

NINETY-NINE FOR 3

The classic version

Game design by David Parlett

Note

Over the years I have experimented with different ways of choosing the trump suit and structuring the whole game. The simplest method is described first. Others appear as variations under the main description.

Cards

37, consisting of a Joker plus 36 cards ranking A-K-Q-J-10-9-8-7-6 in each suit.

Deal

Whoever cuts the highest cards deals first. The turn to deal and play passes always to the left. Deal 12 cards each one at a time, and the last (37th) card face up to one side.

Trumps

The suit of the turn-up is the trump suit for the current deal, unless it is a Nine or the Joker, when the play is at no trump.

Joker

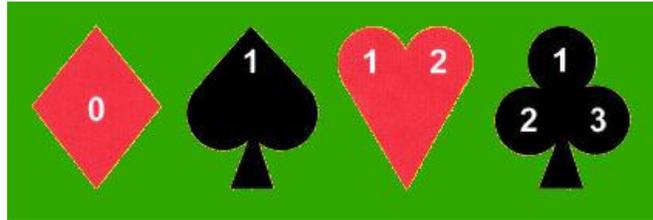
The Joker has no independent value but counts exactly as if it were the turn-up, both for bidding and trick-playing purposes.

Object

To win exactly the number of tricks you bid. You bid secretly by making three discards face down, leaving nine cards to play to tricks. Your bid-cards must be selected in such a way as to represent how many of the nine tricks you undertake to win. For this purpose, the suit of each bid-card represents a specific number of tricks by means of the following code:

- ♦ any diamond discarded represents **0** tricks bid
- ♠ any spade discarded represents **1** trick bid
- ♥ any heart discarded represents **2** tricks bid
- ♣ any club discarded represents **3** tricks bid.

These representations are easily remembered because they are based on the shapes of the suit signs: a diamond is a nought with straight sides, a spade has one point, a heart has two cheeks, and a club has three bobbles, as illustrated above. Note that the ranks of the bid-cards are irrelevant to the number bid. It's only their **suits** that count.



Premium bids

Normally, bid-cards are left face down throughout the play of tricks. **But:**

- For an additional bonus, you may offer to declare by turning your bid-cards face up at start of play, thus declaring your target and revealing more information about the lie of cards.
- For a higher bonus, you may also offer to reveal. This involves not only turning your bid-cards up but also then playing with your hand of cards exposed on the table before the opening lead.

Only one player may declare or reveal in each deal. If more than one wish to declare, the leader has priority over the middle player, and either of them has priority over the dealer. Anyone offering to 'reveal' has priority over anyone only offering to 'declare', regardless of position. If two or more wish to reveal, however, then the same positional priority applies.

Play

Dealer's left-hand neighbor leads to the first trick. You must follow suit if you can, but may play any card if you can't. The trick is taken by the highest card of the suit led, or by the highest trump if any are played. The winner of each trick leads to the next.

Score

If you took exactly the number of tricks you bid, you must turn up your bid-cards to prove it. If not, you can keep them hidden. You each score 1 point for each trick you won, regardless of how many you bid. In addition, if you succeeded in winning exactly the number of tricks you bid you add a bonus related to how many players succeeded, as follows:

- If all three succeeded, each adds a bonus of 10 points.
- If only two succeeded, they each add a bonus of 20.
- If only one player succeeded, that player adds a bonus of 30.
- There is an additional bonus of 30 for 'declaring' or 60 for 'revealing'. This goes to the declarer/revealer if successful, or to each opponent if not.

The highest score that can be made in one deal is 99. This occurs when one player wins 9 tricks (9 points), is the only player to succeed (add 30), and played with cards revealed (add 60).

Game

Play nine deals, or any higher multiple of nine, and the winner is the player with the highest score. Alternatively, a game is 100 points and the overall winner is the first to win three games.

Strategy

There are three players and nine tricks. Therefore: if in doubt, bid three.

Note that the four suits differ in trick-taking potential according to their differences in bidding value. Since the average bid is three, and the various ways of representing this are [♣ ♦ ♦], [♥ ♠ ♦] and [♠ ♠ ♠], it follows that diamonds and spades are more likely to be out in bids than hearts and clubs. Given an average distribution, clubs and hearts are therefore usually all in play and will go round at least twice without being ruffed, so their Aces and Kings are usually reliable trick-winners. Clubs are especially reliable as trumps, as it would be self-defeating to discard them in bids. At the opposite extreme, diamonds are very unreliable. The Ace is as often as not ruffed on the first diamond lead, and when diamonds are trumps there is usually at least one player who will discard three of them - especially Ace, King and Queen - for a plausible bid of zero.

Because you are aiming for an exact number, low cards are as important as probable trick-losers as high ones are as probable winners. Middle-ranking cards are unreliable in either respect, so it is usually best to discard Jacks, Tens and Nines as bid-cards and to retain Aces, Kings, Sevens and Sixes as trick-winners and losers respectively. This consideration will often lead you to the best of several possible bids.

Nevertheless, if you really cannot find a sensible way of bidding, a good ploy is to throw out three cards whose absence from play is most likely to upset everyone else, such as the top three trumps, or three Aces. You may not make your bid, but neither will anyone else, and if you should happen to win a majority of tricks, you will even gain on the deal!

If you have a middling card that may or may not win a trick, such as ♠ J, lead it at the earliest opportunity in order to clarify the situation.

A no-trumper always favors the lead player. Never declare at no trumps unless you have the opening lead, or unless you have a cast-iron bid of zero (in any position).

VARIANTS FOR 3

Optional alternatives

Junk the Joker

This is now my preferred version of play. No Joker is used. Instead, the first deal is played with diamonds as trump. (Or at no trump, if you prefer, though I don't.) Thereafter, the trump suit for each deal is determined by the number of players who succeeded in the previous deal, namely (and obviously) clubs if all three succeeded, hearts if two, spades if one, or diamonds if nobody made their contract.

Ninety-Nine declared

At each deal there is no predetermined trump. Instead, the dealer's left-hand neighbor may announce a trump suit in return for playing a declared or revealed game. If he passes, the next in turn has the same option, and so on. As before, a revelation overcalls a declaration. If nobody is prepared to make a premium bid, the trump suit remains the same as it was in the preceding deal, except in the first deal of the game, when it is no trump. (It is not advisable to allow players to bid no trump, or at least especially not the first player, as a no trump game strongly favors the leader to the first trick.)

[See the original site rules for additional variants. etc.](#)