

Welcome to FarmVille

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FarmVille is a Web-based farming simulation game produced by a gaming company called Zynga. In contrast to many computer games that you have to buy on a disc, anyone with an Internet connection and a Facebook account can load FarmVille in his or her Web browser and play for free in an instant. The ease of access is one of the reasons FarmVille has become so popular.

The basic concept of FarmVille is relatively simple. You manage your virtual farm by planting, growing, and harvesting virtual crops; tending livestock and trees; constructing buildings such as barns and chicken coops; and buying and selling goods made on the farm. By completing these tasks, you earn coins that you can spend to expand and upgrade your farm. You also gain experience points, which go toward earning new levels, new items, and new gameplay opportunities on your farm. Through weeks and months of dedicated farming, you can build your initial small, empty farm into a massive, thriving mega-farm bustling with life.

Whereas most games cease to exist when you turn them off, crops and other items on your FarmVille farm continue growing and ripening in real time, even when you're not actively playing. Fully grown crops can wither on the vine if they're not harvested promptly, meaning that you may have to plan your daily schedule around your FarmVille play time to some extent. This time-sensitive gameplay can be a little annoying, but the game doesn't require a heavy time investment — just a half hour to an hour



each day is enough to keep up with most basic farming tasks. Of course, you can play much more than that — the sheer time-sucking amount of stuff to do and collect on your farm helps make FarmVille one of the most addictive games out there (as more than 50 million users, as of this writing, can attest).

This chapter tells you what FarmVille is and the basics of playing the game. It also provides some tips to help you avoid getting too engrossed in the magical world of digital crops. Welcome to green pastures and the simple life — all controlled with the click of your mouse.

Why Millions Play FarmVille (and You Should, Too!)

Surely there has to be some common factor that makes FarmVille appealing to so many millions. Maybe deep down inside, we all want to be farmers. Perhaps we're intrigued by farming's Zen-like simplicity. Or could it be some innate desire to own land and return to days of simple, natural living?

Whatever the case, FarmVille is attracting people from all walks of life. The virtual farmers of FarmVille represent a broad range of backgrounds and professions. Business professionals, stay-at-home moms, doctors, the unemployed, stockbrokers, technology gurus, college students, and retirees are living second lives as diligent Internet farmers. Even if you don't play, chances are good that you know somebody who enjoys virtual farming.

Ease of play

Satisfying gameplay sessions in FarmVille can last as little as a few minutes, and real-world interruptions won't ruin your progress, because the game saves your progress constantly. What's more, playing FarmVille doesn't require your full attention. You can easily play the game while multitasking on a conference call, watching a mindless TV show, or waiting for dinner to cook.

With a laptop or mobile device, FarmVille can even help fill those wasted wait times that can seem to fill up a day. Whether it's a lull in your work schedule, an otherwise boring airport layover, a long delay in a doctor's waiting room, or a ride on the subway, you can make it more tolerable by cashing in on coins from the day's harvest.

Aside from the occasional withered crop, FarmVille has few of the frustrating setbacks that can sour the experience of traditional games, such as impassably tough challenges, frustratingly obtuse puzzles, or "game over" screens.

Additionally, in contrast to some games that require hours of focused attention just to get up to speed, FarmVille is designed to be easy to grasp almost immediately. Of course, every game has experts who make it to higher levels than some, and FarmVille is no different, but anyone — including you! — can become a farming veteran if he or she just keeps playing.

The challenge of self-improvement and competition

How do you beat FarmVille? Easy answer: You don't. Rather than display a final challenge and a "Congratulations, you win!" screen signaling the end of the game, FarmVille features a never-ending cycle of farm-tending for its own sake.

That doesn't mean the game doesn't have any goals, though. The possibilities for self-improvement are nearly endless, depending on what aspects of the game are most important to you. Some farmers might want to gain experience points and reach higher levels as quickly as possible. Others may focus on amassing as many items as they can. Still others may focus on growing and mastering all the crops, or amassing a fortune in Farm Coins, or earning every possible ribbon. What you do with your FarmVille experience is largely up to you. Improving your statistics for their own sake is all well and good, but many farmers also turn FarmVille into a competition with their friends, battling to reach ever-higher accomplishments before their neighbors do. Keeping up with the Joneses applies just as much in the virtual realm as the real world, and many FarmVille players take beating their neighbors to that next goal incredibly seriously.

Social gaming and FarmVille

Although FarmVille can technically be played as a single-player game, it takes advantage of Facebook's social networking framework to encourage interaction with other players. Socializing with other players by visiting their farms, sharing gifts, and participating in cooperative jobs is one of the keys to getting the most out of the game. This focus on social interaction puts FarmVille at the forefront of a new trend called social gaming.

Simply defined, a social game is any game with social interaction. Although social gaming isn't

an entirely new concept, it has recently become one of the hottest sectors of the video game industry. Because of the success of games such as FarmVille, many game developers are eager to get a piece of the social gaming pie. And it's not a small pie by any means. Whereas tens of millions of people play traditional video games on consoles and personal computers, simple social games have attracted hundreds of millions of players, many of whom never bothered to keep up with the reflex-heavy and technically complex world of traditional video games.

Creativity

The virtual world of FarmVille isn't just a place to live out your rural fantasies; it can also be a canvas to express your artistic sensibilities. By carefully setting items down in specific arrangements, you can create anything from re-creations of famous paintings and cartoon characters to FarmVille-ized versions of real-world architecture and three-dimensional visual effects. True, these creations don't serve any larger economic purpose on your farm, but as any artist can tell you, sometimes creation is its own reward.

One of the most common methods for creating FarmVille art is by stacking multicolored hay bales next to each other in a massive grid. By treating each hay bale like a pixel in a digital image, you can make these grids form any image you can think of. With each hay bale costing 100 to 600 Farm Coins (see Chapter 5 for more about amassing Farm Coins), it's definitely a pricey hobby, but one that can generate amazing results, as you can see in Figure 1-1.



Figure 1-1: An abstract design made using FarmVille hay bales.

Entertainment and escape

Of course, the primary purpose of any game is entertainment, and FarmVille is no different. Most virtual farmers would probably cite entertainment or escape as the main reason they love playing FarmVille, and in today's fast-paced world, who can blame them? For many people, escaping to the virtual world of FarmVille is the next best thing to a real vacation that may be impossible for any number of reasons. The game provides an easy, cheap way to relieve stress, relax, and unwind. There's something about the familiar rhythm of the plowing, seeding, and harvesting cycle that helps make the stresses of everyday life seem just a little less stressful. The camaraderie and companionship generated by interacting with FarmVille neighbors can also provide a sense of community.

Understanding the Key Concepts of FarmVille

Throughout this book, we cover the various facets of FarmVille in great detail, of course, but the following sections give you the basics of how FarmVille works and what you'll actually be doing in the game.

You get your own farm

After you install the FarmVille app on your Facebook account (see how in Chapter 2), you start with a small, mostly empty farm, which we call the *play area*. This farm, and the game itself, aren't actually stored permanently on your computer, but exist on "the cloud" of FarmVille servers maintained by developer Zynga.

Your virtual farmer begins the game owning a few plots of plowed land and a bit of money, denominated in FarmVille's two in-game currencies: *Farm Cash* and *Farm Coins* (discussed in detail in Chapter 5). You can purchase more of this currency using real money, but you can also earn it simply by playing the game, as discussed in the next section.

You can easily customize the look of your farmer (see Chapter 3), but customizing and growing your farm to your desired specifications is a bit more complicated and forms the bulk of the game.

You grow crops, plant trees, and tend animals

That little bit of money you start with won't last very long if you don't invest it in profitable items. Using the mouse, you click around your farm using in-game tools (as discussed in Chapter 3) to plow plots of land, plant crops, and, eventually, harvest those crops for more money than you put in.

These crops grow, ripen, and eventually wither even when you're not actively playing the game, meaning that you have to check in and harvest them on a real-time schedule. You can also purchase trees and animals, and periodically collect coins from them without worrying as much about keeping to a strict play schedule. We tell you about these money-generating items in more detail in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6.

You decorate your farm

FarmVille currency isn't just good for generating more FarmVille currency — it's also good for buying decorations that make your farm uniquely yours. These decorations don't serve any functional gameplay purpose, but many farmers lose hours of their lives choosing and arranging the game's hundreds of in-game decorating options to their particular tastes. Think of this portion of the game as a virtual, farm-themed doll house, with an ever-expanding selection of accessories waiting to fill it up.

You help your neighbors (and they help you)

As a social game, FarmVille is partially focused on helping fellow players, known in the game as neighbors. FarmVille neighbors are a subset of your Facebook friends, so although all your FarmVille neighbors are Facebook friends, not all your Facebook friends are necessarily FarmVille neighbors.

You can help your neighbors by sending them free gifts or by visiting their farms and performing some basic farming tasks daily. After you've been playing for a while, you'll also be qualified to work with neighbors on co-op missions (as discussed in Chapter 12) and buy crafted goods from the Farmers Market (as discussed in Chapter 7). Of course, your neighbors can do all these things for you as well, forming a big, reciprocal cycle of good will.

It's not all sunshine and happiness, though — some players can get pretty competitive about FarmVille, working hard to make their farms that much more spectacular than those of their neighbors. Chapter 4 discusses interacting with neighbors in much more detail.

You upgrade your farm (and yourself)

As you perform various actions and buy various in-game items in FarmVille, you earn *experience points* (XP) to denote your progress. Earning enough experience points grants you a new *level*, which often comes with the ability to buy new items or access new purchasable items, as discussed in Chapter 8.

Avoiding FarmVille “addiction”

In a January 2010 episode of his syndicated talk show, television psychologist Dr. Phil confronted a mother whose love of FarmVille had probably gone too far. She admitted that the game was stopping her from returning phone calls or talking to her family, and generally causing her to neglect her responsibilities. Using his trademark “get real” approach, Dr. Phil pleaded with this woman to end her “ridiculous addiction” and “get out of FarmVille! . . . Reintroduce yourself to your family. Cook a meal. Go on a date. Go to a movie. Go jog. Go sit out in the backyard and watch the grass grow. Do something. Actually, maybe start a garden for real.”

Certainly there are many worse things to be addicted to than video games, but getting a bit too engrossed in the virtual world is a very real risk for some people. FarmVille players can be especially susceptible to the effects of addiction for several reasons. The game’s time-sensitive crops encourage players to check in frequently to avoid withered crops. A built-in community of fellow players can draw people away from their friends and family in the real world. Weekly updates and limited-edition items keep players coming back to see what’s coming next. Random gifts and hidden items have a slot-machine-like effect on some players, keeping them clicking for that next random reward.

If you ever get to the point where you start thinking, “I can’t stop watching my crops!” you’re not alone. Many people engage in virtual farm life not just for an occasional escape but also as a constant way to avoid real-world problems and responsibilities. It can happen to anyone:

Dimitar Kerin, a Bulgarian politician, made international headlines for tending his virtual crops during budget meetings, even after he was asked to stop by fellow city council members.

Don’t let the risk of addiction threaten to ruin the fun you can have farming. Instead, follow these tips for avoiding addiction — not just in FarmVille, but with any video or computer game.

- ✓ **Limit the time you spend playing.** Set a strict time limit for how much you’ll allow yourself to play each day — a half hour or an hour, perhaps — and stick to it religiously. Use a stopwatch or a kitchen timer to help remind yourself to stop playing when your time is up.
- ✓ **Schedule your gameplay.** Set aside a specific time every day to play the game, and don’t let yourself log in before or after that time. Use the scheduled play time as something to look forward to throughout the day rather than allow the game to kill productive time.
- ✓ **Make a list of your real-world obligations for the day.** Reward yourself with a quick visit to FarmVille after you’ve completed everything on your list — but not before.
- ✓ **Plant crops that fit your lifestyle.** Crops that sprout every four hours demand constant attention and frequent logins to harvest. Planting crops with longer growing times requires less frequent play time to get them harvested; it also gives you a longer margin of error for avoiding withered crops. For more on farming on your own schedule, see Chapter 6.

As you *level up*, as the process of earning new levels is known, you earn the ability to purchase storage buildings (discussed in Chapter 9) and farm expansions (discussed in Chapter 6) to help your farm hold even more items. You also earn access to more advanced features of the game, such as vehicles that help you perform farming tasks more quickly (as discussed in Chapter 6) and the Farmers Market, which lets you craft goods and sell them to neighbors (as discussed in Chapter 7).

Besides experience points and levels, you can also earn more specific *achievements* for certain in-game actions. These include ribbons for performing certain actions a set number of times, collections for finding certain hidden items, and crop mastery levels for harvesting certain crops frequently. These achievements are discussed in more detail in Chapter 11.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, this continuous process of farming and improvement has no end point. Developer Zynga is constantly adding new features and new items to keep long-time players interested (as discussed in Chapter 10), and players often change which aspect of the game they want to focus on as they continue to play (as discussed in Chapter 15).