Isaludo

Ten Modern Solo Games Using a Standard Card Deck

Wil Su

Beta 1.11 - Sep. 4, 2021

Introduction

The standard deck of cards really doesn't get enough love from the hobby, does it?

Everyone has a deck of cards or two in their house. They're versatile, classic, and cheap. There are nice patterns buried within the ranks, suits, and face cards - all ripe for game design. With only the barest of themes, they're also a good way to prototype "rules kernels" - simple, semi-abstract game designs which can serve as the core for larger games.

As an ode to the humble 52-card deck, this book contains **ten solo games** playable with a standard deck of cards. Solo, because these were designed in spurts over that weird year where social distancing became a thing.

Some of these games are original. Some were born from games I've enjoyed, modified to a point that I feel the gameplay and strategies are different enough to count as a new game (though all original authors are credited).

All the games featured here have the following features:

1. **Thematic, Modern Design** - These games are **not** based on Klondike-style "put a black seven on a red eight" solitaire. Not that there's anything wrong with those kinds of games, but there's a whole lot of unused design spaces to explore!
2. **Pure Card Game** - The games use only a standard 52-card deck (54 with jokers) with no other components, not even dice, coins, or score sheets.
3. **Rules-tight** - Most of the games take one core idea and run with it. These games' rules are meant to be memorizable

with a bit of effort, and special actions connected to specific cards are minimized.

4. **Strategic** - While the games here have various degrees of luck, it is possible to become better at them.
5. **Have a loss condition** - A personal preference. It is possible to "win" or "lose" these games (with variable difficulty), but I provide a scoring option when I can.

The presentation of these games is unashamedly inspired by Scott Huntington's Femtitva, a collection of original, modern multiplayer games also using a standard deck of cards.

The name of the book means *to salute* in Filipino. It's also a combination of the Filipino word *isa* (one) and Latin *ludo* (game), owing to its solitaire focus.

Happy gaming, everyone!
Wil

Basics and Conventions

The games in this book use a **standard 52-card deck.** Some games require up to two **jokers,** which usually comes with the pack.

The book uses standard suits and colors: red **hearts** (♥) and **diamonds** (♦), black **spades** (♠) and **clubs** (♣). The Jacks, Queens, and Kings are called **face cards;** 2-9 **number cards**. Cards are identified by their rank and suit icon: for example A♠, 4♥, 10♣, or Q♦.

All games in this book have a (personal) rating from 1-3 along six axes, which may help you find a game you're in the mood for:

- **Complexity** - How simple or complex are the rules? Are there many edge cases and things to remember? Note that even the most complex game in this book will probably still be considered a 'light' board game.
- **Weight** - How large is the decision space per action? Can the game be played casually or does it require a lot of thinking per turn?
- **Footprint** - How big of a space do you need to play the game?
- **Strategy** - How reliant is the game on strategy, i.e, making a long term plan, and executing this plan?
- **Tactics** - How reliant is the game on reacting to the current situation or unforeseen circumstances?
- **Luck** - How reliant is the game on luck? Note that a high luck game does not necessarily equate to having low strategy or tactics.

Contents

Loot the Loop ... p. 32
Co ●●● | Wt ●○○ | Fo ●○○ | St ●○○ | Ta ●●● | Lu ●●●
Raid a temple, grab jewels, and avoid traps. A dungeon-delving game played in your hand, similar to Maiden's Quest.

Syndicate ... p. 39
Co ●●○ | We ●●● | Fo ●●○ | St ●●● | Ta ●○○ | Lu ●○○
A brain-burning puzzle about gaining the mafia's trust. Slowly move your agents up the ranks to take out the syndicate from within.

Hide and Seek ... p. 43
Co ●●○ | We ●○○ | Fo ●●● | St ●●○ | Ta ●●○ | Lu ●●●
A deduction/risk management game about efficiently finding your friends' hiding places within the playground.

The Emissary ... p. 47
Co ●●● | Wt ●●○ | Fo ●●● | St ●●○ | Ta ●●● | Lu ●●○
A solo trick-taking game where you try to gather support from neighboring kingdoms using rhetoric suave.

The Games

Skyway

Complexity	●●○	*Weight*	●●○	*Footprint*	●●○
Strategy	●●●	*Tactics*	●●○	*Luck*	●●○

Arranging tiles to create maps is a cornerstone of many great city-building games like Suburbia and Sprawlopolis. However, most games of this genre require more information on each card than a simple rank-and-suit system can provide. Skyway takes its cue from the Decktet game Aucteraden. By allowing a single space to have more than one "suit" on it, the paths can intersect and weave around each other to create a small, tight puzzle.

Overview

In *Skyway*, you are a city planner in charge of designing a notoriously convoluted traffic interchange. Over three passes through the deck, you will be drafting stacks of cards from a random market, which you'll place into a 3x3 grid. However, each grid cell may only be stacked three cards high - any more and the bottom cards get discarded. Your aim is to create a path of at least 5 increasing cards for each of the four suits.

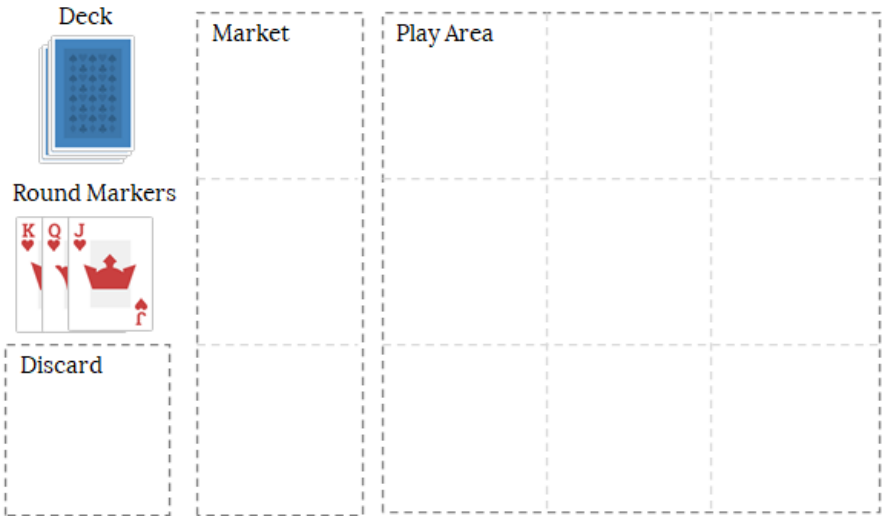
Components

- A standard 52-card deck, no jokers

Setup

Separate all twelve face cards. Choose any three face cards and place them face up as **round markers,** then remove the rest from the game.

Shuffle the rest of the 40-card **deck** and place it face down. Leave room for a **discard pile**, a 3-space **market,** and a 3x3 **play area.**



Turn one round marker face down to mark the first round.

Gameplay

The game is played over a series of turns. Each turn is composed of the following:

1. Reset the market
2. Draft and play blueprints

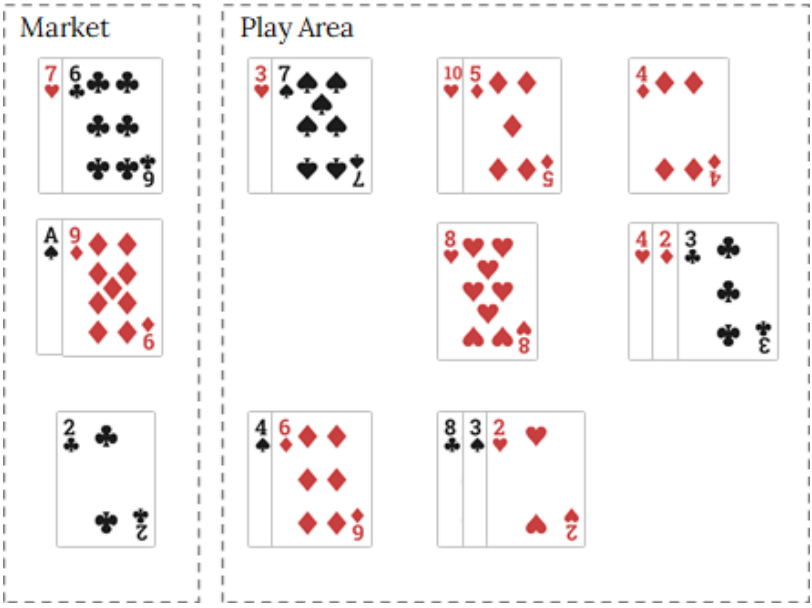
Reset the market

Deal five cards from the deck into three face-up market stacks (**blueprints**). Two sets of blueprints should have two cards each, while the final blueprint should have one card. Deal the same way every time - don't vary the way you deal as you see the cards that are dealt.

Draft and play blueprints

Choose one of the three sets of blueprints and discard the rest. Place your selected blueprint into one of the spaces in your 3x3 play area, on top of any other cards already there. Fan all cards slightly to the right so all their ranks and suits are visible. You may not rearrange the order of any cards.

Each space of the play area may only be three cards high. If placing cards causes that space to have four or more cards, discard from the bottom of the stack until three cards are left. Place these bottom cards in the same discard pile as the undrafted market cards; they will be available again in future rounds, if any.



In the mid-game example above, I choose to draft the 7♥ 6♣ blueprint stack and place it on the middle-right space. Since that space now has five cards, the bottom two (4♥ and 2♦) will be discarded. The stack will now be, from bottom to top, 3♣ 7♥ 6♣.

Second and Third Round

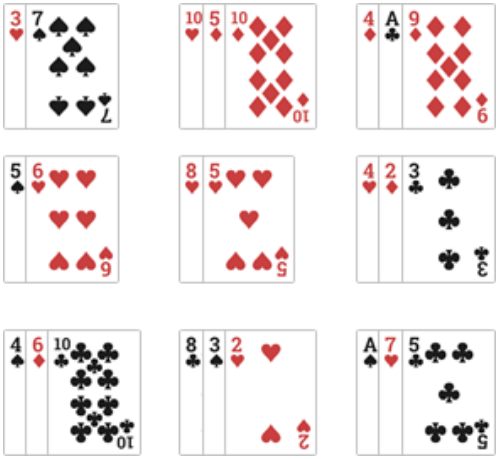
When the deck runs out, shuffle the discard pile and continue with it as the new deck (finish dealing the five-card market with the new deck if it runs out halfway). Flip the next round marker face down.

You will go through the deck **three times**. If the deck runs out of cards in the middle of dealing the market in the third round, shuffle one last time and deal enough cards just to finish the last market.

Game End

After three full passes through the deck, note your completed 3x3 play area. For each of the four suits, look for the longest sequence of increasing value that can be drawn through vertically and horizontally adjacent cards. The sequence may loop back on earlier spaces, but you must move to a new grid space with each step. The "height" or layer of the card doesn't matter.

If you have **at least a 5-card increasing sequence for each of the four suits**, you win the game! Your score is the total length of all four sequences. A winning setup is shown below.



Start from bottom-center 2♥, up to 5♥, left to 6♥, right to 8♥, and up to 10♥.

From bottom-right A♠, left 3♠, left 4♠, up 5♠, up 7♠.

From middle-right 2♦, up 4♦, left 5♦, right 9♦, left 10♦.

Top-right A♣, down 3♣, down 5♣, left 8♣, left 10♣.

The Sandwich Guy

Complexity	●○○	*Weight*	●○○	*Footprint*	●○○
Strategy	●●○	*Tactics*	●●●	*Luck*	●●●

The Sandwich Guy was a game developed while looking through experimental Friedmann Friesse games such as the Fast Forward series, and in particular Finished! Of course, this game ended up having nothing in common with those games - it's probably closer to Rummy, if anything. I play it as a casual filler, though I'm certain there are more optimal ways to play if someone devotes time to deeper analysis.

Overview

You are *The Sandwich Guy*, whose food truck is known far and wide as a premier foodie destination. You're given a non-stop barrage of ingredients, which you must discard three at a time to make sandwiches. The quality of the sandwich you make is based on the suits of the cards you discarded. Depending on the quality, you get anywhere from two to four cards as replacement ingredients. You win once you've gone through the whole deck.

Components

- A standard 52-card deck, no jokers

Setup

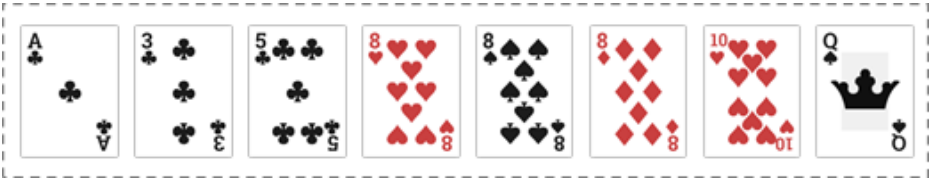
Shuffle the **deck** and place it face down on the table. Draw the top eight cards of the deck to form your **hand**. Set aside space for a **discard pile**.

Gameplay

Each turn, you must discard exactly three cards in your hand that can be arranged into a valid **sandwich**, or you lose the game. A sandwich is valid if one of the three cards is **exactly between** the other two. That is, the difference between the first and second card is the same as the difference between the second and third card.

Card values go from Ace (1) < 2...10 < Jack (11), Queen (12) and King (13). Cards "loop" around from King to Ace, so assuming that this is your hand (arranged in order to be clearer), the following three sandwiches are all valid:

- A♣ 3♣ 5♣ (difference of 2 each step)
- 8♠, Q♠, 3♣ (difference of 4, with Q-K-A-2-3 looping around)
- 8♥, 8♠, 8♦ (difference of 0)



- 8♥, 10♥, 8♦ is **not** a valid sandwich; steps must be increasing.

Discard the three chosen cards, taking note of their suits:

- If they are all the same suit, draw the next **four** cards from the top of the deck to add to your hand (e.g. A♣ 3♣ 5♣).
- If the discarded cards are all the same color but different suits, draw **three** cards (e.g. 8♠ Q♠ 3♣).
- If the cards are not all the same color, draw **two** cards (e.g. 8♥ 8♠ 8♦).

You may only hold a maximum of **eight cards** at any time; if you would draw a ninth card and you already have eight, ignore the last draw - like the fourth replacement card if you discarded A♣ 3♣ 5♣ in the example above.

Making poor quality (i.e, different color) sandwiches reduces your hand size, which will make it harder to form sandwiches in future turns. You can recover from this by discarding same-suit sandwiches, but mind the hand limit. Sequence carefully to avoid getting locked out.

Game End

Any time you are unable to make a valid sandwich with the cards in your hand, you lose.

If you draw the last card of the draw pile, you win the game. Continue creating sandwiches without replacement until you can't anymore. Your score is the number of cards left in your hand; the lower the better. A perfect game will leave you with only one card in hand.

Tips and Notes

- You may freely look through or sort the cards in the discard pile, as it's important to know how many of each suit and number has been discarded.
- Similarly, you may look through the draw deck at any time, as long as you shuffle afterwards.
- Cards in valid sequences are at most **six steps away** from each other. All sequences with more than six steps like "8, 2, 9" (difference of seven) can be rearranged into a sequence with a difference of six or below (in this case "9, 2, 8", a difference of six). Hooray math!

Area 52

Complexity	●●○	*Weight*	●○○	*Footprint*	●●○
Strategy	●●○	*Tactics*	●●○	*Luck*	●●●

I've always wanted to make a game using Button Men mechanics, owing to how elegant it is. I wasn't able to find a suitable theme until I randomly found Onslaught by Thorin Tatge, which had similar elements. This game riffs from that - the theme of alien defense is the same, but gameplay and tactics are very different. Like Button Men, the game is heavily reliant on luck. Despite this, there's still an undercurrent of subtle strategy, related to concepts of probability and mathematical parity.

Overview

As the commander of the Frontline Alien Resistance Team (F.A.R.T.), you must manage a squad of elite soldiers to fight off a wave of invading aliens. After the first wave, the aliens will attack again with deadlier force - you win if you are able to repel both waves without running out of resources. Having a good variety and spread of defenders is critical to efficiently counter the invaders.

Components

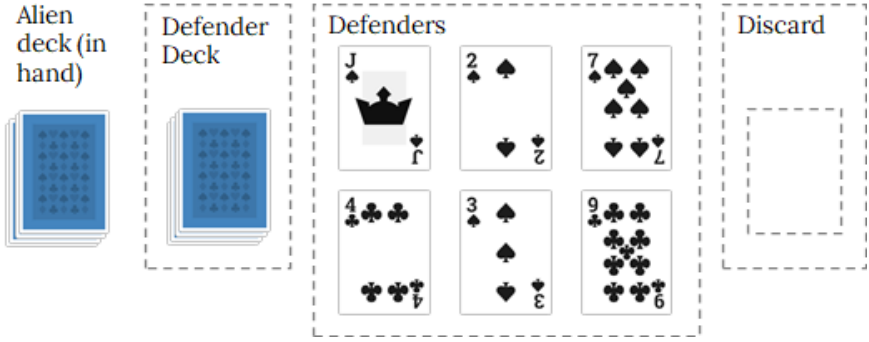
- A standard 52-card deck, no jokers

Setup

Separate the black cards (**defender deck**) from the red cards (**alien deck**) and shuffle each. Place the defender deck face down on the table, and deal six cards face up (**defenders**). The position of the

defenders on the table doesn't matter. Hold the alien deck face down in your hand. Leave space for a **discard pile**.

In Area 52, Aces have value 1, while Jack, Queen, and King are 11, 12, and 13 respectively.



Gameplay

The game is played over a series of turns. Each turn, you reveal three new aliens, then defeat or avoid these aliens one at a time.

Flip the top three cards of the alien deck (or as many as are left) face-up in your hand. Be careful to maintain the order. The top face-up card is the **current attacker,** and you should also be able to see the next two attackers coming in.

One at a time, in order, you must choose to engage the current attacker via either a **dual attack**, a **single attack,** or a **sacrifice**.

Dual Attack: Choose two defenders whose sum adds up **exactly** to the attacker's value. Discard the attacker, while leaving both defenders in place. *While one soldier suppresses, the other strikes with a clean flank attack. No casualties.*

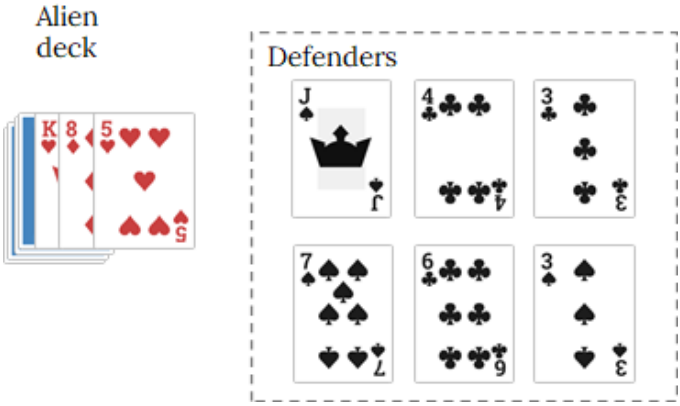
Single Attack: Choose a defender with a **greater value and opposite color** from the attacker. Discard your defender and replace it with the attacker. *Your soldier was hurt in the fight; it now has a lower value.* Note that the color swap means it can't be used for another single attack again - at least during this first wave.

Sacrifice: If you cannot or do not want to defeat the invader via an attack, choose a defender and discard it. Then move the current attacker to the **back** of the alien deck face down. *You order a soldier to break formation and distract the alien temporarily. Both of you know this is suicide.*

If after any attack or sacrifice you end up with less than six defenders on the table, immediately draw cards from the defender deck to replace them. If you run out of cards in the defender deck, you stop drawing and must make do with the forces on the board for the rest of the game.

Once you've handled all three attackers in order, flip the next three alien cards face up and repeat.

The example on the next page demonstrates all three actions.



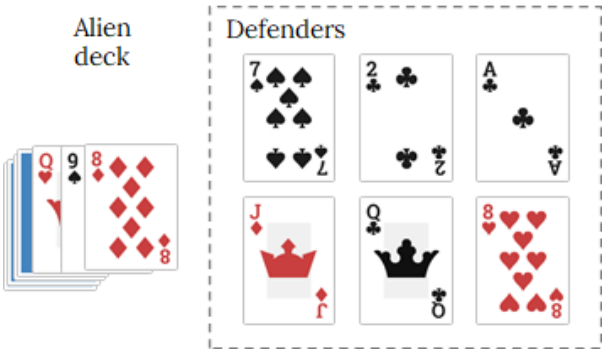
- Use a **single attack** from my 7♠ to defeat the 5♥ (discarding the 7♠ and replacing it with the 5♥)
- **Dual attack** with (newly acquired) 5♥ + 3♣ to defeat the 8♦.
- I have no way to dispatch the K♥, so I **sacrifice** my 3♠, and replace it with a new defender. K♥ moves to the back of the alien deck. *I need to remember to set up my defenders so they can dual attack a 13-value alien later.*

There are a couple of alternate plays which would have allowed you to defeat all three aliens. Can you spot them?

Second Wave

Once you've defeated all cards in the alien deck, shuffle the discard pile and start a second wave of attack using these cards. Remember that all cards are discarded to the same pile, including defenders! The second wave should thus have a greater number of aliens, now with a mixed force of **black and red cards**.

In the second wave, the aliens are deadlier: Whenever you perform a dual attack, **you now also discard any defender used in that attack whose color matches the alien's color.**



In the Second Wave example above, I'm in a pretty tough spot. 8♦ is easy enough to defeat with Dual 7♠ + A♣, but what about the next attacker 9♠? I have three options, none optimal:

a. Dual attack 8♥ + A♣, lose the black A♣.
b. Single attack J♦, which turns to a 9♠. (I can't single attack with a Q♣, as single attacks require the opposite color)
c. Dual attack 7♠ + 2♣, lose both cards.

Options (a) and (b) lose less units than (c), but how do I now handle the third attacker Q♥? Dual J♦ + A♣ would have been the best option, which I can't do if I choose (a) or (b)!

Game End

If you run out of defenders on the board, you lose the game. Your score is negative of the number of cards left in the alien deck, including all face-up attackers. Subtract 50 from your score if you're somehow still on the first wave.

If you successfully destroy all the attackers of the second wave, you win the game! Your score is the number of cards remaining in the defender deck (if any) plus the number of defenders on the table.

Dead Center

Complexity	●●●	*Weight*	●●○	*Footprint*	●●○
Strategy	●●●	*Tactics*	●●○	*Luck*	●●○

Dead Center is based on Tom Francis' Gridcannon, but replaces the core placement mechanism to provide tighter control and a gradually increasing decision tree to the player. The result is a puzzle that rewards both strategic and tactical play (and always seems to come down to the wire, for me at least). The placement rules may seem a bit funky at first, but are pretty easy to grok once you actually start playing.

Overview

In *Dead Center*, you must kill twelve zombies surrounding your 3x3 cabin before the deck runs out. You do this by playing cards into piles within the cabin to attack adjacent zombies. The power and precision of your attacks is determined not by the card you played, but by the two other cards on the same line.

Components

- A standard 52-card deck with two jokers

Setup

Separate the twelve face cards (**zombies**). Shuffle the rest of the deck, and deal nine cards (**the cabin**) face up in a 3 by 3 grid. Shuffle the face cards, and deal one each face down on the twelve spaces vertically or horizontally adjacent to the cabin's outside cards.

Gameplay

The game is played over a series of turns. Each turn, you must perform each the following three actions in order:

1. Reveal a zombie if able
2. Draw a card and play on a valid pile
3. Kill a zombie adjacent to the card you played, if able

Reveal a Zombie

If any zombies are still face down, choose and reveal one of them by turning the card face up. As there are twelve zombies, this only happens during the first twelve turns.

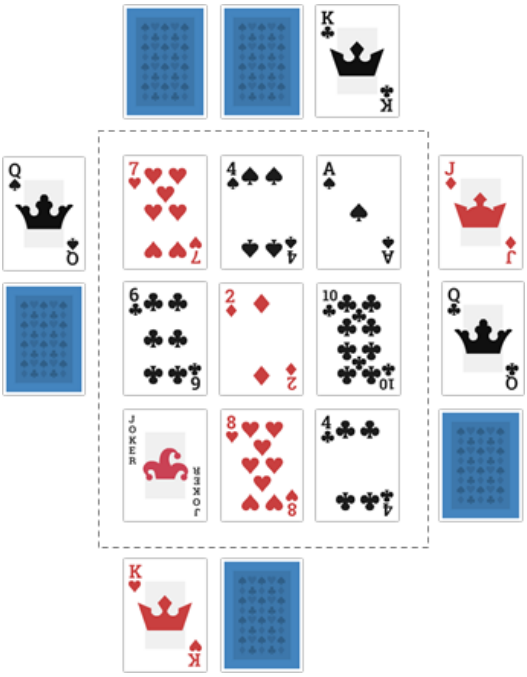
Play a card

Draw the top card of the deck, and play it face up into one of the central nine piles. The pile(s) you may play on depend on the color and value of that pile's top card. You may play your card either on:

- **A card of equal value,**
- **A card of the same color and greater value,** or
- **A card of an opposite color and less value.**

Another way to think about the placement rules, in solitaire terms, is that you *build up* with alternating colors, while you *build down* with a single color.

Aces have value 1. Jokers may be played on any card, and have any card played on it. Cards you play on a pile become the new top card of that pile.



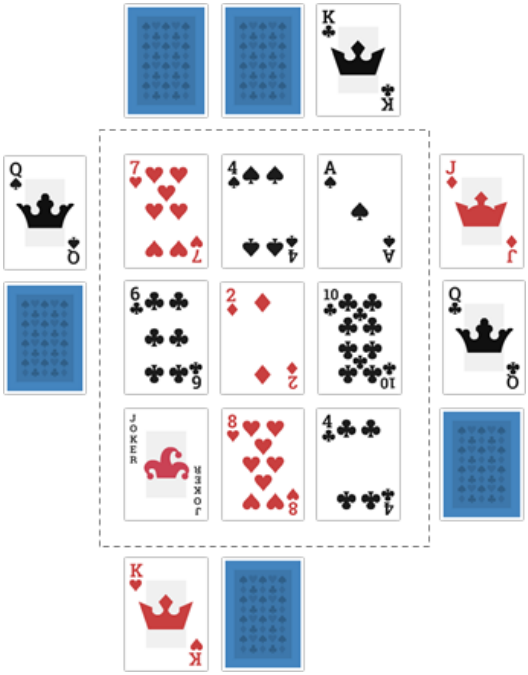
- If the next card is a 3♦, I can play it on the 7♥, 8♥, A♠, or Joker.
- A 7♠ can be played on the 7♥, 2♦, 10♣, or Joker.
- A Joker can be played anywhere.

Kill a Zombie

After placing your card, you may then kill a **single** face up zombie adjacent to the pile you just played on, if your attack is strong enough. (The four corners of the 3x3 grid have two adjacent zombies each, the edges have one, and the center has none). The strength of your attack isn't based on the card you played, but rather its **support cards:** the **two other cabin cards** on the same line as the card you just played and the zombie you're attacking.

For an attack to kill a zombie, the sum of these two **support cards** must **be at least 10**. In addition,

- To kill a **king**, both support cards must match the king's **suit**.
- To kill a **queen,** both support cards must match the queen's **color**.
- There are no suit restrictions to kill **jacks**.



- If I play a card on the A♠, I can kill the K♣ (10♣ + 4♣) or the J♦ (7♥ + 4♠), but not both.
- Playing a card on the 7♥ can't kill the Q♠; the support cards are the correct color but only have a sum of 5 (4♠ + A♠).
- Playing a card on the Joker doesn't kill the K♥; the support cards total at least 10 (7♥ + 6♣) but are not both hearts.

When used as an attack support card, Jokers have value zero but count as all suits. A Joker must be paired with a 10 to kill.

The game becomes a puzzle of sequencing attacks and setting up cards for future attacks. You can't attack or kill facedown zombies, so the order you choose to reveal them is also part of your strategy. If you can't kill any zombie with the card you played, nothing happens; proceed to the next turn.

Game End

If you have to draw a card but the deck is empty, or if you are unable to play a card, you lose. If you **manage to kill all twelve zombies**, you win the game. Your score is the number of cards left in the deck.

Variants

For a harder game, reduce the number of Jokers to 1 (my preferred way to play), then to zero.

The First Boba Tea Shop in London

Complexity	●●○	*Weight*	●○○	*Footprint*	●●●
Strategy	●●○	*Tactics*	●●○	*Luck*	●●●

Push-your-luck games have an incredible ratio of enjoyment to rules. This game isn't original but is a variant of Queue 4 by Andrew Bowling. An alternate action was provided to give more choices in the early game and more control to the player, at the expense of a tighter win condition. The game has a lot of hidden depth and can be enjoyed either casually or with a lot of analysis; all credit to Drew.

Objective

20XX. The British love their queues, but the hype for this newfangled Bubble Tea is so huge that some people even dare to cut in line. How will you direct them to maximize your sales during your first business day?

In *The First Boba Tea Shop in London*, you are the franchisee of a famous Taiwanese milk tea stand, managing an increasingly agitated line of customers outside your store desperate to try the newest craze. You need to play as many cards as possible into four ordered queues. If someone tries to cut in line you can either kick them out, or clear the whole line. To win, you must go through the whole deck without discarding any four cards of the same rank.

Components

- A standard 52-card deck, no jokers

Setup

Shuffle the deck of cards and place it face down. Deal four cards (**customers**) face up in a row to start the four queues outside your store.

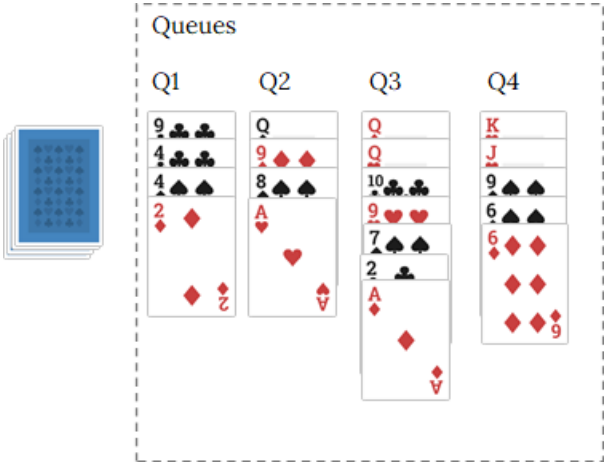
Gameplay

Unlike standard solitaire games where you see a card and decide where to place it, here you do the opposite - you first choose a location you *think* will be able to accommodate the card you will draw next, then see if it does.

The game consists of playing cards one at a time into one of the four queues, and managing the consequences of people not following the **politeness rule**.

The Politeness Rule

Cards in queues must be stacked in **equal or descending order** at all times, with the lowest-value card on the bottom and the highest on top. Aces are low (1). The example below is a typical midgame. Matching ranks are allowed, such as 9-4-4-2 in the first queue (Q1).



Playing a Card in a Queue

On your turn, first choose a **queue,** then a **target position** within that queue for your next customer. This target position may be above the highest card, below the lowest card, or in between any two adjacent cards in that queue.

Draw the top card of the deck and check whether the card fits in your target position following the politeness rule**.** If it does, the card joins the queue at that position and the turn ends. (Shift the cards around to make space as necessary.)

If it doesn't, you must make a choice: **let the rude customer stay** or **kick the rude customer out**.

Let the customer stay

Discard **all** the cards in the queue you've targeted, then place the card you're currently holding as the first card to restart the queue. *No one wants to stay in the same line as that rude customer. They all leave in disgust, tsk-tsking under their breath.*

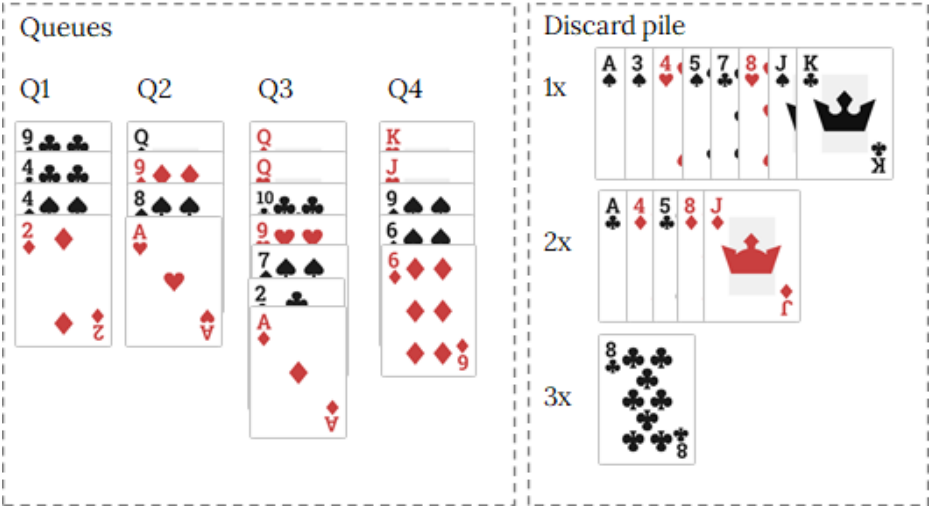
Kick the customer out

Discard the card you're holding **and** the top card of the deck. Then draw the next card and see whether this new customer fits into the **same target position** you chose earlier. *You call a cop to escort the unruly customer out, to the silent cheers of the rest.*

If this new customer still doesn't fit, you may again choose to let them stay or kick them out. There's no limit to the number of times you may kick out a customer, but remember that you can't change target positions, and you lose two cards each time.

All cards are discarded face up. Pay attention to how many cards of each rank you've discarded; once you discard **the fourth card of any rank**, you lose the game.

It's helpful to sort discarded cards into three rows. The first time a card of a particular rank is discarded, it goes into the first row. The second time, it goes into the second row, and so on. Cards in the third row are dangerous: One more and the game ends.



Let's look again at the midgame example earlier. The position in Q2 between the 8♠ and A♥ is eight cards "wide", and seems like a good spot for the next card's target position. But wait - the discard pile already contains three 8's!

This makes Q2 *very risky*, as you can't afford to let a Q2 rude customer stay (the whole line will be discarded, including the fourth "8"). A little bad luck and you'll be forced to kick a string of cards out, increasing the risk further.

Game End

Any time you discard the fourth card of any rank, you lose the game. If you've **gone through the entire deck of cards** without four-of-a-kind in the discard pile, you win the game! Your score is the total number of cards still in queues at the end.

Other Notes

At any point before drawing, you may look through the remaining cards in the deck, as long as you shuffle it afterwards. This becomes especially useful toward the end of the game.

Foursquare

Complexity	●○○	*Weight*	●●○	*Footprint*	●●○
Strategy	●●○	*Tactics*	●●○	*Luck*	●●○

This abstract "tile-laying" game is inspired by Poker Squares, the dual-axis flip-flopping of Reversi, and the many variations of the Lights Out puzzle. I wanted to create a game where there's a feeling of bouncing around trying to firefight multiple axes at once. The theme is, of course, a terribly forced pun.

Overview

In Foursquare, you are the mayor of the fictional Flavortown, a trendy neighborhood known for being the birthplace of cutting-edge restaurants. New restaurants (cards) will be placed one at a time in a 4x4 grid. Placing the highest or lowest card in a row or column causes all other cards in that row or column to flip over, as other restaurants go out of business or try to challenge the newcomer. Your task is to end up with sixteen open restaurants in your city, while preventing too many from being closed at once.

Components

- A standard 52-card deck, no jokers

Setup

Remove all the face cards from the game. Shuffle the remaining 40 number cards **(restaurants)** and hold this **deck** face down in your hand. Draw the top card of the deck and place it anywhere on the table to start your grid of restaurants.

Gameplay

Each turn, draw the top card of the deck and play it face up on the table. You may play the card either:

1. As the first card of a new pile, vertically or horizontally adjacent to an existing pile, or
2. On top of an existing card or pile of cards.

Your whole grid cannot grow to more than four cards in length, width, or height. This means you can have at most sixteen piles arranged in a 4x4 grid, with each pile having a maximum of four cards.

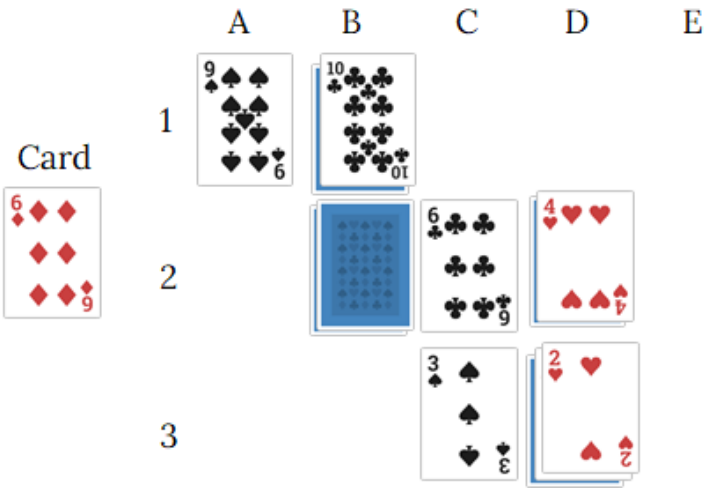
Flipping cards

After placing each card, look at the top cards of all the other piles on the same row, if any. Check if the card you just placed is the **uniquely highest or lowest card in that row** (In other words, it's either higher or lower than all other cards in that row, or the only faceup card). If it is, this restaurant is *too cool* - **flip over the top cards** of all other piles in the same row. *Other restaurants on the same street are forced to close down as they run out of customers. However, a lot of copycats also try to open in empty lots to ride the trend.*

Aces have value 1. Ignore facedown cards when comparing values.

Afterward, check the columns as well - if the card you just placed is the uniquely highest or lowest value in that column, flip the top cards of the other piles.

If after flipping cards in both rows and columns, your grid has **more than four piles with facedown top cards** (closed restaurants), the industry goes into recession and you lose the game.



Grid coordinates are added to the example above to illustrate.

- Playing the 6♦ on B3 will flip the 10♣, 3♠, and 2♥ face down, and the top facedown card on B2 face up. (You always just flip the top card, not the whole pile)
- Playing the 6♦ on B1 will flip the 9♠ on A1 and the card on B2.
- Playing the 6♦ on B2 will flip the 10♣, but will not affect row 2 (6♦ is not the *uniquely* highest card on that row)
- I cannot play the 6♦ on A3 (not orthogonally connected), E2 (grid will be five cards wide), or D1 (Four cards will flip and I'll end up with five facedown cards.)

Game End

Continue drawing and placing cards one at time. If after placing and flipping, you have a **4x4 grid of all face up restaurants**, you win the game. Your score is the number of cards left in the deck.

If you run out of cards to place, or you cannot place any card without violating any of the constraints on grid size or number of facedown cards, you lose.

Loot the Loop

Complexity	●●●	*Weight*	●○○	*Footprint*	●○○
Strategy	●○○	*Tactics*	●●●	*Luck*	●●●

I was intrigued by the concept of a deck being a singular physical space you can traverse through multiple times, like in Palm Island and Maiden's Quest. While those two games have the luxury of using their rotation to change their values, I'm limited by cards' order and facing to quantify the game state.

Loot the Loop *is that weird game that is* much *easier to demonstrate than to explain - the example at the end is a bit more detailed to compensate. But once the rules have been internalized, I believe it provides one of the most enjoyable "flows" of the games in this book.*

Objective

You are the dashing adventurer Maxx Delver, currently exploring the long-hidden Temple of the Sun. The temple is filled to the brim with trinkets and traps, but you're most interested in the four royal jewels said to lie within.

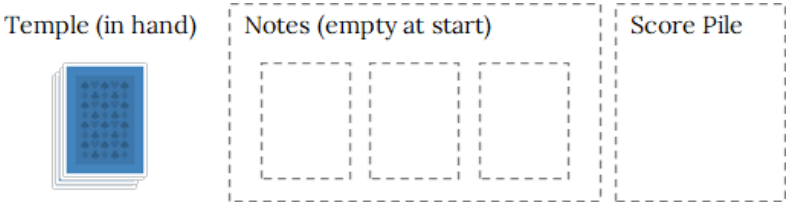
The temple you're raiding is shaped like a closed loop (i.e., a donut), and the top card represents your physical location within it. You "move" through the temple, always forward, by moving cards from the top to the bottom of the deck. The temple's layout will be revealed as you explore, exposing traps you must avoid as you cycle multiple times through the deck. You win once you get all four jewels and land on the exit.

Components

- A standard 52-card deck with one joker.
- Aces are **jewels** you're trying to loot. Number cards (2-10) are minor **trinkets** in the temple. Face cards are **traps** you must avoid, while the Joker is the temple **exit.**

Setup

Shuffle the deck and hold it in one hand, face down. Leave space on the table for three cards (your **notes**) and a **score pile**.



Gameplay

The game is played over a series of turns. Each turn, you must perform **exactly one** of the following four actions. What actions are allowed depend on the top or top two cards of the deck.

Action	**Can only be performed if...**
Look Around	The top card of the deck is face down
Explore	Either or both of the top two cards in the deck are face-up number cards (trinkets)
Mark a path	The top card of the deck is a face up number card (trinket), and you have less than three cards in your notes
Return to a marked path	You have at least one marked path in your notes

1. Look Around

Turn the **top two cards** of the deck face up, careful to maintain their order. If the second card of the deck is already face up, just flip the top card and leave the second one as is.

You may ONLY perform this action if the top card of the deck is face down.

Note that this is the only action you can do at the start of the game. You generally want to perform this action whenever you can, as revealing the temple layout is of vital importance.

2. Explore

If **either or both** of the top two cards in the deck are face-up number cards (trinkets), choose **one** of those cards' values. Count exactly that many cards from the top of the deck and move them to the bottom, maintaining their order. Include the aforementioned top two cards in the count. *You see a branching path and decide to take one, and see where it will lead you.*

If there is only one face-up number card among the top two cards of the deck, you may only travel by that count. If neither of the two top cards of the deck are face up number cards, you may not use the explore action at all.

Here are some examples of what the top of your deck might look like, and their associated action options.

You can **explore** 3 or 7 spaces

You can't **explore** (neither of the two top cards are face-up trinkets)

You can **explore** 7 spaces (the Ace isn't a trinket)

You can **explore** 7 spaces ("3" is face up but not in the top two cards). You can also **look around.**

You can **explore** 6 spaces (...or 6 spaces)

You can explore 3 spaces. You can't **look around** (top card is not face down)

Each time you explore, after you move the required cards to the back, take note of the new top card of your deck. This is the room you **land** in.

- If it is a **face-down card**, nothing happens.
- If it is a **face-up face card** (trap), you lose the game.
- If it is a **face-up ace** (jewel) or **trinket** (number card), you nab it! You must move that card to your score pile.
- If it is a **face-up joker** (exit) and you have all four aces in your score pile, you exit the temple and end the game. Otherwise, nothing happens.

3. Mark a Path

If the top card of the deck is a number card (trinket), remove that card from the deck and place that card face up in front of you on the table in your notes. You can mark a maximum of **three** paths at any one time.

During your first pass through the deck, all cards are face down, so you'll spend it exploring, looking around, and taking notes. Once you start your second loop, some cards are already face up - start timing your movement to land on face up trinkets and jewels.

Remember that treasures you land on are removed from the temple, so the longer you stay the greater the density of traps!

4. Return to a Previously Marked Path

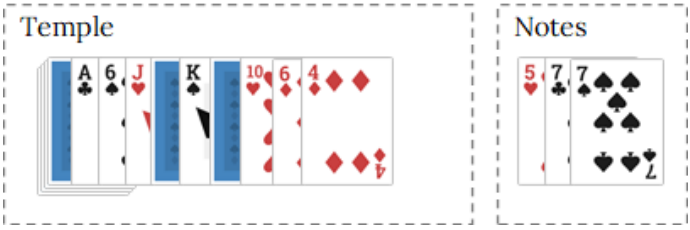
Return a path card of your choice from your notes to the top of the deck, face up.

Marking paths and returning to paths changes the top cards of your deck, and is the primary way to manipulate movement options when trying to land on specific cards.

Remember that marking and returning are separate actions. If your notes are already full, you can't "swap" a saved note and the top card of the deck.

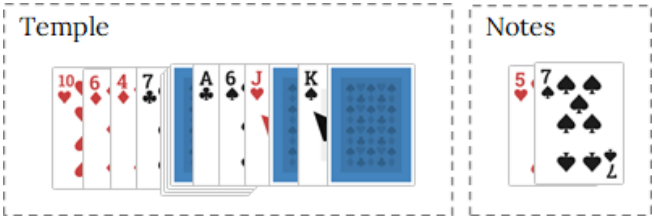
Example

In the mid-game example below (top cards fanned to be clearer), it seems like I'm stuck. I can only explore 4 or 6, both of which will land me on a trap. For example, if I **explore 6,** I move six cards from the top of the deck to the bottom - 4♦, 6♦, 10♥, a facedown card, K♠, and another facedown card. It will land me on the J♥ which represents a pit of spikes or something equally painful. Exploring 4 lands me on the K♠ in the same way.



My notes are full, so I can't mark any new ones. Instead, I a) **return** the 7♣ from my notes to the top of the temple, then b) **explore** 4.

Four cards are sent to the back of the deck. But now that I have an extra card buffer, I just barely miss the K♠ and instead land on the facedown card. I'm safe!



I push the bottom cards back under the bulk of the deck as I won't need to worry about them until later. I c) **look around** and find 9♥.

I can explore 9 to shoot ahead, but I want to land on the A♣ to score it. Since my notes now have a free space, d) I **mark** the 9♥ to move it to my notes, then e) **return** the 5♥.

f) I now **explore** 5. This lands me on the A♣ and I remove it from the temple to score! As the card after the A♣ is face down, g) I can **look around** as my next action, hopefully allowing me to explore further.

Game End

Continue exploring the temple and hunting for the jewels (aces) and exit (joker). If you get stuck in the temple and can't move, or all movement choices you have will land you on a trap, you lose the game.

If you land on the face-up exit after an explore action, check your score pile. **If you already have all four jewels**, you immediately escape the temple and win the game.

Your score is the total number of cards in your score pile, **including trinkets**. Yes, greed is rewarded - you're under no obligation to immediately seek the exit once you have all four jewels. If you think you can still nab more loot from the shrinking temple, by all means!

Other Notes

- You are free to look through the deck and all its face up cards at any time. You may even count cards to plan routes. You may not look at any face down cards, however.
- When traveling, it's helpful to first count off the total number of cards to move with your thumb, then transfer the whole block of cards to the back. It's easier than doing it one by one.
- It's possible to start the game with a really unlucky streak (like the top two cards being traps, and you can't even move once). Just restart the game, or just shrug and accept that's the life of a treasure hunter.

Syndicate

Complexity	●●○	*Weight*	●●●	*Footprint*	●●○
Strategy	●●●	*Tactics*	●○○	*Luck*	●○○

Syndicate was a failed attempt to create a standard-deck engine-builder ala Splendor... or was I trying to make Factorio? Nothing's left in the original design except for the core of using basic resources to get even more resources which can get higher tier ones, and so on. After weeks of fiddling around, I somehow ended up with this design - and I warn you, it's an incredibly *brain-burning game. With no randomness beyond the initial deal, it toes the line between game and puzzle.*

Overview

In *Syndicate*, you lead a large-scale police sting operation in 1930s Chicago to infiltrate the mafia. You must slowly gain the trust of the mafiosos, bringing your team of undercover agents slowly up the ranks. Promotion is difficult, as you may only bring in people that have enough rapport and trust with the other existing members of the same rank. Once you've promoted one agent above the highest level, you can take down the whole operation in one swoop.

Components

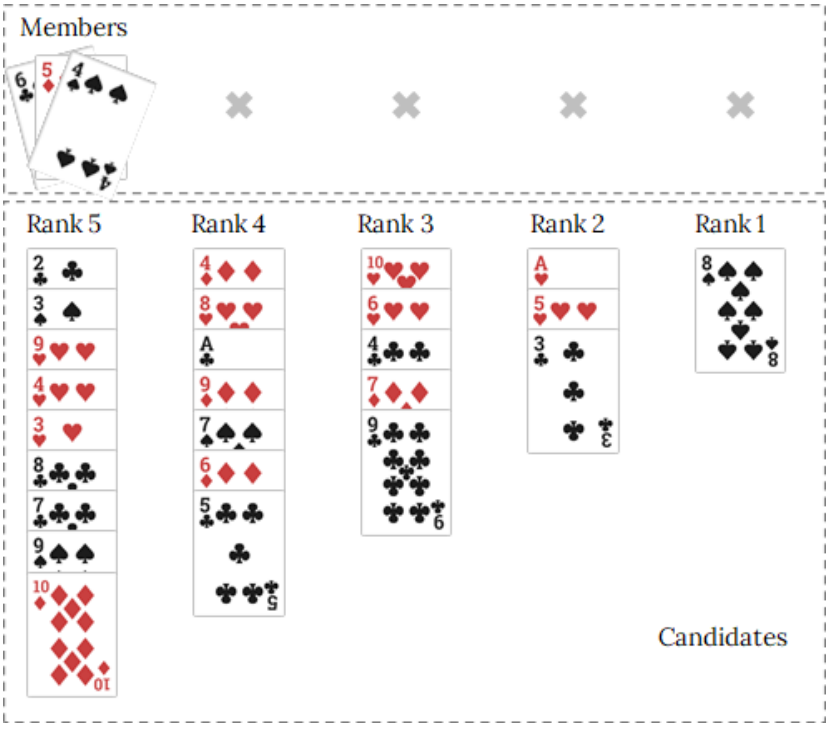
- A standard 52-card deck, no jokers

Setup

Remove all face cards from the game and shuffle the rest into a 40-card deck.

Deal five columns of cards face up, with cards fanned slightly so their rank can be seen. The leftmost column should have nine cards, then each column after should have two cards less (9, 7, 5, 3, 1). These five columns represent the five **mafia ranks,** with the leftmost column being the lowest rung (rank 5) and the rightmost one the highest (rank 1). The cards here are potential **candidates** for the rank.

Choose any three cards from the remainder of the deck and place them above the leftmost rank, fanned so their values are visible. These are the current **members** for Rank 5. Remove the unused number cards from the game.



Gameplay

The game is played over a series of turns. Each turn, you simultaneously **promote** one member of a rank and replace the promoted member with an **eligible candidate** from that rank.

Cards may only be promoted from ranks with exactly three members. To promote a member, move its card to the next rank, adding it **either** to the higher rank's members or candidates.

You may only promote someone if you can find a valid replacement from the candidates below it, which you move up to the members area to replace the promoted card.

The validity of a replacement is based on the two remaining unpromoted members. *The mafia is very finicky about replacements - they only accept people that jive with the existing group.* A replacement is valid only if its value is the **last digit when you either add or multiply the values of the remaining two members.** Aces have value 1 while Tens have value zero.

Take the previous page's example. If I promote 6♣ from R5 to R4, the remaining members are 5♦ and 4♠. The replacement can be either the 9♥ (5♦ + 4♠ = 9) or the 10♦ (5♦ x 4♠ = 20 → "0").

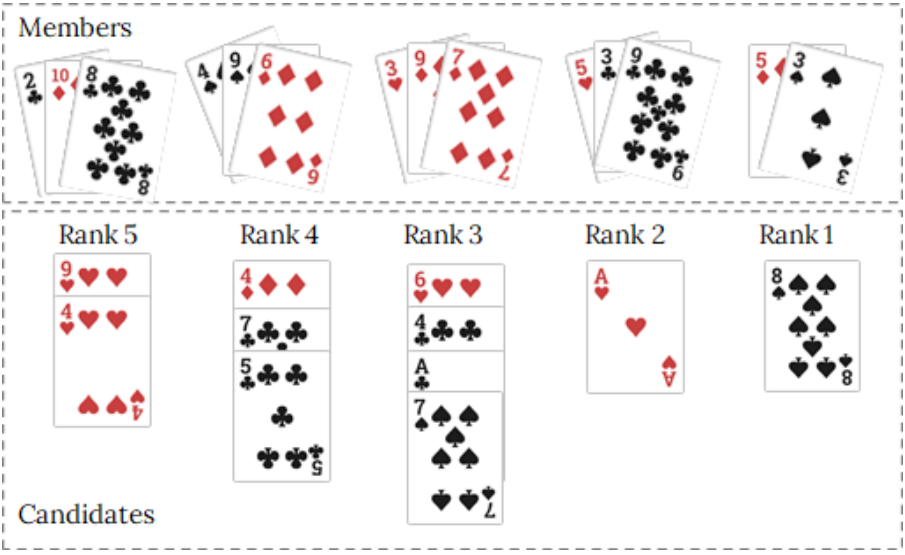
Each rank may only have three members maximum. At any time promotion causes you to have four members in a rank, choose and **sacrifice** one, leaving three. (Remove them from the game; they suffer a grisly fate). There is no such limit for candidates.

Game End

Continue promoting and infiltrating the higher mafia ranks. Once you've **promoted someone from rank 1** (to a "rank zero") you win the game! Your score is the total number of dead (sacrificed) cards,

the lower the better. If you **get stuck without a valid move**, or you give up, you lose the game.

The illustration below shows the endgame of the earlier example. It might be easier to follow with real cards.



- Promote 4♠ from rank 4 (R4) member to R3 candidate. Replace with 5♣ (9♠ + 6♦ = 15)
- Promote 5♣ from R4 member to R3 member, sacrificing 7♦. Replace with 4♦ (9♠ x 6♦ = 54)
- Promote 5♣ from R3 member to R2 candidate. Replace with 7♠ (9♦ x 3♥ = 27)
- Promote 3♣ from R2 member to R1 member. Replace with 5♣ (9♣ x 5♥ = 45)
- Promote 3♣ from R1. Replace with 8♠ (5♦ + 3♠ = 8). Win the game.

Hide and Seek

Complexity	●●○	*Weight*	●○○	*Footprint*	●●●
Strategy	●●○	*Tactics*	●●○	*Luck*	●●●

This game was developed from a question of whether a solo, replayable deduction game could exist. Deduction games, by their nature, require some kind of mechanism to validate whether your hypothesis is correct or not. Single player games are therefore either not replayable (Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective) or use tools such as the punched-out cards from John Kean's Black Sonata. The setup here simply begs you to not think too much. *It's stupid, but it works.*

Overview

You are Sheryl Holmes, terror of the first-grade playground. Known far and wide (at least three schools over!) for your observational skills, you have a reputation of being unstoppable at hide-and-seek.

In *Hide and Seek*, you will be placing cards around a grid of hidden playmates, trying to match their suit. You may reveal anyone's identity at any time, and you score if the cards you placed match the playmates' suit. The more playmates you find, the easier it is to narrow down the identities of the rest, so you must strike a delicate balance between guessing too early versus too late.

Components

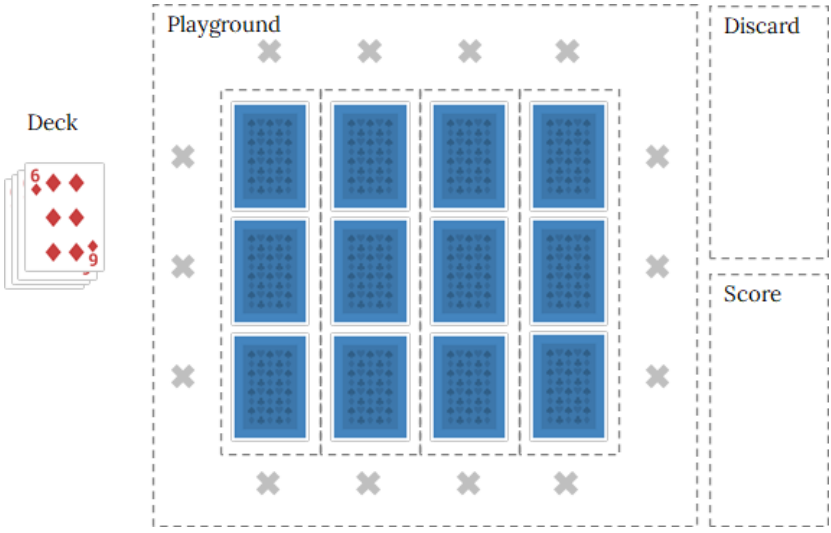
- A standard 52-card deck, no jokers

Setup

Separate the twelve face cards. Randomly deal them face up into four piles of three cards each, **with no pile having any two cards of the same rank or suit.** *Don't think too much.* (What I personally do is imagine four piles and deal the royals one at a time to the first pile that can accommodate it, scanning from left to right each time.) After this, flip the piles face down, shuffle each pile, and randomly exchange their positions. Wait a minute or so until everything disappears from short-term memory.

Spread each pile vertically on the table to end up with a 3x4 grid (**playground**) of cards. You should know that each column has a Jack, Queen, and King of a different suit, but you shouldn't know where any card is, or even be able to name two specific cards which are paired with each other in the same column.

Leave 14 spaces to place cards around the grid, a **discard pile,** and a **score pile**. Shuffle the rest of the 40-card **deck** and turn it face up. You should see the top card of the deck at all times, but no further.



Gameplay

The game is played over a series of turns until all twelve face cards (**playmates**) are face up. Each turn you may do exactly one of the following actions:

1. Place a guess
2. Reveal a face-down playmate
3. Withdraw a guess

Place a guess

Place the top card of the deck face up into an empty space at the playground's perimeter ("x"s in the diagram on the previous page). Each space may only hold one card.

Reveal a playmate

Choose a face-down playmate and turn it face up. Then move any previously placed guess on that playmate's row and column that matches the card's suit to the **score pile**. Leave guesses that don't match its suit behind; ignore empty spots. You can score a maximum of four cards per playmate you reveal.

At first you have little to no information to base your guesses on. But the more playmates you've revealed, the more you can narrow or deduce the identities of the remaining ones, leading to more and more efficient guesses.

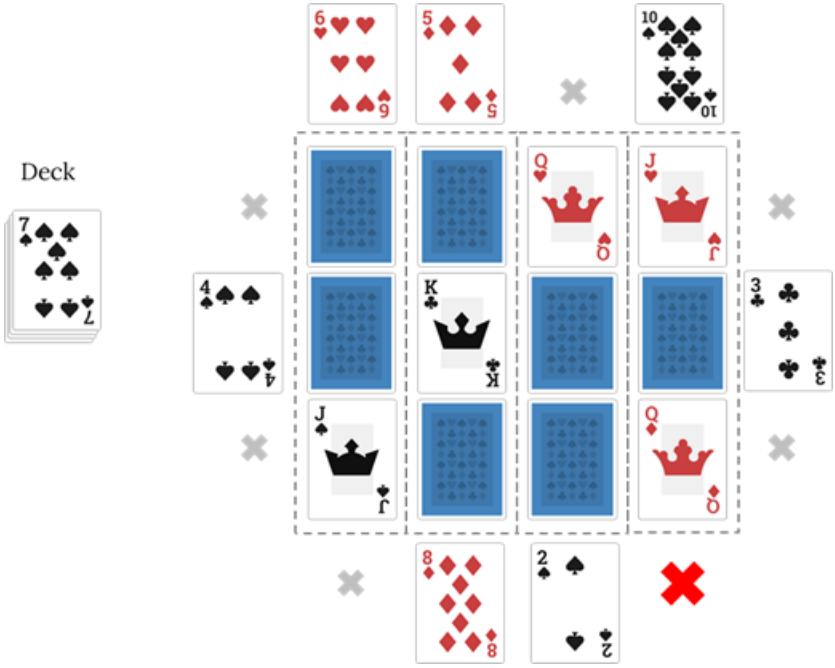
Withdraw a guess

Discard the top card of your deck to remove a previously placed guess of the **same suit** from around the playground. Discard both cards. This is the only way to free up a locked guess space.

Since wrong guesses cost cards to remove, the game becomes one of balance - Do I guess early, or wait for more info before placing cards? Will I be losing opportunities to score if I wait too long, or be clogging up spaces needlessly?

Example

In the example below, it might be a good idea to play the 7♠ on the location marked with a red "X" for your next turn. Can you deduce why?



Game End

The game ends after you decide to reveal and score the last face-down playmate. Your score is the number of cards in your score pile; to win, **you should have a score of 20 or more** (half the deck).

The Emissary

Complexity	●●●	*Weight*	●●○	*Footprint*	●●●
Strategy	●●○	*Tactics*	●●●	*Luck*	●●○

Trick-taking is one of the oldest mechanics used in card games. While there has been a renaissance of modern trick-taking games like Fox in the Forest and The Crew, finding a way to apply the mechanic to a solo game is a fun challenge in itself.

The game is inspired by the decktet game Gongor Whist, which itself was patterned from the standard-deck card game Oneonta Whist. This game also holds the core for the free print-and-play game For Northwood!, which swept top prizes in the 2021 BGG 54-card contest. Familiarity with trick-taking games will make understanding the following rules a breeze. Of course, prior knowledge isn't strictly necessary.

Components

- A standard 52-card deck, no jokers.

Setup

Separate the 9s and 10s (**kingdoms**) and place these eight cards face down in a row (they're just placeholders; the value doesn't matter). Separate the twelve face cards. Shuffle the Kings and Queens together **(rulers)** and deal them face up from left to right, one on top of each kingdom.

Set the four Jacks aside in a stack; these cards represent you and your **advisors**. Shuffle the remaining 32 cards into a facedown **deck**.

Objective

In *The Emissary*, you are a young noble sent by your father to gather support from eight neighboring kingdoms. In each kingdom, you engage in a series of debates with their ruler. Using the right amount of force and deference, you must win exactly a certain number of debates per kingdom. Succeed and you may call upon the ruler for future support; fail even once and lose the game.

Gameplay

The core game loop consists of 1) visiting a kingdom and 2) playing out a series of debates in that kingdom against its ruler.

Choosing the kingdom to visit

Draw eight cards from the deck. Review the cards in your hand, then choose which kingdom to visit. Place your stack of advisors under that kingdom to mark that you're visiting. You must visit each kingdom once and only once per game.

The position of that kingdom along the line determines how many debates you must **exactly** win to get support from that ruler. The leftmost royal needs one win, the next two, and so on. You must win eight debates in the rightmost kingdom.

The ruler's suit represents their favorite topic; for this kingdom, this suit **trumps** all other topics of conversation.

Once you have chosen a kingdom to visit, you now play out the series of debates.

The Debates

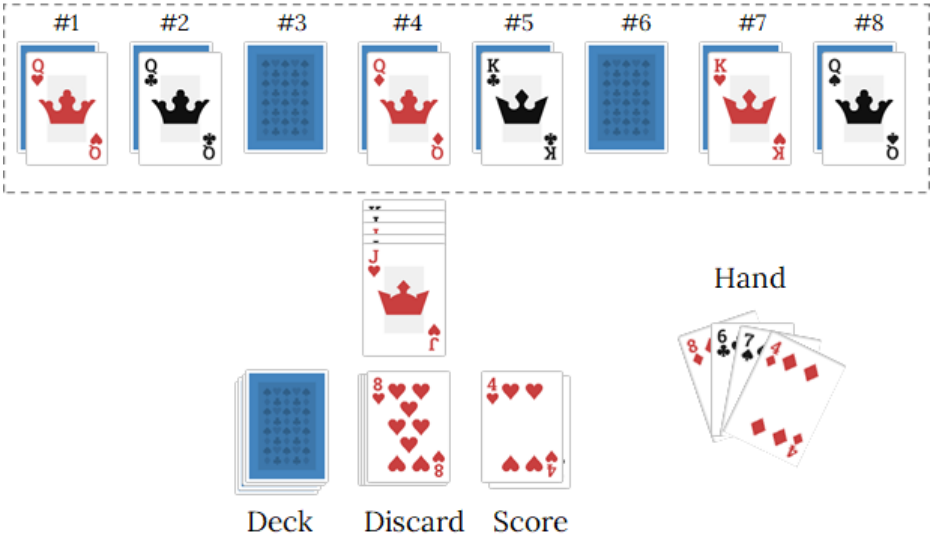
Place the top card of the draw deck face-up into a discard pile. The ruler is now talking about a topic - you must respond! Play a single card from your hand in response. Playing a card follows standard trick-taking rules:

- You must play a card in your hand with the same suit (topic) as the ruler's card if you are able.
- If and only if you cannot follow suit, you may play **any** card.

You win the debate if either:

- You played a higher card of the same topic (suit), or
- The debate card isn't of the ruler's favorite topic and you responded with any card of their favorite topic. *Way to go, you suckup.*

Aces are low and have value 1. If you win the debate, place the card you played in a separate scoring pile. If you lose the debate, instead place your card in the discard pile as well. Keep engaging in debates until you run out of cards in your hand. Once your hand is empty, the number of cards in your scoring pile shows how many debates you have won for that kingdom.



In the mid-game example above, I've already visited kingdoms #3 (K#3) and K#6, and am currently playing out debates in K#4. The ruler just played an 8♥. Since I have no hearts in my hand, I can respond with any card - 4♦ or 8♦ will win the debate, 6♣ or 7♠ will lose it. *Tough decision. Which one will give me the best chance to get exactly four wins?*

Advisor Abilities

To help control the number of debates you win, each of your Jack advisors has a special ability you can activate, once per kingdom. **Before the first debate or between any two debates,** you may choose to activate advisor abilities by turning a face-up Jack face down. (Activate it *before* the ruler card is dealt; you can't use abilities 'in response').

It's up to you whether you want to use abilities earlier when you have more cards in hand, toward the end, or a mix of both. Resolve each ability fully before deciding to use another one.

The ability depends on the suit of the card used:

- **Hearts** (diplomacy) - Discard all cards in your hand that match the current kingdom's trump suit.
- **Clubs** (military) - Draw a card for each club in your hand.
- **Spades** (politics) - Swap the current ruler with the ruler of an unvisited kingdom. (This changes the trump suit for all debates of this kingdom moving forward, and also for that other kingdom when you visit it). This ability does nothing when you're visiting the final kingdom.
- **Diamonds** (commerce) - Draw two cards, then choose and discard two cards from your hand.

Hearts and clubs abilities change the number of cards in your hand, and therefore change the total number of debates you need to play in a kingdom. The target win number remains the same, however.

If you run out of cards in the draw pile, shuffle the discard pile and continue using it.

When you run out of cards in your hand, if you have won exactly the number of debates equal to the kingdom's number, congratulations! Add that ruler face up beneath your advisors. In future kingdoms, you may also turn a supporting **king or queen face down** to use their suit's ability. The only difference is that unlike Jacks whose abilities you can use once per kingdom, kings and queens are **one-time-use** abilities. They're still very useful in a pinch, though.

Shuffle all the cards in the discard, scoring pile, and draw deck together. Turn all spent Jacks back face up (not kings and queens), draw eight new cards, and choose the next kingdom to visit.

Ending the game

Continue visiting the kingdoms one by one, convincing (and leveraging) allies as needed. If you end any kingdom without winning the exact number of debates needed, you **lose the game**.

Note that the central kingdoms are slightly easier, with kingdom 1 and 8 being very hard to win. Grab support before attempting these, and approach them when you're dealt a favorable hand!

If you **get support from all eight kingdoms**, you win the game. Whether you win or lose, your score is the number of kingdoms won plus the number of supporting kings/queens with unused abilities, for a perfect score of 8+8=16 points.

Afterword

Thanks to everyone who's reading this! The best way to show support is by sharing this document, giving feedback to the boardgamegeek thread or my email, or if you really want to, buy me a coffee.

More Cool Links

- I have a geeklist where I play and review other really cool solitaire games playable with a standard deck.
- Femtitva by Scott Huntington and the Cheapass Poker Suite by James Ernest are also free ebooks that have (multiplayer) games to play with a standard card deck.
- If you like card games in general, the Everdeck is my other thing - it's a special multi-suited deck of cards which can be mishmashed to play a whole bunch of modern card games. It's designed with a lot of math-y combinatorial goodness.
- The Emissary was the basis for the free print and play game For Northwood!, where it won the 2021 BGG 54-card contest as well as swept several awards.

Credits

- Thanks to all proofreaders and supporters!
- Cover design image taken from clipart-library, personal use license
- Card images from the wonderful Kenney the "Asset Jesus" (CC0 1.0)

About the Author / Contact

efofecks@gmail.com
Boardgamegeek; Wordpress