

### ***Durak*: A Russian Card Game**

*Durak* is a traditional Russian card game for two players.<sup>1</sup> The first player to get rid of all of her cards wins. Each player tries to accomplish this goal in game rounds that consist of a series of attacks and defenses. The loser, who has cards remaining when the other player runs out, earns the title of *durak*, Russian for “fool.”

The game uses only the following 24 cards from a standard 52-card deck: the 9, 10, J, Q, K, and A of all four suits (diamonds, hearts, spades, clubs). One player shuffles these cards, deals five cards (face down) to each player, and places the remaining, unused cards (face down) in a pile next to the game space. This pile of cards is called the “talon.” The dealer turns over the top card from the talon and places it underneath and perpendicular to the talon so that the card’s suit is visible. This card is out of play and not used in the game; its only purpose is to determine the “trump” or dominant suit for the game (e.g., if the card is the 9 of hearts, the trump suit will be hearts and the card’s rank of 9 is completely irrelevant to game play). Each player picks up and looks at her own five cards, termed her “hand.”

Play begins with the dealer as initial defender and the other player as attacker in the first round of the game. The attacker can play, face-up, any card from her hand, with the intent of forcing the defender to add that card to her hand. The defender can choose between two options: she can either pick up this card or defend against it. If the defender picks up this card, the attacker wins the round. Players then draw cards from the talon so that each player has a minimum of five in her hand, with the round’s loser (in this case, the defender) drawing first.

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<sup>1</sup> *Durak* can be played by 2, 4, or 6 players with variations of rules; however, game progress and goals remains identical. I will explain only the variation intended for 2 players.

The attacker, as winner of the previous round, remains the attacker and begins a new round by playing another card.

To defend against a card, the defender must do one of the following: (1) play a card in the same suit with a higher rank, or (2) play any card in the “trump” suit, because this suit can successfully defend against all others. If the attacking card is in the trump suit, then only a higher-ranked card in the trump suit can successfully defend against it. For example, suppose that the trump suit is hearts. The attacker plays a 10 of clubs. The defender can defend by placing the J, Q, K, or A of clubs or any rank of hearts on top of the 10 of clubs, so that the suits and ranks of both cards are visible. For the example, suppose that the defender plays the K of clubs and successfully defends.

When faced with a successful defense, the attacker may choose between two options: she can end the round by choosing to end her attack unsuccessfully, or she can continue her attack. If the attacker chooses to end her attack unsuccessfully, the pair of cards already played (here, the 10 and K of clubs) is discarded and removed from game play. If necessary, both players draw from the talon so that they hold a minimum of five cards, with the unsuccessful player (in this case, the attacker) drawing first. The previously defending player becomes the attacker in the next round.

If the attacker chooses to continue her attack, she now plays another card next to the pair of cards already played. The attacker’s next card must have the same rank of one of the cards already played. In our example, if the attacker continues attacking after the 10 and K of clubs have been played, the attacker can start her next attack with a 10 or a K of any suit. Suppose the attacker plays the 10 of diamonds. At this point, the defender again can choose between picking up all the cards already played that round (three cards in our example: 10 of clubs, K of clubs, 10

of diamonds), thus rendering the attack successful, or she can (if possible) defend again.

Suppose the defender successfully defends with a “trump,” playing the 9 of hearts against the 10 of diamonds. Now the attacker can again choose to end her attack (as before) or play the 10, K, or 9 of any suit to continue her attack. If the defender had instead trumped the 10 of diamonds with the 10 of hearts, then the attacker could only continue her attack by playing any 10 or K, the only ranks of cards available according to the rules.

The defender may defend up to five cards in any round. If the defender successfully defends five of the attacker’s cards, or at any point before that when the attacker can no longer continue, all the pairs of cards played are discarded, and players draw cards from the talon with the unsuccessful player (in this case, the attacker) drawing first, so that each player has a minimum of five cards. The defender begins a new round as attacker.

Play continues with players attacking or defending in this fashion until the talon runs out. At this point, one or both players cannot replenish their hands fully to a minimum of five cards each. The player who either attacks or defends with her last card is the game’s winner, and the other with cards remaining is the *durak* or fool. The *durak* should shuffle all 24 cards and deal again if the players decide to replay the game.

Russians play this game fervently, viciously, and repeatedly – so don’t be a fool!