



Faculty of Science and Technology

BSc (Hons) Game Design

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***Balancing for Everyone: Designing Card Games
for All Levels of Play***

by

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Abstract

Balance and card games are often discussed together and how balance changes a player's enjoyment of a game, with a card games balance heavily affecting the overall player experience if a game is imbalanced by making players feel as if the decisions, they are making have no impact. Card games often struggle with introducing new players to card game mechanics all while maintaining a fair and balanced game that can be played by all. The purpose of this paper is to delve into what creates fair and balanced card games and develop a game that can accommodate players of varied skill levels, experience, and knowledge of card games while keeping the game fair and enjoyable for all players.

This game was designed and developed considering different elements of card game design and UX design to make sure players understand mechanics of the game without including incumbering visual and improving overall clarity.

Through a series of user studies, each involving two participants playing a full match of the developed card game against each other, it was revealed that the game was effectively introducing players to the mechanics of card games while still actively engaging players. showing that card games can be designed and balanced in a way that players can easily pick up and understand card game mechanics while still making them feel that the decisions they're making are important and that they have a fair chance to win. The game was also effective at creating an experience that is accessible to new and experienced players, revealing many aspects of card game design that can impact a games balance unintentionally such as visual elements and conveying information to players.

KEYWORDS

Balance, CCG's, fairness, understanding, Player experience

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1 Introduction

This project intends to provide insight into the balance of collectible card games and to design, develop, and test a game that can create a fair experience for players of all skill levels, regardless of prior experience with card games or video games in general. Balance is something that affects card games in many aspects and in most cases, becomes more apparent throughout a card game's lifespan, with phrases like "power creep" and "broken" being used to discuss a games balance when new mechanics or cards are introduced.



Initial Release: 2008

Card Effect Word Count: 18



Initial Release: 2019

Card Effect Word Count: 181

Figure 1: Examples of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG Cards Over the Years

In figure 1 you can see an example of this and how card games change dramatically over time, becoming increasingly harder to understand and take in as a new player. These barriers of entry can put players off discovering card games due to game complexity. This is what this project aims to avoid and instead create an experience that people can easily pick up and understand within a few minutes.

Game imbalance is an issue that affects games by causing players to become frustrated with a game and begin to blame for possible losses, with some worst-case scenarios causing players to quit or leave games for an extended period or possibly forever. This reveals another goal for this project, design and experience that can be easily balanced over its lifespan without negatively impacting the player's experience. With these issues and sub goals in mind, the primary goal of this project is as follows:

Can card games be designed for a universal player base that is fair for players of all skill levels, regardless of experience?

This primary goal will be the driving force behind many elements of this project and the user study required to complete this goal. Background research for this project now begins, delving into prior work on balance within video games, card games, and card game design.

2 Background/Related Work

For this project, the background research and related work will be focused on looking at work that displays different ways of balancing card games and designing games for balance, as well as making games for wide audiences and onboarding players. Here is a list of the types of work that were researched for this project:

- Balance in card games
- Balance in video games
- Creating Digital/Physical CCGs and card design
- Designing for new players

2.1 Game Balance

While there have been a few academic studies looking into the balance of certain games and more specifically card games, there is little research into balancing games outside of academic books. Balance and fair play are discussed in books by different scholars who all explain a variety of techniques and processes for balancing aspects of games.

Jesse Schell (2008) presents 17 lenses for designing the balance of games in his “the art of game design”. These lenses are described as different ways of viewing your game and can be used to question your design decisions. Some of these lenses that will be useful for this project include the lens of meaningful choices, The Lens of Challenge, The Lens of Fairness, among many others. Schell also mentions skill vs chance and its respective lens, and how “Too much chance negates the effects of player skill and vice versa”.

Tracy Fullerton (2018) discusses balance and what creates imbalance within games and how this can be kept in check through different balance and design practices. Firstly, she talks about how the rules of a game and its objects or “super objects” can create an imbalance. The book expands on fundamental design decisions and mentions how designing different game objects (or cards in this project’s case) need to have their strengths and weaknesses carefully considered so there is no dominant strategy.

When dominant strategies are discovered by players, it reduces the number of choices that a player can make, as no player will choose to use a strategy if there is a clear strategy that stands above all others. Dominant strategies reduce both challenge and choice, which is ultimately fun for neither player, which Fullerton says should be removed or obscured at all costs. Fullerton also showcases techniques that are helpful to keeping a game’s balance in check, such as keeping a game modular. By breaking the game down into subsystems that aren’t interconnected, makes it easier to balance a game. Another technique, “Purity of Purpose” is about designing the components of your game with a clear mission in mind and doesn’t have more than one function.

Fullerton also talks about playtesting in chapter 9 of the same book. In this chapter she displays an iterative design process for playtesting a game as well as how to go about setting up a playtesting session. These design tips for playtesting will be essential for the playtesting of the game being made for this project. Based on Schell and Fullerton's research into playtesting, playtesting can be used to determine what elements of a game or in this case, cards, or mechanics, are out of balance and impacting the rest of the game. Playtesting will also inform design decisions that will improve the iterative design process for the game being developed for this project.

2.2 Card Game Design

The "Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design: An Encyclopedia of Mechanisms" by Geoffrey Engelstein (Engelstein 2019, p.186) displays a variety of techniques and designs for both developing and balancing tabletop games which is useful for this type of project. It discusses how it's possible to balance tabletop games based on their individual mechanics and how each mechanism is effective for balancing different aspects of play.

Engelstein showcases a variety of card mechanisms for different card games, and how different techniques of balancing and designing cards games are used in tabletop games for effective balance. While many of these building blocks may not apply to the designs of this project, they provide an insight into what is effective for designing the basics of a tabletop game.

Ethan Ham (Ham 2010) discussed the relationship between a card's rarity and its power and how naturally hard it is to balance CCGs (Collectible Card Games) due to how players can be at an unlevel playing field by not owning powerful cards that other players do have. This is shown to influence a player's enjoyment of a game when they feel like their skill was outweighed by their opponents having a much stronger collection of cards.

It also discusses how hard CCGs are to balance and test when designing hundreds of cards that all interact differently with each other and how cards affect a game's rules since many card games introduce new cards that change and warp the game's rules. A quote that stood out from this journal was from Lee Moyer, the artist for Sanctum's card art & producer of Oppositions, "rarity should equate to specialization, not power. In fact, the more bluntly powerful the card is, the more common it should be". This shows that while cards can be strong on their own, certain players having access to these cards impacts a game's balance greatly.

This journal touches on many issues that impact physical CCGs and can still be easily carried over to digital card games. Being able to own cards instantly causes a divide between players, as not being able to own powerful cards puts a player at a disadvantage by not having them or investing time, effort, or money into getting them.

Kristin Siu (Siu 2016) discusses "Reward Systems in Human Computation Games" and how giving players both multiple rewards and a choice of which awards they want can impact a player's overall experience and enjoyment of a game. In the paper, participants were made

to play a game with two different versions of the game being used on participants. One where the rewards for the game are randomly chosen for the player and one where players get to choose their rewards. The version of the game proved to be more effective at engaging players and having them perform tasks more effectively when given choices for their rewards.

As Ethan Ham demonstrated in his journal, players being able to choose what cards they wish to play with in a card game is essential for tabletop games. So, we can consider that having a selection of cards to choose from that are equally powerful but still accessible should impact a player's enjoyment of a card game and provide a more balanced experience.

Gianluca Zuin (Zuin 2019, p.6) discusses how newly designed cards can be balanced by carefully analyzing its resource costs in "Learning a Resource Scale for Collectible Card Games." In the paper, the card game Magic the Gathering is used as an example for calculating resource values of its cards and how the mana costs of cards are determined. Magic's color system is also mentioned, and how "if an ability is vastly present in some color but scarce in others, it might be the case that it should be valued differently in each context. Further, cards that have more than a single color or no color at all are more flexible regarding their abilities and strategies." This is something that will be important not only for balancing the costs of cards in my game but designing the mechanics of each card in relation to its cost as well.

Balance is a topic professionals in the games industry continuously cover as well. From developer interviews to GDC's, balance is widely talked about by designers who are balancing games. Jeff Kaplan, (Bratt, 2017) former lead designer and director for Overwatch, was interviewed about how he and the team at blizzard handled the balance of the heroes in Overwatch. He talks about what he refers to as a "balance triangle" where at each point

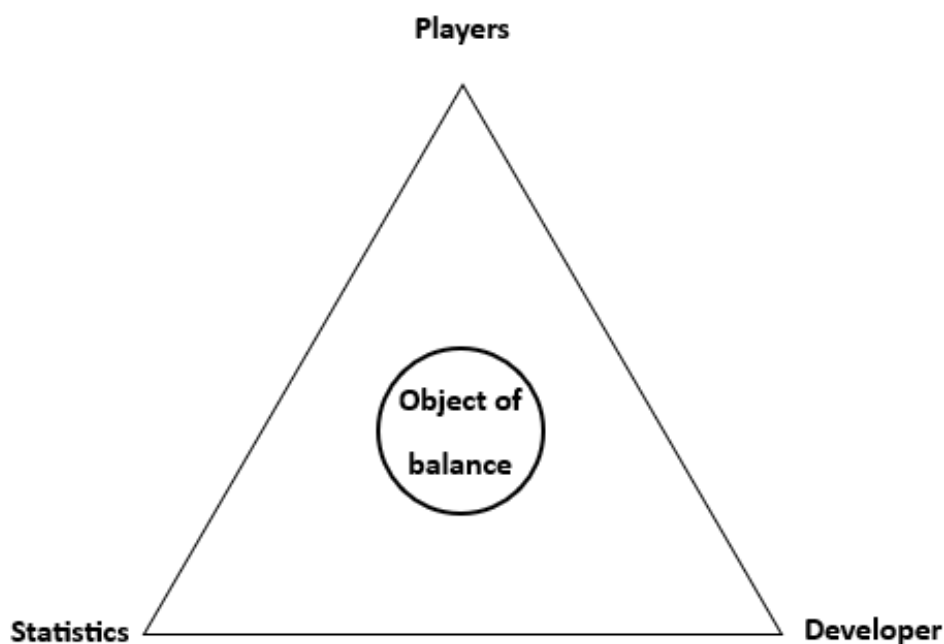


Figure 1: Blizzard Balance Triangle

of the triangle is a different value. An example of the balance triangle can be seen in figure 1.

At one end of the triangle is the player sentiment, and at the other ends are the statistics and the developer intuition/judgement. This triangle can be used to pinpoint issues with a game objects balance, for example in Overwatch the hero Symetra was incredibly powerful in terms of her statistics and win rate. However, the player base considered her to be unfun and in turn didn't play her, which then pushed the object of balance down towards the developer end, when Blizzard decided to rework the character to fix her many issues.

Kaplan makes it clear though that "there is no right or wrong, there is no magic formula...it's more art than science at a certain point" meaning that the balance triangle won't solve everything, and if something on the triangle leans entirely in one way that doesn't mean that's the entire issue with the object of balance. This technique of the balance triangle will likely be used in the evaluation process of this project.

In his 2018 GDC talk, Dylan Mayo (Mayo 2018) discusses "Balancing Mechanics for Your Card Game's Unique Power Curve." In this talk, multiple collectible card games are used as examples for displaying how their unique power curves create new card designs as well as how/when they can be played throughout the game. In figure 2 Mayo shows an example of hearthstone cards on a power curve, where he mentions how in hearthstone the higher the cost of cards, the less flexible they are, but are usually much stronger on the curve, and how good a card is depending on the ratio off the power curve.



Figure 2: Dylan Mayo's example of card strength on a power curve

An example he gives is two cards that have the exact same ability, one is a seven-Mana minion with high stats, and a minion at two mana with lower stats. The two-cost card is much stronger than the seven-cost due to how much stronger it is on the power curve compared to the same effect later in the game. This is also impacted by the mechanics that surround these cards, and how resources are gained to play cards, as that can determine why cards are more powerful at certain points in the game.

Eric Dodds, (Dodds 2014) game director on Hearthstone, gives “10 Bits of Design Wisdom” about how the game was developed. One of these tips is “don’t change too much” which meant to design elements, terms, and words for the game to be quick to understand. Card values like “attack”, “health” was named simply since players would be quick to understand what those words mean and relate to on cards. Eric says to “use terms people know” that players are familiar with, making the job of explaining these elements of the game much easier.

“Even the names of your spells, minions and cards are important” which Eric says gives players context to players for the power or effects of cards with certain names. These values and tips will be important going forward when designing my game to be accessible and understandable for players. Eric both shows an example of the early design decisions for Hearthstone and how many card games have multiple different phases and mechanics which can only be done in certain orders. This prompted the design choice to simplify the game down to the basics, so it was easier for new players to pick up and play.

3 Design and Implementation

Based on prior research into game balance and design, a select few papers and research have set the foundations for this project’s design decisions. These include:

- “Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design: An Encyclopedia of Mechanisms”
- “Rarity and Power: Balance in Collectible Object Games”
- “Game Design Workshop”

After carefully reviewing this background related work on designing and balancing cards games, a game has been designed that takes multiple aspects of these works and applied them to the individual elements of the game. The game being developed is Guild Rush, a 1v1 card game where players must command a deck of creatures, which are decided at the start of the game against their opponent, which is then added to their deck. The game mixes elements of sealed play and traditional draft modes in card games in the attempt to create a fair, balanced, and level playing field for both players regardless of experience.

The game will be developed using the *Unity* game engine and will be programmed in C# by myself. Assets for the game that I will be developing include art/sprites and UI elements. Any assets that I will be unable to develop such as any 3D models or visual effects, I will purchase or use free assets from the *Unity* marketplace. Music and sound effects will be produced by Scott Holland from the Music & Sound Production course at Bournemouth University.

Having completed the necessary background research and literature review, the goals trying to be accomplished with this game based on the prior research is as follows:

- Develop a fair and balanced game that players of different levels of experience can enjoy. The game should be easily accessible and understandable to new players regardless of prior experience with other digital card games.

- Introduce new mechanisms to card games that avoid naturally occurring balance issues.
- Design an experience that players can easily pick up and understand.

The design decisions of Guild Rush were made with these goals in mind and using design techniques taken from the background research.

3.1 Game Rules

Card games, especially CCG's (Collectible Card Games) are rule changing games as referred to by Ethan Ham, stating that "In a CCG, each card has some effect on the game: increasing the player's resources, decreasing an opponent's resources, changing a rule, and so forth" which he says makes card games naturally unfair by design. This means that when designing the rules for this card game they should be carefully considered to avoid this issue, however it may be impossible to avoid. So, when going forward with designing these rules, it may help make certain aspects of the game more flexible if cards are going to be playing around with the rules of the game.

Each game is a best of 3 starts with both players picking up a sealed pack of 10 random cards based around a certain type of class (e.g., Dragons, Warriors, Thieves). This chosen pack of cards is then added to that players deck, and a starting hand of 5 cards is drawn. The decision to have players pick their starting conditions was done for multiple reasons. As previously quoted, Gianluca Zuin talked about how different types of abilities should be specifically present in one group compared to others, cards in each creature class can be balanced differently based on their playing style. This means that unique play styles for each class can be created and keep them balanced at the same time.

3.2 Card Design



Figure 3: Creature card example

When designing cards, Eric Dodds design ideas were considered to design the names and effects of these cards to feel clear and give an indication as to what they do. The card example in Figure 3 is a standard creature card, displaying its name, cost, health, strength, and creature class. The gem icon displays a number within the icon showing how many gems are needed to play the card. A cards health and strength are grouped together and made to stand out on the card as they are two of the key value of a card. Finally, the creature class type displays a symbol indicating what class the creature belongs to. The purpose of the class symbol is to distinguish cards from one another for both players.

for many cards with effects, a card's stat line can impact a card's power in combination with its effects. For example, the card seen in Figure 3 is a 2 cost 3 health and 1 strength, when actuality it is a 2 cost 3/2 due to its effect. Chrono wizards effect lets it gain +1 strength at the end of your turn. This means that while it's a card with good stats in the early game, it allows you to build up a stronger creature the longer it's alive. With this effects its base stats need to be lowered to accommodate for the cards effect to keep the card in balance.

The final card pool for the game contains a total of 40 creature cards, (20 Rogue cards and 20 Wizard cards) and 14 Guild commands. As the deckbuilding for the game requires both players to pick ten cards, there would need to be enough cards for players to choose from so the same ten are not always picked. There also needed to be an equal number of creatures for both decks, each with varying stats, effects, and theming to differentiate them from each other, which was why a cards guild type was included on the card as seen in figure 3.

3.3 Win Conditions

Strength is required to win against your opponent and is a value determined by the total of each players creature strength on board (or by other card effects). Creatures have health and strength values that let them attack into an opponent's creatures to remove them and their strength from the board. To win, 1 player must have 10 more strength than their opponent to win the round.

In figure 2 you can see an example of a standard creature card. The maximum number of creatures that players can have on both sides of the board is 8 since there needs to be enough spaces for players to keep placing creatures to build up strength but not too much space for creatures as to overcrowd the board visually and take away from the decision making that goes into deciding which creatures to play if your board is nearly full.

When a card is played or leaves the board, it's sent to the discard pile where they will stay until the end of the round or until a player runs out of cards in their deck, where cards in the discard pile will be shuffled back into the deck.

3.4 Gameplay & Resources

Resource systems are a central piece of balance for games, card games especially. Many digital and tabletop card games have tackled resource systems in a variety of ways. Magic the gathering uses Mana as a resource system that must be played as physical cards in the game. Hearthstone does uses and ticker system that gives players 1 Mana each turn. Both resource systems have positive and negative impacts on a games balance. While Magic makes playing Mana more interactive and makes players build up their resources over the course of the game, when low on cards, drawing into a land card can feel very disappointing. Whereas, in Hearthstone it means players always have access to mana to play cards, but this can have an impact on what cards can be played if the player draws a bad hand or draws cards that they can't play until later in the game.

Both examples I've discussed could be used in some form in the game I'm developing but it must be noted that it will be hard to design a resource system that doesn't run into any of these negatives that come with them. I believe leaning towards the Hearthstone style ticker system will be most effective for this style of game, if it's modified to alleviate some of the negative issues that it has.

At the start of the first round, the player going first is randomly decided and does not draw on their first turn, to prevent the first turn player having too much advantage. The cost for cards is Gems, which is used to put cards from the hand, into play. At the start of each of their turns, players draw 1 card and gains 1 extra gem each turn, adding to their total gems. At the start of the game both players start at 1 gem and the max number of gems a player can have, is capped at 6.

The decision to cap the maximum number of gems at 6 was made to keep rounds short, and for balance and development reasons. If the Gem cap was closer to 10, it would mean that many more cards would need to be designed, developed, and balanced. Making sure that many cards are balanced, and any more cards that are developed later in the game's life will be much harder to keep on a similar power scale. This is otherwise known as "Power Creep", where over the lifetime of a game more cards or elements are introduced (which are normally much stronger than previously released cards) to keep players engaged and return to a game. This is another reason for why the options to choose which creature class you play at the start of the game was made. While this it doesn't avoid the potential for power creep, it means different creature classes can be compared in terms of power, and new classes can be added over time with unique gameplay mechanics.

Another key mechanic for the game, is the Guild Board. The Guild Board is a store which can be opened at any point in the match and is filled with cards from that player's chosen creature class. Cards from the Guild Board must be purchased using Gems. Cards on the guild board are drawn from the class deck. Then, every turn new cards are drawn from each player's class deck to fill this store. When purchased from the Guild Board, cards are added into the player's hand and get added to the players deck permanently at the end of the round. The contents of the guild board are unique to each player and the contents of the opposing players guild board can't be viewed by the other player.

3.5 Objectives & End of Round

The main objective of the game is to have more strength than your opponent to win. Strength is earned by playing cards and having creatures on the field. A creature on the field gains strength fight with your opponent's creatures. To win you must have 10 more strength than your opponent. The game is a best of three, and between rounds players can access a store to modify their deck.

After 1 round is over, players are given Gems to spend at the end of game Guild Board which lets them add or remove cards from their deck for a price. The player who wins gets 15 gems and the loser gets 10. Then at the start of the next round the loser gets to choose who goes first or second. These choices and rewards were introduced to give players a goal that goes towards winning the overall game with Geoffrey Engelstein (2019) saying *"Another design technique that can be considered is giving a bonus for triggering the end of the game, to incentivize players to take that action."*

Kristin Siu (2016) says, *"With multiple rewards systems, offering players the choice of reward is both effective and engaging."* This end of round store was introduced as well to explore this idea of giving players multiple rewards of their choice to keep them engaged going into the next round and optimize any potential strategies they have.

Both players have 2 minutes to decide on what purchases they wish to make in the store, a button to ready up and proceed to the next round will be at the bottom of the screen. Once both players ready up and/or, the 2-minute timer runs out, the next round will begin. This is to stop players from possibly stalling out this end of round procedure and make sure the flow of the game is kept going so players do not lose interest going forward.

3.6 Deckbuilding

An issue that comes with collectible card games is the fact that cards are naturally, collectible. Meaning players with a better collection of cards are much more likely beat players with a smaller collection, simply because they have either not invested enough time or money into obtaining cards.



Figure 4: Guild Command card example

As Ethan Ham (2010) discussed and quoted “rarity should equate to specialization, not power. In fact, the more bluntly powerful the card is, the more common it should be” I’ve designed the deckbuilding around this idea. Before starting a game, players must construct a deck of 10 cards using a powerful core set of cards that all players have access to which all have unique varying effects, designed to fit into a wide range of strategies and are powerful on their own. These cards are called Guild Commands and act as special abilities that can be used at any point if players can pay the cards Gem cost.

An example of a Command card can be seen in figure 4 which shows its effect that lets a player swap a creature they control with an opponent for a low cost. This card and many of the other guild commands were designed with having clear strengths as well as a minor downside which balances the strength of the effect. The *Trade Offer* card for example costs 2 gems, but technically has a hidden cost of needing to play your own cards and give up a card to gain control of an opposing creature. By having a powerful core set of cards available to everyone before the start of a game gives everyone accesses to a strong toolkit with many different options, regardless of what class they pick at the start of a match.

3.7 UI & UX

The visual elements of a card game should be clear and concise to the player, especially if there’s multiple elements and mechanics going on during the game. Cards games can run into the issue of not keeping players well informed to the point where they no longer understand what’s going on and lose interest, or too much information all at once that overwhelms the player and causes the same effect.

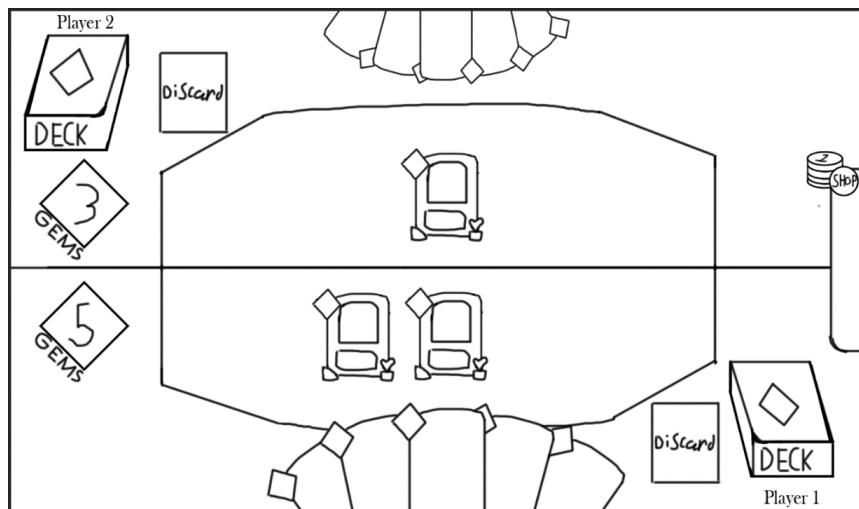


Figure 5: Gameplay and UI mock-up

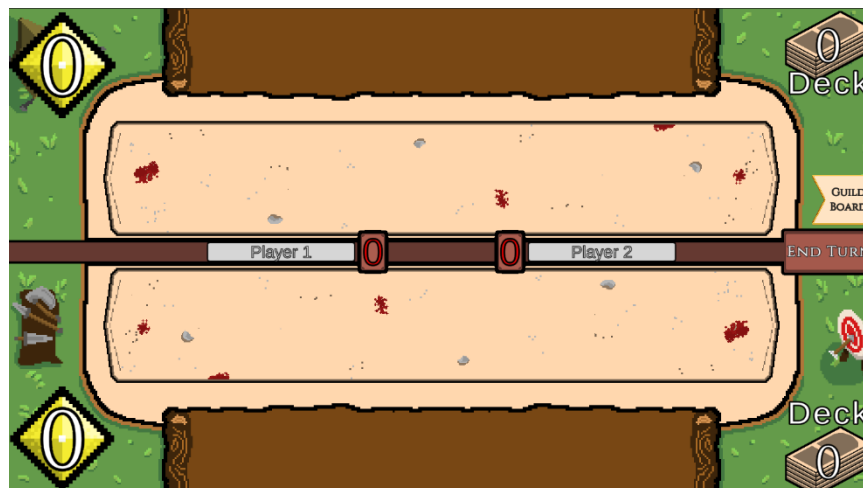


Figure 6: Finalized Game UI

An early lo-fi mock-up of the game board and UI elements can be seen in figure 5 that demonstrates the basic visuals of the game. Elements that are viewable on both players side of the board include:

- both players decks and how many cards are in them.
- both discard piles and their contents.
- Each players total gems and gems spent that turn.
- The current items in the guild board.

The only elements that are not viewable to both players are the contents of each players decks, the Guild Board which you can see tabbed in on the side, and what cards are in each player's hand. The Guild Board is tabbed in on the right side of the screen and when clicked opens it up for the player.

3.8 Sound & Music

While sound effects and music are being developed by Scott Holland from the Music & Sound Production course at BU, I will be providing the composition and input on what sounds, and music are required for the game. As the game is in a fantasy setting, the music for the game will use classical instruments and will change when different actions occur during gameplay. Once development of the whole game is finished, the project will be handed over to Holland to implement music and sound effects using *Wwise* and *Unity*.

3.9 Development Details

The development of the game will be done in *Unity* for PC platforms and designed to perform on standard PC hardware. While the game is likely to perform fine when doing user study/testing at Bournemouth University, it's important to make sure it performs well on most platforms for testing purposes.

3.10 Implementation

Development on Guild Rush started by setting up basic interactions and objects, such as a card prefab which will hold and display a cards data and information. Another element that was developed early on was multiplayer networking using Mirror. Unfortunately, due to development issues with creating certain mechanics, online multiplayer had to be scrapped and changed to a local hotseat gameplay session. However, this has not affected any other design decisions for the game and makes testing the game easier, even allowing for participants during the user studies to interact and talk with each other directly.

Major systems such as combat, playing cards, being able to win a game were the first major mechanics and interactions developed so a base for the game could be built around. Once those were in place, larger development goals included setting up both player decks, deckbuilding, and the Guild Board, as they were the major focus of the games design and required the most attention.



Figure 7: Finalized Gameplay



Figure 8: Final Guild Board

Most visual elements of the game were done early on in development such as minor card art and some UI assets, so testing and developing the mechanics of the game were made easier by having visuals in place. The remaining UI assets were created once major mechanics were finalised and in place, such as button icons, background art, and menus. While the visual aspects are not the key selling point for the game, they needed to be carefully considered as players will rely on visual information and elements of the game to impact their decisions within the game. So, visuals must be clear, concise, and understandable.

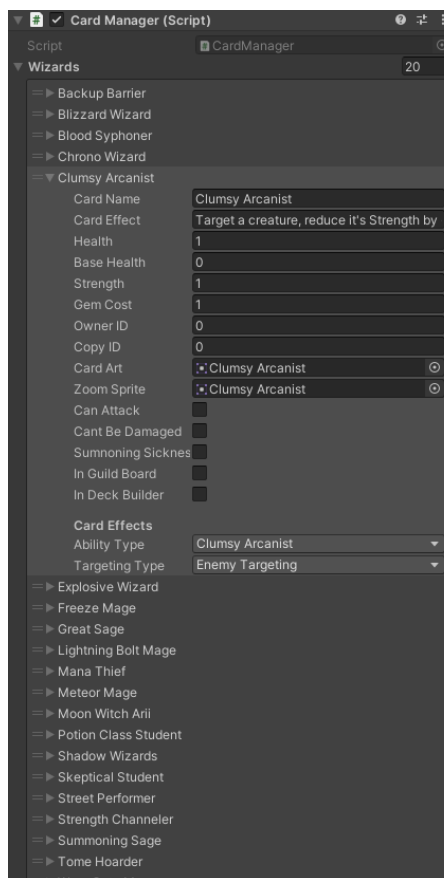


Figure 9: Card Manager (Unity editor)

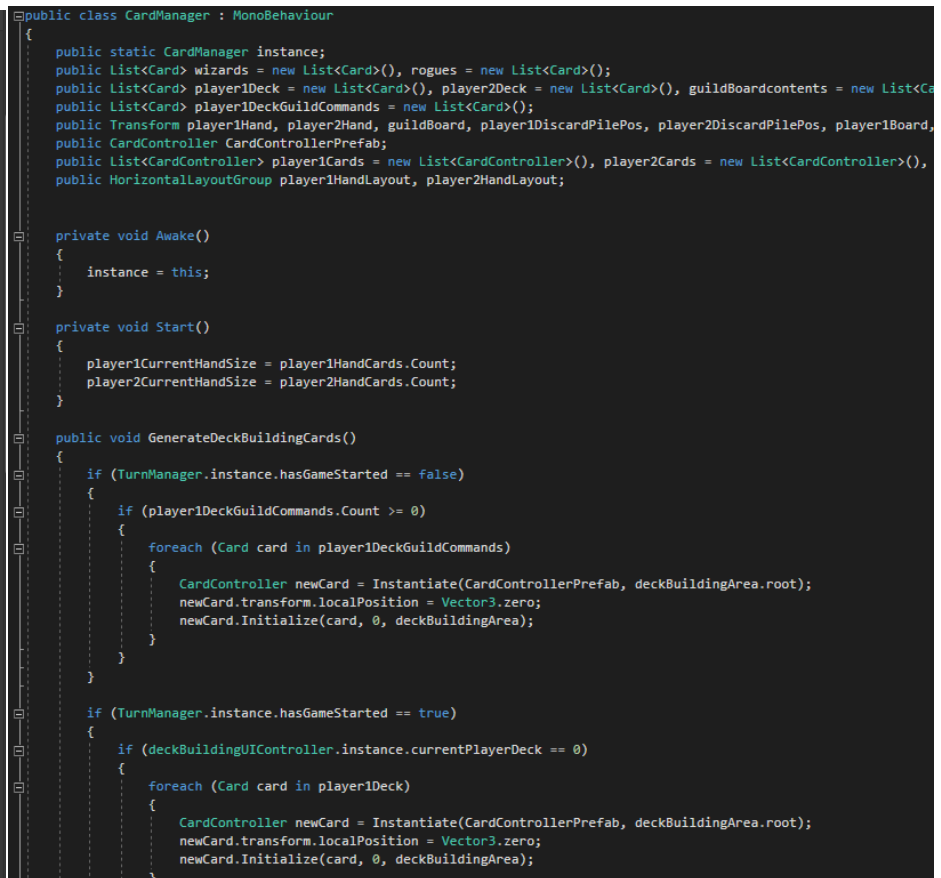


Figure 10: Card Manager (Script)

In figure 7 you can see the final look of the game with finalized visual that are compact and communicate different elements of the game quickly and clearly without too much clutter. Key information such as the current gems and the number of cards in deck was made to be larger to stand out and communicate the current state of the game to player easily. The central goal of the game, winning by strength, is put at the center of the screen next to the players' names, with the current player box highlighted in green. Since both players are fighting to have the most strength, being able to see your opponent's strength as well as your own to compare how close you both are, was critical. In figure 8 an example of the final version of the guild board can be found. The visuals for the guild board are simple and easily display a set of 3 cards with locations on the board plotted out for them.

The programming for the game uses a series of managers and controllers that handle many of the systems and mechanics required for the game to function. The most in-depth being the card manager, which handles the decks, drawing cards, card locations, and combat of cards. This script can be seen in the *Unity* editor as well as scripting in figures 9 and 10. Cards can be added, modified and directly have their text adjusted which will then be displayed on the card itself.

Every card created within the game is derived from a single card prefab which can be seen in figure 11. When a card is created it spawns a card then gets the information on the card from the card manager and assigns it to the card prefab, updating its text, values, and art simultaneously on its creation.

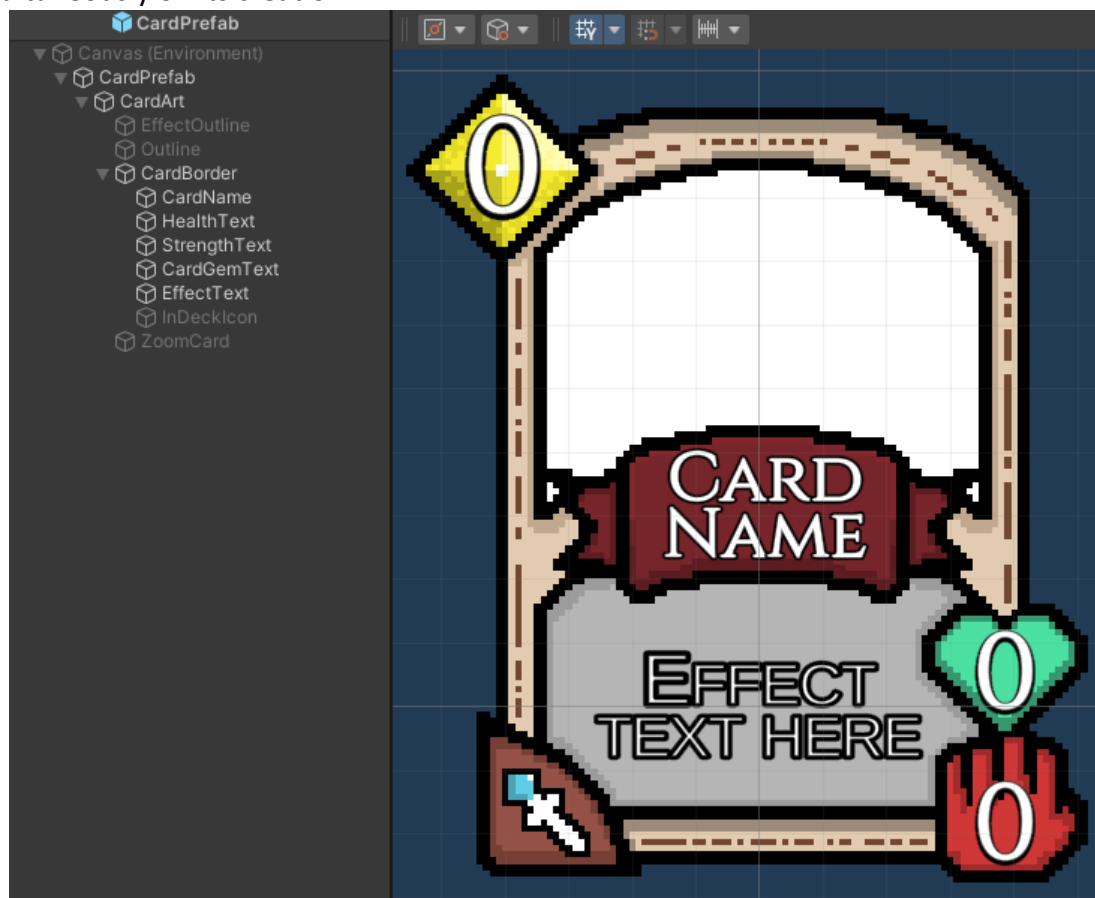


Figure 11: Card Prefab

4 Evaluation and Reflection

Once developed, to reach the desired conclusion based on the previously discussed design philosophies and research, a user study will take place to determine if it is possible to design and balance a game for everyone. This user study will primarily be used to evaluate how effective the balance of Guild Rush is and to determine what players consider to be balanced, yet, still fun and enjoyable as well. The primary research question for this study is a variation of the primary project goal which is **“Has Guild Rush been effective at creating an experience that is balanced for all players but still enjoyable?”**

Before starting the in-person user studies, 4 casual playtesting sessions took place online using Tabletop Simulator early on in development. These early playtests were used to test if the basic mechanics of the game were effective at creating a balanced game and what elements needed to be adjusted before development starts in Unity. While the game is in a finished state at the time of some of these studies, there were some minor bugs which were not discovered during development.

However, these bugs did not impact the data obtained from the study, only the length of some of the sessions was shortened due to them. Another development issue that affected the test but did not impact the results was going from an online multiplayer game to a hotseat local multiplayer game. In the test both players will pass turns back and forth on the same computer. In a full version of this game, it would ideally be online multiplayer.

4.1 Methodology

Below is the step-by-step process of the methodology that was used when undertaking the user study for this project.

1. **(5 Minutes) Introduction and explanation of what participants will be required to do.**
2. **(2-3 Minutes) Explanation of the game’s rules and basic mechanics.**
3. **(5 Minutes) Both players build their starting deck.**
4. **(20-35 minutes) A full match of Guild rush will be played.**
5. **(10 Minutes) Interview questions with both participants present.**
6. **(5 Minutes) Wrap up.**

For the study to take place, 10-12 participants will be required to take an in-depth qualitative study to gather data on what players thought about the balance of the game developed for this project. Each study session will be thirty minutes to an hour long (depending on the length of the match) and will have 2 participants play a full match of Guild Rush answer a series of interview questions. The study will be audio recorded and transcribed as long as both parties’ consent to the audio recording.

Participants for this study will primarily be Bournemouth university students from across multiple courses. While there is no specific requirement for who can take part in the study, having a wide variety of different players of different skill levels and experience within

gaming would be useful. This will be important particularly for this project, as perspectives from players of different skill levels will inform the answers provided when asked about what players consider to be fair and balanced, as well as how well they can understand the game as a new player to trading card games or video games.

The first 5-10 minutes of the study will be dedicated to running through the rules of the game to both participants as well as explaining some of the more complicated rules of the game as they arise during the playtest. During these first 10 minutes, players will also be asked to construct a 10 card deck out of the 14-card core set of Guild Command cards. The next 30 minutes of the study are dedicated to a full best of 3 match. Key observations will be recorded and written down as they occur during the playtest. Once the playtest concludes, both participants will be asked a set of questions on their thoughts on the balance of the game together. While these responses will be audio recorded, key written notes will be taken from their responses.

4.2 Analysis

After five sessions with a total of 10 participants, data collected from these studies has been transcribed and coded using emotion coding to determine how the participants of the study perceived and felt about the games balance, based on Saldaña's (Saldaña 2021, p. 105) examples of emotion coding. There are situations in modern gaming where players will say things such as "That card is so broken!" or "That's so unfair" to either express their frustration or other emotions when faced with unbalanced gameplay scenarios. Saldaña stated that "If an ANGER, ANGRY, MAD, or comparable Emotion Code is present, be aware that anger is a consequential emotion and that a triggering emotion precedes it" which when applied to the example given about players discussing their frustrations with a games balance, will be important for this project.

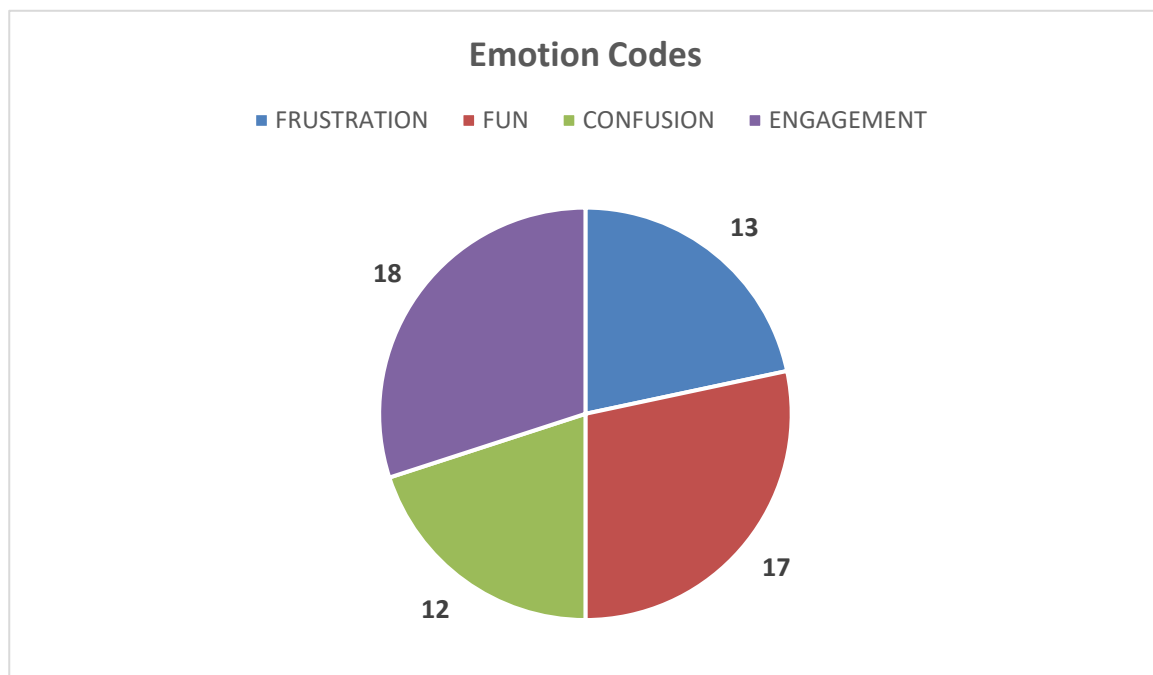


Figure 9: Emotion Codes

With emotion coding, how players feel about a game's balance are often expressed verbally, meaning we can easily understand what participants think of the game's balance. This decision to use emotion coding was also made partially with the Blizzard balance triangle in mind, as player sentiment weighs heavily on the perspective of a game's balance. The primary emotions that arose from this were **FRUSTRATION, FUN, CONFUSION, ENGAGEMENT**. These primary emotions appeared during gameplay scenarios where decisions were actively being made. In figure 9 the final total of the codes can be seen. You can see that the largest emotions represented are frustration and engagement.

4.3 Results

Data was collected and codified based on player emotions and experiences during the study sessions and once the previous data is gathered and analysed from the numerous early playtests and user study sessions, the key results of the study are as follows:

1. **Core gameplay was effective at engaging players and making them feel like their decisions had weight to them.**
2. **Balance was effective at making the game fair for new and experienced players.**
3. **The games UX was effective in most aspects with minor clarity issues.**

Each of these results will be covered in subsections and will show what lead to the conclusion of these results.

4.3.1 Gameplay Results

Gameplay was received well overall, with many participants that were excited to experiment with and try new cards effects, with the core design principle of deck building using a powerful core set worked well at balancing out both decks. When asked about their experience with the game P6 said "it was pretty fair and they were they all have many different attacks, many different options, many different things to do. There was, it's like a strategy game so you can build a lot of stuff."

Early playtests on Tabletop Simulator with fully designed cards and mechanics showed players enjoyed the overall feel of the game and felt that the game was fair and balanced with each deck having its own identity which felt fun to play. These early tests did reveal an issue with the win condition of the game. The conditions to win a round were originally that you needed 10 more strength than your opponent to win, this proved to extend the length of the game whenever 1 player got closer to victory, and naturally the other player playing a card moved the goal posts further away. This prompted to new changes to the game:

1. The goal now is to have more than 10 total strength.
2. You must start your turn with more than 10 strength to win.

These decisions were made to add a definitive goal to the game that did not constantly change. With the original design it was harder for players to keep track of and made the pacing of the game much longer and more boring. Having to start your turnover the

strength threshold also allowed for more tense situations and interactions between players trying to stop each other from reaching the goal.

4 Participants mentioned issues with the Guild Board mechanic, saying that even though the guild board was useful and let players spend their leftover gems, it did also make the mechanic feel slow as you were essentially paying double to play a card from the Guild Board. For example, when a six-cost card appeared in the Guild Board P7 said “you will spend an entire turn getting that card and you can't do anything else or play a card” which they and other participants considered to be slow feeling. Feedback on the mechanic included changing the prices of the cards on the Guild Board to be separate from their actual cost, to make it easier to play with other cards or the turn they're bought.

4.3.2 Balance Results

Overall balance results showed that players believed the game they played was fair, balanced and fun for players of varying skill levels and experience. When asked whether they thought the game they played was fair, 8 out of 10 participants agreed that they thought it was fair and that players had equal opportunity to play the game without feeling one sided.

During the user study, participants experienced frustration at some points alongside engagement. For example, in the game between P5 and P6, after P6 played a card that clears their opponents board, P5 says “That card is stupid. Okay, this is stupid. I hate that card”. Based on what they're saying you could assume that they're upset and frustrated with the current gameplay scenario. However, P5 says “Well, I'm going to do the smart thing here and just do this” which means that while previously frustrated, P5 became more engaged by trying to come up with a new strategy to counter what their opponent did.



Figure 9: Raid Wipe Card

This example shows that while players can become agitated or frustrated by powerful gameplay elements, it allows players to become more engaged by finding new ways to strategize against another player and ultimately makes them want to win more. An assumption could also be made that, if these cards or game elements were too strong and lead to an unfair scenario, players would've instead become increasingly frustrated and wanted to stop playing.

4 out of 10 participants commented on the power level and strength of certain cards, mainly within the core set of Guild Commands. When discussing this, participants also clarified that while the cards were strong in nature, it still felt fair because the cards were available to both players, and they had the choice to build their deck in a way that worked with certain cards. Meaning, players still considered cards that were inherently strong or powerful to be within the game balance because they had the choice to use them and play around them. A card that was mentioned when discussing these powerful cards was the card Raid Wipe, which can be seen in figure 9. Players considered the card to be extremely powerful and could completely change the state of the game. With the decision of playing it, holding a lot of weight for some. When asked what decisions players made that they think had a direct impact on the game's outcome, P5 said "I was thinking, what do I do now if I don't play any cards, like if I play more cards, he'll just use the raid wipe. But if I don't keep playing, like I'm just giving him more time to build."

Among the 10 participants that took part in the study, 7 players chose Raid Wipe for their starting deck. This point in combination with P5's comment, we can see a slight meta emerging. While Raid Wipe is a strong card that players are fully aware of, it's because they are aware of it that players believed it is more balanced, as a continuous threat of having your progress halted forced players to plan differently and play around the card.

4.3.3 UX Results

The games overall user experience was effective at introducing players to the basic mechanics of Guild Rush as well as general card game mechanics/principles. Participants stated that the game was easy to pick up and learn from their short time playing and could easily read most situations with only minor confusion which occurred from a lack of animations on certain events such as combat and targeting cards for certain effects.

4 participants also commented on issues with card clarity. Saying that because the health was green and strength was red, it was confusing at some points when combat was happening. There were multiple situations where participants had to check with me which stat was which before going into combat. When asking these questions, they were about to make specific plays using certain card effects and interactions. This can mean that if the visuals of the game aren't fully clear, it can impact a player's decision making. Therefore, placement of UI elements on the card and the screen should be adjusted. While there were only 4 participants who verbally commented on this, 8 out of 10 participants had to ask about which is which, showing that most participants were unsure which value was which.

For many of the cards played during the study, participants thought that cards and their effects were clear within their text. However, some participants discussed how elements of

the game were not obvious right away and were confusing. 5 participants asked during the game, if their gems each turn would carry over to the next turn, and how gems were obtained were initially unclear. 3 out of these 5 participants originally thought that unspent gems would be carried over to their next turn, thinking that they could save up gems for later turns. When explained that gems would be refreshed to max number of gems possible at the start of their turn, participants were slightly disappointed as they felt like they were letting gems go to waste.

This is interesting as some of these participants were familiar with other card games and their systems, which could mean that while many visual elements of card games are transferable between each other and make sense, the systems in place, even smaller systems such as gaining mana/gems is not always clear and requires careful instruction. This can be easily remedied with a smaller tutorial or walkthrough that fully explains these systems to players, with P6 saying:

“For me, I still don't understand it. But I think because I'm a slow learner. If it was like practice rounds. Or like a little tutorial. Like a computer kind of thing. And then, like, help hints I think that would help.”

When asked about their experience with card games and games in general, P6 said they had very little experience with them which made some aspects of the game confusing. However, when playing the game, they still managed to win a round against their opponent who said they had played a wider variety of card games, meaning that the game was still able to introduce these mechanics to P6 in a short span of time and help them win.

5 Conclusions and Future Work

Based on user study data, the final version of the was well designed, well received by participants, and was regarded to be well balanced, with the overall engagement with the game being high. At this point research for the project concludes, and reflections on the project can be made here.

As the primary focus of this project was to create a balanced experience for all players, it feels as if this goal has been achieved and that it is possible for card games to be designed in a way that's fair for all players. This project has also provided insight into how balance can affect players' decisions when playing games as well as card games in general. This has also given the researcher on this project the opportunity to learn more about how game balance impacts video games and their ability to engage players, learning that it is difficult and nearly impossible to perfectly balance a game. However, this balance and sometimes imbalance, is what can create exciting gameplay and player experiences.

While this goal was achieved it should be noted that it was not without its issues. The balance of cards and mechanics by themselves was effective but some aspects of the UX and visual elements of the game affected the game's balance, impacting decision making and causing confusion. If this project was to be done again or continued, this would be considered more.

Another aspect of the game that would be reworked given more time is the programming, with many mechanics of the game likely being much harder to implement than they needed to be such as cards themselves. Instead of information in a list handled all on one script, they could have been made as individual scriptable data/objects which then is assigned to the cards prefab. This was not foreseen early in development and although the game works as intended in the final version, it would be better to reprogram some major elements of the game so they would be easier to work with in a game that would be developed and updated constantly.

The project could be improved further, given more time and continued development, many different additions and changes could be made. Firstly, the addition of more cards, which would further improve the selection of deck choices to be made when starting the game, as well as new types of guilds which introduce different playstyles. These would allow players more choice at the start of the game and would allow full utilization of the game's core design. As previously mentioned, the base coding for the game could have been handled better, but to further improve on this, the game would benefit more from being an online multiplayer game where players can connect and enjoy the game without needing to be in the same room.

In conclusion Guild Rush has been effective at introducing new and experienced players to cards games and has created an environment that welcomes new players easily while keeping the game feeling fresh and fair for all, thus achieving the initial goal set at the start of this project.

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Ludography and Digital References

Appendix

Appendix A



Research Ethics Checklist

About Your Checklist	
Ethics ID	48487
Date Created	25/02/2023 15:50:56
Status	Approved
Date Approved	24/03/2023 16:21:16
Risk	Low

Researcher Details	
Name	Jake Warren
Faculty	Faculty of Science & Technology
Status	Undergraduate (BA, BSc)
Course	BSc (Hons) Games Design

Project Details	
Title	Balancing for Everyone: Designing Card Games for All Levels of Play
Start Date of Project	07/02/2023
End Date of Project	22/05/2023
Proposed Start Date of Data Collection	27/03/2023
Supervisor	Charlie Hargood
Approver	Charlie Hargood

Summary - no more than 600 words (including detail on background methodology, sample, outcomes, etc.)
This paper focuses on the state of game balance within card games and designing a game that is fair and balanced for all players, regardless of experience. My product i'm developing The research for this paper will include looking into what players perceive as fair and balanced, but still enjoyable when playing games. The game i'm developing for this is a 2 player card game that requires players to build a deck of cards over a series of rounds against the other player to win. The game is set in a traditional fantasy world with similar themes. The information that will be needed for this project is how players understand balance and what players of different skill levels consider to be fair but also fun. This information will be necessary for the development of the game being made for this project and the overall design decisions and evaluation for the game. To get this information an hour long study is required using human participants (likely to be other Bournemouth university students as well as friends and family) in a gameplay test where 2 human participants will play a competitive card game against each other using the game I will be developing. The study will start with participants being given basic instructions and rules of the game and answer some quick interview questions which together will last about 10 minutes. Then participants build a small deck of cards and play a full game for 35 minutes. Followed by a 15 minute interview about their experience with the game. 10-16 Participants will be gathered primarily through word of mouth, and the study itself will take place at Bournemouth University using the available computer labs at the Poole gateway building. There will also be some informal playtests at the start of development to test the base mechanics of the game between players online

and with physical printed out cards.

As for any ethical issues that may arise from these user studies, participants will be asked to give their consent to take part in the test and are free to leave the study at any point. No confidential or personal information will be needed or used outside of the study and there will not be any risks to myself or participants of the tests.

Filter Question: Does your study involve Human Participants?

Participants	
Describe the number of participants and specify any inclusion/exclusion criteria to be used	
For my study I will need 10-20 participants. As previously mentioned these participants will be gathered through word of mouth and will mostly consist of bournemouth university students and close friends as they are easily reachable and likely to help with the study.	
Do your participants include minors (under 16)?	No
Are your participants considered adults who are competent to give consent but considered vulnerable?	No
Is a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check required for the research activity?	No

Recruitment	
Please provide details on intended recruitment methods, include copies of any advertisements.	
I'll be contacting participants for the study through word of mouth. These participants will mostly consist of friends and Bournemouth University students.	
Do you need a Gatekeeper to access your participants?	No

Data Collection Activity	
Will the research involve questionnaire/online survey? If yes, don't forget to attach a copy of the questionnaire/survey or sample of questions.	No
Will the research involve interviews? If Yes, don't forget to attach a copy of the interview questions or sample of questions	Yes
Please provide details e.g. where will the interviews take place. Will you be conducting the interviews or someone else?	
I will be conducting the interviews at Bournemouth University using the Poole Gateway building computer labs.	
Will the research involve a focus group? If yes, don't forget to attach a copy of the focus group questions or sample of questions.	No
Will the research involve the collection of audio recordings?	No
Will your research involve the collection of photographic materials?	No
Will your research involve the collection of video materials/film?	No
Will the study involve discussions of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, criminal activity)?	No
Will any drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) be administered to the participants?	No
Will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potential harmful procedures of any kind?	No

Could your research induce psychological stress or anxiety, cause harm or have negative consequences for the participants or researchers (beyond the risks encountered in normal life)?	No
Will your research involve prolonged or repetitive testing?	No
What are the potential adverse consequences for research participants and how will you minimise them?	

Consent	
Describe the process that you will be using to obtain valid consent for participation in the research activities. If consent is not to be obtained explain why.	
Consent will be obtained using a standard participant agreement form which participants are required to sign and date	
Do your participants include adults who lack/may lack capacity to give consent (at any point in the study)?	No
Will it be necessary for participants to take part in your study without their knowledge and consent?	No

Participant Withdrawal	
At what point and how will it be possible for participants to exercise their rights to withdraw from the study?	
Participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any point by vocally expressing that they wish to withdraw.	
If a participant withdraws from the study, what will be done with their data?	
At the start of the study, participants will be given a participant ID which will be attached their recorded data. If a participant were to withdraw, they will hand back their participant ID and any of the participants recorded information that's tied to that ID will be deleted and/or disposed of and will not be included in any findings within the paper.	

Participant Compensation	
Will participants receive financial compensation (or course credits) for their participation?	No
Will financial or other inducements (other than reasonable expenses) be offered to participants?	No

Research Data	
Will identifiable personal information be collected, i.e. at an individualised level in a form that identifies or could enable identification of the participant?	No
Will research outputs include any identifiable personal information i.e. data at an individualised level in a form which identifies or could enable identification of the individual?	No

Storage, Access and Disposal of Research Data	
Where will your research data be stored and who will have access during and after the study has finished.	
Any digital research data will be stored on university protected H drives that only I will have access to.	
Once your project completes, will your dataset be added to an appropriate research data repository such as BORDaR, BU's Data Repository?	No
Please explain why you do not intend to deposit your research data on BORDaR? E.g. do you intend to deposit your research data in another data repository (discipline or funder specific)? If so, please provide details.	

NOT APPLICABLE

Final Review	
Are there any other ethical considerations relating to your project which have not been covered above?	No

Risk Assessment	
Have you undertaken an appropriate Risk Assessment?	Yes

Attached documents	
Participant Agreement Form.docx - attached on 23/03/2023 15:36:52	
Participant Information Sheet.docx - attached on 23/03/2023 15:36:55	
Sample Interview Questions.docx - attached on 23/03/2023 15:36:58	

Appendix B

User Study Interview Questions

Q1: Do you think the game you played was fair and why?

Q2: Do you feel that the decisions you made when playing had a direct impact on the outcome of the game? And if so, what decisions were they and why?

Q3: Were there any points in the game where things felt unfair and if so when was it and why?

Q4: Do you think the game was challenging enough to still be enjoyable but balanced and why?

Q5: Was the game easy to understand and to learn from the short time you had to play the game? If not, why?