



# Sad Robot

A story game about the human diaspora

Marcus Shepherd



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Blue Golem Games, Leeds, United Kingdom

[blue-golem-games.itch.io](http://blue-golem-games.itch.io)

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# Introduction

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## What is this?

This is a collaborative story game about automated broadcasts between colonies in the human diaspora.

## What you'll need

You'll need at two players and at most four players, and several hours to play the game.

Each player will need four six-sided dice, to keep track of attributes that change a lot. You'll also need an additional four six-sided dice for the communal pool.

You will also need a standard deck of playing cards, with the joker cards removed.

It can be useful to have an index card and something with which to write, as well as a copy of the rules to hand.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to specifically thank *Dominic*, *Howalt* and *Rus* of the **Tavern Keeper** community for their input, critique and early playtesting.

The game takes its name, and to some extents its theme, from the song *Sad Robot* by the band Pornophonique, from the album *8-bit Lagerfeuer*. Their music is available under a Creative Commons license from [Jamendo.com](https://www.jamendo.com).

# Setting Up



Each player is a robot sent to observe, record and report on the development of a colony in the human diaspora. Each player gives their robot a name, and possibly a function.

Roll four six-sided dice, and assign the scores to the Stability factors: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL and ENVIRONMENTAL. High indicates more stability, and low less stability on that factor. Each player gives their colony a name, and describes their colony in roughly these terms.

You'll need to remove several face cards (**J, Q & K**) depending on the number of players:

**Two players** Remove **J♥, Q♥, K♥, J♠, Q♠** and **K♠**;

**Three players** Remove **J♠, Q♠** and **K♠**;

**Four players** Don't remove any face cards.

Each player draws four cards from the remainder; this is the initial hand limit.

## Stability Factors

The Stability factors indicate the relative ability of a colony to deal with problems from internal and external sources of various topics (SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL and ENVIRONMENTAL). They range from 1–6:

**1** At the brink of collapse

**2** Poor stability

**3** Below average

**4** Above average

**5** Good stability

**6** Very good stability

Note that by these definitions, most “Western” nations would be in “good” or “very good” stability; failed or rogue states tend to fall into category 1, and everything else is somewhere in between. At the time of writing, Earth is at very good environmental stability.

The absence of a Stability factor indicates either that colonists can no longer work to maintain that stability, or that that particular factor dominates their lives (particularly true of environmental stability). This becomes fairly defining for the narrative of a colony.

## Social

- Population size, demographics & diversity
- Poverty, class & underclass
- Division of labour, care & leisure
- Refugees, migrants & internal displacement
- Disenfranchisement, discrimination & segregation

## Political

- Nepotism, bribery & corruption
- Public services, civil service & governance
- Jurisprudence, security & human rights
- Representation, accountability & oversight
- War, external influence & espionage

## Economic

- Monetary, trade & barter systems
- Tangible, intangible & virtual resources
- Scarcity, abundance & wastage
- Value, interest & inflation
- White, grey & black markets

## Environmental

- Climate, weather & space weather
- Planet, moons & solar system
- Native flora, fauna & aliens
- Geology, oceanography & tectonics
- Stasis, upheaval & decline

# Playing the Game



Play rotates anti-clockwise around the players. If you're playing in a format where anti-clockwise doesn't make sense, go in reverse alphabetical order.

On your turn, play a card from your hand. Each card represents a major event from a generation of the colony. Once drawn, you narrate what has happened to your colony in the form of an automated missive from a surveillance robot.

On an **A** or **2**, you may increase one Stability by 2, corresponding to the suit of the card (♥ — SOCIAL; ♦ — ECONOMIC; ♣ — POLITICAL; ♠ — ENVIRONMENTAL). No Stability may be higher than 6. This is a leap forward: a great peace, a bountiful harvest, increased freedoms, a scientific breakthrough.

On a **3–6**, you may increase the corresponding Stability by 2, but you must decrease another Stability by 1. No Stability may be higher than 6. You cannot decrease a Stability below 1 in this way. This is a success at cost: a tenuous peace, a progressive policy, a controversial science, political progress.

On a **7–10**, decrease the corresponding Stability by 1. You cannot decrease a Stability below 1 in this way. This is an issue which would not existentially threaten a society: a conflict, lessening of freedoms, a disease outbreak, the failing of technology.

On a **J**, **Q** or **K**, you must sacrifice any Stability points equal to the following schema: **J** — 2 points; **Q** — 5 points; **K** — 10 points. These cannot correspond to the suit. This is a catastrophe which can be damaging to a society, and the sacrifice is the loss of stability to get through it. The point value represents the impact of this Catastrophe. You may sacrifice an entire Stability factor to remove an issue, regardless of value, but this factor cannot be used again — you will not be able to play cards corresponding to its suit.

You can't play a card if it would take a Stability above 6 or below 1, unless the appropriate common pool is available. If you cannot play any card, you must discard a card and draw another, repeating until you can play.

Your maximum hand size is equal to the number of Stability factors which you still have. At the end of your turn, if you have fewer cards than your hand size, draw a card (unless there are none left).

## Common Pools

If at least two players have the same Stability factor (i.e. at least two players have not yet sacrificed a Stability factor to withstand disaster), you may elect to add points to the corresponding collective Stability,

which is the common pool of CULTURE (♥, SOCIAL), TRADE (♦, ECONOMIC), DIPLOMACY (♣, POLITICAL) and TECHNOLOGY (♠, ENVIRONMENTAL). This can be 1 point to you and 1 point to the common pool, or zero points to you and 2 points to the common pool.

If you cannot sustain a catastrophe, in part or in full, you may request for assistance from other colonies, again as a missive. They can provide this in the form of decreasing the collective pool. The other robots send their replies detailing what help is being sent, and how it will help.

## Colony Failure

A colony fails if it cannot sustain a catastrophe through the decrease or sacrifice of Stability. The robot may still send missives on their turn, detailing how the world has changed since the colony failed.

## Ending Play

The game ends when all cards have been played, or all colonies have failed.

The robots send a valedictorian missive, and fade into the night.



# Sad Robot

This is a collaborative shortform story game for 2–4 players. Each player is a robot sent to observe, record and report on the fortunes and misfortunes of a single colony in the human diaspora. Each turn is an automated missive from that robot to its colleagues.

You'll need several six-sided dice and a regular deck of playing cards, with the jokers removed.