

Cripple Mr Onion

Rules and Frequently Asked Questions

These rules were reconstructed by Andrew Millard according to the game depicted in *Witches Abroad*, a Discworld novel by Terry Pratchett. The modifiers were developed in conjunction with Terry Tao.

This version of the rules of Cripple Mr Onion is given in six parts:

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Cripple Mr Onion was first mentioned in *Wyrd Sisters* and has, since then, been seen in a number of places. The most extensive of these, to date, is the section in *Witches Abroad* on the riverboat, and it is from this section that the rules of the game as presented here have been reconstructed.

Loosely speaking, it is a cross between pontoon (or blackjack) and poker, but played with a deck of cards having eight suits. Of course, the unusual nature of the Discworld has given Cripple Mr Onion features found in no other game.



“Three witches back from Genua,
and everything's okay again –
for about five minutes.”
by Kea.

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Introduction

Cripple Mr Onion requires an eight-suit deck of playing cards; we recommend The Fat Pack, which adds Roses, Axes, Tridents and Doves to the traditional suits of Spades, Hearts, Diamonds and Clubs. For the purpose of forming flushes, these are taken to be paired as follows:

- ♠ Spades are paired with Axes ♣
- ♣ Clubs are paired with Tridents ♠
- ♥ Hearts are paired with Roses ♣
- ♦ Diamods are paired with Doves ♠

Alternatively, an English or French deck, with the suits Clubs, Spades, Hearts and Diamonds, can be mixed with a Spanish or Italian deck, with the suits Staves, Swords, Cups and Coins. Otherwise, two regular (four-suit) decks can be used adequately for most purposes; see the modifiers for further comments on this.

The game also requires at least two players, but not more than seven – this isn't to do with the number eight for a specific reason, but a result of the fact that there aren't enough cards for more than seven players – with a ready supply of small coinage or tokens when gambling takes place, and the players arranged as evenly as possible around the table on which the game is played. A container able to hold cards should be placed centrally on the table: this is to be the discard pot - along with another container for coins or tokens if gambling is to take place: this is the Pot.

The Hands

Cripple Mr Onion revolves around forming groups of cards which either sum exactly to twenty-one (an onion) or come close to this total without exceeding it; in the usual fashion, a picture card (P) is worth ten, an ace (A) is worth one or eleven, and other cards are worth their face value: a ten (T) is worth ten, a nine is worth nine, and so on. Since groups of cards which sum exactly to twenty-one can be formed in various ways, they are ranked in a particular order according to their composition, along with a few other groups which do not give twenty-one in total but which are of some interest; these special hands, described below, are worth more than any other valid combinations of cards and usually dominate the play.

There are thirteen categories of winning hands and in increasing order of worth are:

1. **Bagel**: this is a combination of two cards which totals exactly twenty; it is, therefore, one of TT, TP, PP or 9A.
2. **two-card onion**: this is a combination of two cards which totals exactly twenty-one; it is, therefore, either TA or PA.
3. **Broken Flush**: this is a group of at least three cards, summing to at least sixteen (but not more than twenty-one) with all of the cards except for one in the same suit-pair.
4. **three-card onion**: this is a group of three cards which totals twenty-one exactly; examples are ATT, 56T, and 579.
5. **Flush**: this is a group of at least three cards, summing to at least sixteen (but not more than twenty-one) with all of the cards in the same suit-pair.
6. **four-card onion**: ... four cards which total twenty-one; for example, A55T, 2469, and 3378.
7. **Broken Royal**: this is a special case of a three-card onion where the three cards are specifically 678 (of any suit-pairs).
8. **five-card onion**: ... five cards ... e.g. A235T, 23466, and 33348.
9. **Royal**: this is another special three-card onion being 777.
10. **six-card onion**: ... six cards ... e.g. A2233T and A23456.
11. (**Wild Royal**: this is a combination that may only be played when eights are wild - see the modifiers for details - since it consists of three wild eights.)
12. **seven-card onion**: ... seven cards ... e.g. A223445.
13. **Onion**: an Onion (capitalised letter 'o') is a two card combination of a picture card and an ace; however, PA on its own is just a two-card onion (place two above), since to occupy this exalted position, the group must consist of two Onions, PAPA or **Double Onion**, or three Onions, PAPAPA or 3[PA] or **Triple Onion**, or four Onions, 4[PA] or **Lesser Onion**, or even five Onions, 5[PA] or **Great Onion**. The Onions themselves are arranged according to their worth, with Double Onion the lowest and Great Onion the best.

Notice that the maximum number of cards making up an onion is seven (there is no eight-card onion) and that for PA to be of any real value, the player must hold at least two picture cards and two aces. Also, if a player should be unlucky enough to receive multiple bagels, the qualifiers "double", "triple", "lesser" and "great" (with small initials) are used.

Since each player is ultimately in possession of ten cards, a number of groups, most of them usually winning hands, can be formed; the objective of any individual player is therefore to form the ten cards into the best possible set of groups, with each of the ten cards taking part in only one of the groups. For

example, representing Clubs and Tridents by 'C', Spades and Axes by 'S', Hearts and Roses by 'H' and Diamonds and Doves by 'D', the hand:

3C 3S 4S JS AH 7H QH AD 4D 6D

is best split into:

- ◆ **Double Onion** - JS AH QH AD
- ◆ **five-card onion** - 3C 3S 4S 4D 7H
- ◆ **a six** - 6D

whereas the hand:

9C 4S QS KS 4H JH AD 7D TD KD

is best split into:

- ◆ **four-card onion** - AD 4S 7D 9C
- ◆ **double bagel** - QS KS JH TD
- ◆ **a fourteen** - 4H KD.

From this list of winning hands, it follows that some cards are intrinsically more valuable than others: tens, for example, are only useful in bagels and small-card onions whereas twos and threes are necessary for constructing many-card onions; aces and picture cards are obviously of great value. However, a player's strategy in selecting cards for replacement (see the game descriptions and certain of the modifiers) should also be influenced by the number of players, and whether eights are wild or not, since these factors influence the relative likelihood of each hand's winning the round.

The Non-Gambling Game

At the beginning of each round, one player is identified as the Dealer, with the player to the Dealer's left as the Elder and the player to the Dealer's right as the Younger – this sets the order of precedence in being dealt cards and in winning in the event of a tie as Dealer, Elder, other players in order and, lastly, Younger. In the event that the Dealership changes, these identifiers move to be based around the new Dealer. The round opens when the Dealer shuffles the pack of all 104 cards and the Younger cuts the pack.

All the players are dealt five cards in this order: the Dealer receives two cards and deals all the other players, in order from Elder to Younger, three cards; the Dealer then receives three cards and deals the other players two (this is done to speed up the dealing, which isn't exactly the most interesting part of the game). Then, in turn, from Elder to Younger, each player discards up to four cards into the discard pot and announces the number of discards to the Dealer who replaces them from the top of the pack; the Dealer then discards and replaces, also announcing the number thrown away. It is important to note that up to this point all cards have been dealt face down, each player is only aware of their own cards and, by way of the draw, ought to have a better hand than was originally dealt.

The second set of five cards each is now dealt in the following way: the Dealer receives five cards face down on the table, and then, in turn from Elder to Younger, each other player is dealt five cards face up on the table. Cards dealt face up on the table must remain that way, although the owner of those cards may rearrange them there if desired.

Now the final part of the round, Showdown, takes place. Beginning from the Elder, the highest card grouping is declared and displayed on the table; if the player to the left of the Elder cannot equal, beat or play some modifier that affects the Elder's cards, that player's cards are all placed face up on the table, in their groupings if the player wishes, and that player is out of the round; the comparison of the next leftward player's cards with the Elder's then takes place. If the Elder's cards are equalled, then the next card grouping must be considered. If the Elder's cards are beaten, then the Elder has the opportunity to play a modifier or rearrange the card grouping in an attempt to obtain a better arrangement; once the Elder's cards are undoubtedly beaten, however, the Elder is out of the round and the comparison of the currently leading player's cards with the next leftward player's takes place. By this process of comparison, consideration of lower groupings, rearrangement of card groups and playing of modifiers, and knocking out of players, the holder of the best set of cards, between the Elder and the Younger, is found. Finally, the Dealer's cards are compared with the only player left in, and the process of finding the better cards is repeated; the player who holds the better cards has then won the game. Note that in the event of either a complete tie between two players' cards or an impasse due to circular use of modifiers, the player of greater seniority wins - often, this means that the Dealer wins. Once all the players but one have been knocked out, leaving the winner holding the best cards, the round is over, the cards and discards are collected up and the winner becomes the Dealer for the next round.

The Gambling Game

There are two types of betting that are used in the gambling version of Cripple Mr Onion and these will be described before the details of how they fit into the game are given.

The first type is "matching the Dealer's stake". First, the Dealer chooses a number of coins or tokens to be the stake, on the basis of the cards known to the Dealer, and, naming the amount, places it in the Pot; if the Dealer wishes, the amount may be zero. Then, when called upon by the Dealer to do so, each player must either match the stake, placing an equal amount in the Pot, or fold, placing all cards in the discard pot and losing any claim to the Pot in that round; of course, if the stake is zero, all remaining players can stay in for free.

The second type is "raising the Dealer". When called upon by the Dealer, each player may choose to make an extra bet against the Dealer, according to cards that are known to that player. If the player chooses to raise, the chosen number of coins or tokens are placed on the player's cards and the amount is named. Finally, when all the players who have not yet folded have done this, the Dealer must place an amount equal to the total value of raises into the Pot - and all the individual raises then go into the Pot as well - or lose the Dealership: often this means that the Dealer must fold.

Each round begins in the same way as for the non-gambling game, except that now, before the first deal takes place, every player places a previously agreed amount, the Stake, into the Pot as the ante. Then after every player has discarded and received replacements, the first round of betting takes place.

The Dealer selects a stake, as described above, and then, from the Elder to the Younger, asks each player first to match that stake and then to raise it; if the Dealer cannot match the total value of the raises, then the Dealer folds. This matching and raising occurs twice. The Dealer then selects a stake for the third time and again asks each player, in order, to match it; this time, however, the players are not asked to raise.

The second set of five cards for each remaining player is then dealt as follows: as before, the Dealer receives five cards face down, but now each player has the option of buying from one to all of the five cards face down, at the price of an amount equal to the Stake per card, instead of receiving them all face up. Cards may be bought one at a time, if desired, and once the player has finished buying cards, the Dealer deals the remainder from the five to that player face up on the table in front of the player. As each player receives the full complement of ten cards, an extra bet may be made, in the same manner as raising the Dealer, and then, once every remaining player has ten cards, the Dealer must consider all the extra bets.

If the Dealer matches the total extra bets made, the game continues with the second round of betting described below; however, if the Dealer does not wish to match the extra bets, then the Dealership changes without the Dealer folding - this is the only time when this can take place. The Dealer gives the Dealership to the Elder who, to become the new Dealer, must match the total extra bets, the Elder's own extra bet going into the Pot if the Dealership is accepted; of course, if the Elder does not accept, the Dealership is passed left again until one of the other players accepts it, or until it has gone full circle with no-one wanting it - in that case, everyone folds, the Pot becomes the ante for the next round, the old Dealer remains as Dealer, and the next round starts afresh.

Once the extra bets have been matched, be it by the original Dealer, the Elder or one of the other players, the second round of betting takes place. This consists of two stages of matching and raising as in the first round of betting, but now not followed by a third stage of matching only.

Finally, Showdown takes place, exactly as in the non-gambling game, but now, of course, the winner claims the contents of the Pot as the prize for winning.

In the event that the Dealer folds, the Dealership is auctioned as follows: from the Elder to the Younger, the players who are still in are asked by the old Dealer if they wish to be the new Dealer - if the player wishes to be the new Dealer, that player must advance an amount equal to the Stake. If another player, when asked, also wishes to be Dealer, then that player must match the existing bid and advance another amount equal to the Stake. This process continues around and around the table, with each prospective Dealer making sure that the most recent player's bid is at least an amount equal to the Stake higher than the last bid, until all the players except for one have declined to advance any more, having placed their own total bid in the Pot as they declined, and the single player left becomes the new Dealer, placing the winning bid in the pot. If nobody wishes to be the new Dealer, all the players fold, the Pot becomes the ante for the next round, the old Dealer stays as Dealer and another round begins anew.

The Modifiers

The modifiers have usually been created for one of two reasons, either to make the game a little more interesting and a little more uncertain, or to decrease the chances of winning with a specific hand. It is not necessary to use any of them, apart from numbers zero, which gives the game its name, and one, which makes many-card onions and then Onions more probable, and in a game, say, between four hardened professionals, even the Null Eights Rules would probably not be used. The employment of the modifiers, therefore, is left to the discretion of the players, but some possibilities for using the modifiers beyond number zero are as follows:

- ◆ just modifier #1;
- ◆ modifiers numbers 1 to 3;
- ◆ bring in the modifiers as the game progresses, one in every or every other round;
- ◆ let the Dealer, for each round, declare which modifiers are in force in that round;
- ◆ play all the modifiers from the beginning.

A number of the modifiers use specific cards to represent mythological and not-so mythological Discworld characters, and, if two decks of cards with the same suits are used, confusion may arise as to which of the two, say, queen of spades is to represent the Lady. A solution, if not particularly satisfactory, to this is to mark one of the two cards with a symbol, in this case, for example, the letter L, on the face side so that the marked card becomes the relevant one for the modifier and the other becomes an ordinary card.

The modifiers are all, some to a greater extent than others, based on Discworld life, mythology and beliefs and have been assumed to have evolved, with the game, over many centuries; none of the modifiers are arbitrary in their action or purpose, but a detailed knowledge of the Discworld is not necessary to use them. Finally, the ordering of the modifiers in the list below is, apart from the Crippling Rules in position zero, largely accidental and is not a guide to their usefulness or effectiveness.

Modifier #0: Crippling Rules

- i. A nine-card running flush may be used to cripple a Great Onion and win the game.
- ii. A ten-card running flush out-cripples a nine-card running flush in crippling a Great Onion and may also cripple a Lesser Onion.

(Once a Great Onion or Lesser Onion have been crippled, the usual process of Showdown stops, and the player with the crippling hand wins immediately.)

Modifier #1: Null Eights Rules

- i. During a round in which eights are not wild (see **ii**), an eight may be used as if it had value zero in order to trump up an onion. In the event of a tie between two onions with equal numbers of cards, the onion with the fewer null eights wins.
- ii. In the round following a round in which a null eight has been played, eights are wild, acting as any regular card. The wild Royal, three wild

eights, may then be played. In the next round, eights return to their original role.

(To "trump up an onion" means to make a four-card onion into a five-card onion by the addition of one null eight, or to make a three-card onion into a seven-card onion with four. Note, again, that there are no onions beyond seven-card and that wild eights cannot be used as either null eights or as any of the special cards giving rise to later modifiers.)

Modifier #2: Wild Crippling Rule

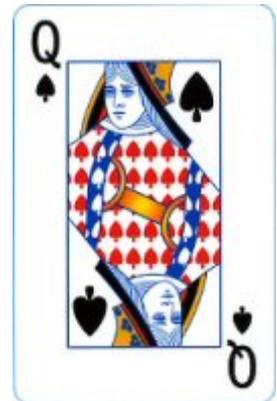
In a round in which eights are wild, to successfully cripple the relevant Onion, the running flush must have at most the same number of wild cards as the Onion being crippled.

Modifier #3: Octavo Rule

When eights are wild, the card group consisting of eight eights can be considered as a Lesser Onion, but beats other Lesser Onions and may not be crippled like a Lesser Onion of any other composition, but may be crippled like a Great Onion.

Modifier #4: The Lady's Rules

- i. If eights are not wild, the Queen of Spades may be declared, before or during Showdown, and replaced by the player's choice of one of the next two cards from the deck, the chosen card taking up the place of the Queen; the other card goes to the discard pot. This move may not rescinded.
- ii. When eights are wild, the Queen of Spades may be declared in order to devalue one ace, for every other player, that would otherwise be played as having value eleven, to value one only. (Each player gets to choose which ace in particular is devalued.) This does not affect any aces in a Great Onion, but may affect cards, in any grouping, which, by being wild or by other means, would otherwise be played with value eleven.



(To "declare" means to put the card on the table face up and point it out to the other players; here, of course, the queen may no longer be used in forming card groupings since a replacement card has been received, but should be left near the player on the table rather than in the discard pot.)

Modifier #5: Fate's Rules



- i. If the Queen of Spades has been declared and replaced, the King of Doves may also be declared and replaced in a like manner, in the process making all aces held by the player who used the Queen of Spades have value zero.
- ii. If eights are wild, the King of Doves may be declared so that eights immediately cease to be wild; a different player who has the Queen of Spades, whether visible, played or not, may then make his own eights wild again. The King of Doves may not be revoked once declared, and a single player may not use the King of Doves and then the Queen of Spades in this way.

("Zeroed" cards are of no use in the game, and cannot be used like null eights to trump up an onion.)

Modifier #6: Great A'Tuin's Rule

Declaring the Queen of Roses allows the player to reduce the value of one of the player's cards by eight points and to increase the value of a different card by eight points. The two affected cards must still have value between one and eleven inclusive.

(A two that is shifted up to value ten may be considered a picture card, a three shifted up to eleven as an ace of value eleven.)



Modifier #7: The Elephants' Rule

Any four cards, each being either a nine or a ten, or an eight when eights are wild, that are declared with the Queen of Roses in one player's hand, allow that player to shift as many points as are needed to generate a Double Onion. This Double Onion may be beaten by any other Double Onion. Any nines or tens in the player's hand that are not involved in the shift may be considered as ones, not aces, and twos respectively.

(Since the five cards involved here have only been declared, and not exchanged as well, they are, of course, still playable as cards in groups. Remember that a ten may not take the role of a picture card in an Onion – a shifted nine, eight etc. is needed. With two nines, two tens and the Queen of Roses, a possible shift is: add one each to the nines and tens – hence the Double Onion - and take four from the Queen of Roses to be a six.)

Modifier #8: The Sender of Eight's Rules

- i. When eights are not wild, a visible Jack of Diamonds makes any aces belonging to a player who uses any eights become zeroed (see #5i).
- ii. When eights are wild, a visible Jack of Diamonds zeroes all aces and disallows eights from taking on value one or eleven.



Modifier #9: Death's Rules

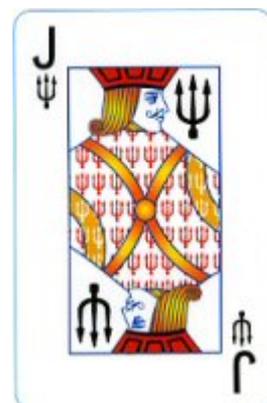


- i. When eights are not wild, a visible King of Axes makes one picture card in every player's hand that has two or more picture cards have no part in forming a Double Onion.
- ii. When eights are wild, a visible King of Axes makes one picture card in every player's hand that has two or more picture cards have no part in forming either a Double Onion or a Triple Onion.

(The "killed" picture card can still take part in groups other than the specified Onions.)

Modifier #10: The Archchancellor's Rules

- i. Any player who plays the Jack of Tridents may not also play an eight as having value eight.
- ii. If the Jack of Tridents is declared at any time during the game, the King of Axes can also be declared if held by another player; if the King of Axes is declared, then all the other players must now declare one previously undisclosed card each. If the King of Axes is not immediately declared by another player, the Jack of Tridents becomes wild for the rest of the round.



Modifier #11: The Fool's Rule



If, at any time before Showdown, the Jack of Clubs is declared, then, for the rest of the round, bagels change with Onions in the order of winning card groupings.

(That is: the two-card onion and the single bagel change places; the Double, Triple and Lesser Onions are exchanged with the double, triple and lesser bagels respectively; the great bagel becomes only beaten by, but may also be crippled like, the Great Onion which remains at the top of the list. This makes bagels worth something, other than a tie-breaker. The Jack of Clubs, of course, can still take part in bagels, and any other card grouping.)

Frequently Asked Questions

What does it mean for eights to be wild?

In most card games, when a card is wild, it means it can take on any value you choose, although sometimes there are restrictions. In the rules and modifiers as presented here, eights represent spells and the Jack of Tridents represents the Archchancellor, so being wild represents magic at work.

There isn't the usual poker-style system where everyone who stays in pays the same amount, is there?

That's correct. Everyone is basically betting one-on-one with the dealer, as is the case in pontoon and blackjack.

Does the dealer really have so much of an advantage that it's worth paying so much more than everybody else to play a hand?

It depends on the style of play. If the dealer is good, then that person will keep the dealership and can make lots of money. If the dealer is no good, then the other players can extract lots of money before the dealership changes. Don't forget that being the dealer offers more chances to cheat as well, which is no doubt a very important part of the game on the Discworld. 😊

In the Null Eights Rule, when does a wild eight revert to being only eight or null? Is it after a wild eight is used or after the round in which a wild eight can be played?

By and large, eights have value eight, but can be chosen to be null in order to trump up an onion. However, if someone uses a null eight in one round, then in the next round, eights are wild. Whether anyone uses a wild eight in that second round or not, eights return to their usual state in the round after that.

Under the same modifier, why would you use a null eight to trump an onion when the less you use the better?

Null eights are less valuable than regular cards in an onion of the same number of cards, but a five-card onion still beats a three-card onion, no matter how many null eights have gone into their composition. Hence, you can use null eights to make a relatively poor four-card onion into a much better six-card onion, and it doesn't matter that you used two null eights unless someone else also happens to have a six-card onion, in which case you have to see who has used fewer null eights.

In Great A'Tuin's Rule, do the two cards affected have to total between one and eleven together or by themselves?

The cards individually must have a value between one and eleven, just like all other regular cards. Their total is fixed, since the modifier is just letting you move eight points from one card to another, but the value of that total doesn't matter as far as the modifier is concerned.

Has anybody ever played this for real?

Oh, yes. In 1992 and 1993, when Terry (Tao) and I were working out the kinks in the game and developing the modifiers, we played the game quite a number of

times with other students. I think everyone who was involved enjoyed it, and it worked out pretty well. The size of the games varied from three people to seven, the most important lesson being that the style of play has to change according to the number of players.

Is "Terry Tao" a clever pseudonym for "Terry Pratchett"?

No 😊 Terry Tao is a Hedrick Assistant Professor at the Department of Mathematics, UCLA, specialising in harmonic analysis and partial differential equations. Visit <http://www.math.ucla.edu/~tao> to find out more.

Questions? Comments? Suggestions?

You are welcome to email me at andrew@crimron.net.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Terry Tao, Leo Breebaart, Phil Penney and, of course, Terry Pratchett for writing the Discworld books, without which none of this would be possible. Thanks, too, to Roger, Diana and James Clough of The Fat Pack Playing Card Company for making countless wishes for a nicely designed eight-suit deck of cards come true! I would also like to thank Kea and Rhett Ransom Pennell for use of the excellent graphics.

The following have asked questions, brought facts to my attention or otherwise contributed: Dave Budd, Paolo Comunian, CJ Stone, Bob Dahlin, Will Ashworth.

Andrew C. Millard
4th July 1998



"One for the road, sir?" by Kea.

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Prepared for printing by Timothy Green
March 2010 using OpenOffice.org Writer
on an Acer PC running Ubuntu 9.10
(karmic) GNU/Linux.