

DIRTY PRESS



A Roleplaying Game by Ben Scerri

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INTRODUCTION

Dirty Aces is a tabletop roleplaying game for five players. It requires two decks of regular playing cards with different coloured backs (remove the Jokers), four copies of the **Playsheet** at the end of this book, and some pencils and erasers for the table. You'll also need at least twenty poker chips, or other counters to use as **Chips**.

If you're not sure what a roleplaying game is, then I'll let Epidah Ravachol¹ describe it, because he does it better than anyone.

A roleplaying game is:

- ❖ a game you play with friends in a social setting,
- ❖ an exploration of intriguing or fanciful scenarios,
- ❖ a chance to be someone you're not,
- ❖ a celebration of sticky situations,
- ❖ collaborative daydreaming,
- ❖ exercise for your personal sense of drama,
- ❖ a way to trick ourselves into creating interesting things,
- ❖ and it's something you've been doing all along.

THE SETTING

In **Dirty Aces**, there is no specific setting, only a tone and several touchstones indicating what the setting *should be like*. **Dirty Aces** is a game about playing a group of closely bound protagonists who aren't always heroes, who are travelling through a frontier, lawless, or otherwise disconnected world.

Are they on the prairie? Out in the Old West? On the fringes of Known Space? Following the Beam towards the Dark Tower?

¹ **Dig a Thousand Holes**, Epidah Ravachol's blog.

TOUCHSTONES

When you're getting ready to play *Dirty Aces*, or pitching it to your friends, it's worth referring to or consuming the following media. These will get you in the right headspace to play *Dirty Aces*.

- ❖ Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* (novels),
- ❖ *Firefly* or *The Expanse* (television),
- ❖ The Builders & The Butchers' *Bringin' Home the Rain*, or Justin Cross's *Drink the Water* (songs).

These touchstones can be used to draw inspiration for the kinds of stories that can be told with *Dirty Aces*, or they could be seeds for your own original setting.

THE PLAYERS

There are two types of players in *Dirty Aces* – the **Players**, of which there are four, and the **Dealer**.

The **Players** take on the roles of individual Player Characters (**PCs**) in *Dirty Aces* and control everything that they say and do.

The **Dealer** takes control of everything else in the world, and presents challenges and obstacles to the **Players**. They also take control of all the Non-Player Characters (**NPCs**).

The game, and the story, comes out of this interaction – the **Dealer** presents a problem, and the **Players** attempt to solve it, and in the process, create more problems which the **Dealer** fleshes out and presents again.

The job of everyone – **Players** and the **Dealer** – is to create a compelling narrative and enjoy the fiction. You cannot win or lose *Dirty Aces*, you can only create a great story.

THE CHARACTERS

The **PCs** that the **Players** create are people of consequence, who live daring and dramatic lives. They're pulled here and there by fate, and must live with the consequences of their actions whilst they forever try to get the upper hand.

They might be the stars of a Western, or Knights of Eld following their own Beam in Stephen King's *Dark Tower*. Or perhaps they're scoundrels on the run from the Galactic Empire, or the Alliance. Whoever they are, they live and die by chance (or fate, or Karma, or the Force, or ka, or whatever you want to call it).

There is only one thing that is essential to these characters – they're part of a close-knit team who trust each other. They have each other's backs, and when one goes down, it is a blow to them all.

CARD CONVENTIONS

The **Suits** on the playing cards are very important in *Dirty Aces*, and each has its own meaning. They are:

- ❖ **Hearts** (♥) – represents a **PC's** mental strength, wisdom, resilience, and fortitude.
- ❖ **Diamonds** (♦) – represents a **PC's** mental agility, cunning, intelligence, hand-eye coordination, and acuity.
- ❖ **Clubs** (♣) – represents a **PC's** physical strength, endurance, vitality, and vigour.
- ❖ **Spades** (♠) – represents a **PC's** physical agility, dexterity, speed, and finesse.

Higher cards are always better, and **Ace** is high – it counts as a **Royal**, and is higher than the **King**. This means there is no 1 value card.

Royals have a numerical value when being compared to **Non-Royals**: **Jack (11)**, **Queen (12)**, **King (13)**, and **Ace (14)**.

CAMPAIGN CREATION

Before you set out to play, everyone should agree on the setting of the game, and how long you plan to play for – whether you’re playing a single session, or aiming for more.

It doesn’t matter what setting you choose, so long as everyone is on the same page. If you’re creating an original setting, it is worth creating a “Yay!”/“Nay” list of things that *definitely exist* and things that *definitely don’t exist* in the setting, so that no one is blindsided or disappointed.

CAMPAIGN SEEDS

If you need some ideas for your campaign, draw 6 cards, in 3 pairs, and consult the following:

1 st	2 nd	Who Are You?
	♥	Pirates
	♦	Mercenaries
♥	♣	Gangsters
	♠	Thieves
	♥	Bounty Hunters
	♦	Escaped Convicts
♦	♣	Rogue Agents
	♠	Wanted Folk
	♥	Masterless Ronin
	♦	Dishonoured Knights
♣	♣	Wandering Rogues
	♠	Travelling Performers
	♥	Mystic Warriors
♠	♦	Legendary Heroes

- ♣ Retired Soldiers
- ♠ Beat-down Losers

1st 2nd

Where Are You?

- ♥ The Wild West
- ♦ The Age of Sail
- ♥
- ♣ The Mean Streets
- ♠ The MegaCity Arcology
- ♥ Ancient Rome
- ♦ Feudal Japan
- ♦
- ♣ Napoleonic France
- ♠ A World at War
- ♥ The Days of Camelot
- ♦ The Space Lanes
- ♣
- ♣ The Lost Colony
- ♠ The City of Shadows
- ♥ The End of Days
- ♦ The Ruins of the Old Times
- ♠
- ♣ The Other-verse
- ♠ The Caverns Infinite

1st 2nd

What Hounds You?

- ♥ Corrupt Lawdogs
- ♦ Servants of the Empire
- ♥
- ♣ Roughnecks in Every Bar
- ♠ Eyes Watching Everywhere
- ♥ A System That Crushes Little Folk
- ♦ A Darkness That Turns Good Folk Bad
- ♦
- ♣ A Need to Stay Alive in a Cruel World
- ♠ An Evil Spreading Across the Land

♥	The New Order
♦	The Fanatic Cult
♣	The Endless Armies
♠	The Things from Beyond
♥	Your Sins, Your Failures
♦	Your Old Associates
♣	Your Dark Mirrors
♠	Your Secret Demons

For something a little bit different, try drawing twice from the same list and combining them. Consider the Touchstones:

- **Firefly** is just *Wandering Rogues* in the *Wild West/Space Lanes* being hunted by *A System That Crushes Little Folk*.
- **The Dark Tower** is *Dishonoured Knights* in the *Wild West/The Mean Streets/The Days of Camelot* being hounded by *A Darkness That Turns Good Folk Bad* and *An Evil Spreading Across the Land*.

Mix and match until you get something that excites you!

CHARACTER CREATION

Each **Player** needs a **Playsheet**.

The **Players** take one of the decks of cards. This becomes the **Player Deck** and the **Players** should separate and set aside the **Royals**. The **Dealer** takes the other: it is the **Dealer Deck**.

Players, think about who your **PC** will be. Discuss your ideas openly with everyone else, until you all come to something you're interested in. This means that you should be as interested in each other's **PC** as you are your own.

Dealer, make sure you *get* the concept of the **PCs**. If you don't, ask for clarification.

Don't worry about defining everything about a **PC** just yet – we'll play to find out more about them.

MAKING ASPECTS

The next step is for each **Player** to think of between one and five things about their **PC** that makes them unique, and is core to their being. Distil each *thing* down to a snappy phrase, sentence, or word. We call these **Aspects**. If you make less than five now, you can define up to that limit during play. Write these **Aspects** in the middle section of your **Playsheet**.

Aspects can be anything. Some good examples are: ***A Huge Gun, I Never Forget***, or ***Roland of Gilead***. The only requirement is that everyone around the table understands what they mean, and their subtext, so they can be aware of, and be a fan of, each other's **PC**.

Make sure your **Aspects** govern different things, and that there's little or no overlap. You want each one to say something different about a character – not rehashing the same point over and over.

PLACING CORNERS

The strengths and abilities of a **PC** are represented in the moment by their **Corners** – the four zones on their **Playsheet** for their four **Suits**. Each **Corner** represents how strong a character is in that area of their being – a character with a high card in their **Clubs Corner** is healthy and strong, whilst a character with a low card is sickly and weak. These are always temporary, because **Corners** change often during play.

At the beginning of play, and at the beginning of each session, the **Dealer** should randomly deal out the **Royals** to the **Players**. **Players** have the option of swapping their **Corners** among themselves at this point, if they believe one would be stronger in a certain area than

another. By declaring that you're the "**Ace of Hearts**", for instance, says that you're exemplifying mental strength within the party.

No **PC** may have two **Corners** that are the same rank of **Royal** – only one **Ace, King, Queen, or Jack** per **PC** - and no **PC** may possess two cards of the same **Suit**. Keep negotiating until everyone fits into these rules.

FINAL POINTS

Each **Player** then takes 5 **Chips** with which to **Invoke Aspects**.

Shuffle the **Player Deck** and the **Dealer Deck**. Each **Player** draws 5 cards from the **Player Deck** which only they may look at.

Collectively, the group of **PCs** is called the **Party**. The **PCs** in your **Party** that aren't your **PC** are called your **Allies**.

CONFLICTS

When the **Players** want to do something in the fiction, they can just do it. When the **Dealer** thinks something would work against them – a rival, an enemy, a force of nature, the character's own bodily limitations, etc. – a **Conflict** occurs.

Conflicts should only arise when they would make the game more interesting, and when things can go wrong. Navigating a storm, entering a hostile saloon, or pistols at dawn are all great **Conflicts**. Buying rope, riding a horse on a lazy afternoon, or having an open and calm conversation are not.

Conflicts revolve around **Tricks**, made up of a card played by the **Dealer** and a card played in retaliation by a **Player**. The side with the higher card wins the **Trick**.

The **Dealer** decides how many **Tricks** the **Conflict** is worth. The more **Tricks** there are, the longer and more difficult the **Conflict** will be. As a

flat rule, every **Conflict** goes until the **Players** have collectively taken that many **Tricks**, or the **Dealer** has taken **three Tricks** against them.

If the **Players** get their **Tricks** first, the thing they wanted to occur happens, and play continues in their favour. If the **Dealer** gets their three **Tricks** first, then what the **Players** wanted to occur doesn't happen, and something else goes wrong - maybe some **Very Bad Things Happen!**

As a guide to determining how many **Tricks** a **Conflict** is worth, follow:

3	Easy
6	Average
9	Difficult
12	Impossible
15	Legendary

Remember, regardless of difficulty, the **Dealer** only needs to claim **three Tricks** for the **Players** to lose a **Conflict!**

DETERMINING THE TRUMP

The **Dealer** determines the **Suit** of the **Conflict**, called the **Trump** – whichever one makes the most sense, given the **Suit** descriptions. You can use the following guide:

- ❖ **Hearts** (♥) are used for challenges of spirit, fear, love, courage, idealism, will power, or ideas. They could be debates, or entirely internal struggles with one's demons.
- ❖ **Diamonds** (♦) are used for challenges of words, cunning, trickery, deception, and the like. They could be gambling card games, negotiating a deal, conning someone.
- ❖ **Clubs** (♣) are used for physical struggles, brawls, battles, and bar fights. They could be fixing a broken axle on a cart before an opponent arrives, building defences for a town, or defending the ramparts from invasion.

- ❖ **Spades** (♠) are used for struggles where speed and finesse are the most important – pistol duels, races, chases, sniping or avoiding being sniped.

PLAYING CARDS AND **TAKING TRICKS**

The **Dealer** draws two cards from the **Dealer Deck**, and plays whichever they prefer into the playspace in front of the **PCs** engaged in the **Conflict**. Cards played by the **Dealer** need not match the **Trump**, but the choice is given so the **Dealer** can frame the scene better. The **Dealer** should then describe how the card manifests in the fiction, based on its **Suit** and its number – the higher that number, the more serious the threat, with the **Suit** describing the method or tactic being used.

A 10 of Hearts in a gun fight might be a courageous charge from an opponent, whilst a 2 of Spades might be a quick but poorly aimed volley of bullets.

Players must play a card on any cards that are played in front of them, otherwise they **Fold** and some **Very Bad Things Happen**. Both the number on the card, and the **Suit** is examined:

- ❖ If the **Player** plays a card higher than that played by the **Dealer**, that **Player** takes a **Trick**.
- ❖ If the **Player** plays a card lower than or equal to the **Dealer's** card, the **Dealer** takes a **Trick**.
- ❖ If the card's **Suit** matches the **Trump**, everything goes according to plan, and the **PC** doesn't suffer consequences.
- ❖ If the card's **Suit** doesn't match the **Trump**, then **Bad Things Happen**. This happens even if a **Trick** was taken – success at a cost.

When a **Player** plays a card, they should describe how their **PC** is acting to overcome the **Conflict** (even if they're not going to take a **Trick**, you should describe how the **PC** tried and failed to succeed in that moment.). This description should stem from both the **Suit** and

the number on the card, with higher numbers representing greater amounts of effort.

INVOKING ASPECTS

A **Player** may, at any time, **Invoke** one of their **Aspects** by playing a **Chip** and stating which **Aspect** they are calling on to aid them. If the **Aspect** makes narrative sense, then this is allowed. The **Dealer** and the **Party** collectively get to decide if an **Aspect** makes sense – if it doesn't make sense to someone at the table, keep explaining until it does, or until the **Dealer** decides that it isn't clear, and that the game to move on. **Players** may only call on each **Aspect** once per **Conflict**.

Invoking an Aspect allows a **Player** to draw another card and play another card, on their or an **Ally's** playspace to help them. The card played need not be the same card they drew. Note that with the above, two or more cards are cumulative – if you have a **4** and a **King** played on the same card, then you have a total of **17**.

If **Bad Things Happen** when a **Player Invokes an Aspect**, then that **Bad Thing** centres on, and threatens, that **Aspect** of that **PC**. Note that if the new card's **Suit** doesn't match the **Trump**, this means that **Bad Things Happen!**

GETTING BACK CHIPS

A **Player** restores 1 **Chip** at the end of any **Conflict** where a **Trick** was taken from them specifically (not from an **Ally**). This is regardless of success or failure in the **Conflict**, but represents the shifting of fate – when something bad happens, something good is right around the corner for the **PCs**. A **Player** cannot have more than 5 **Chips**.

GOTCHA!

A **Player** may also, at any time, swap one of their, or their **Ally's** played cards in the playspace with one of their **Corners** of the same **Suit** so long as the card that was in their **Corner** was higher than the one

swapped with. This can be done to suddenly change the situation and turn a failure into a success. Remember to describe this sudden change in the fiction!

NON-ROYALS IN THE CORNERS

When a **Non-Royal** is in a **Corner**, a **Player** must act as if their **PC** is somehow drained in that trait – if a **Non-Royal Heart** is a **Corner**, they must act as if their **PC** is mentally drained and weakened.

If at any time a **PC** finishes a **Conflict** without at least one **Royal** in a **Corner**, that **PC** faints, and **Very Bad Things Happen**, unless an **Ally** can swap one of their **Royals** with a **Non-Royal** of an **Ally** to help them.

REDRAWING CARDS AND SHUFFLING

The **Players'** hand is redrawn from the **Player Deck** when they are depleted, or at the end of a **Conflict**. Redraw up to a max of 5 cards.

If at any point the **Player Deck** or the **Dealer Deck** is depleted, return the cards from the relevant **Discard Pile** and reshuffle the depleted deck before continuing play.

BAD THINGS HAPPEN

When **Bad Things Happen**, the **PCs** suffer consequences. These consequences should first and foremost stem from the fiction. As the **Dealer**, imagine what could go wrong in the current situation – that thing does go wrong. It could be that the **PCs** are harmed (and can't play a certain **Suit** for a round), or they might lose their opportunity for action and need to find another way to solve the problem before them. Or maybe something unconnected but still ill-fated occurs. Imagine what is dramatic, and bring it to life.

As a guide, the card that the **Dealer** played when **Bad Things Happen** should tell you what sort of **Bad Thing** occurs:

- ❖ **Hearts (♥)** – they're tested or taxed mentally, something occurs to call into question their motivations or convictions, or their relationships are strained.
- ❖ **Diamonds (♦)** – they're not clever, quick, or witty enough to evade harm, suspicion, or they miss an opportunity to slip away, especially when it might cause collateral damage.
- ❖ **Clubs (♣)** – they're too weak, or they're taxed physically and are hurt whilst performing their action.
- ❖ **Spades (♠)** – they're too slow, or not skilled enough to prevent something bad from happening, especially when it damages something they care about.

In addition to the fiction shifting, the **Dealer** draws a card from the **Player Deck** and replaces the relevant **Corner** of that **Player** with that card, so long as it is lower than the current **Corner**.

When **Very Bad Things Happen**, it's like the above, but it's terrible to behold, and it changes the course of play completely – **PCs** are captured and put into danger, they lose something they love, or they are unable to do something they needed to do. The **Dealer** instead draws two cards, and picks which to replace a **Corner** with.

Whenever a **Player Invoked** an **Aspect** and **Bad** or **Very Bad Things Happen**, then those **Bad Things** focus on and threaten that **Aspect**. **Dealers**, look through crosshairs at everything the **Players** give you, and take those shots!

AFTER A CONFLICT

After a **Conflict**, discard all **Tricks** and used cards to their relevant **Discard Piles**. Make sure that **Player** cards and **Dealer** cards are put into the **Player Discard Pile** and the **Dealer Discard Pile** respectively.

HUNKERING DOWN

When a **Conflict** is over, and there's time to breathe and talk things through – to palaver – the **PCs** may **Hunker Down**. During this time, **Players** may freely trade their **Corners** amongst themselves, ignoring the normal restrictions from a **Gotcha!** Each **Player** may also request a single **Royal** from the **Player Deck** (including the **Discard Pile**) to replace one of their **Corners**.

Shuffle both the **Player Deck** and the **Dealer Deck** with their respective **Discard Piles**.

THE END AND MORE

A game of **Dirty Aces** ends when everyone feels something significant has been accomplished. Perhaps several **Conflicts** have been strung together, a story has been told, and everyone is satisfied with the victory (or defeat) of the **Party**. Perhaps the **Dealer** set out with a story in mind, and when that's concluded, the game can end. My favourite method is for everyone, at the beginning of play, to discuss where they think the adventure is going to go, and when it gets there (or some similarly interesting place) to end it.

If you would like to play **Dirty Aces** over several sessions, and see your **PCs** progress in terms of power and character growth, feel free to rewrite one **Aspect** per session completed to reflect a lesson learned, or a skill advanced. Alternately, or additionally, you can use the **Ace Up My Sleeve** special rule.

ACE UP MY SLEEVE

When a **PC** is particularly trained or experienced in a certain circumstance, they may play an **Ace** from a single **Suit** from the **Player Discard Pile**. You should note which **Ace** you have up your sleeve at the beginning of each session of play by drawing special effects – like shine-lines, bullet holes, or the like around the relevant **Corner**.

EXTRAORDINARY THREATS

Some threats are so extraordinary and powerful, that they require a massive amount of effort to overcome. In these situations, the **Dealer** may choose to use this special rule.

During a **Conflict**, the **Dealer** can play two cards into the playspace of the **PCs** that are involved. The values are cumulative, but only the **Suit** of the highest (or most interesting) card is used for the description.

Extraordinary Threats should only occur in the direst of circumstances, and should be used only for dramatic effect.



GLOSSARY

Ally: A PC in your Party that isn't you.

Aspect: A unique and cool thing about a PC that can be Invoked.

Bad Things Happen:

Consequences from PCs playing cards other than the Trump.

Chip: A token spent to Invoke an Aspect.

Conflict: A contest where the Players attempt to earn more Tricks than the Dealer.

Corner: One of the four Suits that governs an area of your PCs abilities.

Dealer: The Game Master – the player who controls everything in the world that isn't the PCs.

Dealer Deck: The deck of cards the Dealer uses, separate from the Player Deck.

Dealer Discard Pile: The place where discarded cards from the Dealer Deck are kept before being shuffled back into the Dealer Deck.

Invoke: Call upon an Aspect to bring it into play.

Non-Player Character (NPC): A character that isn't a PC – one that is run by the Dealer.

Non-Royal: A card valued 2 to 10, other than Jack, Queen, King, Ace.

Party: All the PCs together.

Player: The four players, other than the Dealer.

Player Character (PC): A character controlled by a Player.

Player Deck: The deck of cards the Players use, separate from the Dealer Deck.

Player Discard Pile: The place where discarded cards from the Player Deck are kept before being shuffled back into the Player Deck.

Playsheet: The special sheet the Players use to keep track of their PCs. Like a character sheet.

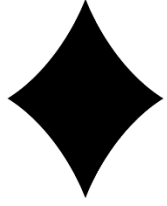
Playspace: The space in front of a Player, where the Dealer plays cards for them to beat during a Conflict.

Royal: A card valued 11 to 14 – Jack, Queen, King, Ace.

Suit: The symbol on the card – Heart, Diamond, Club, Spade.

Trick: A finished pair (or more) of cards that is won by either a Player or the Dealer.

Trump: The Suit at the centre of a Conflict.



DIRTY ACES PLAYSHEET

NAME

ASPECTS

