

The World's Best Card Game

Oh Hell is an incredibly simple game. Four minutes from now, you will know how to play.

How to Play

Oh Hell is in the family of trick-taking games, which includes games such as spades, bridge, bid whist, euchre, and pitch. Like all trick-taking games, players take turns playing one card each from their hand, with the best card played winning that *trick*. The key feature of Oh Hell is that players are *not* trying to win the most tricks, but instead trying to predict *exactly* how many tricks they will win, and then make it happen.

The game consists of a series of rounds, each of which takes about 3 or 4 minutes to play. In each round, all players are dealt a specific number of cards, which varies by round. Once all the cards are dealt, the top card from the remaining deck is turned over, and that suit becomes the *trump suit* for the duration of the round.

Once the cards are dealt and the trump suit revealed, a bidding phase begins. Each player, beginning left of the dealer and going in order, makes a bid for exactly how many *tricks* they are going to win during the round, by placing that number of bidding chips spread out in front of them on the table. Anyone can make any bid, except for the dealer, who bids last and may not bid a number that makes the total number of bids equal to the total number of tricks in the round. That ensures that at least one person will not *make* their bid.

After the bidding, the play phase begins. The player to the left of the dealer chooses a card to lead and play continues around to their left, each player playing one card from their hand. Players must *follow suit*—play a card from the same suit as the original one led—if they can; if they are out of the suit led, they may discard a card from another suit, or play a trump card. The trick is won by the highest trump played, or if no trumps are played, by the highest card in the suit originally led. The winner of the trick collects the cards from the table and places them face-down under one of their bidding chips.

The player who won the trick then picks a card to lead the next trick, which again is won by the player who plays the highest trump, or the highest card of the suit led if no trumps are played. This continues until all the tricks are played, which ends the round.

At the end of the round, players receive a score based on how many tricks they made, and a large bonus if they won *exactly* the number of tricks they bid. If they win more or fewer than they bid—that is, if they *bust*—they do not receive the bonus. Cumulative scores are kept on a scorepad by one of the players.

The deal then moves to the left and a new round begins.

Mechanically, that's the whole dang game.

Scoring

There are countless ways to score a game of Oh Hell. Just ask anyone who played it with their family growing up, and you'll hear about any number of variants. Appendix B contains a description of common variants that you might want to try. In my experience, the following are the best scoring rules for making an Oh Hell match fun, strategically interesting, and well-balanced between skill and luck. The strategy advice in this book is based on these scoring rules.

- For each trick taken, score 1 point
- If you bid 1 or more and made *exactly* the number of tricks you bid, score 10 bonus points
- If you bid 0 and took *exactly* zero tricks, score 5 points plus 1 point for each trick in the round.
- If you make more or fewer tricks than you bid—if you *bust*—you get no bonus points.

For example, imagine it is the eight round:

- Matt bid 4 and took 4 tricks; he get 14 points (one for each trick, plus 10 for making his bid);
- Mike bid 2 and took 1, so he gets 2 points (one for each trick, no bonus);
- Sarah bid 1 and took 2; she gets 2 points (one for each trick, no bonus);
- Randy bid 0 and took 1; he gets 1 point (for the trick he took, no bonus);
- Kirsten bid 0 and took 0, she gets 13 points (5 for making exactly zero + 8 since it's the 8 round);

Structure

There are a lot of ways to structure a game of Oh Hell. The most important consideration is how many people are playing. Here are my recommendations for how to structure the game, based on the number of players:

- If you have four or five players, play Regular Oh Hell;
- If you have six or seven players, play Bust-Out Oh Hell;
- If you have eight or more players, play Rotation Oh Hell or Tournament Oh Hell;
- If you have 11 or more players and it's a casual game, consider playing Party Oh Hell.

Regular Oh Hell

Regular Oh Hell is exactly what it sounds like. Figure out how many rounds you want to play and just start playing.

With four people, our competitive Regular Oh Hell matches consist of 31 rounds, the first round with 3 cards in your hand, and then moving sequentially up until the 13 round, then back down to the 3 round, then up again

ending at a second 13 round. An entire match takes between 2 and 3 hours. Note that in the 13 round, all the cards will be dealt, and therefore there will be no trump suit; the hand will be played notrump.

With five people, a match is 29 rounds. Begin at 3, work your way up to 10, back down to 3, up to 10, and back down to end at 3. This also takes about 2 or 3 hours.

At the end of the match, most cumulative points wins.

Of course, you may not have the time or desire for a full match, in which case a *sprint*—in which you only play a few hands, perhaps starting at 13 and going down to 3—also makes for a fun game. You can also simply set a time limit, and go up and down from 3 to 13 (or 3 to 10) over and over again until either the time runs out or everyone is ready to stop playing.

In any case, the smallest round should be the 3 round. I do not recommend playing a 2 round or a 1 round, except with children or in casual game-playing environments. They introduce an amount of luck into the game that is not suitable for competitive play.

Bust-Out Oh Hell

With six or seven players, the best structure is Bust-Out Oh Hell. It is structured identically to Regular Oh Hell, except that if you do not make your bid, you have to sit out for the next round. So if, for example, you don't make your bid in the 6 round, you do not get to participate in the 7 round that immediately follows, and you will return to the game for the 8 round.

To begin, all players play the 3 round, but after that someone will always have busted, meaning you will never have a hand in which there are more than five players (or six in the seven player game), and some hands will have only 2 or 3 or 4 players (depending on how many people busted the previous hand). You always come back into the same seat when you return, but you never have to deal when you are coming back in; the deal moves to the left to the next player who survived the previous round.

Players who are busted and sitting out for a round are not allowed to sit at the table. They may prowl around the table and watch seated players play the next round, and while they cannot comment seriously on the hand, they are welcome to make snide remarks about how poor the decision-making is in either the bidding or the play. The players in the hand are required to show the prowler their cards at any requested time during the hand.

Bust Out Oh Hell is extremely frustrating and extremely fun. It definitely features the best trash-talking in all of Oh Hell. Buy a lot of snacks, since there will always be at least one player sitting out each hand, and that means your snack spread—called the *Losers' Lounge* in Bust Out—will disappear fast.

At the end of the match, most cumulative points wins.

Rotation Oh Hell

With eight or more players, you should play Rotation Oh Hell. This is Regular Oh Hell, played at multiple tables. Each table plays a hand and scores it normally. After the hand, if you are playing with an even number of players, the *first* player who busted at each table switches tables and assumes each others' seat for the next round. The deal moves clockwise around each table, and unlike Bust Out, you *can* sit down at the table and deal; it *doesn't* skip to the next player who made their bid.

If you are playing with an odd number of players (say 9), only the first bust at the bigger table switches. Both tables have 5 chairs, and one person moves tables each round.

Rotation Oh Hell can scale to any size and any number of tables. If you have 12 or more players, you play with 3 tables of 4, and move one player from each table in a set order, Table A to Table B to Table C to Table A. If you have 13 players, you only have one player move. Put 5 seats at each table, and have the first bust at the big table head to the next table in the order.

At the end of the match, most cumulative points wins.

Party Oh Hell

If you have a casual cardplaying group and 11 or more people, Party Oh Hell is an excellent structural variant. We have used this successfully on couples' nights when many players are either new to the game or very casual players.

Party Oh Hell is essentially a combination of Bust-Out and the Rotation game. If you don't make your bid, you sit out for the next hand. But the *first* person who busted at each table comes back in at the other table after sitting out for a round. Other people who busted return to the same table they were at after they serve their one round sit-out.

If you are playing with an odd number of players (say 11), then only the first person to bust at the bigger table switches tables.

At the end of the match, most cumulative points wins.

Party Oh Hell has the benefit of always having at least two players busted out (one from each table), and often many more. We have had rounds of Party Oh Hell where more people are in the Losers' Lounge than at the tables. Since a round of Oh Hell typically takes 3-5 minutes, this provides opportunities for players to step away from the game and talk with each other, in a constantly mixing set of groups.

Be warned, Party Oh Hell requires a much bigger snack setup in your *Losers' Lounge* than any other form of the game.

Playing for money

Oh Hell is a great game to play for fun, and we do it all the time. But in our weekly competitive games, we play for a small amount of money. The best way to do this is to play for a set amount of money per point that each player deviates from the average score. We usually play for \$1/point.

So at the end of the match, if the scores are 245, 231, 217, 216, and 201 the average score is 222 and the payouts are \$23, \$9, -\$5, -\$6, and -\$21.

In Regular Oh Hell or Bust Out, we give the person who finished first a 20 point bonus prior to totalling up the average and the payouts. In Rotation Oh Hell, we give a 20 point bonus for every table in play, so with two tables we give 25 points to first and 15 to second, and with three tables we give 30 to first, 20 to second, and 10 to third.

We score the game on an Ipad (or multiple Ipads editing the same cloud document for Rotation) at the end of each round, and usually connect the scoresheet to a television that can be viewed from the table in real time.

You can find downloadable versions of our premade excel scoresheets for Regular, Bust-Out, Rotation, and Party Oh Hell [here](#).

Tournament Oh Hell

We use a tournament structure at our year-end championship, and periodically when we just feel like it. With 8 players, players are assigned randomly to two tables of four. Each table plays an 11-round sprint (13 to 3). Players are then rearranged into two new tables of four, and another sprint is played. This is then done a third time. At the end of the third sprint, players' cumulative score is ranked, and the top four players play a Championship table sprint, while the bottom four play a consolation table sprint.

Tournament Oh Hell for money is played differently than the other versions. Each player buys into the tournament for a fixed cost (we do \$25, but any amount works), and then prizes are awarded to the top 3 finishers at the Championship table, as well as the winner of the consolation table.

You can find downloadable versions of our premade excel scoresheets for Tournament Oh Hell [here](#).

Equipment

All you really need for a game of Oh Hell is a deck of cards, plus pen and paper to keep track of the scores. But I highly recommend you also get a set of bidding chips and a Bust Bell.

Bidding Chips

Any sort of poker chips will do. Casino-quality clay chips, or those rinks-dink plastic ones they sell at CVS. Each player should get about a dozen chips of the same color, plus one chip of a different color, which serves as the zero bid.

Players bid by putting out the number of chips in front of them that corresponds to the number of tricks they are trying to take. Then, each time they win a trick, they place it face-down under one of the chips. That way, everyone can always see what every other player bid, as well as how many tricks they still want to take.

You can play Oh Hell without bidding chips—I did for the first 30 years I played the game—but it's a nightmare trying to remember what people bid or how many tricks they are still trying to get. The bidding chip is the single greatest innovation in Oh Hell history, and it's not close.

A Bust Bell

The bidding chips are the greatest innovation in Oh Hell history, but a Bust Bell is the true spirit of the game. Get yourself one (or two) of those hotel desk style reception bells and place it on the table. As soon as someone busts, ring the bell. It's a trash-talking move without parallel. And don't be shy about getting creative: sometimes hammer it when they bust, sometimes act totally nonchalant and barely touch it. Sometimes act like a busy secretary barely paying attention as you hit it. Sometimes cascade a waterfall of chips down onto it. Whatever you think will make the bustee come unglued the most in that particular moment.

Why to Play [recreated from my 2011 essay, needs update]

Oh Hell is simply the greatest card game ever invented. By far. And by that I mean "it's the most fun game that you will want to regularly play and will be able to regularly play." Let me explain.

I like to play card games. I'm not talking about poker. (I like that, too, but as they say, Bridge is a card game you can gamble on; poker is a gambling game you play with cards.) I'm talking about real card games: Bridge, Whist, Pitch, Rummy, All Fours, Hearts, Spades, Catch the Ten, and so forth. But I constantly run into a very frustrating situation: I don't know a lot of other people who like card games as much as I do, and even when I do find myself in a situation with the right people, a lot of game simply "don't work" for one reason or another: people don't know how to play, don't like certain games, etc. As it turns out, most card games do not have the right ingredients to be spontaneously played when the moment strikes a group of people.

So what are the ingredients of a great card game? I would venture that there are four (or five).

1a) Meaningfully complex strategy. This is by far the most important ingredient to any card game. Any decent card game has to provide positive feedback for skillful play; making better decisions than the other players should usually result in victory. I say usually because all card games have an element of luck; the

best games are ones in which the the time horizon for long-term skill to overtake short-term luck is short enough to allow better players to win over the course of a game, but also so that weaker players receive a negative feedback for poor strategy. So, ceteris parabis, the more strategic decision points, the better. In any case, at a bare minimum, there has to be some strategic choice involved in the game. Otherwise, no matter how you dress it up, you're just playing [War](#) or [Klondike solitaire](#). Good for passing the time, but not much else. Or maybe you're just playing [Speed](#) or [Spit](#), which are fun but not really strategy games.

1b) **Unstable strategy**. Closely related to strategy complexity is what I call strategy instability. A game with a stable strategy is one in which you can devise your strategy either prior to the cards even being dealt, or right after they are initially dealt, without worrying too much about having to adjust them during the course of the game in response to your opponents actions. This is partially the downfall of a game like [full-books Go Fish](#) or [Palace](#): you get your hand, you watch what cards your opponents plays, but you really don't need to react strategically to all that much. On the other end of the spectrum, games like Bridge and [Whist](#) require not only careful attention to what your opponent is doing, but a rethinking of your strategy based on what they are doing.

2) **Rule simplicity**. This is the death knell of so many card games, and particularly ones that satisfy the conditions of strategy complexity and instability. If a game can't be taught to new players in 10 minutes or less, you're not going to play it that often. This is, far and away, the downfall of [Bridge](#). I spent the better part of two hours a few weeks ago teaching some smart and relatively card-savvy people how to play Bridge, and we still never got around to playing a real game that first night. Just awful. Same with [Wisconsin Skat](#). I'm pretty sure that would be one of the most popular three-person card games in the world, if it didn't take half the night to teach it to someone.

3) **Scalable participants**. Nothing is worse than wanting to play one of the great partnership games (Bridge, [Bid Whist](#), Partnership [Spades](#), or even [Gabes\(!\)](#)) and having either just 3 people or, even worse, 5 people. The games that scale are much, much better. Mostly because you have a lot more opportunities to play them.

4) **Little down-time**. This is the downfall of [Pitch](#), which otherwise would be an amazing game. Way too often, you are barely participating, because you got dealt a junk hand, had no plausible chance of bidding, and during the play you're cards are so bad that you're nothing more than an automaton tossing junk into each trick. In effect, all of the strategic complexity disappears, because your hand is so bad that it requires no strategy to play it. A surprising number of games are like this, and it's a major problem. Bridge suffers from the same problem with the dummy; you can end up sitting out hand after hand if your partner keeps winning bids.

5) **Tricks and trumps**. When you cut to the chase, there are really only two strategic card games: [Rummy](#) and Whist. Almost everything else is just a variation on one of those two. After 30 years of playing card games, I've still never found a Rummy variation that can compete with any of the top Whist variations. Perhaps this is more of an opinion or personal preference, but the element of tricks and trumps simply dominates on the level of strategic complexity.

So this is where Oh Hell comes to the rescue. If you know how to play any game that uses tricks and trump, I can teach you how to play in less than two minutes: X rounds, in the first round each player gets 3 cards, second 4, and so forth, up to the maximum the number of players can accommodate, and then back down. In each round, after the deal, a card from the deck is flipped for trump. After that, starting left of the dealer, players make a single bid on exactly how many tricks they will win. The dealer cannot bid a number of tricks such that total bids equal total tricks. After the bids, left of the dealer leads and players must follow suit if they can. Trick winner leads next trick. After all tricks played, players who made exactly their bid score (10+bid) or (5 + round #) if they bid zero tricks, everyone else scores zero. Most points at the end of all rounds win.

The beauty of the game is that it satisfies all conditions for a great card game. Obviously, it's a tricks and trumps game. And you can play with any number of players 3 to 7 (or more if you modify the number of rounds). But the real beauty is that there's zero down-time. Since each person's objective is to correctly evaluate the exact number of tricks they can take and then execute that evaluation, the absolute strength/weakness of your hand is of utterly no consequence to the playing of the hand. It is pure genius, because it completely wipes out the boredom of getting bad hands over and over again, as well as the complaints that people are getting "dealt bad cards." Bad situations can still arise strategically, but there's no such thing as a bad hand out of the gate.

And, of course, the strategy. Good lord, the strategy. I've never met another game that plays and feels like a cross between bridge and poker, but this one does. In one sense, you have to plan your tricks out, like Bridge, before the hand starts playing out. But inevitably, the actions of the other players will affect which cards in your hand are the winners and losers, and thus which cards you need to win with and which cards you need to dump. And thus it is often the case that you end up pitching an Ace away on other-led suits, only to later win tricks with trash cards. Like Bridge, you often spend a lot of time pondering how you are going to lose control and then gain it back. But like poker, there's a lot of room for bluff-like moves, especially ducking tricks. It's the most strategically-dynamic card game I've ever played. Even the bidding requires some interesting thinking and tactics, especially in the early/late rounds, when you hold very few cards in your hand.

Oh Hell also has more "eureka" moments than any other card game. It's the kind of game that makes you feel brilliant, and makes you marvel at other people's brilliance. In the end, it's one of the few games that leaves everyone at the table smiling.