

# Initial Design Process

## Concept, Hook, and Direction

Our core concept for Magic Farm in the beginning was a fantasy-themed battle card game for 2-4 players with a focus on **strategy** and **sabotage**. We wanted something lighthearted and silly that still encapsulated the feeling of a PvP game. Taking **thematic** inspiration from games like *Harvest Moon* and *Stardew Valley*, and **mechanical** inspiration from *Magic: The Gathering* (MTG), our hook became “a battle card game for players of any age and skill level.”

## Design Challenges

Some early design challenges we faced mostly revolved around making the game **feel** like farming. What was the end goal of farming? What challenges do actual farmers face? We decided that, as most jobs, the primary goal of farming is to **earn money**, so that became the goal of our game (which made more sense than losing life or just growing for the sake of growing). For the second question, we decided that the main challenge of farming is working around the **shifting seasons**, so we really wanted to incorporate that mechanic into our game. Another design challenge we faced was making more **secondary mechanics** for players to interact with, while drawing from our inspiration.

## Design Solutions

Our initial solutions to the first two problems went hand-in-hand. We created a system where the **season** would shift after a certain number of turns, and once a **full year** had passed, the game would end. At the end, the player who had the **most money** was declared the winner. The seasons not only determined the end of the game, but also caused differing effects on the cards depending on the current season. We thought this made sense thematically while also differing from the structure of MTG. We also thought it would create interesting **gameplay dynamics** toward the end, as players were aware of their approaching deadline.

For the third problem, we came up with the idea of **gathering resources**. In *Stardew Valley*, you can mine ore and cut down trees, and in MTG, you require mana to cast spells. We put the two together into a system where players could spend their turns gathering resources which could then be used to play different cards with different effects *besides* growing crops. We felt this added a new, **modular** layer of gameplay which created more interaction and **choice** among players.

# First Playtest Results

One major thing we learned from the first playtest session was **balancing** the different components within the game. Specifically, the **buy/sell** component.

In the first playtest session, players were allowed to sell materials as well as use them towards constructs and magic spells. Since the winning state was determined by the player with the most gold at the end of the game, players **defaulted** to selling all of their resources. This took away from the original core concept, which was farming. Selling resources became the main focus.

Another situation that came into light was the amount of **time** it took to complete one round of the game. 30 minutes into the first playtest session, the players were only on turn four (**out of 40**). Although farming in real life requires patience, this was far too long for a card-based game and patience became thin.

Lastly, many of the problems during the first playtest session came from the imbalance of **cards**. There were unique cards which were more common than they should have been. So during playtesting, the game became unbalanced.

Although we acted on most of the critiques, one thing we did not pursue as heavily as the others was the addition of **more cards**. The cards of the first prototype were hand-drawn cards done by a team of two. So it limited us to add more as we felt it was not as big of an issue as other components. Although there was an imbalance with the cards' uniqueness, we felt that changing their **stats** fixed the issue more than adding cards to the deck.

Another critique we did not act upon is reducing the amount of turns. Instead, we changed how the seasons play out in the game.

# Design Response

## Seasonal Changes (Pun intended)

After the first playtest, it immediately became clear that the **season-shifting** system needed to be fixed. With our initial solution, we never expected the game to be reaching the length of games like *Monopoly* or *Risk*. After several iterations, we realized nothing was working, and the whole design needed to be scrapped. We changed the entire way that seasons worked, and with it, the goal needed to change as well.

While not as realistic, we made it so that the season shifted **every turn**. This made the timing of crop growing in the game much more interesting, as well as sped of the **pace** significantly. With that in place, the goal of the game changed to the players needing to reach a **specified** money target. Whoever reached it first was declared the winner. This kept in line with our initial solution and theme, but was much **quicker** and easier to understand. It also encouraged more player sabotage and **interaction**, which is something we had wanted from the start.

## Other System Changes

The most prominent system change we implemented was the **Shop** system. We wanted to give players more **choice** over what cards they were playing with,

so we made the shop have a select few cards in the center that the players could see and buy *beforehand*, instead of randomly drawing. This also made playing cards **less confusing** because the players no longer needed to spend gold to play cards, only to buy them initially.

We also changed the way that crops grow. They used a d6 counter system instead of a token system, and were no longer discarded upon completion. Instead, they could be re-grown and re-harvested at a consistent rate. This made them more **viable**, while again promoting more player sabotage.

## Card-specific Changes

Resource cards couldn't be allowed to be **sold**, period. That much was obvious from every playtest we ran; it was way too powerful, and clearly the dominant strategy. It also took away from the core feeling of farming that we were aiming for. To **balance** out this change, we made crops more valuable and spells less costly.

We also changed the **cost/return** values of all cards to be nice, even numbers (50s and 100s). This was because many of our testers claimed that the math **slowed down** the game pace significantly.

# Second Playtest Results

The second playtest showed great **improvement** compared to the first playtest session. Since we took into consideration most of the critiques, such as length of gameplay, selling issues, and card imbalances, the second playtest session was **faster**, and slightly smoother than the first.

Although there was some context in the written directions that wasn't clear to the players, they did figure out the action tokens and how the d6 was supposed to be used in the growing of the crops. We also eliminated the mechanic of selling materials which greatly fixed the issue of **imbalance** between growing and selling within the game.

The **feedback** in this round of playtesting focused more on the clarification within the direction booklet, such as making a **glossary** of terminology, as well as the symbols used on the cards. The winter and fall symbols looked too similar and the players were getting confused.

The playtesters did enjoy the **physical components** like the action tokens and d6. Simplifying the prices allowed easy **math** and more focus on the game itself.

Overall, the second session allowed us to see that the critiques in the first session when improved upon made the game much sturdier.

# Projected Design Response

## Future Design Improvements

If we were to continue working on Magic Farm, we would like to make the gold system more **tactile**. Instead of tracking it with math on a piece of paper, we would like to include tokens or some other physical representation of the gold. This would make it easier to keep track of, and it would improve the game feel in our opinion.

We would also like to continue refining the **Shop Action**, and how the Product cards appear. For example, sometimes players weren't happy with *any* of the options laid out, so they stopped shopping. Perhaps if the cards refreshed each season, or the players could use one of their actions to refresh the cards, this issue could be solved.

Another thing to work on would be creating a consistent **visual design** across the cards. Although fun to look at, there were times during the playtest they were unclear, so this would help with the **clarity** of the design language. They should be easy to understand at first glance, with the text only helping to clarify.

Finally, we would like to add more unique mechanics to cards in order to increase **modularity** without actually adding more cards. This would help improve the current feeling of "lock-and-key" that some of the cards have.

## Results of the Changes

Many of the changes we made for our Beta Playtest were **positively** received. The removal of selling was a big plus, and people liked how much quicker the game was (both in terms of crop growth rates and how turns played out).

One tester who had also tested the Alpha version also made a comment that it "felt more like farming". This was nice to hear since it meant our changes were a step in the right direction to achieving our core gameplay goals.

# Overall Design Reflection

## The Good

In the end, we do feel that our game was **successful** in capturing our core design goals, and the player fantasy was adequately fulfilled. After many iterations to the turn sequence, growing, shopping, and spellcasting mechanics, it really became a fast-paced but lighthearted game with lots of player interactions.

The parts of Magic Farm that we feel best meet our goals and expectations are the growth and season-shifting mechanics. After we fixed them, they became a very **engaging** and crucial part of the game. Because seasons are constantly changing now, it gives players more **agency** of when they want to harvest their crops. Should they harvest for immediate benefit, or wait for the season bonus with a risk of the other player sabotaging them? This also helped to promote the latter action, which was one of our **core pillars** to begin with. We feel that this became a very positive change for the overall direction of the game.

## The Not-So-Good

An aspect that could still be improved upon would be the **shopping**. While we fixed a major issue in the randomness of the system, it still isn't perfect. There is still a problem when it comes to **stalemates** in the center, where neither player wants what is available. Currently, there is no way to rectify this, but going forward that would be one of the things we would look into. Another thing would be just improving the general **visual style/design** of the game to make it more cohesive *and* coherent to all players, old and new.

## Lessons

One good lesson to take from this experience going forward is: if a design just isn't working, **scrap it**. There will always be another way to solve a problem, and holding onto an idea that you like or want to work is only going to slow you down. This was the case of both the initial season-shifting system and the resource selling. We decided to just get rid of them completely, and the game was better off because of it.