

The Pool: Bulwark

## THE SETTING

Inspiration: Comics like Sin City and Reckless, movies like To Live and Die in L.A. and Dragged Across Concrete, books like Richard Stark's Butcher's Moon, and especially by the role-playing game Haven: City of Violence by Louis Porter, Jr.

The place: Bulwark, an amalgam of the worst aspects of every American city circa 1995. Virtually no citizen's life is untouched by crime, and if they're lucky it's of the organized kind. The different gangs fight for power and in this landscape the police are just another gang.

The situation: Amid the usual backdrop of "everyday crime", there is a newly arisen serial killer active. The usually apathetic police have been kicked into high gear to solve the case. For law enforcement, this is a nightmare they were hoping to ignore. For the gangs, this is an obstacle to pursuing business as usual. For the citizens, well, they thought things in Bulwark couldn't get any worse, and now they're realizing they were being optimistic.

(The following adaptation of James West's text for The Pool has been taken from Ron Edwards):

## MAKE UP YOUR CHARACTER

We are playing in the hard-boiled crime idiom, with "hard-boiled" turned up to the maximum intensity. Write 50 words or less to describe anything about your character's appearance, their origin or background, their viewpoints, their allegiances, what they can do, their gear or resources, their companions, their official mission, or what they want.

- Do not use superlatives.
- Make up names and words. Make up and include other characters or past events if you want.
- Underline words or short phrases to define traits: as many as you want.
- Give the character a name: this doesn't count towards the starting 50 words.

Assign bonuses to one or more traits:

You have 15 dice: you may spend up to 14 for Trait bonuses.

+1 Bonus costs 1 die; +2 costs 4 dice; +3 costs 9

The remaining dice become your starting Pool

Further thoughts on making up a character:

- Think about making a character that could be the protagonist (or antagonist) of the kinds of stories mentioned in the inspirations.
- That means some characters may be aligned with criminal gangs, some may be aligned with the police, some may be lone wolves (private eyes, hitmen, etc.). You can also consider the case of a "civilian" somehow caught up in the underworld.

- Don't worry about being too clever; don't be afraid of cliches. A lot of the specifics and individuality of the characters comes out from how you will play them. We will end up with characters and stories that are unique to us and speak to our interests even if we start out with characters swiped directly from the inspirational material.
- Feel free to orient your character toward the situation brewing with the serial killer any way you want. That means it's perfectly fine to not address it at all in your character story (I would say this should be the default option), and also fine to tie your story directly and strongly to it, and, yes, fine to land someplace in the middle. The situation is there mainly to provide a background event to spur on the initial moments of play. The idea being, as in Fritz Lang's *M*, that there is a crime afoot that has disrupted not only the lives of citizens, but also the operations of the "organized" criminals.

## RULES OF PLAY

The GM plays the backstory and the physical qualities of situations in play, begins new situations including cuts in location and time, and plays all non-player characters including those listed in characters' stories.

Players' knowledge and backstory input is restricted to content in their characters' stories.

Conflicts (dice rolls) are identified by anyone in play based on what's happening or on what they're about to do.

The scope of a given roll and its potential dangers are identified by the GM.

Everyone involved rolls [1-3 Gift dice] + [dice equal to the bonus for one Trait] + [Pool dice they choose to gamble]. One or more "1" showing on a die indicates success. Describe the success or failure, including ordering, causal events, actions, effects, and characterizations. No new information may be introduced except as GM-provided backstory or situation. For the actions undertaken and the scope, the effects are as decisive and conclusive as possible.

- If the conflict is failed, the GM narrates. All gambled Pool dice are lost.
- If the conflict succeeds, either the GM narrates minimally and the player adds one die to their Pool, or the player narrates with greater latitude for effects and consequences (a Monologue of Victory).

## LATER DEVELOPMENT

During play or between sessions, assign or increase bonuses to Traits as you desire using the same method as above. Bonuses may not be traded back into Pool dice. Bonuses may not be moved or shifted between traits. Between sessions add one die to your Pool and add 15 words to your character summary, either as new sentences and phrases, or as additions and revisions to existing text. Underline content as Traits using the same method as above.

