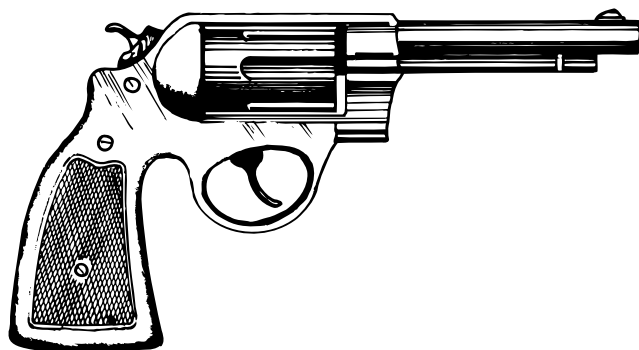


# GUN COWBOY



# GUN COWBOY

You are alone, You weren't always alone.

You are doing coin tricks in the rain.

*This is a solo journaling game about dead outlaws. They might not know they're dead yet, but they are. They will burn themselves up until only the bones remain.*

*This game uses a standard deck of 54 playing cards — jokers included — as an oracle deck to generate prompts. This game uses a single coin to resolve moments of risk. This game uses a journal and pen, or a keyboard and a word processor, or any other way to write down and reflect on what is happening to you. This game uses you, and is played solitaire.*

*This game was written by Che. This game was inspired by too many things to count, but I have a great fondness for the book Blood Meridian, the Red Dead Redemption video game series, and the movie The Assassination of Jesse James By the Coward Robert Ford.*

*This game is a western.*

*We should talk about that.*



## a note on genre, myth, and history

It may go without saying that the western is a loaded genre, but I'll say it again: the western is a loaded genre.

The myth of the american "Old" west is not just one which carries colonial stereotypes — it is a myth which sprang from and reinforced the processes of militarized and settler colonialism which defined and continues to define the american state. From the early (and often explicitly racist) "adventure tale" to the "golden" (and often explicitly racist) age of western film, from the spaghetti western to the neo-western to the acid western, westerns participate in a particular mode of mythmaking which, even isolated from the particular time and place of the "Old" "west" still builds on the the ideas which justified the genocidal establishment of a white nationalist state.

Consider *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, a 21st century pillar of the anti-western subgenre. It's a great movie, and the downfall of an all-american hero in the form of the legendary Jesse James is evocative. Yet we must also know that Jesse — like many of those who fled westwards after the end of the Civil War — was a confederate veteran and ex-guerilla. This all-american hero — like so many "all-american heroes" — put his life on the line in military service to protect the institution of chattel slavery.

Often even the most staunchly "anti"-western serves as a tool in the laundering of history and the transformation of those responsible for acts of genocide into blank culture-myths. *Assassination* references James's service in a "war that never ended" — but invites us not to engage the historical figure so much as the myth which has gathered around him.

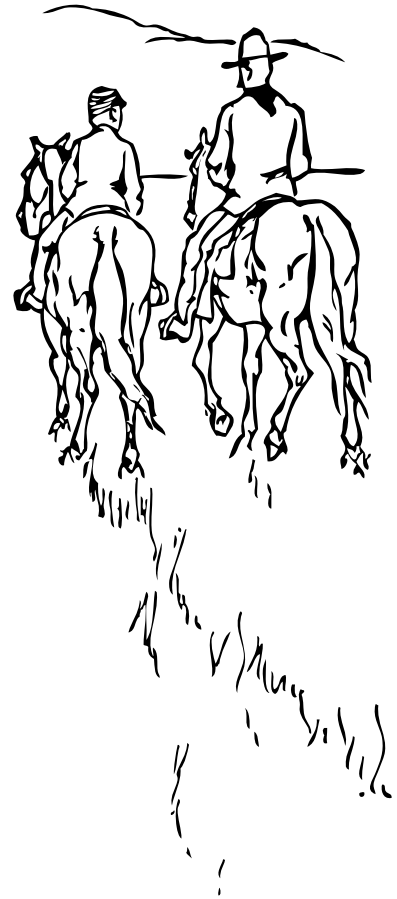
Yet the common themes of the western — liberation from the bondage and the pursuit of a better future for one's community — remain compelling to us today, and so westerns are still made, although the history of this kind of utopian thoughts in the US has often been a history of stolen land and of murder. The conflict between oppressive "civilization" and the free-dreaming outlaw — that is to say, the independent settler — has often manifested as just one more proxy war in a long line between two arms of a settler-colonial state.

This is a game about dead men walking, and the cost of a life of violence. This game is, no matter what I do to preface it, participation in the western myth. This is a game about the ways that myth destroys. The logic of the western — pulp or revisionist, spaghetti or acid or florida or neo — is a logic which does not free itself from the work of cultural empire building and mythic justification of genocide without focused, intentional work on the part of participants in the genre. The task of fighting that empire's symbolic language (which transforms a man with a gun into a god and violence into the ultimate freedom) falls to the authors, interpreters, editors — and, indeed, players — of new western media.

This may all seem like a long winded justification of why it's okay for me to write and publish a western in 2022. It is that, to some degree, but it's also an appeal to you, as a participant in this western, to engage myth carefully and critically. It is so, so easy to get caught up in the dream-weaving and lying, the intangible ideas which cover up all too material blood.

This is a game about a vanished, impossible dream — a dream which was rotten from the start, and which killed itself along with many, many others. In the end, only the dead remain. This game was written on the ancestral land of the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Ute peoples. They were stolen with guns and people and myths. As of this writing, the local government under which this game was written is in the process of drafting a land acknowledgement of their own, which, though it may also go without saying, is not the same as a land return.

*Che, March 10, 2022*

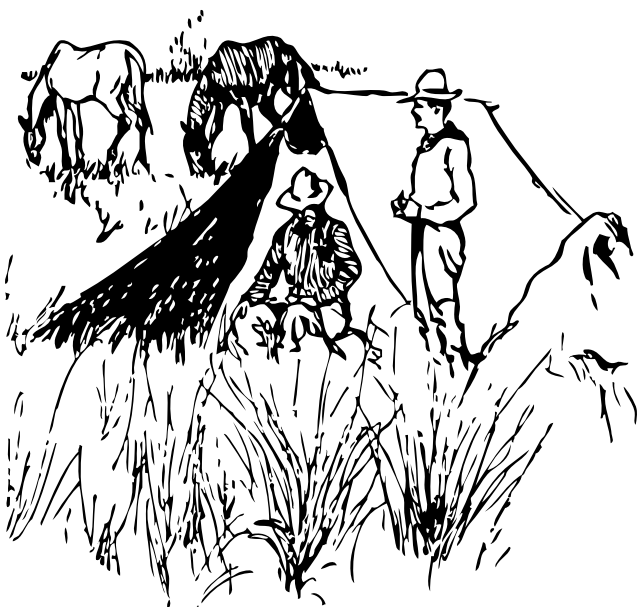


## **playing the game**

You are an outlaw at the end of a long career. Once upon a time you had a gang, a posse, a crew. You robbed banks and you held up stagecoaches and you ran from the law. That time is over now, and you are alone.

Now, you wander. Maybe you were looking for something, once — somewhere free from the federals, and the tin-star sheriffs, and the judges. Somewhere to put down roots. But you've forgotten how to do that. So you wander, and you write down what's been happening in your journal.

All you'll need to play is a deck of cards, a journal with some way to write in it, and at least one flippable coin — I'm a fan of silver dollars, if you've got them, but quarters will suffice



As you play GUN COWBOY you will generate situations — moments, encounters, and strangers on the trail — by drawing from a deck of playing cards and consulting the tables at the end of this guide. You will plan your escape from these situations using a set of attributes which will change and fluctuate as you play. Then you'll flip some coins to see whether your abilities fail you or not, and write down what's happened in your journal.

Begin every journal entry with *Today something funny happened* or *I've been thinking* or some other such simple opening. End every journal entry on the move again. No matter how much you want to stay, no matter how safe things feel — you'll have to move on. You can't put down roots no more.

## the deck and the journal

The deck, for the purposes of GUN COWBOY, consists of what is sometimes called a “standard” set of playing cards — four suits of thirteen cards plus two jokers, one black and one red. Your journal, for the purposes of GUN COWBOY, consists of whatever you've got with you in your saddle pack for writing and thinking on. Loose paper or bound paper or a keyboard — so long as it lets you reflect for a bit and leave something behind, once you're gone.

At the start of each journal entry, draw three cards and lay them facedown in a row. Flip the first card over and read the prompt aloud — this card is the past, that which has happened in a place just before you come riding up the bend. Ask yourself: what happened here five minutes ago? Five years? Now flip the second card and consult the prompt. This card is the moment, what is happening right now. This might be the person calling the shots, or it might be what this place looks like currently, or it might be a spiritual moment, which you come upon internally. Flip the third card and consult. This is the dilemma, the problem or choice facing those present in this moment, which you may help to resolve or exacerbate.

Read these cards as broadly or as narrowly as you wish. Read these cards like you'd read the tarot. If you don't like a card, draw another.

Allow the past to draw you in. Allow the moment to engage you. Allow the dilemma to matter. Let yourself feel things for folks and places as you cross their paths and rest at their edges. Then leave them behind. Once upon a time you might have stayed here, settled down with a love and a land and a life. No longer.

Using one of your four attributes, move on.



## the attributes

You have four attributes. They are **GOOD** (stand tall, stay true, act with valor), **QUICK** (witted, footed, eyed. be smart, sharp, and cool), **UGLY** (labor, scar over, callus. work, impose, let your body take the blow), and **GUN**. **GUN** is used to do violence and to kill. You had a gun once. It was oiled and clean and took bullets and lives, but now it is at the bottom of the river or buried deep among your meager possessions or pawned to buy you dinner in a town some miles back. Each of your attributes begins with a value of three, except for **GUN**. **GUN** always starts at zero.

When things are in motion and you must escape a situation, determine your course of action first. Only once the plan is clear in your mind should you ask yourself which of your three attributes (or **GUN**) best characterizes your action. Increase this attribute — and decrease all others — by one. When you were young you were complex, but with age you have grown simple.

Do not reduce **GUN**. **GUN** will never decrease. Now, flip a coin and call the toss. If you accurately call the toss, your abilities do not fail you and you escape the situation. You have as many tries to get it right as the number of points in the attribute which characterizes your escape. This is not true for **GUN**. **GUN** does not require a coin toss. When you do violence, you succeed — at the violence, anyway.

If you fail to correctly call the toss and run out of tries, you still escape, for now, but the situation is not resolved. Subtract one point from the skill you used and know that someone is hunting you. Remember, none of this matters for **GUN**. **GUN** never fails. Flip if you want, call if you want, but know that it is all for show.

If you doubt in your ability to escape a situation, you may forgo rolling and just hit the road. Treat this narratively a failure, but do not adjust any stats.

Either way, write in your journal. Tell us what you saw, how you felt, how you helped — and how you got out.



## resolution

There comes a time when you are all burned up. That's just the way it is, and will be.

If it ever comes to pass that you have only one attribute with a score above zero, the game ends. For the purposes of this measurement, **GUN** does not count as an attribute. **GUN** means nothing, in the end.

Subtract the value of your **GUN** skill from whichever other attribute remains, and consult the resolution chart below for one last prompt. Tell that story. Tell as much of it in your journal as you can, but remember where you're speaking from. There comes a moment when you have to put down the book, and pick up your gun, and go out to face the light.

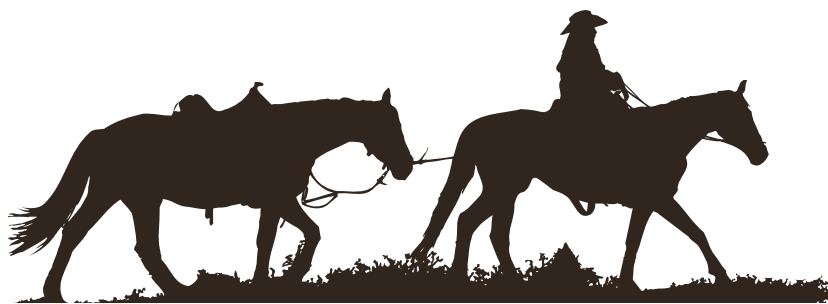
End your entry, and say goodnight.

## say farewell (and howdy)

And that's a wrap on GUN COWBOY. It's up to you from here on out. Thank you for playing, or at the very least reading this far. If you have thoughts, feedback, or just want to say howdy you can find me on twitter @che\_bur\_ashka. You probably got this from my itch page, but if you didn't, it's sche.itch.io. If you didn't get the game from there, don't worry about it. We've all been bandits, once a-time or two.

Stay warm, cowboy, and wander safely. There's some charts and such below, I put 'em on a page to themselves, so they'd look all pretty-like.

*Che, March 10, 2022.*



## **resolution & oracle charts**

**0**

**gun alone**

If your final score is zero or less than zero, i.e. if your GUN score is equal or higher than the remaining attribute, you are overcome by your reliance on violence. You will die as you lived: brutally, swiftly, and to the smells of smoke and iron. Tell the story of doing final violence, all that you know how to do.

**1 - 2**

**nothing much**

If your final score is one or two, you come to nothing remarkable, in the end. You blend into the ocean of migrants in the west and vanish in the screaming maelstrom of the modern world, or die one day in the desert and are forgotten, absolutely. Tell the story of ending, alone.

**3**

**memory**

If your final score is three exactly, you pass into the memory of the people you have met. You are remarkable — remarkable for them, anyway — and pass, without a footnote or a citation, into the local lore of the places you have been. It is not the same as being remembered. Tell the story of re-encountering someone you met once, and knowing you are not the person they remember. This is a form of death.

**4**

**faith 'till it breaks**

If your final score is four or higher, you have committed yourself altogether to the pursuit of a single quality. You are, perhaps, the goodest, quickest, or ugliest outlaw in the whole history of the west, and your skills carry you on out of this dangerous life and into safety. You come to rely on them. And then, one day, they fail you. Tell that story.



### **ACE OF SPADES, THE JAMMED GUN**

*Someone sits with their back against a tree, a revolver laid across their lap. It is only when you get close that you notice details: the decayed skin peeling away, flashes of yellowed bone.*

### **TWO OF SPADES, THE DUEL**

*They meet at dawn, or High Noon, or some other, resonant, time. They face off. Hands hover over holsters. It would be dishonorable for either of them to be remembered as having drawn first.*

### **THREE OF SPADES, THE STANDOFF**

*A complicated mess. Three old friends stand in a wide triangle. One gun each. To shoot first is to get shot second, and to kill is to kill an old friend. This was always the way this was going to be.*

### **FOUR OF SPADES, THE CAMP**

*The poacher isn't here, but his stuff is. There's food on the table and there's pelts and skins stretched on wide frames. Ripe for the taking. Or the waiting, if you'd like to meet him.*

### **FIVE OF SPADES, THE BLOODBATH**

*Something happened here. Something bad. Two, three dozen dead. None left to bury them. There was a fire. It takes a certain kind of learning to read these kinds of tales.*

### **SIX OF SPADES, THE DEVIL**

*He is standing at the crossroads with a long coat and a gun. He will kill you, if he can.*

### **SEVEN OF SPADES, THE GHOST**

*They say she comes for all sinful men. They say she leaves children crying in their cribs. They say she seduces folk away from the path, leads 'em to fall. But what if you've already hit the bottom?*

### **EIGHT OF SPADES, THE FORT**

*It squats, wide and ugly, looking out over the valley from the highest nearby peak. The trees are not permitted to come within forty yards of the palisades. They are rumored to have a cannon.*

### **NINE OF SPADES, THE BATTERY**

*Boom, boom, boom! That mighty sound like thunder. There is artillery firing, but on what?*

### **TEN OF SPADES, THE BATTALION**

*It marches like a forest going to die, all long rifles and shouted commands. Cavalry ride ahead, to screen and to scout. Where they come, few remain.*

### **JACK OF SPADES, THE DEPUTY**

*They have recently come up in the world, and wear their tin star proud-like.*

### **QUEEN OF SPADES, THE BELLE**

*She could never conceive of a life without the comforts of home.*

### **KING OF SPADES, THE SHERIFF**

*He is old, and feels it in his bones. A career cop. The kind who deserves shooting.*

### **BLACK JOKER: AN OLD ACCOMPLICE TRACKS YOU DOWN**

*What could they possibly want from you?*

### **ACE OF HEARTS, THE POSSIBILITY OF RAIN**

*It has been a long, dry ride. You are thirsty. The road is thirsty. The whole world is thirsty. You want nothing more than rest, and water, and to sleep somewhere cool and comfortable tonight. Did you feel that?*

### **TWO OF HEARTS, THE PARABIOTIC MOSSES**

*Strange, crawling plants. They only grow along the north side of trees, so it's said. A scientist once told you it's about the sunlight they get, you know. There's something you can't quite shake.*

### **THREE OF HEARTS, GOD-IN-THE-TREETOPS**

*When you look out from the highest place over the deep green and gray of the forest below, it is impossible to ignore the divinity in this earth.*

### **FOUR OF HEARTS, A HERMIT'S STEAD**

*Abandoned. Who knows where they go? But they are gone, leaving behind shelter and a fireplace and, if you take them, supplies. Perhaps they won't mind.*

### **FIVE OF HEARTS, THE OVERGROWTH**

*This settlement was sprawling, once. Its central lodge — palatial. A monstrosity of sawn wood and brick. But the green has torn it all down, in the end. Torn it all down, down, down.*

### **SIX OF HEARTS, THE DEVIL**

*He is standing at the cross-roads in a clerical collar, holding a goblet. He'll sell you a wish, if you take a sip.*

### **SEVEN OF HEARTS, THE LAND IS OUR MOTHER**

*She remembers it all. Isn't that clear? Don't you feel in your heart that she remembers?*

### **EIGHT OF HEARTS, THE RESERVATION**

*This is the only place they are allowed to live, thanks to decisions they had no say in and treaties they did not sign. They survive, despite the odds.*

### **NINE OF HEARTS, THE STARS!**

*Look at them, look at them. Whirling overhead. There is something greater than all this.*

### **TEN OF HEARTS, THE FOREST AND THE TREES**

*The woods stretch on forever. They are unconquerable, divine. They are being cut down, one by one.*

### **JACK OF HEARTS, THE ITINERANT**

*They tend to too many flocks, and wear thin.*

### **QUEEN OF HEARTS, THE SISTER**

*She wears blacks, and believes in the potential of every soul.*

### **KING OF HEARTS, THE HERMIT**

*He is a steward of the land. He walked down the same road as you, once, but turned away.*

### **RED JOKER: A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH AN OLD FRIEND**

*What have they done to survive?*

### **ACE OF CLUBS, THE SINGULAR BLOOM**

*Here, in a field of mud which once was a forest, a single blossom sprouts among the stumps. It is green and growing with potential, laboring to survive among the receipts of great labor.*

### **TWO OF CLUBS, THE FISTFIGHT**

*The rage of those who have little else. Outside the bar, outside the stable, outside the factory. They brawl with each other, fists and kicks and biting.*

### **THREE OF CLUBS, THE CLAN**

*They are a sprawling web of inter-relationship, part blood and part choice and stronger than either. They strive, together, and keep their place afloat.*

### **FOUR OF CLUBS, THE SHANTY-TOWN AROUND THE MINE**

*It sprung up of its own accord. There is life here, and labor. There are people making do. An ignorant person would call it a chaos. It operates by its own rules, and serves its own needs.*

### **FIVE OF CLUBS, THE ABANDONED WORKSITE**

*This place was a hub of activity once, a beehive. Now it is empty, and not even worth the cost of tearing it down for scrap.*

### **SIX OF CLUBS, THE DEVIL**

*He is standing at the crossroads in dirt-stained workwear, holding a shovel. He needs a favor.*

### **SEVEN OF CLUBS, THE CUNNING WOMAN**

*She sells poultices, potions, and herbs. She can cure all ills or grant great fortune. She will not brew love potions, or endeavor to raise the dead.*

### **EIGHT OF CLUBS, THE COMPANY TOWN**

*It was designed by their greatest experts, to be clean and mechanical and policed. It was made, by those who live here, dirty and human and unpolice-able. It is inhabited by those with a need.*

### **NINE OF CLUBS, THE DIVINE TRAIN!**

*Look how it blasts through the wilderness! Hear the horns! Hear it go!*

### **TEN OF CLUBS, THE UNION PICKETT**

*They stand together, they fight together, they rise together, they fall together. They will seize their share of the house that they have built.*

### **JACK OF CLUBS, THE MIGRANT**

*They are hungry, hungry. They go where there's work. They are one of thousands.*

### **QUEEN OF CLUBS, THE UNION LASS**

*She stands above the crowd, waving the banner of the workers. She is a symbol, and she is a person. She struggles to reconcile the two.*

### **KING OF CLUBS, THE HOMESTEADER**

*He has carved something from this land by the work of his hands. Something firm, and real, and stolen.*

### **BLACK JOKER: AN OLD ACCOMPLICE TRACKS YOU DOWN**

*What could they possibly want from you?*

### **ACE OF DIAMONDS, THE COIN IN THE GUTTER**

*It glitters among the mud, discarded or forgotten. It is value misplaced. Do you stoop and pick it up?*

### **TWO OF DIAMONDS, THE ADVERTISING WAR**

*The advertisement — the birth of a new, american art. These two live in the world of ideas and symbols, and will drag each other down into the (imagined) mud.*

### **THREE OF DIAMONDS, THE FAMILY BUSINESS**

*The business is as old as the family and as new as every generation reimagining it. It may be restrictive, but so is a tomato lattice. It lets them grow. What are they selling?*

### **FOUR OF DIAMONDS, THE CARAVAN AND THE PEDDLER**

*These folk move where they can, carrying an ecosystem on their back. The things they provide are invaluable, though unacknowledged. What treasure do they keep?*

### **FIVE OF DIAMONDS, THE TAPPED MINE**

*The gold here is gone, the iron long-forged. They moved on, once there was nothing else to extract. What lives here now?*

### **SIX OF DIAMONDS, THE DEVIL**

*He is standing at the cross-roads in a silk velvet suit the color of red wine. He wants to buy your soul.*

### **SEVEN OF DIAMONDS, THE CURSED TREASURE**

*Rumors of gold have lured dozens to their death. When found, it shines with an ethereal light. It's true owner is long, long departed. This is their legacy.*

### **EIGHT OF DIAMONDS, THE NEW DEVELOPMENT**

*They've hacked down a grove and built hotels and lodges. New houses that look just like the ones in every new town. The road is not yet broken in. There is money to be made here, for someone to invest.*

### **NINE OF DIAMONDS, THE WONDERS OF MODERNITY**

*A triumph of science and a wonder of engineering. The new world is here on display. Look at it! It dazzles.*

### **TEN OF DIAMONDS, THE CIRCUS**

*This place is a glitz of glamor and light. It is a hustling bustling shuffle. What do they steal from you, and what wonders do you see?*

### **JACK OF DIAMONDS, THE SALESMAN**

*They would do anything for a commission.*

### **QUEEN OF DIAMONDS, THE SUFFRAGETTE**

*She wants so badly to participate.*

### **KING OF DIAMONDS, THE MOGUL**

*He could rest on his laurels and does, sending out fingers to find him more.*

### **RED JOKER: A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH AN OLD FRIEND**

*What have they done to survive?*