



THE
RACKED
RULE SET

BY WILL TRURAN

COLOPHON

This zine was designed and written by William Truran as a part of his graduate studies at Rochester Institute of Technology in the year MMXXI. It was set in the typefaces Work Sans, designed by Wei Huang and Avara, designed by Raphaël Bastide, Lucas Le Bihan, Walid Bouchouchi, Jérémy Landes, and Wei Huang. The physical editions were printed with an Epson ET 3760 on Canson Newsprint and hand sewn in Rochester, NY.



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INTRO

I designed this system to create experiences that foster an emotional connection to historical events that are traditionally taught through dates and data. It is not meant to be a means of creating a fictional history, but rather to invent fictional scenarios based on actual events. The system's rules are light because the primary focus is how the game feels and how we handle such dark events that still cause an emotional response in participants today.

Ultimately I hope The Racked System allows us to learn to be more empathetic to our neighbors and to take actions when we see people being mistreated.

- WILL TRURAN



1 THE SYSTEM



Rules-Light, Prep-Heavy

The Racked System is built on hardships, the loss of power, and exploring how far humanity can be pushed when survival is on the line.

THE SYSTEM

Unlike most systems, the players do not play the roles that birth legends. They will not act as people we read about in history books. There are no combat stats, no treasures to be won, and no dreams of exploring far away lands. The Racked System is designed to build roleplaying experiences around the moments that impacted an individual, but do not fit into the context of a textbook. The moments that made the heroes... the villains... the dates... and the data all fade away. In these moments, mere survival is all consuming.

This system is designed so that the majority of players can sit down and start playing without learning complex rules. They will not need to memorize any stats, but rather can focus on who they will become. The simplicity that is given to the players is, however, countered with the heavy preparation that goes into each session. The Narrator, a term you will become familiar with, must become familiar with historical moments and feel comfortable with the material so that all players learn together without straying from historical truth in the struggles the system is recognizing.

The Racked System creates fictional moments based on actual events. This should never be used in an attempt to recreate the records of an individual. The goal is to allow the players to create a new story and leave with empathy for those who actually felt the pain they imagine -- if only for a moment in the comfort of a home around a table with their friends.

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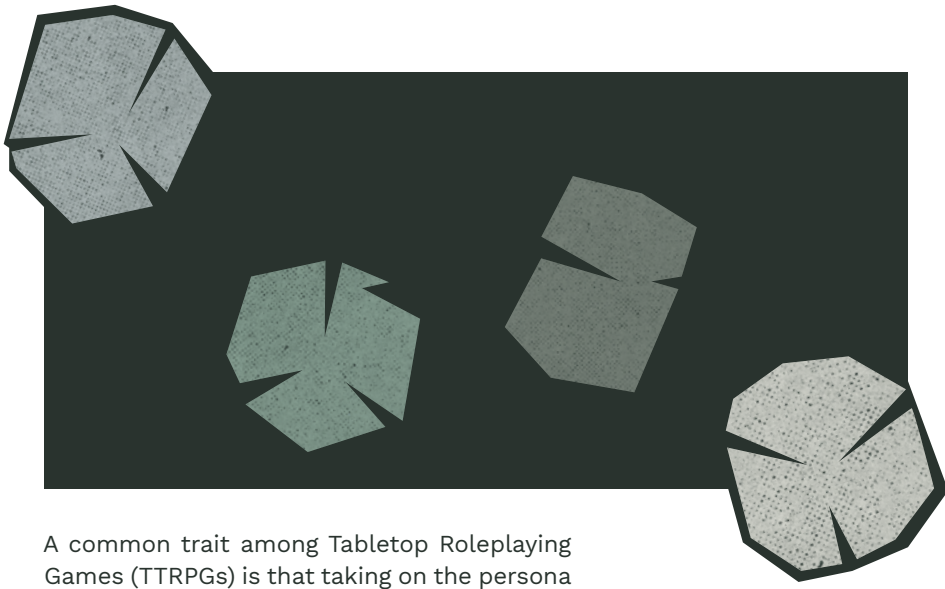
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THE PREP



Research & Planning

Before examining how this system works and how it differs from other games, it is essential to prepare for the experience of running a session with the Racked System.



A common trait among Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TTRPGs) is that taking on the persona of a character can build strong emotional ties to a story and engage a player unlike any other form of media. This is the primary reason the system was built. The Racked System takes complex historical events and breaks them down into small moments that can be better understood through roleplaying. By removing the cold distance created by a textbook, it is more likely that players can comprehend the emotions behind historical events, and even more importantly learn lessons that can be applied to modern life.

The Racked System approaches history with a completely new lens. This brings along many powerful benefits, but also requires a higher level of attention in communicating the material and recognizing the mental well-being of the players at the table. Sessions will most likely contain many scenes where the players are experiencing what it is like to be a victim in a way they have only seen in the movies. It is important to present the material with the respect it deserves and not water it down. With that respect in mind, it is also important

to make sure the players do not leave the table traumatized in a way that negatively impacts their well-being.

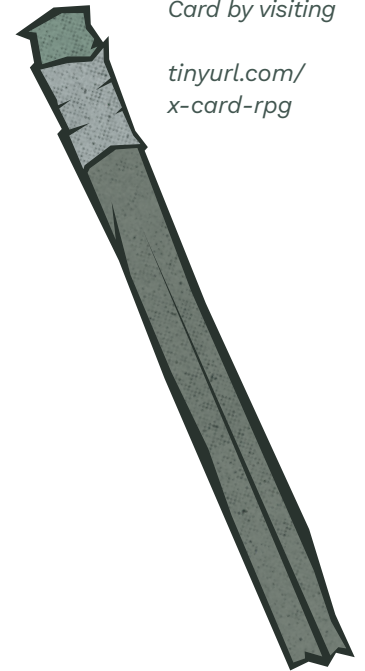
The X Card, created by John Stavropoulos, should be implemented to enable the entire table to end scenes or show distress without verbalizing why. This tool can be as simple as a piece of paper each player is given with an X drawn on it. At any time a player feels uncomfortable they present the 'card' to the table which signals that the scene needs to be wrapped up or that the content has gotten too dark and needs to be lightened up.

In addition to The X Card, the next chapter covers Roles which will enable more collaborative storytelling. This allows multiple members at the table to have control of the pacing and to share the responsibility of ensuring that no one crosses from uncomfortable to a realm of misery in which they are no longer able to engage with the material.

The Player Roles are covered in the next chapter starting on page 14.

Learn more about the X Card by visiting

tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg



Required Items

Though the Racked System is designed to be simple to play, there are a few items players need.

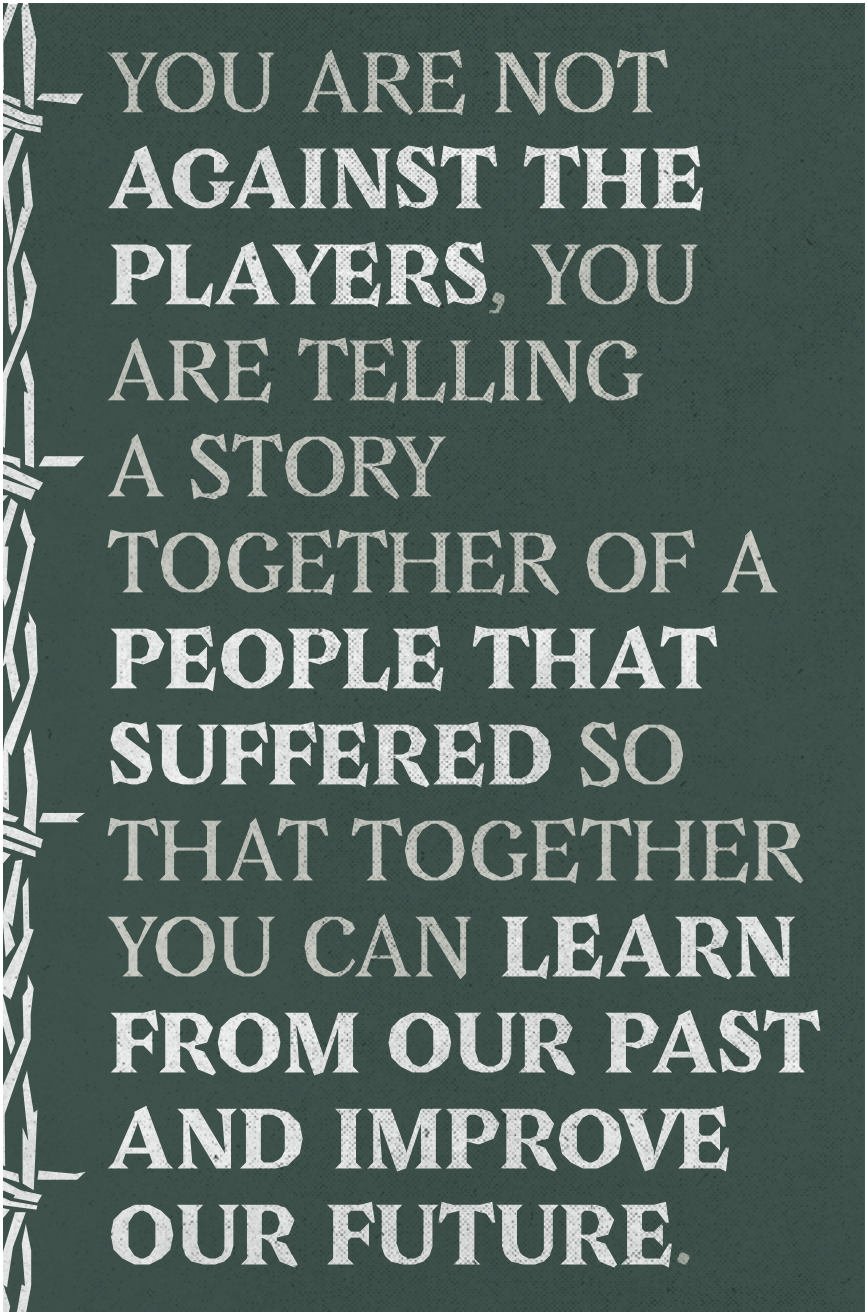
- **The rule set (this zine)**
- **A setting document**
- **A character sheet for each player**
- **Some pencils or pens**
- **At least six, 6-sided dice to be shared**

THE PREP

That's it! No grid, miniatures, or fancy accessories. Allow this simple setup to encourage a deeper experience where imagination dictates each player's reality.

Though everyone's emotional state is of the highest priority, the importance of handling the material appropriately cannot be ignored. The Narrator should utilize the setting document to prepare a session, but may also consume other materials to improve their understanding of the period. It is important to know the material so that when improvisation is required, it will be based on evidence and used to continually build the story. If there comes a moment where a Narrator is unsure of the facts, they must be honest with the players and attempt to move on without establishing false information.

The last aspect of preparing the session is to consider the personalities at the table. Though many other TTRPGs encourage laughter and things like 'the rule of cool', settings created with the Racked System are meant to be much more serious. If a player suggests a course of action that is outlandish, remind them of the purpose of the gameplay at the table. Also understand that there will be many moments of uncomfortable conversations. Each player will handle these feelings differently and the Narrator will aid each of them by working through what they are experiencing. Be prepared to handle these situations in such a way that players do not feel worse for their response to feeling uncomfortable, even an inappropriate response such as nervous laughter.



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THE ROLES



Narrator, Journal Keeper & Cast

RACKED is a system about education and learning, not combat and triumph. With that, the roles of the people around the table are as unique as the experience.



THE ROLES

The Narrator is the equivalent of the gamemaster (GM) in other systems.

The three roles are the Narrator, the Journal Keeper, and the Cast. In short, the Narrator controls events and time, the Journal Keeper establishes the environment and pacing, and the Cast together guide a story through the historical setting.

The Narrator

The Narrator is often the one organizing the game. They prepare the material, set the scene, and act out all the characters not being played by the rest of the table. This role is by far the most difficult and requires the most sensitivity because often they will be representing the most evil humans in history. With that, the Narrator must understand how to discuss ideas that the players may not be able to handle without sugar coating the truth of the events. Taking breaks, interrupting gameplay, and breaking immersion will all be necessary at points and should not be avoided.

In addition to managing the table, the Narrator is also responsible for studying the materials before running the game. Settings will be broken up into chapters that cover specific time periods and will provide many resources so they can properly understand what was occurring during the recreated period.

The Journal Keeper

In addition to the Narrator, the Journal Keeper aids in progressing the story. When thinking about a session, players must picture the story as though it is being recorded within a journal. The Narrator controls the world of the journal, but the Journal Keeper controls what is written down. Sessions are told through chapters controlled by the Narrator. These chapters are further broken down into scenes partially controlled by the Journal Keeper. Where are the players during a scene, what are they doing, and when has a moment been sufficiently experienced? These are some aspects that the Journal Keeper can control as they make a record of gameplay.

The Journal Keeper can almost be considered a second Narrator, but this role does not require any preparation.



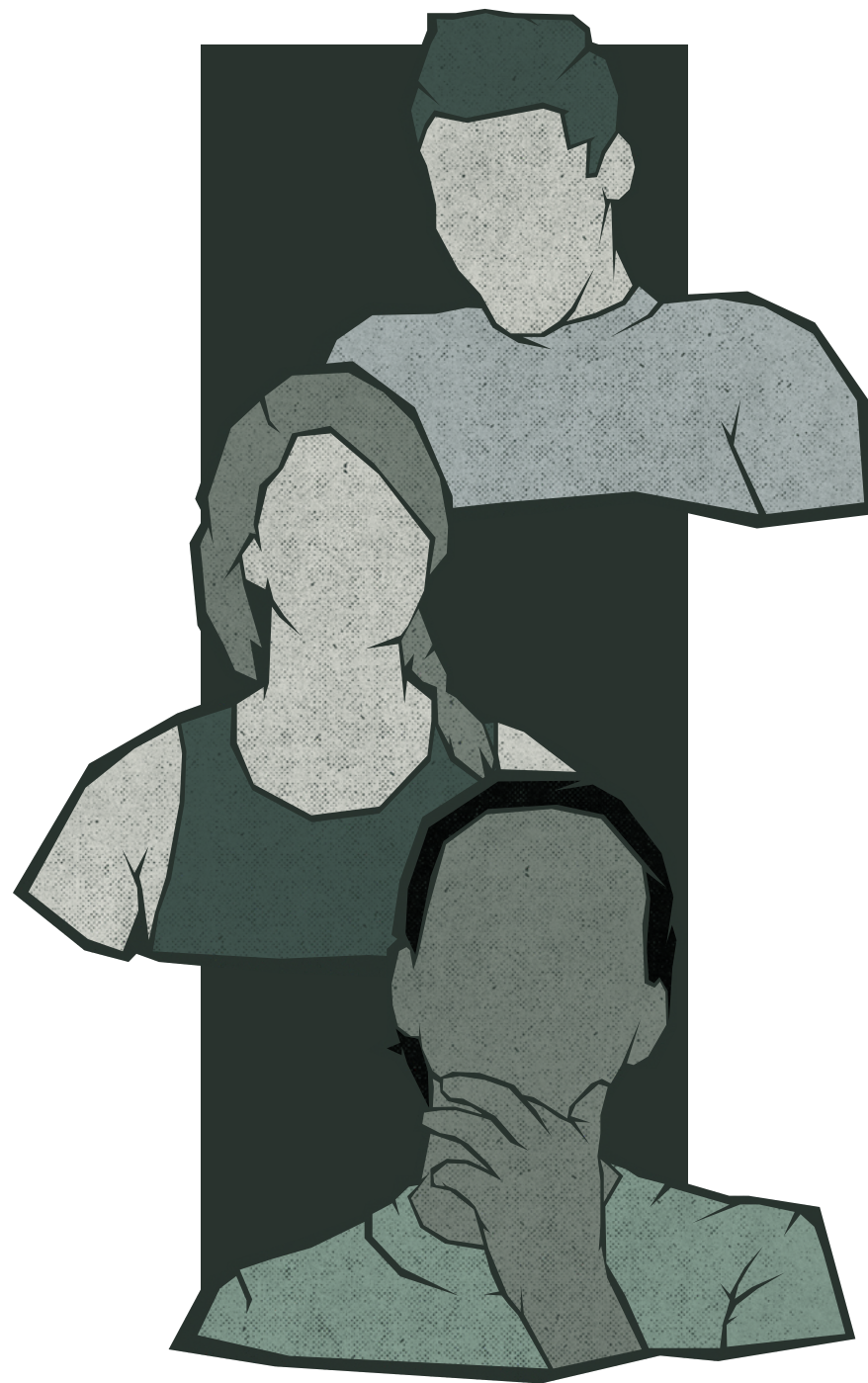
The Gameplay is explained in chapter 5 starting on page 28.

For some that are used to more traditional TTRPGs, this concept of co-running the table may be a bit hard to understand, but **Chapter 5: Gameplay** will provide more details.

The Cast

The remaining players are assigned to the Cast. Along with the Journal Keeper, the Cast will live through each moment and learn about the historical events from the Narrator. They will also discover what it is like to be a powerless people, victimized, and betrayed by those they once trusted.

Experiences using the Racked System are recommended to be run with at least three people that fill each of the three roles. This will aid in smoother storytelling and will alleviate pressure from each participant, but more importantly provide a sense of safety at the table. Use each of these roles to tell a story crafted by every participant. These roles enable multiple members to control the hard moments and allow multiple individuals to take control of a scene when others need to step back.





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MAKING A CHARACTER



Background, Personality & Property

Those playing as the Cast or the Journal Keeper need to create characters. This can often be an emotional component to the experience where the players begin to realize that the victims that so often go nameless are as human as the players themselves.

PERSONA OF A CHARACTER



*You are not simply playing a person you wish
to be, but one that could have been.*

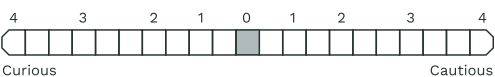
MAKING A CHARACTER

A player is not simply playing a person they wish to be, but one that could have been. The setting document will contain tools and information to aid in creating characters that represent the period. Each character can take inspiration from the player's life, as if they were living during the set period. It may also take inspiration from movies similar to the setting. Players are discouraged from attempting to recreate historical figures, a practice that can be insensitive, offensive, and inaccurate. The Racked System should never be used to recreate a person's life or retell an individual's story. The system should aid in telling fictional stories based on real events so that everyone involved can feel as if they have a new understanding of events.

There are two tools in every setting: the Character Sheet and the Character Templates. These will help guide character creation as well as introduce players into the system's format.

Character Sheet

The character sheet will contain specific items related to the setting, but all character sheets will also contain a personality graph. This graph illustrates opposing traits that may come up in each session, such as Cautious and Curious. Each pairing is broken up into twenty-one parts, with the center pre-filled. The player is able to fill in a total of fifteen parts across all of the pairings. This will determine the personality of their character.



No personality trait can have more than 9 of those points at the time of creating a character. In addition, each row must have at least 1 point spent.

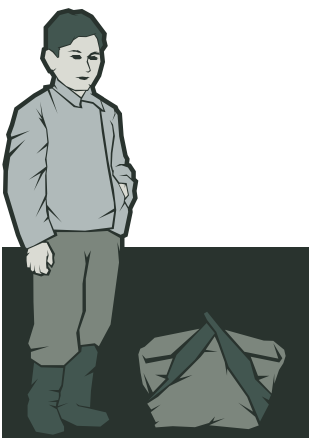


The personality graph serves two purposes. First, it acts as an in-game aid to help the player make decisions that reflect the character they are roleplaying. If the players see a figure quickly turn a corner, will curiosity bring them to investigate? Or will they cautiously avoid potential trouble? Second, the personality graph is necessary for resolving encounters. If a player chooses an action that aligns with their personality graph, they will get a bonus to their roll. This will be explained in more detail in **Chapter 6: Rolling Dice & Event Encounters**.

Character Templates

The second tool to aid in character creation are the templates. Templates assist those not comfortable with creating a character from scratch by providing sample characters to choose from. All aspects of the character sheet can be altered and customized. Players can browse character templates to help further understand the setting.

The graph is not a concrete guide. Allow each player to explore what they believe each trait should look like.





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THE GAMEPLAY



Encounters, Reactions & Outcomes

As a sample experience of The Racked System, this chapter will explore The Chosen People, a sample setting created using the Racked System in which the players experience life in Germany during the Holocaust.

THE STAGES OF PLAY

1 Narrator ESTABLISHES EVENT

The Narrator explains what is occurring and introduces the setting, including how it has affected the players and bringing the entire experience into focus. Through this initial establishment, enough tools will be provided that all of the players can visualize the atmosphere.

2 Journal Keeper REACTS WITH SCENE

The Journal Keeper takes in what the Narrator has shared and begins to draw a scene. The Journal Keeper may choose to include details such as the location of the players, the time of day, or the smells wafting through the air.

3 Everyone REACTS TO THE SCENE

The Narrator builds upon the scene with additional details. Everyone else acts based on the scene setting and details. This can include what they do, how they are feeling, and how this alters their environment.

4 Narrator BUILDS UPON CHOICES

The Narrator takes the actions, builds encounters around them, and explains how the players are changing the setting. With these changes, the Cast and Journal Keeper have a new set of items to interact with and decide on new actions they want to take.

THE GAMPLAY

The Racked System allows all players to make actions whenever they feel ready. There are no turns and sometimes inaction is as powerful of a stance as action. Each chapter begins with the Narrator setting the scene.

The group gather their character sheets and the Narrator reads the Chapter opener. "The date is April 7th, in the city of Berlin. Last week there was a boycott of Jewish owned businesses and earlier in January, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany.."

Once the Narrator finishes the setting, the Journal Keeper explains where they are. This could be based on any information found in the players' character sheets, or even what occurred in a previous chapter.

The Journal Keeper, knowing the characters are all young children, states that they are home after school eating a snack.

Now that the Narrator has initiated the chapter, and the Journal Keeper has set the scene, all players at the table can take actions and ask questions.

One of the players asks what they are snacking on. The Narrator not knowing exactly what they would be eating says something to the best of their knowledge, "They are snacking on a small bowl of pretzels and while eating your father walks in. You all are aware that he is home much earlier than normal and that something is wrong, because he takes your mother into another room and a conversation of whispers can be overheard."

After explaining the Narrator pauses, allowing the players to talk.

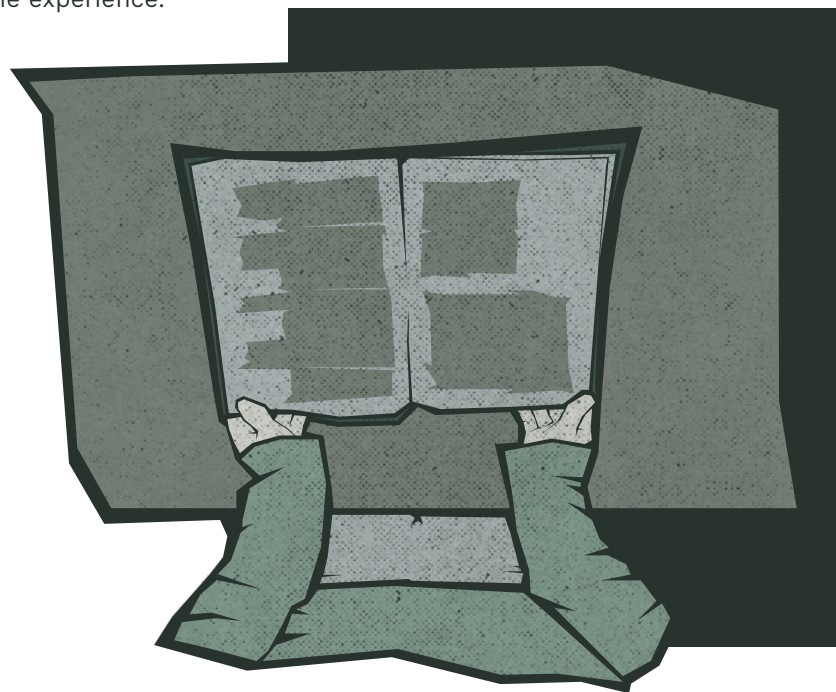
This is just a sample of what could happen. The Narrator will have many topic points and

information to help inform what happens within the chapter. Often the Narrator will have to make educated guesses, such as inventing a snack.

One player asks another what is going on. They shrug. Another player looks at their character sheet and is reminded they are more curious than cautious and says "I want to try and get closer and listen in." The narrator then explains that they move over to the wall and can hear that new laws have been passed and their father can't work at the university anymore.

It is the Narrator's role to remain calm, give the most appropriate answers possible, and when in doubt admit they do not know. If it is crucial for the story, take a break to look it up online, or move on if the detail is insignificant enough that it will not impact the experience.

Chapter 6: Rolling Dice & Event Encounters will explore how more complicated scenarios are decided with dice.





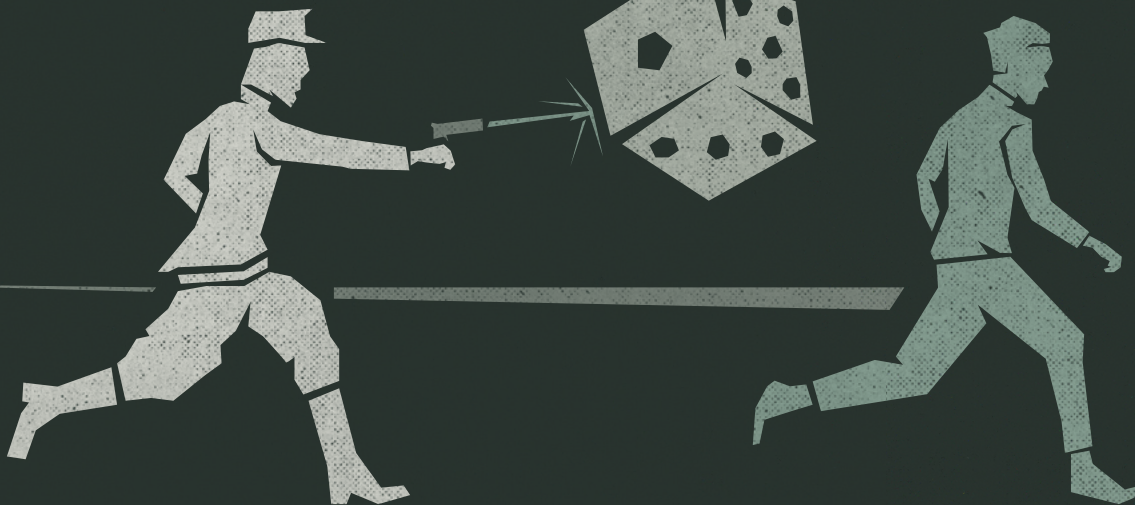
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ROLLING DICE & EVENT ENCOUNTERS



Difficulty, Rolling & Results

Any event encounter that does not have an obvious outcome requires a roll of the dice to simulate the aspects out of the player's control. The table should have at least six 6-sided dice the players can share. When an encounter begins, a difficulty rating assigned by the Narrator will determine how many dice can be rolled.



The encounter difficulty ratings include Easy, Moderate, Hard, and Near Impossible. This chapter will expand on how encounters are treated.

DIFFICULTY	DICE POOL	SUCCESS	FAILURE	PERSONALITY BONUS
Easy	Three Dice	4,5,6	1	1
Moderate	Two Dice	5,6	1	1
Hard	One Dice	5,6	1,2	.5
Near Impossible	One Dice	6	1,2,3	0

The difficulty level impacts the amount of dice the player rolls, what dice results create a success, what creates a failure, and how much the personality graph will impact the overall roll.

To pass an encounter successfully, the player will roll the number of dice required by the difficulty and need more successful dice than failure dice.

If a player enters an easy encounter they will roll 3 dice. If more dice roll 4,5,6 than roll 1 the encounter is resolved successfully. A roll of 1,2,5 would not be a successful result because there are equal successes and failures. The player, however, may be acting on a personality with a 2 bonus that they can add to the neutral dice.

Bonus Dice

If a player can make a strong connection between the encounter and their character (such as an item they may have, a location they are from, something about their appearance) they are allowed to add a dice to their Dice Pool. This bonus die cannot add a failure, if the die rolls a failure do not include the die in determining success. If the encounter is rated Easy and the player has a strong connection to the encounter, the Narrator may give a successful outcome without requiring rolling.

Personality Bonus

The last column of the encounter table is the Personality Bonus, which comes from the player's personality graph. The Bonus can be distributed across every die that meets the following criteria: (1) the die is not a success or failure, (2) the encounter is not rated Near Impossible, and (3) the encounter clearly fits within a personality trait that has at least enough points to have a +1 bonus point earned.

If we go back to our previous example from Chapter 5: Gameplay where the Narrator decided to require a roll to sneak over to hear what was being said, it would be set as an easy encounter. This means 3 dice will be rolled. There are not any reasons to add a dice, but because the player had a curiosity bonus they can apply that to any die that is neither a success or failure.

If the encounter is Hard, then your personality dice are cut in half, rounded down. This means to alter a die by one the player must have at least +2 bonus in the appropriate personality trait.

It is important that a failure doesn't keep information from the players that would help explain the event and lead to learning opportunities.

ROLLING DICE & EVENT ENCOUNTERS

We touched on what is needed for success but here is the complete breakdown to roll results for encounters.

SUCCESS

More successful dice than failures.

SOFT FAILURE

The same amount of successes and failures.

FAILURE

More failed dice than successes.

A soft failure can be 0 successes and 0 failures.

A soft failure should not result in major setbacks. If one occurs, the Narrator should provide alternate outcomes that can allow the players continue their journey, but perhaps down a different, harder path.

A hard failure should result in major setbacks. This can often result in gruesome moments that either involve the players or perhaps those around the players. Make sure you are aware of the emotions at the table when deciding the outcome and describing the events.

With this encounter mechanic it is up to the narrator to determine the difficulty. The Racked System is not meant to simulate a single person taking on a dungeon of goblins, but your players may want to try and fight back a soldier, sneak through a fence, or stay hidden during a search. Do not be overly cruel, but also do not let them think that the impossible is plausible.

The Racked System is a Rules-Light / Prep-Heavy System. With that, the rules should be easy enough to learn and loose enough to mold to the setting's needs.



