# MDA Analysis of Sort the Court!

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## Introduction

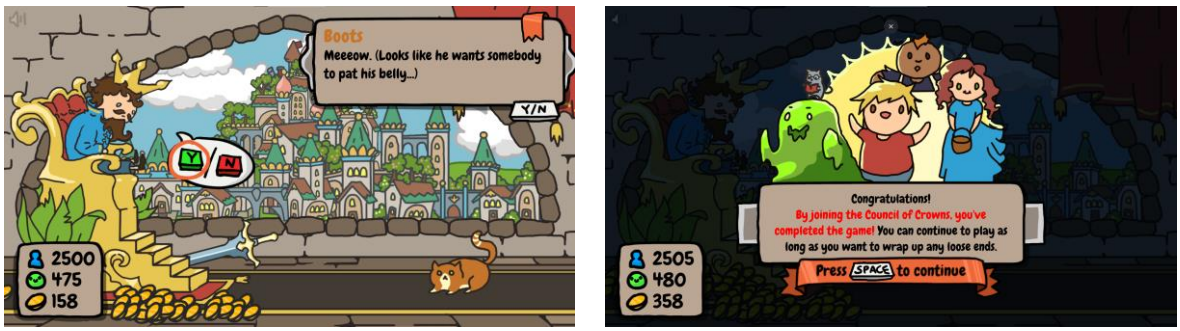
Sort the Court! is a roleplaying simulation game made by Graeme Borland and co. in Unity. In the game the player takes the role of a ruler in a burgeoning kingdom, approving or disapproving of problems brought to them by their citizens.

This report aims to analyse the communication design in the game as well as break down the game into formal components of the MDA framework.

## Communication Design

### UI

The game uses simple HUD to show the player their resources and a dialog box to communicate with NPCs only able to communicate with Yes and No.Each button is colour coded in contemporary colours (green = yes, red = no) is visually represented and labelled. Lastly an end of day graphic is shown communication the effect each decision had on the resources for that day.



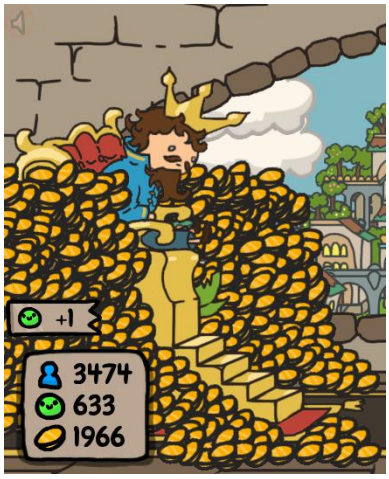

*Screenshots showing the HUD in action and the end of day screen (greabor , 2017)*

### Sounds

Each action the players makes is accompanied by an audio clue implying the action taken (gold makes a coin jingle, when yes is pressed a “erhmm ” is played). When an NPC initiates dialog they mumble.

### Art+Animation

The throne hall the player resides in uses art to communicate the game state and animations to actively tip the player off to their effects. Lastly information like the players resources and time of day are diegetic (more gold = bigger gold pile, more people = bigger city, as time passes throne room darkens).





*Screenshots showing the diagetic elements (gold pile and time of day) (graebor , 2017)*

**Feedback process**

The feedback is given in layers each building on the little information that came before it to build a bigger picture , with each action taken showing a visual reaction – example: Decision is given and made - HUD shows resources changing - animation is played show the effect visually (gold pile decreases) - end dialog is given - time changes.

## MDA Framework Analysis

### Mechanics

**Sorting**

The entire game revolves around the players ability to make decisions by choosing yes or no. Each decision the player makes has an effect on the kingdom's resources. When the player is first presented with a decision it is told to them by an NPC with a problem and some flavour dialog. Each decision the player makes effect some of their resources increasing or decreasing with resources effecting the players kingdom.

**Resource Mechanic**

*Gold*: Gold is used to purchase goods and services. The player can overspend and go into debt resulting in a red minus next to their gold value - in certain encounters happiness and population can be exchanged for large quantities of gold.

*Population*: the population count serves as a milestone counter in the game unlocking new encounters and more gold from taxes – if the population reaches 0, the game is over.

*Happiness*: the amount of happiness the kingdom has effects all the other resources – the less happy the people are the less growth the kingdom sustains and eventually the population decreases until a game over.

**Random Encounters**

The game is composed of random encounters with NPCs coming the player with a problem – encounters unlock quest paths and effect other encounters with lasting consequences (slaying the dragon, banishing grandma, selling your kingdoms souls for gold).

## Dynamics

*Resource/Kingdom Management:* Through the action of sorting through the court the player directly manages their resource pool, reading deeper into the encounter's motivations and outcomes from their kingdom.

*Investing:* Certain encounters require multiple days to solve and eventually when solved they have an effect on the players resources (slaying the dragon gives gold, building the tavern gives income). This allows the player to strategically asses what to spend money on for a future pay-out.

*Morality:* Since the player is role playing a ruler, they are in charge of a population meaning they can do anything with it including actions that would morally reprehensible in reality (selling their souls for gold). This leads to the dynamic of the morality of the players rule when they begin to question their actions as it has consequences for virtual people and become their own moral compass.

## Aesthetics

*Fantasy:* The player takes on the fantasy of being a ruler in a fantasy world making decisions directly controlling the treasury, population and indirectly controlling the happiness.

*Discovery:* Each run is random so the player will discover new random encounters and pursue divergent routes for their rule and find new character who semi-randomly appear.

*Challenge:* Each run does not play out the same resulting in random difficulty, where some runs might intentionally ruin the players kingdom (this is rare but can happen) causing the player to claw their way back to stability.

## Conclusion

Sort the Court works well as a roleplaying game with resource management, allowing the player to effectively rule over the chaos of the random encounters and grow their kingdom by giving the player the right amount of information to make decisions while still keeping tension. The game has cutesy light hearted atmosphere using its art, sounds and user experience matching its gameplay.

## References

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M. and Zubek, R. (2004). *MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research.*

*Sort the Court!* (Web version) [Video Game]. (2017). Graeme Borland