

The Pool As HeroQuest Plugin

These are Nick Hollingsworth's personalised notes on using The Pool to play HeroQuest (or Hero Wars) with an existing set of HeroQuest characters. They assume you are familiar with HeroQuest but you don't need to be familiar with The Pool.

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1 Credits

The Pool (©2002 by James V. West) is a stripped down narrative rpg system, a copy of which can be found at <http://www.randomordercreations.com/thepool.html>. The above site also has links to *The Pool* variants.

These notes also contains things inspired by discussions archived on the Forge, and other places (for example a change sometimes called 'The Rule of Three'). See The Forge's Pool forum at <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/index.php?c=3>

HeroQuest is © 2004 Issaries Inc. <http://www.glorantha.com/>. *Hero Wars* is an earlier version of the same game.

2 The Pool as Plugin.

It is one of the unsung strengths of Heroquest that a consistent method is used for describing everything about a character and that this description is independent of any of the mechanics of the game. This allows resolution mechanisms to be picked to suit the needs of a particular situation.

You can use The Pool as an alternate set of rules for Heroquest. More interestingly you can use it for some sessions or parts of sessions and use the standard HeroQuest rules the rest of the time.

Because you use normal HeroQuest characters completely unchanged The Pool becomes another tool in your armoury of rules for resolving contests; you might perhaps think of it as a tool for resolving a *session long freeform contest*.

3 When To Use The Pool

The lightweight and simple rules of The Pool are very well suited to running a session of play where you want a high degree of improvisation from GM and players. Both players and GM should try to keep the pace up, but at the same time it's OK for whoever is narrating to ask the others for information or their preferences.

4 In A Nutshell

One person is the GM. The rest are players. Players narrate after they win a contest; the GM narrates the rest of the time. Only players ever roll dice, GMs never need to.

5 The Pool

Each player takes 6 D6. This is that player's starting Pool. A player with multiple characters still has one pool with which to direct the narrative.

The number of dice simply reflects that player's degree of control over the story. When a player has few dice the GM's narration may often describe things as going badly or being dangerous, but this is a guideline not a rule.

6 Start

The GM gets a heap of dice of a different colour to the players.

The GM starts to narrate the story. He does not ask the players for input; he just describes events happening. Unlike other games he does not describe a conflict and then ask what the characters will do; instead he just describes conflict and its resolution. If the players don't say anything then the GM just continues narrating the story, taking it wherever he wants. When the players interrupt and say what their characters try to do the GM simply narrates the outcome of this too; there's no need to roll for skills, combat or anything.

Either GM or players can call for a Roll to resolve a conflict whenever they want. This Roll will decide who narrates. Repeat after me: they aren't skill rolls; they aren't necessarily to see who wins; they are about who narrates. Players

can ask for a roll whenever a conflict is apparent or even when they want to introduce one. If no one calls for a roll the GM just keeps narrating.

7 Conflict Rolls

7.1 Player States Intent

The player broadly states what his character is doing and (more importantly) roughly what he intends to narrate if he wins.

The player suggests the ability that supports his actions but the GM gets to rule on what the most appropriate Ability actually is. When a statement of intent comes without precedent in the story (eg: 'I pull out my silver sword to hit the werewolf') the GM might opt to give zero GM dice and/or disallow any Abilities.

Players can renegotiate their intention with the GM as long as pace of play is not affected. If things bog down or anyone looks bored the GM will insist on a roll on the latest coherent statement of intent.

Note that unlike HeroQuest only one ability can be used at a time and the characters can't augment abilities to increase their chances. In theory you *could* choose to allow auto augmentation of abilities by the player before deciding on the relative difficulties; but we don't; The Pool's approach of only using one skill at a time makes the player describe the ability in use rather than just name check it for a bonus. Its still possible for players to take control and improve the odds – see the 'Augmentation' and 'Transfers' sections below for details.

7.2 GM Loans Dice

The player gets loaned a number of dice to roll. The GM decides how many to grant; he explains the situation but does not explain his workings.

The number will either be simply:

Difficulty:	Almost impossible	Very difficult	Odds against	Odds in favour	Very easy	Almost certain
Dice:	0	1	2	3	4	5

Or roughly estimated using:

- **Difficulty Dice:** a number of dice are granted based on one character ability relative to the opposition, whether that's another character or 'the world'.

Difficulty:	2 Masteries less	1 Mastery less	5 less	5 more	1 Mastery more	2 Masteries more
Dice:	0	1	2	3	4	5

- **Relevance:** The GM may choose to grant an extra dice if the characters ability is much more relevant to the situation than his opponents. He may penalise a dice if it's much less relevant or is improvised.
- **Circumstances:** The GM can grant or remove dice to reflect the circumstances. All the normal situational modifiers can be applied. For example each extra opponent is worth +3 on the resisting ability.

The GM is encouraged to grab a rough figure out the air and keep up the pace of play rather than indulge in mental arithmetic.

These dice will be returned to the GM whatever the result of the roll.

7.3 Player Gambles Pool Dice

If the player wants to increase his chances he can add **up to 9 dice from his pool**. He is gambling these and will lose them if he fails the roll.

7.4 Player Buys Dice With HP

Before rolling the player may spend 1 HP (only) to buy two extra dice from the GM to increase his chances. These dice are lost regardless of the outcome of the roll.

Caution: Unlike the rest of these rules this suggestion has not been play-tested.

7.5 **Player Rolls**

The player rolls the dice (the GM never rolls any).

- If he gets a 1 on any dice he wins, he keeps his gambled dice, returns the loaned dice and either:
 - wins 1 to 3 Reward Dice to add to his pool but lets the GM narrate the victory, or
 - narrate the result of the conflict himself in a player's Monologue Of Victory (MoV).
- If the player fails he loses all the dice he gambled and the GM narrates a defeat.

8 When the GM Narrates Defeat

The player failed. The GM narrates something that is not the stated intent. The details of the outcome are entirely up to him. He may introduce new complications or simply narrate a scene that is opposite of what was wanted.

The description will probably reflect the number of dice you have left in your pool and *should* add complication to your situation. It doesn't have to translate into a "critical failure", it just has to increase the tension, up the ante, whatever you choose to call it. Often the narrative will describe the character succeeding in the task in hand but with a result, perhaps later in the game, that puts new obstacles in the way.

9 When the GM Narrates Victory and the Player Gets Dice

The player won but took the extra dice, so the GM gets to narrate an outcome. This will probably be positive to reflect your increased number of dice. It will reflect your intended outcome, but may not be quite what you wanted. He may go for something beneficial for you, or sometimes he may put the hammer down on your behind.

The choice of how many Reward Dice the player gets for a win is entirely the GM's without discussion and happens after the player forgoes MoV. Some GMs will base the choice on the improvement in the character situation, some may give 3 to players with few dice in their pool and 1 to players with large pools, some may consider the number of 1's rolled, some may combine all these issues, and some may always give 1 dice.

10 When the Player Narrates Monologue of Victory

The player won and declined the extra dice and so gets to describe the character's actions, the actions of those around him, the outcome of those actions, what's happening in the next room, who's entering the scene, what happens to any PC or NPC, etc. But:

- 1) You can't make serious alterations to the characters of other players (such as killing them) without that player's consent. You can add complications for them and affect the things around them, but don't trample on the creation of a fellow player.
- 2) You can narrate a victory that finishes a scene and puts an NPC or group of them out of the picture. But occasionally a description of the death of an NPC may get watered down by the GM.
- 3) 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.
- 4) The GM may end your MOV at any time.

11 PC Death, Defeat and Heroic Recovery

As your Pool decreases in size so your ability to control the story and avoid disaster decreases. If you lose in a potentially irreversible contest (such as death) you can either accept the outcome and make a final MoV to describe it (no rolling required), or roll for a Heroic Recovery. When you roll for a Heroic Recovery you can gamble any number of dice, but you don't get dice from Abilities or from the GM. 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 cast are lost.

If you win you survive, but you do not get a MOV or gain any dice for your Pool. The GM will describe how disaster was cheated.

If you fail the roll, your character dies or is otherwise damaged. You make a final MOV in which you describe your character's defeat in detail. Make it a good one.

12 NPC Death

To kill one or more NPC it's best to state it as the intent; otherwise a monologue of victory describing the death of an NPC *may* get watered down by the GM. It's not a *rule* that NPC death must be stated in the intent – it just avoids the GM intruding on your Monologue once you win.

The GM may occasionally ask for NPCs to be left alive because they make the storyline easier to construct. However it's much better for the GM to go with the flow and improvise some other storyline or way of unfolding events.

Players should not automatically kill all NPCs. Consider: the narrative will always feature antagonists; if NPCs are killed others will take their place. So kill off ones that do not interest you and allow the ones you enjoy having in the story to survive. Since players have considerable power there are many ways of ending a scene without writing interesting NPCs out of the story. Once players grasp this GMs should not automatically rescue NPCs. By killing an NPC players are expressing the opinion that his part in the story is over.

13 Conclusion

Once the GM has presented a climatic scene and the players made a MOV to conclude it to everyone's satisfaction the story is over.

14 A Few Words Aimed At HeroQuest Players

Recovery

When you are very low on dice don't struggle too much against the GMs narrative. Your small Pool shows your character has become relatively powerless to control events. Instead, look for anything that you can describe the character doing that is directly relevant to his Abilities. It does not matter if they are peripheral tasks and don't directly improve your situation. Just roll the free dice you get for your Abilities, don't gamble the few dice you still have and if you win take the dice and let the GM narrate; this way you may be able to earn some bonus dice for your Pool.

Augments

Unlike standard HeroQuest only one Ability can be used at a time, however you can still improve your odds with an auxiliary skill. If you have a hard task to perform and want to improve your odds then first describe the character preparing for the hard task in a way that allows you to use your good Abilities, roll and choose to take extra dice. The GM's narration might make matters worse, but it probably won't, in fact the GM often won't choose to narrate anything at all. Now use the extra dice to improve your odds on the hard task.

Transfers

Players can give each other dice simply by describing their character helping the other character. Players can't lend dice, only give dice. The GM can choose to limit the number transferred based on what was described, or require a successful challenge in order for it to take place.

Preparing Scenarios

Since the pool allows both the players and the GM to direct the story, preconceived scenarios can only serve as an inspiration in the mind of the GM. Once play starts the story is likely to very quickly head off in its own direction.

Even a scenario prepared in a 'narrativist' manner is only indirectly usable. Such scenarios are written specifically to be a starting point and avoid describing how events will unfold during play, though they might suggest a list of things that might happen. However, unless all the players are also allowed to read it and everyone agrees it describes the starting situation for the story then it only exists in the mind of the GM and thus there is no reason to suppose that events invented by the players will mesh with it.

Player Narration

The GM should suppress his instinct to cut the player Monologue of Victory short. The effect of allowing unfettered player input is one of the take home points of playing The Pool, so you might as well go with it and see it through. The first time a player makes a MoV they are likely to focus on the contest in hand and will probably stop after describing the outcome of it; the GM should just push them to keep going. Don't start reigning in their monologues until they have definitely learned that its their right to be as creative as the GM.

15 Example

GM: "The cliff toad's tongue is wrapped round and round Baldar pinning him to the sacrificial column. He struggles, but the priest laughs at his futile efforts and then runs his blade across the hero's cheeks. Blood runs from the..."

Baldar's Player (interrupting): "But the pain stirs Baldar to struggle harder, he cries out 'Storm Bull give me strength'. Baldar has a feat called Strength Of The Bull 10W."

GM: "What do you want to happen?"

Baldar's Player: "Baldar's preparing to burst free. Its an augment."

A 10w ability vs the worlds default resistance to magic of 14 would normally give 3 dice. But Baldar is pinned in place by the giant tongue. So the GM goes to loan Baldar's player 1 dice, saying "Baldar's arms are pinned down, the priest smirks knowing he can't work magic like that".

Sago's Player (interrupting): "Hang on. Sago's still watching all this from the ceiling and decides to distract the toad and give Baldar the chance he needs. He draws the globe of acid from his old bag."

GM: "I didn't know he had one."

Sago's Player: "Of course he has, look, Smugly Produce Item From Bag 10W."

The GM loans the Sago's player 3 dice. The player rolls them and gets a pair of 1s.

The GM gathers up his loan dice.

Sago's player smiling: "I'll take dice please... Two! Thanks."

GM: "So Sago reaches into the depths of his battered bag and draws out a cloudy glass globe".

Sago's player: "and throws it at the column above Baldar."

GM: "Are you intending to describe Baldar escaping?"

Sago's Player: "No, just the tongue twitching giving him his chance, I'm going to transfer some dice."

GM: "Oh, ok. Feel free. You don't need to roll again"

Sago's Player: "Actually I'll roll for it please, I want the extra dice. Sago has Javelin 19, so he can probably throw things ok."

GM: "Its not a difficult target to hit, but you're going to cover Baldar if you fail the roll". He loans the player 3 dice.

Baldar's Player: "Baldar stares pointedly up at Sago hanging from the ceiling and mouths 'no'."

Sago's player, ignoring all protestations, adds several dice from his pool and rolls. The last dice comes up 1.

GM (gathering up his loan dice): "Ok. Here's another dice for succeeding. It has to go to Baldar since you were transferring."

Sago's Player chooses to give Baldar's Player 4 dice in total to bring his Pool up to 6.

GM: "The globe shatters on the stone above Baldar. Acid splashes equally over the toad's tongue and Baldar's head. The tongue twitches and writhes as the acid hits it, but the monster quickly..."

Baldar's Player (interrupting): "But a moment is all it takes for Baldar to get one arm free. He grabs at the priest."

GM: "Is Baldar calling for that Strength Of The Bull feat now?"

Baldar's Player (suspecting that the GM is likely to narrate things into a worse situation if there are any more augments): "Yes but he's using it as an active skill. If he augments with it first there might not be enough time left to act, so he's just grabbing him."

The GM compares Baldar's 10W feat with the priest's Dodge Opponent 1W. That's 3 dice. He loans them to Baldar's player. Then he thinks better and says "The priest is taken completely by surprise" and adds another dice. Baldar's player rolls the 4 dice the GM loaned him and 5 of the 6 dice from his Pool. Thankfully, he gets a 1.

GM: gathering up his loan dice "Do you want some dice?"

Baldar's Player (straight faced): "Thanks but I think I'd rather narrate... As the spasming tongue rearranges its grip Baldar's arm shoots out, his hand locking onto the priest's throat till that fiend's eyes roll up into his head. The power of The Bull flows into Baldar's arms; there is no doubt he could collapse the cartilage and kill his captor. But as he tightens his grip, face set with anger, hair smouldering from the acid, he sees a glow of green coming from a talisman under the priest's tunic. On a wild impulse he grabs it and sends the priest tumbling backwards. The chain of the talisman splits and links scatter and fall onto the stones.

"The priest lies on the ground; a line of blood trickles from his forehead where he hit the floor. He turns and snarls at Baldar but the anger in his eyes is snuffed out when he sees the gigantic beast has released the warrior who now slumps to the floor. Freed, the bloated demon is advancing on its tormentor to claim the payment it has longed for since he bound it years ago.

"Baldar's strength ebbs faster, he staggers from the plinth, heads for Sago who has descended and clasps him in silent gratitude. From the shadows behind them comes the creak of twisting bones as the toad slowly masticates."

(having narrated the immediate result Baldar's Player runs out of steam)

GM: "Go on if you want."

Baldar's Player: "No. I don't know what else is there for them to find."

GM: "Just make it up. It's OK"

Baldar's Player: "Oh. Err... Eager to be away from that place they retrace their steps through the dark maze. Sago is half carrying Baldar. Perhaps this is why they lose their way and instead of emerging to find their horses under the evening sky come instead to an opulently appointed room. All round the edge are piled silken cushions; in the centre towers a thick glass tube filled with green liquid and human heads".

GM: "Ok stop there! No sooner have they seen this than..."