

# War

This effect is based on the card game “War”, which most people have played at some point in their lives. The original inspiration for this routine was a curious property of the Aronson stack which I noticed one day: if you play a game of “high card wins” with a deck in Aronson order (by repeatedly dealing one card to the spectator and then one card to the magician), the final score will be a highly imbalanced 19-6 with one tie, in favor of the magician. While this leads in a straightforward way to a “magical” take on the game of War, I’ve jazzed up that basic observation in several ways. Although the setup which I use is still based on the Aronson stack, you don’t need to know the Aronson stack to perform it.

**Effect and presentation:** David is selected to help with a demonstration. *“David, are you familiar with the children’s card game ‘War?’”* David says that he used to be. *“Well, let me do a quick demonstration then. It’s very simple — it’s just high card wins.”* The magician quickly deals out a few sample hands. *“If you get a four and I get a three, that would be a win for you. A four and a nine would be a win for me, and an eight and a seven would be a win for you.”* The demonstration cards are swept off to the side.

*“A lot of people think that War is purely a game of luck, but in fact it’s a game of tremendous skill. Now I’m a rather modest guy, and I don’t like to brag, but I must warn you I’m really good at this game. Would you mind if I demonstrate?”* David consents to being used as cannon fodder.

*“The first thing we need to do is give the cards a good shuffle.”* The magician splits the deck in half and fairly riffle shuffles the two halves together. *“Second, we’ll get rid of about half the cards — otherwise the demonstration will take too long.”* The magician places about half of the deck inside the card case. *“Remember, though, the very first thing we did was shuffle the cards. But we’ll give the deck another shuffle right now, just to make sure.”* The magician cuts the remaining cards into two piles and gives them a riffle shuffle, but does not fully push the two packets together. He allows David to complete the shuffle by pushing together the partially interlaced packets. He then allows David to cut the cards and complete the cut. *“Are you ready to go to War?”* David nods his head yes.

The magician deals out the top 14 cards, alternating between David and himself so that each ends up with a pile of 7 cards. *“Take your pile, square it up, and turn over the top card.”* David turns over a three. *“A three, not a very auspicious start. Look, I just barely beat you with a six. Go ahead, try again.”*

This time David has a four and the magician has an eight. *“It’s okay, you’re a beginner — take a deep breath.”* They continue playing, with the magician winning every one of the seven hands.

*“You’re not off to a great start, but let’s keep going. Give the cards another cut, maybe that will help.”* David cuts and completes. *“Perfect, let’s go another round.”*

The magician deals out the remaining 12 cards into two hands. As he does so, he says *“There’s something I didn’t tell you, David. It’s not just that I win a lot — although I do, obviously — it’s that I somehow know what’s going to happen before it even happens. It’s hard to explain — maybe I should just show you.”*

*“Square up your cards and hold them in your lap so that I can’t see anything. Now David, I feel bad that I just won seven in a row, so I’m **not** going to win this time. Go ahead, turn over your next card.”* David turns over the Jack of Clubs. The magician turns over the Jack of Hearts, saying *“Of course I didn’t say I was going to **lose** either — it’s a tie!”*

*“This time something tells me that you have a low card, like a 3 or 4, but that I’ve got a face card.”* David turns over the Four of Hearts, and the magician turns over the King of Hearts. They continue like this, with the magician winning the next four hands after announcing in advance certain characteristics of each card.

*“Just to recap, I won [the magician counts the pairs which he won] 12 hands, and you won, let’s see... zero. But there was also one tie, so it could have been worse!”*

*“There’s something else I didn’t tell you, though, David. I actually knew **exactly** how this was all going to play out before we even started, before we shuffled and cut and shuffled and cut again... You’ll recall that I won 12-0 with one tie. Please read the prediction which I wrote and attached to the bottom of the card box.”*

David turns over the card box; there's a small Post-It note affixed there which says:

“The magician will win 12-0 with 11 ties.”

Apparently something has gone wrong, since there was only one tie, not 11.

*“Before you go shouting ‘Fake News!’, David, there **is** still a chance that my prediction is correct. Remember, we began by shuffling and then I placed about half of the cards into the box.”* The magician removes the remainder of the deck from the card case. He deals the cards face up in pairs in different spots onto the table, filling the table with cards: *“There’s two ties... there’s three... there’s four...”* When he reaches the last pair and turns it over, it’s another tie. *“...and there’s eleven! So I won 12-0 with 11 ties — exactly as predicted!”*

**Explanation:** The effect makes use of a specially prepared deck of cards. Half of the cards are cut short, which allows you to riffle shuffle without disturbing adjacent pairs of short and long cards. In addition, the long (i.e., regular) cards are marked on the back, enabling you to determine your cards — and therefore the spectator’s, as well — without ever looking at the faces. Finally, the deck begins in a special order which facilitates both the main demonstration and the surprising climax.

**Preparation:** There is considerable freedom in the exact order and pairing of the cards, so feel free to modify the arrangement which follows to suit your own needs. However, I’ll describe how I personally prepare and arrange the cards.

### **Short cards**

You will need a deck of short cards along with a matching regular deck. If you use Bicycle cards, there are plenty of inexpensive short decks available, but be aware that quality control can be lacking. (I have found that some decks of Bicycle short cards lead to unreliable riffle shuffles, and some are cut so poorly that people will notice something fishy about them.) Phoenix short cards, in my experience, are of excellent quality and are nearly 100% reliable for this effect.

## The order of the cards

The order of the cards I use for this effect is as follows. Every other card, starting with the top card of the deck, is a short card and is highlighted in bold:

**4S** 3D **4D** 9D **7S** 3C **JC** JH **6D** QC **8D** AC **2D** KD **4H** KH **QD** AH **10C**  
10D **2C** 2H **6H** 6S **5D** 5S **JS** JD **3H** 6C **9S** AS **9C** QS **3S** AD **7H** QH **2S** 9H  
**4C** 8H **7D** 7C **KS** KC **10S** 10H **5C** 5H **8S** 8C

Place a bottom-cutting reverse breather crimp into the Jack of Diamonds.

## Marking the cards

The 13 (regular / long) cards you'll need to mark on the backs are the following:  
JH QC AC KD KH AH 6C AS QS AD QH 9H 8H

You will mark each card both with its own identity and with the identity of the short card which precedes it in the stack order. For example, the back of the JH should indicate both that this card is the JH and that the preceding card is the JC. And the back of the QC should tell you both that this card is the QC and that the preceding card is the 6D.

You should also place a pencil-dot the back of the 10C and the 7D (these are both short cards). You'll see shortly what these marks are for.

The spectator will never handle any of the marked cards, so you don't have to be too paranoid about making your markings subtle. However, fortune favors the prudent, so I recommend using a marking system like the one Pete McCabe describes in his *PM Card Mark System* e-book.<sup>1</sup>

Alternatively, if you're an Aronson stack user, there is another option. You will notice that for each of the above 13 cards, the bold card preceding it is also the preceding card in the Aronson stack. Thus, if you simply use a standard marked deck, it will tell you the identity of the long cards, and by subtracting one from

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<sup>1</sup> If you're using Bicycle cards, you can place one set of marks on the angel in the upper left / lower right, and the other set of marks on the angel in the upper right / lower left.

the stack number you'll also know the identity of each corresponding short card. In this case, you don't need to make any markings of your own.<sup>2</sup>

## The prediction

The last bit of preparation you need to do is to prepare a prediction. I write "Matt will win 12-0 with 11 ties" on a small yellow Post-It note<sup>3</sup> and stick it to the underside of the card case.

**Handling:** Use the top six cards of the deck to do a quick demonstration of the rules of War, as in the presentation above.<sup>4</sup> There are three reasons for the demonstration phase:

1. I want everyone to understand the rules of the game.
2. It quickly uses up some cards, which shortens the later phases a bit.
3. I couldn't figure out a way to pair all the cards up using a deck based on the Aronson stack<sup>5</sup> and still get the climax I wanted.

Once the demonstration is complete, sweep these six cards aside; they will not be used again (and are not counted in the final "score").

Now cut at the breather crimp and give the cards a riffle shuffle. Try to shuffle as evenly as possible, but it's okay if your shuffle isn't perfect. You do, however, need to shuffle in such a way that all the short-long pairs stay paired. For this, you need to riffle shuffle the way "normal people" do, with the cards held by

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<sup>2</sup> I'm an Aronson stack user myself, and I use Phoenix short cards paired with Phoenix marked cards.

<sup>3</sup> When I performed this effect on stage at Fechter's Finger Flicking Frolic in 2017, I used a larger prediction. I created a fake newspaper with a large headline reading "WAR DECLARED Final Score: 12-0 with 11 Ties" and modified the script accordingly.

<sup>4</sup> Note that I neither explain nor incorporate the rule where, after a tie, three cards are dealt face-down. While crucial to the actual card game, I think it would be distracting and confusing to incorporate into this trick. It's much easier to simply explain that the game is "high card wins", and I've never had a spectator express concern about this discrepancy.

<sup>5</sup> Because I use the same gimmicked deck for other effects (such as "S.O.L." from *The Buena Vista Shuffle Club*), I wanted to be able to rearrange the cards into Aronson stack and have them still alternate short and long. The stack described here accomplishes this.

their narrow edges, and not the way magicians and casino dealers often do where the cards are held by their long edges. If you shuffle well, then all of the “tying” pairs (except the JC/JH, which is special) will now be at the bottom of the deck, but if this isn’t the case, don’t worry — the trick will still work.

You will now place about half of the cards into the card box. More specifically, spread through the face-down cards and cut immediately above the **first pencil dot** that you come to. Place all the cards in the bottom portion into the card case (so that both pencil-dotted cards will end up in the case). You could do this with a table spread or an in-the-hands spread, as you like.

Riffle shuffle the remaining cards again, making sure to cut so that both halves have a short card on top. This is easy if you riffle down to make the cut, and in any case the marks will allow you to easily verify that you’ve done this correctly (since the short cards are unmarked).

It’s also possible to overhand shuffle a deck like this without destroying the short and long pairs, and incorporating this technique will make “War” even more baffling (especially for magicians). To do this, hold the deck loosely in your right hand with the faces of the cards toward your left hand and the backs toward your right palm. The left thumb pulls off a block of cards, allowing a few pairs to fall into the left hand. Repeat this action, with the left thumb continuing to pull cards into the left hand. If you experiment a bit with the proper tension in the right hand’s grip, you’ll find that you will see only even stack-number (i.e., long) cards as you shuffle, which means that no pair has been separated.

Invite the spectator to cut the cards and complete the cut. Usually, because of the short-long principle, there will again be a short (unmarked) card on top after the cut, which is what you want. If this is not the case, ask the spectator to cut again. Eventually, there will be a short card on top and you can proceed.

You now play War with the spectator. I break it up into two phases to vary the presentation and keep things from getting boring. In the first phase, we just play the game and I don’t predict anything about what’s about to transpire. You will either win every time, or you will win every time with the exception of one tie.

In the second phase, I deal out the remaining cards and start making “predictions”. However, I don’t like to be too precise, so I won’t say “*I think you have the 2 of Diamonds and I have the King of Diamonds*”, but rather “*I believe you have a low card, like a 2 or 3, whereas I have a high face card.*” You can get more precise toward the end if you wish. I will also, as appropriate, ad-lib lines such as: “*I feel like you’re not even trying at this point, has this been a soul-crushing experience for you? Because you have a Two this time and I have a King!*” To dispel the notion of marked cards (which I am of course using, but not in the way most people would think), I usually ask the spectator to cover up his cards or place them under the table.

It’s important not to conspicuously look at the backs of your cards while reading the marks during the second phase. To accomplish this, **as you turn each card face up, read the markings on the back of the next card.** It takes a little practice to get used to the rhythm of this, and not to forget what you just saw as you’re improvising remarks to the spectator. But it’s quite doable and worth the effort.

Once all of the hands (except for the ones in the card box) have been played, count your cards in pairs and announce the score. If your initial shuffle was reasonably good, the score at this point will either be 12-0 with 1 tie or 11-0 with 1 tie. In the first case, all of the remaining pairs in the box will be ties. In the second case, all but one pair will be a tie and the other will be a win for you. At any rate, no matter how bad the initial shuffle was the final score will always end up being 12-0 with 11 ties, as predicted.

To make the finale play a little bigger, and to keep the pace moving, I turn over the cards in pairs and toss the face-up pairs onto different spots on the table, covering as much of the table as possible with “ties”.

**Reset:** It’s not really feasible to quickly reset this effect in front of an audience, but if you keep the short cards on top and the long cards on bottom (or vice-versa, when they’re face-up) throughout the routine — which is easy to arrange if you pay attention to it — then the effect will reset much faster.

**Credits:** I began thinking about this routine after seeing Vincent Hedan demonstrate some of the effects from “Multitude”, which is his take on the classic “Multi-Effect Deck”. In the Multi-Effect Deck, the short and long cards

are paired into mates, so for example the KC would be paired with the KS. I started exploring applications of a different pairing system based on alternating short and long cards in the Aronson stack. Vincent Hedan informed me later (by email) that he has also explored the concept of combining a memorized deck with long and short cards. To my knowledge, the idea of combining short and long cards with a memorized deck first appeared in print in the August 2005 *Linking Ring*.<sup>6</sup>

The idea to utilize an apparently incorrect prediction, only to find that the prediction is in fact correct after accounting for all the ties in the card box, came to me when I (re-)read the trick “Cupit”<sup>7</sup> in Pit Hartling’s *The Little Green Lecture* (pp. 30-36). Although the two effects are quite different, both use short and long cards and end with a table full of pairs.

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Simon Aronson for pointing out this reference. The *Linking Ring* remark simply says: “An idea from Norman Beck for those who do Memorized Deck work: Make up a deck of long and short cards with the odd number cards being short and the even number cards being long. This gives you 26 key cards and several added weapons.” (p. 104)

<sup>7</sup> This is now marketed by Card-Shark as a stand-alone effect called “Cupid”.