

# War, sort of

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# War, *sort of*

## Abstract

This spin on the childish card game keeps the premise of high cards claiming cards your opponent has played for yourself. The version develops the original's simultaneous turn-taking in order to give you the choice to bide your time or act swiftly before your opponent switches the terms of the game.

## What you need

2-players

A deck of standard playing cards without jokers

## Starting the game

You and your opponent split the deck equally.

Hold all of your cards face down in one hand. Then flip the first two cards of your deck onto the table right in front of you face up. These are your "action cards."

## Gameplay loop

To start playing, flip the top card of your deck face up on your right hand side, a little in front of your action cards. Your opponent does the same with their first card simultaneously. Next, continuing to act at the same time, you and your opponent place the next card from your deck face up on the left hand side. Place the next card face up on top of the first on the right, then the next one to your left, and so on. There should be four stacks of cards slowly growing in the center of the table.

## Activation

As you flip over cards, you and your opponent are preparing to react to a particular circumstance. Whenever 3 out of the 4 top cards on the piles are the same color, red or black, then those piles are considered "active." This is when your action cards come into play.

## Playing Action Cards

Once the piles are active, you can do one of three things:

**Option 1:** do nothing, continue to bide your time, and let the piles grow.

**Option 2:** You can claim all of the cards in one of the active piles by playing one of your action cards of the same color and higher value than the top card on an active pile. Take all of the cards in that pile into your deck.

**Option 3:** You can “fill the whole”, by playing an ace or a 2 of any color on top of the “inactive pile.” Doing so does two things: you claim all cards in all four piles and add them to your deck, and you also inverse the value of all cards (see below)

The first player to play an action card correctly on a pile blocks any other action cards from being played. If you play an action card incorrectly, bring it back to right in front of you. Your opponent may play an action card unhindered if they so choose.

Once active piles have been resolved, deal yourself a new action card if you played one. Once you and your opponent both have two action cards in front of you, restart dealing cards onto the piles. A new action card may only be played once new cards have been added to the piles.

## Card value

When the game starts, kings are high, followed by queens, jacks, etc. all the way to 3. Whenever you play an ace to fill a whole, exclaim, “aces!” and either maintain or revert to the kings-high order. Whenever you play a 2 to fill a whole, exclaim, “2s!” which reverses the value of all the cards, meaning 3s are high, then 4s, 5s, etc. The ordered value is maintained if another 2 fills a whole, and is reversed again if anyone plays an ace.

## Winning

You win the game once you have claimed all the cards in the deck and your opponent has none.

## Design Process

I started this redesign of war with a lofty goal. The game war is the most simplistic simulation of war “IRL”: the side with bigger numbers wins. I thought that by distilling war IRL into a few more simple mechanics, I was bound to create an interesting game with meaningful player choice.

The first two mechanics I imagined were attacking and defending. An encouraging pair I thought, because that would naturally involve making a choice to do one or the other in the game. This is where the idea that eventually became “action cards,” was born. Initially, players started the game by lining up an ace, a king, and a queen in front of them out of the main play area. I thought these could be used at various times to “attack” and claim cards that were being played in the center of the table.

As these rules were taking shape in my head, I came upon a second axiom around which to organize my design. The game war, while un-engagingly simple, does have one interesting aspect that makes it stand out amongst other games played with standard playing cards: players act simultaneously. I thought this rhythm was worth preserving, so I started thinking of things to adapt from games like Egyptian Rat Screw and Dutch Blitz.

At first, both players were supposed to be building four different piles from their decks, similar to the final rules described above, but the activation triggers were different. I tested card “sandwiches” from Egyptian Rat Screw, which proved too chaotic to track with four piles. I tested all four piles having to match suites, but that took too long. Three out of four cards of the same color, finally proved to be both easy enough for players to notice, and frequent enough to maintain the playing cadence I was trying to emulate from the game war.

Once that was settled upon as the “trigger,” then the real headache began. How would players replenish their action cards once they used them to attack? What did it mean to attack? Simply playing a high card? What about defending? Was that just playing a low card? While testing, I realized I was making players acknowledge whatever luck gave them with an action, rather than giving them choices.

Figuring out how players would replenish action cards ended up focusing my design efforts. Because players were concentrating on keeping track of the activation trigger in the center of the table, getting new action cards had to be a mindless, automatic process that players could do by feeling. With those criteria in mind, I decided that action cards would have to simply be whatever card was at the top of the player’s deck. I also limited action cards to two per player. That way, they would have fewer cards to keep track of, but deciding which of the two cards to play would hopefully provide the meaningful choice needed.

I now had action cards as a manageable mechanic. However, using them to “attack” and “defend” was frustrating for both myself and my testers. Which card successfully attacked and which card successfully defended always came back to card value. Everyone felt things were being left to chance, just like in the game I was trying to fix. After banging my head against a wall with a few iterations, I decided to try a new approach. Maybe instead of making a new war card game by re-interpreting war IRL, I should keep one of the iconic mechanics from the original war card game and use it differently. That’s when I went back to highest value wins, and things clicked into place. There was a trigger (three cards of the same color), a way to win cards

(playing an action card with a higher value than the cards at the center of the table), and an automatic process to restock the action cards.

The final problem I discovered while testing this iteration were 2s. With aces high, 2s couldn't be played as action cards. If ever you flipped over a 2, you got stuck. Earlier in the attack-defend quagmire, I had tinkered with the idea that high cards could only attack, and low cards could only defend. The structure behind this bivalency bubbled up again, which somehow triggered the inspiration for the final role of aces and 2s. They became a kind of trump card, and gave the game a swingy-ness that would ensure you wouldn't get stuck with a "low" card for long.



An early version of testing when action cards were still all face cards.