



FREE · OPEN CONTENT

THE POKER RUN ENGINE

CORE SYSTEM REFERENCE

VERSION 1.0

ONE DECK. ENDLESS SETTINGS.

One Resolution System. Unlimited Expeditions.

POWERED BY THE POKER RUN ENGINE™

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The Poker Run Engine is a universal framework for creating short solo expedition games using nothing more than a standard deck of playing cards and a tracker sheet. Every Poker Run game shares the same poker-hand resolution, the same expedition loop, the same progression model, and the same final confrontation structure — only the setting changes. This document describes the pure systems. Genre, setting, and flavour are applied as an overlay.

01

Core Premise

The player commands a fragile asset (ship, vehicle, team, etc.) and repeatedly undertakes short expeditions into increasingly dangerous territory. The goal is to gather specific resources/discoveries and improve the asset until it can confront a final threat.

Session length target: 10–25 minutes per expedition.

Components: Standard 52-card deck + one tracker sheet (paper or digital).

02

Core Resources (always present)

Resource	Role	Starting Value	Typical Cap
Integrity	Hit points of the asset	3	5–6
Support	Secondary resource (crew, fuel, morale...)	2	6
Advancement	Gates access to deeper zones	Rank I	Rank IV / Final
Currency	Spent between expeditions on upgrades	0	—

Optional but recommended secondary trackers:

- Discoveries (3 types, specific counts required for the final confrontation)
- Specialists / permanent abilities unlocked by Support milestones
- One limited “ghost” or temporary resource (e.g. Ghost Crew)

03

Core Loop

1. Choose a reachable Zone (gated by Advancement rank).
2. Resolve **three Encounters**.
3. Return to base.
4. Spend Currency on upgrades / repairs.
5. Repeat until ready for the Final Confrontation.

When the draw pile empties, shuffle the discard pile into a new draw pile **after** the current check is fully resolved.

04

Encounter Structure

For each of the three encounters:

1. Turn over the top card of the deck.
2. **Number cards (A–10):** Suit determines encounter type → make a Check.
3. **Face cards (J, Q, K):** Trigger a special Face Card Event instead of a normal suit encounter.

Standard Suit Mapping (reskinnable)

Suit	Encounter Archetype	Success Reward	Failure Cost
♠ Spades	Hostile / Conflict	Small currency or no damage	Lose Integrity
♥ Hearts	Opportunity / Aid	Gain Support or heal Integrity	Nothing (or optional risk)
♦ Diamonds	Resource / Salvage	Currency (scaled by hand)	Nothing
♣ Clubs	Discovery / Site	Mark a Discovery + currency	Nothing

Exact numbers and secondary effects are set by the genre overlay.

05

Check Resolution: Discard & Draw

1. Draw **5 cards**.
2. Discard **0–4 cards**.
3. Each discarded card **may require paying a cost defined by the current Overlay**.
4. Draw replacement cards until you again have **5 cards**.
5. This is your **Final Hand**.
6. Evaluate the Final Hand.
7. Discard all five cards.

“Engine Principle: The Poker Run Engine never defines the discard cost. Each Overlay defines the resource (or no cost at all).”

Hand	Result
High Card	Failure
Pair	Success
Two Pair	Strong Success
Three of a Kind	Critical
Straight or better	Exceptional

Rewards and penalties scale with result strength. Exact values are defined by the genre overlay.

06

Face Card Events (highly reskinnable)

Card	Archetype Role	Design Intent
Jack	Opportunity / Choice	Immediate flexible benefit or extra action
Queen	Ally / Temporary Asset	Grant a limited-use special resource
King	High Risk / High Reward	Immediate Check with strong stakes

These should feel rare and memorable. Exact effects change with genre; the roles above should stay consistent.

07

Progression & Upgrades

Between expeditions the player may spend Currency on:

Upgrade Type	Cost Band	Effect
Support +1	Low	Increase Support (unlocks specialists)
Module / Gear	Low–Mid	Permanent or once-per-expedition bonus
Special System	Mid	Powerful limited-use ability
Advancement	High	Increase Advancement rank (unlock zones)

Advancement ranks typically gate four zones of increasing danger and reward. Rank IV (or a special “Prototype” state) is required to attempt the Final Confrontation.

08

Support → Specialist Ladder

Specialists are **active only while current Support meets their threshold** — not permanently unlocked. If Support drops below a threshold (from a penalty, injury, or any other source), that specialist immediately goes inactive; it automatically reactivates the moment Support meets the threshold again, by any means. Active specialists stack, so an asset at max Support benefits from all of them at once. Status is always read from the current Support value, not from history — no tracker checkbox should imply permanence.

Recommended structure (thresholds can shift slightly by genre):

Threshold	Specialist Role
1+	Basic utility (extra discard, mobility, or minor exploration edge)
2+	Safety net / failure mitigation
3+	Information / peek ability
4+	Improved currency gain
5+	Damage prevention
6	Economy discount

This threshold-gated design gives secondary-resource loss real teeth — losing Support can cost an overlay's asset an active ability mid-expedition, not just a number on the sheet.

09

Zones / Pressure Curve

Four zones of escalating danger. Each higher zone adds concrete pressure (extra Integrity loss, secondary resource loss, permanent attrition, etc.).

The final zone should create a sense that remaining too long is itself dangerous.

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Discoveries & Final Confrontation

Three distinct Discovery tracks. Specific counts are required before the Final Confrontation may be attempted (classic example: 3 / 2 / 1).

Final Confrontation structure (recommended):

- Three successive Checks.
- Require a defined combination of Successes + at least one Critical/Exceptional.
- Failures cost significant Integrity.
- One limited recovery option available during the confrontation.

Survive with Integrity remaining = victory.

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Design Principles for Overlays

When creating a new genre version:

- Keep the Engine's rules identical whenever possible.
- Change names, flavour text, and exact numbers freely.
- Preserve the emotional shape: fragile asset → repeated short expeditions → escalating pressure → gated final confrontation.
- Use Face Card Events and Modules as the primary places to inject unique genre identity.
- Resist adding new core systems. Prefer reskinning or small numerical tweaks.

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Poker Run Engine Summary

Draw a card for each of three encounters. Number cards trigger suit-based encounters resolved by a five-card poker check with a limited mulligan. Face cards trigger special high-impact events. Between expeditions spend currency to improve Integrity, Support, Modules, and Advancement rank. Advancement unlocks deeper zones with greater pressure. Collect specific Discoveries, then attempt a three-check final confrontation. Specialists stay active only while Support meets their threshold, deactivating and reactivating as Support rises and falls. The entire game uses only a standard deck and a tracker sheet.

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