

Michael Hrechun

ART 380

Assignment C

### Durak

Durak is a Russian card game that has been popular across much of former Soviet controlled Europe since the late 1900's. The name ("дурак" in Russian) can be translated to English as "fool" or "stupid," which is an appropriate name given that it is a game with no winner, but one single loser. The object of the game is to avoid being the loser and thereby insure that you are "not a fool." It is typically played in a relaxed social setting among a group of friends, as not having a single winner is not conducive to serious, competitive play. Often Durak is played as a drinking game to pass the time, with the single loser being required to take a shot of Vodka. This is another factor that does not bode well for serious play.

Groups from children, to grandmothers, to prison inmates all are popular targets for Durak. This diverse audience is likely due to the fact that its rules are a sort of a combination between an easy to understand card game, like War, and a complex trick taking game, like Hearts. This creates a nice mix between fun and strategic game play that is enjoyable to a diverse audience.

A typical game of Durak consists of four players, although it is not impossible to have anywhere from two to six players participating. Players sit in a circle facing inwards towards one another, keeping the hands dealt to them private from other players. In the center of the circle of players there sits the deck of remaining cards (face down), trump card (face up), and discard pile (face down, explained in greater section in the Rules

section). There is no spatial requirement for the distance players must sit away from each other, any comfortable amount is okay and will not adversely affect play. The average game of four people will generally last around 15 minutes.

Durak is an excellent game for evoking a number of emotions within the players. The game begins slowly and lightheartedly. Player joke around about piling on an attack on another player, yet since there are still cards in the deck to draw from, everyone generally is able to stay competitive. It is when the deck is exhausted that players begin to feel much more feverish and aggravated when their neighbor attacks them with a number of very high ranking face cards, forcing them to have a huge hand. This sense of aggravation only heightens when the player discovers that they are the last one left with cards and thus, the loser!

### **Equipment**

To play Durak, the players will require a 36-card deck of the traditional suits (Diamonds, Hearts, Clubs, Spades). This Deck will consist of only cards rank 6 – Ace, inclusive, of those four suits and can be made by removing all cards ranked 2 – 5 from a standard 52-card playing deck. Also suggested to play a game where there is no winner and only a loser is a sense of humor.

### **Vocabulary**

- Trump suit – the card suit chosen at the beginning of the game that any ranked card from this suit will beat any ranked card from any other suit. A card of the trump suit can only be bested by another card of the trump suit of higher rank.

- Trump card – the card drawn to decide the trump suit at the beginning of the game. It is placed perpendicularly underneath the deck so that it is still visible to all players as a reminder of what the trump suit is.
- Deck – the face down stack of remaining, undealt cards at the beginning of the game. Players will draw from the deck in order to replenish their hands if they ever have less than six cards in their hand in the game until the deck is exhausted. The deck sits in the center of the circle. Sometimes the deck in Durak is referred to as the “Talon” however this rule set will not utilize this name.
- Discard pile – the face down stack of cards that have discarded during play. It sits somewhere inside the circle of players, off to the side.
- Attacking phase – the time of play where players are allowed to “attack” another player. Not physically, mind you!
- Defending phase – the time of play where the defender is allowed to “defend” from attacking player(s).
- Replenish phase – the time of play where the players take turns drawing from the deck to create a hand of six cards should they end the turn with less than six in their hand and the deck is not empty.
- Bout – one round of attacking, defending, and replenishing.
- Take – the defender, at any point in time between attacks, may choose to give up the defense and take all the cards that are currently in play into his/her hand while also forfeiting their turn to lead the next attack.

- Holding – should the defender successfully defended against all attacking cards laid against him/her, then they have “held” and all cards in play are discarded into the discard pile.
- Durak (“the fool”) – the player who lost the last round by being the last one to have any cards in his/her hand. This person is forced to deal the next round as the act of dealing is traditionally considered a menial chore.

### **Goal-Oriented Rules**

- One player volunteers to be the initial dealer.
- The initial dealer shuffles the deck of 36 cards.
- The dealer deals out cards one at a time to every player until everyone has six cards.
- The dealer then removes the top card from the deck and places it face up, underneath the deck in a perpendicular manner so that all players may still see what the drawn card is. The suit of this card becomes the trump suit for this round of play.
- Players now look at their cards. The person with the lowest ranked trump card begins the game as the first attacker. If nobody has the six of the trump suit (the very lowest ranked card available in the 36 card deck) then initial play goes to the person with the next lowest card, the 7. This repeats until somebody is able to make the first move.
- The game now progresses in the following loop until someone is declared the loser:

- a) The initial attacker is either the last defender if he/she was successful, or the person to the left of the last defender if he/she was unsuccessful. If this is the start of the game, the attacker is the person to the dealer's left.
- b) The attacker will always be attacking the person to his/her left.
- c) The attacker leads off the attack by placing any card they want face up in front of the defender.
- d) The defender has two choices to make here, they can either refuse to defend and simply perform a "take" by putting the attacker's card into their hand, or they may begin the defend phase.
- e) If the defender "takes" then the attack is over and all cards in play during this bout are taken into the defender's hand. A defender who "takes" forfeits their turn to attack. The bout ends here and the players skip to step "i" to replenish cards then on to the next bout.
- f) If the defender chooses to defend, he/she must place a card down that is either of the same suit and higher rank as the attacker's card, or is a trump card. Note that if the attacker lead off with a trump card, then the defender must defend with a higher-ranking trump card. The defending card is placed on top of the attacking card it is defending against, but not as to block it from view from other players.
- g) Now is where the fun begins! The attack is now open to everyone besides the defender to join in on the attack. The order to which players may take turns in adding cards to the attack begins with the initial attacker, then the player to the defender's left, etc clockwise as many times as desired until

either nobody can add more cards to the attack or nobody is willing to. Between attacks the defender either defends against all cards attacking him/her or takes as described in step “h.” All of these attackers, during their turn to add cards, may put down as many, or as few, cards as they like as long as the total number of cards attacking are less than both the number of cards in the defender’s hand or six, whichever is smaller. Every new card added to the attack must be the same rank as another card already in play (either from the defender or a previous attacker). Note that at any point in-between player attacks the defender may choose to forfeit the defense and pick up all the cards laid in play and place them into his/her hand.

- h) The defender proceeds to defend against these new attacking cards after each attacker lays them down. That means that before the next player may join in on the attack, the defender must have defended against all current cards. Then the next player can add cards. Then the defender defends against these, and so on until the defender either successfully defends the bout, or takes.
- i) If the defender has successfully beaten off attacking card played in front of them, then all the cards currently in play (attacking and defending) are placed face down into the discard pile.
- j) Before the next bout begins, a replenishing phase takes place starting with the initial attacker, then anyone else who participated in the attack in the order of participation, and finally the defender. In this phase, anyone who

has less than six cards will draw the sufficient number of cards from the deck to obtain a hand of six cards again in the order outlined above.

k) Go back to step “a.”

- Once the deck is empty, play continues as normal, excluding the replenishing phase. When a player has no more cards in his/her hand and the deck is empty, they remove themselves from the game and play continues around them.
- When there is only one player with cards left in their hand, they are declared the Durak and will gather the cards to deal them out for the next round of play.

### **Boundary Rules**

- When a defending player decides to perform a “Take” move by picking up the all the cards in front of them during their defending turn, they forfeit their next attack. This rule allows attackers to lead off with a strong card, if they so desire, without having the repercussions of it being thrown right back at them when the game is down to two players.
- All players attacking during the attacking phase may not attack with any more cards than are in the defenders hand or six, whichever is lower. This rule prevents the defender from becoming simply overwhelmed and being forced to take cards on the table simply because they do not have any cards left to defend with.

### **Critique**

Durak is a game that is designed for casual play, and as such the rules do have some holes within them. For example, in a game of more than two players, when the

defender fails their defense and loses their turn to attack, the player to their left gains an advantage as they will not be attacked in that round of play. Additionally, a similar situation occurs when the defending player lays down his/her last card in a successful defense, leaving the game and not being able to attack the person to their left.

There are a number of effective strategies that any Durak player should try to adhere to. One tactic to follow is to attempt to hold high-ranking trump cards all the way to the end game when the deck is exhausted. At this point in the game it is exceptionally more important to be able to put up a strong defense, as there is nothing forcing players to replenish their hands at the end of a bout. Another sound Durak tactic is to try, as best you can, to keep track of where the high-ranking cards have gone. This is a good idea mainly because of the aforementioned strategy of holding high-ranking cards until the end of the game so that you can win a defense or an attack.

Playing Durak is meaningful in that player actions within the game are both discernable and integrated into the larger context of the game, following the definition of meaningful play in Salen and Zimmerman's "Rules of Play." The result of the game is clearly "discernable" as it is over when only one player is left with cards, making that everyone else the "winners" and more importantly, that one person the "loser." Additionally, the player is constantly capable of gauging how well they are playing based upon how many cards are in their hand compared to the size of their opponent's. All of the information to make this assessment is plainly presented to the player. Durak also satisfies the condition of being "integrated" in that actions taken at every point in the game will have consequences later in play. Should a player use up trump cards and high ranking cards at every chance they have early in the game, they will suffer many losses in

the end game bouts due to having a very weak hand. So, with these characteristics in mind, we can safely say that playing Durak is meaningful.

The impact of Durak is widespread, much like it's audience. The emphasis in Durak of not being the only loser reinforces a belief that transcends the nations it's played in, that is the fact that nobody wants to be the odd man out. Russian players of Durak will even go so far as to ridicule the loser further. For instance someone who has lost twice in a row and has to perform the "menial chore" of dealing again may rouse up an old Russian saying "Shapku s duraka ne snimayut," or "One should not take the hat away from a fool." Essentially, it's probably one of the worse parts of your night when you lose a game of Durak. That is until you get your revenge the next round!

## Sources

My Grandmother

"Rules of Card Games: Durak." Pagat. 4 Nov 2008  
<<http://www.pagat.com/beatng/durak.html>>.

"Durak." Wikipedia. 4 Nov 2008  
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durak>>.

"Durak." The Game Cabinet. Oct 2000. 4 Nov2008  
<<http://www.gamecabinet.com/rules/Durak.html>>.

"Durak - Play online, free!." PlayOK.com. 4 Dec 2008  
<<http://www.playok.com/en/durak/>>.