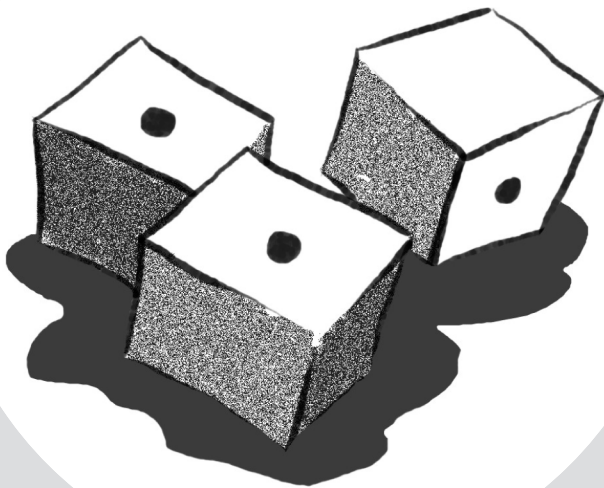


# THE POOL

*A role-playing game by James V. West*



# THE RULES

*The Pool* is a role-playing system geared toward player and GM narrative collaboration. You can use it for any setting you like. One person in your group needs to be the Game Master, or GM—this is the person who runs the game. To play you need a lot of d6s (six-sided dice) including a handful of “GM dice” that look different from the rest.

Before character creation begins, each player needs 15 dice for their starting Pool. The rest of the dice go into a common pool.

## 1

### CHARACTER CREATION

Once your group has decided on a setting you can begin creating characters.

Making a character is simple: just write a 50 word Story. Pretend you’re writing a book and this is the introduction of your main character. You only have 50 words to play with, so focus on the most important elements of your new character and how the character fits into the setting your group has chosen. Mentioning your character’s name does not count towards the word limit.

#### EXAMPLE OF A STORY

I’ve created my first character for *The Pool*. The setting is a world of darkish magical fantasy.

*“Damart is a sorcerer trained in elemental magic by the secret Lost Land order. He was expelled from the Order after falling in love with a young initiate who died when he tried to teach her a spell she could not control. Now Damart seeks the means to bring her back to life.”*

# 2

## ASSIGNING TRAITS & BONUSES

Now pick the most important elements of your Story. These are Traits that will help you gain narrative control during play.

Traits can be anything from friends and enemies to a good horse or a knack for attracting trouble. Whatever is important about your character can be a Trait. Though you can word a Trait any way you wish, make sure it doesn't contradict or expand your Story.

For example, Damart's Story reads "seeks the means to bring her back to life" so a Trait based on that statement could be called "Searching for a way to bring his love back from the dead" or "Trying to find a way to raise his love from the dead" or something similar. But calling the Trait "Has vast knowledge of death magic and resurrection" would not work because the Story does not relate any special death-related skills or knowledge.

Make sure your Traits are specific enough to avoid game conflicts over vagueness. For example, Damart is an elemental sorcerer. When he uses magic it is elemental magic, not death magic or shooting stars from his fingers. Avoid listing Traits as vague as "Magic" or "Scholar"—be specific.

You can assign Bonuses to important traits, in the form of dice. Bonuses increase the effectiveness of traits during play. You do not have to assign a Bonus to every Trait. To assign a Bonus, spend dice from your starting Pool. The cost is the Bonus times itself. Thus, a +2 would cost 4 dice and a +3 would cost 9 dice and so on. It is very important to leave some dice in your Pool — at least 3 or 4.

### EXAMPLE OF TRAIT AND BONUS ASSIGNMENT

After writing Damart's Story, I choose the Traits I want and assign Bonuses to them. These Bonuses cost a total of 9 dice, leaving 6 dice in my Pool.

- *Elemental sorcerer of the Lost Land Order* +2
- *Outcast of the Lost Land Order*
- *He is driven by love* +2
- *Searching for the means to raise his love from the dead* +1

# 3

## CASTING THE DICE

Dice are cast to determine the general outcome of conflicts. This is not the same as rolling when you simply want to take an action. The swing of a sword can be achieved through simple dialogue with the GM, without throwing dice. The effect of a die roll in *The Pool* is much broader than the swing of a sword.

Anyone can call for a die roll whenever a conflict is apparent or when someone wants to introduce a new conflict. Just broadly state your intention and roll.

To win a die roll, roll a 1 on any of the dice you cast. Ignore any other results. If you don't roll a 1, you fail the roll.

When you roll, the GM will provide 1-3 GM dice to add to the throw. If you can show an obvious connection between your intention and one of your character's Traits, you can add Bonus dice to your roll if that Trait has a Bonus.

In addition, you can gamble up to 9 dice from your Pool. Adding dice to your roll greatly increases your chances of getting a 1. But if you fail a roll you lose all the dice you gambled. A bad throw can instantly reduce your Pool to nothing.

### EXAMPLE OF THE DIE ROLL

Damart is in an ancient library. I want him to find a piece of knowledge that will help him on his quest, so I ask for a roll based on the Trait "searching for the means to bring his love from the dead +1". The GM hands me 1 GM die (for my +1 Trait) and decides to give me 2 more to roll as well (he can give me an extra 1-3, remember). I still have 6 dice in my Pool, so I add 4 of them to the roll as a gamble to increase my chances.

I cast all 7 dice and, luckily, I get a 1. If I had not rolled a 1 I would have lost the 4 gambled dice from my Pool, leaving me with only 2.

# 4

## SUCCESS & FAILURE

When you roll successfully, you have two options: add a die to your Pool, or make a Monologue of Victory.

If you chose to add a die to your Pool then the GM will narrate a positive outcome to the conflict, but he will do so any way he chooses. This means things might not go exactly the way you wanted.

Making a Monologue of Victory (or MOV) is the only way to ensure that the conflict results in what you want. Giving an MOV is like taking control of the game for a few moments. You can describe your character's actions, the actions of those around him, and the outcome of those actions. You can even focus on less direct elements of the conflict such as what's happening in the next room or who's entering the scene.

You can do just about anything. In fact, these are the only real limitations you must observe:

- 1) Don't make alterations to the characters of other players (such as killing them). You can add complications for them and affect the things around them, but don't intrude on the creation of a fellow player.
- 2) Keep your narration in synch with the established facts and tone of the game. If you need to ask the GM questions or prompt the other players for responses during your MOV, do so.
- 3) Keep your narration reasonably short.

Observing these rules of courtesy and continuity will help everyone enjoy the game even more. If you ignore these rules, the GM may end your MOV at any time.

If you fail a die roll two things will happen. First, you will lose any dice you gambled. Second, the GM will narrate an outcome that is not what you intended. The details of the outcome are entirely up to him. He may introduce new complications for your character or simply narrate a scene that is opposite of what you wanted.

CONTINUES OVERLEAF >

### EXAMPLE OF A MONOLOGUE OF VICTORY

With my successful die roll from the previous example, I choose to give an MOV. The GM turns it over to me, everyone listens...

"After a frustrating couple of hours searching through ancient tomes, Damart is ready to give it up. There's nothing here. But then he notices a very strange thing. In a darkened corner a book is leaning against the wall. But it isn't just leaning, its moving! He takes a closer look and the book scurries under a table. It can walk! He crawls under the table and manages to get his hands on it. The book squirms, but isn't strong enough to break free. On it's cover are letters from a very old language he has some familiarity with. They read 'Land of the Dead'. There are bloodstains on the edges of the pages."

I decide that's a good stopping point. Everyone is very curious about this walking book and now the GM resumes control of the game, taking into consideration this new element I have just invented.

## 5

### THE CONTINUING STORY

If you have 9 dice or more left in your Pool at the end of a session, you start the next session with the same number. If you have less than that, you start the next session with 9 dice in your Pool.

At the end of each session, you may add up to 15 new words to your character's Story. They can be new lines or additions to old lines. You can also save them until the end of the next session and then write a total of 30 new words.

You may add new Traits when you choose. You may add or increase Bonuses to Traits anytime you wish the same way you did when you created your character: the desired Bonus times itself (+2 costs 4 dice, +3 costs 9 dice, etc.).

# 6

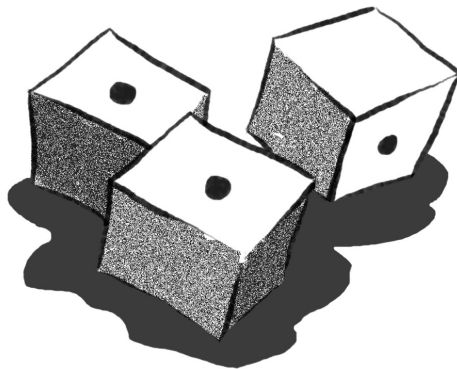
## AT DEATH'S DOOR

Your character does not have “hit points” or any other measure of life. But he can die. If your character fails a die roll in a situation the GM deems utterly lethal, you can either accept death and make a final MOV to describe it (no rolling required), or make a final roll to save his life. In this roll you cannot use any Traits and the GM cannot grant you any extra dice. All dice must be gambled. Your fellow players may pitch in up to 9 dice each to help your character survive.

No matter what the outcome of the roll, all the dice you cast are lost--even dice gambled by other players.

If you win this roll your character has survived the incident, but you do not get a MOV nor do you get to add any dice to your Pool. The GM will describe how death was cheated.

If you fail the roll, your character dies. In this case, you get to make a final MOV in which you describe your character's death in detail. Make it a good one.





## END NOTES

This game was designed more-or-less in a single night back around 2001 or so. I presented it to the community of the lamentably defunct [indierpgs.com](http://indierpgs.com) website and got quite a bit of positive feedback, including this from Ron Edwards (*Sorcerer*):

*“Here is a two-page freebie available on the internet that may be the beginning of a whole new wave in RPG design. It presents an amazing concept, astonishingly strong, and so pure. My players, hardened RPG veterans, cannot stop gushing about it.”*

Here is a video of Ron Edwards delivering a talk about *The Pool* at the University of Milan: [Game Designers on Stage YouTube link](#)

I did eventually develop the system into a finished RPG called *The Questing Beast*, also thanks to much feedback at *The Forge*. So my special thanks goes to Ron Edwards, Scott Knipe, Paul Czege, Mike Holmes, Blake Hutchins, Nathan E. Banks, Rene Vernon, Tim Denee (and [rpg.net](http://rpg.net)), bankuei, David Farmer (and the other folks at Collector Comics...now called Little Monsters.), Shawn Martin, James Perrin, Phillip Keeney, Dawna Keeney (wink), etc.

There were many variations of this game created by the RPG community as well as some non-English translations (French, Italian and Portuguese). I have made these available in a zipped file at [www.jwarts.com/thepoolvariations.zip](http://www.jwarts.com/thepoolvariations.zip).

I'm always eager to hear about other people's experiences with *The Pool*. Write a review on one of the great RPG websites, such as [rpg.net](http://rpg.net). Or send me an email with your thoughts, comments, criticisms, etc.

Thanks for checking out *The Pool*!

[jvwest@gmail.com](mailto:jvwest@gmail.com)  
[www.jwarts.com](http://www.jwarts.com)