UNDERSTANDING THE POOL

By Ron Edwards / Adept Press
An essay in support of The Pool, a role-playing game by James V. West
(www.randomordercreations.com/rpg.html)

Ed Healy and I founded the website Hephaestus' Forge in 1998-99, to showcase independent games we'd discovered on-line. Clinton Nixon and I revised the site in 2000-01 to serve as a discussion and design resource for such publishing. A community of interested individuals began to work out some important ideas, such as protagonism and what would later be called Creative Agenda, but only within certain parameters of design.

We were working with a diverse but still limited range of games to think about. The book-published independent games, representing different people's idiosyncratic and even quixotic defiance of conventional publishing and design wisdom at the time, were Amber (1989), Maelstrom (1994), Obsidian (2000), Orkworld (2001), Hero Wars (2000), Apocrypha (2000), Sorcerer (1996/2001) including initial PDF versions of the first two supplements, Multiverser (1997), and Pocket Universe (2001). Internet-only publications, regarded at the time as curiosities, included Puppetland, Shadow Side, Elfs, early InSpectres, Soap, Wuthering Heights, Ghost Light, and Risus. Non-independent games which factored into the discussions included Prince Valiant (1989), Amber (1990), Everway (1991), Zero (1997), Extreme Vengeance (1997), and a few others.

There were no Little Fears (2002), no The Riddle of Steel (2002), no Dust Devils (2002), no Universalis (2003), no Burning Wheel (2003), and no My Life with Master (2003). More importantly, although there were some rumblings and mutterings about possible rules for how and when people might talk during play, and about what, no one had managed to place it as a central design feature.

The Pool gained attention sometime in the middle of 2001. We saw things there that we'd been skirting around without seeing, and placed in such a fashion that they were simply and easily functional. Furthermore, playing the game exposed certain crucial issues of play which until that point were veiled and often denied, what would later be called Credibility, Authority, scene framing, and more. Because The Pool does what *it* does so well, it's like a personal diagnostic test for what *you* don't do well.

Sure, the independent design revolution was under way and obviously pre-dated the Forge itself, which had been founded to promote interest in it. But we had now received an orthogonal shock which showed that differences among our views, such as Mike Holmes and I wrangling over Simulationism, or Seth Ben Ezra and I wrangling over Author vs. Actor Stance, were contained within only one plane of understanding role-playing functionality.

The Pool did not begin the independent play-and-design revolution any more than the Forge itself did. But it was the linchpin upon which dialogue at the Forge underwent a profound change, breaking techniques out of game-specific packages, which itself spurred design, play, and commerce into a quantum leap of content and reflection.

Everyone's ideas transformed to produce a larger picture in which the techniques of talking, the techniques of physical objects, and the techniques of numbers could dance in a thousand different ways. The design revolution gained a genuine vocabulary for a rapidly-expanding range of techniques options. When Ben Lehman, Nathan Paoletta, Shreyas Sampat, Eero Tuovinen, Jason Morningstar, Tim Kleinert, Emily Care Boss, Tim Koppang, Gregor Hutton, and others started designing games, this framework was their foundation. The Iron Game Chef and later the Ronnies contests were carried out within its context.

Without The Pool, no Universalis, no Donjon, no Wyrd, no Dust Devils, no later-stage InSpectres, no Violence Future, no Dead Meat, no Otherkind, no The World The Flesh & The Devil, and no Legends of Alyria. And without those, no Trollbabe and no My Life with Master, and without those, no Shadow of Yesterday, no Dogs in the Vineyard, no Nine Worlds, and no Primetime Adventures.
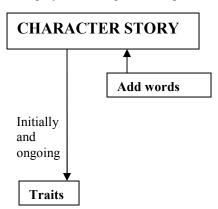
I want to restore what was once indisputable common respect for The Pool among players and designers of independent role-playing games. The history I provided above is only a little piece of what I'm after; I am trying to inspire *play*. It's sometimes mistaken for a technique rather than a game, and that's not true. It deserves real play on its own terms, not merely as a one-step-removed spawner of technique for other games. I also think such play would continue to teach us all a lot about the issues receiving debate and attention today.

Another purpose is to explain and investigate what The Pool text provides. I didn't organize what follows as a re-write for the game, but as a walk through the play-levels of the text's explicit content. I included some perspectives and Best Practices suggestions, but I hope to have kept those distinct from the main goal, simply observing what is actually there in the text and explaining the interrelationship of the game's parts.

Character first

The "Character Story" is a written paragraph about your character. Anything you care to underline in there is a "Trait." Words are added following every play session, and nearly inevitably contain new Traits.

The following isn't much of a diagram by itself, because it contains no game mechanics besides the automatic procedures stated above, but it is both the foundation and the ultimate point of every single other feature of playing The Pool. You start with a descriptive paragraph. You add to it after each session. In both the original Character Story and the additions to it, various things are underlined and incidentally called Traits. This ongoing description *is* effectively your character, in full, and developing its content is the point of play. Later diagrams will provide the subroutines and procedures to illustrate this point.

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        │   CHARACTER STORY       │◄──────┐
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             │                      ┌──────────────┐
             │                      │  Add words   │
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   Initially │
   and       │
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        │  Traits  │
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Although the rules don't address this, the Character Story can't be written in a vacuum. Someone has to take the lead and provide context for genre and setting. It's true that The Pool rules can handle any genre and setting, but they can't do all or any of them together, and they can't handle too much dissonance among the participants. The text offers one hint through the example of character creation, in which prior to the Story being written, the genre is specified: "a world of darkish magical fantasy."

In that context, simple as it might be, the example character's Story also provides crucial setting and situation content for play, through evocative language and introducing proper names. Looking over several initial Stories of this kind provides content for the GM's prep, through the following contributions:
- Organizations and characters named in the Stories can want things and do something about it
- Exactly what constitutes danger and opportunity for a given character is often evident

Armed with these, the GM's prep is easier than it might seem, and he or she is also free to add things of his or her own, whether a character or circumstance, either as a unifier or disruptor toward the other material.

The text leaves "character purpose" entirely open, and I interpret this to mean *wide* open. For example, it's not mandated that the player characters be teammates or buddies, or that they line up together on a given

side of a given conflict, or share goals or values. I'm not saying that they shouldn't, only that such things are entirely open to what the players happen to want.

Best practices: Color-first

Because play begins, functions, and ends at the service of the Character Stories, genre and setting must remain means to this end. A given genre-and-setting, whether familiar or newly-created, is not merely a backdrop of details and requirements, but rather its own special Pandora's box of engaging and recognizable crisis situations for the characters.

It's hard to articulate this necessary context while relying on character creation as the central creative input. Open group discussion tends to flounder, because you're spinning the "what character" and "what setting" dials at the same time. This effect is also illustrated by Pitch Sessions leading to lowest-common-denominator show concepts in Primetime Adventures or by groups getting bogged down in the Tenets Phase in Universalis, and both of these games at least have designated procedures, whereas The Pool does not.

The most effective option I've found, when organizing a game, is to use a single picture as an orienter for everyone playing, and then let them come up with character concepts that are inspired by or consistent with it. Consider these two illustrations (at this writing, swiped from the Random Order Creations website without permission):

 AND

Although they are both character portraits, they invoke whole worlds of setting, action, general tone, and potential drama external to their actual subjects. Furthermore, the content suggested by each is unmistakably distinct. Therefore such an illustration (and only one, not the choice between the two) as a starting-point usefully provides both width *and* constraint for others' creative inspiration.
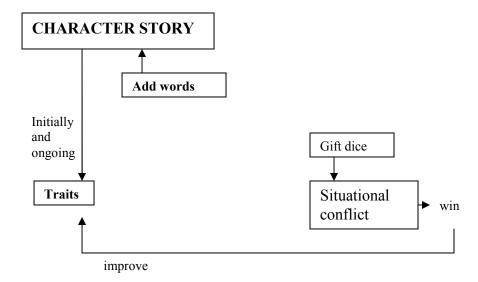
Move straight into making Character Stories, which will provide plenty of setting details and terms. The characters will probably be very different yet also compatible for purposes of play.

System 1: The nature of conflicts

The following diagram fills in the basic features of actually playing the game, in black un-bolded text. Effectively, characters face crisis situations, resolved by dice mechanics, and either prevail or don't. If they do, then the player has the choice of increasing certain features of Traits, or affecting the play-fiction more directly, which often has direct or indirect effects upon the later modifications of one's Character Story.

The diagram does not yet explain how features of the character sheet (Story and Traits) affect play, or illustrate the details of how play affects them. The single listed feature of rolling dice is, in this construction, the character's only asset. There's more to the system to learn, but this is the skeleton.

CHARACTER STORY

Add words

Initially
and
ongoing

Gift dice

Traits

Situational conflict → win

improve

What it does show is that the fictional situations and their embedded conflicts which call upon the dice must not only be engaged with the Character Story, but actually be considered part of it. Although in fictional terms the character may sometimes feel as if he or she is buffetted by uncontrollable events, in raw game terms, such events and their outcomes are always and forever subordinate to the character's fictional presence. Their very purpose is to put pressure on and ultimately add to the Character Story, which is itself only a description. Therefore unless the unbolded items are integrated with and relevant to the bolded black items, there is no game here.

Toward this end, perhaps the single most useful item in the GM's bandolier is the stable of NPCs produced through the Character Stories, explicitly or implicitly. Their attitudes and actions are his or her most interesting and flexible means to introduce, develop, and discover crisis-level circumstances for the player-characters, or even better, to elicit player-character actions which are themselves crisis-level circumstances.

The most open question in the system, and most crucial, is when such circumstances call for the mechanics to be invoked – when to roll. I'll address this in more detail later in the essay, but the *first* principle must be, "Frequently." The mechanics of the dice Pool benefit from the appearance of less-likely outcomes cropping up when they're least expected, so for that to happen, play needs lots and lots of instances.

Given that, the deeper question about rolling dice is even more important: "About what?" I interpret the text to imply, strongly, that each player is expected to advocate for his or her character, in circumstances that impose danger, opportunity, or both – in the context of that character's goals and drives. Therefore a scene (location, characters, interaction) may develop into such circumstances, and then, no matter what, it's time to roll.

In other words, as a Pool GM, it's not enough to fling speedbumps or delay things by making strings of clues. To keep the dice mechanics from becomign frivolous, the Pool GM has to care about the Character Story, in a way which might be best called, "Oh yeah?"
- If the story asserts risk and fear of something, then "Oh yeah?" poses its possible role in curent events
- If the story asserts hope or drive toward something, then "Oh yeah?" poses an unusual or disconcerting obstacle, or even worse, uncertainty regarding its true value
- If the story asserts confidence in something, then "Oh yeah?" poses a reason to doubt it, whether unexpected information or a limit to its positive qualities

"Oh yeah?" isn't about devaluing these story components or contradicting them; you don't simply assert that a "strong" character is a weakling and call for a roll to prove it, or assert that the long-lost lover flatly hates the character's guts. But it *is* about whether the component in question really matters as much as the

Character Story implies it might, and it may be about providing more than one possible viewpoint about that component.

Best practices: How much to a roll?
The scope of a given roll is left undescribed in the rules, and again I interpret this to imply flexibility. A roll in one scene may concern the momentary impact of a single scathing remark; in another, it may cover days or weeks of battle. Managing this flexibility in play isn't obvious. Is climbing a dangerous mountain a single roll, or two, or twelve, or what?

I've found that the best guide comes from paying attention to players' statements during a given stretch of play, especially in a given scene (again: location, characters, actions). The scope of their characters' actions, as they describe them, is an excellent guide. "We cross the mountains to get to the Haunted Valley," "We camp for the night," and "We collect firewood and I scout around for a bit," operate at different scales of time and space. I usually impose conflict at that scale, or if I think the current scale of play is not interesting (i.e. relevant to the Character Stories), then I shift the scale explicitly myself, and again, merely play through scenes.

The point is to develop crisis situations within already-functioning scenes, with the players already speaking, and the characters already doing things. Working the other way – deciding on a conflict first, and its scope, then playing "toward" it or even jumping right into it – is much more problematic and I don't recommend it.

Best practices: The dice need not be subtle
Don't be too fucking arty with conflicts. If two guys are fighting, don't have the rolled conflict be about whether the girl on the sidelines is impressed or not. Stay concrete, in the fictional tension of the scene, in terms that the characters would understand: your guy defeats this guy or he doesn't. After you know how that works out, and only if it's called for in the terms outlined above (i.e. there's some reason for her not to be sympathetic to your guy), *then* have a conflict with the girl. It will be all the better for the framing context of the fight's outcome.

Best practices: Gift dice
The other concern is mechanical. In every conflict, you award the player 0-3 Gift dice to roll. Consider the somewhat artificial situation in which that's all he or she will be rolling. So, do you award them or not, and if so, how much? The real question here is why.

- As a realism thing – you might decide that the opposition faced by the character is notably harder or easier in terms of in-fiction difficulty.
- As a character sympathy thing – you might like the character such that you want to increase his or her chances as a form of advocacy, acting essentially as a co-player.
- As a player sympathy thing – you might decide that a particular player could use a "win" at the moment, or conversely, needs a little extra adversity, or has such a good chance already that you feel no need to add to it.
- As a fiction-engagement thing – in terms of immediate Color, whether established earlier in play or as it strikes you right that instant, your personal imagery of the moment is vivid enough that you want to express it to everyone else by ramping the percentage of success up or down.
- As a story-outcome thing – in terms of grossly influencing the system to favor stuff you either want or don't want to happen at all.
- As a pressure valve – easing or heightening anxiety or excitement about rolling, in a measured fashion relative to how easy or hard conflicts have been until this point.

The game text doesn't say how to do this, so you must figure it out. I confess that I find myself using some of the above options more than I'd have thought, including those I'd disavow in out-of-play conversation. So play around a little bit with Gift dice as the fancy strikes you, in order to arrive at what makes most sense and is most fun for you as a participant. I do recommend trying out the whole range, including none.
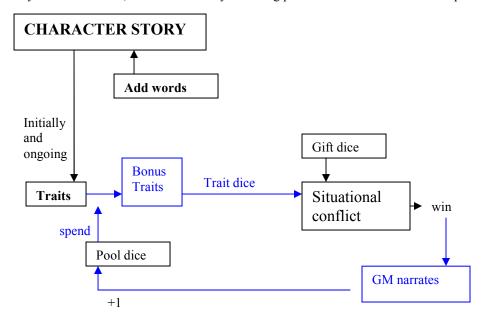
System 2: Traits and the default use of the Pool

The foundation mechanic is found in your character's Traits which have been given a special status by spending (sacrificing, burning, whatever) your Pool points. You have less Pool now, but you have Traits which freely bring Trait Dice into rolls in your favor. Traits are used singly; they cannot be stacked for multiple sources of dice. Therefore Trait use operates on the same scale as Gift dice.

Traits can't act against you, mechanically. The GM cannot penalize a roll, for instance, by the value of a Trait which he or she thinks would cause trouble in a given conflict. The GM is supposed to be utilizing Traits' content (or for that matter anything in the Character Story, Trait or not) in problematic ways anyway, so the negative side is already accounted for. And he or she can always withhold Gift dice as an indirect expression of a particular conflict being hard for this character. But when you pick a Trait to use in a roll, it's in your favor, even if it's a matter of *overcoming* a limitation such as a lame leg. This is story-logic, not simulative logic. A wound or disability is an asset if your character grimaces or concentrates with the effort of dealing with it in adverse circumstances.

A given Trait can sometimes raise thematic issues rather than merely logistic ones. Sure, you might have used "Mean as cat piss" Trait in any number of interactions and confrontations, but do you really want to use it on the nice old lady who is currently obstructing what you want?

The diagram shows the simplest way to utilize the mechanics of the game. Your character gets involved in conflicts, and when you win them, you increase your Pool one die at a time, and as you decide certain Traits need to acquire or increase mechanical weight, then spend Pool points to do so. In this construction, essentially its default mode, the Pool is merely a holding pen for eventual Bonus Trait improvement.

This section of the diagram is technically optional, but a character with no dice-beefed Traits is beholden solely to GM Gift dice for any fictional effectiveness. In practice, characters begin with at least two or three such Traits and continue to develop them, and add new ones, through play.

Best practices: what does it really mean to "use" a Trait?
Nailed-down criteria for Trait use, in games of this kind, isn't very well understood, or if it is, not by me. For example, should the current in-play situation obviously already involve the Trait? For instance, should the player role-play the character being "Mean as cat piss" in order to validate his or her subsequent mechanical use of the Trait for bonus dice? Does that mean if he or she does not, then the Trait is not available? Or does the opposite apply, i.e., that upon stating that the Trait is being used mechanically, does

that automatically alter the circumstances of the fiction, such that it's a way to announce, even establish, that the character is being "Mean as cat piss" regardless of how he or she has acted so far in the scene?

From observing my own play of The Pool, as well as Primetime Adventures, Legends of Alyria, Hero Wars, and a variety of other games with similar features, the answer seems to be "both as needed," although *why* that's a functional answer remains mysterious.

I also know that for these games to work, every Trait should be limited in practice. It *can't* be applicable to any and every situation the character might be in. I don't think it's necessary to write a paragraph for each Trait explaining the limit, only to acknowledge that play will in fact find such limits in time.

But this raises the key question of, once a given Trait is invoked mechanically, or perhaps just before, who decides whether it's eligible to be used? I don't really know. The harsh reality is that if you name a Trait that doesn't connect with the other people's engagement in the imagined fiction, then you're not actually contributing to anyone's enjoyment of the game, yourself included ... and so the response of anyone at the table along the lines of "Lame!" or "I'm not seeing how that works," or anything in between, will actually take on systemic weight.

Later in play, usually everyone is pickin' Traits off their sheets all the time, in any number of ways, for any number of actions. At that point, no formal approval or suggestion process is involved; everyone is operating in a given range of group standards for when Traits apply.

Teaching trait-based mechanics and action statements
Here's what I've done in practice, in terms of teaching people the systems. Imagine that we are playing our characters in some location and situation, in which an adversary is escaping on an eldritch horse with a captive the player-character really does not want to see in the adversary's hands. I observe that the player has either (a) stated a desired outcome like "catch the guy" and not described how the character is doing it, (b) stated that the character is doing something, but no actual goal or desired outcome is apparent, or (c) somewhat cryptically named a Trait which doesn't obviously invoke one of the previous options, like "My father's hat!"

For the first one, I say, "What do you do?" and then see if any of the Traits is strongly implied by the answer. For the second, I pose a possible outcome that the character may be using these actions for. I typically say something like, "So, does that mean you're trying to catch the guy? Or attack him, or follow him, or what?", which allows me to see whether a given Trait seems to be involved. For the third, I ask, "How does that actually help you catch the ship?", which inserts a goal statement merely as a potential solid concept. For all I know, the guy has some wonderful idea in mind for how the hat might be employed. However, more likely he is flailing and just reading what he sees, and in that case, my question is like a life-line he can grab to regain contact with some rationale for how to speak during play.

Best practices: NPCs and other "things" as Traits
The Pool was written at a time when relationships were just beginning to be seen as equivalent mechanics as, say, skill with a sword, as pioneered by Hero Wars (2000). No game at that time had yet textually acknowledge exactly how such features should be used. Let's say you have "My best pal" as a +2 Trait – what can you do with that?

- Must your best pal be present in the scene in order to use the dice? If so, then must he or she be actively engaged in the same conflict?
- Can you simultaneously invoke the Trait to be used for its dice and narrate that the best pal has suddenly arrived? Is such a narration legal as part of a Monologue of Victory, and if so, does the chance of being able to narrate this justify the extra dice? If not, is such a narration legal prior to the roll, basically giving the player authority over the best pal's whereabouts at all times?
- Is merely mentioning the best pal (or, say, brandishing one's Trait-defined sword) enough for the bonus, if the best pal's interests are implicated in the conflict at hand?

As there is no text to guide you as GM, you and the group as a whole must experimental, learn, establish, and stick with your own standards.

System 3: The Pool … activated

A character's Pool represents no in-fiction content whatsoever nor is it described by any fixed amount of dice beyond what happens to be in it at a given moment. As described above, its default use is merely the currency-conversion of successes in conflicts into mechanical improvement of Traits.
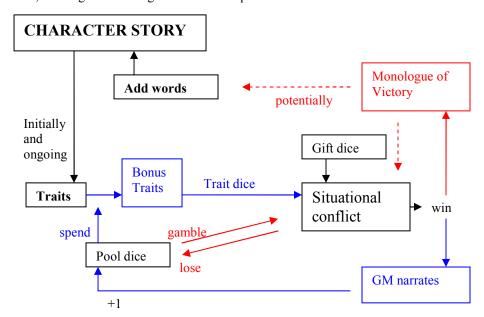
This use of the Pool may be tweaked in two possible ways (indicated in red), both entirely optional:
- Prior to resolving a conflict, gamble any or all Pool dice directly into your roll, increasing your chance of success but risking the loss of dice from your Pool.
- Upon winning a conflict, ignore the default Pool improvement in favor of delivering a Monologue of Victory.

These tweaks may be applied together, separately, or not at all. Whether and when to apply them is left to the player's decision regarding any conflict.

Gambling Pool dice is mathematically extremely significant, potentially bringing the number of rolled dice well above the scale at which Trait and Gift dice operate, so the chance of success can enter the upper quarter of the percentile range.

And at last, the diagram for the game can be completed:

Gambling Pool dice trades off between immediate success and long-term mechanical improvement. The Monologue directly affects the fiction of play, and often comes to influence the content of added words to the Character Story.

(Well, actually, since words are added after every session no matter what, losing conflicts or staying with GM narration sends a dotted line to the "Add words" box too. And so does non-conflict play within scenes. But in practice, I've observed that a Monologue of Victory may add a distinctive jolt to the addition. Also, the other dotted line, their feedback into upcoming scenes and conflicts, is no small item.)

I hope you can see where the game gets its title. The Pool is the single aspect of play in which both tweaks are directly involved, and therefore it is the crossroads for the most significant decisions made by the player, affecting immediate outcomes, longer-term plot possibilities, character development, and more.

"When to roll" revisited
The text provides an apparently rather fixed model for which participants call for rolls and what techniques are utilized based on who does it.

- The GM calls a conflict by identifying a character's Trait which is relevant to the circumstances.
- The player calls for a conflict when he or she wants to get a Monologue of Victory.

It's not explained whether the player has the option to take a Monologue if he or she wins the GM-called conflict, or whether he or she has the option to gain a Pool die instead upon winning the player-called conflict. Removing these options guts the system, as I see it. Nor is it clear whether a player-called conflict may include Traits, or if anyone but the GM can invoke the Traits for dice.

I am not sure whether the phrasing of this section ends up being very stringent after all; if the options described above all remain open, then the rule seems best summarized as "someone calls a conflict, a Trait gets chosen somehow and used, a winning player may choose a Monologue or a new Pool die." That's how I and others have conducted most of the sessions I've played in.
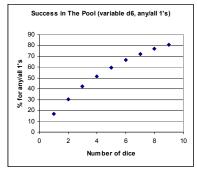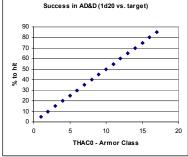
Best practices: Know the probabilities
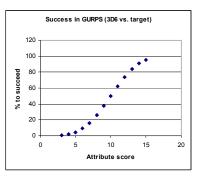Here they are, adapted from a handy table from edcollins.com, a Backgammon webpage.

Number of dice rolled	Any/all 1's (fraction)	Any/all 1's (percent)
1	1/6	16.66
2	11/36	30.55
3	91/216	42.12
4	671/1296	51.77
5	4651/7776	59.81
6	31031/46656	66.51
7	201811/279936	72.09
8	1288991/1679616	76.74
9	8124571/10077696	80.61

To clarify, the Gift dice are rarely the only dice the player will be rolling, so awarding them, if any, usually alters the odds somewhere in the middle of the table – which is serious business, from 42% through 72%. Also, the top end isn't on the table, as the practical maximum number of dice that can be rolled in The Pool is 3 Gift dice + 9 gambled Pool dice + 3 Trait dice = 15, but the added probabilities above nine dice descend in value pretty sharply.

The increased chance of success with increased dice is negatively exponential, which differs from the more common methods of linearity as in all forms of D&D or sigmoidy as in GURPS and in derived dice pool methods such as Shadowrun and Vampire. One take-home is that any increase at the low end is worth gaining, whereas the top end flattens fast much like the GURPS graph. Another is that the jump upwards per Pool die is larger than a unit increase in the other methods.

Best practices: Feast or famine

The Pool mechanics tend to land at least one character in a position of advantage per session, with a lot of dice in his or her Pool; and at least one character in the opposite condition, with an empty or nigh-empty Pool. Even a two-conflict run of success or failure tends to slam a character toward one of these extremes.

In order for this to be fun within the sessions, everyone must embrace the fact that all characters will not be equally effective in a given story, even if all the numbers on their sheet appear to be the same at the start. The best attitude is to say, "This particular story is clearly about how Character X deals with success (or failure)," and be ready for Character X to be yours.

As I see it, this effect becomes a genuine feature in the context of several sessions and distinct stories. The roles do flip in the long run, permitting different characters to be showcased in different ways.
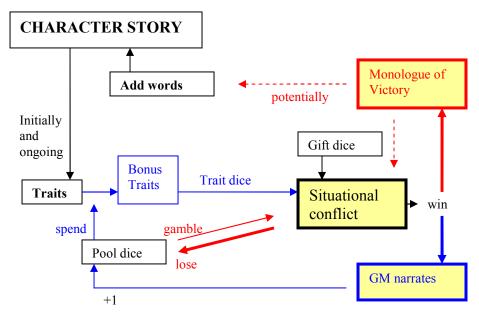
Best practices: Strategy and drama

Is the system degenerate? In early discussions of The Pool, Mike Holmes correctly pointed out that if all you want is the best chance of success this very instant, equally and fully for every roll, then gamble your whole Pool every time. He suggested that this removed the interest from the gambling mechanic. I suggested that all conflicts are not equal in thematic distinction, i.e., relevance to your current Character Story and also to what it may become. Therefore choosing whether to gamble Pool dice, and also whether to increase their number, may be less about your chances of success at this very moment and more about whether you want to risk having less Pool dice available for another conflict later.

If I'm correct, then the decision comes down to small-d drama, which is to say, what excites you about your character and what is happening to or with him or her. When you care the most, dump in the dice; when you don't, reserve them in whole or in part for when you do. In my experience, this approach is borne out, but Mike's point is extremely important and became the basis for a wave of modified-Pool designs, including The Ladder, The Puddle, The Anti-Pool, Snowball, and James' own The Questing Beast; as well as more recent designs like The Path of Journeys and The Exchange.

System 4: Outcomes of conflicts

The emphasized boxes and arrows below address the moment when the dice have hit the table and we all know whether any 1's have appeared.

What does winning vs. losing actually mean? It's all about the player-character's goal of the moment,

under fire, and whether it succeeds or fails in rather definite terms. Since there are no damage mechanics in the game, it really is all about the plot content of conflicts' outcomes. The dice should really speak in The Pool. No failed roll should merely delay or balk a given character's priorities; at the very least, it should force the character to re-assess his or her position in the entire situation of the story at hand. Similarly, no successful roll should merely permit the character to maintain their current state or status; it should always open the door to options, information, or interactions that were not previously available.

But how much of all that goes into the narration, in the moment? Arguably, not necessarily all that much. The narration in the moment solely requires decisive resolution of the immediate circumstances, and consequential implications are an optional add-on.

Injury is a special case. James added the bit about "no damage to player-characters or GM characters" after one of his players expressed fear about having a character killed or maimed on a fellow player's whim. I find this a bit flinchy, and suggest that a more viable version would state that no circumstance or injury can ultimately decrease the character's effectiveness, despite how bad it may look at the moment or if desired, how much it appears to limit the character even in the long run. I also think that the "Death's Door" rule is sufficient for bringing genuine risk to one's character formally into play.

Best practice: "To monologue or not to monologue?"
You know, it's OK not to. If you're playing your character and you win a conflict, then there's nothing wrong with letting the GM narrate. You get a Pool die, which may or may not be a consideration, but more importantly, he or she has to respect the conflict and narrate in your character's favor according to what the character wanted to do. It's a fine option.

If you do choose to deliver a Monologue of Victory, then do so for a reason. It comes down to a desire for either visceral Color or inspired consequence, best illustrated by two examples from the same game, played long ago.
- One player's tough knightly character was attacked by a motley band of cutthroats, and the player rolled successfully. He took the Monologue of Victory and said, "I kill the first guy with one swift stroke, and he hits the ground not even knowing he's dead. I look at all the rest and go …" here the player acted it out, "Grrrrr! And they all scatter, running away." He added little that we did not already know from the successful roll itself, but the Color of the moment was considerably deepened and the player was clearly more excited about his character from that point forward.
- Later, another player's character, from a magical land in which women were the knights and men the languishing love-interests, was uncharacteristically dressed in a fancy gown, dancing with the nigh-undead scary lord of a cursed castle in a ballroom scene. She sought crucial information from him, rolling successfully. She took the Monologue of Victory and said, "He tells me …" here the information was provided, not relevant to my present point, and she went on, "… and I fall in love with him." Whoa! This player was inspired by the atmosphere already present in the scene to provide a shocking experiential shift for her character, therefore deeply influencing potential scenes and conflicts for later.

Best practices: Narration isn't "control"
A lot of internet blood and in-play stress have appeared from fears about what "player narrates" may entail for the content of play, for The Pool and for a number of games using Pool-derived techniques. These fears may be set aside, because this game works best when narration authority applies solely to narration of dice-based outcomes, not over back-story, future events, or events displaced from the immediate circumstances of what the roll concerned.

A single example should provide the model for dealing with the issue in any circumstances. A player-character is questioning an NPC about something important, it's judged to be a dice-worthy conflict, and the player succeeds in the roll. He says, "He tells me what he knows!"

Here it is: the player does *not* get to make up what the guy knows. Instead, the GM tells the player what the guy knows, for the player to use. Again, the player has no authority over back-story. The dice do not suddenly make a player into a co-author at that level.
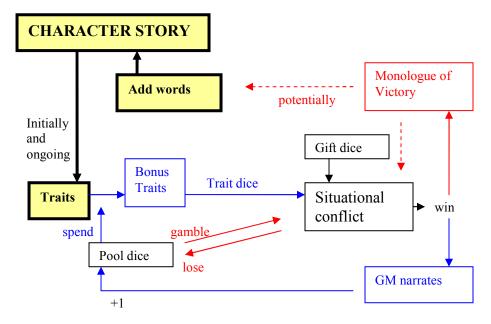
Best practices: GM, keep it short

If you're GMing, then you narrate failed conflicts and whatever successful ones the players don't take Monologues of Victory for. I suggest that these be handled in distinct and entirely fixed ways.

When narrating a character's success, stay with "Meat & potatoes," as close to the already-known features of the conflict as possible, and not extending it into further developments, consequences, or reactions. The only thing to lock down solidly is the genuine victory in the terms understood prior to the dice-roll. This provides a baseline against which Monologues of Victory, when the player uses them, may truly stand out. You can express your characters' reactions or other consequences of the conflict later, via scene-framing and playing your characters in new situations.

When narrating a character's failure, be similarly clear about the decisive outcome of that particular conflict. He or she should not be able to continue doing exactly whatever he or she was doing before that conflict. Sometimes this content is expressed as physical circumstances ("You're dragged off in chains") and sometimes as reactions and commentary from your characters ("The hope drains from her face, replaced by disappointment and contempt.").

The big picture: Character-first, character-always

Consider the character played through time, which is expressed in only two ways: a more extensive Character Story and an expanded list of Traits. Now the diagram has come full circle to its starting components which are best understood as the umbrella or even container for the others. Given many (N) sessions of play, which may include from one to N stories ("adventures"), and therefore quite a lot of conflicts the character has undergone, the three bolded boxes and their arrows have received considerable modifications.

Obviously, the Character Story steadily increases in word length. One crude aspect of this is the decreasing percentage. Assuming maximum word addition each time, the first adds 20%, the second about 17%, the third about 14%, and so on. This decrease may have some useful effects in the long run. However, all words are not equal so quantitative increases in word length cannot really indicate changes in content. Understanding the potential changes in Character Story content constitutes mastery at playing The Pool.

Since merely improving existing features is a function of spending Pool points on Trait bonuses, adding words to the Character Story must be about something else, including but not limited to:

- Descriptive phrases including new Traits which were either "realized" in play or were acquired by the character as part of the emergent plot; as with any Trait, they can be social roles, skills, personality details, institutions, locations, other characters, goals, and more.
- Summaries of important events during play, or past events discovered during play, or the possibility of future events.
- Indicators of emotions, perspectives, and relationships

As a fairly steady "cycle" from session to session, existing Traits get juiced in dice terrms, more Traits get added, older plot elements fade, and new ones come in. That's simple enough although I think the points above show that the range of content is quite wide.

It gets more nuanced than that when you consider the distinction between simply adding sentences to the end and modifying existing sentences. In practice, a slower emergent effect or cycle becomes apparent in the changing Character Story: nuances and shifts in the character's perspective, social role, and obvious immediate challenges to address. It hits most obviously when the new words introduced begin with "But." Other interesting one-word bombshells include "Former" applied to any number of defining nouns, or "no longer" applied to verbs. Still another relevant change at this level is a notable jump or drop in social descriptors.

I can describe the bigger cycles as "story to story," but that implies the wrong causality – "stories" in the sense of thematically punchy and consequential episodes in the character's saga, are made by these cycles, not the other way around.

The rules don't say whether anything in the Character Story can be eliminated. I presume it's better to relegate certain features to the character's past by inserting contextual words. Perhaps sometimes addition means replacement, such that replacing "loves" with "hates" would be a legal one-word "addition," but again, perhaps it's better to spend new words on "used to love but now hates …" I also imagine that minor grammatical modifications for consistency with changes don't themselves count as word changes.

Ideally, although I've yet to see it, it'd be great to see a Character Story in which all the original components, including Traits, have been re-worded as past accomplishments, transformations, or tragedies, and the currently most inspirational material has all arisen through play. Such a Story might even develop inherent paragraph breaks over time.

And even more ideally, and again only as a speculative possibility, I wonder if a Character Story would evolve without too much deliberate effort into a form which includes a genuine ending.

Above the scale of a single character
Is there a larger story at work when playing The Pool, particularly for the GM? A couple of rules features can lend themselves to this effect.
- Given multiple player-characters, shared goals or the net effect of intertwined but different goals can become a sort of meta-story among them.
- Events during play as well as choices of phrase in Character Story modifications can imply or even cause changes in the fundamental conflicts of play (e.g. gaining a significant social status and responsibility), and in the features of the setting (e.g. blowing up an enemy's fortress).

However, the system itself offers no direct method toward such ends, and I suggest that such a thing be left as an emergent property, and always at the service of the current Character Stories rather than the other way around.