

Magical Research Society

About the game

- Designed by Maynard Price for the 2021 Global Game Jam, working with the theme 'Lost and Found'.
- Intended for 2-4 players, though solitaire practice is possible.
- The estimated play time is 10 - 25 minutes depending on the number of players and speed of play.

Backstory

Each player is a leading researcher in the field of magic. When a lost library is discovered, the players must sift through the texts for valuable insights that have been lost to the ages. They must then rush to analyze their findings and submit more credible theories than their peers to obtain an edge in academic standing.

Game components

Magical Research Society (MRS) is played entirely using two decks of standard playing cards that the players will need to provide for themselves. It's better to use two decks that have distinct card backs from each other, but any decks will work. To prepare to play MRS, the players must remove all but the numbered cards and Aces from both decks, and then combine the two decks together.

Aim of the game

Over a series of rounds, players are dealt an initial partial hand and take turns drawing cards from the table to complete that hand. The table is set with 40 random face down cards, and in order to draw cards players must flip over two face down cards and attempt to in doing so reveal two cards with the same number. At the end of a round, players compare hands and the player with the highest value hand wins. The first player to win two rounds in total wins the game.

Setup

To prepare a new game, first shuffle all of the cards together into a single deck. If this is the first time playing, make sure that the deck consists of every numbered card 2-10 of all 4 suits as well as the aces of each suit. Also double check that there are exactly 2 of every card.

Next, draw the top 40 cards of the deck without looking and lay them on the table face down. A rectangular pattern uses up the least amount of space but any pattern will work as long as the cards are not overlapping.

Then deal 5 cards to each player. These are the starting hands for the round, and are a secret until they are revealed in the scoring phase.

Finally, if this is the first time any of the players have played MRS then the player who most recently read these rules goes first with turn order continuing clockwise. Otherwise the players may use this or any other method of their choice to determine who goes first.

Progression of play

Turns

Each turn, the active player will select two of the face down cards laid out on the table. These cards will be then flipped face up for all to see. If both cards have the same number, the player will pick those cards up. They will then select one of those cards and put it into their hand, and then put the other face up on the table in front of them. This face up card is a marker to keep track of how many cards the player has picked up as well as a reminder to everyone at the table that some cards of that type are no longer available. Play then passes to the next player counterclockwise.

The round starts coming to an end after the first turn where a player has picked up a third pair of cards or has had a turn for the 10th time that round. That player has played their last turn. The next time that player's turn would come up, instead the round will move on to the scoring phase.

Scoring

When the turns are all over, the round enters the scoring phase. All players will have a period of time to rearrange their hand to create as much value as possible. Players should be working towards improving their hand throughout the whole round, so this delay should ideally be short. All players will then reveal their hands and confirm each other's hand values. T

Hand value is determined as follows:

- Players must arrange the cards into their hands into groups, while attempting to create the largest single group as possible.
 - Cards can be grouped together if they meet the following criteria.
 - All the cards are of the same suit
 - All the cards are of the same number
 - The numbers of all the cards form a perfect unbroken sequence with no duplicates such as 2-3-4-5
 - Note that a group can only be formed based on exactly one criteria, and a card can not belong to multiple groups even if it could potentially qualify. A player must decide which group a card belongs to when revealing their hand.
 - For example: if a player had three 2 cards in their hand with one being a 2 of hearts, as well as a group containing only hearts, the player must decide whether to treat the 2 of hearts as part of the group of 2s or the group of hearts. It cannot count as being in both at the same time.
- Once the player's hand is arranged into groups, set the group with the largest number of cards aside. The player's hand gains 1 point in value for each card in the group.
- Count the number of groups left after removing the largest group. For each group left, the hand value loses 1 point.
- The point value after removing these points is the final value of the hand
 - For example, a hand consisting of a group of 4 and 2 groups of 2 would be worth $4 - 2 = 2$ points.

After all players have had a chance to check each other's hands and confirm that they agree with the values, the player with the highest value hand wins the round.

To begin a new round, take only the cards from players hands and the remaining single cards left over from when players picked pairs up from the field and shuffle them into the deck. Then draw out cards face down and play them on the field to fill up the holes left behind in the previous round when players picked up cards. Deal a 5 card hand to each player. The first turn of the round goes to the player sitting to the left of the player who won the previous round.

This pattern will continue until the game ends.

Victory

The first player to win 2 rounds wins the game. If starting a new game, shuffle all of the cards into the deck and deal out a completely new table in order to begin on an even playing field.

Thematic Tie Ins

The context of MRS revolves around the players researching recently rediscovered magical texts and experiments with the goal of submitting academic papers based on their findings and improving their careers. For the sake of clarity when explaining the rules, this flavor has generally been omitted in the above explanation of the mechanical ruleset of the game. For those curious, the intended way that these mechanics tie in to the flavor will be explained in this section.

The deck itself represents the discovered lost library, and the 40 cards laid out on the table represent the contents of the library that were able to be recovered at the time that the players started their research.

Due to the fast paced first-to-publish priority of academia, the players don't have time to wait for all the facts to be out before they being putting together their findings in order to submit a paper on the topic - and because of this it's only natural that a large fraction of the possible knowledge available in the library is unavailable to the players.

Further, the random nature of which cards are in the deck and which cards made it onto the field represents the inherent uncertainty of research - the players "don't know what they don't know" and so can't be sure if the knowledge they seek is even available on the field or if it's hidden away in the deck outside of their reach for the round.

The player's hands represent the evidence that they will use to formulate their theory. Some things the player already knows before beginning their research - this is the starting hand and represents the previous research and discoveries the player has made in related areas that can be applied to the topic at hand. When players match up cards on the field they then choose which card to add to their hand, and this simulates the way that people tend to choose how to view the same information through the lens of bias and convenience.

Finally, players reach the scoring phase - the 'peer review' phase if you will - and attempt to sort their hand into the most convenient interpretation of facts that they can. Even so, any pieces of their own data that they are unable to match with their model damages the credibility of their findings and thus the player whose overall hand is the most cohesive is the winner of the round. Eventually one player will win two rounds and thus gain a significant career boost over their peers.