

# MINIONS

- The Design Process

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# THE DESIGN PROCESS

Apart from school game projects, I wanted to make a physical game on my own, so that I could explore game mechanics, and what made games fun in general without the constraints of editors and coding in a digital game project.

Over at least ten months, on and off in my spare time I have been working with this game. I haven't been time-tracking so it's hard to estimate the total hours spent but the last three weeks I have had the opportunity to work full time.

From the very beginning I knew I wanted to make a card game set in the World of the Ancients, a fantasy universe I had been working on. I knew I would have fighting creatures and a board and I wanted to explore means of strategic gameplay as well as using elements from RPG games. I was intrigued by how elements from RPG and RTS blends well.

I strongly suggest you read the rules document before proceeding.

## DESIGN GOALS AND REQUIREMENTS

I didn't make any list on goals when I started, but thinking back, these were the goals I aimed for and kept to them as they became clear for me during the process.

- Strategy rather than chance
- Only cards and dice
- Keep it portable
- Mental / Physical combat.
- Not a trading card game, but open for expansions and sequels
- Target Audience = Board Game and *Magic the Gathering* geeks
- High replayability
- About an hour playing time

### **Strategy rather than chance**

Chess rather than Monopoly.

### **Only cards and dice**

No tokens or other equipments.

### **Keep it portable**

I decided that the cards must fit into a *Dragon Shield* sleeve box, excluding dices.

The box design fits 75+ gaming cards including sleeves.

### **Mental / Physical combat**

This was the core idea of the fighting part of the game. This was how four properties per creature would ensure variation to the creatures.

### **Not a trading card game, but open for expansions and sequels**

I simply didn't want to undertake the design and tweaking of a game with 100+ cards. I traded the



aspect of player customized decks for greater control. The smaller the scope of the content, the easier it would be for me to maintain focus on strategic gameplay.

### **Target Audience**

I realized that I was making a complex card game that had a similar learning curve to a board game. Another goal became clear to me ...

- Aim for the niche between board game and portable card games

I thus aimed for a game that would apply to both

I realize that trading card games have something I wasn't even aiming for – customization of your deck. The aesthetic of winning with your custom deck is truly rewarding. Also, customization ensures replayability.

### **High Replayability**

The game must change from one session to another. Multiplayer as a feature does a great job ensuring replayability – even if the only dynamic element are the players and their actions. Chess has high replayability because of the vast combinations of possible actions and circumstances.

### **About an Hour Playing Time**

The later versions of the game (after adding the feature Ability Cards) often took several hours to play through. I wanted to keep this down to an hour. Now, with Ability Cards and 10 Life Points per player it takes 1-2 hours. One could have about the same playing time with 20 Life Points and without Ability Cards.

Playing time is also affected by the elements of chance, such as the random Battlefield Card locations. In games when Spirits are found early the players do more damage with each kill compared to games when Spirits are found late game.

How much Spirits are found and taken advantage of also depends on player strategy. Some players explore a lot to find them. Others keeps fighting about a few spaces without using the Spirits that much.

## FROM CONCEPT TO PROTOTYPE

The first prototypes were made on scratch paper, so that I could easily erase and add values or rules to them. The cards are now made in photoshop but I still make sure they fit on a A4 paper so that I can easily print new versions, attack with scissors, dress up in sleeves and play test in no time.

### THE CREATURE CARDS

The first concept of the creatures had the physical strength/armor and mental strength/armor attributes, as well as the six-sided die to add to the values when fighting combats.

I made four creatures with different attribute values. Two had immunities, like the *Ghost* and *Immortal*, and two had a zero in one strength value, like the *Ghost*, *Beast* and *Savage*. They had strengths and weaknesses fitting perfectly to each other with a rock-paper-scissors mechanics. Those creatures with immunities were stronger than those without, but still had a nemesis among the others.

#### An Army of Creatures

In one version I made ten duplicates of every creature type and let the player draw them from a pile of forty Creature Cards. Each creature of the same type had the same strengths and weaknesses, but their values in strength and armor varied slightly.

I didn't like that you had to depend on luck to get the creature you needed. With the design goal 'strategy rather than chance' in mind I cut down to eight set creatures that were on the player's hand from the game start.

The eight creatures left made perfectly sense from a lore perspective. But the more creatures there was the more cards the player had to pay attention to. Compromising, I cut my darlings until I had six creatures I could work with both gameplay-wise and lore-wise.

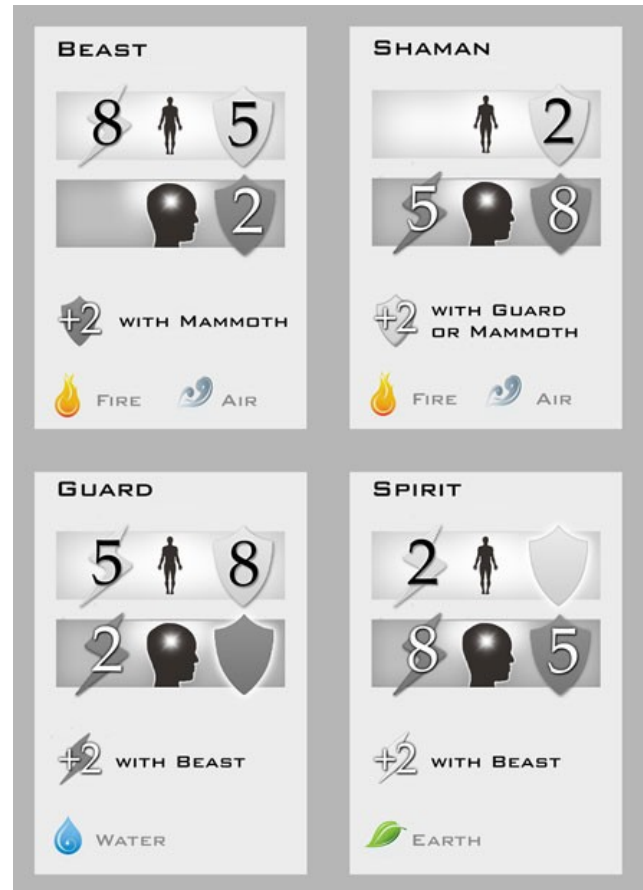
#### Bonuses

In the latest version I added the bonuses to retreat and explore-rolls on the Creature Cards. Prior to that the chance to explore and retreat was always fifty percent chance.

The idea was to value strategy higher than chance. Still, it was a hard decision to make this late in the process. Adding more properties to the Creature Cards makes the learning curve steeper for players new to the game.

### RESOURCES

I needed a resource cost for playing creatures, so that a player wouldn't swarm the board with his creatures in a few turns. It was tempting to add coins or some other token, but I had to heed the



requirement to only use cards and dice.

A rule I went by was to look at what I had before I added a new feature entirely. More features leads to more rules, a steeper learning curve and might mess up existing features.

So rather than adding new resource-cards or additional dice, I used the Battlefield Cards I already had. I added the rule that holding one space on the board allowed you to play another creature.

### *WINNING AND LOSING CONDITIONS*

In the first version the board consisted of nine cards only. There were no bases and the players could play their creatures anywhere. The goal of the game was to collect three spaces in a row, just like *Tic-tac-toe*, except you couldn't use the space in the middle. It made for some easy fun, but not the depth I wanted.

I needed Life Points that you could take from but not alter. When out of Life Points you would lose the game. At first, I tried to use board control to create losing/winning conditions, but it didn't work.

Spaces on the board could be lost to the enemy once won and thus game sessions could (in theory) go on for ever. So I settled on a twenty-sided die to count the Life Points. Some testing resulted in changing it into a ten-sided die to keep the playing time for a game session below two hours.

### *SECONDARY PLAYER GOALS*

Killing the enemy creatures drained the Life Points of the opponent and that's the main goal of the game. But I wanted there to be an alternative way to hurt the opponent. Since I had abandoned the tic-tac-toe mechanic I had no board control either.

I wanted to have something like Victory Points in *Dawn of War* and took a look at the base control system in *Battlefield 2*. The more bases you controlled in BF2, the more damage was made to the opponent's team each time your team killed an enemy. This system suited my needs, so I adopted it.

#### **The Keywords on Battlefield Cards**

I added the *Tribesfolk* and *Wildkin* alignments to the game because I wanted a connection lore-wise between the creatures and the battlefield. Players collect *Tribesfolk* or *Wildkin* keywords to be able to attack the opponent's *Ancient* and deal a lot of damage in one blast.

The keywords *Spirits* and *High Ground* function directly on the core mechanics (*Spirits* allows you to do more damage to a player - an adoption of the BF2 base control system. *High Ground* reveals spaces or hidden creatures). Removing the *Spirit* and *High Ground* keywords wouldn't destroy the game but it would increase the playing time.

## BATTLEFIELD CARDS

Before I introduced the Ability Cards (ACs) or Spirits Cards I had more mechanics provided by the Battlefield Cards (BCs).

There were ranged attacks and bonuses to the creature defending the space. When it was used it worked well, but testers tended to forget the bonuses when their focus was elsewhere. Creature cards are placed onto BCs so that any rules on the BC are easily covered and forgotten.

Since the ACs are rewards they get more attention. They are easier to just read, play and discard so I transferred some of the mechanics from BCs to ACs.



## ABILITY CARDS

I had been toying with the concept of ACs for some time before trying it out. ACs are like the player character's abilities or skills in an RPG. Also, they work as a reward system - when you kill a creature you may draw a card!

The first iteration of the ACs came from concepts based on the *World of the Ancients* lore, which I had been working on prior to this project. I knew what kind of abilities which creature should have and simply tried out different mechanics based on those concepts. Several iterations later I have been compromising with the lore and the mechanics so that the mechanics of the ACs are more defined, while I have added to the lore as well.

Drawing cards from a pile meant a higher element of chance to the game, which I had tried and removed before (with the 40 creatures). However, this would be a separate and optional feature.

I also realized that if an AC required a certain circumstance to be played, the player had to make a strategy on how to create the right circumstance.

For example, 'Strong Bond' require that you have an Wildkin creature in play, and another on hand.



## *FROM ELEMENT CARDS TO SPIRIT CARDS*

Crucial to the game world was of the four elements – wind, earth, air and fire. I was in the process to make Element Cards, one for each element. I also had element icons on the Battlefield Cards for the players to collect. I came to a point when I got close to my deadline, having to start thinking on finishing the game. I needed to cut a feature in development. Elements Card became the Spirit Cards. Spirits Cards lead to the lore idea of the players as Ancient Spirits and connected to the 'mental' theme of the creatures.

Being forced to kill my darlings lead to a tighter final product.

## **THE MISSING ARTWORK**

I spent many hours on Google just to find art that fit into the theme. I have a full deck with artwork for both creatures, environments and some of the Ability Cards, which I use when testing to make the game more inviting. Since I have no rights to the material, I don't show this version online.

Finding a good art director and concept artist is the next step. I have laid the ground for art direction and further development with the documents – The Art and The Lore, found on my online portfolio ( <http://aggedesign.se> ).

# CRITICISM

## COMPROMISING WITH THE LORE REQUIREMENTS

- The four elements were a core part of the lore but were too time consuming to work with, so I cut it. But in a authentic project I might not have that choice.
- Possession and Inherity Kill were two Ability Cards for Ghost resp. Immortal that didn't made it into the game, even though the characters should have theses abilities according to the lore. Adding them, however, would have meant adding a couple of tricky mechanics and set of rules to go with them. You could almost call them 'a feature', which I don't add lightly in the end of the process. They are better saved for another game.
- Unlike *Wildkin* and *Tribesfolk* the *Spirits* keyword on the Battlefield Cards wasn't a lore requirement from the beginning. Instead, I made gameplay feature and made up the lore for it afterwards.

## A COMPLEX GAME

The endgame, when there are many creatures in play (some with equipments or attachments) and all spaces are turned face up, tends to be a little chaotic. The players have a lot to pay attention to and some tire at this point, if you have been playing an hour or two. I would like to find a way to control this chaos without slowing down the playing time.

Ability Cards and Spirits Cards in general distracts the player from the core game. That's why it is suggested to play your first sessions without them. However, some like these two features more than the core game itself. This makes it hard to decide what to do with them but I have some ideas (which will be concepts that will be tested before either discarded / incorporated / back to concept).

# THOUGHTS ON FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

One design goal was to keep the game open for expansion packs and sequels.

## NEW BATTLEFIELDS

An obvious way to expand the game in a sequel or expansion pack would be to provide an additional board setup with additional keywords and rules. Collecting keywords are secondary objectives, not required to win the game, even though they are valuable resources.

## WILDKIN VS TRIBESFOLK

I choose to not struggle with the balancing of two teams with different mechanics, but lore-wise, it makes sense that the *Wildkin* and *Tribesfolk* factions would be fighting each other in a sequel, if the Ancients weren't around to mind control them. It will take a lot of testing and tweaking, though.

## TEAM MULTIPLAYER

The *Ability Cards* are not yet balanced for team multiplayer. If you play without them, however, you could play 2vs2, with each player having a hand of three creatures each. I suggest the following setup.

Team	Player	Creatures
White	1	<b>Wildkin + Immortal</b>
White	2	<b>Tribesfolk + Ghost</b>
Black	3	<b>Wildkin + Immortal</b>
Black	4	<b>Tribesfolk + Ghost</b>

Then we have to adopt the rules to several players. Each player still has two actions, but now four player would share turns. With some more testing I can add this to the rules as an alternative gameplay mode.

## TUNED ABILITY CARDS

Ability Cards provides new mechanics to use for a certain creature. Some creatures share mechanics, rather than having one specialty each. If they had say a couple of distinct mechanics each it would be easier for the players to learn them by heart and make counter strategies.

If you know, for instance, that a *Shaman* usually do ranged attacks on adjacent spaces, you think twice before putting your own creature next to the enemy *Shaman*. This is also true in the latest version of the game but there are other creatures who also use the ranged attack mechanic.

## PERMANENTS AND INSTANTS

Another concept I am toying with regards the way ACs are played. Instead of the categories Equipments and Attachments I would have simply Permanents which are placed on the table before the player rather than attached to a creature.

The AC category Abilities should be changed into the more accurate name - Instants, since they are played, affecting the game instantly and are then discarded.

Permanents will then affect the game (and one creature in particular) until they are replaced with another Permanent for the same alignment or creature type. Each player can then have up to eight Permanents in play at most (one for each creature type and one for each alignment).

The change into Permanents I hope will affect the game in a positive way ...

- A better overview of the current game setup at any given time when ACs are in play. No longer do they hide behind creatures.
- Permanents wouldn't be discarded as Equipments/Attachments are when the creature affected by the card is killed. ACs do in general disappear too soon from the game.
- An additional state. Permanents could be tapped (like creatures that are being wounded) in addition to being in play and being discarded.

I can also think of some negative sides as well ...

- It would be harder to keep track of the opponent's Permanents than your own. It's easier to see if an Equipment / Attachment is affecting the current combat, or the creature you want to attack/attack with.
- Up to eight Permanents per player would be a lot to keep track on (although it is unlikely that a player would get such a variation of Permanents in the same game).
- The total space the game takes up on the table would be at least a couple of card lengths greater.

It's hard to say yet if the negatives play out the positives. Also, there might also be negatives (and positives!) that are hidden from the designer's allseeing eye and only revealed in play testing sessions. Still, I believe that conceptualizing like this before prototyping pays off. Prototyping + testing has a greater cost (in time, in my case) than conceptualizing + prototyping + testing. Why? Well, prototyping + testing are ought to be repeated more times (and thus cost more time) than the latter would.