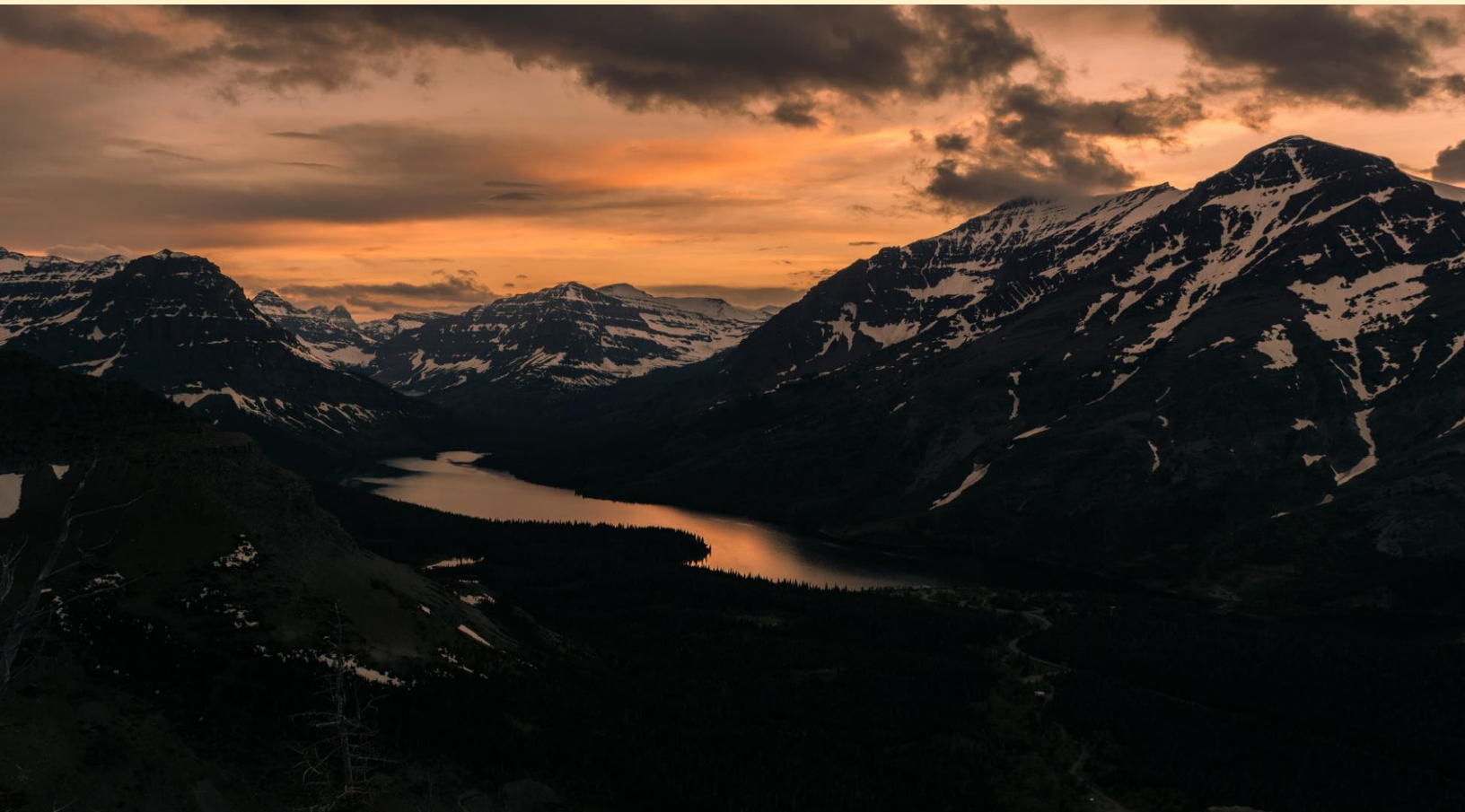




Dream At High Noon

By Amr Ammourazz



Billy examines the sizeable pot in the middle of the table and smiles internally. A flush might not have been the best hand out there, but the community cards were all over, a 2 of spades, a 7 of spades, a king of hearts, and a queen of spades, no pairs or straight-flush in sight; no way for Manuel to have a better hand. They had to be bluffing.

A quick rap, Manuel finally checks. Their body tense, leaning across the table apprehensively.

Billy flops a card, then flips over the river, a second 7. He smiles, registering the quick frown on Manuel's otherwise perfectly stoic face.

“All in.”

Billy confidently slides his money over, then looks challengingly at Manuel. They had to fold at this point.

Manuel taps their hand against the table a few times, sighs, and responds in kind, sliding all their money forward.

Their funeral. Billy smiles confidently, and flips his hand, an ace and king of spades. He doesn't point out the hand, just lets the cards speak for themselves. “So I guess I'll be taking that.”

Manuel's hand is on top of the pile, stopping him. “Not so fast.” Manuel flips their cards over, a 2 and a 7, the worst starting hand, and the ticket to Manuel's new life.

Billy's mouth drops open, stunned in absolute shock. Manuel, all tension gone, leans back confidently. “Now, I believe all these winnings are mine, though I'd be willing to let you keep your portion, provided we can come to an arrangement.”

We all know the scene, a group of Cowpokes gathered around a poker table, putting more than just money on the line. Their hopes, futures, burdens, and even their lives are often in the pot. A mix of fate and skill will determine what their next chapter will be... if they even have one. But honestly? Despite the risks, at least they can say they tried; that they put it all on the line for a dream of a better life. And now, dear reader, it's our turn to do the same. Will you play your cards right, even when fate deals you a bad hand, or will they come tumbling down around you? Will High Noon see your dream come true, or will this be your final dawn?

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Introduction

Howdy Partner! Seems you've found yourself in my neck of the woods and want to know what's going on. Don't worry, I'll break everything down for you. And if you're already familiar with all the basics, skip on ahead!

What is Dream At High Noon?

Dream At High Noon is a Texas Hold 'Em based Cowpoke Roleplaying Game, and part of the Card DREAM series of games. It uses the historical and cultural connections between this Poker Game and the Cowpoke genre to present a set of mechanics that are atmospherically reminiscent of the genre's tropes. It requires no actual knowledge of how to play Texas Hold 'Em, but rather re-imagines most of the mechanics and terminology from the game to fit a storytelling context!

What's a Roleplaying Game?

A roleplaying game, or RPG, is a framework for collaborative storytelling. It uses a specific set of mechanics to facilitate telling a story as a group, where no-one knows the ending ahead of time. Dream At High Noon uses a traditional breakdown of one facilitator, called The Dealer, and up to five Gamblers. The Gamblers will each play a specific cowpoke, who would be the protagonists if this was a TV show. The Dealer is in charge of pushing the story forward by responding to the actions that the cowpokes take, giving voice to every other person in the world (Non-Gambler Characters or NGCs), and helping adjudicate the rules as they come up.

What do I need to play Dream At High Noon?

This rulebook, at least one standard deck of playing cards with Jokers, though ideally two, a set of poker chips or replacement tokens, and something to write character info on. Print-outs of the reference and character sheets available online are useful as they provide helpful templates for organizing information! You also need between 1 to 5 other friends to play with. That's it!

How do I use this book?

This book is divided 6 sections. The Getting Started and Narrative Control tools gives you everything you need to play the game. The Peripheral Mechanics explain how to run a game of Poker and a Showdown, as well as spend chips. Long-Term Play gives you all the tools to take this in a campaign, and so you only need it if you plan on doing that. Talents are to be referenced during character creation, and Dealing the Cards is for whoever plays The Dealer.

Getting Started

Still with me partner? Excellent. I'm gonna walk you through everything you need to know.

Navigating the Edge of the World

A roleplaying game is about telling a story, so the majority of the game takes place as a conversation. Dream At High Noon encourages every player around the table to contribute to this in some way. While it's The Dealer's job to manage the game and make sure things move along in a consistent manner, everyone else can describe or even give voice to NGCs, help create set pieces, offer potential tensions or drama, or throw whatever ideas they want at the story. As a Gambler, don't be afraid to speak up if you think of something cool that's separate from the specifics of your cowpoke, and as The Dealer, your job is to actively encourage them to share.

Slipping on the Hat

However, one of the main responsibilities of each Gambler is to properly represent your cowpoke, and there are two main ways to do this: Out of Character and In Character. Out of Character is a natural continuation of the conversation: You describe who they are, what they do, and give overviews on what they say. In Character is taking the conversation into the first person: describing things from their perspective, giving us insight into their thoughts, and saying their words as them. In character can be a lot more powerful of a mindset for telling a story, but if you're ever unsure exactly how to phrase something don't be afraid to slip Out of Character for a second to explain what you're trying to convey to make sure everyone's on the same page.

Creating a Crew

While you can tell any Cowpoke story you'd like with this system, for the most part, it's helpful to assume that the group knows one another and has been working together as a crew long enough to have a purpose. To aid with this, every Gambler should draw a card from the deck and use the chart in Appendix A to add details about your group, from past accomplishments to failures, or whatever else they feel is relevant to add. Then, The Dealer draws a card from the deck and references the chart in Appendix A to determine the crew's Goal, with input from The Gamblers. Once that's written down, you're ready to draft your very own cowpoke.

Drafting a Cowpoke

To create your very own cowpoke: First, get your character sheet. This can be a blank index card or a printed out sheet. Next, take a deck and separate it into four piles by suit. Shuffle those, and deal 1 card from each suit to every Gambler. These cards determine your talents (More on those on Page 44). Once you've written down your talents, write down a name, pronouns, and some general descriptions of your appearance. Next, choose 2 approaches that you're a Master of, and 1 that you're an Amateur in, and 1 that you're Skilled in. Finally, draw a card and use the table in Appendix A to determine your personal goal. Once you've got all that, The Dealer should pass out 10 poker chips to each player, then you're good to introduce your cowpoke to the group!

Relationships and History

To help get a roleplaying dynamic going, every pair of characters should draw one card between them, and use the chart in Appendix A to create a relationship with one another. This will help further flesh out the cowpokes, as well as the history and dynamic of the group, and ways you might have known each other before operating as a single posse, or ways you've come to know each other since. Once that's done, you're ready to start playing!

A Note on Racism, Homophobia, and other Discrimination

It's no secret that blatant bigotry exists within the time period. But, that's not what this game is about, so forget all that. I mean it. No-one needs your best impression of what a racist cowboy would be, especially since most of those racial sentiments are still alive and causing harm today. If you want your table to be welcoming to marginalized folk, then bigotry should have no place in your game, even if it's just "fictional." Populate your world with folks of diverse ethnicities as well as sexual and gender orientation. Gamblers: Make your own Cowpokes as diverse as possible, don't be scared. Most cowpokes weren't white anyways, so don't let the portrayal of the Cowpoke genre scare you off from playing one, or from not making them a straight man.

Note: If your entire group agrees and consents together to tell a story exploring bigotry, you can do that. However, to make sure everyone is comfortable at all points, you should use all the tools provided in the Safeties On section on Page 11.

Approaching Problems

Whenever you tackle a problem, make a check, or enter a conflict, you will choose the approach that's most in line with how you're acting in the situation, based on how you've described it narratively. Dream At High Noon has four approaches, detailed below:

Shootin'

The world isn't a safe place, so it's often best to make it clear where you stand. Shootin's about being direct, whether approaching a problem with skill, charm, grace, or violence, you're not subtle about it. If you're being aggressive, getting up in someone's face, setting clear stakes or boundaries, or otherwise being straight-forward in your approach, you're shootin' for success.

Dynamite

Who needs a delicate touch when you can take out the problem wholesale? Dynamite is about being loud, fast, and leaving a mark. Use this approach when you take brute force approaches to problems rather than leveraging skill or precision, when you don't mind causing collateral damage or dealing with fallout, when you act without warning or hesitation, or rely on a final solution to eliminate a problem.

Ridin'

True cowpokes know that the most important skill to survive the job is persistence. Ridin' is about sticking it through, buckling up, and doubling down on your goals. This is the approach for showing grit, executing long term plans, being persistent, toughing out resistance, or otherwise refusing to buckle in the face of pressure.

Slick

Bluffing is the only thing you need when playing poker, and is life any different than a long game of poker? Slick is about being subtle and keeping your cards close to the chest no matter the scenario. Use this approach for cunning solutions, being deceitful, outwitting your opposition, or otherwise applying a more delicate touch to a problem.

Poker Chips

One of the core mechanics of this game is the use of poker chips. If you don't have access to any, find something else you can use as a token. Whether it's spare dice or paper clips, whatever you have on hand will do! You start with 10 chips and they will constantly change hands. They should be changing hands frequently throughout the course of the game, but your goal is to never run out. Whatever chips don't belong to a Gambler stay with The Dealer in the bank.

At the start of each Story, once the main narrative is revealed in character, The Dealer will place an appropriately sized pile of chips to the side to form the Story Pot. This pool will increase in size over the course of the Story, and be divided up amongst The Gamblers upon completion of the Story. More details on types of Story, ways to calculate the story pot, and Story generation can be found in the Section on Stories on Page 23.

In universe, chips serve as a representation of your position. They are a mix of wealth, resources, contacts, and stability. The more you have, the better position you're in, and you can spend them to gain access to any of these things whenever you want something that would require a meaningful amount of resources to gain access to. For regular expenses (food, simple ammo, etc.), assume you have enough on hand to cover whatever you need; spending chips should only come into play for something impactful to the narrative (and your wallet). You can spend them like this by paying them directly to the bank (More on that on page 32).

Their other use is as a meta currency. You can use them in a variety of ways to manipulate the narrative or increase your odds of success on a check while also upping the stakes, such as when you accept a job. At any point during a job, a player can place a chip into the Story Pot to state a narrative fact. This can be having an item available, a flashback that establishes a fact about the situation, or whatever else you can come up with. If it's a big enough concession, The Dealer can ask for a second chip that is removed to the bank, though this should be done sparingly. After, any player can call by throwing one chip into the Story Pot to add an extra twist to the detail.

Safeties On

Let's make something clear if it isn't already: the point of the game is to have fun, whatever that means to you and your group. As a result, the story you tell should be one that's enjoyed by everyone involved, and if it ever isn't, something needs to change. The best way to ensure that is to extend the conversation before, during, and after sessions to include check-ins with people to see if they're having fun and feeling comfortable with everything that's happened. However, that's not always the easiest, so the game has some built in ways to keep that happening. On top of those, I highly recommend the following tools as a way to facilitate a safe environment.

The X-Card

The X-Card is a piece of paper you have on your table that a player can Hold up, tap, or otherwise signal too at any point if they're not feeling comfortable with the going-ons. There should be one within easy reach of every player. One simple way to implement it is to use the Jokers from your character creation deck as X cards. For voice only online games, you can use an X or Emoji typed in chat instead. A player can also declare pause or signal their discontent in an alternative verbal or visual means if that's easier. When the X-Card is invoked, we stop, then ask them to tell us what caused it. This can be something that isn't fun or interesting to explore, something that causes personal discomfort, or just pre-emptive to prevent going down a path they want to avoid. Don't be afraid to use it if something is bothering you, even something as simple as a name that has negative connotations to you. The most important rule is that no-one can ever ask why. We simply accept the X, rewrite the fiction, and move forward. This tool was designed by John Stavropoulos, and you can find more about it here: <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>

Stars and Wishes

At the end of each session, the Dealer should ask every Gambler for one Star and one Wish. A Star is something they liked about the session, which could have been introduced by another Gambler or by The Dealer. This is a good way to signpost the type of content they enjoy and want to continue seeing. A Wish is something that is yet to occur that they want to see more of, and could be asking buy-in from the other Gamblers or set-up from the Dealer. Finally, The Dealer should give their own set of Stars and Wishes, as their comfort matters too. This combination of tools allows us to tailor the game experience to the expectations of the table.

The Confidence to Say No

This one's a little weird, and less a tool and more me giving you permission. Sometimes, people make suggestions that you find uninteresting to a story. The point of collaborative storytelling is to build up on the ideas and fiction presented by others, but if someone says something, especially about your character that goes in a direction you don't want, stand up for yourself, because your fun matters too. This goes for the Dealer too, sometimes a check might be asked for at a time where failure is uninteresting to the narrative. Don't be afraid to vocalize things like that, and point out that this story isn't interesting if things go wrong here. Remember: The rules are there to make sure everyone has fun, not get in the way. If you wanna do something not in the rules and the group's cool with it, DO IT!

Open Door Policy

The Saloon Doors never lock, and neither do the (metaphorical) ones to your table. If at any point, someone needs to leave the table, they can just get up and go. This can be for quick things like bathroom and water breaks, to straight up leaving the game session. This is very important for con games where people might not be comfortable asking for a break or leaving if made uncomfortable, but is just as important with groups you know. Maybe something unrelated comes up mid session and someone needs to leave or someone's just not feeling it, and that's ok. This emphasizes that the player comfort comes before the game and helps people feel safe to bring up concerns or otherwise take care of themselves as needed. This was designed by Erik Fatland, and you can find more about it here: <http://leavingmundania.com/2014/02/27/primer-safety-in-roleplaying-games/>

The Cowboy Hat Stays on During Play

Physical props can be a great prop both for building atmosphere and signaling comfort. If you have access and the inclination, gathering some hats, sheriff badges, or other appropriate props and handing one out to each player is a great way to build a mood. This also serves a second purpose: a player can put on a prop to signal either being in character or involved with a scene, and take it off when needing to talk out of character or withdraw quietly from gameplay for a moment. Once they slip the prop back on, it's an effortless way to signal that they're ready to be reincluded in play as soon as is possible. This can be replicated in a voice game by including an Emoji or phrase in your screenname that is easily visible to all.

Playing a hand

Sometimes, while telling stories like this, situations will come up where the most interesting outcome is uncertain, where both failure and success can advance the story. That's where the checks come in. Checks occur by playing out an altered version of a poker hand, with the goal of trying to create a good enough hand to succeed (keeping in mind that Jokers are wild). If you're not familiar with poker hands, that's ok! Here's a quick breakdown, in order of worst to best:

1. Pair: Any simple two of a kind.
2. Two Pair: Two separate two pairs. Your highest pair is compared first, then the next set.
3. Three of a Kind: Three cards of any one number.
4. Straight: Any 5 sequential numbers. The highest card is used as the tie-breaker, then the second highest, etc.
5. Flush: Any 5 non-sequential cards of the same suit. Once again, it goes to the highest card in ties, then the second highest, and so forth.
6. Full House: A three of a kind and a pair combo. Ranked first by the triplet then the pair.
7. Four of a Kind: All four cards of one rank.
8. Straight Flush: Any 5 sequential cards of the same suit.
9. Royal Flush: The best possible hand, an Ace, King, Queen, Jack, and 10 of the same suit.

A card in a higher tier will always beat a hand in a tier below it (this means that a Straight Flush beats out every other hand in the game besides a Royal Flush).

When comparing two hands within the same tier, highest card (with Ace usually being highest and 2 lowest) wins. If it's the same value and it isn't pairs, you then look at suit, which rank Diamonds, Clubs, Hearts, then Spades from lowest to highest. If you have no other hand, you default to comparing the highest card in your hands.

In cases of identical pairs, you defer to the remaining card for highest card as the comparator. This should only be used in circumstances where all the numerical values are identical.

Upgrading or Downgrading a hand X times shifts the final tier of the hand up or down X times, meaning upgrading a pair once treats it as a two pair, etc.

Raising

The other mechanic that comes into play during a check is raising. When you Raise, you spend poker chips to up the tension on a check in hopes of a better result. This has a mechanical benefit, but you should also explain what it means narratively. Below are the values for raising.

- 1 chip: Draw a Card.
- 2 Chip: Convert a Card into a different card for this play before cards are revealed.
- 3 Chips: Upgrade or downgrade a hand.

Quick Checks

If a moment of uncertainty comes up that doesn't warrant entering a full structured conflict, you use a quick check. This can be something like trying to pick-pocket someone as you pass them on the street, pushing the bartender for information, or sealing a deal. Anytime a Gambler engages in a quick check, they put chips on the line. Beyond that, if a gambler Raises during this check, they add the appropriate number of chips to their wager for the check, and if they succeed, they can keep all wagered chips. This is usually 1 Chip, but can be more if the risk is high enough. These quick checks fall under two categories: Static Difficulty and Opposed Checks.

Static Difficulty

If you know how hard a task is going to be and there isn't much variance to it, you want to use a Static Difficulty. The Dealer will assign a Target Chip Count (TCC) to meet. After that is determined, decide which approach fits how you've been acting, then draw 6 cards if you're an Amateur, 7 if you're Skilled, and 8 if you're a Master. You then try to use those cards to make a better poker hand than the difficulty. The tier of your final hand is the number of chips it is worth. For example, a Straight is worth 4 chips. You can choose to spend chips from your supply to the Story Pot to cover the difference, spending a maximum of 1 as an Amateur, 2 as Skilled, and 3 as a Master. Any chips above the difficulty can be spent as if you had raised for narrative advantages to boost the success. If you don't meet the difficulty, you either fail, or some other complication occurs that turns your success on its head. Furthermore, your wagered chips go to the Story Pot, forfeiting them for now with a chance to reclaim the later.

Opposed Checks

Not all things are straightforward though. Often times, what you're trying to do may be actively opposed by another force, or have an otherwise variable difficulty. In that case, an Opposed Check is in order. Both players involved, whether two Gamblers or a Gambler and The Dealer, determine what approach they're taking. Then, you draw cards: 3 for an Amateur approach, 4 for a Skilled approach, and 5 for a Master approach. Finally, The Dealer flips over 3 community cards. Using those and their in hand cards, each party involved in the check tries to make the best hand possible. The winner succeeds at the task and claims all the wagered chips.

Helping Hand

Sometimes, things might not be looking good after a Gambler draws a hand, and they need someone to bail them out. If you want to help a fellow cowpoke out and swoop in with the assist, first, describe how it is you do this in the fiction. Then, place at least one chip as wager. If you are helping out with a Skilled approach, you can place up to 2, and as a Master you can wager up to 3. The Gambler attempting the check can spend the chips you wager on the effects of the raise action as if they had raised the chips themselves. If they ultimately succeed, you get to keep your wager, but earn nothing extra. If they fail, your wager also ends up in the same location with theirs.

Quick Check: Flow of Play

- 1) Players around the table have a conversation outside of a structured scene.
- 2) A moment comes up in the narrative with some uncertainty.
 - a) If the group decides on the most interesting outcome, they execute that.
 - b) If all outcomes have the potential to drive the story, a check is needed.
- 3) The group examines the situation to determine how escalated it is.
 - a) If it is a larger uncertainty that benefits from structure, it becomes a conflict.
 - b) If the uncertainty is contained to this moment, a Quick Check is needed.
- 4) The Dealer determines what kind of check it is.
 - a) If there is no variance, it is a Static Difficulty.
 - b) If there is an active opposition, it is an Opposed Check.
- 5) The Gambler places their wager, chooses an approach, and draws their cards.
 - a) For Static Difficulty, they draw 6/7/8 for Amateur/Skilled/Master.
 - b) For Opposed Check, they draw 2/3/4 for Amateur/Skilled/Master.
- 6) The Dealer sets up the difficulty.
 - a) For Static, they choose a Target Chip Count.
 - b) For Opposed, they play three community cards and draw an appropriate hand.
- 7) Raises and talents are used to modify the check before reveal.
- 8) Hands are played and then evaluated, with the winner succeeding and claiming the wager.
 - a) For Static Difficulty, chips can be spent to boost their chip count to meet or exceed the difficulty, spending up to 1/2/3 for Amateur/Skilled/Master.
- 9) The Deck is shuffled again and the conversation continues.

Structured Conflict

Sometimes, a scene has many, uncertain, moving parts to it. In this situation, a greater structure is needed, which is provided with the following framework.

Setting the Stakes

The first step is to set the stakes. Every Gambler involved in the scene puts a certain amount of chips into the pile. This is called the Ante, and is usually only 1 chip, but for high-tension situations can go up to 3 or further. The Dealer then puts in a number of chips based on the threat level (more about that on Page 58). Then, the two people most responsible for causing this conflict must pay the Big and Little Blind to the pile, which are usually 2 and 1 chips respectively, but again can be more (though the Little Blind is always 1 chip less than the Big Blind). This pile of chips forms the Betting Pot for the conflict.

Next, each Gambler involved declares the approach they're taking in this conflict. Besides the usual narrative meaning, they also have mechanical effects explained on Page 21. Finally, the Dealer flips over a card into the community pool, adding an extra one for each threat level. Once that's done, you're ready to start. First round Initiative begins with the person who paid the Big Blind (and often, if one is uncertain as to who the Big vs Little Blind should be, the person who would take the first/ instigating action in a conflict is a good indicator). Play progresses around the table in a simple (e.g. Clockwise) order. Going down a list of names works for online play.

Playing a Round

At the start of every round, Gamblers are dealt a number of cards based on their chosen approach. Then, going through the initiative order, every character takes a turn. A turn consists of a Main Action, a Manoeuvre, and as many free actions as they'd like to take. A round keeps going until every person has checked once in the round, at which point everyone shuffles their remaining cards back into the deck, a new card is revealed into the community pool, and everyone is dealt new hands once more. Finally, everyone reduces the reload on their spent talents by 1. The person after the character who checked last goes first.

Actions in Conflict

Main Actions

There are 4 Main Actions someone can take during their turn. They are:

1. **Play:** When you want to make a check, declare what it is you're trying to do and set it up in the narrative. This will involve you playing *at least* one card from your hand, though you may play as many as you'd like. If this doesn't have a specific target, The Dealer assigns a static difficulty, and you must try to match or beat it, much like with a static quick check. If it targets a character, they have 3 options available to them:
 - 1) They can choose to not oppose it.
 - 2) They can choose to fight back if in the right approach.
 - 3) They can choose to avoid it or act defensively, if in the right approach.

If they choose not to oppose it, their defence is a specific target based on circumstance, like cover in a combat, or reputation in a social situation. No defence is a TCC of 1. Light cover or defence should give a TCC of 2 or 3. Higher cover and further modifiers can go up to 4 or beyond. This check is then resolved according to the rules for Static Difficulty checks.

If they choose to fight back, they forfeit their Main Action on their upcoming turn, and then use only their held cards and the community cards to create a hand to oppose your check. The character who wins gets their attack off first, but if the other character survives and played a hand that could beat the targets static defence, they'll get their attack off too. In the case of a tie, both shots hit simultaneously. Defending this way does not count towards Play total for the round.

If they choose to defend, they don't forfeit their action, but instead use held and community cards to create a difficulty to oppose you, which you must play a hand higher than to hit. However, if you miss, they don't get an attack off.

2. **Hold:** You can place any cards from your hand face down to be held by you between rounds, up to the total number of cards your approach allows you to Hold. If you already had held cards, you can swap them into your hands when you place new ones. Held cards can be used as part of any play action, but are also the only cards you can use defensively.

3. **Check:** Pass your Main Action for the turn. The round ends when everyone does this at least once. If you checked last turn and the initiative returns to you in the same round, discard as many cards as you'd like, then draw back up to full.
4. **Fold:** Withdraw from the conflict. You forfeit all earnings from the Betting Pot, but make an immediate exit from the conflict on your own terms without further complication.

Manoeuvres

There are 3 main Manoeuvres you can take:

1. **Move:** This is simply repositioning yourself in the battle field. While there's no specific ranges or range bands, your weapons are only effective if they make sense to be, so this is your chance to position yourself to take advantage of them (or hide from your opponents).
2. **Swap your Weapon:** If you want to switch between which weapons you're using mid combat, you can spend your Manoeuvre to do so.
3. **Interact with the Environment:** Simple things like pulling levers, swinging a door shut for cover, or pushing a barrel over that might not require a check but cause meaningful changes to the battlefield would take a Manoeuvre.

Free Actions

Besides conversing in and out of character, there are 2 main Free Actions you can take:

1. **Use a Talent:** You can use any of your talents when applicable, using as many talents as are available to you in a round in one go.
2. **Raise:** You can Raise like you would in a quick check, but all the chips go to the Betting Pot instead of the wager for that check. Additionally, if you Raise for narrative effects or to amp up the stakes during conflict, any and all other player can call for half your chips, rounded down to a minimum of 1, to add an extra twist. These chips also get placed in the Betting Pot for the conflict.

End of Conflict

Conflict ends when either every participant on one side Folds or is eliminated from the scene. Once that's done, any collateral costs are subtracted from the Betting Pot, and the remainder is divided up amongst the winners. While The Dealer hands back the winnings to The Gamblers, or when the final Gambler folds, you should take this as a chance to check in. Ask each Gambler both how they and their Cowpoke are feeling, and if there are any changes or retcons that need to be made at this point. Afterwards, play resumes with the conversation.

Conflict: Flow of Play

- 1) Once The Group and The Dealer decide this is a conflict, the main instigators are deemed the Big and Little Blind. Everyone places the appropriate Ante into the Betting Pot..
- 2) Every gambler declares their approach for the conflict, and the Big Blind starts initiative. Initiative progresses around the table in a set order (clockwise, through a list, etc.).
- 3) Every player draws a full hand based on their approach.
- 4) Each turn, a player can take a Main Action, a Manoeuvre, and infinite free actions.
 - a) Main Actions are: Play, Hold, Check, and Fold.
 - b) Manoeuvres are: Move, Swap a Weapon, and Interact with the Environment.
 - c) Free Actions are: Use a Talent and Raise.
- 5) If every character has checked this round, move to step 6. If only one side in the conflict remains, move to step 7. Otherwise, pass initiative forward and repeat step 4.
- 6) Players discard non-held cards. The Dealer shuffles the deck, adds one community card, and reload is reduced, then return to step 3, continuing initiative where it was left off.
- 7) Return all cards to the deck and shuffle. The Betting Pot is divided amongst the winners:
 - a) If The Gamblers won, it is divided equally amongst them. If they have Dealer controller Allies, they would get an appropriate share.
 - b) If The Gamblers lost, The Dealer decides how much is salvageable and places it into the Story Pot, returning the rest to the bank.
- 8) The Dealer carries out the post conflict check-in, and the conversation resumes.

Approaches in Conflict

Choosing your approach in conflict serves two purposes: It should inform your roleplay in how you approach the conflict, and has mechanical effects that reinforce that. Each approach has 3 stats in conflict:

- 1) Draw: Determines the number of cards you draw at the start of a round
- 2) Hold: Determines the number of cards you can have held at any given time, and
- 3) Play: Determines the amount of times in a given round you can use the Play action.

Additionally, they have modifiers for if you are an Amateur or a Master at the given approach.

Shootin':

Draw: 5, Hold: 2, Play: 2

Master: Draw +2, Hold +1, Play +1

Amateur: Draw -1, Hold -1

Dynamite:

Draw 8, Hold 0, Play 3

Master: Hold +2

Amateur: Draw -2

Ridin':

Draw 6, Hold 3, Play 2

Master: Draw +2

Amateur: Play -1, Draw -1

Slick:

Draw 6, Hold 4, Play 1

Master: Play +1

Amateur: Hold -2

Death

The world is a dangerous place, and oftentimes the end comes all too soon. There are 3 main ways that a character can reach their end in Dream At High Noon. In any of these situations, the Gambler resolves the death appropriately, then they should draw up a new Cowpoke and return to the group as soon as possible.

Bleeding Out

Arguably the most straightforward option, if a character ever reaches 0 HP, they find themselves at Death's Door. If this happens during a conflict, they have two options: Choose to immediately fold and search for medical attention, or fight it out. If you fold and are able to heal up in time, you can continue living for now. If you fight, you don't track further damage, but anything brutal enough to kill you spells your end. If you survive and heal up by the end of the fight, you tough it out and keep on marching just like any good cowpoke should.

All Outta Options

If you are ever completely out of Poker Chips, things are dire. You need to take immediate action to complete the current Story, and earn back some chips with only whatever you have on hand, and if you fail, you're out. Describe what happens to your Cowpoke, whether its death, a short lived exile, or turning truly to desperate measures. Either way, you forfeit control of your character going forward, and have to draw up a new one.

One Final Ride into the Sunset

Perhaps the least obvious but the most intuitive, at any point it is appropriate, a Gambler can decide that their cowpoke's story has come to an end. The Gambler gets to narrate a short scene describing the death of their cowpoke, even dictating a few events that might otherwise require checks, as long as these don't impede on the agency of the other Gambler's (if this would involve their cowpokes, consent is always key). Afterwards, play resumes as normal.

Stories and Other Convenient Structures

To identify distinct plots from session to session, this game uses the structure of Stories. A Story is a specific event that happens in the life of The Gambler's cowpokes, whether it be a specific job they took, a lead they followed on a personal connection, or any other clearly outlined event with a start, goal, and finish. Most of the time, a full Story maps to a single session, but for Long Term Play, a Story could cross as many sessions as is appropriate until the goals are met. This is to distinguish from Narratives, overall arcs that could easily cross Stories. A cowpoke's personal goal or relationships might be a Narrative, as well as any plot threads that connect disparate stories. If you're telling a type of fiction with a main antagonist, dealing with them would usually be a Narrative to be woven over the period of multiple Stories, as they provide obstacles, meetings, confrontations, and even opportunities over the period of the game. This section goes into more detail about how to Start and End Stories, the types of Stories available, and other general advice to make sure everything flows smoothly. For more on Narratives, see the Long Term Play section on Page 38.

Starting a Story

Starting a Story is a pretty simple process: First, the group agrees on a story type from the list below, then The Dealer draws a card from the deck to determine the initial hook for it. Once that's settled, The Group sets up the first scenes, and once the main plot is introduced and the reward explained in the fiction, The Dealer will state an appropriate number of chips that map to it. They place these chips into the Story Pot, at which point each Gambler has a chance to raise as many chips from their own supply as they wish, which The Dealer must meet. However, for each chip put in this way, an appropriate complication must be added to the Story that will make things harder and more interesting for our cowpokes, with more chips adding greater or more numerous complications to the fiction. Sometimes, it makes sense to tie specific stipulations to portions of the reward, like completing an extra task or bringing someone back Alive instead of Dead. This also makes it easier to adjudicate how much of the reward is earned at the End of the Story. In this case, meeting these stipulations becomes part of getting the full reward.

Types of Story

Stories in Cowpoke media comes in all shapes and sizes, from personal gripes to specific jobs to tales of circumstance. Below is a list of a few common types and how to use them in your game, but you should by no means feel restricted to this list.

The Job

Keeping things straightforward and professional is the easiest way to keep trouble to a minimum. Do the job, get paid, and get out. This is a category of story where you have a clearly outlined task set-out to you by someone else, whether it be a contact who reached out and negotiated a job, or advert picked up from a job board, like a bounty or missing persons poster. Jobs usually have the reward explicitly set out front, often taking the form of money or other concrete resources, but sometimes offering favours or contacts for the truly desperate or powerful.

The Score

Technically, this is still a job, you just happen to be self employed. An opportunity passes by that's too good to ignore, like a speeding train transporting valuables... literally. These types of stories have a pretty clear concept of what the reward is most likely to be, but you won't actually know till you actually pull off the score. Usually something you can tangibly steal like money, but could also be information, records, or some other item of worth. Varies from heists to cons to some other type of crime with a reward in mind, but as long as you're doing it of your own volition then its a score. Heist movies are a good reference for this type.

The Rumour

Sometimes you need to take a risk to get a bigger reward. You heard from a friend who heard from a friend who heard from a friend about a big thing, a whisper caught on the wind or overheard at poker night at the local bar, a scrap of paper found lost in the desert with hints of something greater... and you've decided that it's worth your time. This could be something from the chance to face off an elusive bandit, discover a long lost treasure, or a shot at achieving something incredibly personal. The reward is nebulous and often doesn't exist, but if it does, well y'all will be set for life. Unfortunately, the risk is just as unknown, and probably even more deadly than anything you bargained for. Good luck partners.

The Vendetta

Sometimes, the only reward that matters is revenge. This is a category of personal stories, either to an individual or the whole group. These goals are usually pretty targeted like getting back at someone who hurt you, tracking down someone personally important, etc. The reward might not even exist for this type of story, but that's not what really matters, it never was.

The Showdown

While not all Stories are about conflict, this one certainly is. This is a Story centered around a central conflict that doesn't fall under the other categories. It ain't personal, no-one hired you to do it, heck, you might not even have a reward waiting for you if you do it, but you've gotten yourself roped into it somehow. Wrong place wrong time I guess. But one thing's for certain: ain't nothing gonna stop you from winning this fight.

The Circumstance

Similar to The Showdown, this is a Story about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. You were minding your own business, travelling between jobs or trying to keep your head down, and then something happened. And if you're there, might as well get involved so you can go back to not caring, and because waiting is boring. Murder on The Orient Express is a famous story of this kind, although not in the genre of Cowpoke fiction.

The Hunt

You're after a reward, whether it be a bounty to bring in, an item to retrieve, or just a task to complete. But it's dangerous. And you're not the only one after it. And they're dangerous too. This is a race to complete the task first, and if you're fast enough, maybe you'll avoid running into anyone else after the same reward. And if not... well, just hope that the you don't become the hunted instead.

Ending a Story

Just as important as the start of a Story is its end, where some things get tied up neatly, and the rest left loose to explore if we ever return to this world and characters. The first thing to know is when a Story ends. The simple yet not particularly useful answer is it ends when it comes to its conclusion. That can mean a couple things: the crew resolved the main narrative associated with the Story as well as any stipulations or side tasks they wanted to, the crew drastically failed at said task, or the parameters shifted enough and whatever new task or focus of the story that was chosen by the crew was instead resolved. Basically, when the main tension seems dealt with for now and the characters have had enough time in this story, it comes to an end.

At this point, based on the group's success, completion of any stipulations, and any other costs or consequences they've incurred, The Gamblers should decide how much of the Story Pot they think they've earned. For example, if they completed the main task but failed at a few stipulations, and incurred some negative consequences or collateral they need to clean up, perhaps they only get half of what's in there. Judge yourself honestly and fairly, but don't be too harsh for failures and costs. The Dealer can step in as needed, though mostly as an arbiter or to remind you of any facts as they become relevant.

Next, each Gambler examines their relationship with every other Gambler and decides if its grown further along the same path or changed in any way, and writes any new notes as appropriate. This could simply be reinforcing what was previously established, mildly shifting it to something adjacent, or writing a completely new one, based on what happened in the fiction of the session. Finally, they note any progress on their personal or crew goal for the group to be aware of, narrating any important details to their characters. There are no set steps to complete the personal or crew goals, but rather, they should be of an appropriate difficulty to last the duration of the game and give a satisfying narrative (more on this on Page 38).

Narrative Control Tools

The Six Shooter

As mentioned before, players should be taking an active hand in the construction of the narrative. Raising provides a mechanical way to reinforce that concept, and The Six Shooter is another one. At the start of each Story, every Gambler should draw a card. Then, using the tables for plot generation in Appendix A, The Gamblers should create a plot hook associated with the card. Write down every Card and the associated hook somewhere visible for everyone to see (I recommend drawing a barrel of a 6 shooter and styling each one as a bullet, but a bullet point list works too). Finally, The Dealer should do the same until there are 6 separate cards and plot hooks. This list of hooks is called The Six Shooter.

At any point during play, a player can use one of the cards from The Six Shooter that was drawn by either them or The Dealer. They count that card as part of their hand for a single check and resolve it as such, then describe how the associated plot hook appears in the situation to cause a complication. The Dealer can also use this to influence a check using only their own Bullets, and the group instead describes how this plot hook was a boon to The Gamblers all along.

The first person to do this is called The Quick Draw and must be a Gambler. Instead of the plot hook being introduced as a complication, it is introduced neutrally, but amps up the tension of the entire session.

When there is only one Bullet left, instead of the set card drawn at the start, it is treated as a wildcard and can sub in for any card in the deck. However, the complication introduced becomes even worse than it otherwise would have been. Only a Gambler can use the wildcard.

Hold Your Horses

Often times during roleplay things can get tense, sometimes too much so. If the tension is starting to bleed out to the players (a term meaning that in character emotions are affecting the player roleplaying them), then we need to take a little pause. Calling a quick pause for a water break or a moment to think or decompress is perfectly acceptable as a pressure release whenever it's needed. Doing nothing during a pause but recollecting oneself is totally valid and encouraged, but here are a few other options to keep the fiction rolling in the meantime.

Flashback

This option provides an alternative if you need a quick break from the current scene but are still capable of roleplaying. One of the characters involved in the dramatic moment can narrate a flashback, pulling in any other willing player to help flesh it out. This flashback should be related to the source of the current drama, allowing the scene to heighten its narrative weight while also easing off the tension of the moment for a second.

Cut Away

This option keeps the narrative moving while allowing the players involved in the high drama scene to take a break. The conversation cuts other to something the other Gamblers are doing, or The Dealer can narrate a separate scene that's going on in parallel. Once the players involved in the initial scene feel up to it, cut back to the drama and continue on.

Start a Bar Fight

Sometimes, the tension might have reached too high a peak to continue going forward with it at this time, but you don't want to X what has happened out of the fiction. It could also be the case that it's just not narratively appropriate to resolve the tension in this moment. In either case, one of the players involved can dictate how a NGC starts a bar-fight, or other situation appropriate incident that serves as a pressure valve and distracts from the tension at hand. This is handled entirely narratively, and play continues on with the conversation and scene left hanging in the air.

Limit/ No Limit

Many poker tables nowadays will have a limit set to them. That means that no matter what happens in a round, the pot can never exceed a given value. In your game, sometimes it can be appropriate to set a limit on a scene. This limit keeps the tension from getting out of hand or signpost that everyone is ok with things getting tense in a specific situation. Anyone can invoke a stricter limit, but loosening it requires full consent from everyone the group. Limits are usually agreed upon at the start of the scene, but in the middle of the fiction the group could decide to raise or lower it as needed. The following is a simple scale you can use for it, but feel free to fine tune the terms of the limits a little as fits your group.

- 1) **Keeping things Chill:** For when a lower tension scene is needed. Only Quick Checks can be made, if even, and you cannot invoke active talents or use the raise action
- 2) **Light Action:** A little tension is nice from time to time. Talents can be used and you can raise at most once per check.
- 3) **Loose Holster:** Sometimes, words and simple actions aren't enough. Structured conflicts are allowed, but you can still only raise once per check.
- 4) **Gun's Out:** Drastic times call for drastic measures. While there are no mechanical restrictions in this limit, it still signals that not everyone is ok to go full out, and things might need to be reined in from time to time.
- 5) **No Limit:** Anything goes. Ramp the drama up to 11 friends.

Peripheral Mechanics and Variant Rules

If it hasn't been made obvious so far, poker is an important part of any cowpoke story, almost as important as climactic gun duels at high noon. And the same way I don't expect any of you to actually have a gun duel to figure out who lives and dies (please don't do that), I wouldn't want to hinge in-fiction poker on the skill of The Gamblers (though if that's what the group wants you totally can do it that way). You'll also need to acquire goods, services, and other favours during your travels. This section will walk you through all of that.

Poker

Poker in Cowpoke Fiction is more than just a pastime, it's a ritual. And as with all rituals, there are many forms it can take. Here are a few.

The Long Con

A full game of poker takes time, with people playing smaller hands to learn one another's habits, before finding the right hand to finally go all in and risk it for the reward. To replicate that slow build up of tension, everyone starts by narrating a few hands. To do this, every character involved partakes in a Static Check, with a difficulty determined by The Dealer based on how high stakes the game is. This is played out by each character flipping over a card one by one, rather than playing the full check, and as they reveal a card, they narrate something happening across the span of the games. Once everyone's checks are final, anyone who succeeded can try to bait the others into a round for keeps. At this point, every character still involved places the agreed amount of chips on the line, and describes what it is they're betting (it could be money, a favour, a deal, an item of worth, etc.). Then, everyone plays one, final, opposed check, bringing any talents or Raises to bear. The winner takes home the pot.

The Quick Draw

Sometimes though, the tension starts right at the stake setting. That's perfectly valid. In that case, more time should be devoted to showcasing the atmosphere and attitudes of the table members as the singular round is being played. Otherwise, resolve it as the final stage of a Long Con.

Showdown at High Noon

Similarly to poker, showdowns are about the tensions and the ritual more than anything else (the living part is nice too, I guess). The following process emulates that experience.

Step-Up

As each character involves steps out into the open, the fate of the characters is set. Someone leaves today in a coffin. At this point, each person chooses their approach for this standoff, and draws cards according to the normal draw rules for a quick opposed check plus one extra card. However, the Dealer should not draw the community cards yet. Describe what it looks like as your character settles in place, as well as any thoughts through their mind and initial impressions.

Staredown

As they stand across from one another, tension mounts and the world melts away till only two cowpokes are left. The Dealer will reveal the first community card for the check. Then, each player can choose to Hold as many cards as they want from that hand, shuffling the unkept cards back into the deck, then drawing back up to their initial hand size.

Countdown

As the timer slowly ticks, the nervous sweat, and the calm stay collected. Each player plays two cards face down in front of them, then chooses one card for the opponent to discard randomly. After discarding a card, they draw a card from the deck (not shuffling the discarded one), and the Dealer reveals another community card. Repeat this process once more playing only one card instead of two, keeping everything else the same.

Quick Draw

The timer hits its final notch, and the cowpokes reach for their guns. At this point, the involved players activate any talents they wish to use and raise as many times as they'd like before revealing their hands. Once both are ready, they reveal their hands to their opponents. The winner's shot hits the other first, killing or wounding as per the stakes of the showdown and their own judgement. In a tie, both go down. Sometimes, the dream belongs to no-one.

Spending Chips

You are not a cowpoke by choice, at least not fully. If you had the money to avoid this path, you definitely would, and maybe one day you will. That said, you're not completely destitute either. You have contacts and resources, and know how to make do with what's available to you. This section goes a bit more into the specifics about them.

Gear and Other Accoutrement

While this game is not concerned with tracking the specifics of gear, you're assumed to have everything you need to get about your daily life; a horse with riding gear, some clothes, and whatever simple weapons your character may carry beyond your signature one. Anything beyond that is gonna require some elbow grease to acquire or re-acquire. Most things can generally be abstracted out to either one poker chip handed to the bank, or a favour. Some rare things could run you up as high as 2 poker chips, though it'll rarely be higher. If you ever lose your signature weapon, you can't use the talent till you re-acquire it. That'll run ya 2 poker chips and contact with someone who has access to that type of weapon. Acquiring medical supplies and care usually costs 2-3 chips. These chips are paid straight to The Bank.

Contacts and Favours

For a wide open expanse, the world is a surprisingly small place. Chances are that wherever you go, you'll know someone, whether directly or indirectly. Whenever you want to cash in on your contacts or favours owed to you, you give up poker chips that narratively represent you no longer having that leverage. If it's asking it from a Gambler, you hand it over to them, otherwise, it goes to the bank. The amount of chips should be proportional to the favour. For example, cashing in a favour post a poker game will often simply be the amount wagered in the pot. Occasionally, if you're not giving up all your leverage or the relationship still has weight, The Dealer can instead decide that you place the chips into the Story Pot, and adds an additional stipulation to the job. If you succeed at the stipulation, you'll get to keep the chips, and by extension the resource.

Amateur Hour

We're not perfect at doing everything in life, and oftentimes in the fiction a cowpoke will have to approach a problem in a manner they're not as comfortable with. This is a good thing! Trying out stuff you're not skilled at is a way to create narrative complexity and drive character growth. To emphasize these points, this set of variant rules can be used to incentivize characters taking their Amateur approach. Feel free to use as many or as few in your game.

Learning Experience

To incentivize trying stuff out with an Amateur approach, when a cowpoke tries a Quick Check with their Amateur approach in something they're not great at, The Dealer must match their initial wager. This means that trying things you're not as good as gives you a chance of immediate reward. This reinforces the idea that doing things you're not good at leads to growth.

Furthermore, if they enter a conflict using an Amateur approach, The Dealer should add more chips to the Betting Pot, usually around 2 or 3, but they can add more depending on how risky a situation is. This serves a similar purpose to the previous variant rule.

Beginner's Luck

When we lack the restrictions of knowledge and experience, sometimes we luck into things by not being crippled by not knowing how much we don't know. Beginner's luck is a pretty common phenomenon that exists in the world, and if you wish to replicate it in your game, the first time a character tries something with an Amateur approach that they'd never attempted before, upgrade their check once. This is a great rule to encourage cowpokes to try things they otherwise wouldn't risk, but will more likely lead to a zanier, more loose tone. If you're trying to go for a grittier story, this might not be the rule for you, but using some variant on it with more restrictions (like needs to watch or receive tutelage from someone else) could be a way to incorporate it regardless.

Long Term-Play

If you've read everything up until this point, you're fully equipped to run the game for a One-Shot or quick arc that centers around a single Story. However, if you have the intention to bring this game back to the table more than once, especially for multiple Stories, this section provides all that you need to make that process go smoothly.

Short-Story Anthology

The traditional mode for long-term play in a campaign for an RPG is a series of connected and immediately chronological stories. That is not the preferred mode for this game. Instead, borrowing from tropes of the Cowpoke genre, and to drive home that this is not a world you can escape in a day, a week, or even a month, the primary mode of play is a Short-Story Anthology. Each distinct Story takes place chronologically, but with an appropriate time skip in between each. Sometimes this can be shorter, like a week or a month, especially as the Narratives come to a climax, but these can just as easily be for a year or even longer. A lot of things happen in the world, but there's only a few worth mentioning, and those are the Stories you play out.

To keep the fiction cohesive, interesting, and constantly pulling the cowpokes deeper into the world, there are a few new tools to introduce, as well as some modifications to existing rules.

Shootin' for the Goal

When running shorter Stories, Gamblers are free to do whatever they want with their personal goals, as they will form mostly to inform roleplay and are unlikely to be fully resolved within the limited scope of a single Story. However, in long-term play, these goals are explicitly meant to last over the course of the entire game. When creating cowpokes with this end in mind, Gamblers' should choose goals that are more nebulous and harder to achieve; something major like finding a long lost family member, getting revenge on an untouchable oil baron, or taking down the greatest outlaw there is. These are the types of goals that will allow payers to build up towards them each Story, and create a satisfying Narrative for the character. Achieving their goal is one of the core parts of retirement for a character. If the Goal ever becomes irrelevant, they can shift it to something new, as long as it is still core to the characters identity.

Time Lost, Time Gained

While we don't need full details about every cow you herded or each turnip you pulled, the time between Stories does contain downtime in which you can do things for yourself. You should narrate overall how you've been spending your time, but also specifically choose two things you accomplished during the time period. Below are the main things you're likely to do:

- **Pursue a Goal:** Make a development on your personal or crew goal based on available contacts, resources, and revelations from previous stories.
- **R&R:** Spend some time, and an appropriate amount of chips healing. For most, this is roughly at a rate of 2 chips per HP. You can heal up to half your HP this way.
- **Retrain and Resupply:** Pay 5 chips to the bank to draw two cards from one of the suits, then decide which one you want to keep, discarding the other back to the deck. You can replace your own card with the new one, and put the remaining one on your crew sheet. Anyone else can swap out their appropriate talent for that one by paying 2 chips.
- **Establish Connections:** You can personally seek out connections, spending an appropriate number of chips to the bank and adding them to the crew sheet. However, the relationship is more directly tied to you than the group, and should be handled that way.
- **Create Resources:** Most resources can be acquired within the fiction of a Story, but for the rarer objects, you can guarantee access through this downtime action and paying some chips to the bank. Choose to either keep it to yourself or add it to the crew sheet.

Long Time No See

At the start of each Story, each Gambler should go around the table and discuss with every other Gambler how their relationships have developed, regressed, or stagnated in the time period since the last Story. If things were left off tense, have they cooled down or gotten worse? If cowpokes had gotten close, did they have a chance to see each other in the meantime, or has absence made the heart grow fonder... or changed things for the worse? These are important details to establish to inform how the relationships start off during the Story, and while none of the changes should be major enough to radically alter a relationship, minor rewrites of what is currently on the sheets are not out of the question. Once that's done, proceed with the usual Story set-up.

Gunning for the Objective

During every Story, each Gambler should always have their goal in mind. To make sure that happens, at the start of each Story, after the rest of the set-up, each Gambler should draw a card and use the table in Appendix A to create a hook, complication, opportunity, or other event related to their goal. This will appear in the fiction of this story, and The Dealer should collaborate with The Gamblers to make sure all of them are relevant or available in the fiction. However, it is up to each individual Gambler as to whether or not they choose to capitalize on these opportunities, as often times it will come with a risk such as distracting from the mission at hand. Ultimately, each cowpoke must decide how much they're willing to put on the line to achieve the thing they care about the most... whatever that may be.

Refreshes

With the time available in a long-form game, your Stories do not have to be restricted to a single session, and will often span across a few. However, since finishing a Story is an important part of resetting the status of many resources, it can be useful to have an alternate method to do this for when a Story drags on. A Refresh is the solution to that. Longer Stories can contain multiple refreshes. In a Refresh, the Six Shooter is fully reloaded, and any players who have not yet used their bullets can choose to replace or keep them. Then, the status of the Story is evaluated, and based on how much has been accomplished, some of the Story Pot should be divvied up amongst The Gamblers. In the same vein, any Gambler can raise to complicate the Story further, with The Dealer being forced to match the raise. Note that this should only be done if everyone is comfortable with this story going on longer, as more complications necessitates more time dedicated to this adventure. Next, the status of relationships can be quickly checked and modifications may be made as necessary. Finally, any player who has not yet capitalized on their personal goal hook for the Story can draw a new card from the table, using it as an omen which alters the initial hook in some way. Within the fiction, a refresh can take many forms: Whether a night spent camping and recuperating, a check-in with the source of a job, or simply a moment of introspection. In some cases, a refresh need be done for purely mechanical reasons to keep the game flowing, with no narrative backing, and that's perfectly valid too!

Running a Crew

In long-term play, your Crew is something that should grow and evolve along with the cowpokes and the world. As you complete stories, you will gain access to more resources, contacts, and maybe even members of your crew, operating independently of The Gamblers' cowpokes. This section provides more advice for weaving the crew into a longer Narrative.

There's more than just this Story

Details that can be brushed over in a single Story game need to be solidified in long-term play. These are things like if your crew works together always, or just within the scope of a Story. You have specific your specific goal, but are you part of a larger organization or group, or are you your own leaders? Do you have a base you "operate" out of, a home community, or just the gear you carry with you? Details like these should flesh out the fiction of your crew and help you better tell a long-term fiction about them. Most importantly, don't forget to name yourselves!

Single-minded Focus

Similarly to Personal Goals, Crew Goals should be much better defined, and something that everyone in the group is in agreement about working towards. Crew Goals can often be boiled down to one word, like Respect, Fear, Power, or Wealth, though the specific incarnation of what that means for your group should vary. This is much more likely to change than personal goals, as your crew evolves in needs, goals, and desires. Sometimes, there may even be tension about what this should be, and if so, it should be resolved within the fiction of the next Story.

Fancy New Toys

If the group is interested in making the crew a central part of play, one of the options at the end of every Story is to remove some of the chips from the Story Pot before divvying them up to advance your group. Sometimes, this will be baked into the reward, if you were already promised a contact or resource, but other times could represent you increasing your representation or otherwise leveraging the resources of this mission to further the situation of your crew. Every further development the group agrees on should be written on the crew sheet, and can be drawn upon at any point within the fiction of a Story or as part of downtime actions.

Narratives

As discussed in the section on Stories, Narratives are the long-term equivalent, often spanning over multiple stories, if not the course of the entire game. This section has some advice on the types of Narratives you can wield to make your game more interesting for everyone involved.

Everything Personal

Each cowpoke's individual story is a Narrative, often focused around their personal goals and relationships with others. The Gamblers usually tend to take the most active role in this one, as their ability to influence it is the most clear cut, though it's useful to remember that you can influence whichever Narrative you want through suggestion, manipulating the fiction, or just taking an active role in the conversation!

Recurring Characters

Recurring characters can be a useful Narrative to wield, as how they change over time and interact with the group can reveal a lot about the development of the fiction. These can range from friendly contacts to full blown antagonists, each providing different influences and complications on the fiction, and creating a different type of Narrative to engage with.

The Game

It can be helpful to think of your entire game or Story anthology as a single Narrative, told through these individual snapshots of time in the cowpokes' lives. The entire group contributes to this Narrative, both through telling the Stories and through fulfilling and weaving other Narratives. An extension of this is...

The World

Perhaps the weirdest one to conceptualize, but the entire world is one living, breathing Narrative, and it should respond to the ripples sent out by each Story. As Stories progress, relationships shift, and goals reach completion, the very world should shift to reflect this. Afterall, while the world is far greater than just our cowpokes, the parts of it that matter feel the impacts of their actions. Everything they do can be reflected back in the shifting landscape around them, and both The Gamblers and The Dealer should keep this in mind as they weave the fiction.

Retirement

The Getting Started section includes rules on Death that can lead to an abrupt end to a cowpoke's Narrative, however, sometimes a cowpoke is able to reach their Dream At High Noon and make it out of the life. To do so, a Cowpoke needs only to complete their personal goal. Once that's done, they're free to go... But not quite. Retiring is tricky business, and things don't always go perfectly as planned. If a cowpoke completes their goal and their Gambler decides that retirement is in the cards for them, they withdraw from the crew at the end of the Story, and that Gambler should then proceed to draw up a new cowpoke. However, before they do that, they need to narrate the end of their cowpoke's Narrative.

First, describe the ideal terms of your retirement, whether it's to own a ranch or retire to an eventless life in the middle of town. Then, decide how much of your current resources you are going to take with you, and how much you leave behind for the group, and describe the actuality of your retirement appropriately to how much you left for yourself.

Next, look at the current status of your relationships, and together with the associated Gambler, narrate a final scene for your characters. If the group is continuing to play, this happens in the downtime before the next Story, otherwise, this happens whenever is appropriate for your cowpokes'. You might continue to interact later, and if play continues your cowpoke could reappear as a NGC, but this should cap up that Narrative of the relationship for now, even if it leaves some things unresolved... sometimes not everything in life ties up neatly.

Finally, answer the following questions:

- Did I make a meaningful contribution to my crew's goal?
- Did I leave behind more than I took for myself?
- Am I remembered fondly by the majority of my group?
- Am I remembered fondly by the world?

Based on the answers to these questions, determine the final fate of your character, with more Yeses leading to a better outcome and vice versa. This sets the sun on the final chapter in your cowpoke's life, even if they'll appear in fiction before then.

Session Zero

Session Zero is another name for a set-up session, in which you create characters, establish relevant details about the world and the game, and introduce all the safety tools that are in use. It is a way to ensure that every character is compatible and part of a cohesive fiction, and make sure that everyone is on the same page. Session Zero ideology is baked into the core of this game, from the quick group and relationship character creation system, to the safety tools and check-ins that are a part of the mechanics. As a result, this is not a game that requires an explicit or separate Session Zero, especially since the entire set-up process is relatively quick and should take under an hour to get everyone rolling straight into their first Story.

However, it can still be useful to designate the Session Zero portion of your first play session to highlight the safety tools and do things such as ensure everyone is on the same page, answer any questions that may exist, and resolve anything that needs to be resolved before play starts. This can also be a perfect time to prototype your cowpokes before committing for the full length game.

The Poker Game that Started it All

To help with this, before launching fully into the first Story, I recommend that everyone take part in playing an in character game of Poker using the rules on Page 30, with The Dealer assuming an important NGC to the group. This should give everyone a chance to start getting comfortable with the mechanics of the system, introduce their cowpokes to one another, and develop their voice. This can be a non-cannon game if you wish, or you could frame it as the poker game in which everyone met, serving to further highlight the importance of poker as a ritual within the fiction, or just an important hand in your past. Either way, once everyone feels comfortable with the system and their cowpoke, you're ready to get rolling!

A Quick Note on Accents and Voices

Voices are totally allowed and actively encouraged during TTRPGs, if you're comfortable doing one. A voice can be as simple as altering speech pattern or switching up vocabulary. However, ethnic accents or speech patterns mocking real individuals are completely unacceptable, as they promote stereotypes that are uncomfortable for members of the group being mocked. I promise your game will be just as fun without them, and infinitely safer. Don't do them.

A World That Doesn't Want Us

A simple fact about this world: It does not want you in it anymore. Cowpokes are kept around because they're useful, but that usefulness is on a short fuse. Now, obviously that's not true of every piece of cowpoke fiction, but for the most part, it's a central theme. The following is a set of variant rules that drive home this point, making the game a grittier one where your interactions through the world slowly whittle away at you, bit by bit.

Consequences

The central mechanic this ruleset introduces is consequences. Consequences are metaphorical, though sometimes literal, scars left on your character as they progress through the Stories of their life. The most common way a character contracts a consequence is by hitting 0 HP and arriving at Death's Door, or by running out of poker chips and being truly out of options. However, if a narrative moment of failure, defeat, or hurt big enough occurs, The Gambler could self-impose a consequence. The Dealer can suggest a consequence in those situations but should rarely impose one unless the situation is extremely dire.

Whatever the cause, whenever one would gain a consequence, they should draw a card and use the table in Appendix A to interpret what the consequence is. These can range from traumas to physical scars, but whatever it is it needs to be something that will stick with the character forever. Even if it's something that can be "healed," like a bad physical injury, it will have an effect on the character that they won't forget.

Downtime

To drive home the impact of consequences, during every downtime or period between Stories, each Gambler draws one card for every consequence, then makes the best possible hand out of it. The tier of this hand (as per the list on Page 13) determines how much the consequences have affected the character since the last Story. A low tier like 1 or 2 might be picking up a bad habit or tic, or spending a downtime action practicing self-care. Higher tiers like 4 or 5 can have consequences as bad as an addiction to painkillers or drugs. However, you are the ultimate arbiter of how the consequences manifest on your own character.

Retirement

If, despite everything, your character does make it to retirement in this world, on top of the usual retirement rules you do one final thing before determining the fate of your cowpoke. For each consequence, draw a card and use the table in Appendix A to interpret how the consequence comes into play during the retirement. Unlike previously, this is not inherently negative; the world has stripped away at your cowpoke until there is nothing left but the raw expression of what they are. These final draws should express that in some form, narrating how these consequences have warped, shifted, and revealed what was truly beneath. Then, proceed to the end of their story as per usual.

Health and Healing

Healing isn't always easy to come by, and some things can't be bandaged away. When using this ruleset, healing should be much more inaccessible. you can find supplies to stabilize yourself from Death's Door with relative ease, and that's about it. Increase the cost of all healing services by at least 1, including those provided by the Lady of Death, Nine Lives, and Fortified talents.

Additionally, for the Tenacity talent, you can give the player a chance to redraw at creation. If they choose to play with it, you can give them a consequence every other time they hit Death's Door instead of every time, their choice. For Nine Lives, since they aren't likely to reach Death's Door, every third death, or any particularly brutal one, can lead to a consequence.

Finally, if you really want to make things more lethal, you can decrease everyone's starting hit points by 1 (except for Nine Lives), or give more enemies weapons that can deal more than 1 damage. Good luck partners, you're gonna need it.

Talents

There are four categories of talents, one for each suit, that you have access to. Each one has 13 talents that you randomly draw from at creation. Every character should have unique talents, so you should use the same deck for creating every character and not reshuffle it until everyone has drawn.

Additionally, in long term play, you should keep track of which talents have already been drawn, especially if you don't keep the character creation deck separate. When someone uses the Retrain and Resupply downtime action to draw new talents, if they draw any duplicates, they should discard them and draw again, to keep a unique pool of talents always in play.

Reload

Besides the Clubs, all your talents have a reload value. This is the number of rounds in a structured conflict it takes for that ability to be ready to use again. Reload is tracked at the end of a round once everyone has checked. A simple way to do it is decrease your reload number by 1 at the end of each round, and once it hits 0 your talent is ready to use again.

For example, a reload of 1 will be ready again next round, whereas a reload of two can be used every other round, and so forth.

Some reloads will include words. Once per Conflict means that once it's used in a conflict (or scene if you are outside of a conflict) it can't be used again. X scenes means that you can't use it again until you've ended X scenes, including the current one. After effect ends means you don't start tracking the reload until the effect of the talent has come to an end.

Finally, if someone uses a talent outside of a conflict, they must pay chips equal to its reload value to the Story Pot if they want to use it again in the same scene. Once Per Conflict and X Scene talents cannot be sped up this way.

Clubs - Passive Ability

These are talents that are always available to you. You don't need to choose to activate them, rather, every time you meet the conditions listed, its effect will happen, as many times as valid.

- **Ace of Clubs: One in the Chamber**

You always save a little extra just in case. When one of your abilities goes on reload, draw a card.

- **2 of Clubs: Killer Shot**

Most people would think you're foolish, you call it alternate strategy. If you go in on a 2-7 split, upgrade your final hand once for every time you Raised.

- **3 of Clubs: Third Time's the Charm**

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Every third check you attempt in a conflict automatically succeeds.

- **4 of Clubs: Formidable**

A reputation like yours is hard to gain. Upgrade the first check each scene when you lean on the respect it affords.

- **5 of Clubs: Pent-up**

You keep things bottled up and under control... for now. No-one can read your emotions without your permission, and when you reveal them, get an automatic success.

- **6 of Clubs: Devil's Smile**

You've got a smile sly enough to seal a deal with the devil. Upgrade all checks based on deceit by one.

- **7 of Clubs: Luck of the Draw**

Some are just born lucky. When you Raise to draw a card, draw an extra one that's played blind with your next check.

- **8 of Clubs: Cowards Recompense**

You make running an art form. When you fold out of a conflict, reclaim your Ante.

- **9 of Clubs: On Cloud 9**

People can't get in your head if your head's not on this earth. Downgrade all incoming aggressive social checks once.

- **10 of Clubs: Tenderhearted**

Your heart's your greatest weapon. Upgrade the final result of any check done with compassion once.

- **Jack of Clubs: Jack of all Trades**

Master of none matters not at all. Treat all your approaches as Skilled, and upgrade your hand once when you leverage your lack of expertise and unique approach to catch someone off guard.

- **Queen of Clubs: Pulling the Strings**

True power lies in the shadows. When you use the Hold action, draw back up to your hand size before you used the action.

- **King of Clubs: On top of the World**

You're the best at what you do, and it shows. Choose only one Master approach, but when using it, draw 2 extra cards.

Spades - Sig Talent

These are more active abilities you can call on to shift the flow of play.. Using these adds 1 more chip to your wager for a quick check, or 1 to the Betting Pot of a conflict.

- **Ace of Spades: Winds of Fortune**

Whether through experience or good instincts, you can tell when the very world is going to shift before anyone else. If you declare that the winds are changing, you can choose Aces to be high or low until the scene ends, then play this card as an ace of any suit.

Reload: 2

- **2 of Spades: Double or Nothing**

Before attempting a check, you can raise the stakes to raise the reward. Double your wager and The Dealer does the same, but if you lose, it goes to The Bank instead of a pot.

Reload: 1

- **3 of Spades: Three's a Crowd**

You can be single-minded in your dedication when it matters. Choose a target; while both of you are still in the conflict, you can only affect one another with actions, but no-one else can affect you.

Reload: 2 after effect ends

- **4 of Spades: Foresight**

You're always 1 step ahead of the opposition. Before The Dealer draws cards for a check, you can look at the top 3 cards of the deck, and return or discard as many as you'd like.

Reload: 1

- **5 of Spades: Take Five**

Breaks are an important part of mental health. When you pull yourself to the side to catch your breath, draw a card, and either take a poker chip, or heal 1 (if possible).

Reload: 2

- **6 of Spades: At Sixes and Sevens**

Confusion is precisely when you thrive; have everyone discard and redraw their hands, picking up to 3 cards from the discard pile to add to your hand before drawing to full.
Reload: 2

- **7 of Spades: Jackpot**

Sometimes things go well, and sometimes they go really well. When you beat a hand by more than one tier, activate this talent and ask for a specific concession, or let The Dealer surprise you with something great.

Reload: 2

- **8 of Spades: Eighty-Six**

Sometimes, people have to go... permanently. When you have a clear shot, make a check at a difficulty of at least a straight. A success kills an NPC or takes a PC out of the scene.

Reload: 2

- **9 of Spades: The Whole Nine Yards**

When you go all in on a check, ask your opponent if they want to match. If they don't, you succeed. If they do, upgrade your final check twice.

Reload: 2 scenes.

- **10 of Spades: A Decades' Worth of Stories**

You've been around the block... and again... and again. When you share a story that could help out, the first person to act on it upgrades their check once.

Reload: 2

- **Jack of Spades: Knave's Deceit**

After an opposed check where the hands are revealed, you can take an opponent's card and play it as your own, but only if it improves your hand. They have the opportunity to play a new card to replace it.

Reload: 2

- **Queen of Spades: Throne of Lies**

Your web is so deep that even your lies have lies. Once the hands are revealed, you can swap out one of your cards for another, add an extra card, or Raise a final time.

Reload: 2

- **King of Spades: Devil's Luck**

Why watch your own back when you can let the devil do it for you? You can change any face card into another face card, but it's new suit must be red.

Reload: 1

Diamonds - Unique Weapon

Every cowboy always has access to a weapon, but not quite like this one. This one's different even from others of its own class, and the damage it can wreak proves it. You can use these weapons as often as you'd like, but their abilities come with a cooldown.

- **Ace of Diamonds: Ace in the Hole**

Type: Bow and Arrow

Damage: 1

Range: Long

Ability: Sharp arrows and precise aim make light work of cover; treat all cover as one category weaker if you don't move before shooting. Additionally, you can aim so precisely as to completely ignore cover for one round if it's the only shot you take.

Reload: 2

- **2 of Diamonds: Double Trouble**

Type: Double Barrelled Shotgun

Damage: 1

Range: Medium/ Short

Ability: You can bring both barrels to bear for maximum impact: deal double damage, or split it amongst two adjacent targets.

Reload: 1

- **3 of Diamonds: See Through**

Type: Sawn off Shotgun

Damage: 2

Range: Up Close and Personal

Ability: With enough force anything budes. Firing point blank at cover will demolish it without a check, dealing damage to anyone immediately behind it relative to the material demolished.

Reload: 1

- **4 of Diamonds: Horseman of War**

Type: Melee Weapon

Damage: 2

Range: Stabbing and/ or Crushing Distance

Ability: Few are prepared for the speed and brutality of someone who can skillfully use a melee weapon. If you kill a target, you can choose to immediately move to another nearby location and strike again, repeating till you fail to kill someone.

Reload: 3

- **5 of Diamonds: The Needle**

Type: Luger Pistol

Damage: 1

Range: Medium

Ability: A gun renowned for its piercing prowess, if you're able to line-up the right shot it can hit multiple targets. Hit any enemies in a straight line, with their defence upgrading once for every target hit before them.

Reload: 1

- **6 of Diamonds: Full Barrel**

Type: Six Shooter

Damage: 1

Range: Medium

Ability: Desperate times call for desperate measures. Draw 6 cards, then play 6 separate attacks by combining all available cards. After, you can only check on your turn until the end of the round, but draw no cards.

Reload: Once per Conflict

- **7 of Diamonds: Lucky Shot**

Type: Colt

Damage: 1

Range: Medium

Ability: When a shot would otherwise miss, luck bends the universe to your will. Upgrade the hand you played twice and re-evaluate the shot.

Reload: 2

- **8 of Diamonds: BOOOOOM!**

Type: Dynamite

Damage: 3

Range: Area, thrown

Ability: Go big or go home. Dynamite is lit on a fuse, so all ranged attack checks with dynamite are downgraded. On a successful attack, an enemy can give up their Manoeuvre to reduce damage by 1 to dive out of the way. It destroys all cover in its area of fire.

- **9 of Diamonds: Prey on the Weak**

Type: Hunting Rifle

Damage: 2

Range: Medium-Long

Ability: Years of tracking wounded animals is a transferable skill. When you hit an opponent with a shot that doesn't kill, they become marked and instantly discard a card. Until they heal the wound, you will be able to find them no matter where they run.

- **10 of Diamonds: The Judge**

Type: Executioner Pistol

Damage: 1

Range: Up Close and Personal

Ability: A gun just as likely to cause pain as it is to kill doesn't have a place in the hands of most, but you know how to wield it, and it shows. When you openly display the gun, upgrade all checks to intimidate or otherwise wield a person's fear against them.

- **Jack of Diamonds: Jackhammer**

Type: Repeating Rifle

Damage: 2

Range: Long

Ability: You must spend a Manoeuvre or Main Action pulling the lever between every shot. When you settle down and unleash hell, draw and play the top card of the deck with every shot taken until you move or the round ends.

Reload: 2

- **Queen of Diamonds: Daughter of Death**

Type: Sharps Rifle

Range: Line of Sight

Damage: 2

Ability: At the end of your turn, mark a target for death. At the start of your next turn, if you still have Line of Sight, take the shot, and if it hits, it's lethal. If they're gone, proceed with your turn as normal, and don't put this on reload.

Reload: 3

- **King of Diamonds: Kingslayer**

Type: Pair of Personalised Derringers

Damage: 1

Range: Short

Ability: Designed for concealment, no-one can find these on you without your permission. If fired on an unsuspecting target, you can take a guaranteed shot or a normal shot which instantly kills an NPC if you succeed.

Hearts - Constitution

The hearts are a little different from the others. These cards describe your constitution by giving you your hp, but also by giving you a unique way to interact with damage. Some of these are active, some are passive, but all can apply as many times as they're relevant.

- **Ace of Hearts: Within an Ace of Death**

HP: 2

You always barely slip away. When a hit would take you to 0, draw 5 cards and play them defensively (on top of any already taken defensive options), using the new hand. Draw 1 less card each time you've used this in this conflict.

- **2 of Hearts: Double Edged Sword**

HP: 3

Whenever someone hits you, you can immediately play an attack against them that doesn't count towards your total plays if you have a valid weapon to strike back.

- **3 of Hearts: Third Strike, You're Out**

HP: 3

Sometimes, you've just had enough of the incompetence. The third miss against you each combat causes the person who took the check to be eliminated.

- **4 of Hearts: Fortified**

HP: 4

You are strong built to take hits and do a decent job recovering; healing services only cost you 1 chip to acquire.

- **5 of Hearts: A bunch of fives**

HP: 4

Hitting you only makes you hit back harder; when you take a hit, draw equal to double the damage taken.

- **6 of Hearts: A bullet for every threat**

HP: 3

There's fast reflexes, and then there's what you can do. When hit by an attack, you can immediately play cards to attempt to shoot the bullet mid air. Make a check of a difficulty equal to the hand used for the incoming attack.

- **7 of Hearts: Lucky Horseshoe**

HP: 2

Wherever you picked it up from, your horseshoe has never let you down. Something about it draws enemy fire. The first attack that would hit you each turn bounces off it harmlessly instead. Heal an HP when you spend downtime caring for it.

- **8 of Hearts: Right in the Moneybags**

HP: 3

Losing money hurts but not as much as a bullet does. When you take damage, you can pay 2 chips to the bank to reduce it by one. At the end of combat, you heal 1 HP for every 3 poker chips you receive.

- **9 of Hearts: Nine Lives**

HP: 9

Very easy to kill yet hard to put down, any attack against you only does 1 damage and appears to take you out of combat. Return on your turn whenever you wish right as rain. You can't heal except by spending 4 chips and participating in a personalised ritual.

- **10 of Hearts: Tenacity**

HP: 2

You've always been a "when I die" type of person, and have the sheer force of will to back it up. When fighting at death's door, upgrade all checks by 1 and heal 1 if you win the conflict.

- **Jack of Hearts: Mostly a Pretty Face**

HP: 2

If radio existed, no-one would tell you had a face for one. Upgrade all social checks where your charm comes into play while at full health. Heal 1 whenever you successfully convince someone to do something for you.

- **Queen of Hearts: Lady of Death**

HP: 3

Many wish they had magic, but what's more magical than the power over life and death as given by science. A little medical training goes a long way, and you can heal anyone as long as they acquire 1 chip worth of supplies.

- **King of Hearts: And all the King's Men**

HP: 3

People really should stop getting in the way of bullets and you.... Or not, you won't complain. When you would take a hit that would drop you to 0 HP, you can move to put an unsuspecting friendly character into the line of fire instead.

Dealing the Cards

So, your group has roped you into being the dealer and you have no idea what to do, eh? Don't worry pal, I've got your back. Here's everything you need to know.

Keep Talking and Nobody gets Hurt

While managing the characters and keeping the rules flowing is important, your main job as The Dealer is to always keep the conversation flowing. If things start stalling out, it's your job to keep the story moving by kickstarting the narrative. A great way to do this is to pull the players directly into the characters shoes, addressing them by character names, describing a situation or revealing some information, then always ending it by asking "What do you do?"

Dead Men Walking

First rule of Cowpoke fiction: Any Non-Gambler Character is a Dead Person Walking. But, while they still have the ability to control their own two feet, it's your job to keep 'em moving. Remember, you have control of all the Non-Gambler Characters in the world, and can bring them to bear at any point to spice things up. A great way to do so is to have a list of names with motivations and a quick feel attached, that way you have a fast reference attached to them. The table in Appendix A is a great way to generate quick personalities with the draw of a single card.

Another option available to you is to hand over control of a NGC to a Gambler for the scene. This can be especially useful if one of The Gamblers' cowpokes' not in the scene, and they need something to do. As you do this more and more, you can start entrusting them with voicing more plot critical NGCs as they learn to separate their personal interests from the good of the story.

Tension

A subset of keeping the conversation flowing is to always keep the environment tense and the stakes high. Slow scenes are nice from time to time, but if The Gamblers are ever getting too comfortable, it's time to shake things up. Giving them hard jobs with complications and stipulations is the best way to do this, but you can always be willing to ask the players to provide ideas too. If you ever hit a wall, the table in Appendix A is a useful way to generate plot hooks, beyond reminding and encouraging players to use the Six Shooter.

Soft and Hard Moves

The dichotomy of Soft versus Hard moves is a useful framing to keep in mind. Soft moves are nudges, little set-ups in the fiction that offer opportunity to be responded to before a concrete change happens. Hard moves are direct decisions that can only be reacted to after the fact. Soft moves are best thought of as loading a gun and pointing it at the group, then asking them what they do, while a Hard move would be firing it and asking them how they respond to being shot.

An example of a Soft move would be the introduction of a critical NGC into a scene and describing them as they enter the room. A Hard move equivalent would be the NGC immediately engaging the group in conversation before any of them can weasel away.

You should reserve Hard moves for when a golden opportunity is presented in the narrative or for when you really need to push the tension, and the rest of the time lean on Soft moves, putting the narrative power of how to play out a situation in the hands of The Gamblers.

Checks

For Static Difficulty checks, your main responsibility is to assign a Target Chip Count for the Gambler to meet. Most checks are likely Low To help with that, here's a handy scale, where the majority of checks should fall around the low area, occasionally dipping into medium as things get tricky. Hard should be sparingly used for when things are serious.

| Difficulty/ Stakes | Target Chip Count |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| Minimal | 1 |
| Low | 2-3 |
| Medium | 4-5 |
| High | 6+ |

When Adjudicating checks as a Non-Gambler Character, you can generally follow the Amateur, Master, or neither scale of the players, choosing what makes the most sense for the character in the given scenario. Feel free to give them an extra penalty or boon if they're exceptionally qualified or not, but that should be used sparingly. You'll need to this primarily as part of an opposed check, but might be useful if a friendly NGC needs to attempt a check.

Conflicts

During structured conflict, your approach should be a little different. First, determine how threatening the opposition is. If the players can handle them easily, it might be a simple threat. If the players should be running, put it at impossible. Anything else should go in the middle. Below is a scale of how many chips you should add to the conflict pot based on this threat level:

| Threat Level | Ante |
|-----------------------|------|
| Not even a fight | 1-2 |
| Simple enough | 3-4 |
| Some resistance | 5-6 |
| People could get hurt | 7-8 |
| People could die | 9-10 |
| RUN | 11+ |

Whenever a NGC attempts a check, they draw and play a few cards. For disposable mooks, have them act as a group and draw a card for each one who participates in the action. For bigger threats, give them a larger hand based on how scary they're meant to be, and let them play a set amount of cards. Below is an example chart of what that might look like.

| Character | Draw Quantity | Play Quantity |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Hired Gun in a fight | 4 | 2 |
| Socialite in an argument | 5 | 3 |
| Rogue Judge | 6 | 5 |
| Outlaw Leader | 7 | 5 |

For most NGCs, limiting the amount of Play actions they take in a turn to 1 and having no held cards is appropriate. This rule should only be broken for the most memorable and important NGC confrontations that The Gamblers have to face.

Incentivization

Ultimately though, besides everything else here, your goal as The Dealer is to be a fan of The Gamblers. Even when a piece of fiction is breaking down the main characters, throwing adversity at them to shatter their spirit, it's always with the goal of making them shine. No matter what conflicts you introduce or how much tension you create, everything you do should be with the goal of bolstering the Narrative, and by extension, the cowpokes. And to that end, even when their characters are suffering, you should be checking in to make sure that The Gamblers are not having "fun" per-se, but rather, are enjoying the experience and story being told. Because they don't always have to be having fun, but they should always be enjoying the game.

To that end, one tool you can use to guide Gamblers along and encourage them to do fun things such as creative problem solving and unique role-playing is to incentivize them with poker chips. Note also that the role-playing doesn't have to be in character, and what is unique or boundary pushing can vary from person to person. If someone does something super cool that adds unique elements to the story, pushes their own experience with storytelling and RPGs, or is just fun for everyone there, feel free to slide a poker chip over to their supply. Don't give out too many, but be kind and encouraging with them, using them to push The Gamblers to new creative heights.

Appendix A: Random Draw Table

This is a random table that can be used to generate whatever you need at random. Plot Hooks, Events, NPCs, conversation topics, or even random animals if it's what you want. To use it, simply draw a card and cross reference its suit and number in the list to find out what it means. The meanings are vague and meant to be interpreted by the group or person drawing it within the context of the fiction. Be creative, and try to figure out the most interesting and fun interpretation. For more complicated topics, you can draw multiple cards to tell a fuller story.

Below each of the suits and numbers are some further descriptions of what they could mean. You are not limited to these examples or descriptions, but they should provide a jumping off point to help guide your interpretation of the cards, and can be an easy fallback if you're ever stuck.

For the suits, we have:

- **Diamonds: Resources and Wealth**

Diamonds are the card of riches, signifying material wealth the likes of which The Gamblers can only ever dream. Drawing this card could mean a well-paying job, an affluent NPC, or even secret treasure.

- **Clubs: Recklessness**

Clubs are the card of the daredevil, signifying opportunities and obstacles that will require intense skill, luck, or stupidity to overcome. Drawing this card could mean an audacious job, a hotheaded contact, or a risky opportunity.

- **Hearts: Intense Emotion**

Hearts are the cards of passion, signifying events that will pull on every emotional string The Gamblers possess. Drawing this card could mean a job with personal significance, an old flame, or a new one.

- **Spades: Strife and Conflict**

Spades are the cards of discord, signifying events that will challenge not just The Gamblers, but the very order of the society around them. Drawing this card could mean a job as part of a larger conflict, an NPC with a grudge, or the start of a deep rivalry.

For the numbers, we have:

- **2: Connection**
Signifies a chance to make a new bond, whether personal or professional.
- **3: Choice**
Signifies an important decision with lasting ramifications.
- **4: Favour**
Signifies the chance to earn or cash-in on a favour, or that a favour will be called in on you.
- **5: Change**
Signifies a large shift in social, personal, or political dynamics.
- **6: The Past**
Signifies old events and acquaintances coming back to haunt you.
- **7: Luck**
Signifies a shift in the fates, usually but not always in your favour.
- **8: Influence**
Signifies social and political power.
- **9: Finality**
Signifies an end.
- **10: Prosperity**
Signifies good fortune and opulence.
- **J: Deception**
Signifies lies, deceit, and manipulation; events that always have another layer.
- **Q: Insight**
Signifies truth and revelation; a chance to learn about what really matters.
- **K: Authority**
Signifies control, respect, and importance; someone you want as a friend and fear as an enemy.
- **A: Potential**
Signifies the chance for something greater to come, or perhaps nothing at all.

Appendix B: Kitbashing and Other Licencing Concerns

While I don't have much specific advice for kitbashing this game with other system, I want to make this explicitly clear:

You have my permission to hack, kitbash, modify, rip components out of, or do whatever you want to this game and its systems for your own personal use or even to create and publish a new system.

While the core resolution mechanics of poker hands is pretty intrinsic to this game, you can very easily remove the poker hands and use your own system to calculate how a check translates into chip count for static checks and a separate system for opposed checks. But regardless of that, a lot of the safety tools, narrative control tools, and framing for this game are transferable to other systems, and if you feel so inclined to use one of them, please do.

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