the player must answer each day, these decisions are limited to yes and no answers only. Depending on how these decisions and questions are answered, the resources of the kingdom will either increase or decrease. The main goal is to see how long you can maintain your kingdom and how far you can expand it.

Resource management

The core mechanic of Sort the Court is its resource management which is facilitated by the daily decisions a player must make. These resources are the current population of the kingdom, the overall happiness in the kingdom, and how much gold you as the king/queen currently have. Every day, a large variety of characters will appear before you and ask a question, make a request or demand or even just come to talk to you about some topic. These are limited to four a day. Depending on how the player answers, their decision will affect their current resources or create a scenario in the future that will impact their resources. For example, you may sacrifice many of your population in return for a large sum of gold, or you may agree to a trade deal that will only affect you in a few days after.

These daily decisions are communicated well as the player can gather a general understanding of what may happen should they make a certain choice. The wording generally alludes to which resource it will affect and how it will affect it, with some being very specific and others being quite broad. This system creates engagement between the player and the mechanics as they must figure out which option they want to take for their desired outcome.

These decisions lead to mainly small changes but there are times when the player must make a huge decision that will impact their kingdom greatly. These decisions are generally demands or offers made by the game's large variety of monster characters. For example, there is a time where a large dragon will come to you angrily and demand a tribute or he will cause problems for you. If you agree to pay the tribute, you will lose a large amount of gold but if you refuse you will lose a large amount of population and happiness. Another example is a demon who will offer you a great reward if you sacrifice your people to him. If you agree you will lose a very large amount of your population and some happiness but in return, you will gain an extreme amount of gold. However, if you refuse nothing will happen and the demon will simply leave. Therefore, this shows if a player can analyse and understand what is being communicated to them, they may use the system and its resources to create the kingdom that they want.

How the core mechanic is communicated

The game communicates the resources and general ambience extremely well to the player through visual means. Not only is the possible effect communicated through the wording of

the questions and requests. But the effect is also visually communicated as the resources change. This gives the player a good amount of feedback as to what effect their decision has made without having to see any numbers or data.

Firstly, as the player makes decisions, the lighting will change to show that the day is progressing. This shift goes from morning to afternoon, then to evening, and finally ending at nighttime. This gives the player a sense of how time flows and indicates which decision they make will be the last of the day.

The gold is shown through a pile of gold surrounding the player. As the player acquires more, gold coins will drop onto the pile and make it even larger but as the player loses gold, these coins will disappear. Should the player get rich enough the gold pile will start reaching the top of the screen. This is a great means of communication to show how much gold is available without giving a defined number which lets players make decisions faster by just glancing at their gold pile.

The population is shown through a town that can always be seen in the background. As the population increases, the town in the background will expand. Eventually, when the city reaches the largest point it can horizontally, it will start expanding vertically. A decrease in population is also shown as the city shrinks proportionally to the amount lost. This allows the player to physically see how their decisions have impacted the kingdom and allows them to see if they have managed their resources effectively.

Happiness does not have visual feedback like the others, but it does affect the other resources. At the end of a day, depending on the happiness value, the population of the kingdom will increase or decrease. The game communicates this through a small text at the end of each day, which may make players aware that they are on the right track or they need to do something to get back on it.

Conclusion

Sort the Court uses its resource management and decision-making system to create a meaningful play. The way it communicates these systems and ideas are implemented well, giving the player substantial feedback as to what they should do and the effect of what they have done. This ensures the player utilises the core mechanics to enjoy the game in the way they want to and have fun.

References

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