DEGREES OF DIFFICULTY

A solo journaling role playing game
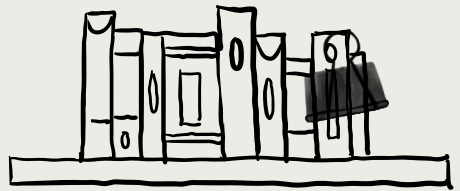
By Shawn Graham

WHAT IS A
SOLO JOURNALING RPG?

'Degrees of Difficulty' is a solo role playing game, where you take on the persona of a grad student newly arrived in a Digital Humanities program.

You use cards and dice to generate event prompts that you react to, chronicling what happens in a journal. A block tower represents the precariousness of your situation. Sometimes, things happen that knock you for a loop - pull from the tower and see if you can keep it together.

Some combinations of cards offer other surprises. Pulling the Ace of Hearts represents one path to a 'win'. There are others.

YOU WILL NEED

- Standard Deck of Cards: Each suit represents different challenges in your program
- Block Tower: Represents your academic progress and work-life balance
- Tokens: These represent your completed work and evidence of progress
- Two six-sided dice: Used for handling unexpected challenges
- A journal to record your journey
- Academic atmosphere (a quiet library corner, a busy campus coffee shop, your favorite study spot)
- Coffee (optional but recommended)

If you don't have these, you can use the game pad at
https://shawngraham.github.io/solo-rpg

Acknowledgements
This work is inspired by Quinn Dombrowski, who leads an actual live-action DH RPG with their classes. How lucky those students are!
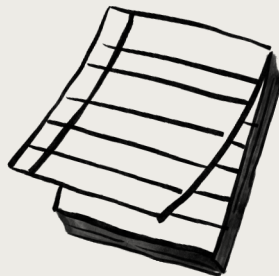
By the way, you don't have to accept the prompts as written. If you can see a reasonable way that a prompt should be altered, by all means, do so.

YOU SIT DOWN AT THE COMPUTER, AND, FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS, OPEN THE 'TERMINAL'

"Digital Humanities combines traditional research methods with computational analysis," the department website promises. But as you look at the required courses - programming, statistics, literary theory, historical methods - you wonder how anyone manages to bridge these different worlds.

You have just started grad school, moving to a new city to do this. Your MA thesis in Digital Humanities represents your attempt to contribute something meaningful to humanities scholarship via computational methods. Your undergraduate degree in English Literature prepared you well for close reading, but Python still feels like a foreign language. Your humanities professors want theoretical frameworks; your dh prof insists that the tech is the theory.

The clock is ticking. Funding is limited. Imposter syndrome is rearing its head. And your first semester starts.... now.

You open the 'terminal' program, and try to decipher the 'getting started' information in the syllabus. The cursor blinks steadily on your screen, waiting.

YOUR FIRST
ENTRY
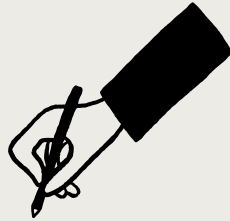
What made you choose Digital Humanities? What was your undergraduate background? What do you hope to contribute to the field? What scares you most about this interdisciplinary journey?

Shuffle the deck and build the tower. Roll Id6 and draw that many cards - these represent your first week's experiences. Follow the instructions on the cards and record your reflections.

Then progress deeper, one challenge at a time, toward your goals...

If the tower falls, you have lost your work-life balance and must take a leave of absence to reassess.

If you run out of tokens, you lack sufficient progress to continue in the program.

A LIBRARY OF EVENTS
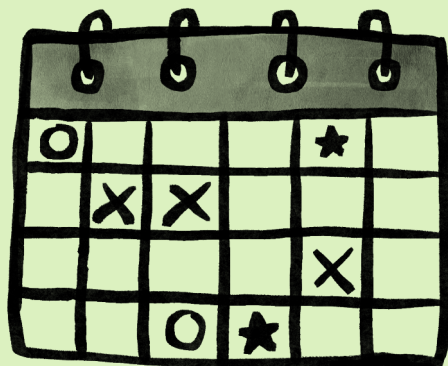
SPADES: TECHNICAL CHALLENGES
"EVERY ERROR MESSAGE IS A LEARNING
OPPORTUNITY."

HEARTS: ACADEMIC RELATIONS
"FINDING YOUR PLACE BETWEEN DISCIPLINES."

DIAMONDS: RESOURCES AND TIME
MANAGEMENT
"BALANCE IS NOT SOMETHING YOU FIND, IT'S
SOMETHING YOU CREATE."

CLUBS: PERSONAL GROWTH
"SOMETIMES THE BIGGEST BREAKTHROUGHS
COME FROM ADMITTING WHAT YOU DON'T
KNOW."

SOMETIMES, CRAP JUST HAPPENS

Sometimes, dice rolls help determine the outcomes of events. Unless otherwise instructed, assume I die.

When rolling, consider the context of the academic or technical challenge being faced:

> I-3: The outcome creates additional work, stress, or other negatives (3 represents the worst outcome)

> 4-6: The outcome represents progress, understanding, or other positives (6 represents the best outcome)

When facing technical challenges (signalled by the command "Debug"):

Roll 2d6:

> 2-5: Need significant help/revision
> 6-8: Can solve with some guidance
> 9-I2: Successfully resolved independently

You might end up rolling twice for a given card - once to resolve the debugging problem, and again to resolve the larger context.

SPADES: TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

Ace: Successfully complete your first programming tutorial. Add two tokens.

King: Your code works but you don't fully understand why. Roll dice to determine if you take time to study the fundamentals or move forward with your partial understanding.

Queen: The documentation for a crucial library is outdated. Roll dice to determine how you approach learning the new version - or whether you bother.

Jack: A key script stops working after a system update. Roll die to determine your troubleshooting approach.

10: Your visualization isn't showing what you expected. Debug.
- Positive: Ask for help in lab meeting (add 1 token)
- Negative: Spend hours trying to fix it alone (lose 2 tokens to lost time, pull 1 block)

9: Discover you need to clean your dataset manually. Roll.
- Positive: Develop systematic approach (lose 1 token to time spent)
- Negative: Rush through the process (pull 1 block)

8: Your analysis requires learning a new statistical concept. Debug.
- Positive: Take an online course (lose 2 tokens to time investment)
- Negative: Copy code without understanding (pull 2 blocks)
- Or find study group (roll 2d6, 7+ gain understanding, gain 2 tokens)

7: Version control becomes confusing with multiple drafts.
- Positive: Set up proper Git repository (lose 1 token to setup time)
- Negative: Keep multiple folder copies (pull 1 block)

6: Server space is running out mid-analysis.
- Roll 1-3: Panic and delete old files (roll 2d6, 4 or less lose 2 tokens)
- Roll 4-6: Request more space (pull 1 block)

5: Code works on your laptop but not on department computers.
- Positive: Document environment setup (pull 1 block from time spent)
- Negative: Only work from home (lose 2 tokens to isolation)
- Or seek IT help (roll 2d6, 8+ for success)

4: Need to integrate two incompatible tools.
- Positive: Learn API documentation (lose 2 tokens to learning curve)
- Negative: Manual data transfer (pull 1 block)
- Or find alternative tools (roll 2d6, 7+ find solution)

3: Realize your code isn't properly commented.
- Add documentation now (add 1 token but pull one block from stress)
- Negative: Leave it for later (pull 1 block)
- Or pair program with classmate (roll 2d6, 9+ improve code quality)

2: Computer crashes during final analysis.
- Positive: Restore from backup (add 1 token but pull 1 block from stress)
- Negative: Recreate work (lose 1 token, pull 1 block from stress)

HEARTS: ACADEMIC RELATIONS

Ace: Opportunity to present at graduate student conference! Set aside. At the end of each turn, roll d6. On 6, add a token. When you get to I5 tokens, attempt THE GRADUATE CONFERENCE (See THE ENDING OF THINGS below).'

King: Meeting with advisor reveals different expectations for your project. Roll the die to determine how you handle the conversation. Pull I block if the interaction is negative, add I token if the interaction is positive.

Queen: A humanities professor questions your computational methods while a computer science professor questions your theoretical framework. How do you respond? Roll the die.

Jack: Need to explain your methodology to your parents who are bankrolling your degree. Roll to determine how well this goes. Pull I block if the interaction is negative.

I0: Department seminar discussion highlights gaps in your background knowledge.
- Positive: Ask questions openly (gain respect, add I token)
- Negative: Stay quiet (lose I token to missed learning)

9: Opportunity to join digital humanities working group.
- Positive: Commit time (add I token, gain community, but pull I block for time impact)
- Negative: Focus on solo work

8: As an in-class exercise, your prof has you peer-review each other's work, anonymously. The feedback seems contradictory and petty.
- Positive: Find synthesis between perspectives (gain I token)
- Negative: Get overwhelmed by competing demands (pull I block)

7: Traditional humanities scholar you take other courses with critiques computational approach in prominent popular magazine. Does this mean they won't take your work seriously?

6: The system for allocating teaching assistantships assigns you to a class completely outside your discipline and interests. The prof wants you to grade essays. You don't feel qualified to do this.

HEARTS: ACADEMIC RELATIONS

5: Department politics affect resource allocation. All grad students now have to 'hot desk' and share a single computer. Your supervisor's nemesis secures extra space for their grad student, which makes the situation worse.

- Positive: Navigate diplomatically (pull 1 block for stress but maintain relationships)
- Negative: Take sides (lose 2 tokens, pull 2 blocks for stress) Or focus on your work and suck it up (roll 2d6, 6+ avoid drama; if the roll fails, pull 2 blocks for stress)

4: The PI on a project that you have secured a research assistantship on wants you to sign an agreement stating that you will not use the data for any research other than that which they expressly permit (including your thesis!)

- Positive: You make the best of the situation
- Negative: You go ahead and integrate some of the data into your thesis work; your supervisor eventually smooths things out, but at a cost (pull 2 blocks)

3: Faculty decide that digital work has to be made 'equivalent' to written work, and the department now wants you to indicate 'how many words' your interactive visualization of an 18th century correspondence network is equivalent to.

- Positive: Approach the task in good faith (pull 1 block)
- Negative: Approach the task in good faith, but discover the task was not meant in good faith (lose 1 token)

2: Teaching Assistant duties, research assistant duties, contributions to the DH society, personal relationships, course work, and family issues all clamour for your time - all at the same time.

- Positive: Develop a scheme to prioritize (but pull 1 block since you feel guilty about prioritizing)
- Negative: Fall behind on thesis (lose 2 tokens to stress)
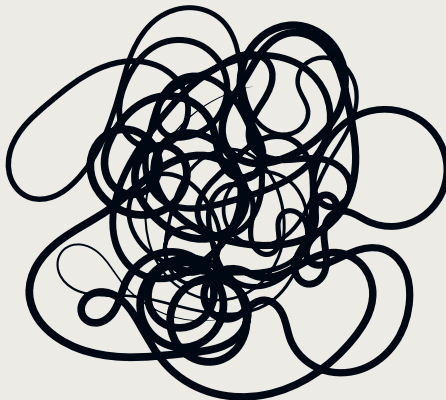
DIAMONDS: RESOURCES AND TIME MANAGEMENT

Ace: Secure additional funding for next semester. Add two tokens.

King: Grant deadline approaches while technical issues mount. Roll die to determine your prioritization strategy.

Queen: Library workshop offers new research tools. Roll die to determine if you can fit it into your schedule (and how; you might have to shift priorities).

Jack: You have the opportunity to travel to a conference, but the department student travel fund is already used up by other students. Roll die to explore alternative funding possibilities. If you can go, add I token.

I0: Perfect dataset discovered behind paywall.
- Positive: Find through library resources (gain I token)
- Negative: Revise methodology (pull 2 blocks) Or apply for small grant (roll 2d6, 9+ gain access)

9: Computer upgrade required for analysis.
- Positive: Department provides resources (gain I token)
- Negative: Use personal funds (lose 2 tokens) Or share lab resources (roll 2d6, 7+ find solution)

8: Time conflict between important lecture and coding workshop.
- Positive: Record lecture (pull I block but maintain learning)
- Negative: Miss one event (lose I token) Or negotiate alternative timing (roll 2d6, 8+ attend both)

7: Software license expires mid-analysis.
- Positive: Find open-source alternative (pull I block for transition)
- Negative: Pay personally (lose 2 tokens)

6: There's a journal article that seems like it would be very important to read and consider. Unfortunately, it's paywalled and your library can't afford to pay the ransom, er, subscription fee. You'll have to go without... though your fellow student tells you about Scihub. Do you look for it there?
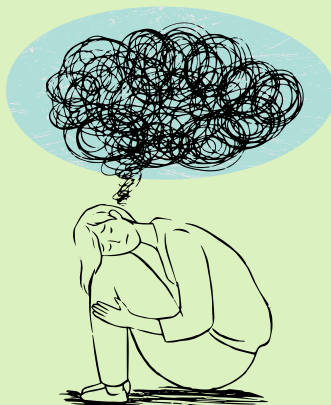
DIAMONDS: RESOURCES AND TIME MANAGEMENT

5: You are introduced to Zotero, JabRef, Tropy, Obsidian, and a whole host of citation and research management software. It's a bit overwhelming.
- Positive: You find a sensible tutorial and integrate these tools into a daily research workflow. Describe the flow. Add I token.
- Negative: You become overwhelmed by the tutorials, options, settings, plugins, 'best practices', and decide to just keep everything in a single word doc. Pull I block.

4: Your computer dies. How will you replace it?

3: Your prof talks about ideas concerning 'data sovereignty', FAIR and CARE principles... and you realize this has serious implications for the work you were hoping to do for your thesis.

2: The community group whose archive you were going to work with is having second thoughts. You had pitched some sort of public-facing resource... but they're not sure if its a good idea for their materials to be made available this way. Roll 2d6. If you roll anything other than a I2, you need to reconfigure your approach to address their concerns. If you roll a I2, they agree to continue as before... but you've lost a lot of time and you need to rebuild trust. Lose 2 tokens.

CLUBS: PERSONAL GROWTH & MENTAL HEALTH

Ace: You realize that even when tech or a particular method 'breaks' or 'fails', the way it breaks is itself illuminating. What if you sought out these breakages? Add 2 tokens.

King: During office hours, when it's just you and some other grad students waiting quietly for undergrads who never come, you all get to talking. One of you reveals how the stress of all this... newness... is getting to them. How do you react? Roll. If the result is 1 - 3, pull one block.

Queen: Your seminar involves 'unessays'. You've never had that kind of ...freedom, before. Do you buy-in to it? Roll.

Jack: Imposter syndrome strikes hard today, as a new technique is introduced in your core seminar. Pull one block.

10: You attend a job fair with a friend in another program. Recruiters seem more interested in them than you.
- Positive: You explain DH to the recruiters most impressively
- Negative: You try to explain DH, but are met with blank stares. Pull 1 block.

9: The workload is getting to you. Roll to find out how or if you're dealing with it well.

8: You're the first in your family to go to grad school. Does your family understand or support what you're doing? Roll.

7: The 'hidden curriculum' is hindering your relationship with your advisor. Roll to figure this out.

6: Your relationship with your partner/spouse/close friend is being impacted by the daily stress. Describe how, and what you're trying to do about it - roll.

5: You take up (or return to) a non-digital hobby. What do you do? How does it make you feel?

4: Social events put on by the DH Society offer an outlet for stress, and a chance to connect. Roll to see how the latest event went.

3: For once, everything comes together just right. You're feeling great, the work is going well, and you're on top of everything. The next time a prompt tells you to pull a block, ignore it.

2: Everything sucks. The weather is cold and grey. Getting out of bed is a struggle. Psych yourself up to go to class.

SURPRISES

If you should happen to pull four Queens, Jacks, or Kings ignore the individual card prompts and follow these ones instead:

Four Queens
If you draw four queens, your supervisor has integrated your contributions into a research article and made you a co-author. Add 5 tokens.

Four Jacks
The university communications department finds your work really 'sexy' and takes your photo for a feature article on the main page of the university website. Most of your peers are happy for you - except for one, who embarks on a campaign of micro-aggressions. Pull two blocks.

Four Kings
Something wonderful has happened in your life, beyond your academic work. It causes you to re-think your plans. Grad school can always wait. Withdraw in good standing and pursue this opportunity!
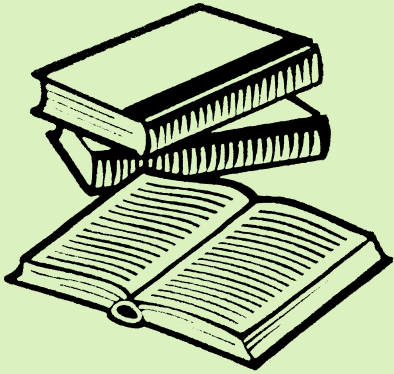
THE ENDING OF THINGS

The Graduate Conference

Having drawn the Ace of Hearts and collected I5 tokens, you may attempt THE GRADUATE CONFERENCE. This represents your moment to share your digital humanities research with the broader academic community. Draw three cards. Each represents a different aspect of your presentation that members of the audience question you on:

Spades: Technical flaws | Hearts: Source Data | Diamonds: Analytical Claims Clubs: Secondary Literature

Take the face value of each card (A,K,Q,J = I0) For each card:

- Add +I to that value for each block pulled during your journey (as best as you can remember)
- Subtract -I from that value for each 5 tokens you possess beyond the required I5
  - This sum is your 'challenge' value.
- Roll d26: If the value rolled is higher than the challenge, you handled the question well.

At least two questions well-handled represents a triumphant conference presentation. Record your final entry: What were you questioned on? How did you answer it? What conversations emerged from your presentation? What unexpected connections were made? In due course, you take these lessons and successfuly integrate them into your thesis, which the External Examiner explicitly compliments during the examination.

If you fail to achieve two successes, you may try again at the NEXT graduate conference after collecting 5 more tokens, but must pull I blocks to represent preparation time for your next presentation opportunity.

But if you don't succeed after two annual conferences, you must apply for an extension to remain at the university. Loose all tokens except 5 then continue playing.

AFTERWORD

Our expectations of grad school can sometimes be formed from our ideas around 'ideal' experiences. This RPG presents many less-than-ideal situations.

This game gives you a chance to contemplate those situations, to ask 'what would I do if...'

When things break, we often learn more than when we contemplate the perfect, unbroken object.

My hope with this simulation is that through it you are able to confront, in a private and safe way, some of the issues that might emerge, and have a plan for when they do.

Fail Gloriously!