

*Snowball is a variant rules system based on **the Pool**, a game copyrighted by James V. West, of Random Order Creations (www.randomordercreations.com). Thanks go out to Nathan Banks for introducing me to The Pool and having several interesting conversations with me about the game. Thanks also to Shreyas Sampat, Jeremy Rice, Chris Edwards and Joshua Kashinsky for their playtesting and inspiration, Guy Jobbins for being the first Snowball GM besides myself, and Nikki Noble for all her proofreading and encouragement.*

The unlikely name of "Snowball" is a reference to the snowball effect, one of the most well-known examples of positive feedback. Like the shift of a snowball at the top of the mountain can eventually cause an avalanche, this game encourages both character and story to grow larger and reinforce one another as the story rolls on.

These rules were imagined and adapted by Alexander Cherry of Twisted Confessions (www.twistedconfessions.com), an independent game publishing venture. All comments, criticisms, errata and questions are welcome on the website, either in the forum or through email. Snowball was last updated on March 15, 2004.

What is Snowball?

Snowball was originally created as an attempt to emulate backwards-storytelling, starting with the last scene, and moving backwards towards the beginning of the story in discrete intervals (like the movie *Memento*). However, it has expanded beyond those narrow roots and can easily be used for more "normal" play. Section five gives tips and tricks on how to play Snowball in either mode.

Like its ancestors, Snowball is a role-playing game geared towards a narrative collaboration between a GM and one or more players. Characters in Snowball are not defined by assigning values to a list of pre-approved attributes in an attempt to balance them against an objective standard. Instead, they are defined through a series of Traits, whose only rating is how important such Traits are to the story.

In Snowball, the influence players have on events is not limited solely to dictating the actions of their characters. By invoking Traits, suggesting Ideas, and gambling dice, the players can actively direct the story, essentially assuming the role of the GM for brief periods of time.

Creating a story can sometimes be seen as a hike up the top of a high mountain, trying to reach the peak. In Snowball, everyone starts at the top, and the story naturally rolls down to the bottom, gathering more details in the trip.

Zero: Before You Begin

One person in your group needs to be the Game Master, or GM – this is the person responsible for setting up the scenes, creating situations, playing other characters, and directing the game when no other player has the reins. The GM should ensure not only that the game runs smoothly, but that it remains enjoyable to all participants.

You will need a bunch of six sided dice, probably about ten per player, including a handful of GM dice that look different from the rest.

Snowball is designed to be used in any setting – but before play begins, you should decide on just one. Before the first game, there should be a general idea as to the genre in which you will be playing, as well as the setting and opening of the first scene. See Section **Five** for more details.

One: Character Creation

Character creation in Snowball is very easy, although it can be frustrating for those who want to know every detail about their character at the start of the game.

Each character begins with a name, five dice in their Pool, and a Trait that must be showcased during the first scene. Traits will be discussed in Section **Two**, and handling Events in Section **Three**. Creating a back-story for a character is discouraged, but can be done – however, keep in mind that everything is mutable, and your imagined back-story could be changed by a single roll of the dice.

The Pool

Every character has a Pool filled with dice, whose exact number changes over time. These dice are the basic currency of Snowball, and can be spent to add new Traits to a character, increase existing Traits, or gambled to increase the chances of a roll's success. The more dice a character has, the more potential they have to affect the story. See Section **Two** and **Three** for more information on what to do with the Pool.

Two: Defining Traits

A Trait is a short, definitive statement about your character, something important, something that makes your character who and what they are. Traits can be anything: an aspect of personality, a skill, a handicap, an ability, allies or enemies, possessions, beliefs, destinies – anything that helps bring the character to life. Traits are ranked by number - which determines how many free dice you are given when they are invoked.

Make sure your Traits are specific enough to avoid conflicts over vagueness - instead of "Magic" or "Scholar",

say "Wizard of Fire" or "University Professor." Be sure that your fellow players and the GM are clear as to the purpose and nature of your chosen Traits.

A starting **Snowball** character has a single Trait, which begins at level 3. This should be one of the most noticeable things about the character, as it will come up immediately in the first scene. Further revelations about your character come later, new Traits unfolding just as they would while reading a book.

Adding and improving Traits may only be done one level at a time, and only in certain situations – between scenes, and during appropriate moments in play. Every time a Scene ends, any character who was in that Scene may add or raise **one** Trait by a **single** level, which costs an amount of dice from one's Pool equal to the level. For example, buying a new Trait would cost 1 die (and would start out at level 1), while raising a level 2 Trait to level 3 would cost 3 dice. Any Trait added or improved between scenes must be invoked at least once in the next scene in which the character appears.

In addition, while inside a scene, a player may choose to add a new Trait, or increase an existing one. To do this, the player states an **Idea** or declares how the Trait will be used in a **Conflict** and spends his dice. Additional dice can be gambled on this roll. See the next section for more details.

If a Monologue of Victory is rolled, the change or addition goes through as planned. If a Monologue of Defeat is rolled, the dice are still spent and the Trait is improved, but the Trait does not have a positive effect. In some cases, this sort of corruption might even change the description of the Trait.

Conversely, in a Guided Event, the player does not spend his dice (they are returned to his Pool), nor does he get the Trait. They may not try again to increase or add that Trait until the next scene begins. See Section **Four** for more details on Monologues, Guided Events, and their role in the game.

Finally, one may reduce a Trait if they so desire, at any time after it has been used at least once. This adds dice into their Pool equal to the levels lost. However, a character may not *completely* remove a Trait without the GM's permission, and must always have at least one Trait total. Generally, if a Trait is removed, it should be addressed somehow in the current or upcoming scene.

Three: Events

In Snowball, dice are cast to resolve all Events, which in turn push the game forward by determining narration privileges. There are two types of Events in Snowball – Conflicts and Ideas.

A Conflict occurs when at least two forces are at odds with one another. In classic RPGs, this could be anything

from a character trying to jump a ravine to a giant snake trying to strike someone. In Snowball, you don't always have to roll dice if you want to try something – just say you do it. But if you or the GM decide that the act is (or could be) of some importance to the story, or if you simply have an interest in it, you roll dice to determine who gets to describe it, and whether the action succeeded or failed.

An Idea is different from a Conflict because it comes into play right out of someone's head, rather than out of an obstacle already set in the game. Ideas can be as simple or complex as you want. They can come into play at any time. If you have an Idea, announce it and the GM will let you roll for the chance to describe it. Ideas are pursued and resolved on a first-come first-serve basis, so make sure you speak up!

Events are, by definition, something important enough to the story that dice are rolled to decide their outcome and who gets to narrate the result. Either player or character can say they want dice to be rolled to determine how the narration will proceed. Even if you are not present in a scene, you may still call for a roll to introduce a new Idea.

Before rolling for an Event, one must first declare both **Intent** and **Calamity**. The Intent is what you want to have happen – keep this short, the full narration comes later. Conversely, the Calamity is what you don't want to have happen – whatever sort of hindrance, complication or problem you can think of that will make the story even more interesting than it already is. If the GM calls for a roll from a player, the player is still responsible for stating both of these.

Next, decide what Trait, if any, you will be invoking for this roll. You may invoke your own, or in an Idea involving another character, you may invoke one of theirs. You may never invoke more than one Trait in any Event, and do not have to invoke any Trait at all. Invoking a Trait gives a number of free dice equal to its level.

If you or the GM believe that this situation calls for a new Trait, or an increase in a Trait, you add the dice spent on raising or adding the Trait *instead of* invoking an existing one.

The GM may also award 0-3 Bonus Dice per roll, as he sees fit. This is not based on difficulty, but rather on both how much he likes your idea, and whether or not he wants it to succeed. You may also gamble dice from your Pool, adding them to the roll – the more dice gambled, the more likely success, but if you do succeed, those dice are lost.

Add up all your dice from various sources (Trait, Bonus, Gamble), and roll them. There are three possible results:

- If you roll even a single 1, it's a good result - don't even worry about the rest of your dice. You get a

Monologue of Victory, which must follow from your stated Intent. You also lose any gambled dice from your Pool.

- If you roll no ones, then check for sixes. If you have even one six, you get a Monologue of Defeat, which must follow along your previously-stated Calamity. You also gain a single die in your Pool.
- Roll no ones or sixes, and your roll is neutral. The result is a Guided Event, which the GM may narrate as he sees fit, regardless of your Intent or Calamity.

A conflict between two players or their characters is always treated as a Guided Event, with no roll. Also, no player character will ever die without that player's consent, at which point they get a free MoV to describe the death.

Four: Victory and Defeat

During a Monologue, the player in question is entirely in control of the game for a short time. He can describe actions, dialogue, new characters, new events... whatever might make a good addition to the story. But there are a few ground rules to keep in mind.

- **Focus** – Make your narration appropriate to the type of Monologue you're giving. A Victory should be in line for what you stated in your Intent, and shouldn't stray too far out of bounds. A Defeat should always add complication or conflict. And if you used a Trait in rolling for an Event, your Monologue must highlight that Trait, either positively or negatively.
- **Respect** – Don't alter another player's character. You can certainly use their characters and their actions, but try to keep them within the parameters of behavior that have already been established. If in doubt, ask the player if your Monologue is appropriate to their character.
- **Consistency** – Keep your narration consistent to the story as a whole, and the facts that have already been put forth within the story. If it's already been said that General Mongo died twenty years ago in the Battle of Bliss, don't describe him as a happily retired advisor to the military.
- **Conciseness** – You should end your Monologue in a timely manner. Going on for too long robs the other players of their chance in the spotlight. The GM may interrupt your Monologue if it goes on too long - try to keep it no more than a minute or two.

Five: Scenes and Story

Like a movie, play, or television show, a game is a series of scenes. The GM is the one who decides how to set the first Scene. He can do this by deciding exactly who is in the Scene and what is happening, or by using a scene suggested by one of the players.

The GM has as many options for setting a Scene as his imagination allows. Scenes can open quietly or in the heat of conflict, abruptly or subtly. A Scene can even take place without any player character present. If a character is in a scene, and they have added or improved a Trait since the last scene, the GM should craft the scene to highlight that Trait.

Once the Scene has reached its natural end, the GM will announce a Scene change. Players who want to add more to a Scene may announce an Idea before it closes.

After each Scene has closed, all the participants may add a die to their Pool. **This is important.** They may also increase or add a single Trait, as described above.

More than one Scene can be happening at once, either emulating the same time frame, or in different times altogether. The player's characters probably won't be together all the time. They may not even know one another. If more than one Scene is happening at once, the GM will cut between them at natural pauses or cliffhanger moments, keeping each player as involved as possible.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Snowball was originally designed for reverse-Scene game play, inspired by the movie *Memento* (2000). The opening Scene should always be the very end of the story, the final pages of the book. Keep in mind that, if this were a forward-moving story, the credits are pretty much going to be rolling after this scene – start it with a bang, and let it end on its own course.

Generally, the opening scene should set in less than a hundred words. Always leave more questions than answers, and keep in mind the Trait each player has chosen for their character, as well as anything else agreed upon such as genre, setting, and so forth.

As an example, here is the opening Scene from the very first game of Snowball, where I started off with quite a literal bang:

"Everyone's ears were ringing. The pistol lay smoking on the ground where it had been thrown. Blood was everywhere, the hired men scattering in fear. And, lying amidst the sand on the slabs of the ruined temple, The Green Man's blood oozed from his ruined face, a hole in the base of his neck."

The setting was a renaissance high fantasy, and the suggestion from a player was "the death of the Green Man."

When the Scene opened, nobody knew who the Green Man was, or who had shot him. The other details (hired men, the ruined temple) were also improvised without explanation.

After that scene concludes, the GM should set each next Scene before the previous Scene began – the required time frame is variable, and can usually be left open for interpretation. As with the first scene, keep the opening of each successive scene under 100 words if at all possible. It helps if each opening keeps the players on their toes - try to start Scenes in the middle of some action, or introducing some new twist, with only occasional Scenes devoted to downtime.

When running any particular Scene, the GM should keep in mind any new or improved Traits the involved players may have added to their characters, as these Scenes should be constructed to highlight these Traits. GMs should not be shy about incorporating their own ideas to complement the player's ideas, and calling for rolls when necessary.

The play goal of each Scene in reverse-Style is obvious – to get the characters from the opening situation to the situation which opened the "previous" Scene (or to an earlier point which could naturally lead to the situation). Thus each scene after the first has its own endpoint, which is already defined, and it is the job of the entire group to maneuver there, players and GM alike. The GM shouldn't necessarily make it easy - scene openings are a good spot to introduce a new plot complication.

Scripting out an adventure for Snowball isn't all that difficult - come up with a somewhat structured story in chronological order, split it out into scenes, then reverse them when introducing them in play. Make sure to keep things vague enough that any Traits a character may gather, or start with, can be incorporated. And be prepared for rolls that succeed when they "should" have failed, or vice versa.

In a more open-ended environment, such as Snowball campaign play, be sure to keep track of the hints and pieces that have been laid out in play. If a character mentions something like, "this isn't the first time you've lied about something like this," make note so that it can be incorporated into a later scene.

Starting at the End (or in the Middle)

Even if you don't plan on using Snowball for reverse-Scene play, there's something to be said for setting your first Scene at the end of the story, or at some other important turning point. This is a method often employed by storytellers – start off with the fight/flight/stand-off, then go back to "it all started when..."

Using this method helps give the players and GM a goal to move towards, a frame around which the narrative may

develop. The actions the characters take in the Scene, and the statements they make, can be used to establish developments and relationships that are only fully realized later. It also is often a good excuse to put all the characters together, though this is not necessary.

If the first scene is meant to be the final scene of the narrative, try to provide some closure before the Scene ends in the manner suggested in the previous section. If it is simply meant to be a pivotal scene that the story will move past when it comes around again, don't worry about closure.

Out of Order

Snowball can also be used to tell stories where the narrative has no direct sequence whatsoever. This is easiest when the scenes are in some sort of pattern, whether regimented (i.e. alternating scenes set in the 1920s and the 1990s, or scenes set just a week apart) or more intuitive and freeform (moving back and forth as seems fit). It also works well for a time-loop scenario, where each iteration of the same scene (or collection of scenes) reveals new information, both about the participants and their environment.

Much of the advice in the previous paragraphs can apply to Out of Order play as well - the main difference is that, much of the time, there is no well-defined end-point for the subsequent scenes.

The biggest suggestion is simply to keep track of the various bits of foreshadowing hints that are dropped in the game. Encourage the players to add foreshadowing in their monologues, and be sure to add foreshadowing yourself. New scenes can then be pieced together using these bits.

In addition, allow players to call for scenes of their own, within reason. If a player wants his character's next scene to involve a particular set-up, he probably has a good reason. Let it happen!

Six: Example of Play

Danny, Ken, and Veronica have gathered together to play a game of Snowball, using the example opening scene from earlier and using the Memento style of play. Ken is the GM; Veronica is playing Ioana, whose single trait is Dryad (3); and Danny is playing Specere, a Pangolin (3). We join the game already in progress. Both players have four dice.

"Everyone's ears were ringing," Ken says. "The pistol lay smoking on the ground where it had been thrown. Blood was everywhere, the hired men scattering in fear. And, lying amidst the sand on the slabs of the ruined temple, The Green Man's blood oozed from his ruined face, a hole in the base of his neck."

"Okay," Veronica says, "there's the beginning. What's the next step?"

"Improvise," Danny says. "We're standing over a dead body."

"Yeah," Ken adds, "your characters know what happened, but as a player you don't. You can improvise facts in play."

"Ioana climbs down the tree, staring at the corpse. She takes up a branch and pokes at it."

"There's a tree?" Danny's kind of slow.

"There is now," Ken says. "In the distance, the sun was setting. The sandstorm seems to be picking up again."

"Well, I suppose that's one way to resolve it."

"Is that your character speaking?"

"Yeah, sure. Specere says that...from a few steps below the scene. He's leaning on his staff, looking solemn."

"Ioana says, 'Is it real? Oh Lord, it's bloody real' and she buries her head in her hands and begins to sob."

"So..." Danny asks, "did WE kill the Green Man?"

"All you know is that he's dead. Based on your actions, and maybe the dice, YOU get to decide who actually shot him. And why."

"Oh, okay. In that case, Lethandyr lets out a rasp, as if he hadn't breathed since the shot rang out."

"Now you're getting it, Danny" Veronica says. "Do you want this guy to have any special relationship to you?"

"I think I'm going to call for a roll on this one," Ken says before Danny can speak. "On a success, Lethandyr is friendly to you; otherwise, he's hostile."

"Um, okay," Danny says "Those are the Intent and Calamity, right?"

"Right. You can change the details if you want, but that might affect how many dice I'll give you."

"No, no, that's okay."

"You're gonna have to spend a die," Vanessa says to him, "to cement this relationship."

"What do I roll?"

"Well, you're spending one die," Ken says, "and I'm giving you two, for a total of three. You can gamble more dice if you want, but if you win, you lose 'em."

"No, no, that's enough," Danny says, and tosses three dice. They come up 1, 5, and 4.

"Okay, that's a Monologue of Victory. You now only have 3 dice in your Pool, and write down "Friendly Relationship with Lethandyr" on your sheet, with a level of one. And then make your Monologue."

"Um, Specere stares sternly back at Lethandyr. Lethandyr wheezes, 'I had to do it, Spec, I had to.' He begins to sob."

"Lightning cracks in the distance," Ken says, "as the sandstorm whips up the spirits that dwell in the deepest part of the desert. The sun begins to darken behind the clouds."

"I wasn't done yet," Danny says. "Specere looks at Lethandyr and says, 'I hope it was worth it, my friend.' NOW I'm done."

"Okay, the lightning still happens. Sorry bout that. Lethandyr now says, 'It had'ta be done. Doesn't matter 'twere worth it or not.' He wrings his hands. 'Is it finally over? D'ya think the lightning will take me now?'"

"Ioana says 'No, you don't deserve it.'"

"Wow, that's kind of harsh. Okay, Vanessa, let's invoke your dryad trait. As the clouds obscure the sun, your tree is going to start to wither. That's the Calamity, anyway. Intent is open."

"Um, okay, Intent would be to allow the tree to grow and create a shelter from the oncoming storm."

"Very nice. I'll give you only one die for that, though, since I'm not sure I want y'all to have shelter."

"Sure, that's 4 total, and I'll gamble two..." Vanessa rolls six dice, and gets 3,4,6,6,5,2. A MoD. "Wow," she says, "Ioana suddenly collapses to the ground, let's say, as the tree begins to wither. How did a dryad get into the middle of the desert, anyway?"

"That's for the story to find out. Anything else in your monologue?"

"Ioana looks up at the tree as she writhes in agony, and cries out 'Nooooo!!' Okay, I'm done. At least I didn't lose any dice." She adds one die to her pool, in fact.

"Fade to black?" Danny asks.

"No, we still need to use your Pangolin trait. What is that again?"

"It's a scaly anteater. I figure Specere is sort of like a teenaged mutant ninja turtle, only an anteater instead."

"Oh. Well, um, the scene won't end until you showcase the Pangolin trait. How do you want to do that?"

"Well, Pangolins curl up into balls to protect themselves. How's about this - Intent shields him from the storm, but Calamity causes a lightning bolt to kill him. After all, this is the LAST scene."

"That's the spirit! I'll give you three dice to go with the three from your Trait. You gambling?"

"Not for this." Danny just rolls his six dice and gets 4,2,4,5,3,4. A Guided Event. "What now?"

"Well, your Pangolin's fate will remain in question. As he curls up into a ball, the final light of the sun is now gone, the sandstorm raging, coming towards the ancient redoubt, lightning flashing angrily. Lethandyr stands tall and proud, hoping, begging that the storm will take him, and a

weakened Ioana tries vainly to get to cover. But this time, the storm will not fade until it tastes the blood it desires most."

"Fade to black now?" Danny asks.

"Yeah. And you each get another die in your pool."

"Sort of a tragic ending for these four characters, no?" Vanessa asks. "The green man dead, Ioana crippled, Lethandyr suicidal... Specere is the only one with any great chance of survival. How did things get this way?"

Ken grins. "That's what you're going to find out. Now, before we start the next scene, anyone want to buy any new Traits?"

Appendix: Event Flowchart

It has been pointed out to me that an easy-access flowchart of how to resolve events might be well-received and useful in game, for ease of reference. One follows.

1. Identify Conflict and/or State Idea
2. Determine appropriate Trait (if any) and take a number of free dice equal to its level; alternatively, spend dice to raise a Trait if appropriate
3. State Intent and Calamity as appropriate
4. Receive bonus dice from narrator
5. Add any gambled or spent dice from the Pool
6. Roll the combined dice
 - If you have at least one 1, don't even worry about the rest of your dice - you have achieved a Monologue of Victory. Narrate following your stated Intent, and lose any gambled dice.
 - If you have no ones, and at least one 6, you have a Monologue of Defeat. Narrate following your stated Calamity, and add a die to your Pool. Gambled dice return to the Pool; spent dice are lost.
 - If you have no ones or sixes, it is a Guided Event. The GM narrates as he sees fit, regardless of Intent or Calamity. Return all gambled and spent dice to the Pool.
7. Increase Trait if appropriate.