

POLARIS



Poolaris Version 0.4
2006-June-15
Christopher Peterson
poolaris@lawfulneutral.com

Poolaris is a fantasy role-playing game that combines the negotiated narration and chilly setting of Ben Lehman's *Polaris* with the simple rules of James V. West's *The Pool* (and bits of James's *The Questing Beast* and *Anti-Pool*). Unlike most role-playing games, Poolaris has no Game Master (GM). The players share the GM responsibilities.

To play, you need a lot of six-sided dice (d6s), including a handful of “bonus dice” that look different from the rest. Before character creation, each player needs 20 dice for their starting Pool. The remaining dice go into a common pool.

SETTING

Poolaris is a game for three to five players set during the final years of the Northernmost People, just before the remnants of their civilization were swallowed up by their own Mistake.

Once upon a time, as far north as north can go, there lived the greatest people that this world will ever see. They are gone now, destroyed just as the world destroys all beautiful things. All that remains are these moments we call memories, moments frozen from the flow of time.

The protagonists of the story are Knights of the Order of the Stars, beholden by ancient oaths to serve the stars and protect their people. The antagonists facing the knights are multitudinous — demons from the Mistake, doubters among the people, and even betrayers within the brotherhood of Knights.

Once, there would have been no need for Knights. Once, when the sky was dark and perfect, the starlight pure and cold, and the people without fear or flaw, there would have been no need for war. But that time has passed now, gone like a long winter dream, and so you are called to battle demons beneath the burning sun and its alien blue sky.

This is no longer a history; this is not yet a story. This is all that remains. Whatever else is what you make of it.

CHARACTER CREATION

Making a character is simple: each player has about one minute to describe his character and their background. Pretend you're telling a campfire story and this is the introduction of your main character. You only have a minute to play with, so focus on the most important elements of your new character and how the character fits into the world of Poolaris.

Example Story

I've created my first Poolaris character: "Orion is a knight trained in elemental magic by the Knights of the Order of the Stars. He was expelled from the Order after falling in love with a young knight who died when he tried to teach her a spell she could not control. Now Orion seeks the means to bring her back to life."

ASSIGNING TRAITS AND BOXUSES

The other players write down details from your description they think are cool. The player then chooses 3 or 4 Traits from those lists. These are Traits that will help you gain narrative control during play.

Traits can be anything from friends and enemies to a good horse or a knack for attracting trouble. Whatever is important about your character can be a Trait. Though you can word a Trait any way you wish, make sure it doesn't contradict or expand your Story. For example, Orion's Story reads "seeks the means to bring her back to life" so a Trait based on that statement could be called "Searching for a way to bring his love back from the dead" or "Trying to find a way to raise his

love from the dead” or something similar. But calling the Trait “Has vast knowledge of death magic and resurrection” would not work because his Story does not relate any special death-related skills or knowledge.

Make sure your Traits are specific enough to avoid game conflicts over vagueness. For example, Orion uses elemental magic, not death magic or shooting stars from his fingers. Avoid vague Traits such as “Magic” or “Scholar” — be specific.

You can assign Bonuses to important traits, in the form of dice. Bonuses increase the effectiveness of Traits during play. To assign a Bonus, spend dice from your starting Pool. The cost is two times the Bonus. Thus, a +2 Bonus would cost 4 dice and a +3 Bonus would cost 6 dice and so on. It is very important to leave some dice in your Pool — at least 3 or 4. You do not have to assign a Bonus to every Trait.

Example Traits

After writing Orion’s Story, I choose the Traits I want and assign Bonuses to them. These Bonuses cost a total of 16 dice, leaving 4 dice in my Pool.

- * Delves in elemental magic +2*
- * Outcast of the Knights of the Order of the Stars +1*
- * Driven by love +3*
- * Searching for the means to raise his love from the dead +2*

CASTING THE DICE

Dice are cast to determine the outcome of conflicts. This is not the same as rolling when you simply want to take an action. The swing of a sword can be achieved through simple dialogue with the other players, without throwing dice. The effect of a die roll in Poolaris is much broader than the swing of a sword.

Anyone can call for a die roll whenever a conflict is apparent or when someone wants to introduce a new conflict. Just broadly state your intentions:

1. What you want to happen on a successful roll,
2. What bad thing will happen on a failed roll,
3. And what Trait, if any, you’re using as a bonus.

If you can show an obvious connection between your intention and one of your character’s Traits, you can add Bonus dice to your roll if that Trait has a Bonus. To win a die roll, roll a 6 on any of the dice you cast. Ignore any other results. If you don’t roll a 6, you fail the roll.

Before you roll, the other players can attempt to influence your intention. Each player may:

1. Attempt to veto your roll,
2. Lend you 1 “Force die” to add to your throw,
3. Or accept your intention, but not lend you a Force die.

If any players think your intention asks too much, they may attempt to veto your roll. If two or more players veto, you must abandon your roll or renegotiate your intention. Your roll did not fail; it just didn’t happen.

If the other players do not veto your roll, each may lend 0 or 1 Force dice. These Force dice let the other players “vote” for or against your successful intention. Force dice do not belong to any one player. Each non-narrating player has 1 Force die to lend for the current roll only.

You are strongly encouraged to negotiate your intention with the other players to encourage them to lend you Force dice! For example, maybe one player will give you his Force die if you reduce the benefits of a successful roll. Maybe another player will give you his Force die if you also increase the consequences of a failed roll. And maybe the last player just wants you to fail and refuses to lend you his Force die.

In addition, you can gamble up to 9 dice from your Pool. Adding dice to your roll greatly increases your chances of getting a 6. But if you win a roll, you lose all the dice you gambled. A big gamble can instantly reduce your Pool to nothing.

Example Die Roll

Orion is in the ancient Leftmost Museum. I want him to find a piece of knowledge that will help him on his quest, so I ask for a roll based on the Trait “searching for the means to bring his love from the dead +2”. I add 2 Bonus dice (for my +2 Trait) and two other players decide to lend me Force dice to roll as well. I still have 4 dice in my Pool, so I add 2 of them to the roll as a gamble to increase my chances. I cast all 6 dice and, luckily, I roll a 6. I win the roll, but I lose the 2 gambled dice from my Pool, leaving me with only 2. If I had not rolled a 6, I could keep the 2 gambled dice and add an extra die to my Pool, leaving me with 5 dice.

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

When you roll successfully, you get to make a Monologue of Victory (MOV), but you also lose any dice you gambled. Thus, you are encouraged to use as few dice as you think necessary to accomplish the task, leading to more failures as you gamble with just how many dice might work. In cases of extreme need, like a climactic battle, you could still just unload on the contest. But you’ll be hurting for dice after your roll.

Making an MOV is the only way to ensure that the conflict results in what you want. You take control of the game for a few moments. You can describe your character’s actions, the actions of those around him, and the outcome of those actions. You can even focus on less direct elements of the conflict such as what’s happening in the next room or who’s entering the scene. You can do just about anything. The only real limitations you must observe are:

1. Don’t alter other players’ characters (such as killing them). You can add complications for them and affect the things around them, but don’t intrude on the creation of a fellow player.
2. Keep your narration in synch with the established facts and tone of the game. If you need to ask the other players for responses during your MOV, do so.
3. Keep your narration reasonably short.

Observing these rules of courtesy and continuity will help everyone enjoy the game even more. If you ignore these rules, the other players may end your MOV at any time.

If you fail a die roll, two things will happen. First, you get to keep any dice you gambled and add an extra die to your Pool. You might frequently use little or no dice and accept failures just to get the extra dice when your Pool is low. Second, another player will narrate the outcome you didn't want to happen. The details of the outcome are entirely up to him. He may introduce new complications for your character or simply narrate a scene that is opposite of what you wanted.

Example Monologue of Victory

With my successful die roll from the previous example, I get to make an MOV, but I also lose my 2 gambled dice. Everyone listens:

"After a frustrating couple of hours searching through ancient tomes, Orion is ready to give it up. There's nothing here. But then he notices a very strange thing. In a dark corner, a book is leaning against the wall. But it isn't just leaning, it's moving! He takes a closer look and the book scurries under a table. It can walk! He crawls under the table and manages to get his hands on it. The book squirms, but isn't strong enough to break free. On its cover are letters from a very old language he has some familiarity with. They read 'Land of the Dead'. There are bloodstains on the edges of the pages."

I decide that's a good stopping point. Everyone is very curious about this walking book and now narration passes to another player, taking into consideration this new element I have just invented.

NEMESSES

To create the feel of a serial adventure, characters may have recurring enemies, tracked on their character sheet as Nemesses, each of which has an accompanying Nemesis Bonus. The Bonus should start at +1. Characters can share Nemesses or have personal Nemesses.

Example Nemesses

- * Those Annoying Raiders From The South +3
- * Mitzsch the angry Black Demon +5
- * The Vindictive Archbishop Steven +7

Any time you want some more Pool dice, another player may narrate the arrival of one of your Nemesses. You can encourage another player to summon your Nemesis, but you cannot summon them yourself. The Nemesis's Bonus dice are added to your Pool, but an equal number is also subtracted from your highest Trait Bonus for the remainder of that game session. If that Trait Bonus is reduced to +0 or less, then you cannot invoke that Trait for the remainder of that game session.

Nemesses are simply a method to temporarily shift Trait Bonuses to your Pool when your Pool is low. You should pay extra attention to ensure that the setup and resolution for this special cross-over is suitably elaborate and exciting in order to justify the large amount of Pool dice won from two Nemesis Bonuses. No more than two Nemesses can team up in a single encounter.

When a nemesis is defeated, they are not killed. They are typically "vanquished" or "foiled again" to seek revenge at a later time. Each time a Nemesis is defeated, their Nemesis Bonus increases by +1, reflecting their more elaborate revenge schemes and extra reinforcements.

To cross off a Nemesis permanently, which will often mean that the party has killed them once and for all, the players can spend their Pool dice to "pay off" the Nemesis Bonus. To maintain the feel of an action serial, when a Nemesis is defeated, two new Nemesses can be introduced. The old Nemesis's Bonus is divided however wished among these two new foes. For example, the Vindictive Archbishop Steven +7 is finally locked away in prison. The party now has to deal with his partner in crime, The Sadistic Baron Thomas +4. The destructive battle in the Archbishop's underground lair also earned the wrath of The Lunatic Forest Druid +3.

THE CONTINUING STORY

If you have 9 dice or more left in your Pool at the end of a session, you start the next session with the same number. If you have fewer than that, you can start the next session with 9 dice in your Pool.

You may add new Traits or increase Bonuses to Traits any time you wish the same way you did when you created your character: the desired Bonus times itself (+2 costs 4 dice, +3 costs 6 dice, etc.). You may decrease a Bonus and add dice to your Pool equal to the subtracted amount (-2 bonus gives 2 dice, -3 bonus gives 3 dice, etc.). If you decrease a Bonus to zero, that Trait must be removed from your list. Increases and decreases in Trait Bonuses should tie in with key developments in your character's story.

AT DEATH'S DOOR

Your character does not have "hit points" or any other measure of life. But he can die.

If your character fails a die roll in a situation the other players deems utterly lethal, you can either accept death and make a final MOV to describe it (no rolling required), or make a final roll to save his life. In this roll you cannot use any Traits and the other players cannot lend you any Force dice. You must gamble your entire Pool. Your fellow players may pitch in up to 9 dice each to help your character survive.

No matter what the outcome of the roll, all the dice you cast are lost — even dice gambled by other players. If you win this roll your character has survived the incident, but you do not get a MOV. Another player will describe how death was cheated. If you fail the roll, your character dies. In this case, you get to make a final MOV in which you describe your character's death in detail. Make it a good one.